Crown Prince Mycroft discovers that his brother, Sherlock, is escaping from the castle to spend time with a new friend, John Watson. How fortunate that this new friend comes with his own rather protective guardian, the young and handsome man of the law, Greg Lestrade.

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Chapter 1

“Sherlock! Where have you been?”

“Haunting my bedchambers like a corpulent spirit. How boring of you.”

“And imagine my surprise when I check to verify that you are well and entertained, only to find you missing! Have you any idea… I nearly set the entire contingent of the Royal Guards to locating you!”

“That would have been laughable. They are so lethargic that they have grown nearly as rotund as you and can do little but roll around the halls like inflated pig bladders being used by the common children for their pointless games.”

Mycroft set aside his curiosity as to how Sherlock knew the manner by which the common children found amusement and focused on the most relevant issue at hand.

“Regardless of their level of fitness, they exist to safeguard our welfare and you, a prince of the realm, should not conduct yourself in a manner that makes their task more difficult.”

“Pffttt… they exist to serve and they serve as I command.”

“Oh, did Father expire and the crown magically pass, as by fairy hands, onto your brow?”

“I have no desire to find my skull permanently dented by that monstrosity of metal. Your skull is already misshapen and grotesque, so further disfigurement shall not even be noticeable. And the guards are not only flabby, but incompetent! I discover them every time without fail!”

This tangent would certainly be explored.

“Discovered? Sherlock, where have you been?”

“Ugh… have you nothing better to do that stick your substantial nose into my affairs? I am sure the larder is lonely and patiently awaiting your familiar loving attention.”

“Where, Were. You?”

“Very well. Since my presence is not required at any part of the day save the evening meal, I have to do something to prevent slipping into mental stagnation during the hours I am sentenced to this prison of stone.”

“A royal prince ensconced in an extremely comfortable suite of rooms in a well-maintained castle can hardly claim prisoner status.”

“Nevertheless, it is intolerably boring and I must tend to my own mental survival if I am to continue on with this burdensome existence. So…”

“Yes?”

“I may, on occasion, affect an escape.”

“An escape? You abandon the protection you are accorded…”

“Protection from what? The leaves on the trees? Perhaps the birds with their vile habit of soiling
the cloaks of passersby with their excrement?"

Mycroft wondered if there was any medicine in existence to alleviate the magnitude of the headache he was currently growing.

“Protection from those who would wish you harm or hope to capitalize on your exposure to earn a ransom.”

“That you underestimate my abilities to elude capture is insulting. I should demand satisfaction!”

“I believe there is an age requirement for such an action and you lack several years before you can make your demand. I shall note it, though, in my diary, so if you choose to again take up the issue I can remember the specifics of the situation. However, to stride back a few steps… did you say that our guards did pursue you from our home…”

“Prison!”

“We may debate that at a later date. Please attempt to remain focused on the current topic of conversation.”

“I shall defer to your far less agile brain and speak as plainly as I do with John. Now and then, my justifiable flight from this house of shackles is noticed and the buffoons attempt to pursue me while I conduct my investigations. They are shamefully incompetent, as I would expect of any that labor under your negligent yoke, and I am able to slough off their prying eyes and purchase my freedom through my superior intellect and cunning.”

So the palace guards were aware of Sherlock’s escapades, but had not informed him. This would not go well for them. However, other matters were now battering at his consciousness and demanded their turn in the sunlight of inquiry before any other actions were taken.

“Investigations?”

“Naturally. Without your stultifying grip on my mental prowess, I have been able to exercise my considerable talents in both a challenging and productive manner. I have conducted many investigations, all of which have been brilliantly successful.”

It was rare that Mycroft saw his brother’s eyes actually alight with happiness and honest pride and a small amount of his head pain abated, though it sat in wait in case it was called again into service.

“May I know the details of these successes?”

“Not that you are worthy of knowledge of my endeavors, but the balladeers will not write for me songs of my triumph unless you direct them to, so I likely have little choice. Just today, for your information, I discovered the identity of the individual who absconded with Mr. Smith’s chicken, which bore the rather ill-applied name of Sweet Jenny, because it was truly foul-tempered beast. John was hard-pressed to keep hold of the bird as we returned it to its rightful owner. It required a number of strips of cloth to bandage and a tumbler of grain alcohol to disinfect his various beak and talon-based wounds. Although I am not certain one can contract disease from a chicken, if there was any chicken inclined to spread pestilence, it would certainly be Sweet Jenny.”

And now the second issue demanding his attention.

“And this John… he would be…”

“None of your business.”
“Oh, I think he is very much my business because anyone associated with you requires the full measure of my attention. Now, please give your testimony.”

“You cannot control your meddlesome nature, can you? It is as if the tendrils of your obsession are so entwined in your synapses they are akin to the vines of ivy that clasp to the walls of this asylum like a suitor to the body of their lover.”

“How colorful of you. Now… John?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes grandly, which was still as adorable a gesture at twelve years old, as it had been when he was six.

“John is my assistant.”

“That is not as enlightening as you might believe it to be.”

“I require an assistant for my investigations and John serves that purpose.”

“My confusion was not in his job description, but rather his identity. Who is John? From what family does he hail? What are his allegiances? “

“As if any of that matters! He is an acceptable assistant, and that is the only relevant issue.”

“Oh, I find that I must disagree with you most heartily on that point. Sherlock… I know you pay little attention to any of the lessons you are given on politics, the machinations of court society or the duplicity of…”

“Bother me not with your inane games and foolish concerns about who is or is not plotting and scheming on this issue or that. John is my assistant and that is the end of the matter.”

There was a decisiveness to Sherlock’s proclamation that was just a bit too forceful for pure stubbornness and Mycroft felt a small smile begging his permission to break free.

“Sherlock… is this John, perhaps, your friend?”

“Enough! I shall stand for no more of your interrogation! And do not believe, for a moment, that you shall be able to confine me to this crypt, for I shall swiftly and contemptuously confound any attempted incarceration.”

Well, that was going to be Mycroft’s plan of action, but now he was far too intrigued to go forth with that initiative. A friend? Sherlock had never made any attempt to gain a friend, yet had somehow garnered one for himself in this boy, John. Who must have the patience of the kindest of the saints if he suffered Sherlock’s temperament and continued with their association. But, the specifics of this boy still must be known.

“That is your choice and I shall respect it, for now. However, I will need to have your… acquaintance… examined for any possible threat to your person. For all you know, Sherlock, he could be a pawn of one our enemies to draw you into a snare.”

“There is little that is snare-worthy about a cordwainer's son!”

Sherlock’s face suffused with a bright pink color that Mycroft had to admit was quite charming.

“Ah… am I to understand that John is not party to your true identity?”

“I… that is… I did not find it necessary to reveal that information. So far as John knows, I live
within the confines of this mausoleum as the child of the man who makes the shoes and boots of the oafs that trod its halls.”

“Clever. However, this John must not be possessed of great intelligence, since ‘Sherlock’ is a highly uncommon name and you easily fit the description of the youngest of the royal family. Your garments alone would speak of wealth and privilege, not concepts associated with many cordwainer’s families.”

“Do not insult John! John’s brain may not be of the caliber of mine, however, it is far superior to that of the dull-witted drones of the useless and dreadfully tedious members of this court and the townspeople with whom I must associate, though not, of course, by choice. For your information, to John, I am…”

“Yes?”

“Sherwin.”

“Pardon?”

“I shall not repeat it.”

“I think you must, for I am certain I did not hear what my ears seem to have mistakenly informed my mind.”

“Sherwin! I… I had to think quickly when he introduced himself. And I am not so stupid as to mill amongst the unwashed in my usual clothing. I obtained suitable garments to serve as an appropriate disguise. The head of the kitchen staff was helpful in this instance and forsook her inevitable attempts to ply me with baked goods to find the items I required.”

So, Mrs. Hudson was also privy to Sherlock’s shenanigans. A word would have to be had with her, as well. However, at minimum, his brother was not entirely unaware of the potential dangers of revealing himself outside of these walls, where protection and defense was not available if he met with an unavoidable threat.

“Well, your chosen nom de guerre at least coordinates nicely with your unique personality. And I commend you for taking some precautions with your safety.”

“I say again pffttt. I am more than able to defend myself if the opportunity arises. However…”

Sherlock’s defiant expression faltered slightly and Mycroft waited with a bit of worry for his brother to continue.

“I calculated that John might behave differently if he knew my actual identity.”

Something Mycroft understood easily. He had yet to find an individual who saw him as a person first and a prince second. The knowledge of his status always impeded his attempts to cultivate any meaningful relationship, be it friendly or romantic and he, long ago, resigned himself to the typical pattern followed by his ancestors. Become an asset to be brokered in an arranged marriage, which was especially not to his liking owing to his tastes which did not run towards the feminine, and surround himself with allies, as opposed to true friends. It was a blessing, actually, that Sherlock did not carry his responsibilities and could try for more, though he had never before done so. Now… this would be very, very interesting to explore in more depth.

“In that, I am afraid, you are likely correct. Our responses to people are based, in a large part, on the mantles they wear. Now, when are you next to meet him?”
“Oh no. You are not going to intrude upon my time with John. And if you hope to restrict my liberty, then I shall…”

“Rest your throat, Sherlock. My question was only to give myself time to find a proper retinue for you. No… I am sorry, but I must insist. However, their vigilance shall be clandestine and shall only interfere in the most dire of circumstances, such as the appearance of weapons or a vegetable sack being thrown over your head.”

“I do not approve.”

“I did not expect you would, however, in this manner you shall have unfettered time with your assistant and I shall not have such a great worry for your well-being. We both benefit from this arrangement, so I expect you to concede the logic and agree.”

Sherlock snarled, but eventually nodded and Mycroft finally let himself relax and smile at his brother.

“Excellent. And the date of your next assignation?”

“I am to meet John tomorrow afternoon. A tavern owner has reported that his profits have been pilfered and he suspects one of the serving wenches. I shall uncover the truth!”

That was not exactly a scenario to make Mycroft happy, but if he reneged on their agreement at this point, he would very much look the blackguard and it would certainly hurt his already problematic relationship with Sherlock.

“That sounds most interesting. And I am certain your entourage will enjoy, on their first day of duty, spending an agreeable afternoon in a tavern. Do enjoy yourself.”

Mycroft left a slightly astonished Sherlock in his wake and hurried out of Sherlock’s rooms to begin preparations for his brother’s next adventure. One which he would be observing in person.
Chapter 2

The word with Mrs. Hudson turned into, as it generally did, a pleasant hour of conversation, tea and cakes; however, it also secured his own set of rough-hewn clothing to wear while shadowing his brother and his new friend. Which was, if he was to be honest, a tad uncomfortable to think about. Not the portion concerning Sherlock, but the moving through the citizenry as no more than one of their own. Not that he was possessed of an unhealthy amount of arrogance or prejudice, but this was not something he had done before. In truth, he had no concrete idea how to speak or act as a member of the general populace, therefore, his strategy would be to interact with as few of the people he encountered as possible and minimize any chance of one, being discovered, and two, causing offense. Though he was well capable of defending himself, unlike Sherlock, despite his rather inflated self-opinion, it was a situation best avoided as any injury would require an explanation to Mummy and Father, and that could not possibly lead in a positive direction.

Following his little brother as he made his break for freedom, Mycroft had to admit that Sherlock’s method of egress was quite clever, using the wing for the servant’s quarters to make his way out of the castle while carrying a large bundle of laundry that nicely obscured his face from passersby. In his common clothes, it was difficult to distinguish him from any of the other young boys who performed simple jobs in the household. Letting Sherlock get a good head start, Mycroft hastened after him, keeping his brother in sight, but not so close as to be discovered and noted happily that the men he had chosen to safeguard Sherlock’s welfare were keeping pace with the nearly-running boy and never lost sight of his whereabouts.

After dashing down street after street, Sherlock finally arrived at a very modest house out of which, after he pounded on the door, stepped a boy near Sherlock’s age, but not near his height. The child was small, but sturdily built and sported a crop of straight, straw-colored hair that, with his lack of height, contrasted sharply with the young prince. After a not-unsurprising lack of greeting on Sherlock’s part, both boys sprinted off and, after a few minutes, pushed their way through the rear door of a building that was obviously a drinking house, which Mycroft entered through the proper entrance after drawing in a deep steadying breath. If strength could be taken from any quarter, it was that two of Sherlock’s bodyguards entered, also, with the other two loitering outside closely watching the customers that entered and exited. This was going to be a challenge. He had never been in a tavern before, but had heard bits and pieces of stories from members of the household and he could not deny there was an appeal to visiting one in person; however, there was also a hint of impropriety and unseemliness about such an establishment and that… well, that also held its own form of appeal.

It was only luck that Mycroft spied an empty table in a darkened corner a good distance from the two boys who were skulking near the large casks along the wall, occasionally carrying food or drink to a patron or being handed a scrap of cloth to clean a spill. It was extremely interesting to see Sherlock participating in the menial labor, though, perhaps, he viewed it as part of his overall disguise. Regardless it was a charming sight… Sherlock and his new friend cooperating to bring resolution to their mystery and there was no doubt that his brother was enjoying himself, though no one else might have the ability to perceive it but a brother well-practiced in reading Sherlock’s camouflaged emotions.

He wasn’t so caught up in the tableau, however, that he missed the man who entered the tavern not long after him and, after a quick word with its occupant, took a seat at a table in an equally dark corner after the table was vacated. Though his attention was diverted momentarily by the young woman who arrived to take his order, Mycroft returned his focus to the new patron, who was placing his own order with a very bright smile given to the same young woman who had served him a
moment before. A very bright smile and… a handsome one, as well. Which matched well with his handsome face and rather roguish, shaggy hair. And, the gentleman seemed only a few years older than him, not that the fact was relevant. At all. In any manner. He was here to obtain details about Sherlock and John’s interactions not be distracted by a comely man who might… oh dear, he was looking this way.

Mycroft quickly averted his eyes and hoped his rather pointed staring had not been noticed. However, a quick peek assured him that his spying had not been discovered, but something just as upsetting was now in play. Though he was not versed in the ways of the average citizen, Mycroft was quite skilled in reading body language and it was clear this newcomer was doing much what he had done minutes before… taking in the environment and then focusing his gaze on the two boys that were now pouring mugs of beer for one of the women to take to the tables. And it was not a casual, inquisitive gaze… it was that spoke of great interest and that was extremely worrisome.

This time, Mycroft was caught staring and received his own brilliant smile from the mysterious observed, which quickly turned inquisitive when it was not returned. Or, rather, when it was returned with Mycroft’s own cautiously defensive glare. A few more moments of each man attempting to decipher the nature of the looks they were being given and Mycroft found his opponent rising from his seat and walking over to drop into a new one at Mycroft’s table.

“Hello. Care to tell me what’s got you bothered?”

It took a second or two for Mycroft to shake off his shock at the brashness of the action, but no member of the royal family every let their confusion or discomfort show in their features.

“I was simply wondering why you were devoting such attention to the young boys currently clearing that table.”

“Oh? And what business is it of yours?”

It was becoming difficult to maintain his steely resolve gazing into the man’s warm brown eyes and being serenaded by his seductively-rough voice.

“The same business as for anyone who had a care for the welfare of two defenseless boys being eyed by a stranger many years their senior.”

Mycroft held his table companion’s gaze a little longer before he was given another wide, easy smile and a very unexpected slap on his shoulder.

“Hah! Well, that’s good to hear. Nice to know that if I’d gotten here a little later, someone in this place would have jumped in if the lads had been bothered. John’s not entirely defenseless, though. I’ve taught him a thing or two about fighting, in case he ever got himself crossways of someone with exactly the intentions you were hinting at.”

There were many things that a Crown Prince did not do, but Mycroft found himself betraying many of them as he felt his face twist in confusion and the pitch of his voice rise precipitously to further betray his mental turmoil.

“You… you know those boys?”

“I would hope so or all those nights tucking John into bed was some elaborate hallucination and I think someone would have pointed out if I’d gone mental.”

“John… John is your son? You… pardon my continued confusion, but you seem scarcely old enough…”
The serving girl happily interrupted Mycroft’s babbling by bringing both their drinks to Mycroft’s table and the eldest of the royal brothers raised an eyebrow in surprise when his tablemate tossed coins to the girl to pay for both of their mugs of ale.

“He’s not my blood, but… well, I look after him. Oh, and I’m Greg, by the way.”

Mycroft shook the hand that stretched towards him and felt the last of his concern wash away.

“Ah, I believe I understand. I am…”

Oh, this was not something for which he had in any way planned.

“…Michael. And, to provide a better and more honest answer to your original inquiry, Sherwin is my brother.”

It was a lucky thing, Mycroft felt, that his conversation partner enjoyed smiling, because he very much enjoyed watching that smile and would happily do so as often as it chose to display itself.

“Really? Actually, now that you say that, I can see it. You’ve both got that same way of speaking, like you got a chance for a real education and you hold yourself differently than the rest of us. Comes from living up there in the castle, I expect. Good for you, though. Take every opportunity this world gives you and make the most of it, that’s my motto. So what brings you out today, Michael? Got a day off from the cobbling?”

Mycroft restrained himself from reminding his table companion that cobblers repaired shoes and then noted, from Greg’s eyes, that the man was keenly aware of that fact and was simply teasing. Honest and kind-spirited teasing, which was something Mycroft had never before experienced, but found he rather liked. It made him feel a part of the joke and that was a very, very new thing for him.

“In truth, it was to learn more about Sherwin’s new relationship with John. He speaks little to me of the details of his day and I took it upon myself to fill in the gaps in my knowledge.”

“Checking out the new friend? Can’t say I blame you. There are plenty of rascally boys around to fall in with around here. I spend half my day sometimes dragging them back to their mothers after they’ve done something stupid.”

“I… your job is minding children?”

And wasn’t this Gregory’s laugh as magical as his smile. And eyes.

“Some days that’s exactly what it is! Actually, I’m most of what serves for the law in this section of the city. Me and a few other lads, that is, but I get the burden of organizing that lot into a serviceable team.”

“You… you are the constable?”

“Well, not on paper. Old Harry has the job, but he’s more about…”

Mycroft watched as Greg mimed drinking his ale.

“… than keeping the peace. I started on the job when I was just a kid really, not long before I found John and I can’t say it’s a bad deal, overall. I get to have a bit of excitement now and then and we really do help people. Me and the boys work hard to give them peace of mind and keep their damn money in their pockets. Now, most people are starting to count on me to take Harry’s job once he toddles off to the country or whatever he’s going to do when he decides he’s too old for the
headache anymore. I actually did a bit of school myself so I can read and write, which puts me as the most likely to handle all the business with the justices and the little directives and messages that come from the Royal Guards, the other watch houses in the city…”

A man of the law… how very intriguing. If there was one thing Mycroft staunchly supported it was law and order, especially when it was so enthusiastically enforced.

“I believe I understand. And I assume this also explains John’s interest in the area of crime.”

“Well spotted! Actually, depending on the day, he wants to do my job, join the guard force at the castle, be a soldier, travel as a scribe for hire… you know how it is with boys. Something different every day and, god love them, they’re young enough to make whatever they want of themselves. Truth be told, though, it was Sherwin that got him started on their little brand of mischief. Your brother marched right up to the watch house announcing, very loudly mind you, that a crime was being committed. There wasn’t much going on, so I followed after him to check things out.”

“He was not in danger, I hope.”

“Nah. Wasn’t even a crime, either. There’s reasons other than burglary that a man might be sneaking through the window of a house. When the husband of that house isn’t currently at home.”

Mycroft had to admit, to his shame, that it took a long second for him to make meaning of the idea and hoped there wasn’t a flush on his skin when the mental picture finally formed. Another bit of unseemliness that… held its own appeal, at least so far as what was going on once the window had been climbed through. Especially if the person waiting looked in any way like the person who was currently taking a sip of his ale and licking away the small trace of foam on his lip with a very nimble tongue.

“Ah. Yes, such an explanation would not have occurred to him.”

“But, Sherwin at least took the initiative to report it and gave me a good summary of his observations, so I was really rather impressed by him. Once we’d settled things, he demanded to come back with me to examine the cells and John had stopped by to visit. They hit it off immediately, which is very unusual for John, and… well, now and then, I might toss a bit of information gathering or a wayward animal their way and there’s their day’s entertainment taken care of.”

Mycroft watched the boys’ continued cooperation and wondered why John would have difficulty finding friendship and how in heaven’s name Sherlock came to be the exception. However, those were questions for another day.

“Yes, I heard the results of their most recent success. How are John’s poultry-inspired wounds, if I might inquire?”

Mycroft rarely laughed, but found himself joining in as Greg erupted into a long and absolutely breathtaking giggle.

“You’d swear he’d been stabbed by a dozen daggers by the amount of theatrics I had to sit through while I patched him up. Of course, when I gave him and Sherwin a couple of coins to spend at the baker’s for their troubles, you should have seen the pair of them strut along like they’d just come home from the war.”

Mycroft looked again at his brother and John as they continued to work, keeping their eyes always
on their target, a tall dark-haired woman who spent an unusually long time at tables with slightly older men and always found an excuse to bend over to display her ample assets when bringing their food and drink. Every few minutes the boys engaged in a feverish round of whispers and nods before getting back to their for-show employment. As Mycroft studied the boys, he felt the hairs at the back of his neck prickle and realized that as his eyes were on Sherlock and John, there were currently eyes on him. Lovely, lovely eyes…

“Yeah, they’re good at noticing things. The owner already knows she’s taking a bit for herself, but her father’s the local butcher and he doesn’t want to sour the deal he’s got going for his meats.”

“So you are to discover her actions and take appropriate measures.”

“Now you’ve got it. Keeping the peace… the problem’s taken care of, but no bruised feelings and people’s businesses suffering. I didn’t want those two involved, but Sherwin and John were there when this got dropped on me and… well, if I didn’t agree they’d have put their noses in it anyway. So, they’re gathering evidence and are going to bring it back to me so I can make the arrest.”

“Bring back to you… oh, they do not know you are present.”

“And spoil their fun? Of course not. But, I thought it best to keep an eye on things. This tavern is actually one of the quieter places to sip some decent ale and have a cheap bite to eat, but now and then, someone takes a little too much of that decent ale and we get called out to break up a fight. That’s not likely to happen in the middle of the afternoon, but better safe than sorry.”

A man of the law and a man of obvious protective paternal instincts, along with a gentle and kind heart. And lovely, lovely eyes. Mycroft was not entirely certain why his mind seemed to be fixated on that particular fact, but if he did have to succumb to some form of obsession, there were far worse things by which to become transfixed.

“I thank you for that. If I had not specifically extracted today’s agenda from my brother, I would not have known their plan and I do admit I was not entirely content with their coming here.”

“So you decided to spy, too.”

“That would be correct. However… oh, I do believe we have been somewhat incompetent in our espionage.”

“Come again.”

“We have been found out.”

Greg looked away from the lips that had captured the full of his attention since he sat down at the table and saw two very irritated boys stalking across the floor towards them.

“Oh look, Michael, here’s two lovely lasses to ask if we’d like another round. Yes, please, and if you give us something pretty to look at while you walk away, there’ll be a little extra for you when you bring back our mugs.”

“You have no sense of humor, Lestrade, so kindly do not assault my ears with your prattle, which is as pathetic as your attempt at surveillance. And… Michael?”

Sherlock coughed loudly and phlegmatically a moment then continued on.

“What are you doing here, Michael?”
“Sherwin? Who’s this?”

Mycroft turned what he hoped was an ingratiating smile towards the smaller boy who, now that he was closer, the prince could see had all the signs of a confident and happy boy. Apparently, Sherlock’s… Sherwin’s… acidity had not worn away the young man’s luster.

“This is my brother. At least so long as he remains alive, which shall be no longer than it takes for me to choke the life out of him.”

“How amusing, dear Sherwin. However, that would call attention to you in a most unprofessional fashion and your quarry would certainly be alerted to the altercation, which might disrupt your investigation.”

“Your brother’s got a point, lad. Now, why don’t you saunter back and refill our drinks so you don’t raise any suspicions. We’ll just keep sitting here getting to know each other better.”

Which sounded like a very happy plan to Michael, the reigning Crown Prince of this tavern. Actually, since his father wore not this specific crown, Mycroft would elevate himself to King instead and used a very familiar wave at his brother to hustle him along. Sherlock scowled mightily and John joined in as ferociously as he could before they stormed off with empty mugs in their hands.

“They’re good boys. We could be stuck with worse, right mate?”

Mate. Such an ambiguous word, but each facet of its possible meanings held his interest, so Mycroft wasn’t going to complain.

“I heartily concur. And, now that we have demonstrated our deplorable skill for skullduggery, we have not the worry of our mission weighing on our minds and may more fully enjoy our afternoon.”

“I like the way you think. We’ve got a good table, good beer, our own private serving wenches... afternoons don’t get much better.”

No, Mycroft had to admit… they did not.
Chapter 3

Mycroft was very glad he was skilled in steering the course of a conversation, because it was quickly becoming apparent that he had little to talk about with his new companion. Not because the vision sharing his table was a dullard or lacked, himself, topics of interest to discuss, but rather because the issues on which he had knowledge were either cripplinglly boring or would demolish his assumed identity as a shoemaker’s son. Fortunately, Lestrade was a scintillating conversationalist and possessed a wealth of amusing tales of adventure associated with his job or the boys they were currently chaperoning.

“So, Michael… I haven’t seen you before and I make a point to know the names and faces of everyone who has business in this area. You don’t get out of the castle much, do you?”

No, not really. The trip to visit some foreign court now and then, as part of his duty to the family… the occasional social event where his attendance was mandatory, but beyond that… no. It was not for him to enjoy a stroll through the streets or sit and enjoy an afternoon with a delightful man who wore old and mended garments as proudly and grandly as any duke in their finest robes. Yet, here he was. And, for some reason, he could not think of any place on the Earth that he would rather be.

“No, there is always work to do, always a new task arises as an old one concludes. However, I also have had little reason to explore much beyond the gates. I… I have no social group in the city to which I belong, therefore… well, explorations are far more enjoyable when shared, are they not?”

Did that make him sound awkward? Pathetic? Mycroft had hoped for, perhaps, shy and industrious, but in hindsight… how was it he had sat through hour after hour of lessons on the use to flirtation as a tool and could not muster the proper attitude now that he might have opportunity to employ flirtation as it was truly intended!

“Oh, I agree with that. A good walk-around is always best with someone to talk to. Same for a nice evening with good food and drink. And I understand how it can be when you don’t have time to get yourself in with a group of people. Makes finding that company for your nice evening tough to come by.”

Now, that was not something Mycroft could in any way believe. Someone as vibrant, as vivacious as the man sitting with him would have absolutely no difficulty cultivating friendship with anyone he met and… establishing romantic ties with the most exquisite and learned persons in the kingdom. Not that the latter was in any manner causing him pleasure to think about, but the bare facts were not something that could be argued. Odious and uncomfortable though they might be.

“I find that difficult to believe, Gregory. Surely a man with your attributes would have no difficulty establishing himself socially.”

“Well, that’s nice of you to say. Very nice, actually.”

And was that, perhaps, a bashful smile moving across those lovely lips? It was a strange urge to want to taste a smile, but Mycroft was suffering that urge right now and the uniqueness of the feeling was as exciting as the reason behind it.

“But… well, I haven’t really had the kind of life that lets you make a lot of connections. No time for it for a long while and now… well, with John and the job… yeah, it’s hard.”

“I understand both the lack of time and the responsibility for another taking priority over other
issues. But, may I ask… the situation of your life – would you mind sharing it? I find I would like to know more about the enchanting man with whom I am sharing this pleasant moment of time.”

“Oh… that’s… umm…. yeah, that’s…. ok. Well…”

How utterly delightful that chastising his mind brought it charging to the fore. The lovely-eyed man of the law was having such a difficult time speaking so widely was he smiling and if there were an artist present with his canvas and brushes, he would be commissioned immediately to commemorate the sheer delight on his companion’s face. And that painting would have a very good home in his private bedchamber.

“Oh… funny, no one really asks me about myself so I guess I’m a little unsure how to tell things properly.”

“If I might suggest? You mentioned that you had not seen time for social enjoyment for a long while, before even John became part of your life. For what reason is that the case?”

“Keeping a roof over my head, mostly. I was… I was younger than John over there, when… do you remember that horrible winter? That really, really bad one? There were so many people dying and you couldn’t even bury them because the ground was frozen solid. I mean, that’s not that uncommon, but there were so many! Stacks and stacks of people and there was nowhere to put them. And it wasn’t only the cold, it was the sickness. People got sick and couldn’t get better. It was too cold and there was too little food… for the common folk, at least. Not one less cart going up to the castle as normal for that whole winter, though. Not one, but people here were living on scraps and whatever wood they could find to keep warm…”

Mycroft was growing concerned at the growing upset in his tablemate’s voice and it was a strong and compelling instinct that prompted him to reach across and place his hand across Lestrade’s for comfort. The warm, rough hand which felt so breathtakingly alive beneath his touch.

“Listen to me carry on… and I’m not speaking bad about those beyond the gates, don’t think I am… it was just hard, being so young, to see all that food going up and none coming down. Especially when my parents took ill. There was no medicine left to go around and no matter how much I looked or worked or even stole, not enough for them to eat to keep up their strength.”

Mycroft realized he had not released Lestrade’s hand and decided to take the bold step of giving it a gentle squeeze of support.

“Their fate?”

“Two more bodies on the stacks.”

“Oh Gregory… I am sorry. I am so very sorry…”

And he was. Mycroft remembered that winter well. The servants were run off their feet keeping the fires burning hotly so no one suffered the terrible cold that raged beyond the stone walls. But his family never, not once, lacked food. Or drink. Or warm clothing and blankets. In fact, beyond curtailing his ability to take his riding lessons or a stroll outdoors, his life was much the same as usual. There was no hardship. No sickness. No death.

“Thanks for that. Anyway, it was a long time ago… well, I had to do something and good thing I wasn’t a lazy lad or things might have turned out much differently. I was lucky, very lucky, that my family owned our house outright, as did my father’s father and his father’s father. No money owed but the taxes and I worked every hour I could to keep that house… many nights I barely slept!
Mucking stalls, sweeping floors, running errands, writing letters or reading them for those who couldn’t, helping the candlemaker or the smith… there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do to earn a bit here and there so I could give the Crown it’s due and keep my house. Put food in my mouth, too, when I was lucky. Barely had time to breathe, let alone have a little fun with friends.”

Mycroft felt a strong surge of emotion that he could not quite pin down, but he was truly awed by the man whose hand he still clutched. So many would not have persevered…

“Such a courageous youth you were. You should be proud, Gregory, very proud. Not one in a hundred children could accomplish what you managed so successfully. You are a man of great strength and that is admirable. Extremely admirable.”

Mycroft waited patiently while Lestrade took a few deep breaths and realized that part of the reason he still held Lestrade’s hand was that his new friend had yet to draw back. Another surge of emotion rose up and this one was more curious and difficult to categorize than the last.

“I don’t know about that. It was survival, pure and simple, but I’ll thank you anyway.”

“It was honesty and take it as such. Now, how did you then become the esteemed constable-by-proxy that I now find you?”

“It happened by chance, really. The smith had me deliver the new keys for the cells to the watch house and they were talking about needing another body out on the street. Well, I laid down those keys and said they’d found him! Of course, they laughed at me, being nothing but a boy, but I said I’d work a month with no wages and they could decide at the end of that month to keep me on with pay or not.”

“And here you are.”

“And here I am. That’s… well, that’s going on ten years ago. Sometimes it’s hard to believe I’ve been on the job so long, especially when most ones my age are just barely out of their apprenticeships!”

“Another fine feather for your cap. With every word your show yourself a formidable man and I despair of ever rising to your heights. But young John… you said he came to you not long after you took this position.”

Lestrade took a long drink from his mug and gazed fondly at the small blonde boy carrying a large mug to a waiting customer.

“It was fate, I think. Fate I got this job because John came along with the first real bit of work I had to do. Normally, things are fairly quiet and the first months after I was taken on were easy ones. Then we had a nasty spell… bandits causing lots of problems on the roads. One day, one of the farmers came with word that there’d been an attack and… well, we went out there and it wasn’t pleasant. A family traveling in a cart, not even a nice one, actually, and they’d been… there was only one survivor. The mother, father and daughter were gone, but the boy was alive… had a bad wound in the shoulder, though. It still gives him trouble… probably always will. I have no idea what the bandits thought they were going to get from them, either but… I honestly think they took the only valuable thing in that cart and that was the lives of the people they killed. Anyway we took John to have his shoulder treated and… it was touch and go there for awhile, he got feverish and I thought we were going to lose him, but he rallied like the strong boy he is. But then… well, then we had a problem.”

“A problem? If he was well…”
He was getting there, but we didn’t know who he was. He was just a little thing and knew his name, his family’s names, but couldn’t tell us where he was from or who was his other family, if he had any. We sent word around to some of the villages beyond the forest, but no one sent back any word about him. So there he was, living in the doctor’s house and that wasn’t going to last but a few days more. Then what? One of the ‘charitable’ houses that takes in orphans? Not likely.”

There was an ugly look in Lestrade’s eyes that Mycroft didn’t understand, but knew he must. And that was not Michael’s curiosity, but the curiosity of the one who would one day wear the crown.

“What is the trouble, Gregory? Are they not kind to the children?”

“If you consider kindness selling them into labor to those that pass through the city looking for children for just that purpose. Or worse… there are far worse things people want children for than working the land. That’s what those houses do, Michael. Sell the poor little things to whoever will pay the price and they never ask why the child is wanted.”

Mycroft felt his blood boiling and it had nothing to do with the man who had turned his hand over so that it could clasp his own palm-to-palm. This was intolerable. Despicable! And under his family’s flag… no, this would be stopped. There were few things he could do now, but he could inform. Make things known and, if that produced no results, find the names of those responsible and make things… difficult for them in a variety of ways that would ensure it was nearly impossible to conduct business. What he would do with the children displaced or those visited by John’s fate in the future, he had no idea, but he would come to a solution. There was always a solution, if one was committed to finding it.

“Yeah, it’s bad… and I couldn’t let that happen to the poor little tyke who’d lost everything already. The lads looked around for a family to take him, but there aren’t many looking to take on another mouth to feed and he was too young to start in a trade…”

“So you took him.”

“I did! I was barely old enough to be able to make a son of my own, but I had a bed for him and he was a little thing so he wasn’t going to eat much, so I took him as mine. It wasn’t easy at first, not easy at all, but I muddled through. Poor John, he had to come with me every day for the first few years and I’d have to figure out who would watch him when I had to go out. Luckily, there’s a seamstress down the street from the watch house and a cabinetmaker a little further along and they were happy to have a eager little helper once in awhile. He still spends time there when he’s not off with Sherwin and I’m not too proud to brag that he wields a mean needle and thread and made, or helped make, a couple of small pieces of our furniture. And I’m teaching him to read and write, so he’s going to have lots of skills when he’s ready to get out in the world. Sherwin’s helping him with numbers, too, so maybe he could run a shop if he wanted. He’s got a good mind and he’s hard working. John’s got a great future ahead of him, just you watch.”

Lestrade was simply beaming with adoration for his ward and Mycroft found he was beaming, too. Especially since Sherlock was actually participating in young John’s growth. So unexpected and so simply wonderful. If there was a family with which his brother could become associated because of his wanderlust, there could be none better than the one he had found. Especially with a father so ruggedly masculine and with lovely… oh no, he was not going to get distracted by those entrancing eyes yet again.

“John is a blessed boy, Gregory, to have you as his guardian. I am in awe of your abilities and what you have given him. I hope you offer yourself congratulations frequently, but if you do not, I shall happily take up the job and do it for you.”
Oh my… that was rather forward. Or perhaps not. After all, he was holding hands with this beautiful creature…

“Really? Of course, that means I’ll have to see you again… is that something that interests you?”

“If it did not, I would be a terrible fool.”

One should not peek one’s tongue out of one’s mouth in such a provocative manner if one does not want to find oneself dragged from one’s chair and debauched in a most vigorous fashion.

“Well then… seems that we’re thinking very much alike. I’d certainly enjoy seeing you again, Michael, maybe when those two have something else to keep them occupied. Sherwin is supposed to bring John a couple of books to look at, which I really hope he doesn’t get in trouble over, and they’ll probably spend hours with them. Maybe you and I can drop by here for a little of that time while they have the run of the house. It’s safe, don’t worry about that. There’s not a person on the street that doesn’t keep an eye out for each other and John knows what to do if there’s any trouble.”

And, of course, there would be four armed men with eyes on the structure every moment.

“I think that would be quite agreeable. And I believe…”

Mycroft ran through his mental calendar and made a few minor adjustments.

“I can be free in two days’ time. There is… the house staff is in need of shoes and we are on a schedule to deliver them. Will that be agreeable – two days?”

“Yeah, that works for me. Come by early enough and I’ll throw in dinner so you and Sherwin don’t have to go hungry.”

“That will be delightful. I cannot imagine a more pleasant evening. Ah, and it appears our investigators are reaching the conclusion of their mission.”

Lestrade followed Mycroft’s eyes and grinned watching Sherlock throw his rag to the floor in a very emphatic statement of termination of his employment. After a few hushed words and eyes cut towards their table, Sherlock and John marched forward, jaws set and thrust out, all of which fell to dust when they saw the older generation with their fingers entwined.

“Greg! What are you doing with Sherwin’s brother?”

“Mycr…Michael! What are you doing with Lestrade?”

It was not juvenile for Mycroft to curl their fingers together more tightly and lean more closely to his companion.

“Simply sharing stories and enjoying a brief respite from our busy lives.”

It also was not juvenile for Lestrade to lay his free hand on Mycroft’s arm and smile a very wicked smile.

“Just passing the time and learning all sorts of things about each other.”

“Sherwin, I think I’m getting sick.”

“I agree. This is decidedly amorous and if matters continue along this trajectory, I shall not be able to contain my nausea.”
“Then make your report to Gregory, brother dear, before your dire health disables you from speech.”

Both boys giggled and found a full twenty different ways to say ‘Gregory’ before Lestrade reached out and swatted both of them on the back of the head.

“Now, you heard Michael. What did you learn?”

“If you have damaged my brain, the impact to civilization shall be crippling.”

“Start talking, Sherwin.”

“Fine… from our investigations…”

Mycroft sat back and listened to Sherlock list his evidence and describe his deductions, punctuated frequently by additions from John, and he had to admit he was impressed. It was very interesting to see Sherlock put his considerable intelligence to use in a productive manner and, further, take such pride from it.

“Ok… that’s good. I can use that. I’ll stop back in tomorrow and verify a few things, but I think you two have another success on your record.”

“And our reward? Come on, Greg… you said we could.”

“And you cannot violate your word or you cannot claim to support the honesty and integrity you expect of the citizenry.”

“Alright, but it’ll have to be tomorrow, because it’s getting late.”

Sherlock and John shared a look and then nodded their agreement.

“May I be party to this deal making?”

“Oh, sorry Michael. It’s just that I told these two that I’d take them out so they could swim. That’s one thing I don’t let John do alone because his arm can get weak if he gets cold and he had a close call once; we were lucky someone was in shouting distance to pull him out of the water. So they get to splash about tomorrow as a reward for wrapping this matter up for me. That’s ok, isn’t it? I never thought about it, but I guess I should ask you before letting him go off like that.”

Mycroft looked over at Sherlock who was pointedly not looking at him in return.

“I have no objection, however, be aware that Sherwin does not know how to swim.”

“What! Sherwin, you told me you were a better swimmer than a fish. You’re such a liar.”

“Pay him no heed, John. He is simply jealous of my abilities and, note that he does not divulge his own shame for you to vilify.”

“What? Sometimes I wonder about you. Do you think that if you use more words people are going to pay more attention to you?”

“That I choose to demonstrate my superior mind is something for which you should be grateful, as it provides you with a model to strive to emulate. And, if I must state it plainly - Michael also cannot swim.”

Now Mycroft was the subject of inquisitive gazes and Sherlock’s triumphant smirk.
“That true, Michael? You not one for swimming?”

“I am afraid, Gregory, that I lack your physical prowess for athletic activities.”

“That’s ok, I’ll teach Sherwin and then I’ll teach you.”

Mycroft’s head spun a moment and hope his hearing had failed him.

“That is not necessary.”

“Of course it is! I know one of the absolute best spots to swim and what were we saying awhile ago? Things are always more fun when they’re shared. When you get some time free, we can have a little fun in the water. But you boys are first, so make sure you eat up well tomorrow, Sherwin, because swimming takes a lot of energy.”

“If I must.”

“Yeah, you must because I’m not carrying you back home. John, you ready to go? I’ve still got some things to do before we go home and if we don’t leave now, they won’t get done.”

“I’m ready. See you tomorrow, Sherwin. Nice to meet you, Michael.”

“And you, John. I was very pleased to make your acquaintance. And I look forward to seeing you again soon.”

Sherlock and John whispered together again, then did a very good job of looking stern and disapproving.

“Come on, Greg. We need to talk.”

“Come along, Michael. We are going to have words.”

Lestrade and Mycroft burst out laughing, which tapered off to giggles, mostly to prolong the time until they had to unclasp their hands and part company. Not that either of them was prepared to admit it.

“Very well, Sherwin. Gregory, John… it has been a joyful afternoon. Do enjoy the rest of your day.”

Mycroft rose and felt no shame letting his fingers run across Lestrade’s arm as he walked from the table to take Sherlock by the shoulders and propel him towards the door. Every step he took, he could feel a warm gaze on his back and knew delicious brown eyes would, tonight, factor heavily in his dreams.

“Alright, Greg… what’s going on with you and Sherwin’s brother?”

“Nothing. Yet.”

“Oh no… you can’t try and be his boyfriend or anything. You can’t.”

“And why not?”

“He’s Sherwin’s brother. That’s just weird.”

“So, if he was any other man, it would be fine?”
“Sure, because I wouldn’t know his brother, now would I?”

“Well, right now we’re just friends.”

“Friends don’t hold hands.”

“We’re good friends.”

“If there’s going to be kissing, I better not be there to see it.”

“I think I can make you that promise.”

“Ok, then. Now we can go. And we’ve got potatoes for dinner tonight right? To go with the rabbit?”

“Lots of potatoes and I’ll roast them up crisp, just like you like them.”

“Yes! Then what are we waiting for?”

“For you to stop blocking my chair.”

“Oh.”

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“I am far too furious with you to demand an explanation.”

“Thank heavens for small favors.”

“You intruded onto my time with John.”

“In truth, it was not my intention to intrude, simply to observe. And what I observed, I greatly enjoyed. You are very talented, Sherlock. I was most impressed by your dedication to your investigation.”

“I…”

Sherlock looked like that last thing he was expecting to hear was praise for his work, but quickly pulled his air of aplomb back over his features.

“Of course you were. I am an exemplary investigator.”

“And John is a very capable assistant. You complement each other nicely.”

“As I informed you from the onset.”

“That you did and I apologize for doubting your assessment.”

“I am not, however, happy with your association with Lestrade.”

“Then I shall, heretofore, be twice as happy to keep the scales balanced.”

“Humorless, as always. Now, what are your intentions towards him?”

“To be honest, I do not know. I find him greatly companionable and that is as a rare a thing for me as it is for you. I shall simply have to navigate our association as best I can.”
“I am still not pleased, but perhaps if you have someone else on whom to focus, you shall spend less time meddling in my affairs. You will inform me in advance, however, if there is to be intimacy, for I shall not survive stumbling upon your clumsy attempts at seduction.”

“I give you my most solemn vow.”

“Very well. And I demand to be left unmolested after dinner so that I scribe my notes from today’s work.”

“I shall only stop in before I retire to bid you goodnight.”

“I am not a baby.”

“No, but for today, allow me my little indulgence.”

“This shall be the last time.”

“Of course.”

Until tomorrow night. And the one after…
Chapter 4

Mycroft followed Sherlock back through the maze of hallways that served as his egress route, bending over the entire time as if speaking with the smaller boy so his own identity was not so clearly evident. He was not entirely certain why he was continuing the subterfuge, but he felt a little more comfortable doing so. This was not his part of the castle. Here, he was the outsider and it would cause quite the stir if he was noticed. The staff would be uncomfortable and so would he… not something he normally might consider, but today… today it tickled at his mind. It had been a superb afternoon, truly he could recall none more pleasant. And it was so utterly simple… a simple establishment, simple people… and he did not mean that in an insulting fashion it was just that they lacked the everpresent pretense and duplicity of those in court. They laughed because they were happy, raged because of true anger and that was refreshing. The most refreshing aspect of the day, however, had been that he had fit into that world and done it, if not well, at least passably. He had enjoyed a few hours of genuinely entertaining time with a splendid man and soon he would do it again. Not as Crown Prince Mycroft, but as the humble Michael, who crafted shoes for a living would he enjoy again a comfortable bit of time with someone who found him agreeable and treated him collegially. That comfort was as precious to him now as every bit of gold in the treasury and the thought of losing it, even for this moment when Gregory was not present, was unthinkable.

Sherlock detoured to the kitchen and Mycroft chuckled as the boy threw his laundry bundle away as he entered the large room and strode in as regally as Father, demanding food. He chuckled even harder when Sherlock received a ladle across the back of his head from Mrs. Hudson before she directed the staff to prepare Sherlock a snack, amending her order when she saw that Mycroft was also present.

“You do our kitchen great honor, you Highnesses. Of course, it would have been greater if you’d wiped the mud off of your shoes before you dragged it in with you. Look at you both! And going out without something warm over your shoulders. You’re not actually poor, you know… you can give yourself a nice warm cloak before you go outside.”

“It is not actually cold, Mrs. Hudson.”

“That’s no excuse not to stay warm.”

Sherlock’s ‘don’t bother’ look cleanly cut off Mycroft’s next comment.

“As you say. Sherlock and I shall add a cloak to our wardrobe post haste.”

“That’s my boys. Now, did you have fun? Sherlock, you solved your little mystery?”

“It was not a little mystery! It was gross thievery and yes… John and I were successful. Lestrade shall conclude the matter tomorrow.”

“That’s good. I’m sure he’ll be nice about it, too, dear boy that he is. That girl is stupid and vain, but she’s not got an evil heart.”

Mycroft took a seat next to his brother at the staff table and stared confusedly at the cook, who was inspecting their plates before she allowed them to be served.

“You are aware of Sherlock’s… associates?”

“I’m aware of most of what goes on in the city, especially if there’s gossip involved. And there is such a tasty lot of gossip about that young Lestrade. Well, not really gossip… mostly silly
daydreams, which isn’t surprising since he’s a very fine looking lad. And such a hard-worker, too. There have been a lot of happy imaginary marriages with that young man, I can tell you that much.”

Mycroft felt a rush of heat flood his cheeks and Sherlock’s evil laugh was not helping.

“You have made Mycroft blush, Mrs. Hudson. Thank you for that – it is the highlight of my day.”

“What? Oh! Your Highness, I’m sorry, I… hold on a moment. Why are you blushing?”

“You have stoked the fires of his jealousy. Mycroft behaved most inappropriately today, if the truth is to be known, and Lestrade was his partner in shame.”

“Really? Oh, you know I want the details for that.”

Mrs. Hudson pulled up her own chair and waved for a cup of tea to be brought over.

“It was horrifying. John and I were most scandalized.”

“That’s not details, you awful little thing. Sultry looks… long, passionate kisses… hands all over each other… that’s details. So get going.”

“Good heavens, Mrs. Hudson! I did not ravish the man!”

“Oh? Well, that’s no fun.”

“Mycroft and Lestrade did, however, hold hands and gaze longingly at each other.”

“Oh! See, that’s good. That’s how it all starts.”

“I have already prohibited any intimate conduct in my presence, so I shall not be able to pass along any further intelligence.”

“Well, you’re no help. See if I make you any more of those little honeyed nuts you like so much.”

Mycroft pecked at the food in front of him and made a list of ways to end his brother’s life in a painful, yet untraceable, manner. Though the threat of withholding of his favorite nibble seemed to be draining Sherlock of his life’s blood and that was, at least, entertaining to watch.

“And you, your Highness? What do you have to say in your defense? And there had better be details because your brother’s rubbish at it.”

Mycroft sighed and set aside his fork, wiping at the corners of his mouth before speaking.

“There are no details, Mrs. Hudson. Gregory and I…”

“Oh my, you call him Gregory. That’s love for you, already setting up the little special way you talk to each other.”

“AS I WAS SAYING, Gregory and I simply engaged in conversation…”

“Is that a euphemism?”

“For what?”
“Randiness.”

“No.”

“Drat. Go on then.”

“We discussed pleasantries and, due to a slightly emotional turn in the conversation, I sought to comfort the man with a small measure of contact and, no, that is also not a euphemism.”

“Pffttt… Youth is wasted on the young.”

“And Mycroft is grievously downplaying the situation. There was lust in their eyes and I will testify to that before the justices.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere. How’d he take to learning he was holding hands with his high and mighty Prince Mycroft  blah blah blah forty names and titles it took him nearly a full week to push into his memory?”

Mycroft felt a flush begin to rise again and fought it down valiantly. A helpful weapon was Sherlock’s own flush creeping onto his cheeks. Unfortunately, Mrs. Hudson was nothing if not observant.

“What! Don’t tell me you kept that a secret! Even your brother…”

“Oh, Sherlock… why are you turning such a lovely pink? Are you perhaps feeling a measure of guilt over a little deception?”

“SHERLOCK! You said you’d told John who you really were!”

“I do not recall speaking with you on that topic, Mrs. Hudson, so kindly do not slander me.”

“If lies were money, you’d have more than that father of yours. What were you thinking! Both of you! You can’t keep something like that a secret. They’re going to find out and when they do, it’s not going to go well for you.”

“If John knew who I was it would not go well for me either! He would not be my friend, then, would he? No one wants to be friends with me because they are terrified their heads are going to come off if they say something wrong. And you know that is the truth!”

Sherlock skewered a large hunk of meat and shoved it into his mouth, using the copious amounts of chewing required for its digestion to cover his embarrassment at his outburst. Mrs. Hudson reached over and stroked the young boy’s hair and gave him a sympathetic smile. Yes, that was part of the reason Sherlock had difficulty making friends, but there were other reasons, as well. None of which seemed to bother John, though, and Mrs. Hudson thanked the heavens nightly for that fact.

“Well, I suspect John wouldn’t care one way or another who you were, but maybe waiting a little until you tell him won’t be a bad thing. But don’t let it go too long or then you’ll have a mess on your hands. You too, Mycroft and notice I’m not using your title, so you know I mean business. Can’t have a relationship built on a lie or it’ll come tumbling down around your feet. Now, you two finish up and I bet I can find you something sweet if you clean your plates.”

Sherlock immediately shoveled three-quarters of his food onto Mycroft’s plate the second Mrs. Hudson’s back was turned and shot his brother a triumphant grin. Mycroft made a nearly silent whistling noise and the kitchen hound ran over to eat the food Mycroft quickly spooned onto the floor.
“Don’t think I didn’t see that, you two. You’re lucky you’re cute or it’d be hard for the both of you to sit down for the next couple of days!”

“That would be unpardonable treason, Mrs. Hudson.”

“Remember you said that, Mycroft, if dear Greg decides you need a bit of chastisement. Hate to see you end a nice night with Greg locked up in his own cells.”

Mycroft sputtered and Sherlock eyed his distress with unabashed glee.

“Why, I never!”

“Not yet, probably, but you never know. You just might get lucky if things keep going well for you.”

The next afternoon, Sherlock stood at the door of Lestrade’s home and drew in a deep breath before knocking. Whereas he thrived on new and unique experiences, new and unique experiences involving water were not something he had given a great deal of consideration. Before he could actually bang on the wood to announce his presence, Lestrade opened the door and greeted the boy with a large smile.

“And here’s Sherwin! Nice and early, too. This’ll give you two a good long afternoon of swimming. How’s… um…. how’s your brother doing? Busy, I suspect.”

Sherlock quickly noticed how Lestrade’s tone changed when he asked about Mycroft and shared a knowing glance with John, who just shrugged and made ‘going crazy’ signs with his hands.

“Mycr…Michael is forever busy and thank heavens for it as it reduces the amount of time he spends bothering me.”

“Oh. Makes sense, I guess. Lots of work to do up at the castle, I suppose, and your dad is probably getting him trained to take over the business, too.”

“One could say that. One could also say he is being groomed for a life of tedium and boorishness, but it amounts to the same things, really.”

“That’s sounds awful. You’re lucky you’re not the oldest, Sherwin, so you get to do what you want to do and don’t have to be boorish. Though you’re sort of like that anyway, so I guess if something happens to Michael, you’ll already be half-trained to step in.”

“If you begin to drown today, John, I shall be hard pressed to race to your aid.”

“You can’t swim anyway, that’s why we’re bringing Greg. He’s good for something now and then.”

“Thanks for that, John. Ow. Oh dear me, think I’ve got a kink in my back. Sorry boys, can’t go out to the lake today because I’ve got to rest up. Fix me something hot to drink, you little bastard, and Sherwin can get my bed ready so I can nap and let this back of mine settle down.”

“How utterly transparent and contemptuous. You shall escort us for our swimming outing and cease this tomfoolery.”

“Really, Greg. Not your best effort.”
“Hey! I’m the adult here, show some respect.”

“If all one needs is years to command respect, I am not certain respect is something worth having.”

“No getting all philosophical on me, Sherwin. I’m the adult, which means I put food on the table, pay the taxes that gives the table a place to live, buys the wood that cooks the food to put on the table that has a place to live…”

“This is becoming some form of fable, isn’t it?”

“Shut it, little bastard number two. How does Michael deal with you all day and night? No wonder he looks so tired.”

“What? Does he? Hmmm… I shall pass on your assessment to him the moment I return.”

“NO! Don’t you dare!”

“What’s wrong, Greg? Worried your boyfriend won’t like being called tired? I can understand that - it’s not really what one would call an attractive term. About as bad as calling him fat.”

“Which my brother is, so that would be two truths told in one day.”

“STOP! The both of you are officially on my official list of things that officially aren’t allowed to talk anymore! Now, get your arses out the door and I’d better not hear one more word about Michael…”

“Oh, that’s not a good sign, already not wanting to hear his boyfriend’s name. There’s trouble, I think, Sherwin.”

“I concur, not that I find it a particularly unhappy event.”

“I am tying rocks to both your feet, so you better say your goodbyes now.”

“Bet your dad isn’t cranky like Greg, is he Sherwin?”

“Hmmm…. I shall have to give it some thought. Be prepared to jot down some notes as I dictate them.”

“With what? We used the last of Greg’s paper making those treasure maps.”

“YOU DID WHAT! Do you have any idea how much paper costs!”

“Oops.”

“I think we have taken his mind of his broken relationship with my brother, however.”

“Rocks and feet. MARCH!”

“You were a good friend, John.”

“You were, too, Sherwin.”

“_____”

“I refuse.”
“Sherwin, you have to.”

“I most certainly do not.”

“You can’t swim in your clothes.”

“Enumerate your reasons, if you can.”

“What’s that mean?”

“List your reasons.”

“Oh! Ok. One, your clothes will get heavy, being all wet, and it’ll be hard to swim, even if Greg doesn’t tie rocks to our feet. Second, you’ll get your clothes all wet and then you’ll have wet clothes to wear even after we’re done swimming. That’s all I’ve got, but I think that’s enough. Now come on, you don’t have anything I don’t have, so what’s the matter?”

“Sherwin, get your clothes off and get in the lake. I promise you won’t catch any diseases or anything if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“That is one of my concerns, yes. There is likely enough animal and bird excrement in this body of water to fertilize a cabbage field.”

“I think the fish eat that actually.”

“Oh. Do you now, John? And what might the fish make after they eat said excrement.”

“Ummm… oh, more of it?”

“Very good. You have now described the Law of Conservation of Dung as succinctly as any scholar. Well done.”

Lestrade took advantage of the distraction to grab Sherlock by the waist with one arm, use the other to strip off his clothes and chucked the boy into the shallows. John whooped and jumped in after Sherlock, who was scowling and wiping water off of his face.

“I could have you executed!”

“Why, the hangman gets a special price on his shoes from your dad? Now, we’re going to start with floating.”

“At least that should be easy. Even corpses can float.”

“Then it should be a snap for you. Once you can float, we’ll move on to paddling.”

“Do you know Mrs. Hudson, the cook?”

“Actually, I do. Why?”

“Oh, nothing. Floating it is, then. What do I do?”

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“Ah, Sherlock… I thought I might find you home. My suspicions were first aroused when I discovered the slice of fruit tart I requested be served with my afternoon repast replaced by a raw egg and a few unwashed carrots.”
Mycroft closed the door to Sherlock’s suite and walked over to where his brother was reading by the fire.

“I required sustenance! Swimming is extraordinarily tiresome and physical.”

“But you mastered it handily, I assume.”

“Of course! I was graduated rapidly to retrieving the flung apple and proved my mettle nicely.”

“Excellent. How nicely you bring honor to the family name. And… how was Gregory? I trust he is well?”

“He is alive, more than that I did not notice. Well, beyond the occasional bouts of nakedness when he assisted John or myself with a finer point of swimming technique. My eyes are still attempting to recover from the insult.”

“N…nakedness?”

“Was I not speaking English?”

“O…of course. I simply… naked?”


‘No… no, that is quite alright. I believe I understand.”

Mycroft wiped the small amount of perspiration that had sprung up on his forehead and Sherlock rolled his eyes in annoyance. His brother was as transparent as Lestrade; there was little wonder that they were clinging to each other as infant to its mother.

“He spoke of you.”

Mycroft jumped into the chair across from his brother and stared at him intently.

“What did he say and do not omit anything.”

“My, aren’t we eager. For your information… he commented on your appearance.”

“In a positive or negative manner. I must have that information!”

“Hmmm…. let me think.”

“Do it quickly.”

“You are making me nervous.”

“Good. That should hasten the action of your brain.”

“I believe I am falling into a stupor of forgetfulness.”

“I shall carve you into pieces and feed you to the hunting pack.”

“That would upset Mummy and she would likely be required to produce another spare heir, which would irritate her further. You know she detests carnal relations with Father.”

“REPORT!”
“He said you looked…”

Such a feeling of power… one word and his brother would either soar or crash. But a crash would mean enduring his brother’s wailing and that would distract him from his reading. Mycroft would owe him dearly for this.

“…well composed.”

It was the least noxious thing Sherlock could think of, so it would have to do.

“Really?”

“Of course, Lestrade would think a swineherd to be well composed, so it is not much of a compliment, however, take it as you will.”

“I shall. And It does bode well for our next meeting.”

“I thought you were only friends with him.”

“Friendship is most certainly the foundation of our relationship, yes.”

“Ugh… you shall soon sink into romantic prattle and I have not yet fully digested your tart. Please leave so my digestion shall no longer be assaulted by your paltry attempt at falsehood. And your lust is the creating the vilest of stenches. My eyes are watering as we speak.”

“One day you shall understand the intricacies of relationships, Sherlock, and you shall not be so quick to hold your nose. Which you should cease because your nose is turning quite red.”

“Out!”

“Very well. I do have matters that require my attention. I shall check on you later.”

Mycroft rose and walked towards the door, pausing before he opened it to turn back to his brother.

“He actually said I was well composed?”

“With his limited grasp on vocabulary, yes.”

“Ah… thank you, Sherlock. I… yes, thank you.”

Mycroft left without another word and Sherlock released his nostrils, staring at the door after his brother. It was exceedingly uncomfortable to think of Mycroft in any form of relationship, friendly or not, and the ‘or not’ was nearly horrifying to contemplate. Mycroft and Lestrade cooing and making strange faces at each other as he had seen for others who engaged in courting rituals was going to be unutterably sickening, but… well, at least it might take some of the sourness out of his brother’s personality. And, if Lestrade’s mood could be bolstered, he might be inclined to give over cases of a more challenging nature. Though it might wear away his stomach lining from the frequent bouts of nausea, this situation could be beneficial on the long run. Tomorrow’s dinner would be very interesting to observe...
Chapter 5

“Note that I am waiting patiently, however, my patience is not boundless.”

“You have not waited patiently for anything in your life, Sherlock, so I rather doubt the veracity of your statement.”

Sherlock snorted loudly and dropped into a chair, glaring at his brother, who stood in front of a mirror trying on his second set of clothes, tugging and shuffling the garments with a strong look of disapproval on his face.

“Now, tell me if this is an appropriate ensemble for our gathering.”

“We are having a simple meal in a simple home with simple people. If you wear a sack over your flab, you will most suitably attired.”

“That is rather ungracious to our hosts.”

“John has no need for my graciousness, in fact, he would surely be baffled if I offered it and I shall not be dragged to a bloodletter to fix whatever he feels has plagued me.”

“Such a lovely speech. You are approaching Father’s level of garrulosity, god help us all.”

“So sayeth the only man on Earth who can survive on the sheer volume of the words he pushes out of his mouth. Which does not readily explain your girth, so I admit to a degree of scientific befuddlement about the situation.”

“Yes, you surely have been practicing. Are you hoping to impress your little friend with your verbosity?”

“Nonsense. And John is not as easily impressed as you might think.”

“Meaning you have tried and met with failure.”

“Meaning persons of character cannot be swayed by worthless words and airy proclamations.”

“Which you now admit is your standard pattern of communication. I am so happy we have finally come to an agreement. In fact, I might indulge in a little wine in celebration.”

“No! You shall not become inebriated prior to our departure. I shall not suffer your wine-clumsied flirtations over the dinner table. However… Lestrade might appreciate being provided with a measure of wine to accompany his meal. I might have knowledge that when he has a few extra coins in his pocket, he has been known to purchase a small amount of wine to consume in the evenings.”

“Ah… yes, that is very good to know. A gift of appreciation for being asked to share a meal is quite appropriate. I believe Mrs. Hudson can supply me with something suitable. That was quite a helpful suggestion, Sherlock. What is it going to cost me?”

“You question my motives?”

“Certainly.”

“Very well, that might be fair, but so long as it brings you closer to your goal, do you really care
about what I might gain from the situation?”

Mycroft chewed his lip and tried to mount a rebuttal, which was slow in coming. So slow, in fact, that the words failed to make to his lips.

“There is some merit to your assertion, but I shall rethink the situation should your actions warrant it.”

“By then, however, I shall have gained my reward and you shall be closing the stable door once the horses have escaped.”

“Sherlock, have you actually been paying attention to your lessons in tactics and strategy? I thought your snoring indicated your tutor was earning a very easy wage.”

“Camouflage.”

“So many lessons I am learning this evening.”

“And I shall extract payment when you actually have something I value.”

“How gleefully I await that moment.”

The grooming of a Crown Prince for his ultimate position was ceaseless. Every day was a string of formal and informal lessons on every imaginable topic and skill, starting from the earliest childhood and continuing on until the crown was placed upon his brow. Calm, poise, calculation, presence, strength… all as deeply ingrained in the psyche as the instincts of the species itself. All of which was failing him miserably as he approached the door of the small and modestly-constructed dwelling.

“The breeze from your quaking is blowing my hair into my eyes.”

“Ah, that explains your much-improved appearance. And it is not unusual that entering into a new form of social interaction be accompanied by some measure of trepidation.”

“Weakling. We shall be overtaken by the barbarians within minutes of you taking the throne. I am going to begin immediately studying their language so I can make it abundantly clear that I am not allied to you in any manner when they storm the castle.”

“Be silent, Sherlock. It would not do for you to be overheard.”

“Yes, yon cat is most certainly an enemy spy.”

“And yon windows are open to catch your shrill and strident voice.”

Sherlock flicked his fingers in a dismissive wave, but kept his mouth shut until their destination was reached and he banged on Lestrade’s door, which was answered by a grinning John.

“Thank heavens! Greg’s been nervous as an expectant father.”

“JOHN! You’re not too old to put over my knee!”

“But I run faster than you do, Greg, so good luck catching me. Come in, I’m starving and I couldn’t even snack until you got here.”

Mycroft smiled at the boy and walked into the house, which, he had to admit, took him a bit aback.
From the outside, it had not seemed so small, but once inside, Mycroft realized that the entirely of the living space he was viewing could fit in one of the rooms of his suite. Yet John and Gregory appeared perfectly content to make this tiny space their home.

“Um…. hello, Michael. Thanks for coming.”

“I am also present!”

“And hello to you, too, Sherwin.”

“Good evening, Gregory. I am delighted to find you well. And I am very grateful for your invitation. Please accept this as a token of my regard.”

Mycroft held out his gift and refused to admit to holding his breath as Lestrade took the wine from his hand.

“I… this is wonderful! Thank you, Michael. That’s very kind of you. I’ll pour some for us.”

“And for me, as well!”

“Not a chance, Sherwin.”

“Please, Greg? Just a little?”

“None for you either, John. You’re both too young and if I give you some, that’s less for me and Michael, which isn’t something I approve of either. Now, it looks like Sherwin’s brought the books he promised, so why don’t you two start looking through those, while I get things ready to eat.”

Sherlock and John released very put-upon sighs and climbed up the small set of stairs that led to the second level that served as the bedrooms.

“They grow up so fast. It seems like only yesterday that John was jumping on my lap every time I sat down, just so he could be part of whatever it was I was doing.”

That was certainly not an experience Mycroft shared, however, he understood the point very well. Every day his brother became someone slightly different than the day before and it was truly a marvel to behold.

“I concur. However, I am undecided if this is a positive or negative event.”

“Me, too. My best guess is that it’s a little of both and it’s always going to be that way. Ok, here you go.”

Lestrade handed over Mycroft’s wine and the prince was happy he had already sampled it to verify its quality. Not what was served at table when his family took a meal together, but it was decidedly pleasant, nonetheless.

“This is great! Hope you didn’t steal it from the King, I’d hate to have to lock you up.”

Mycroft hoped he wasn’t obviously staring at the warm flash of light in Lestrade’s eyes, but it was calling him like a moth to a flame.

“Perish the thought, though rates of purchase are quite reasonable when one is friendly with certain individuals employed to oversee the food and drink within the gates.”

“Using every resource you’ve got – that’s the best way to go about life.”
“It is a very amenable philosophy. Is there anything I can do to help you prepare?”

“Thanks, but I’ve got it. John’s been begging for chicken and I was able to trade for a nice fat one that’ll give us chicken for a couple of days, so that should keep him quiet for awhile.”

Lestrade stirred a large, heavy pot sitting over the fire and Mycroft had to admit that is smelled agreeable, even if it looked a little... well, it was difficult to tell actually what was in the pot.

“That was quite fortuitous of you. I hope you did not have to trade away something of great import to satisfy young John’s stomach.”

“Nah, just a couple of toys I made for him when he was younger that he doesn’t play with anymore.”

“Toys?”

“Some soldiers I carved, at least the ones that survived. Whole legions drowned in the lake or burned up in the fire or just got hacked to death. John was a terrible force of nature for those sad bastards to battle. Poor thing had nothing when I took him in, no clothes let alone anything to play with. I started making things for him when I had the time. Carve little people or animals out of wood, build him cities and fortresses with rocks and sticks and mud, concoct games with cups and chips of wood or pebbles, silly things like that. Kept him occupied, though. John had it hard for a long time... he had horrible nightmares, he’d be nervous around adults and even other kids, didn’t like to talk to anyone he didn’t know... I can understand it after what he went through, but it didn’t help him make friends, so I tried to at least give him things to do so he wasn’t so bored all the time.”

Mycroft wasn’t at all certain why he felt such a surge of pride in the man to whom he was listening, but it was there nonetheless. How utterly loving and devoted a parent he made, for someone so young. John could not have been delivered into more capable hands than the ones currently placing bowls on the small table.

“I would not use the word ‘silly,’ Gregory. I would say instead ‘creative.’ That you could imagine such playthings, then render them, is very much to your credit. I could not have done so... I would likely have fewer fingers than I do now had I tried to carve a plaything for Sher...win.”

“I thought you’d be pretty good with a knife, actually, what with making shoes.”

Did one use a knife in the construction of a shoe? Mycroft tried to imagine the process and saw where it could factor into the construction process, though probably not in the manner in which he imagined, but that did not matter and a bit of dissembling was required.

“Leather and such offer not the same resistance as wood and, in any case, I am afraid I lack the proper artistry to render such a recalcitrant material into anything acceptable, whether my fingers remain on my hands or are given over in sacrifice.”

“Oh, I think you’ve probably got very talented hands. For carving, I mean.”

But the new twinkle in Lestrade’s eyes said that carving was most certainly not what he meant and Mycroft couldn’t stop the foolishly-shy grin that began to spread across his lips.

“I take that as a compliment from one who undoubtedly is supremely dexterous. Perhaps… perhaps there shall be cause at some future time for you to properly assess my skill level.”

Mycroft immediately decided that if there was a single thing brighter than the twinkle in Lestrade’s eye, it was his large and glorious smile.
“I think we can find time to make that happen.”

Apparently, even a royal could muster a sincere flirtation if the cause was worthy. As often as he had been instructed in the use of flirtation and seduction for political gain, he had never felt the urge nor had the opportunity to practice his lessons on another person. Now… he found it was rather a natural thing to play with his constable, but he could not, in his deepest heart, believe it could be as natural and comfortable with any other.

“Excellent. I am already alight with anticipation.”

“Yeah… me, too.”

Mycroft caught Lestrade’s eyes and felt their gazes lock in a way he had never experienced. In the next instant Lestrade took a step towards Mycroft, who took a step forward in return, raising his hand slightly for what reason, he had no idea, but was very eager to learn.

“We’re hungry!”

The in-harmony screech of two boys peering down from their perch broke the moment and the two older males nearly leaped to opposite sides of the room.

“Thanks for that, you little bastards. Nearly gave me a heart attack!”

“Rather that, I think, that contracting whatever disease awaited you if you had followed through with your amorous advances towards my brother. Hoof and mouth is most likely, but by no means the only possibility.”

“We shall speak of this Sherwin.”

“Excellent. I can always do with another nap in my day.”

Sherlock and John scurried down the stairs and dropped themselves into chairs, alternating their glares between their empty bowls and Lestrade, who rolled his eyes and motioned for Mycroft to take a seat.

“Might as well get to eating then or they’ll start gnawing on us for their dinner. Michael, have a seat and pour us some more of that lovely wine. I’ll get the food.”

Mycroft ignored the two cups that waggled at him and poured wine for himself and Lestrade, switching for the pitcher of water for the boys’ drinks. Lestrade followed behind him with large ladles of stew from the pot on the fire, and Mycroft watched as Sherlock and John tore hunks of bread off of the loaf in the center of the table and started using it to help their spoons shovel food into their mouths.

“Good heavens, is there some form of food thief waiting to prey upon us that you feel you must consume all of your meal before it can be stolen from your bowls?”

“Pack of dogs, aren’t they? Mind your manners, you two! John, I taught you better than that and Sherwin, I’m sure you act better than this at home.”

Actually, Mycroft was far more pleased with this behavior than Sherlock’s norm. Sherlock was generally a sullen lump at dinner, absentmindedly picking at his food until he could escape unnoticed. Here, he was actually eating what he had been served and doing so in tandem with John, evidence further of their bond. Also of great interest was that when chastised, Sherlock, quite surprisingly, modified his behavior and was now, along with his partner in gluttony, slowing his pace
and actually washing down bites of food with his water.

Mycroft waited for Lestrade to fill the last two bowls and take his seat before taking a taste of his own portion, pronouncing it... interesting. A bit more bland that what he was used to, but not excessively. Much of the bulk was a thick broth with vegetables and, it appeared, some form of grain. Here and there were small pieces of chicken, though the dish carried the flavor of the bird throughout. It was hearty and would be quite filling, he was certain... an excellent dish for a family of limited means, especially to stretch a meat over, as had been indicated, several days of meals.

It was such a unique concept for Mycroft to consider. Sherlock left behind on his plate in two meals as much meat as was in the entire stewpot. In one meal, on many occasions, really... And he was known to order a nice roasted chicken be delivered to his rooms, when he could not be bothered to sit and consume a full meal, settling for picking meat off the carcass while he worked on some matter of state or his studies. If he desired it, also, there were other meats, a variety of vegetables, fruits, cheeses, breads, cakes, pies... And it had always been thus. Regardless of weather, of feast or famine in the land, he had always enjoyed bountiful choices and copious quantities. Whatever he wanted, as much as he wanted... and whatever and how much he ever cared to waste.

"Well?"

Mycroft realized three sets of eyes were on him, one far more anxious than the other two.

"Highly palatable. A very enjoyable dish, as well as filling and warm."

Now it was Lestrade’s turn to smile bashfully, though he quickly tried to hide it with a chunk of bread pushed into his mouth.

"Yeah, Greg’s not a bad cook, as long as there’s no disgusting bits involved like liver or innards or something, but I’m not sure anyone can make that taste good. He still makes me eat it, though."

Mycroft laughed at John’s very good mimicry of a poison victim and Sherlock's use of the time to steal the remains of John’s bread.

"It is unfortunate that not all of our daily nutrition can please the tongue as nicely as this. Gregory could surely find employment in the royal kitchens were he not dedicated to the keeping of order."

Enduring another round of theatrically-proclaimed ‘Gregory’ ringing in the air, Mycroft could not help but chuckle at the boys’ behavior, especially since Sherlock was truly happy in his antics. It was not a common thing to see his brother happy, but it seemed to be the normal thing while he was with John.

"That’s enough, you two. You’re going to choke in a minute and I am going to be more than a little angry if I have to spend the night digging your grave when I’m supposed to be enjoying myself at the tavern."

"And do not expect Mycr...Michael to assist you. Manual labor is as agreeable to him as the plague and produces about the same complement of boils and sores in its aftermath. Truly, it is best avoided for all involved."

"Oh, I bet Michael doesn’t mind working up a sweat for a good cause."

"If the ‘good cause’ is racing to the kitchens to abscond with a cake newly removed from the oven, then yes."
“Then isn’t it lucky I bought a cake for after dinner, so he doesn’t have to run.”

John’s ‘aaaaahhh!’ was loud, but diminished as his chair tipped back and he fell onto the floor. Sherlock looked down and simply shook his head, settling for using the free moment to try and steal a drink of wine from a distracted Mycroft’s cup.

“We have cake?”

“Well, we do, but you’re down there using your arse to sweep the floor, so that leaves you out.”

“Someone’s gotta sweep, Greg… it’s not like you do it.”

“I had a kid just so I didn’t have to sweep, but you can do it later. Now get up here and finish your food or you still won’t get any cake.”

John grumbled and dragged himself very dramatically off of the floor, joining Sherlock in a not-very-surreptitious survey of the room for the promised baked goods.

“Dear heavens, I had no idea that my invitation to dine would include entertainment. This is truly a wondrous night.”

“Anything for you, Michael. Sky’s the limit.”

Neither Mycroft nor Lestrade paid attention to the chattering of the young allergic-to-romance boys and instead shared a smile that made both feel a warmth that had nothing to do with the food or wine. Now, if they could just make it past the cake with everyone alive, the rest of the evening promised to be very interesting.

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Dinner proceeded much on the same vein as it began and Mycroft could not remember a more engaging meal. He had suffered innumerable meals of the most grand nature and none were as enjoyable as was this. It was almost a pity to see it end… almost.

“Ok, we won’t be gone too long, but if anything happens, you know where we are. John, Sherwin… stay out of trouble, alright?”

Sherlock and John’s ‘yes’ was in-unison and lackluster, but Lestrade wasn’t worried. John and Sherlock had enough sense to stay safe, at least as long as the danger wasn’t actually interesting, and they had their books to keep them occupied so they didn’t go out looking for interesting danger.

“You ready, Michael?”

“I believe I am. Sherwin, I shall hold you to your word to have a quiet evening in my absence.”

“We did not agree to quiet, simply to avoid trouble. There is a distinct difference.”

“Very well, but if you engage in a contest of blood-curdling screams, do not be surprised if you are visited by a number of individuals, who shall not be pleased that you are shamming your mortal wounds.”

“True, people take screaming very seriously in this area.”

As would the well-armed guards standing in watch, which was the purpose of Mycroft’s reminder and it was a relief to see his brother give him an understanding nod. As soon as Lestrade ruffled both boys’ hair, much to their extreme displeasure, he motioned for Mycroft to lead the way and the
pair left the house to begin walking towards the tavern.

“Now I just have to hope they don’t eat me out of house and home while we’re out. John’s at the age where he’s starting to eat his weight in food every day and Sherwin’s seems about the same. I bet the cooks up there in the castle love him.”

Sherlock ate, normally, a quantity of food sufficient for an undersized field mouse per day, however, he apparently altered his behavior when in the presence of his new acquaintances. Though, now that Mycroft thought about it, his brother was far more apt to eat well when he visited Mrs. Hudson and was served whatever happened to available at the moment.

“They do, actually. Sherwin is often in the kitchens and is very willing to serve as food taster for whatever currently sits waiting for his attentions.”

“One day, maybe he’ll bring John up there with him and they can both gorge themselves. I have a feeling a horde of cooks would adore the both of them sitting there with open mouths.”

Lestrade laughed at the thought and, thankfully, did not notice that Mycroft didn’t. Someday John would wonder why Sherlock did not ask him to visit his home or explore the halls of the castle. He would question why that part of Sherlock’s life was never open to him. When that day came, Mycroft had no idea how Sherlock would react, nor what it would mean for him. As Sherlock feared discovery, his own fear was growing, too. Although he had no concept of what was happening between himself and Lestrade, something was happening and he had no desire to see it upset. Not when this something was marvelously unique and exciting.

Discussing bits of nothing as they walked, Mycroft and Lestrade found themselves at the tavern and already Mycroft knew that visiting the establishment at night was a much different beast than visiting in the afternoon. From the street, the sounds inside could be heard and, while they were decidedly sounds of merriment, it made the prince a little nervous to enter inside.

“Looks like a good crowd tonight! I see lots of faces I recognize and that’s a good thing, since they’re solid lads, not likely to cause trouble. I really don’t want to have to interrupt our evening to haul a few to the cells because they’ve forgotten their manners.”

“That would put somewhat of a damper on the night; however, I am most certain I would find observing you at work to be quite fascinating.”

“Well, you might learn a few new words, that’s for sure.”

With a wink, Lestrade turned and began pushing his way through the crowd racing forward at one point to snatch a table that was being vacated, much to the consternation of other patrons who had been eyeing the space. What interested Mycroft is that the various hand gestures and evil eyes being thrown back and forth ceased when he arrived and took a seat. In fact, it rather seemed that the expressions on their opponents faces became quite intrigued by the turn of events and full-scale war over the small table seemed to have been avoided.

“There we go! Great spot near the fire. Always the best place to sit, when you can get it. Good fire, good company... that’s the way to spend an evening.”

“I heartily concur. I admit that I am not often blessed with companionship to accompany my good fire, but a book enjoyed by firelight has its own appeal.”

“That sounds great actually. I don’t come across many books and they’re far too expensive to buy anyway, but you must have access to a lot if Sherwin can smuggle a few out of the castle and
not have them noticed."

“Oh, there is quite the collection in the library, though it sees less use than one might expect. It is not difficult to spend a day browsing for a title to read and not encounter another soul save the librarian himself and, fortunately, he is not averse to Sherwin or my presence.”

“That must be amazing... really I can’t even imagine being able to just walk around and have books around you to pick up and read. You’re very lucky in that, Michael. Really lucky, indeed.”

Actually, the thought hadn’t crossed Mycroft’s mind, but he supposed he was. To him, it was unthinkable to be unable to read at his leisure and have at his fingertips a myriad of topics from which to choose. What would it be like to think a book a rare, virtually-unobtainable object? Truly, it was not an image that formed easily in his mind.

“If you like, as Sherwin has brought books to share with John, it would be a simple thing for me to bring books to share with you.”

“Really? I mean, no... I don’t want you getting into trouble for something like that. It’s nice of you to offer though.”

But the bright flash in Lestrade’s eyes at the offer settled the matter for Mycroft and, in his mind, the decision was made.

“Nonsense. I do not lie when I say that the library is shamefully neglected by the members of court and it would do the books a kindness to be used for their natural purpose. If it soothes your worries, I shall obtain permission from the librarian before I spirit away any of his charges.”

And another bright flash of glee that stirred something in the prince. It felt extremely pleasant to make his companion happy. There was a pleasure purely associated with that act and it was, again, a new experience. Though it filled his heart to bring benefit to Sherlock, this was a different thing and it did demand to be explored further as their association progressed.

“Are you sure?”

“I assure you I am quite certain. I shall make a point to present you with something at our next meeting.”

Which, Mycroft realized, they had not necessarily agreed upon, so it was a bit presumptuous on his part. But fortune favors the bold... or so he hoped.

“That sounds... well, whatever’s better than great! Thanks, Michael. That means a lot to me, I won’t lie about it.”

“I am happy to be of service. It is always gratifying to meet someone who appreciates the written word and I look quite forward to discussing with you the titles that you read.”

“Yeah, I was one of the lucky ones. The church does have a little school they run for those willing and able to pay and my parents were able to afford it for a couple of years, enough to get me fairly well sorted with reading and writing. Learned a little about nature, too, and some history. Most lads don’t see that much in their lifetimes, so I count my blessings.”

“With your keen mind, I am certain that you could master any subject to which you turned your attention.”

Back was the rather startled and shy grin that was quickly becoming Mycroft’s favorite to view.
“Keen mind? Me? That’s... it’s not like I’m you, who’s the smartest person I’ve ever met.”

Now that was a compliment Mycroft greatly appreciated.

“And also one of the funniest and best looking.”

Oh my... if there was an off-switch to his brain, Mycroft was sure it had been flipped because the world seemed to shift off axis a moment and settle quietly into a placid little place, where its only function was to play the replay the last sentence over and over in a continual loop. At best he considered himself slightly better than dreary in terms of humor and marginally-acceptable in terms of appearance. That such a vivacious and handsome specimen looked upon him in such a way... this was absolutely exhilarating.

“Oh, but I would counter that you yourself match that description point for point and I am very glad for it because I am able to enjoy both your companionship and your appearance, so none of my senses can cry for lack of enjoyment.”

“Such a flatterer... not that I’m complaining, mind you.”

And Mycroft wasn’t complaining by this new gleam in his tablemate’s eye and the very small peek of tongue as Lestrade licked lower lip. Flattery and flirtation... so far, their assignation was moving along quite swimmingly and in a direction that was quite desirable. As the girl stopped at the table to drop off the mugs that Lestrade had ordered using a series of hand signals once he had caught her eye, Mycroft allowed himself to imagine more evenings like this. Convivial conversation, a lively atmosphere where he was simply a peer among peers, honest opinions being shared and solicited... it was satisfying him in a way that was quite profound. And the most satisfying thing about the entire matter was currently having a long drink of ale while bathed in firelight.

It was a feature of his life that Mycroft was always highly aware of his surroundings and the events happening in his sphere, however, he felt that awareness begin to slip away as he continued to relax and indulge himself in the moment. So much of his time was scheduled, ordered, occupied... it was joyful to have no cares beyond the making of his companion smile. It was only after he finished his third mug of ale that the passing of time politely asked to be recognized and, interestingly enough, it seemed to be tapping Lestrade on the shoulder also.

“Well, I suppose we should see about getting back to the boys. I doubt they even remember we’re gone, but...”

“But it is foolish to court disaster if one can possibly avoid it.”

“Exactly. I have to tell you though, Michael... this has been the best night I’ve had in I can’t remember how long. I actually don’t want it to end, silly as that sounds. Do you think... well, would you be willing to do this again? I promised John I’d take him... there’s this troupe of performers that paid their respects at the watch house today and John’s already at me to take him to see them. Maybe you and Sherwin could come? Have a little fun then... well, maybe if you had a book or two we could just sit and read awhile. Talk while the boys did... whatever the hell they get up to when they’re together. Does that sound good?”

Good? ‘Good’ was a completely inadequate word for what was being described. Any additional time in this man’s company would be splendid. Spectacular. Enchanting…

“I believe that would be quite a lovely night. Thank you for the offer.”

“Brilliant! Could you come out tomorrow night? They’re going to be in the city a few days, but
I admit that I’d like to catch the first performance and get an idea of what to expect. Helps to know in advance if there’s anything going on that might get people agitated and come banging on my door or sharpening their knives.”

Even in recreation, his Gregory was committed to keeping a watchful eye on the welfare of the citizenry. Very admirable and very respectable. And… rather attractive, if the truth be told…

“I believe tomorrow will fit into my schedule nicely after a bit of rearranging.”

“They really work you hard up in the castle, don’t they?”

“My services are in high demand, yes. Though if that should be considered fortunate or unfortunate, I am not of firm mind. However, I can set aside time when necessary and I cannot envision a more wonderful way to use that time than spending it in the company of such a vibrant and enlivening companion.”

“I’d say I like to spend time with you, too, but it’d sound common compared to what you spun, so I’ll just do this instead.”

Lestrade hoped Mycroft didn’t see his deep breath as he reached over and took Mycroft’s hand, running his thumb over the skin a few moments before he pulled it back again and smiled.

“Yeah, it felt as good as it did the first time.”

Felt? Mycroft could still feel the presence of large, coarse fingers stroking his skin. And only now was it striking the prince that touching him without explicit permission was punishable by death. For this person, however, unsolicited contact was not only permitted, but encouraged. Cajoled, if need be, because the more he could feel of those hands on his skin, the happier his body and mind both would be.

“A very true statement. Perhaps it is something we could indulge more in as we take our stroll back to your residence.”

“I like the way you think, Michael.”

“A sentiment I strongly reciprocate.”

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And hand-holding was certainly on the agenda of activities as the men walked back to Lestrade’s house, a walk that took noticeably longer than the outbound journey. It was a lovely night and even though Mycroft could discern Lestrade’s heightened senses as he kept alert for disturbances, there was also a calm in his companion that was gratifying because he was at least partly the cause. This truly was an addictive feeling – bringing happiness to another person in such a direct and tangible way. And, already, he was experiencing the pang of loss knowing their night would soon end and he would not see that luminous smile until tomorrow. All so very new to him and all so very delightful.

When they reached Lestrade’s door, since there were no sounds of chaos or destruction coming from the house, the two stopped and stood, neither making a move to continue inside.

“This has been fun, Michael. And I’m already ready to give it a go again. Tomorrow, right?”

“Absolutely and I, also, am very keen to have another evening in your company.”
“Good, I’m glad. Really, I’m very glad, actually. Not too sound strange or anything, but, well, you know…”

No, Mycroft had no idea, however, he had suspicions and they were sufficient for now, because he was also not entirely certain if he could properly frame his thoughts and feelings in a coherent fashion. Nor choose the proper actions at this juncture, because the mere thought of walking away from this glorious man was inhibiting his body from simply opening the door to collect Sherlock and be on their way.

“I believe I do and I find that a marvelous thing, if I may be so bold.”

“Bold is good. I like bold.”

“As do I.”

“Something else we agree on.”

“It seems we do.”

“So… you won’t mind if I do something a little bold right now?”

Mind? Mycroft was desperate for such a thing to happen!

“I would not mind in the slightest.”

Not that he had an idea of what Lestrade had in mind, but, at this point, any further interaction with his prospective… whatever he may be… would be welcomed gladly. Watching Lestrade carefully, Mycroft observed the slight hesitation, followed by a stiff resolve, and before he could even process the action, Mycroft found his lips being taken in a very brief, very light, but very identifiable kiss. A true kiss. And his first, which was appropriate since one’s first kiss should be utterly perfect and this one was as perfect as a first kiss could be. Just a touch to reflect growing affection and give the promise of more.

“That ok? I mean, I don’t want to…”

“If your gesture was not agreeable to me, Gregory, I doubt that I would do this, in return.”

With his own measure of hesitation, then resolve, Mycroft leaned in and gave a kiss, this one lasting a little longer as he rejoiced in the feel of what he had always hoped to experience someday, though his imaginings had never been quite this delicious. And he had hoped that when he kissed someone, they would look at him exactly the way Lestrade was at this moment.

“No, I guess you wouldn’t. I, um…. tomorrow, right?”

“Most certainly. At roughly the same hour as we did today?”

“Yeah, that’ll be good. Give us time to get a good spot to watch the show. If we don’t, I won’t hear the end of it.”

“Very good. I… I am very looking forward to our reunion.”

“Me too.”

Lestrade finally opened the door and hit the two eavesdropping boys, toppling them onto the ground.

“No, I get any privacy, ever?”
“This situation must be studied very closely. We are attempting to ascertain if some form of witchcraft is at work.”

“Michael, he’s all yours.”

“And I thought you had begun to grow fond of me, Gregory. How sorely am I disappointed.”

Lestrade’s laugh was accompanied by a light dragging of his fingers along the side of Mycroft’s hand and Mycroft happily traced the small shock of sensation all the way up to his chest.

“I’ll try and convince you some more tomorrow night.”

Two boys shot off the floor and glared at the couple.

“You’re seeing each other again? And what are we supposed to do? Just sit in here and die.”

“Your John is quite dramatic, isn’t he, Gregory? I understand fully his affinity to Sherwin.”

“Yeah, those two are a once-in-a-lifetime match. And, for your information, you spoiled little bastard… you’ll be watching the performers with the rest of us out in the east field.”

“YES! With the jugglers and tumblers and musicians? This is going to be the best!”

Mycroft had to laugh, himself, at John’s enthusiasm and that his brother seemed equally energetic. They were continually provided with entertainers at home, but this situation seemed especially interesting to his brother, perhaps because he had someone with whom to share the experience.

“Funny, I didn’t hear a ‘thank you’ in there anywhere.”

“Ugh… thank you Greg for taking us out of this death house to have some fun.”

“Did that hurt?”

“It sort of did.”

“Good. Sherwin, Michael… we’ll see you tomorrow.”

Lestrade spun John and gave him a light shove away from the door then turned and shared one last look with Mycroft that made both men’s hearts flutter. For his part, Mycroft spun Sherlock and poked him into moving out the door which slowly closed behind them.

“I am of the opinion that you committed some form of romantic assault on Lestrade.”

“I am of the opinion that it is none of your business. And he assaulted me first.”

“Confession!”

“But you have no witnesses, so it counts for naught.”

“And do you intend to inflict on him the needs of your libido again tomorrow?”

“If I am blessedly lucky, yes.”

“I must warn John. We shall require blindfolds and perhaps, lengths of cloth to wrap our ears so we survive the evening.”

“Hmmmm…. that shall handicap your enjoyment of the entertainment quite appreciably.”
“Damnation… very well. You will agree to remain behind us or otherwise out of eyesight during our amusement.”

“I believe I can agree to that resolution. Now, tell me about your evening. Did John enjoy the books?”

And all the way home, Sherlock regaled Mycroft with tales of his and John’s time together and the older brother made the effort to memorize each one. Sherlock was growing up quickly and he had no intention of letting moments such as this pass him by…
Chapter 6

Upon their return home, Sherlock scurried to his room and Mycroft turned towards his, only to run straight into his mother who was exiting his chambers at the same moment.

“Ah, there you are, Mycroft. Oh dear lord, what are you doing in those hideous clothes?”

“I… I simply… you see, I was…”

“No… no, do not bother to explain. I suppose I should be thankful that your urges have finally woken and you are seeing them tended to properly, with women of no consequence. Do show some degree of discretion and commons sense, however, my son. Your father also sought to slake his lusts in the arms of the peasantry and if I were to count the probable number of bastards he has scattered throughout the city I would need to remove my shoes and use my toes to help tally the total. Now, do not forget that your presence is required at breakfast tomorrow and your father will likely be in a mood, so prepare yourself accordingly. Goodnight, Mycroft. And I am happy to see you enjoying yourself. I was beginning to wonder if you were better suited for a monk’s life than that of a King.”

Mycroft watched his mother stroll away and was very glad she, as usual, was content to speak without a need for a response from anyone else in the vicinity. Quickly, he dashed into his room and, after a moment’s thought, poured himself a large glass of his favorite wine and settled into his customary chair by the fire. Setting aside the more disturbing elements of his mother’s speech, he reflected upon the pieces that perhaps should warrant his attention. Was he simply using Gregory as a potential mechanism to satisfy his physical desires? Not that they had made much progress in that area, but there was no denying that was the trajectory of their current path. Was there truly emotion behind his wants? Affection? Or was it simply attraction and the desire to fulfill the longings that his body was becoming quite forceful in expressing? Experiencing it now, the thought was actually abhorrent to him. The very last thing he wished to do was use the man in the way his mother described. It was dishonorable and he had no desire to treat his Gregory so disgracefully. More than abhorrent, the thought was painful. Sickening. And, perhaps, that served as his answer.

He did not want to take his new friend as a bed partner only to shun his companionship at other times. In truth, it was the companionship that was his greatest desire. The feeling of being completely comfortable in Gregory’s presence and knowing that his own company was valued and enjoyed. It was the look in those rich, brown eyes when there was laughter and… oh, the look when he had taken a kiss… there was nothing in his life that was as beautiful and inspiring as that look. And it was for a small and simple kiss. A quiet statement of pleasure with what they were sharing and growing. A need not to ravish, but to cherish and make the sentiment clearly known. So, no. He was not hopeful of further time with his Gregory for the wrong reasons. For shameful or entitled reasons. It was for respectful and honorable reasons. Pleasant and companionable reasons. Reasons that stemmed from the heart and the mind not… other regions. Though he was not so naïve that he would deny those reasons were not altogether absent. It was simply that they were not the primary ones and therefore, acceptable in their role in his feelings.

Stretching out his long legs, Mycroft finally was able to relax and enjoy the outer warmth from the fire and the inner one from the wine and the memories of his evening. Tomorrow would bring more and they, too, would be invitingly warm and welcome…

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“Ugh. Why are you here? Have you repulsed everyone else in court and have been forced to run and hide from your imminent assassination?”
“Your sense of humor is as genial as usual, Sherlock. And the reason I am here is to inform you that… Father’s birthday approaches.”

“Oh no. Not again.”

“Yes, it is rather strange, but it seems to occur once a year.”

“Like a locust invasion or the plague.”

“And like a locust invasion or the plague, we shall be forced to endure the pain and horror of the celebration.”

“How many shall arrive?”

“From the list I perused, we may expect more guests than last year and I do believe that even a greater percentage of boors and mental defectives shall be in attendance than usual.”

“I shall instruct Mrs. Hudson to infect my next meal with poison.”

“That would not absolve you from your duties. Father would simply have your corpse tanned, stuffed and mounted to display to his guests.”

“You are likely correct. And he would probably direct a puppeteer to fasten strings to my arms and legs and install me as one of the entertainments for after the banquet.”

“Verily, I believe your fate would be sealed in such a manner, so I would advise clinging to life if only to avoid such debilitating, albeit ghostly, humiliation.”

“At least I do not have to do much more than appear and remain alive. Your torment shall be glorious to view, as it is every year.”

Torment was the correct word. Between the preparations that he would need to supervise, there was the time commitment during the celebrations. The banquets, the amusements, the ball… in addition to the meetings, private conversations, schemes, surveillance, conniving… it was part and parcel of his life, but it was tedious at the best of times, which the king’s birthday most certainly was not.

“Thank you for that, Sherlock. However, as you are of an age where you should be expected to assume more responsibility, I believe it is time to include you in the preparation process.”

“What? NO! No No No No NO! I am not going to be dragged into hours of discussions about fabrics and seating and music and who can’t be placed in a room next to whom or there will be deaths! I refuse most emphatically!”

“Oh do pardon me, brother dear. My attention wavered a moment. Did you say something?”

“I shall take up residence with John and Lestrade for the duration.”

“I think not. Even Mummy and Father might notice if you were absent for an extended period. They would surely wonder why they were enjoying such peace and quiet and have the situation investigated, ruining your endeavor. I am sorry, Sherlock, but this year, you must contribute to the festivities. I will, however, do my best to keep that contribution to the barest minimum.”

“See that you do. If I am too burdened I shall take steps to reduce that burden and if that means committing genocide, I shall not hesitate!”

“Your enthusiasm is truly heartwarming. Now, we shall be meeting Gregory and John this
evening, so do ensure you have completed your lessons and have ideas for keeping yourself amused after we return to their home for the evening.”

“Why? Oh no… do not tell me you are going to become amorous. This is absolutely intolerable!”

“What Gregory or I do is of no concern to you, so your absence will be a beneficial thing for you and me both.”

“Disgusting. The ramifications of the germ issue alone is unthinkable.”

“Someday, Sherlock, you shall think differently.”

“Unlikely. And John shares my sensibilities fully.”

“In say… three years, we shall have again this discussion and I will be most interested to hear your feelings on the subject.”

“I shall add a few more languages to my repertoire so I have a greater variety of ways in which to voice my opinion. Now, leave. My tutor is soon to arrive and adding his corpulence to yours shall overstress the floor.”

“Until later, Sherlock. Do be ready on time.”

“I shall leave whether you are prepared or not, so I would advise you be ready on time.”

That was not even the slightest concern, as Mycroft was uncomfortably certain he would be dressed and waiting for his brother a good hour before their moment of departure.

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“Do not embarrass me.”

“How do you suppose I would accomplish that, Sherlock?”

“I do not waste time daydreaming of your depravities. Suffice it to say that I expect your behavior to be exemplary and chaste at all times when I am within range of any of my senses detecting your shameful behaviors.”

“We are attending an outdoors and public performance by traveling entertainers, then retiring as a group to Gregory’s home for a few hours of peaceful conversation and reading. I cannot find anything in that which conforms to your suspicions.”

“Which books have you chosen? Let me inspect them.”

Mycroft handed over the two books he had chosen to present to his companion and laughed at Sherlock’s disappointed snort.

“Not a salacious illustration to be seen. And the subject matter is as dry as week-old bread. This is acceptable.”

“Hark, do I hear the angels sing?”

“You have not an amusing personality, Mycroft. Do not bring further scorn upon yourself by denying your true nature.”
“Of course. One must stay true to one’s self.”

Well, as closely as one could when one was actually completely denying one’s true self by cloaking said self in a very thick and rather unseemly lie. A lie which he slipped into quickly as Sherlock pounded on the door of John and Lestrade’s house.

“Michael! And Sherwin. See, I noticed you right away, this time. Come in.”

Sherlock darted past Lestrade and, after a quick look around, headed up the stairs to where John could be found, leaving Mycroft and Lestrade alone downstairs.

“Glad to know we’re unnecessary. Come here, Michael. I’d… I’d like to say hello properly, if I may.”

Mycroft felt a very tingly finger of excitement trace up his spine and stepped closer to Lestrade, who lightly draped his hand on Mycroft’s hips and tilted his head slightly upwards to catch the prince’s lips in a gentle kiss that lingered as each man took the opportunity to taste and explore a bit more than they had the previous night, this time very tentatively parting their lips to take the kiss deeper. It was only when the books slipped out of Mycroft’s hand did they break off and Mycroft’s breath was again taken away by the expression on Lestrade’s face. It was… adoring. Really that was the word for it and the twist in the prince’s stomach was not at all painful. It was, instead, ecstatic.

“And books! Already this is the best night I could imagine and now, there’s books!”

Lestrade bent down to carefully pick up the books from the floor and held them close to his body like they were babies. It was the most charming image imaginable and Mycroft again took stock, only to again find nothing in his life that warranted him this piece of luck.

“I do hope the content is to your liking.”

“But don’t worry, it will be. I mean… books!”

The joy in his Gregory’s eyes lit up the room brighter than the fire and Mycroft resolved himself to provide this man every book in the royal library for his reading pleasure.

“Which I shall enjoy greatly sharing with you after the first part of the evening’s festivities. I believe the boys are quite eager for their entertainment.”

“John hasn’t talked about much else all day. Now, he wants to run off and learn to juggle. See the world one performance at a time.”

“Dear me… and he likely could convince Sherwin to join him as some form of trickster. Or a musician as he is quite skilled with a variety of stringed instruments. Perhaps they can perform as a team… when they could be pried away from solving their little mysteries, that is.”

“Now that is something I would pay to see! Actually, Sherwin should bring something with him one evening so we can hear him play. I guess… there’s lots of instruments at the castle for him to borrow. That where he learned?”

“Yes, actually. There are… opportunities that present themselves, formally or informally, and that is one of which he availed himself. I shall discuss the matter with him and determine what he can be persuaded to do.”

“Thanks for that. I think it’d be nice to get a free bit of music. No, I take that back. Little bastard would probably demand we throw coins at his feet.”
“I believe you might be right. I shall begin saving for the event.”

“Good to see the lad earn a wage. Best to start on your career young, so you get a jump on the others. Now, you ready to go? Earlier we get there, the better spot we get.”

“And you are quite anxious to begin your inspection of the venue and individuals that shall be providing us with amusement.”

“Have I told you how much I like that big brain of yours?”

“Perhaps, but I never tire of hearing kind words from your lips.”

“How about you let me tell in in another way, instead.”

Lestrade set the books down and crooked a finger to beckon Mycroft over for another kiss that involved, this time, a small amount of wandering hands across various arms and shoulders, the fleeting touch of fingertips to a cheek and neither would ever admit to the small moans of delight as their tongues met for the first time and the heat of their embrace suddenly flared sharply. If very loud and very intentional thumps on the stairs hadn’t interrupted them, Mycroft had no idea where this would have led, but he honestly could say he didn’t care.

“Keep your eyes averted, John. By the position of their feet, this is not something to which we should bear witness lest we be turned to stone as if by a basilisk.”

Mycroft turned to see Sherlock and John navigating the stairs with their hands over their eyes, though Sherlock was peeking between two fingers so their descent did not end in broken bones. Not that his brother’s fate mattered greatly at the moment, what with the muscular arm wrapped around his waist that drew him against an equally muscular body.

“You two crack your skulls, don’t come crying to me. I’ll just wait for the inevitable and have food for the next month.”

“What a silly thought, Gregory. Sherwin is far too stringy and sour to make an appetizing meal.”

“I would make the finest of meals! How dare you slander my tender and well-flavored flesh.”

“Don’t worry, Sherwin. I’ll eat you when you die and tell everyone how tasty you are.”

“You are a good friend, John.”

“Now that we’ve got that sorted, you two ready?”

“We have been ready for quite some time, Lestrade; however, we feared descending into this pit of lust and licentiousness. Now that we have put a stop to it, we may depart.”

Lestrade squeezed Mycroft a little tighter to him and held back the laugh that desperately wanted to break out.

“Alright then, and I expect you two to be on your best behavior. If I have to take you to the cells in front of the whole city, you can expect the cells won’t be your biggest worry when we get there.”

Sherlock waved his typical dismissive wave and Mycroft held back his own laugh seeing John mimic it perfectly. Already the night was exceedingly enjoyable and it was only just started…
Being rarely seen in public had its benefits as Mycroft learned quickly, since everyone they passed seemed to know Lestrade and John, nodding and smiling, as the group walked by, completely failing to recognize him in the process. And when they reached the field where the show was to be held, people walked up to greet the future-constable and Mycroft did not fail to notice that Lestrade gladly introduced him to those they met and openly showed him small bits of attention, whether it be laying a hand on his shoulder or draping an arm around his waist. And it was bliss. It was a bliss that crept under his skin and into his bones and the prince was deliriously content with the sensation. It was encouraging, too, to see that the citizens seemed happy he was at Lestrade’s side. Perhaps the young man’s unattached state had troubled those he watched over, in addition to generating completely inappropriate fantasies about his imaginarily-married state. Also, there was no concern over the person at his side being male, which was something he had heard was the case among the… lower… classes, but had never had occasion to verify firsthand. The situation was not unheard of in the royal ranks, but… no, this was not something on which he would expend any further thought. To do so might destroy this beautiful moment and that was not acceptable.

Sherlock and John claimed a section of territory as close to the performance area as they could and went so far as to mark their kingdom by outlining their borders with sticks planted in the corners. For their part, Mycroft and Lestrade stayed behind them and took their own seats in the grass. Once the show began, Mycroft felt a very unusual twinge hearing his companion being acknowledged and thanked by the company’s lead and decided he enjoyed it. How strange and singular to be the one lower-ranked, but it was not at all unsettling, given it was his Gregory who held the higher position. It was actually rather thrilling to be known among the assembled as the one who had been chosen by this man to sit at his side and enjoy a night with him and his dearest John.

As the show continued, Mycroft relaxed fully into the experience and found himself laughing and gasping and oohing and aahing as much as anyone else in attendance. And it was so much more delicious having his Gregory doing the same and sharing their own looks and laughter during the performance. When it was over, Mycroft escorted the boys to meet the performers as Lestrade had a word with the man in charge and only after Sherlock and John’s supply of questions had been thoroughly exhausted were Mycroft and Lestrade able to pry the boys away and start them walking back home.

“Ok, that was actually a lot of fun. We get people come through now and then and some of them are just awful, but this lot is really talented. I’ve glad we came out.”

“I heartily agree. The demonstrated a very good command of their craft and exceptional showmanship.”

“Now that I’ve given it a look over, I suspect John is going to badger me to let him and Sherwin come out most nights until they move on.”

Mycroft looked ahead to where the boys were walking. Sherlock pointing upward to the night sky and John gazing upwards and listening raptly to what his brother had to say.

“You are probably correct. Fortunately, Sherwin has few obligations and can use his time as he wills.”

“But not his big brother, huh?”

“But as such, though… when something is important to me, I do my all to make time for it.”

Mycroft very much hoped Lestrade could see in his face how ardently he meant that and rejoiced when a large and bright smile spread over Lestrade’s lips.
“Never been called ‘important’ before.”

“And I have never bestowed the term upon anyone.”

This time, it was Mycroft’s turn to wrap an arm around a welcoming waist and it was that way they walked the rest of the distance to Lestrade’s home, both wondering if the man they considered important was more stunning in the sunshine or touched by moonlight…

Sherlock and John bolted upstairs the moment they reached the house and the remaining members of the party drew chairs close to the fire and toed off their shoes, silently agreeing to stretch out so their feet could rest against each other as they read.

“This is what life is all about, Michael. Finding those little moments where everything is perfect and making the most you can of them.”

“You are very wise, Gregory. I pity those who do not recognize the gifts they are given and treasure them dearly.”

One slightly rough foot rubbed lightly against Mycroft’s baby smooth one and the prince knew in his heart of hearts he did treasure this. Treasured it more dearly than any painting, jewel, property or comfort he possessed. All of that could be replaced, but this… this was unique. Special. Irreplaceable. And it was his. Not his family’s, not the Crown’s, but his. And the value of that could not be measured.

For the next few hours, Mycroft and Lestrade alternately read and discussed their reading, sharing passages of text and critiquing both the ideas and the prose. For Lestrade, it was the chance to let a part of himself that no one had ever seen come into the light. For Mycroft, it was the chance to let his mind be challenged in ways it never had been in the past. If Sherlock and John had not stepped in between them to point out the lateness of the hour, neither man believed they would have moved until sunrise.

“Yeah, I suppose I should get some sleep before I have to spend the day keeping the peace. And shoes wait for no man, right?”

“You would be most surprised how often one’s services are required at the earliest hours.”

Sherlock, for instance, had somewhat of a habit of doing mischief to his footwear and new specimens were needed before the breakfast hour.

“Sherwin, John… why don’t you two go say goodbye to each other. Outside.”

“Great. They’re going to kiss again. Come on Sherwin, we don’t need to see this.”

“Just the thought of the stray spittle is enough to put me off my next several meals.”

The boys hurried outside to the sound of Mycroft and Lestrade’s laughter, then Lestrade stood and held his hand out for Mycroft to take. After he rose, Mycroft stepped into the arms that were outstretched to take him and nearly melted into Lestrade’s embrace.

“Can you… are you free again soon?”

Mycroft ran his mind over his future days and saw a great wall of obligations and responsibilities staring angrily back at him.
“Not as soon as I would like, I’m afraid. It shall be… the better part of a week before I can again pry myself from… my workbench.”

The disappointment on his Gregory’s face was like a dagger to the chest and Mycroft wished he had some way of altering time to vault past those days to return to his man’s arms.

“However, I believe I can visit again in five days’ time, if that is agreeable to you.”

It would take a rather enormous effort on his part to get the trade delegation that arrived tomorrow situated and satisfied by then, but perhaps he could simply steal away for an evening with no one the wiser.

“Any time I get with you is agreeable to me, Michael.”

Something in his Gregory’s voice, something in his eyes, something in the curve of his chin or the dance of light from the fire against his skin… something caused Mycroft’s heart to clench and he experienced a truly tangible ‘snap’ as a feeling locked into him. It was a feeling he saw echoed in a thousand small ways in the man holding him like a precious and fragile bit of glass and this time the kiss he took was not brief. It was not tentative or hesitant. This kiss was bold. Electrifying. The shock of feeling Lestrade’s tongue slip between his lips to meet his nearly buckled Mycroft’s knees and he quickly let his passion carry him into a world where only the two of them existed and this joy would never end. Where there was only the sensation of his Gregory’s hands roaming across his back and the feel of the glorious constable’s skin beneath his fingers as he dared lift a corner of Lestrade’s shirt to stroke the forge-hot flesh underneath. If the banging on the door had not finally broken through the fog of their hunger, Mycroft was certain he would have ended the evening in Lestrade’s bed, finding relief from the ache growing in his soul, as well as in his trousers.

“God… Michael… you…”

Lestrade kissed Mycroft again, this time so gently and sweetly that the prince had to work to keep his eyes from filling with tears.

“Now is the time, Gregory, if you have reservations or concerns… for I do not know if I shall be able… I desire this too greatly to… now is the time, my dearest Gregory…”

Mycroft realized he was babbling, but couldn’t stop and it was only a final kiss from Lestrade that soothed his mind enough to hold back the flow of words.

“I’m not going anywhere, Michael. And I don’t want you to either, ok?”

Mycroft nodded, afraid to open his mouth to let the torrent of his emotions start again. This was… profound. Nearly overwhelming. And he would not wish it away for anything under the sun.

“So, five days? That’s not that long, really. We’ll do something special, too, just wait and see. Now, let’s get you home so you don’t get crossways of your patrons for sleeping through your work.”

Lestrade walked Mycroft to the door, unsurprised that the scowls on Sherlock and John’s faces were as fierce as the most barbaric of the tribes he’d heard about from returning soldiers.

“Sherwin, you coming back tomorrow?”

“Of course! John and I have amassed another list of questions that must be addressed by the performers and John wants to learn to juggle. I shall stand as his critic.”
“Oh good, very nice of you. Come by early and I’ll feed you up before you two go out, ok?”

“That is acceptable.”

“Wonderful. Michael… I’ll see you soon, ok?”

Lestrade reached over and cupped Mycroft’s cheek, smiling when the prince covered the hand with his own.

“Whatever’s in your head… you’re not alone. Understand?”

Mycroft drew Lestrade’s hand down and pressed a kiss to his palm. With a small nod and a tiny, but very hopeful smile, he took a step back, spun Sherlock around and began to walk away, pausing only once too look behind at the man framed by the candlelight streaming through the small windows.

After a few blocks, Sherlock began tugging on his brother’s sleeve and it was another few blocks before Mycroft actually stopped to look down to face him.

“Are you alright? You are behaving strangely.”

Mycroft blinked once. Then again. Then a third time, still saying nothing, which gave Sherlock a very unexpected feeling of concern.

“I do not know.”

“Mycroft, what is wrong?”

The crown price began walking again and Sherlock ran forward, blocking his brother’s path.

“Mycroft! You must tell me! What is wrong?”

Mycroft looked up into the sky and watched the stars while his mind struggled with the conflicting pulls of confusion and euphoria.

“I think I love him, Sherlock. And I do not know what to do.”
Chapter 7

Sherlock guided his brother home, since Mycroft’s mind could not stop wandering and his feet were very content to follow. Once they returned to the castle, Sherlock debated taking Mycroft back to his rooms, then decided upon directing him to the kitchens, where the brothers were pounced on by Mrs. Hudson as a hawk might land upon that a pair of mice.

“Look at you two! So handsome for your dates and… wait. Sherlock, what’s wrong with him?”

Mrs. Hudson poked at the older Holmes brother looking more and more vexed as he barely seemed to register her attack.

“The most horrifying of eventualities. He is in love.”

“What! Oh my… oh my my my… sit him down and let me take a look.”

Sherlock drug Mycroft to a chair and Mrs. Hudson gave the Crown Prince a thorough inspection that involved more poking and a scrutinizing that would have terrified the young man if he had been fully aware of it.

“Mycroft, did you have a nice time with Greg tonight?”

That question did pierce Mycroft’s fog and it lit up his brain like the Sun.

“Oh lord, he’s got the smile! It’s all over him!”

“How can a smile be ‘all over’ someone?”

“Shut it, Sherlock. Oh, this is wonderful. My little Mycroft is in love. And it couldn’t be with a better man than Greg. Mycroft, did he… gah! he’s gone off again. It’s no use talking to him right now… Sherlock! Does Greg feel the same way?”

“I was not party to the entirety of their time together, however, there is clear indication that the barrel of pork fat is not alone in his feelings.”

Mrs. Hudson did a spirited dance in her chair, then jumped up and gave Mycroft a bone-crushing hug.

“I wasn’t sure I’d live to see this! Oh, I’m getting a little misty… my Mycroft’s first love and it’s someone real and not one of those ridiculous fops that parade around here with the intelligence of a clump of mud. Good solid lad my boy chose. I’m… oh, I really am getting misty… I’ll make some tea. The good stuff, too, what I stole off your father during the last trade meeting.”

The deliriously-happy cook rushed off to get tea made and a plate of goodies prepared, while Mycroft continued to fight through the heavy, yet unimaginably comfortable, haze in his brain.

Love… he was in love. And it was… glorious, terrifying, hopeful, dreadful, comforting, upsetting and so forth and so on… Of all the things he had encountered in his life, this was by far the most confusing. And intriguing. And spectacular. And he was not alone. Gregory had said that explicitly and he was a man of unimpeachable honor. He would not make the admission if it were not entirely truthful and accurate. Whatever was in his own heart had its twin in the heart of his precious Gregory…

“Are you ever going to function properly or are you permanently defective? I shall NOT be
happy if such is the case as I would be dragged into the cesspit of your life and be forced to uptake it as my own.”

“I… I am quite functional, Sherlock. I simply… it is difficult to process the volume of new information and its implications.”

Mrs. Hudson plopped back into a chair and her staff set the table for tea and a snack, into which Sherlock immediately dove.

“The implications are easy, son, you and Greg live happily ever after, if you know what’s good for you. Prince Gregory… oh, that has such a lovely ring to it. And what’ll John be? I can never figure out all the titles. The rules have to be two books long!”

Three actually, but Mycroft didn’t have the energy for either the correction or the discussion that would ensue. Gregory… Gregory could be nothing. Not his husband, not his openly-recognized lover… nothing. It would not be tolerated. He could no more wear a crown upon his brow than could the hound that was currently waiting patiently for Sherlock to drop something onto the floor. As it stood, he could have no place in court, let alone stand as the life-partner for the future king. Of course, it would not be out of bounds, once the crown was securely on his head, to award his Gregory a title and accompanying lands to make the situation somewhat more tolerable, from the standpoint of a everyone-knows-and-agrees-not-to-comment love affair but… his constable would not be pleased, and rightfully so. It was a bit of dishonesty that would not sit well with him and would disable him from performing the job he so greatly enjoyed. Gregory was a proud man and would not accept less than a full and honest acknowledgement of their relationship and that was not something Mycroft could give. His love was a common man. Common and man. Two details which disqualified him from the pool of acceptable candidates for the person to openly share his life. For Sherlock… there would be less scandal, however…

“Mycroft? You’ve wandered off again. And why are you frowning? Wait a minute. You just wait one minute… don’t tell me you’re thinking… do not tell me you’re not going to…”

Mycroft slowly cut his eyes towards Mrs. Hudson and wasn’t at all surprised to find hers glaring back at him.

“No. Absolutely not. If you think you’re going to keep him on the side as your shameful little secret, then you are not the boy I raised! I have done everything in my power to keep you from turning out like that horrid man who sired you and I cannot believe you’re considering something so…. disgraceful!”

Sherlock tried to turn invisible and slunk down in his chair so he wouldn’t be felled by a stray flaming arrow.

“Mrs. Hudson… it is not that I wish such a thing, but… can you not see…”

“I’ll tell you what I see. I see a ruling class that thinks people like Greg aren’t even… people! Use them, humiliate them and then cast them aside… believe me, I’ve seen plenty of that from you lot. And to think your brain even let that thought be born!”

“NO! I would never treat Gregory in that manner!”

“But you won’t admit to him either, will you? Bring him to that birthday ball I’m racing about trying to lay in supplies for? Introduce him around and show him off? No. No you won’t, apparently.”
“That is unfair. I would likely not do that with anyone at this time. It would be too soon, the action would be improper…”

“Fine, next year. Birthday’s come every year, you know. Gonna do it next year?

That was still not fair! He wanted his love to be showcased. Give him his due and all the privileges as befitted the consort of a Crown Price… show everyone what a glorious man he had found… how handsome, strong and clever a man he had gained in his life. Let everyone see his character, be shamed by his integrity and strength… but he could not. Father would never permit it and… ultimately, there was the matter of an heir, something he very much enjoyed forgetting. He had to provide at least one heir, preferably more, to ensure stability of the family’s legacy and that was something his dear Gregory could not give him. It was cripplingly unfair that the one person who completed him was the one person he could not take joyfully to his side to walk together through the remainder of their years.

Mycroft heaved a large sigh and crumpled in his chair.

“What do you believe I would be allowed such an honor?”

For the first time, Mrs. Hudson’s anger cooled a slightly and she noticed that Mycroft’s eyes were washed in a tired, bleak darkness that spoke of his true heart. A heart which would not find satisfaction because of who he was, regardless of what he wanted.

“No, I suppose not. I guess I forgot for a moment that you don’t really have the final say in your life. Have you even told him? Who you are, I mean?”

“No… it has not arisen. There never seems to be a time for which that subject can be broached without ruining something enjoyable and special. Something I greatly treasure.”

Mrs. Hudson put herself for a moment in Mycroft’s shoes and had to admit they hurt. The poor thing’s life was laid for him out the day he was born and the only say he had in it was to stay or go. And not even she would tell him to walk away from role he was being groomed to play, and not only because it would leave Sherlock as next in line for the throne and god help them all if that happened. But, that didn’t mean he could play with young Greg’s emotions. It wasn’t decent and it certainly wasn’t caring.

“You have to, Mycroft. You don’t have a choice. This isn’t fair to him, especially now. And what are you going to do about now?”

The very question that had been plaguing him.

“You can’t… you can’t get his hopes up, knowing you’re not going to follow through! He’s not had much chance to find someone, what with his job and having to raise John… you can’t let him think it’s finally happened only to learn it’s all been a lie. That’ll kill him, son. It would kill anyone with a heart and Greg’s is one of the biggest I know.”

“I am aware of the situation, Mrs. Hudson. More keenly than you might imagine. I did not look for this, you know. I did not set out to find the other half of myself, yet so have I been blessed and now… I do not know what to do. You are, however, correct… I do not want to hurt him in any manner, but I also…”

Mycroft felt like his insides were being torn in a hundred different directions and he feared the end of it because he would be left completely empty and the thought of that was worse than the pain he was suffering now.
“I cannot envision losing him. I have only known him briefly and already I fear the hole inside me should he vanish from my life. I can see no… I am trying desperately to find some way to reconcile the elements of this situation and am not… I can see no solution! I love him. I have never loved before, yet I knew this feeling immediately for what it was. I have a duty that demands the whole of my existence, yet I have a love which finally makes that existence worthwhile. And I cannot have it. Or I can… I do not know. I cannot SEE!”

Mycroft wanted to rip his hair out of his head and might have done just that if Mrs. Hudson hadn’t laid her hands over his to quiet his distress.

“It’s alright, Mycroft. Settle down. If anyone can find a way to make this work, it’s you. But, you are going to have to tell him. He needs to have a say in what’s going on.”

“And what if he says goodbye?”

“That’s a chance you’ll have to take. He deserves a good life, son. You do, too, but it can’t come at the expense of his.”

No, that was not allowable. He could not take Gregory’s happiness, his self-respect. He would be the most atrocious villain if he even considered such a thing, but… but a little longer. Perhaps just a little longer to enjoy this feeling of bliss. A small amount of time to remain Michael and partake in the love he was able to share with the most special man in the world. A fragment of his life to amass just a few additional memories to take with him when… should… he be unable to make anymore.

“No, you are quite right. If the only gift I may bestow upon him is honesty, then honesty he shall have. Perhaps he shall see some solution that currently eludes me.”

“He’s a smart one, that’s for certain. And very good at solving problems. Now, you drink your tea and have a nibble. I’m going to check that those silly girls are getting my soup right and then maybe we can take a little walk in the garden just like we used to and you can tell me about your night. Drink up, now and I’ll back in a bit.”

With a small peck on the top of Mycroft’s head, Mrs. Hudson went to replace her stamp on her kitchen and Sherlock slithered up in his chair enough for his eyes to peek out over the top of the table.

“Is it safe?”

“I believe your well-being is unthreatened.”

Sherlock slithered up further and took a long drink of his tea. After looking over his shoulder to pinpoint the cook’s location, Sherlock leaned forward and whispered to his brother.

“Are you going to tell him?”

Mycroft knew Sherlock’s question was not solely out of concern for his future. The boy had his own stake in when Mycroft revealed himself.

“Yes. At some point. I… I need more time to think. To seek some resolution so that I might offer that to him concurrently with my revelation.”

“Also, you’re afraid.”

“There is that.”
“Were you… were you telling the truth when you… can you truly not be with Lestrade?”

It was perhaps a small smile on Mycroft’s lips, but it was the first one he had been able to give since this conversation began. Sherlock honestly appeared concerned and that was a very rewarding thing to see.

“Given my responsibilities and the expectations of me… I do not, now, see how it may be possible in a manner that accords Gregory any respect. Mrs. Hudson is correct… I do not want him to be a secret, hidden away as if his presence brings me embarrassment. And I cannot now see a way to have him sit at my side and fulfill my obligations to the degree to which I am duty-bound.”

Sherlock’s sour and discontent expression spoke volumes and Mycroft’s mood lifted even higher.

“That is ridiculous.”

“I agree, however, it is my reality, nonetheless.”

“But you shall find a way, correct?”

That was absolutely uncertain, but knowing he now had the additional task of staving off his brother’s disappointment made the battle seem that much more necessary to win.

“I shall do everything in my power to do so. Now, finish your tea as you will be accompanying Mrs. Hudson and myself on our stroll.”

“What! You are mistaken in that, I assure you.”

“No, I am correct in that for you also have tales to tell and I shall not deny you the opportunity to regale Mrs. Hudson with your stories. And look, we already possess our warm cloaks, so the night air shall not cause a chill.”

“You shall pay dearly for this, Mycroft.”

“But of course. As if I were not anticipating that very thing.”

The next days were bitterly hard for Mycroft, though he did his best not to let it show. In fact, as best he could, he swallowed down his emotions because it was on him to secure a good agreement in this trade deal and it was now more vital than ever, knowing better the people it would benefit. The goods for which they bartered, foods for which they contracted to purchase or supply… all of this had importance beyond the large stone walls separating him from the population. It was the population about whom he should be thinking and this was propelling him with a greater drive than even he normally displayed. People like Gregory and John needed him. They needed resources, plentiful and well-priced so that they might have a more comfortable life. Under his rule, there would not be another winter where starvation and disease cut such a horrifying swath through his lands. He was not so naïve to believe he could shield everyone from the harsh truths of nature, but he could see that they were provided for as best he could. He could try, truly try, and that was more that was being done now.

No, that was not entirely true. He had started to take steps already, though he labored somewhat alone in that. He had empowered his own guards to investigate the charitable houses and evicted those in charge who were found to be of the sort his Gregory had described. He had installed new overseers who were informed in no uncertain terms that no impropriety or mistreatment would be tolerated and channeled a small amount of his personal income towards maintaining these residences,
which he had consolidated into two households. Fewer locations were easier to keep under surveillance than many.

And he was learning. Gathering information on the real details of the lives of his people. He had a head filled with sterile facts that he was finding did not correspond with any significant accuracy to what those he would rule witnessed daily. It would be many years before he would step into his father’s shoes and when the time came, he would be prepared. The political maneuvering, the negotiations, the scheming and planning… that was child’s play. Properly ruling a vast expanse of territory occupied by real people… living, breathing, people with families who did not necessarily know each day if they would have a log for the fire or food for the table… that was hard. Tremendously hard. His decisions mattered, not in an abstract manner, but in a real and visceral manner. People would live and die by his word or lack thereof and that was not something he could ever take for granted.

For example, this mind-bogglingly bothersome trade meeting he was hosting. It was irritating, infuriating, boring, nonsensical and a hundred other things that set his teeth on edge. However, they were all much as this, so none of that was surprising. The difference was that this time he was invested in more than an academic or political fashion. This would open trade avenues that would bring substantial quantities of foodstuffs and allow their own craftsmen to find additional markets for their wares. This was important. It touched people in the most direct manner possible and he would do his utmost to make that touch a pleasant and rewarding one.

However, it was not easy to concentrate fully on his task when his mind desperately wanted to turn in the direction of his Gregory. Each day he wanted to sneak away and pass an enjoyable hour or two with his love, but that time was not available, no matter how he struggled to make it so. And each night he lay quietly, letting his mind play for him wonderful scenarios of what would be occurring if he was not alone in his very large bed. At least Sherlock brought him news, small items of news, about his Gregory. It was not much, but it was enough to reassure him that his love was well and shared his sense of loss.

“He is as repulsive as you in his groaning, simpering and hand-wringing. John is nearly crippled by the humiliation of being seen with him in the street.”

His constable longed for their reunion as greatly as did he and when they could hold each other as they did in Gregory’s small house… his world would feel right again.

Now, however, it was another day of toil for the betterment of his subjects. A long and tiring day, but if it went as planned, his much-hoped-for meeting with his Gregory could occur tomorrow as they had tentatively agreed. If it did not go as planned… well, surely he could muster as much theartic drama as his brother and affect some form of grand headache to remove himself from the proceedings for an evening. Or, perhaps he could arrange suitable entertainment for his guests. With enough food and wine, it was likely his absence would not even be noticed…

It was brutally late when Mycroft finally peeled his guests/opponents off of him and sent them along to rest, but he was still not surprised to find his brother storming in a few minutes after he entered his rooms. Sherlock’s need for sleep appeared to be about the same as the fire in his hearth.

“And was your day, brother dear? I assume you found a suitable suite of diversions with John and your new friends in the performers’ guild.”

“John is a talentless fumble-fingers, yet he refuses to give up this ridiculous idea of becoming a juggler! Already he carries two lumps on his head from the effects of his lack of coordination. It is
painful to watch and he does not care in the slightest about my suffering.”

“Ah, so may we describe your day as eventful?”

“Eventful… the only portion that might be appropriately wear that term is this morning when we apprehended a pickpocket outside the milliner’s shop.”

“We?”

“John and I. The urchin was sufficiently stupid as to perpetrated his crime where we could observe. He further demonstrated his idiocy by attempting to evade capture and we were forced to give chase.”

Mycroft had no idea whether he should be furious, concerned, amused or proud. He decided for a complex mixture of all four, with heavier proportions of the latter two.

“However, he did not get far, I presume.”

“No. While John followed the criminal’s trajectory, I predicted where it would ultimately veer off the current path and took a secondary route, where I was able to surprise him and then it was merely a matter of moments before we had him secured and then brought him to the watch house. Of course, Lestrade refused to incarcerate him, because he is a pitiful excuse for an enforcer of the law, and simply returned the culprit to his mother. The only solace was that she quickly enacted punishment on the lawbreaker and I suspect his posterior is still stinging from her justice.”

“Often a swift and decisive action is the most effective way to cement a point. And did your miscreant’s mother reward you for your contribution to her son’s rehabilitation?”

Mycroft nodded at the package under his brother’s arm and Sherlock snorted loudly.

“No. This is for you.”

“Me?”

“I was forced to act as a lowly messenger and bring this to you or Lestrade would not allow John and I to accompany the farrier tomorrow and observe him in his work. And ride the horses.”

Mycroft struggled not to laugh as Sherlock kept his eyes carefully focused on everything in the room but his brother and reached out, instead, to pluck the package from under Sherlock’s arm.

“At least you are experienced on horseback, so you should not suffer the shame of being caught in a lie about your abilities in that area. Now, let us see what Gregory has sent me.”

Actually, Mycroft was having a very difficult time controlling the shaking in his hands. His constable had sent him a gift. Regardless of what it might be, it was something he had not received before – an honest and freely-given gift. Very slowly Mycroft drew out the contents of the sack he was holding and hoped it wasn’t him he heard gasp loudly when he saw what his Gregory had done. In his hands was a shoe. Not a shoe that one could wear, but a shoe carved of wood. The detail… every bit of stitching was represented as was the grain of the leather. Turning it round and round, Mycroft could find no bit that was not perfect for a real shoe, except that in the hollowed out portion where one’s foot would rest was a slip of paper, which he immediately drew out to read.

*Michael,*

*I know this isn’t as good as what you would make, but working on it made me feel close to you.*
Tomorrow? At the tavern?

Greg

“Oh, so that’s what he’s been working on at night and hiding from John. A shoe. How crude and utilitarian.”

“I believe you mean how skilled and considerate. A token of affection based on his belief of my profession. To make it was a labor of love and that sets this as the most valuable of my possessions.”

“Yes, an inexpertly carved shoe of cheap wood surely exceeds in value the gold or chests of jewels in your personal vaults.”

“Someday you shall understand, Sherlock.”

“When that day arrives, I trust you shall pity me enough to kill me.”

And with his pronouncement, Sherlock spun on his heel and left Mycroft’s rooms. For his part, the Crown Prince settled into his favorite chair and gazed upon his present, imagining his Gregory spending hours working the wood. It was a great deal of effort and all of it done for him. His love had spent his spare hours crafting this and stated boldly that it was a balm for the loneliness in his heart. Well, that set his decision nicely. Yes, he would see his constable tomorrow, regardless of circumstances that might make the meeting a difficult one to achieve. There was no sacrifice too great to ensure this rendezvous because he must give his thanks, make his pleasure known. Reward his dear Gregory for this most precious gift. Hopefully, reward him in a manner most amorous and enthusiastic…
“Just choose something!”

“The making of an impression is the most delicate of things, Sherlock.”

“You have no need to make an impression on Lestrade; he is already besotted with you.”

“Perhaps it is fortunate you are staunchly committed to a life of bachelorhood, because you are painfully lacking in basic understandings of relational dynamics. Because he is besotted with me, and I adore and respect him utterly, I want to present myself to best effect for our evening out.”

“You are going to a tavern. You are supposed to be of limited means, which directly correlates to a limited wardrobe. The best you might hope for is a larger-than-normal selection of shoes, given what he believes is your profession. The number of pieces of clothing Lestrade owns can likely be counted on two hands with fingers remaining and that *includes* his shoes. Do you begin to see why excessive fussing over your appearance is not only a foolish waste of time, but a potential misstep in your campaign of misinformation?”

Mycroft looked over at the sizeable selection of potential garments he had acquired and had to admit that there was scarcely enough room in Lestrade’s entire home to house them.

“Ah… yes, there is validity to your argument. What then do you suggest?”

“Wear the same trousers that you wore for your last meeting and a shirt that is very similar to the one from that night. Or precisely same one… it really does not matter. If you demonstrate proper hygiene, you will already be vastly superior to the other tavern patrons.”

“Hmmm… you may be right. I forget that the world into which I am entering is not the world with which I am familiar. Thank you, Sherlock. You have been most helpful.”

“You may repay me by actually dressing yourself so that we may depart. John and I have several important activities in which we are engaging and I am wasting time that could be spent on obtaining our results.”

“Results?”

“I am attempting to categorize plants by their aroma, both fresh and dried, and we are beginning our catalog tonight. This is vital work, as only yesterday I was able to determine where Lestrade had been during the afternoon by the smell of his clothing.”

“And you did not find it… undignified… to sniff articles of clothing currently adorning a body? Or, for that matter, sniffing articles of clothing for any reason whatsoever?”

“Nonsense! One day, that could be crucial in apprehending and prosecuting a criminal. If a sheep was stolen from a clover field, a suspect redolent of clover most likely would be the culprit!”

“And if their clothing had been washed prior to apprehension?”

“Must we again have a discussion about the hygiene of the peasantry?”

“No, but I would consider that another confounding factor in your theory. A garment saturated with the aroma of a week’s activities would be difficult to analyze in terms of a timeline.”
“Ah… there is that. That shall be my next initiative! Regardless, this one is the proximal concern and to it I will devote the full of my attention and intellect.”

Mycroft was absolutely amazed by how Sherlock’s chaotic nature had found a channel that was productive, at least in theory, and brought his brother such happiness. And to share it with a trusted friend… really, it was not something he thought he would see for Sherlock for many, many years. If at all…

Prioritizing is a hallmark of a successful venture. I applaud your nod to planning. Now… is this acceptable?”

Mycroft had traded his newly acquired ‘old’ shirt for one that was simpler in design and had the faded appearance of his previous one, so with the plain, loose trousers, he did look very much as he had the last time he had seen his constable.

“Yes. Are we finally ready to leave?”

Sherlock’s impatience was a normal condition, but now it was impatience for a rewarding reason and that, again, put some additional spring in Mycroft’s step.

“Yes, do you have ready the laundry bundles?”

“No. This time it shall be a water jugs. It would not to do be too predictable in the method of our escape.”

“That shall be quite heavy; are you certain your strength shall hold for the duration of our departure?”

“I did not say they would be filled.”

“Planning… I am very proud of you, Sherlock.”

“As you should be always.”

Mycroft saw Sherlock to John’s home and made note that Sherlock’s retinue were properly positioned before turning and walking towards the tavern where, according to John, Lestrade was already waiting. It was a silly thing that His Highness Crown Price Mycroft should be as nervous as a cat over something as simple as an evening in a tavern, but nervous he was. This was an evening with Gregory… their first after making… some form of admission of affection and that did escalate the level of expectations. He, also, could not forget the gift! A handcrafted token of regard that Mycroft had to physically stop himself taking to bed with him as some form of soothing device. It did, however, rest on the table by his bedside, much to the consternation of his personal housekeeping staff.

Before he pushed in the door, Mycroft steadied his nerves and let his muscles relax to the point that when he actually strode into the tavern, his agitation was not readily visible. A few seconds of surveying the space and he found his quarry, looking as handsome and vital as ever. And smiling broadly at his arrival. Mycroft smiled back and covered the distance to the small table quickly, being interrupted briefly before sitting by Lestrade lifting up slightly to take a quick kiss from Mycroft’s lips.

“There’s my Michael. And looking as gorgeous, as ever. How are you?”
“Well, thank you. And I must return the compliment; you look stunning, Gregory. Absolutely stunning, this evening. I missed you greatly these last days and my soul is now tranquil, no longer burdened by the turbulent humors of our separation.”

“You, sir, should be one of those balladeers.”

“You would not think such if you heard me sing. It is a punishment fit for the worst of the traitors of history.”

“Oh, I expect your voice is lovely, given the right circumstances… the right provocation…”

And from the slight gleam in his eye, Mycroft had some suspicion as to what circumstances his Gregory was referring. Such a libidinous creature… and wasn’t that the most splendid of things?

“Perhaps it something we can test. I am certain you can devise a suitable platform for experimentation.”

“Might have a few ideas… and getting more all the time.”

Lestrade motioned for the serving girl to bring drinks for them and allowed the hand he used to hail for their order to settle back onto the table to rest on Mycroft’s own.

“And I missed you, too, Michael. Did you… did Sherwin give you…”

“Next to my bed, where I may see it each night as I fall asleep and each morning as I wake, I keep the beautiful piece that you crafted. I was astounded, Gregory. Moved profoundly by the sentiment and greatly impressed by the skill and technique. Thank you, my dear. Thank you most sincerely for thinking of me and for gifting me with something that I shall forever treasure.”

Such a wealth of smiles had his Gregory, but the one that crept gently and shyly across the man’s face was now officially his favorite.

“I’m glad you liked it. I know it’s not anything fancy, but… I did think of you. Every moment that I worked on it, I thought about you.”

“As I have thought of you, Gregory. You have never strayed from my thoughts, nor my dreams.”

Lestrade’s smile deepened and he tried to hide his delight by taking a large drink of his ale. But Mycroft wasn’t fooled. His constable was as pleased to be thought of as was he. It was something Mycroft had never before reflected upon, but how joyful could be a life if no one ever spared a thought for it?

“However, I am most certain you have also been kept busy with your work. I have heard nothing of looting or pillaging, so I congratulate you for your success in safeguarding our fine citizens.”

“Actually, I’ve needed to tamp down a bit of silliness, but that’s common for the season and with the King’s birthday getting close… that always stirs things up. Everyone wants to make merry and I get to handle the ones who take it a little too far. But that’s alright, it only happens once a year and it’s good to have people excited about something. It’s fun, too, to see all the carriages and soldiers ride in when the guests arrive. I think that’s part of why John wants to learn to juggle; kids who can do something like dance or tumble sometimes get tossed coins for their trouble. He’s been hinting he wants a good knife, but he knows I want him to earn the money himself. I’m sort of waiting for him and Sherwin to demand that they get paid for their investigations, actually. In something other than
trips to the baker or the lake, that is.”

How interesting… Mycroft had never considered how an event at the castle might impact the city, however, it did make sense. There would be many guests arriving, all in their finest carriages… processions of foreign soldiers sent to guard their royal charges, soldiers that would mill among the taverns and entertainment houses telling stories of adventure in faraway lands. All of which were lies, but there was an appeal about a roguish man in uniform. Perhaps he should mandate such for the law enforcers of this lovely city… Gregory would be a vision in a well-tailored uniform.

“I bet it’s even crazier in the castle. Do you… do you get to see any of it? The banquets or the balls? I hear they’re amazing.”

Amazing? That was not, as far as Mycroft could remember, synonymous with excruciating. Boring. The percentage of the time that was devoted to intelligent conversation and genuinely entertaining pursuits skirted nil and, routinely, his best company was Sherlock, which was telling in its own right.

“They are…active. A great ball is colorful and… there is light from countless candles. The music spans a great diversity of styles so that all of the dances currently in vogue may be enjoyed. Wine flows and jewels glitter…”

“It sounds beautiful. Wonderful, really.”

Perhaps on an aesthetic level, Gregory was correct. If he gave it thought, Mycroft had to admit that there was a visual appeal to the festivities. It was, though, much like the people who attended the event – highly decorated on the outside and vacant on the inside. Though that was not entirely true… there were some who were better than the others. Some with a streak of decency and integrity, an appreciable amount of intelligence or humor, they were simply few and far between.

“It is a lovely thing to see, I do admit. Though the preparation and cleaning are rather substantial tasks.”

So sayeth Mrs. Hudson. Often and at full volume. At least she was not tasked with cleaning the great hall or the castle’s foundation might crack from the sound of her fury.

“You don’t have to do any of that, right? They don’t call everyone to muck in for a big thing like a ball, do they?”

Oh, he had to ‘muck in’ most assuredly. It was his show of respect, supposedly, towards his father to plan a proper tribute for his birthday. Actually, it was his mother refusing to shoulder the burden and handing it off to the next victim… candidate… on the list that was the heart of the matter.

“No, that, fortunately, is not visited upon me, though I have my own set of responsibilities that must be met and they are sufficiently onerous.”

“Good, don’t want my Michael getting hands like mine. I like having something soft to hold.”

My Michael… there were no two words in the world that sounded as pleasant to the prince’s ears. If ever, one day, he could be so privileged to hear My Mycroft, he might faint away from the pleasure.

“And I enjoy the strength and ruggedly masculine texture of your own. It is fortuitous that our skin complements each other as strongly as our demeanor.”

“That it does, and since I like spending time with your demeanor, it goes without saying, I like spending time with your skin.”
Lestrade gently caressed Mycroft’s hand and the prince found himself able to focus on nothing but the sensation and the wellspring of warmth that bubbled up inside of him.

“I shall allow you all the time I can possible give for that very purpose.”

How that would be actually be accomplished, Mycroft had no firm idea, but surely there had to be some way…

“That’s what I like to hear. Now, why don’t you catch me up on what you’ve been doing? I’m sure you’ve got a few stories to tell.”

Few that he could actually relay, but Mycroft had already prepared a list of possible items of discussion that he may have overheard in his dealings in the castle and had witnessed in Mrs. Hudson’s kitchens, where he had, to some degree of shame, taken to hiding during breaks in his negotiations, both for the food and the companionship.

“I do, actually. And you shall regale me with your own set, I assume?”

“Oh yeah, got a few juicy ones I know you’ll like.”

And, for the next two hours, the newly forged couple shared tales and gossip, laughed over Sherlock and John’s antics and heatedly debated points of law or politics… and Mycroft was overjoyed. Finally, someone with whom conversation was easy and natural. Someone who freely voiced their opinion and challenged his. It was an exhilarating experience and this was something he had to protect. To preserve and cultivate. Some way… there had to be a way to keep his Gregory…

As the evening wore on and platters of food were emptied in addition to their mugs of ale, the two men relaxed into that particular state of being where the world ceases to exist outside the cozy cocoon surrounding you and your companion and you hope for nothing in the world than it would forever remain this way.

“So, Michael… how about we take a walk? Stretch the legs a little and enjoy some of that warm night air. I may have even put a few stars in the sky for you to look at.”

One of the very nice things about being ‘Michael’ was that he was able to allow someone else to take the lead for awhile and not be responsible for making all the decisions and generating all the initiatives. It was horribly demanding and tedious have to direct every aspect of the interactions with individuals in his day, save his parents. And Mrs. Hudson, of course, but even Father had some difficulty actually issuing the formidable woman a direct command.

“You are a scintillating romantic, Gregory, and I admire that greatly.”

“You know, I never was before. I guess all I needed was the right inspiration. Come on, let’s go.”

And with a leap upwards, Lestrade extended his arm and Mycroft laughed as he accepted it, rising and hooking their arms together to make their way out of the tavern, through a sea of knowing and very interested smiles.

“I believe we are the subject of some speculation, my Gregory.”

“What? Oh, you mean those miscreants… yeah, I guess we are. People aren’t used to seeing me with anyone, I guess. But, if it helps, I’ve gotten stopped a lot and asked about you and in a good
way. People are happy, I suppose, to see us out and about having a nice time. And they like you, just so you know. Smart, polite, funny... I've heard nothing but good things. Handsome, too, for your information. I've been told I've got myself a good one and that's something I take to heart. And if there's one thing I've learned in life is never to get a good thing slip though my fingers.”

Lestrade unhooked his arm from Mycroft's and wrapped it around the prince's waist, squeezing gently. Mycroft found himself leaning into the embrace and savoring the warmth of the man who held him. Yes, Michael was a very lucky man and it would be the focus of every measure of his attention to find a way to make Mycroft just as lucky.

For a long time the pair walked through the city, Lestrade pointing out the details along the streets he patrolled and stopping now and then to share a word with others out enjoying the night air. A second stop, this time at a different, although very agreeable tavern, for more ale heightened their level of relaxation and Mycroft thought about how wonderful it would be if this was his life. Nights out with this marvelous man, nights in a warm and loving home with a good book and good conversation. Nights either way that would end in a shared bed where sleep would not be found for hours...

As their stroll continued, the path took them out of the residential area and into the fields surrounding the city and through a small section of the forest skirting those fields until Mycroft gasped as he spied a lake laid out in front of them, still as glass and reflecting the moon and every star his Gregory had hung in the sky.

“It is beautiful.”

“Thought you’d like it. I come here at night sometimes just to think. There’s no place lovelier or more peaceful. And it’s the best place in the world for a swimming lesson.”

“Ah, so this is where Sherwin honed his skills.”

“And now you.”

Mycroft gaped at Lestrade who grinned in response.

“Pardon?”

“You don’t know how to swim, so now it’s your turn to learn.”

“Gregory... I do not believe this is the proper time for...”

“Sure it is! The moon’s bright, the night’s warm, there’s no one else around – it’s perfect!”

Perfect? To demonstrate his utter lack of physical prowess? There was a dissonance in that which could not be overstated.

“I am not...”

“Yes, you are. Whatever it is... you are. You need a lesson and I know you don’t want Sherwin and John here when it happens. I bet the water’s just right, too. Hold on...”

Lestrade ran over and cupped his hands, filling them with lake water and ran back to Mycroft.

“Hold out your hand and... there. See, nice and comfortable.”

Mycroft watched the water flow over his palm and had to admit it was quite pleasant. To feel it flow
all over… oh no.  *All over…*

“It is very agreeable, but…”

“But you’re just dying to get in there and feel more of it.  Don’t worry, I’m ready, too.”

And something in Lestrade’s voice, in the moonlight shining in his eyes, let Mycroft know that when his constable said he was ready, he meant for more than a swimming lesson.

“Come on, Michael.  It’ll be fun, I promise.”

Lestrade took Mycroft’s still extended hand and held it between his own, lightly stroking the skin to calm his companion’s nerves.  And Mycroft had a great many nerves to calm.

“Very well.  But do forgive me if I have not your natural talent for athletic pursuits.”

“Michael, I think you’re perfectly fit and, further, you’ve got the nicest body I’ve ever seen.  Well, what I’ve seen of it, that is.  I’m looking forward to seeing more, though.”

Now, Lestrade reached up and started to stroke Mycroft’s cheek which soothed one set of the prince’s nerves and enflamed another.  These were, however, not entirely unpleasant.  And became even less unpleasant as Lestrade’s hands ran up and down his arms and smiled comfortingly before stopping, taking a step back and reaching down to draw his own shirt over his head.

And then Mycroft’s nerves came back in force.

His Gregory was spectacular.  Broad of shoulder and narrow of waist… his chest muscles were defined, and his stomach was flat and hard.  There were a few scars scattered across that glorious canvas that served only to enhance his love’s appeal and… he was so far from this exemplar of physical perfection that it was nearly incalculable.

“Michael?”

Mycroft snapped out of his reverie and hoped his worries weren’t painted across his face in broad strokes.

“You are exquisite, my dear.  Absolutely breathtaking.”

No, that must be amended.  Now that his constable’s tiny shy smile was slowly creeping out to play on his lips… his breath was fully and irrevocably taken away.

“That’s, uh… that’s nice of you to say.  Care to join me?”

No.  Not at all.  Under no circumstances.  It would bring the apocalypse or a plague or some form of locust among the cabbages.

“Michael?”

The skies would rip and rain down disaster, volcanoes would fill the skies with sun-shuttering soot and the banshees would sing the dirge of civilization as the bodies fell by the thousands…

“Come here, Michael.”

Of course, as long as ‘here’ was vaguely in the opposite direction of this angelic vision and covered at great speed.  But, apparently, his radiant angel was intent on thwarting his wholeheartedly cowardly escape, as the hands that were gripping the hem of his shirt was most certainly not his own.
“Is my Michael a shy one?”

“In truth… I… I have had no opportunity to verify this beforehand, but… I cannot deny… you see, it is…”

What ‘it is’ was a bone-melting blade of fire that slashed at his spine in the most delicious way as two work-roughened hands ran up under the cloth of his shirt and across his skin.

“You don’t need to be shy with me, Michael. I already know you’ve got a great body. It does things to me that no one else’s does. But it’s ok if you don’t want to; we can just sit here and enjoy ourselves. I can show you how to swim anytime. And we’ve got lots of time…”

Such a caring man, so very dear… and so very awful by taking away those majestic hands to let him decide without distraction. Utterly, utterly evil and that was why Gregory owned his heart. But that heart must not be weak. And it must trust. If his constable said he would not scoff, then he must believe it to be true and show courage, though if his companion was struck blind by the outcome, he would see him looked after in grand style for the rest of his life.

Slowly Mycroft drew his shirt over his head, tossed it on the ground near Lestrade’s and waited for the sound of his constable’s eyes being seared in their sockets. Waited actually for any sound at all from the beautiful man… but none came. Not that Mycroft was surprised… even without a glass, he could see his torso in his mind. Pale as if a corpse, a narrow chest that faded downwards to a soft and rounded stomach and all of it covered with a woodland of hair that had sprouted over the last year or so. His Gregory should not be so insulted as to have to look on his grotesqueness. Such a man should only be witness to…

“You’re gorgeous.”

Now he was hearing things. Already, shame was eroding his senses.

“God almighty, Michael… you’re… I knew my hands weren’t lying but… come here, love.”

Mycroft’s legs decided his brain was worthless at the moment and took the two steps forward to again stand directly in front of Lestrade who tentatively reached out and ran his hands over Mycroft’s chest.

“And I bet the other half’s just as lovely, isn’t it?”

Other half? Oh. Oh dear…

“Come on, Michael, we’re going to have a great time.”

Lestrade stepped back again and pulled off his boots, then divested himself of every last bit of clothing. Mycroft was quite certain that his gulp could be heard at the castle. In all his dreams, in his most secret fantasies, he had not pictured someone as arousing as his Gregory. Strong legs that framed something heavy and thick that was already lighting up areas in his mind with the most luxuriant of possibilities and areas of his own body with the desire to make those possibilities a reality.
“Your turn, love.”

Mycroft swallowed heavily and hoped his dear Gregory’s goodwill held just a little longer. Slowly and not at all because he was worried about his physical presentation because that would be cravenly cowardly, Mycroft slipped out of his shoes and removed the last of his clothing, until the only thing he wore was a long gown of moonlight.

“Oh my… oh my oh my oh my… doesn’t my brain have some naughty thoughts right now… is there any part of you that’s not perfect? Just so bloody amazing…”

Lestrade closed the few steps between them again and both men nearly jerked at the shock when a piece of each of their anatomy made contact a split second before any other part of their bodies and it was with a heavy moan that they fell into each other’s arms to share a kiss that had each shifting slightly to make room for those parts of their anatomy to grow freely.

“You’re who I’ve been waiting for, Michael. I really believe that. And I honestly never thought I’d find you.”

Lestrade took Mycroft in another kiss and with his eyes closed, never noticed the mixture of panic, joy and sadness that flooded Mycroft’s own. His Gregory… there was never such a pure statement of affection given to another person as the one just given to him. He had to keep this man. He had to… because his Gregory loved him and that was a gift beyond price.

“Nor I you, Gregory. But you are the light in my eyes and the beat of my heart and I do not know how I lived before you put the life into my soul.”

This time it was Mycroft that took his love in a deep and lingering kiss, which was finally cut off by Lestrade pulling away and taking the prince’s hand to draw him towards the water.

“Time for a swim or we’ll never get the chance at this rate.”

Before Mycroft could protest, he was thigh-deep in surprisingly warm water and, even more surprisingly, enjoying the feel of soft mud oozing between his toes.

“We’ll start with floating. Easy to do. Just take a deep breath, lie on your back and…. float.”

Mycroft watched Lestrade demonstrate the technique and did his very best to ignore that it was his beautiful Gregory laid out, fully bare, illuminated by the rays of the moon that his eyes feasted upon or this lesson would end quite abruptly for other pursuits.

“See? Now, you try.”

One deep breath and Mycroft was on his back, staring up at his constable’s smiling face, as Lestrade kept his hands under Mycroft’s back as a safeguard.

“Good! Very good. Now, roll and see if you can do it on your stomach. Keep your face out of the water if you want to.”

Mycroft rolled and floated a moment until he felt a hand run down his naked backside, then it was a near descent into the water as the air flew out of his lungs in a pleasured sigh.

“Hold on… there we go. Ol’ Greg’s not going to let you drown. And, sorry about that. I couldn’t help myself. You have no idea how beautiful you are and I guess I don’t have much self-control when I see something that lovely. And your bum is very lovely, kind sir.”
“You are quite wicked, my dear.”

“And you love it.”

“I do. Of that, I have no doubt.”

The large smile that crossed Lestrade’s face told Mycroft that his other message, the deeper one that his love was not only for his constable’s wickedness, had been clearly understood.

“Glad we understand each other. Let’s move on to paddling, shall we? Watch me and follow when you think you’ve got it.”

Lestrade took a quick kiss from Mycroft’s lips, then began a simple paddle that did not look terribly dignified, but Mycroft had to admit was successfully keeping his constable from expiring in the murky depths. After a moment, he mimicked the motions and found himself moving about in the water, slowly, but steadily and keeping his head above water.

“Yes! That’s my Michael. Now, follow me…”

Lestrade paddled out further from shore and Mycroft followed until his companion stopped and seemed to stand straight in the water, though the level was at his chest. Mycroft followed suit and felt a sharp sting of panic when there was nothing beneath his feet but more water.

“It’s ok, Michael. Look, I’ve got you. Keep some air in your lungs and paddle with your feet to stay afloat.”

Mycroft felt as if he was dancing a jig in the water, but soon the panic began to ebb and he realized that it wasn’t as hard to maintain his position as he had thought.

“See? We need to be out here for other things, but I’m going to be here the whole time, so don’t worry about anything. Now, what I want you to do is going to be hard to believe, but let the air out of your lungs and stop paddling.”

What? He must have misheard.

“Gregory?”

“Sink, love. Let yourself sink, then come back up. Paddle and use your arms to push down in the water. I’m going to sink with you, so you’re not going to be alone. You can even open your eyes and check if you want to.”

If something happened, if he were to drown tonight, the consequences would shake the foundation of the kingdom. The scandal, the passing of the crown to Sherlock… if it had been anyone else asking this of him, he would have laughed, but it was Gregory and in his hands he would gladly place his life, so down he went. And, when the nervousness became too great, he did open his eyes and it was the calm smile and indulgent gaze of his constable as he sank along with him that shoved down those nerves and gave him the strength to do as he was told and struggle back to the surface.

“Excellent! You did that like you born to the water. No panicking or flailing or pulling water in your mouth... perfect. Just like the rest of you.”

Mycroft felt a very unseemly pride at his Gregory’s praise, but would not trade it for anything.

“Now you know that if anything happens, you can get yourself back up so long as you don’t panic.”
As it was for most things in life and politics. A cool head was absolutely critical and that suddenly chased away the last of Mycroft’s worries about their swimming adventures. If there was anything he could manage in his life, it was a cool head under pressure.

“Thank you, Gregory. I was rather worried at first, but I see clearly the value of your lesson. You are an exemplary teacher.”

“Thank you, Michael. And look at you, keeping yourself above water without even thinking about it.”

Which, now that it was pointed out to him, he was actually doing. More un-princely pride and glee ran through Mycroft’s veins and he could not stop a smile beaming into the night which made his constable laugh with delight.

“My Michael’s part fish! Now, let’s see what else he can do.”

And for the next hour or so, Lestrade instructed Mycroft in the intricacies of basic swimming until the prince could successfully perform all the fundamental techniques to enjoy a leisurely swim in the lake, no matter what his constable chose to lead him towards. It was only when Lestrade noticed signs of fatigue in his shoemaker’s eyes that he led them back to shore and dropped down on a thick patch of grass, patting the ground beside him.

“Time to dry off and catch our breath. Join me?”

“I would be honored.”

Mycroft dropped tiredly down onto the grass and remembered what Lestrade had said about swimming being taxing work.

“Thank you for this, Gregory. I have had an exhilarating experience and am very glad for the new skill.”

“Anytime. We can come out any night you’d like, so long as it’s not too cold. I’m not letting you catch a chill just for a night out.”

“How solicitous. Chilly nights were made for firelight, in any instance.”

“That’s sounds… why is it the word I keep coming up with around you is ‘perfect?’ Anyway, that sounds perfect. And isn’t it nice I’ve got a nice fire and a couple of solid chairs just for the occasion. Unless, of course, you’ve got a nicer place for us to spend time.”

Yes, he did. An expansive and comfortable set of rooms with a very large fire, unlimited food and wine, comfortable chairs and a bed that cradled the body like a mother’s arms. And none of it could he share with the man he loved. Not yet, at least.

“My quarters are meaner than are yours, I’m afraid. And I have not the degree of privacy that you enjoy. I would offer you all I could, but I fear it would not satisfy as greatly as what you experience in your own loving home.”

And that was absolutely true, so there was no growth to the stain of his enduring lie.

“So long as I’m with you, I’m completely satisfied, Michael, but we can use my home for our fire, if you’d like. And it’s always open to you, you know that, right? Anytime you’d like, for as long as you want to stay. It’s just been John and me for a long time and… I like having more people in the house. People that I care about, that is.”
Lestrade rolled onto his side and looked at Mycroft, laying a hand on his stomach and stroking light circles over the skin.

“And I do care about you, Michael. More than care, really. I felt something the moment I saw you and that something’s grown stronger every time we’ve met. I… I know how you feel, I think, and I want you to know that I feel the same way.”

“Do you, Gregory? What I feel is not something to say lightly.”

“I know. And I will say it if you want me to. I think I fell in love with you that very first time we talked. I didn’t think that could happen; it seems sort of strange that it can, actually, but I did. I felt that you and me got locked together and even when you’re not here, I can still feel you inside me. It hurts, though, because I want all of you there with me. I want your smile and your laugh and your brilliant mind and all of this beauty… I want you.”

Mycroft looked into the depths of Lestrade’s warm brown eyes and his heart clutched at the show of raw emotion they contained.

“Then have me.”

Mycroft rose slightly to catch Lestrade’s lips and felt the bliss thread through his veins when his constable rolled gently on top of him and settled between his parted thighs.

“If I do, I won’t be able to let you go. Are you sure?”

“I love you, Gregory, and I have never been more certain of anything in my life.”

Lestrade’s body shuddered at the declaration and Mycroft gasped at what it made him feel at the most primal level. There was no signal, no nod of agreement, simply a firm uniting of two souls in a love that burned brightly in each their hearts.

“I love you, too, Michael. And I’m going to do everything in my power to make you happy.”

This kiss was like no other they had shared and both men knew the reason. It was sweeter, spicier, deeper, brighter… everything about it was magnified a hundredfold and each used their whole body to cement the promise that was being made. As they moved their arousal grew and Lestrade wasn’t sure when his hips began gently thrusting against his shoemaker’s, but it was the most wonderful sensation he had ever experienced. But he wanted more, wanted to make Mycroft feel every bit of the love he held and he slowly slid down the long, pale body, laying a trail of kisses, some placing a mark of his love on the creamy, writhing body, until he could use his mouth for more than kisses. Drinking in Mycroft’s moans, that gradually turned into begging, the constable used his lips and tongue to stimulate the hard and lengthy morsel of flesh that so desperately desired his attention, until his reward painted the back of his throat in thick stripes and his ears filled with his lover’s cries of pleasure. Placing a final small kiss on Mycroft’s inner thigh, Lestrade repositioned so he straddled Mycroft’s hips and began to use his hands to find his own release, rejoicing when those hands were replaced by Mycroft’s who worked his constable as skillfully as his imagination could muster, watching every bit of sensation he produced play out across Lestrade’s face until his lover reached the point of his greatest beauty and warm splashes of arousal coated Mycroft’s long fingers.

“Oh god… that was… fantastic. You are fantastic, love.”

Lestrade collapsed onto Mycroft’s body and the prince wrapped his lover tightly in his embrace, unmindful of the evidence of their joy on his hands.

“As are you, my beloved. You enflame me with a passion I would not have believed I
possessed. Perhaps it is because it was the one I loved inciting the flames of my desire that they burned so hotly.”

“And I am happy, and privileged, to do it again and again and again.”

Which, in Mycroft’s mind, sounded like an exceedingly grand plan. One they could begin on as soon as he had a small while to recover.

“So, what’s say we enjoy the water a little more and then think about dirtying ourselves up again?”

How splendid was the love with someone who shared your thoughts.

“I heartily concur. It is not so late and I find myself loathe to see this night end quite yet.”

Lestrade smiled widely and took a final kiss before hopping up and extending his hand to help Mycroft off the ground.

“Well, it doesn’t have to, does it? Sherwin can share John’s space and you can share mine. Have a nice sleep after a long night of… swimming?”

It was a bit dictatorial to mandate Sherlock’s bodyguards stand watch all night, but now and then it was good for a Crown Prince to exercise his authority in a draconian manner.

“I am very agreeable to that suggestion.”

“Yes! Tell you what, first one to swim to the other side of the lake gets to tell Sherwin and John they might need to put some fabric in their ears if they want a good night’s sleep.”

“Their reaction would be delicious. Yes, a very worthy prize.”

“On three then?”

“Perish the…”

Mycroft shot across the grass with Lestrade following and nearly stumbling with laughter. Yes, he had never thought he’d find the one person for him and now that he had… life was certainly going to be an adventure.
Chapter 9

Sherlock and John clutched their hearts to signal their impending deaths when Lestrade announced that Sherlock and Mycroft would be staying the night and, further, exactly where the prince would be sleeping, but the deaths passed quickly as Sherlock decided this would simply give him more time for his experiments and the boys officially proclaimed that they would be considering themselves alone in the house for the duration. Which suited the older generation perfectly fine, as it gave them an uninterrupted night in each other’s arms. A slow, quiet round of lovemaking preceded the most comfortable and relaxing sleep of Mycroft’s life and it would have lasted long into the morning if someone hadn’t begun to toss assorted vegetables at him from a protected launch point around the corner of the door frame.

“Sherl… Sherwin, your life is not so valuable that it’s loss would severely inconvenience my day.”

“Is it your intention to spend the remainder of said day continuing to saturate the air of this monk’s cell with the effluvia of your amorous desecration or shall you rise and meet your obligations?”

Ah. Michael could spend the morning in the arms of the man he loved, celebrating that love in the most delightful ways, but Mycroft… Mycroft could not. Mycroft had a full day of responsibilities awaiting him. Mycroft had to don again the mantle of authority and work to the best of his ability for the good of his subjects. And Mycroft was already likely late for his morning routine, so much as a Crown Prince could be late for anything, but too great a lateness would surely be noticed and commented upon.

“You raise a valid point. Thank you, dear brother. I will depart shortly. Shall you be accompanying me?”

“No. John and I are at a critical juncture of our work and I shall not forsake our important research for a boring morning of useless time-wasting at home.”

“Very well, I shall ensure you absence is not questioned. Now, please take your eyes from our bed so that I may say goodbye to Gregory properly.”

“Our bed? I require a chamberpot. My insides have suddenly turned to water.”

“Go outside and have fun fertilizing the plants, Sherwin, but give me and Michael a few minutes alone, ok?”

Sherlock harrumphed loudly and marched downstairs, leaving two giggling figures in his wake.

“I apologize, Gregory. I had hoped Sherwin had not wakened you.”

“It’s alright. You would have to do it anyway. Leaving, right?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Would that I could, I would not leave your side for an instant.”

“It’s ok, love. I have to leave soon, too. Did you… did you enjoy it here? Last night, I mean?”

“Enjoy is entirely too insufficient a word for what I experienced. This is the closest to the proverbial paradise that my life has ever seen and likely will ever see until the end of my days.”
The wash of relief and euphoria that crossed his constable’s face was a beauty that would carry him easily through the drudgery of the coming day.

“That’s good… that’s the way I feel, too. I mean, it’s not much, my house, that is, but it’s a good home when you love the people in it. You and Sherwin… you’re part of that now and I’m glad you like it. Happy family under this rickety old roof. That’s good to know, actually. Really good. Oh god, I’m sort of babbling aren’t I?”

“I am in no manner judging the impact of your emotions on your verbal capabilities, for I find myself near this state regularly in your presence.”

“Thanks for that. I’m just so…I feel a little like I’m going to burst I’m so happy. You’re coming back soon, right?”

Now, that was a question. Mycroft looked ahead through the challenges of his coming days and saw a window open agreeably soon in the future.

“I shall easily be available in two days’ time. What do you suggest?”

“A hearty dinner, some reading, maybe a game or a walk with the boys, then a good night’s rest right here.”

There was nothing his Gregory could have suggested that would have sounded better. A quiet evening spent in pleasurable pursuits… something he had tried to achieve often in his life, but had never accomplished so fulfillingly because he had always made his attempts alone.

“Excellent. I look forward to it with great anticipation.”

“I’ll make something special. First dinner here after… well, after last night.”

“An event well worth celebrating.”

“That it is. Ow!”

What appeared to be a potato bounced off Lestrade’s head and a glaring John proudly stood in the door to claim responsibility.

“Are you getting out of bed at all today?”

“What’s it to you, you little bastard? And it’s turnips for you for dinner tonight, by the way. Nothing but turnips.”

“Little you know. Sherwin and I are working in the tavern today and I’m going to fill up on venison and lamb and potatoes and bread and pastries and won’t even have room for your turnips.”

Lestrade shared a look with Mycroft and both men shook their heads in a very resigned way. Lestrade wiped away the sleep from his eyes and heaved a large sigh he hoped might launch the small boy back down the stairs.

“And when did you decide this?”

“Just now. Sherwin and I observed some questionable things last time we worked there and we want to investigate further.”

“Questionable? Mind telling me about it?”
“Yes.  This is our case and we don’t need you sticking your nose in it.”

“See what I have to put up with, Michael.  Think you can handle that little tosser treating you as shabbily as he does me?”

“I do live with Sherwin, if you remember.”

“Oh yeah… guess you’re already broken in, then.  John get downstairs and warm something up for us to eat.  And you will give me an idea of this investigation you think you’re working because I’m not going to have you causing trouble for some ridiculous scheme you’ve cooked up in that head of yours.  And if you don’t want that tongue fried crisp for breakfast, you’ll stick it back in your mouth and get going.”

John harrumphed as loudly as Sherlock had before him and stomped down the stairs.

“I think I need to start locking that door.”

“Dear Gregory, you will look upon these times in years to come and remember them fondly.”

“Tell me that again after they’ve walked in and you’re buried balls-deep in my mouth.”

“I believe it would be wise to begin locking the door.”

“Great idea.  Wish I’d thought of it.”

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What a fatiguing day.  And infuriating.  And dispiriting.  So many people, so little intelligence, let alone common sense.  It was much like managing blades of grass as they whipped this way and that depending on the direction of the wind you had to trod firmly on them to cease their continual gyrations.  Perhaps he should be glad that Father felt confident to leave so many tasks to his judgment, but some days… some days he feared greatly when the rest of the responsibilities of the Crown landed on his shoulders and his days grew twice as burdensome and three times as long.

The prince had just settled into his favorite chair to enjoy a glass of wine, when his door slammed open and a glowering Sherlock strode in to stand directly in front of him and fix him with a stormy glare.

“To what do I owe this pleasure, brother dear?”

“You have been summoned.”

“Really?  I just took dinner with Mummy and Father and they were retiring for the night.”

“Fool.  You have been summoned.”

Oh.

“Oh.”

“Truly.”

“Is it… serious?”

“I pity you.”
It was serious.

“Very well. Let me finish my wine and…”

Sherlock plucked the glass out of Mycroft’s fingers and downed it with a single swallow. After Mycroft finished patting his choking brother on the back and slipping some water into his mouth to wash away the experience, he straightened his brother’s disheveled clothing and walked with him out of the room.

To the kitchens.

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“OUT! Everyone clear out of here right now!”

Mrs. Hudson shooed the staff out of the kitchen until only the dog remained, who curled up in his basket and stared sadly at the soon-to-be-murdered Crown Prince.

“YOU! Sit down! Other you – sit down, too!”

Mycroft and Sherlock nearly jumped into chairs at the staff table and pointedly refused to look at each other, mostly for fear that their nervousness would be detected and used as future blackmail material.

“Mrs. Hudson, do calm yourself…”

“No! You do not talk right now, Mycroft. Not one word, do you hear me! Well… what do you have to say for yourself!”

“If I had any idea to what you were referring, I might be able to craft a reply, however…”

“Don’t you get smart with me, boy. You know damned well what this is about!”

Mycroft’s brain ripped through the pages of his mental journal and came up with nothing; at least, nothing new to fuel flames this intense in the cook. However, a look at his brother said Sherlock did know something and the very guilty face his was presenting said it was something severe.

“Sherlock… you seem to have information I lack for this situation. Kindly rectify that.”

“I… I don’t know if…”

“Speak!”

“Don’t bully your brother, you evil git!”

“Sherlock!”

“I… it is Lestrade!”

“Yes… oh Mrs. Hudson, do not tell me you are beating this same drum…”

“No! It… Mycroft, the situation is dire.”

Mycroft felt his heart clench and nearly threw himself on his brother to demand more information.

“What! Is he hurt? Did I somehow give offense? He was content when I departed. Happy…
ebullient, even.”

“He…”

“Sherlock, please.”

“He told John and I before I departed… he believes that you are his betrothed!”

It was not possible for time to stand still, but Mycroft was absolutely certain there was no flow of time for an eternity while he stared at Sherlock, who was defying the absence of time and fidgeting in his chair.

“What?”

“He… he believes that you and he are to be married.”

“No… what?”

“Oh don’t pretend like you don’t know what Sherlock’s talking about you miserable thing.”

Mrs. Hudson whacked Mycroft on the back of the head and glared with the force of the sun at the quivering prince.

“I… I do not! There was no proposal… no accord…”

“Did you have sex with him?”

Mycroft’s arms shot across the table to cover Sherlock’s ears.

“Mrs. Hudson! Please…”

Sherlock yanked his brother’s hands down and rolled his eyes.

“As if it was not completely evident.”

“Now, answer my question, Mycroft, or so help me…”

“Yes! Fine… yes, I did.”

“Told him you loved him?”

“Yes, as he did to me.”

“Wanted to be with him for the rest of your life? Never let him go.”

Oh dear.

“Perhaps. Not in those precise words…”

“Slept in his bed, under his roof with John, his son, in the house?”

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“If I do, I won’t be able to let you go. Are you sure?”

“I love you, Gregory, and I have never been more certain of anything in my life.”
Oh no.

“I love you, too, Michael. And I’m going to do everything in my power to make you happy.”

Oh no no no…

“That’s good… that’s the way I feel, too. I mean, it’s not much, my house, that is, but it’s a good home when you love the people in it. You and Sherwin… you’re part of that now and I’m glad you like it. Happy family under this rickety old roof. That’s good to know, actually. Really good. Oh god, I’m sort of babbling aren’t I?”

How had he…. no!

“Well? What were you thinking! That he’d let anyone into his bed with John home if he didn’t mean it to be permanent? Setting up his marriage bed, is more like it. Saying loud and clear that you and he and John were going to be family. That one there, too!”

Bed… our bed he had called it when speaking with Sherlock this morning. With Gregory lying next to him hearing each word. This was a disaster…

“You didn’t need a formal proposal you stupid thing because your actions spoke a lot louder than those words ever could. How could you? He’s already rung round this morning asking if I’ll do the wedding feast because he doesn’t have family to do it for him and he knows I know the both of you and will do you proud. So happy he was glowing! Absolutely shining with happiness because his Michael was going be his husband. I could kill you right now!”

Mrs. Hudson stormed off to put the kettle on and to keep from actually going through with her threat, leaving a near-terminally stunned Mycroft in her wake.

“Sherlock…”

“John said, today at the tavern, that it was going to be ‘great’ that we were to be able to engage in an even greater number of pursuits than now we do because of your and Lestrade’s impending union, though Lestrade had not broached the topic yet with either him or I. I was not fully certain what he meant, but when I arrived here and Mrs. Hudson kidnapped me…”

“No one would pay your ransom, you sour brat. And where were you in all of this! He’s supposed to be putting some distance between them and you let it get completely out of hand!”

Two large mugs of tea landed in front of Sherlock and Mycroft, both of whom sniffed them to check for poison.

“I am not his keeper! John and I were engaged in the most important of studies and notice that it is not me that is to be married. I am well capable of keeping myself out of the matrimonial clutches of a besotted suitor.”
“And you better well keep it that way! I’m not letting you and John do anything stupid like this one has!”

“I am not in love with John!”

“Doesn’t matter, I’m not allowing it anyway! It’s bad enough you’re lying to him, let alone breaking his heart into a thousand pieces, which is exactly what I said your brother would be a bastard to do, that great… bastard, Crown Prince Life Destroyer!”

Mycroft had long ago tuned out the conversation around him and sat quietly trembling at what had occurred. How had this occurred? No… he could understand how, but… how? Gregory… his dearest Gregory, who he would gladly take as his husband if he could… he was going to be devastated. Humiliated. He would feel betrayed, and quite rightly so… His constable had given to him the most precious gift of all, that of his heart, only to see it crushed in the foul grip of unworthy fingers. This was… he had committed the worst of crimes. The most disgraceful of sins and the one to suffer was the most exceptional man alive…

“Well! Mycroft, are you listening at all?”

“What? No, I admit that I have been lost in my own thoughts.”

“That’s the wrong plan, don’t you think, since your thoughts are what got you into this in the first place?”

“At the moment, it is all I can do.”

“No, what you can do is march right over to Greg’s house and tell him the truth. Get it over with now before he spreads his good news and is completely humiliated when it all falls apart.”

Oh dear… that was something that had not occurred to him. It was news fit for rejoicing and his love would surely desire to share it. Yes, he needed to speak with Gregory this instant.

“There is some merit to that. I shall leave immediately.”

“And I shall accompany you! You cannot be trusted to do anything properly when Lestrade is involved.”

If that were actually not true, Sherlock might find salt in his tea for the next fortnight for the insult.

“Very well, let us make haste. Mrs. Hudson… I am sorry. I did not mean for matters to become so… convoluted. Or shameful.”

“I’m not ready to forgive you, Mycroft, but you make this right and I might think about it. Go, and don’t come back unless you’ve worked this out.”

One emphatic finger pointed towards the door and the princes were racing to change their clothing and make good their escape. Once outside the castle walls, Mycroft nearly ran towards Lestrade’s house, Sherlock fast on his heels and then screeched to a halt as the small dwelling loomed in front of them.

“What? Have you been distracted by the scent of baked goods cooling on a windowsill?”

“Enough, Sherlock. I simply… I do not know what to say.”

“Let me think. ‘Gregory, I have cruelly used your affections and cannot reciprocate your
devotion in the way I desire and you deserve.’ That would be a start.”

“That is not funny.”

“It is not supposed to be; it is supposed to be honest. You will then declare that your relationship is severed and claim the fault completely to be yours. You may concoct some tale of mental defect if you believe that would assist your cause.”

“I notice you do not say I should reveal who truly I am.”

“Of course not! That would impact my association with John and that is not acceptable.”

“And you do not feel that the severing of mine and Gregory’s relationship would accomplish the same thing?”

“No. Your weakness of character is not my fault and cannot be held against me. John shall realize this and I shall gladly supply a sufficient quantity of scorn for your behavior as to seem very much their ally in this.”

Mycroft had to admit that it could very well salvage Sherlock’s position. Not that he believed for a moment his tender and loving Gregory would forsake Sherlock for the sins of his brother, but his thinking had been demonstrably flawed in recent times and there could be ramifications he utterly failed to anticipate.

“Very well. I shall do my best, however, I can make you no promises. This is… this will not be easy for me, Sherlock. I do love him and what I must do now… I shall lose him, Sherlock. I shall lose the person who owns my heart and do not think… no, it doesn’t matter. I forfeited my rights to his affection, to his regard, when I failed to properly read the situation that was very much of my own making. I behaved in an entirely dishonorable fashion and must suffer the consequences, though they shall span the remainder of my life. My own heart is shattered beyond repair, Sherlock, so you must excuse me if I commit some faux pas that impacts you. I shall… I shall do what I can to remedy the situation should that transpire.”

Sherlock felt an uncharacteristic twinge of sadness for his brother and wished that the situation could have found a different resolution. He had hoped, though he was loathe to admit it, that Mycroft would find a solution to his dilemma and that his brother, and Lestrade, would find some measure of happiness with a life together. Now that it was truly impossible… it did make his own heart ache a little. Before he could say anything, Mycroft drew himself up, shoulders back, and marched to Lestrade’s door, knocking a little too forcefully, and stood waiting for admittance. Which came in the form of John, with a spoon still in his mouth.

“Oh, hi M’kl. Shrwn. Cm n.”

“John! Talk to people politely or… Michael! What are you doing here? Actually, who cares, come in! Here, sit down, we were having a late dinner. John, put two more bowls on the table and take down the other loaf of bread.”

“Gregory, this is not necessary…”

“Sure it is! Gotta keep you fed and well, don’t I? It’s just a little mutton stew, but that one didn’t fill up on as much free food as he thought during their investigation and I had to make do with what we had. Come on, have a seat. What brings you out anyway? I thought you were busy for a couple of days.”

Mycroft hesitantly took a seat at the table and looked, surprisingly, to his brother for strength.
Gregory was glowing… positively radiant with joy and he had to bring a black and impenetrable darkness into the room and wrap his beloved in its shroud.

“I… I had matters I thought best to discuss with you that would be best broached sooner than later.”

“Oh? Ok, well that’s fine. Anything’s fine, actually, so long as it brings you here for a bit of bonus time with me and John. And now that you’re here… we were having a chat, John and I and you can weigh in on it.”

Thankful for a brief reprieve, Mycroft smiled and nodded for Lestrade to continue.

“You see, I figure Sherwin is going to need a bed and John and I thought the carpenter he works for now and then will be a good one to ask to make it for us. He might give the labor as a gift, but we’ll need to pay for the materials. I don’t know what will be the cost, but I’ve got a little put away that should cover things. Does that sound good to you or do you know someone else you would prefer who might build it for us? I’m sure they have carpenters and furniture makers up there in the castle and if you’re friendly with any of them, then that might be another option.”

Most certainly not the brief reprieve for which he was hoping. And dear John… sitting there nodding eagerly. His excitement over what he saw as the future was so clear and real that it stabbed painfully into what was left of Mycroft’s heart.

“Ah… in truth, I had not given the matter any thought. But… that does bring me to the nature of my own conversation, if you do not mind the interruption.”

“Oh? Ok… what’s on your mind, love? Had a rough day? Don’t you worry, I’ve got a little wine we can share and there were a few things in one of those books you brought that I want to discuss with you. We’ll chase your troubles right away, just you wait and see.”

And what a delight that would be as the years wore on… ending a tiring and tortuous day with his man, who gladly took pains to ease his burdens and gave freely of his boundless love. Something, now, he had no hope of ever enjoying…

“Gregory… this is not easy for me. Not easy at all, because I love you dearly and so… so desperately want the future you envision for us…”

Mycroft found himself unable to force out another word, so thick was the bile in his throat.

“Michael? Michael, are you alright? John, get him more water. Sherwin, what’s going on with your brother?”

“He… he… it is about your impending nuptials.”

“Then why does he look like he’s about to faint? Michael, talk to me… what’s wrong?”

Everything. Every possible thing was wrong, most painfully, at this moment, the look of sheer terror on his lover’s face.

“Gregory… I love you with a fire that shall burn eternally. I adore you, admire you, cherish you, desire you… I worship you, my beloved, with more fervency than any priest for their god. But I… I cannot…”

No, Mycroft had been wrong. This was a look of sheer terror on his constable’s face. Colorless, contorted in dread of what the next words would strip from him… it was not fair. This man should
be rejoicing in their love and the new status of that love and now… this was not fair!

“Michael… are you telling me that you don’t want to marry me? Did I do something? Say something?”

Not fair… his beautiful Gregory, with a single tear sliding down his cheek. Young John, frozen in shock and clinging to his father’s arm like the babe he no longer was. It was NOT FAIR! He loved this man, wanted a marriage with him, desired nothing more than to make a family and a life with him and his son… And he could not bear the hurt that was now on his love’s face. The pain that was growing every second he sat silent… He could leave now and endure no more of his Gregory’s pain filling his own worthless eyes. All he had to do was leave. Rise and leave now, taking away his repugnant self and… Gregory would suffer greatly, but it would ease. It would pass in time and his constable could find someone else with whom to be happy. If he cut the cord now, it would be a clean cut. One that would be far less devastating than if he waited. It was the kind option, the respectful option…

“No, that is not my meaning, my beloved. Not at all. Do not believe for a moment I do not desire our espousing; it is simply… may we wait to announce the event?”

Sherlock’s sharp gasp was met by Mycroft’s stern pinch under the table and the prince promised himself a frightening one for himself when he had a moment alone. What was wrong with him?

“W…Wait?”

“Yes, you see… I want this to be a grand time of celebration and greatly desire you garner all the accolades and congratulations you are due. Now, with the king’s birthday on the horizon, the populace’s attentions are already occupied with festivities and… I do not want this announcement to be lost in a celebration not our own. It is just a matter of weeks, my Gregory. Not so long, really, for us to properly enjoy what will be the start of our engagement?”

Sherlock’s gasp was now a choke and Lestrade absentmindedly pushed a cup of water in his direction, the lion’s share of his attention fully focused on Mycroft.

“That… that was what you wanted to talk about?”

No. Not at all. Not in a hundred millennia.

“Yes… I know well your excitement, Gregory. Only this evening spoke with Mrs. Hudson and…”

“Oh! Yeah, I forgot about that. I just thought… I want the best wedding I can give you, Michael, and I’ve no family to help with any of it. And Mrs. Hudson throws a spectacular wedding feast, since she has access to those big kitchens and all that help. I want the future Michael Lestrade to have the very best wedding this city has ever seen.”

Sherlock’s squeaked ‘Michael Lestrade’ completely dispelled the last of Lestrade’s worries and the man leaned back in his chair, ruffled John’s hair and laughed.

“Or whatever we decide. I can be Gregory… you know, I’ve never even asked your surname. That’s fairly shoddy of me, isn’t it? So go on, what is it?”

Mycroft panicked a second then realized that few, if any, remembered the actual surname of the royal family and if they did… well, it was not altogether uncommon.

“Holmes.”
“Gregory Holmes… I like the sound of that. We can decide as the day gets closer, but we will need something to put down in the marriage records.”

“I vote for Lestrade. John Holmes is boring.”

John banged his spoon on the table for emphasis and Sherlock quickly followed suit.

“I must concur. Sherwin Lestrade is a far more pleasing name than Sherwin Holmes, which is also boring.”

Mycroft glared at his brother, who simply shrugged resignedly and looked back with a ‘what do want me to do?’ expression on his face.

“Alright you two, we can have a formal meeting about it later. I… you know, I have to agree with you, love. I hadn’t thought about it, but you’re right. No one’s talking about much but the birthday right now, everyone’s busy getting ready for all the additional trade that’s going to come in and there isn’t much attention to spare for anything else. And I don’t want that. I want it to be like you said – a big celebration where the only focus is us. You’re brilliant! Here I was thinking you were going to call the whole thing off and you were actually trying to make it as special as possible. I love you, Michael Holmes… and not only for your enormous brain.”

Lestrade’s smile lit up the room brighter than the fire and he sent John to get the bottle of wine he had purchased for when Mycroft next visited.

“How about we finish dinner and then spend a little time together. You can stay, right?”

Though he should slink away in shame, Mycroft could not bring himself to forego any time that could be spent with his constable.

“For a small while. I am expected back tonight, but I did not want to meet my pillow without having this conversation with you. Before… word of our joy spread too widely.”

“A small while is perfectly fine with me. Good night for a little conversation before bed. Are you… you’re still coming back day after tomorrow, right?”

If Mrs. Hudson hadn’t disemboweled him by that point.

“Of course. And I shall be able to stay far longer than I am tonight.”

“Really? How much longer?”

“I would greatly enjoy seeing the sunrise with you, Gregory.”

“Oh no, Sherwin… I think this is going to get ugly fast.”

“I quite agree, John. Let us take our bowls upstairs and salvage our appetites. And our digestion.”

“Greg? Is it ok if we eat upstairs?”

Lestrade looked across at Mycroft who was smiling indulgently at the small boy.

“Go ahead. But don’t spill anything.”

“As if you could tell with this floor.”
“Thanks for that, Sherwin. That can be your first job when you move in – giving the floor a proper scrubbing.”

“Your little jokes are funny only to you, Lestrade. Come, John. We may further discuss the results of today’s investigation and plan our next move.”

Sherlock and John sniffed haughtily and brought their bowls and cups up the stairs, serenaded by Lestrade and Mycroft’s laughter.

“It’s going to be a busy house, love. And I am positively overjoyed by that.”

“Oh, life with both Sherwin and John would surely leave one with nary a dull moment.”

“That’s the truth. Well, eat up, Michael and then we can take some time to relax. You can tell me all about your day.”

Well, he could tell Gregory many lies about his day…

“That sounds delightful. You are an exceptional host, my dear.”

“Only when I’ve got the proper inspiration.”

It was a little under three hours from the moment he knocked on Lestrade’s door that Mycroft and Sherlock were saying their goodbyes and reiterating their promise to return soon. Neither Sherlock nor John was surprised, however, when they were evicted to wait outside so Mycroft and Lestrade could have a final and more personal goodbye. Taking Mycroft in his arms, Lestrade gave his lover a kiss that the prince felt down to the tips of his toes.

“I’m glad you came out tonight. Gave me a bit of a fright there, but I’m very glad you did. How in the world did I find someone as clever as you?”

Clever? What a terribly funny jest. There was none so dimwitted as the man currently slated to take the reins the kingdom on which they stood. Clever… until that was synonymous with feeble-minded, the appellation was most unsuitable.

“And how was I so fortunate to find someone as scintillating as the man who currently embraces me with unparalleled gentleness and warmth?”

“Oh, you and your words. You’ll write something won’t you? For the wedding? I mean, there’s the usual droning goings-on we’ll have to suffer through, but you can add things and I’d love it if you’d write something to read at the ceremony. Will you?”

Oh, what was it to promise now that his honor lay bleeding in the street with the rats tearing away slivers of decomposing integrity.

“Without question. I shall scribe you a missive that shall not be forgotten by any who hear it.”

“Yes! Thank you, Michael. That means a lot to me. Actually it means this much to me…”

Lestrade took another kiss from Mycroft’s lips, but let his hands roam, while he pressed his body close to his lover’s. Without the boys waiting outside, Mycroft had no doubt that their passions would have carried them upstairs to end the night in tangled sheets and spent passions.

“I forever labor to bring you joy. Now, however, I must leave your side for awhile. But, I will
not be away for long.”

“Take care of yourself, Michael. I’ve got big plans for you.”

“Plans I gleefully share, my dearest.”

Pulling away before he could get caught again in his constable’s web of seduction, Mycroft walked towards the door and opened it to the predictably-displeased Sherlock and John standing with hands folded across their chests.

“We have been waiting for an eternity. Kindly restrain your lusts in the future so we are not inconvenienced.”

“Of course, Sherwin. Terribly inconsiderate of us. John, do you and Sherwin have plans for tomorrow?”

“No, Sherwin says he has things to do.”

Sherlock pointed to his shirt and Mycroft remembered that they were both scheduled for a fitting for new clothing for the upcoming birthday events.

“Oh yes, how remiss of me to forget. He does have a full suite of tasks to accomplish. Well, in any case, do enjoy your day.”

“Thanks, Michael. Sherwin, I’ll see you later.”

“I shall meet you at the tavern at the appointed hour.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there.”

John nodded soberly at Sherlock, waving as he returned inside the house and Mycroft cocked an eye at his brother as they began to stroll away from the structure.

“Should I be concerned?”

“Not as concerned as you should be when Mrs. Hudson finds out about your failure. What is the matter with you! Have you taken leave of your senses!”

“Hush, Sherlock… the neighbors do not need to hear your shrieking.”

“These are not your neighbors. These are Lestrade’s neighbors and you seem to forget this fact. You are not going to be living in his ramshackle house, you are not going to be his spouse and you are not going to have a shred of dignity remaining if you continue with this farce!”

“I KNOW! Believe me, Sherlock… I am not unaware of that fact.”

“Then what happened? You… you dissolved like snow in boiling water!”

“What could I do? You saw him! So gloriously happy, so trusting and content with the idea of who he believes me to be and what he dreams for our future. You saw him and how that changed when that dream was threatened. My heart froze in my chest, Sherlock. I could not bring him such pain. I love him far too deeply to hurt him so grievously… I had to make it stop. I simply had to make it stop.”

“With more lies! Lies that tangle you further in a growing web of deceit in which, at the center, sits a vile and vicious spider waiting to consume you whole!”
“You do not tell me anything I do not already know.”

“Are you… do you still believe you can somehow salvage this? Do you honestly have faith that you can find a way to keep Lestrade at your side?”

No. Not at all, but that was irrelevant. He would find a way. He would not allow his beloved to suffer. He would make their love something they could celebrate and enjoy for the rest of their years. He would… he had no choice.

“I am committed to nothing less. I do not know what fashion the solution might take, but I will find a way, Sherlock.”

“If it helps, I hope that you do.”

“Truly?”

“Of course. With the distraction Lestrade provides, I am far better able to enjoy my life without your continual stultifying presence.”

“Your romantic side does you credit.”

“Pfft. I spit on your evaluation.”

“I believe that is some form of crime, actually.”

“I already have to scrub floors, why not add streets to my penance.”

“I shall discuss it with Gregory.”

“As if the outcome of that is not guaranteed. I do not appreciate your subversion of justice.”

“One uses whatever tools one has available.”

“I shall remember that for the future.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Very.”
Chapter 10

Sherlock and Mycroft took an alternative route back into the castle, one which avoided any proximity to the kitchens and returned to their rooms, Sherlock to read a new book on poisonous plants and Mycroft to think. Not that he had much hope of that leading in any productive direction. How had he allowed this to occur? Foolish… he had been unutterably foolish. Leapt into a world completely foreign to him with no knowledge of the rules and customs and never once considered the potential consequences. He would not do that when visiting a foreign court… he would research the situation thoroughly so that he clearly understood all customs, nuances and traditions, both formal and informal. Yet, he failed entirely to employ such a strategy in this instance. In hindsight and with the perceptions of someone of his Gregory’s upbringing, it was blinding clear what would be the outcome of his actions and words. For his social strata, courtship and marriage was a lengthy and negotiated process. Love, in truth, was not a factor of consideration. For Gregory’s station… there must surely still exist the marriages of mutual benefit or contrived for family gain, but there was also more opportunity for a wedding born of nothing but love, such as he would now be anxiously anticipating were he Michael Holmes, shoemaker.

Looking around the room, only one of the expansive suite he occupied, the prince closed his eyes and pictured his constable making himself a home in them. Gregory would be agog at the ostentation, the excess, though these rooms were actually quite spare compared to others in the castle, owing to his own taste for simplicity and elegance over superfluous decoration. He would adore the chairs positioned near the fire, so similar in position to those in his own home, but so much more comfortable and enveloping of the body they held. The unlimited availability of wine and food at any hour and of a quality unknown amongst the majority in the city. His own collection of books, separate from that of the main library… volumes of personal interest that he would lovingly share with his dear constable. His Gregory would adore these rooms, both for the comfort and for the amenities and they could be happy here, especially with his love content in the knowledge that his beloved John was similarly privileged.

Could… but how? His original reasons why their relationship could not be experienced fully had not changed. Not a whit. And they were not reasons he could envision a method of changing. Especially not in his current position. A prince could do much, but a prince was not a king. Perhaps… or not… Father would accept him taking Gregory as his lover, but it would have to be a very obvious thing that such was the only role his dear constable played for him. A possession to be taken and used. In no manner, for no reason, in any lifetime was that acceptable. They could not wed, could not produce heirs to the throne and he could not step down from his responsibilities. Sherlock would likely run away to keep from being installed in his place and the instability that would produce was unthinkable. Almost as unthinkable as the result of Sherlock someday taking the throne. He could have his love only in the way he did not want him and, at his moment, he saw no alternative. And even if, for some unimaginable reason, his Gregory consented to a concubine’s life, when he did marry, their relationship would likely be severed anyway. A casual affair might and likely would be tolerated, but a long-term relationship spoke of influence and no queen would permit such a threat to her power.

All it would have taken was strength of character, courage and integrity and these would no longer be worries of import. His Gregory would be in pain, but the pain would be one that would heal in time. Now… the pain he would suffer when the truth won out would be… truly, he could not calculate such a magnitude. And his constable’s status… not a thought had been given to the potential loss of status when it was discovered that he had been tricked. Had been made the fool. That was crippling enough for a man, but for a man of the law it was nearly inexcusable. Would his
job suffer? Likely. He would lose the respect of those he served and that... no. He could not continue to think along these lines. He could not if he ever again hoped to see the sunrise for, at this moment, the thought of a dagger to the heart was not an entirely unpleasant one.

It was no surprise to Mycroft that he had no inclination to sleep that night, nor that Sherlock apparently had the same difficulty. When his brother stormed into his rooms and hurled himself into the empty chair by the fire, Mycroft simply retrieved a book he believed his brother would enjoy, dropped it into Sherlock's lap and let Sherlock join him in reading until a servant arrived to bring breakfast and remind them about their obligations for the day.

“Well?”

“Well what, Sherlock?”

“Have you found a way to resolve your dilemma?”

“No... but I have time. I have purchased for myself the luxury of time and that... I shall not let a moment of that time be wasted.”

“You are again supposed to visit with Lestrade tomorrow night, how are you going to contain your vast cowardice and shame through not only that visit, but the ones that follow? Surely, your subterfuge is wearying?”

That was a very underwhelming term for the situation.

“It is. But, I have little choice if I am to have any hope of gaining the life I want with Gregory.”

Sherlock picked at the food on the tray the servant set on the small table beside his chair and cut his eyes several times at his brother before he finally spoke.

“Then... I shall assist you.”

With Sherlock, a simple statement had best be clarified before one met with a worrying surprise.

“With Gregory?”

“NO! Well... not as such. However, I shall make myself available to assist for matters pertaining to Father’s birthday. Nothing that interferes with John and my time for our investigations, of course, but I am certain you can find some small issues to delegate to me that I shall not find lethally inconvenient.”

Mycroft peered more closely at the figure speaking to him to determine if it really was his brother or if he had been replaced by an imposter. An especially helpful imposter.

“If you are honest in that, then I am deeply grateful. Thank you, Sherlock, that shall be tremendously helpful.”

“Remember, however, that my own life cannot be unduly perturbed.”

“I shall not forget. Today, fortunately, we must simply pose like statues for our new clothing.”

“Ugh. I fail to see why we cannot wear the clothing we already possess. In abundance.”

“It is a mark of status that we have wardrobes bursting with articles of clothing that could each be
used to purchase food for a peasant family for the whole of winter.”

“An interesting shift of perspective. That was not entirely your previous manner of thinking.”

“No… but perhaps I see more clearly certain issues than I did before.”

“Before Lestrade, you mean.”

The helpful imposter apparently possessed a marked impertinent streak.

“Though I may ultimately suffer the remainder of my days as half a man struggling to exist with a broken heart, I can take some comfort that from Gregory I have started to look and learn in ways I had not previously and I believe, in all honesty, it shall be to my credit when I take the throne.”

“If it matters to you, I do think that would please him. He is disgustingly attached to the unwashed citizenry and if he felt he had somehow positively benefitted them it would give him succor. In your goodbye speech, you should emphasize that point.”

“I am hopeful there shall be no farewell address, Sherlock.”

“I, however, do not see the odds being in your favor. I take no pleasure in that, but that is the fact as I perceive it.”

Mycroft set aside his book and let out a long, cleansing sigh.

“I know and I do not have it in me at this time to try and dispel that idea. But I have faith, Sherlock. And I have never met a challenge from which I did not emerge victorious.”

“You have also never stood directly in opposition to Father.”

Yes, there was that.

“And such might not be the proper technique to ensure victory.”

“Perhaps. Regardless, we must make ready for the day. Are we eating our midday meal in here, also?”

“Yes. I believe this is the one location Mrs. Hudson is not likely to spring a surprise assassination attempt.”

“Pfft. She would simply poison your food. Or use one of the herbs about which I was reading that would loosen your bowels in a most amusing fashion.”

“You might be correct. I may have actually to conscript Father’s food taster for the duration of Mrs. Hudson’s irritation.”

“Coward.”

“If you learned the identity of these herbs, Sherlock, so can I.”

“I have grown bored with this conversation.”

“I do apologize. I shall endeavor to be more entertaining in the future.”

“See that you do.”
One long day of garment-makers, various meetings and avoiding Mrs. Hudson left Mycroft tired, but feeling decidedly unfulfilled. The few hours of sleep he gained that night did little to relieve his fatigue or sense of having an infinitesimally-small itch that he could not scratch. By the time Sherlock arrived for their journey to meet John and Lestrade, the prince was nearly aching for his constable’s soothing touch and a night spent quietly in his arms.

With two new books tucked under his arm for his lover to enjoy and a bottle of wine skeptically entrusted to Sherlock’s clutches, the future king stopped in front of Lestrade’s door and found he needed a moment to summon his fortitude before knocking. As greatly as he desired this night, the weight of his lies was beginning to take its toll.

“Michael! You don’t need to knock, love. Come in! And Sherwin, bearing gifts?”

“If you term the vehicle of your chemically-promoted debasement a gift, then yes.”

“Oh, your brother’s got something special on his mind for tonight?”

Lestrade’s purely wicked grin inflamed Mycroft’s senses and dropped Sherlock to his knees, clutching his heart in cardiac distress.

“Oops, better take that wine off you before you die. Hate to have you break the bottle and be buried smelling like the tavern floor.”

Lestrade retrieved the bottle of wine and then turned his wide smile to Mycroft, who felt that persistent edge of dissatisfaction and unease melt away. When he was with his Gregory, all was well…

“And my Michael has something for me, too, it looks like.”

Mycroft handed over the books he had brought and adored how gleefully Lestrade accepted them.

“This is amazing! Truly, Michael, I can’t thank you enough.”

“I shall gladly accept a small token of affection as payment.”

Lestrade’s chuckled and set down the books and wine before taking Mycroft in a tender kiss that the prince felt to his very core.

“Is that enough or am I short on the bill?”

“I am entirely accepting of an installment arrangement for payment.”

“Then consider me in forever in your debt.”

Sherlock crawled away from the nauseating display and towards John, who was trying to carve a piece of wood with his eyes closed to avoid being blinded by the sight of his father’s ardor.

“John, we must flee this den of iniquity.”

“We’re going to be fleeing soon, anyway, so just hold out, Sherwin.”

John’s words caught Mycroft’s attention and he gave Lestrade a curious look.

“Gregory? Do you have an outing planned?”
“As a matter of fact, I do. Now and then a few of the lads get together and play a little music at the tavern and it’s always a good time when they do. Thought we’d make a night of it with the boys. Of course, if that doesn’t sound good to you…”

“That would be delightful, my dear. Such a marvelous idea.”

And it was, at that. An evening of activity and entertainment was a marvelous way to discourage serious conversation about topics upon which he must spin an endless stream of untruths.

“Great! My wages came today, so we can afford to celebrate a little. And then we’ve got a nice bottle of wine waiting for us when we come back. You’re still staying right?”

“Unquestionably. There is nowhere I would rather be than by your side.”

That, at least, was a pure and beautiful truth.

“Me, too.”

This kiss was longer and slightly rougher than the first because two days of denial was beginning to break through both men’s walls of propriety and it was only the very pointed clearing of two young throats that tempered their embrace.

“Should we just go along and leave you two behind to do embarrassing things?’”

“No, John, you evil little thing. How I earned a son so wicked is something I’ve never been able to figure out.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘lucky.’ Now come on, we’re hungry.”

Lestrade heaved a very put-upon sigh and wrapped an arm around Mycroft’s waist.

“Hmmm… what do you think, Michael? Maybe we should just change our minds and stay here for the night. We’ve got bread and… bread to eat. It’s mostly fresh, too.”

John snorted and Sherlock nodded approvingly before marching out after his friend, leaving Lestrade and Mycroft to steal one last kiss before darting off after them, hand in hand…

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“Good heavens, such a gathering.”

Mycroft looked around the tavern, which seemed almost bursting with patrons and marveled at the energy that nearly making the humble establishment glow and hum.

“Once word gets around that there’s free entertainment, people take advantage of it. And the tavern gets a good boost in business, so anytime someone wants to play, the owner is inclined to let them. But… well, I hope you don’t think I’m awful, but… I may have used a little influence and…”

“Would you two come on? People are trying to take our table!”

John waved frantically and Mycroft had to chuckle that Sherlock was already standing by a vacant table snarling at anyone who approached.

“Gregory, did you perhaps have a table set aside for our use?”

“Yeah… I knew it’d be crowded and with the boys, it just seemed the best idea. Do you mind?”
If Lestrade only knew how utterly adorable Mycroft found his lover’s chagrin over this ridiculously mild abuse of power…

“Not at all! I admire your forethought. It would have been beastly minding Sherwin and John while milling about the press of the masses.

The men moved towards the waiting table and joined Sherlock and John who were already sitting and madly waving towards the serving girls to get their attention. As Mycroft removed his jacket, he took in the looks and whispers in their direction and smiled. In court, looks and whispers never had good intent, but here… people were happy. A couple newly in love was cause for celebration, especially when one of that couple was a valued part of the community. An engagement would truly bring joy and Mycroft was not so blind as to misread that very hope on many of the faces that were trying to hide their interest in the just-arrived party.

“This is going to be fun. Good crowd means money and money means the music can go for hours. And… there’s definitely going to be dancing. I hope you’re up for it, love, because I can dance all night…”

Mycroft returned Lestrade’s devilish grin with an almost bashful one of his own. Dancing… he was quite an accomplished dancer for the dances he had been taught, but for an occasion such as this, those skills might not exactly be useful.

“I shall endeavor to keep pace, however… I admit that I am not terribly experienced in the art of dance, so do pardon me if I lack you degree of expertise.”

“Mycr…Michael somewhat resembles an overfatted pig waddling to its feeding trough when he attempts to dance. More than one partner has been fatally crushed beneath his cloven hooves.”

John’s snigger was both for Sherlock’s words and the swat he got from Lestrade for those words, which, further, amused the girl who was waiting to take the happy family’s request. As Sherlock complained of brain damage, Lestrade ordered food and drink and Mycroft again enjoyed the experience of not having to be the one in charge. It was blissfully refreshing to have his Gregory tend to matters and leave him free to simply observe and absorb.

“So, Michael… how goes the shoemaking? Staying busy?”

“Very, actually. With the impending celebrations there is much to do, so much so, in fact, that Sherwin has graciously volunteered to assist me.”

“Did you have to drug him to get him to say that?”

“Not quite, but I may have to implement that action in order to assure his continued adherence to that promise once he is actually tasked with duties to perform.”

“Nah… he’s a good kid, he’ll do what he said he’ll do. You know, you can always have John if you need another pair of hands.”

An offer that would be gratefully accepted if there was any possibility it could be.

“I shall keep that in mind. And I do promise not to monopolize Sherwin’s time to the point where he is neglectful of John.”

“I am holding you to the very letter of that accord, Michael! I have far more important matters to tend to than your pointless obligations and burdens.”
Sherlock punctuated his pronouncement with a stolen drink of Mycroft’s ale, which produced the same choking as for Mycroft’s wine, but this time it was John who managed to alleviate the young prince’s brush with death with a few solid poundings on the back.

“That’ll teach you to steal, you little bastard. Oh, they’re getting ready to start playing.”

Mycroft followed Lestrade’s wide and excited eyes to where the musicians were picking up their instruments and drinking the last of their ale. At home, he could have music at any time, but for his love, this was a less common occurrence and one he obviously treasured. How wonderful it would be to allow his Gregory the pleasure of music at the wave of a hand…

There had never been as festive a gala in the castle as the one in this small tavern. Mycroft was agog at the enthusiasm that permeated the space and how he actually felt a part of it. Normally he was at distance from the frivolity, approached cautiously for conversation by the attendees, but here… here individuals and couples freely visited their table, drawing up chairs to talk to his beloved Gregory and, without hesitation, him. Silly, funny, friendly conversation that was absolutely enthralling. Michael Holmes was gladly welcomed into the constable’s sphere and embraced as the man who sat at the constable’s side and in that guise, Mycroft Holmes was thrilled with the timbre of the evening. Until, that is, the inevitable arose and his Gregory stood, extended a hand and beckoned him to dance.

“Oh Gregory… I do not know if this is wise. Perhaps someone else would make for you a better partner.”

“Stop talking rubbish and let’s get started. Sherwin and John are already having a go and you can’t let them upstage us, can you?”

Another thing which amused Mycroft greatly. Somehow, John had convinced Sherlock to join the patrons dancing in the space that had been cleared specifically for that purpose and whether together or singly, the two boys had taken advantage of the opportunity to work off some of their nearly inexhaustible energy.

“Very well, but promise to cast me aside if I bring you dishonor.”

Lestrade’s rude noise was lost in the start of a new tune and the quick spin he led Mycroft through as they began to dance to the lively piece the musicians were playing. And, as Lestrade happily took the lead, Mycroft found it was not difficult to follow the steps and do justice to his partner.

“See, you’re an amazing dancer, Michael! I could dance with you until dawn.”

“It is your proficient tutelage that deserves the praise, my beloved.”

Lestrade spun Mycroft again and took a kiss from his lips as a new piece began and he launched into a new set of steps for Mycroft to follow. The prince smiled and let his mind wander to a place where his constable was dressed in the finest of clothing, and dancing with him in the castle ballroom. They would shame every other couple in attendance. But, and this was a crucial fact, he would not enjoy that dance any more than he was enjoying this one. The fine clothes, the jewels and wealth… none of it could make his Gregory shine any more brightly than he already did…

“You know… we’ll have to start thinking. Do you want dancing for the party after the wedding? Some people like things a bit more serious, but I always thought a little fun was more appropriate.”
Mycroft would want dancing that went on until long after sunrise. Dancing and gaiety to celebrate the most joyful day of his life and then a full day in bed to continue the celebrations in a more private manner with his bridegroom.

“A momentous occasion should be enjoyed in every possible way and I would be honored to celebrate such an occasion by dancing in your arms.”

So brilliant a smile for so brilliant a man. How could he ever dim that glorious light? A way… there had to be a way to continue to stand bathed in that brilliance…

“Yes! One of Mrs. Hudson’s incredible feasts, then music and dancing… it’ll be a grand day, love. Truly a day worthy of you and how much I love you.”

And if that day could occur, it would be an event that would shake the kingdom like an earthquake. The marriage of a Crown Prince was a seminal occurrence in the history of a dynasty and would shape the direction that dynasty would take. It would be a stiflingly formal affair and a lengthy one, but if he could share it with his Gregory, it would be a blessed time. If… the sticking point that he must find a method to overcome.

“I, also, am fantastically eager for that day, my dear, and look forward greatly to the moment I can proclaim publicly that you are the man I adore above all others and choose to keep in my heart for the entirety of our years.”

Not a lie, not any of it a lie. That much he could state with complete honesty… and taking his lover firmly in his arms he tried to emphasize just how honest was his response. The prince let his constable lead him through another dance and then another and another, until the time seemed to stand still, frozen in this perfect moment. The happy couple danced and laughed and kissed and it was such a freeing experience that Mycroft began to forget he was Mycroft and believe he was Michael. A simple man with a simple life that was as fulfilling as he could ever wish and it was with some regret that they took a break from dancing to rest and refresh.

“This is intolerable!”

And be assailed by Sherlock’s personal evaluations of their evening.

“Oh, and for what reason. I am finding this a glorious evening.”

“That is because you have no ear for music, Mycr… Michael. Or your fat blocks the ear canals and renders them dysfunctional. The screeching of a cat is a symphony to you.”

“Yet, you appeared content to enjoy that screeching and use it as a backdrop for your own dancing experience.”

“Pfffttt… you are grossly mistaken.”

“Despite your belief, I do possess functional senses and employed them to witness that very thing.”

“I challenge your statement with the clear evidence that you appreciate this lackluster musical performance, indicating faulty hearing, are suffering visual hallucinations, indicating an inability to trust your vision, and your uninspiring choice of paramour, indicating an inability to credit your evaluation of objects you actually experience truthfully.”

“Sherwin, is it impossible for you to be nice to your brother? We’re going to have to work on that when you’re living with me.”
Sherlock opened his mouth to fire a reply at Lestrade, then thought better of it since... stupid Mycroft and his lack of spine. The man-worm had ensured that any comment could bring his own comfortable circumstances into a very dangerous area. Nothing could be allowed to damage his relationship with John. It was too important...

“And if you don’t like the music, go and do something about it.’’

“Oh, future-constable Lestrade, are you advocating mass murder, for that is the only method I can envision for rectifying this deplorable situation.”

“Then I guess you’re not as smart as you think you are. Follow me.”

Not that Lestrade gave Sherlock a choice, grabbing his shoulders and marching the young boy forward in front of him. Towards the musicians.

“Michael, I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Yes, John… I find that I concur.”

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“Why have you kidnapped me?”

“Not a kidnapping, just an opportunity.”

Lestrade motioned one of the musicians over and had a whispered chat with the man that ended with both of them smiling down at an irritated Sherlock.

“Alright, Sherwin, have fun.”

“What?”

Lestrade walked backwards a few steps, grinning evilly at the young prince, who found himself being handed a small fiddle-like instrument and bow. From his seat, Mycroft felt his heart clench from the rush of adrenaline seeing what his beloved had set in motion. If John hadn’t been cheering and Lestrade hadn’t stood behind him and wrapped strong arms around his shoulders, he might have leapt up to spirit his brother away from the makeshift stage.

“Calm down, love. You’re tight as a drum.”

“Gregory, you do not know my brother…”

“It’s going to be ok, Michael. I promise.”

Mycroft leaned back into Lestrade’s embrace and could only pray he was correct. Looking at Sherlock, who was still staring at the instrument in his hands, that prayer was an ardent one. At least his brother was not snapping at the man who was talking to him and when he was given the nod, Sherlock put his instrument under his chin and began to play a surprisingly jolly tune that, in a few seconds, the rest of the musicians joined in to accompany him.

“See, Michael? You told me he was good and I knew you wouldn’t say that if it wasn’t true. Look at him, he’s fantastic!”

And he was. Mycroft knew Sherlock was extremely talented, but he had never seen his brother living his music this way. He began the tune alone and as the other musicians joined, they added to it and Sherlock modified his original piece according to the new flow of the music and the others
responded to him in turn. Against his normal tendency to demand his way for all things, Sherlock participated as a dynamic part of a whole in a manner entirely new for him and it both astounded and mesmerized Mycroft, who found himself humming and tapping his feet along with music.

“Sherwin’s amazing!”

John was nearly dancing in his chair and staring wide-eyed at his friend. As the first song ended, the second began and this time it was Sherlock who joined in after the first few bars, adding his own unique twist to the tune. With couples starting to rise to dance, Lestrade tapped Mycroft on the shoulder and held out his hand.

“Shall we?”

“Absolutely.”

Mycroft gladly took his constable’s offer and fell again into his embrace as they danced to music that, in Mycroft’s completely unbiased opinion, measurably possessed a greater level of quality than it had before. Looking over his love’s shoulder, he had to laugh at John grabbing the hand of a tall serving girl and dancing for the remainder of the song, although he scarcely reached her waist. As yet another tune began, John moved through the crowd and sat on the floor near the musicians to stare transfixed at Sherlock as he played.

“I think John approves of my brother’s abilities.”

“I think John approves of your brother, abilities or not. But yeah… he does seem like he’s seeing something magical, doesn’t it? Makes sense because that’s what it is… magic. Sherwin’s a bloody witch with that thing. Does he get to play often?”

Mycroft thought and tried to remember when anyone had actively and honestly praised his brother for his musical talent and could bring no occasion to mind.

“He does, in point of fact, though in solitude. There are none who would play in ensemble with him, however, so this is a singular event.”

“Lad has true talent… and I can already tell you that he’ll be asked to join in again next time they decide to play. Not everyone can keep up with this lot and Sherwin’s doing it easily. I tell you, when those great carriages start arriving for the king’s birthday, he should be out on the street playing. Lad could earn a nice bit for himself with that talent.”

And greet their guests in the process. It would actually be more than Sherlock had ever done in the past…

“I shall suggest to him that very thing. And I am certain John would be very forceful in drawing in the audience for Sherwin’s performances.”

“He would! John would be dragging them over and shaking them up and down for loose coins. I tell you, with some thought, those two could have a nice business together.”

What a wonderful thing that would be. Sherlock and John with the run of the castle and grounds, every possible diversion available to them, including any of their own making, which would likely be the lion’s share of their entertainment. John would be installed in a suite next to Sherlock’s own so the boys could craft their own private world and establish a base camp to explore the larger world outside their doors. Not that this was more than wishful thinking at this point, however…

“I daresay you are correct. They would grossly shame us in terms of income, though I am not
entirely certain what proportion of their fortune would be gained through entirely ethical means.”

Lestrade laughed and kissed Mycroft’s lips, touching his cheek with roughened fingers and whispering ‘not a lot’ in his ear. After the kiss, Lestrade ran his hand slowly down Mycroft’s long neck and across his shoulder, giving the prince a smile that promised much once the evening of music was completed. Another night in his lover’s small bed, with the boys nearby… his Gregory had termed it properly. A family. It had always been he and Sherlock as the family unit, since Mummy and Father had little time for their rearing, but now… this was the life of a true family and the thrill of that was positively exhilarating. And as they continued to dance, watch Sherlock perform, which showed no sign of stopping, and enjoy the tavern’s bracing ale, Mycroft let go completely his princely alter ego and lived, for those final hours, as Michael Holmes, soon-to-be-husband of Gregory Lestrade and the most joyful man under the sun.

Sherlock’s sweat-covered self calmly drank his water, as well as John’s effusive praise.

“You’re brilliant!”

“True.”

“Really, Sherwin, you’re… fantastic!”

“Also, true.”

“No, I mean it… that was amazing!”

“And, again, you state the obvious.”

Mycroft and Lestrade watched the boys with indulgent eyes and felt enormous pride that when the musicians called the night complete, Sherlock was barraged by admirers and words of praise, all of which, at first, seemed to confuse and overwhelm the boy but, as his confidence returned full-flower, so did his façade of unbreakable arrogance. There was no denying, however, Sherlock’s remarkable performance and the right and proper appreciation it was given, nor the extreme, albeit secretive, glee Sherlock gained from the accolades.

“John’s right, Sherwin, you did yourself proud tonight. Just wonderful the way you fell in with the lads and gave their music a little extra something. Going to play with them again? About once every few weeks or so, they give it a go…”

Mycroft could see Sherlock’s eyes light up, then slowly fade to shadows, making the Crown Prince’s heart began to break into a thousand pieces.

“I… I do not know. I would like to, because they surely need my assistance not to find themselves hounded out of the city like the criminals they are, however… it shall depend on many factors not subject to my control.”

Lestrade frowned and looked at Mycroft who stumbled for a reply.

“You see… it is difficult for Sherwin to anticipate when his… his time is called upon infrequently, but when it is, there is no challenging the request. However, I shall do my utmost to ensure that this opportunity is repeated as frequently as he might wish. Or, at minimum, as often as is feasible.”

Mycroft’s hopeful smile to Sherlock was met with tightly narrowed eyes and a scowl that was
quickly packed away before it drew unwanted attention from Lestrade and John.

“Oh. Yeah, that makes sense, but I hope he gets to play often because… did you see how much people loved it! Lucky us that we’ll get to hear him play whenever he wants to…”

Lestrade and John were nearly beaming with delight over this new addition to their home and it was all Mycroft could do to keep his own smile on his face. If he could not find some acceptable resolution to this situation, his partner and young John were going to suffer horribly from his failure…

“Yes, it is a gladdening time when Sherwin fills the night with music. Now, are we prepared to depart? Gregory? Do you desire further refreshment?”

“God no, I haven’t indulged to his extent in a long time. You’ll be lucky if I don’t wobble on the way home.”

Actually, Mycroft did hope for a little wobble, as it would simply be more excuse to hold his lover tightly as they walked. And his Gregory did look slightly intoxicated… a look he wore exceedingly well, truth be told.

“Very well, Sherl… Sherwin, are you sufficiently rested to walk?”

“As if I would not be. I am possessed of incredible stamina.”

“Of course. John?”

“I’m ready. Sherwin and I have things to do and it’s already late to get started.”

Sherlock’s ears pricked up at that and rubbed his hands eagerly, causing Mycroft and Lestrade to share a mutual grimace of worry.

“Very well. My dear, shall we?”

Lestrade nodded and slowly got to his feet, already showing a little wobble, now that the alcohol was happily making itself at home in his bones as the adrenaline from the dancing ebbed away and Mycroft chuckled as the boys sprinted along ahead and he was left with the privilege of walking, hand in hand, out of the tavern and along the streets with his slightly unsteady lover.

“Michael?”

“Gregory?”

“I just wanted to say… well, I love you. I love you so much I… I can’t… I can’t express how wonderful everything is when you’re with me doing it. This has been the most… I’ve not had nights like these, not until I met you. I mean, yeah, I’ve had a lot of fun in my life. Ok, *some* fun, but with you, it’s like I’ve never had *any* fun. Ever. Or smiled so much. Or laughed. Everything I’ve always wanted… it’s you. For me *and* for John. I worried a lot, you know, about finding someone and having them not take to John or the other way around. That would mean, no matter what I felt for them, I’d have to let them go because if that person couldn’t be a real family with me and my son, then they weren’t the person for me. But then I meet you and… everything just… you *are* the one for me, Michael. I just wanted you to know that. I sound stupid don’t I? I’m sorry… I’m sure that doesn’t make sense and that’s not right because you deserve me making sense when I say things like that and…”

“Heavens, Gregory… calm yourself. I would say your words sound like a dream I never knew I
possessed that has suddenly come true in the most spectacular manner possible. I can attest that for each word you uttered, I found myself in perfect agreement. I love you desperately and know that the blending of our lives will be wonderfully harmonious, both as a couple and a family.”

“Really?”

“Did you doubt?”

“No, but I thought my dumb speech might have changed your mind.”

“That is not, in any manner, possible. Besides, I find that you are exceedingly adorable with the flush of inebriation on your cheeks and the open honesty of your slightly intoxicated mind.”

“I’m a cute drunk?”

“Very.”

“That’s sweet. I think I’ll marry you.”

“What a delightful idea. We may discuss the issue in more detail when we are safely nestled beneath the blankets of the bed we shall share this night.”

“Can I lock the door?”

“Hmmm… there should be a valid reason for taking such action.”

“I’ll lick you in places you don’t even know you have.”

“You may lock the door.”
Chapter 11

Mycroft lay in Lestrade’s bed, completely boneless and sated, soaking up the soothing heat his partner emitted like a campfire. His Gregory had definitely provided his promised licks, as well as strokes, sucks, caresses, squeezes and a host of other things that made his orgasm one that felt it would shatter his bones.

And then he did it again.

“You’re absolutely beautiful when you’re like this, Michael. You’re beautiful all the time, of course, but right now, there’s a peace about you that… well, if I wasn’t so tired, we’d be starting on Round 3.”

“I do believe that would take from me the very last of my life, though I would expire with a smile upon my lips, so I would deem it an agreeable fate.”

“I was thinking that when we get a bed for Sherwin, I should see about a larger one for us. I know this one is small and…”

“There is nothing to deplore about a small bed, Gregory. In something too large, you might roll away from me while I slept and that surely would inspire nightmares.”

“Well, can’t have that now, can we? Ok, we’ll keep this one for now, but…”

Lestrade rolled onto his back, which, Mycroft had to admit, did put him nearly spilling over the side of the mattress. More worrying, however, was the look on his lover’s face.

“Gregory?”

“I’ve been an idiot.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“No, I have. I never even… I’m so sorry, Michael! I never even asked if you wanted to live here! Or could live here! Can you? You don’t have to live up in the castle, do you? Or do you? And I just assumed that Sherwin would come with you, but… fuck! I don’t even know if both your parents are alive! I’m… I am so sorry, Michael. I haven’t taken any time to learn about your life and I can’t… I’m going to make a horrible husband!”

Mycroft’s heart stuttered at his partner’s distress and he quickly moved to pull Lestrade towards the bed’s center and drop his own form on top of his lover’s body.

“You will stop that foolish prattle this instant. First off, do you believe I would not inform you, and in no uncertain terms, if I did not choose to make this my home?”

The sourness from the deceit in those words made Mycroft’s stomach turn, but he would not let his constable suffer from such a ridiculous notion for a single minute.

“And, yes, both of my parents are alive do live in the castle, however, they have their own matters to which to attend and Sherwin’s rearing has been left almost exclusively in my hands since… well, since it was feasible for me to do so.”

Since Sherlock sent every possible nurse and nanny stomping away from their employment in anger,
was closer to the truth.

“Where I go, so shall he until he is of age to follow his own will. However…”

The subject at hand was certainly ripe to follow and conversation was so much more productive when one had the full and intimate attention of one’s partner.

“… while I do find great comfort in your home and have enjoyed my times here immensely, as we consider consolidating our lives, would relocation be something you would consider?”

Lestrade’s slightly confused frown didn’t worry Mycroft unduly, but it did put him on alert.

“To the castle?”

Some hesitation and concern in his lover’s voice, but nothing to prompt undue concern. And, though the castle was their most likely option, there was some possibility of a private residence until Father’s passing forced them back behind the castle gates.

“It would not be impossible.”

“Oh. But, I thought you said your digs were worse than mine?”

“Perhaps I could see them improved.”

Not a lie. His Gregory, should it be possible, would enjoy luxuries beyond his imagination and all of them lovingly given by the man savoring the feel of his muscular body and the heat it emitted in abundance.

“I… I hadn’t thought about that. This has been my home forever, but I guess the same is true for you and the castle. Right?”

“Yes, I have lived there since I was born.”

“Oh, then I’d be a complete ass for not thinking about moving there. Your home is as important to you as mine is to me and… yeah, it’d definitely be something I’d be willing to talk about. With Sherwin and John, too, because they’re part of the decision. Now that I think about it… maybe that would be a better option for John, actually. I mean, look at the opportunities! All of those books, and if Sherwin was able to get lessons, then John could, too. This has been a good home for us and it’s been in my family for a very long time… I worked myself near to death to keep it, but if it can’t give John the best opportunities for his future, then I’d be completely selfish not to consider giving it up.”

Mycroft could hear the conflicting emotions in his lover’s voice and felt a true anger at himself for letting this glorious man suffer one instant for something that was not relevant at the moment anyway. If he could not make their relationship succeed, then this pain and mental trouble was simply cruel.

“It is not a matter for consideration at this moment, Gregory, so do not distress yourself. We shall speak more of it as the time approaches and, quite rightly, include both Sherwin and John in that discussion. Remember always, my dear, I want only what will make you happy. I wish for nothing but your comfort and security and the best for the bonds of our incipient family. We shall come to the wisest and most beneficial decision, my love… do not despair that we shall not.”

Mycroft leaned his head down and kissed Lestrade’s lingering frown until it was washed from his constable’s lips.
“You’re right… I guess I got a little carried away, didn’t I?”

“Not an unexpected condition for a decision of such significance. In truth, I had not given this my full consideration, either, but now that we are both alerted to the situation, we can apply a more systematic approach to its study and resolution. Begin to ponder the benefits and detriments and, certainly, a clear pattern shall emerge. But that is an activity for another day. For now, rest yourself, for tomorrow shall come quite early.”

“Don’t remind me. At least I didn’t drink enough to make the morning a misery.”

“You exhibited admirable forethought.”

“No, I just remembered that if I drank any more ale, we might be eating leaves and bugs for the next week. It’ll be nice when I’m officially the constable and have the wages to go with the job. Put food on the table and have some extra to enjoy a few more nights out than normal with my Michael.”

Lestrade ran his hands up and down Mycroft’s back and the prince luxuriated a moment in the feel of being wanted, something he had never experienced before meeting his Gregory and now… now it was something he was not at all certain he could survive without.

“I am not lacking funds of my own, Gregory. Do not forget that I shall also contribute to the household coffers and our conjoined funds should provide for those extra amenities that are now scarce in our lives.”

Truth. He would make a more concerted effort to fund his portion of the entertainments when they enjoyed nights away from home. Gregory’s instincts might drive him to feel a responsibility to be the provider for their currently-fictional family, but he would come to understand that he would be loved, valued and respected just as much in their, hopefully, real family as he was now, though their means were incalculably disparate. And he did have a scarcity of amenities in his life as the one he most prized, time with his beloved, was in short supply.

“I won’t forget. I guess… it’s been only me and John for so long, with everything on my shoulders that I’m just used to always thinking that way. You’re welcome to knock me on the head when I’m being daft, though. Anytime you want. Just don’t dent my skull too badly. I’d hate to have to start wearing hats to hide my lumps.”

“I shall be very delicate in my chastisements. Now, do you feel sufficiently calm to sleep?”

“Ummmm… if I say yes, does that mean you’ll stop being my human blanket?”

“It means I shall simply accomplish the task from a slightly different position.”

“Ok then, I’m ready for some rest.”

“Excellent. And, Gregory… do enjoy the most pleasant of dreams.”

“You’re here, love. Those are the only dreams I can have.”

“Arise!”

Lestrade opened a very heavy eye to stare at a duet of scowls bearing down on him from above.

“How in the hell did you two get in here? I’m certain I locked that door.”
"Pfft. As if I could not circumvent your pathetic lock."

"Sherwin… ok, new house rule. When that door’s locked, you knock if you need something and you do not pick it and stroll in without asking. And you only knock if profuse bleeding or death is involved."

"It is not as if I wish to smell the stink of your carnal behavior, but we have a vital issue to discuss."

John nodded solemnly and Lestrade opened a second eye, which, if anything was heavier than the first. Second new house rule… no drinking in excess when he couldn’t sleep late in the morning.

"Ok, what is it?"

"We desire breakfast."

Third house rule, anyone under the age of fifteen was going to be executed as soon as he found some trousers.

"Then why are you talking to me instead of eating?"

"Your attempt at a jest last evening has been found not to be a jest. You possess bread and more bread. Nothing else."

Fantastic.

"John, you know where the money is. Go and buy some butter for your bread."

"And?"

"And what, Sherwin?"

"I desire something sweet. And hot porridge. This hovel is intolerably cold."

"One, I don’t have time to make porridge. Two, it's not cold. Three, if you can find someone selling honey, we could do with a bit, so you can buy that."

"Appalling. No porridge or meat or fruit. I shall perish."

"And we've got a big day planned, Greg. How are we supposed to get things done if our stomachs are rumbling the whole time?"

Lestrade pinched the awake and now laughing Mycroft on the thigh and signed loudly.

"Fine. Get cheese, too. And John chooses it. I don't need to spend the last of my wages on some fancy cheese you stole a taste of in the castle, Mr. Musician."

The boys loudly huffed their annoyance and marched out of the bedroom to begin their errand.

"Ok, you liar. Open those eyes."

Mycroft complied and offered his most sweet and innocent grin as an apology.

"Good morning, my dear. What an early hour you choose to wake me."

"Did you teach him how to pick locks?"
Yes.

“Of course not. Sherwin is a child possessed of many interests and the determination to pursue them.”

“And, again, you’re a liar. Well, at least we’ll have an actual breakfast now. I’ve been too busy to buy food or remember to ask John to do it for me. Looks like I’ve got some work to do today to make the house inhabitable.”

Another thing new to the prince. Food came to the castle… Mrs. Hudson did not have to go in search of it.

“I would gladly assist, however, my day is replete with obligations that I cannot set aside.”

“I know you would, Michael. Actually, I may just set John and Sherwin to do it for me. They should be able to find time, in the midst of whatever insane plans they’re hatching for the day. Besides, they’ll probably find a new set of things to get in trouble over running through the vegetable stalls.”

Mycroft laughed again picturing his brother stalking like a dark spectre through the vegetable sellers, narrowly avoiding escaped chickens bent on his destruction for his slanderous comments about the infamous Sweet Jenny.

“They shall proudly accomplish the task you set for them, I am certain. And, as I have now heard the gentle slamming of the door to your lovely residence, shall we make the most of our time alone?”

Mycroft crawled back on top of Lestrade and gave his lover what he sincerely hoped was an alluring grin.

“Boys out of the house means we can actually make a little noise, too. I think making the most of our alone time is the best idea I’ve heard today.”

“Then let us give a performance to put Sherwin’s music to shame.”

“Our own private concert…”

“The very best kind.”

It was only by a small margin that Mycroft and Lestrade’s morning activities missed being intruded upon by Sherlock and John’s return, but the older pair met the younger one downstairs in a mostly-composed state of dress and grooming.

“Here. Food. Cook.”

“And here I thought you were an educated boy, Sherwin. All those small words are making me start to think differently.”

“Verily, herein exists another – Fool.”

“Ha ha. And, to think, I was going to the trouble of making something nice and hot to drink since you said you were cold. Maybe I’ll just make enough for me and Michael to enjoy, instead.”

“As if I want a cup of your boiled herbs, twigs and witchcraft.”
“I’ll go easy on the witchcraft for your tender tummy.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and shared a look with John before depositing their purchases on the table. Feeling like he should make some contribution, Mycroft pulled the food towards him and began crafting it into a meal with the bread that had already been laid out on the table. Sherlock and John hopped into their chairs and stared at the prince like hungry wolves as he cut their bread and slathered the slices thickly with butter and honey, though, after seeing the widened eyes and ecstatic smile on John’s face, the Crown Prince realized he might have used a bit of a heavy hand with the condiments. Luckily, the boys gobbled their food so quickly that Lestrade didn’t notice the extravagance. The second slice was far more meagerly provided, much to Sherlock and John’s disappointment.

With hot beverages to invigorate them and food to strengthen them, the boys announced their departure to search for some of the specimens from Sherlock’s book of poisonous plants, but were allowed to leave only after they gave their word that no plant would be tasted, applied topically to the skin, fed to the unwary, rubbed on the unwary, brought home and left where they might accidentally be mixed into any meals or brought home and intentionally mixed with any meals. After the two had raced off to start their explorations, Mycroft and Lestrade enjoyed a more leisurely breakfast and neither was happy when Mycroft announced it was time he, too, departed.

“Will I see you again soon, Michael?”

Mycroft sent his brain forward into the future and was not happy with the information it returned and delivered.

“I am afraid it might be some time before I can easily get away. These next several weeks shall be abominably cluttered with duties to perform and obligations to meet; however, I promise to make myself available whenever it is possible.”

“I know you will, love. And don’t worry what time of day it might be. I’m either here or at the watch house most of the time and I’d love to see morning, afternoon or night. And it’s only for a little while longer until we won’t have to worry about this anymore, so I’m not concerned.”

Mycroft had done a very good job of putting his true reality out of his mind between last night and this morning, but now it fell back onto his shoulders with a painful crash.

“No, we have little time remaining before this is but a memory and we may move on to the next phase of our lives together. I must leave now, Gregory, but there shall not be a moment you are not in my thoughts.”

“And you’ll be in mine. One last kiss?”

“I believe the occasion calls for it.”

“Maybe two?”

“If you are good, there might be three.”

“Then good I shall be.”

The Crown Prince deftly avoided detection getting into the castle and hurried to his rooms to change into more appropriate clothing. The very last person he hoped to encounter was his father, so, of course, that was whom he found sitting in a chair in his rooms and favoring his son with a knowing
“Ah, Mycroft. I wondered if you might put in an appearance today. May I inquire as to your whereabouts last night?”

Fortunately, the king’s mind did not often turn to his youngest son unless there was screaming or flames, so Sherlock’s actions were not in question.

“I…”

“And do not attempt to dissemble.”

“Very well. I spent the evening at a tavern in the city.”

“Evening. Which ended quite some time ago. Would you care to put some detail to the remainder of the hours you were not at home?”

“If you are asking, then I shall say that I do not care to do so.”

Mycroft had no idea how to respond to his father chuckling merrily at his pronouncement, so opted for the safest choice of staying silent.

“My son… I had truly despaired of seeing you bloom into a man, but now I may rest easy. I did not believe your mother was lying, per se, when she notified me of your, shall we say, change in behavior, but I did hope to bear witness to some evidence myself. Just remember to use good judgment, Mycroft, and if anything seems… amiss… see the court physician immediately. Most of those little problems can be treated easily if you catch them early enough. You may take my word for that.”

The Crown Prince had never fantasized about taking a pike to the heart, but that image was filling his mind quite nicely at the moment.

“Yes, Father. I will.”

“Excellent. And son… I know I rarely thank you for what you do and how capably you perform your duties, but I am aware of the fact that, in addition to your usual affairs, my birthday celebration falls upon your shoulders each year and I do know how tirelessly you work to make that celebration an enjoyable one for me and my guests. I want you know that I am very grateful for your efforts and they shall be rewarded.”

Now that was a very interesting turn. It was rare his father offered thanks for anything and to be so open with his praise was rarer still. And, though his father’s rewards carried the burdens of memorizing a new title, tending new lands and managing an increased number of tenants, it was good practice for later when all of his father’s holdings passed to his hands.

“Thank you, Father.”

“Now, you have a busy day ahead of you, I am certain, so I shall leave you to prepare for it.”

The king rose and walked to the door, stopping next to his son first to give him a highly unexpected hug.

“And, do allow yourself some time in the coming days to relax, son. Life is not worth living if you do not leave yourself any time to enjoy it.”
When the door closed behind the king, Mycroft finally felt it was safe to breathe again and let out a long one to purge his body of the bounty of fatherly advice. Though he did have to admit that the last piece was sound. Life was not worth living if you did not stop to partake of the wonders that surrounded you. He had not fully realized this simple fact until he met his beloved and now… now it seemed painfully obvious.

A quick wash and fresh clothes and the prince was ready for a new day of his normal duties, in addition to the birthday preparations. It was only a week until the first of the guests were slated to arrive and there was so much to do before then. But… he would take Father’s advice and not lose sight of what made his life truly worth living…

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The next few weeks were terribly difficult for Mycroft and Sherlock both, but the drudgery and frustration of planning an elaborate and highly-attended royal celebration was ameliorated by the time they could find to spend with Lestrade and John. Sherlock, of course, could do this more often and for a longer duration each visit, but Mycroft did his best not to neglect his partner. A few hours in the evening here, a morning there… the uncommon, but treasured full night in his lover’s embrace. They spoke of much and let their bodies say what was best said through touch and pleasure. When the day arrived for the first event of the celebration, the birthday banquet, Mycroft made a point of visiting Lestrade that afternoon to help soothe his own frazzled nerves.

“Good god, love, have you even slept?”

“Not a great deal, if I am to be honest.”

“Why in the world are they working you so hard? They can’t need that many shoes!”

Oh yes… shoes.

“I have found myself conscripted for a greater-than-normal number of tasks this year. My skills… there are other areas in which I can contribute and it has been both my privilege and my burden to do so.”

“My poor Michael. But it’s almost over. The banquet’s tonight, right? And the ball tomorrow?”

“Yes. Then there are a myriad of smaller affairs that span a week more.”

“I wish I could see it; it must be amazing to see all of that happen. John and Sherwin have been making the most of things, though. They earned a good amount from the guests when they arrived and still make a nice amount of coin from the soldiers and attendants when they get into the city. And it’s just like you suggested. Sherwin’s been playing music and John draws the attention of the nobles in their carriages and the soldiers on foot. John does a bit of dancing, too, and… you should see it. They fashioned a little outfit for Sherwin with a big hat they borrowed from the milliner and a mask they made themselves, so Sherwin looks very mysterious. I think it’s really helps their business.”

Lestrade laughed and Mycroft gave his brother a silent nod of admiration for his cleverness.

“I believe they can fund our next evening out, in that case.”

“I’ll remember that! But… it’s getting late. You have to leave, don’t you?”

“Alas, but I do. I still have much to do before the banquet begins, but I had to see you, my beloved. It is perhaps selfish of me, but you are my source of strength and I felt I must sip from the
head of the spring before I faced the rest of my day.”

Lestrade smiled softly and took Mycroft in a gentle embrace, kissing him so slowly and tenderly that the prince was certain he could feel his flesh and bone melting into a contented pool of bliss.

“And I’ll be that for you whenever you need it, Michael. Now, get out of here before I throw you out.”

This time it was Mycroft who laughed and stepped back to give his partner a deep bow.

“Oh, of course, Highness. I shall see you soon.”

“I’m counting on it.”

Mycroft turned to leave and tutted his partner for the saucy swat his bottom received before he strolled out the door. This is what he had sorely needed, a few stolen moments with his Gregory to put his body and soul aright. Now… he simply had to survive the birthday banquet…

“MYCROFT! WAIT!”

The Crown Prince had barely kept his legs to walking pace as he left the banquet hall, but once through the massive doors, he tore at full tilt towards his rooms with Sherlock scrambling to keep pace. As soon as he reached his chambers, Mycroft slammed the doors behind him, Sherlock barely making into the rooms in time to avoid being locked out like the rest of the world.

“Mycroft?”

“Not now, Sherlock.”

Perhaps not ever. The pain… he had never felt anything so crushing…

“Did you know? Father’s announcement…”

The hair on the back of Sherlock’s neck nearly stood on end hearing the rough and brittle laugh his brother forced out at his question.

“What do you think?”

Mycroft threw himself into his favorite chair and wondered if he had enough wine in his rooms to drink himself to death. Sherlock took the other chair, then reconsidered and moved to sit on the arm of this brother’s chair instead.

“Mycroft… you are to be married.”

“Father’s reward for my service is truly a notable one.”

“He has arranged a wedding… obtained for you a bride…”

“I am well aware of the situation, Sherlock.”

“A bride!”

Perhaps he could simply douse himself in the wine and throw his body into the fireplace, instead. It would be a painful death, but an agreeably dramatic one.
“That detail did not escape me.”

“And… her!”

“That also did not escape me, Sherlock.”

“She… smiles. And keeps cats as pets! Surely the female is deranged!”

“No, she is simply… kind.”

“And deranged. This is disastrous!”

That, at least, Mycroft agreed with utterly. A wedding… he was to be married and the formal announcement to the people would come tomorrow. He was out of time. Out of time…

“How shall you fix this debacle?”

“I… I do not know, Sherlock. I am not certain… I do not believe I can.”

“You will deign to be joined to Princess Mary?”

“She prefers Molly.”

“More evidence of her unsuitability. You must do something!”

Sherlock slid down the arm of the chair and wedged himself next to his brother.

“Sherlock…”

“No! You… you are meant for Lestrade. You are happy with him and it is he you should wed and not the cat woman!”

Mycroft wrapped his arms around his distraught brother and held him tightly.

“I know, Sherlock, but it seems… I am not so c…clever as I hoped I was.”

Sherlock’s heart clenched at the pain and defeat in his brother’s voice and refused to look at Mycroft’s face to see those emotions darkening his features.

“What shall we do?”

“I do not know, brother dear. I truly do not know…”
Neither Mycroft nor Sherlock was certain who was comforting whom, but both jumped sharply at the knock on Mycroft’s door, timid as it was. The Crown Prince looked at his brother, who only shrugged, then rose to see who was interrupting his time of mourning.

“Oh.”

“Hi! You sort of disappeared after the banquet and I thought that… well, I thought we should talk.”

Mycroft stared at his future wife and merely sighed before stepping back and nodding for her to enter.

“Oh no! The cat woman.”

“Hi Sherlock! And I’ve got a new one, too. His name is Sir Mousekiller, because he’s actually very good at it, unlike the rest of the lot who just lay about on their cushions and wait for food and belly rubs.”

“Deranged! I stand by my original evaluation!”

“Sherlock, do be polite. The Princess is… your future sister-in-law. Please, your Highness, do have a seat.”

Mycroft indicated the empty chair by the fire and took a seat in the other one, though Sherlock refused to move an inch, instead settling in to glare at the smiling princess who sat and drew up her legs in a comfortable and rather un-princess-like fashion.

“Please call me Molly. It only makes sense now that we’re going to be married.”

“Yes, it would be a grand thing; however, Your… Molly… I do not think you paid me a visit to discuss my book collection.”

For the first time, Molly’s eager smile faltered and she looked almost… contrite.
“No, you’re right. I… I just wanted to say I’m sorry. This is my fault and I’m sorry and I know it’s not fair to you, but in a way it is, and I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am at how this worked out since it’s all my fault really. But not really. Understand?”

“Deranged!”

“Not now, Sherlock. I am sorry, Molly, but I do not understand.”

“No, I suppose not. It’s like this… my father has been pressing me to marry for a long time and I’ve been able to hold him off with one excuse or another but… he told me that if I didn’t pick someone soon, he’d do it for me. I didn’t know what to do! I mean, I understand because if he dies and I’ve not got a son to become king, my brainless cousin Harold will take the throne and that is not something anybody wants, but do you have any idea what’s available among the eligible males of royal rank? Let me tell you, it’s not a very pretty picture. Then, your father’s messenger brought a letter saying he was seeking a wife for you and I said yes. Jumped at the chance, if that makes you feel better. And I am sorry, Mycroft! But… if your father sent my father that letter, I know he sent it to other fathers and there… well, you know who the available princesses are and I can’t imagine you with any of them! It’s as bad as for the men, if not worse. I mean, what if Irene’s father had been first to say yes? She’s on the market, you know. Again.”

That made both Mycroft and Sherlock shudder.

“I needed a husband and you were going to get a wife regardless so…”

“You calculated this to be the most beneficial situation.”

“Yes! I’ve always liked you. And Sherlock, too. You’ve always been kind and you listen to me when I talk, not in the ‘being polite’ way, but you actually listen and we’ve had some real conversations about things that matter, which is not something I get to have often with anyone. And I remember what you said when I told you that women in my kingdom aren’t encouraged to study or learn… you thought it was idiotic! And that a woman couldn’t take the throne… you said that was short-sighted. That’s not what some of the other princes say. They usually agree with women being treated like they aren’t real people and the rest don’t have much opinion about anything at all. With you… I figured that you wouldn’t mind if I read and studied and maybe even traveled to see all of the things I read about and learned new things on the way. You’d think that was a good idea and not something I couldn’t do just because I’m a woman. And I wouldn’t care that you liked those things, too. You’re smart and not… boring. Do you know how many men father has paraded in front of me and they don’t have anything to talk about except hunting or eating or drinking or wealth. No art or music or science or nature or politics. And the women are just as bad… they only talk about dresses and perfume and gossip… and you’d be miserable with one of them. Especially since…”

Mycroft blinked out of his surprise at Molly’s speech and wrinkled his nose in confusion.

“No, I do not believe I do.”

Mycroft watched Molly waffle about a bit before smiling hesitantly and fiddling with her sleeve.

“Not every princess would be happy with a husband who… well, how can I put this… Ok… I like you, Mycroft, but I don’t love you and I think you feel the same way. I… I don’t particularly like the idea of sharing a bed… and the things that go on there… with someone I don’t love and who doesn’t love me but I don’t think I have to worry about that with you since… women aren’t really your area, are they? Oops! Sorry, Sherlock. I forgot you were here.”
As if Sherlock’s death rattle was not a giveaway. Mycroft stared at the woman he was to marry and hoped his mouth wasn’t hanging open.

“You know?”

“It’s a bit obvious if you’re not… blind. But most everyone in our circle is, so don’t worry about anyone else having worked it out. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that, I don’t see why anyone would and I have to admit it works out nicely for me since I don’t believe I’ll be called to your bedchamber very often. And you won’t have to be worried about being called to mine. Oh… I think something’s wrong with your brother.”

If the drool running down his cheek and the eyes rolled back in his head were counted, then yes.

“Ignore him. You have given this substantial thought. I must commend you for that. Your analysis is quite thorough.”

“Neither of us can avoid our fate, I suppose. That’s our price for being who we are and having what we have but… we can try and make the best of it. Our marriage might not be… normal… but I think it will be successful, since we both understand what makes the other person happy and are fine with it. I’m sorry for all of this, Mycroft, but I’m also not, if that makes any sense.”

And it did. The Crown Prince had to admit that his fiancé’s reasoning was sound and her perspective was most refreshing. For a fixed-end situation, this was a very welcome outcome… a wife with a true desire to expand her mind. Someone who enjoyed discourse on matters of consequence. Someone who was kind and pleasant and amusing and understood his nature… accepted it and did so gladly. Truly, there were far worse ways for his circumstances to find resolution and few… if none… that would be better. And she was not put off by the now-seizing princeling sharing his chair.

“I must agree with your evaluation. May I offer you some wine?”

“Oh, yes! I do like a spot of wine now and then. More than now and then, actually. I mean, who doesn’t like a little wine once the sun goes down. Or at noon. Wine is lovely on a picnic, too.”

“Deranged! And a drunkard! And you… milquetoast… have you already forgotten your paramour? Has your love for him already gone cold? I am disgusted with you. Pour me a large measure of wine so that I might wash the rancid flavor of revulsion out of my mouth.”

Mycroft dropped the goblet in his hand and whirled on his brother, shooting panicked eyes towards Molly who was processing Sherlock’s outburst and responding with a growing and knowing smile.

“Mycroft… do you have a… is there someone in your life?”

At least Sherlock looked embarrassed that he’d shoved that bit of information into the open and quickly moved to poke at the fire and ignore the rest of the people in the room. Mycroft kicked the dropped goblet into a corner and poured wine into two fresh ones, walking back and handing one to his intended.

“Yes.”

“And… well, how serious is it? Come on, you can tell me.”

Mycroft scrutinized his fiancé and realized that, yes, he could tell her.

“If I were not who I am, we would be the ones planning a wedding.”
Molly’s face brightened like the sun and she nearly danced in her seat.

“That’s wonderful! Who is he? No, let me guess… Prince Erik! He’s gorgeous, but I really didn’t think he liked men.”

“No, that is not…”

“Oh… Henry, then. He… I think he likes a bit of both, actually and he’s not completely useless.”

“No, not Henry. You see…”

“Tell me it’s not James. He does have a nice bottom, but…”

“NO! Molly… you must understand… Gregory is not whom you might assume I would take into my arms.”

“Gregory? I don’t know any Gregory? Is he from one of those really hot areas…”

“No… Gregory is… you see he…”

“Lestrade is law enforcer who works at one of the watch houses in the city.”

Mycroft scowled at this brother, who returned it with interest.

“A commoner?”

“Do not insult Lestrade, cat woman!”

“No! Oh, please don’t think that. I would never… that would be awful of me. I just… alright, maybe that wasn’t exactly nice to say. I’m sorry. Really, I am. So go ahead, tell me all about him.”

Molly wriggled in her chair to get as comfortable as possible and settle in for the story. Mycroft found himself smiling, for the first time since the engagement announcement, and took a long sip of his wine before speaking.

“He is… spectacular. Strong, handsome, intelligent, witty, honorable…”

“Is he sexy?”

“Ridiculously so. I feel quite the plain plank of oak by comparison. And he is exceptionally virile, much to my delight.”

“Perfect! He sounds wonderful. How did you meet?”

“His son, John, became friends with Sherlock and it was through that association that we were introduced.”

“And you love him? Really and truly love him?”

Mycroft felt the most exhilarating rush of joy spread through him as he was finally, finally, able to talk about his beloved to someone other than Sherlock.

“I do. He is the one for whom my heart beats and when I am not in his arms… I am astonished I remain alive.”
Molly waved her hand at Sherlock to stop his retching and giggled excitedly at her future husband’s elated grin.

“I’m so happy for you! There’s nothing better than being in love, is there?”

Mycroft caught the sly twinkle in Molly’s eye and, now, it was his turn to grin knowingly.

“And may I assume you are also graced by this blessed affliction?”

“I am. This is so perfect! I knew you’d be the right one to marry, I just knew it!”

“May I inquire as to whom you have given your devotion?”

“Oh! His name’s Jim. You might have noticed him at the banquet… he’s the one who looked like he was going to murder you when our fathers announced our engagement. He’s supposed to be my bodyguard but… well, I guess he is, in a way, though guarding isn’t the only thing he likes to do to my body.”

Mycroft stared in shock at his future queen, then looked at his brother who had been lying face down in front of the fire, pretending to be a very deceased corpse, but was now peering up at Mycroft and mouthing ‘the spy?’

“My dear… I hate to inform you, but that individual is most assuredly…”

“A spy. I know. For that horrible little land to the north of ours, but I have my own spies in that court and… it’s so sweet! Jim knows a lot about my father’s dealings and all he reports is silly little things or things they already know. He’s not even trying to do a good job! I think he knows I know, too, but doesn’t want to say anything and spoil the mystery.”

The Crown Prince burst out laughing and had to admit that he could not have asked for a more clever wife. Nor a more genial one.

“And he accepts that you shall now be wedded to me?”

Finally, Molly’s smile dimmed and Mycroft felt his heart ache for what he knew would be the answer.

“It’s not like he has any choice, does he? He’s like your man… not one of us. Which is a good thing, in my opinion, since a lot of us are just bastards, but with no money or title or property… I’ve not even let anyone know we’re together because… well, no one minds if you’re hopping into bed with someone of our class, but anything beyond a quick night with someone like Jim… it’s not looked upon very well, is it? You’ve let down the side and… well, there’s no possibility for any political gain or money, which is all anyone ever seems to care about… I hate it, I really do. It’s not right and it’s not fair, but… I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Yes! Exactly… and neither do I. I adore Gregory with all that I am, but I see no pathway to bring him the equity and honor he so greatly deserves.”

“I guess all we can do is love them however we can. It’s not going to bother you about Jim and me, right? We’ll be very discreet, we already are, and we’re not going to do anything to make you look foolish…”

“I have full faith, Molly, do not concern yourself about that. And I am very content with your and your spy’s relationship. It is a comfort to know, actually, that you are not looking to me to fulfill your natural womanly needs. I admit… I do not believe I would have made you very happy in that
particular area of our union.”

“Oh Mycroft… thank you!”

Molly threw herself out of her chair and took Mycroft in a long and firm hug, then gave him a quick kiss on his cheek before bouncing back to snuggle back in her chair.

“You are quite welcome. And I hope to meet your Jim soon, if only to provide my assurance that I shall take no action to evict him from your life.”

“I think he’d appreciate that, actually. When Jim gets something into his head, it can be crippling difficult to pry it back out and if he decides you’re a threat… well, it might not only be looking at you murderously you’d have to worry about. He’s adorable when he’s villainous, though.”

“Then, perhaps, we may share breakfast. Just three of us…”

“Four!”

“Excuse me, Sherlock… four of us…”

“Five.”

Mycroft looked at Molly and had no idea the reason behind the slightly confused look on her face.

“Five?”

“Me, Jim, Sherlock, you and Gregory. Or do you call him Greg? Jim hates it when I call him James, though I sometimes do it just to rile him up. He’s a tiger when he’s riled up.”

Molly giggled happily as Mycroft felt a dagger plunge into his heart.

“Ha! And here your cowardice has again brought you shame! I would spit upon your craven form if I were not still weak and dehydrated from enduring the particulars of this maddening conversation.”

“Mycroft? What’s Sherlock going on about now?”

That was the last question the Crown Prince wanted to answer, but… Molly should know of his disgrace. If she was to share his life, then she deserved to know the depths to which he could sink and understand… understand why he might live the remainder of his years in sorrow.

“There is… there is a complication.”

Molly felt a tingle of dread start to crawl up her spine and gave her fiancé a very stern ‘well, I’m waiting’ glare, which was just the leverage Mycroft needed to unstick his tongue to let his story flow. From start to finish, he divulged the history of his and Lestrade’s relationship, including the most shameful part of it all.

“HE THINKS YOU’RE ENGAGED TO HIM!”

“I can hear you quite well at normal volume.”

“I can’t… Sherlock! Why did you let this happen?”

“Why do females always lay the blame on me?”
“Because you’re a rapscallion and he’s not. But now, I guess I have to rethink that.”

Molly crossed her arms and stared across at Mycroft who, she had to admit, blushed heavily at her displeasure.

“Molly… I did not know how to… I could not have predicted his interpretations of my actions and… I could not hurt him. I could not hurt him. I thought I had time to find some solution to my problem and now… I do not. As it stands, Gregory believes he is to wed Michael Holmes, humble shoemaker and live a contented life as a family with us as guardians to his son, John, and Sherlock.”

“You are incredibly stupid.”

“Finally, the woman speaks sense!”

Molly stuck a leg out and gave Sherlock a short kick to his upwardly-turned bottom.

“Assault!”

“And it’ll be another one if you don’t start being decent, you awful thing.”

Sherlock rolled over to sit up and made a rude noise that he’d learned from John.

“Mycroft… what are you going to do? You have to tell him. You should have done it long ago, but you absolutely have to tell him now. It’s cruel not to… you have to see that.”

“I know. It is cruel and reprehensible and cowardly and when I do I shall lose him and I… I cannot bear the thought of driving him away. My life shall be meaningless without his love.”

Molly couldn’t hold her irritation any longer seeing the truly distraught look on Mycroft’s face. He was blindingly stupid, but she honestly couldn’t say for certain if she’d have done things differently in his place…

“What now, then? They’re going to be sending criers everywhere announcing our engagement. And I know my father… he’s not going to give me any chance to back out of this or muck it up, so he’s going to work to push all the traditional this and that’s out the window so we’re married as soon as possible.”

“And my father will likely think that a fine idea so that I do not so something similar. And I have no doubt he would want to see me wed and situated before my bride realizes to whom her troth has been pledged.”

“Oh stop it. You’ll make a great husband… well, at least for me. But you’ve got to tell your lover, Mycroft. With everything… he’s bound to find out and that would be the worst possible slap in the face.”

“I am painfully aware of that. Tomorrow…”

“You’ll tell him tomorrow?”

“No… I shall think about it tomorrow. Right now my mind is not sufficiently focused to formulate a competent strategy of approach.”

“Just tell him! You don’t need a strategy to do that, just a mouth and a bit of breath!”

Sherlock cackled and it was Mycroft’s foot this time that made contact with the young prince.
“Fine! Fine… I shall tell him tomorrow. Though… my schedule is quite filled with preparations for the ball…”

“Your morning is free! You said you could share breakfast with your purchased bride and her diminutive courtesan.”

“Sherlock’s right, obnoxious as he is. If you can have breakfast with me and Jim, you can go and tell your Greg. I’m going to call him Greg, I like that better than Gregory. Anyway, you do that first thing and then… well, then maybe I can sneak you away for a little time to talk about how it went. No one would be surprised if we went off for an hour or two alone, now would they?”

Molly smiled encouragingly and Mycroft found himself very thankful that if he had to see his life changed in such a profound, and unwanted way, it was with someone who was quickly becoming a valued friend.

“Very well. Sherlock, do you and John have plans for tomorrow?”

“For the afternoon. Someone has been setting snares for game in Mr. Porter’s field and we have undertaken the investigation to find the perpetrator. Since I shall not attend the ball, we intend to secret ourselves in the trees and observe in the darkness.”

“Has Gregory approved of this?”

“He cannot approve or disapprove something about which he does not know.”

“Then you shall inform him. You and John are not to take cases that Gregory has not previously vetted.”

“He has no say over my actions!”

“No, but I do and you know well that whatever Gregory decides I shall support fully.”

“My time should not be impacted by your henpeckedness!”

“In matters of your investigations, I defer to his judgment, so if I discover you have not gained his approval, we shall have words.”

“Ugh… you are utterly impossible.”

Molly watched the back and forth between the brothers and decided two things… one, she’d been right about Mycroft being the best choice for her mandated marriage and two… if Mycroft actually lost his Greg tomorrow, she’d do what she could to help win him back…

And where do you think you’re going?”

Mycroft froze in place with one foot in his trousers and looked over his shoulder towards the sound of his mother’s voice.

“I’m… getting dressed.”

“Those are not your standard clothes, Mycroft. Do not tell me you are planning a trip into the city? Not today of all days!”

“I… just a small gathering with friends for breakfast. I shall be back with more than sufficient
time to oversee the final arrangements for the ball.”

“And what about the procession?”

Mycroft slowly put his other foot into his trousers and tied the waist closed before sitting on the edge of his bed and letting his brain sort through what his mother had just said.

“Procession?”

“Of course! There have been criers through the entire city all of last night and this morning announcing your engagement and there shall be a procession through the streets to introduce your future bride to the populace. It won’t be a large affair, maybe twenty carriages or so of our most esteemed guests. Your father and I shall ride, of course, along with your fiancé’s parents. Sherlock, also, if I can find him. If not, perhaps it is for the best. We shall depart within the hour, so do change out of that ridiculous costume and into something suitable. And I do mean suitable… you have not made a public appearance in quite some time and you must use this occasion to firmly place your stamp on the city. I will send word when we are ready to depart.”

And, as silently as she arrived, Mycroft watched his mother leave and only then flopped down on the bed and began to pound his arms against the mattress.

“Is she gone?”

The slightly muffled words had Mycroft leaning over the side of his bed to look beneath the bedskirt and find his brother peering back at him.

“Why are you under my bed?”

“Because Mummy is not.”

Fair enough.

“Did you hear?”

“That is why I am currently intimate with the dust on the floor.”

“You understand the danger?”

“I do.”

“Do you think Lestrade has heard the news?”

“Undoubtedly. From what I gather, there is likely not a person in this ramshackle city or the near country that will not have been harassed by the idiots shrieking your fate to the four winds.”

“Come out from under there so we may speak in a civilized fashion.”

“Have you finished dressing?”

“You shall not be sickened by the sight of any exposed skin.”

“Very well, then.”

Sherlock crawled out from under the bed, dusted himself off, then hopped onto the bed next to his brother.
“What do you plan on doing, Mycroft?”

“Commit suicide? Contact a sorcerer to cast a spell upon the people to blind everyone for the morning?”

“Do you not have some say in how the city’s watch houses are run?”

“Yes, but how…”

“Can they not be commanded to send patrols to maintain order? Patrols that you assign to specific areas of the city. Away from the procession route?”

Sherlock shrieked as Mycroft held his face and planted a kiss on his forehead.

“Molester!”

“That is an inspired idea! I must script the orders immediately!”

Mycroft dashed towards the door then remembered two things.

“I must change.”

“That would be wise.”

“And John? Shall you…”

“I will handle John. I am certain he will want to view the procession, but I believe I can either turn his mind to other matters or keep him distracted from seeing your carriage.”

“Thank you, Sherlock. I will not forget this.”

“As if I would let you.”

Sherlock made his escape from the castle and could not be happier to avoid all the pomp and circumstance his brother had to suffer. It was all nonsense and he had no time for nonsense. There were far more important and far more interesting things to do in this world and he was determined that those were the things to which he would devote his life. And John would experience them with him. John let him be who he wanted to be, not who he was told to be and that was something he cherished, though he would not, of course, allow anyone to discover that particular fact. And, regardless of how poorly Mycroft fared when he finally divulged his shame to Lestrade, John’s regard for him would not be affected. It would not change, not one bit. It could not… that absolutely was not something he could contemplate.

Running through the quickly filling streets, Sherlock found himself at Lestrade’s door in nearly record time and pounded on it sharply as he caught his breath. Which he quickly lost again, seeing Lestrade himself answer the knock.

“Sherwin! Didn’t think we’d see you this morning. Come in! We’re just getting ready to go, so you got here just in time.”

Sherlock stormed inside and scowled at the grinning constable.

“Why are you here?”
“Where else should I be?”

“Oh, let me think… guarding the city!”

“Not today. I was already feeling a bit under the weather and I’d bartered a day off with one of my mates at the watch house. And wouldn’t you know we’re having a royal procession! The Crown Prince getting married… that came out of nowhere, didn’t it? But, I don’t have to tell you that. Or maybe it really didn’t; we common folk may just not have known about it.”

“Sherwin! This is great! You can come with us!”

John bolted down the stairs and stood next to his friend.

“I can’t wait to see the Princess! Have you seen her? Is she beautiful?”

Not exactly the word Sherlock would have chosen, but… no, perhaps that *was* an acceptable word. Molly was comely enough, he supposed, and she was not vapid and vain like the other females of their social rank. There was beauty in that, if he was forced to say so.

“She is… agreeable.”

“Well, I’ll get to decide for myself, because we’re going to be right up front to see everything! Come on, Greg! We want a good spot!”

John started dragging Lestrade out of the house and Sherlock dithered with indecision about how to proceed, ultimately deciding to follow and attempt to manage the situation on-site. This was going to take skill…

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“You look lovely, Molly.”

And she did. Mycroft admired the genuine loveliness of his future wife and thought her Jim a very lucky man to have won her heart.

“Thanks. You do, too. This came up rather suddenly, didn’t it?”

“Yes, when Mummy sets her mind to something, time bends freely to her will.”

The prince helped his princess into the carriage and in a few moments, they were in motion out of the castle gates.

“Did you… well, *did you*?”

“No. There was no time; it shall have to wait until tomorrow. However, I have set plans in motion to see Gregory occupied well away from the procession route and Sherlock is tending to John, so I need not fear a discovery that shall ruin my plans.”

“What about the other people?”

“Other people?”

“Well, you said that you and Greg did a lot and people were warming to you… don’t you think any of them might notice that it’s you riding in this fancy cart?”

“Ah… no, that had not occurred to me.”
“I’m marrying a stupid man.”

“Then I am fortunate to be marrying a brilliant woman.”

His fiancé’s giggles did help soothe the wash of fear that flooded through the prince, but he knew there was nothing for it now. The best he could hope was that his love would be duty-bound until late and would not have time to converse with any who might seek him out to disclose what they had learned. Perhaps… if he slipped out for an hour or so during the ball, it was unlikely he would be missed. He often took time to engage in discussions of a political nature that kept him occupied for that long… often longer. Yes, that would be the correct action. Divulge his secret tonight and then… spend tomorrow begging forgiveness that he was entirely certain would not be forthcoming.

“Look at all the people! I think everyone’s come out to watch!”

Something that pleased Sherlock not at all. People smelled, were dirty and had an infuriating tendency to… jostle.

“Which is why we should be somewhere else. Do you have any idea of the diseases that must surround us this very moment? We would be far better served preparing for this afternoon’s investigation.”

“Not gonna happen, Sherwin. John told me what you were up to and I’m not letting you go up against poachers. They can be dangerous.”

“Piffle. How dangerous can be someone who places snares for rabbits and weasels?”

“People don’t eat weasels.”

“Little do you know, John. I am quite certain the throng that surrounds us would gladly feast on weasel, bones and all.”

“That’s disgusting! And they’re probably stringy and tough, anyway.”

“I still see no substance to your argument. Again, I point to the masses in our immediate vicinity.”

Sherlock and John launched into an argument over the dietary preferences of the common man and it only broke when Lestrade swatted them both and turned their heads towards the center of the street.

“Shut it, you two. Look, there’s the King and Queen! Wave, you bastards.”

Sherlock quickly scooted behind Lestrade’s legs and fought being pulled back out where he could be seen.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m… I’m not supposed to be here? Yes! I’m not supposed to be here.”

The fact that the royal family would have no knowledge of Sherlock’s identity, let alone existence, if he was the son of a shoemaker in the castle didn’t immediately occur to Lestrade, who thought the excuse plausible and didn’t press the issue.

“I might get into trouble – we must leave!”
“Settle down, Sherwin. Just stay back there and I’ll tell you when it’s safe to peek out. You might get to see the royal family often, but we don’t, so this is a big treat and John and I aren’t going to miss it. In fact, I don’t think I’ve seen the princes before, at all. John! Look! Here comes the new couple!”

Sherlock dropped to the ground feigning a bout with death, but nothing was going to distract John and Lestrade from getting their look at the soon-to-be newlyweds.

“Oh, she is beautiful! And her smile is so pretty! And the prince…”

Sherlock didn’t want to look. He did not want to look, but there was no power in the world that could stop him from getting up from the street and looking up at John and Lestrade, who were staring at the passing carriage with what could only be called shock. For a moment. Then, John’s face filled with confusion and Lestrade… Sherlock rarely felt pain for another person but he felt it now. Lestrade’s face was filled with every emotion that Mycroft had feared and all of it shining through the tears beginning to form in the constable’s eyes.

“Sherwin?”

“Not Sherwin, John. It’s Sherlock, isn’t it?”

Sherlock nodded slowly, desperate to ignore the wet traces on Lestrade’s cheeks, which were hastily wiped away to make room for new ones.

“Well, you’ve had your fun, Your Highness. Had a good laugh at the p… peasants. Come on, John. We’re going home.”

Lestrade grabbed John’s arm and dragged away the boy, who was staring back over his shoulder at the friend he thought he’d had.

“We should also depart, Highness.”

Sherlock looked up to see one of his security detail gently smiling down at him. Wiping away his own trace of emotion, the young prince nodded and allowed himself to be led away. Back to where he belonged.

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“Oh, look at how happy they are! I think the people are thrilled to see you, Mycroft.”

At the lack of response, Molly turned to her fiancé and reached across to grasp his hand, seeing the distress that was threatening to tear the prince apart.

“Mycroft, what is it? Are you alright?”

No… no he would never again be alright. Not after his eyes had locked with those of the one he most adored in the world and saw those eyes fill with hate…
Chapter 13

Mycroft pulled himself together and completed the procession with a joyful smile on his face and for all the populace knew, he was happy and content with direction of his life. If they could see inside his mind, they would see a picture that was so vile and bathed in the blackest of emotions that they would race away in fear for their souls. His Gregory… his Gregory despised him. Loathed him utterly and was entirely justified in that feeling. The coldness that rose in his constable’s eyes could have summoned the force of winter and, in truth, that was what Mycroft felt in his heart. A cold and icy wintery mass because the fiery love that had filled it had been ripped away. His beloved had removed his affections from their unworthy receptacle and left a frigid and bottomless hole in their place.

And he deserved it. He had betrayed his lover in the most despicable way. Everything he had told his constable had been a lie, save his declarations of love. Those were not only truthful, they were nearly a prayer to the man he worshiped. Yet he had defiled those words… crushed them to powder under the weight of his deceit. He was warned, he could not say he was unaware of the magnitude of his offense. He had held good intentions, but they were so heavily biased by his cowardice that the term ‘good’ must be called into question. Every step of the way he had failed his Gregory and the frigid, viscous mass coiling through his body, slowly choking off his life and breathm, was more than fair payment for his offenses.

“Mycroft? We’re here.”

Mycroft blinked out his reverie and let his false smile fall away. Back home. Home… what a completely inappropriate term. He had not understood that term, not felt he had found such a mythical thing until he discovered one special dwelling that housed a warmth and bounty of love such as he never could have imagined. That had he had been allowed to share it, was encouraged to become a part of that magical place… it was the dream of a lifetime; a dream that was now wearing the stain of his spittle and quickly darkening into a nightmare.

“Come on, Mycroft. I can’t imagine you’re not ready to get out of those clothes and into a big bottle of wine.”

A barrel of wine was more appropriate. And that offered the additional benefit that he might drown both his feelings and his body at the same time.

“Of course. And…”

Oh no.

“… and I must find Sherlock. If he has even bothered to return. He… I saw him with Gregory and John…”

“The poor little thing! Oh… I doubt things went well for him afterwards.”

“No… I am quite certain they did not.”

“Well, that’s just something else we have to work on. This could still be fixed, Mycroft.”

“Really? How?”

“Ok, maybe I don’t know right now, but that’s because it’s a new problem and we haven’t had time to work on it.”
“I have been ruminating on this very issue since the night I met my beloved.”

“True, but you always had at the back of your mind that this might not happen. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but this outcome wasn’t real. Now it is and that’s going to make a difference. Now, you don’t have a choice. Now… you actually have to do something. That does make a difference. You know it does.”

And she was right. Mycroft had to admit there was a vast difference between managing a hypothetical situation and a bitterly real one. The reality would be a strong motivator to focus his thinking, cast off his laziness and inefficient analysis of the problem… yes, things were now very, very different.

The prince hopped down and offered a hand to his future wife, who stepped out of the carriage and walked with him towards their individual rooms, though they only made it part of the way before Mycroft was set upon by a flurry of small and rough hands pushing him down a corridor, accompanied by a long string of ‘sorry, Your Highness’ until he reached what in his mind was becoming known as the Door of Doom.

“Well… I see why you’ve been avoiding me, you evil thing.”

Mycroft was absolutely certain that if someone held a mirror in front of him, he would see the blackened flesh and singed hair that the fire in Mrs. Hudson’s voice had gifted him.

“And who are you? Oh… obvious, given that you’re with this villain. Come in, dear, and have some tea. You… go tend to your brother.”

Molly carefully approached the older woman and shot Mycroft a worried look before following Mrs. Hudson towards the roaring fires. For his part, the prince finally took in the whole of the room, which included a small boy sitting at the staff table, his head on the tabletop and buried in two thin arms, with the kitchen hound lying across his feet. As broken as his heart had been, each fractured piece shattered into a hundred more seeing his brother in such pain. Mycroft crossed the kitchen floor and ran a hand across the back of his brother’s head before taking the seat next to him.

“How are you, Sherlock?”

“Do not speak to me.”

“I must if I am to ascertain your well-being.”

‘As if you care.”

“I care profoundly, as well you know.”

“I think Lestrade would offer a different opinion.”

The slightly watery quality of Sherlock’s tone hurt as much as his actual words.

“What… what happened, Sherlock?”

Sherlock raised his head and Mycroft suffered another sharp stab of pain seeing Sherlock’s red eyes and flushed skin.

“He believes you used him as a joke! That he was an amusement for your entertainment! He shed tears! His humiliation compromised him! And John…”
Sherlock’s head dropped back onto the table and it was all Mycroft could do to lay a hand on the nape of his brother’s neck and squeeze gently. As it was, that small bit of comfort sapped the last mote of his energy and he sat wishing fervently that he would simply cease to function. His Gregory… the strongest, most noble man he knew and he had reduced that pillar of strength to tears. He had transformed their precious, passionate love into a source of shame. What his dearest had desired so greatly – a loving husband and a family – had been made into a mockery of his hopes and dreams. Could his Gregory ever trust again? Should he, if the one begging that trust was the one who deserved it least?

“John shall forgive you, Sherlock.”

“How should he? I fed him my own lies, which he swallowed whole and are now, likely, sickening his stomach like a bad piece of fish.”

“But you only asked from him his friendship, which you could and did freely return.”

“And Lestrade… you asked of him his love and you also returned that freely to him.”

“True… but I also knew that our love might never have a future worthy of Gregory. Even now, if you win John’s forgiveness and I believe that entirely possible, you could enjoy a friendship to last a lifetime. I cannot say the same and that is unforgiveable.”

Mrs. Hudson made her approval of that statement known with sharp flick to Mycroft’s ear before setting down a cup of tea in front of him. Molly, with her own hot cup of tea, took a seat next to Mycroft and reached across to pat his hand, then give Sherlock’s hair a little ruffle.

“Try to think positively, you two. Yes, you were incredibly stupid. And dishonest. And cruel. But you don’t know what Greg or John are going to say until you actually talk to them. You need to do that first so you can make a plan about how to fix this. But… you also need to be prepared to accept that the best you might be able to do is tell them you’re sorry, you didn’t mean to treat them poorly and make them feel a little better and less abused.”

Mycroft heaved a long, heavy sigh and nodded. If his Gregory could never again love him, then he would accept it, but would do as Molly said. He would not allow his love to continue to believe that he had been a simple plaything. He would do whatever it took to impress upon that incomparable man that his love had been real, that none of his feelings were untrue. That much he could give to his one true love – the reassurance that he had been and would continue to be cherished so long as this sad excuse for a prince drew breath.

“And you better act fast, Mr. Crown Prince of Broken Hearts. The longer Greg has this eating away at him the harder it’s going to be for you to ever get him to listen to a thing you say. And you had better come up with some story for him to use when the story of his being played for a fool makes its way around and that impacts his job. For a LONG time.”

“Yes… that must be a priority. Gregory’s career cannot suffer for my actions. He values his work far too highly.”

“And he needs it to eat, don’t forget that. You might have sacks of gold lying about, but if he can’t do his job or find other honest work because he’s a laughingstock, then he and John don’t eat, don’t pay their taxes…”

Mycroft looked up at Mrs. Hudson and had no idea how he could feel even more disheartened. He thought he’d sunk to the lowest possible point, but he had been sadly mistaken. Yes… this was more than an issue of emotion and honor, it was an issue of his love’s basic welfare and survival.
“I will ensure that is not his future, Mrs. Hudson.”

“See that you do. The only reason I haven’t stuck a spit up your ass and started turning you over the fire is that you’ve got to see him righted first. If you fail him again, expect that your parents are going to be having you with a nice sauce for dinner!”

And, as his future bride nodded approvingly, Mycroft knew he must see his constable tonight. Make his presence visible at the ball, dance with Molly, then sneak away for the most important conversation of his life.

“Tonight. I shall speak with Gregory tonight and do what I can. Then… I shall continue to do what is necessary. Beg at his door, humiliate myself completely to preserve his dignity and demonstrate my contrition. I care not what it takes; he shall not be blackened by my touch.”

But, after a glance at his brother, Mycroft knew he had one further mission.

“And I shall make it unmistakably clear that Sherlock should not be penalized for my actions. For his misdeeds, he must seek his own forgiveness from John, but he shall not be blocked from his chance because my actions have made it intolerable for either of us to be seen, let alone heard.”

“Good. Now, drink your tea and go find your lady some biscuits. You always hide my best ones, don’t think I don’t know that.”

Mrs. Hudson walked away after giving the Crown Prince a near-lethal evil eye.

“She’s so much nicer than our cook! And makes amazing tea.”

Mycroft cut his eyes to Molly who was beaming happily and suddenly started to laugh. His life was officially out of control but, right now, a good cup of tea sounded like the grace of heaven. And, taking a sip from his cup, the angels certainly did begin to sing. In truth, he’d half-expected his tongue to start melting.

“Yes, Mrs. Hudson is a talented cook.”

“And very smart.”

“At the most unpleasant of times.”

“That’s when it’s most helpful, though.”

“Unfortunately true.”

“Not unfortunately… someone’s got to keep you in line. I bet she’s a lot of the reason you’re not a complete twat.”

“He IS a complete twat!”

“Sherlock… language.”

“I know several. In which would you prefer I speak?”

“That of courtesy, if you please.”

“Boring.”

Molly giggled and Mycroft had to agree with her assessment. There was a little less despair in his
brother’s voice and that, to him, was a victory.

“Then let us make things less boring. You know where the biscuits are hidden, retrieve them and we shall take a moment to collect our wits. I shall need mine, yours and any others I can find for my coming battle.”

Sherlock hopped off of his chair and dashed towards a large water barrel with the kitchen hound hot on his heels.

“You really do hide biscuits?”

“We must have a reserve supply for when we have irked Mrs. Hudson to the point she does not bake them.”

“Why do I think that happens a lot?”

“Because you are not a fool.”

There was only one fool in this room and it was him. Now, he had to repair the damage his foolishness had caused. Tea and biscuits were a very good first step towards that goal…

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Lestrade sat staring at the fire, as he had for the past several, hours and still could not command his mind to function properly. Nothing functioned properly. He’d barely been able to hold himself together through all the people who crashed through his door, shocked to the core by what they had seen as they stood watching the royal carriages pass them by. John hid from them all, cloistered upstairs, refusing to speak or even come down for food or water. When there were no more callers, he had finally taken this seat and not moved a muscle but to add wood to the fire that was failing utterly to warm his bones.

“Gregory?”

The constable hated with everything in him the shiver that hearing Mycroft’s voice still sent through his body.

“Why are you in my house… Your Highness? But maybe royalty doesn’t have to knock like us common folk.”

Such coldness… such penetrating frost in his love’s voice. If his mission wasn’t so vital, Mycroft would turn on his heel and walk away so as to never hear that soul-chilling sound ever again.

“I did, Gregory. You did not hear and… I did not think you would be pleased if I took louder measures to gain your attention.”

“Wouldn’t matter, Your Highness. It’s not like everyone doesn’t know who you are. Now.”

“I see.”

“Do you? Well, good for you, then. Oops. Shouldn’t talk like that to you, should I? I’m sorry, Your Highness. I’m not used to addressing someone of your station.”

Water would freeze on his lover’s tongue and Mycroft hated himself anew for stealing the warmth and joy from that beautiful voice.

“You know I do not care about such things.”
“And how would I know that? How would I know anything about you? I don’t know you or did you forget that? Forget that I have no idea who you are?”

“That is not true.”

Mycroft finally mustered the courage to step closer to the fire so he could look Lestrade in the face.

“You know me for who I truly am, Gregory, know me more fully and deeply than any other.”

“Funny, never seen you in those clothes before. Wonder what part of the you I know fully and deeply likes to wear them.”

The prince wasn’t sure which tone was more painful to hear, the bitter cold or the brittle playfulness that bled anguish from every word.

“It is not by choice I wear these tonight… I came from… I took myself away from the ball and…”

“Oh, that’s right… the ball. Your fiancé’s probably wondering where you are. Better get back so she doesn’t feel she’s been abandoned.”

Daggers to the stomach surely felt kinder than the verbal thrusts from his constable’s words.

“Gregory, we must talk. May I sit?”

“Sure you want to? Might wrinkle your fine trousers.”

“I DO NOT CARE ABOUT MY TROUSERS!”

“Hold your voice down! John’s probably… hopefully… asleep by now and I’ll be damned if you steal that from him, too.”

Mycroft dropped into what had been his seat by the fire and stared into Lestrade’s eyes. More of his robbery… not a drop remained of the glorious life and vitality that had shined from those lovely, lovely eyes…

“I apologize. How is John, Gregory? And please do not answer in anger; I care about him. As does Sherlock.”

Lestrade opened his mouth to say something cutting, but found he hadn’t the energy and, honestly, didn’t have the desire to interact with Mycroft any more than he had to.

“John’s devastated. You know he has problems trusting people, being comfortable around them, opening himself up to them… he took a knife to the heart, so how do you think he’s doing?”

“He still has reasons to trust, Gregory. Not me, perhaps, and I would not ask that of him, but Sherlock… knowing now who Sherlock truly is, can you imagine his life? He has no friends, he does not fit in with other children his age, especially the children he encounters due to his position. In John, he found someone he could take as a friend and be one in return. The Sherlock you knew is who my brother truly is; there was no mask or subterfuge about that. And he greatly treasures John… that was evident from the moment he spoke to me of his new friend, his first friend. And that was a friend he was terrified of losing if his identity were to become known. He feared John would not be able to embrace him as gladly knowing he was second in line to the throne. That John would hesitate, pull away, feel uncomfortable… Sherlock dreaded greatly the dissolution of their friendship and, therefore, kept up his ruse. It was not from disrespect. It was certainly not to mock or degrade.
There was no contempt, derision or disregard. It was a poor choice, perhaps, but an understandable one if you are aware of all the facts."

“He lied to John to get what he wanted.“

“That is a purposefully harsh interpretation. You cannot sit there, knowing your instincts as a father, and say that Sherlock and John were not a successful pair. There was no artifice in their enjoyment of their time together. There was nothing flawed or lacking in the affection they showed and the laughter they shared. They found in each other someone who complemented them and Sherlock could not bear to endanger that great gift. He shall come himself to speak with John and attempt to repair their breach. I only ask that he not be turned away before he has the opportunity to bear his feelings and ask John to forgive him, to rekindle their friendship.”

“What? He still… your brother still wants to be friends with John?”

“Yes! I am not lying to you, Gregory… Sherlock values his friendship with your son more than anything in his life. It gives him boundless pleasure and a true sense of bonding with another person. He desires nothing more than to continue with their adventures, to visit and play, to investigate… he wishes simply to go on as before.”

His constable sat silently for a moment, then picked absently at the hem of his shirt before speaking.

“I won’t tell John what to do or not to do. It’s up to him to make his decision and I’ll accept or enforce whatever decision he makes. If he says he doesn’t ever want to see Sherlock again, then that’s the final word on the subject. If you try and…”

“I shall abide John’s decision, no matter what it might be. You have my word.”

The ugly twist to Lestrade’s lips screamed how poorly chosen were Mycroft’s words.

“I am sorry, Gregory. You have no idea how deep is my sorrow over how I have treated you. But… can you see why it might be so? The reasons for Sherlock’s deception mirror my own and…”

“I’ve already made my decision, Your Highness. After you leave here, you will never cross that threshold again.”

Mycroft was unhappily aware than the whine of pain he heard came from his own lips.

“Gregory, you must listen…”

“No, I mustn’t. Sherlock’s a kid… a very smart kid, but a kid nonetheless. I can… I can see him making a stupid decision and I can forgive him that. And you’re right… nobody’s ever been able to reach John like Sherlock has. I’ve never seen my son happier than when he and Sherlock are up to no good. But you’re not a child. And you weren’t content to simply be my friend… you knew we could never be together. You knew I could never love you, marry you, make a life with you… and you let me believe it all. I see now why you raced over here to tell me to keep quiet about our so-called engagement. That was the one piece of kindness you showed me and I can’t say for certain it was entirely to protect me. All day I’ve had people barging in to ask what’s going on. Everyone thought we were headed for a wedding… everyone thought we were truly in love and ready to spend our lives together and then… they find out it’s all a lie. Don’t worry, though… I, at least, kept you from looking like a complete bastard. And me from looking like a bloody fool.”

Leaning forward in his chair, the prince hoped the shock on his face wasn’t highly evident.

“What… what did you say?”
“That I knew. That we met because of Sherlock and John, people knew Sherlock and John were together before we were… we met and fell in love and tried to have some form of life together while we figured out how we could be accepted by your people. Then… then you got engaged, which I suspect happened quickly since no one had any idea about it and we’ve got enough folks who go to the castle for trade to hear the news and gossip. I said you didn’t have a choice and we decided to end things between us since it could never go anywhere with you being married. And… on the procession route… I got choked up since I’d never seen the two of you together and it hurt. People understood or they like a good tale of doomed love so much they chose to understand. I actually got congratulated for turning the eye of a prince and having him actually want to be with me. So you don’t have to worry about the peasantry thinking you’re a heartless prick… you’re part of a love story now. Love and loss, desire and sacrifice… all the good stuff that makes the best ballads. And I don’t look like a complete idiot who let himself be tricked into thinking… into thinking…”

Lestrade began to choke on his words and Mycroft reached over to comfort his love, only to draw back when Lestrade’s eyes widened, almost in fright at the thought of his touch.

“I… just go, Your Highness. Go and don’t come back. Don’t ever come back. Go live your grand life with your lovely new bride and your castle and your wealth… but just go.”

There were a thousand things Mycroft wanted to say, a million even, and as many actions to take to remove that horrible misery from Lestrade’s, but none would stand a chance against the avalanche of pain that was falling on his dearest love, so he did the kindest thing possible and obeyed. Silently and quickly, Mycroft rose and left the small house, never looking back because that would send him flying again through the door and forcing another encounter that would do his beloved no good. Perhaps… perhaps it was best to simply grant his Gregory’s request. Go and never come back. The forgiveness he sought was yet another selfish act and the man he loved should suffer no more of those at his hand. He had suffered far too much already…

There was little surprise that, when he slipped back into the ballroom, no one commented on either his absence or reappearance. For a fleeting moment, Mycroft considered simply forsaking the festivities entirely and returning to his rooms to drink himself into unconsciousness and repeat that action every night for the next year or twelve. Turning and nearly tripping over his brother, however, changed his mind.

“Well? Did you meet with success?”

“That would very much depend on the criteria you set to define success.”

“That was vague and unhelpful. You failed, didn’t you?”

The scowl on Sherlock’s face spoke less to his usual irritation and more to a true upset that his brother had not healed their respective wounds.

“Oh some fronts, yes. However, I did secure Gregory’s promise that he will not forbid you to speak to John and I outlined the rationale for your actions quite effectively. I feel… you shall have a true chance with John, Sherlock. Be honest with him, be forthright with your feelings and your genuine happiness with his company and I believe you have a fighting chance of repairing your friendship. It might not be easy, at first, and there may be awkwardness as you find a new equilibrium, but there is a chance.”

Sherlock nodded and set his mouth in fierce slash of determination.
“I will speak to him tomorrow.”

“That is wise”

“Shall you… are you returning tomorrow to speak again to Lestrade?”

Mycroft suddenly felt very, very tired and wondered if this was the feeling a warrior experienced when they lost their final prospect for victory.

“No.  Gregory has made it quite clear that my presence is no longer welcome in his home.”

“But that shall not stop you… it cannot!  You must… you must… do something!”

“There is nothing to do, Sherlock.  I sat there, watching my worst fears for my Gregory come true and I realize now that I cannot cause him any further distress.  What purpose would that serve?”

“You would regain his love!  He would know… did you tell him how deeply you cared for him?  How even I, patient as I am, grew tired of your songs of praise and devotion to him?”

“Actually, no.  I did not… the conversation did not take a turn that facilitated that discussion.”

“Then you must try again!  He must hear your words and know you love him!”

“Again, for what purpose.  I cannot have him, Sherlock.  I can love him, want him, cherish him above all others, but I cannot have him.  Not in this life, not with who I am.”

Mycroft looked around and saw, again, no faces giving him inquisitive or annoyed looks for his absence and decided that yes, it was time to retire for the evening.

“I believe I shall absent myself from the proceedings and take to my rooms, but I shall be available if you wish to talk further about how to approach John.  I am happy for you, Sherlock.  I do believe that you and John shall overcome this troubling time and renew your connection, perhaps forge a new one that is even stronger.  Goodnight, dear brother.  Continue to enjoy your evening.”

Sherlock watched his brother walk away, slowly and slump-shouldered, and finally turned to the figure now emerging from the shadows.

“He is a fool.”

“No, Sherlock… he’s defeated.  Whatever happened tonight made him think there’s no hope.”

“What shall we do?”

Molly looked down at her future brother-in-law and smiled.

“We find him some hope.”
Chapter 14

Sherlock peeked into his brother’s room long after breakfast and found Mycroft still in bed, blankets pulled up so only his hair was visible. Apparently, the Crown Prince was not intending on making an appearance anytime soon. The next stop was Molly’s rooms, but Sherlock had at least enough common sense not to barrel in as if he owned the space, though he very much did, so it was his right, of course. A moment of determined knocking gained him the highly irritated stare of the princess’s bodyguard, bed-clothed and tousle-headed, glaring down at him.

“I demand to see Molly!”

“You won’t be able to demand much without a tongue.”

“Oh, Jim, stop being silly. Come in, Sherlock. We were just having breakfast. The servants here are amazing! Tell them to leave the tray outside the door and they do it! We have to be so careful at home, because my staff just does as they please and I think they try and catch me doing something improper. Which, I have to admit, is a fairly common occurrence, but it’s not a bit of their business, no matter what they think.”

Sherlock pushed his way past the man in the doorway and shared a mutual ‘I’m watching you’ snarl as he hopped on the bed and stole a bit of meat from the breakfast tray.

“I am here to discuss strategy.”

“That’s a good idea. Jim and I have been talking about it and the only thing we can think of is to just go and talk to Greg, while you talk to your friend.”

Sherlock shook his head a little to dislodge the bedbug that must have wandered into his ear canal and compromised his hearing. A glance at the dark-haired man climbing back into the bed started a brief, but informative, silent conversation where upon it was decided that Molly was a good-hearted person, but perhaps not the most versed in the ways of approaching situations of extreme delicacy.

“You intend to confront Lestrade and do what? Wave your crown at him and tell him to be a good boy and return my brother to his bedroom?”

“That’s unfortunately close to what she’s thinking.”

“Have you no control over your female?”

“If I did, I might have actually had a little melon with my breakfast instead of just the privilege of watching her eat it.”

And the fool said it with a smile directed towards Molly, which assured Sherlock this ‘Jim’ was another of the besotted idiots that were appearing in his life at a very upsetting rate.

“You are useless to me, then. I shall confine my comments to the dominant member of your pairing.”

“Jim’s pretty clever, Sherlock. I’d bet he could find a way to kill you with one strand of my hair then make it seem like you’d done it yourself, poor little suicidal boy.”

“Really? I would very much like the details of how that would be accomplished.”
That Sherlock seemed quite eager for the information was both precious and alarming, so Molly quickly brought the conversation back on point.

“As I was saying, I think that maybe Greg needs a fresh voice to listen to. Someone who understands what he’s going through and what Mycroft’s going through, too.”

“Yes, being lectured by the fiancé of the man you thought was your fiancé shall surely break through the barriers of his emotional pain and send him racing back into my brother’s pale and flabby arms. This plan is stupendous. Truly, there is no chance of defeat.”

“Well, what have you come up with?”

Sherlock’s dark scowl was its own answer.

“That’s what I thought, so if it’s a choice between no plan and doing nothing or my plan and doing something, which do you prefer.”

“Inaction will not make the situation worse, whereas a misguided plan could exacerbate matters.”

Another expressions-only conversation between the males in the room awarded themselves congratulations for being logical and practical thinkers, as opposed to the romantically-addled female currently… oh, she was frowning at them.

“I see that, you two. It’s not a bad idea! And I’ve never even met Greg, so he can’t be angry that I did anything to him…”

“Except become affianced to the one he loves and destroying any chance they may have had for happiness.”

“You’re not helping, Sherlock. And, anyway, I’m going to do it whether you like the idea or not. Now, are you coming with us to talk to John or do want to do that another time?”

Another male commiserative look and Sherlock hopped off the bed to stand and straighten his clothes.

“Since you cannot be dissuaded and your rooster lacks the temperament or testicles to manage his hen, I see little choice but to accompany you and attempt to ameliorate the damage your actions may wreak. Wait here and I shall return shortly with clothes.”

“I have a trunkful of clothes, Sherlock.”

“You believe arriving at his door in a dress that could be sold to purchase several homes like his is an appropriate way to begin your conversation?”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Failure. We are doomed to failure. I shall be lucky to escape this day without a boot impression on my backside.”

“That’s a sure thing if you don’t learn a few manners.”

“Your feet are small, ruffian, so I have little to fear. Though, from what the female staff has to say about male foot size, I would say Molly has little to enjoy, either.”

“Well, judge for yourself.”
Sherlock’s legs nearly flew him out the door as Jim moved his hands to draw up the nightshirt he was wearing and Molly gave her lover a tender-heated punch in the arm as a reward.

“He’s a terror, but you shouldn’t try and traumatize the boy like that.”

“Oh, so now you’re on his side about my attributes?”

“Jim, I doubt he’s ever seen one that big and you know how I reacted the first time I got up close and personal with those attributes.”

One slow, lazy smile crossed the bodyguard’s lips and Molly got a very naughty case of the giggles.

“I think my attributes might need a little extra attention so their feelings don’t get hurt.”

“Well, I suppose they deserve it, but quickly, though. We really don’t want to send Sherlock off his nut.”

“He’s already off his nut, Princess. And, he might learn something.”

“Some lessons you need to discover on your own.”

“Like us and that oil you bought from the herbalist?”

“I did pack a little vial of it, you know. Just in case.”

“Can that be my reward for following you and Sherlock today?”

“I think that can be arranged…”

Sherlock returned with ‘borrowed’ clothes for Molly to wear and, luckily, saw nothing to stunt his growth when he presented them to the princess. A few minutes of changing and some reduction in the ornaments, and weapons, her bodyguard was wearing and they were sneaking out of the castle.

“I have to admit, this is a much more comfortable dress that what I normally have to wear. And the shoes don’t pinch my toes. When I travel, this is how I’m going to dress and not in a heavy, hot gown with pinchy shoes.”

The walk to Lestrade’s home was not a direct-path trajectory as might have been predicted by the urgency of their mission. Sherlock and Jim had to devote much of their attention to keeping Molly corralled during the walk through the city because the woman seemed to have an intense desire to wander off to investigate the slightest sight, smell or sound she experienced and absolutely marveled at it all. Already they had to purchase for her a honey-drizzled bun from a bakery, as well as some flowers she’d never seen before, spent time letting her roam through the market stalls and talk to every merchant they passed, stood in wait as she argued with the milliner because the hat she wanted was actually a man’s hat, but it was the hat they left with anyway… it was quite awhile before they actually arrived at the small house and a further while before any of them had the courage to knock.

Lestrade wasn’t sure if he was happy he’d been sent a message to take another day at home or if he was frustrated by it. Apparently, people were trying to find him at the watch house to hear his story of tragic and epic heartbreak and the constable was concerned if he actually appeared, they’d be overwhelmed by the crowd. By tomorrow, however, the worst should have passed and he would be
able to get back to his job and to his life. His real life. The one that had no lover, no fiancé, no one who saw him as special... the life he would lead from this day forward. At least John was feeling a little better. Lestrade looked over at his son, who was at the table, practicing his writing, and hoped that, somehow, Sherlock could come back into John’s life. John was less angry today, but there was still such a sense of hurt he could sense in his boy and it made his own heart ache even more deeply than from his own pain. Lestrade was about to suggest they have a quiet day at the lake when a knock sounded on the door and he decided that no matter his intentions, it seemed, something was going to step in and punch a hole through them.

Lestrade wasn’t surprised, of course, to find people at the door, but he was surprised it wasn’t people he actually knew. Though the woman did look familiar...

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

John’s high-pitched and prolonged shriek sent Lestrade on high-alert, but seeing no reason for the alert, had to wonder if his son had finally cracked under the pressure.

“John! Have you gone mental?”

“The… it’s the Princess! The one in the carriage!”

Lestrade slowly turned back to the pair at the door, one of whom was shyly waving at him.

“Tell me I’m hallucinating.”

“You are not, though the quality of ale you imbibe will likely destroy both your vision and your brain in due course.”

Not, perhaps, the best way for Sherlock to introduce himself, but what was done was done. Peering from around Molly’s skirt, Sherlock tried to look as agreeable as it was possible for him to accomplish.

“And Sherw… Sherlock.”

John was already out of his chair at the sound of his friend’s voice and tried not to make it appear as if he was now the one hiding behind Lestrade’s proverbial skirts.

“It is permissible to speak to John?”

John looked up at Lestrade as if he was hoping that his father would say no, but, deep in his eyes, the future constable saw that his son desperately hoped he’d say yes.

“You’re more than welcome to talk to John, so long as he wants to talk to you. John? Are you alright with that? It’s ok if you’re not.”

John remained motionless a moment, then nodded slightly and Sherlock took that as an invitation to come inside and stand by friend, all of the bluster drained from his face, and waited until John nodded for him to follow up the stairs.

Leaving Lestrade alone with a princess at his door.

“Um… come in, Your Highness?”

“Thanks! I’m Molly, though, if that’s ok with you. I hate being formal with my friends or
people I think could be my friends. Oh, and this is Jim. He’s my you.”

And on that note, Molly left a highly confused Lestrade in her wake, strolling into the house and, after a few moments of inspecting everything in it, dropped down in one of the chairs by the fire and motioned Lestrade to take the other, with Jim drawing a chair from the table to join the discussion.

“What do you mean he’s your me?”

Lestrade was very surprised he got the words out because he was suddenly realizing that he had a princess sitting across from him and, unlike that bastard Mycroft, it was making him very uneasy. Just like a peasant should feel when near royalty. And he was sitting! Wasn’t he supposed to be kneeling or something? Admittedly, she didn’t seem as imposing as one might expect of a princess, but the plain woven dress and lack of jewels had a lot to do with that.

“Jim’s my lover, just like you’re Mycroft’s.”

That was not what Lestrade was expecting and his dropped jaw took a long time to close.

“Wait… what?”

“Jim and I are together! And we have been for quite a while now. Mycroft knows, I told him the night we were engaged. And he told me about you, too. It’s actually a funny story, because it showed just how compatible a couple we really are.”

Lestrade sat raptly listening to Molly tell the tale of her and Mycroft’s engagement and felt his mind swimming in the details.

“You… you chose him. Like a cheese at the market?”

“The best of a bad lot. No! Wait, I didn’t mean it like that! Mycroft’s a great catch for anyone, but especially for me since he’s a decent person, unlike lots of our sort, and… well, he’s not really going to be upset that I’m not wanting him to keep me warm at night, now is he? I know it wasn’t fair to him, but he was going to get a wife regardless and…”

“This worked out best for the both of you.”

“Basically, yes. It seemed like this would be an ideal situation – I’d get a husband who I actually liked and who treated me with respect and he’d get a wife who liked him and didn’t mind that he preferred men. And already had a man he loved! He does love you, Greg. He said that very clearly and he was so cute when he said it. His face got this dreamy look and, you know that little smile of his when he’s just as pleased as he can be? Well, that’s the one he made.”

Lestrade did know that smile. He knew it very well. It was breathtaking. His Michael, supremely happy about something, and so utterly content that his face glowed with a quiet joy that warmed the room around him. Bastard.

“Whatever Mycroft felt or didn’t feel doesn’t really matter. Anyway, if he’d have cared at all, he wouldn’t have let me believe we could have a life together. You have no… can you imagine what that feels like? Having someone let you think you’re going to be a family and find out it’s all a lie? That there was never any intention of letting anything like that happen? That you’d been used? Played with?”

“Yes.”

Molly and Lestrade turned to the man who hadn’t said a word up to this point and stared at him, for
Molly, with a look of growing concern.

“Her Highness fought against getting pressed into a marriage she didn’t want and I thought… I thought that would mean she’d fight forever. That it would only and always be the two of us. It was foolish and sentimental, but it’s what I believed. For all the good it did.”

This time it was Molly’s jaw that dropped and Lestrade felt very sorry for her because a punch from one you loved was the most painful blow of all.

“Jim?”

“It’s not your fault, Molly. It’s mine for believing that what we wanted could actually happen. That you’d be able to keep defying your father’s wishes and what a silly boy I am for thinking you could fight that battle and win.”

Molly reached over, grabbing Jim’s hand and he smiled softly at her.

“I’m so sorry, Jim. I am so, so sorry. I knew you didn’t want me to marry, but I didn’t think… I didn’t know you hoped that deeply. That you believed… I never meant to hurt you like that.”

“Don’t be upset, Princess. You weren’t left with many choices, were you, and I have to agree, actually. Prince Mycroft is the least disruptive choice of the lot. He won’t treat you poorly or have his hands on you so I have to make you a widow.”

Molly gave her lover a sad smile and resolved to offer every bit of reassurance she could that they were together and her heart couldn’t ever belong to anyone else. For Lestrade’s part, he didn’t think he’d ever meet anyone who might understand him, and he’d be happy to commiserate over a large mug of ale at the tavern with the man, but there was a difference between them and that difference was critical.

“I’m sorry for that, mate, I really am. But she never lied to you, did she? Made promises she had no intention of keeping? Let you believe something she knew couldn’t possibly come true? Told you to hope, dream of something that could never be?”

Jim shook his head and gave Lestrade a ‘you beat me on that one’ smirk that the other man actually appreciated for its honesty.

“Greg, you have to understand what Mycroft was up against.”

“No, I don’t. All it would have taken was one conversation. Just one. Just a few minutes of honesty.”

“And then what? Would you have stayed with him? Said, ‘Oh Wow! The Crown Prince likes me and I think that’s brilliant!’ or would you have been uncomfortable and self-conscious and all of the things Mycroft feared? Would you have asked questions he doesn’t have an answer for yet, like how you can stay together with him being who he is? How likely is it you would have not let your relationship go anywhere because you’d be too full of worry and… thinking you were just a common person. Huh? Tell me that.”

Lestrade clenched his jaw and ran his hand through his hair. How could he even answer that? How did he know how he would have reacted! All he knew was how he did react when he found out after-the-fact and he was fairly certain the pain would never fully heal. He wasn’t scared of royalty… didn’t think they were better than he was, so why would it have mattered that Mycroft had a crown on his head?
But maybe it would have. He’d already felt a little in awe of Michael. A little common, in comparison. Michael was so elegant, well-spoken, educated, graceful... nothing like him. He did feel a bit self-conscious sometimes that he came off like an ignorant peasant when they were out and about. But... he’d also known that Michael thought he was something special and had traits worth admiring and that had tipped the balance. Would that have been enough, though, knowing who his Michael really was? Already it had been hard sometimes to keep his head high and breathe through those moments when he realized he had been sitting there listening to Michael talk and was almost too scared to say anything because Michael’s voice was so refined and his words... nobody could weave words like his Michael. He could paint pictures with them, create magic with them... And that was Michael. Not Mycroft. Crown Prince Mycroft. Future King Mycroft. Oh god... he would have run in circles wanting to run away and hide and being terrified to run away and hide because angering the Crown Prince would probably lose him his head.

“Ok. Maybe if he’d told me at first, I’d have been a little unsure or uncomfortable, but not after we’d been together awhile. Not after... not after I’d fallen in love with him. Yeah, ok, that’s not exactly true because I fell in love with Mich... Mycroft the first day we met, but once I knew he loved me back... he could have told me. He should have told me!”

“You’re right, but he’s not very bright sometimes, apparently. I admit he was very stupid about not telling you before things went as far as they did, but it doesn’t mean he doesn’t love you. He was scared and stupid and scared stupid people do... scared and stupid things!”

Greg looked quizzically at Molly, then at Jim, who shrugged his shoulders and reached over to give his princess a pat on the arm, which made Molly smile before she launched back into the fray.

“Yes, he ignored good sense and worse, he ignored Mrs. Hudson...”

Lestrade groaned loudly and slumped in his chair.

“Mrs. Hudson... she knew everything! I must have looked like a complete fool... I asked her to cook the wedding feast! No wonder she stared at me like I’d asked her to cut off my head and make it into soup. She must think I’m a complete idiot.”

“No, she doesn’t. She’s very angry at Mycroft, actually. Scarily angry, which he absolutely deserves from her since he told her he’d tell you who he was and then didn’t. Twice. Or three times, I got a little lost when she was telling me the story. But, she thinks you’re wonderful and that he was terrible for letting you think you were going to have a wedding. So, don’t worry about her. Worry about you. What are you going to do?”

Lestrade laughed for the first time in what seemed like a year and was glad he at least knew the answer to this question.

“Nothing. I’m not going to do anything. Mycroft gets his nice life and a nice wife, I mean that, too, you seem very nice... and I get this. I’ve got John and my job and my house... how he could stand to spend time here just baffles me with what he’s used to... and it’s good. It’s enough. It’s more than a lot of people have and I’m happy with it.”

“And what about love?”

“Not something I’m putting a lot of value in anymore. Anyway, I lived without someone to love besides my son for a long time and I’m not going to fall apart because I’m without it again. If I ever had it to begin with.”

Molly got out of her chair and punched Greg hard on the arm, which made Jim giggle, earning him a
finger wagging by his lover.

“You and Mycroft deserve each other; you’re both stupid. Don’t you listen at all? He loves you. Loves you deeply.”

“That’s nice for you to say, but I’ve not got a lot of faith in what Mycroft says. If there’s one thing he’s good with, it’s words. I’m sure he had lots of nice words to make him seem like he cared, but I’ve got his actions to look at and they paint a different picture.”

“Now, you’re just being stubborn.”

“About what? I got my heart broken and I’m moving on with my life to try and put that behind me. How is any of that being stubborn?”

“Because… it just is.”

“That’s very insightful.”

“Just talk to him!”

“WHY? What do you think that’s going to do?”

“I don’t know!”

“Well, that’s helpful.”

“It is! I mean… it will help.”

“Help who? Look, Your Highness… I understand you and Mycroft are friends and…”

Lestrade cut eyes towards Jim in sympathy.

“… and that you’re going to be husband and wife. You want what’s best for him and that makes sense, but what’s best for Mycroft is not what’s best for me. I’m not ready to forgive him and I’m not sure I ever will be. And you can say he loves me, but even if that’s true… what does it matter? I can’t have him. Can’t be part of his life. I’m not going to be some shameful secret he keeps tucked away for a quick shag when he has the urge. I won’t. I may not have riches and a title, but I’m worth more than being his bit on the side.”

“That’s not what he wants!”

“Is anything else possible?”

Molly hated smart men. No, that was a lie, she adored smart men and was forever grateful she was in love with one, engaged to another and, now, growing to respect a third. But why did they have to be so infuriating?

“I don’t know. We’re trying to figure it out.”

“We?”

“Yes! You’re right that I consider Mycroft a friend and I’m trying to help him. He’s been trying to think of some solution to this since he met you and now I’m working on it, too. Greg… you should have seen him last night. He looked like he’d led a battle and seen every soldier under his command slaughtered. Completely defeated and… broken. That doesn’t happen over someone you don’t love desperately. He doesn’t want you as a dirty secret. He wants… he wants you to be a part
of his life!”

“Like Jim is in yours? Sorry, Jim, but I have a suspicion that you’re actually her secret, aren’t you? Not exactly out there in the open, I bet. That might work for you two, but it won’t for me. I want… I want what I thought I was going to have – a real relationship that I could acknowledge. Celebrate. I have a son and, for a moment, I thought he and I were going to be part of a larger family. A loving family. I was going to raise two boys with my husband and we were going to be happy. We were happy… then I realized it was all a lie.”

Molly had no idea what to say because Greg wasn’t saying anything wrong. And she could tell from her lover’s posture, carefully controlled as it was, that Greg’s words were striking some very unpleasant and powerful chords.

“Please, just talk to him. Or let him talk to you. I promise you that Mycroft never, ever wanted to hurt you. That was the furthest thing from his mind. He just… he was scared of losing you and thought he had time to find a solution. Then the time ran out. Just talk to him. If nothing else happens, I think you’ll feel better if you actually hear from him that he cares. That he didn’t lie about everything.”

“Just the most important things.”

“No. The most important thing was that he loves you and he didn’t lie about that. Give Mycroft the chance to say that to you himself. If you ever cared about him, give him that chance, at least. It will give him some peace and I do think, I really, really do that it will help you, too. And it’s going to help your John if you’re not so angry and hurt, don’t you think?”

A thought that had pressed on his brain strongly as he tried to keep calm when John was present. His son was struggling with his own troubles and it wouldn’t help for John to see his personal heartache. How could the boy come to him for comfort, knowing his father was suffering his own pain? He wouldn’t. John wouldn’t want to make things worse and he wouldn’t seek the support he needed and that was completely unacceptable. That… that was the only thing that had been said today that might, might, change his mind about seeing Mycroft one final time.

“What do you want me to say?”

“That you’ll talk to him. That you’ll listen to what he has to say. That you’ll give him the opportunity to tell his side of the story. To explain himself. Maybe it changes nothing, but at least you’ll always know that you had the full truth and didn’t make any decisions based on what you thought the truth to be.”

“I don’t have any decisions to make in this situation. Not a single one. There’s not a thing I can do to change one bit of any of this. I have zero say in any of it. Not a grain of power or standing or status. He holds it all and no matter what I say or want, I can’t change one tiny thing about what we are or what we might want to be. No, I take that back. I have one decision and that’s to move on with my life and not wallow in this miserable ache that’s twisting my insides into knots and that’s a decision I’ve already made.”

Molly wanted to tell Greg he was being stupid again, but he wasn’t. There was nothing he could do and that was a frustration she understood very well. He didn’t have any power here, not a bit, and feeling so helpless, on top of feeling completely betrayed had to burn like a hot coal sliding down your throat.

“That might be true, but you do have some power… you can help fix Mycroft. Maybe you think he doesn’t deserve it and maybe you’re right, but he’s been destroyed and you can help him start to
heal. Mycroft said you were a good man. That you cared and had the largest heart of anyone he ever knew. I can’t believe that person would be willing to let someone else suffer if he could do something about it.”

Jim’s chuckle highlighted Lestrade’s visible annoyance that Molly had scored a point. He did not want to admit that it hurt to think of Mycroft suffering. It shouldn’t hurt at all, not even a twinge, but it did. He couldn’t lie to himself and say that Mycroft’s actions suddenly made his love for the miserable bastard vanish. His heart still beat faster when he thought of that gorgeous face. When he remembered Mycroft’s voice or touch…it wouldn’t always be like this, but right now, it was another layer of his torture and that part of his mind was starting to scream at him to help the person he loved. And he knew himself well enough to realize that the only way to stop the screaming was to do what it said.

“Once. I will talk to him once. He can say whatever he wants to say and I’ll listen. If that makes him feel better, good. If it doesn’t, that’s not my fault or my problem. Then everyone leaves me alone to try and pick up what pieces I can and move forward. No coming back and trying again. Right now, Mycroft’s name is good with the community. I saw to that, but I can change it, too. He tries to harass me or do anything to John and I will turn the tide of opinion against him and, while that might not do much now, people are going to start looking more closely at him. They’re going to judge more harshly any decisions he makes, he’ll get no benefit of the doubt, no unquestioning loyalty. A few specific words in the right ears, a few more general words to many ears and those little seeds will sprout and send out tendrils that will plant new seeds and so forth and so on. He has favor right now with the people, but, in this city, it’s not very hard to turn that favor into something else entirely.”

The royalist in Molly was appalled at the threat, but that was a little dusty corner somewhere past the stables in her mind, so it was easy to ignore. The rest of her was incredibly pleased with what she was hearing. Mycroft was right about Greg being strong and courageous. He was perfect for her fiancé! Had just the right blend of softness and steel, head and heart and…well, he was a very easy one to look at. What that face must look like when they were having sex…was not something proper for her to think about, so that thought would grow wings immediately and fly right out of her mind. Ok, immediately was such an immediate word…”

“Thank you. And don’t worry… the last thing Mycroft wants to do is hurt you any further. I know it sounds strange coming from me, but he cares about you and will do whatever it takes, whatever you ask to make you happy. Or, at least, less unhappy. I’m sure he’ll race here as soon as I…”

“No. Not here. I told him he was never allowed over my threshold again and that still stands. Tomorrow night at the lake. Tell him that. He’ll know where to go.”

“Oh, ok. That sounds very romantic, actually. Nice and private, too. All sorts of things can happen in nice, private romantic places.”

Lestrade looked over to Jim and this silent conversation informed the constable that Molly’s capacity for optimistic hopefulness was nearly unlimited and Jim was content to never try and change that. He carried enough realistic cynicism for the both of them.

“Like we can talk without being barraged by people wanting to ask a hundred questions.”

“Well, if you simply have to be practical about it. Now that we have that settled, what can we do while we wait for Sherlock and John? Oh! I know! You must know the best places to do a little shopping. Why don’t we don’t we do that? And stop at a tavern. I can’t believe Mycroft got to go to a tavern! Well, what he can do, I can do, too, and I want a big mug of ale and… whatever else
you have at a tavern. Then more shopping. And sightseeing. And more shopping.”

Lestrade looked at the items Jim had already carried in with him, including the large bouquet of fresh flowers and couldn’t help himself laughing. And... oh, it was not pleasant to concede, but he did have to say that Mycroft had gotten very lucky with his engagement. He shouldn’t like Molly, should resent her terribly, but it just wasn’t possible. She was too... nice. In other circumstances, she would be someone he wouldn’t mind having as a friend, but there were no other possible circumstances, so this would likely be the last time they would ever meet. Might as well let her have a little fun for her efforts.

“I think we can find something to keep you occupied. I’ll leave a note for the boys that we’ll be back later. Though... ok, now that I know who Sherlock is, I don’t feel that comfortable leaving him alone here. Not that I think he’s in any danger but...”

“There are four armed men watching the prince. I suspect they always have been; they seem familiar with the area.”

Greg looked at Jim, who shrugged, and stood up, holding out a hand for his Princess to join him.

“Wonderful. Well, it’s good to know Sherlock’s never been unprotected when he’s been out with John. I don’t need to lose my head because someone knocked him about a bit after he got too cheeky for his own good.”

“I don’t think Mycroft would take your head for that, Greg. He’d probably award a few medals, instead. Sherlock could use a few knocks, and Mycroft dotes on him too much to do it himself, which he absolutely knows. They’re too cute together. I can’t wait to get to know John a little better. I bet you two are cute, too.”

A final manly conference informed Jim that Lestrade was most certainly not cute and womanly opinions on the topic were not going to change that. Jim’s contribution was that womanly opinions had a tendency to become law regardless of their own manly input and it was a lesson he had learned through hard experience. Lestrade sighed and stood up, walking to the corner where he kept the sacks they used for a day’s shopping and, after a moment’s hesitation, grabbed them all to toss over his shoulder.

“Ready, Your Highness?”

“Yes! I am so excited - this is going to be fun!”

Strangely, Lestrade believed that might turn out to be true.

Sherlock followed John upstairs and tried to calculate the best approach to speaking with his friend. In truth, he’d never had full faith that he would be allowed this far and had not adequately prepared himself to plead his case. Luckily, John seemed willing to take the lead.

“I don’t know why you’re here, Sherlock. You’re not my friend, so you don’t have any reason to be here, at all.”

The prince had also not calculated how difficult and painful it would be to hear John’s words, but he took it as his due for his own deceit.

“I am your friend, John, albeit with a different name.”
“Friends don’t do things like that to each other. You lied to me from the very first day we met and kept lying to me. At least I know why you never wanted me to go up to the castle with you. I thought that maybe you felt I wouldn’t fit in there, but now I know better. Though, now that I think about it, I guess it’s still true, isn’t it? I don’t fit in with your other friends, do I?”

Sherlock stared at John a moment, then sat down on John’s bed and scowled.

“I do not have any other friends. “

This time, it was John’s turn to stare and, if he could still believe his instincts, Sherlock wasn’t lying.

“Why not?”

Sherlock shrugged his shoulders and stayed silent. He honestly had no articulable answer to that question.

“Well, that doesn’t matter, I guess. No… actually, it makes things worse! I was your friend, apparently your only one, and you still didn’t care enough to be honest with me!”

“Then you wouldn’t have been my friend!”

“How do you know that?”

“I… I just do. People… people like you and Lestrade… don’t treat me as if I could be your friend. You bow and scrape and say Yes, Your Highness… Whatever you wish, Your Highness, As you command, Your Highness. And no one talks to you or listens to you. Well, they listen, but pay no attention because they do not believe it is their place to actually be part of a conversation with you and you are basically talking to yourself. It’s BORING! I can do anything I want to do, as long as I want to do it alone because the people with me might as well be logs and rocks.”

John glared at Sherlock, but dropped on the bed to sit next to him before he replied.

“And you thought I’d be another log rather than a friend.”

“Everyone else behaves that way. I had no reason to expect you to be different.”

“That’s actually an awful thing to say, just so you know.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah, it says you think I’m just as boring and grovelly as those other people.”

Sherlock’s scowl deepened and he wanted to pound his fists against something. Why couldn’t he express himself properly?

“That’s not what I meant. At first, when I did not know you well, I had no evidence to contradict my assumptions. Later, I knew you were unlike those with whom I had previously interacted and realized my assumptions were incorrect.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me!”

“I thought it was too late! I… I thought you would be angry at my deceit and sever our friendship. I did not know what to do.”

John sat there and tried to picture what it was like for Sherlock at the castle and found it surprisingly easy, since it sounded very much like his life before he met the prince. He didn’t have friends. He
didn’t fit in well with the other children. They just weren’t like him and it was hard to talk to them or play with them because it just didn’t work! And Greg made some of them wary, because they liked to get into trouble. Others knew why he was adopted and that made him sort of a freak. The boy whose family was killed. The boy with the dodgy arm. Sherlock might have money and nice clothes and lots of food and things to do, but… Sherlock was as alone as he was.

“Ok, maybe I understand that a little. Maybe. But, it was still an evil thing to do. Selfish. You didn’t give me a chance. You were happy to lie to me to get what you wanted and that’s not what friends do.”

“Well, if I had experience with friends I might have known that, but I did not. And I believed you wanted to be my friend, as well, so announcing myself would be detrimental, also, to you.”

“Are you saying you lied to protect me?”

“To an extent. You are not so provided with admirers that the loss of one would not be felt sharply.”

“You are so arrogant!”

“I am not trying to be! I just… I did not want our friendship to break. I value it. If I did not, rest assured, I would not have devoted time towards it.”

That, John had to admit, was a good argument. Sherlock didn’t easily do things he didn’t want to. It was miserably hard to get him to do things he thought would be boring. If he wasn’t having fun, if he wasn’t enjoying himself, he wouldn’t have kept visiting. Wouldn’t have kept their friendship alive. However…

“True, but you also like to experiment. What if I was just an experiment? You’d enjoy that and that means you didn’t tell me who you were because I was just one of your investigations and you didn’t have all the information you wanted yet.”

NO! John was not supposed to raise valid concerns! He was supposed to see his contrition and… not that he had actually made any apologies, had he? This was intolerable!

“You were not an experiment. Not an investigation or a puzzle. You were… are… a person who is important to me and whose company I enjoy. I am sorry for lying to you, John. I am sorry for making you upset and for cutting at the bonds of our friendship. I never meant to demean you or trick you or hurt you. I thought I would lose you and I could not bear that. But, you are right… it was selfish and you did not deserve my duplicity. I am sorry for it all and I hope that you can find it within you to forgive me.”

Sincere apologies were not Sherlock’s forte and certainly not something with which he was comfortable, but once the words began to flow, they came easier and easier and he knew, deep in his heart, that he meant each and every one. He just hoped the new frown on John’s face meant something… un-frownworthy.

“Do you really mean that? And you had best tell me the truth, because I’ll know and it won’t go well for you if you’re lying again.”

“I do. I never wished to cause you any harm, John. You are… you are my best friend and I could not do that to you. Not intentionally. I hoped, like my brother hoped, that some magic, perhaps, would arise that would prevent the situation from ever becoming a problem. That I could see each day like the one before and never have to endanger that which we had created. It was
childish and foolish and it is easy to see why Mycroft fell victim to that mindset, but I am very disappointed that I was also caught in its clutches.”

John’s face darkened frighteningly and Sherlock raced through his mind to determine how he had again offended his friend.

“I may forgive you, Sherlock, but I don’t think I can ever forgive your brother. He… he did more than lie to Greg. He LIED to Greg! You have no idea how badly he hurt my father. Greg’s been trying to hide it but his heart is torn up in to hundreds of tiny pieces. Greg thought… he thought he’d finally met someone who could love him. He’s lonely, Sherlock, even more than us; he’s been alone a very long time, even before he took me in. Mycroft fooled him into thinking that he wouldn’t be lonely anymore and I can’t… that’s just cruel. Mean and horrible and cruel and nobody who treats my father that way is ever going to get my forgiveness.”

“Would it help to know that Mycroft does love Lestrade? That he would, if he could, perform all of the appropriate courtship rituals and take his hand in marriage?”

“Pfft. Sherlock, your brother knew he was getting married to someone else and…”

“No, he did not.”

John blinked back his surprise and crossed his arms, giving Sherlock a ‘you’d better explain that’ scowl.

“Mycroft was trying to conceive of a way in which he could give Lestrade the honorable love he most desired, but Father… Father, without Mycroft’s knowledge, sought and found for him a wife. He only learned of his engagement the day before the procession. Mycroft was not truthful with Lestrade, that much is certain, and his sins are something for which he must atone in his own way, but the sin of concealing an engagement is not one of them.”

“Your father really just went and found some princess without even asking Mycroft if that was alright?”

“Correct. And, I assure you, Mycroft was not happy with the revelation, though, of the possible options, Molly is not the most odious choice. And she is aware of Mycroft sexual preferences, along with his spoken-for affections. In fact, her escort is her own paramour. It is a ludicrous situation, such as you might witness in a supposedly-comical performance by one of the wandering troupes you favor, but there is no changing its course at this point.”

John wasn’t sure he could have been convinced that being a royal was anything but a great thing, but this was making him rethink that opinion quite quickly.

“And he really loves Greg?”

“Yes, there is no question about that. His reasons for concealing his identity were very similar to mine, though, to his detriment, he did know that their union was not one that would ever be approved of by members of our class. He thought to find some solution, some exception, but…”

“He got engaged.”

“Quite. And now he drags his lifeless carcass through the corridors like a reanimated corpse, moaning and bleating for the love he has lost. It is exceptionally undignified.”

The last thing John wanted to do was feel sorry for the person who’d hurt his father so badly, but he couldn’t help himself. What an awful thing to have happen to you! Be told who you had to marry…
not be able to marry the person you loved… how could he not feel sad for someone like that!

“So what now? Mycroft marries his princess and lives happily ever after?”

“If he is not with Lestrade, I do not believe that phrase is applicable. Neither does Molly, which is why she is attempting, as we speak, to salve Lestrade’s temper so that he might again meet my brother for a discussion.”

“But they can’t be together! Why would he even talk to Greg if he knows they can’t love each other?”

“To receive forgiveness. To assure Lestrade that he was always loved and that the affections they shared were true. And… to leave clear the path should some solution arise that might permit their love to exist openly. There are many minds turned towards this problem, so… perhaps, there is still hope.”

John flopped down onto his bed and let the information run around his brain. Sherlock lied to him to keep their friendship. Dumb. Mycroft lied to Greg to keep their relationship. Dumb. Apparently, having a good education didn’t keep you from being dumb. Really dumb. The dumbest in the world dumb. But dumb didn’t mean nasty. Dumb didn’t mean you were evil or you liked to hurt people. He didn’t like being lied to, but Sherlock was sorry, really sorry, and that counted for something. He liked Sherlock, too. They had fun and could talk about anything. And Sherlock didn’t treat him like the strange orphan boy; Sherlock treated him like a friend and friends forgave friends when they did something dumb…

“Alright, I guess I can at least think about forgiving him. But he had better do something to make Greg feel better! Even if they can’t be together, Greg can’t keep hurting as badly as he is. It’s not fair and it’s not right.”

“I shall pass along your viewpoint. But John….”

“And I forgive you, Sherlock. Just do not ever do anything like that again. No secrets, no lies, nothing like that. You know now that it’s wrong and I don’t like it, so if you lie to me again, you’re doing it knowing you’ll hurt me and that’s going to be the end. The very end and no amount of I’m sorry is going to change it. Understand?”

He was being forgiven! John would be his friend again! And now… now that John knew his identity, he could sneak John in to the castle and add that territory to their kingdom. This was most excellent! And they would explore and investigate and do it together, just as they had before. He had his friend again, and, no, there was dust in his eye from Lestrade’s filthy hovel; he was certainly not feeling his eyes growing moist for any other reason.

“I accept your terms. Thank you, John. This… this means a great deal to me.”

“I’m happy about it, too. I didn’t like being angry with you, Sherlock.”

“I did not like you being angry with me, either. I shall endeavor to prevent that happening in the future.”

“Good. Now, we should probably check on the others. I haven’t heard them talking in awhile and I’m not sure if that’s good or bad.”

“It is entirely possible that Lestrade committed some insult to Molly and her insufferable bodyguard dispatched him before they returned to the castle.”
“He kills people?”

“I have seen no evidence of it, but he is a spy and they are not known for their strict moral code.”

“A spy!”

“As I said, this is a ludicrous situation.”

“Spies aren’t ludicrous, they’re exciting.”

“Jim is not exciting.”

“His name is Jim? That’s not a very good name for a spy.”

“He is also not a very good spy.”

“I think I’ve missed some good stories.”

“I shall regale you at our leisure. Come, let us see if there is a corpse to tend to.”

“Greg better not be dead, because I really don’t want to have to dig his grave. I’m too hungry for digging.”

“I thought people were paid for that task.”

“Greg doesn’t get his wages until next week and he’ll start to stink by then.”

“Very logical. I highly approve.”
Molly decided that after she married Mycroft, she would sneak out of the castle as often as she could and roam the city with Jim. It was extraordinary! It was simply astounding what you could find if you just bothered to open your eyes and look! And travel... she would travel everywhere and see everything that it was possible to see. This was why, well, one of the reasons why, she'd jumped at the chance to marry Mycroft. She’d be able to do all of these things and her Jim could do them with her. Mycroft wouldn’t care a bit and that was an enormous relief but... she and Jim were going to have to talk about today. Her beloved spy understood Greg far too well and that wasn’t something she took pride in. He was her secret. A cherished, treasured secret, but a secret nonetheless and she had never given a thought to how Jim might feel about that. Never gave the issue a single bit of her attention, because she’d never even realized it was an issue. So, now, she was more determined than ever to help Mycroft out of this mess. The stakes, which were already high, just went up into the clouds and there couldn’t be any failure. Jim was better than some shameful, unremarked lover. She loved him! He didn’t deserve to secret. Greg didn’t deserve to be a secret either. Not one bit. Neither did his sweet little John who was currently glowering at them as fiercely as Sherlock, who was standing at his side on the other side of the room.

“Finally. That you, Lestrade, left John and I here alone, without sufficient food and drink to support a shrew’s survival, is a deplorable statement of your childrearing ability.”

“Shut it, you little bastard. Oh, excuse me, prince bastard. And I take it by the ‘John and I’ that you two have worked things out?”

Sherlock and John nodded in unison and Molly giggled at their serious, and perfectly matched, expressions

“John has demonstrated admirable decision-making and proffered me forgiveness.”

“Son, did you proffer?”

“I have no idea.”

“Good enough. To celebrate your reunion, you two can go off and get some water. Two pails should be enough.”

“What! I am not your manservant, Lestrade!”

“Me, either!”

“No water, no dinner. And, maybe no cake that I may have bought a little of while we were waiting for you two to work out your differences.”

“C…cake?”

“Do not give in, John!”

“But, Sherlock... cake.”

“You have the backbone of a carrot. And I, apparently, shall have calloused hands of a serving wench.”

Molly giggled again as Sherlock and John retrieved their pails and stalked out the door, after
verifying that Lestrade’s story about baked goods was not a fabrication.

“Wow. You’re really good with kids. I’ve never seen Sherlock listen to… anyone… so easily.”

“He’s a good lad, just has his own way of seeing the world.”

Lestrade put away the few things he’d picked up during Molly’s shopping and tavern binge and suddenly felt the energy flow out of him like air from his lungs. Sherlock and John were back together and, apparently, thick as thieves, just as they’d always been. That was good. That was so good, it was difficult to describe. His son had his light back and there was nothing in the world more important than that. But he got… nothing. Oh wait, he forgot. He got to listen to Mycroft rattle on and on and try to make excuses for being a complete lying bastard. Just the thing for brightening up his own day tomorrow, which was already likely to be a miserable one. He’d created a tremendous stir at the market today, much to Molly and Jim’s amusement, so it was a fairly certain thing that his celebrity wasn’t going to wane quickly. The questions, the demands he tell his story again and again… it had started to drain him and, now, he had a princess staring at him as if she wanted to go on another adventure in the city, which, when it was over, would see her return to her wonderful life with her lover and his former lover as her fiancé. She’d had a wonderful day and would have many more in the future and he got… no, he didn’t want to think about that. Not when he was feeling so damned tired…

“Well, Your Highness… anything else I can do for you?”

“Oh! Oh… oh… that was strange because, for a minute, I didn’t know who you were talking to! Today has been fantastic! Being me, but not me at the same time and… I’ve never had so much fun. But, I suppose we should get back to the castle. Father won’t look for me until later, but I did tell Mrs. Hudson that I would pop in and visit her today. She’s going to give me all the embarrassing stories about Mycroft and Sherlock when they were little, so I’ve got things to hang over their heads when they’re being difficult.”

And, immediately, Molly knew she’d just punched a hole in Greg’s heart and she wished Jim would just give her a good kick for being stupid. Brilliant… remind Greg that she was going to be a part of Mycroft’s daily life, of his future, and Greg… he’d had that stolen away from him. She could see the pain in his face and tried to smile both comforting and apologetically at the same time.

“S… sounds like fun. Mrs. Hudson’s a good one to know, a good person to have on your side. But you shouldn’t keep her waiting or you’ll find something on your dinner plate ready to fight you before being eaten. It’s been nice to meet you, Molly. Jim, you too. Have… have a nice life.”

Lestrade smiled as sincerely as he could because he honestly meant what he said. They seemed to be good people and it was wrong to wish them ill. He just wished some of their happiness might have the chance to rub off on him.

“Yes… it’s been nice to meet you too, Greg. I… I hope it’s not the last time.”

Though, from Lestrade’s increasingly-strained smile, Molly knew that wasn’t very likely if things didn’t change radically. Rather than find another opportunity to put her foot in her mouth, Molly grabbed Jim’s hand and, with a final wave, hurried out the door, leaving Lestrade to give in to his fatigue and drop heavily into his favorite chair. The boys would be back soon, or not if something caught their attention, but he would at least have a few minutes to pull himself back together. Molly was an unexpectedly pleasant woman and would be a good wife to Mycroft. Really, he wished her all the best and was happy she’d found a way to make something of the mess she’d been handed. He would never, ever, begrudge her the decisions she made or the advantages they bought her. You did what you had to in this life. One day… maybe he’d get the chance to… no. No, no thinking
ahead; there wasn’t anything but blackness there right now. Another day. Some other day he’d look ahead and see something other than darkness and then he’d start to hope again. Start to feel again. Just not right now. Someday, just not right now…

Molly and Jim retraced their steps back into the castle and the princess sent her lover to put her purchases in her bedroom and then down to the kitchens to tell Mrs. Hudson she’d be by to visit soon. Right now, she needed to find Mycroft and give him the news.

Where she did not expect to find him was still in his bedroom. In his bed. With the blankets over his head. Groaning.

“How much did you have to drink last night?”

“A touch.”

“A grope is more like it. I count three wine bottles, no… four and I haven’t even checked under the blankets.”

“Fine, I had more than a touch. I was a tad distressed by my conversation with Gregory and…”

“Stop lying. You were shattered. I saw you, Mycroft. Heard you, too. You were in pieces and I hate to tell you, but wine isn’t the glue to put those pieces back together.”

“I forgot for awhile that they were separated, however, and… there is benefit in that.”

Molly clapped her hands loudly and Mycroft’s horrified shriek of pain made her grin.

“Hope that benefit is worth what you’re paying for it. Anyway, you need to pull yourself together because you have to be in top shape for tomorrow.”

Mycroft pulled aside a corner of his blanket nest and peeked an eye out to stare at Molly.

“What is special about tomorrow?”

“You’re meeting Greg to talk. At the lake. He said you’d know where that is.”

There was no chance that his mind had correctly processed whatever his fiancé had vocalized, so Mycroft wondered if she had vocalized anything at all.

“Are you a hallucination?”
“No and I’m fairly certain that’s not complimentary, so you’re going to be in trouble as soon as I’m not worried you’re going to throw up on me.”

Mycroft squirmed out a little further from his burrow and blinked uncomfortably at the sunlight streaming through the windows.

“Why would you say that I will meet Gregory at the lake?”

“Because that’s what he told me to say.”

The hallucination worry was still very much alive and Mycroft flinched at the swat he got when he reached over to pinch Molly’s arm.

“I’m real!”

“You… you spoke with Gregory? You?”

“Well, me and Jim. And Sherlock. He worked things out with John, by the way. I don’t think he’ll be back until later, though, which is a good thing. Greg mentioned dinner and cake and I think he was talking to both Sherlock and John. I thought it was alright to leave Sherlock there since you’ve got armed men watching him, so I hope that’s not a problem. Anyway, it seemed like something he did often, so why disrupt his day since it just back on track! Oh, and I adore John! He’s so cute! And Greg… well, cute isn’t the word is it? Gorgeous is more like it. And smart and a great father… he’s a winner, Mycroft. If you don’t think of some way to keep him, I’m really going think you’re the stupidest man in history.”

“You… you spoke with Gregory?”

“Is something broken in your brain?”

“I… I am not entirely certain.”

“Let’s suppose there isn’t and go on from there. I talked to Greg and… well, a lot was said, but I got him to agree to listen to you. I have the feeling he thinks it’s just going to be you telling him how sorry you are and then him saying thanks and walking away forever, but we both know that’s not true. You’re going to make him believe there’s still hope. That if he just has faith, you’ll…”

“I shall what? I see no endpoint to this scenario that involves my Gregory in any other role than a bystander to my existence and that is not acceptable.”

“Yet. You can’t see any other option, yet. You can’t give up on me now, Mycroft. It’s too important for you give up looking for an answer. He’s willing to listen, so you have a chance to convince him that the last thing you’re doing is giving up on what you two have. He loves you so much, I couldn’t have missed that for any reason, so you need to build on that feeling and repair some of the damage you’ve done to him so he’s willing to hold on and give you some time to figure this out.”

Mycroft slowly laid his head back on the pillow, wincing at how loudly the feathers crackled from the weight, and let himself think. Gregory would speak with him again. It was not a thing he ever thought would happen, yet the opportunity was already waiting for him. He would have that most-desired chance to tell his dearest how desperately he cared, how deeply he loved and how profound was his shame at his behavior. If nothing else came of their conversation, that would be enough. But…

… if there could be more… if he could convince his Gregory to hope, to embrace again his dream of
a loving and contented future… that would be a blessing an unworthy cur like himself did not deserve. But he would grip it as tightly as he could and refuse to ever let it go.

“If Gregory is willing to bear my presence and listen to my words, then I shall do everything within my power to express both my love and my sorrow for his pain. And… if it is possible to instill in him a sense of hope, I shall do my best to plant that seed. Thank you, Molly. You did not have to do this for me but…”

“No, I did. And, actually, I got my own little reward for my troubles.”

Mycroft cocked his head, emitting a pathetic moan, but listened attentively and enjoyably to Molly’s tales of adventure as an anonymous woman in the city and was very pleased to hear that his love joined in the entertainment, for it must have breathed some fresh air into the heaviness of his mood.

“I can’t wait until Jim and I can get out and explore again. It was the best time and I learned so much. I didn’t expect to learn anything, but it was fascinating to talk to people and learn about their work and their lives… it’s so different from ours.”

“Endlessly different. However, the bonds of love and family are the same. Stronger for them, perhaps, because their love is not often born, I think, of simply having to make the best of a situation into which you are thrust and spending years with a person with whom you eventually grow fond.”

“You could be right. I know that my love for Jim is nothing like what my parents have. Thank heavens.”

“I concur. Mummy and Father are fairly amiable; however, I know there is not the true passion of love between them. Father did not even meet Mummy until their wedding day! And his verbalized observation on their wedding night that her bottom was notably large was the final nail, I believe, in the coffin of their relationship.”

“Oh yes. There really is nowhere to go from there. At least we don’t have that problem.”

“True. I do not find your bottom large at all.”

Molly’s giggles were punching Mycroft in the skull, but it was good to hear them anyway. She had done him a great service and if his pitiful wit could be offered as payment, then he offered it gladly.

“Cad.”

“That I am. Fortunately, my roguish opinion is unnecessary, since your ear is turned only to that of your darling Jim.”

“True…”

“That was a sadly pregnant pause, Molly.”

“Yes… it’s just… when we were talking to Greg, Jim said he understood what Greg was feeling. That he felt the same way about him and me, though without the out and out lying part. And Greg said Jim’s my secret… that I hide who he is to me and I could tell Jim agrees. It is true, but I never saw it as a bad thing until I talked to Greg and… well, I saw the look on Jim’s face. He’s hurt by it and I can’t let that go on. But I can’t be open about who we are to each other, either. My father would kill me! Or lock me away somewhere with nothing but birds to talk to.”

“Ah, I believe I am familiar with that particular tune.”
“It wasn’t until today that I understood what Jim is feeling and I really do feel a little dumb about it. If we didn’t talk to Greg, I’m not sure Jim would ever have said anything either and that’s a disturbing thought. He would have had to live with that pain and I can’t believe I never even noticed.”

“He would not want you to. He loves you, Molly, and your happiness is what he values most. It is reassuring, I suppose, that he has chosen to remain by your side, knowing the situation, but, I agree that the circumstances are not optimal for enduring happiness.”

“So, that’s why you’re going to restore Greg’s faith in your future and then work with me to come up with some answer to our problem.”

Mycroft slithered back down under his blankets and began to relax his mind into the proper configuration for thinking. Unsurprisingly, it was going very, very poorly.

“Tomorrow is my meeting, correct?”

“Tomorrow night, yes.”

“Then there is no reason for me to move from my bed today.”

Molly shook her head in pity; it was not ladylike to admit that she’d endured a few days hiding under her blankets herself, so that secret would stay secret for the time being. Some things one just had to suffer and learn from on one’s own…

“That bad, huh?”

“I believe a pail might be necessary in the near future.”

“I think I’m leaving now.”

“Your wifely devotion is heartwarming.”

“Everything has a limit, Mycroft.”

“Duly noted.”

“Is there any meat in here?”

Sherlock poked through his bowl of stew and scowled at the offending vegetables.

“Probably an insect or two, but beyond that, no.”

“Your sense of humor does not improve with age, Lestrade.”

“Maybe not, but my cooking does. When I was young, I ate things mostly raw because I had no idea how to cook. If I didn’t burn something, I boiled it until it made its own soup by falling apart in the water. John was lucky that by the time he came around, I’d figured a few things out.”

“You are not as skilled as you would like to think. Mrs. Hudson would be appalled.”

“Mrs. Hudson’s been cooking her whole life and she’s… well she’s got some years on her.”

“Hmm… I shall pass along that you believe her to be old. I am certain she will wish to take
time to discuss the matter with you fully when you next meet.”

John’s snickering was as much for Sherlock getting a piece of bread thrown at him as the image of Lestrade getting lectured by the mysterious Mrs. Hudson, who John pictured as vaguely dragon-like, with very sharp teeth.

“You know, if you’re not happy with what we’ve got, you’ve got a whole castle full of things to eat and Mrs. Hudson making them for you.”

“Pfft. You understand nothing. If I am provided with a cold leg of squirrel and a half-roasted potato, also cold, I consider it a feast. The only appreciable nourishment I receive is when I creep into the kitchens under the cover of night and partake of what remains in the hound’s bowl.”

“You have a dog!”

“The kitchens have a dog. I have naught but his gnawed bones and mutton gristle.”

Lestrade found it funny that sitting at his table was the second in line for the throne of this entire kingdom and… it didn’t feel any different as when it was just little Sherwin dutifully eating his meatless stew and dodging hunks of thrown bread. Maybe… maybe if John had met Sherlock as Sherlock, things would have taken a very different turn in their friendship. If a friendship would ever have grown at all.

“You still have a dog, though. Maybe we can take him out with us sometime when we’re working. Dogs have good noses, you know. He might be able to sniff out a thief or find a missing sheep or something.”

“Hmmm… there is merit to that suggestion. If he could be trained to follow a specific scent, he could be valuable to our investigations. We shall begin tomorrow. I will collect you in the morning and show you the most parsimonious path into the castle.”

Lestrade reached over to close John’s mouth, which had dropped open at Sherlock’s words.

“I… I get to go to the castle?”

“It is not as interesting as you seem to believe, but you shall know that sad truth for yourself soon enough. Now that you are aware of who I am, we have access to the resources of the castle for our investigations and experiments.”

John did a wiggly dance in his chair and Lestrade felt both joy for the opportunities now open to his son and a deepening hole in his own heart because John was going to pull further and further away from the father who loved him so dearly. It was a normal part of growing up, that couldn’t be denied, but right now… losing another person in his life was not something the constable could bear to think about.

“Just stay out of trouble, you two. I can’t keep an eye on you up there and I can’t get you out of a tight situation, either.”

“Don’t worry, Greg. I don’t think Sherlock can actually get into trouble.”

“That is somewhat true, because none of the servants dare lift a finger against me, save Mrs. Hudson and her ridiculous spoons, but Mummy and Father are not hesitant to mete out a punishment if they see fit to do so. Not that they see much of me, which is very much by design, but acting in their stead is the lumbering behemoth and he is far more knowledgeable about my daily comings and goings. His network of spies is as enormous as his waistline.”
And now they were talking about the King and Queen as if they were… people. This conversation was becoming very unsettling… and, at the same time, not. And no mention would be made of how much he wanted to swat Sherlock for commenting on Mycroft’s waistline. Which was most certainly not enormous. There was a very pleasing softness to it, a gentle and appealing curve to his belly that made it fit perfectly in these big hands… ok, now it was time to stop thinking altogether before he disgraced himself further with his own weakness.

“Spies or not, just be good for a change. And John, I want you home by dinner.”

“What! Please, Greg…”

“We may not be finished with our work!”

“Look, normally it only takes me sending out the word and I can find out where you two are, but that’s not going to be easy when you’ve spent the day up there. I need to know what’s going on with you, John.”

“I shall send a servant to notify you as to our agenda and timetable.”

“Stop acting like you’re royalty, Sherlock.”

“I am royalty, Lestrade.”

“Yeah, well… not when you’re with me. No sending servants to do anything.”

“Fine. I shall send one of my bodyguards. Mycroft provided me with four and when I am at home, they do nothing but drink wine and attempt to seduce the kitchen girls.”

One large headache was brewing and Lestrade truly did not need that added to his current list of pains.

“Great. Sounds perfect. I’ll just…”

No, he wouldn’t just sit here waiting next to an empty chair at the table… he’d be at the lake listening to Mycroft go on about whatever it was he was going to go on about.

“I’ll just keep myself busy. I’ve got something to do anyway.”

Two suspicious boys staring at him wasn’t helping Lestrade’s digestion very much, which wasn’t a terrible problem since his appetite left him quite awhile ago.

“What?”

“None of your business, John.”

“Very much my business, Greg. You never have anything to do and now you’re being sneaky. What do you think, Sherwin? I mean… Sherlock.”

“He is behaving in a very cagey fashion. Confess, Lestrade and save yourself the humiliation of being the subject of our investigation. We do not fail.”

That they didn’t. And they had a right to know, anyway.

“I said I’d meet Mycroft at the lake tomorrow night. He wants to talk. I don’t know what about exactly; Molly said he wanted to explain his side of things and I guess I owe him that much. I… I didn’t give him much chance to actually do that the last time I saw him, so it’s fair, I suppose, to let
him say his piece. Not that it’s going to change anything, but maybe it will… I don’t know. Clear the air, take away some of the hurt… but that’s about all.”

Sherlock and John shared a look that spoke volumes about what each other thought about the idea and both got a swat from Lestrade for thinking this was a promising idea.

“And do not think this means Mycroft and I are getting back together because we’re not. Not ever. He’s got a fiancé and that sort of puts an end to any possible relationship we might have had, even if I forgave him for lying to me, which I haven’t. And which I won’t. This is just the proper goodbye that we didn’t get before. Nothing else.”

No, the two little miseries did not just give each other ‘not if we can help it’ looks. He was not going to get caught up in one of their little schemes…

“Look, I saw that and I don’t appreciate it. I’m happy you two made things right between you, I’m very happy about it, but that’s not going to happen with Mycroft and me. I’m sorry, but what I want from life he can’t give me and, anyway, I can’t trust him. That’s the end of the story.”

“You still care for him. It is written on you as boldly as the illumination of a manuscript.”

“Sherlock… life isn’t black and white. You don’t love someone, then see it vanish like smoke in an instant. Yes, I still care for him. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have agreed to this meeting. But that doesn’t mean anything beyond I’m willing to let him get some things off his chest. Don’t make this into more than it is.”

“What if Mycroft wants ‘this’ to be more than it is?”

“Then he’s going to be disappointed. There’s no future for us, Sherlock and that’s the end of it. Mycroft’s going to get married and live his life… he’s going to be king someday! You tell me, where’s my place in all of that? Nowhere. I’m not going to be the one he sneaks out to visit now and then when he’s got an itch to scratch. I’m not. I don’t have much in this world and I never will. I’ll always be a simple lad who’ll work myself hard every day to keep a roof over my head and food in my mouth and give John the best future I possibly can. But I’ve got my pride. No matter what little else I have, I do have my pride and I’m not going to be a shameful, dirty secret for anyone. Not even a prince.”

Lestrade didn’t realize that he’d started snarling out the last bit until he registered the widened eyes of Sherlock and John and, with the sour taste of his speech in his mouth, it was simply too much. With a shove of his chair, the constable was out of his seat and marching upstairs to get out of the room and away from the pair of eyes that watched his every step until he was out of sight.

“Greg’s not doing very well.”

“No, he is not. Mycroft is an idiot.”

“Yep. He’s definitely going to have a hard time getting Greg to forgive him and I think you can forget about them ever getting together again. But, if he says he’s sorry, I think Greg will feel better and that’s all I care about right now.”

“Mycroft is hoping for a reestablishment of their relationship.”

“He’s… Sherlock, Mycroft won’t hurt my father will he? I mean, if Greg tells him they’re through for good? Try and force him to do what he wants? Mycroft’s powerful and could do all sorts of things if Greg made him angry…”
Sherlock was appalled at the idea, but had to admit that, from John’s standpoint, it was a valid concern. Mycroft could, if he was so inclined, destroy Lestrade completely; however, such an action was ludicrous to contemplate. Mycroft’s heart was far too tender, in matters concerning the constable, for him to ever cause Lestrade to come to harm.

“Mycroft would do nothing deleterious to Lestrade. He is pathetically besotted with him and could no more treat him cruelly than he could pass by a roasted chicken and leave it uneaten.”

“I’d say he’s been pretty cruel so far, actually.”

“But only by omission, not direct intention. Mycroft is entirely capable of making coldly-analyzed decisions, taking brutal actions, but only for the political arena… for the good of his future subjects. He is not a weak man, or even a highly sentimental one, but he could never harm the ones he loves and he loves Lestrade to the very depths of his soul.”

John sat quietly a moment, then nodded sharply.

“Ok, I believe you. But, I’m going to say something to Mycroft tomorrow to let him know that he had better make Greg feel better or he’s going to have to answer to me.”

“In his current frame of mind, I believe that will be a substantial threat.”

“Good.”

Sherlock left Lestrade’s home after dinner and the cake that they’d been promised, portions enlarged due to it being consumed by two mouths and not the intended three, and snuck back into the castle, debating a few minutes before making his way directly to Mycroft’s room.

“You appear as if you were summoned from your crypt three years after your demise.”

“Thank you, Sherlock. I appreciate your assessment.”

“I did not believe the effects of gross intoxication lingered to this extent.”

“Nor did I. However, I think I now understand the basis for some of Father’s more disagreeable days.”

“An interesting thought. Do you know what else is interesting? That you are meeting Lestrade tomorrow night. I take it Molly was successful in her quest.”

“Apparently. I never thought Gregory would speak to me again, but I shall not let this opportunity pass me by.”

“It will not be easy.”

Mycroft cut a still-bloodshot eye at Sherlock and motioned for him to continue.

“Lestrade has not wavered from his position that you and he are forever separated.”

“Yes, I am aware.”

“How do plan to approach him?”

“I have no idea at this point.”
“You had best think of something! What have you been doing all day?”

“Avoiding sunlight and revisiting yesterday’s meals.”

“Disgusting. If, tomorrow, John chooses to thrash you, I shall stand by and cheer him on.”

The boys’ relationship seemed well and truly repaired and Mycroft breathed a sigh of relief. This was truly a splendid development.

“And why would John take such an action?”

“He is unhappy that Lestrade is suffering. And he is. Tonight, Lestrade was overcome with emotion and could not even finish his meal. John has stated clearly that it is your responsibility to ameliorate Lestrade’s anguish and I cannot disagree. He plans on putting you on alert tomorrow when he arrives.”

Arrives? Oh, this was very encouraging…

“John shall visit you here?”

“Yes. We have decided to train the kitchen hound to search for specific scents so he may assist us with our work when it is required.”

And, perhaps, as the days passed, share some lessons, enjoy an afternoon reading one of the many, many books at their disposal… if he could do nothing else for his beloved, he could offer John every possible opportunity, educational or otherwise, to grant him a very promising future.

“A very worthy endeavor. And I shall do my utmost to reassure young John that my intentions are first and foremost to alleviate his father’s suffering. If that is the entirety of what I accomplish tomorrow, I shall still consider my mission a success.”

“Very well. You might avoid a thrashing.”

Sherlock walked over to the fire, toed off his shoes and curled up in one of Mycroft’s large chairs.

“Now, we must strategize.”

“We?”

“Do you think I would leave something as important as your reconciliation with Lestrade entirely in your hands? Besides, I have known him longer than you and you will benefit from my insight.”

“Ah, I see. Very helpful of you.”

“I am nothing if not munificent.”

Mycroft laughed and took the seat opposite his brother. Frankly, any help he could acquire at this time was gladly welcome. Tomorrow night would come much sooner than he expected and he had much to prepare…
Chapter 16

“John, will you just sit down!”

“I can’t! I’m too excited! Why don’t you go to work so you don’t have to watch me stand?”

“I’ll leave as soon as you do.”

Because if Sherlock changed his mind, forgot or had his plan discovered and stopped, Lestrade didn’t want John to be left alone here waiting for someone who could never come.

“That’s stupid.”

“Which is why it’s perfect for you. Now, don’t do anything to get yourself beheaded or exiled or something and keep out of people’s way. As much as I hate to say this, ask Mycroft before Sherlock wants to do something insane.”

“I’d be talking to him all day.”

“Ok, that’s true, but you know what I mean.”

Well, he hoped John knew what he meant, but since there was someone pounding on the door, Lestrade just had to trust his son wouldn’t end up in the castle dungeon by lunchtime.

“Sherlock! Right on time. John’s ready to go and I’m holding you to your word that if he’s going to be late, someone is going to let me know.”

“Since our lateness would overlap your assignation with Mycroft, it seems rather a pointless endeavor. What shall my representative do, affix a note to the door with a knife?”

“John, take this one back to where he’s out of my hair and do what you can to have a good time.”

Grabbing Sherlock’s arm, John raced out the door, waving to Lestrade as they vanished into the distance. The future constable looked back longingly at the bottle of wine sitting on the shelf, then made his own exit, heading towards the watch house for his first day back after the destruction of his life. There was little chance it was going to be a good day, and there was zero chance it would be a good night, so his focus was on simply surviving these hours and returning home to that inviting bottle of wine and an excited John filled with stories to share, which he would listen to with just as much excitement. After he saw Mycroft tonight, that chapter of his life would be firmly closed and the fact that John was embarking on a new chapter of his own life was something he was glad for. And if any stories John brought home involved Mycroft, well… chapter closed. No extra chips coming off his heart over this. Not at single one…

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“This is… Sherlock, this is… it’s just like I imagined it.”

Sherlock knew he had nothing to do with the castle’s architecture, furnishings or staff, but he felt a bit of pride at John’s clear amazement at his home.

“If you imagined a prison in one of the barbarian kingdoms, then you are justified.”

“Sherlock, this is amazing. You have to admit, my house compared to this… there’s no
“True, your hovel is a chamberpot in the barbarian prison, but, at least you have a measure of freedom and your days are yours to plan and manage.”

“But you can snap your fingers and someone brings you anything you want. I snap my fingers and all I get is Greg looking at me funny.”

“It is not Lestrade’s fault that you failed in your training of him to be properly obedient to your wishes.”

“I think I’d get spanked if I tried.”

“To the valorous go the spoils; your cowardice has undone you.”

“Well, that’s the first thing I’ll ask Mycroft when I see him. ‘Hi Mycroft! Sherlock says he’s got you trained to be properly obedient, so go and get us two big platters of food and lots of wine. Be quick about it, too!’ I’m sure you’ll have a different opinion about spanking after that.”

“If you sent Mycroft for food and wine, you would not see him again as his gluttony would distract him completely from his task. And, I suspect he shall avoid wine at all costs today. He overindulged disgracefully after speaking to Lestrade and spent yesterday huddled in his bed, sickened and shamed by his excesses. “

“Oh… that’s bad. Greg did that once and he wouldn’t let me open the shutters on the windows or even speak to him all day. He got sick a few times, too.”

“Apparently idiocy is a trait they share.”

“We’re not idiots like that. They should take lessons from us.”

“So have I been saying to Mycroft since I was four.”

“I don’t think he listened.”

“Yes, that much is evident.”

Sherlock snuck John into his room, where Sherlock lost his commoner’s garb and John changed into something slightly more regal so the pair would attract less notice, though each boy was completely ignorant of the fact that Sherlock being seen with any child was cause for gossip. Luckily for the pair, the general consensus was that if the young prince was distracted with a playmate, he wouldn’t be causing his usual brand of chaos, so no mention would be made of the change of circumstances for fear of disrupting the one chance the castle inhabitants had for peace.

With John properly dressed, the two hurried towards Mycroft’s rooms, which Sherlock entered without knocking, offending greatly John’s sense of propriety.

“Sherlock!”

“Pre-announcing myself gives my brother opportunity to hide his activities, which could be interesting and I would, therefore, not be able to demand an explanation for why I was not made part of them.”

“It’s still not nice, Sherlock.”
“Thank you, John. It is good to know that I have an ally in instructing Sherlock in the basic niceties of life.”

John turned to see Mycroft entering the room through a side door and wrestled with the rush of emotions he was experiencing. He had liked Mycroft… when he was Michael. He was nice and smart and funny made his father happy. He’d wanted what he thought they were getting, a family with Michael and Sherwin and it was going to be the best thing to happen to him since Greg adopted him as a son. Then it all fell apart and it was Mycroft’s fault.

But he also sort of understood why Mycroft did what he did and if Sherlock was right and he really cared for Greg then maybe he wasn’t such a bad person. And he was going to try and make things right tonight, so that was good. It wouldn’t be betraying Greg to be nice to Mycroft, he supposed, especially if Mycroft was going to try and think of a way to make them the family he’d promised.

“John?”

“What? Oh… hi, Mycroft.”

The Crown Prince understood perfectly the small boy’s uncertainty and discomfort and wished he had a set of magic words to make it vanish into thin air. The best he could do was provide the assurances he’d promised Sherlock and be ever-vigilant against any words or actions that would further blacken him in John’s eyes.

“I am very happy you now are able to visit Sherlock in his home, John. I am confident that you shall both find many enjoyable activities to pursue and please know that whatever I can do to create more or support the existing ones, I shall do without hesitation. You have simply to ask.”

“Thanks. I’m sure we’ll find lots to do.”

Mycroft hated hearing John’s voice without its characteristic energy, so he sat down on the chest at the foot of his bed and motioned John to sit next to him, with Sherlock standing close in case he needed to intervene. Handing Mycroft a cloth for a bloodied nose was the least he could do if John became disgruntled with his brother’s attempt at pacification.

“I know you are unhappy with me, John, and you have full right to be. I did not anticipate this turn of events, but you must know I did not ever wish to see it come to pass. I had hoped to find some method to make everything I offered you and Gregory become reality and I have not turned away from that goal. It is alright if you do not view me kindly at this time, it is certainly my due, but I hope you shall, at least, not count me among your enemies, because that is most certainly not what I wish to be to you.”

John sat a moment, thinking about what the prince had said, and had to admit that Mycroft wasn’t asking for things to be like they were before and that was something to consider. If Mycroft had, he would have been suspicious, but this felt real and that was a point in the prince’s favor. There was just one thing he had to make clear, though…

“Ok… I don’t want to be your enemy either, but if you do anything to hurt Greg or take away his job or anything like that, then you will be my enemy and I’ll make you pay for being evil.”

Mycroft’s widened eyes made Sherlock’s inner self cackle with glee. Of course, that was completely ruined by his brother’s surprised face softening into a fond and indulgent smile.

“I consider myself duly warned. And I offer you my most sincere assurances that I will never harm Gregory, nor allow him to be harmed by any hand. He is safe with me, John; please have no
“Alright, I believe you. But if anything changes, we’re going to have a problem. Oh, and I don’t know what you hope to say to Greg tonight, but it had better be good. He’s a mess and if he stays that way… I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“I am going to try my very best to rectify that situation.”

And that was a nearly spiritual truth. His first priority was easing his love’s soul, taking away the darkest of the hurt; everything else, even the reformation of their bond, was secondary.

“And may I know the reason for this pleasant visit?”

John opened his mouth to answer, then frowned and turned to look at Sherlock, who rolled his eyes and huffed.

“We are verifying you are in proper condition to speak to Lestrade and notifying you that we shall not be available today for any of your ridiculous concerns. Our agenda is filled with highly important matters and we will not appreciate any intrusion by you or your lackeys into our work.”

Or, as Mycroft read between the narrow and cramped lines, Sherlock wanted to give John his chance to stand up for his father, so the day may proceed without that worry continuing to hang over his friend’s head.

“At this point, I have no intention of imposing any demands on your day; however, I cannot predict if Father or Mummy might have other ideas. I will try to intercede should that occur.”

“Very well. Come, John. We have much to do.”

Sherlock marched out of Mycroft’s suite, with John close on his heels, and the Crown Prince felt it polite to wait for them to leave until he began to laugh. This was what he had always hoped Sherlock would have in this life and he, in all honesty, could not be happier for his brother and John. After a moment’s reflection he decided it would be prudent to send orders that the boys be given the run of the castle, albeit within the limits imposed by sanity and common sense. The freedom and creativity they enjoyed in the city and in Lestrade’s home should not be relinquished simply because they were in a new venue. And, as he was well aware, what Sherlock was denied, Sherlock desired the most and sought to acquire by any means possible…

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Unless you knew Mycroft very well, and the number of individuals who did could be counted on a single hand with fingers left over, you would never have noticed how his nerves became more and more frayed as the day wore on until he was at the point he resembled a cat being held over a barrel of water. With the hour of his departure approaching, the prince donned his customary garb for visiting his lover and, following a very unexpected urge, snuck down to the kitchens to beg a cup of tea to steady himself.

“Oh, have a new man in the city to seduce?”

Mycroft sighed heavily and sat at the staff table.

“No, Mrs. Hudson. You know that is not the case. I have an appointment to visit Gregory to… talk.”
“Talk?”

“That is what I said.”

“Didn’t you already do that? I thought he’d made it very clear that he was done talking to you, young man.”

“True, however… Molly brokered another meeting so that I might address issues I found myself unable to broach during our last discussion.”

“Oh… well, I knew I liked that girl. So, what do you think you’re going to accomplish?”

Mrs. Hudson set a cup of tea in front of the prince and watched him take a sip, nodding approvingly as the comfortable warmth filled his insides.

“Gregory is suffering terribly from the grief of betrayal and his belief that our love was not what he felt it to be. I need to reassure him that he was always loved, always desired and that I had no intent to hurt him in such a grievous manner. I… I was not able to fully discuss these matters the one instance we spoke and I must do what I can to convince him that I never toyed with him, never viewed him as anything but the person I desperately wanted as my partner in this life.”

“Think he’ll believe you?”

“I have no idea, but I must try. Even if he does not believe me now, as time soothes his wounds, he might come to believe my words were true.”

“Fair enough… and is that’s it? That’s all you’re hoping for?”

“That is my primary goal, however, I shall try, also, to beg a second chance to create with him a love that we may cherish the rest of our days.”

Mrs. Hudson had both expected and dreaded that answer. As much as she wanted that future for her little prince, it simply wasn’t meant to be.

“You know that’s not possible, Mycroft.”

“I do not know that is impossible. The timeframe was so cruelly abbreviated that I scarcely had time to apply any real mental effort to the task.”

“Want to try that again with a little more honesty?”

Mycroft snorted loudly, but had to admit he’d told but half the truth.

“Very well… it is true that I do not know what may be done, but I also did not work to my full potential to find a solution. I thought… I thought I would have time. I thought that, for awhile, I could simply enjoy the life of Michael Holmes, for that life was a blessed and joyful one. I became complacent, even lazy. I realize those are sins that discredit me terribly, but if there is a thing I can credit myself, it is that I learn from my mistakes. And, I am not alone in my quest. Molly has become aware that her situation with her own lover is not unlike my own and whatever solution can be discovered for my own dilemma shall serve multiple purposes. Sherlock has also vowed his support and counsel, and you are surely aware the importance of that source of assistance.”

Mrs. Hudson laughed sharply and gave Mycroft a long, strong hug. She couldn’t see a way to bring about the future they wanted, but that this much effort was going into the problem… maybe something could be done to actually find her Mycroft his happily ever after.
“You’ve got a good army on your side, boy, but it won’t mean a dirty radish if you don’t bring Greg back on your side. For what it’s worth, I hope you can do it, but only if you really are committed to making this work.”

“I am, Mrs. Hudson. In that you may have full faith.”

With a quick swipe, the cook stole away Mycroft’s half-finished tea and nodded towards the door.

“Best get going, then. Where are you meeting him?”

“The lake that is near his home… a place that is meaningful for us. That he chose such a significant location gives me hope that he is truly willing to hear my words and reflect upon them, whether he consciously realizes it or not.”

“I wish you luck, Mycroft. Stop in and visit me when you’re done if you want to talk about how things went.”

“I shall. Thank you, Mrs. Hudson.”

“You’re welcome. Now get the hell out of here.”

The third time Lestrade stopped himself leaving to go back home, he called himself a coward and kicked a rock into the lake, watching the ripples give life to the moon that was reflected brightly in the glass-like water. It was just a talk and no one ever died from talking. For his part, really, it was mostly just a listening. Sit here, let Mycroft say what he had to say and wash his hands of it all. Actually, it could almost be considered restful and that would be a great thing. Today had been chaotic, both for the spurt of petty, silly crimes that landed in his lap and the frequent visitors to the watch house to say hello and try and wring more details out of him about his ballad-worthy romance. By afternoon, he took to simply patrolling more quiet areas of their part of the city just to get a break from the nonsense, so a relaxing few minutes watching Mycroft put on a show wasn’t the worst way to end the day.

The third time Lestrade turned away from the lake and took a few steps towards home, Mycroft wanted to smash his head with a rock and just end his misery. He had planned battles, fought in more than some might expect, too, and here he was cowering in the shadows, scared witless of stepping into the light and engaging the man he loved in conversation. It was understandable… the stakes were incalculably high and one misstep, one single error in judgment, and he would lose Greg forever. However, it was also unquestionable that his weakness had brought him to this point and showing more of it would not further his cause.

With a silent prayer to the stars that were looking down upon them, Mycroft stepped out of his hiding place and moved towards Lestrade.

“Gregory?”

One day, Mycroft’s voice wouldn’t affect him so deeply, but today was obviously not that day and it took a hefty portion of his will to keep Lestrade from letting Mycroft in on this little fact.

“Mycroft. Hmmm… did you think I would be more comfortable with you wearing rough clothes like me or were you worried about getting a bit of nature on your normal finery?”

Mycroft winced slightly at the bitterness of the tone, but he had known this would neither be easy nor pleasant.


“You reacted poorly to my attire the last time we met and I hoped to avoid such a thing tonight. Apparently, I have failed.”

Lestrade scowled, but mostly from anger at himself for being an ass. That was not why he was here. And, above all, he was determined to be the better man, the honorable man, in this discussion.

“No… no, you didn’t. I’m sorry, Mycroft. It was a rude thing to say. Not that it’s any excuse, but it’s been a rough few days and I’m not at my best right now.”

Which Mycroft could easily see now that his love’s face was washed by moonlight. Gregory looked so tired, so completely spent… his body and mind utterly depleted and the desire to gather the man up to serve him a hot and filling meal and find him a soft bed in which to rest was nearly overpowering.

“It is understandable and I take no offense. In truth, I did expend a great deal of thought on how to present myself this evening, because I wanted to do nothing to aggrieve you further. That is the opposite of what I hope to accomplish, Gregory. I am here to bring you ease.”

“That’s what your princess said. I really have no idea how you plan to do that, but I promised to give you the chance.”

Still willing… Mycroft had not worried that his constable would renege on his word, but he might have been more hesitant about expressing his willingness to follow through with that word.

“And I thank you for that. When we last spoke, there were many things I wished to say to you and was not able. I do wish first, however, to say thank you for allowing Sherlock his own chance to reconcile with John. They seem… I am unutterably pleased with that they have fully restored their connection. I can assure you their time today has been a busy one, though, for them, most enjoyable. The staff could likely only attest to the former, however.”

Lestrade didn’t want to laugh, but he couldn’t help it. And it was good to hear that John was having fun.

“Already up to no good?”

“Actually, their behavior has been within their standard limits. Chaos, anarchy, misrule, biscuits…”

“Sounds pretty standard, except for the biscuits. Mrs. Hudson?”

“Quite. I believe she would adopt young John if she were so able. His appetite is very much to her liking and he is polite, quite a change from what she is most familiar.”

“I always told him being polite would get him further than being a little bastard.”

“I believe he has witnessed the truth of your teachings. When I saw them last, just after lunchtime, Sherlock was sending John, with his lovely manners, towards the Guard captain to beg access to the weapons.”

“What! Tell me he won’t…”

“Under no circumstances; the man is possessed of a keen and practical mind. However, he may have directed them to the smiths to watch a sword or two being crafted. In time, though, it would be expected that a boy learn to properly acquit himself with a variety of weapons. When it becomes appropriate, we can begin to instruct them in the proper techniques.”
Lestrade’s bitter and disbelieving huff and dark chuckle struck directly to Mycroft’s heart as painfully as his teeth struck to his tongue.

“I apologize, Gregory. Truly, you have no idea how deep is my regret over my words, but that is ever the trouble when I am with you… I have little difficulty communicating precisely and effectively, except when you are my conversation partner. I shall not assign that disability the lion’s share of this relationship; however, it has played its role. May we… may we sit? I feel a tad foolish standing here as if I am merely exchanging pleasantries in the garden.”

With a shake of his head that Mycroft was completely unable to interpret, Lestrade walked over to a clear patch of ground and dropped down, staring out at the water. The prince slowly approached and took his own seat, a considerate and non-presumptive distance from his constable.

“I admit that the night we shared here is one of my fondest memories. It is not my nature to trust, Gregory, I have been taught from birth to always seek the ulterior motive of those with whom I interact and expect duplicity at every turn. But with you… I instinctively trusted. I never looked for the dark shadows of your actions or the lies that you concealed with your luminous smile. I trusted you completely and without reservation. And that was before I even knew, in a tangible way, your feelings for me. Feelings which I shared and still do. I love you, my dear. If you have suffered any doubts on that score, you may lay them to rest because I love you deeply and truly and with the entirety of my heart and soul.”

Another dark chuckle that Mycroft hated, but he refused to allow his hopes to flag.

“You don’t deceive and betray someone you love, Mycroft.”

“No… not unless you are doing so to preserve that love and are working desperately to find a way to allow it to take the course you so greatly desire. I was not speaking falsely when I likened Sherlock’s fears to my own. I feared you would think me someone who could not love you, someone who lived in a world so far removed from yours that we could never find common ground. I worried terribly that you would balk at my station and… I would lose what we had created and I could not bear that. I simply could not.”

“So, you say you trust me, but apparently not enough to expect me to be an adult about things. Maybe I would have been uncomfortable or worried about seeming like a stupid peasant, but… that’s what having a brain is for. Some time to think and talk to you a little more… maybe visit Mrs. Hudson and talk to her, too, because she knows everyone and everything… even get Sherlock’s opinion, crazy and hysterical as it is. You didn’t trust me enough to even give me a chance to show that I could look past what you were to who you were and still love you. Sorry, but you’re not winning me over, Your Highness.”

“You say that, though, my dear, with hindsight, which was not something I possessed at the time. This is new to me, Gregory. Entirely new. My first kiss was yours. The first intimacy I enjoyed was at your hands. I had no experience on which to draw, especially since I had no knowledge I would meet you that first day. You will admit, will you not, that the situation was not suited for full disclosure? At the very least, it would undo Sherlock’s own deception and that was not my place for it was something he very much needed to do himself. I did not foresee that by our conversation’s end I would be absolutely enamored of you. How could that possibly be foreseen? Does one person in a hundred feel what we felt that first day? And do not deny you felt something, Gregory, for I know well that you did.”

He’d deny it if he wanted to. Ok, that sounded like John when he was… well, that sounded a lot like John right now. And Sherlock, too. Now was not the time to be a child if he’d just accused Mycroft of treating him like one.
“No, I won’t deny it. And I told you that the night we were here. I didn’t anticipate it, either. I saw you sitting there and thought you were the best looking man in the tavern… best looking man I’d ever seen, really. And after a few hours, I knew that, if was at all possible, I wanted to be part of your life.”

“And, for me, it was the same. It was not until later that all of the pieces of the puzzle came together into a recognizable picture and I knew my feelings for what they were. But how to tell you? How to return to that first day and replay our meeting, but with the name I gave you being my own? How to say to you, after that initial untruth, that I was not as I presented myself? I could think of no strategy that did not have, as a highly-likely outcome, your dissolving our relationship and rescinding your affections. It was too great a risk to be taken without not fully thinking through every possible scenario to make the revelation of my dishonesty as undamaging as was feasible. I would have told you, Gregory. I would have. It… I admit that I did not understand the ramifications of our night in this spot. I had no, absolutely no, comprehension that my words and actions would be taken by you as an agreement to wed. I was not unhappy for it, though, as I would be honored to have you as my husband and do desire that future for us most strongly, but…”

Lestrade picked up another rock and tossed it into the lake, thinking that its descent beneath the water’s surface was a lot like what was happening to him right now.

“You don’t have to lie to me anymore, Mycroft.”

“It is not a lie! Our love is not a lie! That my heart quickens when I hear your voice is not a lie! That I dream of you, spend hours in reverie, envisioning those beautiful eyes that captivated me from our first meeting… none of that is a falsehood. My lie was my name, and that alone. Time was my enemy, Gregory, and I shall not aggrandize myself by saying that I used the days and opportunities I was given with laudable efficiency, but every day I turned my thoughts to how I might extricate myself from my deception, keep your love and build for us a future that included everything for which you also hoped.”

“A future you knew was impossible!”

“NO! No… I refused to accept that. At first… at first, the barriers did seem insurmountable, but I chose, I chose, to find a way, regardless of the probability of failure. Only… I was again undone by the villainy of time. I had no forewarning of my engagement, my dear. We sat there, at Father’s birthday banquet and… he believed he was giving me a reward. Rewarding me for being a diligent and devoted son. I knew not of his planning or whom he had chosen until the die was cast. Molly did not arrive early for the celebrations and I did not see her until we were in the banquet hall, far too separated for any communication, likely to prevent that very thing. I did not tease you with the lure of something that was unobtainable, my dearest… it was my most fervent hope that I could find a mechanism, a pathway that would give us that for which our hearts yearned. I simply… ran out of time.”

Lestrade hated that he was starting to believe Mycroft’s words. That they rang true and made an unhappy sort of sense. It wasn’t fair! He was the wronged one, so he should not be sitting here feeling sorry for the one who wronged him! And it didn’t help that hearing Mycroft say he loved him eased the suffocating pressure in his chest, soothed the unending ache that had plagued him since the moment he saw Mycroft and Molly in that carriage. It shouldn’t make any difference. Not a bit. But it did. It made a tremendous difference…

“Ok, I suppose I can understand your point of view… I can believe it wasn’t your intention to make a fool out of me, even though that’s what happened. And I can believe that you were actually trying to find a way to make things work, even though it didn’t. But… what do you want from me,
Mycroft? That’s… that’s what I need to know.”

So much, in the prince’s opinion… but, if he only received a small fraction of his desires, he would be content.

“I want you to know how precious you are to me. How like a jewel you shine in my eyes. I want you to believe that I love you and every word of love I spoke to you was the truth. That I see you as a treasure… a prize. An exquisite, intelligent, honorable, virile, caring man who holds my full heart in his hands. If, somehow, it is in your capacity to give, I would beg your forgiveness for the sins I have committed, the wrongs and ills that I have perpetrated. Perhaps not today, while the wounds are fresh, but it is my hope that, in time, you could forgive my idiocy and cripplingly-poor judgment. I made disastrous decisions, Gregory, but never with the intention to hurt. I could not do that to you."

Lestrade clawed and grasped at the bile that was beginning to ooze from his heart, attempting to keep in firmly in place, but it slipped through his fingers, drop by drop, until the level was just low enough for that heart to start to beat again. He still hurt, he still felt as if he’d been attacked by wolves and had to fight his way to safety, but… but it was manageable. Tonight, he might actually sleep more than a few hours and when the sun rose in the morning, he might actually greet it instead of curse it for bringing a new day of heartache. Mycroft was right though… it was soon, too soon, to completely put this behind him but it might be possible to give his former lover the one thing he asked for.

“You made a lot of mistakes, Mycroft, but I can’t say you were trying to play a game or wanted to watch me dance like a puppet on a string, which was what I thought. It helps to hear you say that we weren’t a lie; that you actually cared. I… I admit I feel better right now. It doesn’t hurt as badly and I can actually see a future when I might not hurt at all. I can’t say I forgive you completely because, you’re right, that’s going to take time, but I’m starting to. And, eventually, I know I’ll forgive you enough to think about you and smile. I love you, Mycroft but I was destroyed by all of this. Knowing you love me, too… it makes a difference.”

The prince nearly choked on the lump that formed in his throat and hoped his Gregory did not view him weak as the tears rose in his eyes. He could be forgiven. Would be once his love’s bruises healed. The greatest gift had been handed to him and he cradled it gently in his heart where it found a welcome and grateful home.

“Thank you, Gregory. I cannot fully express my gratitude for this, but know that it is profound.”

“It’s alright, Mycroft. I think I would have needed to anyway in order to move on. You can’t carry around a bottle of poison in your chest and expect to live a happy life.”

Move on… not words Mycroft liked to hear, but… perhaps this was the opening he needed to broach his second wish for this meeting.

“It is my intention, my dear, that you are not required to, as you say, move on. I have not given up, Gregory. I still seek a solution to our dilemma and I am joined in that search by Molly, who has come to realized that her situation is not dissimilar to mine. This is of paramount importance to us and we are committed to finding some avenue to achieve the lives we covet.”

Lestrade stared at Mycroft as if the prince had grown a second head. What had been an understanding of his former lover’s perspective was fading quickly.

“Are you insane?”
“Not to my knowledge, no.”

“Don’t get smart with me, Mycroft. You know we can’t be together. I’m not so lowborn that I’m not aware of how my life differs from yours. You won’t be allowed to be seen with a commoner, let alone marry one. And a man? I can’t think of a single instance where one of you lot took a spouse of the same gender!”

“It is rare, I grant you, but not entirely unheard of.”

“Doesn’t matter! How about that fact that you are getting married to someone your parents picked out for you. Under no circumstances do I see them calling off your wedding so you can be with someone they think is completely unsuitable for you. Please, Mycroft… I said I’d forgive you. Don’t make me think you’re starting another round of fun and games at my expense.”

“I do no such thing! I would never visit that upon you. I am entirely serious in this, Gregory. I do not know what resolution I might find or create, I have no idea what options are available to me, but I am committed to finding them. And Molly is fully prepared to toil just as industriously towards a solution as am I. Sherlock has even granted his support and attention! There are no games here, my beloved, no disgraceful amusements or cruel jests. I love you. I want with you that which you desire most – a loving family. Your dream of raising Sherlock and John with me at your side is not a dream I deride or ridicule. I embrace it. I crave it. I want to spend my life loving you and sharing the joy of our union with you and your son. Would you grant me the thing that has confounded me at every turn of our courtship? Would you grant me time? Time to fully apply my will and intellect to this problem and bring to you an answer that binds us and celebrates the love we share? Just a little time, Gregory… it is not so much to ask, is it?”

“Yes! I am not going to sit home at night, wishing and hoping for what could be… how long until your wedding? It can’t be anytime soon… I can only begin to imagine what a royal wedding is like, but it must take months if not years of planning.”

“Normally, yes, but I am confident that is not the case here. There are numerous indications that my wedding shall occur far sooner than is the norm. Molly’s father is well aware of her rebellious nature and shall surely desire she be wed quickly to prevent any inappropriate behaviors and choices on her part. And my parents… they despaired that I would ever be prepared to take a wife and will wish to ensure this bride is quickly joined to me and added to the family ranks. It shall not be a protracted engagement, Gregory, of that I can assure you. Could you not wait that short time if there was a chance we might never see my wedding day arrive? That we might see, instead, an opportunity for our own love to be cause for rejoicing? An opportunity to share our passion for a lifetime? The stuff of our fantasies, my dear… is that not worth a second chance? A little time and patience?”

Lestrade’s fist clenching and unclenching over and over was becoming a source of worry for the prince who knew that if his constable opted to express his opinion physically, it would be a debilitating lesson he would learn.

“And what if you can’t? What then?”

That was not something Mycroft could contemplate. He simply could not even consider the possibility of failure. It was not permissible and that was the end of the matter.

“I shall not fail you, my love.”

“I wish I could believe that, Mycroft… I really do, but I don’t see any hope.”
“That is because you are new to the analysis of the situation.”

“Oh, and what have you come up with?”

“I, also, am new to the analysis, but I have reached the stage where I am optimistic of the outcome.”

“That’s bollocks.”

“No, I am very aware of the appearance of the aforementioned bollocks and that is not applicable here.”

Not fair… Mycroft had no right to make him laugh!

“Now’s not the time for jokes, you bastard.”

“That there is levity in your voice indicates this is certainly the time. Please, Gregory… I know already that you are the one person in my life that I shall love. You are branded on my heart and the mark can never be erased. Allow me this chance… if you want me to beg, I shall take to my knees and do so gladly. I shall beg until my throat is raw and I have exhausted the last of my tears. Please, my beloved Gregory… for us…”

Every bit of Lestrade wanted to get up and just get away from what was certainly going to be another broken heart if he said yes. And this time… it probably wouldn’t ever heal. That was the choice… say no and endure no more suffering, although the ‘what might have been’ would always haunt him or say yes and risk fracturing his heart beyond repair and never being able to fully trust or love again. Damn Mycroft…

“We won’t be able to see each other, you know.”

“I… I do not understand.”

Lestrade heaved a heavy sigh and knew that this was completely the root of the entire disaster.

“First, I wasn’t lying when I said I don’t fully forgive you right now. In time, maybe, but not now. And I can’t say I trust you a great deal, either. I could trust you again… that much I know, but not now. And are you forgetting, yet again, that you’re an engaged man? Who everyone knows is an engaged man? We can’t be seen together, Mycroft.”

“Surely for a simple greeting? Sherlock and John are fast friends and that is well known. It would not be inappropriate for us to pass a casual moment of conversation as we see to their entertainment?”

“Mycroft… please don’t make this harder on me as it is.”

No, that he could not do. His Gregory… this was an agreement. He was agreeing to wait, to show patience and have faith that the one he loved would persevere. But it was a costly agreement, that much was certain and to add difficulty to it was a cruelty.

“That is the furthest thing from my mind, though I, perhaps, became overeager. I do not wish to repay your patience with stress, my dear, and will avoid such at all costs. But… as an uncommon thing? Only as a few and far between meeting? A scarce few minutes to share a smile and reassure myself that you are well and still have faith in what I am trying to accomplish? Please… I shall not abuse your goodwill in this, beloved, I give you my most solemn word.”
If Mycroft wasn’t so aggravatingly sexy when he begged Lestrade might have had a chance, but there was no denying the prince when those lovely lips were saying ‘please’ in such a sincere and needy way.

“Fine. But consider this your only warning. If you try to go further, if you destroy everything about my reputation that I tried to save… “

“Never! Never, Gregory… do not expend any energy worrying about that, for it shall never come to pass. And thank you… Again I say thank you and again the words are ludicrously insufficient to truly express the depth of the sentiment.”

“Yeah, well… I guess this is how it’s going to be. I don’t know what I’m going to tell John so I don’t look foolish and weak, which I probably am, but I’ll talk with him tonight so he knows what to expect.”

“And I shall inform Sherlock.”

“Ok… so, is that all? Are we done?”

Mycroft looked up at the sky and wondered if his good fortune could stretch just the tiniest bit further.

“We might not see each other for some time, my dear and… we are well assured of privacy, are we not?”

“I am not having sex with you!”

“What? Good heavens, no!”

Drat.

“And I would not presume to even ask for a kiss, for I must labor to deserve that from you again. But… we began our journey by clasping hands, did we not. Might we not start this new one in the same way? If it is not too forward of me, I would like to sit here with you, hold your hand and speak of pleasant things as we once did. Nothing more, but it would mean a great deal to me.”

How was it he could hate Mycroft and love him at the same time. Damn the man… why did he have to ask for something so… perfect.

Lestrade said nothing, but moved a little closer to Mycroft and laid his hand on top of the prince’s, an act that again, brought unshed tears to Mycroft’s eyes. Turning his hand palm up, he laced his fingers with his dearest constable’s and began to regale him with another tale of Sherlock and John’s adventures. Which led to other tales, then smiles then laughter shared in the moonlight. It would not be easy, whatever efforts would be necessary to keep this beautiful man at his side, but it was immaterial. *This*… this was worth it all…
“I WAS IN THE CASTLE!”

Lestrade had just settled into his chair with the cup of wine he’d been longing for all day when John burst into the house and raced around the small space with his hands in the air until he finally got dizzy and dropped into a chair, which he immediately sprang up from to drag near the fire before dropping into it a second time.

“What? I’m not sure I heard you. No need to whisper, son, no one’s sleeping upstairs.”

“Ha ha… I’m just… IT WAS AMAZING!”

John’s excitement was nearly making the floor shake and Lestrade felt his own smile spreading over his face. Apparently, his son had very much enjoyed his day.

“So, you and Sherlock had fun, I take it.”

“We had a great time! We explored all over and there’s still… there’s still more to see than what I’ve already seen! And we got to watch an axe being made and the smith said if I wanted to learn, he could show me how to make a knife! I have to ask you first, which is stupid since it’s not going to be your knife, but… can I?”

Well, if he said no, John would probably collapse into a pool of tears and he did not have the energy to clean up that mess tonight.

“Well, alright, you can make a knife, but I expect you to be careful. That’s hard and dangerous work and you can’t fool around while you’re at it. No being silly with Sherlock or you’ll hurt yourself, probably very badly.”

“Yes! And I’ll be very careful, don’t worry. Sherlock wants one, too, and I’ll even keep an eye on him so he doesn’t get distracted and lose a finger or something. Now this is even a better day than before! And I didn’t think that was possible!”

John launched into a long series of tales of his adventures with Sherlock, the results of their work with the kitchen hound, Sherlock’s rooms, the kitchens and how much he was able to eat, the fact that Mrs. Hudson was not actually a half-woman/half-dragon hybrid, Jim showing them how to throw a knife so they could practice with their own when they were made and so many other things that Lestrade simply lost track of the details. The theme was all he really needed to know – his son was happy. He hadn’t been upset by scale of it all or by Sherlock’s wealth and status. They’d played as they always played and remained an inseparable team. Now, he could rest easy that John’s time at the castle would be good for him, and that wasn’t counting the possibilities to get John a real education. What he could teach the boy was nothing compared to what Sherlock had learned and he knew that, even without asking, Mycroft would begin to arrange lessons that included John in Sherlock’s learning experiences.

“And… this afternoon… Mycroft said I could… well, when Sherlock is with his tutors, I can be there, too and if I want to borrow books from the library I can borrow any and as many as I want. That’s ok, right?”

Point proven. Well, Lestrade had to admit that at no time did Mycroft ever show John anything but kindness and always paid attention to his son and his needs, as well as his antics. It was why he’d known, truly known, that they could be a successful couple and family. Apparently, Mycroft still
had full intention of seeing John taken care of, even if they weren’t doing it together. Maybe his pride should be hurt at the thought, but it didn’t. Whatever good Mycroft could do for John was fine with him.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea. You’re a bright boy, John, and it’s good that you’ll have the chance to put that to use. You know I want you to have every possible opportunity and a good education is going to give you a lot more than you can begin to imagine. I’m thrilled for you, son. I really am.”

“It doesn’t bother you that Mycroft is going to help me with that?”

Well, that was as good as opening as any for the conversation that was waiting to happen.

“No, it doesn’t bother me. You’re the most important person in the world to me, John, and I don’t mind anything that’s going to give you a better life. And… Mycroft and I had a long talk tonight. We sort of… well, we came to an understanding.”

John made a little squeak that Lestrade refused to understand, even though he actually did, and it was just more push in the direction of giving Mycroft the chance he wanted. Unfortunately, it also meant more heartbreak when… if… Mycroft failed.

“Well?”

“What? Oh, sorry. Mycroft and I talked and I began to see more of his point of view and… maybe I don’t think he’s quite as much of a bastard as I thought. I told him that sometime, not now, but one day in the future, I could probably forgive him for what he put me through and that made him happy, I think.”

“Is that all?”

John glared at Lestrade who began to understand what criminals felt like when he was working to get a confession out of them.

“Why shouldn’t it be?”

“You don’t lie well, you know. Really, you’re terrible.”

Ok, then…

“Fine. Maybe there’s a little more. Mycroft… he doesn’t want me to give up on him. On us, I guess is a better way of putting it. He wants to try and find some way to actually make a relationship between us work. A real relationship, too, not… not something that leaves me in the shadows.”

John’s excited smile grew larger and Lestrade had to laugh at his son’s glee.

“Hurray! Sherlock said Mycroft wanted to be with you and was going to try and find a way to do it and he was right!”

And, apparently, he was the last one to know about it.

“So, you knew Mycroft had plans?”

“Uh… not really. But sort of. Sherlock said Mycroft still cared about you and wanted to make things better between the two of you and that could include getting back together. Maybe even getting us another chance to be a family. But… I didn’t know if he’d go through with telling you
any of that or if any of it was actually true.”

Well, at least John wasn’t an entirely hopeless romantic. Always good to have a practical streak when it came of matters of the heart. As he was coming to learn.

“Well, he says that’s what he wants and he asked me to wait for him to make it work. I want to know what you think about that, though.”

Do you think he can make it happen?”

“I don’t know. Mycroft says he can, but I don’t see how. I don’t know that much about royalty, though… what they can and can’t do. What’s possible and what’s not.”

John’s bright smile faded as he thought about Greg’s words, but the determined expression that replaced it was nearly as encouraging.

“Then you should wait and see if he can do it.”

“And you’d be happy with that?”

“I don’t have to wait for anything.”

“Ok, let me put it this way. Do you think it’s… I don’t know, sort of stupid and weak to put any faith in what Mycroft says? His history with the truth isn’t exactly good.”

“Yeah… that’s true. I don’t think he’s lying this time, though. He’s not dumb and has to know what would happen if he lied to you. Anyway, I told him how much trouble he’d be in with me if he did anything to you again.”

And what the constable would have given to be there for that conversation.

“I’m sure that put the fear into him.”

“Oh, it did. And I meant it, too. I don’t care if he is a prince, he can’t treat you like he did even one more time or… well, Mycroft doesn’t want to know what ‘or’ actually means.”

His own little defender. He’d tried his very best for John over the years, but knew it couldn’t be as good as what John would have experienced with a real family. Now and then though… he got evidence that he hadn’t done such a bad job, all things considered…

“Thanks for that. I feel a lot better knowing I’ve got you on my side in this. But… if Mycroft can think of something… are you ready for what that will mean?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Things would change. We wouldn’t have the same life anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we wouldn’t live here, to start.”

John gasped softly as the idea entered his head and, had to admit, it wasn’t entirely pleasant.

“No… I guess we wouldn’t.”

“And it wouldn’t be just us and Mycroft and Sherlock. You’ve gotten to see a little of what their
life’s like. I expect it’s not as simple as ours. Or as private.”

Thinking back on his day, John realized Lestrade was right. It had been the greatest day, but he got to come back here when it was over. Back to the house he called home where it was just him and Greg and he could relax without lots and lots of eyes watching what he did. With Mycroft and Sherlock, if they’d live here, it would have been just as… home. He hadn’t thought about having to leave here and, although he’d had fun today, had no idea what it would be like to actually live in the castle. To be there all the time and never see his home again. His bed and his table. And what if people didn’t like him. Right now, he was just Sherlock’s friend and nobody seemed to mind, but would they look at him that way if he was something different? More like Sherlock’s brother than a friend. A brother who didn’t talk as nicely as Sherlock or have the same education or know how to do things that royal people do. A brother who’d lost his own family and had to stay warm or his arm didn’t want to work. Would the people at the castle be happy that someone like that was Sherlock’s brother? And… he hadn’t even met Sherlock’s parents yet…

“I… I hadn’t thought about it.”

Though he was now and it pained Lestrade to see that John’s thoughts weren’t necessarily happy ones.

“You’ll have to start. So will I. Mycroft and Sherlock won’t live here, with the life we have. We’d have to leave our life behind.”

John thought some more and realized he couldn’t do it unless he had more information. And he knew who he had to ask.

“I’m going to talk to Sherlock about it.”

“That’s not a bad idea. He can answer your questions, at least. Talk to Mycroft, too. He’d be helpful to tell you just how things would change so you would know what we’re facing.”

“You can, too, when you see him next time. Are you going to start visiting the castle, too?” Lestrade let out a laugh that John absolutely didn’t like. It didn’t sound at all like his father’s normal laugh.

“No. I told Mycroft that I won’t see him until he has an answer. Or… at least not more than a quick hello if we happen to cross paths.”

“But why? If you’re back together…”

“We’re not, John. Don’t forget that. I said I’d give him a chance, but I also told him that he didn’t have either my forgiveness or my trust right now. I… I don’t want him in my life right at this moment, pressuring me for something I’m not ready to give yet. And how would it look? Mycroft’s an engaged man and everyone we know remembers he and I used to be together and aren’t anymore. And why. What would it look like if he was visiting here or we were going to the tavern? An engaged man doesn’t spend time with his old relationships unless something else is going on that’s not exactly honorable. I’m sorry, John, but until I think there’s any real hope we can have a relationship I can be proud of, and that’s entirely in his hands, I’m not going to torture myself or risk looking like someone without any pride or integrity.”

“I guess you’re right. I’ll have to do the investigating for both of us, I guess. And I can pass Mycroft messages from you so they’ll be secret.”

“I’m not having you carry Mycroft love notes from me.”
“Who’s going to do it if I don’t?”

Lestrade barked out a laugh and decided that John’s romantic streak was as hopelessly wide as he’d thought.

“You’re really hoping this works out, aren’t you?”

“Since I never lie, I have to say yes.”

“Even with all the changes we might have go through?”

“Maybe I’ll change my mind after I talk to Sherlock and Mycroft, but right now, I’m still hoping that we can all be a family.”

Of course, if everything fell to pieces again, John would be crushed a second time and Lestrade would have the pain of that guilt to carry as well as the pain of his own broken heart. Maybe he should have thought this through a little more carefully, but there was nothing for it now but to pray the worst possible outcome didn’t happen.

“Then I’ll hope with you. Now, why don’t you go up to bed… why do I suspect tomorrow’s going to be another long day for you?”

“Because it is. I told Sherlock I’d meet him in the kitchen early so we can get the dog and take it out to see if it remembers anything we taught it. Then he’s supposed to sit through some lesson on history and I’m going to sit in, too. And we have to start learning to make our knives and then there’s lunch…”

“Oh, I think I understand. Are you… will you be home for dinner?”

“Hmmm… hard to tell. It depends what we decide to do and how long it takes.”

“Yeah, I understand.”

John hopped up and gave Lestrade a quick hug before running upstairs to get ready for bed. Not looking back, he missed the look of deep and heavy grief that dragged the light out of his father’s eyes. There wasn’t anything Mycroft was going to be able to do about this mess… he wanted to believe there was, but he knew in his heart there wasn’t. There was too much working against them, even though Mycroft didn’t want to believe it. And, now, his son was moving on to be part of a world that he would never have a place in. He didn’t begrudge John the excitement and opportunity of that new world, but knew that now the hooks were in him, they’d drag his son further and further away from the world his father offered. Seemed to be the pattern… what he offered just wasn’t worth much. There wasn’t really a question about why he was going to be alone in this life, was there? Looked like he needed to start becoming a little friendlier with this lovely and depressingly cheap wine. So long as he had coins, it would never leave him…

Mycroft wavered at the kitchen door before turning away and slithering towards his rooms and the security of a quiet place to think. Quickly changing out of the clothes he’d worn to meet Lestrade and into the old, well-worn evening garments he refused to allow his room staff to discard, the prince settled comfortably in front of the fire. Though it was foolish, he could not stop the repetitive stroking of his own hand where, just a short while ago, his Gregory’s skin had touched. His Gregory… no longer fully lost to him. There was hope, a slight, thin thread of hope that glowed dimly, but it did glow, though it was so clear to him that his love still believed that, in reality, their meeting had been a goodbye. A beautiful, happy goodbye, but a final conversation, nonetheless.
His Gregory wanted their love to thrive, did not wish him failure in his efforts, but was not prepared to be confident in his success either. And that was right and proper. He had no victories on his record to offer in proof of his abilities. His love could only evaluate him based on betrayal and lies and the constable would be a fool to be confident in such a man as he appeared to be. Unfortunately, in this case, of the many ways he could describe his beloved, his Gregory could never be called a fool. Now, their future rested solely in his hands and there would be no second chance if he could not deliver on his promises. He would not even seek one, for the disrespect it would show the man he loved would be abominable. One chance… and time was not unlimited.

“Mycroft?”

So deep had he been in the ocean of his mind that the prince had not heard Molly enter his rooms.

“Ah, Molly. I apologize, my thoughts were elsewhere.”

“That makes sense. You… you met Greg tonight, right? How did things go?”

Molly took the seat opposite Mycroft and smiled hopefully at her future husband.

“It went well, in many aspects. I was able to convince Gregory of the sincerity of my feelings for him. And of my contrition concerning my behaviors. Further, I was able to extract an agreement that he would wait to close completely the door on our future until I was able to determine a successful pathway to bring us the life together we desire.”

“That’s wonderful! Mycroft, that is really a wonderful thing… so why aren’t you smiling?”

Mycroft sighed and rubbed his eyes before responding.

“Oh… for many reasons. Firstly, much of his agreement to wait is, I believe, simply a parting gift to me. He does not feel as strongly as I do that I shall find a solution to our problem. He shall honor his promise, of that I have no doubt, just as I have no doubt he is honest in his hope that I can bring about what I am asking for him to wait.”

“Well, I suppose I can’t fault him for that. He was so hurt by all of this and it can’t be easy to believe what you say.”

“And he does not. Nor does he fully trust or forgive me, which, also, is entirely understandable. He says he shall likely be able to offer both to me in the future, but not at this time.”

“Greg isn’t a stupid man. He’s not naïve, either.”

“No, no he is not. And he is a man with a strong reputation in his community, who desires to retain that reputation, so he will not agree to see me until I have a solution to present him.”

“Ooooh… I’m sorry, Mycroft. He does have a point, though.”

“Unfortunately, yes. I had hoped, however, that it might be possible to have further opportunities to reassure him that the measure of trust he has given me was not being squandered. At best, I shall be able to pay him a ‘good day’ on the occasion our paths intersect because of Sherlock and John.”

“Who are so incredibly cute together! I was in your library when they marched in and began to look for books. I don’t think they ever stopped arguing, but they were so happy doing it… those two truly are made for each other. Even Jim had something nice to say and that’s as rare as snow in the summertime.”
“That is something for which I am forever grateful. If their friendship had been irreparably broken, I would never have been able to forgive myself for my part in the breach.”

“But it wasn’t, so stop worrying about that. You’ve got other things to worry about and… you’ve got to start worrying fast.”

There was a hesitant cast to Molly’s eyes that set off the alarms in Mycroft’s head.

“Molly… is there something you want to tell me?”

“Yes… it’s like this… we’re getting married.”

“Are you feeling quite alright?”

“That did come out a bit stupidly, didn’t it? I mean, I know when we’re getting married.”

Once, Sherlock had dropped a sliver of ice down the back of his shirt and it felt very much like Molly’s announcement.

“When?”

“Five weeks from now.”

“I see.”

He knew it would not be a very protracted engagement, but he had hoped for a bit more time than that.

“From what I can tell this is the perfect amount of time because the guests that travel long distances for your Father’s birthday normally stay for over a month for politics and trade purposes, so they’ll all still be here for the ceremony. The ones who don’t have far to travel can just come back for the ceremony. And that’s enough time for extra guests to arrive, my mother to get here and have a dress made for me, the ceremony and celebrations to be planned and my things to arrive here from home. And there’s supposed to be a few parties in our honor… it’s only five weeks though, Mycroft. That’s not much time…”

“No, it is not and we shall have to make good use of every second of it.”

“Yes, we will. Do you know how much of a dress I’m going to have to wear? Take every scrap of cloth from every dress of every woman in the city and you’d probably have about half the fabric they’ll use to make my wedding dress. And don’t get me started on the underthings. It’s going to take three strong men to keep me standing upright while I saw my vows!”

“Yes, that is a truly devastating fate you would suffer.”

“I have felt freedom, Mycroft. Dresses that only have one layer of cloth. One, one, layer of underthings. I have felt that sweet freedom and do not want to go running in the complete opposite direction! I even dream of trousers and one day… I shall fulfill that dream. Being able to run without tripping over my skirt and landing face first on the floor. It’s not fun, you can take my word on that. And do you know what riding a horse is like in a dress? You don’t want to. I want to ride a horse and go running and climb a tree and do all the things that you men get to do. A dress that’s the weight of a horse isn’t an acceptable substitute.”

“And as my wedding gift to you or my avoided-wedding gift to you, I shall give you the services of my personal tailors and bid them follow your orders to the letter.”
“Yes! Trousers shall be mine!”

“And an appropriate shirt and jacket. Have you any opinion on shoes?”

“My head is officially swimming right now.”

“I exist only to make you happy, my wife.”

“You’re doing a good job of it so far.”

This was simply intolerable. He had passed a week without seeing his Gregory in the past and had spent most of his life without his love, but this week that he had not been in his love’s company was the most painful torture he had ever experienced. Every night, when he was finally able to take to his bed, his body ached terribly for the partner it wanted and no amount of pacification could quench the fire. Fortunately, and as equally unfortunately, his body did not find rest until the very early hours of each morning. There was so much to do in the aftermath of Father’s birthday and some mornings the sun was rising before his head met his pillow. Molly was correct, the birthday guests traditionally made effective use of the post-celebration time to conduct business, political and economic in nature, and his presence was ever in demand for some negotiation or other.

This, of course, left precious few hours to ponder and research his own pressing problem. It seemed the moment he set foot in the library, he was called away to mediate some dispute and every moment he tried to speak to a historian or philosopher about a ‘hypothetical’ question, he was interrupted by some messenger tearing him away for a matter of state. But, from what he had gathered so far… no, he would not think of that. There still existed four weeks to find a solution. Wars had been planned in that time. Wars had been fought in that time. Surely he could find a way to keep the man to whom his heart belonged in that span of time? Not that Molly or Sherlock had fared much better. They had spent copious amounts of time looking for answers and were not able to provide any useful information towards their common cause. However, no one was in any manner defeated at this stage. It was too soon… far too soon…

Mycroft strode into the kitchens to find a cup of Mrs. Hudson’s tea and was struck, as always, by the sight of Sherlock and John sitting at the table, eating, in this case, their dinner and discussing the events of their day.

“Oh no, it’s Mycroft.”

“And hello to you, Sherlock. I trust you have had a pleasant day.”

“We successfully conducted a very important investigation and are enjoying our reward.”

It was only now Mycroft noticed just how… royally… the boys were dining. And he was quite sure he smelled something very special and sweet coming out of the ovens.

“And what was this monumental task?”

“Someone has been stealing Mrs. Hudson’s sausages. We discovered the culprit and brought them to justice.”

“I see… your commitment to the law is quite encouraging.”

Which, naturally, reminded him of someone else who had an enduring commitment to the law…
“I am quite sure Gregory will be pleased with your success. How… how is your father faring, John?”

John looked up from chewing and scrunched his face tightly.

“I’m not sure.”

“Can you perhaps be a tad more specific?”

“Well, I’ve been here every day, so I haven’t seen much of Greg. By the time I get home, I’m usually tired and go to bed pretty quickly.”

“You… surely you must share a nice meal together each day? I know how greatly you and Gregory enjoyed that time together.”

“Not lately. I usually come straight here after I wake up and have breakfast and I eat my dinner before I go home. I’m sure Greg’s thrilled because he doesn’t have to pay for my food.”

Or his beloved was sitting lonely at his table each morning and night without the son he loved so dearly. At a time when that loneliness would feel sharper and more cutting than ever. John, Sherlock and himself spending time together here and his Gregory left alone… this was not something he had predicted… could he demonstrate any measure of intelligence when it concerned his dearest love?

“However, he might not enjoy spending each evening alone after a hard day at his work. You know he treasures you, John and the time he spends with you. Do not become so enamored of what diversions you find here that you forget the person who loves you with every fiber of his being.”

John cringed a little and cut eyes towards Sherlock, who looked slightly uncomfortable, as well.

“Yeah… I suppose I have been spending a lot of time here. Greg hasn’t said anything, though.”

“Nor would he, for he would not dream of denying you a moment’s enjoyment, even at the cost of his own loneliness. Simply share a meal with him each day, John. Take time in the evening to tell him of your day and inquire about his. All will be well.”

“I can do that. Thanks, Mycroft. Greg’s been through enough and I don’t want to add to it. I’ll make sure to have breakfast with him tomorrow. Sherlock and I are going to do experiments on some crusty stuff we found growing on the stones down in the cellars, but we don’t have to start early for that. Right, Sherlock?”

“It is not necessary to begin that particular initiative until after breakfast.”

“Breakfast with Greg, it is. Of course, that means I’ll have to choke down his excuse for cooking and have gas afterwards, but it’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.”

Sherlock and John’s giggles earned them a gentle swat to the back of their heads by the Crown Prince before he moved to get his tea, which he hoped would ease the knot in this stomach. If he could but spend an evening together with his Gregory, once again lost in conversation and a simple show of affection… the thought of his constable alone in his small house, already heavy of heart and feeling it grow more weighty… ah. After all, it was quite late was it not?

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“Mycroft, you didn’t have to bring me home in a carriage.”
“Gregory would be most distressed if you were accosted due to the lateness of the hour and the nefarious souls that wander the streets at this time. And it is not what one might term a carriage… more of a cart, really…”

“Avoid even looking in his direction, John. His libido is enflamed and he is hoping to catch a glimpse of his intended sex partner in order to decrease the flare of his internal blaze.”

“That is completely disgusting.”

“I quite agree.”

And they were both entirely wrong, in any case. The moment he saw his beloved his internal blaze would erupt into a fire that could consume a forest, leaving nothing but ash in its wake. But that was in no manner a deterrent to his endeavor. He would see his Gregory and tonight and, if he was very lucky, he might find peace in his sleep.

As the carriage pulled up to Lestrade’s house, John and Sherlock jumped out and stared at Mycroft as if waiting for him to burst into flames. Highly disappointed that he did not as he followed them out of the carriage, John opened the door and walked into his house. Sherlock began to follow, but Mycroft laid a hand on his shoulder and held him outside. His Gregory would not be pleased if he were to enter the house, even to extract Sherlock from John’s side.

“Sherlock? What are you doing standing… out… there…”

Lestrade had moved to the door to see what Sherlock was up to and got an eyeful of the reason. A tall, gorgeous eyeful…

“Mycroft.”

“Gregory.”

“Release me to wait in the carriage. I do not want to be in the path of the coming saliva storm.”

Mycroft removed his hand and Sherlock returned to the carriage, sitting bolt upright with his arms crossed in front of him as if readying himself to repel any stray sentiment that might waft in his direction.

“Mycroft… why are you here?”

“The hour was late and John was fatigued. It was a simple matter to see him safely home.”

“You’re lying.”

However, his love did not appear particularly upset by the fact.

“Drat. I have been found out.”

“It’s not a crime, so I can let you go this time. How… how are you, Mycroft?”

“Well, thank you. Busy, but well. And you? I hear from John stories of your work, but how do you fare, my dear. My v..very, very dearest.”

The rush of emotion that suddenly hit Mycroft would have embarrassed him miserably if he didn’t see it mirrored in Lestrade’s eyes.

“I’m fine, Mycroft. Tough days, you know how it is, but I’m fine.”
“Good. I want for you nothing less. For us, as well.”

“How’s… how’s that going? Any progress?”

The lie or the truth… his love had suffered far too many of his lies, but he could not bear to deliver unhappy news.

“There are threads being pursued that I hope will be fruitful. I have not given up, Gregory. I shall not, do not fear for a moment that I will. And I have a full month to yet find a solution.”

Lestrade’s eyes widened and Mycroft nodded his assurance that the constable had not heard incorrectly.

“A month… that’s… well, that’s a full month of time, now isn’t it? I know you won’t give up, Mycroft. I just hope something comes of it. So… thanks for bringing John home. I guess he’ll be at the castle bright and early again tomorrow.”

And there it was. The glint of sadness in those lovely brown eyes. At least Mycroft knew his efforts with John had not been in vain.

“Not so early, perhaps. John was despairing of suffering digestive turmoil because he would be consuming the breakfast you prepared for him. I believe you shall have to endure his presence at your table in the morning, as well as his list of complaints.”

“Really? John’s staying for breakfast?”

Never again would he take time with Sherlock for granted. One day, it would be him watching the boy he loved expand the boundaries of his life and have less time for the bond they shared.

“Such is my understanding. But, do feel free to send him along earlier, if you desire. Mrs. Hudson is quite happy to ply hungry mouths with food.”

“NO! I mean… that’s ok. It’s good for the little bastard to eat common people’s food for a change.”

“If it helps grow him into a man of his father’s caliber, then I heartily approve.”

So beautiful… his Gregory’s soft, shy smile was positively the most beautiful thing in this universe. And he would have basked in that smile for hours if a shrill and demanding voice hadn’t split the night like a thunderclap.

“Will I be sitting here forever? If so, I demand a beverage, for I am growing parched!”

Lestrade and Mycroft chuckled at Sherlock’s usual imperious exclamations and Lestrade took a step backwards so he was more inside his home than out.

“You’d better be going, Mycroft, or he’s going to leave without you.”

“It is not unlikely. What humor he takes in his day is often at my expense. Be well, Gregory. If you have a need, any need, please have me informed of it. I… I do consider you my partner in this life, even with our present circumstances, and am utterly committed to you in all things.”

“Yeah… I’ll remember that. Take care, Mycroft. I’ll… well, I hope to hear from you soon.”

Lestrade took another step back and closed the door gently, leaving Mycroft to gaze at it a few painful moments before he joined Sherlock in the carriage.
“Finally. I wondered if I would be sitting here until morning.”

“Yes, that was so very likely an outcome.”

Mycroft gave the nod to start towards the castle, then sat back to try and hold onto the feeling of being with his Gregory as long as possible.

“He… he seemed pleased to see you.”

“I believe he was. He is hesitant, however.”

“Lestrade has not described specifically his mind on this issue, but I believe you are correct. Hesitant, though, does not mean necessarily a loss of faith.”

“No, it does not. And that is what sustains my own faith.”

“Yet you lied to him. We have discovered no fruitful lines of investigation.”

“I know, Sherlock… it seemed kinder, at this point. Later, I shall not be able to show such kindness.”

“Assuming we continue to fail in our efforts.”

“True and I am not willing to make that assumption.”

“I agree it is too soon to concede. We have not yet exhausted all possible avenues of inquiry. Is it possible for you to claim a case of plague to push back your wedding date?”

It was a sign of his mental fatigue that Mycroft seriously considered the idea.

“If I did not exhibit the proper set of symptoms, my ruse would be quickly uncovered. Our timeline is fixed, Sherlock, and we must live with it.”

“Very well… John and I will recommence our own efforts tomorrow.”

“After your… crusty stuff… experiments, I presume.”

“Of course. Priorities must be established and maintained for full efficiency of action.”

“Naturally. I would expect no less.”

Three weeks… it had been three weeks and it was common knowledge in the castle that one approached the Crown Prince slowly, quietly and only if absolutely necessary because he was quick to anger and woe be it to the person who bothered him for what he deemed less than a critical need. Of course, as everyone understood, this was not necessarily abnormal for a bridegroom within weeks of his marriage. Those old enough to remember the King’s behavior before his wedding were especially unsurprised, though they agreed that Princess Molly was a far more agreeable bride than the current Queen.

Three weeks… he had worked tirelessly every day, his attentions split in a hundred directions, and only the directions devoted to his obligations to the Crown were being met with success. Father even congratulated him on the ferocity of his negotiations and the deals he was brokering, completely unknowing of the source of his energy. Frustration, rage, sorrow, love, lust… very powerful motivators, indeed. Only once more had he seen his Gregory and it was for as brief a time as their
first meeting. A few words of greeting and nothing more as he delivered John home one evening when his desire to renew his own spirits proved too strong to ignore. And, this time, he could not deny to his love that he had not made progress. It would be unfair and Gregory had endured far too much injustice at his hand already. The light draining from his constable’s eyes, replaced quickly by the dull patina of resignation… the image had haunted him for days. He was failing. For the wonders he could work in politics, he was completely unable to secure one viable method for bringing his Gregory into his life. And his failure harmed more than him as what he could not do for his Gregory, Molly could not do for her Jim.

Feeling greatly the need for some form of respite, Mycroft left behind the various books and papers he was studying for a very delicate trade meeting looming on his calendar and returned to his rooms, only to be met by a scene that sent a spike of worry through him that touched every nerve. Approaching his door was Sherlock, supporting a John who was red-faced and teary eyed.

“John! Sherlock! Whatever has happened?”

Mycroft threw open his door and nearly dragged the boys inside. A cloth was wet to hand to John and Mycroft nearly danced foot to foot waiting for the small boy to pull himself together to report.

“There’s… there’s…”

“There is a fire in the city. Lestrade sent John to stay here until the fire has been vanquished.”

Mycroft’s heart stuttered and he grabbed John’s shoulders, though he kept looking towards Sherlock for further information.

“John’s home?”

“No, the fire is north of that and, hopefully, will not spread so far… so long as Lestrade and the other men are able to contain it.”

Gregory? Mycroft thought his heart had faltered before, but that was nothing compared to the stoppage it was experiencing now.

“How else is going to help? No one from the castle ever helps with fires, even though you have lots of men and carts that could carry barrels of water! The watchmen and whoever else can carry a pail try to help and Greg always makes me stay home even though he goes out to fight the fire. And he’s so stupid he doesn’t even just give orders, he does everything he can, even if it means going into burning buildings to get people out! He thinks I don’t know, but I do! He risks his life for other people and no one here ever even does one thing because nobody cares about the common people and our dumb, common lives!”

John broke down into a torrent of tears and Mycroft wasn’t so foolish that he believed they were solely for his father’s current activities. His father, with his dumb, common life, wasn’t good enough to earn the basic happiness other people enjoyed and the fault lay squarely on the shoulders of the man too insecure in his own abilities to offer John comfort. Though he had to try…

“John… I assure you that if I knew a fire raged, I would surely send assistance. I was not informed of this, but now that I am, I will take steps.”

Someone had to know, though, and when he found out who was failing to help his people during
such a crisis, the consequences for them would be dire.

“R…really?”

“Yes. I shall tend to it immediately. Sherlock, take care of John and make him comfortable. I expect he shall stay the night with us.”

Sherlock nodded slowly and wrapped his arm more tightly around his friend, who leaned into Sherlock’s embrace as he was dragged back to the dark place of worry and fear that his mind would not let him escape. Assured John would be looked after properly, the prince calmly walked out of the room then, when he had closed the door behind him, sprinted at full pace towards the Guard quarters to dispatch every one of them to assist with battling the fire. What he did not expect was to nearly run headlong into his fiancé as she and her lover turned a corner in the corridor.

“Mycroft! Are you… what’s wrong? You look like… what’s wrong with Greg?”

“Nothing, I hope. John is here, in tears… there is a fire and Gregory, along with others, is attempting to battle it. I… I had no idea he would be called to such a duty…”

“Who’d you think?”

Mycroft looked at Jim and filed away the slight, but sharp, bitter note to his tone.

“I had not given the matter any thought, I suppose.”

“When there’s a fire, it’s everyone with two good arms out there trying to save what can be saved. And, a lot of the time, it’s their lives that can’t. Fires are nasty and don’t care what or who they destroy.”

Mycroft completely understood Molly’s soft gasp, because his own was more of a scream and it was only years of practice camouflaging his emotions that held it in check.

“As John informed me. I am going to send the Guards out to assist and whatever soldiers are currently in residence. That… that should be some help, should it not?”

“The more hands the better. Barrels and carts, too, to bring water. Pails to fill.”

“Yes, all we have. I will also be there personally to see that all that can be done will be done.”

“I’m coming, too!”

Both men looked at Molly like she had grown a third arm and their denial of her wishes came nicely in unison.

“You can’t stop me! And I can help. I am not some dainty, fragile flower that is completely useless when people need help!”

“Jim… she is your… your. Deal with her.”

Mycroft strode off and Molly, despite her anger, had to give an inner nod to her fiancé for never, not once, stepping on her Jim’s toes when it came to their relationship. Not that she wasn’t about to squash his foot mercilessly if he tried to keep her from going.

“Molly, you can’t go out there. It’s dangerous and there’s… there are going to be people hurt. You don’t need to see that.”
“Oh? And why? Am I too good to be around the sick or injured? Am I too noble to lend a hand when people need it? If you say yes, Jim, you had better be prepared what happens next.”

There were two choices as far as the spy could tell. One, try to keep her here and face a night of fighting that would likely end with his ears ringing and him sleeping on the floor for the next week or letting her go and seeing what it meant to ‘lend a hand’ for something like this. He had to admit, if anyone could face that for the first time and make good use of their presence, it would be his Molly.

“Will you promise to listen to me while we’re out there?”

“As long as you don’t tell me to come back here, then yes.”

“Fine, I won’t banish you, but… just listen to me when I say something. It’s going to be for your own good and I might not have the chance to tell you twice.”

It was rare that Molly saw true worry in Jim’s eyes, but it was there now and she decided that keeping her promise would be a very important thing tonight.

“You won’t have to.”

“Ok, let’s go find Mycroft. He’ll probably be quick to leave if Greg’s out there.”

“If something happens to him… I don’t know if Mycroft will every recover from it.”

“Don’t think that way, Molly. We’re going to need every positive thought we can tonight.”

Mycroft and Molly stared dumbly at the scene in front of them and it took a sharp elbow to the ribs by Jim to get Mycroft moving and issuing orders to his men, directing them to join the masses attempting to slow the spread of the fire and find whoever was in charge to bring to him for a word.

“Why… why are they wasting water on buildings that aren’t on fire?”

Molly’s voice sounded so small and young that Jim couldn’t have stopped himself wrapping an arm around her if he tried, though he encircled her waist so it wasn’t likely to be seen with them sitting in a carriage.

“What’s already burning is lost. You try to save the buildings that haven’t started yet. Get them good and wet so the fire can’t take hold. If you can ring the fire and leave it nowhere to go, it’ll burn itself out.”

Molly looked around at the people, so many people, but not everyone fighting the fire. Some just standing, alone or in small groups… families… crying. Then, she began to catch sight of the injured and knew she couldn’t stay in the carriage any longer. Jumping out, she waved over one of Mycroft’s men and sent him back to the castle to bring whatever could be found to help those with burns or broken limbs… or worse.

“Molly?”

The princess hadn’t heard her lover get out after her and wasn’t certain how to articulate what she was feeling. She had to help. These people… she could not stand by and watch when she had two hands to offer in support.

“I’m…”
“You are not getting a pail and throwing in, Molly.”

“No, but I can help with the injured.”

“You have no idea what to do, love.”

“I’m not stupid… I can figure out what to do.”

Jim had to concede she had a point.

“Alright, you work with the injured, but be ready to move if the fire breaks through and begins to move this way. I’m going to find Mycroft and see if he needs me for anything. If not, I’ll be joining the others keeping this monster in its cage.”

He couldn’t kiss her, not in public, but Jim smiled at his princess as he ran towards the tall figure he saw talking to a small cluster of men. As Molly turned to start her own work, she didn’t have time to wonder why her bodyguard was willingly leaving her unguarded…

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Hours passed as the fire continued to blaze, consuming buildings and homes with no regard for who it left homeless or jobless or dead in its wake. All the while, Mycroft coordinated the efforts to minimize the damage and took many of his own turns hurling pails of water or driving a cart to a nearby lake or stream to have barrels filled to continue the fight. The one thing he didn’t do was find Lestrade, though he thought a time or two he saw a flash of his lover’s profile among the men swarming the site. It was barely controlled chaos and finding a specific person in the enormous crowd was impossible. Jim had left to coordinate the men who were working the west side of the fire where he could keep an eye on Molly and took himself southward and around the perimeter to survey the efforts and reapportion men to best advantage. It was not unlike leading a battle against an enemy that was as fierce and unpredictable as any he had faced or studied.

And this enemy truly produced its own shares of casualties. He could not help but wonder about those who were seeing their lives taken by the flames. He knew now what it would mean to them to lose their home. If his Gregory lost his house… he would lose everything. He would have nothing. It was barely comprehensible to the prince that someone could have only the clothes on their backs and not one thing else. And, perhaps, no means to immediately obtain more. Where would these people sleep? What would they eat? For those whose homes also housed their businesses… how could they even earn a wage to eventually begin buying the necessities one needed to survive. And how… how would anyone find the funds to rebuild the structures? Gregory worked hard for his wages and provided for himself and his son, but with very little left over. To construct a new home? What did that cost? He truly had no idea, but it could not be a cheap thing… and would that new house welcome a whole family back into its arms or would it forever ache for the ones now missing?

The prince stopped a second to drink some of the water he was carrying and then threw himself back into his work. The sun would rise in another hour or two and that would make a tremendous difference. The extra light would be helpful to survey the extent of the damage and… everything was always more disheartening at night. The sun would perhaps give hope to those who had little right now. And, with a little light to clarify his own mind, he could think of ways to help those people who greatly needed him.

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Molly had never been thankful for her ridiculous dresses and underclothes until she realized how many bandages could be fashioned from the seemingly miles of fabric and still preserve every bit of
her modesty. It was a good thing, too, since so many bandages were needed. People caught in the path of the fire, those who woke too late to escape their homes unharmed, those trying to fight the fire only to find it the victor in their personal combat. Luckily, with a few of the doctors from the city and an extra that joined them from the castle, she found herself coordinating the aide to the injured and providing her share of that aide to the ones she could. And, to her surprise, she found she enjoyed it. It felt good to bring some measure of relief to the suffering, even if all she could do was give them a little water and a kind smile. But she was learning, too. How to treat a burn, how to set a break... it had taken her most imperious voice and scowl to convince the doctors to show her some basic techniques, but no one denied a princess when she was at her most princess-y and that allowed her to give even more help than quiet sympathy.

Not that she wasn’t giving that, as well. The injured would continue to hurt for a long time and that was if infection didn’t take them. The burned would always carry scars. The dead… at least they no longer suffered. And those, as far as she could see, were mercifully few. But then it was the families with no homes, the ones whose wage earner wouldn’t be able to work, perhaps, for a long time. And they had nothing. No clothes, no food and not a toy to distract the children who were seeing their worlds fall apart. This was unfair! And it would have been so much worse if Mycroft hadn’t mobilized his own men and resources to help. Which was a new thing… she kicked herself for being so idiotic. Her own city must have known fires, but she never heard of any. And she wasn’t so blind about what happened in her own castle that if the palace guards and soldiers were sent out en masse she would have missed the event. No one helped. The people suffered and they didn’t lift a finger to help them. It was criminal! But now she knew better. And so did Mycroft. He wouldn’t stand for this any longer, that much she knew. He was a good man and would be a great king and she was honored to, maybe, become his wife. If that was ultimately what happened, at least the kingdom would benefit from it because they both would make sure the people didn’t suffer such a tragedy and be ignored ever again.

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A few hours, after the sun had finally risen and as Molly was wiping her face of the drenching sweat she was very unused to wearing, she saw another victim being dragged towards the area she’d unofficially set aside as the casualty zone. As the rescuers dashed off to return to the fray, the body they dragged over sat up and began to cough harshly. She couldn’t have recognized the cough, but she did recognize the face and that set Molly running over to the man to immediately begin checking him for injuries.

“Molly?”

“Shhh… you just rest a minute, Greg and let me see what’s wrong with you.”

Greg grabbed Molly’s hands and looked at her hard as if convincing himself that he wasn’t hallucinating.

“Why are you here?”

“To help. John told Mycroft what was going on and Mycroft sent out every available man and all the resources he could.”

Lestrade began coughing again and Molly took the opportunity to throw off his grip and return to checking him over.

“I’m fine, Molly. Just got some smoke into me. Once I’ve coughed it out, I’ll be good as new.”

“And what about the burns on your back?”
“I’ve had worse from my fire at home. Really, I’m ok. But… why are you here?”

“This again? I’m here to help. Mycroft and Jim are out there somewhere handling the fire and I’m… well, I guess I’m in charge of the injured.”

“You put yourself in charge, didn’t you?”

“That smile of yours won’t save you from a thumping, you know.”

“I know and it’s… thank you, Molly. It will mean a lot to the people that you were here. It doesn’t… it doesn’t happen and that’s not something the citizens take well. We expect it, but it doesn’t mean we like it. This will mean a lot. And… you said Mycroft’s here? Actually here?”

“He’s been organizing things and… oh, you would have been so proud! He’s been doing his bit to fight the fire, too. The last time I caught sight of him he looked… well, he looked about like that.”

Molly grinned and pointed and Lestrade’s eyes followed her finger to the tall, completely disheveled figure walking his way. Mycroft’s jacket was in tatters and the sleeves of it and the shirt below had been shoved up a little to stay out of reach of stray embers. His face, like everyone’s was smudged and his hair was wild and utterly out of control. Lestrade doubted that he had ever seen anyone as supremely captivating as the man he was facing. The man whose face was starting to light up in a bright smile.

Mycroft began to run towards his lover and felt a hand land on his arm in caution. Looking over his shoulder, the prince caught Jim’s slight head shake and felt a mountain land on his shoulders. Nodding briefly, Mycroft turned and walked slowly towards his lover and fiancé and, though it broke his heart into pieces, passed Lestrade by to stand next to Molly and reach down a hand for her take and stand with him.

“And how are you, my princess? You look as if you have had as trying a night as have I.”

Molly smiled at Mycroft and knew it was as brittle as the one he was giving her. As much as he wanted to take his Greg in a long hug, she wanted to do the same for Jim who looked like he was about five seconds from dropping where he stood. She wanted to hug him and kiss him and tell him how proud she was of him and how much she loved him and worried about him and if he did anything like that again, he had better check in with her every chance he got so she wasn’t worried to death like she was tonight! And then hug him and kiss him again and hold on for an hour until she was convinced he wasn’t actually a ghost. But she couldn’t. No more than Mycroft could. There were far too many eyes watching them intently right now.

“It has been busy, but we’ve done well.”

“I should say so. I did hear that the injured were being tended efficiently and compassionately and it seems I can give to you the credit. I am very impressed and very thankful. You are truly a wonderful woman.”

Mycroft couldn’t miss Lestrade’s slouch at his words and hated himself for it. He knew his Gregory did not begrudge Molly the compliment, but… it could not be easy. Especially… Mycroft’s brain began to work and when it did the panic set in. Leaning close to Molly’s ear, he began whispering.

“Why is Gregory here? Was he injured? What is wrong with him?”

Molly patted Mycroft’s hand and cleared her throat dramatically.

“Mr. Lestrade is being a little stubborn about being examined.”
Lestrade ignored Mycroft’s thunderous glare and struggled to stand, suddenly realizing his legs had other ideas on the subject. This time it was Molly holding Mycroft back from reaching his constable and she felt a tear rising because Jim had dropped next to Lestrade and looked just as tired and sore.

“I’ll see he has a doctor take a look at him, Your Highness. No use letting one of the city’s lawmen fall victim to his own stupidity when there still a lot of work to do.”

Jim quickly took a look over Greg’s body and shared a quick whisper with the constable.

“It looks like it’s just a few burns. Some a bit nasty, but nothing to really worry about. I’ll see them looked at, though. You shouldn’t worry, Princess and, anyway, I believe you’ll soon be leaving. Prince Mycroft was just returning to the castle to oversee a meeting with the city officials about what role the Crown will now play in civic emergencies. Or something like that. It was all above my head, anyway.”

Molly cocked her head at Jim, because firstly, he was a highly intelligent man and secondly, she had never heard that tone of his voice. It was… defeated. He must be very tired…

“I… Mycroft?”

“I am returning at this point because I want to make a very quick start on what I hope will be a series of new policies regarding events such as these. And you are surely in need of rest.”

“But…”

Molly looked at Jim and Lestrade and shot a frantic look at Mycroft who tried to keep his face as calm as he could. If he allowed himself any leeway right now, he would be carrying his Gregory in his arms to a carriage and bringing him directly to his rooms where none would tend to this lover save him.

“It's alright, Your Highness. I'll see things done here and find my way back later.”

Molly frowned grandly and Mycroft put an arm around her, nodding his apology to Jim.

“Thank you for that. And I shall leave word that in my absence you shall act as my representative for any remaining matters here. There should be little to manage at this point, but it always reassures frightened people to know someone is in charge. Is that acceptable to you?”

Jim blinked a few times then croaked out a ‘Yes, sir. Thank you. I shall not disappoint you.’

“I am very confident of that. Come now, Molly. Let us return. We are leaving our hard work in good hands.”

Molly looked at Jim, who gave her a small, yet not inappropriate smile before she nodded. Mycroft tried to catch Lestrade’s eye, but his lover was staring into the distance, coughing softly and rolling his shoulders to work out the tension. Giving his own smile to Jim, this one in gratitude, Mycroft escorted Molly away from the fire scene and to their waiting carriage.

“I hate this, Mycroft. I hate it worse than anything. I couldn’t… I couldn’t even give Jim…”

Mycroft got Molly into the carriage and set them on their way just as his fiancé began to cry.

“I know, Molly. It is not fair. And I despair, more each day, that I shall not find a way to make it so.”
“You… you’re not giving up, are you?”

“No, but… if I am so stupid a man that I have never given a thought to the tragedies that befall my subjects, then how have I the intellect to solve a problem such as ours?”

“You’re tired, Mycroft. That’s why you’re talking that way.”

“I am tired… but the truth is still the truth.”

“No, tired truth is just pessimism. We’re going to win, Mycroft. We are.”

“Mycroft smiled at the tearful Molly and tried to convince himself that she was right. Maybe his thinking was muddled due to the trials of the night. Maybe he was not quite the fool he felt at the moment. Maybe… so many maybes. So very many… and, right now, the only one that mattered was that maybe he was doomed to the failure he feared the most…

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“You didn’t have to stay here, you know. There’s nothing wrong with me.”

Lestrade and Jim watched Molly and Mycroft stop to talk to a few people, then continue to walk away, each man left behind experiencing his own pain that grew sharper with each step their respective partner took away from them.

“I know. But… it’s good to be doing something. And I’m King of the Fire, now! Wonder if I can find a crown.”

“It’d look good on you.”

“Think so?”

“Yeah. Too bad poor lads like us don’t get to wear one.”

“That’s the truth of it. Or get to choose our path in life.”

Lestrade watched Jim gaze at Molly, who Mycroft was helping into their carriage and it suddenly struck him that the man hadn’t protested not going with them. He was Molly’s bodyguard, after all…

“Not that it’s any of my business, but shouldn’t you be doing your real job and keeping your princess safe?”

Jim’s laugh was an ugly sound and Lestrade knew he wasn’t going to like the answer to his question.

“See those two men hopping onto the back of the carriage? That’s the princess’s guards.”

“What?”

“She probably thinks they’re Mycroft’s and he probably just thinks… who knows what he thinks. But they’re Molly’s new guards. My replacements.”

“You can’t be serious! Mycroft would never…”

“He doesn’t know. Not yet, at least. This is Mycroft’s father’s idea. Molly will be part of their family now, live in their court… she should be protected by their people. Not me. I was… informed… of this fact yesterday.”
“And you didn’t tell her.”

“No. Why worry her? Until she’s married, they can’t exactly make me leave and by then… maybe she and Mycroft will have thought of something. If not…”

Jim shrugged and Lestrade heaved a heavy sigh. He, of all people, knew how the man felt.

“What will you do?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Not to be rude, but John says you’re a spy. Can’t you just go back and do that?”

Jim laughed and his dark eyes began to shine for the first time since he’d sat in the dirt.

“I don’t think that’s going to be possible.”

“Makes sense. He said you weren’t a very good spy.”

“Actually, I’m a very good one; I just never expected to fall in love. Now, I don’t think I could return home and get what would be called a warm welcome. They probably share John’s opinion by now.”

“Well, if it helps, we can use another body at the watch house. The pay isn’t the best, but it’s steady.”

Jim turned his head to look at Lestrade, who was looking back with a ‘if we don’t help each other, who will’ expression that the spy found he greatly appreciated.

“I’ll keep that in mind. But, it might not even be an issue. My Molly hasn’t given up trying to find an answer and what she puts her mind to, she usually gets.”

“And your real opinion that isn’t influenced by your silly, lovesick heart?”

This laugh was a little more real. It was good to talk to someone who actually understood what a mess his life was right now.

“We’re in deep trouble.”

“Yeah, that’s what I think, too. I’ll see it through to the end; I promised I would but… at least I’m expecting the disaster this time.”

“That actually does help, doesn’t it?”

“Nothing worse than a surprise. You can take my word for that.”

“Oh, I believe you. I was there for the aftermath, remember?”

“Couldn’t forget it if I wanted to. I’ve never done that much shopping at one time in my life.”

“Oh, that was nothing. You should see her when she actually has something she knows she wants to buy.”

“You’re a brave man.”

“But a terrible spy.”
“Yeah… there is that…”

Lestrade and Jim giggled and felt it clear a little something in their chests besides smoke. Their lives were headed for very deep, very dark chasm, but right now, they could laugh. They could make a difference here, really make a difference, and they could also laugh. Right now, things weren’t so bad. Right now, they could feel a little better about things. There was more than enough time for tears later on…
Chapter 18

Never… never in his lifetime had Mycroft been so fatigued and energized and exhilarated and heartbroken and despondent and he was certain that as he stormed through the corridors of the castle he was the subject of a hundred startled looks, but he didn’t care. He had to rid himself of these clothes and then meet the city officials he had summoned so that no disaster of this magnitude ever again harmed his subjects without his knowledge. That they had endured without a speck of assistance from the Crown was shameful, simply shameful, and he vowed that the disgrace stopped here and now.

But, today, he had done something. He had personally made a difference. Not a difference at distance, but an immediate and palpable difference. He had worked… thrown his back into the battle and only left when it was clear that the threat was no longer critical and would be successfully managed by others. He had set aside his title and, for that one night, simply been one of the many desperately trying to salvage what they could of the tragedy. Learning… he was learning and this critical. And Molly… how widely opened were her eyes to the suffering of the people and how magnificently she rose to the challenge and provided her own contribution to situation. Her Jim’s eyes were so filled with pride when he looked at her, and she deserved every bit of that pride for he could not think of one other female of their rank who would have thrown themselves headlong into the fray and worked so tirelessly for the betterment of others, especially in such difficult and physical circumstances.

But his poor Gregory… so exhausted. And injured. And alone. It only struck him now that his love would return to a home that was empty and cold, though he would surely be relieved that his son was safe and well. He would suffer the pain of his efforts with no form of comfort and that was… heartbreaking was in no manner a sufficient word. There was no justice in this world if he could not cradle that magnificent man in his arms after such a trial, sing praises in his ear and help him find the sleep that would take away the darkest pains of this experience. And since he could not do those things, justice had apparently forsaken him in the cruelest of ways.

“Mycroft!”

It didn’t necessarily surprise the prince that John and Sherlock were still in his rooms, but it did light a fire in his heart that his personal space had been viewed as a place of security for the boys in their hour of need.

“Hello, John. And before you ask, your father is well. A bit charred in places, but absolutely hale and hearty.”

“You saw him?”

“That I did. And at the distal end of the battle, so there is virtually no chance that his situation will have changed. The fire is almost defeated and he is with Jim, so between the two of them, I suspect there will be no further danger on the horizon. You may rest easy tonight that he is safe.”

Sherlock and John had been sitting by the fire, with books in their hands, but now John was laying back on the floor, staring at the ceiling, with an expression on his face that was partly joy and partly a relief that was so strong it was both pleasant and painful in equal measures. Then, of course, the thoughts of what could have happened began to flood the young boy’s mind.

“I hate when he does that! He could die and he doesn’t even seem to think about that when he runs out after he gets the message.”
Mycroft crossed the room and squatted near the boy, wearing as reassuring a smile as he could muster.

“I can assure you, John, Gregory thinks about that very seriously because he is well aware what his death or disablement would mean for you. He does not choose his actions rashly and if the need were not so great, I feel certain he would not take the risk. You are his priority and only a tremendously important event, one that affects many, could pull him from your side. You should be proud of him, John. He is a courageous, dedicated man who labors indefatigably for others. That is extremely admirable.”

“I am proud of him, Mycroft. I really am. I just… I don’t want him to get hurt.”

“I completely understand and I heartily agree. It shall be our task to see him safe and I know that with two such stalwart guardians, he shall live a healthy and rewarding life.”

John cocked an eye towards the prince and narrowed it to a slit as he tried to do what he'd seen Sherlock do time and again – observe. Mycroft didn’t look like he was lying, so maybe he did intend to keep an eye on his father, even if they didn’t actually become a couple again. Sherlock said the time was getting very, very short, but he believed, he had to believe, there was still a way for there to be a happy ending for the prince and his father.

“I’m going to do everything I can to make that true. Greg’s worked hard to give me a good life and I’m going to do the same for him.”

“As shall I. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to tidy up a bit before a very important meeting to ensure a night like this does not occur again in the future without my notification and intervention. If you will excuse me? Sherlock, thank you for your heartfelt concern about my welfare.”

Sherlock sighed loudly and laid aside his book to stare at his brother with a look of unconquerable boredom on his face.

“Is there a reason for concern?”

“Not as such, no.”

“Then my time would have been wasted expressing unnecessary emotion. I shall, however, comment on your smell, which is vaguely campfire-like, but one that was fueled by clumps of dried dung.”

His brother so loved his little jabs and vituperations. However, Mycroft had taken note of how thoroughly Sherlock had inspected his condition when he entered the room, although his brother tried valiantly to camouflage his intentions. The imp might believe his supercilious attitude was its own brand of disguise, but Sherlock was sadly mistaken…

“Lovely. For that, I should withhold the information that I was accompanied on my task by Molly, who took charge of the injured and now has plentiful and thorough knowledge of such things as burn wounds, broken bones and a host of other ailments that are probably quite interesting and valuable to someone eager to pursue law-breaking blackguards.”

Sherlock’s sharp gasp was Mycroft’s own reward and he left to make himself presentable with the sound of two pairs of running feet singing happily in his ears.

Fuck, he was tired. Chasing down the worst of criminals wasn’t nearly as draining as fighting a
bastard like this monster of a blaze. He was tired and aching, but the fire was finally nothing but smoking ash and, all told, it could have been much, much worse. And, surprise of surprises, they’d actually had help… for once, the bastards in the castle finally poked their heads out of their mole hole and came out to lend a hand. It had made a difference, too. A big difference. Lots of men, lots of supplies and lots of water got moved that wouldn’t have, keeping far more buildings and people safe than they could have saved alone. And it was all because of Mycroft. He’d taken action after he talked to John. And Jim said the news floored the stupid bastard. He’d never actually wondered why the castle never sent out any aid, because they never sent out any aid for any reason, but now he at least knew it was because the word didn’t make it to their ears. Maybe. It didn’t reach Mycroft’s ears, at least, but now Mycroft knew what was going on and was going to do something about it. That alone was almost worth this fire, if it got them help for all the others in the future.

“Greg?”

“Jim… you finished being King of the Fire, Your Highness?”

“I’ll always be King of the Fire. No one can take that away from me.”

“I’m pretty good with wood and a knife. I’ll make you that crown you’ve been wanting.”

“King of the Fire with a crown that burns if you put it to the flame. There’s a symmetry to that I appreciate.”

“I try my best. Look… me and the lads are going to invade a tavern and have a little or a lot of ale. Take a bit of time to shake all of this off before we go home. Want to come?”

Lestrade laughed that the offer seemed to genuinely surprise the spy/bodyguard, but he’d meant it sincerely and hoped his partner-in-misery accepted.

“Actually, yes. That sounds good. Molly’s probably busy chasing down the castle doctors and demanding they teach her everything they know, so she won’t miss me for awhile. I’ve seen her excited about a lot of things, but she was glowing last night. Molly’s not like the rest, you know… not like all the other crown-wearers. She wants to learn and experience. It makes her happy to do things, especially if they’re meaningful. That’s why… as much as I hate to say it… I’m glad she’s marrying Mycroft. He won’t stop her doing the things she loves and will probably encourage her to do even more. Try everything she’s wanted to try, learn everything she’s wanted to learn… and she’ll do it, you know? Try everything, do everything… for such a sweet little thing, I’ve never met anyone so determined and full of life.”

“You’re a very lucky man.”

“Thanks for that. Now, I just have to hope my luck will last.”

“Yeah, definitely time for the tavern. You’re getting lovesick and I’ve already crossed that bridge. A few mugs of good ale is the best thing for it.”

“I thought many mugs was an option.”

“Oh, we’re going to have fun.”

“Yeah, definitely time for the tavern. You’re getting lovesick and I’ve already crossed that bridge. A few mugs of good ale is the best thing for it.”

“I thought many mugs was an option.”

“Oh, we’re going to have fun.”

“You reek of the tavern.”

“Such a cute lad. That curly hair hides your little horns brilliantly.”
Jim flashed Sherlock a lopsided grin, then gave Molly a sloppy kiss on the cheek, much to John and Mycroft’s amusement.

“Jim… are you drunk?”

“And happily so, my princess. Even the King of the Fire needs to relax sometimes.”

Molly shot her fiancé a look of pure confusion and the Crown Prince struggled to stifle his laughter. After Mycroft’s meeting, he had sought out the boys and was tickled to find them still in Molly’s rooms, with the princess teaching them how to tie knots, a skill she had learned from the man now swaying slightly as he straightened up after his kiss.

“Greg asked me to come with him and some of his mates for a little or a lot of ale and it ended up being quite a lot of ale, but we deserved it. Not one person in the tavern wasn’t covered in soot or wearing one of my lady’s bandages. It was a party, really. All my fire subjects in one place. Just a glorious thing.”

Jim smiled broadly and this time Molly did giggle, as much out of relief that he was here and safe as for how cute her Jim was when he was absolutely sweating pure alcohol.

“Oh! And John… Greg says don’t worry about coming home until tomorrow night. He’s going to sleep the rest of the day away and probably won’t be much to talk to tomorrow morning. Ever had a hangover? It’s not fun, you don’t want one. Wee thing like you’d probably just shrivel up and die and poor Greg would cry himself into his own grave over his wee little shriveled up and dead son. No ale for you.”

Jim wagged his finger at John, then at Sherlock for good measure.

“It is good to hear that Gregory will, at least, achieve some rest today. And that he was able to take some recreation after his toil.”

Molly nodded at Mycroft and laid her shawl on the arm of the chair before pulling Jim down so he could sit before he simply fell over.

“I’m just happy he dragged Jim along with him. It’s nice to see the two of them getting along.”

“Well, we have to, don’t we? I mean… we’ll probably be working together soon and who wants to work with someone they don’t get on with?”

Molly again looked over to Mycroft and found him looking as confused as she felt.

“Jim… what do you mean?”

“Hmm? Oh, he offered me a job at the watch house. Don’t worry, Molly, I’m not actually being pushed out until you’re married, but… well, that’s only a couple of weeks away, I forgot about that… anyway, when I’ve lost my position, I’ll need something to keep myself alive, now won’t I? Greg said they needed another body and I met some of those I’d work with and they’re… well, they’re solid, average men who, at least, I don’t have to worry about putting a knife in my back when I’m not looking. That’s important, you know.”

“Jim, dear… what are you talking about? Why would you lose your position?”

“What? How’d you hear about that?”

“You just… oh, never mind. What does that mean?”
“What does what mean?”

“You losing your post!”

“Oh! You’re not supposed to know about that. Mycroft’s arse of a father told me I wasn’t needed anymore. Those two oak trees that are following you around are the new me. So, you’ll be married, I’ll be unemployed and alone, Greg’s going to be alone and bitter and misery loves company, so we’ll work together and go out to the tavern when we need to forget about the alone… ness. Don’t worry, we’ve got it all planned.”

Jim grinned and giggled at whatever plan was running through his mind, entirely unaware of the look of shock on the four faces staring at him.

“Mycroft…”

“I have no knowledge of this, Molly. I admit… I admit I noticed the retinue attached to you, but thought it was simply extra protection to keep you safe until our wedding. I had no idea Father would do such a thing, though I cannot say it is beyond his capability. Especially if he had caught wind about Jim’s… second profession.”

“And you people need to stop saying I’m a bad spy. I’m a good one. A great one, actually. Fair hand at assassination, too, though my friend Sebastian is really the master at that, but he taught me a thing or two.”

Sherlock and John jumped up and knelt next to Jim as if they were worshipping a newly –discovered god, eagerly awaiting the next of his holy words.

“Yes, well, that would surely not work in your favor should Father become aware of it. Molly… I am sorry. I will have a word with Father and try my best to convince him away from his decision, but I fail in that task far more frequently than I succeed. I will try, though. Do not doubt that for an instant.”

Not that Molly was hearing many of Mycroft’s words because her mind was completely occupied with trying to process the idea of her life without Jim at her side. The thought of continuing her life with Jim as her secret lover had become painful enough, but to exist without him…

“Mycroft, this can’t be happening!”

John patted Molly on the leg and tried to smile comfortingly.

“I’ll make sure Jim’s alright, princess. He can stay at our house if he needs a place to live and if Greg said he give Jim a job, he means it so that’s taken care of. Not that any of it’s going to be needed because you and Mycroft have ideas, right? I mean Sherlock says it’s not hopeful, but he’s probably exaggerating… you’re going to find a way to keep everyone together, aren’t you? There’s still… a little time and you’re royalty, so you have to be able to think of something because you’ve got an education and money and… know things.”

Sherlock had been very quiet during the entire exchange and took his own turn patting someone, this time John being the recipient.

“At this juncture, the outlook is bleak. Neither Mycroft nor Molly has been able to find a single pathway to success and our results, as you know, have yielded nothing productive, either. There is no reason to believe this will change in these final weeks. As it is, Mycroft’s calendar for his tedious meetings and negotiations is as full as one of Mrs. Hudson’s sausages and Molly’s mother arrives in two days to, I am certain, engage in some form of female witchery necessary to transform her
daughter into a bashful, blushing bride. The time available to continue their research is effectively nil.”

John’s face fell into a deep frown and he dropped from his knees to his bum and tried not to pout.

“However, though Sherlock’s assessment is quite accurate, that does not mean we have halted our efforts. Molly and I are both highly committed to finding a solution to our woes, though they seem to be growing. We have not declared defeat, nor shall we as long as there remains even a single minute of time remaining until our wedding.”

As Mycroft tried to console the upset boy, Jim reached down and pushed the hair out of John’s eyes, giving the boy a wide grin.

“Don’t fret, John. Molly is the smartest woman there is… and the prettiest… what were we talking about? Oh yes, she may not be able to do anything about this, but she’ll try to the very last and I think Mycroft’s that type, too. How many beds do you have in your house, anyway? Will I need a bedroll?”

Molly wrapped her arms around her very dirty lover, trying not to cry and Mycroft decided that it was best to leave the couple alone.

“Sherlock, John… let us continue this discussion in my rooms, shall we? Molly and Jim have a great deal to talk about and our presence is not necessary for that conversation.”

“Princess, will you be alright?”

Molly did let a tear flow, hearing the concerned, yet highly defeated tone of John’s voice, but nodded anyway.

“I will, John. Thank you. And thank Greg for thinking about Jim.”

John nodded and let Sherlock give him a hand up. Still holding his friend’s hand, Sherlock led John out of the room, with Mycroft following a moment later after giving Molly an understanding, though brittle, smile. When they were gone, Molly wiped her eyes and pulled herself together enough to show a brave face to her increasingly sleepy-eyed lover.

“I think someone could use a good bath and a chance to toss his remaining shreds of clothes out of the window.”

“Too tired. I’m just going to lie here by the fire and go to sleep.”

“Jim, you’re filthy.”

“And you love that, don’t you, princess.”

It wasn’t right to blush when your heart was breaking, but… her dark-haired spy had a streak of magic in his blood. And now he was grinning his lecherous grin… well, there went the last of her resolve right out the window, probably just after his clothes.

“If I promise to bathe with you, will I change your mind about getting clean?”

“Will you wash every bit of me?”

“Even the bits that probably don’t have any soot on them.”

“That’s my girl.”
Mycroft did his best to keep Sherlock and John amused, but the energy seemed to have drained out of the boys and he finally defaulted to letting the pair read quietly until they were yawning more than they were reading, then gently coaxed them into Sherlock’s rooms, where Sherlock found John some nightwear and the pair crawled into Sherlock’s sizeable bed for the night.

“Goodnight, boys. If you like, we may share breakfast tomorrow before you begin your day. I am most certain it will be a full and engaging one.”

“John and I have vital work to conduct and…”

“Yes?”

“We wish to visit the site of the fire.”

Mycroft was about to protest that plan, then reconsidered. Sherlock, though he would not wear the crown, was also a prince who would have the ability to exert influence and should know certain things so that influence would be wielded wisely. Or, as wisely as was possible with Sherlock.

“I have no objection to that idea, however, seeing the site of the fire and exploring it are two very different activities. Stay away from the actual damaged area as I know firsthand it is not safe. And… you must remember that what appears to be ruins and detritus was someone’s home or business. What items you find in the debris were owned and likely treasured by someone who may now have nothing. Show respect for their tragedy and do not forget what they have suffered.”

“We will, Mycroft. We just want to see how big it was and Sherlock wants a few samples of the burned wood to test. Will that be alright? Not big ones, just little ones.”

“That should be fine, so long as you remember to treat anyone you might meet with kindness and compassion for they deserve all you can bestow.”

“John and I will not give anyone cause for upset.”

And this time, strangely, Mycroft actually believed his brother.

“Very well. I shall see you tomorrow.”

Mycroft blew out the candles by Sherlock’s bed and left the room, already hearing whispering in his wake. Likely, he should have a room set aside for John’s use, but… that would mean he expected John to spend many nights here and those would be nights his Gregory would be alone, which was not permissible. Even now… no. No, he would not give in to the temptation to take himself to his love’s home and provide the care and love he needed. He would not let the vision of his Gregory, disheveled and battered, propel him into the city, arms laden with fresh clothing, hearty food, soothing creams for overtaxed muscles and his own body to provide the physical comfort and adoration his constable so richly deserved. He would be strong and let his Gregory obtain the rest he needed. Tomorrow night, however, John would likely need an escort home and he would be honored to provide that service.

He was paralyzed, that was the only explanation for it. Mycroft tried to move his body so that he might actually leave his bed, but his muscles were singularly unwilling to obey his commands. The ones that showed willing were cruelly punished for their efforts by a stabbing thrust of pain that made him grit his teeth and promise the poor morsel of flesh that nothing like that would be asked of
“Mycroft?”

The small, hesitant voice in his ear almost made Mycroft turn his head in response. If his neck hadn’t turned into a tree trunk, he might have actually accomplished the task.

“Ah, John. Is it breakfast time?”

“Yes. Sherlock’s in the kitchens and ordering them about, well, everyone but Mrs. Hudson and I’m here to tell you to hurry up because he’s hungry.”

“I consider myself informed. I shall be along shortly.”

“Ok.”

John left and it was only a small urge that rose up in the prince to call him back and beg help getting his body to move. Apparently, staying in motion yesterday had kept him limber and his delicious slumber last night was bought at a high price. As slowly as an aged snail, Mycroft forced each arm and leg to bend, feeling immense pride at not vocalizing the internal screams his body was shrieking to the heavens, and after thirty or forty years, was able to roll clumsily out of the bed to stand stock still until his balance was ensured. After another century or two, he was able to stagger towards his wardrobe, strongly considering breaking his personal moratorium on having a servant perform his dressing and grooming, and pulled onto his body the first garments his hands landed upon. Shoes… the ones that he could slide his toes into without having to bend or sit to affix them to his feet were the perfect choice…

Following a crippling session with his comb and other grooming tools, Mycroft finally left his bedroom, greatly concerned that the epoch required for his preparations would find him walking among the skeletal remains of the castle staff. After a further decade, the doors to the kitchens loomed…

“Good lord, Mycroft! You look like you’re about ready to snap in two like a twig. Sit down and I’ll get you some tea.”

Oh, thank you, Mrs. Hudson. Sit down… after it had taken him a millennium to actually stand up? Apparently, his day had already planned his punishment for his life’s sins and it was getting an early start on things. And look, Sherlock was glaring. How refreshing…

“Why are you… strange?”

“Because, brother dear, I exerted myself to an extraordinary degree during the fire and I must now repay my body for the demands I placed upon it. Once I have enjoyed a bit of breakfast and taken a stroll, perhaps, through the gardens, I shall be fine.”

“The oldest member of court does not have a morning as boring as that. You have officially died.”

That might actually be the preferable condition compared to his current agony.

“You keep a civil tongue in your head, Sherlock Holmes. Your brother did a great thing yesterday and I’ll not have you making fun of him for it.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t bring a brace of pheasants to roast over the flames so he had a snack while working.”
One spoon contacted one curl-cushioned head with a respectable thump and Sherlock, knowing well Mrs. Hudson’s tactics, used his hands to protect his plate from her wrathful theft and not soothe his bump.

“Well, your reflexes are still quick as an adder’s, I’ll give you that much. Be nice, Sherlock. Mycroft risked life and limb out there, don’t think I don’t know what a fire means in terms of risk and loss. And he’s the first of you lot to get off his arse and lend a hand. I hear the Princess Molly also deserves a little something special this morning.”

“She does, Mrs. Hudson. Her efforts and, frankly, talents were extremely helpful for the injured. And Molly worked tirelessly as any man.”

“She’s a good one and you’re lucky to have her. Or that bodyguard is lucky to have her, I should say.”

Mrs. Hudson’s large and knowing wink made John laugh, Sherlock roll his eyes and Mycroft clear his throat and shove down a rising blush.

“Though… I’ve heard a few things, Mycroft. About how long that bodyguard’s going to be bodyguarding, that is.”

Mycroft sipped the tea Mrs. Hudson had brought and then nodded slightly.

“Yes, Jim informed both Molly and myself of his dismissal last night. I am going to speak with Father about the situation, but I do not hold out much hope of success. If we cannot craft a comprehensive plan to remedy our collective problems, then… then Molly shall not only be wed to me, but shall not have her chosen lover at her side. It… I really did not believe the situation could worsen, but it has done so handily.”

“This is why I’m glad I’m not one of you. I wish you could just say ‘hang it all’ and do as you pleased, but none of us can do that in life, I suppose. There’s always a price to pay and some prices just don’t justify what they purchase, no matter how much we want it. If it’s any consolation, I hope you can do something. For you and Molly both. Now, I’ll get you something to eat. You keep stretching out those muscles or you’ll just seize back up again.”

Advice Mycroft quickly followed as he began stretching out his arms and legs and back, much to Sherlock and John’s amusement.

“He looks like a cat.”

“A portly cat. One that is completely incapable of catching rats to earn its bowls of cream.”

The portly cat was, however, entirely capable of distracting its brother with one paw and extricating a sausage from his plate with another.

“Just what the horse-sized cat needs, a sausage. If you are able to fit into your wedding clothes, I will be extremely surprised.”

“I shall now ensure that your own costume for the ceremony is most appealing. The quantity of ruffles, ribbons, lace and other sundries that shall adorn you will be without compare. In fact, I shall commission a portrait of you in your finery to grace the walls of your rooms so that you may gaze upon your loveliness for eternity.”

“For your information, I shall not even attend the ceremony, should it actually occur. I have far better things to do with my time than endure the droning of the officiant and your wheezed replies to
his questions.”

“If I am there, brother, so shall you be.”

“You will have to catch me first and that is as likely as John learning to juggle.”

“I’m a great juggler!”

“I challenge your definition of ‘great.’ “

When Mrs. Hudson arrived with Mycroft’s plate, he successfully tuned out the eternal argument between Sherlock and John and concentrated on continuing his little stretches between bites of food and organizing his mind for the day’s obligations, which were many. So much to do and for so many reasons… was it possible to survive two weeks without sleep? The prince had a creeping suspicion that he would find out…

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Before he was even aware a full day had passed, Mycroft found himself escorting John home, with Sherlock in tow as a makeshift chaperone in case his journey was witnessed by anyone who might wonder about his travels.

“Mycroft… I’m not a baby, you know.”

“Most young men, John, would appreciate being delivered to their doorstep to avoid the effort of walking such a distance.”

“Maybe if you were actually doing it for me, I’d be grateful, but you just want to see Greg, so I can complain if I want to.”

Sherlock nodded sagely and fixed his brother with a ‘your pathetic lies have defeated you’ sneer.

“There is no reason this service must be provided for a single reason, though I will not deny I would like to verify Gregory’s physical state with my own eyes.”

“I think you’re hoping to kiss him.”

Well, if the occasion arose…

“Your father has been very clear on the parameters and limits of our interactions and physical affection certainly falls outside of those boundaries.”

“Phooey. If he had any sense he’d be getting all the kisses he could right now. If you can’t actually be a couple anymore, then he’ll never get another chance!”

Apparently the specter of impending doom was causing John to begin thinking in desperate terms.

“Let us keep a positive thought, shall we.”

“The rest of you aren’t coming up with any ideas – I’ve got to look out for Greg and he needs kissing. You don’t want to hear how he says your name at night when he’s dreaming. All moany and groany and it’s just pitiful.”

Dreaming? Oh Gregory, I think not, you delightfully lustful man…

“Positive thoughts, John. If we meet with success then I shall gladly take all steps to ensure you
have a quiet and uninterrupted sleep.”

“Good, because Greg gets mad at me when I tell him to try and keep quiet and I’m tired of getting in trouble because of his stupid dreams!”

Luckily they arrived at John’s house before Mycroft needed to respond and the boy hopped out of the carriage to barrel through the door as if he was prepared for some form of moany, groany greeting.

“Well?”

“Yes, Sherlock?”

“Go and get this over with.”

“And what, pray tell, do you mean by this?”

“Whatever romantic nonsense you hope to perpetrate while you have the opportunity.”

Apparently both boys were advocating an escalation in amorous advances. Could there be a faint whiff of puberty in the air?

“I shall endeavor to keep my nonsense brief.”

“And I shall retrieve a book I loaned to John.”

“Are you, perhaps, attempting to give Gregory and I time alone?”

“I fear for the welfare of your subjects for some form of mental disease is obviously sapping what little intelligence you currently possess.”

Sherlock made his way out of the carriage and Mycroft smiled at his brother’s very dramatic ignoring of his existence as he followed afterwards. Then, of course, he was unsure how to proceed, but Lestrade stepped outside and resolved the situation.

“I should have known. John said the carriage driver wanted a word with me and Sherlock agreed a little too quickly. How are you, Mycroft?”

Unraveling quickly, actually, seeing his lover standing there, a bandage on his hand, dark circles under his eyes, an odd cant to his stance that spoke of either fatigue or pain and neither was acceptable.

“Gregory… what… your hand…”

“This? It’s nothing. I went to lift a piece of wood and didn’t realize the underside was smoldering. It’ll sting for a day or two, but that’s all.”

Mycroft tried to stand still, tried to keep his arms at his sides but failed utterly. Nothing could have stopped him walking a step forward and taking Lestrade’s injured hand between his own, as if he could will it healed.

“Mycroft…”

“A moment, my love. All I ask is a moment… to think of you hurt…”

“I’m not hurt, Mycroft. A little singed and I’m still pretty tired, but…”
“And your back?”

“It’s fine. Mycroft… this isn’t the first time I’ve had to help with a fire.”

A fact Mycroft already knew which did not lessen the stab of distress that that pierced him when he thought of his constable suffering like this in times past. In addition to the other suffering of his life…

“That does not alleviate my concerns, Gregory. I may not share your bed, but I do share your heart and the pain you suffer torments me as well.”

He should only be holding his beloved’s hand. He should not be stroking the constable’s arm, marveling anew at the firm muscles and the warmth of his skin, which he could feel even through the fabric of his Gregory’s shirt.

“I know, Mycroft. It’s just… this is what our life is like.”

“Our?”

“Common people like me. We get hurt, we suffer loss and we keep going on. We have to, there’s no other choice.”

And he surely should not be allowing his hand, now both, to trace the lines of his Gregory’s shoulders, lightly teasing the base of the neck that seemed to be crying out for his touch.

“But that is why you seek the comfort of the ones you love, correct? Take solace in their affection and strength from their adoration…”

How beautifully his Gregory trembled under his fingers. Every touch on his neck, his cheek… so rich with sensation… how like a dance it was leading his beautiful, beautiful Gregory into a patch of deepest darkest shadow…

“Mycroft…”

No, those lips are not for speaking, my dear. They are to marry with mine…

The prince took his constable in a long, slow kiss and pressed his body close so that each could feel the beat of the other’s heart. Actually, the prince was certain his heart had ceased entirely to beat until he felt again the heat of his lover’s embrace and the masterful play of skilled hands across his skin. Though… it could not last forever…

“Mycroft… we can’t…”

“We are, Gregory. For this one small moment, away from any eyes but ours, let us have what we desire. And you do desire it, your body cannot lie…”

And this next kiss burned with a lash of fire that had each man moaning slightly as they tried to press together more closely and give every bit of passion in their soul to the person the loved. If a loud and youthful clearing of the throat hadn’t broken through the thunderous sound of need ringing in their ears, a kiss would not have been the way this meeting ended.

“Your master calls, Your Highness.”

“And Sherlock would not argue that point in the slightest. My Gregory… if I had all the time in the world and all the words ever written from which to choose, I could not express to you how
deeply I love you. I would say this to you every day if I could, and show you every night. You will… you say you are well, but you will take care of yourself, will you not? You will promise me that?”

Lestrade loved and hated that the he was holding felt so perfectly… perfect in his arms and that, no matter what had happened, he loved Mycroft just as dearly as he had the minute the prince stole his heart.

“I promise. And Mycroft… I love you, too. No matter what happens, I do love you.”

With a final kiss that was a soft, lingering promise that ‘no matter what happens’ would never occur, Mycroft turned, checked for possible observers, then quickly joined Sherlock in the carriage. A brief order and they were moving away from his beloved and back into the bleakness of what his life held in store for him. As they departed, Lestrade leaned against the wall of his house and slowly pulled himself back together. He did love, Mycroft. Loved him, wanted him… if only he could have faith in him. Mycroft hadn’t given him any hope, had he? Not one hint that anything about their situation was going to change. With only two weeks left until the wedding, there still wasn’t any hope. Well, at least he’d gotten a goodbye kiss… it was actually more than he’d been expecting…
Chapter 19

Mycroft had to dub these last seven days a week of horror. Pure, unadulterated horror… small, congratulatory celebrations with various factions and cliques, larger congratulatory celebrations with larger factions and cliques… then the celebration hosted in the city by the officials Father had installed to oversee the day-to-day workings of his capital and that was the most horrific of all, though only for the reason that he felt so completely unworthy of the respect and gratitude he received during the event. So many people, so very many people, cautiously approaching him and his fiancé to thank them for their efforts in the fire and its aftermath. So grateful that he had stepped in where no one had before and, further, brought his princess to help their injured. Such sincerity and for something that should not have been. There should have been help in the past and these people should instead be hurling rage into his face that they had endured so long without it.

And then, there were the ones who knew. Knew he had loved one of their own and had to walk away from that great love because of duty and obligation to the throne. The pity in their eyes, the sadness, the compassion… it slashed his heart to bloody ribbons for he deserved none of their regard. If they knew the truth, they would look at him in a far different manner… but, happily, their respect for his Gregory did not predispose them to look upon Molly in an unfavorable manner and it was a joy to see his fiancé embraced by the people who would, someday, call her Queen. They appreciated her spirited nature and that she demonstrated honest interest in their lives and stories. It was a stellar evening, a spectacular success replete with good omens for when it was he who wore the crown… and the pain in heart as they rode away from the festivities made it difficult to breathe.

Now there was a week remaining… one single week. And every bit of reading, inquiry, heavily-couched questions, consultations and brainstorming had not produced a single viable solution to his troubles. Walk away, abandon his title… he could not do that, especially now when it was abundantly clear that his subjects needed his rule, needed his efforts and attentions. And his Gregory would not permit it. Gregory absolutely would not allow him to lay down his responsibilities and uptake a life that would permit them to be together, but leave his subjects without him to champion their interests. And his love would also not accept an unacknowledged life in the shadows, should he retain his position and title. So what was left? Where could he turn?

“Mycroft?”

Mycroft broke out of his reverie and gave his fiancé a gentle smile.

“Molly… I apologize. I did not hear you enter.”

“I’m sorry about coming in, but your staff was looking at me funny standing out there banging on the door and they probably already think I’m a bit daft.”

“I doubt they think that, but I would never want you to feel uncomfortable in your home.”

“My home… that sounds very final. You still haven’t thought of anything?”

“No. And you?”

Molly dropped into the chair opposite Mycroft and beat at the layers of her dress so they lay somewhat flat.

“No. Wait, I take that back. If you claim Jim as a slave and I do the same for Greg, we can exchange them as gifts. Won’t that be nice! They’ll get to stay with us and everyone will know who
they belong to, so we can parade them about as much as we like. Care to give that option a go? Or we can just take our individual lovers as slaves directly and avoid the gift-giving step, but that doesn’t seem nearly as romantic. Oh, and you have to convince your father to reinstate slavery, but that’s a minor issue, I’m sure.”

“And I’m certain Gregory and Jim will thank us profusely.”

Mycroft got up to poke at the fire, then poured him and Molly a glass of wine and retook his seat to stare at the flames, trying to ignore the memories they dragged forth from him.

“And you’re sure Greg’s doesn’t have any noble blood in him? Not a drop?”

“I have investigated his family as far into the past as I am able and can find no hint of the aristocracy in his ancestors. Tradesmen, farmers, even a few who came from the coast and fished for a living, but beyond that…”

“Don’t feel bad. I haven’t found anything for Jim, either, though I’ve practically had to sit on him to get him to tell me anything about his family. I think he still wants to have some mystery about him, the silly thing…”

“Not silly, Molly… he is trying to preserve something, keep something, when so much is being taken away from him. But I do hope he has been completely forthcoming… your plight at least does not have the complication of an heir. If you can find a way to keep Jim at your side, he can give you the heir your position demands. I cannot claim the same.”

“True… or, at least, if you and I have to get married, he can be part of making our baby and after we have a couple of little ones… maybe Jim and I could have one of our own. They’d be so far down the line that getting the throne wouldn’t be an issue and my father’s hair is dark, so a dark-haired baby wouldn’t necessarily cause suspicion and…”

Molly continued on for a moment, not realizing that Mycroft’s brain had gotten stuck in a hole a bit back and hadn’t moved forward along with the conversation.

“Pardon me, but… be part of making our baby?”

“Oh… yes, that. Well, I was thinking that you being who you are, it might not be easy to get things going in the bedroom area, if you know what I mean. And… well, I think that babies, if you’re going to have them, need to have a little love in the mix when they’re created. I know not everyone thinks that way, but I do. And not that I don’t love you, Mycroft, but I don’t… at least not that way, so…”

“Molly, are you proposing that while we… procreate, Jim shall be in attendance?”

“Yes. And Greg.”

“Gregory, also?”

“Well, of course! It would be stupid and more than a bit wrong to have my Jim and you not have Greg, don’t you think?”

“Four… all four of us in the bedroom?”

“Well, don’t make it sound strange or anything! I mean… it can be fun, actually. You know, Sebastian, that friend Jim mentioned? Well, sometimes, when he’s in in the area at home and gets word to Jim, he stops by for a visit that sometimes… well, with a little wine in you, anything can
happen, can’t it? And four isn’t really a larger number than three and I thought that if you’ve got Greg there to… get your *spirits* up and Jim’s there to get my *inspiration* flowing… well, with all that going on, and who knows what else, anything going on between you and me is just a tiny part of a much bigger picture. And, after a few goes, baby! My grandmother actually gave me some good advice on when it’s best to… you know… if you want a child, so… we can be efficient about things. And after our two, or three… we’ll have to talk… then we’re done!”

Never let it be said his fiancé wasn’t a woman possessed of exemplary problem-solving abilities. And… well it was an intriguing idea, now wasn’t it…

“Your ability to strategize astounds me, Your Highness. Already a hurdle has been overcome.”

“But only if Jim and Greg are still with us. Otherwise, we’ll have to muddle through on our own and… oh, that won’t be a lot of fun.”

“Quite. Well, if we required further incentive to put the entirety of our resources towards our situation, we now have it.”

“And my dress. Have you seen it? No, you haven’t because to see it fully, you’d have to lay it out on the ground and stand on top of the castle and look down on it and I don’t remember twenty large men taking my dress for a little stroll. Frankly, I don’t even have to make an appearance at the wedding ceremony. Just stand my dress up next to you and no one will know the difference. They won’t be able to see me in the stupid thing anyway.”

“I admit I did take a brief look into the rooms in which they are using to house it and saw naught but a wall of blue silk that seemed to stretch on endlessly.”

“That was probably one sleeve. What’s your gear like?”

“A demur ensemble of vibrant indigo, gold and white. If I am caught by a ray of sunshine, I shall not only reflect the ray, but bolster it to the point where it shall blind anyone caught in its path.”

“Brilliant. We’re going to make a ridiculous pair standing in front of members of every royal family we’re allied with and half we aren’t.”

“As have every married couple who came before us.”

“It’s not my fault they were idiots.”

“And our goal is to avoid adding to the collective ancestral idiocy.”

“There’s enough of that without us.”

“On that point, you have my full agreement.”

“So we keep trying.”

“That is the only option open to us, Molly. We have still a few days to find some recourse to end this problem and we must use them to best advantage.”

“A few days isn’t much, Mycroft. Not much at all.”

“No, but it is *something* and we must take heart in that.”

Molly drained her wine and huffed loudly.
“I’m going to go find Mrs. Hudson. We’re supposed to be planning the meal for the wedding feast and I want to make sure that if I have to, I can eat myself into a happy place and enjoy my wedding to the fullest.”

“Oh, what a marvelous idea. I may pop into the kitchens at some point and add my personal choices to the menu.”

“We’ve got to find our happiness where we can, Mycroft. Take all those little opportunities, even if the opportunities are only roasted venison and honey cakes.”

“I do enjoy a well-prepared honey cake.”

“We all do, Mycroft. It’s simply a fact of life.”

Mycroft stood behind Molly in what was becoming her usual chair in his rooms and, as a unit, they faced Jim who was sitting across in the second chair, glaring at them with a truly dangerous look on his face.

“No.”

“Jim, please.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Jim…”

“You’re asking too much of me, Molly. It’s not fair.”

“Jim, perhaps if I…”

“Stay out of this, Mycroft.”

And the prince obeyed. This was not an easy thing Molly and he were asking and it would not do to antagonize the man they were… it was not inappropriate to describe their request as cruel.

“Jim, I know this isn’t easy…”

“You want me to go to your wedding! You want me to sit there and watch you marry another man! Right before they take a boot to my backside and kick me out the door!”

“That’s not the way it is! Well… not entirely. It’s just… I want you there, Jim. I need you there. I know it’s a lot to ask, but do it for me. It’s going to be miserable, but if you’re there… please, Jim. I need you to be there.”

“You need… I don’t believe this. I get the privilege of watching my life fall apart and you need? Mycroft held his tongue, but hoped Jim would agree. Tomorrow was the wedding and Molly had been unravelling more and more each day. Every morning brought a slate of activities and objectives concerning the wedding and she was drowning in the planning and preparations, none of which would bring her any happiness. He truly was not certain that if Jim was not there to serve as a source of strength for her, she would not bolt during the ceremony. Already he had sent word that the horses would be kept in the stable under a watchful eye at all times to erase her most likely mode of transport. They had no ideas… they had no more avenues of exploration… time was up and there was nothing about which they could boast but the completeness of their defeat.
“My life is falling apart, too! I’m the one that’s got to stand there and sell my life away!”

“You’re getting a wonderful life! You’re getting everything you ever wanted!”

“Except you!”

Jim threw his hands in the air, got up and walked over to stare out of the window.

“I don’t get you, Jim and that’s the only thing I truly want.”

“You don’t need me there, Molly. Look at Mycroft… he’s not asking Greg to swallow his pride and let his heart get cut out in the process.”

“Actually, he is.”

Jim spun and looked at Mycroft like he’d lost his mind.

“What is wrong with the two of you? Are you… what is wrong with you? You want Greg and I to put on our best clothes, which wouldn’t buy the finger of one of your gloves, sit amongst royalty where we’ll drip humiliation like rain off a rooftop, and then watch the ones we love say their vows and abandon us forever. Doesn’t that sound like fun? I wonder why I ever thought it was a daft idea…”

“You’re just trying to make it sound as bad as possible.”

“That’s because it is as bad as possible!”

“PLEASE!”

Molly looked near tears and Jim felt the anger drain out of him. He couldn’t hurt his princess. He never could. Couldn’t hurt her and couldn’t deny her anything…

“Fine. Fine! I’ll be there. God help me, but I’ll be there.”

Molly rushed forward and gave her lover a hug, picking him up off the floor slightly and squeezing him tightly in relief.

“Excellent. Now, I… I shall send a letter to Gregory and hope that he is as understanding and compassionate.”

“What? Are you completely stupid? Both of you… I have no idea how you’re able to figure out how to eat. You don’t ask a man to come to the wedding of someone he loves, someone who didn’t actually come through with his promise to keep there from being a wedding, by sending him a letter!”

Jim disentangled himself from Molly and stalked towards Mycroft with an angry gleam in his eye.

“Why don’t you do it in person?”

Because he was a horrendous coward. Because he had failed his Gregory utterly and facing him to make that declaration would break him utterly. Because he had spent all of last night in a cold sweat, with contrasting bouts of hot tears that had left him nearly unable to function. Right now, even the smallest action was taking every bit of his energy and concentration, because his body and mind were desperate simply to shut down and let his life proceed without any further conscious input. He had lost everything. He had asked his Gregory to wait and it was all for naught. Asked him to hope and allowed those hopes to be dashed. Now… he would pay for his failure for the rest of his
days and if he could not at least meet his punishment with his Gregory present to witness it, ‘the rest of his days’ would be few in number.

“Because he deserves not to be insulted by my presence in anything but a remote and sterile fashion. I have failed him and I know that. I ask only that he lend me his strength one final time so that I may successfully fulfill the obligation placed upon me. And… you will not have to suffer the humiliation of being, as they say, out of place. There is always an area for functions such as these that is set aside for senior or favored household staff. I thought you and Gregory might observe the ceremony from there, acting as escorts to Mrs. Hudson.”

Jim snarled, but realized he didn’t have anything to say in reply. This was ridiculous. Ludicrous… Molly and Mycroft were idiots to think this was a good idea but… his Molly cried all night last night. And every day, she lost some of the light that made her more radiant than any candle. If she needed him, he would be there for her and he had a suspicion Greg would feel the same way. And it was only for a little while… by this time tomorrow, his princess would be a married woman and he would probably be starting to learn what it meant to enforce law and order…

“No letter. I’ll tell him. He deserves to be asked in person and I’m the best one to do it if you can’t work up the courage to do it yourself. Molly, I’ll be back… later. I’m not sure when.”

Turning away from Mycroft, Jim stormed out of the room and Molly felt her fleeting moment of relief bleed away and the tears rise up to take its place. Crying seemed to be the only thing she was able to do successfully lately…

“We’re horrible!”

“Yes, my dear, we are. We ask them to pay terrible prices for the sin of loving us and then we are too weak to even call the debt settled without an additional, brutally-high payment. Perhaps it is an omen… they are good men who deserve better than we can offer, so they are ripped from our clutches to find someone who might not take from them so greedily and given nothing back in return. They are free now to find someone who will love them in a way that can flourish, not wither because that love can never see the light.”

“Do you really believe that or are you just trying to make me feel better?”

Mycroft chuckled and it sounded like the rustling of dried, dead leaves to Molly’s ears.

“A little of both. I am… I am but a step from collapsing into an insentient heap from the grief I feel and if I do not attempt to tell myself pretty lies, I fear that step shall come quickly. I love him, Molly… the pain I feel…”

Was not something he could vocalize, so Mycroft simply waved off the rest of his words and swallowed the rush of emotion that threatened to overwhelm him.

“I know. Can I… would it be alright if I just sat in here awhile? Watch the fire or read a book? I’d rather not be alone right now.”

Mycroft nodded and held out his hand for Molly to take as he walked her back to her seat.

‘Of course. After all, we should become accustomed to this sort of thing, should we not? I foresee many nights such as these.”

“That doesn’t sound as nice as it should.”

“No, no it doesn’t.”
Greg looked at John when he heard the knock on their door and hoped his son didn’t see the panic he was feeling spread over his face. Not a word… he hadn’t heard a word from Mycroft and John said Sherlock didn’t like talking about the topic of the upcoming wedding, so he’d had no news to report. Now, on the eve before the ceremony, there’s a knock on the door…

“Well, aren’t you going to answer it?”

“Poor John, broke both his legs while sitting on his arse. That takes a lot of skill. I’m very proud.”

“Ugh…”

John hopped out of his chair and walked to the door. Normally, he would have his own response for his father, but… he was trying not to… well, it wasn’t exactly like he was trying not to talk to Greg now, but it was so hard talking to Greg! His father wasn’t right, wasn’t normal and sometimes he wondered if Greg even heard him when he was talking, anyway.

“Oh. Hi, Jim.”

“Hi, John. Is Greg here?”

“Yeah… come in.”

John stepped out of the way and let Jim enter the house, though he really didn’t want to. The look on his father’s face when he saw who their visitor was wasn’t a happy look.

“Jim… I can honestly say I wasn’t expecting you. At least not today.”

“And I didn’t expect to be here. But… we have to talk.”

And that was the sound of the book closing at the end of the story. Greg nodded and looked over to his very confused son and smiled gently.

“John, why don’t you go and stay the night with Sherlock? I’m sure you want to be there as early as possible tomorrow and this way you’ll be at the castle at first light. It’s alright, son. You go and have a nice time.”

John thought a moment about saying no, because something was obviously going on that wasn’t good, but he had no idea what that was or how to help and… and he had the feeling his father and Jim were going to be talking for a long time.

“Ok… Sherlock and I are going to watch all the things being done for… well, all of the things being done and…”

The wedding… this was about the wedding… oh no… Jim wasn’t here to give good news…

“… and we’re going to help if we can. Or I’ll help and Sherlock will watch and avoid being given any jobs to do. Are… are you going to be ok?”

John didn’t like that his voice wasn’t steady because he really needed to be strong for his father, but… it was over. As much as he’d hoped and tried to think only good thoughts about what their future would be like… it was over.

“I’ll be fine. Jim and I are just going to chat for awhile, so don’t worry about me. I’ll see you…”
well, you come back when you want to. I expect you’ll stay with Sherlock tomorrow night, too, what with all the celebrations. That’s alright… you just go and have a wonderful time.”

John hesitated, then nodded before running out of the house, more to keep his father from seeing his upset than to quickly be on his way.

“So, the bell’s rung, has it?”

Jim nodded and took the seat John had vacated.

“They’re out of ideas. Not that they didn’t try; I’ll give them credit for that, at least. They didn’t give up and it took everything possible out of them. You should see Mycroft and Molly… it’s like looking at two empty husks. Molly’s been avoiding me because she keeps crying and doesn’t want me to see her do it. Mycroft is… strangely calm, almost like he’s under some kind of spell. There’s no life there, just a bland politeness that’s eerie and worrying.”

“I guess we should be glad for that, odd as it sounds. Means they care, right?”

“That’s not something I ever doubted, but yeah… it’s been hard to hold onto it as tightly as usual these past few days.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised, though. There wasn’t any way they could fix any of this; it was good of them to try, but I knew there wasn’t going to be a happily ever after for us. That’s not the way it goes. A princess gets a prince, a prince gets a princess… they don’t get us.”

“Nice while it lasted, though.”

“Yes, it was… when I was with Mycroft, when he was Michael, that is, that was magical. I never thought I could love someone like that… love them with everything in me. Love them so much it was like my world had stumbled out of some dark place and finally found sunlight. Probably should consider myself lucky… not everyone finds love like that, not even once.”

Jim nodded and Lestrade took the moment of silence to pull down the wine he’d purchased specifically to drink tomorrow night when his heart was shattered and poured some for him and his guest, before taking his seat once more.

“Is that job offer still good?”

“Sure. Actually, tomorrow’s a good day to start. We’ll need extra men on the street anyway. The word around is that a lot of people will be celebrating the wedding and I’d rather have any problems taken care of quickly before they get out of hand.”

Now, that was an opening if Jim ever heard one.

“Um… that won’t actually be possible. For me and you both.”

“Why? What are you talking about?”

“You and I are going to be getting our hearts ripped out watching Molly and Mycroft get married.”

Lestrade stared at Jim and wondered if he’d actually died hearing the news and this was some form of afterlife that had a very evil sense of humor.

“You’re not serious?”
“Oh, I’m very serious. Mycroft was going to send you a letter but I told the bastard you should at least be asked in person.”

“Asked… so I can say no.”

“You could, but you shouldn’t. They’re not like us, Greg. Loss, failure, heartbreak… they don’t understand any of it, because they simply don’t experience it in their lives. To a degree, it’s incomprehensible to them and neither is handling it well, but they’ve got to put on a good show tomorrow… be part of the spectacle and do their bit to shine a favorable light on the thrones they’re going to sit in someday. I’m not sure how well that’s going to go if we’re not there to give them someone to look to when they’re feeling lost or, in Molly’s case, thinking about doing something rash.”

“Bollocks. They’re strong as iron and they’re… bred for this sort of thing! Raised for it from the minute they’re able to walk!”

Jim smiled at Greg because he’d tried to convince himself of the very same thing and failed just as badly as Greg knew he was failing, though he was trying hard to hide it.

“You know that’s not true. Before they met us… before they found out what it meant to really love someone, this wouldn’t have been a problem. But that changed and… like I said, they’re not handling it well.”

“So, I’m supposed to sit there and watch the executioner bring the axe down on my future and what… smile?”

“No, but we can, at least, show them we care. Show them we won’t forget them, that we don’t hate them, that we wish them well… it’s not much, but it will make a difference. And it’s a way to say goodbye, isn’t it? One final goodbye that won’t even need any words…”

Lestrade leaned back in his chair and wished Jim wasn’t smart enough to make this preposterous idea make sense.

“And then off we go to the tavern to get heroically drunk?”

“You read my mind. Sure you don’t have any witchcraft in your blood?”

“If I did, I don’t think I’d be in this situation.”

“No, you’re probably right about that.”

Jim returned to the castle rather late, but wasn’t surprised to find Molly still awake and waiting for him. It was their last night together after all and neither of them could bear to see it pass without letting the other know the passion they felt was still strong would never fade…

Mycroft watched Sherlock and John play some game that seemed to have rules only they understood and it was very late when he was finally able to get them to go to bed. For himself, there would be no rest. It wasn’t possible and he would be foolish to try. Tonight would be devoted to memory, the last time he could dream of a future where the one he loved would forever be by his side.
Lestrade met Jim in the kitchens and suffered Mrs. Hudson checking his grooming, straightening his clothes, fussing with his hair and giving him a slab of bread with butter and a cup of tea to settle his nerves before it was time to take their place in the great hall to watch the ceremony. And what a ceremony it was… Lestrade couldn’t have imagined anything like it. Though he had to smile at Sherlock and John, hovering at the edge of the proceedings, his son dressed in what must be a hastily-modified set of Sherlock’s fine clothes, everything else he saw just took his breath away. The people, the chandeliers with hundreds of candles, the architecture, the jewels… and his Mycroft was the most stunning thing in the room. He looked majestic, there really was no other word for it. And then there was Molly, in a dress that put every other in the hall to shame. They were a beautiful couple. A regal couple. And, after an hour or so, they were a legal couple. Though his heart had flared with a painful stab of hope when he caught sight of Mycroft finding him among the crowd and smiling, that hope faded quickly when his love, with moisture clearly visible in his eyes, turned away and committed himself to his bride. When the vows were spoken and the final words said over the newly-married couple, the ceremony was over and the kingdom had a princess who would, someday, be queen.

“Well, that’s done. How are you boys doing?”

Jim and Lestrade looked at Mrs. Hudson and couldn’t muster more than a shrug as an answer. If they tried to speak right now, the result would just be embarrassing.

“Well, it’s good you were here. I saw those two look for you and it was good, good, that they saw you giving them support. That’s what you do for someone you love; you put their needs first, even if it hurts. Now… come with me, we’ve got work to do.”

This time, both men made the attempt to actually speak and it was Jim who was first able to form decipherable words.

“Work? We don’t have anything to do here. In fact, we’ve got an appointment with an ale barrel that we plan to drain dry.”

“You can do that later. I’ve got a feast to serve and then there’s the ball that has to be kept provided with wine. You both have two functional arms and that means you can help with things. Come along boys… it’ll do you good to keep busy right now.”

Not they had much of a choice, since Mrs. Hudson, despite her age, had a trap-like grip and more than enough strength to pull the two towards the kitchens to get started on their work. And, though neither would admit it, there was plenty of time to drink later. They had unlimited nights ahead of them to sit at the tavern, drinking ale and trying to forget the love they had lost. Not that they every would… but it wouldn’t stop them from trying…
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

And we come to the end of our tale. I have cherished every kind word given and thank you all for following along with the story. I also must thank mystradesexytimes for bidding on a story from me to celebrate Mark Gatiss’s birthday and benefit the London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard. Truly, to all of you, my gratitude and sincere hope you enjoy the final installment of this tale...

Mycroft strode down the aisle, away from the sea of eyes watching his every step and kept his head held high and a small, satisfied smile on his face. His new bride, he was proud to see, did the same. No one else had to know that as they held each other’s hand, the grip was tight enough to hurt and each welcomed the pain. It was their due. Molly's tiny whimper seeing Jim sitting next to Mrs. Hudson had sounded like a thunderclap in his ears and he had fought manfully to keep the tears out of his eyes when he saw his Gregory, but failed miserably. When he said his vows, it was not to the lovely Molly to whom he pledged himself, but to the man watching the unraveling of their hopes and the dismantling of their dreams for the final time. His Gregory was his true spouse and that was how he would always think of him. One person owned him body, soul and mind and that person was a man he would never again be able to hold.

There was a small amount of time allotted for the couple to refresh themselves and the guests to move to the banquet hall and, in that time, Sherlock and John found the newlyweds and blocked their progress as they moved towards their rooms.

“You are married!”

Sherlock looked as angry as Mycroft had ever seen him and John was providing very effective reinforcement.

“Did you doubt that would happen?”

“Yes!”

One solid kick to Mycroft’s shin, was followed, in exactly the same spot by another forceful one from John before both boys stormed off, leaving the prince trying not to yell in pain and Molly patting his arm sympathetically.

“I forget those imps had hopes as big as ours. We let everyone down…”

“Not for lack of trying. My shame for my treatment of Gregory is profound, but I cannot add to it that I did not try to find resolution. I can add that I asked he sit in audience for his abandonment. It was wrong… I should not have done that. His face… I shall find in my darkest nightmares, the image of his face as the life drained from his eyes… twice. I have destroyed him twice and both by direct action, if not by intent…”

Molly clutched Mycroft’s arm more tightly and the prince pushed aside his pain to try and provide comfort for hers, which was equally intense.
“But, let us put away such thoughts… it is upon us now to appear the contented couple and that we must do. I shall collect you soon but do take whatever time you need for the next phase of our nuptial celebration… it is good we arrive after the guests are seated. It shall make a stronger impact if we do.”

Mycroft silently escorted Molly the rest of the way to her rooms, then dashed to his own to give himself the maximum time to fall completely apart before he had to repair the damage to his clothes and grooming. This day must proceed flawlessly; it was a matter of duty and he always performed his duties perfectly. It was not important that he despised this, that it had broken his spirit… none of that was relevant. He had a duty and that duty he would perform to the best of his abilities. It was what he did. It was what he was born to do…

Jim and Lestrade found themselves deposited in the kitchens and given a rapidly-described list of duties, most of which involved heavy lifting of food and pots around the kitchens or, when it was time, carrying laden trays into the dining hall for the serving girls to dispense food they held to the guests. At least, it was entirely possible to sneak their own samples of the goods and that, for Lestrade, kept his stomach in check. The roiling nausea that had developed and grown during the ceremony nearly had him seeking an empty pot for his own when Mrs. Hudson finally released her grip, but another large slab of bread and butter had drawn down the sensation to a miserably uncomfortable, but manageable level. Of course, seeing Sherlock and John, obviously upset and storming towards him and Jim, nearly undid the effects of his food-based medication.

“They are married!”

“Yeah, they are. Did you expect anything else?”

“Yes!”

Sherlock applied a savage kick to Lestrade’s shin and John added his own, directly on the first strike zone, before following his friend out of the kitchens, though not before stealing an entire tray of baked goods as their own food-based pacification.

“Fuck those little bastards… but I forget that they hated this whole thing as much as we did.”

“Once you talk to John, he’ll calm down. It might take him awhile, but he will. And I know Mycroft will talk to Sherlock.”

“Yeah, and maybe he can talk to John, too. Actually…”

Something dark and ugly slid across Lestrade’s face and Jim wasn’t foolish enough to believe that it would be best to just let that ‘actually’ be the end of their conversation. Looking around to make sure Mrs. Hudson was preoccupied, Jim pulled Greg over to a nook in the kitchen and pushed him down so he was sitting on a large sack of grain. Fortunately, there were two grain sacks, so the spy could take his own seat next to his companion.

“What’s on your mind, Greg. Besides the blindingly obvious, of course.”

Lestrade rubbed his eyes, then the back of his head and then his neck, all in an attempt to make his thoughts disappear, but they wouldn’t. They hadn’t for any of the times he’d tried.

“It’s John. Look around you, Jim. Food, warmth, opportunities to learn… not only from books but from people. There’s countless trades being practiced and John… he could have access to all of that. You saw him a minute ago… not wearing the simple things I can get him, but clothing that
makes him look like someone who’s important and that will open up opportunities for him, too.”

“Alright… John’s a lucky boy to have Sherlock as a friend. I don’t see…”

“What if it could be more, though?”

“I don’t understand.”

Lestrade bit his lip and tried to keep the words in, but they had been plaguing him for awhile and… it hadn’t stopped making sense…

“What if he could have a real family like he wanted? A real family like he had until those bandits stole his from him. And not just a family, but a wealthy one. A powerful one. A family with a father and mother and brother who already adore him and could give him everything a boy could want. Set him up with a future that would be like something from a dream…”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“John’s not mine, you know. Not by blood and… not even on paper anywhere. I take care of him, I raise him and I love him so much it’s barely believable, but there’s nothing anywhere that says he’s mine. He could just as easily be Mycroft’s instead.”

“No…”

“Yes. Mycroft would, if I asked. Made it a… final request. The last payment for everything he’s done to me. I could ask him to take John and raise him. They do that, you know… the royals, I mean. I’ve read that in some of the books Mycroft lent me. They take in kids now and then and give him a home. He wouldn’t have any title or anything and that’s fine, but he’d have a good, loving home with people he cares about and the whole world at his feet when he grew up. I can’t offer him a future like that and I can’t even offer him a family. He already loves it here, so why not… why not just let him go so he doesn’t have to worry about dividing his attentions and can concentrate on his new life without the old one hanging about muddying up things.”

“Greg, you’re just upset about today…”

“Yeah, I am, but I’ve had this idea for awhile. John deserves the best this life has to offer and he won’t find that with me. He will find it here, though.”

“You’re not thinking clearly about this. John can have all of that and still be your son. I admit I don’t know him that well, but there’s no mistaking how much he loves you, Greg. You turn your back on him, no matter the reason and that’s going to hurt him so badly you won’t even have the same John anymore. Look at yourself. You have breaks that are never going to mend; is that what you want for him? A golden spoon in his mouth and nothing but a hole where his heart used to be?”

“He’s young. He’ll get over it. And he’ll understand when he’s grown and has his own children why I did what I did.”

“Greg… promise me you won’t do anything today, alright? Not today when no one is thinking properly. We’ll talk about it more later, when things have had a chance to settle a bit. You’ll see how crazy an idea this is…”

“It’s not crazy.”

“Ok… misguided, then. This isn’t the right thing to do. I know it might seem that way, but… just don’t say anything to anyone yet. Let’s talk about it…”
“You’re not going to change my mind, Jim.”

“Maybe not, but maybe I can get you to change your own. Come on, now… Mrs. Hudson’s found us and I have a feeling she isn’t thinking kind thoughts.”

If the ‘why are you on your arse and not working’ expression was to be believed, no… her thoughts were definitely not charitable ones.

“Fine. I won’t say anything now, but in a day or two, I will send word that I want to meet with Mycroft one last time and I won’t leave until I’ve got his promise to take care of John.”

“Like I said, we’ll talk about it.”

“You just won’t let go, will you.”

“I like to solve problems. I couldn’t solve ours, but I’ll be damned if I’ll let another slip through my fingers.”

“WHY AREN’T YOU TWO WORKING?”

Lestrade and Jim leapt up from their thrones of grain and raced to get back to their assigned tasks. Luckily, neither noticed the look on Mrs. Hudson’s face as they went about their work. After you’d worked in the kitchens long enough, you came to know how sound played off the walls and just where to stand if you wanted to overhear, say, someone was having a quiet word in that particular nook…

“Sherlock… are you sure it’s ok for me to be here?”

John looked around the banquet hall and at the large plate in front of him, along with the dragon’s horde of cutlery, glasses and decorations that was almost making it hard to concentrate on his food. At least they were at on the end at smaller table where he didn’t have to worry about being surrounded by people who dressed like… kings. Which they probably were. Unlike him. Though… he did look nice in the clothes Sherlock lent him. No one seemed to even notice he wasn’t really one of the noble set…

“Does anyone seem to care? Or even notice?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean it’s right.”

“I am allowed to have whoever I want to dine with me. And… I may have discussed the matter with the sluggards preparing the space and demanded that no matter the official guest count, an extra place be laid. I even marked out which seat that would be.”

And he had. A piece of parchment had welcomed John when he sat down, which said ‘This is not your seat. It is John’s.” Sherlock’s piece had his name and what John had come to recognize as Sherlock’s personal seal. All through the ceremony, he and Sherlock had felt their emotions rise and, because they weren’t babies, they didn’t let anyone notice, but it was terrible and horrible and awful and the kicks Mycroft and his father got were nothing compared to what John wanted to give them. But he was feeling a little better now, after a quick chat with Mrs. Hudson, a stomach starting to fill with food and the fact that nobody had yelled at him or tossed him out on his ear.

“Ok, I feel a little better. I just didn’t want to take anyone else’s place.”
“There is quite enough space and food to feed the gaping maws of everyone in here and their horses. Mycroft won’t leave the kitchen for days there will so much food left over for him to consume. Molly will have to saddle him and ride him out when it comes time for their official wedding portrait.”

“I suppose. I really didn’t think this is how everything would end, Sherlock. I really thought, right up until the very last second that something would happen that would make things the way they should be. Maybe I was stupid, but…”

“No, you were not stupid. As much as it pains me to admit it, Mycroft’s talents for tactics, strategy and critical thinking are without compare. I also believed he would find a solution where none seemed possible. It is his personal gift, but it was not up to this particular challenge.”

“So, now it’s Greg and Jim all alone and miserable, Mycroft and Molly married and miserable and us… just miserable.”

“It is ever the way that in a battle there is collateral damage. Innocents suffer and I, for one, am most certainly an innocent in his conflict.”

“I just don’t know what I’m going to say to… hey. Sherlock, is that Jim?”

John pointed to a figure moving along the wall across the hall from their seats and Sherlock narrowed his eyes slightly when he made the identification.

“It is. That is strange… I assumed he would have been evicted by this point or, at the very least, kept busy with kitchen tasks that maintained for him a low profile. Apparently, Mrs. Hudson, does not have a sound mind for tactics and strategy…”

“What are you saying about Mrs. Hudson, you little bastard?”

Sherlock and John jumped at the sharp whisper in their ear and turned quickly, only to find Lestrade’s grinning face as he squat down behind them.

“What are you doing here, Lestrade?”

“Working. Or avoiding work for a second. Jim and I are the backs carrying those heavy trays, well some of the backs… quite a few of those kitchen girls have bigger muscles than I do!”

“But why are you here. Where you can be seen?”

“No one sees a servant, Sherlock. You, of all people, know that. And we’re staying out of sight, mostly. I just… I thought I’d check on you two. See how you’re doing? John… having a nice time?”

John swallowed the piece of meat he’d been chewing and nodded.

“Except for the wedding part, I’m having a great time. Look at all of this!”

“I know… it’s amazing. And what a nice set of clothes you’re wearing.”

“Like them? Sherlock had some of his altered to fit me so I wouldn’t stand out. It was sort of done quickly, so I have to watch I don’t break any of the stitches, but I actually look like everyone else here!”

“You certainly do. And using your best manners to eat, I notice. Hands aren’t covered in sauce,
nothing’s in your hair…”

“Notice I’m not laughing, Greg. For your information, a lot of these people have worse manners than me!”

“Oh, I did notice. A few are right pigs, but when you can drop half of what you eat and still have enough on your plate to feed a family of four, I guess it’s hard to worry about manners. And there’s going to be music and dancing later… I know you like that.”

“Sherlock doesn’t get to play though.”

“They refused my demands to be given time to perform. I am still stung by the severity of the insult.”

And he did look put out by the slight. If this had been a common person’s wedding, Lestrade thought, Sherlock would be right up there with the rest of the musicians, just like the night at the tavern. Apparently, that sort of thing wasn’t proper for a celebration like this one.

“Well, we know you’d have done a fine job of it and given the people something amazing to dance to.”

“And I would have! I would have led the musicians through any number of songs and increased the participants enjoyment of the day immensely!”

How greatly he’d miss this. Sherlock’s arrogance, surface-level as it was, his banter with John… he’d miss this horribly, but it was time to think about John and not himself. His son looked… he did look like he fit in. And filling his stomach nicely. How often in the past had he worried that the reason John was so small was that he wasn’t giving his son enough to eat or the right things to make his body grow. Here, he’d get his fill at every meal and in-between if he wanted it. Good meat and fresh vegetables… not whatever his father could afford at the market that day. John would get stronger and learn more and meet people who could help him in ways his lowly father couldn’t possibly begin to match. Jim was an idiot… it wasn’t a crazy idea. It was the right idea. One look at his son and anyone would understand it was the right idea…

“You would, you’re absolutely right about that. But now, I’m going back to work, so you two enjoy yourselves and try not to get into any trouble.”

“Mycroft said if we did anything loony, he’d make a game at the ball of people trying to smack our bottoms while we ran around with our trousers off.”

“Mycroft does come up with good punishments. And you know he’ll do it, too. I’ll see you later.”

Lestrade kissed John on the head and gave Sherlock one for good measure. If he had his way, this would be nearly the last kiss he ever gave his son and everyone should share in the event.

John watched Lestrade scuttle away until he cleared an archway and stood to walk back to the kitchens and something itched at the base of the boy’s brain.

“Sherlock… did something seem strange to you about Greg?”

“Beyond the fact he defiled my hair with his spittle? Perhaps…”

“He only smiled once the whole time he was talking to us. Greg always smiles when he’s talking to us.”
“It has been a difficult day for him; I would not expect him to be ebullient.”

“Does that mean happy?”

“In a sense.”

“Then yeah, you’re right. But… well, maybe I’m just imagining things. I’ll talk to him tomorrow when I get home. Maybe he won’t be so sad by then.”

“I suspect Lestrade will be upset for quite some time, actually.”

“I do, too. I was just trying to be positive.”

“It doesn’t suit you.”

“Yes, it does! I’m a very positive person.”

“Positively gruesome.”

“See if I dance with you at the ball, Sherlock.”

“Your hands upon my person is not something I am anticipating with bated breath.”

“Just for that, I will dance with you, just so you squirm.”

“To dance with me, you will have to catch me and your tiny legs are insufficient for the task.”

“We’ll race before the ball and I’ll show you who’s the fastest.”

“I accept your challenge.”

And, with the thrill of a new round of excitement in their blood, the boys dove back into their food and their observations on the people around them. It was a miserable reason for a party, but if they had to attend a party, they were damned well going to enjoy it as best they could.

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Banquets, at the best of times, were tedious, draining events and this one was the apex of the breed. Mycroft sat with Molly on one side of him and his father on the other, Molly’s father on her other side and it felt as if he and she were being pressed in a vice. The scrutiny, the continuous toasts and well-wishes, the ribald jokes about their wedding night… if he could summon a host of demons to lay waste to the assembled he would gladly utter the spell.

“Mycroft!”

Molly’s squeak, soft as it was, grabbed the prince’s attention over the volume of the noise at the table and gave him a spike of worry.

“Molly?”

“Look!”

Mycroft followed his wife’s eyes, which were squarely on Jim, who was setting down a large tray and picking up two empty ones to carry away with him.

“Molly…”
“He looks so sad, Mycroft. And why is he here? Why is he here looking sad when he’s supposed to be with Greg getting drunk so they forget about being sad?”

“I have no… ah. I do have an idea.”

Because his own eyes had landed on his Gregory, performing a similar action, though he slid to the ground and nearly crawled over to where Sherlock and John were sitting to speak a moment with the boys.

“It appears they have been conscripted into Mrs. Hudson’s army of workers.”

“That’s not fair! They shouldn’t have to be here. Not… not when they had to sit through the ceremony already.”

“I agree, but I suspect Mrs. Hudson would argue that busy hands was the best medicine for their woes and there are no hands busier now than those of the servants.”

Not that he liked this situation one bit. His Gregory should not have to serve and toil when his heart was naught but a scattered handful of shards blowing away in the evening breeze. But… he could see his love. Watch him for a few minutes more. His Gregory was always glorious by candlelight… and now he was lit by hundreds that bathed him in a soft, golden hue that he wore exquisitely. And the ripple of his muscles as he had set down the laden tray… his love was the most stunning man in the room, wearing only his humble garments. If he lost those humble garments… the vibrance of his beauty would put the hundreds of candles to shame.

“Are they… they’ll be alright, won’t they, Mycroft? I mean… it’s good that they’ve become friends, right? Greg’s going to look after Jim, get him sorted and Jim will be company for Greg when he’s lonely. They’ll look out for each other, won’t they?”

“I am certain they shall find comfort in each other’s acquaintance. “

“But will they be alright?”

“That… that I cannot say.”

Though, from what he could see… it was questionable. His Gregory had smiled broadly at Sherlock and John when he stopped to speak with them, but only once. His body and face… they did not demonstrate the normal vitality for which his love was known. He was broken, it was being screamed from every part of him and all of his constable’s splendor could not erase the cracks and fractures that permeated his being.

“But, both are strong and do not allow adversity to defeat them. We must have faith, Molly.”

“Our having faith doesn’t really help them, does it?”

“No, but it is all we can do.”

Mycroft and Molly spent the remainder of the banquet striving to catch small glimpses of the loves of their life and only very rarely did they meet their lover’s eyes, which… perhaps it was a good thing. The power of those small shared glances was incalculable. It was like a bolt of raw summer lightning that arced across the room and blew apart again their already splintered hearts. It was almost a relief when it was time to move from the banquet hall and get ready for the ball.
“At least I can change out of this dress. I can barely walk in it, let alone dance.”

“I am certain your new gown will, however, be just as lovely.”

“It’s lighter, that’s all I really care about. Mycroft… you know they expect me to sleep in your bedchamber tonight…”

“I do. You shall enjoy the comfort of my bed and I shall enjoy the comfort of my floor. There is no reason to begin any… activities… tonight, be they an innocent rest or something more progenitive.”

“You don’t have to do that, Mycroft.”

“It is no trouble. As it is… I suspect I shall find little sleep tonight and I would not want my turbulent attempts at slumber to disturb you. And it is only for one night. No one will question when you again take to your own rooms the following evening.”

“Without Jim.”

Mycroft wrapped his arms around his wife and held her tenderly.

“I wish it were otherwise.”

“I don’t want… I love him, Mycroft. And I don’t think this pain is ever going to go away.”

“No, I do not think it will. And it is not a pain that shall lessen either, I suspect.”

Molly stayed in Mycroft’s arms a few moments more, pushing down the ungrateful thought that his embrace didn’t comfort nearly as well as another’s she remembered and, finally, drew back to start walking down the corridor.

“I shall collect you when we are needed, my… wife. There will be a great deal of dancing, I’m afraid.”

“And the first dance… that one is only us. I can’t say I’m looking forward to it.”

“Neither am I, but I am fairly accomplished as a dancer, so you need not fear overly for the health of your toes.”

“Sorry, but I can’t really say the same.”

“I shall place reinforcement in my shoes.”

“That would be smart.”

Lestrade and Jim found out quickly that they didn’t need to speak to communicate since they were seeing what they were feeling mirrored in their friend’s face every time they met in the corridor or kitchen. This was agony… Molly and Mycroft looked so… perfect… together. Not happy together, that much was evident, though maybe only to them, but certainly perfect. They’d have perfect kids and look perfect in their crowns and it might not be a bad thing that they’d gotten set aside because neither of them would paint the perfectly perfect royal picture they saw every time they delivered a fresh tray of food. Luckily, the feast didn’t last as long as either might have expected and, as the banquet hall cleared, so did their minds and it was actually relaxing to concentrate on the simple task of clearing and moving tables and benches, all against the backdrop of the musicians starting to tune
their instruments and play a few preliminary tunes for the ball.

“Think we can sneak away now?”

Lestrade laughed a true, free laugh for the first time in days.

“If it was anyone but us, I’d say yes, but Mrs. Hudson isn’t going to let us go so easily. Have you noticed she keeps peeking out of the kitchens to make sure we haven’t run off somewhere?”

“She’s worried about us.”

“She is. Mycroft… from what I can tell, she sort of raised Mycroft and Sherlock and still keeps an eye on them. What affects them, affects her, so we’re taking some of her attention. I talked to John a little and he says she wanted things to work out between Mycroft and me. She really wanted it to happen and when she met Molly, she wanted the same for you two. I really believe she’s unhappy things… fell apart.”

“She’s not the only one.”

“No… and every time I see him it’s like a horse has kicked me in the chest.”

“What do you think is the chance of that happening?”

“Zero. There’s nothing wrong with dreaming, though.”

But, as both men knew, that wasn’t true. Dreaming could sometimes be the very worst thing in the world to do…

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“Sherlock… this…”

“Boring.”

“No! It’s… I can’t even describe it!”

John looked around the massive hall and felt a thousand things vying for his attention at once. Everything glittered and shined and was so beautiful he could barely believe it. He didn’t think places like this actually existed, didn’t think they could exist, but here he was in a glittery set of clothes in a glittery hall with glittery people and the music was starting… the only thing missing was his father being there with him. No, not with him… with Mycroft. Molly was nice, she really was, but Mycroft loved his father and Greg loved Mycroft and it should be them walking arm and arm into this beautiful place to dance. They looked so happy when they danced together at the tavern…

“That is not surprising given your limited vocabulary, but I admit the ostentation of this occasion does defy a quick and clean description.”

“And you get to see this all the time.”

“Fortunately, this level of disaster generally occurs only a few times a year. Other balls and banquets are a little smaller. We usually entertain only an hundred or so people at a time, not this…”
population explosion.

As John’s head was swimming he caught sight of Jim hovering in an archway and the boy quickly looked around to see if Lestrade was present, gasping happily when he caught sight of his father helping load a cask of wine near the musicians, along with a large tray of cups.

“There’s Greg! And Jim’s over there!”

“If they wore a wig and melons in their shirts, they might at least receive some form of gratuity for their efforts. Of course, they would have to suffer their bottoms being fondled and offers of impure behavior behind closed doors, but they would at least supplement their income.”

“I think Greg would rather be poor than let someone squeeze his bum or his melon chest. Unless it was Mycroft. Sherlock… am I imagining things or is that… it’s not Mycroft’s real smile, is it?”

Sherlock sighed and shook his head. No, it was not his brother’s real smile. It was the one he wore when his real emotions were absolutely not to be revealed. It might be during a negotiation or one of Father or Mother’s diatribes but… today it was showing very uncharacteristic signs of strain. These particular emotions were not as willing to be camouflaged…

“No, he is hiding his distress and that you were able to discern it demonstrates how poorly he is accomplishing the task. However, as you have been under my tutelage for some time, it is highly unlikely that anyone else shall notice.”

“Did you just say something nice about me?”

“Do not expect it to happen again.”

Dancing… he would have to dance and laugh and be glad and show everyone how blissfully satisfied he was with his bride and his marriage and if his first official dance with Molly was not but moments away, he would be filling an empty wine cask with the bile from his stomach. His mind would not let go of the image of dancing with his Gregory and it was savaging him cruelly. Holding his love in his arms, seeing his gleeful smile as they moved around the small, cleared patch of dusty floor… hearing his Gregory’s laugh and feeling his lips upon his skin as a kiss was stolen… it had been a glorious night. Sherlock and John occupying themselves with their own dancing and then… Sherlock had played. His brother had captivated a roomful of people and he had never before seen Sherlock so suffused with honest pride in himself…

None of that was here now. That small, dark tavern had been a place of unprecedented joy and in his massive monument to wealth and privilege, not a drop of that joy existed. There was satisfaction at good wine, food and music, relief from his parents that he was now a married man who would dutifully continue the family line but… there was no joy.

“Look, there’s Sherlock and John. They are so cute together, even with Sherlock scowling.”

“Truly, Molly, I believe that is when he is at his most endearing. When he smiles, it is almost a certainty there is a game afoot which it bodes ill for any it ensnares as a player.”

“Oh, stop it. He’s a sweet little thing, mostly. And… oh.”

“Molly?”

“There’s Jim. He looks so tired. Why doesn’t he just go home?”
Molly pinched herself for her outburst because her Jim didn’t have a home to go to anymore. He’d lost his home because of her. Because she was a ridiculous princess who had to do what she was told and had to live the life she was told to live and keep company with those she was told she could… she’d taken his love, his home and his livelihood and if it wasn’t for Greg he’d have nothing right now. It was her fault and it wasn’t fair and right now all she could think about was the last time they’d danced, in her rooms in her castle, listening to musicians playing in a side garden for another pair of lovers to enjoy. It was a spontaneous, special moment and it was the last one she would ever have. It wasn’t fair…

Knowing he would likely not be far, Mycroft surveyed the edges of the throng filling the hall and found his constable moving some of the heavy chairs that sat along the wall for weary dancers. His love should not be here, but he would savor every second he could lay eyes on the man he loved. To be here now, with his Gregory on his arm, preparing to dance their first dance as a wedded couple… no, he could not allow himself to think about that because if he did the tears he was struggling to hold back would surely break free. He would dissolve in a pool of them and if he drowned in that pool, he would not curse his fate because it would be a kinder one that living his remaining days without his Gregory. His caring, honorable, vivacious, sensual, intelligent, witty, incomparable Gregory…

Lestrade listened to the musicians perform the final tuning of their instruments and, catching sight of Jim, thought a moment about joining him to watch this first dance. The first dance was always the new couple’s alone and his Mycroft was a brilliant dancer. But, he realized he didn’t want company watching this and Jim likely wouldn’t either. He didn’t want company while he remembered his last dance with Mycroft, he didn’t want company while he daydreamed that it wasn’t Molly that Mycroft was holding in his arms. Maybe it was a good thing Mrs. Hudson had set him and Jim out here to keep an eye on things while the ball started. For one last moment, he could live a fantasy surrounded by music and majesty and have something to replay in his mind when he looked at the empty place across from him at his table and next to him in his bed.

When the first notes of the first piece for the first official dance sounded, all of the voices in the hall hushed as everyone stopped to watch Mycroft and Molly move to the center of the floor and begin to move to the music. For Jim and Lestrade, their feet shifted this way and that, as they followed the steps with minute motions, the greater dance taking place in their imaginations, where it would forever live. Sherlock and John pushed to the front of the crowd to watch and, sensing John’s rising distress, Sherlock slipped his hand into John’s and squeezed lightly in support. He, of course, would not let this affect him. He would not become misty eyed or wear a lie that others would call a smile. They would never be a family with John and Lestrade, it was that simple. Mycroft and Lestrade would never share the love they felt and that was an inarguable fact. There was no room for emotion in any of this. There was nothing to change it, so wasting energy on contemplating the ‘what might have been’ was foolish. Utterly foolish. And he was not foolish. Not he; he was logical and rations. John, however, was not, so… there was no harm in holding his hand a little while longer…

When the music began, Mycroft extended his hand to his bride and led her into the vast empty space ringed by the wedding guests, took her in his arms and began to dance. Even through the layers of stiff fabric and whatever else lay in the dark recesses of her dress, he could tell her body was stiff and resistant, though she followed his lead obediently. Just as a princess is trained to do…

“Molly, you look lovely and dance beautifully.”
“I look like one of those elephants I’ve seen in your books, though I’m a blue one, and I’ve already stepped on your toes once.”

“I scarcely felt a thing.’

“And that’s the truth of it, isn’t it? We’re supposed to be feeling something. We’re supposed to be happy and giddy and hopeful and excited and we’re not. You look like you want to vomit.”

“I will not deny that assertion.”

“And I just want to cry. I want to run away and cry until there’s no water left in me, so I’ll never have to cry again or hurt again… I want to be here with Jim, in front of everyone, dancing because he’s my husband and we’re starting our lives together. I want to be anxious to leave this room and get out of this dress and start my wedding night with the man who’s going to love me exactly the way I like best and then let me curl up against him to fall asleep… He’s the only one who ever took me seriously, ever made me feel special and like something more than a big dress, a title and a tiara. Jim loved me, Mycroft. Me, not a princess, but me. He’s the only one I ever wanted to grow old with and now... I can’t even dance with him…”

Mycroft admired the way Molly could bare her soul and keep all of it off her face so no one but him had any idea that she was falling apart inside. And no one but him understood because he felt pieces of himself crumbling away with nothing manifesting to replace them. Everything she had said, he recognized in himself and every wish was one he shared. Half-hidden in shadow stood the person who had made his life complete, brought light to his lonely soul. His Gregory who was a better man than any in this room. Who was more noble than the lot combined. Who any prince should be honored to have on their arm, to sit next to them at dinner and lie next to them in sleep. It was infuriating that something as arbitrary as birth could determine who he was allowed to love, to wed… that duty assigned to him only by a random event of conception should lay a barrier between him and his beloved.

Duty… duty was what guided his life. Structured his behaviors and formed the basis of his decisions. Duty was something that he had learned nearly to worship, for its importance was paramount to someone in his position. One did not fail in one’s duty. One did not run from it, no matter the consequences of standing firm, one did not make choices that compromised one’s duty or took actions that went against what one was duty-bound to do. And he knew now exactly what that was.

“Molly… you are my wife and will always be my wife, is that not correct?”

“What?”

“Answer me, if you will.”

“Ok… yes. I am and I will.”

“And will you trust me that I shall always honor you in that role? Never take from you what is rightfully yours and give to you all that you deserve as my princess and, one day, my queen?”

“Sure.”

“Will you bear our children and lovingly nurture them with me as they grow?”

“That’s what I’m expecting, yes. Mycroft, what is wrong with you?”

“Will you show solidarity with me against all who would threaten our rule, our children, and our
people?"

“Yes! Mycroft, you’ve got to…”

“And nothing will change that? Not what the years bring, not who… not who we might bring into our lives to love openly because we have a duty towards them.”

Molly’s eyes widened as she realized what Mycroft was saying.

“One has a duty to the ones they love, do they not? To the spouse with whom they share vows and the spouse with whom they share their hearts. One cannot, simply cannot, shirk one’s duty no matter the difficulties one might face. To do so is dishonorable and that is not who we are. We obey our duty, we commit to it fully no matter… no matter what might happen when we do.”

“Yes, we surely do. We do our duty because that’s who we are and no one, no one, lets us forget it.”

“Then do it we must. Our other spouses have been waiting far too long for their dance, my princess. Let us rectify that.”

“First one back wins.”

Mycroft shot off in one direction and Molly in the other, ignoring the extremely shocked faces of everyone in the hall, then pushed through those faces to reach the ones whose own faces were quickly moving from shock to confusion to shock again as they were grabbed and dragged through the crowd back to the center of the room. With a gesture, Mycroft ordered the first-dance piece to be played again and took his now-shaking constable in his arms to start to dance.

“W…what the f…fuck are you doing?”

“Dancing with the one I love. The one to whom I am truly wed in my heart.”

“Have you gone insane?”

Mycroft laughed and held his beloved tighter, pressing his body against his Gregory’s in the most intimate fashion… the way one would only hold their lover.

“I had, I think. I had gone completely insane because I forgot that my husband is another to whom I am responsible.”

“I’m not your husband!”

Lestrade looked wildly around the room and the people who were staring in near horror at what they were seeing and prayed no one was calling for the palace guards.

“In law, no. But you were there, Gregory. You were there at the ceremony. Tell me you did not say the words. In your mind, you made your vows to me as I did to you. I… I cannot offer you a legal wedding, my love. I cannot claim you as my prince. I am bound to Molly and that will never change, but I will not endure that binding without you at my side. You shall spend this night with me as my newly-gained spouse and you will be recognized as the one who owns my heart. They will know, all of the assembled and beyond, that my wife is only half of my household. You are the other. As she will make a life with Jim, I shall make one with you, though we shall also share a life as we are duty-bound to do. We will have children, Gregory, it simply must be so, but you shall be there to help love them and teach them and be part of the family that we will share. My duty to my parents and my name will be fulfilled completely, I shall not compromise that. But… I shall fulfill it
my way. I cannot list you as my husband, my beloved, but I can love you as my husband and that is what I ask of you. I ask you now, as you dance with me and I announce to everyone with this dance that you are mine forever more, if you will accept it. Will you be mine, Gregory? And allow me the honor of being yours?”

Mycroft didn’t even try to stop the tear he felt rolling down his cheek and shuddered when Lestrade gently wiped it away.

“Are you sure, Mycroft?”

“I have never been more certain about anything in my life.”

Lestrade breathed a few minutes and when he looked around this time, he saw John and Sherlock sitting on the floor, looking for all the world like their legs had just given out and dropped them on the ground. But they were smiling… smiling like the day they’d gone to see the performers outside of town. Smiling like they’d smiled at the tavern when they’d danced and share time… as a family. There really wasn’t a decision to make…

“Then… yes. I don’t know how this is going to work and I’ll probably be assassinated in my sleep at some point, but if I can be yours, really yours, even for one night, I’ll take the risk.”

Mycroft leaned in and kissed his lover, with the loud gasp from the guests making him giddy with delight. Let them be shocked. Let them be scandalized. He had publicly laid his claim to this man and been claimed in return. Gregory was his… and there would be no hiding the fact. It would not be easy, but they would have each other, which was all that mattered. And, from what he could see from the fact that Molly was kissing her Jim as if she was finding water in the desert, he was not alone in his happiness.

“Thank you, my love. I… I could not imagine living my life… it was so hard to…”

Lestrade was the one who leaned in this time for a kiss and quieted his prince’s nerves.

“I know. Everything you want to say, I know because I felt it. I love you, Mycoft and, now, that’s all that’s important.”

“And I love you, Gregory. Every day I shall tell you this and every day I shall mean it more fervently than the last.”

“And we get to dance again. You still dance wonderfully.”

“As do you and this is only the first dance of many tonight.”

Another kiss as the music segued into a new tune that brought more couples out to dance, some far more hesitant than others, but neither couple noticed a thing. There was far too much in their own new worlds to explore…

Lestrade gazed into Mycroft’s eyes as a slower piece played and felt the familiar tendrils of bliss begin to thread through his spine. It had taken him a very long time to relax and he still wasn’t entirely at peace with his surroundings, but he’d… well, he’d made it this far. Mycroft had kept them far away from the thunderous faces of the King and Queen and well as the other King and Queen that were Molly’s parents, and he had danced with his love as if they were the only ones in the room. But he had also shared a few dances with Molly while Mycroft took a turn with Jim, which made both him and Molly giggle, but both knew it was their partners’ chance to talk and set
the ground rules for the life that was facing them all. He even danced with his son, who spent most of the dance just getting dragged around as he hugged Lestrade with all his might. It took Sherlock to pry the boy away and the suggestion of stealing wine from unattended goblets that got John away from the dancers completely. The only thing Lestrade wasn’t sure about was that no one spoke to him, or to Jim for that matter all night. It wasn’t hard to tell they were being studied and the whispers that followed glances in their direction couldn’t mean anything good. It was a very large relief when Mycroft wrapped an arm around his waist and began to do his own bit of whispering, which could certainly be described as good.

“Shall we retire for the evening, Gregory?”

“Are we… allowed to?”

“Absolutely. We have been in attendance for easily the requisite number of hours and the ball will continue for quite a few more. The celebration is really a thank you for the gifts and favors that accompany my marriage and our presence is not necessary for the festivities to continue. Besides… my body can no longer hide its desire for you and I would rather not take you here in front of everyone. The beauty of your body would surely generate a multitude of challengers for your hand and I would rather not have the staff clean the blood of my victims from our lovely floor. They have enough to do as it is…”

“And Mrs. Hudson will kill us.”

“That, too.”

“Lead on.”

Mycroft nodded over Lestrade’s shoulder to Molly, who took it as a signal to take her own leave and both halves of the newlyweds dragged their former and eternal partners away from the ball and to their respective rooms to start on what would be the wedding night they both thought they had lost.

And, standing in a sheltered corner of the ballroom, looking on with pride, was a smiling woman who silently sent along her congratulations to the new couples. It had been a very large gamble, but love as great as theirs just couldn’t be kept under control for long and a little prod here and there, the sight of your loved one continually in front of your eyes… well, that control just wouldn’t last long, now would it? With a little whistle, Mrs. Hudson returned to the kitchens to make herself a good hot cup of tea. And find some replacements for special little helpers…

Along the way to his rooms, Mycroft was both surprised and gladdened that all of the servants he and his Gregory encountered smiled at them and meekly offered congratulations on his union. And they were not referring to his marriage to Molly. With a light heart Mycroft pushed open the doors to his rooms and pulled his lover inside, quickly closing the doors behind them, then pinning his Gregory to those doors in a kiss that threatened to set both of them on fire.

“Don’t hurry on my account.”

Mycroft froze in place and with a panicked look at Lestrade, turned slowly, hoping he hadn’t heard who he thought he heard. And, of course, his ears were as sharp as ever.

“Father.”

Lestrade gulped and tried to bow or kneel or something but Mycroft grabbed his hand and fixed him with a look that said to stand stock still and wait.
“At least you remember that much. I was worried about your mind since you apparently forgot you are married. To the woman who also seems to have forgotten she is married. Now, I see that I can’t blame some form of head injury for this… whatever this is all about, so let us start with that, shall we? What in the name of my father and his father before him is this all about!”

Mycroft flinched at the sharpness of tone, but refused to show any fear or guilt or regret or anything that would say he was anything but proud of and confident in his actions.

“Molly and I do not love each other.”

“And that means what? You mother and I don’t love each other and we’ve been married for years!”

“But that is not what we want! We do love and the ones we love… we will not forsake simply because we have been commanded to take each other as man and wife.”

“Man and wife… and that is another thing. Did you fail to notice that the person you were just kissing as if you could use your tongue to tickle his toes from the inside is not actually a woman?”

“If you must know, I have had ample opportunity to verify his masculinity firsthand.”

“Oh, I see…this is the person you’ve been sneaking out to see in the city.”

“He is. Gregory is the man I love, Father, and nothing can change that. I thought… I did believe I could simply turn away from him and live my life with Molly only at my side and she believed the same for her Jim…”

“The spy.”

“…as you say, the spy, however, we could not. Gregory is the one who brings to my life those things which make that life worth living. He fills my heart and my soul, knows that I am a weak, flawed man and loves me still. He inspires a passion in me I have never known and I choose him to be my partner in this life. He is my friend and my lover, the one to whom I may show my tears and well as my smiles. I shall not cast him aside, Father, nor keep him lurking in the shadows to slake my lusts when they take me. I have stated who he is to me in an incontrovertible manner and I shall not renounce that statement.”

“And your wife? Exactly where does she figure in your grandiose speech?”

“Molly is, as you said, my wife. She and I will do everything that we are destined to do to fulfill those roles. She shall be at my side whenever it is required that she be. She will perform all the responsibilities awarded to her and reap all of the benefits due her. We are husband and wife, Father, and shall live our lives in that manner.”

“I see. Of course, I noticed that you did not mention children in your argument.”

“An oversight. We will have children. She shall gladly bear me heirs to continue our line. As I stated, we are husband and wife and we will bring the next generation of our family into this world.”

The King stared at his son and reluctantly admitted he was not showing one sign of backing down. Not one hint of uncertainty or hesitation.

“Furthermore…”

“No… I am very tired of hearing your voice, Mycroft. It’s time for the other one to speak.”
Lestrade’s whispered ‘me?’ came a second before Mycroft pulled him forward to face the king directly.

“You… who are you?”

“His name is Gregory, Father, as I have stated and…”

“Not one more word out of you, Mycroft. My patience is as thin as your mother’s charity right now.”

Mycroft snapped his lips shut and shrugged apologetically at his noticeably petrified lover.

“I… I’m Greg Lestrade, sir. I mean, Your Majesty.”

“Not a name I recognize, which isn’t terribly surprising. And, of course, it does nothing to answer my question. Who are you?”

“Gregory is…”

“If I have to form a gag out of your pillow linens I will do it, Mycroft.”

Balling his fists so tightly he feared he would draw blood, Mycroft tried to distract himself from throwing lifelines to the man looking for all the world like he wanted to jump out of the window.

“I work at one of the… your… watch houses, Your Majesty.”

“I see. And… oh good god, Mycroft! You look like you are about to lose a battle with constipation! What is it?”

“Gregory is not just a man of the law, Father. He is next in line to be constable for his area. He is highly respected in his community, both for his skills at his job and for his character. He is a superlative watchman and father and…”

“FATHER?”

“My… My son, John, Your Majesty. He was orphaned when he was just a little thing and I took him in.”

“When Gregory was scarcely older than Sherlock is now. And it is John who is Sherlock’s bosom companion so you understand the quality of the child and the father who reared him.”

“Wait… the little blond thing running around with your brother… that is John?”

“Yes. They are inseparable.”

The King rubbed his temples a moment then heaved a massive sigh.

“Let me see if I understand you properly. You have fallen in love with a man, a common man, with a child not of his own blood and plan to live effectively as husband and… husband with him while maintaining your husband and wife relationship with your new bride up to and including the production of children. Do you have any idea how that sounds, Mycroft?”

“Untenable, perhaps, to someone not familiar with the details and history of the situation, but I assure you… that is what I intend.”

“And that damnable spy who has attached himself to your bride? Is he simply to live off of your
largesse?"

“Jim loves Molly, Father, do not doubt that for a second. And it is his talents in espionage that shall earn his keep for I am of a mind to use his as my spymaster. You have always emphasized that the one who controls your spies must be someone you either trust implicitly or control through some means. As I undertake greater and greater responsibilities, I shall want to build my own network for information and influence and I cannot think of a person more suited to the task than the man deeply in love with my wife, a woman who has demonstrated clear and true commitment to our kingdom and its people.”

And if that was not his best example of thinking on his feet in a moment of crisis, Mycroft would be highly surprised.

“Well, I cannot say that is an entirely ridiculous idea.”

“Thank you.”

“But that is the only idea of yours that I cannot say is ridiculous. You have taken a very rash action tonight, Mycroft. One with very far-reaching implications.”

“I am aware of that.”

“Are you? Are you truly aware of what you have done?”

“If you believe I have not analyzed every aspect of my decision a hundred times over then you are the fool you claim me to be. I know well what this may cost me in terms of allegiances, but I shall create new ones. I do not necessarily intend to follow exactly your course of rule when the throne is mine, in any case. A proverbial shifting of the winds is not, therefore, unanticipated. I may have to tighten my hand for some time in matters that are mine to oversee and I am willing to do so to replace firmly my stamp on those situations. I know precisely what I have done, Father, and I do not regret it in the slightest.”

Mycroft wrapped an arm around Lestrade’s waist and tried to comfort his lover, who was still greatly ill-at-ease.

“And you… Gregory. What do you plan to do now that my son has decided to bring you within my gates?”

“I… I plan to do what I’ve always done. Do what I can for the people of my community, keep order in the streets…”

“You intend to continue at a watch house?”

“Oh… yes? I’ve been doing it all my life and I’m good at it, Your Majesty. And like Mycroft said, I’ll be constable someday and people are counting on that because then I can really make a difference.”

“That is not acceptable.”

Mycroft stared at his father and his mind raced frantically for the meaning behind that sentence.

“Sir? I don’t understand.”

The King stood up and approached Mycroft and Lestrade, who felt no pride at taking an in-unison step backwards.
“You are not going to be on the street when you are now a viable asset to leverage against my son.”

“But, Father! Gregory’s work is important to him and…”

“A gag, Mycroft… I may just have one fashioned to your measurements and keep it on hand, because I feel I will find use for it more and more now that you have lost control of your senses. Your… Gregory will not make himself an easy target and compromise your ability to ability to fulfill your responsibilities.”

“But…”

“It has been on my mind for some time to take steps to… formalize the actions of our watch houses. They operate independently and scarcely pay any heed to any word but that of their constable. This cannot be allowed to continue. Your… Gregory… will be installed as… let us call him Commander of the Watch… and have direct authority over those pathetic excuses for law enforcement vehicles that have lost their due respect for and allegiance to the crown. He shall have his base here and take an administrative role, though, I suppose, he will have to make regular visits into the city to evaluate their performance. I shall have space readied and staff assigned for his use. Now… I will do my best to ameliorate the damage you have done tonight, Mycroft, but do not take steps to thank me for a day or so as I plan on being far too inebriated to pay any attention to anything you have to say. And avoid your mother at all costs. I am not entirely certain she will not murder you on sight. Gregory… close your mouth. And please do not give me cause to regret my decision.”

The King strode towards the door and paused with his hand on the latch.

“I cannot say I entirely agree with your decision, son, but I am proud of you. And I will do what I can for you and your… well, I suppose I shall have to use the term family, now won’t I? Have a good night.”

Leaving two astonished figures in his wake, the King smirked as he left the room and laughed once he had closed the door behind him. And to think, he’d believed Sherlock was the unpredictable son…

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After they were certain the King was not going to march back in and say that either he’d changed his mind or this had been an elaborate jest, Mycroft and Lestrade began to relax and let what they’d been told sink in.

“He didn’t kick me out.”

“And he provided you a position… is that… will that be acceptable to you?”

“I don’t know… I like what I do, but he’s right about me being a target now. And… I know what it means to do the job well. I know what needs to be done and what has to happen to make it happen. I don’t want to sound arrogant, but I think I could do what your father wants. I really think I could do the job and… all I’ve wanted to do was make a difference and help people and I can’t think of a better way to do that than make sure the watch is doing the best job it can. I’m sure I’ll hate not being out there doing the work myself, but it’ll be worth it, I think. I guess it is acceptable to me, not that I really have much of a choice.”

“No, you don’t. Welcome to my life, my love.”
And that silly joke suddenly made the prince’s heart clench. It was their life now…

“Mycroft?”

Both men spun and saw Molly’s smiling face peeking around the door.

“Molly! What if Gregory and I had been indisposed.”

“Then I’d be a lucky girl, wouldn’t I? Anyway, I won’t say I was spying because Jim would just roll his eyes, but I was spying and I saw your father leave… and… well?”

“He has given, for lack of a better phrase, his approval.”

“Yes! Oh, Mycroft… I can’t believe it… that’s wonderful!”

“And your parents? Are they amenable to our arrangement?”

“Who knows? My mother is apparently having some form of fit and my father said that he was just happy I was your problem now. I don’t think they’re going to raise a fuss. I’ve got my Jim back!”

“And where is he now?”

‘Waiting for me. I couldn’t… I just couldn’t do… anything… until I knew this was actually the way it was going to be. So… I’ll be leaving now. A late breakfast tomorrow?”

“I believe Gregory and I would very much enjoy that. Goodnight, Molly, and give our regards to Jim.”

“I will. And Mycroft… thank you.”

Molly sped away before she started to cry again and raced down the corridors in a most undignified fashion. Her Jim was waiting… her Jim. Forever and ever, openly and recognized… Mycroft was right. She would be spending her wedding night with her husband. The one she’d pledged herself to a long time ago…

“Well, love… I don’t know about you, but I suggest we lock that door and get back to the business of getting to know each other again.”

“I agree. I predict that breakfast will come quite late in the morning, actually.”

“I predict we might need a snack before then to help keep up our strength.”

“Oh, I do adore it when we are alike in our thinking.”

“And I adore you.”

“As do I you.”

“I’d adore you more, though, if you were naked.”

“Then let me not disappoint you…”

1 ½ years later
“Your discussions, my love?”

Lestrade joined Mycroft in the small garden they had unofficially claimed as their own and sat on the large blanket that had been spread out on the grass.

“Irritating as always. But once I got the constables to just shut up and listen, they agreed that I actually had a good idea. Now, it’ll be another battle to see this implemented the right way, but I’m used to fighting. Oh, and Charlie asked if he could build onto my house. He’s getting married! Wants a bigger home to offer his new bride, even if he’s only renting it. Apparently, she wants quite a few kids.”

Lestrade reached forward and picked up the little gingery baby who was smiling at a job well done of sitting up by himself.

“I told him these little bastards were more trouble than they were worth, but he won’t believe me. Silly boy’s going to pay the extra taxes for a bigger house just to fill it with these smelly things.”

One very large and loud kiss was pressed on the smelly thing’s belly, which caused an eruption of laughter than never failed to make both men laugh, too.

“Henry approves of his odiferous state, my love. And, I suspect his aroma shall escalate soon as he has not long ago finished a very hearty lunch.”

“Which means Molly will be cranky. Since his teeth started to come in, feeding time hasn’t been her favorite thing. Poor Jim has gathered enough flowers lately to fill a farm cart to keep her even-tempered.”

“The trials of womanhood. Yet, only this morning, she expressed a desire to begin on our second.”

“What?”

“Yes… apparently, my wife would choose to have our offspring rather quickly so they are close enough in age to play together and shall all reach the age of consuming solid food in a relatively brief amount of time. She is very anxious to begin her adventures abroad.”

“Well, good for her. I know she’s been hoping for that and I’ve got no problem doing extra duty as child minder.”

“Of course, this does mean we shall have to make our second child. And, likely, third.”

“I know. But, you can’t say it was exactly a hardship.”

“No, that I cannot.”

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten you and Molly lying back and watching… you know.”

“You and Jim complement each other quite… arousingly, my love. I do believe I have enjoyed no other visual entertainment quite as much. As a deliciously rare treat, I cannot deny the appeal.”

“Well, we’ve got two more kids to make, so maybe you’ll have a few more performances to watch.”

“I am already rife with anticipation.”

“I’ll make sure to learn a few new moves in preparation. And… speaking of… am I seeing
Mycroft looked in the direction of Lestrade’s interest and it wasn’t until a finger pushed his jaw upwards that he closed his mouth.

“Tell me I’m really seeing this, Mycroft.”

“Hush, my love. We must not startle them.”

Rocking Henry gently on his shoulder Lestrade smiled widely and wriggled to sit closer to Mycroft so they could enjoy an entirely different type of show. Sitting next to what they likely thought was a secluded stand of trees by the pond a short distance from the garden was Sherlock and John. Sherlock’s arm was around John’s waist and if they sat any closer together not even air would be able to pass between them. After a few moments, John laughed at something Sherlock said and the young prince grinned shyly before giving John a very quick peck on his cheek.

“Sherlock just kissed John. I think I’m hallucinating.”

“Only if that hallucination is shared because I saw it, also. Well, they are coming into that particular age where they are experiencing the wonder of attraction.”

“Oh no… young love on top of another baby… I’m too old for this Mycroft.”

“The number of years you have seen can only be numbered in the twenties, my love.”

“That’s years enough in this family. I need my own adventure abroad.”

“Hmmm… if you can persuade Molly and Jim to mind the children, there is no reason we cannot take a short trip, perhaps a week or so, just for ourselves.”

Lestrade kissed the baby in his arms and wavered back and forth in his mind before answering.

“Just a week, right? A little trip?”

“Henry will be quite alright for that duration, Gregory. He is a very self-reliant boy.”

“Like his dad. And his mum.”

“And the others fathers who love him like their own.”

This kiss was purely for his Mycroft and Lestrade savored it like the finest wine.

“We’re blessed, Mycroft.”

“That we are, Gregory. For the love we share and the family we have created, we are well and truly blessed.”

Lestrade smiled, then looked again towards Sherlock and John, cringing at the sight he was seeing.

“Christ, that’s more than a little peck.”

“Oh my… well, Sherlock does not do anything by halves.”

“I think our week away is going to have to wait until those two have had their special little talk.”

“Which you shall administer.”
“Me? What’s wrong with you?”

“It is really more your area.”

“Says the man who stroked himself while giving me very explicit instructions about what to do to his wife’s lover!”

“I have no memory of that.”

“There you go, Henry. Join our family and it’s one big happily ever after. Which your dad happily forgets.”

But, Lestrade’s wicked grin told Mycroft his husband knew that was something that would never be forgotten. Not by either of them, not in a thousand years. With another kiss and a whispered ‘I love you eternally, Gregory,’ in Lestrade’s ear, the pair turned attention to their youngest son and settled in to enjoy their afternoon. As they did yesterday and would do tomorrow… happily ever after, indeed. For those who found it, every day was something to be remembered…

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