The Habits of a Lifetime

by out there

Summary

The idea of Sherlock and Eurus connecting over music, over anything, is terrifying. Mycroft has spent decades watching over Sherlock, talking about their fictional family dog and the myth of the east wind, trying to protect Sherlock from the things he doesn’t remember. He’s worried about Sherlock and stood guard over Eurus, and been worse than useless in the end. He was complicit. While he thought he was juggling both threats, maintaining enough control over the situation to keep everyone safe (mostly Sherlock, but the rest of the world as well), he had allowed the threat to escalate.

In which Mycroft is not an easy man to know and an even harder one to look after. Fortunately, Lestrade is diligent and determined, and knows how to pay attention to people. Where family comes with obligations, but it also cares, even when you don't want them around. Where life mostly goes as expected, but sometimes has unanticipated joys.

Notes

This was started after watching the Final Problem, after s4 ended with that scene of everyone visiting Eurus. To me, it felt like a lot of time must have passed, something must have changed for Mycroft to go from fear and distrust to visiting with family. Also, there was so much left open-ended in regards to the Holmes family background, to Sherlock and Mycroft’s childhoods and how Eurus had affected them (both knowing and not knowing), that I desperately wanted to work out my feelings about the finale in story form. Honestly, given that this was 54K written 6 weeks (and my last story was 11K written over 14 months),
I am amazed at this level of productivity.

Of course, I couldn’t have done it on my own. An incredibly huge thank you belongs to Misbegotten, who gave constant feedback and happily listened to me blather about Mycroft and Lestrade and all my opinions on them, and then beta-read. Another huge thank you to Celli who literally suffered hundreds of emails as I wrote paragraphs here and there, who asked questions about motivations and characterisation until it crystallised in my head. Those two wonderful people have offered so much enthusiasm and support over the last six weeks that I can’t say thank you enough.

I also want to thank Tchomet for agreeing to britpick. Getting a request from a virtual stranger can be a bit much, especially when it’s a story this long, but I didn’t feel comfortable posting without having it checked. Having a britpick come back with such enthusiasm and such precise and perfect suggestions was more than I’d hoped for. Thank you to King touched for a second beta-read, because a fresh set of eyes is wonderful for a long story (especially when it’s in a fandom as prolific and responsive as Sherlock fandom), and for fixing a paragraph that refused to sit well.

As a last note, I decided to use the Mature rating because while there are a few explicit mentions of sex, it’s a very tiny part of the story. Literally less than 2% of the word count features sex, and that’s only if you include the fade-to-black scenes as well. Rating it Explicit seemed like it would give a false impression of the story.

See the end of the work for more notes.

There are very few things Mycroft regrets. Which is not to say that every decision was easily made or clearly right, but when it comes to errors of judgement, things he would do differently if he had the opportunity, he can count them on one hand.

The fact that they inevitably involve Sherlock is indisputable. It’s an obvious pattern, but it’s within his power to correct.

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The first step is to meet with Lady Elizabeth Alicia Smallwood. There is no point pretending that there is any neutral ground between them, so he attends a meeting in her office.

Her office reflects its occupant: well presented, orderly and understated. Lady Smallwood is usually an ally, and one of the few people Mycroft respects. He wouldn’t say that he likes her, but he finds her far less tedious than some of their mutual colleagues.

“Mycroft,” she says, as she leads him to the armchairs perched on one side of her office. “What is this about?”

“A reallocation of security measures.” Mycroft hands the files over to her. Most of it is electronic, of course, but the passwords and details of current security measures are also kept in hard copy.

He saw the surprise on her face when he walked in, when she saw the folder in his hand, the split second of curiosity and concern before she blinked and locked her reaction away. Regardless of what she suspects, she still takes the time to open the folder, to read and confirm the information before acting. “This has been part of your portfolio since you started. It was a condition of your
employment, I believe.”

“It was.” The acknowledgement doesn’t cost Mycroft anything. He had been at university, jumping through hoops to complete three degrees concurrently, and still bored and restless, when Uncle Rudy had suggested an interview for a mostly unofficial position. Protecting family had seemed important then, had been necessary in a way that it no longer is. “Circumstances have changed.”

From Lady Smallwood’s sympathetic frown, the fiasco at Sherrinford has already become common knowledge amongst certain clearance levels. There will be official reviews at some point, but Mycroft has no intention of being part of that committee if he can avoid it.

“I believe my judgement is compromised,” Mycroft says slowly, because compromised is a much kinder word than wrong. Faulty. Unreliable due to intimidation and fear. “I also believe the contained threat has reduced, and the potential threat is minimal.”

Lady Smallwood tilts her head and looks at the open file. The fluorescent light catches on her blonde hair, pulled up in a timeless chignon. Mycroft allows himself a moment, only a moment, to note the missed opportunity: he will never know this woman any better; he will be another person of interest listed on the file, another data set to observe for changes in behaviour. He will have slightly less privacy and far less ability to shelter Sherlock from consequences.

But Sherlock does not need his help. Sherlock is not that little six-year-old boy who refused to speak for months. Sherlock is not twenty-five and overdosing yet again. Sherlock has not needed his help for a long time.

And when Sherlock is involved, Mycroft makes mistakes. It would be best for all if he was not involved, so he will hand over the Holmes surveillance to someone competent. And objective.

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The second step is far easier. He requisitions a new mobile and finds a new flat. At times like these, he appreciates Anthea and her sheer efficiency. Arrangements are made -- furniture moved, security systems upgraded, drivers practising new routes -- and it’s all done with admirable speed.

It’s something of an indulgence. Sherlock’s visited his home twice in the last six years, and if Mycroft did not call Sherlock, Sherlock would never bother to contact him. By all probability, it’s unnecessary and achieves nothing.

But it feels good to close the deadbolt on his new front door.

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Hindsight is a beautiful thing, if rather impractical. In hindsight, Mycroft can recognise that they attended the circus twice as children, once when Sherlock was three and once when he was eight. It was the first visit that had scared Mycroft, the greasepaint-covered faces hiding who was really there, the lack of logic as so many clowns streamed out of a car. The laughter and pantomime that Mycroft didn’t understand when he was so used to understanding everything.

Sherlock had loved it. At three, he had laughed and cackled over their antics. Beside him, Eurus had been a toddler with a blue ribbon in her hair, sitting on Mummy’s lap and staring at Sherlock.

At eight, Sherlock had been quiet and sharply unimpressed, until the clowns tripped over their own feet and fell into a messy sprawl. He chuckled, but it lacked the sheer joy Sherlock had once possessed.
Afterwards, Sherlock had said, “You’re supposed to watch the show, Mycroft.”

“Clowns don’t interest me.”

“You’re scared of them.” There was something gleeful in Sherlock’s tone, spiteful and pleased with himself. “You avoided looking at them. Your hand tightened on your popcorn every time you did.”

Then Sherlock paused, watching him with open curiosity. “It’s only acrobats in costume. Why would you be scared?” and for a moment, there were echoes of Eurus, curious and cool and ‘Aren’t you scared of heights?’

“Don’t be smart, Sherlock. I’m the smart one.”

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In hindsight, he should have realised the clown suggested Sherlock and Sherlock’s memories of Mycroft’s childhood fears. If it had been Eurus it would have been fire and locked doors and heights.

In hindsight, he should have realised that Eurus was conditioning him as much as everyone else. That a few minutes online was enough to identify threats to national security and find traces of a consulting criminal brilliant and mad enough to willingly follow her lead. Disasters had been averted and lives had been saved, but it was a breadcrumb trail for Mycroft to follow. It was a reason for Mycroft to talk to her, a slow escalation in the type of presents she asked for, a sign of good behaviour so he could convince himself that letting Moriarty and Eurus meet was a contained threat, a calculated risk.

He had worried about Sherlock and stood guard over Eurus, and been worse than useless in the end. He was complicit.

He had been outsmarted. While he thought he was juggling both threats, maintaining enough control over the situation to keep everyone safe (mostly Sherlock, but the rest of the world as well), he had contributed to the threat. He had allowed it to escalate.

In hindsight, it’s clear. It takes several hours explaining it to the review committee before they understand but at least Lady Smallwood asks relevant questions. Right now, he needs to be thankful for small mercies.

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“Finally.” Gregory Lestrade says it like a joke, rubbing the back of his neck and standing up. He rolls his shoulders, a result of sitting in the intentionally uncomfortable chairs in the Diogenes foyer. People are not encouraged to wait; the foyer is intended to be decorative only.

There is a firm policy that members will not be disturbed for guests. So Lestrade sat and waited. Really, that tells Mycroft enough. It’s not urgent. Sherlock is in no immediate danger.

Which makes this a good opportunity to update Lestrade on the current contact procedures. Lestrade shrugs the last of the tension from his shoulders. “You’re a hard man to find.”

“Thank you.” Mycroft smiles and makes no attempt to pretend it’s genuine.

“I tried your mobile, but it’s disconnected. Same with your office number.”

“My direct line changed.” Mycroft fishes a blank card from his pocket and picks up a pen from the
foyer desk. “If you have any future concerns about Sherlock, this will be the best number to call.”

Lestrade takes the card. He stares at the number for a moment too long. Mycroft’s handwriting is clear; there should be no confusion about the numbers.

“Is this your new number?” Lestrade asks, dark eyes watching him closely. Most people wouldn’t think to question the assumption. But Gregory Lestrade is careful, meticulous and methodical. He performs his job well through consistent and rigorous effort. It’s a small pity that Mycroft probably won’t deal with him again.

“No, but it is the relevant number if my brother needs assistance.” Mycroft hooks his umbrella over his arm, a nice, clear signal that this conversation should be finished now.

“I tried to get in contact earlier. You sounded--” and Lestrade pauses, finally noticing Mycroft’s umbrella and coat. “Maybe we should talk about this in your car? If you’re going somewhere, I don’t want to hold you up.”

There’s nowhere Mycroft needs to be, but if Lestrade is going to insist on talking further, the other club members would not appreciate conversations in the foyer. “That would be better.”

Lestrade waves a hand and says, “Lay on, Macduff.”

Mycroft almost smiles. So few people reference that quote correctly.

He remembers meeting Lestrade years ago, same boyish good looks, same thick grey hair -- although it had been a shade darker then -- same odd mix of deferential respect and staunch belief that no one was above the law. It had been at the Yard, a rare visit for Mycroft to assess the officers in person, to have a clear idea of who Sherlock was dealing with. Lestrade hadn’t been insufferably stupid; he’d defended Sherlock’s results while acknowledging the flaws in his personal skills. He had proved himself a tolerable option for Sherlock to befriend.

There had been a moment in that early acquaintance, a brief glance from Lestrade that had been sly and interested, suggesting momentary attraction. It had been intriguing to consider. Apart from Lestrade’s superficial appeals, he was also confident and self-aware. He could acknowledge that he wasn’t the smartest man in the room and not take offence at that fact. In Mycroft’s experience, most people didn’t recognise a higher intelligence -- they secretly believed they were equally clever, that there was some trick being played, that it somehow didn’t count. Most people bristled or rationalised.

But those same qualities made Lestrade an ideal liaison for Sherlock and New Scotland Yard. Sherlock needed someone who could respect intelligence without being awed by it, and the current foray into detective work might end badly with a different officer. Lestrade was far too valuable keeping Sherlock occupied to risk the inevitable childish jealousy that would spring from Mycroft encroaching too close to Sherlock’s life.

The fact that Lestrade had been married then hadn’t weighed into his decision. It might have, if he considered it for more than a second.

Now, the tan line from Lestrade’s missing wedding ring has faded entirely and Sherlock’s reputation with the Met -- and his general fame -- will ensure he continues his work. Those previous objections no longer hold weight, but the opportunity has passed by. Lestrade is single and dating -- hair neater, nails well-tended, all those other tiny details that point to a generally heightened attention to his appearance -- and Mycroft has known him for years. Mycroft is not the sort of person who improves upon acquaintance.
“Look,” Lestrade says awkwardly, once the silence in the back of the car has dragged on interminably. “Are you okay?”

“I’m well, thank you. You?”

“I’m fine,” Lestrade replies, mostly out of habit. “Sherlock didn’t go into the details, but--”

“But he wanted you to check on me,” Mycroft finishes for him. “I do appreciate the efficiency of outsourcing these conversations. Do let my brother know I’m fine.”

“Most people wouldn’t be, after going through something like that.”

“I am not most people,” Mycroft replies sharply. He should be more polite. After all, this has nothing to do with Lestrade. “Tell my brother that I am fine. Or tell him that I am a shaking, sobbing mess. Tell him whatever you wish.”

The driver takes a few turns. Lestrade stares out the window as if he recognises the streets leading to the Yard. “The way I see it,” Lestrade says, giving Mycroft a wry look, “a man like you doesn’t have a lot of friends. There’s not many who’d listen with a sympathetic ear and not look for some advantage. But if you want to talk to someone, call me.”

“It’s a very kind offer, Detective Inspector.” The car slows to a stop. There’s the click of doors unlocking. “It won’t be necessary.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but for a pair of geniuses, you and Sherlock lack basic coping skills. You should talk to someone.”

The attitudes of the modern police force: the importance of trauma risk management, the careful monitoring of emotional health and welfare of a witness. As prosaic as it is, Lestrade clearly believes in it. “Rest assured, I will be monitored and subject to psychological scrutiny for months, if not years, to come. If I need to see a qualified professional, I will.”

Lestrade frowns but at least he opens the car door. “It’s not the same thing,” he says as he gets out.

“The appropriate measures will be taken. Goodnight.”

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The most annoying part of Sherlock’s mad pantomime is the damage to Mycroft’s belongings. The paintings were stained and have been sent for professional restoration. His entire collection of Hensley films have been cut and spliced with home movies. Not the other films -- thankfully Sherlock left the rest of the film noirs alone -- but Mycroft wonders at the wilful destruction. Sherlock knew his tastes well enough to know he’d be watching a Hensley film, and surely Sherlock would have seen the movement of dust along the shelves, seen which movie Mycroft would watch next.

Now his favourite films, all of them, have to be carefully reconstituted, matched to the unordered stack left in a white envelope on his bed. Sherlock even scribbled a smiley face on it.

It’s time-consuming to fix, but Mycroft is more than capable of matching the scenes himself. He could purchase new copies but these were his. His brief escape to a world where everyone dressed well and spoke precisely. He loved those movies as a child, grey rainy days spent watching Detective Hensley save the dame and arrest the bad guy, or sometimes save the double-crossed PI and shoot the femme fatale. The clues made sense; the stories were always logical and safe. No one hugged, no one shared their deepest feelings, and any sign of affection was hidden in wry
wisecracks. Tears were always a sign of emotional manipulation. It was a fictional world that made intuitive sense to Mycroft.

Sherlock found them dull. He’d complain about them, call them boring and demand a story be read to him instead. Mycroft would grudgingly comply, at least until Sherlock was almost five and Eurus taught him to play the violin. Then the pair of them would play for hours; wander around the house with small violins in their tiny hands, playing snippets of songs, making up the tune between them.

Whenever they were trapped indoors, the violins would come out and the endless playing would start, loud enough that Mycroft couldn’t hear the dialogue. The solution was to memorise the films. Then he could turn the volume down and listen to his younger siblings create music as Detective Hensley saved the day.

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“Personal call, line three,” Anthea says, typing on her tablet. She’s scanning the incoming messages, searching for references to Baghdad. They have an hour window before the decision will have to be made; any additional information will be useful.

There’s nothing they can do right now but wait, so Mycroft might as well take the call. It’s a London number, so he forgets his first assumption -- his parents calling to argue for visitations again, calling for something he honestly can’t approve, and Lady Smallwood has no intention of agreeing to yet -- and wonders who it is. Sherlock doesn’t call unless he has a case that directly involves Mycroft, and Mycroft would know if there were any current mysteries to be solved. John Watson wouldn’t call unless it was an emergency, and in that case, Lady Smallwood would have informed him. (Mycroft hopes she would. If Watson attempted to contact him, she would probably allow him the relevant information before the call came through.) There isn’t anyone else who would claim a personal relationship with Mycroft.

Mycroft picks up the phone. “Mycroft Holmes.”

“Hi, it’s Greg,” Lestrade says.

Not what Mycroft expected. “How did you get this number?”

“Called the number you gave me, told them I had to talk to you. Said it was personal but wasn’t about Sherlock.”

Mycroft doesn’t mean to, but he lets out a snort of amusement. He hasn’t heard something so patently ridiculous in weeks. “Our interactions have always revolved around Sherlock. It is always about Sherlock.”

Anthea raises one dark brow in question, but she only glances away from her screen for a moment. Mycroft shakes his head in answer: it’s nothing urgent, they don’t need to inform Lady Smallwood. It’s a momentary distraction but Mycroft currently has the time to deal with it.

Anthea looks back at the tablet in her hand. She walks out of his office still watching the screen.

“I gave Sherlock my word. Said I’d keep an eye on you.”

“And what precisely are you looking for?” Lestrade is diligent and honourable. He owes a lot of cases to Sherlock’s help, has a fair number of commendations due to it. He owes Sherlock and if this has been promised, Lestrade will continue until he’s satisfied. It will be easier to jump this hurdle now than risk forced interruption in his life. It could be inconvenient later. “Never mind. I assume you want to meet in person?”
“We can talk on the phone if you want.”

Mycroft feels his face twist in disgust. The phone is a useful tool when necessary but he can read people so much better when he can see them. Besides, the more inconvenient he makes this conversation, the less likely Lestrade will keep pursuing the matter. “I’d prefer not to. You’re at the Yard. Come to my office when you’re finished for the day.”

“How did you know—” Lestrade starts to ask, as if it isn’t perfectly obvious from the background noise. “No, don’t want to know. How late will you be there?”

“Current estimate is three a.m., although that is a best case scenario.”

Lestrade lets out a low whistle. “And I thought the hours here were horrible.”

“They do leave something to be desired. If only security threats would occur within a nice nine to five time frame.”

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It’s unfortunate that Lestrade arrives at 8:23pm, just after the surveillance photos come through. “Sit.” Mycroft points to a chair, the furthest one from him. “Don’t speak.”

“Woof.”

“Did you just...” Mycroft looks up from the blueprints displayed on his computer screen -- four floors, multiple vulnerable points, twenty-three staff currently in the building, room and corridor references assigned for this excursion only -- but he did just hear Lestrade... “Bark?”

“If you’re going to treat me like a trained dog,” Lestrade says with a shrug. Now that Lestrade has Mycroft’s attention, he sits with an expression of vague amusement.

“Leave, or be quiet. This is time sensitive.” Mycroft ignores the other end of his office, and pulls up the photographs. He works through them one by one, looking for inconsistencies and unexplained movement. He marks the relevant pictures to Anthea and then picks up his phone. “North stairwell, second landing, windowsill’s been replaced. Possible pressure trigger. Third floor, east-west corridor, room 138. The plaster on the south wall has been repainted. Ground floor, fire exit 2, behind the extinguisher.”

Mycroft flicks through the pictures again. He’s not certain but better to be safe than sorry. “Check the rooftop stairs as well. Most likely it’s staff sneaking out to smoke, but check it anyway.”

He hangs up the phone, leaves Anthea to deal with the rest of the conference call. She’s more than capable of organising the team leaders from here. She’ll contact him if he’s needed. Best case scenario: the teams will be successful and nothing will happen. Worst case: he’s going to be here most of the night drafting diplomatic responses and talking to far too many people.

“Is it safe to ask what that was about?” When Mycroft looks up, Lestrade is leaning forward in his chair, poised for action if needed. Unnecessary in this case.

“It’s not an immediate threat,” Mycroft replies. “Don’t worry about it.”

“So that wasn’t you directing a bomb squad? Because explosions are the sort of thing I worry about.”

Mycroft wonders if his surprise shows. “Not on British soil,” he allows, which reveals more than he
should but is still safe enough.

“Is it okay, me being here?” Lestrade asks, at least showing that he understands the scale of Mycroft’s concerns. “If things are about to go pear-shaped, we can catch up some other time.”

Catch up makes this sound casual and done by choice, rather than obligation and debt. It’s an interesting choice of words.

“There’s nothing I can do now.” Mycroft has done what he can, but he can’t lead the teams. He can’t shoot the guns for them. Recent events have made that abundantly clear. “But I need to stay until we know the results.”

“So I’ll read about it in tomorrow’s papers?”

“I hope not,” Mycroft says sincerely, because if it ends up in the paper in any way there will be far worse consequences. There will be many, many phone calls to be made. He stands, straightening his cuffs, and walks over to the tea set and glasses waiting on the small table beside Lestrade’s chair. “Would you like a drink? Tea, coffee?”

“Water for me. Caffeine this late at night and I’ll never sleep.”

Mycroft doesn’t have trouble sleeping. He usually feels that he doesn’t have enough hours to sleep; he refuses to squander them on insomnia. He pours tea for himself and a glass of water for Lestrade, and sits in the other visitor’s chair. He lets the silence build until Lestrade feels obligated to fill it.

“Look,” Lestrade says, placing the glass back on the table. It seems to be a habitual way of starting sentences he doesn’t want to say. “I wanted to make sure you were okay. After everything that happened.”

“You promised Sherlock you’d check on me, I do remember.”

“Yeah, but–” Lestrade starts and then stops himself. He sighs and rubs a hand across his eyes. “You don’t make this easy, do you?”

“I’ve told you I’m fine. There are others already monitoring my response. I don’t see how I could possibly make this easier for you.”

“Not that. I meant, talking. Getting to know someone.”

“That’s hardly necessary.” Mycroft swirls the tea in his cup. For a moment, he yearns for sugar. For sweet milky tea, the way he’d have taken it as a child. However he is an adult and he takes his tea with lemon. “You agreed to check on me. I am fine. Your obligation is fulfilled and your promise has been kept.”

Lestrade rubs a hand over his mouth, muttering something about being saved from Holmeses. “I’m not here because Sherlock asked me. I’m here because it was so bad that Sherlock Holmes asked me to watch out for the brother he usually can’t stand.”

The ‘usually’ feels like a kind lie. If it isn’t Christmas -- a holiday Sherlock enjoys beyond all logical reason -- they can’t spend five minutes together without bickering.

“I went for a pint with John last night,” Lestrade continues, “and he told me what happened.”

“Those events are classified,” Mycroft says sharply.
Lestrade doesn’t even blink. “Which is why he’s not writing it up in his blog. But he wanted to get the story out and his last therapist shot him, so he told me.”

“All of it?” Mycroft asks, despite knowing that Watson’s retellings are detailed and precise, if given to a little hero worship of Sherlock’s mental abilities and possessing rather twee titles.

“I think so. All that he knew first hand, at least.”

Mycroft considers sending Lestrade away. He considers telling the whole sorry story and trying to justify his actions, or lack of. He considers confessing that it was his fault, his short-sighted arrogance, his false sense of security; that without him the whole debacle might never have occurred. At the very least, it might have taken Eurus years longer to arrange.

“I wasn’t a very athletic child,” Mycroft says, choosing an easier truth to disclose. “I was scared of heights, scared of falling out of trees.”

Instead of questioning the change in topic, Lestrade says, “Reasonable fear if you ask me.”

“Sherlock and Eurus would climb trees, climb anything they could, really. I would watch them because I was too scared to join in.” He can remember it all too clearly, standing on the ground, watching the branches to spot Eurus’ pigtails and Sherlock’s messy curls. The way Eurus would lead them to the tallest trees and wait for Sherlock to suggest climbing. The way that she would encourage him to climb higher and higher. “I always thought they were going to fall. No, I always thought Sherlock was going to fall. I never looked at Eurus and worried for her. I always worried for Sherlock.”

“Makes sense.” When Mycroft raises a questioning eyebrow, Lestrade offers half a smile and says, “He was the slowest of the three of you, right? He’d be the most vulnerable. You know, thinking of Sherlock as the stupid one is the weirdest part of this whole thing.”

Part of Mycroft wants to defend Sherlock: he is still smarter than the vast majority of London. But if he lets himself stop telling this story, he’ll never start again. “After Redbeard, after Victor Trevor disappeared and no one could make Eurus talk about it, she started drawing. Pictures where Sherlock was crossed out, where he was lying in a coffin. Imagine it, a child playing with pencils, carefully colouring in Sherlock’s gravestone. Singing to herself as she did it.”


“Our parents tried. Had her evaluated by two different psychiatrists, who both believed that she was still processing the disappearance of Victor, that the focus on death was a way of accepting what had happened and the concept of mortality. One said it was her fear of losing Sherlock in a similar way that caused the drawings. The other said it was her first exposure to death and loss, and she hadn’t yet conceptualised the true difference between alive and dead.”

“So in other words, she was smart enough to fool the docs.” Lestrade takes a slow breath in, clearly contemplating his next words. “It’s rare enough but it happens. Creepy as anything to find the murderer’s some teenager who has no idea why killing someone isn’t good.”

“You’ve seen it?”

“Only twice, thank God. First time was a twenty-year-old who strangled his girlfriend, just to see what it felt like. Second time was a kid, twelve at the time, who killed a boy three years younger because he wanted his schoolbag.” Lestrade shakes his head, as if he can shake away the memories. “It sticks with you. And when you see the interview footage, or worse, if you’re the one in the room,
you can’t forget how wrong that feels. To look in their eyes and see there’s a piece missing.”

“That piece is called humanity, I believe. Or compassion.” Mycroft allows himself a wry smile.

“Although I’m hardly one to talk.”

Lestrade tilts his head, eyes narrowing. “There is a difference between aloof and odd, or in
Sherlock’s case downright rude, and that. It’s a big difference.”

Mycroft nods, conceding the point. He has never clung to psychiatric labels the way Sherlock has.

“Did John mention the fire?”

Nodding, Lestrade pours himself another glass of water. It’s a smooth motion, confident and certain,
accustomed to a watching audience. A motion he uses when interrogating suspects. Mycroft wonders
what Lestrade suspects of him. “After she started calling him Drowned Redbeard, Sherlock...”

For a moment, the memories are stronger than he is. For a moment, he remembers that song being
sung all night long, the old hearths and chimneys echoing Euris’ high-pitched voice and Sherlock
crying, so terribly upset. He remembers lying in his own room, listening and not knowing what to
do. He’d never been good at emotions, never quite trusted that he could understand the nuances well
enough to navigate those illogical twists and turns. So he lay there, listening to the song lyrics.
Trying to see the answer Euris said was there. It made no sense, but it felt like the answers were
only just out of reach. It felt like learning calculus and differentiation, like a few sentences of
explanation from Euris would align it into understandable patterns. But Euris had said, “The answer
is the song. Only Sherlock can solve it,” and Mycroft wasn’t clever enough to solve it alone. He
couldn’t fix it, so Sherlock was crying while Mycroft waited for someone else to intervene.

“Mycroft?” Lestrade asks. His voice is soft but it still startles Mycroft a little, drags him away from
being twelve and hearing Sherlock’s bedroom door open, being petrified and holding his breath until
Mummy spoke, until she hushed and soothed Sherlock and took him to their room for the night.

Mycroft’s hands are tight around his cup. He forces himself to loosen his fingers, to set it down
before something gets damaged.

“When we realised he was dead,” Mycroft says, voice cold but it might be the only way he can tell
this story, “Sherlock stopped talking. He did as he was asked. He ate, dressed, slept as long as
someone told him to but he wouldn’t talk. He’d sit and stare into empty space or he’d wander the
gardens. He wouldn’t pick anything up or look at anything, wouldn’t run around to explore, he’d just
walk aimlessly and be back by supper.”

When Mycroft looks away from Lestrade’s concerned eyes, his whole expression exuding sympathy
and care, he can see Euris as she was back then. Brown hair caught in two pigtails, denim skirt with
dark blue top, fascinated eyes watching Sherlock. Too bright and too interested. He can hear her
saying, “It’s not permanent, Mycroft. It’s a broken bone. He’ll heal into a different shape.”

“Different shape?” Lestrade asks, confused and Mycroft realises he spoke aloud. If he was the type
of man to flush with embarrassment, he’d be bright red right now.

“That was what she said. That Sherlock would heal like a fractured bone. There is always a sign of
the break; it’s always identifiably different from the original. A different shape, permanently
changed. She was right. He was never the same child.” Mycroft flattens his hand against the chair’s
armrest. He doesn’t allow himself to reach for the cup. “After that came the drawings.”

“And?”
Mycroft dislikes being questioned. He especially dislikes vague questions, at least when they’re directed at him. “And what?”

“You mentioned the fire earlier. What happened?”

At any other time, Mycroft might applaud Lestrade’s instincts. He pays attention to people, recognises when a suspect avoids a topic. He is not so fond of that skill right now. “She set the fire.”

“And?”

“Sherlock was sleeping in a bed in our parents’ room, since he wasn’t talking. They were in the eastern wing. The children’s rooms were in the western wing. That’s where the fire was set.”

“So a tiny psychotic genius trapped herself in a fire? Was she supposed to be rescued?”

“She went outside to wait.” Mycroft takes a deep breath and pushes away memories of smoke and heat; the feel of a warm doorknob in his hands, refusing to turn; the noise of a fire burning, cracking the wooden frame of the house, so much louder than he’d have expected it to be. “She locked my bedroom door. I had to climb out the window.”

“And you were scared of heights,” Lestrade says slowly. “And she knew that, right?”

“Yes. Our parents asked if I was hurt. Eurus asked if I was still scared of heights.” Mycroft pauses, considering what to say next. This is the single most uncomfortable conversation Mycroft has ever had, and that includes every time he’s been trapped talking to the Prime Minister. It does not include his conversations with James Moriarty or Eurus, for obvious reasons.

“You think it was targeted at you?”

“I was quite sure. Although I don’t know if the goal was to kill me or to break me like Sherlock. My parents... They didn’t ascribe any real malice to it. Confusion and a lack of understanding, but they didn’t believe that she intended any harm.” Mycroft can feel the sneer on his face, an echo of his childhood disdain for the mental faculties of his parents. “Luckily, Uncle Rudy stepped in and convinced them it would be untenable to have her living in the same house. She needed constant supervision, for her own safety.”

Thankfully, Lestrade remains silent.

“I watched five people die, Inspector. More were killed, guards who were doing their jobs and never expected such treachery. I am very sorry for my role in it, for the choices I made that allowed it to happen.” Mycroft reaches for his cup, keeps his hand steady and his grip gentle. “But I’m not haunted by memories. I’m not losing sleep to nightmares. I am, for all functional definitions, fine.”

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He doesn’t expect to hear from Lestrade again, but a week later he calls. Mycroft is reading through the endless tedium of Cabinet meeting minutes -- terribly dull but essential to know -- so the call is a welcome distraction.

“Mycroft Holmes.”

“Hi. Look,” Lestrade says, voice gruff and angry, “is there any chance you know where your brother is right now?” The way he says ‘your brother’, the sharp emphasis in his tone, suggests there are a multitude of insulting adjectives Lestrade would like to insert between the words.
“He is being recalcitrant, I take it,” Mycroft replies, happily minimising his screen for a moment. “If it’s dangerous, I would suggest calling the number I gave you.”

“He’s stealing evidence from my crime scenes,” Lestrade says with a great amount of annoyance. Mycroft can sympathise. “So, no, not dangerous. He’s not at Baker Street, and I thought if you happened to know his whereabouts, I could strangle him now instead of later.”

“No longer in my purview, I’m afraid.”

“Looking after your, the slightest pause as Lestrade edits whatever he was about to say, “baby brother is no longer in your purview?”

“The Holmes surveillance was reassigned. It’s no longer part of my portfolio.”

“Really?” Lestrade asks, losing the tone of annoyance. Now he sounds surprised, curious. A little disbelieving.

“More objective oversight was required.”

“But it was really part of your job?”

“I have said so.” On many occasions.

“Yeah, but I didn’t believe you. I always thought you were using the perks of your job to keep an eye on Sherlock. Keep him out of trouble as much as you could.”

Sometimes Mycroft wonders about the world around him. He can understand ignorance and disbelief when people are fed lies, but when they’re told the truth and still don’t believe it, he worries for the future of this nation. “That would be a blatant abuse of my position.”

“I guess it would be. I just... Didn’t think the government really cared about Sherlock Holmes.”

“Given the lengths that we are required to go to in order to keep one sibling imprisoned, there is some concern around the other.”

“Huh,” Lestrade says, mostly to himself. For a moment, Mycroft listens to the background sounds -- the echo of carpeted steps, the voices of other people further away. Clearly, Lestrade has stepped into a meeting room for this call. Somewhere with solid walls where he can pace without being seen. Finally there’s a sigh of defeat. “Don’t worry then. He’ll return the evidence eventually. Just got overexcited at the idea of twins.”

“Identical twins?” Mycroft asks, already thinking that there are very few advantages gained from having a genetic duplicate when committing murder.

“Apparently it’s never twins, except this case has them.”

“Were there multiple methods of murder? Stabbing and blunt force trauma, perhaps?”

“Still waiting on the ME report. Why?”

“Having a genetic duplicate offers very few advantages for murder. Either one committed the crime, planning for DNA evidence to convict the other, or they both did. If it’s the former, you’ll have one method of murder and both twins claiming innocence, but one will try to undermine the other’s alibi. If it’s the latter, there will be two different attacks which only killed in combination.”

Lestrade paces. Mycroft hears it in his breathing pattern. “Why would that help?”
“Both twins would be able to beat a polygraph, because neither killed the victim. They can honestly say that and mean it. If it gets to trial, both lawyers will argue that their client wasn’t responsible for the death, that their actions alone would have only been assault. You’ll struggle to even manage a successful manslaughter charge.”

The line is silent for a while. Mycroft brings the minutes up on his screen. They have to be read eventually. He might as well make use of this time while Lestrade processes.

He’s reading the second page when Lestrade clears his throat. “Sometimes the two of you make me feel obsolete.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mycroft replies. “You are highly useful in your role. Each to their best utility.”

“Did you just call me a tool?”

“A useful one,” Mycroft clarifies.

Lestrade snorts. “I don’t think you meant for that to sound as patronising as it did.”

“I was utterly sincere,” Mycroft replies. “Police work is about more than solving the crime. It involves gathering evidence to prove it, ensuring justice is delivered in court, talking to victims and witnesses.”

“And paperwork. Endless, endless paperwork.”

“It would be a waste for me or Sherlock to spend our time doing that.”

“I’m good for the grunt work that you couldn’t be bothered with?” Lestrade asks. His tone is dry but Mycroft suspects he’s being teased.

“You solve murders. I doubt a dead body cares if it takes you an extra few weeks to find the killer,” Mycroft replies, enjoying the verbal sparring more than he usually does. “Whereas my role demands a faster intellect. Otherwise there is the occasional war or terrible trade agreement.”

Lestrade sounds as if he wants to laugh. “And what’s Sherlock’s excuse?”

“Sherlock doesn’t have one. But forcing him into meaningful employment would be unnecessarily cruel to those forced to work with him.”

This time, Lestrade does laugh. It’s not a common reaction to Mycroft’s sense of humour. “Hang on a minute.” There’s the sound of a door opening, the background conversation of a busy open-plan office. Mycroft returns to reading the minutes as Lestrade closes a door and then logs into a computer. His office, most likely. A few more keystrokes, the click of a mouse -- and Mycroft has to stop himself physically rolling his eyes at the sheer petty short-sightedness of partisan politics -- and then Lestrade says, “Huh.”

“The ME report came through.”

“Cause of death was a combination of blunt force trauma to the skull and a stab wound to the abdomen. Thanks.”

Mycroft feels the surprise on his face. He’s accustomed to a professional thank you at the office, an unthinking verbal tic, an ingrained habit of good manners. Being thanked outside of that environment always comes with sarcasm. But Lestrade was genuine. “You’re welcome.”
“I’d better go,” Lestrade says, sounding pleased. “I need to text Sherlock.”

“To return evidence?”

“Not as such.” Lestrade sounds very pleased with himself now. “I’m thinking: cheers for help but we’ve got it figured out. Thanks anyway.”

The image of Sherlock’s scandalised affront at receiving such a message is a thing of beauty. If Mycroft were a better man, a more forgiving man -- if he could be around Sherlock without regressing to somewhere between the ages of twelve and seventeen -- he wouldn’t take such pleasure in the thought. He shouldn’t, but he does.

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Life continues as expected, until Sherlock flounces into his office, coat swishing behind him. “You’re coming to John’s birthday party,” he announces grandly.

“I most certainly am not.”

It’s the first time he’s spoken to Sherlock since their parents argued for visitations to Eurus. There’s been a silent truce. Mycroft doesn’t allow himself to review the surveillance information and Sherlock... Well, Sherlock hasn’t changed at all. Mycroft can see the grime of dirty streets and strange cases, the updraft of helicopter rotors in the fall of his messy curls. Regular visits to Sherrinford, then.

Lady Smallwood had asked if he wanted to have veto rights over his sister’s permitted visitors list. He’d told her it was probably better if he didn’t have any influence over the decision.

“You’d be dead if not for John,” Sherlock declares dramatically. “I would have killed you years ago. The least you can do is come.”

“The least I can do is absolutely nothing, brother mine,” he says because such conversational fallacies have always irritated him. As Sherlock well knows.

“It’s his birthday.”

“Many happy returns.”

“His wife is dead. Our sister nearly drowned him. Come to the party.”

“I fail to see how my attendance will make any difference to those facts.”

“Even you can spare a few hours.”

“I have work that needs doing.” Mycroft ignores Sherlock’s scoff at his clear desk; he cleared it the second he was told Sherlock was in the building.

“Just come, Mycroft.” Sherlock’s expressive face is both annoyed and pleading; he almost looks worried by Mycroft’s refusal. Usually, he looks relieved when Mycroft declines. “I promised John I’d invite you.”

That’s the heart of it. John Watson has made Sherlock invite him and forced this interaction. Sherlock doesn’t want to disappoint Watson, even if Watson’s reasons are base sentimentality. Sherlock cares about John, and Sherlock has promised.

As pointless as it is, Mycroft has spent too many years worrying about Sherlock’s happiness to stop
now. “I can manage ninety minutes. No more.”

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For Watson’s birthday, the Baker Street flat is decorated with coloured paper streamers in shades of blue and red and matching paper plates. There is a dubious punch served in flimsy plastic glasses. These arrangements seem to have mostly been the work of Mrs Hudson, who keeps walking through the crowd with plates of sausage rolls and deep-fried miniature spring rolls. In a small flat, it’s rather artful how she manages to take different routes but always, always avoids drifting close enough to have to offer him anything.

Mycroft promised Sherlock ninety minutes, therefore he will be staying despite the complete lack of food. He is perfectly capable of starving for thirty-seven more minutes; it’s his own fault for skipping lunch.

He swirls the pink punch in his glass. He has no intention of drinking it, but holding a glass or a bottle seems to be mandatory.

There are people from Watson’s surgery here, police from the Yard, and a wide variety of people that must have been Sherlock’s past clients. It’s an interesting mix of young and old, ordinary and somewhat strange, but Watson and even Sherlock are enjoying it. They’re both smiling, shaking hands, sometimes hugging, and generously imbibing the punch.

Lestrade has spent some time talking to Sherlock’s preferred Medical Examiner -- Molly Catherine Hooper, Mycroft remembers -- and a short-haired confident woman, who must be Harriet Watson, judging by the facial structure.

Mycroft has wished John Watson a happy birthday and given the required gift (“A Harrods gift certificate, Mycroft? You couldn’t think of anything more personal?” Sherlock had complained). He even thanked Sherlock for the invitation, in front of Watson. Then he let other well-wishers come through and had retired, with that obligatory plastic glass of punch, to stand between the desk and the window.

It’s the perfect location. Close enough to groups of people to look as if he’s paying attention to the conversation; not close enough that anyone bothers to talk to him directly. In a room this size, his height allows him to observe the party but against the tall windows, he doesn’t make much of an impression.

Food would be nice, but every time Mrs Hudson sees him from across the room, her smile gets tight and she weaves through a different group of people.

Across the room, Lestrade holds up his empty glass and escapes the conversation in search of a refill. When the glass is full, he wanders over towards Mycroft’s window. Mycroft takes another look at the group standing two feet from him, wonders which person, or persons, Lestrade knows. None of them are police -- a doctor, two nurses, a hairdresser, a plumber and... an insurance actuary -- but maybe Lestrade doesn’t know any of them yet. Mycroft suspects the redhead in the middle of the group has drawn Lestrade’s attention; he certainly paid attention when she shrugged her coat off and revealed the low neckline of her dress.

(If so, it’s a pity. She has a boyfriend overseas, and is hoping to be engaged by Christmas.)

Mycroft shifts the umbrella on his arm and moves the punch to his other hand. The umbrella is loaded -- it’s become habit to check that it’s loaded before he leaves home, or leaves work, or gets out of the car -- but it doesn’t feel reassuring in a room that so recently exploded behind him. Not that
any sign can be seen of that now. Sherlock has made sure the whole flat looks as if nothing ever happened.

Lestrade walks up to the left of the redhead, and then behind her, and then around the group. He stands beside Mycroft and says, “Contraband, tell no one,” and passes Mycroft a folded paper napkin.

It’s warm in Mycroft’s palm. He opens it to reveal three golden spring rolls. “I’m not sure you understand the depth of risk you’re taking here.”

“Warfare through catering. I can handle it.”

Mycroft waits until Mrs Hudson returns an empty tray back to the kitchen. He eats the first one, says, “Thank you very much,” and manages to swallow the second as she returns to the room. “You have my gratitude.”

“It’s just a snack,” Lestrade says, shrugging. His grin is too easy, his eyes a little too bright; he’s certainly been enjoying the punch. “You know, I’ve never seen her dislike someone so much before. I’ve dragged Sherlock out in handcuffs and she still offers me biscuits with tea.”

“It’s more than mutual,” Mycroft replies. Lestrade leans closer, scanning Mycroft’s face as if looking for the joke. “Mrs Hudson? Who doesn’t like Mrs Hudson?”

“I don’t.” Mycroft’s never hidden it. However he spends a good deal of his career being civil to people he finds abhorrent, so it usually only shows when he’s distracted and stressed.

“Why not?”

It’s a question that Sherlock would never ask. As far as Sherlock’s concerned, Mrs Hudson is one of the better aspects of living in London. Sherlock knows Mycroft doesn’t like most people, and he doesn’t care for any more information than that.

“Why not?” he echoes back and Lestrade shrugs.

“Yeah. You’ve got to have a reason. Even if it’s just that she talks too loud or walks too softly, there’s always a reason you can’t stand someone.” Lestrade looks around the room, and then adds, “It’s clear. She’s in the kitchen.”

Mycroft chews the last spring roll. It’s a little cool, but still tasty. After he swallows, he says, “Sherlock knew her husband.”

“Yeah. Something happened in America, right?”

“Sherlock knew him in London. He was one of Sherlock’s dealers.” Lestrade is quiet, but he was around long before John. He must remember Sherlock back before he got a grip on himself: dangerously thin, skin stretched across his cheekbones, the jittering of his hands. Lestrade might not know about the empty syringes left across the floor or the borderline overdoses, but he knows enough.

“I never knew,” Lestrade says, and the smile is gone. Honesty is such a terrible idea at social functions. Mycroft should know better.

“It doesn’t matter,” Mycroft says, using a partial truth. It doesn’t matter to anyone but him. He’s the
only one who looks around this building and thinks of the cost, the number of families mourning for 
addicts, the number of addicts paying to waste their lives away. “I have an unforgiving temperament. 
Just ask Sherlock.”

It’s the ideal opportunity for Lestrade to make his excuses and wander off to a different section of the 
party. He could find a more lively conversation partner, someone who enjoys crowds and pointless 
chatter. Not Mycroft, who is counting down the minutes until he can leave.

Lestrade stays until his glass is empty. It’s more than Mycroft expected.

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He certainly doesn’t expect Lestrade’s fast steps down the stairs at Baker Street, the sudden grip on 
his arm as Mycroft opens the car door. Mycroft glares at the fingers around his arm, and Lestrade 
pulls his hand back with an apologetic grimace.

“Sorry,” Lestrade says, still slightly out of breath. There’s the faint odour of illicit cigarettes, a 
backwards slide in his ongoing attempt to quit. “I went to get another drink, and started talking to 
John, and then I saw you leave.”

“Unfortunately, I couldn’t stay longer. Scheduling conflict.”

Lestrade pushes a hand through his hair, grey strands showing it’s been cut this week and it’s shorter 
than he’s accustomed to. “Look,” and again, that habitual stalling word, “I figure you probably have 
this already, but I had to change my phone -- the Thames and Sherlock, don’t ask -- so this is my 
new number.” He pulls out a business card from his trouser pocket. There’s a mobile number 
scribbled on the back. The ink is long dry and the corners are dog-eared from being in his pocket for 
at least three hours.

“I could have found it if I wanted to,” Mycroft replies.

“Yeah,” Lestrade agrees, smiling and leaning a little closer, “but this comes with the invitation to call 
me. Just... If you want to talk.”

It’s an awkward invitation from a usually confident man. The leaning in, edging closer, the hopeful 
smile: all signs of attraction. Of interest. Mycroft wonders if the man himself is aware of it. Is it a 
conscious motivation, or simply lowered inhibitions due to too much of that ghastly punch?

Mycroft takes the card with no intention of ever using the number. “Thank you for the offer.”

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He truly has no intention of calling. Mycroft planned to spend the night with a glass of good Scotch 
and a Detective Hensley film (now that his collection is intact once more). But the ritualistic 
indulgence feels lacking. He has a cigarette in the ashtray and a glass waiting on the table beside him. 
The film is playing without a single flicker of childhood memories.

Everything is as it should be, but Mycroft can’t relax. He can’t focus on the film and ignore the 
world. He keeps glancing at the door, wondering if he should open it. He keeps waiting for an 
unknown noise, or a familiar voice.

The security system here is state of the art. The interior decor may be sleek and iced silver, far too 
modern for Mycroft’s tastes, but a good security system had trumped other concerns. He’s checked it 
once tonight. He refuses to bring the controls up on his phone again. He will not sit here and be 
scared by ghosts that are safely locked away.
But his phone is in his hand and his thumb is hovering over the security app. Mycroft takes a breath and dials Lestrade instead.

“Hello,” Lestrade answers, friendly enough for the private number that would show on his phone.

“This is Mycroft Holmes. Am I interrupting?”

“If this is something to do with Sherlock, yes. I’m in the middle of a personal matter,” Lestrade says, only half joking. It’s Saturday evening so Mycroft can’t begrudge the man wanting some peace; Sherlock is many things but he is not peaceful. “But if it’s you, I’m only watching Indiana Jones. I’ve seen it before.”

“Novelty is not the only value to a film,” Mycroft replies. “Sometimes the familiar is more engaging.”

“Spoken like someone who has a collection,” Lestrade says, guessing but guessing well. “Indiana Jones? Bond?”

“Film noir, mostly.”

“Any particular favourites?”

Out of habit, he deflects the question. He’s found it’s usually best to keep conversations vague and imprecise; people never remember the details. “Just a few old movies. Nothing you’d know.”

“Try me.”

“You have a familiarity with the genre?”

“I’m a cop,” Lestrade says, which doesn’t entirely answer Mycroft’s question. “We all grew up watching heroes with badges.”

“Hmmm.” It does sound rather likely. There’s a high number of civil servants who watched Yes, Minister as children.

“Give me a good buddy action film any day, but I’ve seen a few of the old black and whites. And The Bill. Every copper seems to go through a stage of watching The Bill,” Lestrade says, warming to the topic. “So...?”

“So?”

“What’s your favourite?”

It’s hardly a state secret. It’s something most people don’t know, but there’s no actual reason to obfuscate the truth. “The Detective Hensley films. They were never terribly popular, but I rather liked them.”

“I think I know those.” Lestrade clicks the fingers of his dominant hand as he thinks. It should be a more annoying than it is. “They’re the ones with what’s-her-name? She played Velma, Velma -- Velma Lynn, that’s it!”

“Very good, Inspector.”

“You know, you could call me Greg.”

“I really couldn’t,” Mycroft says with a perfectly appropriate level of distaste. He’s never seen what’s
so terribly difficult about pronouncing a few extra syllables. Why so many names are shortened and minimised is beyond him. “Inspector Lestrade is quite adequate.”

“So said my last performance review.”

“I doubt that.” Mycroft swirls the glass of Scotch in his hand, considers the virtues of drinking it compared to the comfort of having something to hold and distract himself with. “Your clearance rate puts you in the 98th percentile of your rank. Your performance review should have been more complimentary.”

“I’d wonder about you knowing that,” Lestrade says, but he doesn’t sound concerned in the least, “but I’m just going to put it down to a Holmes thing.”

“I have a good memory, access to a lot of information, and I enjoy knowing things.”

“What kind of things?”

“All kinds.” There is a pause, which is to be expected. Too much honesty is becoming a pattern in his conversations with Lestrade. He associates Lestrade with Sherlock, natural given that Sherlock is the one thing they have in common, and he is allowing himself to talk as if Sherlock was in the room. As if he only had to wait for a pause, rather than factor in an allowance for processing time. Rather than remember that the world he perceives is not the world most people live in. “Apologies. That’s the sort of thing best not acknowledged.”

There’s an amused snort from Lestrade. “Still true, though.”

“But best not said.”

“What about Gregory?” Lestrade asks, jumping back to the topic. “As a form of address.”

“Allowable, although--” Informal, Mycroft thinks. Familiar. It suggests a closeness that Mycroft does not encourage with people. He learnt the lesson in university: peculiarities are excused more easily from afar. People find him less off-putting when they don’t believe they know him well. Some polite distance makes life easier for all concerned. “-- as I said, Inspector Lestrade is perfectly adequate.”

Lestrade sounds amused, although still stubborn enough not to surrender the point. “Standing on ceremony a little.”

“I have no objections to ceremony, formality or traditions. They are not inherently bad qualities. The world could do with a little more of them, if you ask me.”

“I’m fine with that as long as I don’t have to wear a tie.”

“And what did the humble tie ever do to you?”

“It’s a choking hazard. Believe me, it’s a disadvantage up close.” It’s easy to imagine: Lestrade attempting to subdue a suspect, a hand clenched around the tail and blade of a tie, the impact from a sudden forceful pull. “But the real problem is coffee.”

“Coffee?”

“Coffee, tea, hot drinks of any kind. Soup. My ties just have an irresistible attraction to hot liquids. No one looks professional in a tie dipped in coffee.”

“The practical solution is to wear a waistcoat.”
“No,” Lestrade replies, relaxed and confident. “Did that at the wedding. Not doing it again.”

“And if you get remarried?” Mycroft hears himself ask. It’s overly personal; Sherlock would accuse him of prying. But he is curious. “What then?”


The idea is horrifying. “And bare feet, one assumes.”

“It’d be fun. And no dashing off from the reception to make the honeymoon flight.”

“Instead, you’re sharing your honeymoon destination with every attendee.” Lestrade clearly hasn’t thought this through. Wedding receptions are a crowded cacophony of people: strangers making acquaintances, old family feuds resurfacing, emotions running revoltingly high. It is a maelstrom of social agendas and loud, thoughtless chatter. “Human nature suggests that those who suffer the inconvenience of international travel to attend a wedding will try to capitalise on their investment by extending it into a holiday.”

“But realistically, it’d be a small group. Might be nice having a few friends around when you finally emerge from the hotel room.”

Friends, Mycroft thinks with a mental shudder. Honestly. “Each to their own,” Mycroft allows magnanimously.

“Not your ideal?”

“There is no possible world in which that would be my ideal wedding.”


“Reasonably,” Mycroft allows. If it has to be done in front of a crowd, he might as well enjoy the maximum pomp and ceremony. Realistically, any marriage at this age would be strategic, or a necessary media distraction, so it would need to be expansive and expensive.

“No?” Lestrade is more observant than Sherlock credits him.

Mycroft’s personal ideal would be quiet, private, personal. It would not involve photographers and crowds and halls of witnesses. It would be unobserved and... heartfelt. That idea is so saccharine that Mycroft rolls his eyes. What a ridiculous notion. What a ridiculous conversation. “It’s purely hypothetical, trust me.”

“It’s not like I’ve got offers beating down my door.”

“But you enjoyed being married,” Mycroft replies. “You’re both attractive and a fundamentally decent man, which is a rare combination. It’s hardly a stretch of logic to assume you’ll marry again.”

Another pause. Mycroft decides to interrupt rather than wait for Lestrade to parse and reply to his statement of obvious facts. “I’ll let you return to your film,” Mycroft says. “Good evening, Inspector.”

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Dealing with his parents has always been easier with distance. He doesn’t object to his parents in
theory. His mother is clever, if unambitious enough to let her work stagnate simply to raise offspring; his father has always been a vague presence, slow to realise things but happy to be led to the answer. They’re well-meaning people, steadfastly in love and pleased with each other’s company in that small cottage. They are content and complete, and Mycroft wishes them well.

Preferably from a vast distance.

They only come into London a few times a year (birthdays and anniversaries, mostly). A few times a year Mycroft can manage to carve time out of his schedule and make lunch reservations. He’ll invite Sherlock and Sherlock will refuse, or be late, or run off to a case. So he always ends up spending nearly two hours making interested noises at stories of current gardening woes or cooking experiments. It’s dreadfully dull and the minutes drag into an eternal torture. But he does it because he is their son. They’re family, and family comes with obligations.

Those obligations used to include sitting at lunch and distracting his parents from the fact that Sherlock was too high to remember how door handles worked. After that, it was allowing Sherlock the choice to come, ensuring that they spent time with at least one child so Mummy wouldn’t show up on Sherlock’s doorstep and push her way inside.

Now it’s sitting here and listening to both of them compliment Sherlock. Sherlock, who is running late today, has apparently solved poverty, famine and war by visiting Eurus. Sherlock, who now is being described as such a sensitive, sensible boy, has been seeing her twice a week. Sherlock, always so clever and mature, has been trying to get Eurus to respond to the violin.

Mycroft keeps his left hand under the table, clenched but out of sight. He knows better than to trust his parents’ opinions. Even as a child he could see that while they loved each other completely, they loved their children from a skewed perspective. Sherlock is their little adult, always so precocious even if his experiments burnt holes in rugs or flooded the kitchen. Eurus has never meant anyone any harm, has always been misunderstood and too smart for her own good. Mycroft...

Mycroft is not entirely sure how they see him. Still a timid, cautious boy too fond of sweets. Intellectual and insecure, always trying to prove he’s smart. Always old enough to know better and always at fault when squabbling with Sherlock. He is not their smartest child, or most liked, but he is the one who makes reservations and turns up for lunch.

But he has limits. The idea of Sherlock and Eurus connecting over music, over anything, is terrifying. He has spent decades watching over Sherlock, talking about their fictional family dog and the myth of the east wind, trying to protect Sherlock from the things he doesn’t remember. Mycroft carried that weight because no one else in the family could.

Well, apart from Uncle Rudy. Occasionally, Mycroft misses his uncle. It was pleasant to have one logical adult in his childhood.

Not his parents, with their irrational refusal to discuss Eurus. They moved the family to that three bedroom cottage and all signs of Eurus were gone: her toys, her clothes, all photos and family movies edited and culled. Sherlock had the excuse of being too young to comprehend the relevant facts. Mycroft has never been able to excuse his parents for wilfully ignoring facts as they choose.

He is not a forgiving man. He has never claimed to be.

He is, however, reliable unlike Sherlock who waltzes in forty minutes late. He comments on being in the middle of an interesting study of bathroom mould. Knowing Sherlock, it’s absolutely true.

“Oh, don’t sigh like that, Mycroft,” Sherlock says, lounging back in his chair as if sitting upright is
far too much effort. “We still have time for your regular four courses.”

Mycroft would reply, but it’s far more satisfying to watch Mummy chide Sherlock for slouching, and watch Sherlock suddenly straighten. “Some of us have meetings scheduled this afternoon,” Mycroft says instead.

“Really?” Sherlock says with contemptuous disbelief. Usually, Mycroft keeps his calendar clear when their parents are visiting. Sherlock knows this, which is probably why he suffers no guilt when he avoids them.

“Sure you can’t get out of it?” Dad asks, as if Mycroft’s position regularly features meetings of no real importance.

“Really, Mike, you could have made an effort. We so rarely see you both.”

“Christmas is only months away,” Mycroft replies, ignoring the nickname that he abhors. He could stay for a while longer, but the signs are clear -- his father toying with his wristband, the tightness around his mother’s eyes and the tension in her knuckles -- that he won’t enjoy the coming conversation. “And I really must be off.”

As he walks over to claim his umbrella and coat, he hears his mother ask, “Sherlock, dear, how is Eurus?” and thinks it was a well-timed escape.

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Work is thankfully busy without being calamitous. No wars, no further hostage situations and no large scale attacks; he’s also been able to sidestep the ministerial debriefs. Any month where he doesn’t spend more than twenty minutes talking to the Prime Minister is a very good month.

Lady Smallwood stops by his office one Tuesday evening. She mentions the security has been upgraded at Sherrinford, necessary given the increase in visits.

“Has the guard structure significantly changed?” Mycroft asks. “Is it anything we should be implementing elsewhere?”

“Not immediately applicable,” Lady Smallwood allows, “but worth keeping in mind next time we have a Royal engagement overseas.”

“Good,” Mycroft says, and turns his attention back to the surveillance reports on his desk.

She continues to stand there. She does not look out of place at all. Most people are at least slightly uncomfortable in here. Mycroft prefers it that way.

“Was there something else?”

“Visitation requests from Mr and Mrs Holmes,” she says calmly. She doesn’t muddy the situation by referring to them as his parents. “We would increase security during and immediately after the visits, but it can be done.”

She’s not asking for his permission, but she clearly wants his opinion on the matter. Mycroft keeps his tone as politely cool and impersonal as possible. “As you think is best.” He doesn’t want to suggest approval or disapproval. His judgement is too compromised in this matter to allow any influence.

“And you?”
“Me?”

“Should I add you to the civilian visitors list? For personal visits.”

“No need.” Mycroft has never visited Eurus for personal reasons. It has always been necessary, a last resort in desperate times, and it has always had the dubious protection of professional distance. He has stood on the other side of that glass and made a deal with the devil, and told himself it was worth standing in the same room as that eerily cold stare. Anyone in his role would try all possible ways to protect British citizens and then negotiate as required.

Avoiding catastrophic death counts made him visit Eurus; thankfully, that’s no longer his responsibility.

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Another Saturday evening, another film and another phone call with Lestrade. This time, Lestrade calls him. “I wanted to ask a favour,” Lestrade says, which explains the unexpected call. “Since we’ve moved and staff numbers have dropped, the pool of available cars have shrunk.”

Mycroft lives in a world where secrets and favours are a currency of exchange. Given the lengths Lestrade has gone to on Sherlock’s behalf, and occasionally on Mycroft’s politely worded suggestions, a few return favours are owed. This was not the expected favour, but a small reallocation of departmental budgets is well within Mycroft’s abilities. “How many additional staff cars do you need?”

“What? No. I was just thinking this Friday, Baker Street, maybe I could get a lift?” Lestrade asks, a little sheepishly. “Cabs are impossible to get on Fridays, and I could get the tube, but I’m being lazy. I figured it’s only a few minutes out of your way, so... Yeah. A favour. If it’s not inconvenient.”

It’s such a small request it barely counts as a favour. “Give me the relevant times and I’ll arrange a car for you.”

“The invite said seven, so six-thirty should be good.”

“Easily done.”

“Thanks.” There’s a pause, a scratch of a pen as Lestrade notes something down. “So I’ll see you Friday.”

“I doubt it.”

“You’re not coming?” Lestrade asks, and he sounds mildly dismayed. “Why not? Are you hiding a deep-seated fear of housewarming parties?”

“I am not hiding a deep-seated fear of anything,” Mycroft replies. His fear of Eurus could hardly be called hidden. “But I am not invited, and therefore am not attending.”

“Sherlock texted the invites,” Lestrade says, carefully edging around the most likely conclusion: that Sherlock purposely did not invite him. “Maybe he hasn’t finished inviting people?”

To be fair to Sherlock, he hasn’t received any text messages from him. Or any calls. Sherlock doesn’t usually initiate contact, so Mycroft hadn’t thought anything of it. There was no reason for Sherlock to have contacted him, but it’s possible that a message was sent.

Unlikely, but possible. “He may not have my new number.”
“Should I give it to him?”

Mycroft can picture it too easily. Lestrade handing over a carefully copied number, probably on a fluorescent post-it note, and Sherlock sneering, “You can make the attempt, but don’t expect Sherlock to be gracious. It’s most likely he either already has it, or doesn’t want it.”

Lestrade chuffs out a small sound. “How often did you wish you were an only child growing up?”

“Only occasionally. I went through a stage of--” Mycroft stops himself from speaking, but it’s a moment too late. Lestrade has the instincts of a good police officer, and the right mix of approachability and determination to be very successful at interrogations. Mycroft knows he’ll follow the topic, question it until the rest unravels.

“A stage of what?” Lestrade asks, sounding convincingly casual.

It’s pointless trivia. Nothing important. “I read a lot as a child. For a while, I was quite enamoured of the idea of boarding school.” Routines and strict rules, official guidelines for how to behave and the obvious politics of group interaction in an enclosed environment. It had appealed to him, especially compared to the loose supervision of home.

“I always picked you as a public school type.”

It’s the accent, the manners, the structured clothing: all expected social signals of a certain range of government employees. Mycroft likes a well-fitted suit, he appreciates clear pronunciation, and civility allows societies to continue running smoothly. But most people look at the signifiers and make the simplest assumptions. “Day school only, I’m afraid. Although Sherlock was home-schooled until university.”

A hissed indrawn breath, then Lestrade says, “Sherlock? Home-schooled? Your poor parents.”

“It was less schooling, and more a case of letting him occupy his time as he wanted. It suited Sherlock well.” Sherlock has always responded better to freedom and choice than rules and structure. Sherlock has also never learnt to obey rules, and still childishly insists on doing as he pleases. But everyone had worried about him, and Sherlock had never insisted on external schooling as Mycroft had, so placating him was considered as important as keeping him occupied.

“That made you want to be an only child? That Sherlock could stay home?”

His adolescence was spent in books, philosophy and science, mathematics and literature. School was dull but necessary, and even then Mycroft knew eschewing all social niceties would limit future opportunities. “If I’d been an only child, I would have arranged to go to boarding school.”

“I think your parents might have had something to say about paying for that.”

“Do you really think our parents had to pay for any of our schooling?” Mycroft asks, amazed at the thought. “Scholarship standards are hardly challenging.”

Lestrade laughs. “For a moment there, I forgot I was talking to a Holmes. My mistake.”

“Try not to make it again,” Mycroft suggests, although most people insist on making that mistake continually.

“So what stopped you?” Lestrade asks. He does have a remarkable ability to remain focused on a query. “From boarding school?”
The truth is that Mycroft didn’t want to leave Sherlock alone. Sherlock was a harsh child after they moved, sharp and carelessly cruel, but he was still Mycroft’s brother. While he had no doubt that his parents loved Sherlock, he had no faith in their reasoning, their ability to recognise danger or to protect Sherlock from it if possible. They encouraged Sherlock, but they couldn’t keep up with him intellectually.

Mycroft hadn’t been able to do anything about Eurus; he hadn’t been clever enough to understand how she thought or what would make her do the things she did. But he was smarter than Sherlock, and he could stay three steps ahead of him, make sure he didn’t end up twisted and dangerous like Eurus. But he could only do that if he was there. He needed to stay close to monitor Sherlock and watch over him.

“I would have come home after a term and found Sherlock had blown up my room. I think Baker Street is a good example of how often explosions occur around Sherlock.”

“Usually not his fault, though,” Lestrade says easily. “Anyway, you should come on Friday. Seven o’clock.”

“That housewarming party seems rather delayed. Sherlock moved back in months ago.”

“It’s for John and Rosie officially moving in.”

“As opposed to unofficially living there as they have for the past how many weeks?” Mycroft doesn’t know the details, but it’s an obvious assumption. Where Sherlock goes, John Watson follows, and vice versa. Once the Baker Street flat was habitable, Watson would have returned as well. There were signs of him and his child all over the flat at his birthday party.

“Well, John’s finally given up his place so now it really is official,” Lestrade replies. He sounds needlessly amused by the situation. “They’re turning the upstairs rooms into a nursery and playroom for Rosie.”

“Mrs Hudson’s letting them rent both rooms?” There are only two rooms on the third floor. If both are being converted, Watson and Sherlock must be sharing the room off the kitchen.

Mycroft has always found sex to be physically pleasant, all chemical reactions and bodies, but ultimately meaningless after the moment. Sherlock, on the other hand, has always avoided it. He’s always hidden and run from it, unable to separate physical intimacy from emotional connection, sentimental enough to believe sex holds any meaning in and of itself. If Sherlock could change his mind for anyone, it would be for John Watson.

Even if Watson’s wife has only been in her grave for a handful of months.

Mycroft remembers them in Sherrinford, Sherlock collapsed against the wall and Watson standing in front of him. He’d never seen anyone so close to Sherlock, able to reach him in the midst of his distress, able to support Sherlock back to his feet. In that single moment, it had been undeniably clear which of them Sherlock would have to shoot. Mycroft’s death might pain Sherlock, but Watson’s loss would break him. In hindsight, he shouldn’t be surprised by this development.

“I think so.” If Lestrade understands the implied change in Sherlock’s relationship with Watson, he shows no sign of it. He is an observant man so he should have noticed, but everyone has their blind spots. “Come on Friday and see for yourself.”

“The fact remains that I haven’t been invited.”

“I’m inviting you. John said I could bring someone, so there’s your formal invite.”
“Hardly formal,” Mycroft replies primly.

“You want it engraved in gold leaf? Delivered with roses and chocolates?”

Mycroft blinks, reviewing the conversation in light of this sudden turn. He stares at the black and white image in front of him, searching for other signs of flirtation. Lestrade is always friendly and prone to easy amusement. He’s been more invested in talking to Mycroft -- and far more interested in talking about Mycroft -- than people usually are. Monitoring him on Sherlock’s request only goes so far, but sexual attraction would explain the rest.

“You could at least phrase it as a date if you’re asking me on one,” Mycroft replies, because Lestrade is attractive and far from stupid, which are his two non-negotiable qualities in a sexual partner. If he’s wrong, Lestrade can make a joke in response and laugh it off, but he’s very rarely wrong.

“Come to your brother’s housewarming party,” Lestrade says, the tone of his voice making it clear he’s rolling his eyes right now. “Be my date.”

“I’ll pick you up at six-thirty.”

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Mycroft gets a text at 6.15pm on Friday night. Sherlock’s petulance is so loud Mycroft can hear it in the written words.

John says I have to invite you. 7pm. Baker St. SH

It’s followed shortly by:

Please tell me you’re not in London right now. SH

Mycroft considers it for a few moments. He could follow Sherlock’s wishes and refuse, could call Lestrade and say that something unavoidable came up, but he doesn’t want to. He’s already locked his office for the night and waiting for the lift.

He pulls out his phone to type a response.

Sorry to disappoint, brother mine. I’ll be there soon. MH

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When the car pulls up outside New Scotland Yard, Lestrade is already waiting in his trench coat. It’s exactly 6:30pm when Mycroft leans over and opens the door.

“Hey,” Lestrade says, grinning boyishly. He’s dressed for work -- charcoal grey suit, white shirt with the first few buttons undone -- but the fabric sits heavier on him, a better quality of material. Mycroft appreciates the effort.

“Good evening,” Mycroft says, and turns back to the phone in his hands. It’s a slow steady drive through traffic, at least twenty minutes at this time of day, but it’s been a busy day and there are a few loose ends that still need tying. From the corner of his eye, he sees Lestrade pat his pockets down and pull out his own phone. He checks his email and then plays solitaire, but he doesn’t interrupt.

At least he doesn’t interrupt for a few minutes.

“Never let it be said that you don’t know how to show someone a good time,” Lestrade says as he
concedes defeat and taps on New Game.

“Hush.” Mycroft returns to calculating compound interest and net present value over the next seven years. When he considers the fluctuating price of oil and the current infrastructure expansions...

“Hush?” Lestrade echoes, brows raised and a grin threatening to escape. “So far, this isn’t a date worth a formal invite.”

Mycroft holds his hand up for silence, working through the range of interest rates that he could ask for and where the most likely compromise will occur. He sends off another three emails -- one to each party, one to their internal finance committee to explain his reasoning and avoid an unnecessary debrief -- and then turns his attention to Lestrade.

The car turns into Baker Street. “Unfortunately, that wasn’t something that could be left until the morning.”

“Are you going to be stuck on your phone all night?” Lestrade sounds curious, not annoyed. These are the benefits to seeing someone who understands having an irregular work schedule.

The likelihood that his emails will be read, trusted and authorised without query is depressingly low. There will be bargaining and wheedling, and he doubts he’ll get through the night with less than five follow up calls. “Possibly.”

Lestrade settles his shoulders back and widens his eyes a little. His smile has the shadow of a wince. Clearly he’s about to suggest something he’d prefer not to. “Would it be easier from the office?”

Police officer. He’s used to working with physical folders, referring to files to accurately answer queries. “That would only make it feel more tedious,” Mycroft replies. “I know the relevant information.”

Lestrade relaxes back into the leather car seat. “Because you know everything.”

“Yet the fact that I’m right does not expedite the process as much as it should.”

Lestrade chuckles, opening the door as the car rolls to a stop.

Upstairs, Sherlock looks at him closely. He notices that Lestrade and Mycroft arrived together, but doesn’t think it interesting enough to mention. Instead, he drawls, “Where was it this time? Singapore, Brunei? No, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. I’m sure that’s a completely productive use of your skills.”

Mycroft tightens his grip on his umbrella. Being used as a go-between for squabbling royal families in the UAE is hardly the most satisfactory part of his role. But there’s no value in financial instability, and making these things work smoothly will allow him to call in favours in the future. “To ensure something’s done right, sometimes one needs to get one’s hands dirty. Metaphorically speaking.”

“Metaphorically,” Sherlock repeats mockingly. He turns to Watson, waving a few long fingers towards Mycroft as he speaks. “My brother wouldn’t willingly do anything he could delegate.”

It’s intended as a sly jibe at Mycroft’s supposed sloth, but it is true. “If the task can be delegated, there’s no need for me to be doing it.”

“Okay, you two,” Lestrade says, exchanging a long-suffering look with Watson, “this is a party. Brotherly bickering to be kept to a minimum.”
“We do not bicker,” Mycroft objects (as Sherlock says, “Mycroft started it,” which is patently untrue). “How did I start it?”

“You arrived,” Sherlock replies and honestly, how can you reason with that level of immaturity? Aristotle himself would be stymied.

Thankfully, Mycroft’s phone buzzes in his pocket and he has an entirely reasonable excuse to disengage from the conversation. He takes the call on the staircase. Not that most guests would speak fluent Arabic, but he doesn’t need Sherlock eavesdropping as he outlines suggested terms and promises to relay the counter offer. It takes ten tedious minutes, and he takes a vicious pleasure in ending the call, even if he has to sound polite while doing so.

Before he can return to the party proper, the next call comes through. He runs through the same information. Ignores the counter offer completely, promises to relay their counter offer. The stairwell is too small to pace in, so he finds himself wandering upstairs instead, peeking around half-closed doors as he once more explains -- in small words, to people so convinced that they’re equally clever -- that he is right.

The walls are painted a pale mint green; no reinforcing gendered clichés for this nursery. There’s a white cot to one side, quality of wood and fittings suggesting its source is Ikea, and a matching chest of drawers with an old single bed against the far wall. One could assume this is Watson’s room but there’s a hint of dust on the neatly folded sheet. It hasn’t been disturbed in over five days.

He agrees with -- and makes soothing noises to -- someone who supposedly runs a city-state, and finally gets to end the call. He pinches the bridge of his nose and spends a moment blissfully imagining turning his phone off. Not an appropriate action but it is tempting.

Mycroft takes a breath. He checks his inbox quickly, and then slides his phone into his pocket.

The room next door is clearly a playroom. There’s an abundance of brightly coloured plastic toys, all in garish primary colours, and the walls in here have been painted a cheery lemon. It’s free of furniture, although there are a few beanbag chairs and cushions thrown about the floor. The carpet shows a clear story of this space: frequently used by Watson and Sherlock, toys scattered after use, Rosie doted upon and adored. It’s hardly a future he’d anticipated for Sherlock: child, domestic partner, family life mixed with casework. It’s unexpected, but it’s vastly preferable to what he’d once feared.

“Christ!” he hears behind him as Watson freezes in the doorway. Clearly, he’d assumed this room was empty until he stepped inside. “Nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Apologies,” Mycroft says, although he’s never managed to sound sincere when apologising for the sheer lack of observation in the general populace.

“It’s fine,” Watson says, shaking his head and shrugging it off. “I wasn’t expecting anyone up here, that’s all. I’ve been sent to fetch her bunny.”

“The white one,” Mycroft points to a stuffed white rabbit ear under an avalanche of toys in the eastern corner, “or the blue one?” This time, he points to a plastic bucket of oversized Legos and the stuffed animal perched on top.

“Blue one.” Watson picks it up, turns it over in his hands. “Apparently the white one is scary.”

Mycroft nods. Not that he has any opinion on stuffed toys, or children in general.

Watson frowns, his whole face collapsing as he thinks. “Are you waiting for another call?”
“There will be further calls but not for a while.”

“You know Sherlock’s been visiting your sister?” Watson clings closely to the stuffed animal, tightens his knuckles for a moment. “He said you weren’t on the visitors list.”

“As Sherlock already mentioned, I do believe in delegating where possible.”

“That’s why you haven’t been?”

Watson is not actually stupid. It should make Mycroft like him more but like most things to do with Sherlock, he finds himself ambivalent at best. He has spent most of his life trying to protect Sherlock in some way, and Sherlock has always bristled and disliked his efforts. Then Dr John Watson came along, and Sherlock worries about his good opinion. He cares what Watson thinks of him and when Watson berates him for risking his life, Sherlock listens. Mycroft is both extremely grateful that Sherlock has found someone -- to listen to, to care about, someone he’s happy to have near -- and disappointed that Sherlock needed someone reckless enough to run into danger alongside him.

“It’s hardly your place to question my motives, Dr Watson.” The momentary surprise on Watson’s face makes Mycroft modulate his tone, drag it back to something civil and impersonal. “I will not be visiting Sherrinford again.”

The lines around Watson’s face suggest worry (for Sherlock), guilt (for his relationship with his own sibling) and something judgementally disbelieving towards Mycroft. “But she’s your sister, and--”

“And we watched her shoot a woman who took great pride in her rose garden. She drowned two innocent men, a guilty man, and would have let you drown as well. She left a trail of bodies, guards shot with their own weapons, and some of them died by their own hands. I will not stand in the same room as her.”

Watson stares at him and refuses to break eye contact. “In that case,” he says firmly, “the party’s downstairs.”

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When the next call comes, Mycroft goes downstairs to take it. He makes sure the door is unlocked and steps out onto the street. There’s a chill in the air but it’s more comfortable than standing where he so clearly doesn’t belong.

At least he finally has agreement in theory. The paperwork will wait a few days, but it’s the verbal approval he was waiting on. He’s in the midst of typing up a quick confirmation email when the door creaks open behind him. He glances over his shoulder but it’s only Lestrade. Lestrade, who has no interest in trying to read over his shoulder; Lestrade, who has spent most of this party laughing with Watson and the nurses from his surgery.

He sends the email and says, “Yes?”

Lestrade buries his hands in his pocket for warmth. It ruins the line of his suit. “You’re not doing too well with this date. I think you’ve only talked to me for five minutes tonight.”

“Do feel free to rescind the invitation,” Mycroft replies, watching his inbox for a reply. There are some sacrifices that come with his job, and free time is one of them. Better for Lestrade to recognise that and cut his losses now. Mycroft’s not going to apologise for something that can’t be avoided.

“That seems like too much trouble,” Lestrade replies but the joke falls flat. “What I can’t figure out is if this has just been a bad night for you, or if you’re using your phone to avoid a date you regret
agreeing to.”

There’s something charmingly obvious about the way Lestrade states the facts. A request for information, no signs of emotional blackmail or guilt. “The former, I assure you.” He glances over at Lestrade, and finds Lestrade smiling at him.

“Any chance you could turn that thing off and come back to the party with me?”

“I’m waiting on an email. And parties…”

“Not your scene?”

“Not my scene, not my act, not even my play,” Mycroft says, and there’s a bright glint of Lestrade’s grin in reply.

“I’m going to go upstairs and say goodbye, and then you can give me a lift home,” Lestrade says simply, as if they’re confirming a pre-existing plan. “Okay?”

“Acceptable,” Mycroft says, opening the email that just arrived.

***

Lestrade’s flat is functional and neat, if Mycroft ignores the coffee mugs in the sink and the small spatters of toothpaste on the bathroom mirror. It’s the sort of flat Mycroft had expected.

He doesn’t expect Lestrade’s mattress to be as supportive and comfortable as it is. But he’s glad to be wrong when he pins Lestrade to the bed.

“Fuck,” Lestrade groans out when they break apart to breathe.

“I think you can be a little more specific than that, Gregory,” Mycroft says, catching Lestrade’s earlobe between his teeth.

“Fuck, yes,” Lestrade says, then kisses him again.

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“You can stay the night,” Lestrade offers, lazily sprawled beneath the covers. He’s still naked, hair caught at ridiculous angles and a darkening mark on his collarbone. Mycroft hadn’t been thinking about consequences when he made that mark -- he hadn’t been thinking about anything beyond the immediate -- but leaving such a possessive mark is a bad idea. He is not a possessive person; he is well aware that tumbling into bed like this is usually a short-lived affair. He should not be staking claims he has no intention of keeping.

“I need to work in the morning.” Mycroft smoothes his shirt down and pulls on his waistcoat. He does the buttons up by feel since it would be a shame to look away from Lestrade.

Lestrade’s eyes are closed, and he’s already half asleep, mouth soft and slightly parted. He has one arm folded above his head, showing the gradation of tan from his forearm to his bicep (a clear preference for wearing T-shirts on summer days) to his shoulder, to the paler skin of his chest and stomach. Still not as pale as the skin on hips and upper thighs, not that Mycroft can see either of those now. He can see the few grey chest hairs, the sparse trail leading down his torso, the hair darker closer to his waist.

Lestrade looks... indolent and satisfied. Quite comfortable to stretch out with all that bare skin on
display, too content with the world to care about modesty or self-consciousness.

Mycroft fishes his cuff links out of his waistcoat pocket and has to look away to adjust his cuffs. Once done, he pulls on his jacket and shoes.

“I’ll lock the door behind me,” he says, because a man efficient enough to keep lubricant, condoms and wet wipes in his bedside drawer will not appreciate having to get up to see a guest out.

“Ta,” Lestrade mutters, yawning and rolling over to sleep.

***

There is a phone call at 5am. Phones should not be allowed to ring when he didn’t get back to his bed until half past two. “Mycroft Holmes,” he answers, thinking that if this is about Dubai he may be motivated to orchestrate a political coup, if only to ensure the people in power do not call him at this hour.

“Sir?”

It’s Anthea, meaning it’s not Dubai or Abu Dhabi. This is something new, and probably related to national security to have Anthea involved at this time of the morning. “Send the briefing to my email, I’ll read it in the car. And get coffee.”

“Coffee, sir?”

“Preferably attached to an IV line,” Mycroft says, although he knows Anthea won’t find it amusing. She is wonderfully, preternaturally efficient and has managed both his calendar and the toweringly high number of security reports that cross his desk, and has never once criticised Sherlock within his hearing. A sense of humour really doesn’t compare to those wonderful traits. “Skinny cappuccino, double shot. Get at least three.”

“Yes, sir.”

***

Unfortunately Saturday sets the tone for the following week. There is paperwork: the after action reviews, the brainstorming over alternative actions to be better prepared next time; and then there’s the UAE loan, reviewing contracts and having to placate or push all parties into signing. Then there’s Thursday, which he is never talking about again; honestly, sheer stupidity should be a hanging offence. He spends Friday and Saturday reviewing all the reports that have come across his desk while he’s been otherwise occupied this week. None of them are urgent but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t need to be aware of them.

So when Lestrade’s number flashes up on his phone, Mycroft is not in the best mood to deal with unnecessary drama. “If Sherlock is being more difficult than usual, this is not the best line to call.”

“So if I told you I had footage of him tripping over his own coat and falling into a vat of custard, I should call someone else?” Lestrade replies, easy and warm. He sounds amused enough that the story may be true.

“Did that happen?"

“You’ll have to take my word for it.”

“Really?” Mycroft asks, finding himself smiling despite this week.
“I wasn’t quick enough with my phone but it did happen. Custard everywhere. Dripping down his hair, caught in his scarf. Everywhere,” Lestrade says. It should be unseemly for a grown man to sound so delighted by such a ridiculous story, but there’s an unpolished charm when Lestrade does it.

There’s an alert in Mycroft’s phone. He puts it on speaker and opens the new message, only to find it’s a picture of Sherlock. He’s wet, with viscous yellow custard dripping down his arms and face, smeared over his coat, and a face like thunder. He’s pointing at the picture taker, in the middle of saying something undoubtedly cutting, and glaring with all his might.

Mycroft immediately saves the picture for safekeeping. “Thank you. That has been the highlight of my week.”

Lestrade huffs out a laugh. “From Saturday onwards, I hope.”

Mycroft frowns at the detail, Saturday should have remained eyes only and truly confidential; if information has leaked he’ll be working tomorrow as well. He hates working through weekends, even when he agrees with the urgency.

Then he realises what Lestrade is actually referring to. It’s been a long week; he is not at his sharpest. “Oh, yes, last Friday. No, that was the highlight of last week.”

“Good to hear,” Lestrade says. Mycroft hadn’t typified him as an insecure man, as someone who needed compliments as validation, but maybe that’s why Lestrade called. “Makes me feel better about asking you out for dinner tonight.”

Mycroft’s groan of disappointment escapes before he can stop it. It has been a horrendously long week and spending some time sleeping should be his reward. Sitting in a noisy, crowded restaurant is a punishment he doesn’t deserve.

“Or not,” Lestrade says, then adds, “Bad week?”

“Everything was concluded satisfactorily.” With the exception of Thursday’s debacle and Mycroft refuses to include failures due to sheer, mindboggling idiocy. “But this is the thirteenth day I’ve been in the office.”

“God help you,” Lestrade says with feeling.

“I’m not convinced he has the security clearance.”

“I’ve worked through weekends. It’s shit.”

That succinct but accurate summary startles a huff of amusement from Mycroft. “It is indeed.”

“How about you come over to mine? I’ll cook something, we’ll put on a DVD, have a quiet night in?”

It actually sounds rather pleasant. Lestrade’s company is easy to bear, the man is unpretentious and perceptive, and he’d been looking forward to sitting down and enjoying a film tonight. It would suit Mycroft well but he can’t see why Lestrade would make such an effort. “It sounds very nice, although I do question your motivation.”

“My motivation? I figure if I get you over here, there’s a good chance of repeating last Friday night.”

“Casual sex hardly warrants the effort of cooking.”
“One, good sex warrants a little effort. Two, I’ve got to eat and cooking for two isn’t much harder than cooking for one. And three,” Lestrade pauses, and Mycroft has the impression that the third point was changed ad hoc, “you don’t like cooking, huh?”

“I understand the theory. The practice is tedious.”

“What time should I expect you?”

Mycroft glances at the files he hasn’t opened yet, the reports that might wait until Monday and those that shouldn’t. He thinks about the average running length of a film, the traffic across London, how long he spent in Lestrade’s bed last time and the possibility of being in his own bed by midnight.

“Let’s say seven. Unless that’s too early?”

“Seven it is. No allergies I need to watch out for?”

“None.”

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Lestrade serves chicken breast cooked in lemon juice, with sautéed garlic spinach and steamed snow peas. The lack of carbohydrates is obvious. Mycroft doesn’t think he’s eaten a full meal in front of Lestrade, so he must have made a presumption from Sherlock’s references to weight and diet. Mycroft should appreciate the effort -- he does, truly -- but it’s also disappointing that Lestrade had to make such concessions. Mycroft is perfectly capable of eating around the things he can’t allow himself to have.

Lestrade notices him looking at the plates. “I don’t always eat well during the week. When it’s a busy case, it ends up being takeaway every night. So I try to eat healthier on the weekends. I’m not twenty any more and,” Lestrade adds with a slightly embarrassed shrug, “I can’t live on fish and chips and kebabs.”

“I never could.” By the time he got through school he’d realized that extra weight carried a lot of extra assumptions -- moral failings, lack of self-control, all things that subconsciously made people doubt and scoff, distracted them from recognising that he was right -- so controlling his weight has been a requirement since university days. “It looks delicious.”

They eat on Lestrade’s couch. It’s that or stand around his kitchen bench. (“Having a table in a flat this small seems a waste,” Lestrade apologises.) The movie is *The Maltese Falcon*. It’s not one of his personal favourites but Mycroft enjoys it far more than most modern options.

After Lestrade clears the dishes into the dishwasher, he sits closer to Mycroft’s side. “You’ve seen this before, right?” he asks and waits for a nod before leaning in and pressing his mouth just below Mycroft’s jaw. Mycroft tilts his neck to allow better access and keeps watching the film.

Lestrade’s mouth is warm and wet on his skin, and Mycroft can’t ignore the heat of Lestrade’s palm on his thigh. He keeps his gaze on the screen and listens to his own breathing quicken.

Lestrade pulls back, starts carefully undoing Mycroft’s tie, leaving it loose under the collar of his shirt. He flicks a few buttons open and lowers his mouth to Mycroft’s newly exposed skin.

Mycroft cups a hand around the back of Lestrade’s head; his other hand is high on Lestrade’s bicep, fingers crawling under the edge of the sleeve of his cotton T-shirt. The screen is a blur of meaningless greys.

“Perhaps bed, Gregory,” Mycroft suggests, breath catching as Lestrade’s teeth scrape lightly over his
Lestrade’s clever fingers slide down his shirt, hook on the edge of his waistcoat. “I’m happy to keep unwrapping you.”

It could be pleasant but Mycroft doesn’t have the patience for it tonight. “Bed,” he says firmly. He cups Lestrade’s cheek and kisses him deeply, until Lestrade is squirming to get closer, until his fingers are digging into Mycroft’s thigh. When he breaks the kiss, Lestrade is breathing more heavily as well.

“Okay, bed,” Lestrade agrees, bouncing off the couch with a flattering level of enthusiasm.

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“What do you want?” Lestrade asks, once they’re both naked and pressed against each other between the sheets.

Mycroft considers the question, drawing his knees up to either side of Lestrade’s ribcage and then stretching over him. If the decision is up to him... It’s been some time, but he’s feeling self-indulgent. And Lestrade did ask.

Mycroft leans close to Lestrade’s ear and pitches his voice low. “I want you to use your fingers and stretch me open slowly. Luxuriously. When I can’t keep still, when I’m desperate for more, I want to ride you until your eyes roll back and you forget your own name. Acceptable?”

“Fuck,” Lestrade says, which Mycroft has realized means yes when Lestrade says it in that rough growl.

“Good.”

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Mycroft is a touch surprised when Lestrade says, “We should do this again, yeah?” and stretches out, post coital and cheerfully relaxed, and adds, “Friday? Or is Saturday better for you?”

“Saturday has less chance of an early morning.”

“Saturday, then.” Lestrade stretches again, yawning widely. “So does that mean you’re staying?”

Lestrade’s flat is small and functional, lived in, with food in the fridge and keys dropped on the counter. It’s comfortable but Mycroft knows his own place has better security. It may be large and unfortunately modern, may feel a little institutional with the wide spaces and pale walls, but it’s more secure.

Not that Mycroft’s expecting any sort of attack but there’s no point ignoring preventative measures. “I really prefer sleeping in my own bed,” Mycroft replies honestly.

“Suit yourself.” Already Lestrade’s voice is becoming slower and slurred with sleep.

Mycroft runs the back of his fingers down Lestrade’s cheek. “Go to sleep, Gregory. I’ll see myself out.”

Lestrade mumbles something into his pillow.
Mycroft likes routine. His job itself is unpredictable and the hours can be irregular, but he likes cultivating comforting routines where he can. He likes things to be neat and exact: items lined up in neat rows if possible, to do lists organised by deadline and then alphabetised. He likes knowing that he can focus entirely on the tasks at hand and not worry about unimportant personal matters.

He means Lestrade, of course. (Not Sherlock. He’s no longer worrying about Sherlock because Sherlock is not his responsibility. Sherlock has been adamant for years that he doesn’t need Mycroft watching over his every move, so clearly the job can go to someone else.) No, Mycroft was thinking of Lestrade, of the simple respite in shared Saturday nights becoming a reliable routine.

There’s always food of some sort -- home cooked after a long week, out to a restaurant when Mycroft can tolerate the irritating noise of people, and once a kebab from a tiny shopfront as they walked around London after dark -- and then sex.

Mycroft’s never had something fit so neatly into his life before. Well, there was a stage after university where the most efficient way to integrate a sex life was to pay for it; that fitted into his life very well. But escorts are something of a security risk and certainly a reputational risk, so that hasn’t been a viable option for decades.

But Lestrade doesn’t push for more. There may be phone calls during the week but Lestrade doesn’t ask for extra time, doesn’t try to manipulate an emotional attachment or force some sort of public commitment. He hasn’t even tried to manoeuvre an invitation to Mycroft’s flat.

Even when Mycroft has a reception that he can’t avoid, Lestrade only hums and says, “What time does that go to?”

“I’ll have to stay until eleven, at least.”

“Come round to mine afterwards,” Lestrade says, like it’s an obvious answer. “Do you want me to make you something?”

“No, I’ll have already eaten,” Mycroft replies.

When Mycroft turns up at Lestrade’s door -- closer to midnight than he’d like -- there are no recriminations. There’s only a slow once over, Lestrade’s gaze sliding down his body and back up. He clearly appreciates the tuxedo.

“Look at you,” Lestrade says and the expression on his face can only be described as a leer. “If I’d known this was going to be a formal affair, I’d have worn a tie.”

It’s a blatant lie. “No, you wouldn’t.”

“I really wouldn’t,” Lestrade agrees easily and ushers him inside.

***

As far as these things go, it’s proceeding remarkably well. Mycroft keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop, to discover the part of their arrangement that will be unacceptable to one of them. But Lestrade is clever and sarcastic, and doesn’t tend to get upset over details. He shrugs them off and recognises their inherent triviality.

Even clashing schedules don’t seem to be too much trouble. When Lestrade calls him on Saturday afternoon and says, “There’s a case. I can’t get away today,” gruff and no nonsense, clearly thinking about the corpse, Mycroft doesn’t overly mind. He’s slightly disappointed but he can honestly tell Lestrade not to worry about it, that they’ll see each other next week.
“If there’s anything I can do,” Mycroft offers, which is the type of vague, open-ended offer that he tries to avoid making. Offering too much can lead to unreasonable favours. He knows better.

“No, we’re on top of it,” Lestrade says, and it’s easier than it should be.

***

As so frequently happens in Mycroft’s life, Sherlock is the fly in the ointment. Not even Sherlock himself, just the mention of him. Or more specifically, the mention of Sherlock’s Christmas Eve celebrations. Mycroft remembers when the only person who crossed Sherlock’s threshold was himself. Or occasionally Lestrade. Now, it seems like the flat at Baker Street is constantly full of people.

“So, next Saturday, the Christmas party at Baker Street,” Lestrade says, cutting a vibrantly orange carrot into slices.

Mycroft has no patience for cooking. He does, however, have some interest in watching Lestrade cook -- his hands are very deft with a knife -- and it means he can monitor his emails at the same time. “Hmm?”

“I’m working the Christmas break. Should I meet you there, or can I scrounge a lift?”

“I’m not going.”

“What?”

It’s the sharpness of Lestrade’s tone that makes Mycroft look away from his phone. “I can send a car for you if you want.”

Lestrade stops slicing vegetables, and stares at him. “It’s Christmas, it’s your only brother, and you’re not going?”

“I hate Christmas, I’m not terribly fond of my brother, and I haven’t been invited.”

“You’re going,” Lestrade says, as if declaring it will make it so.

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” Before the conversation can devolve into an argument that feels depressingly familiar and makes him think of Sherlock, Lestrade adds, “Forget about the invitation. It’s Christmas. He wants to see you.”

“I doubt that very much.”

“Every time a posh black car drives past a crime scene, Sherlock puts on his most disagreeable face and watches it until it drives off. Every time.”

Mycroft blinks. That sounds a little too obvious to be Lady Smallwood’s surveillance and surely Sherlock would recognise the appropriate make and model of car. Then again, it is a fairly standard car for a certain level of government employee and hardly rare on London’s streets. “That doesn’t sound as if I’d be welcome.”

“He misses you. And he’s too much of an overgrown child to call you up and say so.”

“Gregory,” Mycroft says in warning, and his tone is much colder than he’d intended. It’s a tone that usually sends people scurrying for the nearest available exit. (Well, Mycroft thinks, he had enjoyed
this while it lasted. People usually don’t stay after the sheen of civility wears thin.)

Lestrade narrows his eyes and keeps his chin level. “You’re going, Mycroft. It’s not negotiable.”

Surprised, Mycroft tamps down on his immediate urge to refuse, to point out that he is an adult and one of the perquisites of that state is the ability to choose how one spends one’s own leisure time. “It won’t end well and he won’t be pleased to see me.”

Lestrade shrugs and the sudden tension in the room eases. “Come anyway. Earn the right to say I told you so.”

“I don’t need to prove my hypothesis to know I’m right.”

“You do if you want bragging rights,” Lestrade says, picking up the knife and turning his attention back to the carrot on the cutting board. “Now, about the lift?”

Mycroft checks his calendar. “Seven at the earliest. Make it seven-thirty to be safe.”

***

Lestrade’s running late when the car pulls up. Mycroft takes the opportunity to close his eyes for a few minutes. He opens them as the car door is unlocked.

“Sorry,” Lestrade says, getting in. Mycroft waves the apology away. Then Lestrade takes a good look at him. “You look wrecked.”

“No, I don’t.” Mycroft has been home to change. His dove grey suit is unwrinkled, his shirt collar immaculately pressed and his cuffs are showing at precisely the right length. He does not show exhaustion easily.

“Unless you look closely,” Lestrade replies. “Did you get any sleep last night?”

“Ninety minutes,” Mycroft confirms although that’s the combined total of two naps taken at his desk. It’s been one of those nights: the kind that starts with reports of missing nuclear materials and ends with the confiscation of a dirty bomb. It was ultimately successful, but only after hours of tension and extended focus.

“You should be sleeping,” Lestrade says, soft and warm and still somehow chiding.

Mycroft sighs. The thought had occurred to him as well. “You said this was not negotiable.”

Lestrade snorts. “Not negotiable under ordinary circumstances.”

“If I cancelled social plans every time a--” Mycroft is tired. He nearly said far too much. He makes a mental note to avoid Sherlock as much as possible tonight. “--an unexpected event occurred, I’d never leave the office. I’m here now.”

“Sounds like your Christmas Eve was even more fun than mine.”

“Tell me what happened,” Mycroft says, hoping it doesn’t sound too much like an order, and Lestrade does. There’s a comforting litany of misplaced court documents and spending the day checking boxes of files to find it. Lestrade is the long suffering hero of the tale, sarcastically slaying bureaucracy and dragging fellow officers away from cake and biscuits in the tea room. Mycroft closes his eyes to listen more closely.

…and then jerks awake as the car stops. “Apologies. I was listening. Initially.”
“Right until you fell asleep,” Lestrade agrees, grinning as he gets out of the car.

***

Lestrade gets a call on the stairs. He drops his head back and squints at the ceiling as he answers, “Come on, Jimmy, tell me you didn’t find another inconsistency in the file,” and Mycroft only pauses until Lestrade’s body language relaxes. Then he leaves Lestrade to the call, and walks up the stairs. When he steps into Sherlock’s flat, there are less people than last time -- Molly Hooper, Mrs Hudson, a few others who are obviously police or nursing staff -- but it’s still more than he honestly wants to deal with.

“Oh,” Sherlock says as he walks closer. “You came.” There’s a glance exchanged with Watson and then Sherlock adds, in the most disinterested tone possibly, “Yay.”

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” Mycroft replies. “It all looks very festive.”

There’s tinsel wrapped through the eye sockets of the skull on the mantelpiece. Sherlock enjoys Christmas, if not the way most people do.

“Thanks for coming,” Watson says because he, unlike Mycroft’s brother, has a shred of manners.

“But we don’t want to keep you up,” Sherlock says. “Feel free to leave. The door’s right where you last used it.”

As Sherlock gestures generously towards the door, Lestrade opens it. The timing is ideal and entirely coincidental. There are cries of “Greg!” (Watson) and “Lestrade!” (Sherlock), and Sherlock seems extremely excited by the interruption. It’s unlike him.

Lestrade grins as he walks inside. “I’m feeling very welcomed. How much have you two had to drink?”

Bouncing up on his toes, Sherlock peers over Lestrade’s shoulder. “You didn’t bring anyone?” he asks brightly, and... oh. Of course. Sherlock’s had the opportunity to observe Lestrade over the past few weeks. An unknown romantic partner would simply be a different kind of mystery for him to solve.

Mycroft steps backwards towards the kitchen before this gets too awkward. It’s a simple thing to step past the sliding door, and be mostly hidden by shadows and that small corner of wall by the landing door. The kitchen is a small space with hard surfaces; their voices carry easily.

“I got a lift with Mycroft,” Lestrade says, which is such a bold obfuscation -- yet entirely true -- that Mycroft smiles.

“We wanted to meet the new girlfriend,” Sherlock says and then rattles off a dozen observations that led him to that conclusion. It’s all very showy and designed to impress, but clearly Watson’s heard it before. He’s far less dazzled than usual. In fact, Watson seems to not even be paying attention to what Sherlock says; he’s watching Lestrade, brows drawn in confusion. Then his brows jump up and he glances over at Mycroft.

It makes sense. Watson is observant in his own way, and Sherlock is blinded by his own assumptions. Sherlock would not consider Mycroft a viable option for his favourite Detective Inspector. When he finally pays attention to Lestrade’s shift of gravity, to the awkward glances in any direction but the kitchen, Sherlock’s bound to have a strong opinion on the matter.

Mycroft did warn Lestrade that this party wouldn’t end well, although this isn’t what he’d precisely
imagined.

“Oh,” Sherlock says, midstream and possibly a touch too loud, “you’re seeing a man.”

“Thank you, Sherlock,” Lestrade says sarcastically. “I’m quite sure I wanted you to publicly out me.”

“It’s my flat. It’s hardly public.”

“It’s also none of your business. And until I decide to tell you--”

“Decide? Don’t be ridiculous!” Sherlock says, taking a step towards the mantelpiece and then turning back. “If you’re going to be so obvious--”

“It’s my life, and given that you keep forgetting my first name--”

“It’s Greg. Perfectly boring Greg. No wonder I forget it,” Sherlock says and Lestrade draws a long, slow breath through his nose. Watson, beside them both, watches the ground and very carefully doesn’t say anything.

Lestrade stretches out the fingers of his right hand, forcing himself not to clench it into a fist. “Okay, this is basic social etiquette: you wait until a friend tells you they’re seeing someone.”

“That’s silly. You’re supposed to wait for a friend to decide to stop lying?” Sherlock asks, turning to John. “John, surely this isn’t right?”

“Maybe this is one of those times you can pretend to give people some privacy,” Watson says doubtfully. He meets Sherlock’s gaze, he doesn’t look over his shoulder, but Sherlock still squints at him.

“What are you not telling me?” Sherlock asks, but it sounds like a rhetorical question. He scans Watson from head to foot, pauses on the tension in his shoulders and the set of Watson’s jaw. “You know who it is. No, we both know them. They’re here and--”

Sherlock makes a sound as if he’s swallowed his own tongue. His entire face twists up in revulsion and he turns on Lestrade with wild shock in his eyes. “I thought you had some taste! I could have understood Anderson -- I mean, Anderson would have been a horrible choice and you could do so much better, but I could have forgiven that! But—Eurgh!” It’s dramatic and overblown and utterly absurd, but Sherlock has never let reasonableness stop him from a tirade. When observed from a safe distance, Sherlock’s temper tantrums rival the best theatre.

Mycroft’s shaking his head in amusement, and wondering what Sherlock will say next, when Watson clasps a hand around one of Sherlock’s flailing arms and says, “Sherlock, leave it.”

“Leave it? John, this is--”

“Your brother and our friend,” Watson says firmly. “Stop talking. Now.”

“But this is Lestrade,” Sherlock says plaintively. “Mycroft shouldn’t be allowed to get his grubby hands all over the few people I do like.”

“Since you can’t turn back time and stop that from happening,” Lestrade says brightly and Sherlock’s expression becomes even more horrified as he considers his brother and sex and Lestrade, “you’re just going to have to live with it.”
Mycroft ducks his head and tries not to let his amusement show.

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The conversation falls back to work -- how the clinic is going, the latest gripe at the Yard -- and then Christmas plans. The advantage of standing in the kitchen is that it’s dark and dim. Mycroft can lean against the counter and stay out of sight. And if he lets his chin drop and his eyes close, no-one’s the wiser.

“Trust you to find a quiet shadow to hide in,” Lestrade says, stepping in with an empty bowl. Mycroft turns around and opens the second left door, reaches to the back of the upper shelf for the crisps. “How did you know they were there?”

“Logical place for them,” Mycroft replies. It’s perfectly obvious that Sherlock helped prepare for this party and he would unthinkingly place the snacks too high for anyone else to reach easily.

“I’m starting to wonder if there are any parties you don’t hide from,” Lestrade says, tearing the packet open.

“The ones I’m paid to attend.”

Lestrade stares at him and says slowly, “I’m suddenly picturing you in a very different profession.”

The idea is so absurd that Mycroft laughs. “I’m not moonlighting as an escort, if you needed that confirmed. I can’t think of anything less likely.”

Lestrade glances across, but the doorway is clear of people. He leaves the bowl on the table and walks closer. There’s a mischievous glint to his eye. “I don’t know. There’s a certain natural talent there.”

“There is a learned skill,” Mycroft corrects. He has always found physical skills take effort to perfect, whereas understanding the theory comes readily. “I wouldn’t be suited to a profession that relies on spending so much time with so many people.”

Lestrade nods. He reaches out and catches two fingers around the chain of Mycroft’s pocket watch. It’s far from indecent, but it feels very personal. Mycroft’s aware of every tiny tug of his fingers.

“So only a rare few?” Lestrade murmurs.

“Very few are worth the effort.”

There’s a spike of laughter from the party. With a rueful smile, Lestrade pulls his fingers back. “Thinking of effort, that wasn’t very nice earlier. Disappearing and leaving me to the mercy of Sherlock.”

“Sherlock has no mercy,” Mycroft replies lightly.

“You saw it coming,” Lestrade says. He doesn’t sound convincingly annoyed. “And you left me out there to fend for myself.”

“You’re not a child. You didn’t need my intervention.”

“You could have told Sherlock to back off.”

Cocking his head slightly, Mycroft asks, “Precisely what aspect of my relationship with Sherlock makes you think he would do anything that I asked him to do?”
Lestrade takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, cheeks puffed out and not in the least self-conscious. It’s something ironically lovely about the very attractive: the confidence not to worry about how they look. “Fine. But it left me with no choice but to admit it.”

“Of course you had a choice, Gregory.”

“What? Say nothing?”

“You could have said you didn’t bring your girlfriend, that it was too early in the relationship to risk exposing her to Sherlock. You could have said you were trying to get back together with your ex-wife. You could have said your boyfriend was working tonight and couldn’t make it.”

“And that would have worked so well once Sherlock realised it was you.”

It would have worked, Mycroft thinks, because he could have stepped forward and distracted Sherlock. No point saying that now. “You could have said it was casual. Or a one-time thing. You could have said it was a mistake. There were other things you could have chosen to say to placate Sherlock, to agree with him.”

“Lied, you mean?” Lestrade says, as if honesty is such an obvious virtue. Then the humour fades from his face, and his eyes are sharp. “Is that why you stepped back? To see if I’d deny it?”

Mycroft doesn’t dignify that with an answer.

“Or were you waiting to see if Sherlock would bully me into changing my mind?”

“Sherlock knows how to make life uncomfortable, and you’re bound to work with him again. It would be foolish to assume you’d worsen the situation for the sake of—” Sex, he thinks. But, no, there have been meals and phone calls. There have been reasons to smile; he’s smiled more around Lestrade than he has for years. “-- a pleasant distraction.”

Lestrade stares at him, thinking. Maybe he hadn’t realised Sherlock would disapprove; maybe he hadn’t considered that Sherlock would make his life more awkward and irritating in response. Mycroft always forgets that other people don’t think things through.

Although given Moriarty, given Eurus, perhaps Mycroft doesn’t have the right to think that so smugly. He’s proved himself as incapable of recognising the likely outcomes of his actions as anyone else.

“There’s no need to make a decision now,” Mycroft says, as kindly as he can. It goes without saying that it’s still not especially kind. It’s cold and civil, and that’s usually as close as he can manage. “Think it over.”

“I wasn’t keeping you a secret,” Lestrade says, which isn’t the point at all.

“There was no reason to tell anyone. Why would you?”

“Normally,” Lestrade says slowly, thinking it through as he talks, “if you’re seeing someone for a few months, you tell your friends about them.”

It’s predictable. There’s no point being upset over something he should have seen coming. Mycroft crosses his arms in front of him and reminds himself that he is overtired but that is no excuse for handling this badly. “If you believe there’s a future in the relationship. If you think it will grow into something more, then yes, you share the news.”
This would be the perfect time for Sherlock or Watson, or even Mrs Hudson, to throw the door wide
and interrupt. But the party continues regardless of Lestrade’s confused regret. It’s uncomfortable
and Mycroft wishes this moment would end. If it were done, were best done quickly.

This is not the time for mangled Shakespeare quotations.

“Okay,” Lestrade says, nodding to himself and squaring his shoulders. “Let’s make this simple. I like
you.”

But not enough, Mycroft expects him to say. But I like my job more. This isn’t leading anywhere, or
I don’t see much of a future here. There are so many ways Lestrade could finish that sentence.

“And?” Mycroft prompts. Mycroft knows where his value lies, in service to Queen and country; he
is not an easy man to like and there is no point wishing otherwise.

“And maybe I haven’t made that clear,” Lestrade says. “I hadn’t thought about telling people
because it was easy having work, and friends, and this, and keeping it all separate. So maybe you
had reason to doubt what I’d tell your brother.”

Mycroft opens his mouth and realised he doesn’t know what to say. It almost sounds like an
apology...

“I like you,” Lestrade says again, grinning like he’s worked it out, “and I want to keep seeing you.”

“Oh.” He is not someone who gapes. He is not someone who is caught unawares. He may not know
the precise idiocy that will lead to something falling onto his desk but he is always quick to assess the
situation and strategise.

Except for right now, apparently.

“Look at that,” Lestrade says wonderingly, a self-satisfied smirk on his lips. “I rendered a Holmes
speechless. I didn’t think anything in the world could do that.”

“Very few things,” Mycroft allows.

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As with most things to do with Christmas, the party is interminable. Every time Mycroft thinks surely
it must be over, surely they can leave now, he looks at the time and realises it’s only been fifteen
minutes since he last checked.

It is mind-numbingly dull. It’s made worse by Lestrade insisting that he come out and join the party.
They compromise on the true meaning of “join” so Mycroft is sitting on the sofa, watching the
conversations happen around the room. Mrs Hudson and Hooper are discussing fingernail polish of
all things (finding a true ruby red is apparently difficult) and Watson’s talking to a small group
gathered around the food-laden table (reviewing football teams and debating the worst players).
Lestrade is standing by the fireplace with Sherlock, hand gestures growing looser with every glass of
punch consumed.

Sherlock’s back is to him so Mycroft can’t read his lips. From this angle, he can’t make out
Sherlock’s reflection either. Knowing Sherlock, it’s done on purpose.

The discussion escalates until Lestrade puts his hands up in a time out gesture and walks away in a
huff. He stops by the table, picks up a handful of nuts, and then sits down on the couch beside
Mycroft.
“For the record,” Lestrade says darkly, “I was good at my job before I met either of you.”

“You had a very admirable solve rate.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And a very promising future,” Mycroft allows, although that might be slightly tarnished these days given the media furore around Sherlock. The Met prefers its officers to be effective and forgettable. “If slightly less press recognition.”

Lestrade pulls a face. He’d be happier if he could avoid the press, Mycroft knows; he’d be much happier if he didn’t have to field questions from reporters to explain how cleverly some murders had been solved.

“He offered to work extra cases with you if you were so desperate for promotion that you would sleep with me?” Mycroft guesses. Lestrade rolls his eyes. “He’s looking out for you.”

“In what way?”

“He knows I wouldn’t make any effort to oversee the appointment of a Detective Chief Inspector.”

“Which makes it sound as if you could do it.”

Mycroft raises an eyebrow. “Of course I could. The point is that I wouldn’t bother. He wants to make sure you’re not continuing due to a false set of assumptions.”

“Instead of the obvious reasons,” Lestrade says.

Mycroft keeps his head tilted towards Lestrade. He doesn’t let his gaze shift towards Sherlock but observes him in his peripheral vision. Sherlock is standing in front of the mirror, phone in one hand, plate in the other; he’s using the mirror’s reflection to watch them. “Which are?”

“That I appreciate a posh suit,” Lestrade says, voice pitched a little quieter.

“As long as you don’t have to wear it.”


From the other side of the room, there’s a loud smash. The whole party goes silent, looking for the source of the disruption -- Sherlock’s dropped the plate -- and Sherlock whirls around to glare at everyone. There’s a sudden noise as everyone talks at once.

“What was that?” Lestrade asks, leaning forward in his seat as if he’s about to get up and help. No need for it. Mrs Hudson and Watson are already stepping forward to minimise the danger.

“That,” Mycroft says, raising a hand to rub his nose and coincidentally hide his mouth, “was a nosey little brother who can’t resist eavesdropping. Or lip-reading, in this case.”

Lestrade looks at him and then looks over at Sherlock -- Sherlock, who is glaring at both of them right now -- and then says quietly but clearly, “Serves you right.”

Sherlock narrows his eyes. He sweeps past Watson and Mrs Hudson, leaving them to clean up his mess. How appropriate. He stops at the coffee table and looms. “The only good thing about this will be watching you explain it to Mummy tomorrow.”

“I’m not going,” Mycroft replies.
Sherlock frowns. “But it’s Christmas Day.”

“I have work.”

“You always come for Christmas Day.”

“Those of us who didn’t make up our titles sometimes have to work the holidays,” Lestrade says, leaning back in the sofa to look up at Sherlock comfortably. “Sad fact of life.”

“Please,” Sherlock scoffs. “Mycroft’s title is as made up as mine.”

Lestrade looks at him, and Mycroft shrugs. His individual titles are all genuine jobs; it’s the combination of those roles that is unprecedented. “Be that as it may,” Mycroft says, “I’m not coming.”

“But you always come for Christmas Day,” Sherlock repeats, as if this is a fact that would stop the world from turning. As if Mycroft is unable to resist doing something simply out of habit. “Does Mummy know?”

“Our parents are aware.”

Mycroft doesn’t go into the details. Doesn’t say that they’d called to confirm family plans to visit Eurus on Christmas Day and that Mycroft had refused. They had talked about family, time of forgiveness, the importance of blood; Mycroft had replied that if decisions were being based purely on genetics, he would donate more to conservation efforts for chimpanzees. Their response was that if Mycroft thought so little of their family, he shouldn’t consider himself invited to spend Christmas with them.

His parents won’t tell Sherlock. If Sherlock thought bad behaviour would get him out of Christmas Day, there would be no stopping him.

“Look, he’s already going to miss Christmas Day,” Lestrade says. “You don’t need to make it any worse.”

Sherlock waves the attempted sympathy away. “Mycroft hates Christmas and he hates spending Christmas Day at home. We both do.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Lestrade asks, as if asking further questions of Sherlock has ever resulted in anything but annoyance and frustration.

“The only good thing about Christmas Day is that Mycroft’s even more miserable than I am.”

“It won’t be so bad,” Mycroft says, because this year won’t be. In certain ways. “You know how our parents get around babies. Convince John to bring Rosie for a visit and they’ll be distracted for hours.”

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Christmas Day is blissfully quiet. Not a footfall disturbs the carpeted corridor, not a voice. Mycroft listens to the low drone of the environmental controls and the sheer joy of sitting in his office, completely and utterly undisturbed. It is the first time in recent memory that he has managed to deal with each and every unread email. This is an annual tradition he could certainly support.

His first and only call of the day comes from Lestrade.
“Mycroft Holmes.”

“You’re the only Mycroft I know,” Lestrade says. “You could probably skip the surname when answering a call.”

“That would presume you are the only one to call me.”

“It’s my number.”

“That doesn’t automatically mean it’s you using the phone.”

“Who else would use my phone?”

Sherlock being annoying. Kidnappers in search of ransom. Emergency services looking for a personal contact. (He does not think of Sherlock at twenty, the accidental overdose, and the call that Mycroft almost didn’t take; he does not think of excusing himself from a roomful of foreign diplomats to pace around a bland hospital waiting room.) “You might lose it.”

“And a Merry Christmas to you,” Lestrade says sarcastically.

“And how is your Christmas?”

“Depressing.” Lestrade sighs. “Did you know there’s a spike in assaults over Christmas and Boxing Day?”

Alcohol, social pressures and forced proximity to those who know your personal failings too well. “It makes sense.”

“I wish it didn’t,” Lestrade says because at heart he is a good man. He believes in people, in general kindness and respect. Despite seeing, day after day, how ugly human nature can be, he still wants it to be better. “Christmas shouldn’t involve bashing someone’s head in.”

“Even our worst Christmas only involved poisoning the entire family.” Lestrade snorts. “Sherlock, huh?”

“How did you guess?” Mycroft replies archly. “He’s always been a terror at Christmas. When he was eight, he tried to catch Santa Claus.”

“When you say catch, you don’t mean stayed up all night?” Lestrade asks, and it’s a harmless sort of question. A harmless story to share.

“Sherlock, as a child, was cherubic. Big eyes, round cheeks and a halo of curls. The rather Byronic look didn’t appear until he was a teenager.” Mycroft feels himself smile at the memory. “He found an antique bear trap -- it was quite enormous -- and he wedged it halfway up our chimney. There he was Christmas morning, curls everywhere, covered in soot from head to toe. The living room was filthy. That carpet was ruined.”

“My Da would’ve killed me for that,” Lestrade says with feeling. “I guess that wasn’t a very fun Christmas?”

“Christmas was fine. My parents didn’t blame Sherlock, they never did.” If Mycroft sounds a little resentful, a little morose, it’s Christmas. He’s allowed to be emotional at Christmas. “He was always their little adult.”

“Sherlock?” Mycroft relishes the disbelief in Lestrade’s tone. “How do Sherlock and adult go
“He had such a single-minded determination. He was always so serious about his experiments, about the importance of his interests. In a child, it seemed precocious and endearing. It’s less so in an adult.”

“So if he was the little adult,” Lestrade says, “what were you?”

“The smart one.” Usually in relation to Sherlock. Frequently used after Sherlock had destroyed something. Mostly in the ‘how did you not stop this from happening, I thought you were the smart one’ way. He considers mentioning it but really, he’d only be complaining about being the eldest sibling.

He understands his parents’ careful treatment of Sherlock. After Eurus, after Redbeard, after Sherlock’s self-imposed silence, they were all wary of Sherlock. They gave him more leeway than they should have, were too worried about what might happen if rules were enforced too strictly or Sherlock’s creative mind was blinkered and restrained. They all tried to protect Sherlock in their own ways; he’s not sure any of them succeeded.

“What was he doing in the chimney, anyway?” Lestrade asks, and Mycroft blinks away the memory of Sherlock standing there, filthy and shrewdly pleased, holding that sharp, metal trap high in the air.

“He’d climbed the inside of the chimney to retrieve the closed trap,” Mycroft explains. “It had caught a scrap of torn red wool. He was determined to build a better trap the following year. I think he wanted Santa to negotiate his freedom with the exchange of a flying reindeer. He was fascinated by the reindeer.”

Mycroft remembers Sherlock spending an entire day at the zoo, staring at the reindeer, noting down every movement in a bound notebook. He talked about genetic anomalies, how Rudolph’s nose might be the first sign of further evolution and posited theories on why Santa’s reindeer could fly. Mycroft’s favourite had been that Santa forced them to breathe helium so they floated like balloons.

Sherlock had tried that himself, but found that no amount of helium would let him escape gravity.

Lestrade gives another hum. “Where did the wool come from? In the closed trap?”

“I really couldn’t say,” Mycroft says. “Maybe it was an elaborate prank on Sherlock’s part.”

That had been the Christmas Eve Mycroft climbed from his bedroom window to the roof. (He was fifteen and too old to be scared of heights. Scared of falling, scared of landing badly and breaking bones, those were reasonable fears. But he only needed to climb well to avoid those outcomes.) He’d had fishing line, a selection of weights and a scrap of fabric in his pocket. It had taken nearly an hour of standing over the chimney with a fishing line in each hand, to carefully catch the fabric and release the trap.

“Or a big brother who didn’t want to tell Sherlock that Santa didn’t exist,” Lestrade says.

“Knowing the truth is so rarely helpful in the grand scheme of things,” Mycroft says quietly. “He had his heart set on a flying reindeer.”

There’s a slamming door from Lestrade’s end of the conversation. “I’ve got to go. Have a good Christmas,” Lestrade says and hangs up before Mycroft can wish him the same.

***
As a rule, Sherlock only uses his phone to text. He prefers the clarity and simplicity of the written word. Mycroft much prefers hearing the other side of the conversation, the tone used, the pauses, the places where people have to stop and think; people often betray themselves in what they don’t say.

He spends Christmas night with a glass of Scotch beside the fireplace. The fireplace is gas fuelled and surrounded by glass and white plaster, set in the living room wall. It’s ugly, fake and modern. It makes Mycroft long for his former abode.

At least the Scotch is good. He has some consolation, he thinks as his phone rings. He answers, hoping it’s Lestrade as unlikely as a second call would be. The truth is even less likely: Sherlock.

“You can’t abandon me there next year,” Sherlock say in lieu of greeting. “That was abysmal.”

“You had Dr Watson with you.”

“John doesn’t count. He likes them. He thinks it’s a great family tradition.”

Mycroft smiles into his drink. As unenthusiastic as he feels towards Christmas, he always enjoyed this sense of alliance. Only he and Sherlock understood how tiresome it was to have such ordinary parents. Not bad parents, not cruel, but ordinary. Who didn’t understand why their sons insisted on speaking in gibberish, refusing to return to English until the other had cracked the cypher of that hour’s code. Who didn’t see that the main reason they both smoked at Christmas was to have an excuse to get out of the house, away from the banalities of small talk. No one would consider them close but at Christmas, they could overlook their differences. It was the wonderful uniting force of a common enemy.

“They weren’t distracted by Rosie?”

“Not for long enough,” Sherlock says. “And then Mummy brought out baby photos. She and John went through them for an hour. How can photos of a baby be so interesting?”

“I really don’t know.” Mycroft’s never understood the appeal of children, the automatic fawning over babies, the cooing over toddlers. Too often, they’re just small, less capable versions of the idiots that spawned them.

Mycroft nearly says the most interesting part of Sherlock’s baby album is the lack of Eurus, but that’s a topic better not mentioned between them. He doesn’t ask about the day’s visit to Sherrinford. He neither needs nor wants to know.

“Next year, you have to come. I don’t care if World War Three is threatening, you have to come.” Sherlock throws the demand out, but it’s simply his default way of asking for anything. Much like Mycroft’s default is to order that it be done.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Mycroft,” Sherlock pauses and his words hang in the air. Mycroft waits for another demand or another complaint, but Sherlock swallows and says softly, “Happy Christmas.”

Sitting by the fire on a crisp Christmas night, a glass of good Scotch in his hand and his brother on the phone. Sometimes, Mycroft’s life contains unanticipated pleasures. “Happy Christmas, brother mine.”

***

The nicest part of the holiday season is how quiet Whitehall becomes. It’s Mycroft’s favourite time of
year. Visits to the Diogenes are motivated by the quality of their Scotch and their kitchen, rather than
the necessity of finding somewhere quiet and undisturbed to think.

At the vibration of his phone, Mycroft stands and makes his way to the Strangers’ Room. Then he
calls Lestrade back.

“Oh, hey,” Lestrade says, sounding surprised and pleased. “I just left a message. It wasn’t urgent.”

“I’m not in the middle of anything pressing,” Mycroft assures him. He turns the glass in his hand,
watching the Scotch catch the light. “In fact, I’m very much at leisure in this moment.”

“At that weird silent club of yours?”

Mycroft frowns. That description clearly came from Watson. Sherlock would have said archaic or
stifling. “Yes.”

“I thought you weren’t allowed to talk? Did I drag you out of there to talk to me?”

“I took the call to the appropriate room,” Mycroft replies. “Now, if you’ve finished mocking, perhaps
we can return to the topic at hand.”

“Which was?” Lestrade asks, sounding very amused.

“I assumed you were calling to reschedule Saturday night, since you’ll be attending a New Year’s
Eve party thrown by friends in Hammersmith.”

“How did you know that?” Lestrade asks, which must be the most annoying question in the world. If
a social engagement is written on a calendar hung on the kitchen fridge, how can it be a surprise that
someone notices it?

“Did you really want me to answer that question?”

Lestrade thinks for a moment. “Not really. It just went from being months away to suddenly this
Saturday, and I forgot to mention it. Or invite you, if you want to come.”

“No, thank you.” Lestrade has been looking forward to this for months. It was clear in the age of the
ink used and the way that Lestrade volunteered to work Christmas day in order to take New Year’s
off.

“Thought you’d say that,” Lestrade says easily. “Not that I don’t want you to meet my friends, but
they’ll be loud and drunk, and someone’s bound to end up dancing on a table top.”

“I’m sure your friends are delightful human beings,” Mycroft says coolly, and Lestrade actually
laughs.

“Yeah, well, they’re a lot nicer when they’re not passing out drunk. But it’s once a year and we
don’t get up to as much trouble as we used to.”

Mycroft interrupts before Lestrade feels the need to justify himself further. “You should text me the
address. I’ll send a car for you.”

“What? Now?”

“For New Year’s. It’s a dangerous time to drive. A chauffeured car would be a much safer option.”

For a moment, Mycroft wonders if he’s overstepped boundaries in the suggestion. Lestrade isn’t a
child to be coddled, and he is certainly capable of navigating London at night. Mycroft prefers taking precautions and minimising risk, but so many people prioritise the illusion of freedom.

It was only a suggestion. Lestrade can refuse it.

“Actually,” Lestrade says, hedging as he thinks, “yeah, thanks. That’d be good.”

“Far easier than finding a taxi on New Year’s Eve of all nights.”

“True. As long as you know I’m not dating you solely for transport options.”

“But the car service is a large part of the appeal?”

“Damn right.” Mycroft can hear Lestrade’s smile. It’s not sentimentality; it’s an observation based on tone and pitch. “It’s easy to get used to.”

“Much easier than driving.” Mycroft pauses and looks around the empty room. The closed door. “I used to drive in London but by the end of every trip, I’d end up contemplating the congestion tax.”

“Cursing it like the rest of us?”

“Considering how much higher it would need to be to be truly unaffordable for the masses. A sevenfold increase would do it. Then, of course, public transport would need to be improved, regional hubs, improved services, and the infrastructure alone would take twelve months to build. Assuming it was well coordinated and there were no external disruptions. Then you’d have the political ramifications and the time taken to get the bills approved.” Mycroft sighs. There were some days when he’d started planning the letter he’d send to request Royal Assent. “In the end, a car service was the most efficient solution.”

“It was a choice between a car service and redesigning the entire public transport system to keep cars out of the city?” Lestrade carefully asks.

“Not all of the city. Maybe just the areas I drive,” Mycroft allows as a compromise.

“Yeah, you definitely took the easy option.” Mycroft is irrationally fond of Lestrade’s sarcasm. “Not that I’m complaining. I like the cars.”

“Good to know.”

***

“We have a situation,” Lady Smallwood says, closing his office door behind her. “I believe you would be the best liaison.”

Mycroft is not aware of any looming situation that needs his direct intervention. It’s been quite pleasant to work steadily through February with the bare minimum of international emergencies. “It involves Sherlock Holmes, I take it.”

“Not yet,” Lady Smallwood says, handing him a folder. “But if he becomes involved, it could be awkward.”

The folder holds photographs of a crime scene. The time stamps are dated this afternoon. Mycroft spreads them across his desk, looking at the details. There are a few shots of Lestrade. Not the Lestrade he usually sees, jovial and quick to smile. This is Lestrade in control of a crime scene, supervising officers, coordinating teams. He’s serious, direct and very clearly competent.
Sherlock doesn’t appear in any of the photographs yet. “What’s the situation?”

Lady Smallwood hands over another set of pictures. These are far more delicate. “The motive for the murder.”

“Oh, dear,” Mycroft says distastefully. “Murder over sexual blackmail? It’s all so very tired.”

“Quite so.”

“How can it be so difficult to think first? If they’re not prepared to legitimise the involvement through marriage, surely the affair is trivial enough to refuse.”

Lady Smallwood glances down at the desk, attention settling on one of the pictures of Lestrade. She doesn’t ask if Mycroft follows his own advice.

“What’s the official line?” Mycroft asks, standing up. He smoothes the pinstripes of his jacket and fastens the top two buttons. It will be easier to deal with this in person.

“Accident?”

“Not with the angle of that head wound.” For that line to work, they would need a Detective Inspector who was either very stupid or very lazy. Lestrade is neither of those. “We’ll need a culprit. Robbery gone wrong could work.”

“I’ll send you the available options.” Lady Smallwood pauses at the door. She rests one hand on the handle -- long fingers, freshly manicured, a pale pink appropriate for the garden party this weekend -- but she doesn’t open the door. “There’s one other thing.”

“Yes?” Mycroft prompts, reaching for his coat. “What is it?”

“She’s started playing.”

Thankfully, Mycroft’s coat is well made. If it hadn’t been, the way he’d suddenly clenched his fingers into the material might have torn a seam. He pulls on his coat. “Alone?”

“In harmony,” Lady Smallwood replies, opening the door. She leaves while he’s fastening buttons. Or more correctly, while he keeps his body turned from her and pretends to do up buttons with suddenly numb fingers.

His first reaction is terror. It’s the sheer terror of something small and warm-blooded being confronted by rows of sharp teeth. It’s a brain stem reaction, a spike of adrenaline and the other chemical markers of fear. He closes his eyes. Smoothes his hands over his lapels. Forces himself to breathe and think.

He wants to call Sherlock. He wants to call up a security team and have Sherlock whisked away somewhere safe. He wants to go straight to Baker Street and forbid Sherlock from this foolishness. Tell him to stop inviting disaster.

Because it will be disaster. Eurus could influence him, so she can easily influence Sherlock. And this isn’t climbing a tree. It isn’t stealing Mummy’s jewellery because it shines. This will be John Watson bloodied on the floor; this will be Sherlock walking out of a Baker Street window, and leaving a smeared, bloody corpse behind.

Or a gun to his head. She might prefer that imagery.
Spending time with Eurus isn’t safe. It’s never been safe, and Mycroft has spent his life trying to protect Sherlock from it. And now, Sherlock is stepping into the lion’s den with a juicy steak wrapped around his neck.

This, Mycroft thinks with his hands still shaking, this is why he can’t make decisions about Eurus. Because the idea of her spending time with Sherlock terrifies him; because he becomes desperate and scared. She’s his sister and she may be valuable in the future, but right now he’d order her execution to keep Sherlock safe.

He pulls out his phone. If nothing else, the honest terror will give him a reasonable cover story.

Lestrade picks up immediately. “Hey,” he says, but he sounds distracted. “Was this important? I’m a bit busy right now.”

“Can I see you?” Mycroft asks quickly, and he can hear the catch, the edge of a tremor. He is not as bad as that night at Sherrinford, finally getting released and handed a phone, but far worse than he should be.

They don’t do this. They don’t visit each other’s place of business; they don’t suddenly demand face to face meetings. They call, discuss plans, and meet on Saturdays. This isn’t what they do but Lestrade rattles off an address and the closest corner, and then says, “Mycroft? Are you okay?”


“I can come there if you need me,” Lestrade offers, even though leaving the scene would be irresponsible and would disappoint his superiors. But he offers anyway, with every intention of coming if Mycroft says so.

“I’d rather come to you.” Mycroft can feel his composure returning already, the fear calming down to his usual constant worry about Sherlock. “The drive would do me good.”

“Okay. Send me a message when you’re in the car,” Lestrade says. “Just to be sure.”

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He sends a message from the car and Lestrade texts back: *Let me know when you’re here.*

Mycroft spends the trip staring at his smartphone, reviewing options and carefully thinking about the crime scene photographs. He’s looking for what would fit, what could have been understandably missed. The most convenient scapegoat is currently lying in the morgue at St Bartholomew’s Hospital, accidental drowning after high consumption of alcohol. He has a history of burglary -- charges pressed, some time served -- and the right height and build to match the cause of death.

The trick will be introducing proof of him at the crime scene, ensuring that the evidence points away from the actual killer. At least this is where professional assassins are useful: they rarely leave conflicting DNA evidence behind them. A fingerprint on a window latch would work, and leave the assumption of gloves used inside the house. There would need to be items missing, something easily exchanged for cash and then something difficult to trade, something that can be planted at the culprit’s empty flat for the police to find.

Mycroft texts his requirements to the security team as the car slows. Then he sends Lestrade a message to say he’s arrived. Lestrade must have been waiting outside because the car door opens as Mycroft slides his phone back into his pocket.

Lestrade gets in and closes the door behind him, before asking, “Mycroft?”
“It was foolish,” Mycroft says, and he’s already counting the seconds. All the team needs to slip unnoticed into a crime scene are a few uniforms, a few Tyvek coveralls and the officer in charge distracted for five minutes. Ten would be even better. “I hope I didn’t pull you away from something urgent.”

“The guy’s dead,” Lestrade says, shrugging. “He’s not going anywhere.”

“Of course.” Mycroft forces a smile. From Lestrade’s concerned frown, it’s less convincing than usual.

“It’s mostly keeping the crime scene clear while Forensic Services do their thing. And most of that is taking their sweet time getting here. Apparently, there’s a backlog,” Lestrade says, but Mycroft was already aware of that. The first step to controlling a situation is to slow down all bureaucratic links, keep things waiting in line while the important details are arranged. It’s easy enough to reassign priority levels. “I can wait for SOCO in here as easy as out there.”

“Well, that does assuage my guilt,” Mycroft says. “I wouldn’t want to be the downfall of your admirable work ethic.”

“You’re not.” There’s a tilt of Lestrade’s head, a sharpness to those brown eyes. He won’t let Mycroft stall forever. “What happened?”

It’s such a simple question. Direct. Purposeful. Mycroft can’t bring himself to answer so directly. “Did you know Sherlock’s been visiting Sherrinford?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s been playing for her,” Mycroft says and Lestrade sits up straight. It’s all in the angle of his shoulder, the tension in his forehead. He knew. He knew about the playing. He knows Eurus plays back. Sherlock must have told him, no, not Sherlock. Sherlock told Watson, Watson told Lestrade and nobody told Mycroft. How can he possibly stay on top of this, how can he possibly keep Sherlock safe if he’s always three steps behind Eurus?

Mycroft tightens his hands around the handle of his umbrella and he thinks about the car. He thinks about the weight of it, how it sat when he got in, if anything seemed strange. It didn’t, he reassures himself. It’s one random car from a pool and he knows the former guards from Sherrinford are dead. There isn’t anyone else free to do Eurus’ bidding. There’s no direct danger.

There’s no direct danger that he can see, he mentally corrects.

“And sometimes she plays along with him,” Lestrade offers gently. Mycroft hadn’t expected him to volunteer the information.

“I found that out this afternoon.”

“It’s not every time,” Lestrade says, still calm and kind, a voice of reassurance and caring. “Not every song. Mostly Mozart and Beethoven, John said, but it’s something. It’s a good sign.”

Mycroft turns on him. “How can that be a good sign? She’s acknowledging the outside world. She’s interacting with Sherlock. That’s not a good sign, that’s bloodshed waiting to happen!”

Mycroft is on the cusp of yelling. He’s breathing far too heavily. This is more than Lestrade needed to see; he needs to be distracted, not verbally attacked.

Staring out the window, Mycroft presses his fingers to his mouth. He breathes through his nose until
he calms down.

“Apologies,” Mycroft says, wrapping both hands around the umbrella handle. He’s making a mess of this. It’s only been two minutes. Snapping at Lestrade won’t keep him here much longer. “That was uncalled for.”

“You’re allowed to be human,” Lestrade says and it’s such a non sequitur that Mycroft looks over at him. And where Lestrade should be offended and insulted, should be angry in return and make Mycroft grovel and apologise again, he only looks... Worried. Sad. “You can be angry or scared. You’re even allowed to show it.”

“No, I can’t.” Clear decisions are not based on emotions, and the decisions he makes are too important to be compromised by a lack of control. Temper tantrums are Sherlock’s purview. Mycroft relies on logic and facts.

He doesn’t anticipate Lestrade reaching across, placing his hand over Mycroft’s on the hook of the umbrella. “You can around me. I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

Mycroft focuses on the warmth of Lestrade’s hand and does his best to ignore the weight of his stare.

“Do you know how rare it is for me to struggle to understand something?” The words come out softly, an almost whispered secret. “Most people are picture books. It’s so obvious. Petty little motives and jockeying for favours, and I can read it all in a glance. But Eurus...”

He wants Lestrade to say something. Anything. Change the topic and leave these things unsaid. But Lestrade only hums in acknowledgement, rubbing his thumb across the back of Mycroft’s hand.

“It’s a code without a cypher. Page after page and I can’t read it. I can’t even see the codes unless she shows them to me.” Mycroft blinks; there suddenly seems to be a lot of dust in this car. But the truth, the truth he tries to avoid thinking about... “She played me for a fool. I led Sherlock straight into a trap, and I didn’t see it until it closed around us.”

Lestrade shifts closer. He drops one arm across the top of the car seat, loosely circling Mycroft and rests his forehead on Mycroft’s shoulder. Close but not confining. Mycroft lets his neck sag, lets his cheek rest against Lestrade’s soft hair. It makes it easier to whisper what he hasn’t wanted to admit to anyone. “And I won’t see it next time.”

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Lestrade stays there, silent and wrapped around him, until there’s a knock at the window. Lestrade pulls back, runs a hand through his hair, and then winds down the window. “Yes?”

There’s a young uniformed officer standing there. Barely over twenty, only his second month on the job. “SOCO’s here, sir.”

“Well?” Lestrade asks, gruff and frowning like it’s obvious.

“Well what, sir?”

“Well, show them the crime scene,” Lestrade spells out for him. “Go on.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” the young officer says and scurries off.

“I’ve never seen you be so intimidating,” Mycroft says, feeling like himself again. It wasn’t the best choice of subject -- he should have avoided it or thought of something else to distract Lestrade -- but
it’s done now. The sting of embarrassment will fade.

He also feels grateful. But there’s no appropriate way to thank someone for staying close until you could drag yourself back together. Or if there is, Mycroft doesn’t know of it.

Lestrade gives him a long, searching look and then nods. “I really am going to have to go stand there and watch them. Are you working late tonight?”

“Probably,” Mycroft says. He’d rather sit in his office right now than sit in his empty flat. Better to be productive than brood over something he can’t change.

“You should come over to mine tonight. It’ll take a while to get this stuff sorted, but I’ll call when I can leave.”

“Best not,” Mycroft replies. “I won’t be good company.”

“Which is why you shouldn’t be alone.”

Mycroft is better on his own. Mycroft doesn’t fall apart when he’s alone (and even if he did, no one could ever prove it). “Gregory, I don’t—”

“This isn’t for you. This is for me so I’m not worrying about you all night,” Lestrade says, and it’s hard to tell how much of that is a joke. Some of it must be, surely. “Come over.”

Mycroft is about to refuse, when Lestrade adds, “Please?” and sounds annoyed about it. Like Mycroft is being unreasonably difficult. Like Lestrade’s only asking for minimal cooperation to reassure himself. Mycroft knows that feeling from dealing with Sherlock.

“Very well,” Mycroft agrees, “but don’t expect me to stay the night.”

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“Thought you weren’t staying,” Lestrade says when he gets into the car and sees the garment bag hanging there. His grin is bright in the evening darkness.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Mycroft replies. “But a spare suit is a practical contingency to have in place.”

Lestrade pulls out his phone and unlocks it. “What time will you need to be up in the morning?”

“Five thirty would be best.” Mycroft considers the traffic, the road works and the routes from Lestrade’s place back to Whitehall. “Six eighteen would be the latest.”

“Nobody sets an alarm for six eighteen,” Lestrade says, setting one for 6:00am instead. “We should stop and get a takeaway. I think my fridge is pretty empty.”

***

As a rule, Mycroft doesn’t sleep well away from his own bed. He will nap at his desk, but sleeping in hotel rooms tends to leave him uneasy. Despite knowing there are security measures in place, he worries. He worries about exits, if the doors are safely locked and if they’ll unlock readily from the inside. He worries about everything in progress on his desk, if there are sufficient file notes to explain his reasoning if someone else should have to unexpectedly take over. He worries about Sherlock, always.

The simplest answer has always been to work. When travelling, there is always a backlog of reports
waiting for him and it’s practical to manage that growing pile by working most of the night and stealing a few hours’ sleep where he can.

It’s harder to justify in Lestrade’s small, neat flat, in his warm and comfortable bed. Lestrade is fast asleep, lying on his side facing the door, neatly staying on his half of the mattress. His breathing is reassuringly deep and regular, but Mycroft can’t sleep. If he tries to get up, the movement disturbs Lestrade enough to start mumbling so he has compromised: rolled to his side and silenced his smartphone, worked on what he can. He doesn’t like working in bed but he doesn’t want to wake Lestrade by leaving either.

He’s rescued by a call from Sherlock, of all things. Not a call to him, which is best because Sherlock calling him at half-two in the morning would have Mycroft tracking the GPS on his phone and rushing to his location. (Even though Sherlock hasn’t lost control like that since meeting Watson, even though it’s been years since Sherlock would be so high he’d call Mycroft by mistake, Mycroft is forever waiting for disaster to strike. Forever waiting for that chasm to open beneath Sherlock, to watch his little brother go tumbling down. He may be helplessly incapable of preventing it but he will be there for Sherlock when it happens.)

Sherlock calls Lestrade’s phone. The ring is loud in the quiet room. Lestrade groans, reaching for the phone and answering without opening an eye. “What?” he demands, his voice gruff.

In the quiet of the room, the sound of Sherlock’s voice can easily be overheard. “Lestrade, yes, surely you have something interesting.”

“It’s the middle of the night,” Lestrade groans, rolling to his back and starting to wake up.

“Well done, you’ve learnt to tell time,” Sherlock replies, voice fast enough for caffeine, not fast enough for amphetamines. He’s restless and bored, but not bored enough to have taken anything. Yet. “Now, as I was saying--”

“It’s the middle of the night,” Lestrade says firmly. “You do not call people in the middle of the night because you’re bored.”

“I’m not calling people, I’m calling you,” Sherlock replies.

“I’m people! Rules that apply to people apply to me.”

Mycroft considers embarrassment versus the likelihood that Lestrade will have any sleep tonight if this is left unchecked. He holds his hand out for the phone and Lestrade passes it over without question.

Mycroft switches the phone to speaker. “Where is Dr Watson?”

“Mycroft? Why are you -- eurgh,” Sherlock says as his brain catches up to his mouth.

Mycroft looks to the ceiling and does not allow himself to feel embarrassed. “The question stands. Where is Dr Watson?”

“He took Rosie to visit his parents. He should have made them come here.” Sherlock believes everyone should come to London. He also believes Watson should never leave his side; Mycroft tends to agree although for rather different reasons.

“Where is he precisely?”

“I didn’t listen. Boring.” Sherlock’s voice is deeper now but the whine is the same. His complaint
throughout childhood had been his terrible boredom. Mycroft has experience dealing with this. “I can track his phone.”

“No phones, no internet, no checking his laptop,” Mycroft says, spelling out the rules of the challenge. “You have twelve hours to call me back in his presence.”

“I’ll only need six,” Sherlock says. He already sounds more focused.

“No use of your phone or anyone else’s,” Mycroft specifies. “At all.”

“Eight, then,” Sherlock says and hangs up, because saying goodbye would be a waste of his available time.

He hands the phone back to Lestrade -- there’s a clear space for it between the lamp and the assorted clutter on the bedside table -- and finds Lestrade watching him curiously.

“Yes?” he prompts.

“I don’t know what I want to ask first,” Lestrade says, putting the phone down by feel and then rolling over, propping an elbow beneath his head. Mycroft finds himself turning, mirroring the pose. “Setting Sherlock challenges when he’s bored, because clearly you’ve done that before, or why you’re so awake right now?”

“Sherlock thrives under a challenge, any sort of puzzle.” That’s obvious to anyone who knows Sherlock. “And I don’t sleep well in strange places.”

“I don’t think my flat’s strange,” Lestrade says, deadpan.

“I sleep better in my own bed.” If Mycroft were the type of person to shrug, he would. “I am, unfortunately, a creature of habit.”

“You should have gone back to yours.” Lestrade reaches out, settles a hand on Mycroft’s side. His fingers are spread wide, spanning three ribs. “No good being up all night.”

“I didn’t want to wake you by leaving.”

“Well, you can go now.” Lestrade slides his hand down slowly, curving around Mycroft’s hip. His hand is cool against the bare skin. “Or since we’re both awake, you could stay for a bit and then go.”

“That sounds eminently practical,” Mycroft says, reaching out for Lestrade.

***

Sherlock’s answering call comes from Watson’s phone at 9.12am. Mycroft’s in the middle of London traffic, well prepared for this morning’s meeting, and he welcomes the distraction. “Mycroft Holmes.”

“Hi,” John says. “Apparently I have you to thank for Sherlock banging the door down at eight-thirty this morning. My parents really appreciated that, by the way.”

That would have been within the six hour window. Mycroft is impressed. He thought the trip alone would have taken Sherlock longer. “And are they enjoying their stay in Devon?”

In the background, he can hear Sherlock asking what’s being said and demanding the phone. Watson huffs. “I think they were enjoying it more before Sherlock rushed in, demanding to see Rosie.” There’s a scuffle where Sherlock gets his hands on the phone and adds, “I was here in under six
hours.”

“You didn’t meet the terms of the challenge within six hours. Within seven, yes.”

“It’s not my fault John was out getting milk when I arrived,” Sherlock replies.

“You were to call me in Dr Watson’s presence. You could have found him in the shop, surely?” Mycroft asks, and hears Watson sputtering in the background. Something about childish games and not getting banned from Tesco.

“Rosie was here,” Sherlock says, as if that perfectly obvious fact explains delaying a six-hour game of hide-and-seek. Sherlock probably spent half an hour telling an infant how terribly clever he’d been to find her. Mycroft doubts they remember anything at that age but whatever keeps Sherlock occupied...

“Did you know Harry was here?” Sherlock asks.

Mycroft didn’t. He’d asked for the Watson’s travel plans, not for an update on the entire family’s whereabouts. “Is that a problem?”


Clearly, Sherlock’s worked out the true reason Mycroft escaped Christmas this year. Faster than Mycroft expected, but that’s most likely due to the boredom of a three-hour drive. “Did you have a point?”

“You’re going to have to talk to them at some point,” Sherlock says, which is patently untrue. Their parents haven’t called since, and Mycroft is perfectly capable of avoiding their calls if need be.

However, Sherlock wants him to attend next Christmas Day. He will have to make peace before next December. That gives him almost a year. “Eventually,” Mycroft allows.

“You should visit,” Sherlock says, and he’s not talking about their parents.

“Enjoy the Watsons’ hospitality,” Mycroft replies.

***

“You have the power to topple governments and overcome chaos, right?” Lestrade asks wearily.

Mycroft smiles into his phone. “It has been rumoured.”

“Any chance you could control your brother?”

“Even my powers have limits, I’m afraid. I thought he was visiting Dr Watson in Devon?”

“He’s back in London. Apparently all that fresh air didn’t suit him.” The way Lestrade says it, it’s clear he doesn’t share Sherlock’s opinion of the countryside. That is a fact worth noting, Mycroft thinks. “But John’s not back for another week, so Sherlock’s being a pain.”

“How so?”

“We have a recently closed case. Sherlock thinks we did it wrong and wants to reopen it.”

Mycroft saves his work and closes it. “What are the details?”
“Nice and simple: robbery gone wrong. We find fingerprints, and the guy already has a record. We find out he’s already dead due to accidental causes, but we find stolen items at his home. Open and shut.”

“And Sherlock’s theory?”

“He says the death was caused by a very precise blow, so precise that it must have been a trained killer,” Lestrade says, sighing.

“What do you think?”

“I think the poor bastard got a fright, gave her a shove and ran before he even knew she was dead. I don’t think he meant to hurt her, let alone planned an exact angle for her head to hit the wall.”

“That’s far more probable,” Mycroft agrees.

“I also think John should have to get permission before leaving London. Sherlock without John is...” This sigh is longer and deeper. “I’d forgotten how bad he gets.”

“Dr Watson has been an improving presence,” Mycroft says, thinking of John and Sherlock crouched in Sherrinford, their shared promise to be soldiers. Caring is not an advantage, but the way John and Sherlock care... They’ve traded vulnerability for shared strength, devoted themselves wholeheartedly and built themselves around each other. Mycroft would never be capable of that single-minded devotion, that clarity of shared purpose.

He has always believed in duty to his country, to her people. If he loved like that, anchored himself to one person, he would let the world burn to save them. There would be no noble self-sacrifice, no agreement to face the worst no matter the danger. There would be calculated losses and personal safety bought at too high a price.

If he were a better man, he would tell Lestrade. Tell Lestrade that he will never choose him over duty, over his job, over Britain’s best interest. Lestrade will never be his first and only priority, and Mycroft will never love him to the exclusion of everything else. But he is not selfless enough to say that.

Lestrade is a smart man. He’ll work it out in time.

***

The second call comes at six o’clock that evening. Mycroft looks down at his phone and murmurs, “Do excuse me. I’m waiting on an urgent personal matter,” before leaving to take the call.

“Gregory,” he says, pitched low enough that he won’t be overheard as he walks away. “What do you need?”

“I don’t want to think about how you know I need help,” Lestrade says. His voice is worn thin from a lot of yelling in the recent past. “I hate asking you to pull strings, I really hate it but--”

“Ask.” If it’s within his power -- and very few things are outside it -- and Lestrade wants it enough to ask for it, Mycroft will do it. Immediately. After all, his other option is returning and he doesn’t especially want to finish that conversation with the Prime Minister.

“Sherlock did some investigating into that closed case and now,” Lestrade takes a breath, steeling himself, “I have a member of the Danish embassy staff in my interview room.”
“Did you arrest him?”


“So you called me?”

“I don’t know if he’s guilty, but if I have to arrest him, I’ll need a machete for the red tape. And if I don’t arrest him, there’s going to be a lot of apologising.”

“Hold him there,” Mycroft says. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

***

The Yard is as busy as it always is. It’s a droning hive of activity as Mycroft walks through the open spaces to Lestrade’s office. He opens the door to find Sherlock striding across the narrow space.

“Simply ridiculous, Lestrade,” Sherlock’s saying, arm thrown wide. “I do not invent crimes to amuse myself. The likelihood she died as described in your report is--”

“Statistically improbable,” Mycroft interrupts, “but far from impossible.”

Sherlock spins around. His coat -- completely superfluous in this temperature-controlled space -- billows out behind him. “I should have known this had something to do with you.”

“I had dinner plans,” Mycroft replies archly. “You are interrupting them.”

“No, you didn’t. Lestrade’s dinner plans were picking up Chinese on the way home.”

Mycroft takes a good look at Lestrade, who is leaning back in his chair and watching them. He looks tired, there’s a tension around his eyes due mostly to Sherlock, but there are two other open files on his desk. He would be far too busy to cook tonight. “Thai, I believe.”

Sherlock frowns at Lestrade, considering. “Yes, fine, Thai. It still doesn’t involve you.”

“Some people appreciate surprises.” No one in their family, certainly, but other people seem to enjoy being caught unawares. “But now there is a minor bureaucrat being held for questioning and a lot of inconvenient paperwork.”

“Perhaps if you talk to him,” Lestrade suggests but Sherlock stalks up to his desk and glares down at him.

“You won’t let me into the interview room. I’ve been here for hours. Why does Mycroft get to talk to him?”

Lestrade is not intimidated in the least. “Mycroft didn’t drag him in here in handcuffs.”

“And I have slightly more experience in these matters,” Mycroft points out. He holds a hand up to silence Sherlock’s oncoming complaints. “Perhaps we could observe him surreptitiously?”

Lestrade leads them to a two-way mirror. For such a new building, it’s such an old-fashioned staple of police work. Mycroft finds it rather charming in its simplicity, even if video recording is more likely to be used these days than an outside observer.

The man, Nielsen, sits there. He seems unconcerned with his hands lying loosely on the table. The basic details are boring -- hair colour, height, build -- but Mycroft looks carefully before turning to
Sherlock.

“I’m right,” Sherlock says.

“No.”

“What?”

“You’re close,” Mycroft amends, and there’s a fleeting expression of annoyance on Sherlock’s face. Narrowed eyes and the endless irritation of always being younger, always being a step behind.

Then the expression shifts into curiosity. “What is it?”


“He’s a minor official but he has gun calluses. Most security only practice with their dominant hand, but he has calluses on both hands. He’s practised, still does practise, and it’s to a much higher standard than a hobby or past skill would suggest.”

Mycroft nods. “Agreed. What else?”

“His clothes: much better than he could afford on his official salary, so he makes money somewhere else. His alibi for the time was a reception at the embassy, but a figure matching his description was seen sneaking out the back. For all the security cameras inside the party, there’s a two-hour window where he couldn’t be found.”

It’s rather good. “I’m impressed,” Mycroft says honestly and Sherlock scowls as if it was an insult. “Unfortunately I have more information than you do.”

“What?”

“His wife is very wealthy. Look at his wedding ring.”

Sherlock stares at it, sees that it doesn’t match the tan line beneath. It’s been removed and replaced, more than once. “He takes the ring off to use the gun. Less possibility of noise,” Sherlock says.

It’s the truth but it’s not the answer Mycroft wants. He takes out his phone and brings up a map. “And his phone’s GPS for the last week.”

Sherlock stares at it, enlarging the picture to the area of the crime. “He visited before.” A true professional might visit once; recurring visits would not happen.

Mycroft takes his phone back. He pulls up another (fabricated) map. “His movements for the last month.”

“Really?” Sherlock mutters, sounding disappointed.

Mycroft slips his phone into his pocket. “Really.”

Lestrade had been silent, standing beside them. Now, he raises a hand. “Care to explain that for the non-geniuses in the room?”

Sherlock looks at Mycroft, and Mycroft raises an eyebrow in return. Sherlock shrugs and explains, “He was visiting his mistress. Or boyfriend, I don’t know which. Is there a male term for mistress?”
“Paramour?” Mycroft offers as Lestrade says, “Bit on the side?”

“Whatever,” Sherlock says. “By probability, let’s say mistress. He’s been sneaking out and seeing her over the past month, judging by his phone records. He keeps removing his ring to see her, and the tan line is becoming less distinct as he puts it back on a slightly different place.”


“The additional income is not from being a contracted killer. It was his wife’s money, explaining the clothes and why he’d sneak out of an embassy reception to keep it secret.” Sherlock pauses. This is where Watson would say something complimentary, Mycroft thinks.

“That doesn’t explain the calluses,” Lestrade says. He has extremely good instincts, but Mycroft has an appropriate answer.

“I can explain that. He is officially an embassy clerk. Unofficially, he’s a security specialist.”

“And that’s okay?” Lestrade asks doubtfully. “A bodyguard who shoots with both hands?”

“Unofficially, it’s common enough that we’re not concerned,” Mycroft says. “Officially, we have no knowledge that he’s anything more than a minor bureaucrat.”

Sherlock smirks. “So he’s you with an accent?”

Mycroft holds his hands out, palm up. “I doubt you’ll find any calluses on my hands, brother mine.” Sherlock doesn’t even glance at them; Lestrade does. Mycroft slides his hands into his pockets, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

“Now that you’ve taken the fun out of a contract killer,” Sherlock says, popping up the collar on his coat, “I’m going home.”

As soon as he leaves, Lestrade sighs and sags against the wall. It clearly has been a long day for him. “Which leaves me with a lot of apologies to make. Thanks for not telling him I called you in to help.”

Mycroft waves that thought away. “Let me talk to Nielsen. I might be able to smooth things over.”

***

“My name is Mycroft Holmes,” Mycroft says, sitting down at the interview table. The killer opposite him gives a tiny wince. Given Mycroft’s reputation in certain circles, it shows an admirable level of control.

“Anders Nielsen,” the man replies. It’s as common as John Smith, but that is his name on official identification. “Why am I here?”

“There was a slight misunderstanding. An overreaction to a perceived threat,” Mycroft says coolly. Nielsen stiffens in his chair, shoulders going back. “The situation is under control now.”

“Am I free to go?”

“Absolutely,” Mycroft says. He folds his hands in front of him on the table, fingers interlaced loosely. “We do apologise for any inconvenience. I hope we didn’t put you out too much.”

Nielsen shakes his head. “No. I understand the importance of doing a job well.”

Interesting. Mycroft reaches into his pocket -- Nielsen watches the movement very closely -- and
pulls out a business card. “My card. Do keep it. If something like this should happen again, I would appreciate a call.”

Nielsen gives a nod. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He takes the card carefully, staring at the number to memorise it.

Sometimes, it’s nice to work with professionals. “I look forward to it.”

***

It’s Saturday and Lestrade’s cooking, slicing courgettes, tomatoes and onion into something truly mouth-watering. He pauses with the onions sizzling in the pan, and looks over at Mycroft grinning. “I nearly forgot,” he says, wiping his hand on the hips of his jeans. It’s such a relaxed, messy gesture. “Look at what I found.”

He picks a case up from counter and passes it over to Mycroft. It’s a copy of Detective Hensley’s *Two In The Hand*. The colour on the cover is slightly bleached; it’s certainly a counterfeit copy but Lestrade looks quite pleased with his find.

“It was down at the market.” Lestrade turns back to the pan, stirring languidly. “Thought we could watch it.”

It’s a charming idea. Mycroft has always liked the villain of this film, a confidence artist named Malone. He was blond with a sharp mischievous smile. As a child, Mycroft had found him magnetic, if untrustworthy and prone to significant changes of heart. As an adult, Mycroft could recognise the physical attraction and all the reasons Mycroft would never waste his time on someone like that in real life. It wasn’t the dishonesty, but the lack of self-awareness. How well could you know a man who didn’t know himself?

He’d never mentioned any of that to Lestrade. “I appreciate the thought but we should watch something we’ll both enjoy.”

Lestrade looks at him over his shoulder. “Something I’ll enjoy, you mean.”

“These films are slow by modern standards.” Mycroft taps a finger against the spine of the DVD case. He may adore these films but he has no illusions about their appeal to other people.

Lestrade turns his attention back to the pan. For a moment, Mycroft contemplates the lovely expanse of his shoulder blades. “But you like them.”

“Yes, but they’re not most people’s taste.”

“You do that a lot, you know.” Lestrade doesn’t turn around, and his voice is softly serious. “Put the things you want at the bottom of your priorities.”

Really, what Mycroft wants most at this moment is Lestrade. “Are you feeling neglected, Gregory?”


“I’m currently wearing a suit that cost more than your entire wardrobe. I have no trouble indulging myself.”

“You have no trouble making yourself comfortable. When it comes to doing things just to make yourself happy...” Lestrade shrugs. “You could put other people out a little. Make them
compromise.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose. Not when it isn’t important.”

“What if I think your happiness is important?”

“I’m not unhappy,” Mycroft replies and he can’t help thinking of Sherlock’s comment about loneliness. He’s content with his life. He’s valuable. Useful. And he is certainly comfortable. “But if it means so much to you, we’ll watch the film.”

They eat dinner on Lestrade’s couch in front of his television set. The picture would be clearer on Mycroft’s projector, but Mycroft still finds himself absorbed into the fictional world. He doesn’t realise he’s mouthing along to Hensley’s dialogue until he catches Lestrade staring at him.

Mycroft is well aware that it’s only acceptable to care about things to a certain limit; beyond that, it’s off-putting and strange. Enjoying a film is fine; knowing every line of dialogue is not. He’s about to apologise when Lestrade leans over and presses a kiss to his cheek.

“Nice to see you enjoying yourself.” Lestrade shifts and settles against Mycroft’s side. He slouches in the chair, low enough to lean his head on Mycroft’s shoulder. “Well, out of bed,” he adds.

Mycroft wraps an arm around Lestrade and watches the film. He feels warmly justified when they get to the good bit and Lestrade says, “What? That doesn’t... Oh, it’s a sham. The whole thing’s a con!”

“Most of it,” Mycroft agrees but refuses to tell him more until Detective Hensley reveals all.

***

One of Mycroft’s favourite aspects of being involved with Lestrade is the chance of an unexpected call during the week. The reason is usually to check plans for the weekend, but more often than not that’s simply an excuse to talk. Mycroft has grown very fond of listening to Lestrade talk about his day, or his neighbour, or delays on the tube. (If Mycroft can find some spare time, he should look into that. There has to be a better way to organise it. Of course, spare time is not an easy thing to find.) He’s spent more than one conversation leaning back in his office chair, feet up on his desk, enjoying the sound of Lestrade’s voice as much as the freedom to be as sarcastic as he pleases. It’s a refreshing break to the tedium of office routine.

“In Sherlock’s defence,” Lestrade says, at the end of a diatribe about how the second worst part of working with Sherlock is the sudden text for help (the worst part of working with Sherlock is the paperwork required), “at least this time he was trapped by the Russian mob. Better than the time I called in armed backup and Sherlock only wanted help with a speech.”

“A speech?”

“For John’s wedding. Which was still the most horrible best man’s speech I’ve ever heard, and that includes one wedding where the best man announced he’d shagged the bride last month.”

“Probably not the ideal time to confirm the groom’s suspicions.”

“At least that one was short,” Lestrade says. “Sherlock’s was never-ending. You weren’t there, were you?”

“Conflicting schedule,” Mycroft lies easily. It was good of Watson to invite him, but he’s under no illusions regarding how welcome his presence would have been. Watson belongs to Sherlock in a
way that will always exclude him from being too well-acquainted with Mycroft. It’s a good thing. Mycroft likes knowing that there is someone unquestionably on Sherlock’s side and, more often than not, at Sherlock’s side. He can play the shadowy spectre in the background if it means Sherlock is looked after.

“You really couldn’t get out of it?” Lestrade asks doubtfully.

“Possibly, but weddings are much the same. Dull ceremonies followed by cake, dancing and mingling,” Mycroft says distastefully. “I appreciated the gesture of the invitation.”

“You would have got to see me dressed up. Tie and all.”

“Mingling, Gregory,” Mycroft points out, and Lestrade laughs. “Besides, Dr Watson and I are hardly close acquaintances. Better to celebrate the day with people you enjoy spending time with.”

“John’s a good man. Wouldn’t hurt to be a little more friendly with the guy who’s--” There’s a momentary pause, a second where Lestrade was clearly going to say ‘shagging’, and quickly changes his mind. “--living with your brother.”

“Thank you for the discreet phrasing.” It also answers a matter of curiosity. Lestrade clearly knows about the change in Sherlock and Watson’s relationship and doesn’t especially care.

“Anyway,” Lestrade says, “on the topic of awkward social engagements you’d rather avoid...”

Mycroft smiles. “Was that the topic under discussion?”

“I’m going out to dinner with friends, Friday next. Will you come?”

Lestrade is approaching fifty, an only child with deceased parents and a friendship group that has survived passing time. His friends’ opinions will be important to him, serving as a substitute for familial approval. Given the way Lestrade speaks of them, their educations and professions, their backgrounds, Mycroft will not be what they expect. “Are you prepared for the most likely outcome?”

“That I’m going to get a lot of punching above my weight jokes, sure.” Mycroft blinks at the boxing reference, but he follows the meaning. He wonders if Lestrade means in terms of wealth, class, political importance or sheer intelligence. All are valid differentials from an outsiders’ viewpoint. “But it’ll be better than the imaginary boyfriend cracks they’re making now.”

“And when they disapprove?” Mycroft is cold and aloof; he does not make a good first impression. Lestrade may have forgotten this but he spends a great deal of time with Sherlock. He has developed a tolerance for unappealing personalities. Strangers will be less forbearing, especially those with a desire to protect Lestrade from unfortunate romantic entanglements.

“What?”

“When someone pulls you aside during the evening to share their misgivings? When they call a few days later to see if it was a joke, to query how serious you are about me?”

“I deal with people killing each other every day, I have a right to be cynical about human nature,” Lestrade says, despite being one of the least cynical people Mycroft knows. “What’s your excuse?”

“I’m not cynical, I’m realistic,” Mycroft says. “And if we exclude Sherlock, I could count on one hand the number of times I have been proved wrong when predicting how people will react.”
“What are you saying? I should wait and introduce you to them when I’m ready to break things off?”

“That is not what I said.” Mycroft sighs. A more devious person might use it as a future excuse to end things, but he knows Lestrade wouldn’t. “I wanted you to be prepared for your friends’ disapproval.”

“We put up with Jake’s ex-wife for five years, and that woman was an utter cow. Doug’s girlfriend laughs like a donkey. If I can put up with them, they can put up with you.” There’s a pause as Lestrade hisses in a breath, and then adds, “Look, can we pretend I said that in a less insulting way?”

“No,” Mycroft says, thoroughly charmed. As far as Lestrade is concerned, his friends will accept Mycroft whether or not they like him. The idea of Lestrade leaping to his defence is quixotic, but charming. “I much prefer honesty to flattery.”

Lestrade groans. “This is why I hate press conferences.”

“An innate tendency to tell the unvarnished truth?”

“It’s the unvarnished bit that gets me into trouble.”

“I’ll keep next Friday free,” Mycroft promises.

***

Meeting Lestrade’s friends goes as well as Mycroft expected. It’s a loose group of a dozen people: seven men, five girlfriends or wives, all in their forties. Mycroft memorises names as they’re introduced. He makes small talk and various interested noises as they go into endless detail about the challenges of running a dental surgery or the difficulty finding parking near the restaurant. In turn, Mycroft talks about the complexities of the public transport system and makes sure to mention that he works for the Ministry of Transport.

Of course he notices when Dave -- former police officer, mid-life change to teaching which he regrets, two kids, three dogs, addiction to online gambling that he’s managing to control -- catches Lestrade on his way back from the gents. The resulting conversation involves bowed heads and a concerned hand on Lestrade’s forearm, a careful expression and a noted effort not to look over in Mycroft’s direction.

At first, Lestrade looks confused. Then his brows rise in surprise and then the corner of his mouth pulls up, a sign that he’s finding this quite amusing.

It happens again with Brett after the mains are cleared. He asks Lestrade to keep him company while he smokes, and after ten minutes, Lestrade comes back in, shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

When Mycroft returns from taking a call, he sees Julie perched in his seat, one hand curled possessively around Lestrade’s wrist, and her head is tilted towards his, her mouth worried. Lestrade no longer looks amused; now he looks resigned.

“I know the divorce was ugly and I know it dragged out,” she’s saying as Mycroft quietly steps closer, “but are you sure about this, Greg? He’s the opposite of Claire in every way, but that’s not enough to build a relationship on.”

Mycroft pauses at a point that’s close enough to hear but not close enough to catch their attention. When Lestrade says, “It’s a few years too late for this to be a rebound,” Mycroft can hear the annoyance in his tone.
“I’m not saying rebound, but...” She gives Lestrade’s wrist a squeeze. “He seems nice enough, polite but he’s... He’s not exactly warm, is he?” It’s a question but she doesn’t give Lestrade time to answer. “I get it. Something casual, something that doesn’t come with a lot of emotional demands, maybe that feels like freedom right now. But eventually you’re going to want something real. Someone you can love.”

This is why Mycroft didn’t lip-read the conversation with Dave. Hearing proof that he’s right is a cold comfort at best.

“Jules,” Lestrade hisses, looking across the restaurant to the facilities. So he noticed Mycroft leave the table, but hadn’t seen him step outside to take his call. Lestrade doesn’t think to look over his shoulder towards the entrance.

“You’re a nice guy. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Can’t you just be happy that I’m happy?” Lestrade asks and Julie frowns at him. It’s the perfect moment for Mycroft walk over to the table and reclaim his seat. Julie has the gall to smile at him as she gets up.

Lestrade drops his voice and leans closer. “And you think there’ll be calls as well?”

“Certainly one, probably two. Mark and Julie would be my guess. She seems determined.”

Lestrade sighs.

***

There’s an endless farewell outside the restaurant, ongoing refrains of this was lovely night and we should do this again and oh, where are you parked and should we share a cab? After the first five minutes, Mycroft messages his driver. It’s another five minutes before the car pulls up, but Lestrade’s still talking about dates and doing this again.

Mycroft steps forward and touches his elbow, and Lestrade turns to him, smiling. Mycroft blinks, wanting to memorise the fall of the restaurant’s lights across Lestrade’s face, gleaming silver in his hair and the bright happiness in his eyes. It’s not as if he’s unaware of how attractive Lestrade is but in that split second, the man is exquisite.

“Our car,” Mycroft says but something must show in his manner, because Lestrade’s eyes flick up and down and his smile turns wicked.

“Okay, guys, we’ve got to go,” Lestrade says, backing away from the crowd. “Our ride’s here.”

“Uber?” Brett asks, and then his eyes go wide when he actually sees the Jaguar XJ, and the suited driver sitting in front. “Guess not.”

Somebody wolf whistles. Mycroft walks around to the far side of the car and pretends he doesn’t see the rude hand gesture Lestrade makes back at the group.

“Okay, that was fun,” Lestrade says as he closes the car door.

“Some parts of the evening were more fun than others.” Mycroft is tempted to slide down in the seat, to let his head drop back against the headrest. But a bespoke suit is not made for slouching.

“I honestly didn’t expect that reaction,” Lestrade says apologetically. “Feel free to say I told you so.”
“If I let myself say that, I fear I’d never say anything else.”

Lestrade looks at him for a moment, and then laughs loudly. It echoes in the car.

Mycroft must be feeling sentimental. He can’t help thinking how lovely Lestrade is like this, happy and carefree from the wine. At least Mycroft’s not mawkish enough to say it.

Lestrade runs a hand through his hair. “Are you working tomorrow?”

“I have a weekend of leisure.”

“You could stay the night,” Lestrade says. His right hand drifts to his collar. A few deft movements of his fingers have the top two buttons undone. It’s not intended as a seductive gesture but it’s still effective.

“I prefer sleeping in my own bed.”

Lestrade gives him a heavy look. “This is where a pushy boyfriend would suggest going to your place.”

“Do you expect me to object to the term?” Mycroft asks and Lestrade looks confused. Context. Other people need context spelled out to them. “It’s the fourth time you’ve used the word boyfriend in the last two weeks.”

Lestrade rubs his knuckles against his nose and pulls a face. “Is there another term you prefer?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Paramour?”

“Given you’re no longer married, that’s not accurate.”

“Partner?”

Frowning in distaste, Mycroft says, “That sounds far too much like a business arrangement.” Before the conversation can become any more absurd, he clarifies, “Boyfriend is fine. And, yes, we’ll go to mine.”

Lestrade grins at him as if he hung the moon and orchestrated world peace. It’s a ridiculous reaction that Mycroft attributes to the wine.

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“Huh,” Lestrade says as Mycroft leads him down the hallway into the open-plan kitchen and living room. He looks around the bank of glass windows and the pale grey walls to the kitchen with its smooth, shiny, dark grey cabinets and swirled marble countertop. “This is not what I pictured.”

“What did you imagine?”

“Wooden panelling and high ceilings,” Lestrade says, staring down at the grey tinged floor, the porcelain tiles that mimic bleached driftwood. “Lead glass. Ornate fireplaces. Oil portraits and maybe a suit of armour or two.”

Mycroft smiles at the accuracy of the description. “That was true of my last place.” He does miss his previous dining table and the large marble fireplace.
“It’s very...” Lestrade looks around, paying attention to the leather and chrome couch, the glass dining table, the furniture that conveniently came with the flat. He looks like he doesn’t know what to think of it. “Modern.”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is secure,” Mycroft replies, nodding towards the motion sensor in the corner. Lestrade’s eyes narrow as he scans the room again, this time spotting most of the sensors and cameras around the room. “Reinforced, tinted glass and clear interior lines of sight. Hideously modern, but security does trump decor.”

***

Mycroft wakes up to someone else’s alarm. It’s a Saturday and there is no earthly reason to be up. “Turn that damn thing off,” he mutters and hides in his pillow.

There’s shuffling from the other side of the bed. Then the shrill noise ceases.

Lestrade yawns and stretches. He rolls back to the middle of the bed and settles a hand across the small of Mycroft’s back. There’s a kiss between Mycroft’s shoulder blades, and then another.

“I’m not awake,” Mycroft mutters, keeping his eyes closed.

“I always thought you didn’t sleep well sharing a bed,” Lestrade says into his skin, in between the warm press of kisses. Despite the appeal of sleep, Mycroft’s interest is stirring. There’s a slow slide of Lestrade’s palm along his spine. “But you really do sleep better in your own bed.”

“Secure.” Maybe Mycroft arches his back into the touch. He keeps his arms wrapped around his pillow. “Go back to sleep.”

Lestrade hums as if he’s agreeing, but his hand slides down and along Mycroft’s thigh. Mycroft’s breath catches as he slides his knee out further, making space for Lestrade’s fingers to trace over the muscle. To smooth lightly from hip to knee, retracing the movement along the back of his leg, gradually drifting towards his inner thigh.

“Sleep,” Mycroft says again but he doesn’t sound discouraging in the least.

“Roll over.” Lestrade eases him onto his back with a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m not awake,” Mycroft lies, but he follows. Curves an arm around Lestrade’s shoulders, nuzzles against Lestrade’s neck. Keeps his eyes closed.

“You’re not a morning person.” Lestrade makes it sound like a delightful discovery. “But I can fix that.”

“Really?”

“I know the best way to wake up,” Lestrade says and disappears under the covers.

He could be right. Lestrade’s head between his thighs is infinitely better than waking to an alarm.

***

Afterwards, Lestrade unsurprisingly falls back asleep. Mycroft has always found sex invigorating, the clarity and stress relief that comes with endorphins; Lestrade, on the other hand, can’t stay awake after sex. He doesn’t so much enjoy the afterglow as sleep through it.

“I’m getting up,” he says and Lestrade manages a mumbled reply that can’t possibly be in English.
He dresses appropriately and heads to the second bedroom. He eyes the treadmill and elliptical trainer with a deeply personal dislike, but it has to be done. Best to get it done now.

He stretches and warms up, and then follows his routine. Ten minutes on the elliptical, ten minutes on the treadmill, repeat three times. By the time he’s on the last ten minutes, he’s sweating and breathing hard, but he’s also feeling the satisfaction of setting a challenge and achieving it. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays start like this; Sundays, too, when his weight starts creeping up and his diet has to become stricter.

He hates the thought of exercise, but once it’s done there’s something so rewarding about the calories burned. And not having to get his suits adjusted.

He’s counting down the last few minutes when Lestrade appears in the doorway, complete with bedhead, bare chest and jeans hastily pulled on, top button not even done up. He looks rumpled and half-asleep; he looks like he belongs in bed. Specifically, sprawled out across Mycroft’s bed.

He’s also holding Mycroft’s phone out. Mycroft steps off the treadmill and takes it.

“And you’re out of breath,” Sherlock accuses.

“Treadmill,” Mycroft explains. Sherlock makes a noise as if he doesn’t believe it but doesn’t want to think about it any further. “Why are you calling me?”

“You know why.” Mycroft can hear the wind -- open space, outdoors -- seagulls and a distant helicopter. Sherrinford, then.

Mycroft wonders what’s happened to convince Sherlock to raise the subject with him. Something to do with a case? Or has Watson spouted more familial sentimentality at him? “Enjoy your visit.”

“You should come. See her,” Sherlock says. “She’s our sister.”

Mycroft rolls his eyes. He reaches for a glass of water and swallows before he replies. “When have emotional pleas ever worked on me?”

“Then think about the intellectual resource. If you showed her some compassion--”

“Don’t lecture me on compassion,” Mycroft bites back, sharp enough that Lestrade stops leaning against the wall and takes a step towards him. Mycroft holds a hand up to stop him coming any closer.

“If you would just see past your fear--”

“The nurse,” Mycroft says over Sherlock’s tirade. “Watch the footage of the nurse. Then talk to me about unfounded fears.”

He hangs up, or Sherlock does. They probably both disconnect at the same time.

“Not even in London and he managed to ruin the mood,” Lestrade says casually, and Mycroft nearly snaps back with something cold and cutting. Something Lestrade doesn’t deserve, especially since he’s right. Physical distance has never stopped Sherlock from being able to annoy Mycroft and dissolve his self-control. He doubts it ever will.

“You okay?” Lestrade asks carefully.

“Would you like me to call a car?” Mycroft asks in response. Lestrade frowns, so he adds, “To take
“You home.”

“No.”

“Then we should get dressed. Go out for breakfast,” Mycroft says, thinking about where would be open locally. Then again, the weather’s too cold to walk, so anywhere is theoretically possible. “Any preferences?”

“I’d rather eat here.”

“That gives you a choice of bran flakes or porridge.” Mycroft wasn’t expecting guests and his kitchen shows that. It’s much easier to diet when there’s no temptation lurking in the middle of the night. If this becomes regular, he’ll need to start stocking his fridge.

Lestrade shrugs. “Porridge. Then you can tell me about the nurse.”

“Some nightmares don’t need to be shared.”

“I work in the CID. I’ve seen things.” Mycroft waves the objection away, but Lestrade steps into his personal space and cups his cheek. “I can handle this.”

Mycroft shakes his head.

“I’ve seen kids’ faces after watching their father beat their mother to death. I’ve stood in crime scenes from the gory to the sadistically cruel.” Lestrade takes a breath and says softly, “You don’t have to protect me from this.”

“Why?” Mycroft asks. “Why would you want to know?”

“Because I don’t think there are a lot of people you can tell.”

***

Lestrade describes his fridge as the saddest single man’s fridge in the history of the world.

“You have seen Sherlock’s fridge?” Mycroft asks.

“That’s not sad. That’s disturbing.” Lestrade raises his eyebrows, and points at the empty shelves. “And he still has more food in there than you.”

“I don’t enjoy cooking.”

“Which is a shame when you have such a fancy kitchen. I bet your oven even cooks at the temperature it says it’s cooking at.”

“I honestly wouldn’t know.”

They’ve showered; they’ve eaten. The dishes have been washed and placed back in cupboards in even, perpendicular stacks. The conversation has been light-hearted, carefully skirting any serious topics. Mycroft is curious. He wonders how long they could avoid talking about it, at what point Lestrade’s consideration would be overruled by his thirst for the truth and his well-developed interrogation skills.

As if hearing Mycroft’s thoughts, Lestrade says, “If you really don’t want to talk about it...”

“I don’t,” Mycroft replies. “Now, what did you want to do today?”
“I wanted to hear about your sister,” Lestrade replies honestly. He holds Mycroft’s gaze and shrugs. It’s such an obvious request for information...

Mycro sighs. He doesn’t have to give in, but he knows he will eventually. Might as well do it now. “This is classified. If you tell anyone about this, the consequences will be unpleasant.”

“Unpleasan?”

“For me. They will be much worse for you,” Mycroft clarifies. He doesn’t have any true concerns about confidentiality -- after all, Lestrade deals with sensitive information daily, he knows not to discuss everything with everyone -- but it should still be stated.

Lestrade nods. “Okay.”

Mycro sits at the dining table and steiples his hands in front of him. This will be easiest if he thinks of this as a debriefing. “How much did you want to know? Just the specifics about the nurse?”

“As much as you can tell me,” Lestrade says, sitting down.

Mycro pictures the situation as a police file. Persons of interest. Relevant background. The pieces Lestrade already knows from Watson and Sherlock, the gaps that must be irritating his police sensibilities. “After the fire, Eurus was sent to a children’s home. Designed for those with dangerous tendencies and mental instability. She was there for seven weeks. During that time, she convinced the Matron to kill herself. She convinced one of the nurses to strangle two of the other children. She also convinced one of the staff to release her and drive her home.”

“How did you find out about this?” It’s a good question. Mycroft was only twelve at the time.

“Uncle Rudy told me. He showed me the case notes. First time I saw a classified file,” he remembers suddenly. They used to be thicker -- handwritten notes and everything printed on dot-matrix paper. Now, it’s mostly electronic. “She returned to Musgrave Hall first. She was looking through the wreckage when Uncle Rudy found her. She said she was checking if Sherlock had forgotten her headband.”

“Lucky the family had moved.”

“Lucky she wanted the headband,” Mycroft replies. “Our parents visited her often in those weeks. I have no doubt that she knew where we’d moved to.” Dirt on shoes, particulates stuck to clothes, unconsidered comments about the new surroundings. If Mycroft could look at their parents and see the signs of moving, Eurus would have known easily.

“After that, Uncle Rudy moved her to Sherrinford. The fire was an efficient way to hide the bodies.”

“How old was she?” Lestrade’s right hand clenches, like he wishes he could write this down. “When they moved her?”

“She had turned five the week before. Uncle Rudy believed if her abilities were known, a permanent solution would be enforced.”

“Kill a five year old?” Lestrade asks as if the idea is abhorrent. At the time, Mycroft had wondered if Uncle Rudy was right, if it was sentimentality or family shame that stayed his hand rather than a practical consideration of the options. These days, he thinks an early termination would have been the easier choice.

But without Eurus’ help, he wouldn’t have identified the attacks in time. It was a ploy for attention,
just another step towards her end goal, but circumventing those attacks saved civilian lives, at least a hundred. On balance, keeping Eurus alive has resulted in fewer deaths overall, if far more personal strain.

“Uncle Rudy took me out to visit Sherrinford.” It had been smaller then, still concrete walls and white painted plaster. He remembers Eurus standing there, hair loose around her shoulders, so small in that barren room. She just watched him, and said nothing. “And then the children’s home.”

“Why?”

“To see how burnt it was. To be able to draw on first-hand information when I told my parents that it burnt down, that there was no identifiable body remaining.”

“You told them?” Lestrade asks carefully. “Not your uncle?”

“Uncle Rudy worked for MI6. He was very adept at lying and our mother knew that. He thought it would be more trustworthy coming from me.” His uncle taught him the importance of strategy, to consider how the delivery of news changed the message. “It worked. Remains were buried in the family plot, although there was no official funeral. I still think it was a kindness.”

Lestrade is quiet. Mycroft listens to the distant sound of London traffic. He considers what to say next. He also considers making tea, but decides holding a cup steady would probably make this harder, not easier.

“I didn’t see Eurus again until I took over the Holmes surveillance. That was eleven years later.” In hindsight, that had been fortunate timing. Uncle Rudy had passed away the next year -- arsenic poisoning in Madrid -- and Mycroft wouldn’t have entrusted the surveillance to anyone else. Sherlock had been seventeen going on thirty, headstrong and wild, and so certain of his own immortality. Eurus had been sixteen, taller, adult curves appearing, hair longer but still loose and untamed. She had the same blank eyes seeing everything and nothing, the same refusal to speak or interact with the world around her. “She was unreachable. She hadn’t spoken a word since she came to Sherrinford. She ate, she slept, she sat in her cell or stood staring at the glass. Physically, she was healthy. Had regular medical visits.

“I reviewed the security and all reports from Sherrinford, but I didn’t visit her again.” Mycroft takes a slow breath. He counts to five as he holds it and then lets it out. “And then, eight years ago, there was the incident with the nurse.”

Of course he reviewed Sherlock’s conversation with Eurus, heard her description of the event. (“I’ve had sex,” she said.) It made sense, for a girl who couldn’t determine which sensation was pain, who couldn’t identify laughter from weeping.

“The previous governor had grown complacent. Eurus had never reacted in any way, had never been a threat, and the guards weren’t watching her monitor feed closely. It showed clearly on the camera.” So clearly, the body laid out for the camera to see, Eurus always behind the body so there was a clear shot of what she did. The other two feeds were clear, couldn’t even see her from their angles. It was the perfect position if you knew which feeds were more likely to be watched. It was the exact position he woke up in, without Sherlock, without Watson, without any sign of life around him. Of course he’d recognised it and seen the simple threat there. “She had twenty minutes between overpowering the nurse and the guards arriving.”

Now Mycroft wishes for a cup of tea. For something to grip. For anything but this chrome and glass mockery of a table that will show the smallest nervous twitch. He presses his palms together, keeps his fingers straight lest he clench them too tightly and stares at the floor. At Lestrade’s socked feet
beneath his jeans. Grey-black socks, faded from washing, starting to wear at the big toe, especially on his left foot. Favours his left side when standing, wears his shoes unevenly, treads heavy on the arch. Socks too thin to be much comfort when standing all day, not usually worn to work.

“It was standard procedure for the nurse to carry a sedative. She jumped him, emptied the needle into his jugular and then stripped the body. She was fast and she was methodical.” He thinks of Lestrade’s socks. He does not think of the camera footage, the precise way she inflicted damage, broke the body as much as she could. He does not think of his relief that the sedative was fast acting, that at least the man didn’t feel it. He thinks of Lestrade’s cotton socks. “In twenty minutes, she managed to dislocate most joints and break the majority of bones.”

“Jesus Christ,” Lestrade breathes out, and Mycroft does not look up. Does not dare meet Lestrade’s eyes. He has no idea what Lestrade would see in his.

“She used her hands and her body. She used precise angles and force. She moved from the feet up and the last bone she snapped was his neck.” And it had snapped. There had been snaps. The pop of a dislocated shoulder or hip, the wet crunch of the tibia bone breaking. “And then she sat on her bed and the guards rushed in.

“After that,” Mycroft continues, “I had to take a more active role at Sherrinford. The governor needed to be replaced, the security measures improved. I visited her in person to monitor her. In hindsight, it was a very effective way of forcing interaction.” Because that was when it started. That was when she started responding to verbal questions, started talking. That was when he would visit and she would look at him and summarise the political situation, without any access to the outside world. And when he was desperate, when he knew an attack was coming and couldn’t find the trail of it himself, he asked for her help. He promised her a violin. He let her talk to a maniacal psychopath, and told himself it was a reasonable compromise, not too much to pay. He loaded the trap for Sherlock and then walked him in.

“Will they show that footage to Sherlock?” Lestrade asks, and Mycroft pulls his attention away from pointless recriminations. It’s done now; it can’t be fixed.

“I don’t know.” He’s not sure what Lady Smallwood would make of the request. He can’t be certain what she would decide. “I don’t have control of it any longer.”

He wants to say it’s better if he doesn’t. He doesn’t know if honesty would help Sherlock or not. It would forewarn him, but that knowledge didn’t protect Mycroft from Eurus’ manipulations. Maybe it would only poison him against her; maybe it’s only driven by a selfish urge to keep them apart. He really doesn’t know the truth of the situation.

“It’s okay not to know,” Lestrade says, which is ludicrously untrue. Mycroft has built a career on appearing omniscient. If Mycroft isn’t right, if he doesn’t know... It’s unacceptable. “But just in case, I should give John a call. Give him a heads up.”

“Classified,” Mycroft reminds him sharply.

Lestrade gives him a look. “Sherlock will tell John anyway. It’s best if John has some warning before the emotional fallout.”

Lestrade is right. There will be an emotional reaction and Watson will bear the brunt of it. “Fine,” Mycroft says, and, “I’m putting the kettle on.”

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Lestrade makes the call on the balcony, leaning against the railing, watching the street below. Mycroft glances at the sliding glass door, firmly closed, and waits for the kettle to boil.

He feels hollow. Empty in a numb, metaphorical way. If this is what it feels like to share a secret, he’s glad he doesn’t do it often: there wouldn’t be anything left of him.

The rest of the day stretches out before him, and he doesn’t know what he’ll do with those hours. It rather depends on Lestrade’s reaction.

He’s not certain what that will be.

He suspects Lestrade will return, will sit down and drink his tea, and then broach the topic of weekend plans. There will be a socially acceptable reason to leave, and Mycroft will call for a car. Given Lestrade’s general workload, given that he left early on Friday for social plans, there will be a backlog and Lestrade will be apologetic for having to reschedule next Saturday. The following weekend Mycroft will probably be in Geneva, so that Saturday will be cancelled. The weekend after, Lestrade will probably claim to be working. There will probably be a few phone calls after that, and then mutual agreement that their conflicting schedules make this relationship unworkable. Everything would be polite and mature, and Lestrade would never acknowledge that what he just heard had anything to do with his later decision to end it.

But Sherlock won’t be affected. It’s a reassuring thought. There won’t be any impact on Lestrade’s career. Mycroft’s position is too secure to be threatened by anything so minor. Really, he tells himself, it’s one of the better ways this could end. He can take comfort in that.

On the balcony, Lestrade lets his head drop back and stares up at the grey sky. He keeps his phone pressed tight against his ear. It’s a sign of tension that he’s trying not to show. The hunch of his shoulders suggests he’s not voicing everything he’s thinking.

Lestrade really should be wearing his coat in that weather. He’s not even wearing shoes.

Mycroft slices lemon. He pours milk into the milk jug and fishes out the sugar cubes for Lestrade (he takes coffee with two sugars, tea with one, small dash of milk in each). He sets the teapot and the cups on a tray, and then takes it over to the coffee table.

He pours the first cup as Lestrade opens the door and steps inside. “Oh, tea,” Lestrade says, stating the obvious as he sees the teapot.

“Would you like me to pour?”

Lestrade slides his phone into his jeans’ pocket. “Yeah.”

“I take it you were able to contact Dr Watson.”

“Yes,” Lestrade says again, taking the thin china cup carefully. He holds the saucer as if he’s scared the whole thing will jump from his fingers. “I gave John the basics. Said to call me if... I don’t know. If he needs to, I guess.”

“Very well.”

“What about you?” Lestrade asks over the rim of his cup. The design is blue forget-me-nots on delicate white china. It strikes Mycroft as slightly ironic, given the circumstances.

“My plans for the day?” he asks cordially. “I thought I’d catch up on reading, go down to my club later.”
“No, I mean, are you okay?”

“Of course.” Mycroft’s a little surprised by the question, by the concern there. “I’m fine.”

Lestrade rubs a hand across his face, forehead wrinkling and eyes squinted closed. “I don’t think you know what that word means.”

He’s disappointed by the idea that Lestrade might be trying to pick a fight. Having an argument and storming out is such a messy way to end this. Once the adrenaline wears off, there will be doubts and regrets. It would be much cleaner to let it wither away over a few weeks. But he can play the role of disagreeable lover if it’s required. “I know more than you ever will,” he says sharply.

“Look,” Lestrade says and then stops himself. He glances towards the balcony, clearly remembering the conversation with Watson. “My plans for the day were--”

“I’ll call the car for you,” Mycroft says and instantly realises he should have waited, should have let Lestrade finish whatever excuse he was going to state. People feel railroaded if you tell them their conclusions before they verbalise it. “Sorry. Do tell me your plans for the day and then I’ll call the car.”

“As I was saying, my plans for the day were basically eat something and try to drag you back to bed.” There’s more he’s not saying; Mycroft waits for the rest. “But you have no food in.”

It’s a weak excuse as far as these things go, but the quality of the excuse doesn’t honestly matter. Mycroft places his empty cup back down. Lestrade places his beside it.

“So I’m thinking,” Lestrade says, and Mycroft braces himself. Makes sure his mouth twists upwards, even if he can’t quite force a smile. “We go down to a market, get food, and for once cook something in your kitchen. Something that takes a while in the oven, so I can drag you to bed while it cooks.”

That’s not the expected script. It was so unlikely that Lestrade would want to stay that Mycroft dismissed the possibility entirely. However, it’s far from an unwelcome development. “I’ll order the car. You need to put on shoes.”

***

Saturday passes easily. They shop, Mycroft watches Lestrade cook and then they eat at the dining table. Mycroft sets up the projector, and they watch the next Hensley movie. Then there are casual kisses on the couch which eventually drift towards more. When they move into the bedroom, it turns into something a little bit desperate.

Sunday passes much the same. Mycroft reads on the couch while Lestrade plays card games on his phone. The silence is restful until Lestrade glances at the wall clock and mentions that he could walk to work from Mycroft’s flat in Westminster.

“You could,” Mycroft says. Mycroft doesn’t walk to his own office, but that’s due to security measures rather than the distance. “However wearing the same jeans and T-shirt you left in might be inadvisable.”

“I keep a change of clothes at the office. Just in case.”

Mycroft raises an eyebrow. “In case you follow someone home for the weekend?”

“In case something unexpected happens. Usually it’s working all night. This is much better.”
Another night hardly makes a difference. “Stay if you wish.”

Lestrade grins. “I’m going to thank you for that later.”

Later is Sunday night, when Lestrade takes his time. He drags his mouth slowly down Mycroft’s body, sucks a mark against Mycroft’s thigh as he gets the lube on his fingers, mouths against Mycroft’s balls as he rubs and pushes and slowly works one finger inside Mycroft.

He presses open mouthed kisses to the side of Mycroft’s cock, adds a second finger. “Just this, okay?” he murmurs and then opens his mouth around the head of Mycroft’s cock. Not the bobbing head and hard suction he usually uses to devastating effect; no, this is gentle and slow, drawn out until his jaw must be aching, his wrist cramping. Drawn out until Mycroft relaxes into it. Surrenders and stops thinking. Allows himself to drift in sensation, float in it until the inevitable happens, until the swell rises and leaves him crashing on the shore.

Afterwards he feels shattered. Wiped out more than sex usually affects him. Barely capable of moving, let alone being an active participant.

“Come up here,” he says and even his voice sounds slurred and slow. “Over me.”

Lestrade scrambles up the bed, holds himself up on elbows and knees.

“Kneel,” Mycroft says, tapping tired fingers against Lestrade’s hip until he does. Until he settles his weight back, knees to either side of Mycroft, flushed and breathing hard, a sheen of sweat over his body, arousal impossible to ignore.

“I want you to come on me,” Mycroft says because these kinks are hardly difficult to identify.

Lestrade grunts like he’s been punched in the solar plexus.

“Touch yourself. I want to see you come. I want you to watch as you come all over me.” He reaches out for Lestrade’s left hand, draws the thumb into his mouth. The scrape of teeth across the soft pad is enough to startle Lestrade into action. To wrap his dominant hand around his cock and strip it in hard, punishing strokes.

There’s a flush across his chest. His eyes are dark and half-lidded; his mouth is loose and parted, panting as he thrusts into his own fist. From the tense muscles of his biceps to the damp white hair at his temples, the man is beauty personified.

Lestrade’s eyes flick from Mycroft’s mouth around his thumb, to his own hand on his cock. His movements are hard and fast until he comes, groaning and staring down at Mycroft’s chest, the mess left there.

“Fucking hell,” Lestrade groans when he gets his breath back. He moves off Mycroft and collapses onto his back. “Fuck.”

Mycroff stretches. Decides a shower would be the best option. “Your alarm is set for tomorrow?” he confirms.

“Alarm?” Lestrade frowns at him, thinking. Or not thinking much, as the case may be.

“Tomorrow is Monday,” Mycroft clarifies.

“Yeah,” Lestrade says already yawning. “Yeah, that’s always set.”
“Then sleep. I’ll join you after a shower.”

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As expected, Lestrade’s call on Tuesday bemoans the backlog of paperwork that developed over one missed Friday afternoon. “I can take two weeks off, and it’s fine. But a couple of hours off and everybody has reports to be reviewed.”

Because Friday afternoons are spent clearing administration tasks before the start of a weekend. It’s a simple pattern of human nature. “I understand the phenomenon.”

“I just don’t know if I’m going to get it all cleared by the end of the week.” Lestrade sighs. “I was thinking dinner Friday night, but it might have to be Saturday.”

One weekend spent together and Lestrade has assumed Friday to Sunday will now be available. Mycroft smiles. “I’ll call you later in the week to confirm plans.”

***

Later turns out to be Thursday evening, where Sherlock answers Lestrade’s phone with a long-suffering, “Not now, Mycroft. Lestrade is supposed to be being useful and you’re only going to distract him.”

Sherlock must have answered it on speaker, because Mycroft can clearly hear Lestrade say, “That’s my phone, Sherlock. Give it here.”

“You can talk to Mycroft when there isn’t an interesting case.”

“You can give me my phone or I’m going to have you banned from the Yard,” Lestrade replies firmly. It’s a threat Mycroft’s considered making in the past, but the security at NSY isn’t a match for Sherlock’s skills. Setting him an additional challenge has never discouraged Sherlock from pursuing anything.

“I’ll just break in,” Sherlock says airily.

“I’ll tell everyone to taser you on sight,” Lestrade replies. “There will be volunteers, Sherlock. We have plenty of tasers to go round.”

Despite his best intentions, Mycroft’s small sound of amusement is loud enough to carry over the phone.

“Fine,” Sherlock says, dropping the phone on a metal table. Mycroft winces at the sudden loud noise in his ear. “Don’t be long, Lestrade. The body shattered. How often does the victim shatter?”

“Metaphorically? All the time. Especially when they deal with you,” Lestrade says. “Now go bother Molly. And don’t pick my pockets.”

“Don’t be annoying,” Sherlock replies, and then there’s the squeak of a swinging door.

“Let me get this thing off speaker,” Lestrade says, and the tone of audio changes. Lestrade lets out a slow breath, and then says, “Hi.”

“A new case?”

“A weird one. The press are all over it. The whole weekend’s going to be a bust.”
“Understandable,” Mycroft says. He’ll start work on Geneva this weekend, see if he can move the trip a few days earlier. There’s a conflicting security committee meeting but if he schedules his time carefully, it should be possible. “We’ll do something next weekend.”

“Look, I’m sorry--”

“Gregory,” Mycroft interrupts the pointless apology. “Please trust that I understand better than most that it’s not always possible to control what lands on your desk. Or the deadline attached to it.”

“Never know when a parking crisis will hit.” Lestrade’s made no secret of his amusement at Mycroft’s claimed employment. “Thinking of that...”

“Parking?”

“Well, thinking of you telling Brett, in detail, the conflicting rationales for parking around Piccadilly,” Lestrade says, meaning Mycroft’s introduction to his friends last Friday. “You were right.”

“I usually am.”

“Mark and Jules both called. At least Mark agrees that the car service is worth seeing where this goes.”

Mycroft smiles at Lestrade’s good humour. “Whereas Julie still believes you should date someone more like your ex-wife.”

“Given how that ended, I think something different--”

“Hurry up, Lestrade!” Sherlock calls out, as the door slams open in the background. “We have to go.”

“I’m on the phone,” Lestrade says sharply.

“If Mycroft has enough spare time to prattle on, he should be visiting people instead,” Sherlock says, purposely loud enough to carry. It’s a far from subtle reminder regarding their sister. “We have to get to the Swan Street dog park. I’m texting John now.”

“Duty calls,” Lestrade says into the phone.

“Go,” Mycroft says. “Call me if you have time. I’ll see you next weekend.”

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Making sure the case holds together in court requires more than just finding the culprit: it requires proof that police followed all reasonable avenues, interviewed all witnesses and tested all items left at the crime scene. Once Sherlock’s solved the mystery of what happened, the police still need to disprove the other possibilities.

Finishing up the casework keeps Lestrade busy for the weekend. Unfortunately the same cannot be said of Sherlock, who raps on Mycroft’s front door on Sunday afternoon.

Mycroft opens his door and looks at his brother. Hair more windswept than usual, a dozen tiny signs of discomfort: a conversation about Eurus then. Mycroft steps back and waves Sherlock inside.

Watson stands at the end of the hallway by the lift. “Come inside, Dr Watson.”
Watson steps closer, frowning. “This conversation might get personal,” he says kindly. “I don’t mind waiting out here.”

“Sherlock already considers you family,” Mycroft says. “You might as well come in.”

He leads them through the entranceway to the open stretch of living space. Sherlock looks around, cataloguing everything he can. Watson mostly stares at the wide stretch of windows.

“Nice place,” Watson says and he actually means it. Sherlock looks over at him, clearly aware of how little Mycroft appreciates the blank walls and empty space of this flat.

“Given your last visit, it seemed prudent to move to somewhere more secure. I’ll make tea.”

“And biscuits,” Sherlock adds.

“I don’t have any so you’ll have to do without.”

“Fine.” Sherlock crosses his arms, leans against the counter. Watson stays on the other side of the room, pretending to care about the view of the building across the street. “I was going to disable your security system here and surprise you, but John said that would set the wrong tone.”

“He was right.” Mycroft fills the kettle and switches it on. He feels like he only just finished moving in, but if Sherlock can break through the security, it’s better to know now. Not what he wants to know -- he doesn’t like moving and all the changes of routine that involves -- but any system Sherlock can disable in thirty minutes or less is not safe enough. “But try it before you leave. See if you can crack it within an hour.”

Sherlock grins and for a moment, Mycroft remembers him at eleven: his bright smile, a crown of dark curls, homemade hydrochloric acid eating a hole through the rug. The smile disappears quickly.

They fall to silence. Mycroft makes tea as Sherlock watches him, raising an eyebrow at Mycroft’s waistcoat -- an older but well-loved suit, if too closely tailored to forgive the smallest weight gain -- but he doesn’t voice the terribly inappropriate comment about Lestrade and regular cardio. In return, Mycroft doesn’t mention that Watson is wearing Sherlock’s scarf, although Sherlock glowers when Mycroft glances at it.

Tea is laid out on the dining table, where Mycroft can sit up straight without it looking too obvious. Sherlock will see it anyway, but that’s inconsequential. He pours cups for everyone -- sugar, no milk in Watson’s; milk, no sugar in Sherlock’s; lemon in his own -- and tilts his head toward Sherlock. “I have nine months.”

“For this conversation?” Watson asks, confusion showing so clearly.

“Before Christmas,” Mycroft replies.

Watson’s confused frown turns to Sherlock, so Sherlock explains. “Mycroft will visit Eurus by December to ensure he’s invited to Christmas.” Sherlock doesn’t say it was his own request that Mycroft attend, but Mycroft hadn’t expected him to. “You should visit her earlier.”

“I won’t.”

“She’s our sister.”

“As she has been for most of the last four decades.”
"You can’t simply--"

"I can and I will, Sherlock. This conversation is becoming tiresome. Make your arguments if you have to and then let the matter drop."

Mycroft can see Sherlock’s visiting Sherrinford more often: twice a week now. Watson clearly approves, from the way he clears his throat and tries to be the voice of reason.

"Eurus has been responding to music," Watson says calmly and Mycroft presses his tongue to the roof of his mouth, does not let himself say anything. "There are a lot of studies that show how lack of interaction, lack of human company, only makes the situation worse. It’s a form of torture for a reason."

Mycroft blinks at the statement, and Sherlock rolls his eyes. "Don’t start with that. Mycroft won’t understand the concept. He hates people."

"You hate people," Watson tells Sherlock.

"Individually. I hate them being boring and obvious. Mycroft hates the whole concept of them," Sherlock says. It’s hardly a secret. "He’d happily live on the moon if the communication channels were reliable."

"And the living conditions comfortable," Mycroft responds because living with bare essentials makes the option far less appealing.

John chortles, but stops suddenly. "You’re serious?"

"Did you ever see The Omega Man?" Mycroft asks, and Sherlock looks blank. They watched it together as children, but Sherlock must have decided it wasn’t worth remembering. "I was jealous of Charlton Heston. The first half of that movie seemed utopian."

Watson shows the typical reaction of someone hearing Mycroft talk honestly about something trivial but personal. He looks bewildered, as if the idea of Mycroft having any awareness of popular culture is ludicrous.

Mycroft takes a sip of his tea. "Assuming isolation has a negative impact on someone as intelligent as our sister is flawed reasoning at best."

"She’s family," Sherlock says.

"As proved by the DNA tests," Mycroft allows. He’d had it checked when he was younger and checked it again as an adult. He had to be certain.

"You’re being difficult on purpose," Sherlock accuses. It’s an amazingly hypocritical statement, given the source.

"If you can’t make a convincing and concise argument," Mycroft replies, straightening his cuffs solely to annoy Sherlock further, "the fault lies with your logic."

"It’s not fair. She never had brothers she could rely on. She was lost and she tried to tell us, and we weren’t smart enough to see it. To be there for her."

Trying to shame Mycroft into action has never been a successful ploy. He doesn’t find guilt especially motivating. "So that’s your plan? You’re going to be a proper big brother?" Mycroft asks calmly. He doesn’t let himself sneer at Sherlock’s term; Sherlock himself was so high he probably
doesn’t remember throwing those words around.

Watson winces. He remembers.

“Yes,” Sherlock bites back.

“I hope you enjoy the experience.”

“And I hope you--” Sherlock starts, but Watson talks over him with a chiding, “Sherlock,” and then adds, “Be nice.”

Sherlock folds his arms, slouching back in his chair. “He isn’t,” he mutters.

“Then be better,” Watson replies and there. Right there. That is the moment when Sherlock lowers his guard and listens to Watson. Mycroft sees the instant when Sherlock stops sulking, stops nursing his annoyance with the world, and allows Watson’s steady presence to comfort him.

It makes Mycroft think of seeing them in Sherrinford. The two of them against the world. No, not that. It was seeing his brother and Watson in their little world of two, everything important wrapped up in one other person.

He would prefer not to witness it over his own dining table, if possible.

“She should know that family cares,” Sherlock says, watching Watson. Sherlock considers Watson family; it’s intriguing to see what Watson’s taught him about the concept. “Family is there when you need them. Even when you don’t want them to be. It’s not fair that she doesn’t know that.”

“Then show her.”

Sherlock stands up, paces towards the door. Watson scrambles to follow him, but Sherlock turns on one heel, swivels back to stare at Mycroft.

Mycro sighs. “You don’t need me there to show her that.”

“You were always there,” Sherlock bites back, fast enough to sound angry. “Every time something went wrong, even when I didn’t need your interfering, your insistence that you knew better, you were always there. For me. She never had that, and it’s not fair.”

Mycro rarely indulges in emotional confessions. Sherlock never does. It’s begrudging and uncomfortable and brutally honest.

They stare at each other for a moment, and then Sherlock turns around and strides out. Over his shoulder, he calls back, “Visit her.”

***

Monday is less busy than Mycroft would like. It leaves him too much time to think about Sherlock. Sherlock saying, “You were always there,” keeps replaying in his mind. He never expected Sherlock to acknowledge that, and he doesn’t know how to feel about it. He should be pleased by the recognition. Flattered, maybe. Instead it feels like failure. He was there for Sherlock and Sherlock ended up addicted to narcotics, risking his mind and his life chasing chemical highs. He did everything he could to protect Sherlock from Eurus, and all Sherlock wants to do is save her.

Perhaps he should have monitored Eurus as he monitored Sherlock. Maybe if he’d devoted that attention to her, she too would have found family ties distasteful. Perhaps he could have had two
arch-enemies.

But if Eurus had hated him the way Sherlock once did -- and back when Sherlock was using, there had been no kindness in him, no temperance to his dislike of everything Mycroft was -- there’s a good chance Mycroft would have died years ago.

That is the sticking point. He can’t imagine spending time around Eurus without it leading to death and disaster. The thought of seeing her again makes him fear for his own life. The situation is as simple and cowardly as that.

No matter how much he thinks about it, no matter how he justifies seeing her or refusing to visit, that base fear is still there. He doesn’t want to see her. He doesn’t want to stand under Sherrinford’s bright lights and see Eurus with her loose, wild hair and too calm eyes.

But he’ll lose contact with Sherlock over this. To lose his parents would be manageable: he’s always known he will outlive them. If it happens earlier than expected or due to his own actions, it’s only a slight change in the expected turn of events.

But Sherlock... For Sherlock, he has sat in dens of iniquity and learnt more about recreational drug combinations than he should ever need to know. For Sherlock, he has done undercover work, surrounded by vile, loud people waiting to pass a message to Sherlock. He sat through Les Misérables with their parents to make life easier for Sherlock. (That last one he regrets more than he can say. It was a terrible idea. He should have left Sherlock to face their never-ending tirade on Dad’s lost glasses and the upcoming village fete.) He has done things he dislikes for Sherlock. He has feared more for Sherlock than he cares to admit.

Something as small as a little personal terror shouldn’t weigh much against decades of doing whatever he can for Sherlock.

For a moment, he remembers the ashes of Musgrave Hall around him, the smell of smoke, his stinging palms scraped in the climb down. It’s a memory Mycroft always associates with Eurus. Her clear eyes watching him calmly, looking for a reaction like a scientist watches a laboratory rat.

He doesn’t sleep well that night.

***

It’s a pleasant surprise to hear Lestrade’s voice on Tuesday. “Finally got the paperwork done. I’ve got the next two days off.”

Now Mycroft regrets moving Geneva earlier. “I’m out of the city for a few days. I leave tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Lestrade says. It’s gratifying to hear his disappointment. “Will you be back for the weekend?”

“Most likely.” Mycroft should confirm weekend plans. He should have a good night’s sleep and be fresh and focused tomorrow. He should be practical about this relationship and keep Lestrade at arms’ length, at least until he comes to a conclusion about Sherrinford. There are a lot of things he should do. “What if I sent a car for you? You could come to my place and stay the night.”

It’s a way of distracting himself, Mycroft knows that, but another restless night alone doesn’t appeal to him. He would much rather forget about Sherlock and Eurus and his own failings, and hold Lestrade close.

“I’m done now,” Lestrade says cheekily. It’s only early afternoon but Mycroft can review these files on the flight. He has a few things he should see to.
“I’ll send a car for you. You can stop by yours for a change of clothes, and come back to pick me up. I’ll need forty minutes.”

“In that case, I’m going to have a shower too. You don’t have to rush.”

***

Lestrade’s wearing faded jeans and an old T-shirt that clings flatteringly to his shoulders. He’s tired but not exhausted. When Mycroft sees him sprawled across the back seat of the car, one elbow along the headrest, he has a momentary urge to climb in and bury his face in the warm cotton and skin, to wrap his arms around Lestrade and hide from the world.

He is not a scared child in need of coddling. He is an adult, so he sits on his side of the car and closes the door. “Since we’re both ignoring our responsibilities for the afternoon, what would you like to do?”

Lestrade shrugs and Mycroft’s gaze diverts to his shoulders for a split second. When he looks back, Lestrade’s smile is very pleased. “Get some takeaway, go back to yours.”

“I could take you out to eat,” Mycroft suggests. Lestrade has gel in his hair and freshly trimmed fingernails. He’s wearing cologne. He has taken pride in his appearance; it would be wasted on a night at home.

“And watch you try to ignore the loud talkers at the next table, while you imagine stabbing them with your umbrella?”

That statement is more accurate than Lestrade will ever know. “I am quite capable of self-control.”

“Think of it a different way.” Lestrade rolls his shoulders and Mycroft allows himself another glance. “What I’m planning isn’t for the general public.”

“Very well,” Mycroft concedes. “You are far too attractive to be resisted.”

Lestrade laughs. “You should have seen me at twenty.”

“I have.” The photographs are interesting. Dark eyes, dark hair, a great deal of youthful charm and an irrepressible smile. But that was a young man still finding his way. He had none of Lestrade’s certainty, that knowledge of who he is and where he fits in the world. That was a callow youth trying on jobs as if they were fashion, not a man who has spent decades serving the public and keeping them safe. “I much prefer you now.”

This time, Lestrade’s laugh is startled out of him. He runs a hand through his hair, forgetting the styling agent bound to smear his hand. “That’s not what most people say.”

“Most people are idiots.”

“You are...” Lestrade shakes his head, clearly searching for the right word. His voice is warm and fond. “Unique, Mycroft Holmes.”

Mycroft smiles down at his umbrella. “Most people don’t mean that as a compliment.”

“That’s because they’re idiots.”

***

Mycroft silences his alarm quickly but it’s not quick enough. Lestrade yawns and stretches, and
checks the time on his phone. “Early flight?”

“It’s always best to arrive slightly before you’re expected.”

“No time for unanticipated delays?” Lestrade asks, this time stretching for an audience. The covers fall halfway down his chest, and for a moment, Mycroft considers reaching out to touch. It’s tempting. He could slide a hand down that warm, bare skin, feel the heat of Lestrade’s cock in his hand one more time...

“I don’t have the time, unfortunately,” Mycroft says, picking up a towel and heading for the shower. Under the hot water, he indulges the idea of asking Lestrade to come along on the trip. Lestrade is resourceful; he could entertain himself sightseeing while Mycroft mediated meetings. And at night, instead of an empty hotel room where he’d work into the early hours of the morning, he would find Lestrade waiting for him.

It’s an appealing fantasy, if utterly impractical. Nobody goes on holidays simply to wait for few hours’ company at night. Lestrade himself prefers places by the sea, somewhere warm with sunshine; he can’t imagine Lestrade developing a tan in Geneva. While Mycroft isn’t keeping this relationship clandestine, he has no intention of publicly announcing it by taking Lestrade on an official visit. Lestrade deals with enough danger in his own job; he doesn’t need an additional target painted on his back.

When he emerges from the bathroom, Lestrade’s lying on his side, watching the door. “When will you be back in London?”

“Sunday. I can’t be more precise yet.”

“Call me when you know what time.” Lestrade yawns again. He rubs a hand over his face, preparing himself to get out of bed.

“Stay,” Mycroft says. “Just because I have to leave before dawn shouldn’t mean you have to. Go back to sleep and lock up behind you later.”

“You’re leaving a nosey copper alone in your house? That’s an invitation to search through everything.”

He would never leave anyone unsupervised in his office, but there isn’t anything of consequence here. “If you find any form of incriminating evidence, I will be very impressed.”

***

He sleeps badly in hotels, he always has. There’s no point trying to get a good night’s sleep. He’s better to work as long as he can and then crawl between the covers in the early hours of the morning.

He keeps to his regular approach, but memories of Sherrinford keep bubbling into his thoughts. He remembers Sherlock holding a gun beneath his own chin, counting down to his death. The noise of two tranquiliser darts shooting, and Sherlock collapsing to the floor with Watson beside him.

“That’s not how you play the game,” Eurus said from the monitor. “But that’s okay. We can play something different.”

Guards rushed into the room. Four around Sherlock, four around Watson, and four around Mycroft. One to aim a gun at him and one to open the doors, while the other two had grabbed his arms and dragged him out of the room, his feet scraping on the floor. He’d struggled and pulled, upset and ineffective, and then heard gunshots echoing behind him. The fight left him suddenly, left him
stumbling on unwilling legs. He could hear a helicopter. He hoped it was a helicopter, hoped it was a rescue, but the guards didn’t let go of his arms. They kept walking like they knew the plan, and then there were more shots fired, further away.

They dragged him into Eurus’ cell and one punch had been enough to knock him out. He woke up in that cell, arms and legs laid out in a mockery of the nurse’s corpse, and spent hours worrying. Worrying that Sherlock was already dead. Worrying that his own death would mirror the nurse’s, would be precise but painful. He listened carefully but couldn’t hear a thing. He yelled and screamed until he was hoarse, and was ignored.

When the SAS stormed through the corridors, there were boots thumping on the concrete floor but no gunfire. He hadn’t understood why until he’d been released. Then he’d seen the Sherrinford guards were all dead. That had been the cause of the gunfire: execution style shots to the back of the head and occasional suicides.

Sherrinford had become a tomb. Not one guard alive. Not one prisoner alive. The only person left alive on that island had been him.

Understandably, he’d been a little rattled when they tried to tell him Sherlock was safe. They claimed to be coordinating with a DI in London, and Mycroft had demanded to talk to him. It had been a relief to find it was Lestrade, to find it was someone who knew Sherlock, who cared about him. Someone who understood Mycroft’s disbelief and impatience, who could use the truth to reassure him. Who could say, “Yes, Sherlock’s okay. John, too. We’re sending them to St Bart’s to make sure they’re monitored until the tox screens come back clear,” and mean every word. Who could say, “Sherlock will be okay. He’s done worse to himself on a bender,” and alleviate Mycroft’s fears.

Those are memories he tries to ignore. He doesn’t want to remember it. He’d rather work through the night on too much caffeine than lie alone in an unfamiliar room, remembering the fear of pain and death, and the reality: that he’d simply been left behind and ignored.

***

Geneva goes reasonably well. Not as quickly as he hoped but smoother than he anticipated, so he gets back to London on Sunday morning. The sunlight has a hint of spring in it, so he takes Lestrade to Hyde Park for lunch.

“How did it go?” Lestrade asks, showing interest without asking for details. Given Lestrade’s natural curiosity, honed over years of police interviews and investigations, it shows admirable restraint on his part.

“Well enough,” Mycroft replies. He slept less than he usually does, but not due to the discussions. He kept thinking of Sherlock and Eurus, and how he’s going to steel himself for the inevitable visit.

“Above my pay grade?”

“Boring.” Mycroft waves the topic away. “Office politics or international politics still boils down to a lot of people pursuing their own agendas. Necessary, but it does not make for a riveting conversation.”

“We’ve spent the last three days reviewing case files before next week’s internal audit. Who expected adulthood to be this dull?”

It leads to a conversation of childhood dreams. Lestrade confesses that he didn’t want to be a police officer (“I wanted to be a rock star,” he says, grinning brightly). Mycroft can’t recall wanting to be
anything in particular; he wanted to be an adult, he wanted to be in control, and he wanted to keep Sherlock safe. It could be argued that his life has everything he expected it would.

He doesn’t say that. He tells Lestrade about Sherlock’s pirate hat, about taking fencing lessons and Sherlock refusing on the grounds that swashbucklers didn’t fence. Sherlock insisted that a hacking motion was more historically accurate.

***

He doesn’t talk to Lestrade about visiting Eurus. If he did, if he mentioned Sherlock’s insistence, the simple fact that achieving outcomes frequently involves doing what one would rather not do, Lestrade would be sympathetic. He would hear it as an officer first, as an advocate for victims’ rights. He would argue that victims should not be forced to confront an abductor, and if they chose to, there should be support provided.

Wistfully, he thinks it would be nice to tell someone whose biases aligned towards sympathy for Mycroft. It would be nice to have one person who didn’t automatically blame Mycroft for the situation, who didn’t think it was irreparably his fault. But sympathy is not a good enough motivator to involve Lestrade.

The possible outcomes are easy to predict. Lestrade would offer support, would suggest accompanying Mycroft if he insisted on visiting. There are no red flags in Lestrade’s history so the security clearance could be arranged. But Mycroft will not be responsible for drawing Eurus’ attention to Lestrade. She’s said nothing so far, but she’s only seen family. He can’t trust that she will remain silent if allowed access to an outsider, to someone more vulnerable to Eurus’ personal style of manipulation.

If Mycroft refused to visit, Lestrade might intercede on his behalf. Mycroft can too easily imagine him arguing with Sherlock, coming to Mycroft’s defence like some knight of old. Sherlock, of course, would find it absurd. Mycroft is not in need of protection; others need protection from Mycroft. While Lestrade’s responses may be endearing, they would ultimately achieve nothing.

So he informs Lady Smallwood that he will need clearance for a personal visit. When it’s cleared, he arranges a time and day. It feels like superstition, but he wears a new suit that day: a simple charcoal pinstripe paired with a dove grey tie and white pocket square. It’s foolish to think that the lack of wear will conceal much from Eurus but he does it anyway.

He steps calmly off the helicopter. He walks through those corridors with a steady stride. He steps into her room, scans to make sure the glass is there, and then stands in front of the glass as the door closes behind him. He puts his umbrella in front of him, leans on it a little, and then raises his eyes to meet hers. She is sitting on her bed, looking at nothing in particular.

He starts counting backwards from a thousand. He will allow himself to blink on every fifth count and no more often than that.

He watches her stare at walls as if she sees more than plain white plaster. She stands and wanders around the room, slow steps from one side to the other, and then back to the middle. She stands opposite him, mimics his posture: shoulders back, feet apart, knees locked. But her hands hang loose at her sides, while his are tight on the handle of his umbrella, tight enough that the whites of his knuckles are showing.

He says nothing. He thinks of numbers.

She says nothing. She just watches. Her eyes remind him of wet pebbles, skipping stones across a
There is nothing here that looks frightening. She’s just a person. A woman in plain white scrubs, with loose dark hair. She breathes, she watches, and she would bleed like anyone else. She is not a monster from a nightmare.

His fear is childish and unnecessary, but his palms sweat. His heart rate is elevated. His instinct is to run and flee and hide. But instincts can be overcome. Fear is useful as a survival instinct, as a recognition of possible consequences; it is not something that should overcome logic.

So he stands there and watches her. He thinks of numbers and ignores his heartbeat, ignores his urge to open his umbrella up, to check again that it’s loaded. He focuses on those numbers counting down to three hundred, to one hundred.

When he reaches fifteen, she holds two hands up, palms out. Her fingers are long and narrow, like Sherlock’s. Like Mycroft’s. When he counts off ten, she tucks her thumb in. Another finger for nine. And eight. She counts down with him, him counting silently, her fingers moving in exact tandem. It makes him feel transparent, as if his every thought is exposed.

When he reaches zero, he straightens, hooks his umbrella over his arm and walks out.

***

He doesn’t call Lestrade the second he steps back onto London soil (metaphorically, at least. Literally, it’s concrete beneath his feet). He waits until he’s in the car.

“Hey,” Lestrade says and in the background there are sirens and gusts of wind. There’s the noise of background conversations. Clearly, Lestrade is outdoors at a crime scene.

“Don’t let me interrupt,” Mycroft says. “It was nothing important.”

“We’re in the middle of things. I’ll call you back, all right?”

“When you have time,” Mycroft insists. “It really wasn’t important.”

***

The essence of exposure therapy is continued, increased exposure in a controlled environment. Like developing a tolerance for snake venom.

He clears time on his calendar, and flies out to Sherrinford every Tuesday and Friday. Sometimes Eurus ignores him entirely, sprawls across her bed and doesn’t look over at him. Sometimes, she stands like a distorted reflection, mimicking his stance, sometimes balancing around a non-existent umbrella. She never talks.

He forces himself to meet her eyes. His count becomes longer every visit, and the clammy palms reduce. The spike of fear, the increased heart rate and the adrenaline rush are not yet under his control, but they will be.

He learns from the first time that he is better to visit in the morning. When he returns to London feeling rattled, he can sit in his office and spend hours reading reports. When the security system at his flat doesn’t feel like enough to sleep safely, he can stay at his desk and work. Or on Fridays, he can collect Lestrade and know that there is someone lying beside him in the darkness, even if sleep is
elusive.

Sherlock notices. He takes Mycroft’s next assignment without complaint, and talks about composing again. It takes Mycroft three pitiful seconds to realise he means he’s composing for Eurus, writing her music to try to reach her. Mycroft keeps a straight face and nods at the news; he considers it a sign of progress.

Lestrade notices, but it’s indirect. “Is it my imagination,” Lestrade asks, eyes scanning Mycroft in a suspicious, unflattering way, “or has that become your Friday suit?”

“I do not organise my clothes by the days of the week.”

“I’m not saying you’ve got Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday sewn into your underwear,” Lestrade replies. “But that’s the same suit you’ve worn the last three Fridays.”

“I do own several pinstripe suits,” Mycroft says, knowing full well Lestrade doesn’t own one.

“I notice what you wear.” Lestrade doesn’t even seem embarrassed by the admission. “That’s the same suit.”

Clearly, Mycroft needs to stop dressing so predictably for his Sherrinford visits. It might feel like a good luck charm now, but it would be disadvantageous to allow his subconscious to rely on it. Especially since there’s no reasonable excuse for wearing a pinstripe suit to Christmas dinner.

“If you must know,” Mycroft says, glancing out the window to the grey streets passing by, “it’s new. I’ve been enjoying it.”

Lestrade reaches out, slides two fingertips along the lapel of Mycroft’s jacket. “Enjoying something new, or enjoying dressing up to meet me?”

“As I said, it’s new.”

Lestrade grins and clearly doesn’t believe him.

***

Not every visit to Sherrinford is successful. On one Tuesday she stands close enough to touch the glass, to flatten her hands against it and show the pressure against her palms. She tilts her head to the left and starts humming.

It’s a slow tune, a three-four beat behind it. Nothing classical, nothing Mycroft recognises from hearing before, but it seems familiar. He’s anticipating the notes rising before he hears them because he’s seen this piece written down. In Sherlock’s notation, quavers scribbled through and then written back in. He saw it on the table in the Baker Street flat.

It’s the piece Sherlock’s composing for her. Or with her. Mycroft doesn’t know which is technically true.

It’s unfinished. It ends on a lingering note, the motif unresolved, but Mycroft is thankful when Eurus falls silent. He doesn’t know what it means. Surely Eurus could extrapolate that he’d be aware of Sherlock’s visits and his current compositions.

Eurus starts to hum the piece again, same notes, same cadence and pitch. Identical to the last time.

Perhaps it’s only a sign of a jealous sibling, her way of staking a claim to Sherlock’s affections.
Sherlock has never composed a piece for Mycroft but Mycroft is not especially musical. He understands the theory and can appreciate the sound, but he never had the flair for it that Sherlock and Eurus had. He never had the patience to practice the same thing to perfection, the never-ending fascination with something as simple as vibrations on taut strings. When Sherlock was feeling kind, he would say it was because Mycroft had no sentiment to his soul, no romance, no poetry, no ability to respond to art or beauty. When Sherlock was feeling unkind, he would say it was because Mycroft’s fat fingers couldn’t move fast enough to play well.

Music is something Sherlock enjoys but it’s not something he shares with Mycroft. They share blood; they share intellect. They share enough common reference points to know each other better than most people but still remain quite different. Distinct. Enough shared to present a united force, if not enough to be truly close to each other.

Eurus stops, leaves that last unfinished note in the air, and if Mycroft thinks of the timing, he can see the empty space left on the page. Space that Sherlock hasn’t filled with anything yet. Most of that last page is blank.

At the end, as if she’s turning the pages back to the start, there’s an infinitesimal pause and then Eurus starts again. Mycroft tries to remember what number he was down to, suddenly aware he’d stopped counting, but as he starts counting again she taps on the glass. One finger, a hard determined tap with her nail, to the rhythm of the piece.

He leans back, says, “Don’t,” in a voice so quiet it shouldn’t be able to carry and she stands upright, head straightening, hands dropping loose to her sides. She stares at him, eyes glassy and vacant and looking right through him. He feels like something small and warm-blooded, something that should scurry into a dark hiding place and wait for danger to pass.

She starts humming again. He turns and walks out.

***

There’s nothing urgent waiting on his desk. Certainly not enough to distract him from the echo of Eurus humming that tune. So he takes comfort in the practical and the familiar, and calls the family lawyers. It takes three calls and two couriers to have the documents complete and correct, and then he gathers his coat and umbrella -- still loaded, checked -- and is driven to Baker Street.

The front door is unlocked. In Central London, no less, but Sherlock has no fear of something as mundane as daylight robbery. He hangs his coat on the hook and then heads upstairs.

Sherlock is standing by the window, child in his arms as he watches the black car parked on the street. Watson and Lestrade are sitting on the armchairs, crime scene photos spread across the coffee table.

“Good afternoon, Sherlock, Dr Watson,” he nods at each of them in turn, “Gregory.”

Watson nods back. Sherlock ignores him entirely. Lestrade offers a half-hearted wave of one hand and says, “Hey. Anything urgent?”

“Family business.”

“Do you need us to leave?” Lestrade asks, nodding over at Watson. For his part, Watson looks pleased with the idea, so the photos must be frustrating them.

“What are you working on?” Mycroft asks, rather than say Watson will need to be here.
“We’re trying to figure out if a crime even happened,” Lestrade says. “No body, missing person, but that doesn’t mean something bad actually happened to him.”

“The blood spatter on the kitchen skirting board would suggest assault.”

Lestrade dives at the photos, shuffling to the picture of the kitchen. “You sure it’s blood--” Lestrade waves a hand. “Never mind. Forgot who I was talking to.”

It is reassuring to remember that life continues outside of Sherrinford. Lestrade will solve crimes and protect the populace as best he can; Watson and Sherlock will solve their little puzzles and keep themselves entertained.

Mycroft pulls the documents out and spreads them on the table. Sherlock takes one glance and then wanders closer. In his arms, Rosamund is nearly asleep, head tucked against his shoulder, eyes drooping.

“How now?” Sherlock asks, his voice a soft low rumble.

There will be a family visit to Sherrinford soon. For all of their separate visits, Mycroft has his doubts. They should walk out of there safely but he feels very far from certain. Contingencies need to be put in place.

“It’s overdue,” Mycroft replies softly. The child opens her eyes to look at him, and then closes them with a yawn. “Given the risks you two take every other week, it should have been done long ago.”

His brother may have only started sharing a bedroom with Watson months ago, but Watson’s been central figure in Sherlock’s life for years. Mycroft didn’t want to acknowledge that as family, but it is. “Now sign the pages or I’ll forge your signature.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “Take Rosie.”

“No,” Mycroft says firmly. “This suit was not made for childcare, Sherlock.”

There’s a muffled snort from the armchairs and Watson’s giggle rings out. Mycroft glares at both of them.

“Sorry,” Lestrade says, sounding like he’s fighting off giggles of his own. He turns to Watson. “Want me to take her?”

“Thanks,” Watson says, and then sniggers again. “Childcare!”

Lestrade comes around and takes Rosamund comfortably. He balances her on one hip, one hand under her, the other spanning across her back. They’re unremarkable hands -- wide palms, strong fingers, all in proportion -- but Mycroft knows how gentle they are, how safe they feel. He’s unsurprised that Rosamund snuggles closer and closes her eyes against his chest.

“Friends with kids,” Lestrade offers as an explanation when Sherlock stares at him. There is something protective and something a little jealous in his expression. “Sign the pages and you can have her back.”

It’s a powerful bribe. Sherlock signs each form without ceremony, and drops the pen back to table. He immediately takes the child back from Lestrade.

“I’ll have to remember that,” Mycroft says, glancing meaningfully at Sherlock.
“Only works if you don’t mind drool on your shirt,” Lestrade replies. Mycroft pulls a revolted face.

“Dr Watson, would you sign as well?”

Watson gets out of the armchair warily. “As a witness?”

“As a beneficiary.”

“Beneficiary of what?” Watson asks carefully, coming around to the table.

“Family trust,” Lestrade says, and then shrugs at Mycroft. “Financial motive for murder. I recognised the paperwork.”

“Do go on,” Mycroft says.

“Just a way of holding combined assets. Beneficiaries get paid funds every so often, as decided by the trustee.”

“Mycrof,” Sherlock says quietly. “He’s the trustee. Keeps it running, indulges in insider trading when he thinks it’s getting low.”

“It is not insider trading. It is reading the stock market and hedging for probabilities.”

“It’s knowing what to invest in because you know which countries are going to war,” Sherlock replies. “Or starting a war to ensure returns.”

“Minor government role, Sherlock.” He has never had the power to start a war and Sherlock knows it. “Minor.”


The child hasn’t stirred. She must be used to Sherlock.

“Very well,” Mycroft says, “Dr Watson, you’ll be a beneficiary in your own right and on behalf of Rosamund until she comes of age. That means additional income for both of you that will continue even if Sherlock does not. Since Sherlock throws himself into danger every other week, it’s preferable to have the legalities sorted now.”

“How much are we talking about?” Watson asks, but he’s picked up the pen. He turns it in his fingers, clearly ready to sign.

“A modest family inheritance,” Mycroft says.

Leaning forward, Lestrade flicks through the documents. He finds the trust balance with the ease of familiarity. He’s clearly had a few cases that involved staring at these legal documents. “Modest, you say? I’d call that a shameless hussy.” He taps a finger on the paperwork, drawing Watson’s attention to the net value. Watson makes a croak that’s vaguely reminiscent of a frog.

“It’s a sufficient figure,” Mycroft replies. “Enough to refurbish Musgrave Hall, should anyone wish to. Not enough to make the family an obvious target.”

“How did you think he affords to dress like that on a government salary?” Sherlock asks snidely. In his arms, Rosamund stays asleep.

“Because I’m not the one spending it all on test tubes and cab fares.”
Sherlock doesn’t thank him. Mycroft hadn’t expected him to. But Watson signs where indicated and Lestrade walks him out, and all in all, it feels like a successful endeavour.

“That was nice,” Lestrade says, pausing with his hand on the door.

“It was practical,” Mycroft corrects.

“Sure.” Lestrade shrugs. “But it was also nice. It’s good for John to know that you’d look after Rosie if anything happened.”

“I’m not volunteering to babysit. It’s simply one less worry distracting Dr Watson from ensuring Sherlock doesn’t end up in an early grave.” Lestrade watches him, like he doesn’t believe the cool tone in the least. It makes Mycroft sigh, and allow a little honesty. “For all intents and purposes, Sherlock has claimed that girl as his own. As much as he’s claimed Dr Watson. They are his family. It’s a family trust.”

Lestrade steps closer, curls a hand around Mycroft’s wrist. There’s nothing untoward in the gesture; it would be appropriate on a public street. Mycroft appreciates the subtlety of it. “Sometimes, even the scary Mycroft Holmes is nice.”

“Rarely.”

Lestrade gives his wrist a quick squeeze and steps back. He opens the door for Mycroft. “More often than you let people know.”

“That,” Mycroft replies, stepping through the threshold, “is highly classified information.”

“Penny for your thoughts?” Lestrade asks, sidestepping a gaggle of tourists and falling back into step beside Mycroft. Lestrade had suggested an evening stroll and Mycroft had been distracted enough to agree.

He doesn’t mind it, honestly. Friday nights in London are busy and full of people, everyone too focused on their own destination to acknowledge those around them. The sense of anonymity is almost freeing.

“I don’t think you’re taking inflation into account.”

“Pound for your thoughts doesn’t have the same ring to it.” Lestrade shrugs. “Ten quid for your thoughts seems too high.”

“Depends on the relative value of the thoughts.”

“Since I’m not going to actually pay you, I don’t think the exact amount matters.” The nicest part of walking is seeing the street lamps and neon shop lighting play across the planes of Lestrade’s face. The curve of his jaw, the arch of an eyebrow, the slight cleft in his chin, all shown in constantly shifting shadows. Light catches on his clean shaven cheek, suggesting he keeps a razor at the Yard; his cheeks are always smooth when he kisses Mycroft on Friday nights, yet when he shaves on Saturday morning, there’s the slightest hint of stubble by Saturday night. “I’m just wondering what you’re thinking.”

“Nothing of importance.”
“Yeah?” Lestrade asks doubtfully. “Because you’ve been kind of distracted tonight.”

“Have I?” Mycroft knows he has. Knows he’s spent most of this evening trying not to think about Eurus’ hands holding a violin, holding a bow the barest space above the strings, miming the act of playing. Miming well enough that he could recognize the pattern in her fingers, see her picking out the same tune she’d hummed before, the same tune Sherlock is composing. But easier to ignore when it was just a pattern, when he didn’t have to hear it. Easier to look in her eyes, to watch her staring back at him, and pretend he didn’t see her fingers move.

He’d managed to keep counting, to leave when he planned to.

“The last few weeks, there’s been something a bit... off.”

“Nothing to do with you, I assure you.”

“I didn’t think it was,” Lestrade replies. He rubs his hands in front of him, warming them. He really should have brought gloves. “But I think it’s something, and I don’t think it’s purely professional. So if you want to talk, here’s the opportunity.”

Mycroff considers remaining silent. He considers steering the topic to something unrelated. Lestrade would allow it; Lestrade would also listen to whatever he had to say. It’s the certainty that the choice is his that allows him to say, “I’ve been thinking about family.”

“Hmm?”

“How important they can be even when you don’t like them, even when you have nothing in common with them.” He’s thinking of his parents, yes, and Eurus. He’s also thinking of Great Aunt Gertrude who is now in a home and couldn’t tell you what year it was.

“Surely you liked someone in the family?”

“Not even Sherlock. I care about him, I worry, I’m proud of him and he irritates me more than anyone else on the planet. But like is not an appropriate word.”

“Anyone else?”

Mycroff swings his umbrella. Hits the shin of the university student walking towards him. The student swears, changing direction enough to let Mycroft pass. “Uncle Rudy. Dead twenty-three years now, but I liked him. I respected him. I mostly understood him.”

Lestrade glances over at him, intrigued. “What didn’t you understand?”

“The appeal of sensible heels and silk dresses. But no chiffon. He always said that no one over five foot eight could carry off chiffon.”

Lestrade blinks at him, clearly resisting the urge to ask the obvious questions.

“Cross-dresser but heterosexual. It was one of those family secrets that everyone knew and no one admitted. In the great tradition of J Edgar Hoover,” Mycroft says waiting for Lestrade’s confirming nod before continuing. “When they shipped his body back, I went over to his flat. Cleared out the heels and dresses, the makeup and the undergarments. All the things he wouldn’t have wanted our father to see. The things one doesn’t admit to brothers.”

“Like?” It’s such a broad question, bold and simple. Of course Lestrade would ask.
“Like finding a problem beyond one’s understanding.” Mycroft takes a deep breath, and lets the thought out. “Like being frightened to visit our sister.”

Neither of them are precisely secrets, Mycroft thinks as he messages tonight’s driver. Lestrade is rubbing his hands together again, blowing on them. There’s too much chill in the air to keep walking.

“Gregory,” Mycroft says as the car pulls up beside them.

“You read my mind,” Lestrade says thankfully. He wastes no time getting into the car.

Once inside, Mycroft removes his own gloves and wraps his hands around Lestrade’s chilled ones. “Gloves,” he says pointedly.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I was the one who said it’s spring, I don’t need gloves. I was wrong,” Lestrade says as if it doesn’t cost him anything to admit it, “and you were right.”

Once Lestrade’s knuckles no longer feel like ice cubes, Mycroft pulls his hands back. He settles into his own seat and watches the familiar streets roll by.

“This goes without saying,” Lestrade says, clearly about to say it anyway, “but being scared after what happened is natural. You don’t have to visit her if you don’t want to, no matter what Sherlock says.”

It’s reassuring when the world aligns to his expectations. “Thank you.”

“If you want me to talk to Sherlock, get him to give you some breathing space on this...” Lestrade is a knight of old, in a well-worn coat and slightly scuffed shoes. Too chivalrous and noble for Mycroft to take seriously.

“It’s a kind offer but there’s no need. I’ve already started visiting her.”

There’s the purr of the engine, the distant sounds of the city outside, and then Lestrade asks, “Why?”

“Because family comes with obligations. This was just another condition to be met.” It’s as simple as that. An amicable truce with Sherlock is conditional upon shared Christmas dinner; Christmas dinner is conditional upon agreeing to visit Eurus. Most things in life require an exchange, obligations traded for privileges, promises traded for expected behaviour.

But Lestrade is frowning at him, a soft, sad frown of concern. “They’re your family. You could say no and they’d still love you.”

“Of course they would,” Mycroft agrees. “But they’d also refuse to see me. Knowing you are loved by people who can’t bear to be in the same room as you is not quite the same.”

Still Lestrade is frowning. Perhaps Mycroft should have avoided the topic after all. He is not usually so honest but Lestrade draws him out of his reserve. Greater men have done more foolish things for less worthy lovers.

“Think of it as a learning experience, Gregory.” Mycroft smiles as if a peace treaty depends on it. “I do very well with stated expectations.”

Lestrade doesn’t ask what expectations apply between them. Mycroft could rattle them off, could cite how Lestrade’s expectations are all around habit and practicality. He expects the cars and phone calls, the weekend hours of leisure, shared humour, meals and sex. He expects the demands of his
job to be accepted, and for their schedules to sometimes clash. There is nothing particularly onerous in that list, and none of his expectations exceed what is reasonable for an ongoing liaison.

Mycroft’s expectations are much the same. That this will continue as long as it is practical and convenient to them both. That it will end when Lestrade’s expectations change: when he needs more than Mycroft can provide, when he expects Mycroft to be someone he’s not.

But that is extrapolated from previous data. He hasn’t seen any sign of it in Lestrade’s reactions, no matter how closely he observes the man.

Mycroft blinks, realising he’s staring at Lestrade. Lestrade only smiles.

“So if I said when I first got in these cars, I expected blow jobs in the back seat?” Lestrade asks cheekily.

“There are limits, Gregory.” Although not logistical limits, because there would be enough leg room to kneel... But, no. The Prime Minister uses these cars. He might not like her, but that would be disrespectful.

***

He’s shorter with Lestrade than Lestrade deserves. He hears it in his tone on Thursday, when Lestrade calls on the off chance he’d left his shirt at Mycroft’s rather than left it behind at the launderette. He’s cold and sharp to Lestrade and it deserves an apology. But work becomes busy, and the next few days are a blur of uncovering the source of an explosion in North Korea and supervising an infiltration team. With time zones and the need to know the facts before certain countries reacted hastily, there isn’t much chance for sleep. Let alone social niceties.

The upside is that it gives him a perfect excuse to cancel his visit to Sherrinford. The downside is that he makes it back to his flat by midday Saturday, having managed three hours sleep in the last three days, and collapses into bed.

He’d messaged Lestrade on Friday that he was unexpectedly indisposed this weekend, but it’s still jarring to wake up alone on Sunday. Half asleep, he reaches across the bed to find the sheets cold. He listens for footsteps, for the sound of Lestrade in the kitchen fixing coffee, or the sound of him getting out of the shower. Starting to worry, Mycroft drags himself awake and then remembers Lestrade isn’t here.

He’s never been one to fret about lovers. He’s never worried about his bed being empty or especially cared what they did without him. Even the ones that strayed hadn’t bothered him: it had been too obvious to truly take offence. It was simply an unmistakable signal that it was time to end things.

He’s not one to miss people. But he has been finding his bed vast and empty on Monday nights. He wants to call Lestrade and ask him over. He wants Lestrade in his bed right now, with his sleepy smile and wandering hands. He wants to wake up and assume Lestrade is somewhere nearby, or if he’s gone out, that he’ll be back eventually.

It’s a foolish thing to want. He doesn’t share well. Anyone who’s seen him with Sherlock knows that. Sharing his space permanently would be irritating.

His schedule is unpredictable. He spends more time in his office or in his club than in his flat. He has spent the majority of his life living alone, as he pleases, and he rarely compromises. He is cold and difficult to like, and at some point, Lestrade will recognise that fact.

He spends some time lying in bed that Sunday, considering the problem. He is tempted to rent a
larger flat, a third bedroom to offer Lestrade space. He would suggest Lestrade leases out his flat, keeps it for that inevitable day when Mycroft’s charms wear thin.

But no matter how he looks at it, the constants are simple. Mycroft wants more; Lestrade will eventually leave. Becoming accustomed to Lestrade spending more time here would be short-sighted and detrimental to both of them. The sensible thing would be to reduce contact, to be busier, to make it less convenient.

He resolves to be sensible about it, but his resolve crumbles when Lestrade calls him that afternoon. “Hey,” he says, and the warmth in Mycroft’s chest is simply a Pavlovian reaction to Lestrade’s voice, “Are things still DEFCON Nine over there?”

“There is no DEFCON Nine,” Mycroft replies, fighting his own smile. Lestrade would know UK Threat levels better than the general populace. “And if such a thing existed, it still wouldn’t apply here.”

“Well, not every country believes in describing a threat as ‘substantial’,” Lestrade replies. “But it sounds like it’s under control now, so where are you?”

This is where he should make up an excuse, should think of a reason to avoid Lestrade until next week. “I’m at mine. Catching up on an unfortunate sleep debt.”


Mycroft sits up higher in bed, tugging at the navy silk cuff of his sleeve. “I’m not even dressed.”

“As it turns out, the dress code for this meal is pyjamas only.”

“And how do you know I’m wearing pyjamas?”

“You left me alone in your place. I looked through your drawers.”

***

Mycroft finds his life full of countdowns. He counts down seconds in Sherrinford. He counts down days until he sees Lestrade again. He counts down the weeks to his mother’s birthday.

Sherlock says, “For Mummy’s birthday, we’re going to Sherrinford. It’s a present.”

Mycroft glances meaningfully at Sherlock’s violin. “How very creative of you both.”

“You should come too. It could be your present for Mummy.”

“And will the entire family be there?” Mycroft asks brightly, his smile and tone entirely false. “Is Dr Watson coming?”

“No,” Watson calls out from the kitchen. He’s been moving things in their fridge and muttering under his breath. Sherlock has ignored him entirely. “Because I am not taking a baby to a maximum security facility.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “Given her inability to remember to hold onto the toys she wants to play with, I doubt the memory will have much impact on her long term development.”

He’s too protective of the child for that to make sense. It sounds like something Sherlock would say, but he’s watching Watson’s reactions a little too closely.
Mycroft leans in, dropping his voice. “Are you really arguing to bring the child to Sherrinford?”

“Rosie’s not going anywhere near there,” Sherlock hisses back. Clearly, Mycroft was expected to know better. “John’s not going, and he’s happier if it’s to protect Rosie.”

Mycroft sits back. It does make a certain amount of sense. Watson may support Sherlock’s visits in theory, but he’s clearly reluctant to see Eurus again personally. If he’s debating Rosamund’s exposure with Sherlock, he can avoid going without feeling guilty for not being there to protect Sherlock. He’s making a point as a parent, and currently taking his annoyance out on whatever is in the fridge.

“I’ll give it due consideration,” Mycroft says, knowing that he’ll agree. He can stand before Eurus without his fear manifesting in any physical way. There’s nothing to be gained by fighting it now.

Clearly, Sherlock recognises that too. “I’ll text you the departure time.”

***

Lestrade stares around the Sitting Room of the Diogenes Club with no attempt to disguise his curiosity. Despite his silence, he is broadcasting his thoughts loud and clear. It’s in the raised brow as he sees the Police Commissioner sitting in one corner, in the narrowed eyes as he spots senior ministers and civil servants sitting amongst judges and the occasional barrister. There are Lords and the occasional Lady sitting here, but they don’t catch Lestrade’s attention.

It’s an indulgence to have Lestrade here, to be able to glance up from his paper and see Lestrade sitting in a comfortable chair of his own. There’s a paper on Lestrade’s lap, but he hasn’t opened it; he’s holding a glass of very good Scotch and watching the room as if an armed assailant is about to step out of the shadows.

Mycroft turns his attention back to the pages in front of him. While he probably knows more about the truth of current affairs than any reporter, it’s always good to monitor where the public is being led. He reaches for his own glass of Scotch, savouring the taste on his tongue, the gentle burn as he swallows and the warmth of the drink settling. This is true comfort: a warm, quiet room; a supportive chair; a good spirit. If he was allowed to smoke inside, it would be ideal.

Mycroft looks up at a tap on his knee. Lestrade is leaning forward, two fingers hovering above Mycroft’s leg and a querying look on his face. The plan was to stay here for another hour and then enjoy the superior food offered here. Mycroft folds his paper carefully, assuming Lestrade wants to leave early, but Lestrade just points to his phone and raises an eyebrow in question.

Mycroft nods and stands, gesturing for Lestrade to follow him through the heavy doors, down a corridor and into the Strangers’ Room. He closes the door behind him and says, “Conversation is permitted in here.”

“Knew it!”

“Excuse me?”

“This. This whole club. The whole ‘we don’t speak lest we accidentally start a war’ thing.” Lestrade grins, turning his hand as he speaks, gesturing at the pair of chairs in here, the matching drinks tables and lamps. He waves a hand towards the bookcases along the wall and the deeply recessed windows, the matching crystal chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling. “It’s a front.”

“I beg your pardon?” Mycroft asks carefully.
“Everyone knows no one talks here, so it’s the perfect place to hash out backroom deals. I’m right, aren’t I?”

He is. The amount of work Mycroft manages to complete within the club’s rooms might outweigh what he gets done at his desk. Hosting a secret meeting in London, city of CCTV and paparazzi, is rather difficult. Turning left down a club corridor and using one of the private rooms is very, very easy.

“I prefer to think of it as efficient coordination. A ‘backroom deal’ sounds tawdry and self-serving.”

“I’ve been sitting there, worrying about why you invited me here, and then I started looking around at who else was sitting there,” Lestrade says. “Why am I not surprised that your main place of leisure is business in disguise?”

Mycroft raises his brows. The answer is that Lestrade is more observant than most people and, given time, smart enough to follow observation to logical conclusion. It hardly needs to be said. “The food here is excellent. That’s why I invited you.”

“Really?”

“What ulterior motive were you expecting?”

“It was something Sherlock said a while ago.” At least Lestrade has the grace to look embarrassed for his source of doubt. “Just after he found out I was seeing you. He told me not to get too attached, that you didn’t tolerate other people for very long.”

“Tolerate other people?” Mycroft echoes, thinking it doesn’t sound like Sherlock.

“Well, he said you can’t stand idiots around you for very long,” Lestrade says, and that sounds more like Sherlock. “But you know Sherlock. Idiots is just the plural of person to him.”

Mycroft decides it’s better not to agree with that statement. Even if it is true. “And?”

“And he said that it’ll be over within a week of you taking me here to eat.”

“Why is it that siblings pay attention to the most annoying things?” Mycroft asks, although that flaw in human nature seems to be a universal constant. He wonders how honest he should be with Lestrade. Sherlock is unfortunately right. He has invited previous lovers here and it usually rang the death knell for the relationship. “I didn’t bring you here to part ways.”

“Sherlock was messing with me?” Lestrade asks with that strange mix of resigned, annoyed and fond that everyone who cares about Sherlock seems to master.

“He was trying to protect you.” Mycroft runs a hand over the back of the chair, dragging fingers over well-polished wood and the edge of black leather. “When past liaisons have lasted for more than a few weeks, they frequently cease after spending time here.”

“Why?”

Mycroft takes a deep breath. He lets it out slowly and resists the desire to sigh. He looks around. He’s very comfortable in these old fashioned rooms, the warm tones of wood, fabric and leather, the small windows and muted lamplight. The membership list proves he’s not the only one to enjoy such surroundings, but they are clearly in the minority. “Because my preferred club is rather reflective of me.”
“Posh. Apparently conservative. Carefully presented. Really efficient when you look beneath the surface?”

“Rigid. Restrained. Stuffy. Out of touch with the modern world.” There is something about seeing Mycroft relax in this setting that suddenly reveals who he is. He’s never pretended to be anything else; he doesn’t understand how people don’t recognise it until they’re shown proof in a fresh setting. Yet it’s happened often enough for Sherlock to spot the pattern, despite his general disinterest in Mycroft’s life. “Cold and emotionally unavailable are other perennial favourites.”

“You’re not,” Lestrade says. Then he dithers and adds, “Well, restrained, yes. And stuffy, maybe. You’re the only person I know who wears a waistcoat for lazy weekends, but you make the whole dapper gentleman thing look good.”

“Dapper?” Mycroft questions doubtfully. Really, Lestrade is too charming to be believed.

“I stand by dapper. You wear a pocket watch.”

***

He doesn’t expect Lestrade to return to the conversation. It’s that night, when Lestrade is sprawled gloriously naked across Mycroft’s sheets, when his skin is still flushed and damp with sweat, when he should be falling asleep already. That’s when Lestrade yawns and rolls over to mutter against Mycroft’s back, “You’re not cold. You know that, right?”

“Hmm?”

“The way you said it,” Lestrade says, sneaking a hand around Mycroft’s side, “like it’s an ugly fact. It’s not true.”

Mycroft runs fingers along Lestrade’s wrist, settles his hand over Lestrade’s. “I am old enough to know who I am. I will never be celebrated for my warmth and congeniality.”

“You’re not cold,” Lestrade says again, as if repeating the lie will make it true. “You don’t usually show how much you feel, but it’s there.”

Mycroft lets himself hold on a little tighter. It’s going to be terribly disappointing when Lestrade discovers he’s wrong. “I’m glad you think so. It explains why you’re still here.”

“You’re a smart guy,” Lestrade says around a yawn, burying his face against Mycroft’s shoulder. He’ll be asleep in seconds. “How can you be wrong about this?”

***

Eurus hums through the next visit, but this time, Mycroft’s expecting it. He stopped by Baker Street on the excuse of checking if Sherlock was suitably occupied or dying of boredom; the flat was empty, suggesting they were currently working on a case. Sherlock had conveniently left the composition on the table, giving Mycroft ample time to review it.

He’s not surprised by the alterations to the piece: the secondary motif growing stronger, the loose outline of the final section. It lacks the detailed touches of the rest but the general structure is there.

He listens the first time she hums it, correlates the sounds to the notes pencilled in lightly or written in ink once Sherlock was certain. When she finishes the first rendition, he checks his pocket watch and decides to stay for an hour. An hour should be enough time for whatever his parents want to say to her. If he can bear an hour of her repetitive humming, he can bear an hour of listen to his parents.
engage in one-sided conversation.

He puts the watch back in his pocket, and leans one hand on the handle of his umbrella. He could think of it as a meeting, as any other forced meal with his parents. Smile, nod in the right places, and pay as little attention to his surroundings as he can. Best to practice these things, so he smiles, nods when she hums the end of piece and lets his mind wander.

The North Korean situation is settled for the moment. There’s chatter about arms smuggling in Kosovo, nothing urgent yet but he knows the players and the expected movements. It’s really just a matter of thinking through the worst consequences and tracing it back to the earliest recognisable signs. The signals that will result in a power vacuum in a year’s time, the blood-drenched struggles that will result if left unchecked.

He smiles and nods, and thinks about which of the three groups vying for power will be the least disruptive in the long term. The actions needed to ensure relative peace. Which of those actions could reliably be performed with discretion.

When he’s narrowed it down to a few direct actions over the next six months and mentally drafted the memo to explain what needs to be done, he checks the time. He expects fifty-two minutes to have passed, but it’s only forty-eight.

Eurus stands there, unblinking. Humming that same tune, watching him. Her hands are loose at her sides, her face relaxed and calm. He notices that the shoulders of her white scrubs are uneven, one slightly higher than the other. There’s no other sign of personality, of preference, of anything so human as foibles and flaws. It’s still eerie to see so much crystalline brilliance and understand so little of it.

He waits until she finishes, and then he smiles, nods and leaves.

***

His mother’s birthday falls on a Monday. He spends the weekend before it with greedy hands on Lestrade’s skin, trying to memorise something he surely shouldn’t have. He feels like a child liberating the last serving of trifle from the fridge: all avarice and guilt, knowing he’ll be found out but wanting it anyway.

He leaves selfish marks on Lestrade. Leaves dark, mouth-shaped bruises on his collarbone, on his rib, on his hip. He encourages Lestrade to hold tighter, to thrust harder, to make him feel it. He rides Lestrade at a desperate pace, punishing and ruthless until Lestrade flips them over, pins his hands to the mattress.

For a second, it scares him. How desperately he wants to cling to this, even if it’s futile. The sense of doom hanging over everything, the anxious wait for it to go wrong. “Gregory,” he says and he doesn’t even know how he should finish that, how to beg for something to stop him thinking, stop him feeling anything but this.

“I’ve got you,” Lestrade says nonsensically, gentling his hands, sliding them along Mycroft’s forearms. He starts to thrust, slow and steady, drags his mouth along Mycroft’s jaw. “I’ve got you,” he says again, movements controlled and frustrating, until there’s a hand around Mycroft’s thigh, pulling up and shifting the angle. Then it’s good: intense and too much and stunningly good.

So good that the breath catches in Mycroft’s chest, that he can’t think. Can only hold on and meet those unrelenting thrusts. Can only groan when Lestrade breathes hot and damp against his neck, “I’ve got you.”
When he gets off the treadmill, Lestrade’s standing in the doorway, with a mug in each hand. Mycroft could point out that he has a selection of cups -- the mugs are only used when he’s been awake for thirty-six hours and needs coffee, and can’t be trusted to hold fine china until he’s had more caffeine -- but freshly brewed tea is worth more than a minor quibble. Especially not when Lestrade is standing there in an olive green polo shirt that suits his complexion far better than it should. For grey stubble and dark, sleepy eyes, Mycroft can resist the urge to comment on the choice of crockery.

“Thank you,” Mycroft says as Lestrade passes him one mug. It’s impossible to miss the almost comical leer Lestrade gives his outfit. “Don’t be ridiculous, Gregory. Lycra is not flattering on anyone.”

“Legs that long and you never wear jeans. It’s a crying shame.”

Mycroft takes a grateful sip of his tea. “You like my suits.”

“Yes, I do,” Lestrade agrees. “Mostly I like taking them off you.”

“Speaking of getting dressed,” Mycroft says, ignoring Lestrade’s raised eyebrow that says they weren’t talking about that at all, “we should do something. Your choice. Anything you want.”

“Anything like anywhere I want to go for breakfast? Or like tandem skydiving?”

Mycroft’s never done it. He’s never seen the reason for jumping out of a perfectly good plane by choice, but it could certainly be arranged. It might be nice to see the ground rushing towards him and spend a few minutes terrified of things that scare most people. “Would you like to do that? The skydiving?”

“I’m not a complete bastard. I remember the scared of heights story.”

“The advantage of the tandem system is that there’s a professional to pull the parachute. Being scared is not life-threatening.” Mycroft wraps his hands around his warm mug. “We can do it this afternoon if you want to.”

Lestrade shakes his head. “Not really. What’s going on?”

“I’m feeling whimsical.” Mycroft shrugs. He can’t banish the thought of what if: what if this is the last weekend he spends with Lestrade, what if something changes on Monday, what if these stolen moments of happiness fade into nothing. They are unfounded emotional concerns with no basis in fact. But it would not be onerous to make an effort this weekend, to make sure Lestrade has something good to remember. Just in case his completely unfounded misgivings prove true. “Indulge me. Anything you want.”

“I need to think about this.”

“And I need a shower, so that works quite well.”

After the shower, Mycroft pulls on a dressing gown and goes to ask about planned destinations. If they’re headed for the country, he’ll wear tweed; if they’re staying in the city, he’ll wear the grey Prince of Wales check.
Lestrade is on his phone. Mycroft spares a moment to be disappointed at losing Lestrade to a crime scene, but he understands too well. He clearly won’t be leaving the city today.

Lestrade wanders into the bedroom as he’s putting in cuff links. “I take it that was the Yard?” Mycroft asks, glancing at Lestrade’s reflection in the mirror.

“John, actually. Given last night, and then this morning…” Lestrade walks up behind him, settles two hands on his sides, and watches his reflection closely. “I asked him if he knew what was up with you. He told me about Monday.”

Mycroft thinks real people would object to the invasion of privacy. But Mycroft has always believed in gathering whatever information you can from all available sources. He rather admires the efficiency of Lestrade’s methods. “And?”

“You want to tell me about it?”

“Need to know.” Finishing with his cuff links, Mycroft picks up his pocket watch from the dresser. Lestrade stays where he is, watching as Mycroft feeds the chain through the last button hole of his waistcoat and slips the watch into his pocket. “You didn’t need to know.”

Lestrade’s snort makes his option of that statement very clear. “There’s a difference between secrets you have to keep and secrets you choose to keep.”

Mycroft fastens his tie clip, a simple mother-of-pearl that matches his cuff links and sets off the polka dots in his tie. “Semantics. It’s still deception.”

“Not semantics. It’s important,” Lestrade says, digging his fingers into Mycroft’s sides. “It’s important to me.”

“Why?”

“I got divorced because of lying and cheating. There’s a difference between lying and upholding the Official Secrets Act. It’s not like I’m upset that you lied to me about Nielsen.”

“How do you know that?” Mycroft asks sharply. “How much do you know?”

“We had a new Sergeant. He collected evidence before SOCO got there. It wouldn’t have been admissible in court, and proving the chain of evidence would have been a headache. But I got it tested out of curiosity.”

“Unofficially,” Mycroft says. That’s why the results hadn’t been flagged before they returned to the Met. It hadn’t been submitted as part of that case.

“I got a friend to do me a favour. Turns out, it’s not a match for the culprit, but it did match Nielsen. Which means he wasn’t in the area, he was in the room.”

Lestrade hasn’t told Sherlock or Sherlock would already be causing trouble. “You won’t tell Sherlock.” It’s a clear order.

Lestrade narrows his eyes. “Do I look like an idiot?” he asks, and then holds up a hand. “Do not answer. It’s a secret for security reasons and officially I shouldn’t have got it tested. I’m not telling anyone.”

It’s a relief to hear. “Good.”
“And I know that’s not personal. Any DI on the case would have got the same official line,” Lestrade waits for a confirming nod before continuing, “but this – us – it’s not worth much if you can’t rely on me.”

“I never said you weren’t reliable.” The idea is absurd. Lestrade is one of the few, the very few, that Mycroft has faith in. He rarely trusts people’s capabilities or intentions, but he has faith in both when it comes to Lestrade.

“You don’t have to tell me the details, but you should be able to say if you’re upset. Or angry. Or disappointed. You should be able to rely on me to help if I can, and if I can’t help, at least I can understand.” Lestrade leans up and presses a soft kiss to Mycroft’s cheek. There’s a rasp of stubble as he hooks his chin over Mycroft’s shoulder. “It’s trust. Letting me in. Letting me know you.”

“I don’t do it easily,” Mycroft warns. “Or well.”

“I don’t know if I believe that. I haven’t seen you do anything badly yet.” Lestrade raises his eyebrows in challenge. “I understand there are things you can’t tell me, but this isn’t one of them.”

“It’s a family visit. Sit in the room, stare at the prisoner, go back home for cake.” Mycroft has no excuse to keep his hands busy so he slides his hands over Lestrade’s. “It’s not a cause for concern.”

“No?”

Mycroft can list the reasons it should be safe. He feels like he’s been reviewing them for weeks. “Security has been upgraded. We have all visited her several times individually with no ill effects. Her current communication is non-verbal.” All verified facts, all utterly true and still, he wishes he could avoid facing this particular fear for a little longer.

Lestrade doesn’t say anything. The weight of his chin digs into Mycroft’s shoulder. It’s bound to crease the silk backing of his waistcoat, but Mycroft doesn’t ask him to step back. If anything, he leans into Lestrade, and the loose hold turns into an embrace, Lestrade’s arms wrapping around his waist.

Mycroft looks down at the dresser, the cleared wooden surface, the closed cuff link box sitting perfectly parallel to the dresser’s edge. “There is no logical reason to fret.”

“Yeah, well, human beings aren’t always logical.”

“I am,” Mycroft says. “I’ve made a career on it. I am renowned for knowing everything, for seeing the consequences and arranging them to our benefit.”

Lestrade’s arms tense, holding him tighter. “Is that what it is? That you can’t control this?”

“Not precisely.” It has nothing to do with the situation itself, and everything to do with childhood fears that he can’t overcome. He can control his reactions to them, but the fear is still there. The desire to run and hide still feels like an appropriate response, even though he knows it isn’t. “I do not say this often, but the facts do not support my personal conclusions.”

Lestrade blinks, frowning. “You know it’s not dangerous but it doesn’t feel that way?”

“I am uncomfortably aware that my judgement is compromised,” Mycroft confesses softly. “I’m not used to being wrong.”

“It gets easier with practice,” Lestrade says and Mycroft shoots him a scathing look.
“I am not used to feeling so... helpless.” Mycroft hates the way the word tastes in his mouth. Hates feeling scared and frustrated and desperate. He hated feeling like this when Sherlock was taking every drug combination he could find. He hated feeling like this when Musgrave Hall went up in flames. He may be older but it’s no easier to bear. “Usually I can identify a risk and take reasonable steps to nullify it.”

“Like the cars,” Lestrade says, “and the umbrella.”

Mycroft pretends not to understand. “Excuse me?”

“Those are reinforced tyres and those cars still sit heavy. I’m guessing plated armour and bulletproof glass.” Mycroft does not confirm or deny. “You act like it’s convenience and luxury, but you’re driven around London in tanks. People only do that if there’s a threat.”

It’s very rare that Mycroft doesn’t know what to say. Even people who know the specifications of that fleet of cars assume Mycroft takes them as a sign of superiority, as a subtle form of bragging. “And the umbrella?”

“You treat that thing like John treats his gun. Which I do not know about, if anyone asks,” Lestrade adds quickly. “You’re comfortable with it, you check for it before entering or leaving a room. If that’s not a weapon of some sort, I’m a monkey’s uncle.”

Mycroft does not comment on the DNA correlation between humans and chimpanzees. He does wonder when Lestrade put it together: the security clearance, the danger, the occasional need to obfuscate. How long has Lestrade known, and why didn’t he leave immediately? “If you know that, why are you still here? I’m not a safe man to know.”

“I arrest murderers for a living.” Lestrade shrugs. “Clearly, safety isn’t my first priority.”

“Gregory--”

“Some things are worth the risk,” Lestrade says, talking over him. “Worth making an effort. Now, you said anything I want, and I know what I want to do today.”

***

Lestrade’s idea of an indulgence turns out to be pulling out his phone and looking up travel sites. “We could go to a travel agent,” Mycroft suggests. Personally, Anthea makes all travel arrangements for him. That would be easier still but Lestrade seems to be enjoying reviewing travel guides.

“Don’t know where I want to go,” Lestrade replies. He looks up, smiling hopefully. “I’ve got a week’s leave booked at the end of next month. I’m thinking somewhere warm and sunny, but I’m willing to compromise if there’s a chance I could convince you to come.”

“Not Spain,” Mycroft says, thinking of economies and the likelihood of being dragged in for an unofficial review of finances, “or Greece. Perhaps France or Italy. The Riviera’s rather nice.”

“Might be a little out of my price range.”

Mycroft waves that thought away. “Ignore the cost. Find somewhere you like, with reasonable Wi-Fi access, and I’ll start scheduling around it.”

“Really?”

“I’ll need to work remotely, but I’ll be with you in body if not in spirit. Barring any unforeseen
When Mycroft glances over, Lestrade’s watching him, lower lip caught in his teeth. “Could you really make that work? A whole week out of the country?”

“I believe so. A few hours a day with my laptop and some privacy, and I should be able to maintain the essentials.” There are a few committee meetings he will politely decline -- and one or two that he’ll need to telecommute to, or the idiocy will run rampant by his return -- but it’s possible with some careful adjustments. “It would allow you time to sunbathe.”

“What’s the point of a holiday if you don’t get a tan?”

Mycroft grimaces. “I don’t tan. I burn. Bright red is only attractive on poppies and lobsters.”

Lestrade laughs and goes back to scrolling on his phone. “What about Capri?”

“Would you prefer a beach with sand?” Mycroft asks, thinking of the azure water and stunning cliffs, the beach clubs with their coloured umbrellas and sun loungers set upon the pebbles. He rather likes Capri, but there’s a distinct lack of sandy beaches. “If so, Sicily would be a better option.”

“As long as there’s sunshine and water, I’m fine.”

“Capri, then.” Mycroft remembers the endless blue ocean and the easily defended layout of the island. How the crowds of tourists can be avoided by taking narrow, steep paths and turning a few corners gives a surprising amount of privacy. “Perhaps the Punta Tragara?”

***

Mycroft expects the best part of Monday will be waking up next to Lestrade. After that first sleepy kiss of the morning, he’ll have to get out of bed and everything will go downhill from there. Unfortunately, he doesn’t even get that. Lestrade’s already up making coffee when Mycroft’s alarm sounds. Mycroft wonders if he could fake an illness well enough to fool Sherlock, something serious enough to be excused but not interesting enough to result in Sherlock’s attention.

“Tea or coffee?” Lestrade asks from the doorway, trousers and shirt on, jacket and shoes still missing. He’s holding a full mug.

Mycroft groans. “Coffee.”

Lestrade walks over, and hands him the mug. It’s sweeter than Mycroft usually takes, and he covetously wraps both hands around the mug. “Thank you.”

“What’s the plan for today?”

“In detail?” Mycroft asks, and Lestrade shakes his head. “Meet at Baker Street, go from there.”

“In that case, can I get a lift there? I need to reclaim some case files before they permanently join the collective clutter over there.”

Mycroft agrees, since their parents shouldn’t be arriving until after nine. But when Watson opens the door, his parents are already standing in the living room. His father is wearing his favourite navy blazer; his mother is in shades of blue and black. Mycroft’s own grey suit seems light-hearted in comparison. Watson shoots a meaningful glance at Lestrade, one that Mycroft doesn’t deign to consider or translate, and says loudly, “Come on in, Mycroft.”
It’s a very effective announcement. Every head swings towards them.

Mycroft steps inside. “Good morning, everyone. Mummy, Dad, this is Gregory Lestrade.”

Lestrade gives a wave and says, “Hi. I’m Greg.” Then he turns to Sherlock and says, “Case files.”

“Microscope,” Sherlock replies.

“What?”

Sherlock almost looks innocent. “Aren’t we quoting things that we use a lot?”

“I need those case files back. The Lestrade library has a three night loans policy,” Lestrade says, rolling his eyes. “All of them, Sherlock.”

“The last one isn’t solved,” Sherlock says, turning to a pile stacked on the table. He throws a blue hand-knitted shawl on the floor. A pair of pruning shears and a picnic basket get the same treatment. The laptop -- Watson’s by the scratches -- gets lifted up, but placed gently back on the table.

“How do you find anything in this mess?” Lestrade asks, and Mycroft doesn’t need to turn to see his mother smiling in approval. The state of Sherlock’s room had always been a source of woe to her.

“Easily,” Sherlock replies smugly, handing over four manila folders. Lestrade takes them and starts looking through them.

“He does know where everything is,” Watson says from his chair. Mycroft wonders if Watson lives in fear of the day Sherlock deletes that information as unnecessary. “I don’t, but he does.”

“I’m sure he does,” Mycroft says, pressing his umbrella to the floor and leaning on it. He crosses his left ankle in front of his right and attempts to look comfortable.

“We’re missing witness statements,” Lestrade says. “Where are they, Sherlock?”

Sherlock spins towards the mantel, his coat billowing as he turns. Mycroft remembers him at ten, those few months of fascination with ballet and ballroom and any other dance he could master. Sherlock had been obsessed with the theory, learning from books and tapes until he was improving other people’s choreography. Then, like every other childhood interest, he’d declared it boring and moved to something else.

“They were boring.” Sherlock hands the loose pages to Lestrade. Most of them are undamaged but there are some tears and sharp cuts from stabbing. “Completely useless. I don’t know why you bother.”

“Because canvassing witness statements is part of a thorough and complete investigation,” Lestrade says in that slow, careful tone that usually appears in press conferences.

“So you do something utterly pointless because somebody told you to?” Sherlock smirks at Mycroft. “No wonder you like him.”

“John,” Lestrade says, “when Rosie’s old enough that you have to explain to her about following rules, could you try to explain it to Sherlock too?”

“Already tried,” Watson replies, as Sherlock says, “We won’t be teaching Rosie to follow mindless rules.” and Watson stares at him.

“Yes, we will,” Watson says firmly. “We will be teaching Rosie that rules exist for a reason, and
there are consequences if they’re not followed.”

“But if they’re stupid rules, she shouldn’t have to follow them.”

“We will talk about this later,” Watson says, and makes it sound like ‘I will explain why you are wrong after your parents have gone’. Or maybe ‘I will yell at you until you agree, whether or not you understand’.

When Mycroft glances over, Lestrade looks quite pleased with himself. He did it on purpose, Mycroft realises. He knew what Watson’s response would be. Mycroft is impressed and lets it show.

“So,” Mummy says, turning her attention to Lestrade, “you work with our Sherlock?”

“And sleeps with our Mycroft,” Sherlock adds helpfully.

Mycroft glares at him. “Thank you, Sherlock. I’m sure we had a great need for that clarification.”

“Mikey,” his mother chides and Lestrade’s brows shoot up, “you didn’t tell us you were seeing anyone.”

“Have you ever considered that’s for a very good reason?”

“I’m sorry, his manners are appalling,” his mother says, as if he’s a misbehaving schoolchild. “I was just surprised that there was someone in his life.”

“We’ve been keeping things quiet,” Lestrade says diplomatically. “No point rushing something good. Worth doing right.”

Mycroft ignores the stunned expression on Sherlock’s face. And his mother’s slightly confused expression. And Watson’s disbelief. The only person who doesn’t seem surprised is his father, and his father barely knows what’s happening at any point in time. “Now, Gregory needs to leave.”

“I’m expected at the office,” Lestrade says with a bright and charming smile. “But it was nice meeting you both. Have a lovely birthday, Mrs Holmes. Mr Holmes.”

Mycroft walks him out, because the alternative is standing in the living room and watching everyone look at each other for an explanation. He understands his parents’ reactions: they don’t know Lestrade. The smile and the good looks, the charm and the patience, it’s unexpected. But Watson and Sherlock should be well aware of how charming Lestrade can be.

As they walk down the stairs, Lestrade leans closer and says softly, “Mikey?”

“I do have the authority to order your execution. Don’t think I won’t do it.” Lestrade grins confidently and only grins wider when Mycroft adds, “They also call me Mike.”

“And you hate it.” Lestrade opens the door, pauses there. “Mikey? And Shirley?”

“There’s a good reason why Sherlock has never referred to me by a nickname,” Mycroft says, and doesn’t add that it might be because he’s vastly smarter than both of their parents combined. Or it might have been the threat that Mycroft would call him Little Bill, as their Great Aunt Gertrude once had. Sherlock had been three and suitably insulted by the nickname, or possibly by the idea of being considered a little version of anyone else. “For once, I would suggest following his example.”

Lestrade nods. He catches Mycroft’s hand and squeezes once, letting go quickly. “Call me afterwards, okay?”
“Of course.”

***

Walking through the corridors of Sherrinford makes Mycroft long for the noise of the helicopter. At least on the helicopter he wasn’t stuck listening to the mind-numbing detail of his parent’s last line-dancing trip. Honestly.

He says, “Oh, really?” and “Yes,” and nods at the right places. He even manages a “What did you do next?” in the middle of a five minute discussion of missing an airport shuttle and waiting twenty minutes for the next one.

The stories are all directed at Mycroft, suggesting that Sherlock has already had to suffer through the Least Interesting Holiday in History. (That’s a lie and Mycroft knows it. Their 2011 trip where nothing went wrong and nothing went especially right was even more dull.) If the stories were more interesting, he might pay his parents more attention.

There are seats waiting for them at Eurus’ cell. Eurus is standing, waiting for them. Her hair has been brushed, but it’s still hanging loose around her shoulders. She has her violin in hand and looks at each of them as they walk in.

Mycroft takes the first seat. For a moment, his eyes drop to the floor, to that section of concrete where the nurse’s body lay, where he woke up. He takes a slow breath and presses his hands to the armrests and looks up to find Eurus staring at him. She tilts her head to the side, blinks, but says nothing.

Sherlock has unpacked his violin. He stands with perfect posture, as if the violin is simply an extension of his hand -- or his hand is an extension of the violin, it’s hard to say -- and raises his bow. Eurus turns her attention to him and mimics him.

On the ground, at Sherlock’s feet, the sheet music is laid out. Page after page, so he doesn’t have to turn anything, only needs to glance down. Eurus has nothing in front of her, but as they start playing, she clearly doesn’t need it.

They perform as mirror images of each other, eyes locked, certain. The tune begins sweetly, the timing clear and steady as they play together. There’s something pastoral and idyllic to the gentle notes, but meticulous, reliable. Then it starts shifting, moving faster, Sherlock’s slipping lower as Eurus slides higher. Still in tandem, still matching the beat of the music, but growing apart and becoming distinct. The music separates into two themes, two motifs. Sherlock’s is lower, it’s wild and carefree, a river rushing down the banks; Eurus’ becomes lighter, sunlight on the air, barely tethered to its companion, floating above.

They hold a note and then switch. Now it’s Sherlock playing the higher notes, a light, deft touch moving faster and joyously. Now Eurus’ violin cries low, yearning notes, darker and craving and slowly, slowly climbing up as Sherlock’s slows, dips lower to meet in the same octave. The themes circle each other, wary and hopeful in turns, rising and slowing to merge back into one tune, back to one united melody.

It slows and softens, but it’s not the end. Mycroft knows this piece too well to be fooled. No, this is sparser, less prone to flights of fancy. Simpler on the surface. The beat is steadier and calm.

Eurus looks to him and, oh, he understands. Not themes, not tunes, but siblings. Eurus above them, unable to pull them up to her level, unable to step down to theirs. Sherlock wild and desperate, searching for connection, for attachment, for chemical highs however he can find them. How closely
they can mirror each other: high and untethered through chemicals and intellect; low and violent, hungry for a reaction no matter the consequence. The moderation between those two extremes, the balance they might achieve together.

And the last section, the restrained mirror of the starting notes. Slower and steadier, but that motif was there from the beginning. It was subtle and easy to overlook, but it was always there. The meticulous count behind the other melodies, a constant for the other two to shift over and around.

He understands it now. Eurus humming for him, miming it for him, playing for him. Always stopping at that last section, leaving that space empty and waiting for him to fill it. Waiting for him to write his own tune, and trying over and over when he couldn’t understand what she was telling him.

The music slows, nearly over, and his mother squeezes his hand. He gives her a reflexive smile, one she mirrors back, but there’s no sign that she understands. There’s no sign that she hears what Eurus and Sherlock are saying with eloquence if not with words.

This is how they fit together. This is how they have always been: revolving around one another, defined by each other. Distinct and different, but what they share in common is how they have shaped each other, for good and ill.

It doesn’t matter if their mother doesn’t understand it. It doesn’t matter if all she hears is two of her children playing together for her birthday. They understand. For once, for this small moment in time, the three of them understand each other.

It finishes with those three distinct themes blending into harmony, into a shared melody. It gently ends and Mycroft surprises himself by clapping enthusiastically. The sound is startling loud, echoing off the walls. Sherlock takes a dramatic bow and grins widely, knowing he’s just been terribly, terribly clever.

***

“You could have told me what you were doing,” Mycroft says, after they’ve taken their parents to lunch and each promised to attend the village fete. (Mycroft may arrange an unexpected trip to South Africa that weekend; Sherlock’s bound to have a very important, time sensitive case he’ll need to work on.)

“I tried,” Sherlock says. He shrugs, recognising that he didn’t try especially hard. “I knew you’d understand when you heard it.”

“It was...” Mycroft doesn’t have the words to describe that music or how much it said. Beautifully honest. Raw and heartfelt. True. Those aren’t words that apply to their family.

“Easier to say without words,” Sherlock suggests.

“Quite,” Mycroft agrees, but it feels like a cowardly escape. Suddenly, he remembers Watson and the power of a simple, unqualified statement. “It was amazing, Sherlock.”

Sherlock looks stunned, eyes wide and mouth falling open a little. “I... um...”

This is how they communicate: through sharp little taunts or fumbling attempts at sincerity. No wonder Lestrade despairs of them. Mycroft disinterestedly wonders if Watson feels the same way.

“You’re right. Much easier without words,” Mycroft says and Sherlock nods gratefully.
He does call Lestrade, but he calls from the car while it’s illegally parked outside the Yard.

“Hey,” Lestrade says warmly, picking up. “How did it go?”

“Very well.”

“Don’t overwhelm me with all that description,” Lestrade says, voice heavy with sarcasm.

“It went well enough for you to tease me about it,” Mycroft points out reasonably. “That’s vastly better than I expected.”

“I’m glad, but I’d like to know the details.”

Mycroft glances across at the empty car seat beside him. “How busy are you right now?”

“Following up paperwork on a few cold cases Sherlock solved on the weekend.” There’s a rustle of paper and then a creak as Lestrade leans back in his chair. “It can wait a bit longer.”

“Can it wait until tomorrow?” Mycroft asks. His pocket watch says it’s a quarter past four. Early for Lestrade to leave, but not indecently so. “I’m in the car downstairs.”

“I really shouldn’t,” Lestrade says slowly, fighting his own temptation, “but bugger it. This stuff can wait. I’ll be there soon.”

“Wonderful,” Mycroft says, and then adds, “Gregory?”

“Yeah?”

This is awkward to say on the phone, but it would be far worse to have to say it to Lestrade’s face. “I am fond of you.”

Lestrade laughs loudly. “Tell me that’s a joke. Because if that’s a genuine declaration, it’s pitiful for a grown man.”

“You are challenging,” Mycroft says, and he doesn’t entirely mean it as a compliment. He can do better if he must. There are a lot of things he likes about Lestrade, he could list them in alphabetical order, but this isn’t about flattery. This is about honesty. “You are very dear to me. I can count the number of people I love on one hand, and you are the only one that I genuinely like, flaws and all.”

Lestrade drags in an unsteady breath. “Okay, I’m on my way. When I get there, I’m going to kiss the hell out of you, whether or not your driver can see us,” he says, and then hangs up.

Mycroft takes him at his word, and raises the privacy screen.

He’s glad he did when Lestrade strides through the glass doors of the Yard and heads straight for the car. He yanks the door open and crawls over to Mycroft, hooking one hand behind Mycroft’s head to pull him in. The kiss is earnest and sweet, if a little uncoordinated; it’s only made better when Lestrade mutters, “I love you, too,” against Mycroft’s mouth, and laughs when Mycroft replies, “I had assumed as much.”
I’m including this out of curiosity. When I’m writing a story, especially something this length, it tends to develop its own playlist of songs. And since it’s now so easy to use YouTube to create a playlist, I thought I might as well share. None of these songs are a pure distillation of their relationship, but they all captured something -- a vibe, an idea, an emotion -- that influenced the story itself. (Sometimes, it was a particularly line, like "I have such duplicity at my command" or "Maybe nothing could prepare you, that something and that someday always comes". Sometimes, it was an idea, like the idea of being haunted by dreams you know better than to believe in or being saved by someone loving you when you’re struggling to love yourself.)

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