His, Share

by MyRubicon

Summary

As a young man, Greg inherited a house in Kensington. It has been leased to the Ministry of Transport all that time, but now Greg is sick of his manky bachelor flat and decides not to renew the lease and move in himself. The tenant has grown accustomed to the house, though, and would prefer to stay. Mystrade unfolds, slowly at first, before the backdrop of Season 4.

Notes

This is my answer to Season 4, and it's become huge. I didn't want to post it before it was completely done, though, because I really hate falling in love with a story and then being left hanging when it's discontinued. So, this is finished, although the final chapters still need a bit of polish.

This story is mostly written from Greg’s perspective. Season 4 is happening in the background at first. It's going to take centre stage for Sherrinford but then fade into the background again. Most of the time, it's more about the impact, often emotional, of the events of BBC Sherlock and their aftermath on the characters through a Mystrade lens. I've taken a bit of an artistic licence at times but mostly tried to stay canon-compliant.

Enjoy!
Chapter 1

Greg Lestrade sighed as he made his tea. The kitchen in his flat, hell, his entire flat, had seen better days about more than half a century ago. The terraced houses on his street had all been built after the blitz had left great parts of London in rubble and ashes, and there hadn't been any renovations worth mentioning since then. The pipes and electrical lines were all surface-mounted, the outdated single-pane windows were draughty and his fuses were those ridiculous antique round china things that he strongly doubted were up to standard any more. There was no elevator, either, but Greg didn't really mind the extra exercise of walking up the worn stairs to the third story; he was sitting behind his desk too much as it was these days. He kept his flat tidy and clean, but it never lost its shabby, manky look, and it was really just depressing. The only good thing about the place was its rather poor but, for the East End, pretty safe neighbourhood. It had been available at the time he moved out of his home and needed a place to stay quite urgently, and, well, maybe it was also a way of giving his pretentious, social-climbing ex-wife the two-fingered salute.

At the time, Greg hadn't been in the frame of mind to go flat-hunting for anything more spectacular; he'd just wanted a place to kip while he buried himself in his work, and so his temporal flat had turned into something much more permanent than he had initially envisioned. His divorce had not been a pretty one; Janet had been trying to fleece him, even though she had been unfaithful multiple times. Greg had felt so numb at that time that he might have let her, too. Fortunately, his sister Sophia's husband had convinced him to use her affairs against her; he was still grateful to Will for supporting him through that mess and fighting for him when he himself had no more strength for it. Janet had been just what Sherlock called a serial adulteress – and Sherlock had also mentioned that she was shagging a PE teacher right when Greg thought that he and his wife were in the middle of a final attempt to patch things up. Dear, gentle Sherlock, always so tactful. Oh, that had been a hell of a Christmas that year, in more than one sense of the word.

After the divorce, Greg had just felt indifferent to his living situation for a long time, as long as he had a roof over his head. Sherlock's faked suicide had hit him hard; he had blamed himself and thrown himself into his work entirely. Only after the mad bastard's return had he started actively taking stock of his surroundings again and finally decided that they did nothing for his comfort and contentment. To be quite honest, he had only recently grown to believe again that he was deserving of comfort and contentment in his life. Forty-eight years old and finally ready to live again – it was a bit pathetic, really, but better late than never.

Thank Christ, though, he didn't have to stay in this dump for much longer. The long-term lease on the Victorian house his dearly missed uncle Francis had left him ages ago was running out, and he wasn't going to renew it. Perhaps the place was too big for him – oh, all right, it was definitely much too big for him all by himself – but it was a beautiful house, and it held lots of memories of his favourite uncle and happy family times. The income from the rent had been welcome over the years, but he made good money as a DCI and could afford the taxes and repairs on his own these days. Francis Arbuthnot had been dead for over twenty-five years now, and Greg's thoughts of him were no longer tainted with the devastating sadness that had made him rent out the house in the first place. Now, he could picture himself in those rooms with those high ceilings and lovely warm honey-coloured oaken parquet floors again. As a boy, he had especially loved the carved wooden period bannisters of the stairs – rather steep to slide down, but of course he hadn't listened to his parents' attempts to curtail this particular adventure of his – but it had been a warm, welcoming place, full of nooks and crannies for curious boys to explore and have adventures in. Also, Uncle Francis had been an avid reader himself and had also liked to read to his nieces and nephews. Not all of the children had been as captivated by the tales as Greg had been. Even though he was a generally active child, for him, story time had been his favourite part of the day. Later, his uncle had given him access
to his extensive library that contained many treasures, once Greg had proven that he could and would treat the books with care. He still had Uncle Francis' antique furniture and Persian rugs in storage, as well as most of his book collection. The storage unit he had rented was climate-controlled and rather expensive, but Greg had never had the heart to sell or give away his late uncle's belongings, except for the immediate personal effects. The more important of those had found new places in the family and the rest had been given to charity. Uncle Francis' lovely antique furniture belonged in the house more than he did, Greg thought with a crooked smile as he closed the door to his shabby flat with the force it required to shut properly, and made his way to the Yard. While being squashed between other commuters on the tube, he longingly thought of large windows, high, bright rooms, comfortable fireplaces, lovely old books and a significantly shortened commuting time. In only a few months, just in time for Halloween and before winter really set in, he would be snugly settled in his own house.

Greg miserably blew his nose, then sipped his warm, sweetened tea slowly, grateful for the small pot of honey John Watson had given him that day. It was too bad that he had to catch a cold out of season, but it was uncharacteristically wet and chilly for this time of year and he and his team had been thoroughly drenched at the crime scene two nights ago. On top of that, the heating had given out in his cheap, manky flat and he'd spent two miserable nights huddled under a mound of blankets that he wouldn't even have needed if he'd been feeling well. Sherlock, of course, hadn't even deemed something as mundane as a cold an option for his transport, and John Bloody Dr Watson, being exposed to all sorts of germs and viruses at his work as a general practitioner at a clinic, had the robust constitution of a particularly sturdy farm horse. He'd recommended cold medication, but Greg couldn't afford to be drowsy right now, and so he'd said something about Lemsip and the antibiotic properties of honey and left him the small but expensive pot, no doubt filched from Sherlock's personal stores in revenge for one of the detective's habitual impositions. The great prat wouldn't be happy to find his imported New Zealand manukah honey gone and would probably throw a tantrum of epic toddler proportions, but that was John's problem to deal with. Besides, Sherlock had stolen his warrant card again only a week ago, so that was simply payback. Wonderful payback, too. Greg closed his eyes and sipped again, enjoying the taste and the way the tea soothed his throat. He'd better enjoy those few moments of peace, he thought, because he had an uncomfortable talk coming up.

“Sally,” he calmly said. “As I've repeatedly told you, you can't keep calling Sherlock a freak. He's of great value to us in certain cases, as you very well know, and he isn't even as abrasive any more as he was a couple of years ago. It's time that you let go of that particular habit. It's not kind, it's not professional, and it stopped being funny years ago.”

“But boss,” DI Donovan whinged.

Greg gave her an unamused look. “Are you trying to copy Sherlock's childish act now? Because honestly, it's doing nothing for your professionalism and my temper. You're a DI, Sally, and you'd better start acting like one.”

“Yeah,” she acknowledged with a sigh. “It's just that he's so bloody annoying at times.”

“So is paperwork,” Greg replied, pointing to his tray labelled “in”, which was so overfilled that the stack was in danger of toppling over, and his email account was in the same state. He'd have to have most of that cleared before he left for home... well, for his chilly, ugly, manky flat that sort of passed
for his home in a vague way, for the night. “Some thing are necessary, like it or not. You can either waste your day whinging about them, or you can do your job. Sometimes, you can do your job while whingeing,” he said, which made her smile, “but that doesn't often work where people are concerned.”

“I'm not certain the freak counts as people,” she grouched, then flinched when her DCI's flat palm forcefully connected with the polished surface of his desk.

“And that's your problem right there,” he sternly said.

His dark brown eyes bored into hers, and she was the one to lower her head first.

“Yes, sir.”

“I don't care,” he went on, his voice low and dangerous, “what you think your problem is with Sherlock Holmes. You're not going to jeopardise the highly valuable working relationship that the Yard has established with this particular consultant. If he does something detrimental like absconding with evidence or your warrant card, inform me, but go about it in a professional manner. You made an exceptional Sergeant, Sally; if being a Inspector proves to be beyond your capabilities, I have no qualms putting you back into a place where you're of greater use to the Yard. Consider yourself warned. The next reprimand is going on permanent record. Have I made myself clear?”

She gritted her teeth. “Yes, sir,” she ground out.

“Good,” he said, still in a firm but less intimidating tone. “That being said, what has he done now?”

She sighed, began to speak, then fell silent again.

“Did he steal something, corrupt the chain of evidence?” Greg asked.

“No,” she replied with a sigh.

“Did he say something... unprofessional to you?”

“Not even that,” she admitted. “As you said, he's been getting better about things like that. It's just, he's so callous, and sometimes it really gets to me.”

“Callous?” Greg prompted.

“It's all a big, entertaining puzzle for him,” she bitterly said. “He doesn't care about the people involved. He doesn't care about anything except his personal gratification.”

Greg shook his head. “Don't presume to know Sherlock. His brain is wired differently from ours, but he does have feelings. It's just... At a crime scene, the damage has already been done, and there's no use wailing and pulling your hair. The only way at this point is forward. Pity doesn't help, but getting justice for the victim does. We all know that, Sally, and yet we break the rule of distancing ourselves far too often. Sherlock is in part so valuable to us because he adheres to the rules better than we can, or sometimes even want to. Don't you dare blame him for being better at it than you are. If he allowed himself to care too much, he wouldn't be half as clear-minded and objective as he is.”

“That's difficult to stomach... sir,” Sally slowly replied.

“Yes, but entirely true,” Greg said. “I know the man better than you, Sally, have known him for many years now. Sherlock does feel, he just doesn't allow it to keep him from solving the case. And he doesn't fancy letting on about his emotions, especially in front of people like you who show him
nothing but scorn. I can't say that I blame him for that.”

“But he can be so cruel,” she softly said, her eyes troubled. “The way he interrogated that witness...”

“But she was lying, wasn't she, Sally? And everybody else had bought in on her vulnerable victim act.”

“But you just can't talk to people that way!” she exclaimed, exasperated.

“Sherlock gets results,” Greg coolly replied. “Yeah, he isn't a nice person, but he's not paid for being particularly nice. None of us are. And don't you dare try to take the moral high ground, Sally. You're not the nicest of persons, either, but I won't bring it up as long as it doesn't affect your job performance.”

She paled, then gave him an angry look. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Right,” Greg said, his face stony. “Let's leave it at that, then. I know that Sherlock can be a bloody arse. By all means complain about him if he violates regulations, but do it through the official channels and in an appropriate way.”

Sally Donovan swallowed, then straightened her back. The look on her face now was her stubborn take-the-bull-by-his-horns expression. “Boss... sir... I need to know if you have a problem with me.”

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, then took another sip of his now lukewarm tea. His throat didn't enjoy the prolonged talk, and a sinus headache was creeping in alongside. He blew his nose, and his forehead exploded in pain.

“Look, Sally,” he said after a small pause while he waited for it to recede, “this is off the record, alright?”

He didn't have to talk about private matters to her, but they had worked together for a long time and gone through hard times side by side.

“Course,” she honestly replied.

“Your personal life isn't my business as long as it doesn't affect your job performance, and I hope you'd agree that I've never treated you unfairly.”

She nodded. “Yeah. This is about Jack Hopkins and me, isn't it?”

“Yeah. D'you still want to talk about this?” he asked tiredly.

“Please,” she insisted.

“Okay. Here goes. You have a penchant for married men, Anderson first, Hopkins now. That's your personal choice, and I won't bother you with talk about emotional unavailability, trust issues, ethics and all that rot, just... You know about my ex-wife, don't you? How she cheated on me repeatedly?”

She nodded, suddenly feeling rather ashamed.

“I won't say it was all her fault that our marriage went to shit,” Greg continued, painfully honest. “My work was more important to me in the end, and I allowed the distance between us to grow. Still, the... the lies, the sneaking around, the slow erosion of trust and affection, the bitterness that crept in, it all was really hurtful. If she'd been upfront about it, it would have been like being shot in the chest, but we could have ended it and got divorced and moved on with our lives years before we finally
did. But what it was like, it was like slowly dying from a gut shot. She was always making me feel guilty even while she was going around my back. Did nothing for my self-esteem, either. In the end, she enjoyed the house, the income, the pretentious dinner parties and the prestige of being married to me, but not my work hours and that I couldn't – wouldn't, really – regularly accompany her to or play host at some boring society event or other."

“Yeah,” Sally softly said. “I noticed most of that, except for the dinner parties.”

“Yeah, not really my cup of tea, those, with all the social-climbing piranhas that were her usual crowd.” Greg gave a tired laugh. “Everyone must have guessed at some point that my marriage was going to the dogs. At any rate, you have your own career ambitions, your own murderous hours on the job. DI Hopkins is in pretty much the same position, and he's on DCI Thomas' team, so there are no conflicts there. To a certain degree, I understand your choices, only...

Sally gave him a wan smile. “Hopkins is your wife and I'm the PE teacher.”

“Yeah, a bit.” Suddenly, a grin crossed his tired features, and his dark brown eyes warmed with honest amusement. “But don't you go telling him that, Sally. I don't think he'd be flattered, being called my wife. Besides, he's not pretty enough for me.”

“Probably not,” she snorted, but she was grinning as well, then, hesitantly, added, “Are we okay, though, boss?”

“Yeah, we are,” Greg reassured her. “Just... whenever you feel like abusing Sherlock for not caring about the people involved, about not caring about anything except his own personal gratification, stop and think for a moment, and don't be a hypocrite. Nothing is as black and white as that, Sally, you should understand that better than most. And anyway, you're in no position to throw the first stone.”

She swallowed. “That's harsh,” she softly admitted. “But yeah, I see what you mean. Ta for explaining, boss. I'll try, honestly try, not to call him a freak any more.”

“Good. I hope we can bury this whole thing now, Sally, because I honestly value your work and I really don't want to put a reprimand on your record,” Greg said with the right mix of firmness and understanding.

“All right, sir,” Sally replied, looking a bit shaken and rather thoughtful, not so much about her career but about her personal choices. That was an ugly light he had made her see herself in, just by shifting perspectives.

The DCI snatched another tissue out of the box on his desk and sneezed, his face contorting into a grimace of pain, and waved her out. They were both relieved the unpleasant talk was over.
With a grim expression, Greg put on the jacket of his off-the-peg suit and his beige raincoat, then picked up his good leather portfolio. He was going to crown court, and it was going to be a bloody difficult morning. Usually, Sally would testify, since she had handled the case, but she had come down with the sinus infection he had apparently passed on to her a week ago in his office. At least he was more or less over it himself now. When she had phoned him two hours ago, her voice had been so utterly gone that she barely managed to get out a whisper, leaving Greg with no option but to order her to stay home and have the case file delivered to his office for his own review. He knew the case as well as any good supervisor did, but since it hadn't been his investigations, some of the finer points had eluded him, which meant that he had to read up on every detail in an extremely short time frame. Now he was more or less on top of everything and barely on time to make it to the court appointment.

Barrister Reginald Moncrieffe had a well-deserved reputation for being smart and tough, and the prosecutor, Fitzgerald Ashford, was an ambitious man who saw this high-profile case as a potential feather in his cap, as long as no lowly policeman dared to bollocks it up for him. This was in no way going to be pleasant.

And afterwards, Greg had an appointment with a solicitor, oh joy. His presence had been politely requested at Appleby Harrington Sykes LLP, but they didn't even have the common courtesy to even tell him what it was all about when he'd made his appointment on the phone. After a day like this, he might very well develop an acute allergy to the legal profession in its entirety, excepting Will, of course, his brother-in-law. Maybe John would be up to a pint tonight to make it all a little more bearable.

Now that was a thought to cheer him up a little; he'd send his mate a text message later. Well, all in all, things would have to be looking up soon; after a day like that, things could hardly get any worse.

When he stepped out of the historical court building three hours later, Greg was mentally exhausted and had a nagging low-level headache, although he was fairly confident that they would get their conviction. He hailed a taxi, uncapped his bottle of water and tried to replenish a bit of fluids on the way. Greg had actually hoped for a little time to stop at a café for a sandwich, but he was nearly running late for his appointment with the solicitor, and so he had to do with the apple in his portfolio. It appeased his stomach, and his headache was slowly receding as the taxi drew up at Chancery Lane, the centre of London’s legal district. It was a posh address for a prestigious private client firm with several specialist solicitors, as his research had confirmed. Greg, not at his best and slightly cranky without his lunch, made his way into Appleby Harrington Sykes LLP with little patience to spare.

“Greg Lestrade, I have an appointment with Thomas Sykes in approximately five minutes,” he said, briskly but politely.

The receptionist, a middle-aged, relentlessly coiffed woman in a suit of middle price range and pearls, regarded him with a mildly disapproving look over her half-moon glasses. Probably, she found his own inexpensive suit distasteful. Greg found it perfectly serviceable and absolutely sufficient for his police work; there was no reason to swan around in designer clothes like Sherlock
at the Yard, or Mycroft Holmes with his perfectly tailored Savile Row three piece suits. Every place and occupation had its own dress code, and Greg's experience had taught him that you couldn't judge anyone's character by the clothes he or she was wearing. A matter, he assumed, the secretary saw quite differently.

She made a show of checking the appointment book, then directed him towards the waiting area. It was as posh as the rest of the place, but at least the leather armchairs were comfortable. Greg debated picking up one of the glossy magazines, but ended up studying his surroundings instead. He might not be as brilliant as Sherlock, but by habit and profession he was an observant man. The waiting room was done up like a turn-of-the-century gentleman's club with a measure of expensive but cold modern influence of glass and chrome, designed to make affluent clients feel at home and keep lower-class undesirables intimidated. He had no illusions about where in this spectrum the disapproving secretary had placed him.

The antique carriage clock on the mantelpiece showed him that it was already five minutes past one, and he sighed and pulled a case file from work out of his portfolio. It would take him quite a while to get back to the Yard by taxi, and he had scheduled an hour for this appointment. He hoped Solicitor Sykes would be reasonably punctual, or able to talk quickly. For now, he concentrated on a case of DI Michael Dimmock's, one that involved a murder of the wife of a Member of Parliament that was bound to attract media attention and some pressure from the higher echelons, and Greg wanted to be up to speed before the Super called him in for a meeting. When he looked up next, he realised he had been taking notes for over half an hour. He replied to a text from Sally, then one from Phyllis in IT. Just then, another text message came in from Sherlock, who was apparently bored.

“out of office & busy, sunshine. go bother john,” he texted back with a grin.

Then he sighed. He wasn't really busy, though, was he? According to the carriage clock, it was twenty to two now. His phone agreed. Greg stowed away his work, got up and approached the desk.

“Yes, Mr...?” the secretary asked him with an utterly bland tone, as if he weren't important enough to have her remember his name.

“My taxi has been ordered for five minutes after two,” Greg calmly informed her, ignoring the intentional slight. “If Mr Sykes wants to speak to me at all, I suggest he make the time now.”

Then he returned to the waiting area, pointedly taking no notice of the woman's scandalised expression and giving her no opportunity to reply. She was clearly dying her hair, he thought, a little viciously, and her pearls were cultured ones, nice but not really expensive. That meant that she probably wasn't shagging any of her bosses, but she wasn't quite that age any more, was she? Prim and proper, unmarried with no signs of the recent removal of a wedding ring; she must have been living the life of a spinster for quite some time at least.

Sometimes, Greg understood quite well why Sherlock liked to put some people in their place with a cutting observation and deduction or two. The difference between them... all right, the differences between them were that a) Sherlock was of course more observant and his deductions more far-reaching, and b) Greg was perfectly content to make them in his head. He didn't need to cause the actual anger, hurt or humiliation to feel smug about having figured the other person.

Not even five minutes later, the secretary appeared with an expression as if she had sucked on a lemon. “Mr Appleby will see you now. If you'd please follow me.”

“My appointment is with Mr Sykes,” Greg coolly reminded her.
“Well, he can't see you,” the woman snapped as she led the way down a hallway with wooden wainscoting. “Mr Appleby will, though, so take it or leave it.”

“Temper, temper,” he mocked her. “Are you the measuring-stick for the usual standard of professionalism in this firm?”

She sent him a cutting look, which spectacularly failed to impress him, then stopped and knocked on a heavy, carved wooden door.

After a muffled “Come in,” she opened the door.

“Mr Lestrade for you sir,” she said in a respectful, ingratiating tone.

“Come in, come in, Chief Inspector,” Bingham Appleby jovially said as he stood and extended his hand. “Tea, Emily.”

“Yes, sir,” the secretary obediently replied and hastily withdrew.

“She wants to get into your pants, Mr Appleby,” Greg said with a grin as he stepped forward and accepted the handshake.

The older man rolled his eyes but smiled. “I know, isn't it horrid? But she does make wonderful tea. Sit, please sit. How may I help you?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Greg honestly replied.

Appleby raised his bushy eyebrows. “I thought, perhaps, the McFarlane case?”

Greg blinked. “As far as I know, DI Dimmock doesn't even have a suspect yet. How do you link yourself or one of your clients to this case?”

The barrister shrugged. “It was in the papers this morning. The wife's rather devastated; she and Helen McFarlane were involved in the same sort of charities. I've barely met the woman, though.”

Greg nodded, making a mental note. When Appleby leaned back and it was apparent that no further information was forthcoming, he said, “At any rate, I had an appointment with Mr Sykes at one o'clock. I was never even informed what it was actually about. Sykes specialises in private contracts, doesn't he?”

The door opened after a small knock, and Emily the Eternal Spinster brought in a tea tray.

“Yes, he does,” the barrister answered as he motioned the secretary to pour. “Emily, do you have any idea why Mr Lestrade was asked to attend a meeting with Mr Sykes today?”

“Miss Morton made the appointment,” she said in a crisp but disapproving tone, “even though Solicitor Sykes already had an appointment with Mr H-, with an important client pencilled in at the time.”

“And you made me wait for three quarters of an hour?” Greg asked, his tone deceptively mild and his dark eyes hard as flint. “I could have gone to lunch instead of sitting here for no reason. Why didn't you give me a ring beforehand, or at least tell me when I arrived?”

The secretary flinched, surprised by this sudden aura of command from the previously attractive but basically unassuming man.

Appleby gave her a stern look, then turned towards his visitor. “Well, Lestrade, I'm deeply sorry for
my staff's incompetence. Perhaps you can reschedule?"

“Thank you, Mr Appleby, but I don't think so, at least not personally,” Greg replied. He reached into his pocket and extracted Will's card from his wallet. It was of expensive stock, prosaic in style and understated in its elegance. “Solicitor Kingsbury handles my private affairs. I'll tell him to expect a call from your office but not to hold his breath.”

He rose from his chair and cordially extended his hand. “Thank you for taking the time to see me, Mr Appleby. This was a waste of your time as well, but I appreciate that at least one person in this firm has a sense of professionalism. Now I'm afraid I have to take my leave; my taxi should be arriving downstairs any minute. Have a nice day, Mr Appleby. I'll show myself out.”

He walked away with aplomb, secretly satisfied about leaving a slightly puzzled barrister and a seething secretary behind.

“Well, that was disappointing,” he heard a smooth, cultured tenor say behind him when he was almost to the door.

“My apologies, Mr Holmes,” another man replied. “I have no idea what happened, and I am deeply sorry.”

“Do continue to pursue the matter,” was the somewhat cold, authoritative reply.

Greg reined in the grin that wanted to bloom on his face as he waited for the characteristic tap of the umbrella behind him. As he opened the door, he turned back to the room.

“Mr Holmes,” he said, and there he was, a tall, slender, auburn-haired man with the magnificent posture in his full sartorial splendour, wearing a bespoke grey three piece suit with a discreet Prince of Wales pattern, his usual golden pocket watch fob and an ice-blue silk tie and deeper blue pocket square.

“DCI Lestrade,” he replied with one of his small, tight, politely insincere public smiles. “How... interesting to meet you here.”

“My time here was rather unproductive,” Greg replied as he politely held open the door, and the two men walked down the stairs together. “I waited for almost an hour for an appointment that was apparently cancelled without my knowledge. I never even found out what it was supposed to have been about. But I know that the secretary is extremely class conscious, dying her hair, unmarried, sexually frustrated and has designs on Mr Appleby, or perhaps simply on his wallet. Also, she has a reputation for making good tea, though I only have that on hearsay.”

Mycroft Holmes chuckled, one of his soft, entirely genuine ones that were rarer than jewels, and it transformed his entire face from austere authority to something oddly endearing. It wasn't a conventionally handsome face with his receding hairline, thin, sometimes cruel lips and long nose, but there was something about it that Greg found extremely pleasing. Perhaps it had to do with those fine features and sharply intelligent blue eyes of his that now shone with genuine amusement.

“Accurately deduced, Mr Lestrade,” he cheerfully said. “Do you have any more observations and deductions to share with me?”

For a moment, Greg felt a surprising warmth suffuse his chest. The man habitually wore thicker armour than an army tank, but when he even slightly opened his hatch, he became dangerously... dangerous, in a very good way. Greg couldn't help smiling back.
“Appleby Harrington Sykes LLP,” he said, obliging the request. “A prestigious private client firm with several specialist solicitors, and after three generations still mostly family-owned. With their seat in Chancery Lane, they have access to well-to-do clients who value tradition; possibly, their parents or even grandparents have already employed the firm. They project an air of conservative competence, of which the conservative part seems to be more important than the competence. The average client is in no position to judge the skill of his or her legal representation, similar to a doctor's skill, actually. There has to be trust, though, and that is first and foremost built on appearances. A book that very much wants to be judged by its illustrious cover, and not necessarily by its contents. Bingham Appleby is quite a competent barrister, but not an extraordinary one. I cannot speak for the solicitors, but as a whole, they are allowing at least one of their secretaries to play tin god to the detriment of the whole firm. I think they would do well to worry less about appearances and more about the actual quality of their work.”

Mycroft Holmes had regarded him with interest, and now smiled again, a slight, barely visible genuine smile. “A harsh but apt critique, I'm afraid,” he agreed. “How are you going to deal with them in the future, if I may ask?”

Greg smiled back warmly. “I don't intend to waste any more time on them,” he cheerfully replied. “If I have any business with them at all, which I'm currently not convinced I even do, I'll let my own solicitor deal with the bother. Oh, I'm afraid that's my taxi, Mr Holmes. Have a pleasant day.”

“You, too, Chief Inspector,” the sharply dressed, slightly younger man replied, still with his tiny but real smile that did funny things to Greg's composure, which he preferred not to think about too closely.

As Greg stepped into the waiting cab, he saw another, much more expensive black car with tinted windows draw up from behind. Mycroft Holmes made no move to get inside, however; instead, he had taken his phone out of his pocket and was making a call.

Interesting, Greg thought as he sat down next to the driver. “New Scotland Yard,” he said. His stomach rumbled, and for a moment he wished he'd pocketed the digestive that Emily had served with the tea he'd never had the time to drink. And if wishes were horses, beggars would be even more skint because of vet, ferrier and stable costs.

He took out his mobile and made a quick call to Will's office. Truth to tell, he was a bit curious about what those posh wankers wanted from him; best not leave Will unprepared.

He'd have to stop to pick up a sandwich on the way. There was a metric ton of paperwork waiting on his desk, and since Sally was ill, he probably wouldn't get home before nine or ten at night. At least the tube would be fairly empty by then. His stomach rumbled again.

“Is there a good takeaway or sarny place on the way?” he asked the taxi driver.

The man, a small but portly older, dark-skinned man, probably from Pakistan, smiled at him in a friendly way. “No problem, innit,” he cheerfully said in a pure Cockney accent. “What d'yew like ter eat, mate?”

That was something about London you really had to love, or at least Greg thought so.

In the end, he decided on Chinese. The cabby had a takeaway menu in the car, and Greg ordered ahead by phone and picked the food up when they stopped there on the way about twenty minutes later. He ate in the car and shared his egg rolls and dim sums with the driver to their mutual satisfaction, and the drive back to the Yard was spent with pleasant chatter and companionable
silences. Just as he'd thought that morning, this day had improved eventually.

Greg still thought so even when John Watson texted him that unfortunately he wasn't free that evening for a pint. He even scaled his paperwork mountain with a semblance of good grace, and if Mycroft Holmes' genuine smile appeared once or twice in his thoughts, well, it was such a rare and precious thing that it was well worth remembering.

“They want your house, Greg,” Will informed his brother-in-law three days later.

Greg was spending his Sunday at Sophia's and Will's comfortable home in Hampstead, and they'd just had a very lovely dinner together. As always, Greg had brought dessert, a non-alcoholic tiramisu that he had made himself and that had survived the tube in nearly perfect condition. His sister's family, including the children, had greatly enjoyed it, although little Daniel's portion had ended up only partly in his stomach, the rest smeared and splattered pretty much everywhere within a young toddler's throwing distance. It had been endearingly domestic, and Greg had been in a nice, relaxed mood until about five seconds ago.

“What?” he asked, sounding a bit witless to his own ears.

“The house in Kensington, Greg. Do you have any others, perhaps a nice one tucked away in Belgravia?”

“Course not,” he replied with a short-lived grin. His and Janet's house had been in Hammersmith and was long sold because of the divorce. “Why would they want my house? Discontent with Chancery Lane?”

Will snorted. “A client of theirs wishes to acquire it. As far as I understand, your tenant has got attached to the place and doesn't want to move out.”

“Well, too bad for him,” Greg drily replied.

“They're offering ten million pounds,” Will casually mentioned.

Greg choked on his cider. “Ten...?”

His brother-in-law scoffed again. “It's worth at least twelve, maybe thirteen. Bastards.”

Greg had turned a little pale at the magnitude of the sum. “I knew the place was worth some serious money, but honestly, that much?”

Will shrugged nonchalantly. “What did you think? It's in great repair, right in the middle of the Phillimore Estate, with both Holland Park and Kensington Gardens nearby as well as Kensington High Street. And it's a detached house; most others are terraced.”

“Well, I don't care. It's my uncle's old house, and I want to keep it,” Greg firmly said. “It's been in the family ever since it has been built, and one day, if I don't fall head over heels in love and have a child in my old age, it will belong to your children, Will. I'm not selling it.”

“Dad!” Lyra yelled from a room or two away. “Dan is drawing on the walls again!”

“Lya stupid! No! No!” That was little Daniel, a few months older than John Watson's Rosie. His
current favourite word was “no”, but he was picking up nicely on the insults. Like many other toddlers his age, he had a talent for mastering words he wasn't even supposed to hear much more easily than those his family actually attempted to teach him.

“Hey! Stop that! Ow! Daaaaad!” Lyra cried.

And there came the expected crash.

“Waaah!” That sounded like Dan again, although he was clearly more annoyed than hurt.

“If I were you, I'd rethink that. These hellions are a two-person demolition crew,” Will drily said and got up with a sigh. He had a box of crayons to confiscate. Inevitably, there would be even more screaming involved. Solicitor Kingsbury could negotiate a settlement of several million pounds with nerves of steel, but his own children weren't vulnerable to either logic or subtle intimidation. They were susceptible to loss of privileges, though, and the first privilege to be revoked was the unsupervised use of crayons. Afterwards, there might be cuddles.

Greg grinned and leaned back. Uncles were clearly there to spoil children; discipline was not his division. He took another sip of cider. Christ Almighty, twelve or thirteen million pounds. He was happier than ever that Will had subtly and skilfully bullied his cheating wife into keeping the house in Kensington out of the divorce in exchange for keeping her adultery out of court. Otherwise, he would have had to sell it to pay Janet off and cover the taxes. Of course, that would have been a blow to his pride – giving that harpy such a reward for being an unfaithful spouse – but in truth, losing the house itself would have hurt much more. No, he wasn't going to sell it. If the tenant wanted a house in Kensington, well, there surely were other properties on sale that he could consider. Honestly, Greg wouldn't even know what to do with such a ridiculous amount of money, and it certainly could never replace his memories of Uncle Francis.

When Will returned, looking exhausted and bearing a green crayon mark on the cuff of his shirt, Greg told him in no uncertain terms that he wasn't selling. Still, there was a residual curiosity left.

“Say, Will, I've never cared, but who on earth is that tenant?” he asked.

He knew next to nothing about managing properties, and had hired a reliable service from the outset to handle those things for him, something that was easily paid for by the generous rent and a decision he had never regretted.

“Well, your lease is with the Department of Transport. I have no idea whom it was assigned to, though. Do you want me to find out?”

“If it's not too much trouble,” Greg replied, “I'd like to know who I'm dealing with. It's not really urgent, though. I suppose I could put a uniform on it, but that might be seen as abusing my authority, and anyway, it would be a bit over the top.”

Will nodded amiably. “Makes sense.”

The rest of the day was spent much more pleasantly, including a trip to the local playground, and when Greg returned home late in the evening, even his shabby, depressing East End flat couldn't destroy his good mood.
Next chapter: Greg and Mycroft meet several times to discuss Sherlock, and they officially become friends.
Appleby Harrington Sykes LLP hadn't been very amused at Greg's continued refusal to sell his Kensington house. Their offer had gone up to fifteen million pounds. Greg had taken a perverse pleasure in telling the bastards to piss off, coached in Will's impeccably polite but firm phrases. He could easily visualise the devious gleam in his brother-in-law's hazel eyes. Sophia had probably taken one look at her handsome husband and dragged him off to the bedroom, Greg thought with a grin. He could appreciate attractiveness in both sexes, and his darling younger sister was one lucky girl, especially since Will didn't just have good looks and brains but also was a thoroughly decent fellow and a great father besides. Greg sometimes wished he could have had children himself. He would have even put his career on the back burner for a daughter or son of his own, but Janet wouldn't have been a caring mother, and the divorce would have been hell on any child, so perhaps it was all for the best. Not that Janet would have ever considered ruining her slim figure for a baby. He had realised too late that she didn't want to marry Greg the copper but rather Gregory, the favoured nephew and heir of the late Sir Francis Arbuthnot. In the beginning, he hadn't quite understood her increasing discontent when he refused to assist her in her social climbing. To Greg, that would have meant a return to the life of a social butterfly that his mother favoured and that he had happily escaped from quite a few years ago. In spite of all her involvement in high society, though, his mother was never shallow, and she had disliked Janet from the beginning, for all that she had never said so outright and treated her daughter-in-law politely. Sometimes, Greg wished his mother had been clearer on that from the beginning, but she had just patted him on the head and told him that every generation had the right to make its own mistakes. She'd supported him through his divorce, though, and cracked open a bottle of her best champagne with him when the decree absolute went through. Dear Maman and Papa, he should visit them again soon. With their mutual busy schedule and his unpredictable work hours, it was hard sometimes, but with a bit of planning and effort, he should be able to make it work.

August came, and with it another meeting with Mycroft Holmes. He was still a disconcertingly attractive man, more striking than conventionally handsome, Greg thought, but propositioning the British Government was more than his job or perhaps his life was worth. “Culverton Smith,” he said over his cup of perfectly brewed Earl Grey, his voice drenched with disgust.

The elegantly dressed, poised man sighed and looked tired for a second. “I am aware.”

“Sherlock jeopardised his life again, while he was in a bloody hospital bed and basically helpless,” Greg went on with a sigh of his own. “That miserable bastard almost suffocated him, for Christ's sake, and Sherlock provoked him into it. How can I help him when he puts himself into danger like that? A minute later, and he would have been... Fuck, I interrogated Smith myself, and he gave me the absolute creeps. I don't know if I've ever met someone so twisted, short of Moriarty himself. I washed my hands for five minutes after I got out of that interrogation room, and I still wanted to take a very long, hot shower and burn my clothes.”

Greg couldn't quite suppress a shudder, and he took a calming sip of his tea. Mycroft Holmes looked sympathetic but didn't say anything; he knew very well that silences made people want to fill them. Greg was aware of that interrogation technique, of course, but he had nothing to hide from the more intelligent and attractive Holmes brother – at least not when the subject was Sherlock – and so he went on, “At least John is firmly on Sherlock's side again, although I don't exactly know how I feel about that any more. I mean, it was John who beat him up a few days ago and put him in hospital in the first place.”
That had been truly shocking to Greg. He knew the man had changed under the grief of Sherlock's apparent suicide, and he was taking the death of his wife hard, but Greg had never expected him to become so excessively violent. In fact, he was currently reconsidering his friendship with John Watson and questioning whether he even knew the man any more.

“Quite true,” Mycroft softly agreed. “For now, I will continue to carefully monitor the situation, Chief Inspector.”

“Thank Christ,” Greg spiritedly said. “I know that Sherlock will rail about invasion of his privacy and probably throw a wobbly worthy of my four-year-old niece, but honestly, I'm relieved you're keeping an eye on them where I can't. Both Sherlock and John aren't exactly at their most stable right now. It's entirely understandable, mind, after everything those two gits have put each other through, but still...”

The dapper, debonair Mr Holmes smiled again, slightly but honestly, and Greg's heart stuttered.

“I am glad you see my “bloody meddling” and “obnoxious interfering” in such a positive light,” he said, looking somewhat tired and sadly disheartened again. It almost hurt to see him that way.

“You care,” Greg simply replied. “Sherlock just can't see that. Perceptive as he usually is, he has huge blind spots sometimes, especially where emotions are concerned. He's been treating you cruelly, but I don't know how I could make him see sense.”

“Caring is not an advantage,” Mycroft Holmes stated, almost automatically.

“You tell me,” Greg agreed with a sigh. “Sometimes, I wish I could switch it off, but at the end of the day, I don't think I would even if I had the choice. And neither would you stop caring about your brother, no matter what a berk he is.”

The elegant Mr Holmes blinked, then took refuge behind his cup of tea for a moment. When he had placed it back on his saucer, his face was serene and inscrutable again.

“You don't have to hide from me,” Greg said with sudden perilous honesty. “We've known each other for quite a number of years now. Stupidly caring for your bright, abrasive, endearing, self-destructive plonker of a brother is something we have in common.”

Minute surprise, hastily suppressed, flitted through those blue eyes, and Greg felt a swell of pride at having managed to cause that reaction in the unshakable Mr Holmes.

“You are correct, of course,” he said, and his tiny smile was back. “Perhaps, after all these years, it is time we disperse with all the formalities, don't you think? Would you call me Mycroft?”

“I'd be honoured,” Greg replied with a smile of his own, wider, less secretive and just as genuine. “Please call me Greg.”

The two men shook hands across the small bistro table, smiling.

Greg tried not to notice how long and smooth those elegant, perfectly manicured fingers were that rested in his for far too short a while. Growing too sentimental wouldn't do, especially not with a scarily perceptive Holmes watching him.

“Allies, then, Gregory,” Mycroft said.

Greg's dark eyes glittered. “We've been allies for years. I was hoping for, maybe... friends?”

Mycroft drew in his breath, and for a moment Greg feared he had gone too far, but then the slightly younger man exhaled softly, suddenly looking almost painfully unguarded. “I do not have friends as a rule, but I think... I think I would care to make the attempt with you, Gregory. You of all people have never attempted to gain an advantage by associating with me, and your honesty is... something that I have come to appreciate.”

“Even when I disagree with you?” the DCI asked cheekily, trying to conceal the sudden, blinding happiness filling him to the brim.

“ Especially when you disagree with me,” Mycroft replied with another tiny smile. “ Not many dare contradict me. You do so only rarely, but always for the best of reasons. I do value your good sense, Gregory, as well as your personal integrity.”

“I value you as well, Mycroft,” Greg sincerely replied. “And I don't have many friends, either. I have colleagues and football mates and people I can meet for a pint, but true friends... There are only very few people I can confide in about the things that matter to me most. There's family, of course, and mainly I'm very lucky in that regard, but you're aware of how much of a mixed bag it can be.”
“Entirely,” Mycroft drily replied, sotto voce. Greg smiled widely. “The Sherlock equivalent in my family is called Lyra,” he said, “but she has a much sunnier disposition overall. Still, her tantrums can reach epic proportions, and her sulks are true works of performance art.”

“Would that be the four-year-old you’ve mentioned before?” Mycroft asked, amused and a little grateful for the lightening of their conversation.

Greg smiled and nodded. “I have pictures on my phone, if you care to see for yourself.” Mycroft, not entirely certain of the protocols of friendship, politely agreed and found himself much less bored by Gregory’s family pictures than he had expected. He was also astonished to see a few familiar faces show up from a stratum of society he had never associated with the down-to-earth policeman before. There was the Honourable William Kingsbury, a rising solicitor from a solid gentry family background, who wasn't simply Gregory's legal retainer but also married to his younger sister Sophia, and there were Lady Blanche and the Honourable Lionel de Lestrade, clearly his parents. All the pictures spoke of a great fondness, sometimes exasperated but always present in the background.

“Huguenot gentry émigré background?” Mycroft asked, his head cocked to the side in an expression of curiosity. He hadn't realised the gentry part before; Greg always left the “de” out of his name, which was why Mycroft had never made that particular association.

The silver-haired man with the youthful face grinned in reply. “Yeah, on both sides. My family has a proud tradition of running away. Very Monty Python, actually.” Mycroft chuckled. “My mother was born a Vernet,” he said, using the French pronunciation flawlessly. “I still maintain that keeping one's head in a crisis is not an unintelligent choice.” Greg laughed delightedly; Mycroft had a wonderfully dry sense of humour that he hoped to see more of in the future, when the man wasn't so closed off any more. Anyone who could make such oblique, disrespectful jokes about the French Revolution was more than alright, really.

“The revolution devours her own children,” he drily quoted. “We're really lucky to have you uphold our little island's political and economical stability, and allow no-one to drag us off à la laterne or to Madame la Guillotine.”

“I do try,” Mycroft very humbly replied, but with a lovely mischievous sparkle in his blue eyes, “to do my small part from my minor position in the British government.”

They smiled at each other across the bistro table, and suddenly Greg's heart felt incredibly light.

When they met again about a week later for lunch at a pleasant but not overly expensive place at which people might have taken exception to Greg's work clothes and tieless state, they settled in for a comfortable meal. Mycroft let Greg choose the wine, and the older man didn't disappoint. Greg wasn't unaware of the scrutiny of those perceptive blue eyes, but it didn't deter him, either. His mother had hammered all those things into her children's heads before they even went to secondary school, and even though Greg had eventually chosen a simpler life for himself, he could still pair wines and food in his sleep. “A very pleasing choice,” Mycroft acknowledged, “and certainly not the obvious one. I might even go so far as to call it inspired.”

Greg smiled at him. “Did I pass, then?”

“It was never a test,” the elegant man with the perfect posture and lovely bespoke suit of deep blue claimed.

“Still,” Greg replied with a hint of mischief, “I'm glad not to have disappointed.” Mycroft cocked his head slightly and regarded the slightly older man with a hint of curiosity. “You seem to be a simple man on the surface, Gregory Lestrade,” he said, “which causes many people not to look any deeper.” “And that's just the way I like it,” Greg freely admitted, “usually. You, however, seem to have a knack for looking where other people don't believe there is anything to see.”
“A blessing and a curse at the same time,” Mycroft replied, slightly hesitant. “Not many people appreciate having an observant mind turned on them.”

“I trust you, Mycroft,” Greg simply said.

There was no doubt he was speaking the absolute truth, and an emotion crossed Mycroft's face so quickly that Greg couldn't quite place it.

“Besides,” he continued, “unlike Sherlock, you have the ability to keep your observations to yourself when they would be hurtful, or when it suits you. Sherlock simply has no filter; he doesn't even truly understand why people react negatively to his outpourings instead of praising his brilliance. Although, this has got a bit better under John's mitigating influence. Still, to get back to my point, I do trust you with the information you’ll deduce about me, and I trust you not to hurt me undeservedly. Only, once you've learned everything there is to learn about me, will you get bored?”

He tried to make the question a flippant one, but he couldn't quite conceal the worry in his eyes.

“No,” Mycroft replied just as simply. “Our minds work differently enough, although you clearly are an intelligent and perceptive man in your own right, and our perspectives differ sufficiently to always offer an interesting exchange of ideas and thoughts. However, perhaps you will eventually grow bored with me, or disenchanted.”

Greg's dark brown eyes were warm when he firmly replied, “Never.”

He could have said much, much more on that subject, but that might have been too revealing, and in the end, that single word encompassed it all.

Mycroft looked at him, then closed his eyes for a moment. Greg, from his experience with Sherlock, thought that he was processing information in that magnificent brain of his. What, he couldn't imagine, but he knew that he had been sincere, and he was certain that his friend would see that.

“You have recently chastised DI Donovan for calling my brother a freak,” Mycroft finally said, changing the subject.

Greg raised his salt-and-pepper eyebrows, but decided not to call Mycroft out on how he had managed to become privy to that particular piece of information. “I've done it many times in the past,” he said, “and her treatment of him has been much better generally, although there is still quite a bit of mutual dislike about. She's had a recent relapse in her professional attitude, though, and as a DCI, I cannot let this sort of thing pass any more. I called her out on her own hypocrisy, and I believe that I have finally managed to make a lasting impression on her.”

“Thank you,” Mycroft quietly said.

“Not for that,” Greg replied with a smile. “Seriously, I was just doing my job without going out of my way for Sherlock. You know I've done much more in the past, and probably will until I either retire or my career goes down the drain because of it. And don't thank me again, Mycroft. I've taken an unwise liking to the ungrateful git, and it's all on my own head.”

“As we have discussed before, that is a mutual weakness,” the other man replied with a small smile.

At that moment, their meals were served, and they spent a few bites sampling their food, which was excellent.

“Did you know that John wanted to celebrate Sherlock's birthday when he was released from hospital two days ago?” Greg asked with a grin.

Mycroft blinked. “Sherlock's birthday is in January.”

“I know,” Greg chuckled. “I didn't tell John, though, and apparently, neither did Sherlock. Perhaps he got a gift he liked, the prat, or he just enjoyed the attention.”

The two men shared a laugh.

“We'd best not alert John to the fact, it might get Sherlock beaten up again,” Greg joked.

Mycroft flinched minutely.

“I'm sorry,” Greg said, contrite. “I didn't really mean that. The two of them seem to be getting along much better now. John seems to have finally worked through some of his anger issues, although I'll keep an eye on the situation from my end.”

“John apparently found and watched a DVD left behind by his late spouse before he rushed to save Sherlock,” Mycroft replied. “It's still not an ideal situation, but I do agree, it has improved overall. I sincerely hope that no further violence may be expected from the good doctor.”
“Until Sherlock provokes him again, the berk,” Greg sighed, “although, to be fair, John's tolerance is usually pretty high when he isn't on his last nerve. He's got a new therapist, as far as I know, and it seems to be doing him good. Didn't catch her name, unfortunately.”

“That is indeed reassuring. Provoking others, though,” Mycroft drily replied, “clearly is one of my dear brother's favourite pastimes. Are you, by the way, familiar with the etymology of the word “berk”?”

“I'm uncertain, should I ask you to enlighten me, or would that backfire?”

“No knowledge is ever wasted,” Mycroft replied in a faux supercilious tone and a shimmer of amusement in his intelligent eyes.

“Then go ahead and slay me, oh knowledgeable one.”

“Well, it is an abbreviation for “Berkeley Hunt” adopted into Cockney Rhyming Slang in the way it was written, not pronounced, thus it is spoken as “berk” instead of “bark”.”

“The question is, now, what would “Hunt” rhyme with?” Greg asked, mischievously.

“Try a vulgar, derogatory term for a part of the female anatomy,” Mycroft replied with a small smirk.

“One that starts with the letter C, maybe?”

“Indeed.”

“Oh dear. My apologies. I didn't mean to call your brother a twat,” Greg said with comical and patently false contrition, “at least not to your face and in a public restaurant.”

“Thank you for that enlightening clarification, Gregory,” Mycroft replied, expression formal and tone desert-dry but eyes dancing.

The two men looked at each other and then simultaneously broke into soft laughter.

“Christ,” Greg chuckled.


“So do I,” Greg happily replied. And if his heart felt particularly light, well, he hoped that Mycroft wouldn't hold it against him.
The next time they met for lunch, Mycroft deliberately chose a small but exquisite restaurant that served traditional French cuisine. It was a hidden gem, neither pretentious nor overpriced, but communication with the waiters was only possible in French, and the menu didn't offer English translations, either.

It was clearly another one of Mycroft’s tests, but Greg was entirely at ease. His family had a branch in France, and he had visited them often as a child and youth. On his mother’s insistence, French was spoken even in their English home as an equal second language. Since he was fluent, he had picked it as an easy subject at school and garnered straight As without putting in the least effort, much to his professor’s annoyance.

Now, he confidently ordered a *sole meunière* with a nice crisp 2010 Sancerre from the Val de Loire, a choice that Mycroft approved of, even as he chose a *salade lyonnaise* for himself.

“You know, Mycroft,” Greg suddenly said, “Sherlock likes to make these stupid little digs at your expense sometimes. You're certainly clever and observant enough, aren't you, to realise when they're not founded in reality?”

The other man gave him a startled look.

“You were considering the *confit de canard*,” Greg carefully added, “but chose the salad instead. You're perfectly fine the way you are, Mycroft, you don't need to be on a diet.”

He eyed the slightly younger man worriedly, afraid that he had overstepped.

“Gregory,” Mycroft replied after a pause, “it is certainly kind of you to say so.”

“No, it's really not,” the DCI calmly insisted. “It's simply the truth.”

Mycroft gave him a pained smile.

“Don’t tell me you believe that git,” Greg insisted, more forcefully now. “You have a bloody fine figure, and you have the eyes to see and a brain to observe that.”

“You truly think so,” Mycroft softly said after regarding him intently for a while, a scrutiny that Greg easily endured because he had nothing to hide.

Now he rolled his eyes inelegantly. “Of course I do.”

In his opinion, the other man was bloody gorgeous, lithe, trim and with the self-confidence and grace of a large, dangerous jungle cat, but he knew better than to say that outright and scare Mycroft off with his unwanted affection. However, he felt a strong urge to punch Sherlock for his incessant callous comments, and anyone else who had so destroyed his friend's self-confidence and skewed his body image.

“I was... unfortunately overweight as a child,” Mycroft slowly admitted.

“Well, I had buck teeth,” Greg said with a shrug. “But we grew out of it nicely, wouldn't you say? In
my case with two years of ugly braces, but I say my blinding and award-winning smile of utter perfection was worth it.”

He grinned so widely that is was almost a grimace. The truth was that he still had slightly protruding front teeth, but he didn't really mind; he'd been too glad to get rid of the braces to even consider prolonging the treatment, and honestly, it wasn't as if he had considered a career as a supermodel or ever lacked for potential romantic partners when he made the attempt, which he hadn't for quite some time now.

With relief, he noticed that Mycroft was minutely relaxing his tense, too upright posture and had even started smiling slightly.

“All that's left,” Greg went on in a deliberately light tone, “are the terrible pictures my mother still has in those dreaded photo albums of hers. If you ever meet her, please don't look at them; they contain enough blackmail material for a decade at least.”

Mycroft laughed softly. “Yes, those photo albums pose a continued threat of humiliation, don't they?”

“Yeah, but we could always burn the family residences down,” Greg said with a grin. “I'll set fire to yours and you to mine, and we'll establish each other's alibis, and like in that old Agatha Christie film, only the world's cleverest detective will ever be able to make the connection – oh, wait. Bad idea, that.”

For a moment, Mycroft looked acutely uncomfortable, but the expression quickly passed as he found humour in the suggestion. “Not if we let Sherlock in on the plan,” he said with a sudden small smile. “He has pictures of his own he wants to see destroyed. His mostly involve a pudgy, curly-haired little boy in a pirate's hat.”

Greg chuckled. “Now those I have to see. Desperately. I offer up pictures of a coal-black Sophia after her attempt to climb up the chimney from the living room fireplace in return.”

They smiled at each other, each man caught up for a moment in past memories with of younger sibling.

Then their meals arrived, and their conversation turned to a different topic.

“You've never said what was behind your failed appointment at Appleby Harrington Sykes,” Mycroft casually mentioned.

Greg was sharp enough not to buy the casual attitude, but he didn't mind answering. “A client of theirs wants to acquire my house,” he explained. “It was a long-term lease, and he apparently has got attached to the place. The lease is due to run out soon, and I won't renew it.”

“But you're not selling?” Mycroft asked, intrigued.

“Well, I'm still living in a horrid flat that I initially rented only because I quickly needed a place after I petitioned for divorce,” he said, “and I'm planning on moving into Phillimore Place myself. It used to be my uncle Francis' house, you know. He was my favourite uncle, and after he died... well, there were too many painful memories. But that was twenty-five years ago, and the pain has dulled, and, well, I really cherish these memories now. That house has been more of a home to me than the one I shared with my ex-wife, and certainly more than my miserable flat. Besides, it's been in my uncle's family since it was first built during dear old Victoria's reign. Apparently, the tenant has money to throw around, so he should easily be able to find a nice house of his own in the neighbourhood.”
Mycroft followed his explanation with a small frown. “You seem slightly annoyed,” he carefully observed.

“Yeah, I don’t take well to attempts of bullying,” Greg candidly replied. “They offered a sum clearly under the market value first and tried to pressure me into accepting. I don’t like to be taken for a fool.”

“I understand,” Mycroft said, his frown deepening. “I believe it may be time to bestow my patronage on a different law firm, then.”

Greg watched his reaction intently. “What aren’t you telling me, Mycroft? After all, we met there that day.”

The other man sighed. “Yes, and I had an appointment with Mr Sykes at one o’clock as well, although I believe I arrived shortly before you.”

“Oh,” Greg said. “The important client whose name begins with an H. Yes, I know, it was quite indiscreet of Emily the Spinster to let that slip.”

“Quite,” Mycroft agreed, his eyes briefly turning hard, “and thank you for alerting me to it; I shall take the appropriate measures.”

Greg grinned. “Are there any solicitors on the Shetlands?”

Mycroft smiled, exposing too many teeth. “Not yet,” he said, his eyes glittering. “Perhaps it is time to remedy that regretful oversight. They might supplement their no doubt meagre income by breeding ponies, a thoroughly honourable pursuit.”

The two men chuckled.

“Back on topic, Mr British Government,” Greg said after a while, firmly but with a smile.

Mycroft sighed. “Please don’t be angry, Gregory. Yes, I do live in a most lovely house in Kensington that I have grown quite attached to, and the lease is about to expire soon. I was planning on obtaining the property for myself, although I never agreed to any bullying or offering less than a fair price. The owner of said property was to be present that day, but somehow, he never made it to Sykes’ office. Apparently, that was the secretary’s fault.”

“Because a copper in a cheap off-the-peg suit could never own a house on the Phillimore Estate,” Greg drily added.

“The Shetlands are too good for her,” Mycroft spiritedly replied. “I can, however, have her transferred to a research station in Antarctica.”

“But think of the poor penguins!” Greg exclaimed dramatically. “No, you can’t do that, especially not on my account. My niece adores pengwings. My conscience would plague me endlessly, I couldn’t sleep at night.”

“You aren’t angry, thank God,” Mycroft softly said.

Greg shrugged. “It was always a possibility that it was you,” he calmly said. Truly, he wasn’t all that surprised, and there really wasn’t anything he could hold against Mycroft except possibly his choice in solicitors. And that had certainly nothing at all to do with the shadow of a sudden, painful insecurity in those intelligent blue eyes that he dearly wanted to disappear again.
“I certainly wouldn't want to keep you from your uncle's residence,” the slightly younger man assured him. “Do, please, consider the matter closed.”

“Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I have an idea that would allow me to have the cake and you to eat it, too,” Greg said with a sudden mischievous smile. “After all, it's a pretty large house, entirely too big for me alone. Even two men could rattle around in the old place without disturbing each other too much.”

“Gregory, are you proposing a flat-share?” Mycroft asked, half shocked, half amused.

“Well, it would rather be a house-share, wouldn't it? Besides, it's just a tiny little bit bigger than Baker Street 221 B; five floors and a bit less than 6,100 square feet, if I remember correctly,” Greg replied. “I wouldn't feel comfortable sharing my home with just anyone, but I trust you, Mycroft.”

The auburn-haired man gazed at him intently again, to the point where it became almost uncomfortable, but again, Greg had nothing to hide.

“Thank you,” the younger man finally said in a humble tone. “I do have to consider it from all angles, especially possible security issues because of my work, but thank you sincerely for the offer, Gregory, and your trust.”

“Of course,” Greg said. “Take all the time you need – until the lease runs out. I'm heartily sick of my shabby flat, and as much as I don't want to displace you, I'm not going to live there any longer than I have to. I promise, though, that I won't hold your decision against you either way.”

“Thank you, Gregory, that's more than fair,” Mycroft agreed. Then he chuckled. “The self-proclaimed simple policeman speaks French fluently, can pair wines better than my mother and owns a house in the middle of the Phillimore Estate. You really do habitually downplay several aspects of your family, financial situation and education, don't you?” he asked, cocking his head again in that curious way of his.

It was entirely non-judgemental, though, and Greg felt safe enough to answer honestly. “I like to fit in at the Yard, and that was the job I really wanted to do. My childhood was privileged, so I don't talk about it much. My Mum was a socialite; to a certain degree, she still is. She loves my father dearly, but a part of her will always be Blanche Arbuthnot, admired débutante and fashionable hostess. Perhaps I went a bit to the other extreme. I changed my career plans because... Well, maybe that's a story for another day. Anyway, at first my parents took it as a sign of youthful rebellion, but over the years they have come to accept, even respect that I love my work, and that I am comfortable with my life as it is.”

“What school did you attend, if I may ask?”


The younger man laughed softly. “I should have expected something like this, you devious man. Does anyone in the Yard know about your public school education?”

“Probably not. I haven't taken any steps to hide it, but I haven't spoken about it, either. And you, Mycroft?” Greg asked, his eyes twinkling merrily. “Harrow?”

“Eton, you heathen,” his friend replied with a theatrical sniff, his long nose as far in the air as it would go, playing up the old rivalry that still existed between those two schools. “But you knew that already,” he deduced a moment later, his eyes narrowing slightly, “and were winding me up.”

“I knew that Sherlock was sent down from Eton,” Greg replied with another mischievous smile. “It
was only logical to assume that you had attended the same school before him.”

“Again, I say, you devious man.”

Greg smirked. “From you, Mycroft, I take that as a compliment.”

That made the older Holmes laugh softly again.

Greg smiled. “I like to see you laugh,” he admitted.

Mycroft lifted one sculpted eyebrow. “Do you now?”

“It’s such a rare thing,” Greg honestly said, “and it makes me glad we’re friends.”

“I don’t quite know how to reply to that,” Mycroft admitted after a pause.

“You don’t have to,” Greg replied. “I didn’t say it to make you uncomfortable; it was simply an observation. It’s good to see that my trust is returned, house-share or not.”

“Oh,” Mycroft thoughtfully said. “I have a tendency not to let people close, but so do you, don’t you? You simply hide it better behind your affable personality. My upbringing and my profession have shaped me, just as yours and your marriage have shaped you. Your former wife has much to answer for, old chap.”

“I can’t deny that I have trust issues,” Greg admitted, just as thoughtfully. “Not many people have seen through me as you have, Mycroft, but then, you’re extremely perceptive. Still, my past experiences have brought me to where I am today, which is not entirely a bad thing.”

“Quite true,” Mycroft agreed with another tiny smile.

Greg strongly felt but did not say aloud that this today literally included a pleasant lunch in the company of a person who was becoming increasingly important to him, much more than because of a silly attraction, and half hoped, half dreaded that the auburn-haired man could tell his thoughts from looking at his face. And he more than half hoped that they would be able to share the house and maybe be able to spend an occasional comfortable evening or weekend together, if their long work hours allowed.

At any rate, the other man’s face was peaceful and content, and if he had deduced Greg’s thoughts, at least it wasn’t going to ruin their friendship.
Chapter 5

5.

“I have a question, admittedly out of mere, idle curiosity,” Mycroft said over the phone a few days later.

“Go ahead, ask,” Greg invited, his smile audible in his voice.

“If I were to simply move out, how would you furnish the house?”

Greg chuckled, then spontaneously said, “I could tell you, or I could show you, which would be much more fun. Are you free late this afternoon? I get off at four today, which means that if I'm really determined, I'll manage to leave the building by five.”

There was a small pause, then Mycroft replied, “Count me as intrigued. Shall I pick you up in front of New Scotland Yard at five, then?”

Greg smiled widely. “That would be great. See you then?”

“Until then; goodbye for now.”

“I'm looking forward to it. Bye, Mycroft.”

He wondered what his friend would say to the contents of his storage unit. If nothing else, he hoped the elegant man with an eye for the finer things in life would approve of the book collection.

Greg actually managed to wrap up his work on time, and so he walked out five minutes to five in order not to be caught up in any last-minute catastrophes. The glass-fronted building with the revolving New Scotland Yard sign wasn't going to be their home for much longer, and although Greg thought that the thing was bloody ugly, he had got used to it over the years he had been working there. The Met would be relocated back on the Victoria Embankment into the Curtis Green Building in Whitehall right next to to original Scotland Yard, probably in 20016 or 2017, and what a hassle that move would be. It was allegedly to save money, although the move alone would cost insane amounts in funds, time, work and stress. Greg was certainly not looking forward to it, although he had signed a motion to take the iconic revolving sign with them when they moved.

A sleek black town-car with tinted windows drew up next to him, and Greg smiled as he opened the door and slid in. Mycroft greeted him with that barely noticeable but genuine and utterly endearing smile of his, and Greg once again had to fight down a sudden surge of attraction and affection. The man was looking absolutely exquisite in a finely tailored grey twill three-piece suit, navy silk tie and discreetly dotted burgundy silk pocket square.

Greg gave the address to the driver and sat back with a smile. His storage unit was at a converted former warehouse at the river Thames.

Mycroft lifted an immaculate eyebrow at him, and Greg smiled.
“Maybe I just want to abduct you to a warehouse, too,” he said, his dark eyes dancing, “to get even.”

“Oh, do you now?” the taller man idly asked as he settled back in his leather seat, completely at ease and his blue eyes filled with matching amusement.

“I know you’ve already deduced it,” Greg cheerfully replied, “although it’s rather decent of you to leave me with the illusion of a surprise.”

Mycroft chuckled. “Storage,” he said, “very likely of furniture.”

“Ah, but what else?” Greg asked mischievously.

“There is more?”

“Maybe this isn’t an entire wash, then,” Greg fondly replied. “It's something I’ll have to remember for its sheer rarity. Surprising a Holmes!”

“Do endeavour to surprise me, then,” Mycroft said with an air of playfulness that was as unexpected as it was wonderful.

Greg couldn’t help it, his eyes softened as he looked at the other man.

Mycroft lifted his eyebrow again in response.

“I've always wondered what sort of man you were underneath your armour,” Greg said, “and I'm just... very much honoured and pleased to be allowed a glimpse.”

It was the truth but not the whole truth, and the extent of which he was ready to reveal at this time.

Mycroft’s expression softened as well. “I'm... unused to this.”

“I know,” Greg seriously said, “which is why I'm feeling so honoured.”

Mycroft took some time to contemplate that, and Greg left him to his complex and no doubt convoluted thought process, content to watch the city slowly roll by beyond the windows and occasionally look at the enigma that was Mycroft Holmes. He was so incredibly intelligent that people like Greg had to seem slow and boring to him, and yet so ill-equipped to handle emotions. Trust came hard to the extremely guarded man, but to a certain degree, Greg understood that only too well. The more he got to know the enigmatic Mycroft Holmes, the man behind the cold, controlled façade, the faster he felt himself drawn in. His affection, his simple fancy was turning quickly into something far deeper, something much more dangerous that might easily leave him with a broken heart. He should pull back, it would be the sane thing to do, and yet he found himself entirely unable to. This charismatic, striking, strangely vulnerable man was going to be the death of him, he just knew it.

“This is... rather intimidating,” Mycroft suddenly admitted.

Greg swallowed. “Yes. Yes, it is.”

They probably weren't even talking about the same thing; for Mycroft, the intimacy of a friendship would be as frightening as his own unrequited love – and God have mercy, he was indeed falling rapidly in love – was to Greg. But still, they were both concerned about vulnerability, about the possibility of getting hurt in the future.

“It's worth it, though,” Greg softly declared.
Mycroft looked at him for a long time, intensely, searching.

Greg, once again, bore his gaze and hid nothing. He didn't even know if Mycroft would be able to interpret correctly what he was seeing; Sherlock was so emotionally stunted that he couldn't recognise love when he saw it. He understood the effects of the "chemical imbalance that is found on the losing side" on the human body and psyche; he had come to personally understand affection and loyalty perfectly well over the last few years. He understood lust and jealousy, greed, possessiveness and protectiveness as possible motivations for murder or self-sacrifice, but as far as Greg knew, he didn't, couldn't understand love. Mycroft had the same or even higher intelligence that set the Holmes brothers apart from other people so noticeably, the same upbringing that had left Sherlock so emotionally crippled. Mycroft interacted better with normal people, at least in rigidly defined, formal settings, but did he in fact understand, or was he simply highly observant and quick to project the appropriate reactions? He did viscerally understand vulnerability as well as the need for companionship, though, and he would see and understand Greg's, that much at least.

“Yes,” Mycroft finally agreed, “it is worth it.”

And Greg smiled. Let his heart be broken; for now he was happy.

Soon afterwards, they drew up to the storage area. They had to go through a personal identification process first, and then they walked to Greg’s storage unit, which was equipped with a retina scanner and a number block to enter a eight-figure code. It wasn’t what Mycroft would consider secure in his line of work, but for a private storage facility, it was perfectly sufficient.

Greg opened the heavy metal door with aplomb and a dramatic bow, and Mycroft smiled as he preceded his friend inside.

It was a bit like the cave of the Forty Thieves if they’d had less gold, more furniture and a rather bad case of OCD. Of course, it wasn’t really a cave but a great, cavernous room with concrete walls and heavy-duty shelving units with multi-layered rows of furniture under dust covering. It had all the charm of an IKEA warehouse, except that nothing had to be assembled, thank Christ for that, and the furniture was less modern but of a much higher quality.

Mycroft curiously stepped forward, and, receiving an encouraging nod and a smile from Greg, uncovered an antique Chesterfield sofa, upholstered with hunter green leather. It was worn in the way that indicated a gentle use and good care for a century or longer, a look of genteel maturation that Mycroft instinctively respected. The piece could have found a place of honour in the Diogenes Club.

Greg, knowing along which lines his guest's thoughts went, smiled. He had never been intimidated by the posh club's atmosphere, and now Mycroft understood why; he had grown up in that sort of place.

The two men carefully covered up the Chesterfield again and went on with their exploration, or rather, Mycroft's exploration. Greg had personally supervised the move of the furniture twenty-five years ago, and he still remembered well enough how the order on the heavy-duty shelving units represented certain rooms in his house that still existed in his mind in just the state Uncle Francis had inhabited it during his lifetime.

Subtly, he guided Mycroft from one treasure to the other, showing off the satin-smooth, delicately carved wood of antique furniture, the gleaming crystal of chandeliers, the duck-egg blue with a white relief of antique Wedgwood Queens Ware and the genteel shabbiness of perfectly worn Persian rugs.
until they finally reached a door in the back. Even before Greg manipulated the panel and gave them access to the carefully climate-controlled area, a sudden, wide smile spread over Mycroft's face and filled Greg's chest with an almost unbearable warmth.

The door hissed open and they stepped through into what had once made up the majority of the late Sir Francis Arbuthnot's library.

The blinding light in Mycroft's blue eyes as he was offered a pair of white cotton gloves was the most beautiful thing Greg had ever seen. While he left the other man to explore, he tried not to stare at him too much. In the end, he drifted towards his old favourites, absent-mindedly caressing embossed leather spines and marbled or leather covers.

After a while, he became conscious of Mycroft's gaze trained on him, and turned with an apologetic half-smile. “Just greeting some old friends,” he said, a little sheepishly. “Sometimes I come here just to remember and take home a particular favourite for a week or two. It's better comfort than a bottle of cheap scotch.”

“Gregory, you have indeed managed to surprise me,” Mycroft said, not smiling but with an expression that was somehow gentle and open. Greg had the feeling that he wasn't really referring to the books, or at least not only to them, and he smiled.

“This collections consists of a fascinating assortment of topics,” Mycroft said after a while of happy browsing and discovery.

Greg nodded. “Yes, I have more than one bibliophile among my ancestors. Uncle Francis himself was interested in a wide variety of topics. This isn't even all of his library. The medical books went to Cousin Christine, and the geography section to Uncle Paul. But the rest, he willed to me, because I loved them.” He smiled a little self-consciously again. “Janet, my ex-wife, wanted a few of the more expensive books in the house as conversation starters, but I never even let her in here, though she nagged me like the harpy she was. She just didn't appreciate the books for themselves. That should have told me right then that our marriage was doomed from the start.”

“There seems to have been little compatibility,” Mycroft carefully commented.

“Yeah, but I was young and stupid and I fancied myself in love,” Greg replied with a smile that was both amused and slightly sad. “I didn't realise at the time that she had, well, great social ambitions. After all, she seemed to be keen on marrying a fellow who lived simply and worked as a Constable at the Met. I thought at the time that it was me she wanted, but it seems she wanted the potential she saw in me, the idea of how I could turn out with “just a little encouragement”."

His voice turned slightly bitter on the last four words. Janet had never wanted him for himself, and if he let it, that thought still had the power to sting, although not to wound any more.

“She,” Mycroft stated with a slight frown, “must have been a monumentally stupid person.”

“Yeah,” Greg replied, still a little down-hearted, “shallow and short-sighted, but I married her, and what does that tell you about me?” Then he laughed and shook his head. “I should've found myself a bloke instead; they're usually more straightforward about such things. Even though, back in those days, we couldn't have got married.”

Mycroft gave him another long, searching look, one that Greg couldn't quite place this time, but he still did what he always did: He stood still, open, hiding nothing, and permitted Mycroft to read him.
One day, he hoped, he would be able to read the enigmatic man to a certain degree himself, if he ever allowed him to.

Whatever Mycroft seemed to be looking for, he had found it, as a small, pleased smile appeared on his face. It was beautiful.

“Yes,” Mycroft finally said.

“Yes?”

“Your furniture is surprisingly adequate,” he gravely continued, but there was a mischievous, playful light in his eyes that made Greg's heart beat faster. “Your books are quite sufficient as well. I can tolerate them in the house.”

“And me?” Greg asked with a tiny smile of his own, and a bit of vulnerability that he couldn't quite help. “Can you tolerate me as well, now that you know that I'm not a complete uncultured heathen?”

“Well, needs must,” Mycroft pompously declared.

They looked at each other, and suddenly they were laughing together.

“Quite sufficient! You are aware, of course,” Greg said, still smiling, “that there are several priceless first editions in this collection.”

“Of course,” the younger man echoed, then smiled back. “That is rather obvious. Still, would you care to show me some of your personal favourites?”

Many people, including Janet, would have automatically assumed that the most valuable books had to be Greg's favourites. Mycroft, however, understood without a word that each had its own value in the way it interested him, touched him or was connected to cherished memories. That understanding was another thing they had in common, and it made Greg's heart soar.

Also, the brilliant man had probably deduced his favourite books already, judging from their positions on the shelves and the tiny margins by which they were out of alignment. The fact that he had still asked and was genuinely interested in having Greg show him those books and comment on them proved, though, that Mycroft Holmes did understand emotions far beyond what his little brother would ever be capable of.

Let his heart be broken, then, Greg thought again as he moved forward to share the treasures of his childhood and youth, and the other books he had grown to love over the years. He would gladly pay the price if he could have this for as long as he could.
“You were quite right when you mentioned the house was large,” Mycroft in the car on their way to Greg's miserable East End flat. “I haven't even furnished all of it, and nearly none, I'm sorry to say, with such pleasing and comfortable furniture as yours. I do entertain, occasionally, for political or diplomatic purposes, and I had an interior designer fill the rooms that were needed for that purpose.”

“That sounds... very modern,” Greg carefully commented.

“And cold,” Mycroft agreed with a twitch of his narrow lips. “I have, after all, an image to project.”

“The Iceman,” Greg said with a lopsided smile that showed how little he actually thought of that nickname. People might have thought it witty and accurate, but in truth, it was cruel and only showed a lack of insight on their part.

Mycroft's face remained calm but his shoulders tensed for a moment until he took in Greg's expression; then he relaxed again. “Precisely,” he agreed.

“Do you at least have a small refuge for yourself, a comfortable bedroom, a retreat with enough good books and good scotch?” Greg asked, feeling concerned but trying to lighten the mood a bit.

“Oh, yes, but it only takes up a small space in the house and is carefully secured, the access highly restricted,” was the reply.

Greg chuckled. “Somehow, I can't see you wielding a vacuum cleaner and a mop.”

The elegant man in his beautiful suit shuddered, then smiled reluctantly. “No, of course I have household staff – carefully vetted, discreet household staff – for that.”

“Oh, good. A house that size would be a nightmare to keep clean by just the two of us, especially considering the hours we work. Perhaps we can come to an agreement to share the cost of a housekeeper or something like that,” Greg reasonably suggested.

“That sounds practical,” Mycroft readily agreed.

“I was thinking,” Greg said, considering the layout, “that we could designate some shared space, like the kitchen and the household room on the lower ground floor, and sort of divide the rest of the house up between us. You could keep the areas where you usually entertain; I'm not really one for dinner parties or other formal events, anyway. That would be pretty much all of the ground floor, I suppose. Each of us could then furnish our own space in the way we like it. When I set up my library, you'd be welcome there at any time, of course.”

“That is generous of you,” Mycroft said and smiled again, that small, slightly uncertain smile. “As a matter of fact, I do have a library of my own set up, and I would like to return the favour, now that I'm satisfied that you know how to treat my rarer books.”

Greg's smile in return was bright. More rare books to explore and enjoy! “I'd be honoured,” he said, trying and failing to keep his enthusiasm out of his voice.
“We might even consider joining our libraries,” Mycroft hesitantly suggested. “I mean, of course, by putting separate shelves into the same room.”

“That sounds great,” the slightly older man happily agreed. “How do you secure your books against Sherlock, though? Because he can be a vicious, vindictive little bastard sometimes, you know, with an occasional case of sticky fingers.”

Mycroft relaxed minutely at the positive response and chuckled. “Agreed, that might be a problem, but I’m quite confident we will be able to find an adequate solution.”

Greg nodded and smiled, then thought a little further.

Mycroft gave him the time, looking both intrigued and slightly amused.

“Do you have any live-in staff?” Greg asked, a bit unexpectedly, judging from Mycroft’s expression.

“Why are you asking?” he stalled.

“Because the third floor, right under the roof, has a rather large room, its own kitchenette and a nicely-sized bathroom,” Greg replied. “It would be perfect either for a live-in housekeeper or, well, me.”

Mycroft blinked. “You would find living under the roof acceptable?”

“Sophia and I used to sleep up there when we were children and visiting Uncle Francis,” Greg replied with a soft, reminiscent smile. “It was cosy. The windows are perhaps a little small, but with proper lighting and a clever placement of furniture, I’m sure it would be nice enough, and it certainly isn’t a space you would have claimed for yourself. Or, if you do have a live-in housekeeper or we should decide to get one, I could take the two smaller bedrooms and the bigger bathroom on the second floor; that would still leave us with two bedrooms and a smaller bathroom for guests.”

“Gregory,” Mycroft said in a tone that was almost strict, “it’s your house. Please do not feel you have to accommodate me in every way. If you wished to reside in the master bedroom and take the first floor, I would of course cede them to you.”

“Nah,” Greg replied with a grin. “With all your posh suits, you need that huge dressing room much more than I do. I’ll be fine with a moderately sized walk-in closet, honestly. Besides, with all the take-out I eat, the stairs will be good for me. I’m used to walking up the stairs, anyway; I live on the third floor right now.”

“Still, the master bedroom does have the nicest bathroom in the house,” the other man insisted.

Greg laughed. “Christ, if you knew what kind of bathroom I have right now! The bathrooms in Kensington on the second or third floor would both be pure luxury compared to it.”

“Why have you never moved from your flat?” Mycroft suddenly asked. “If you don’t mind my inquiry, that is.”

Greg shrugged. “Well, at first I simply wanted to get out of the house and away from Janet as quickly as I could, so took the first place that was available and wasn’t picky about it. Then I threw myself into my work and only went back to the flat to sleep. For quite a while, I didn’t really care much about my surroundings except that they had to be warm and clean; my marriage had gone down the drain, and whatever people say, it felt like a personal failure. And then there was that thing with Sherlock’s fake suicide. Yeah, eventually I got over myself, and I suppose I could have moved then, but the end of the lease for the House at Phillimore Place was coming up and I realised that this was
what I wanted, and it made no sense to move to a different place beforehand."

“Gregory, are you really quite certain that you wish to share your home with me?” Mycroft asked, sincere and slightly worried.

Greg smiled at him. “There isn't anyone else I would even consider this with,” he honestly replied. “And I guess I would start feeling lonely soon, all by myself in that huge house. Seriously, I believe we can make it work.”

“It seems, then,” Mycroft said and held out his hand, “that we have come to a general accord, I believe. The details should not be too hard to iron out.”

Greg shook his hand firmly. “Good,” he simply said.

When they were drawing near Greg's flat, he wondered for a moment whether he should invite Mycroft upstairs. A part of him wanted it far too much, and he decided that he couldn't quite trust himself in that regard. He was determined to never make the other man uncomfortable in any way, and so it was perhaps better not to take that risk. However...

“Do you have ground and floor plans of the house available?” he asked. “Although you'd probably have to look at them only once to have everything saved in your head. ”

Mycroft chuckled. “Yes, I do recall the plans, but thank you for the implied offer. And thank you for inviting me to join you today, it was quite enjoyable.”

“It has something of a treasure hunt, doesn't it?” Greg replied with a small smile. “Well, I had fun, too. Thanks for joining me and for taking me home. Perhaps we can meet again soon and discuss the individual rooms. I'd invite you upstairs, but you'd probably be horrified by my flat, and I guess I have already taken up a large chunk of your time today.”

“I didn't take you for an untidy man,” Mycroft said in a humorous tone but with slightly sharp eyes.

“Oh no, it's tidy, just... shabby, and a bit bare. I've never moved any of Uncle Francis' furniture into the flat; here in the East End, that would just be inviting trouble, really. Well, if you can spare a few minutes, step upstairs and inspect my cleaning habits, by all means. It's an important enough piece of information on someone you consider sharing a house with,” Greg offered.

For a mere fraction of a moment, Mycroft seemed indecisive, then he agreed.

As the two of them left the car, entered the house through the scuffed door and walked up the worn wooden stairs, Greg suddenly became extremely conscious of every ugliness, every flaw of the building that he had invited this elegant, immaculately dressed man to. Nervously, he began to babble.

“For example, I would never move in with Sherlock,” he said. “That flat in Montague Street was a dump, and he hasn't grown any tidier since then. The few times that he kipped in my place, he always left such a mess behind. I used to wonder how John ever tolerated him.”

Mycroft's lips quirked upwards ever so slightly. “I believe the good doctor had the means to assert himself. Often, my brother has lamented the disappointing disappearance of some putrefying human organ or other from the fridge, simply because it was located right next to the edible food, or stuck into Dr Watson's strawberry jam.”
Greg chuckled. “That sounds like John and Sherlock all right. Nutters, the both of them.”

“They seem to be getting along better again these days,” Mycroft mentioned.

“And thank Christ for that,” Greg sighed and unlocked his wooden door, which was mostly defined by its sturdiness and its many layers of partly chipped-off white paint. It also had a stubborn tendency to stick, especially in humid weather, which in London meant more often than not.

Greg motioned Mycroft inside and tried not to look too ashamed. “May I offer you some tea?”

The other man swept the tiny foyer with a brief but keen gaze, sizing everything up with an incredible speed. There were a cheap but serviceable coat rack, a small, perfunctory shoe rack and four wooden doors, painted white and with small glass panes in the uppermost section, the one that led to the kitchen partially open. As Greg had said, the place was clean but gave off a rather worn impression. The silver-haired man lowered his head minutely, then straightened his spine with determination. Now that he was looking at it with the eyes of a critical stranger, it seemed even more manky, and he wondered how and why on earth he had spent four and a half years in this sorry place.

Mycroft gave him a look that was both sympathetic and reassuring, and Greg's smile in reply came suddenly, easily. He was perfectly certain that only a very mall number of people had ever been shown such sincere concern by the perfectly controlled man with the icy façade. It was a quick, unexpected piece of non-verbal communication, Mycroft's encouragement and Greg's gratitude.

The little kitchen with the surface-mounted pipes and electrical lines and solid but worn appliances also held a very prosaic small table and two chairs. It had a second door that opened into the living room, another rather sparse, nearly dismal place, and Greg pushed the door open and invited Mycroft to look around. The dapper man seemed sadly out of place in his perfectly fitted, elegant suit and brogues that looked like bespoke Church's and probably cost more than the entire living room furniture. The only thing that brightened the sorry place a bit was Greg’s double bookshelf, filled to the brim with books of all sorts of topics, colours and sizes.

The three-seater couch was rather worn, but the wall-mounted flat-screen telly was of a decent, though not ostentatious size. There were also a sturdy desk and comfortable swivel chair in the room that designated a work area that clearly saw quite a bit of use.

Greg let Mycroft look around while he arranged a tea tray, then removed the tea leaves from the pot precisely on time and carried the whole thing, cups and all, into the living room.

“It's indeed perfectly clean,” Mycroft hesitantly offered.

He seemed a bit reluctant to sit on the worn sofa, but once he did, he apparently found it comfortable enough, judging from his relaxing shoulders and back.

“But really depressing all the same,” Greg admitted with a smile. “I can't wait to move out.”
“That is perfectly understandable and, I believe, manageable.”


“Just a dash of milk, please,” Mycroft replied and watched the silver-haired man serve the tea as skilfully as any débutante, which made the flat seem even more incongruous.

“It's very good,” Mycroft said in a matter-of-fact way that made it more than a mere polite compliment.

“That is high praise from a man as cultured as you,” Greg replied with a smile. “Maman took great pains to make sure Sophia and I learned our manners. You wouldn't think it, seeing me at the Yard these days, but making proper tea isn't something one ever forgets.”

Mycroft chuckled. “As long as you do not delete it, as Sherlock must have. He can't brew a decent cup to save his life.”

“Oh, but I've seen him do it. I think he just pretends to be bad at it so that the others will run out of patience and do it for him. And he calls you lazy, the silly sod.”

“Oh, but to a certain degree I am,” Mycroft admitted. “Frankly, I don't see the appeal of running helter-skelter through the city after some criminal or other.”

Greg chuckled. “It's the thrill of the hunt. Although I'm getting older myself, and I don't really see the appeal so much any more, either. For the most part, I have a desk job these days. I miss the streets when I'm doing paperwork, but when I'm getting bloody, muddy, cold or rained on, I'm more than happy to return to my desk.”

He got up from the sofa, walked over to his desk, picked up a thick folder from a drawer and withdrew the ground and floor plans of his Kensington property.

“Let's see,” he said, returning to the sofa and coffee table. “Which rooms do you currently have in use?”

Mycroft was truly a highly skilled negotiator; it showed in the quick and unerring way he hit upon all salient points, and in the reasonable suggestions he made. Not even once, though, did Greg feel at a disadvantage. They had gone into this on friendly premises, both ready to make concessions in order to make sure the other party was content, and in the end they both got what they wanted with a minimum of fuss. They decided on the sharing and division of rooms, and agreed to hire a live-in housekeeper. Mycroft's PA would take care of that, because, the taller man casually mentioned, the poor person would have to be vetted to MI5 standards. Maybe that was a joke, maybe not; Greg decided not to ask at the time.

Mycroft was at first bothered by the fact that Greg laid claim to quite a bit less less space for himself than he did, but they solved that by agreeing to let Mycroft pay the housekeeper's salary while Greg would provide the living space in the shape of the previously unclaimed third floor, which was equipped with a large room that could be divided in two, a kitchenette, a rather nice bathroom and a small storage room. That was an agreement that they both could live with.

While they went through one detail after the other, not missing anything due to Mycroft's brilliant analytical mind, Greg couldn't help smiling at him in a soft, wistful way. He didn't even realise he was it doing until Mycroft inquiringly raised a perfectly shaped, elegant auburn eyebrow.
“I'm sorry,” Greg said, determined to tell the truth, but only a part of it. “You're so brilliant at this, and it's just amazing how your mind works. Everyone else must seem so dull to you.”

“You're not dull, Gregory,” Mycroft very firmly replied, cutting to the heart of the matter. “It's true that most people operate at a different, slower speed than I do, and I'd insult you by claiming otherwise. Even Sherlock does. However, you do have an intelligent, active mind, quite a lot of life experience and viewpoints that differ from mine enough to be intriguing. Also, in spite of your sometimes horrifying work, you are an intrinsically decent, kind man, Gregory. You can manage your emotions in a much more skilful and productive way than I, and your kindness and honesty... it is something I experience only very rarely, both at work and in my sadly flat private life, and have come to cherish in your company. You are anything but dull. I could never find you dull, not in twenty, fifty or a hundred years.”

Greg swallowed hard. “Thank you,” he said, his voice not entirely steady. “This means a lot to me, Mycroft.”

It meant everything, but he was still afraid to put that into words and scare that beautiful, brilliant, radiant man away.

Mycroft gifted him with another smile, one that was the slightest bit shy after his uncharacteristically openness. Greg found it utterly, magnificently adorable and was at the same time floored by the incredible trust the other man was showing him.

“You deserve it, you know,” he said, his voice a little rough and completely sincere. “Kindness and honesty, and trust, too, everyone should have that, and I'd be more than honoured if you'd accept it from me.”

And love, if you could only accept that from me as well, Greg thought but never said aloud. If you'd only allow me to love you, I'd make certain you'd be the most cherished person on God's green earth, and you'd never doubt yourself again.

“I shall attempt to reciprocate, although that sadly is hardly my forte,” Mycroft hesitantly replied.

Greg smiled at him warmly, feeling a sudden strong, unexpected protectiveness for the slightly younger man blooming in his chest. Mycroft always took such great pains to appear cold and invulnerable, and now that he had shown Greg the staggering trust of allowing him through his defences at least part-way, it made the DCI determined to defend and protect this softer side in whichever way he could.

“I'd like that,” he simply stated. “Before we became friends, I've been alone for quite a while.”

“So have I, Gregory. So have I.”

After this confession, Mycroft, looking a bit insecure and uncomfortable, put down his cup and quickly excused himself to the bathroom, a meticulously clean room that was so tiny that it was a wonder a shower, an old-fashioned toilet with a pull-chain and a small sink even fit inside. In fact, when the toilet seat was occupied, opening the door became literally impossible. Still, Greg had made the most of the drab space with a colourful shower curtain with a beach and ocean motif that offered the illusion of a wide-open space. Mycroft didn't comment when he returned, but he strongly advocated that they prepare for Greg's move as soon as possible.

The unspoken but clear concern warmed Greg's heart.

They parted soon afterwards, that slightly shy, vulnerable but very much pleased feeling still
As Greg microwaved his dinner, a ratatouille he had cooked two weeks ago in too large quantities for a single person but enough to freeze three additional portions for days when he didn't feel up to cooking, he sighed to himself, torn between happiness and wistfulness. Mycroft Holmes, he thought, would be the death of him, but until then, he would cherish every bloody second he could spend with the brilliant, gorgeous, wonderfully human man.
Chapter 7

The next week, Greg went to visit the house at Phillimore Place for the first time in over twenty-five years. Just seeing the beautiful double-fronted Victorian red brick house with white accents made him wistfully happy.

He walked through the rooms with Mycroft, made final arrangements about who was going to take which rooms and worked out in his head, with a little help from Mycroft, which of the original furniture would best be placed where in his areas. With all the points of the new lease cleared up, everything was forwarded to Greg's brother-in-law Will to draw up the actual contract. Mycroft was apparently still investigating possible new solicitors after breaking ties with Appleby Harrington Sykes LLP. Their meeting was pleasant, productive and oddly domestic, and Greg thought he did quite a good job hiding the shameful fact that he very badly wanted to draw the other man into his arms and inhale his expensive cologne and unique personal scent. Traces of that were to be found in the air of the house Mycroft was already inhabiting, and Greg found another good reason for moving in with him. There were many reasons on the plus side, and the only negative one was that Greg was clearly a masochistic bastard who would be torturing himself, falling deeper and deeper in love with a man he couldn't have.

At work, he announced his change of residence to the correct paper-pusher in administration and later went on a small shopping expedition where he treated himself to a gleaming new fridge, a sinfully comfortable, huge mattress for the antique canopied four-poster bed he had chosen from his storage, decent towels and new bedsheets. Then he went over everything in his old flat and decided what to keep, what to give to charity and what to throw out. In the end, he had surprisingly little to move.

Most of his cheap furniture he gave away on an online marketplace platform for free, leaving the transportation up to the persons who picked the things up. For the move of his antiques and books from the warehouse, he contracted a professional service. That was a bit expensive but the most practical and least stressful solution, since he was working at the time and there was an insurance to cover for any possible mishaps with the valuable pieces. The only thing left for him to do was move his beloved books, his flat-screen telly, some kitchen paraphernalia and his clothes, and he was done. His sister and her family helped with this last small step, although the children were more of a gladly welcomed hindrance, and finished on a Sunday afternoon, early enough to invite them all to his – or at least partially his – spectacular new kitchen, where they cooked lasagne together. The adults shared a very decent bottle of red and the little ones were given grape juice, which was similar enough in colour to the grown-ups' drinks to make them happy. Mycroft was out of the country, or Greg would have very much liked to invite him, too. All in all, it was a lovely evening, and he fell into his new old antique bed, pleasantly tired out.

The next morning, he woke at his usual time. Since he now had a tube station close to his house and
a much shorter commute, he contemplated lying in bed for another half hour, but then excitement got
the better of him. Not everything was in its perfect place yet, the pictures hadn't been hung, the books
were still in their boxes and his bathroom on the second floor still looked as impersonal as a hotel
bathroom. Soon, his things would start spreading around and conquering the space, making it
personal, but for the moment, it didn't quite feel like home yet. Still, Greg enjoyed a long, luxurious
shower under the spray of the main shower-head and the pulses of water from the four smaller ones
embedded into the wall with those lovely Italian designer tiles. When he was done, he meticulously
dried the glass door. Cleaning up after himself was a deeply ingrained, decades-old habit, and one he
wasn't going to change even with professional household staff around.

He dressed with more care than usual; in his new, posher surroundings, some of his clothes he had
previously considered acceptable for the Yard seemed pretty cheap now, and his frame of reference
for the distinction between “still all right” and “tatty” had shifted as well. Reluctantly, he pushed
those clothes to the side and decided to inspect them again when he returned from work. There was
no point in making hasty decisions.

Then he walked down the stairs to the lower ground floor and made himself a nice breakfast,
admiring his new, burnished silver fridge that fit well into the modern, utilitarian kitchen with its
gleaming state-of-the-art appliances, granite counters and a free-standing stove. He'd have to unpack
his uncle's Wedgwood china at a later time, although he found himself reluctant to consider it for
everyday use. For now, he was content with his simple white plates and cups and his beloved teapot.
For a moment, he wondered at what time Mycroft got up when he was home, and if they might have
breakfast together sometimes. He found himself missing the slightly younger man, which was
illogical, since they had never lived together before. With a sigh, he pushed that thought away as
maudlin and unproductive. At least Mycroft had been spared the chaos and noise of his moving in,
and Greg was happy that he hadn't inconvenienced him, because he was secretly dreading that
Mycroft, gorgeous, brilliant, sophisticated Mycroft Holmes would find him tiresome and reconsider
their house-share agreement.

After cleaning up after himself, Greg had a quick look at the kitchen clock and decided to use his last
half-hour to continue setting up his office, which originally had been the smallest guest bedroom on
the second floor, right next to the room he had chosen for his own. His furniture was already in
place, his laptop on the desk, and the desk itself was now quickly being filled again with everything
back in its place. Content, he put the empty boxes aside, washed his dusty hands and went
downstairs. Time to leave for work.

Greg got through two team meetings and enough paperwork to feel like Sisyphus, and wondered
when the giant boulder of reports and forms he had been pushing uphill all day would come
tumbling down again for him to start over, when he received a summons to the Chief Superintendent
himself. This was highly unusual and had Greg on edge, racking his brain for possible reasons as he
stepped into the elevator.

The last high-profile case they'd had, involving the murdered wives of high-profile politicians, had
been solved and closed by Sherlock and DI Dimmock a while ago. Everything was going smoothly
in his division, and Sherlock was definitely clean again, out of hospital and hadn't caused any trouble
except for the usual ruffled feathers for a while. Greg was reasonably on top of his paperwork, and in
his recent performance review Superintendent Allan had expressed his ongoing satisfaction with
Greg's work as a DCI. There was honestly no reason he could think of for being called on the carpet
by the Chief Super himself, and that was nerve-wracking. The last time he had seen the man, other
than passing him in the hallway, had been at his promotion ages ago.
Chief Superintendent Willoughby was only a few years short of retirement age but still an impressive figure of a man. He wore glasses these days, his face was full of craggy lines and his hairline had passed the stage of receding and was well into the state of a pate, but his grey eyes were still sharp and he could intimidate pretty much anyone without too much of an effort. It would be interesting to see the Chief Super and Mycroft go toe to toe with each other, although Greg suspected that Mycroft would easily win that game. But then, Greg was probably partial.

For now, he was polite and deferential without showing any signs of submission. In fact, he was quite determined not to show much of anything at all until he knew what all of this was about.

Willoughby caught his eyes in a long, assessing stare.

Greg sat in his intentionally uncomfortable visitor's chair and calmly looked back.

“Administration has informed me that you have recently moved into a house in Kensington, Lestrade,” he stated in an expressionless voice.

“Yes, sir, I have,” Greg calmly, respectfully replied.

“Now, please don't consider this intrusive, but how the bloody hell can you afford the rent on your DCI's salary?”

Ah. That was it, then. “I don't, sir. I own the place; have for over twenty-five years. I inherited it from my late uncle,” Greg replied, still polite but with a tiny tightening around his eyes. He didn't appreciate the implication that he might be on the take, not at all.

“You seem... unhappy with that line of questioning, Lestrade.”

“I am, sir,” Greg frankly replied, his voice calm but his dark eyes sparking as he grabbed the bull by its horns. “Frankly, I find it insulting. You've known me for decades, sir. I'm not corrupt.”

For a moment, the Chief Super shifted in his seat, a tiny sign of discomfort and maybe embarrassment at being so clearly called out on implications others might have preferred to remain unspoken.

“Besides,” Greg went on in his calm and polite tone, “if I were, I wouldn't be that obvious about it, sir. You must have a really poor idea of either my integrity or my intelligence, possibly both.”

Except for a tiny sigh, Willoughby didn't react.

Greg moved forward in his seat and put his hands on the armrests, preparing to leave his seat, his face hard but his voice still utterly polite. “Well, sir, I can provide you with the paperwork of my inheritance and the subsequent twenty-five year lease to the Department of Transport, if you require it, or you can simply request my fiscal statements from HM Revenue & Customs directly. If that is all, sir?”

The Chief Super sighed, then relaxed his rigid back a fraction. “Stay, Lestrade,” he said, his voice sounding more kindly.

Greg settled back into the torture instrument masquerading as an office chair but left his hands on the armrests. “Sir,” he replied with bland, chilly politeness and hard eyes.

“You're right, Lestrade, I have known you for many years, and while we haven't always agreed on
your methods, I've never entertained any sort of doubt regarding your dedication to your work or your personal integrity. However, what am I supposed to think when two spooks show up and ask intrusive questions about every facet of your life and work?"

“Oh,” Greg said, surprised, and then, more thoughtfully. “Oh.”

“I take it you're aware of what this is about?” the Chief Super sharply enquired.

“I think it's me being vetted,” Greg slowly replied. “I thought it was a joke, you know, but apparently it wasn't. Those two men were MI5, then?”

“You're not making a whole lot of sense right now, Lestrade,” his superior said, but there was a bit of amusement visible, along with quite a lot of frustration.

“Sorry, sir,” Greg said as he settled back in his uncomfortable chair properly. “Well, it's like this. When I didn't prolong the lease with the Department of Transport this year, a posh firm on Chancery Lane approached me about selling the house to their client, who was apparently the man who Transport had had assigned the place to for years. He liked the house and wanted to buy it from me. They tried to bully me into selling at a lower than market price at first, but in the end they even went above the market value.”

“By how much, if I may ask?” the Chief Super queried.

“About two or two and a half,” Greg replied, then shrugged. “I never found out the exact amount, since I'm not selling the place. It's a family matter.”

“Two and a half thousand pounds?”

“No, two and a half million,” Greg drily replied, enjoying the Chief Super's sudden cough. “Anyway, sir, it turned out that I already knew the bloke who'd been living in my house. He's... well, he's a bit hard to describe, really, but entirely trustworthy and decent. It's a rather big place, you know...”

“How big?”

“Not quite 6,100 square feet of interior space, plus a small garden,” Greg calmly replied, viciously pleased by Willoughby's choke but trying not to be too obvious about it. “Well, yes, it's bloody huge, and considering my miserable flat, which I've been waiting to get out of for a while now, I'm not really used to so much space, nor do I need it. But I did want to move back into Uncle Francis' old house, fond memories, you know. My tenant had grown attached to it over the last years, though, and so we compromised. Basically, I've bumped down his rent to a half and we share the place; he has his rooms to himself and I have my own. And that's why I guess I'm being vetted. I don't know if I'll have to sign an Official Secrets Act agreement, but I suppose I will. It's because of his work.”


Greg gave him a crooked grin. “Government, sir. I don't know the details. See, I don't have the necessary clearance,” he drily said, “and even if I did, I still wouldn't know about yours, sir. Anyway, when we were talking about hiring a live-in housekeeper my house-mate said that his PA would take care of that because the personnel would have to be vetted according to MI5 standards. As I said before, I sort of thought he was joshing, but I guess he wasn't, after all. And it makes sense that if his bloody cleaning staff has to be vetted, so would the bloke who shares his kitchen and household room. You know, I might drug his cooking sherry or steal from his fridge. Or he from mine; they'd have to make certain that I won't cosh him if he executes a midnight raid on my mousse
au chocolat.”

Willoughby's thin lips twitched at that image, although he quickly pressed them into submission again. “So, Lestrade, you're telling me that one of my DCIs is a multi-millionaire owning property in the middle of Kensington who now lives with a secretive, high-ranking government official with a ridiculously high security clearance?”

“In a nutshell, yeah. Sir. But I'm still the same person; nothing has changed, really, except that I have nicer digs and a lower monthly net income now. Not that I've really spent much of the rent before; a lot of it gets saved for property taxes, insurances, provisions for eventual repairs and stuff. Oh, and the files I take home from work are even safer now than they were before.”

The Chief Super blinked, then sighed. “Lestrade, you wear Marks & Spencer suits and a cheap watch.”

Greg shrugged. “I couldn't do my job half as well if I didn't,” he pointed out. “Besides, I've never been one for ostentation. That's not why I've moved into Phillimore Place.”

“No, I suppose not. I'll still have to request your fiscal statements from Revenue & Customs, you understand.”

“Yeah, sir, go ahead. It's all aboveboard. And consider that I might be the most difficult to bribe copper in the entire building.”

“True, Lestrade, true; there's hardly a bribe worth your attention, is there? I'll prepare your co-workers for the vetting process.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Well, don't let me keep you,” Willoughby's said with a tiny smile.

Greg nodded. “Gotta cut down the paperwork before it starts breeding. Have a nice day, Chief Superintendent.”

“You, too, Lestrade.”

When the door had clicked closed behind one of his best DCIs, Willoughby sighed and shook his head. “Well, fuck me sideways,” he muttered to himself. “Bastard wears M&S and owns a house in the middle of Kensington, who'd have thought?”

Then he realised that he had never asked about the name of the man who was now sharing a house with Lestrade. On second thought, maybe he didn't want to know.

“So, what did the Chief Super want, boss?” DI Michael Dimmock asked with a grin.

Greg sighed and decided he might as well throw his team a few crumbs. They were all coppers, after all; when they smelled a secret, they wouldn't rest until the puzzle was solved. A bit like Sherlock, really, on a much lesser scale – and oh, how Sherlock would take the news was yet another matter.

“It seems I'm being vetted,” he said. “You know that I've moved to a nicer place this weekend?”

“Yeah, boss. Did that go all right?”

“Well enough. I got rid of most of my furniture, manky old stuff that it was. Sophia, Will and the
children helped with the rest. Well, Sophia and Will helped, and the little ones got in the way a lot,” Greg replied with a fond grin.

“So, did you get all new furniture?” Sally asked curiously.

“Nah,” Greg easily replied. “I took most of my uncle's old things out of storage. They're quite a bit nicer and more comfortable than anything I had in the East End. Maybe I can even manage to clear out the storage unit, save some money.”

“Yeah,” Michael said with a grin. “I heard you've got really posh digs now.”

Greg grinned back. “Yeah, but sharing it with the bloke who's been living there for the last twenty-five years. He's reliable enough, a very decent sort and not prone to making a mess. I knew him beforehand, so that's alright, and we both have our own space in the house. He’s some sort of hush-hush government official, though, which is apparently why two suits showed up at the Chief Super's and started asking suspicious questions about me.”

“Willoughby must have been de-ligh-ted,” Michael drily quipped.

Sally laughed. “Yeah, I bet.”

Greg chuckled. “You have no idea. I had no clue what it was all about when I walked up there today. The Chief Super was looking at me like he was measuring my neck for the noose.” He gave a mock shudder, which made the others laugh again. “But I managed to convince him that I'm not on the take,” Greg went on, grinning. “So when two scary people in suits from MI5 corner you and start asking strange, intrusive questions about me, just tell them the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

“You don't want us to sing your praises, boss?”

“Don't start singing, Michael, or they'll end up in A&E with bleeding ears,” Greg joshed. “And just be honest with them,” he added a little more seriously. “You don't have to be nasty, but you'll do me no favour by covering anything up or embellishing things, either. That always comes out in the end, and then they'll just be mad at me and I'll have to move back into my manky little flat. And then I'll be in a really bad mood and take it all out on you.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Sally said with a grin, and Michael nodded.

“And now sho! do some real work, people,” Greg said with faux sternness, “or I'll find some paperwork to drop on your heads.”

With cries of “Run away! Run away!”, the two DIs scampered off, and Greg was virtually certain that in half an hour, the entire division would be informed. At least Sally and Michael were fairly accurate in their gossip, and they both liked him, so it could be much worse.

Then he suddenly realised what he had been forgetting: his family. His parents would be Not Amused, and Sophia and Will would get in a good laugh at his expense, and he honestly didn't know what was worse. With a groan, Greg turned towards the pantry. He really needed a mug of tea now.
Virtual biscuits to anyone who catches the Monty Python reference. :)

Chapter 8

The next morning, Greg found a colourful banner taped to his office wall with the bold inscription, “Best DCI Ever!”, a new mug that read “Fucker in Charge of You Fucking Fucks” and a “Boss of the Year” award, which was either a ground-breaking piece of abstract art or a six-year-old's crafting project spray-painted in gold, in a prominent position on his desk. Greg tended towards the child's crafting project because Dennis was always going on about how creative his little daughter was. Greg grinned widely and decided to leave them there for the moment. It was his team's humorous but honest way of showing their appreciation and support, and although the things were ugly as all get-out, he decided to keep them in the spirit in which they were given. He pushed the award to the back of his desk, right in front of the two visitors' chairs and next to his name sign, and began tackling his emails and the contents of his “in” tray.

For his own vetting interview, he received a very short-notice summons by email, and he made it to Thames House on Millbank with barely enough time to spare. The interview was highly unpleasant and the questions were intrusive and embarrassing, and in the end, Greg had no idea whether he had passed or not. And the bastards hadn't even seen his banner, mug and artsy, or possibly crafty, award.

With a beginning headache, Greg returned to his office, then, with a sudden mischievous grin, lifted his phone to snap a picture of his desk that showed his gifts, including the banner on the wall behind his swivel chair. He made certain to arrange the mug and the award so that the writing was clearly visible, then snapped a shot and sent it to “number untraceable”, which was Mycroft's phone, with the text:

“was vetted, have no idea of success. my team supports me, though. greg”

Half an hour later, he received a reply.

“Congratulations. That's quite an interesting mug. MH”

He texted back,

“thx. was awarded it by the self-proclaimed fucks. must mean that whatever else i am, i'm at least qualified as a fucker. greg”

An hour and a half later, he received another text.

“I was just informed that your vetting was successful. Congratulations again. MH”

“good, then i don't have to move back into that manky flat. now there's no removing me from phillimore place. greg”

“Excellent. Until later, then, Gregory. I shall return home in another day or two. MH”

“looking forward to it. safe travels, mycroft. greg”

Greg hit the “send” button, then re-thought his latest text and covered his face with his hands. How many different kinds of stupid was he? He was sounding like a bloody needy, pining teenage girl, for Christ's sake!
His phone chimed again.

“I as well. Goodbye for now. MH”

Oh. All right then, Greg thought. The warmth that suddenly filled his chest, well, that and a few cups of decent tea, carried him through a dull meeting, an annoying phone call with accounting regarding a screw-up in one of his constable's payslips, two unpleasant emails and a write-up for a press conference.

He was really quite pathetic, he thought, but he was too happy to care.

“You've met someone, Grant,” Sherlock deduced the next day.

“I meet new people every day, sunshine,” Greg drily replied, “especially when I attend a crime scene or go down to the arrest cells.”

“No criminal would cause an inane grin of that magnitude, though,” was the reply, though delivered in a tone more fond than scathing.

Greg gave the mad bastard a smile in return. Instead of reacting to the consulting detective's statement, he asked, “How are you two getting along with DI Haversham?”

Victoria – never Vicky! – Haversham was relatively new to his team, though a transfer from Cardiff rather than a newly minted DI. She was a self-confident, middle-aged woman with a brisk, no-nonsense attitude tempered with a dash of quirky humour that could either clash or work well with Sherlock's idiosyncrasies, and so it was a legitimate question to ask.

The tall detective with the curly black hair rolled his eyes.

John answered in his stead. “She seems competent enough.”

The two men were working together again, and although there still was a certain stiffness between them, they were already falling back into their old roles. There was nothing that suggested the possibility of further violence on John's side, to Greg's relief. Still, he found himself regarding John with a certain caution and covertly eyeing Sherlock for subtle signs of abuse. If the consulting detective noticed, he didn't call him on it, which was fine with Greg.

“Relatively competent,” Sherlock interjected. Compared to his usual venom, that was positively glowing praise, but then, he had mellowed since his return. Since he didn't often have the opportunity any more to work with Greg directly in the field, he had to establish a working relationship with his DIs, and he cooperated quite well with DI Dimmock, well enough with Gregson and was even working towards a truce with Donovan, more or less. There was too much ugliness on both sides between them to ever make for smooth relations between those two, but at least they were mostly getting along in a snarky, sarcastic way. The fact that Victoria Haversham and Sherlock seemed not totally disinclined to work with each other was welcome news, though.

“Well,” John continued, “she's confident enough to admit that she doesn't quite know her way around London just yet and not too proud to accept useful advice. That's a plus in my books. Besides, she doesn't put up with a lot of shite and seems to be a decent person all around.”

“I suppose she will have to do,” Sherlock said with a dramatic, put-upon sigh.

Greg and John exchanged a grin.
“You still haven’t told me why you are so revoltingly jolly, Graham,” the detective addressed Greg.

The older man smiled, having given up on correcting the inconsiderate prat. “Deduce away, Your Highness,” he invited with a grin.

“You haven't been sleeping in your poor excuse for a flat for three days,” Sherlock began.

Greg's grin widened.

“Oh. You've moved out, then?”

“Yes, Sherlock.”

“High time, too, mate,” John cheerfully declared. “You deserve better digs than that dingy place.”

“Thanks, I like to think so, too.”

“Better area,” Sherlock concluded, “and much closer to the Yard.”

“How do you figure that?” John asked. After all those years, he was still fascinated by the thought process of his former flatmate's deductions, and Greg had to admit, John was getting better at it himself.

“His trousers usually looked so horrid because he used to spend quite a lot of time squeezed in a tiny space on the tube in the morning.”

“I'm still taking the tube, sunshine.”

“Yes, but it's not quite as full and on average, the other commuters put more effort into their personal hygiene, so you're not living in the East End any more. Your commute is shorter and less stressful, that means you have more time to yourself in the morning, too. All in all, you look more relaxed and less rumpled, or at least you did this morning before your workday started,” the consulting detective elaborated.

After the day Greg had had, that was a legitimate amendment, and he nodded peaceably.

“Good on you, mate,” John said with a friendly smile. “Congrats.”

“Thanks, John,” Greg replied, smiling back. He was really glad about the way things had improved between these two, although some of the remaining tension might be masked right now by the euphoria brought on by successfully solving a case. Anyway, John was willing to join Sherlock at crime scenes again, and that was certainly a positive sign.

His phone beeped, and he looked at the text and frowned. “Sorry, I've got to take care of this. Good job on the case, and please go and make your statements now, you two.”

Sherlock huffed dramatically at the prospect of paperwork. “Dull.”

“Catch you in a few days for a pint, John?”

“Sure, Greg. Don't let the paper dragon on your desk slay you!” John said with a grin.

“Next George will be demanding sainthood,” Sherlock muttered, but with an upwards twist to the corners of his mouth.

“Oh ha ha,” Greg drily replied, his dark brown eyes laughing, and fondly waved the two men out of
his office. That evening or maybe the next, Mycroft would come home, and in spite of his anticipation, Sherlock hadn't deduced it. Perhaps he would have if he hadn't been cut short; sooner or later he inevitably would, and telling Sherlock might be less painful than having him burst out with an ill-timed deduction. On the other hand, watching the brilliant consultant detective in a state of less than his usual omniscience was really amusing. Greg would have to talk to Mycroft about how to handle that. He smiled again, that silly smile that Sherlock had picked up on so easily, the perceptive plonker, and didn't even bother to hide it in the privacy of his office.

Then he sighed and prepared to call the obnoxious journalist back. He almost wished he were at the bank of the Thames with Sally, slogging through the chilly mud and looking for more body parts near the place where a severed human leg had been washed ashore. It certainly sounded like a lot more fun than this. Sherlock would probably think so, too, so he wouldn't tell him about the body parts until he had turned in his report like a good boy. He'd learned that strategy after years of frustrating experiences with the world's only consulting detective.

Now, back to the Daily Fail and the berk – and yes, Greg did recall the etymology perfectly, thank you very much – of a reporter who had all the morals and integrity of an sewer rat. Less, probably; rats were supposed to be social animals and rather good parents, weren't they? He wondered why anyone even read that rag. Greg would actually have to record their conversation and make the berk aware of it, too, to avoid having his words twisted and taken out of context. There had to be a special circle of hell reserved for bad journalists, he was virtually certain of it.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Sorry for not updating for a few days; RL caught up with me. Also, I was worried about my original chapter 9, in which Greg interviews a potential housekeeper. I still like it, but since the woman won't become a part of the ongoing story, I decided to take it out and post it as a separate story. This chapter is about another interview, and Mycroft still isn't back and I think that one of those is enough. For me, it still makes sense to leave it in because this housekeeper will become a minor character. Tell me what you think, though.
And I promise Mycroft will be back soon! :)

9.

That evening, Anthea, Mycroft's PA, sent over a candidate for the open housekeeper position. The woman had survived the vetting, so she was alright by security standards. Anthea had already assured him that she was also a competent cook and cleaner, and had heavily intimated that Mr Holmes trusted her choice. Greg had still insisted on a personal interview, at least a short one. The woman was going to live under his roof, after all, and he at least wanted to find out whether they would feel comfortable enough around each other. He got the distinct impression that Anthea – or whatever her name really was – was annoyed at him for his insistence, but this was the place were he was going to bloody live and sleep, and so she could take her opinions and stuff them up where the sun didn't shine. He had put that in less crass but still very clear words, and she had grudgingly acquiesced. Perhaps his day had been just a trifle long and frustrating, and perhaps he should make his harshness up to her – if the housekeeper made the cut.

She didn't.

Ms Scott was a pretty, very feminine blonde in her middle to late twenties, and she wasn't dressed inappropriately, but something about the way she looked at him and moved immediately put Greg's on edge. His professional instincts triggered, he conducted their interview much like that of a witness who was also a potential suspect. In the end, he was convinced that the inappropriately flirtatious woman with a predatory undertone was a gold-digger at best and a criminal at worst, and Greg didn't hesitate to inform Anthea of that fact and insist on an interview with another housekeeper candidate. It was an unpleasant call, but Greg prevailed. He was only sorry that Mycroft hadn't been there for the interview; that would have been interesting in the sense of the old Chinese curse.

The next day turned out to be rather productive for Greg. Sally had agreed to let Sherlock in on the case with the severed body parts, and Sherlock was grinning as gleefully as a child on Christmas morning, which made John grin as well with one part exasperation and two parts fond amusement. Immediately, Sherlock's vast mind became focused on the ghoulish mystery and he didn't bother asking about Greg's potential relationship any more, especially since it must have been clear at a
glance that Greg still spent his evenings pathetically alone.

Work was slow that day, and so Greg ordered Chinese for lunch for his whole team and thanked them for their support during his vetting process, especially for creatively decorating his office.

This caused a lot of laughs and faux hurt and injured faces when he did take down the glaringly colourful banner, but he declared he would keep the mug. He also posed for a picture for Dennis' daughter with the abstract golden award she had crafted for him in his hands and a wide grin on his face. He suspected there were at least a few empty toilet paper rolls involved in the structure. Then he put the ugly thing back on his desk and took another picture with it right next to his name plaque for the six-year-old girl. If she was anything like his niece, those pictures would make her feel happy and proud, and that was the least he could do in return for her effort.

Superintendent Allan, a slightly fussy older man but a decent enough person and superior underneath it all, came by, attracted by the commotion, and was promptly handed a plate full of chow mein and dim sum and exhorted to eat. He did express his concern about the political correctness of the mug, but was quickly reassured by the fucks who had bought it that it was their only chance to call their DCI a fucker and get away with it. Greg, all the while, was grinning cheekily. When he asked Superintendent Allan with a face of concerned kindliness if he was feeling left out and if he wanted a mug of his own, the man sputtered and soon after found an excuse to leave. His subordinates knew better than to laugh at their sometimes rather stuffy Super's retreating back, but there were quite a few mischievous grins to be seen.

Sally, her Sergeant Brian Longfellow, who was actually a comically short man, just barely regulation height, Sherlock and John came in just in time to catch the tail end of lunch, and it was funny to see how John manipulated his friend into eating even while he was on a case. Sally, suppressing her grin, helped by saying that Sherlock might as well leave because he was putting her off her sweet-and-sour shrimps. Sherlock, being the same contrary bastard as usual, immediately settled down for some food, including some of Sally's prized shrimps. When he was done, though, he winked at her, causing them all to laugh because he had clearly seen through the ruse right from the start.

Greg was secretly relieved; this new, snarky playfulness between Sherlock and Sally was much better than their usual exchange of painful poisoned darts. If this lasted – please, God, let it last! – his life might become just a little easier.

Throughout the day, Greg hadn't heard from Mycroft, and so he was trying to not get his hopes up about the other man returning home that evening. At least he'd have a distraction in the shape of another job interview, he thought as he sat on the tube during his way home.

After Anthea's description, Greg had expected poor Mrs Chowdhury to look like a half-ogre. True, she clearly hadn't stepped off a catwalk or out of a Bollywood film, but she was an average-looking, wiry little woman of nearly indeterminable age who carried herself proudly and had the typical Indian brown skin and brown eyes, clever, attentive but essentially kind and not at all calculating eyes. Her long hair had been a pure shiny blue-black once, but now she died it with henna, which left the black as it was and rather stylishly brought out her white streaks in an auburn sort of red. Her dress, mannerisms and slightly accented speech were crisp and matter-of-fact, but there were a quiet dignity and a sparkle of humour about her that Greg liked immediately.
Contrary to Ms Scott the day before, Mrs Chowdhury didn't have any old-fashioned views about men not being allowed to touch anything in the kitchen, and they shared a few pleasant minutes chatting about food preparations and the cuisines of different countries, both interested in expanding their repertoires and learning from each other. Anthea had done the woman another injustice when she'd mentioned that Mrs Chowdhury only cooked English and Indian food. Modern India was a conglomerate of an incredible number of kingdoms and states, and there were more than a hundred different languages spoken on the subcontinent. Their potential new housekeeper had mastered Indian cuisines from three different major regions, and Greg was impressed. He was also pleased when she viewed the contents of his fridge, this time by his explicit invitation, and remarked that he had a good eye for quality in fruits and vegetables.

She was more interested in the kitchen appliances and the utility room than the value of the crockery or furniture, and both rooms were indeed very well equipped with anything a housekeeper's heart might desire.

Greg led her on a cursory tour of the house, focusing on showing her the shared space and his own rooms rather than Mycroft's, and he explained to her that each of them had his own space and that he didn't wish to intrude. She seemed to respect that, and the way she looked around and the questions she asked centred around aspects of cleaning and housekeeping.

When he showed her his bedroom, study and bathroom on the second floor, he actually earned a praise for being tidy, which made him smile but quickly assure her that for all he knew, Mr Holmes was a tidy person as well. Sherlock had once mentioned that Mycroft suffered from OCD, but he also constantly claimed that his brother was fat when he clearly wasn't, the berk, so Greg had no idea whether that was true or not. The auburn-haired man did seem very neat, even fastidious from all he had observed, though.

Greg had saved the third floor for last and hoped that she would like it. Since the rooms were directly under the roof, there was a slope to the ceiling, and the windows weren't as large as in the rest of the house, either. Still, he had always found it a cozy, comfortable place as a child, and even looking around now with the more critical eyes of a grown-up, he didn't find much to object to.

Excellent, subtle lighting, installed when the former attic had been turned into living quarters, made up for the smaller windows, as did several strategically placed mirrors. His movers had done quite a good job, too. The furniture he had chosen from his storage was originally taken from the lady of the house's rooms, all delicately turned light wood and airy gauze. It was a generous space, and with the movable partitions, it could be optically turned into two rooms instead of one. The so-called kitchenette was much larger, more modern and better equipped than Greg's old kitchen in the East End had been, and the bathroom met the same luxurious standard as any other bathroom in the house. There even was a small storage room available.

Mrs Chowdhury looked around with a stunned expression, and Greg was quick to reassure her that of course she could bring her own furniture if she preferred and give the place any personal touch that she wished, including painting the walls any colour she liked. Also, he said, she was of course welcome in the shared kitchen downstairs at any time. For some reason, all his well-meant reassurances made her look only more stunned. When he was about to ask her to sit down and get her a glass of water from the kitchen, she finally replied, her dark eyes suspiciously shiny.

“This is very lovely, Mr Lestrade,” she said, her alto voice slightly scratchy.

“You like it?” he asked with a hesitant smile.
This caused her to laugh warmly. “It's beautiful, I'll live like a princess,” she said.

“That's good, right?”

“Very good,” she assured him with a fond smile. “You're a good man, Mr Lestrade.”

He grinned at her. “Okay, then. Only good people in this house.”

They laughed and went back downstairs together.

Anthea had told him that Mycroft's agreement was a mere formality, but he thought it would be best to wait with the formalisation of the contract until the two of them had met, because personal chemistry was important, too. Pending Mycroft's agreement, he had found his housekeeper. He hadn't had one since he had moved out of his parents' house right after school, and it was an odd feeling to sort of return to the lifestyle he had chosen to leave behind. But it wasn't quite the same; it was going to be much, much better.
When Mrs Chowdhury had left and taken her prosaic but warm presence with her, the house suddenly felt very large and lonely again. Greg kept the telly running as he shelved the last of his books to his satisfaction, then fetched himself a cider and sat down on the slightly worn and extremely comfortable brown Chesterfield in his living room with a sigh. It was bigger than his entire flat had been, but the bright wooden ceiling and the polished parquet floor gave the room an air of warmth. He hadn't lit the fireplace yet, but he was quite happy to have it; it would be wonderfully warm and cosy once it got cold outside. A fireplace was one of the things he had missed in his ugly flat, right along with an unlimited, reliable supply of warm water in the shower. Also, the alcove at the large windows was great. He had put two armchairs and a low table there, making it a comfortable nook to simply curl up and read when the mood stuck him. Right now, it was getting dark outside, though, and so he didn't feel like it. The documentary about the Maya he had been half watching came to an end and there only seemed to be rubbish on, so he restlessly walked over to the kitchen. His earlier conversation with Mrs Chowdhury had made him think about French food, and he suddenly found himself in the mood for baking.

The house had an excellent wireless internet connection everywhere, and so he went upstairs to fetch his laptop for recipes and music. Baking was relaxing sometimes, and certainly better than sitting around feeling sorry for himself. Making certain that he had everything he needed, he put on a playlist of cheerful Debussy pieces and got started.

Mycroft came across him about an hour later when Greg, wearing a smudge of dark chocolate on his right cheek, was just pulling a thin, dark cake in a ceramic pie dish out of the oven that smelled simply delicious.

“Good evening, and is that a tarte au chocolat, Gregory?” he asked with a smile.

“Hello, Mycroft. Welcome back!” Greg cheerfully replied as he slid the tarte on the cooling rack. He was glad that this made a good excuse for turning his back for a few moments, just long enough to tamp down his incandescent joy to something more socially acceptable.

“I already feel rather welcome,” the slightly younger man replied, the tired lines on his face relaxing into something softer.

Greg saw it and couldn't help smiling. “Good,” he simply said as he moved over to the electric kettle to make tea. “It's all part of my dastardly plan, of course.”

“Of course,” Mycroft drily replied, but he didn't tense. Instead he sat down at the table with a content sigh. “From the exquisite smell alone, it might be working. I hope you shan't weasel too many great concessions out of me in my compromised state.”

Greg chuckled. “Actually, it's about the housekeeper.”

“Ah?”

“I didn't like the first one Anthea sent along,” he admitted, “and she was a bit put out with me, but I swear, I didn't object just to be contrary.”

“Anthea said she was quite attractive,” was the slightly cautious reply.

“About as attractive as a blue-ringed octopus,” Greg grimly stated. “Pretty but highly poisonous, although those little buggers are much more adorable, actually. Clever, too. Well, something went wrong with her vetting process, so it's just as well that I objected. By the way, the security systems have been changed; I have the instructions on my laptop right there, if you're interested.”

“That was very conscientious of you, Gregory,” Mycroft observed. “Anthea has already alerted me to the change, however, and I have familiarised myself with the new setup.”

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Greg smiled as he poured the water, cooled down from its boil to the correct temperature, into the teapot and set the timer. “I was just happy that I didn't have to memorise a new procedure and number code,” he admitted. “Anyway, I interviewed another candidate tonight, and I like her. She
seems very competent, polite and professional enough but also a decent, trustworthy person, and I won't feel I'll have to lock my door against predators at night.”
Mycroft chuckled but left the last statement uncommented. “Ah, yes, the woman with the Indian name.”
“Yeah, Mrs Chowdhury. She cooks mostly traditional English and several different kinds of Indian regional food,” Greg added, “which Anthea thought might be a sticking point for you.”
The timer chimed, and Greg removed the tea leaves from the pot.
“Are you attempting to convince me that you can cover the French cuisine when required?”
Mycroft asked, an elegant eyebrow raised but amusement evident in the crinkling of his eyes.
Greg put on his oven mitts again and walked over to the table with the still hot ceramic pie dish in his hands, which he then proceeded to move around enticingly in the vicinity of Mycroft's long and keen nose.
“Only attempting?” he asked mischievously.
“Get thee from hence, evil seducer!” the taller man dramatically exclaimed. “Thou shalt not weaken my resolve! Thou shalt... Oh, bugger. Thou shalt serve me a slice immediately.”
“Right away,” Greg replied with a wide smile as he went to collect plates, small dessert forks and everything else they needed for a very belated low tea.
He only cut them very narrow slices, since the tarte mainly consisted of warm, chewy chocolate that melted divinely in the mouth but was rather filling for the stomach. Then he placed a handful of fresh raspberries on the side of each slice to add something fruity and slightly tart to the flavour. Neither of them favoured whipped cream.
Mycroft delicately ate a morsel and closed his eyes in enjoyment, a sight that made Greg's heart race. His face was so unguarded, so beautiful, so full of pleasure, so... so much like something he might get to see one day in the bedroom if he was a very, very lucky man, and Greg swallowed painfully and brought his sudden physical reaction under brutal control. Mycroft was his friend, so guarded and trusting, so strong and fragile, and he would never betray that trust and make him uncomfortable, even if it killed him.
He ate a bite of the tarte himself, evaluating it critically from colour to taste to texture, and it was pretty good, even if he said so himself. The concentration on the food and what Mycroft, the consummate gourmet, might think of it, helped him will down his unwanted erection and push away his inappropriate thoughts and feelings.
“Heavenly,” Mycroft finally pronounced. “The tarte alone is lovely; in combination with the raspberries, it's truly inspired.”
Greg couldn't help flushing slightly with the compliment. “Thank you.”
“How did you know I was returning tonight?” the taller man asked after a pause, sounding slightly reluctant.
“I didn't,” Greg admitted. “I was just feeling the need to do something productive and rewarding. On some days, paperwork just doesn't cut it, you know. Also, this tarte keeps rather well; it'll still be delicious tomorrow or even the day after.”
“Gregory, you drive a hard bargain.” Mycroft said with a smile. “I should still like to meet the housekeeper, but if I don't find her immediately repulsive, which I do not expect – you are, after all, an apt judge of character – I shall agree to her employment immediately.”
“I was only joking,” Greg said, all of sudden a bit insecure. “Choosing a live-in housekeeper is an important, long-term decision, and one you shouldn't make just to placate me.”
Mycroft smiled at him reassuringly. “I am aware, Gregory. As I said, if I don't feel comfortable with Mrs Chowdhury, I shall make my objections known immediately.”
“Good,” the silver-haired man replied, satisfied, and took another bite of the tarte.
He and Mycroft chatting companionably in the kitchen, sharing food after a long day of work – that was even more wonderful than he had hoped it would be.
“Take a piece to Anthea tomorrow, if you'd like,” he said with a smile. “She has done quick work with the alarm system, and she also did a good job sending over Mrs Chowdhury.”
“A peace offering, Gregory?”
“... Perhaps.”
Mycroft chuckled, amused, then reached across the table to remove the chocolate smear on the other man's cheek without thinking.
Greg's breath caught, and he sat perfectly still, his eyes wide.
“Sorry,” Mycroft self-consciously said, dropping his hand immediately. “It's just, you have a bit of molten chocolate there.”
Greg swallowed. “No, please, go on, if you don't mind. You can see it better.”
His smile was a little shaky, but Mycroft lifted his hand again, almost shyly, and wiped away the dark chocolate. Then he fastidiously cleaned his fingers on his napkin and cleared his throat. “That's better.”
“Thank you,” Greg said in a voice that tried to make sound normal, unconcerned, but still it came out a bit lower, slightly more husky. At least he managed not to flush.
For a moment, their gazes connected, so intensely it bordered on uncomfortable, and they both looked away at the same time.
For a moment, there was only silence between them, and this time it was charged.
“I've been to Surrey this afternoon,” Mycroft said, quite out of the blue, “at a family cottage that is mostly unused, and I sometimes spend time there, especially when I need to relax after a few particularly strained days.”
Greg, not knowing what to reply or even think, simply nodded encouragingly.
The other man hesitantly went on, “Today, however, I felt the wish to return to London. I have picked up a few of my personal belongings, mostly books and a few old films, and brought them with me. Now that you are here, Gregory, this house is...”
His voice trailed off.
After several long moments, Greg continued that train of thought. “Not so lonely? More comfortable?”
“Yes,” the other man admitted.
Greg smiled at him softly. “I felt the same. The house was empty before you came home. It's a bit absurd, because I haven't lived with anybody for almost five years and we haven't even spent one night under the same roof, but somehow, I...”
“You missed me?” Mycroft finished with a slight smile.
“Yes,” Greg honestly replied.
“I'll never understand why, but I am glad of it nevertheless,” the auburn-haired man reluctantly admitted.
Greg shook his head fondly. “We're a pair of idiots, Mycroft, but it seems that together we're a happier pair of idiots, so let's not question it or have second thoughts. I think you're a pretty great person, but I'm not really one for florid words myself, and I'd only make a fool of myself if I tried to explain – but you are a wonderful friend and I'm very glad of your company. Please don't doubt that, don't doubt yourself.”
“I value your friendship greatly as well, and you as a person,” Mycroft replied with painful stiffness and a deep underlying honesty.
“Well, that's good, then,” Greg simply replied. “We'll get more used to each other, more familiar with each other's habits soon enough, and it'll all seem more natural.”
“Unless you come to despise me,” Mycroft said, still painfully honest. “They say, after all, that familiarity breeds contempt.”
Greg sighed. “I don't know who ‘they’ are, but please tell me if you ever find out, because I'm going to visit them and deliver a very satisfying punch in their faces.”
The other man's smile came out weak, and Greg asked, worried, “Mycroft, do you think you'll grow to despise me?”
“No,” he sincerely replied. “I might, though, if you start shooting the walls or leave dirty socks lying around,” he added on a lighter note, his smile growing more genuine.
Greg grinned. “Those are serious points you're making,” he admitted playfully. “Do you think you can keep your own socks and firearms contained?”
“For you, I shall heroically make the attempt,” Mycroft replied, his lips twitching.
“Good. And, look, if I ever do something that gets on your nerves, please tell me and we'll work it out. And I'll do the same, be open with you. We can work with that, Mycroft.”
The taller man exhaled and let go of some of the tension that had sneaked into his neck and shoulder muscles. “Yes, I agree. We are reasonable adults negotiating from positions of mutual friendship and goodwill. It will work.”
That sounded a bit more businesslike than strictly necessary, but pleasingly determined. Besides, formal negotiations were what Mycroft was comfortable with and very, very good at, and Greg welcomed the sentiment.
“Good,” he simply said, then added, “I'm glad you came home tonight. As I said, the house is much more welcoming with you here, too.”
“I am glad as well.”
They sipped the rest of their tea and ate the last crumbs of their slices of tarte in companionable silence, and the only other words they spoke were to say good night.
Greg went to bed happier than he could remember in a very long time.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

11.

The next morning, Greg was cutting up fresh fruit and making toast when Mycroft walked into the kitchen. Greg had never seen him in anything less than a perfectly tailored, perfectly pressed, immaculate three-piece suit, but in the mornings, he apparently wasn't above wearing a silken dressing gown over a pair of very proper navy pyjamas with narrow white stripes and probably an insanely high thread count. His hair and teeth had clearly been brushed, but there still was a small and very alluring vestige of tousled sleepiness around him. Greg couldn't help smiling, but of course he would never say out loud that the other man was utterly adorable, because it was far too likely that he would never get to see this lovely sight again.

Mycroft also was a little grumpy and not very talkative before his first or even second cup of tea, which Greg found adorable as well. He supplied his house-mate with freshly brewed English Breakfast tea with just a dash of milk, a slice of toast, a small bowl of fruit and some yoghurt with honey and chopped almonds while he tried to tease out of the other man what he liked for breakfast.

Mycroft started sipping and nibbling mechanically, not quite aware of what he was doing, and Greg's heart felt so light that it was threatening to float away.

"Much obliged, Gregory," Mycroft finally said after his second cup of tea. "I'm sorry, I'm not the best company in the morning."

Greg picked up easily on his slightly defensive tone. "Still much better than eating alone," he replied lightly. "I try to have a healthy breakfast every morning; it's just not as easy to keep it up if it's only for myself. Do you even like this, or do you prefer a full English fry-up?"

Mycroft chuckled. "No, this is perfect. I need to be alert at work, and that's hardly feasible with a stomach full of greasy food. But I don't really expect you to do this for me."

Greg grinned and delivered a very credible Mrs Hudson impersonation. "Not your housekeeper, dear," he said, pitching his voice as high as he could.

The taller man chuckled and took another sip of his excellently brewed tea. "And yet Sherlock wraps the poor woman around his thumb again every single time."

Greg's lips twitched. "The perils of having a Holmes in the house," he drily said. "Dangerously charming buggers, those, if they put their considerable minds to it. Fortunately, they're a rare breed; I don't know if the world could survive them in much greater numbers."

Mycroft smiled, although something about that statement seemed to bother him.

Greg regarded him for a moment, then decided to change the topic slightly, just enough to make the subtle tension go away. "At any rate," he drily added, "John seemed to enjoy feeding his Sherlock Domesticus, even though I hear they are slightly hard to care for and known for running away or leaving messes in the kitchen and living-room."
Mycroft chuckled, the tension leaving his shoulders, and Greg silently congratulated himself.

“John’s been joining him on more crime scenes again,” Greg gently went on. “I think those two are truly managing to patch up their friendship, thank Christ. Don’t tell John, but I think he never stopped missing Baker Street and Sherlock, even when he was with Mary.”

“And now he is missing Mary and feeling guilty because he’s enjoying himself again,” Mycroft agreed with a sigh.

“In the end,” Greg said, “the little ones will have to figure it out for themselves.”

Mycroft chuckled again. “The little ones.”

“I hate to break it to you,” Greg replied with a small smile, “but your brother may be just the tiniest bit juvenile.”

“Truly? I’m devastated,” the older Holmes declared tragically and pressed his hand to his chest.

“And John's just as mad as he is,” Greg added. “Although Rosie is pretty cute, and rather smart for a baby. Give her five or six years, and she'll be more mature than either of them, mark my words.”

“Sadly, you may be right, Gregory,” Mycroft proclaimed in the same tragic tone. “I fear for the state of the world.”

They looked at each other and chuckled, then rose together to put the dishes in the dishwasher and the remaining fruit and yoghurt into the fridge.

“Oh, Mycroft?” Greg casually asked.

The other man turned, his eyes suddenly sharpening.

“About the vetting process...”

“Ah. I had wondered when you would be asking. Anthea reported you were angry,” was the very cautious reply.

“I’m not angry,” Greg said, “or at least not any more, now that I’ve had some time to think about it. Still, the process was pretty intrusive, and I would have appreciated a heads-up at least. The first thing I heard about it was when the Chief Super called me on the carpet. He connected the vetting inquiry to my moving to better accommodations, and...”

“He suspected you of taking bribes,” Mycroft finished with a sigh. “My sincere apologies, that really did not go as intended. Weren't you briefed beforehand?”

“No,” Greg simply replied. “Don't worry about that, though. It's not your fault, you weren't even in the country. As I said, I'm not angry. It was just, I'd had a pretty stressful time of it, and then Anthea told me on the phone that I'd been vetted to a higher standard, so I was annoyed at first. It was mostly about being left in the dark, though, and unable to forewarn my family. Maman wasn't exactly amused, and I got quite an earful from her. But I would have agreed to the vetting, you know, if given the chance.”

“Oh, Gregory. This was honestly not my intention, and I apologise most abjectly,” Mycroft said, and there was a minute hardness around his lips and in his intelligent blue eyes that indicated that someone was going to catch a right bollocking for that oversight.
“It's over and done with, so try not to decapitate your people. In fact, give Anthea a good slice of the chocolate tarte from me, and take one for yourself, too.” Greg answered, then started grinning. “So, am I really more important to you than, say, a live-in housekeeper?”

“You are,” Mycroft admitted, almost bashfully, “and I hope that you will be even more so in the future. It seemed wasteful to subject you to one vetting process only to have another, more severe one performed not all that much later. I still believe the idea had merit; only the execution was faulty.”

Greg's smile became even wider. “All right, then. See, this is why I couldn't stay mad. Just talk to me next time so that I can see it coming.”

“Of course. Is there a need to smooth things over with your Chief Superintendent?” Mycroft asked with a reluctant smile.

“No, it's all right. He's going to access my fiscal records, and since everything I've done was entirely aboveboard, I have nothing to fear,” Greg reassured him. “Looking back, it was even kind of funny. The face the Chief Super made when he realised that one of his DCIs owns property worth a couple of million pounds right in the middle of Kensington... I would have been tempted to laugh if I hadn't been so shaken up by the situation.” Greg chuckled. “You should have heard him. ‘But Lestrade, you wear Marks & Spencers suits and a cheap watch!’ I told him that I couldn't do my job half as well if I didn't.”

Mycroft smiled reluctantly, not quite resistant to his friend's irrepressible sense of humour. “Still, you shouldn't have to have been subjected to the indignity,” he insisted.

Greg smiled at him warmly. “If I'm allowed to be important to you now, it was worth it.”

And Mycroft, shyly pleased, smiled back.

Over the next few weeks, several things changed but many staid the same.

Mrs Chowdhury came to live with them, having gained Mycroft's approval, and the three of them quickly settled into a pleasant, comfortable rhythm.

Greg was pleased not to have to do his own washing and ironing any more, but on occasion he would still cook or bake, and often he and the housekeeper made breakfast together, listening to a wide variety of music and chatting easily before a grumpy Mycroft made it downstairs and had to be pacified with an offering of a cup of tea or two.

Mrs Chowdhury was a quiet, maternal person by nature with an occasional streak of benign mischief, and she quickly took the two men under her wings. She wasn't even very much older than Greg, but she could have been their mother in many ways, making certain they had packed lunches and excellent home-cooked food waiting for them after a long day. She insisted on a quick call or text message when they didn't make it in time for dinner; in those cases, she plated and covered the food and left it in the fridge with heating instructions. If she was home and hadn't yet given up and gone to bed, she would warm the food herself and coddle her overworked employers a bit.

She never ate lunch or dinner with the two men, claiming it was unprofessional, but she could occasionally be convinced to join them at the breakfast table and sometimes for a casual tea.
Greg and Mycroft turned their attentions on the former dining room next to the kitchen, and their plans to convert it into their combined library were coming along nicely. Greg was content to take Uncle Francis' beautifully crafted antique cherry-wood bookshelves and some sofas, armchairs, Persian rugs and reading lamps out of storage, and the place was soon very comfortably furnished to the taste of both of them.

Mycroft suggested replacing the stylish but cold-looking chrome halogen lamps on the upper ground floor hallway with two of the antique chandeliers he had seen in the storage unit. Greg thought that was an excellent idea, although it wasn't his floor and he only ever passed through, but in his opinion those things were there to be used and enjoyed. He found a business to clean the crystals and retrofit the chandeliers with LED lighting, and as soon as they were done, they would be hung in the hallway by a professional electrician because of all that incredibly heavy faceted glass.

Greg offered Mycroft the use of more of his antique furniture if he ever got tired of the modern one, and they loosely planned another excursion to the storage unit, now a much smaller one in the same former warehouse. He'd probably leave the formal sitting room as it was, but there was at least one room he was considering a change for.

In contrast to the cold elegance of chrome, glass and black leather upstairs in his receiving rooms, Mycroft clearly cherished the warm, gently aged comfort of their new library, and both men regularly spent time there in the evening, together, if their work schedules permitted. Sometimes they would work on their folders or laptops, sometimes read or speak, but they were always in good company and content.

On a few occasions, they would go to Greg's living room and watch a film together; Mycroft's tastes seemed to run to old black-and-white films, but he enjoyed a few modern productions or even a well-made series on occasion. Greg's tastes were wider, but he didn't mind watching those of Mycroft's favourites if he liked them, too, which was often the case.

Greg was home more often than Mycroft, and so he had ample opportunity to move the many paintings and watercolours around before he finally decided where to hang them. Some of them went back into his now much smaller storage unit because he also hung up several photos of his sister and her husband, many of their two children and a few of his parents.

He invited his family one afternoon, but this turned out one of those crazy weeks where Mycroft had to work for several days straight, and so Greg's parents, Sophia, Will and little Lyra and Daniel only met Mrs Chowdhury. The children took to her instantly; Sophia immediately recognised her maternal streak and Will seemed to find her quite pleasant as well. Greg's parents, the Lady Blanche and the Honourable Lionel de Lestrade, were a bit more distant to servants habitually, but they appreciated the clean and well-kept house, the excellent food and the overall competence of his new housekeeper.

Mrs Chowdhury for her part was formally polite to the adult visitors and warm to the children, and didn't mind at all when they followed her around and asked her questions in Lyra's case, or wanted to be picked up in Dan's.

All in all, the afternoon and early evening went well, and Greg only wished that Mycroft could have met his family. He would have charmed the older de Lestrades in a heartbeat and immediately found interesting topics to converse about with the Kingsburys; only the children might have been out of his usual comfort zone, but then, he was used to dealing with Sherlock at his most childish and should be able to manage nicely with every other toddler.
Sophia, Will and the children left after supper. Dan was already asleep and was easy to stow away in his baby safe, but Lyra clung to Uncle Greg tiredly before he buckled her up in her car seat and noisily kissed her cheek noisily multiple times until she giggled. She would soon be out like a light, too, soothed to sleep by the moving car a few minutes into the drive back to Hampstead. Greg traded a few good-natured insults with his brother-in-law and hugged his sister gently, fondly, and after waving off their Volvo he returned inside and joined his parents in the library.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Greg’s father discovers Mycroft's books, and Greg and his mother have a talk.
While Greg bid his sister and her family good-bye, Lionel had helped himself to Mycroft's nicely aged Port Ellen, and Greg hoped that his housemate wouldn't mind too much. Perhaps he should buy him a new bottle, although he feared that a scotch of this age might be more of a month's of his DCI salary's worth, if he even managed to lay hands on one that was. What a shame that distillery had closed; their whisky was still hard to match.

With a small, fond shake of his head, he watched his father, who was avidly regarding the spines of Mycroft's books; of course, he'd been in Uncle Francis' house often enough before to be quite familiar with Greg's own portion of this small but exclusive library. With a smile, he took a pair of white cotton gloves out of the writing table's drawer and handed it to his father, who happily smiled back, put the gloves on and went to inspect the books more closely. This, Mycroft certainly wouldn't mind as long as his books were treated with caution and respect, and Lionel de Lestrade was a seasoned bibliophile.

Greg then offered his mother a cream sherry, from his own supply this time, and sat on the hunter-green Chesterfield with her.

“I'm very glad you've moved back into this place, Gregory,” his mother said with a smile.

“I as well, Maman,” he replied, smiling back at her. Having his elegant mother over at the shabby East End flat had been a nightmare of uncomfortable silences, and it had happened only once. After that, family gatherings always took place in the country.

“Was this very intrusive vetting really worth it?” she cautiously enquired after a pause.

Greg nodded. “Yes. Finding a reliable, trustworthy housemate is not an easy thing. This way, I still get half of the previous rent, which means I have all the costs for the house covered. I do have quite a few reserves and I could have managed on my own, but this really feels much more comfortable.”

She eyed him sharply and for a moment he wondered if she was going to call him out on his evasion tactics, but then she simply sighed. “You were never one to accept help, always so bullheaded and proud.”

“I don't know,” he thoughtfully replied. “I may have never accepted charity, but I've always been glad of your support, Maman. I know that for a long time you weren't happy about the way I was managing my life, but you've never nagged me to death as other parents might have. And see where I'm now, comfortable in a career I love and back in the family home. It all just took some time and a wrong turn or two.”

“Janet,” she said with surprising vitriol, considering that the divorce had gone through ages ago and she'd always been faultlessly polite to his wife during their marriage. “That social-climbing, cheating...” Blanche visibly stopped herself and exhaled slowly. “She stole the best years of your life, Grégoire,” she added in an almost normal tone.
He smiled at her fondly as he shrugged. “We loved each other once, or at least I believed so at the
time. It was hard to learn that she didn't really want me as I was but as the shape of the person she
was hoping to bend me into.”

“Every generation has the right to make its own mistakes,” she said philosophically. “But how it hurt
to stand at the sidelines and watch you being torn apart, mon pauvre petit. And then you moved into
that dump of a flat, and I... oh Grégoire. For a while I was daily expecting the news that you'd got
yourself honourably killed in service to the public.”

“Maman,” he murmured and enveloped her into a gentle, loving embrace. “I was... I was in a bad
place for a while and I buried myself in my work, but I'd never have done that on purpose, je vous
assure. I'm sorry I worried you. Je suis désolé.”

“Oh, Grégoire, dear.”

For all her elegance and poise and sometimes overwhelming personality, she was, deep down, as
vulnerable as anyone else, perhaps even more so. For a fleeting moment, he compared her to Mycroft
and was struck with parallels he had never seen before but suddenly made quite a lot of sense.

“What is it, mon cher fils?” she asked, a smile returned to her face, not entirely genuine but real
enough. She wouldn't tolerate being called on her perceived weakness, and so he let it go.

“I just realised,” he said, “that my housemate, Mycroft, is a bit like you.”

She laughed, bright, bell-like, her eyes alight with sudden humour and quite a bit of fondness, and
shook her perfectly coiffed brown and silver head. “You, though, mon fils, remind me of your father
sometimes.”

He blinked at her. “A rabid bibliophile almost drunk on the discovery of new treasures?”

She laughed again, because that was really what Lionel was looking like right now, nearly giddy and
meant his quiet strength, his remarkable patience and perseverance, his great heart.”

He gave her a reluctant, bashful smile, and she tousled his thick silver hair fondly. Then she hit him
with an unexpected and rather unpleasant question. “Did you ever love Janet, mon fils?”

“No,” Greg admitted after a thoughtful pause. “I honestly thought I did at the time, but it was just an
infatuation. I blame her for wanting to press me into a mould, but honestly, I'm just as bad. I saw her
through rose-tinted glasses, not wanting to believe that my perfect darling could be so shallow. No, I
never truly loved her for herself, either.”

“And yet you never broke your vows and remained loyal to her for as long as you could.”

“That's because I'm an idiot,” he wryly admitted.

“No, you are a very kind and loyal man with a deep sense of duty and an unfailing integrity,” she
firmly corrected him.

“In other words, an idiot,” he insisted, but his lips were twitching and his dark eyes full of laughter.

“And now, mon fils?” she asked. “Has she broken your trust completely, or can you still love?”

He simply looked at her. She looked back. Both understood about the power of silence. Because she
was his mother and concerned for him, Greg was the one to fold.
“I can. God help me, but I can.”

She stretched up and kissed his cheek, then settled back comfortably. “The men in my family tend to fall in love deeply, irrevocably and only once in their lives,” she softly said. “Did you ever wonder why my brother François never married?”

Greg shrugged. “Thinking of my marriage with Janet, it might have been the wise thing to do, actually. But then, you and Papa have been happy for decades. It all depends on the right partner, I suppose.”

“And so it does. Her name was Caroline. She was thrown off her horse when she was only nineteen and broke her neck. They were engaged. He never loved anyone else after that for the rest of his life, and I think it isn’t a coincidence that he died so young.”

“Maman, he never would have taken the cowardly way out,” Greg protested.

“No, never that,” she agreed. “But he didn't have much of a will to live, I'm afraid. When he was diagnosed with cancer, François wasn't up to a prolonged fight that he ultimately had neither the energy nor the determination for.”

“I – I didn't know that. I loved him, Maman. I would have fought alongside with him,” Greg replied, feeling helpless and shaken.

“He loved you, too, my dear. I think he wanted you to remember him the way he truly was, and not ravaged by disease and drugged out of his mind on heavy painkillers. You were at uni at the time, and he knew you'd throw over your final exams in a heartbeat for him. François didn't want that for you. He wanted you to live, to shine,” she softly said.

“But Maman,” Greg objected. He didn't even know what exactly to say, truth to tell, except that this was a decision that had been taken out of his hands, and it felt all wrong.

“It was his sincere wish, Grégoire,” his mother said, gently but with a firm air of finality. “It was his wish, and I honoured it.”

“I would have been there for him,” Greg told her, his voice cracking.

“I know, mon fils,” she sadly replied as she took his tanned hands with the blunt fingers in her paler, more delicate, manicured and yet surprisingly strong ones. “I know.”

“He's gone,” Greg softly said, his dark eyes full of pain. “He's gone, and I can't change it.”

“I know, mon fils,” she repeated with devastating kindness. “He was my older brother, Grégoire. I loved him dearly as well.”

“Please tell me he wasn't alone, at least,” he demanded.

“He wasn't alone,” she firmly said.

At that moment, he desperately wished that he wasn't such a highly trained policeman with solid instincts and decades of experience in the detection of lies and deception. It was a valiant effort on her part, but it wasn't enough to fool him.

Still, she was leaning towards him now, and he met her halfway for another sorely needed hug. If she felt a few warm, salty drops slide into her hair, she didn't say.
When they finally released each other, she gently said, “One love, Grégoire. Only one, but of incredibly great depth. Some say it is a curse, but it can also be a great blessing.”

He cleared his throat. “Clearly, it isn't always a good thing, Maman.”

“But sometimes, dear son, it is, and you have all my best wishes.”

Greg cleared his throat again. “Another cream sherry, perhaps?”

She smiled a little sadly. “Just a sip, please. And the next time, I want to meet your Mycroft.”

“He's a friend, Maman.”

“Pish tosh.”

“I'll not have him made uncomfortable, Maman, I mean it,” he said, his tone suddenly stern. “If a friend is all he wants or needs me to be, then that's what I'll be for him.”

“Grégoire...”

“I don't want to lose him just because you spooked him!”

“Grégoire, calm down. I'm sorry, my dear. I'll not interfere, and I'll let you do this at your own pace, I promise. That being said, I would still like to meet him,” she firmly said, “even just as your friend. A true friend is a rare and valuable enough thing, after all.”

He sighed, the tension leaving his shoulders, then smiled. “All right, Maman. All right. Soon.”

Mrs Chowdhury slipped back into the kitchen silently. She'd wondered about the portrait of Sir Francis Arbuthnot before, the one that hung prominently in Mr Lestrade's living-room. He had at some time rather off-handedly mentioned that this was his late uncle, the one who had left him this house. Now she knew.

She could see the heart-broken young man easily enough in her mind's eye, the one who had been too sad to even contemplate moving into his uncle's house because it hurt too much. That young man still lived somewhere deep inside the older one with the silver hair and the kind smile, the one who had outfitted the housekeeper's room with antiques as precious and lovely as any others in the house and always treated her, a woman, an immigrant, a servant, like a human being and a valued part of the household.

She walked over to the shelves with the cookbooks. The poor man deserved a treat for the next day. There wasn't much she could do for her boys, but showing care and affection through good service and good food was the ways they would always gratefully accept.

The story of Mr Lestrade's failed marriage made her sad, but perhaps, if Lady Blanche was correct, there was another chance waiting for him. She already know that Mr Lestrade and Mr Holmes cared for each other, she just didn't know if it would work out that way. Mr Lestrade was just so much more openly affectionate. Mr Holmes was more reticent, reluctant to show emotions, a bit formal and pompous at times and always a little fussy. So carefully guarded and lonely, she thought, and felt as much empathy for him as she did for the other man. Perhaps they could be more than friends; she would wait and see, and in the meantime take care of them as well as she could in her own way. She was thinking of making Rajma, a lightly spiced, creamy curry with kidney beans. It made a lovely comfort food, especially now that November was approaching and the weather was getting
increasingly uncomfortable.

Somewhere at Whitehall, an attractive, brunette PA revised a surveillance file. Anthea, as she called herself at work, had at first been slightly worried for Mr Holmes when the usually so isolated man had started forging a closer connection with DCI Lestrade. That had quickly matured into sudden plans of house-sharing, and she had upgraded her status to exceedingly worried. In a woman with her training and all those resources at her fingertips, that made for a dangerous situation. She had been the one who had purposefully failed to inform the DCI of and prepare him for the imminent vetting in the hope that he would buckle under the strain and back out. She had also sent him the lovely and flirtatious housekeeper and neglected to run a second background check herself in her eagerness to prove that he would fall for the first available pretty face. In that, she had nearly compromised her superior's household. And she had authorised the surveillance.

Unaware of the bugs in his house, the DCI had only called her out on the other infractions, although he hadn't understood her motives; he'd been angry but kept overall his composure quite admirably. Then he had accepted her well-deserved apologies and sent her a piece of truly amazing chocolate tarte, not out of a lack of backbone but in recognition of her long and valuable working relationship with Mycroft Holmes. And, she suspected, to get back at her for her unspoken distrust in his mastery of the French cuisine. If being proven wrong was done so gently and with such delicious results, she was quite open to it, though.

Besides, he had proven that he had good instincts that would serve to protect Mr Holmes far beyond even the most sophisticated technical measures the Secret and Intelligence Services could provide.

And now she had overheard his conversation with his lady mother, and she suddenly felt utterly ashamed of herself. This was truly a man of integrity, an idiot, as he had half-jestingly called himself, but a kind-hearted, infinitely patient idiot who was foolishly and unselfishly in love with Mycroft Holmes. DCI Lestrade would treat the incredibly powerful, strong and absurdly insecure, fragile man with the greatest of appreciation and the gentlest of care.

Anthea would continue the surveillance, because that was what she did to protect her superior, a man of integral importance to the stability of their little bit of rock in the North Sea but also a man whom she highly respected and reluctantly even liked. She would continue the surveillance, but from now on she would class the DCI as an ally rather than a target. God help him, though, if he ever damaged Britain's most precious resource.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Hikaru_Suzumiya for recommending the Rajma.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, Greg’s colleague, DCI Ian Johnson, informed him that Ms Scott, their almost-housekeeper, had been working under the name of Ms Browning before and could be linked to several thefts, but that wasn’t her real name, either. They'd received some very valuable information from an anonymous but clearly extremely well-informed source, and the further inquiries had checked out. When they went to arrest her, they had caught a serial impostor, thief, embezzler and, in a few cases, blackmailer.

The tea she had made, though, turned out to be just tea, not that Greg had truly expected anything else, and the heart attack of her former employer a truly natural cause, which was just as well. Ian Johnson ribbed Greg about the coppers from Serious Crimes always suspecting murder everywhere, and then they went on and had a good laugh about the con-woman who had stupidly targeted a Yarder.

Later, Greg sent Anthea a quick email with an update and thanks for her help and left the “I told you so” very much unspoken. The woman had merely been a common thief and embezzler, but Greg still shuddered at the thought of the damage she could have done to national security as the housekeeper of Mycroft Holmes. He was fairly certain that Anthea would find out who had botched that vetting and probably take a vicious joy in rectifying the situation, and that was enough for Greg.

Late in the morning, he received unsettling news; John Watson was in hospital. Apparently Sherlock had found him in his therapist's rooms, barely conscious; John had been knocked out with a tranquilliser dart for a while, then drifting as he stubbornly fought his way back to consciousness and managed to text for help. And John Watson was an incredibly stubborn bastard. Right now, he was in hospital and under observation for a few hours, just in case.

Greg, leaving his afternoon paperwork to fend for itself, rushed to the hospital and found a thoroughly rattled Sherlock, pacing and cursing and pulling his curly, disorderly hair. Something seemed to be very wrong beyond what had happened to his best mate, but he wouldn't tell Greg or even accept a cup of the admittedly substandard hospital tea. He even spewed his usual insults only half-heartedly and with a distracted air that was frankly worrying.

John himself wasn't of much help, either. He was still sleepy and had a monster of a headache, and what he said didn’t make much sense. He muttered that his therapist was Sherlock's bloody mad younger sister and had shot him with a tranquilliser gun, and he had thought it was a real gun and he was going to die. After that remarkable statement, the consulting detective had quickly shooed Greg out, claiming that John needed his rest.

Greg, trying to make sense of it all, finally rung Mycroft on his way back to the Yard but ended up on his answerphone. For a moment, he wondered whether he should involve Anthea, then decided
that it could wait until the evening.

Eurus, who or what the bloody hell was Eurus, anyway? Greg looked it up on his office computer and found the Greek East, sometimes South-East, Wind, one of the four Anemoi or major Wind Gods. Not even the older Holmses, known for condemning their boys to being beaten up in the playground by choosing the most outlandish names for them they could come up with, could be nasty enough to do that to their little daughter, could they? It wasn't even a girl's name, for fuck's sake. But judging from how deeply insecure and lacking in the emotional department both Sherlock and, to a lesser degree, Mycroft had turned out to be, their parents possibly had their own deficits where empathy was concerned.

However, John was clearly still drugged and compromised, so he was probably talking nonsense. Probably.

Mycroft came home late that evening, looking tired and worried, and Greg wasn't quite certain if he needed company or to be left alone. His instinct was to hug the other man until the stiffness went out of his shoulders and a sparkle returned to his now bleak eyes, but he didn't think that Mycroft would appreciate or even tolerate that.

However, he did sit down in the kitchen with Greg and accepted a cup of Oolong and a few bites from the plate that Mrs Chowdhury had left and Greg had warmed up for him.

They sat together in silence, Greg sipping his own tea, for a long while.

Finally, he asked, “Do you know about John?”

“Shot with a tranquilliser dart,” Mycroft replied tiredly.

“Sherlock was worried, much more worried than the situation warranted,” Greg softly said, hating to put even more stress on his friend. “John was a bit out of it and had to be kept for observation, but he was scheduled to be released a few hours later. He was in the clear. And Sherlock wasn't just angry at the therapist, either. There is something very wrong, Mycroft, but he wouldn't tell me.”

“That is... quite worrying.”

“John wasn't himself yet when I saw him this morning. He said that his therapist was your younger sister, and he thought she was shooting him with a real gun. For a moment, he thought he was going to die,” Greg went on, even as he saw Mycroft's face become guarded and expressionless, “and that part I absolutely believe. We're going to put a warrant out on the therapist because, well, shooting patients with a tranquilliser gun is a bit not good, but from what I can tell so far, she's abandoned her house and left everything behind. She's probably just someone gone round the bend, but perhaps you should have Anthea run a background check on her. Eurus, John said. Perhaps that's her real name, or perhaps he was just out of it, but who would randomly come up with a name like that?”

The auburn-haired man nodded, his face unreadable.

“Look, Mycroft,” Greg softly said, “I'm sorry to pile this on you when you've clearly had an exhausting day already. We don't even have to talk about this. I just thought I'd give you a heads-up, because, well, either there's a madwoman running around claiming a connection to your family or someone's trying to get to Sherlock through John, maybe both. And it's working.”

Mycroft sighed, and his shoulders slumped. “Thank you, Gregory,” he said in a tired voice. His face wasn't so guarded any more, but still not entirely open.
“It's fine,” the older man reassured him as he poured them each a fresh cup of tea. “I'm your friend, and that means that I'm here if you need to talk and ready to leave you alone if you don't. I know, too, that there are always things that you can't talk about even of you'd like to.”

Mycroft smiled, tiredly but sincerely, and his previously rigid shoulders slumped slightly. “Thank you,” he said again. “Tonight I would prefer silence, if that is acceptable to you.”

Greg nodded and smiled. “Want to read a bit before bed?”

Mycroft nodded gratefully.

They took their teacups to the library and read for a while, keeping each other company.

It was peaceful and comfortable, and the only words they exchanged for the rest of that evening were quiet good-nights before retreating to their respective bedrooms.

The next morning, after Mycroft had had his second cup of tea, he said, “I'll probably be very late tonight, if I come back at all. I have to go to Surrey, go through some more belongings.”

“And have some uninterrupted time to think?” Greg asked.

“Yes, that as well,” the auburn-haired man admitted, looking at his friend, slightly worried that Greg might take it as a slight or rejection, of course, but also with a different, deeper underlying worry, the same one that Sherlock had and that neither Holmes was ready to share, apparently.

There was a small trace of sadness in Greg's eyes, but he was calm, accepting and simply gave the other man an encouraging nod.

“My mother would like to meet you,” he said, changing the subject. “She said that a true friend is a rare and valuable thing, but I think she's just nosy.”

He chuckled, and after a second, Mycroft joined him.

“A mother's prerogative, I believe,” he replied, and some of the tension left his shoulders. “I haven't told my own mother about you yet, because the second I do, she will descend on us like a swarm of locusts.”

Greg grinned. “That sounds like Sherlock has inherited his post-case appetite from her,” he joked. “I always thought it was because he barely eats during a case, but perhaps it's just genetics.”

“Gregory!” Mycroft exclaimed, pretending to be offended while trying not to grin himself. “My mother is not ravenous. She is simply a little…”

“Enthusiastic? Or a disaster of biblical proportions?” the older man quipped.

“Ah. A very good question. For the record, I am immediately agreeing with the first option and not even considering the second one. Not at all,” he pompously stated.

Greg chuckled again. “See, that's why you're a diplomat and I'm not. Perhaps I'd better not introduce you to my Maman after all. She'll disown me as her son and abscond with you instead.”

“But you'd have Mummy, then. I'm sure she would be…” He left the sentence hanging.

“No way I'm finishing a sentence for you again, Mycroft. Clearly, that only gets me in trouble. No,
I'm keeping my Mum and you yours, and that's my final word.”

“Really?” the taller man asked, widening his eyes and looking at Greg entreatingly.

On the face that was always so stern and guarded in public, that childish, playful, mischievous look was completely charming. The older man threatened to melt on the spot, but of course he could never let that show. Greg quickly covered his eyes with his left arm and flung out his right palm in a dramatic defensive gesture. “Oh no, it's working! Must... not... give... in...”

Their housekeeper chuckled and refilled both of their cups. “Eat up, Mr Holmes and Mr Lestrade,” she gently admonished. “Would you like any more toast?”

“No, thank you, Mrs Chowdhury,” Greg said with a smile. “It was wonderful, as always.”

“And you, Mr Holmes? Would you like to have your dinner delivered to your office so you can take it with you to Surrey and warm it up in the evening?”

A hint of surprise, gone in a flicker, flashed across Mycroft's face. Then he smiled. “That is very considerate of you, Mrs Chowdhury. If it isn't too much trouble.”

“Not at all, Mr Holmes.”

“Well, then, someone from my office will pick it up this afternoon. I'll text you beforehand with his or her name and picture.”

“Very clever,” she said approvingly. “The usual overnight bag for a day or two, sir?”

“If you'd be so kind,” he replied and smiled as the little woman said goodbye to Greg for the day and then bustled out with the bearing of a queen and the determination of a field marshal.

“She's a gem,” Greg fondly said.

“You chose well,” Mycroft agreed.

“We chose well,” Greg insisted.

They smiled at each other and drained their cups, content.

“Have a successful day or two, Mycroft,” the older man said as he rose and carried his cup and plate over to the dishwasher. It was a habit that their housekeeper hadn't managed to break him of yet.

“You, too, Gregory,” Mycroft replied, leaving his crockery on the table like a good little gentleman. “I suspect I shall miss the comfort of this house while I am gone,” he added, a little more shyly, “and the company. I've never laughed as much as I do now with you.”

That was a compliment of incredible proportions, and Greg swallowed, then smiled, although it was a tiny bit wobbly. “That's true, and I'll miss you, too. See you soon, then.”

“Goodbye for now,” Mycroft replied a little stiffly. Exchanges like this always left him a little disconcerted.

Besides, they both weren't very good at saying farewell, even for only a day or two.

Greg walked towards the door, having hung his coat and deposited his briefcase near the exit, while Mycroft went upstairs to shower and dress.
It's just one night or two, Greg admonished himself forcefully as he left the house, feeling dejected. Stop acting like a lovesick schoolgirl!

But deep down, he couldn't help feeling unreasonably worried. Honestly, Mycroft spending a night in Surrey was nothing to lose sleep over; it wasn't as if the man were travelling to the Middle East or North Korea. But still, still, something had happened that left both Holmes brothers unsettled, and those were the two most brilliant men Greg had ever met, by an insurmountably wide margin. Well, Moriarty had been highly intelligent, too, but also quite off his rocker and very unpredictable, not necessarily given to logical thoughts or actions. But Moriarty was dead, wasn't he? Had been for a couple of years now.

Still, Greg's copper senses were tingling, and not in a happy way. And that had nothing to do with Mycroft not being under his roof and his guard the following night; of course not. Nonsense, that. Utter bollocks. Really.

That evening, Mycroft rang him on the phone, sounding tired and uncharacteristically overwrought. Greg's heart went out to him, but he restrained himself; Mycroft wouldn't appreciate anything that went beyond calm and sympathetic, so calm and sympathetic Greg was.

“Unfortunately, I won't be back for another night, I'm afraid,” Mycroft said. “I have to visit an old family property.”

“Yet another family home?” Greg asked with a small smile. “I guess I shouldn't wonder about that, considering your solicitors' final offer for my house.”

After a brief pause, Mycroft replied, “My parents live in another cottage in Sussex, of course, but that is not where I have to go. The actual family estate, Musgrave Hall, burnt down quite a while ago and was never rebuilt.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” Greg said. It was such a useless platitude, but Mycroft's slightly strained tone of voice worried him, and he didn't know what else to say. There was a story behind that burned-down house; the whole matter was fraught with many different layers of implications, and he was navigating blind. Then he remembered the joke he had made a while ago about the destruction of incriminating baby pictures by setting fire to their family homes, and that Mycroft had reacted with a hint of discomfort before concentrating on the absurd humour of it all. Perhaps it hadn't been so absurd after all, and Greg felt suddenly quite ashamed of that tasteless attempt at a joke. “Old family matters, not always pleasant. Will you be all right?”

There was a small pause on the other end, then Mycroft said, with a note of gratitude in his polished tenor, “Yes, I will be. Thank you.”

Will be, not am. Of course Mycroft Holmes, analyst and master negotiator, had picked up on Greg's minute distinction and given him an incredibly honest reply.

“There'll be scotch waiting when you come back,” Greg simply said, “and perhaps I could be convinced to make petit-fours.”

Mycroft chuckled. “You devil.”

Greg grinned. “I live to serve.”

“You live to ruin my waistline,” the other man claimed, but there was laughter in his voice.
“You're fit enough,” Greg replied matter-of-factly, “and if it's any consolation to you, we'll make them last for a few days, like we did with the tarte au chocolat. There's nothing wrong with a bit of indulgence in reasonable doses.”

Mycroft laughed softly. “I still say you're an evil tempter with a glib tongue.”

“I take that as a compliment,” Greg said, his voice warm with a smile.

“Please do. I'm afraid I have some more work to do tonight. Enjoy your evening, Gregory.”

“Don't overwork yourself, Mycroft. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Gregory.”

After ending the call, Greg left the library. If Mycroft wasn't going to come home, he might as well curl up in his reading alcove with a bit of relaxing background music, or shelve the reading and burn off a bit of nervous energy by rocking to The Clash or Iron Maiden.

Old family matters. A younger sister that no-one ever mentioned. Mycroft hadn't denied her existence, and Greg had the feeling that while his friend might leave things out, mainly because of their possible classification as state secrets, he wouldn't outright lie to Greg. So, probably, a younger sister, possibly named Euris, the poor thing. Possibly a psychotherapist or posing as one, but with the classical Holmes intelligence, neither should be a problem to her. Harming John, probably because of his connection to Sherlock, but not harming him too badly; while being shot with a tranquilliser dart might be be traumatising, being shot with a bullet would have been far worse. It was more of a warning, a taunt. Sherlock half mad with worry – well, as crazy as usual plus an additional hefty dose – and Mycroft, the unshakable Mr Minor Position in the British Government himself, deeply concerned. These puzzle pieces added up, but to nothing good. And Greg could do nothing to help. Well, fuck. Bloody buggering fuck.

Iron Maiden it was.

Chapter End Notes

And Euris makes her first obvious move...
Chapter 14

After a restless night and a morning wasted on several stupidly extended meetings where an email or two would have sufficed, Greg called John.

“Hey, mate,” he said. “Are you all right? Recovered a bit?”

“Yeah,” John replied, sounding a bit distracted. “I had a monster of a headache, but it's mostly fine now, thanks for asking.”

“Sherlock seemed really worried.”

“Yeah, he was. He even went home with me yesterday and kept an eye on me and Rosie over night.”

“That’s nice of him. Wait – nice – Sherlock – is this the apocalypse?” Greg quipped.

John laughed, then said in a more serious tone, “He’s really a great friend, you know?”

“No, seriously,” John insisted. “Sherlock cares.”

“I know,” Greg said in a softer voice. “He always has, but before you moved in with him, he never knew how to show it. I don’t know his parents, of course, but I sort of blame them for that – that he insults people and pushes them away pre-emptively because he doesn’t know how to deal with them otherwise. That he pretends so hard that he has no feelings, because in his childhood, no-one ever bothered to show him how to deal with them properly. When he’s being really obnoxious, I try to remind myself of that. Of course, the bloody git still annoys the fuck out of me sometimes.”

“You’re a good man, Greg Lestrade,” John firmly said.

Greg grinned. “So are you, John Watson. Don’t give up on the prat, because without you, he’s ten times harder to deal with. By the way, we haven’t managed to find your therapist yet. She’s just done a runner and left everything behind. We’re running DNA analyses right now, but you know that unlike on telly, that takes time.”

“DNA analyses? For a mere case of assault and battery? I thought there’s a budget on that sort of thing,” John asked, with an undertone Greg couldn’t quite place.

“Yeah, but I have a bad feeling about this,” Greg admitted. “Sherlock was really worried, wasn’t he? And if Sherlock’s not either gleeful or dismissive but actually worried, well…”

“Yeah,” John agreed, resigned.

“Is she really a younger Holmes sister?” Greg asked cautiously.

John swallowed audibly. “She said so,” he replied, reluctantly at first, then everything was pouring out like water through a broken dam. “Said her name was Eurus, the missing third sibling. And when she took out her blue contact lens – only one, and that was really creepy – she had a heterochromatic
iris, central heterochromia, just like Sherlock. Her entire demeanour changed from professional therapist to... well, creepy, literally from one second to the other. Dangerous, volatile, highly intelligent and absolutely insane. She knew things about Sherlock that I'd never told her about, and I noticed and called her on it, which in hindsight probably wasn't the best of ideas. Also, I'd told her that Sherlock had never talked about her, and she took that very badly. And then she pulled out that gun, and there was that fur rug on the floor where I was standing, dyed red and looking like a puddle of blood, and she shot me and everything went dark.”

“Shit,” Greg said. “Whether she's really Sherlock's sister or not, she seems to be obsessed with him. Did it seem to you that she was trying to get to Sherlock through you?”

“Yeah,” John said with a soft sigh. “Sherlock honestly doesn't remember having a sister, but he said there's something funny about his memory, something off.”

“Well, he's the man who deleted the solar system,” Greg quipped, trying to lighten the mood. “Wouldn't Mycroft know? Or their parents, for that matter.”

“Yeah, but trying to get a straight answer out of Mycroft is like trying to squeeze water out of a rock. And Sherlock wouldn't want to upset Mummy.” That came out rather bitterly.

“John, I know you're still a little sore with Mycroft, but I think you're being unfair to him. He has always supported Sherlock as much as he could, and much more than other siblings might have.”

“By always interfering,” John shot back angrily.

“Sherlock won't accept help otherwise, even if he badly needs it,” Greg calmly contradicted, “and you know it, John, because you've seen it happen yourself often enough. Sherlock needs to grumble and whinge about it to keep his pride intact, but in the end he does accept the protection, the financial support and everything else he takes from his brother without so much as a thank-you. And Mycroft still keeps helping him. I was there, John, when Sherlock was still on drugs, and I've seen them both in the worst of situations, when Sherlock was high as a kite or coming down, in withdrawal, shaking and vomiting, passed out or in intensive care after an OD. You have no idea of the times he nearly died, John. It was awful; for a while we thought Sherlock was going to kill himself shot by shot and there was nothing we could do to stop him. You're closer to him, that's why you mostly see things from his current perspective. What you said about him caring and not being good at showing it, well, it's the same with Mycroft. He does care about his brother, he's just had the same shitty, emotionally stifling upbringing, and he just can't show it except in his repressed, overbearing, awkward, helpless way. And if he tried to be more open about his feelings, let's face it, Sherlock would tear him to shreds, laughing. It's just the fucked-up way the two of them are together.”

John breathed in and very slowly out again. “All right, Greg, let's just agree to disagree on this.”

Greg sighed, resigned. “Fine. Ending the rant here, back to the case. We'll try to find that woman, whoever she is. As your former therapist, she has your address on file, yeah?”

“Yeah,” the shorter man confirmed. “Yeah, she does. Shit, that's bad. Shit. I didn't think...”

“Calm down, John. Nothing's happened yet, and perhaps nothing will. Just in case, though, pick up Rosie and kip somewhere else until we've got her in custody. I'll have your place put under observation. Under different circumstances, you might have been asked to stay to man the trap, but not with a baby involved. Go to Baker Street or even come to my place, just get the bloody fuck out of there. I've enough room here, and my housekeeper likes children.” He gave John his new address. “Just give me a quick ring or send a text beforehand, okay, so I can give Mrs Chowdhury a heads-up.”
John swallowed again, took a deep breath and pulled himself together like the veteran soldier he was. “Okay, Kensington, though, and a housekeeper? Did you get yourself a sugar mummy?” John joked, trying to lighten the oppressive mood.

“Nah,” Greg quipped back. “Got myself a gorgeous young thing. I don’t quite fit into the neighbourhood, though. The moment I moved in, the rent dropped by half.”

John giggled, then paused. “Wait,” he said, sounding flabbergasted. “That house, it's yours?”

“Nicely deduced, Dr Watson,” Greg replied with a grin. “Yeah, it's mine, I inherited it ages ago. Had a long-time lease on it that was running out this autumn and decided to move back in myself. It's a bit more affordable with a house-share, though – you know, taxes, repairs and all. But please keep mum about that at the Yard. They don't need to know I'm all posh; gives the wrong impression, that sort of thing.”

He could hear John moving around and Rosie babbling cheerfully in the background. From the sound of it, the doctor had already begun packing.

“Oh. I suppose that makes sense. Don't worry, Greg, I'll keep my mouth shut. About that gorgeous young thing of yours, though...”

“I was joshing, John. He's just a friend.”

“Am I hearing a bit of wistfulness in your tone?” the shorter man asked, half joking, half serious.

“He's a friend,” Greg firmly repeated. “Let's leave it at that for a while.”

“Okay. Ugh, why do diapers have to weigh so bloody much? Anyway, that's fine. A man, though?” Luckily, John sounded more interested than judgemental.

“Yeah,” Greg calmly said. “Last woman didn't work out so well for me. Relationships with a bloke are different, you know, even if it's just a platonic house-share, or a flat-share.”

“Yeah, I can see what you mean,” John thoughtfully, a little sadly replied while he rustled about a bit more. “A lot more relaxed, right?”

“Depends on the person, of course, but overall, I'd say yes,” Greg agreed. “We sometimes share a glass of scotch in the evening and just sit there reading. It's comfortable, no pressure, and so much better than being alone.”

“Yeah,” John wistfully said, “I know exactly what you mean. But of course I have Rosie now.”

In the background, the baby was giggling.

Greg laughed. “A bit young for scotch, isn't she?”

The doctor giggled, too; it wasn't hard to see where his daughter got it from. “Just a bit, yeah, aren't you, love? And the reading, too. And the talking, actually.”

“Gah!” Rosie commented.

“Listen, John, I've got to go, lunch break's nearly over. See you soon?”

“Yeah, I'm kind of busy right now, too. I'll drop Rosie off at her daycare for now; I don't want to disrupt her life too much. I don't know where we'll be kipping yet, but cheers for the offer and the heads-up.”

“Bye, Greg.”

Well, bugger. Another confirmed genius Holmes to deal with, and this one completely bonkers.

Greg reached for his phone to connect with his colleague in order to pass on the information and have the observation set up; that was all he could do for now. The only thing he purposefully left out was the name of the suspect, Eurus Holmes.

John was being a plonker about Mycroft with his stubborn Watson head firmly lodged up his arse, but Greg still hoped that he and Rosie would stay at his house for a while. At a little over six months, she was still at that age where every week, even every day made a big difference because she was developing so quickly, and he hadn't seen her in weeks. Daniel was five months older and already standing up by himself and speaking his first words. As proud and happy that made Greg, he sometimes missed the cuddly, uncomplicated infant his nephew had been only a short while ago.

He sighed. Possible baby visits aside, this instincts told him that this whole matter was bad, really bad. On the one hand, his division wouldn't have to deal with it; any fallout would be reserved for his poor colleague's team. On the other hand, he was condemned to watching from the sidelines if it all went to shit, and a nagging, unpleasant feeling told him that it very well might.

Two hours later a case of a possible serial murder came in, and Greg was almost glad, because that would at least keep him busy and distracted. When Sherlock didn't even respond to his messages, though, he wasn't glad any more. Not in the least.

He got home late that night and enjoyed the delicious dinner Mrs Chowdhury had left him. John hadn't called, and Greg, feeling restless, remembered that he had promised Mycroft petits-fours. For that, he had to bake two thin sheets of marzipan biscuite batter first; the assembled layers with their filling would later have to be pressed for up to twenty-four hours before they were ready to be cut into small cubes and glazed. The music he put on and the baking process distracted him from his worries as he measured, whipped, blended, mixed, poured, baked, cut, spread and carefully, precisely assembled the whole thing, four layers of cake, puréed seedless strawberry compote in between and one layer of thinly rolled out marzipan on top. He covered it all with clear kitchen wrap, weighed it down with a heavy wooden cutting board and put it in his fridge with a feeling of satisfaction. Then he cleaned up the mess he had made, an ingrained habit that Cook had continually reinforced in him during his childhood. No cleaning up after himself had meant no licking out bowls or off spoons and not being allowed to decorate later, which for any six- to eleven-year-old with a sweet tooth was a Very Bad Thing and a dire enough threat to make him behave. He sometimes wished he had something that worked so well to hold over his team members or, even better, Sherlock.

Humming to himself contentedly, he filled the dishwasher and wiped down the granite surfaces. He was feeling pleasantly tired and accomplished and decided that he might just as well go to bed now; nothing else was likely to happen that night. And tomorrow he was for once leaving work on bloody time, serial murders be damned, and picking out a lovely food colouring for the glaze and the traditional flower petals for decoration. His fucking petits-fours would not only smell and taste but also look as if they'd come straight out a fucking Parisian bakery, or he would know the reason why. And then he'd send one to Anthea because he could, but only one because he was a bastard like that.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Warning: emotional hurt/comfort. Sherlock and John have been up to no good...

15.

Greg was just leaving the kitchen, planning to go upstairs and to bed, when he heard the click of the alarm systems disengaging on the lower ground floor and then a key turning the lock, not smoothly but hesitantly somehow, as if guided by a trembling hand.

If this were Sherlock breaking in, he'd be nothing short of confident. Mycroft wasn't due until the following day, and Greg couldn't picture him coming home drunk.

But it was Mycroft, he realised a moment later when the door was pushed open. The usually pale-complexioned but perfectly turned out man looked as if he had seen a ghost, his colouring almost translucent, his appearance ruffled, his shoulders hunched defensively, his hands shaking, his eyes wide and dark like a shock victim's.

Greg started walking towards him, his training making him move calmly, slowly, carefully. His slippers made next to no sound on the parquet, and so he scuffed them on purpose and softly cleared his throat.

At those sounds, Mycroft's lowered head twitched upwards like a skittish horse's and his eyes widened impossibly more, his entire body language becoming even more defensive and frightened. It hurt Greg in a nearly physical way to see the usually so proud, poised, self-confident man so small and afraid.

"Mycroft," he said in a very low, gentle, deep voice, the voice he used on traumatised victims or witnesses. "It's me, Greg. Whatever happened, you're home now. You're safe. I'll make sure you're safe."

Mycroft flinched, then straightened his back and shoulders painfully. "Gregory," he said, trying to bring his shaking voice under control and failing miserably.

"Come, close the door and take off your coat and shoes," Greg gently but firmly suggested. He wasn't sure if Mycroft could accept the physical comfort of a hug right now – or ever, really – so clear instructions were important, normalcy was important, the regaining of a feeling of safety by regaining control of the situation.

The taller man nodded chopply, closed the door and mechanically re-engaged the alarm systems, barely managing with his shaking fingers. Then he leaned against the door as if that small action had exhausted him.

Fuck control, Greg decided as he slowly extended his hand to his friend, and when Mycroft didn't flinch away, placed it lightly on the taller man's shoulder. His entire body was shaking, subtly but noticeably at a touch, and Greg felt the overwhelming need to wrap him in his arms and tell him that everything was going to be all right.
“Come here,” Greg murmured, his voice still deep and soothing.

And Mycroft came. It was only one step that brought them into full contact, but he took that step and accepted Greg’s warmth and strength. The embrace was undemanding, light enough to be broken at a touch, but Greg’s body in front of him was solid and steady, and after a moment’s pause, he leaned forward and let himself slump into the offered support.

For a while, Greg simply held him, the man he was in love with, the man who had been hurt, and reminded himself to breathe calmly and steadily. Calm was what Mycroft needed now, warmth and calm and support, and no feelings of helplessness, worry or anger.

Slowly, gently, he started guiding the taller man towards the library door. Mycroft moved like a sleepwalker, and Greg managed to manoeuvre him over to the sofa and rid him of his outerwear before making the younger man sit down. He draped the expensive peacoat over a nearby armchair and quickly, discreetly scanned Mycroft for signs of injuries. Not finding any, he picked up a plaid and, sitting down close to him, wrapped the soft woollen weave around them both. Mycroft slumped against him again, his head coming to rest on Greg's shoulder. Gently, very gently the older man ran his fingers through those feather-soft auburn strands, his heart filled with both impotent rage and boundless tenderness. He pushed his rage down firmly until only the tenderness for Mycroft remained, holding him warm and safe in his arms, a hint of expensive cologne and a unique, subtle, wonderful male scent in his nose.

He didn't know how much time passed until this beautiful, brilliant, vulnerable man finally stopped shivering. Even then, he seemed content to remain as he was, his head on Greg’s shoulder and one arm around his waist even as Greg had wrapped one arm around him, the other still caressing his hair with soft, soothing, undemanding strokes.

“Do – do you love me, Gregory?” he finally asked, his voice small, hesitant, questioning.

“I love you,” Greg confirmed without the least hesitation. His heart was overflowing; he could no longer hide it, even if it wasn't reciprocated. He no longer wanted to hide it from the vulnerable man who could right now use every ounce of encouragement and support. “It doesn't have to change anything between us, but I do love you, with every beat of my heart, with every breath in my body. You're brilliant and gorgeous and wonderful, and I love every single part of you, Mycroft Holmes. You are everything to me.” He swallowed. “Tell me who hurt you.”

“I will, eventually, when you don't look so ready to commit murder any more,” he replied, trying and failing to smile with quivering lips.


“Can we – can we just sit like this for a while?” he asked in a small voice, sounding terrifyingly like a hurt, lost child.

“As long as you wish, Mycroft,” Greg reassured him. “Are you physically injured?”

“No,” the younger man said with a soft sigh. “It's simply in my mind,” he added bitterly.

Greg pulled him a little bit closer. “There is nothing simple about that, Mycroft. You have the vastest, most brilliant mind I know,” he quietly said, thinking of those lightning-quick thought processes, all that knowledge and deep understanding of everything that could possibly go wrong, “and having that turned against you, I can hardly think of anything worse.”
Then he thought for a moment and asked, “It was a Holmes, wasn't it? No-one else could have
deducted or exploited your vulnerable points like this. To ordinary people, you have no vulnerable
points. It was Sherlock,” he concluded, dangerously calm.

“You are quite intelligent yourself, Gregory,” Mycroft said, allowing himself to sink even deeper into
that comfortable embrace.

“To a lesser degree,” he honestly replied. “But couldn't John rein him in?”

“ Apparently, it was Dr Watson's idea in the first place,” Mycroft softly replied, a shiver running
through his body again.

“Those bastards,” Greg said with feeling. “I would have thought it of Sherlock, but John... See if I
ever help that wanker again. Shouldn't even have told him to leave his house, but no, I couldn't do
that to Rosie.”

“What do you mean?” Mycroft asked, sounding a little more alert now that there were facts to
process.

“His psychotherapist,” Greg said, carefully not putting a name to the person, “had his home address
in his patient's file. I don't think that she'll come near John again after she's tipped her hand, but you
never know. I've talked to the DCI in charge, and an observation of the place has been set up, just in
case. I told John to take Rosie and get out. Even offered the bastard a guest bedroom here, which he
didn't take me up on, though. I can't believe I did that. I can't believe he did that!”

He stopped as another thought, another memory of his phone conversation with John, struck him.
“Oh, God, Mycroft, I'm so terribly sorry. He all but told me, but I never realised. I'm sorry!”

“Shush, Gregory,” the younger man said, and somehow, it was now him soothing the other. “I'm
certain you have nothing to blame yourself for. Still, please tell me what happened.”

“I phoned John today,” Greg replied, his voice terribly flat, “and asked him about what had
happened, now that he was no longer under influence of the tranquillisers. He said she'd told him that
she was Eurus, the missing third Holmes sibling. When she took out her blue contact lens – only one,
and John said that was a really creepy effect – she had a heterochromatic iris like Sherlock does. He
said that her entire demeanour changed suddenly from professional therapist to dangerous, volatile,
highly intelligent and absolutely insane. She knew things about Sherlock that John had never told her
about and reacted badly to the fact that Sherlock had never talked about her. John said that Sherlock
doesn't remember having a sister, but his memories seem off, so perhaps he's deleted her. Clearly,
both of them had a strong need to know what was actually happening. I suggested asking your
parents or you. John said, with a bit of resentment, that Sherlock didn't want to upset his Mummy,
and with a lot of resentment that trying to get an honest answer out of you was like... like squeezing
water from a rock, he said. I tried to tell him that he was being unfair to you, but he wouldn't listen.
I'm sorry, I couldn't make him listen, I couldn't make him stop whatever they did to you to get an
answer out of you. Knowing Sherlock's macabre mind... I never thought they'd harm you, Mycroft.
I'm so sorry.”

Mycroft kept his face calm through all of this outpouring until nearly the end. He was grateful that
Greg hadn't in the least tried to get him to confirm or deny those facts and conclusions or even
pressured him for details. When Greg started blaming himself, though, he couldn't remain silent.

“And from that one cryptic remark, you were supposed to figure it all out?” he asked, his tone firm.
Apparently, being confronted with Greg nearly falling apart was helping him regain control of
himself.
“You would have,” Greg murmured, downcast. However, he was still holding Mycroft and even leaning into him subconsciously.

The younger man lifted his long-fingered, manicured hand, captured Greg's jaw and turned it gently but firmly so that their gazes met, blue and dark brown.

“My dear,” he said, and Greg's breath caught, his eyes full of pain and a sudden bright, blazing hope.

“Yes, you are dear to me, very much so indeed,” Mycroft self-consciously admitted. “But listen, Gregory, there is no need to blame yourself. Maybe I could have deducted an imminent action against myself, maybe not. At any rate, I wasn't expecting an attack such as this one, a carefully orchestrated horror performance in my own family's home, a betrayal from within. No matter how much my relationship with Sherlock had deteriorated, I still wouldn't have expected such... such utter cruelty from him. He made my deepest, most irrational fears manifest and thought it was entertaining. So did Dr Watson.”

He shuddered involuntarily, and Greg held him tighter in response. John was on occasion far too fond of letting his frustrations out in a very physical way; well, he would soon feel what it was like to get a fistful of righteous indignation in the face himself. Until then, though, that anger had no place, and so Greg exhaled slowly and let it go.

“If even I wouldn't have expected this, my dear, then neither could you. Do not blame yourself, please. Please, Gregory.” Mycroft's blue eyes were utterly sincere, even pleading.

“I'll try,” Greg replied, reaching out and cupping the other man's face just as Mycroft was still holding his jaw, both firmly and tenderly. “For you, Mycroft, anything. Oh God, I love you so much.”

It was such a relief to be finally able to say it out loud.

The taller man had lifted his head when they were looking at each other, and now brought it forward so that their foreheads touched in a gesture that was at the same time completely innocent and deeply meaningful in the utter trust it expressed.

“I don't know for certain what love is,” he softly admitted, “but if it is a deep, abiding feeling in one's chest that is so strong it is almost painful and causes an insurmountable desire to protect and bring joy to the other person, then I fear I may have contracted it. Are you, perchance, contagious?”

Greg laughed softly as incredible happiness flowed through him like a river of warm gold. “Maybe. I've been suffering from it for a while now.”

“Ah. Is it transmitted by proximity, perhaps?”

“It might be,” Greg replied, still smiling and caressing the beautiful, noble face of the man he loved more than his own life.

“Then, by all means, let us ensure a continued and regular exposure to each other,” Mycroft replied, returning the caress just as tenderly.

“By all means,” Greg echoed and closed his eyes, content just to exist in that breathtakingly tender moment. His heart was filled to bursting, and it was beautiful almost to the point of pain.

He felt Mycroft's face tip, his jaw move closer, then reluctant, almost shy lips brushing against his. With a sigh, he pressed back softly, letting his own lips open a bit. It was a gentle, unhurried, chaste and yet incredibly erotic touch that yet sent every single nerve ending in his lips tingling and spread
warmly through his entire body.

Then Mycroft's long nose bumped into his cheek.

He opened his eyes again, meeting startled, embarrassed blue ones, smiled warmly and kissed the tip of that dear nose. “I love you so much,” he repeated and leaned in again, first brushing his own nose against Mycroft's, then gently nuzzling it in a playful, tender caress.

The sudden reticence and self-consciousness quickly vanished from the taller man's expression, replaced by the same kind of amusement and pleasure, and they kissed again. Greg's hand slid to the back of Mycroft's head and tangled in that incredibly soft auburn hair, and he felt his love do the same.

They kissed for quite a long time, slowly savouring and languidly familiarising themselves with each other's taste and scent and every single reaction, every sigh, every shiver, every small moan. Mycroft was as systematic as always in his approach, wanting to collect all the data, and Greg enjoyed that mutual exploration very much.

“Well, this quite unexpectedly turned out to be both one of the most horrid and one of the most wonderful days of my life,” Mycroft murmured a little breathlessly as he rested his head on Greg's solid shoulder again.

Greg caressed his soft, feathery hair, something he had decided he very much liked. “I still wish I could have spared you the horrid part,” he said, his voice huskier than usual, “but I'm so glad, so incredibly happy... I wasn't certain that you'd ever love me back.”

“You are very easy to love, Gregory,” the younger man replied with a smile, “perhaps even impossible not to. But I thought you were content to be my friend.”

“I would have been,” Greg replied with a slightly sad smile. “If that was what you needed from me, I would have been content to be your friend for the rest of my life. But now,” he added, his smile becoming bright, “now I'm not just content but incredibly happy. Thank you, my wonderful, gorgeous, brilliant love.”

“You mean it,” Mycroft whispered, half astonished, but he couldn't refute the truth of his own observations.

“Every single word,” Greg replied and kissed his forehead tenderly. “And more, because I can't seem to express everything that I feel for you in words.”

“And I, my dear, I who usually am so good at using words, find myself at a loss as well,” the younger man admitted.

“We have time,” Greg said with a smile. “Dear love, we have years and years.”

Mycroft drew in a long breath. “I hope so. I hope so more fervently than I ever have for anything else in my life.”

Greg met his eyes and saw the sudden return of worry. “The South-East wind,” he softly said.

“East wind,” Mycroft corrected him automatically.

firmly in the south-eastern part of the wind rose. And, by the way, he's not a girl.”

“Know-it-all.”

“Pot.”

“Kettle.”

“My heart.”

Mycroft smiled. “You play a most unfair game, my dear.”

“Ha,” Greg said with a grin. “That's nothing yet. Tomorrow, I'll have *petit-four*.”

“You devil.”

“Your devil.”

“That is... good.”

“Very good, my love. Couldn't be better, in fact.”

Mycroft thoroughly agreed, and his answer needed no words.
“Mycroft, do you think you’ll be able to sleep tonight?” Greg carefully asked. He was worried that the man he loved would be plagued by nightmares, especially since John and Sherlock had targeted his weaknesses and fears specifically with their little horror show. He hadn't asked, and Mycroft hadn't told him, what exactly had happened, but he knew the whole charade had been staged to force answers out of the older – oldest? – Holmes sibling, and he'd be damned to hell if he placed himself even in the vague vicinity of that. But knowing Sherlock and his cruel aptitude for finding and exploiting someone's weakest spots with unerring precision, those things would start playing behind Mycroft's eyelids like a horror film as soon as he closed his eyes.

The taller man smiled with sudden mischief, even though there still was a small measure of worry in his intelligent blue eyes as well. “Are you by chance trying to get me into your bed, Gregory?”

Greg's breath caught, but he controlled himself, leaned forward and tenderly kissed Mycroft's nose. “I'd love to,” he admitted. “If I don't keep you with me, I'm afraid everything will melt away into dust and dreams, and I'll wake up tomorrow and I'll only have imagined it all.”

It was only half a joke, and Mycroft quickly leaned forward for a small hug. “Never,” he promised, his beautiful, polished tenor full of conviction.

“Come, then,” Greg said after returning that almost painfully wonderful, reassuring hug. “Put on your most comfortable pyjamas and join me. My bed is large and comfortable enough, and I swear I won't molest you, my love.”

“Why on earth not?” the other man asked with a playful pout. On his often so very serious face, it was an entirely unexpected and devastatingly charming expression. After the way he had looked when he'd come home, ghostly pale, shocked and frightened, it was nothing short of a blessed relief to Greg. He'd managed to make Mycroft smile again; all the treasures of the world could have been laid down at his feet and would have paled to insignificance in comparison.

“Because this day has been long and exhausting in many different ways,” the silver-haired man said, laughing, “and we have to get up early and go to work, and I'm not twenty any more. And because when we make love for the first time, I want us to be reasonably awake and have all the time in the world.”

Mycroft, eyes glittering happily, quipped, “You, Gregory Lestrade, are a romantic! Turning down a sure thing for perfection.”

Greg laughed again, but it was a gentler sound, more tenderness than amusement. “Perhaps I am, gorgeous, but I'll never think of you as a sure thing or just a shag.”

“I know, my dear,” the auburn-haired man fondly replied. “I do not only see, I observe. But while I can reasonably say that I have sufficient prior experience with “just a shag”, I actually have very little where romance is concerned.”

“Oh, Mycroft,” Greg said gently and cupped his jaw again. “I won't insist on candles, music or flower petals on the bedsheets. Actually, I'd rather insist on no flower petals on any surface where they might get stuck to my bum or any other body parts, because that's just a bother and itchy, too.
Also, candles can be knocked over, and there's nothing less sexy than a burning carpet. I just want to make it good for you, love."

“No flower petals, no burning carpets,” Mycroft recapitulated with a hint of a mischievous gleam in his eyes that was very appealing. “What about carpet burns?”

“Hmm,” Greg said in a contemplative tone while his eyes were glittering with laughter. “On occasion, yes, but not too often. What about kitchen sex?”

“Only when Mrs Chowdhury is definitely out and extremely unlikely to return.”

“Agreed. Very much agreed. In fact, that mental image really doesn't do it for me.” Greg gave a shudder that was equal parts humorous and real.

“Then, I suppose, we will have to continue this riveting discussion at a later dare, my dear,” Mycroft chuckled.

“Do you want me to make a list?” Greg asked, grinning widely and waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“Hmm, how intriguing, a reward system for making lists through intercourse or perhaps simply fellatio. Uncommon, but I believe you may be able to make me enjoy it,” Mycroft playfully replied, eyes twinkling.

Greg had no idea how his love could make those clinical terms sound so erotic, almost dirty, but it probably had to do with the deep, smoky purr in that elegant, honeyed tenor. He laughed happily. “You kinky bastard. Christ, I've won the lottery.”

Mycroft's smile softened. “No, my dear, I believe that would be I. Now regarding your kind invitation for tonight, I'm afraid I will be having nightmares.”

“That would be entirely normal after the day you've just had,” Greg calmly replied. “Let me be there for you, please.”

“If this is truly your wish...”

“Very much so, my love.”

“... then I find myself quite powerless to resist. I am, at heart, quite a selfish and hedonistic creature, my dear Gregory,” Mycroft finished with self-deprecating undertone.

Greg leaned forward and kissed his forehead. “I always thought there must be a reason for your incredible self-control,” he lightly said. “And really, I admire you for it, but I also adore how you can let it go sometimes. We'll find a comfortable balance, my love.”

“Yes,” Mycroft said after a short, thoughtful pause that probably equalled an hour or two of ruminations for Greg. “I do believe that we shall.”

“Would you like an herbal tea before bed?” Greg gently asked. “Just because it's been such a stressful day. I could put in a bit of honey for you.”

“I'd actually like that,” the taller man replied with a hint of surprise.

Greg nodded and smiled. “Leave it to me,” he said. “Just get changed and meet me upstairs in my bedroom, or would you prefer yours?”
“I think we should run a series of tests,” Mycroft suggested, well, suggestively.
“Yes! For science!” Greg happily agreed.

“Of course, only for science,” was the utterly dry reply, delivered with gleaming blue eyes.

“We should make a list of qualities the ideal permanent bed should have,” Greg said with smile.
“How firm or soft it is on a scale from one to ten, how bouncy...”

“Ah, I see, you are becoming inspired. Are you perhaps referring to an earlier point in our discussion?” Mycroft playfully asked.

“You, Mr Holmes, are an incredible negotiator; not the smallest detail escapes your magnificent attention.”

“Thank you, my dear. Would you prefer being the list maker, or the person in charge of the reward?”

“I might like to try both, actually. Purely in the name of science again, of course. And then we'd have to make a list for the results. Again.”

“Of course. Gregory, you devil.”

“I live to serve, at least sometimes, my love.”

“That is very good to know. Now, considering our first series of experiments, I believe that for tonight, your bed should do nicely.”

“All right, then,” Greg said, still smiling happily. “See you upstairs in a couple of minutes, love.”

“Until then, my dear.”

Mycroft woke up five times during the night, one time whimpering, three times screaming and one time simply locked up, his whole body completely, painfully rigid with panic. Always, Greg gently coaxed him awake, held him, rubbed his back and murmured soft, loving words of reassurance to him until Mycroft relaxed into the slightly older man's warmth and, eventually, back into a restless sleep.

Greg wanted to cry. He wanted to take a taxi to Baker Street, kick in the door to 221 B and beat Sherlock bloody, then repeat the process at whatever place John was staying. Maybe he was over at Sherlock's, then he could get them both in one fell swoop. He also wanted to take care of Mycroft, cuddle him and show him that he was safe and very much loved. He concentrated on the last option, which wasn't all that hard because all things considered, Mycroft would always be his first priority. Greg was by nature a protector and nurturer, and when he loved, he loved fiercely.

Throughout that restless night, he caught a few mumbled fragments, “bad clown”, “go home, please”, “killed him”, “Father, stop her”, “drowned Redbeard”, “Uncle Rudy”, “cannot be controlled”, “Sherlock, no”, “East wind”, “Sherrinford secure”, “umbrella”, “please, Sherlock”, “burning, it's burning”, but out of context, they didn't make much sense. One day, perhaps, Mycroft would be willing and able to explain. Until then, Greg would wait and take care of him. As to John and Sherlock, those two bastards, Greg had a very long memory.
When they were woken by the final nightmare, it was just after half past five, and so they decided to give up sleep for a lost cause and go down into the kitchen for tea. Mycroft was pale and withdrawn, and not even grumpy as he usually was in the morning. Greg actually found that crankiness charming, although he would have never admitted it to his love, who was likely to take offence. He never would have interfered with an adorably grumpy Mycroft, but that morning he simply looked tired, even disturbed and insecure, and so Greg decided to cheer him up a little.

He took the assembled petit-four cake out of his fridge and lifted the heavy wooden cutting board that was weighing it down. Intrigued, Mycroft moved closer, and Greg smiled.

“I was going to buy special food colouring and the traditional decorations this afternoon,” he said, “but I thought I could whip up a nice lemon icing instead right now, and we could decorate them together with whatever we find here, if you’d like. It was one of my favourite things to do in the kitchen as a child.”

“I was never allowed in the kitchen,” Mycroft thoughtlessly replied as he inspected the thin, compressed layers of cake, “but I should like to try.”

“All right.” Greg, whose heart hurt for the overweight and underappreciated boy his love had once been, gave him a quick, one-armed hug and then moved over to the cupboards to see what he could find.

In the end, he managed to gather a bit of leftover dark couverture chocolate, a small bag of unsalted chopped pistachios and a bag of whole Arabica coffee beans. They belonged to their housekeeper, since the two men rarely drank coffee, but he assumed she’d forgive him if he took a handful.

Mycroft was content to cut thin peels from the lemon – luckily, Mrs Chowdhury only bought organic fruits and vegetables – and did so with a dedicated and absolute precision, which made Greg smile at him lovingly. The older man suspected he looked a bit silly with that besotted expression on his face, but he couldn't help himself. At least they were in the privacy of their own home – their home! – and Mycroft wouldn't be embarrassed.

In fact, the self-proclaimed minor government official smiled back at him with just as much fondness, and Greg suddenly felt incredibly light.

In regard to the petit-fours, Mycroft seemed fascinated by the whole process and happy to participate. He squeezed the lemon and strained the juice through a small sieve while Greg cut the layered, compressed cake into bite-sized cubes. Mycroft's face bore a look of concentration of a magnitude that he probably didn't have to bring to the table at a multinational conference, and Greg was enchanted all over again. Those elegant, long, incredibly dextrous hands made him think of things inappropriate in a kitchen, at least with their housekeeper at home and soon about to get up, and so he swallowed and put all his excess energy into stirring the glaze. Mycroft was standing close, slowly making the icing sugar fall through another fine sieve and into the bowl with the lemon juice, and Greg whipped it as smoothly as he could. Fortunately, the icing was getting thicker and harder to stir by the minute, and he could blame the increasing heat he was feeling and the flush in his cheeks on the exertion instead of the beautiful, long body so enticingly close to his.

Then he made the mistake of looking up and into Mycroft's eyes. Pupils dilated, heart-rate elevated, lips slightly parted on breaths that came just a little quicker than usually... classical involuntary physiological responses to a sexual stimulus.

Greg saw, and he observed.
Fortunately, the sugar was all whipped into the icing at this point, and so he put the whisk away with a hand that was only slightly unsteady. In an almost synchronised move, Mycroft put down his sieve, and then they were kissing with a sudden fierce, overwhelming hunger, hands gripping, teeth clashing, tongues duelling.

Last evening's kiss had been about love and comfort, sweet languid savouring and tender exploration, but this, this was sudden and explosive, all raw, dangerous, consuming heat. Most women would have either drawn back or become pliant under such an almost violent onslaught; Mycroft held his own and returned it pressure for pressure, lick for lick, nip for nip. One of his endlessly long, lithe legs slipped between Greg's, and his erection pressed against the taller man's thigh while he felt Mycroft's a bit higher against his hip. And it was impressive and delicious and made their already fierce hunger even more ferocious. They moved in perfect synchronicity, tongues and limbs entwined, hips undulating against each other, and it was powerful and wonderful and oh God, but Greg was going to come in his pants like a schoolboy. Gasping, he broke the kiss, dropped to his knees and pulled down Mycroft's pyjamas and pants in one smooth motion. The erection now so tantalisingly unveiled before him was much like the entire man, long and elegant and mouth-wateringly perfect, rising proudly from a nest of auburn curls. First, Greg nosed those soft hairs and breathed in the deliciously musky scent while his hand moved upwards and behind to cup one magnificent, pert arse cheek and pull the taller man even closer. He pressed a few butterfly-light kisses on that beautiful cock, drawing a deep, lovely moan from the gorgeous man above him. A few more caresses that caused the sweetest little murmurs, a few more teasing licks that caused deeper groans, and Greg couldn't help himself; he greedily swallowed the magnificent erection down, and immediately had to fight his gag reflex. He hadn't done this in years, but Mycroft was so gorgeous and Greg wanted this so very much, and his love made the most enticing wrecked sound deep in his throat. A pair of long-fingered, manicured hands came to rest in his silver hair, gently, almost cautiously, and Greg relaxed his throat and continued to enjoy this incredible gift he had been given, and the beautiful noises of pleasure, the helplessly contracting fingers in his hair that told him just how much his own gift was appreciated, desired, needed. Greg summoned every ounce of skill he had acquired in the course of his life and used it to show all his adoration, his desire, his own pleasure, and almost too soon, Mycroft gasped out a warning, “Gregory! Close!”

Greg, feeling a surge of pride and an even heavier wave of arousal wash through him, stuffed his free hand down his own pyjama pants and started pulling urgently on his weeping erection while he gave Mycroft another skilful twirl of his tongue and took him down his throat as deeply as he could, humming around him.

Mycroft came silently, eyes closed, mouth open, head thrown back in abandon and his face utterly beautiful in its pleasure, and Greg swallowed every salty, slightly bitter drop that was flowing across his tongue in strong pulses. One look up at Mycroft's debauched, nearly devastated expression sent him over the edge himself in one of the most intense orgasms he had ever experienced.

“Oh, dear God,” Mycroft gasped, his voice trembling as he weakly leaned against the granite counter. “Gregory...”

“Yeah,” Greg sighed, his voice rough and deep, as he sagged against the counter himself. A cupboard handle was poking into his side and the tiles of the floor were hard and cold under his abused knees, but he was floating in bliss and happy to ignore that for the time being. “Incredible.”

He leaned forward, with the added bonus of getting the stupid handle away from his side, and kissed one pale, exposed thigh with an enchanting smattering of freckles. “Gorgeous.”

He leaned his cheek against the soft skin and felt the tiny hairs against his morning stubble. “Beautiful,” he happily sighed.
Mycroft smiled down at him, then sank to his knees as well. “Wonderful,” he agreed.

Keeling, they embraced, tired, content, happy. When the taller man leaned in for a kiss, Greg hesitated for a second, aware what his mouth would taste of, then gave in with a soft sigh. Mycroft didn't seem to mind at all. Their kiss was lazy and slow and sweet, all the earlier urgency and greed gone. What remained was a perfect golden glow of contentment and warmth.

Except that Greg's knees were beginning to feel stiff, sore and cold from the hard floor, and the stickiness on his hand and in his pyjama bottoms were making themselves known. For a moment, he leaned against Mycroft's shoulder, then asked with a sigh: “Paper towel?”

Being together with an incredibly intelligent and perceptive man had its advantages. Mycroft gently kissed his forehead, smiled and got to his feet again, just a little shakily. “Of course, my dear.”

He was so kind to supply several, two of them wet, and Greg cleaned himself off as well as he could. There was a suspicious wet spot left on his pyjama bottoms, and for a moment he felt transported back in time to his puberty when he'd seen such a sight rather regularly in the morning. With an amused smile that soon became a wince, he climbed back to his feet with some effort. His knees, pain receptors slowly coming back online, were protesting loudly, but he was helped up by Mycroft's outstretched hand. It was both soft and surprisingly strong, and Greg smiled up at his partner tenderly. For a moment, they hugged and kissed again, a feeling of peace suffusing them, a sense that all was right in the world. Outside of their comfortable house, bad things were happening and the peace would not last, but for one stolen morning, they enjoyed what they could together.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

A bit of sweet fluff before things get ugly. Those two deserve it.

Mrs Chowdhury found her two charges half an hour later. Mr Lestrade was carefully dipping perfectly cut little bite-sized *petit-four* cubes into smooth lemon icing with a praline fork and Mr Holmes was decorating them with an expression of utter concentration. Mr Lestrade's dressing gown was primly closed and firmly tied around his waist. He was looking at the taller man with open adoration, and it warmed her heart. Mr Holmes, also wearing a dressing gown over his pyjamas, was applying thin lines of chocolate piping with absolute precision, handling his improvised pastry bag – a freezer bag with a tiny corner snipped off to squeeze out the warmed, viscous dark couverture chocolate – very gracefully. Some of the *petit-fours* he made to look like tiny wrapped gifts with delicate dark chocolate bows, others he decorated with precise swirls or diagonal lines, sometimes with a sprinkling of chopped pistachios, meticulously arranged curls of thin lemon peel or a single small Arabica coffee bean. Every little confection became a veritable piece of art. Whenever Mr Holmes was done with his decorations, Mr Lestrade would have another little cube perfectly glazed in white icing and ready on the cooling rack; they worked together seamlessly. The two men had even been clever enough to put a sheet of baking paper under the rack, so any sticky icing that inevitably dripped down would be very easy to remove from the granite surface.

Mr Lestrade noticed her first and gave her one of his kind, boyish smiles. “Good morning, Mrs Chowdhury,” he said in a happy tone of voice.

She had often seen him in a good, relatively relaxed mood, but she had never seen him so radiantly joyful, and it made her smile warmly in reply. “Good morning, Mr Lestrade, Mr Holmes,” she said.

The taller man, uncharacteristically clear-eyed for that time in the morning, looked up from his task and smiled back. “Good morning, Mrs Chowdhury,” he echoed, sounding and looking happy as well.

“Wonderful,” she cheerfully said as she looked at them with a wide smile. “I believe you deserve a celebratory breakfast. Would you like me to fetch a bottle of champagne, gentlemen?”

Mycroft blinked, surprised, but before he could react, Greg already replied, “Lovely idea, Mrs Chowdhury, but we both have to work this morning. Perhaps we could save it for the evening?”

Then he smiled at Mycroft, so vibrantly happy, and any thought of formality or propriety instantly went out of the taller man's head. Besides, their reaction of their housekeeper was a thoroughly positive one, which was a small relief. Her disapproval could have made the atmosphere in the house rather frosty, and she was too good at her job to be easily replaced. So he cautiously smiled back at Greg and agreed, “An excellent idea indeed. Champagne tonight it is.”

“Very well.” With a small, excited bounce in her step, she put on another kettle of hot water and started her breakfast preparations around the two men, who took about another half-hour to finish up the tiny delicacies. Every once in a while she gave them an interested look, and Greg promised her to
teach her how to make *petit-fours* soon. He also admitted to having used up eight of her eggs for the biscuite batter the night before, but she just laughed and said that she had planned on going to Waitrose that day, anyway.

When breakfast was ready, she put a candle on the table for them and went to clean up the dishes and implements used for the *petit-fours*. Greg protested, but she shushed him with more than a hint of fond impatience, shooed him over to his seat and firmly ordered him to celebrate and eat his breakfast. It was an amusing sight, the small, wiry, dark-haired Indian woman, arms akimbo, determinedly directing the much taller, more muscular, silver-haired man trained in hand-to-hand combat. Mycroft watched and smiled; Mrs Chowdhury was indeed a gem.

“I have to go to Baker Street this morning,” Mycroft said with a sigh, some of the brightness leaving him at the unpleasant thought.

Greg bit down on his lip and his first instinctual reply. If he didn't really have to, Mycroft wouldn't be going, so there was no point in asking that useless question. “[I wish I could accompany you,]” he said instead, trying for a light tone that came out slightly forced, “[but then I’d want to punch them in their smug faces, love. Maybe break both of their noses.”

“Thank you, my dear, gallant defender,” Mycroft replied with a slight smile. “[I shall remind myself of the sentiment when I look into those smug faces, and everything will become far more bearable.”

Greg released his breath slowly, softly, and let some of his anger go with it. It had flared up quickly and hotly again, less than the night before but still quite powerful, at the tired, worried, reluctant expression on Mycroft's face. The signs were tiny, barely there to read, but Greg had become much more attuned to the subtle, sometimes secretive man he loved. Also, this was not unexpected; Mycroft had been horridly, cruelly targeted and frightened the day before and was now about to face his tormentors. His usual self-confident, cool, calmly controlled demeanour was only a front that morning, a massive but terrifyingly brittle armour that hid a man who had slept barely four hours in total, plagued by nightmares and long-forgotten, deeply buried primal terrors of his childhood and perhaps some of his worst current fears. Greg wanted to shield him, to protect him, to surround him with all things positive and happy, and he had indeed managed to give him back his balance and even added quite a bit of joy. That didn't negate the fact, however, that Mycroft was still too hurt and vulnerable right now to face Sherlock's usual viciousness and John's disappointing callousness.

Greg looked at his love, his helplessness displayed openly in his dark eyes. He could and would say nothing to change Mycroft's mind, though, and so he gave him a brave, encouraging smile, or at least tried to. It didn't seem to be working very well.

“You are my shield, Gregory,” the younger man gently, firmly said as he took the shorter, tanner, more muscular hand in his own impeccably manicured but equally strong one. “Before last night I had no defence beyond my own, but you have lent me your strength, and I know that you will grant it to me as often and as long as I need it.”

Greg swallowed and nodded, looking into those beautiful, intelligent, brave eyes.

“I may be going to Baker Street on my own,” Mycroft continued, “but I will not be alone.”

Greg nodded again, his eyes gaining a suspiciously misty sheen.
“Sherlock deserves to know the truth,” the younger man went on. “I’ve tried to protect him from it for years, but apparently, the truth will out, and now is the time – he cannot defend himself adequately if he remains ignorant. I owe my brother that much; I must inform him.”

Greg, understanding the implications that there was indeed a sister that Sherlock had deleted and that this sister was currently a threat, nodded again. “I understand.”

That didn't mean that he had to like it, of course, but for all that he wanted to protect his love, he also had to defer to his judgement in this godawful, fucked-up situation.

“I'll tell you as well, Gregory, but not now. Tonight,” Mycroft softly said, his eyes intense.

“Whenever you're ready, love, not before,” Greg firmly replied, then added with a chuckle, “Do I even have the clearance to know?”

“You do,” the auburn-haired man confirmed, his face serious but his eyes soft. “Why do you think you were vetted at that level? I will still be forced to keep some work-related secrets from you, but not very many.”

Greg looked thoughtful for a moment, then a wide smile broke out on his face. “Thank you. Thank you for letting me in even at a time when I thought all I could ever hope for was to be your friend.”

“You are still my friend,” Mycroft replied with a smile of his own, “my very dear, trusted friend, but also my love. I must admit, I had hoped for it as well.”

It was the first time he had ever spoken that exact word to Greg, and he was filled with a sudden, painful happiness. “Mycroft,” he simply said, but he spoke the name like a compliment, like an endearment, like the definition of the most awe-inspiring and breathtaking thing in the world.

They were sitting at right angles, close enough to touch but also angled that they could look at each other... or kiss each other, which they now did, very tenderly. They were both still aware of Mrs Chowdhury's presence in the kitchen, tough, and so they kept it chaste.

“Take good care of yourself,” Greg finally said, letting his nose rest against his love's tenderly, “and call me or text me if they're making you uncomfortable. Remember, you're doing those two bastards a favour; don't let them mistreat you again. Call me, and I'll be there as quickly as I can, lights, sirens and all.”

Mycroft pecked him on the lips. “Thank you, my dear. It is good to know that, and I promise that I shall not hesitate to make use of your kindly offer if needed.”

“Good,” Greg replied, sotto voce.

Then, with a sudden smile, he went to fetch the large plate of petit-fours. “Let's test our efforts, one for each, what d'you say?”

“Just one?” Mycroft asked with a mischievous smile.

“Well, just one right now,” Greg said, “at least for me. That was a wonderful breakfast, but pretty filling. Still, I'd like to know how our first collaborative project has turned out.”

“Collaborative project?” Mycroft repeated with a small, slightly ironical smile.

Greg grinned ruefully. “Stupid management and team motivation seminars,” he said. “Never been to one that actually taught me something that wasn't either utter shite or plain common sense, but they
use impressive words. With many syllables, you know.”

Mycroft, who was completely aware that Greg cherished books and read compulsively and fluently in English, French, Latin and, strangely enough, Japanese, laughed delightedly. “Many syllables indeed.”

He picked up a petit-four and fed it to a surprised but pleased Greg, and was offered one in return from his love's fingers. And oh, it was good, although the tingling in his lips where those marvellous fingers had touched was in all likelihood not due to the tiny confection. The petit-four itself was sweet, very sweet but with a delicate taste of almonds and fresh strawberries, a note of tart lemon and a hint of slightly bitter dark chocolate.

“Perfect,” Mycroft pronounced, his eyes closed and the look on his face... well, it wasn't quite as blissful as it had been about an hour ago, but still close enough to make Greg's pupils widen and his breath catch.

Still, he managed to control himself enough to reply, “Very good, even if I say so myself. We make a wonderful team, my love. Mrs Chowdhury, would you care to try one, too?”

She did, and happily expressed the appropriate appreciation.

Mycroft looked adorably proud and shy at the same time, and Greg said to him, “That's one reason why I find baking so satisfying. You get such a tangible result; paperwork never gives me the same sense of achievement.”

With a chuckle but also a slightly thoughtful look, the younger man agreed. “I can see why that would be the case,” he replied. “I'm quite amenable to further shared projects in the kitchen.”

Greg grinned widely and mischievously. “Wonderful. There are so many possibilities, though. One of us should make a list.”

Mycroft chuckled again. “Oh, you devil.”

For a moment, Greg's dark brown eyes went even darker, and Mycroft's pupils widened involuntarily in response. “Your devil,” Greg murmured, his voice deep and husky.

They exchanged another quick “the housekeeper is near” kiss, chaste, gentle and tinged with more than a hint of frustration.

Then Greg glanced at the clock on the wall, a digital one precisely attuned to Greenwich Mean Time, and sighed, his frustration tripling. “I haven't showered and changed yet, love. I'm afraid I'll have to get a move on, or I'll be late.”

Mycroft smiled at him with a sudden predatory edge. “I'm looking forward to tonight.”

“Christ, so am I,” Greg answered with conviction as he stood up, then leaned forward and gave his love one last short but heartfelt kiss. “Take one petit-four for Anthea,” he said with a wicked grin, “but only one. Take a few more for yourself, love.”

Mycroft chuckled. “She had the gall to doubt your abilities where the French cuisine is concerned, didn't she?”

Greg nodded and laughed.

“You are a cruel, cruel man, my dear,” Mycroft stated with deep admiration.
“I love you, too, gorgeous,” the silver-haired man happily replied, fondly tousled that soft auburn hair and quickly from the kitchen before he could become even more distracted.

“Remember, call me if you need me.” His voice floated down from the stairs, and then he was gone.
After a literally nightmarish start and an extremely lovely interlude in the kitchen followed by a wonderfully happy breakfast, the day truly went to the dogs at around ten o'clock. Greg, slogging through meetings and bravely demolishing his paperwork, remained blessedly unaware for a while, his happiness buoying him up against his tiredness. It all caught up with him shortly before his planned lunch break around one p.m. when he left his office to speak to Michael Dimmock about his current case, a murdered gardener in Crystal Palace Park, morbidly positioned in the jaws of one of the Victorian dinosaur statues that lurked between the trees. Anderson, if he'd still been with the Yard, might have enjoyed that one.

Greg didn't call people into his office as often as other DCIs did, usually only when some kind of discretion was required. The truth was, he liked to stretch his legs and keep his finger on the pulse of his division. Right after his promotion, he'd had to forcibly remind himself not to micromanage his DIs, but he had soon found a solid balance, neither too disinterested nor too interfering.

“Oh my God, that's his place, isn't it?” a young constable – Abby Bhamra, wasn't it? – was squealing excitedly, waving around her phone with the current news.

He almost ignored her with a roll of his eyes as he walked past, but then she said, “Sherlock Holmes, right? Didn't he live there?”

“Yes,” another constable replied, even as Greg stopped and demanded, “What do you mean, did?”

PC Bhamra squeaked, realising that she had caught the attention of the DCI himself, and mutely moved her lips. On any other occasion, Greg would have found it funny.

“At ease, Constable Bhamra,” he said, his voice not as sharp as before, since his sudden appearance practically out of nowhere had clearly shocked her. “Now tell me, what is that about Sherlock Holmes' flat?”

“It's exploded, innit? The entire outer wall's gone. Here, have a look, sir.”

She offered him her phone. He looked.

There was a picture of 221 Baker Street, a fire truck and an ambulance in front of the building. The flat B on the first floor was singed and open to the elements, the chaotic remains of the living-room exposed. Sheaves of paper were floating around like pale little ghosts, sparks and smoke drifting around, contributing to a strangely surrealistic, haunted atmosphere.

Greg thought that they ought to have waited for Halloween for maximum effect. Wasn't all that long any more to the last night of October.

Then he thought, just like Sherlock, the dramatic bastard. Bet he'll try to get out of cleaning up again. Then he thought, Mycroft.

He politely held out the phone to the constable, who dutifully took it back although her dark-skinned face was looking strangely fuzzy around the edges. Then he took out his own phone, found “number untraceable” on his speed dial and pressed the call button.

Then he waited. The display of his phone was fuzzy. He should have it repaired.

Then he was connected to the answerphone. The mechanical message sounded pretty fuzzy, too.

“Bloody unreliable phone.”

“‘This is Greg,’” he said, trying to keep his voice calm and failing. “Call me back. Tell me that you're all right. Please.”

Someone was babbling nonsense about some other person going pale and looking like he was going to faint. He had no time for that kind of shite. He had to get his coat, his money and then go to... go to... go to The Princess Grace Hospital, yeah. Closest hospital to Baker Street. Not a regular A&E but with urgency services, and since it was a posh private hospital, there was no way they would take Mycroft Holmes anywhere else.

So, his office first. Yeah. This way.
Okay. He could do this.
Need to notify the Super I'm leaving.

Anthea. Shit, don't even have her phone number. Anthea would know. I fucking give her tarte au chocolat and a petit-four, and she doesn't even give me her fucking work number. Well, it was just one petit-four. Maybe that's bad karma. Sherlock's and John's bad karma, mostly, though, probably, the callous wankers, and now Mycroft is... No, no, no. As long as I don't know anything for certain, panicking is not on. So yeah. Never mind Anthea, I can find things out myself. Bloody DCI, for fuck's sake. But can anyone survive such an... No. Facts first. Need solid intel, no running off blindly. Deep breaths. Yeah.

Ah, good, there's Sally.

“Would you mind joining me in my office for a moment, DI Donovan?”
Alright, that came out almost as is was supposed to. Good.

“Is this about the Baker Street explosion?” she asked, her voice strangely kind. It sounded a bit like the one he had used on Mycroft last night, the kind, soothing one to calm down traumatised people. Fuck. No, not thinking about that, not now, maybe not ever.

“Can you find out for me if anyone was hurt, and if they were, where they were taken? Dr John Hamish Watson, William Sherlock Scott Holmes, Martha Hudson... Mycroft Alexander Vernet Holmes.”

“I will, boss, but please sit down. Here's a cup of tea. Have a sip, yeah? And I'll make a few calls, yeah? Won't take a minute, boss.”
The tea was half cold, and it had probably tasted like shite even when it was still properly warm. To make up for the over-steeped, bitter taste, Sally had apparently dumped about half the sugar bowl into the cup. He made better tea than that. Mrs Chowdhury made better tea than that. Fuck, even little Lyra made better tea than that, even if she only had garden mud and rainwater to work with. This was fucking disgraceful tea.

“This is fucking disgraceful tea.”

“Yes, boss, I know. It's from the staff pantry, what d'you expect?” Sally was grinning at him, the cheeky bastard. Bastardess? Get your thoughts together, Lestrade.

“So, does Mr Mycroft Holmes happen to live in Kensington?” she asked with another cheeky smile. He smiled back and felt as if his face was going to crack, but it was helping him to regain some control over himself. “Yeah, he does. All right, Sally, who were you talking to just now?”

“Emergency response, someone I know; I was lucky Rick was on the scene himself. The theory is that some sort of strange, unusual hand-grenade went off in the living-room, but they're keeping it very hush-hush for now, ISS on the scene and all. Four people were taken to The Princess Grace Hospital, although the elderly female – that must be Mrs Hudson – only had a few scratches and a bit of a shock; she was on the ground floor and on the other side of her flat when the thing went off. Two of them apparently jumped through the windows; from the descriptions, it sounds like those were Holmes and Watson, the daft buggers. A few sprains and glass cuts, a bit singed all around, and they may have also fractured bones from the fall. The fourth man was worst off; didn't make it outside on his own. They took him to The Princess Grace right away with lights and sirens.”
Greg drew in a deep breath and released it slowly. At least Mycroft was still alive at that point. The Princess Grace Hospital was nearby and had talented surgeons and other highly-paid specialists. Mycroft had a chance.

He nodded determinedly. “I'll call The Princess Grace, then.”

“Boss?”

“Yeah?”

“You're worried about him, aren't you?” Her voice was painfully gentle.

“Yes,” Greg admitted. “I am.” There was really no point in denying it at that stage.

“There isn't all that much going on today. We can hold the fort for you,” she offered.

He smiled at her, genuinely grateful though his smile felt as cracked as old paint. “Thanks, Sally, I'll consider it.”
She nodded and left his room with an encouraging last smile, and he picked up the receiver of his office phone. The Princess Grace web page was open in his browser, the number on display. He dialled, fingers shaking.

At the hospital, the phone was ringing, and Greg dreaded what he would hear when the other side picked up.

The news was both better and, well, not really good but no worse than he had expected. At first, he'd been worried that they wouldn't tell him anything at all. Patient confidentiality usually required a writ before any information could be given to anyone outside the immediate family, even, or maybe especially, the police, and a posh establishment like The Princess Grace tended to protect the patient's privacy zealously. Greg, however, to his surprise and great relief, was apparently listed as Mycroft's emergency contact, together with Sherlock, and so he was told that Mycroft was still in surgery. On the one hand, that meant he was still alive. On the other hand, it had been over three hours since the explosion now, which meant the damage had to be extensive.

Greg pondered his options, then, admitting to himself that he'd be too distracted to work with any efficiency at all, got up to talk to his Super. Remembering something, he turned back to his computer and unlocked the screen again. After the débâcle with Ms not-Scott, Anthea had forwarded the woman's address and phone number to his office mail. Quickly, he opened his mail client and scrolled back, back, back... Ah, there it was, A. Smith at the Department of Transport. He smiled, tired and wobbly but actually a bit amused, and fired off a quick mail with a concisely worded request to contact him on his private phone as soon as possible, along with his phone number. He thought that she had it already or would have no trouble finding out, but in case she didn't have it currently at hand, he wanted to ensure the quickest possible reply.

He saved the contact in his address book and exported it to his phone. Finally he sent his computer back into protected mode and went to speak to Allan about half a day off for personal reasons.

“Is this about Mr Holmes, Lestrade?” Superintendent Allan asked, clearly not pleased.
“No,” Greg tiredly replied, “at least not about Sherlock Holmes.”
“Ah,” the Super thoughtfully replied. The other Mr Holmes was a person not to be crossed even in the Yard.
“He was visiting his brother when the... explosion occurred,” Greg went on and pressed his fingers together because they were shaking in his lap.
“May I ask frankly, Lestrade, what is Mr Holmes to you?” Allan asked, his tone in equal parts sharp and worried.
“And you expect an equally frank answer, sir, I assume?”
“Of course.”
“About anything concerning me, you certainly can, sir,” Greg replied in a mild, subdued voice, “but do you really want to ask such a personal question about Mycroft Holmes?”
Allan paused, his lips pursed. His DCI's pallor, his hands, pressed together tightly to keep them from shaking, his quietly desperate eyes had really answered the question for him, but it was a matter not to be spoken of aloud, and not to be mentioned outside this office.
“Of course,” the Super finally said, “I agree, this is an entirely private matter.”
Greg simply nodded once in acknowledgement. “Thank you, sir. I'm sorry, but I'm finding it hard to concentrate right now, and even if I stayed here, I'd probably be of no use. Would probably be spending all day tomorrow trying to fix all the little mistakes that crept in today. Can I please be excused for the rest of the workday? I'll file for a vacation day as soon as possible.”
Allan sighed. “You have far too many hours overtime accumulated, anyway, Lestrade. Just take the rest of the day off, and call me if you need tomorrow off, too. It won't be a problem.”
“Thank you, sir.”
“And Lestrade?”
“Sir?”
“You're not fit for traffic. Have someone drive you to the hospital. That's an order.”
“Yes, sir, and thank you.”
“Right. Now off with you, and I don't want to see you back here today.”
Greg gave him a wobbly salute and an equally wobbly smile and left.
In TFP, after the explosion at 221 B and Sherlock's and John's spectacular jump through the closed windows, there is a cut and hey, presto, they're aboard the fishing vessel. Logically, some time has passed in between those two scenes; how much time is open to speculation, as are their possible injuries from the explosion. While I don't want to put them in hospital for a few weeks – that would heavily impact the flow of the story – I also don't think that a Hollywood action movie approach in the tradition of Die Hard would do justice to the BBC Sherlock series. So I've tried to strike a balance and keep it somewhat plausible, though not necessarily realistic because a) I'm not certain if the “patience grenade” is realistic to begin with, b) I don't have any in-depth knowledge about weapons and c) I'm not a medical doctor. If there are any blunders in my story, I'd appreciate a helpful comment. :) 

The Princess Grace Hospital is real and has no regular A&E but provides urgency services. I picked the location for convenience because it's the closest hospital to Baker Street, and I certainly don't want to insinuate anything negative about the actual, real hospital or anyone who works there! The layout of the building and the staff in my story are entirely fictional.

Greg gave Sally the petit-fours Mrs Chowdhoury had packed up for him in an airtight container, carefully separated by small baking paper cut-outs, asking her to pass one to each DI and one to the Super. One was left, and she asked him if he wanted to have it, joking that he could use the boost to his blood sugar. Greg couldn't. The scene of this morning at the breakfast table was so clear in his mind's eye, so luminescent and vibrant when everything else now seemed a dull grey. With his best effort at a smile, he replied that she should eat it herself, they would make new ones soon, and tried his best to ignore the brief flash of pity on her face. She then found a uniformed copper to take him to The Princess Grace.

A brief call on the way told him that Mycroft was still in the operating theatre. Greg swallowed down his panic as it tried to rise again and decided to enquire about Mrs Hudson and John and Sherlock instead. Those two were complete fucking bastards, but he was still worried about them and would feel much better once they were back in shape to be punched.

There was no message from Anthea.

The drive to The Princess Grace was both too long and much too short. Greg absent-mindedly thanked the uniformed policeman and walked in before he could give in to his sudden urge to run away. A part of him desperately didn't want to know, because as long as he didn't receive any bad news, Mycroft could be fine in his mind. The much greater part, though, the one that wanted to be there for the man he loved in every possible way he could, won out, of course.

Mrs Hudson was easy to find. Except for the shock and a few scratches, she was all right, and she was eager to look for Sherlock and John. Since she was determined but still a little wobbly on her
elderly knees, Greg gallantly offered her his arm and proceeded to find out where the two miscreants had ended up. Somehow, with Mrs Hudson to take care of, it was much easier to regain a bit of control over his panic, then push it down to a level where it continued to simmer but no longer threatened to compromise his actions. Greg was very good at keeping his head as a copper. You needed to preserve a healthy distance, only then you could think clearly and do what needed to be done. Where Mycroft was concerned, though, his professional distance clearly was all shot to hell. But he couldn't allow himself to break down. He would do that later, but not when there were still things to be found out and matters to be taken care of.

He felt a little bad for only listening to Mrs Hudson with half an ear as she prattled on, but he couldn't really concentrate all that well right then, in spite of his best efforts. Still, he managed to track Sherlock and John to their shared hospital room.

Sherlock was slightly concussed and sleeping; due to the shock wave from the explosion, he had apparently hit his head on the window frame on the way down. Also, he had probably annoyed the hospital staff into giving him some relaxing medication, judging from the wry humour with which John was looking at Sherlock's IV bag. According to the print, it was just a saline solution, but a mysterious arcane glyph, or possibly a few letters in a hurried, sloppy handwriting, had been scrawled on with a green marker and showed that some kind of medical drug had been added to it.

Immediately, Mrs Hudson rushed forward and started fussing over both of them, with John patiently explaining that there was nothing too badly wrong with them.

John had tried to break his fall with a roll, which had saved him from more extensive damage. Aside from his singed hair and an assortment of bumps, bruises, small cuts and light burns, he'd sustained a dislocated shoulder and six stitches in the palm of his dominant left hand and three on his right from landing in the glass shards from the windows. Luckily, nothing was broken, but with his specific injuries, he wasn't exactly able to take care of himself, an infant and possibly Sherlock – or would he count as another infant or maybe a toddler? – at home until he could use his hands again.

Sherlock had suffered a few second-degree burns as well, several glass cuts, including a few shallower ones on his palms and a long one in his scalp that must have bled like mad, bruised knees and a badly sprained left ankle.

When Mrs Hudson went over to the now sleeping detective, who was breathing calmly but hooked up to several monitors just in case, Greg moved to John's bedside and sat down in the visitor's chair.

“T'm glad you two bastards are more or less all right,” he honestly said. And really, he was; they had been utter knobs, but they still didn't deserve this.

“Yeah, we were bloody lucky,” John tiredly replied.

Greg looked at the injured man, and the most vicious part of his anger died.

“You know, I wanted to punch you in the face for what you did last night,” he calmly said, “but now, I suppose I can consider that score settled by karma.”

John rolled his eyes and groaned. “Is this about Mycroft again?”

“What do you think?” Greg coolly, harshly asked back. “You broke into his country home, you bastards, his safe place, and turned it into a bloody horror show. I expected that kind of vicious cruelty from Sherlock, because in spite of all he has learned during the last few years, he doesn't really understand people all that well. But you, John? I'm seriously disappointed.”
The younger man stubbornly pressed his lips together and turned his head away. “Why do you even think he'd care? All we did was shake his perfect composure a bit. That man is made of ice.”

“He's not,” Greg replied so forcefully it shocked them both. Then he took a deep breath and went on in a calmer voice, “Don't claim to know Mycroft. You have never bothered to get to know him, John, and you're far too fucking fond of your preconceived notions. That man has barely slept four hours in total last night and had nightmares several times. I staid with him, you know, and woke him up when things got too bad. You have no idea, you bloody smug, self-righteous twat. You have no idea. And don't tell me you didn't enjoy your little power trip, because I know that you did,” Greg added contemptuously.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

“Christ,” John said with an exhale. “He always seems so... invulnerable.”

“That's how he presents himself to people he cannot trust not to hurt him,” was Greg's cold reply.

John flinched; that barb had hit home as intended. “Christ,” repeated he with a sigh. “I suppose... yeah, I'm sorry.”

“Sherlock knows exactly how to harm him, doesn't he?” Greg went on, still coldly angry. “And you, who pride yourself on being his moral compass, convinced him to go all out and target Mycroft's worst fears, just because you couldn't be bothered to ask him a question like a fucking normal person.”

“Mycroft isn't a fucking normal person, Greg, and we had to know about Eurus. He wouldn't have told us otherwise,” John weakly objected, looking very uncomfortable.

“But you don't know that, do you?” the older man demanded, his dark brown eyes still hard, implacable, and underneath filled with unbearable pain. “He came to the bloody flat today, didn't he? He explained things to Sherlock because he thought he needed to know in order to defend himself. If the stubborn git had decided against telling you, he wouldn't have, period, no matter how much pressure you put him under, no matter what sort of pain you inflicted on him. Perhaps simply asking him would have been enough in the first place, but you don't know that, do you?”

Another uncomfortable silence stretched between them like dusty spider webs.

“No,” John finally admitted, lowering his head. “No, I don't.”

Greg nodded once. “And now you never will.” But the coldness, the anger had left his voice; he simply sounded very tired, almost defeated.

Then he sighed and sat up straighter. “What's going to happen with Rosie while the two of you are in hospital? Is there anything I can do to help?”

Mrs Hudson, who had politely turned away, softly talking to a sleeping Sherlock while the two men were having their conversation in low, angry voices, turned back towards them in her visitor's chair.

“Perhaps I can help,” she offered. “Rosie knows me, and I'm familiar with your house, John. The whole of 221 is, well, not habitable right now, I suppose, with large parts of the outer wall gone.”

A bit of hysteria crept into her voice at the last part, and she let out a nervous giggle.

“Yeah,” John said, sounding both relieved and calming. “That's a wonderful idea, Mrs Hudson. I'd be beyond grateful if you could move into my house for about two weeks, or as long as you want to,
really. Rosie is pretty much used to her day care already, so you can have the entire morning and part of the afternoon to yourself and make all the calls and arrangements you need..."

Greg was content to mostly let the conversation pass him by as the two of them settled the details, Mrs Hudson quickly perking up at the prospect of something useful to do. The small confrontation with John had left Greg emotionally and even physically drained, but at least they had cleared the air between them. Talking to Sherlock would be useless, anyway, so he could consider the matter closed.

John and Mrs Hudson were now discussing the explosion, something about a drone and a top-secret military motion-sensor activated “patience grenade”. The former soldier went on about shock waves and how they'd been lucky it hadn't been a fragmentation grenade or they would have never made it out of the kill zone alive. Usually, Greg would have been interested, but he felt much too wrung-out to care. His brain was filing the information away for later, but right then he just couldn't be arsed when all he wanted to know was that Mycroft would recover.

He took out his phone, but there was still no message from Anthea.

He called the reception desk again for further information on Mycroft, and then slumped with relief.

“Greg?” John asked, clearly concerned.

“He's... he's finally out of the operating theatre. They're taking him to Intensive Care now,” he replied, his voice shaking slightly. “That means that, well, at least he's alive, right?” He got to his feet, giving John and Mrs Hudson a distracted smile that didn't reach his eyes. “I'm sorry, but I have to go. Have a nice day, yeah?”

He didn't even realise how absurd that sounded under the circumstances as he hastily walked out, leaving two people to stare at the gently closing door with confusion and dawning realisation.

Chapter End Notes

Please, don't kill me! It's not quite as bad as it seems right now. Holmses are sneaky buggers.

About John's comment on the patience grenade: Quite a while ago, I've read an interesting meta-text about the DX 707 on BBC Sherlock and different sorts of real-life grenades and what kind of destruction they cause, but I can't remember the author, the title or even the site I read it on. I think I've remembered correctly that the DX 707 can't have been a fragmentation grenade because Mycroft, Sherlock and John couldn't have survived that, but if I've made a mistake, that's all mine.

I'd like to give the author proper credit and put in a link (and I'd like to re-read it myself). If any of you happen to know what article I mean, just leave a comment down below. Thanks!
Chapter 20

The private VIP section of the floor that contained Mycroft's private ICU room had two armed guards blocking the door, Special Forces by the look of them. Of course it bloody did. Greg supposed that after an assassination attempt with a military-grade weapon, that was sensible enough, but he didn't appreciate any sort of attempt to keep him out, not in the least. He drew in a deep breath and straightened his spine. It was time for shaken, worried Greg to retreat and for Detective Chief Inspector Lestrade of New Scotland Yard to come out and do battle. He had managed to make John Bloody Stubborn Bastard Watson see sense, and he certainly wasn't going to let anyone keep him away from the man he loved. Mycroft needed him, even if he wasn't awake yet; there were studies that people could hear what was said to them even if they were in a... No. Nope. Not bloody going there. This hurdle first. DCI Lestrade, giving a dressing-down. He could do that. Actually, one of those two looked a bit like Anderson; that would help.


It took him almost twenty minutes to get past the two guards. Not entirely surprisingly, they hadn't accepted his simple, polite request. They also hadn't cared that Greg was listed as emergency contact of Mycroft Holmes. His warrant card had made no difference. It was only when he insisted, quite forcefully, too, that he had the required security clearance, that one of them bothered to place a call for confirmation. Most of those twenty minutes had been spent waiting, the two Special Forces men staring at him expressionlessly. He wondered if they doubled as guards in front of Buckingham Palace.

Greg had settled into his own you-don't-impress-me-and-I-can-stand-here-all-day, copper version of a parade rest and looked just as expressionless... Well. Maybe almost as expressionless, but he still felt he had given it his best attempt.

Finally, the call came in, and after being searched for weapons, which of course Greg didn't carry, he was allowed inside. He walked through the airlock door into a changing room where he washed, then disinfected his hands meticulously and put on a sterile coverall, face mask and booties for his shoes, then went through the second airlock door into that part of Intensive Care. Mycroft's room was easy to recognise by the two Special Forces guards in front of it, these ones wearing hospital-blue coveralls, booties and face masks as well. Even their firearms had a sterile covering. Greg's heart sank; this stupid little detail hammered home the seriousness of the situation brutally.

When he had almost reached the second set of guards, making certain to look calm and non-threatening although he expected he had been announced, his phone chimed, alerting him to an incoming message.
He had to fumble a bit to get the thing out from beneath the hospital coverall and then read the text. It was from A. Smith, Department of Transport.

“Do not enter the room. A.”

Greg narrowed his eyes. For over an hour, almost two she's left him hanging, and now that he had made it this far, she was telling him that he couldn't see Mycroft? Bugger that. As a matter of fact, bugger her. With an angry, choppy motion, he stuffed his phone into the sleeve of his coverall and turned to the wall. Next to every door, a dispenser for liquid disinfectant had been installed and Greg made very conscientious use of it, taking his time and following the pictorial instructions precisely. He certainly wouldn't risk compromising Mycroft's health – more than it already was – no, not going there – by carrying any germs if he could help it.

Then he calmly walked up to the guards, hands clearly visible and empty.

“Gregory Lestrade, I've been cleared,” he said.

“Yes, sir. You may pass,” was the satisfying reply.

“Thank you,” Greg said.

In his sleeve, his phone chimed again, but he ignored it and pushed open the door.

The deathly pale man in the hospital bed, connected to a respirator and what seemed like a metric ton of complicated monitoring equipment, hardly looked like his Mycroft. Greg tried to tell himself that it was the unforgiving artificial light that made him look as if he were... as if he were nearly... But the monitors were showing moving lines, and everything was in the green with no alarms wailing. Hesitantly, Greg walked closer. Those beautiful, intelligent, vibrant eyes were closed and the plastic face mask obscured most of his beloved features, and for a moment, Greg thought that this wasn't, simply couldn't be, his Mycroft. But he had that long nose, that receding hairline and that fine, soft auburn hair, and those hands... those hands were slender and perfectly manicured, but the fingers weren't quite long enough. The difference wasn't all that noticeable, but Greg loved Mycroft's elegant, expressive hands and had admired and watched them even before he had admitted to himself that he was in love with the man. He had felt them in his hair and cupping his face, on his chest and shoulders, and those were not Mycroft's hands. He leaned forward and sniffed discreetly. This wasn't Mycroft's scent, either. The expensive cologne and shampoo were the same, but the personal scent underneath was just plain wrong. Greg's legs gave out, and he gracelessly dropped into the visitor's chair.

What the fucking hell was going on? And where the bloody hell was Mycroft?

His chest constricted painfully as he looked at the poor sod in the hospital bed who wasn't the man he loved. What now?

All right. If Mycroft was somehow involved in this ruse or if it was arranged for his benefit, the fact that Mr Minor Position in the British Government wasn't in this hospital room had to be kept a secret, so no raising the hue and cry. Calm now. If Mycroft had been abducted, it would also be better for Greg to pretend that he hadn't seen through the ruse, at least until he managed to get more information and maybe get out alive. Information, he needed more information. The question was now, who could he trust, who could he trust?

The phone in his sleeve chimed again.
Greg looked around. There was another dispenser installed on the wall near the door. He picked up one of the sterile paper tissues that could always be found in a hospital room and squeezed some of the disinfectant on it. Then he pulled the phone out of his sleeve and wiped it down with the moist but not wet tissue, hoping that it would survive the procedure, and carefully disinfected his hands again. No point in harming the poor sod over there with germs, after all, Mycroft or not.


Greg bit his lower lip, then texted back, “how was the tarte tatin?”

“Tarte au chocolat. A.” was the reply.

“And petit-four. One. A.”

Good, it was her all right, or as near as he could tell.

“eta?” he texted back. Estimated time of arrival, or how long he would have to wait until someone, preferably Anthea herself, showed up.

“-5. A.” Five minutes, then.

Greg took a deep breath, sat down in the visitor's chair, his phone accessible on his lap, and forced himself to take the unconscious fellow's hand, aware that he could very well be under observation.

“Hey there, Mycroft,” he awkwardly said. “You look like shite, mate. I really hope you get better soon. Mrs Hudson made it out with just a few scratches and a bit of a shock, but the outer wall of 221 B is missing completely. There's a bloody lot of work waiting for the poor woman, but John said she could stay at his house for a while. Sherlock and John have to stay overnight, perhaps a bit longer, but they're not seriously hurt. They've got a few sprains, bruises, dislocated bones and cuts from the glass shards, but that was to be expected. The two daft gits jumped out of a first floor window, after all. Sherlock is sleeping right now, it's the only way the hospital staff can tolerate the annoying bastard…”

ETA -3. Greg kept talking, and the chest of the bloke on the bed rose and fell in the mechanical rhythm the respirator was setting. His hand was icy cold, and Greg got up to find a blanket to put over the unconscious man. Being in ICU was shite. Being in ICU freezing and unable to tell anybody about it was just unnecessary shite on top of that.

ETA -1. He'd found a blanket in the closet and spread it over the poor bloke, then sat back down and started talking again. Someone was going to come soon; Greg dearly hoped that he could trust that person. He kept speaking about random things.

ETA 0. Voices outside. Greg tensed but kept talking, which was right now about the vicious, man-eating dinosaur statues in Crystal Palace Park.

“The funny thing is,” he said as the door opened, “they found the dead gardener in the mouth of a herbivore. The person who planted the body can't have been much of a dinosaur fan. Unfortunately, that still leaves most of the population.”

Greg looked up. The person who had just entered the room wasn't Anthea, but a doctor, and something about the way he moved and held himself triggered Greg's inner alarms. Still, he smiled at the man disarmingly.

“Ah, you like crime stories, Mr...?” the doctor asked with a nervous smile.
“Lestrade,” Greg said as non-threateningly and charmingly as he could. “And yes, every once in a while, Dr...”

“Philby,” the other man identified himself. As he walked closer, Greg could see his name on a corresponding hospital badge on his medical coat. “Are you a relative?”

“Good friend of the Holmes family, listed as emergency contact,” Greg replied, still disarmingly with a concerned undertone. “I was relieved to hear he was out of surgery. What can you tell me about Mycroft’s injuries? His life isn’t in danger any more, is it?”

“For now, Mr Holmes is reasonably stable,” the doctor said with a minute twitch. “As you can see, we are monitoring his vitals closely. I’m afraid he isn’t quite out of the woods yet, though.”

“What's the actual damage?” Greg asked, still as charming and worried as he could be.

The twitchy doctor looked at the patient file and started talking about flying debris piercing the ribcage, pneumothorax, lung collapse, damage to inner organs and internal bleeding, and Greg was feeling increasingly sick in spite of the fact that this person clearly wasn't Mycroft. The doctor wasn't aware of that, though, because nervous as he was, Greg was pretty sure that he was a pathetic liar, and Greg could have told if he were aware of the switched identity.

Discreetly, he opened his browser on his phone as he talked, barely looking down, and called up The Princess Grace Hospital's homepage. Listed under staff, he found a Dr Arnold Philby, intensive care specialist. Not the surgeon who had operated on the man, then. The picture matched the doctor before him, although Philby looked much less self-confident and much more nervous in the flesh. He had returned the patient file to its place and was now busying himself with two small medical vials and two syringes.

“This is to bring the swelling down and to manage the pain,” he said in the way of explanation as he drew up the first syringe.

The vials were positioned so that Greg couldn't really read the labels, but he caught a glimpse of a name that he'd heard before, and although he couldn't exactly place it right now, it was neither anti-inflammatory nor was it an analgesic. Philby's hand was shaking slightly as he added the medication to the IV bag; something was clearly wrong. The doctor put the used syringe in the small biohazard container and drew up a second one with the other, smaller vial. The part of the name that Greg caught, now that he was paying attention, was possibly that of an analgesic, although with injuries that bad, he would have rather expected a morphine derivate.

The doctor nervously fumbled his grip on the vial, and Greg was able to read the full name.

 Fuck. That was a rapid-acting insulin analogue. Fuck. And now Greg remembered, the other one in the first vial was a slow-acting insulin analogue. Bloody buggering fuck. Slowly, discreetly, Greg slipped his hand under his sterile overall to find his handcuffs.

Soon, when the doctor was safely out of the door and away from the patient, probably even off his shift, the poor sod would start sliding into hypoglycaemia. The blood sugar level wasn't something that would be routinely monitored, even under an extensive setup like this. No-one would think of giving him a glucose IV, and even when his heart-rate went down and the doctors and nurses were fighting for the man's life, the slow-acting insulin analogue would keep killing him, and no foul play would ever be suspected.

And the doctor was so twitchy because he was murdering his patient right in front of a witness. Granted, most people wouldn't even have noticed that, but still, the bugger had a lot of nerve.
Just as Philby turned to the bedside table again to put the second syringe into the biohazard container – the vials had disappeared back into his sterile blue coat pocket, but throwing the syringes in the biohazard bin was apparently a deeply ingrained professional habit – Greg rose smoothly, closed the IV drip and twisted the man's arm sharply behind his back and up. Philby squeaked in surprise and pain.

“Dr Arnold Philby,” Greg coldly said as he forced him down on his knees with another painful twist, “you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Mycroft Holmes. You have the right to remain silent. However, that may harm your defence later...”

The handcuffs clicked smoothly in place around Philby's wrists, and Greg grinned grimly. He might be more or less a paper pusher with far too less time on an actual crime scene these days, but he still had it.

But now what? Was this the person Anthea had sent? In that case, he clearly couldn't trust her. He couldn't call in his colleagues, either, in spite of the suddenly ongoing murder investigation; they wouldn't even be let through the door.

His phone chimed again.


Yeah, that didn't really answer Greg's very urgent question. He ignored the whimpering man on the floor who was whinging about how he'd had no choice in favour of looking for something, anything that might work as an improvised weapon. The best he could come up with was the spindly visitor's chair, light enough to lift and with hollow metal legs. That wasn't much. Bloody buggering fuck. But it might buy him some time, if he used it with the element of surprise.

“who is his doctor in charge?” he texted back.

“I mom” arrived almost immediately, then, a short time later, “Dr Philby just went off shift. Dr Stephanidis now. ETA -1. A.”

“I didn't want to, I swear,” Philby sobbed. “Please, Detective, you have to help me!”

Anger rose in Greg, ice-cold and deadly, but he brutally pushed it down again. He was doing that a lot these days, apparently. With a sigh, he pinched the bridge of his nose; he was getting a really nasty headache.

“Tell me, who forced you, and why?” he asked, at least trying to sound patient and understanding when all he really wanted to to was painfully throttle the useless piece of human refuse who had tried to murder his love. But Greg was a professional, and if the doctor happened to dig his own grave by babbling, who was Greg to deny him?

“I don't know his name. But he knew things... he had information...”

Blackmail, then. Well, Greg thought practically, better than a person held hostage, which would complicate things a lot.

“Can you describe the man?” he patiently asked.

The door opened, and Greg moved so he could easily pick up the chair if he had to. It would make a pathetic weapon, but he wasn't about to go gentle into that good night, thank you very much, and if there was some raging required, he was perfectly prepared to deliver.
The person who stepped inside was Anthea, and it was the first time he had ever seen the cool, lovely brunette less than impeccably dressed, less than perfectly composed.

Her eyes widened at the sight before her – a kneeling, handcuffed, snivelling doctor who had just gone off shift, a dangerously alert and defensive DCI – and sharply closed the door.

“What have you done now?” she asked, sounding frazzled and tired.

“Oh, sorry for ruining your plans,” Greg viciously snapped, “but I don't usually stand by when a man is getting murdered. May have something to do with my bloody job, you know.”

“Murdered?” she asked, looking genuinely surprised for a few seconds.

Greg wasn't sure if he was buying it; the woman was annoyingly hard to read. On the other hand, if she had set up this Holmes replacement, she'd hardly have interest in having him die, would she? Or was the poor bloke supposed to die so Mycroft could go into deep cover? He wouldn't be the first Holmes to fake his own death, and that was a terrifying thought on several different levels.

“Explain,” she snapped back.

All right, at least her stress level was completely authentic. And Mycroft did trust her.

“An injection of a slow-acting insulin analogue first,” he curtly replied, pointing of the elevated plastic bag of the shut-off IV, “followed by a smaller dose of a rapid-acting insulin analogue. You'll find the two empty syringes with his fingerprints on them in the biohazard container, the two empty vials in his pocket and the insulin in the IV bag, which is why I turned it off. For the sake of the patient, it should be replaced with an actually usable one soon.”

Hear me, Anthea: the patient. I know this is not Mycroft Holmes.

“Bloody hell,” the usually so prim and proper PA sighed. “In that case, thanks, DCI Lestrade.”

He flashed a small, grim smile in return. “Call me Greg. This day isn't quite over yet, is it?”

“No, I'm afraid not,” she replied with a grimace of a smile of her own. “And what a débâcle it has been so far.”

“So, do I call in my people about the attempted murder, or is your side going to take care of it?” he asked, pinching the bridge of his nose again. The pain had settled in, made itself comfortable and was probably just putting up its feet with a nice cool cider in its hand. Greg almost envied the fucker.

“Let me check with my superior,” she said, cutting a quick glance at the still kneeling doctor and then at the comatose man on the bed before looking down at her Blackberry.

Greg moved back to the chair and sat down heavily. Something she couldn't say aloud in the doctor's vicinity, the man who had thought he was murdering Mycroft Holmes. Her superior was Mycroft... she was going to check with Mycroft?

Hope flared in his eyes, bright and terrible and fragile.

She nodded, a tiny, barely noticeable signal, and went back to speed-typing on her phone.

Christ. For a moment, Greg's world trembled, and he was afraid he'd faint like a little girl.
Mycroft was alive and well enough to text. Thank Christ.

Chapter End Notes

The two insulin derivates mentioned are both perfectly legitimate medical drugs. If used for their intended purpose and responsibly, they aren’t harmful at all, but this goes for pretty much everything in life, including chocolate.

And again, I’m making shameless use of The Princess Grace Hospital because of its proximity to Baker Street. Interior layout, staff and procedures are entirely made up. I mean absolutely no disrespect of the people who work there in real life! And I have a deep respect for health care professionals. It’s a tough, demanding line of work, especially if they get to deal with patients like Sherlock or my mother. :)

P.S.: I’ve edited this chapter to take out the abbreviated names of the medication used, and I think it really improves the text flow. Thanks for the advice, Mice.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

It's been a busy week for me. Sorry for updating late!
Since this chapter is a bit short (but it seemed like a logical stopping point) and as an apology for the delayed update, I'm posting two chapters today.

21.

In the end, Dr Philby was taken off his hands, and Greg didn't mind. He was a thoroughly ethical copper, and while he was occasionally willing to go against the letter of the law for the greater good, mostly for Sherlock, the silly sod, Greg still firmly believed in the spirit of the law. Sometimes he had felt the temptation to break his oath, to make an interrogation just a little bit rougher. There were cases that got to him. Having a smug, unrepentant kidnapper in custody while there was a child somewhere, locked up and starving to death, did make him want to beat the information out of that cockroach. Principles were all good and well when everything was going smoothly; it was in the extreme cases that they were really put to the test. However, there was a very distinct line that Greg had never crossed in his entire career.

With Philby, he knew he would feel the temptation; in fact, he already had in those short minutes alone with him in the hospital room. Someone had capitalised on the information that Mycroft Holmes was vulnerable and sought to use that to kill him by using the conveniently susceptible doctor as a vehicle. That person, extremely well-informed and with the means to act immediately, was still out there, still a threat to Mycroft. After the absolute hell Greg had gone through during the last few hours, he felt terrifyingly disinclined to allow such a person to live.

Whatever Secret and Intelligence Service had Dr Philby in its hands now would acquire every bit of information that could be wheedled, coaxed, pressured, conned or tortured out of the man, and Greg felt surprisingly at peace with that. The difference was that he wasn't disinterested in this case. His personal connection was Mycroft, the man he loved more than his own life. Someone had tried to kill him – judging by the very different approaches, probably two different someones in one miserable day – and all his calm professionalism flew out of the window, sad but true. If this were a case at the Yard, Greg would have requested to be taken off it because of personal entanglement. Well, now he was rid of it, anyway, and he found himself caring very little that all kinds of violations of the law he had sworn to protect and uphold were very likely to take place. He didn't even care that he didn't care, but perhaps that was partly due to his exhaustion and the headache that now lived behind his eyes and was evolving into a real killer. Ironically, he had just left a hospital full of doctors and medication, but right now, he didn't feel like letting even a single one of them near him. Part of him even wanted to take Sherlock and John away from the place where doctors turned legitimate medication and IV bags, things that were meant to save lives, into murder weapons.

“Greg?” Anthea carefully asked.

She was actually using his first name as he had asked; he took that as a mark of respect.

They were now seated in yet another black saloon car with tinted windows, travelling fuck-knew-
“I’m having an illogical emotional reaction,” he drily said.

She cracked a half-smile, a more genuine one than any other he had ever seen from her before.

“I want to check Sherlock and John out of that hospital. I don’t have a good feeling about leaving them there,” he elaborated. “I know it’s stupid, but...”

“But you had a feeling about that doctor, too, didn't you?” she carefully asked.

“He was nervous, fumbling,” Greg slowly, thoughtfully explained. “That housekeeper candidate felt off to me, too – there is usually something about a suspect’s behaviour that rubs me the wrong way. Maybe I can’t exactly pinpoint it at that exact moment, but my subconscious is good at noticing small, subtle signs; it's what I've been trained for. I don't think, though, that I've really noticed anything about The Princess Grace that would warrant a general distrust; it seems to be a fine hospital, all in all. One black sheep and all that.”

He laughed, briefly, self-deprecatingly. “I'm probably just feeling paranoid after the second attempt on Mycroft's life within a couple of hours. If that grenade was sent by Her-Who-Should-Not-Be-Named, though, I think she may have targeted Sherlock primarily. It was his flat, and the earlier attack on John was indirectly aimed at Sherlock, after all. It was brutally forthright both times, tranquilizer gun and bang, grenade and boom. The attempt in the hospital, though, that was clearly directed at Mycroft. There's blackmail involved, it was indirect and subtle enough to be ruled a natural death as a consequence of his injuries. All in all, it has a more... opportunistic, maybe political feel to it. I don't think today's two incidents are related, other than that the first attempt has left an opening for the second one.”

Anthea nodded at him. “Impressive. I'm beginning to understand what Mr Holmes sees in you.”

Greg managed an almost natural grin. “My baking skills?”

She laughed softly. “Those, too.”

Greg's smile faded. “How is he?” he asked, only imperfectly managing to hide his anxiety.

“A little worse off than Mrs Hudson, but better than the other two,” she replied.

Greg sighed in relief and sagged back into the leather seat.

“He never wanted you to see that double of his in a coma,” she gently said. “That's why I texted you not to go inside. It's an artificial, medically induced coma; the double is being handsomely compensated for it and will be quite fine once we wake him up again in a week or two. In the meantime, Mr Holmes can safely recover and operate from the shadows.”

“He's not really very much like Mycroft,” Greg softly said. “His hands are all wrong, and he's just generally wrong. I noticed it almost at once.”

“You are very perceptive, then, or simply know Mr Holmes better than most.”

“Perhaps,” he replied, a little sadly. That “almost” had made for a terrifyingly long and painful stretch of seconds. He dug his knuckles into his closed eyelids and watched the strange colours that appeared from the pressure on his eyeballs. For a moment, the pain ebbed, then it flooded back in full strength. He let his hands sink back into his lap. Useless.
“I couldn't tell you over an insecure phone line, you know,” Anthea added, sounding sad as well. “Your conclusions pretty much match our estimates, but there is still a chance that the explosion in Baker street was in fact an attempt on the older Mr Holmes. That weapon...”

She cautiously stopped.

“John said it was a drone with a top secret military “patience grenade”,” Greg supplied, indicating that the cat was already out of the bag and they might just as well talk about it.

She nodded. “A DX-707, although Dr Watson shouldn't have talked about it in an unsecured location. Mr Holmes authorised quite a number of purchases of these grenades.”

Greg blinked. “So Mycroft knew what it was and how to deal with it, or not deal with it, as it were. This changes things. That attack was directed at them both equally, which is all the more reason to suspect, well, her.”

Anthea paused for a moment, then nodded. “That does make a perverse kind of sense. Anyway, these “top secret military” weapons are not easy to get a hold of; it speaks of a deep level of infiltration of the government, or a very high-level smuggling operation of which we aren't currently aware. The first one is more likely by far, which is why the secure communication protocol was initiated.”

Greg simply nodded tiredly. He did understand, sort of, and he simply didn't have the energy to expend on anger now that he knew that Mycroft wasn't... wasn't... now that his adrenaline was ebbing. And his headache was not getting any better.

“Do you happen to have any water here in the car?” he quietly asked, because replenishing fluids would help, and he hadn't drunk anything since Sally's fucking disgraceful tea.

Knowing Mycroft, there was a mini bar somewhere in the car with a secret stash of the most exquisitely aged scotch; in that case, there might even be ice cubes.

“Just water?” she asked with a small smile.

“I'd also take two ibuprofen on the rocks,” he replied with a faint grin, “if you have any.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “it's been exactly that sort of day.”

He got his glass of water and pain relievers, and then they were silent for a while. Anthea tapped away on her blackberry, frowned, tapped some more and then put it down again.

“Headache, too?” Greg sympathetically asked.

She simply nodded, though she didn't move to take any of the pills.

“That doctor came in at exactly ETA 0,” he suddenly said.

She canted her head thoughtfully. “And you didn't know what to think.”

Greg sighed tiredly. “Of course I didn't bloody know what to think, Anthea,” he replied with no heat in his voice. “There was that poor comatose sod freezing in that bed, hooked up to all those instruments like a dying man, not even breathing on his own and looking far too much like Mycroft. I didn't know how or where Mycroft was, if it was all his idea, if he was even alive or if he'd been
kidnapped. Someone was playing a game, but I didn't know what part exactly I'd stumbled on. Every wrong move I made could have hurt him, so pardon me for not feeling the most trusting at that moment.”

She nodded in understanding. Then, after a small pause, she asked, “You were the one to put that blanket on the double?”

Greg shrugged uncomfortably. “I’d decided that my best bet was to pretend to believe this was really Mycroft Holmes, so I talked to him and touched his hand. It was icy cold, and I thought whatever was going on, the poor sod didn't deserve to freeze when he couldn't even say a word about it.”

She looked at him for a long moment, then nodded in acceptance. “Thank you for trusting me in the end.”

He grinned, although it was still a little strained. “Small, subconscious signs again, you know. Besides, I've always been under the impression that you're loyal to Mycroft, and he's a very good judge of character. In the end, I trusted him more than you,” he added with a brutal honesty that most people would have found insulting, except, of course, for Sherlock. At this point, Greg was far too exhausted for politeness and diplomacy, though.

Anthea simply nodded, content, and picked up her Blackberry again. Sometimes, extremely rational people were really a blessing.

Greg was pleasantly surprised when some time later, the car pulled up in front of his house in Kensington.

“Are you coming in, Anthea?” he asked. “There should still be a couple of petit-fours left.”

The attractive brunette chuckled. “Usually, I'm asked to come in for coffee.”

Greg grinned in an amused, friendly way. “You'll have to ask Mrs Chowdhury; she's the coffee drinker in our home. Thanks for recommending her, by the way; she's a real gem.”

Anthea smiled back, and Greg thought that if he saw a few more of those genuine ones, he might eventually learn to read her, though of course he much preferred learning more about Mycroft.

“You're welcome, Greg.”

They went inside, and Greg was finally home.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

22.

Mycroft, as Mrs Chowdhury informed Greg with a warm but slightly worried look, was waiting for him in the library.

Greg passed Anthea on into his housekeeper's motherly care and to her superior coffee-making skills and left the two women as quickly as he could with any semblance of politeness.

In the library, the fireplace was lit with a warm, merry flame, and Mycroft was dozing on the Chesterfield that was long enough to seat four, lying on his right side and half-covered with a soft, woollen plaid, knees pulled up a bit to accommodate his endlessly long legs. Greg stood there for quite some time, simply watching him in awe and gratitude and love. The poor man was looking battered, a lurid bruise visible on his left temple and cheekbone and his left arm in a black medical sling with a bandaged hand peeking out, and Greg's heart went out to him in an almost painful way. Only after several minutes of gazing at the man he loved did he notice that his face was wet. Impatiently, he scrubbed the tears away with his sleeve. That was when he realised he was still wearing his overcoat, scarf and shoes and took them off only to place them on and under a nearby chair. He wasn't going to leave Mycroft even for the minute it would have taken to hang up his outerwear and put away his shoes in the hallway. Greg was usually a tidy man, but that day, he couldn't have cared less, because nothing in the world was as important as Mycroft.

In the end, he snagged a thick velvet sofa cushion, threw it on the floor in front of the hunter-green Chesterfield and knelt down next to his sleeping love, letting his head sink down close to Mycroft's and covering his elegant hand with his own sturdier, tanner one. From this close, Mycroft's incredibly soft hair still carried a hint of acrid smoke, and a tiny smudge of dried blood close to his hairline had evaded the attempt that had been made to clean him up. But he was alive and breathing, his long fingers warm under Greg's and his chest rising and falling softly with deep, steady breaths, and Greg had never seen a more beautiful sight. Slowly, he let out an endlessly long breath of his own. His relief was powerful, and as his adrenaline finally ran out for good, leaving him about as energetic as a limp noodle, he realised that in spite of the awkward position, he could fall asleep like this. The worst thing that could happen was that he'd slide down from where he was resting against and on the leather sofa and land on the floor, but the woollen Nepalese rug was thick and comfortable and he'd still be close to his love, and beyond that he didn't give a hoot. Feeling content and finally at peace, Greg inhaled Mycroft's wonderful, familiar, beloved scent, sighed softly and closed his eyes.

“Gregory?” Mycroft murmured sleepily.

“Yes, my love,” Greg replied softly, tenderly.

They both opened their eyes and looked at each other.

In the slightly dim light, Mycroft's eyes looked more slate grey than blue; they were still the most stunningly beautiful eyes he had ever seen.

“Christ, I love you so much,” said Greg, his voice low and choked.
Mycroft tried to touch him, then hissed with pain. His left arm was trapped in the medical sling and so bruised that it didn't take kindly to sudden movement. He tried to use his right arm and found out that he'd been lying on it awkwardly and it had fallen asleep. Frustrated, he struggled to sit up, only to find a pair of strong, gentle arms supporting him.

A few moments later, they were both sitting on the couch, Greg at Mycroft's less injured right side and their arms wrapped around each other.

To his chagrin, Greg noticed that his traitorous eyes were leaking again.

Mycroft reached up with his uninjured right hand and gently smoothed the tears away. “I'm sorry, Gregory,” he softly said, his voice shaking.

“No, love, no,” murmured as he leaned up to press tiny kisses to the uninjured side of the face that he loved so dearly. Mycroft wasn't supposed to feel guilty and distraught on top of everything else. “That wasn't your fault. None of this was your fault. I'm just so terribly relieved and happy you're alive and so much less hurt than I feared you'd be.”

“I never meant for you to see...”

“I know, love, I know. I realised very quickly that he wasn't you. Nobody really is like you, you're unique and wonderful and entirely yourself, and I love you,” Greg reassured him, his tone getting almost fierce on the last four words.

“I love you as well,” Mycroft replied, starting to return the sweet little kisses.

“But we were lucky that I was there,” Greg added with a crooked little grin, “or we'd possibly be burying your double in another fake Holmes grave, the poor sod.”

Mycroft sighed, the rest of the guilt he had been projecting now disappearing under his usual sharp intelligence. “Yes. What exactly happened there? I was going to ask.”

“Two injections of insulin analogues into the IV bag,” Greg summed it up, “a combination of a rapid-acting one with a larger dose of a slow-acting, long-lasting one. The attending physician was apparently blackmailed into it, and so desperate that he did it in front of my very eyes. He was on a tight schedule; his shift had just ended and he wanted to get out before the hypoglycaemia set in, not that the insulin was very likely to be detected in the first place. It's a perversely clever murder method. Most other visitors wouldn't even have noticed what he was doing; he just didn't realise that I was a copper.”

Mycroft smiled. “More fool he for underestimating you, my dear.”

Greg sighed and let his head rest against the taller man's shoulder. “Yes.”

Then he tightened his arm around Mycroft's uninjured waist almost reflexively. “Oh God, love, I thought you were hurt so badly that you were in the operating theatre for nearly five hours. I was so afraid I'd lose you. I can't lose you, Mycroft, I just can't. I won't say that I couldn't live without you or some-such silly rot, but could never be happy again without you.”

Mycroft inhaled and it almost sounded like a pained little sob. “My dearest, neither could I without you. I...” He cleared his throat and began anew. “I wanted to send Anthea to you earlier, but this is a complex game with far too many unknown factors. The operation had to be put together on the spur of the moment, and there were far, far too few people I could trust. I honestly couldn't spare her for the hour it would have taken to drive across London and inform you. Anthea is now taking the necessary steps to have a secure phone assigned to you as soon as possible. I should have thought
about it earlier, though. I'm so sorry, my dear.”

“Don't be,” Greg softly replied as he hugged his love tenderly. “I understand, and I'm just glad that you're safe and have the time you need to recover. It was only for a few hours, gorgeous. I would have gone through hell for days and weeks and months and years if it only meant that you were safe.”

“I don't deserve you,” the younger man sighed, sinking deeper into the embrace, although he still held himself somewhat gingerly.

“Not true,” Greg replied, managing a small grin, “but I'm far too tired to argue with a stubborn Holmes right now. I certainly deserve you, though, wouldn't you agree?”

Mycroft laughed, and some of the remaining strain fell away from him. “Yes, my dear. If that's truly what you want, then of course you do, and I will attempt not to worry you so much in the future and instead try to make you as happy as I can.”

“That sounds lovely,” Greg happily agreed and leaned forward for a kiss.

At that moment, his long neglected stomach gave off a loud rumble of supreme discontent.

The two men looked at each other and started laughing. It was a slightly hysterical, rather silly and very much relieved laugh.

“Come, my dear heart,” Mycroft said with a smile. “Let's get you watered and fed. When have you last eaten, or had anything to drink?”

Greg looked a bit self-conscious as he helped the injured man up with a matter-of-fact gentleness that was impossible to mistake for pity. “I missed lunch,” he admitted. “Not that I could have eaten anything with my stomach in a knot. And Anthea poured me a glass of water in the car on the way back. Before that, I think, I last had some truly awful tea from the staff pantry that Sally made me drink because she was worried I'd keel over. That was right after I saw the news picture of the explosion on the news.”

He tried to suppress a shudder, but since he had a supporting arm around Mycroft's waist, the taller man still felt it.

“Oh, Gregory,” he sadly said.

Greg opened the door to the kitchen and they were greeted by two female voices.

Mrs Chowdhury smiled at them, although she couldn't quite hide the sympathetic look at Mycroft's bruised cheek and temple, and at the same time a deep, angry, protective gleam in her brown, almond-shaped eyes. Greg knew exactly how she felt, and if the person responsible ever ran across the petite but formidable housekeeper, he or she could only hope and pray that it wasn't in the kitchen or any other place with easy access to sharp knives, marble rolling pins or cast-iron skillets. He nodded at her in recognition and she nodded back, a perfect, unspoken accord between them.

For some reason, that made Anthea smile.

Mycroft was too focused on sitting down without aggravating his bruises to notice.

Mrs Chowdhury bustled over to the fridge, retrieved a cold gel pack for his face and carefully folded a clean linen napkin around it before she passed it to her injured employer. Then she signalled Greg to sit down as well, who obeyed meekly, which caused Anthea to smirk.
He ignored her, simply glad to be off his feet again, exhausted as he felt.

Soon, he was rewarded with a cup of perfectly brewed Darjeeling and a small sandwich filled with a cucumber spread that their talented housekeeper made herself and that he enjoyed very much. Her sandwiches always were little works of art, neat and pretty and with the crust cut off. Frankly, he was so hungry he would have been content with nothing but crusts, but as long as Mrs Chowdhury was taking care of them, such a thing would not be tolerated in her kitchen.

There was a small platter with mostly crumbs and six petit-fours in the centre of the table, and Anthea was looking a bit like the cat who had got the cream.

“They're lovely, aren't they?” Greg asked, gesturing at the bite-sized delicacies. “I've rarely seen such beautifully decorated ones.”

Mycroft flushed the tiniest bit and tried to discreetly hide it behind his cold gel pack but also looked reluctantly proud, and Greg found it absolutely adorable, not that he would have added to his love's embarrassment by saying so out loud.

“They're wonderful,” Anthea agreed, smiling at them both.

“Dinner will be ready to serve in about half an hour,” the housekeeper informed them, smiling as well and canting her face towards the oven, where something delightful and spicy was sizzling. Next to the ceramic stove, a pot, a small bowl of dried basmati rice, a jar of ghee and an assortment of spices were already set out.

“Will you be joining us, Anthea?” Greg kindly asked. “I believe you've had a really stressful day as well, and Mrs Chowdhury makes the greatest dinners. I can't guarantee for your ability to move afterwards, though. Most people just fall into a blissful stupor.”

“Oh, go on, Mr Lestrade!” the housekeeper said, blushing, and he smiled back at her fondly but unrepentantly. That compliment was well deserved.

The PA looked at her superior, and Mycroft nodded subtly.

“I'd be honoured to accept,” she replied with a small smile. “I do have to go back to the office afterwards, though.”

“Nonsense, Anthea,” Mycroft firmly contradicted. “You've gone well above and beyond your duty today, and the immediate crisis is contained. Go home afterwards and rest, because tomorrow is going to be another demanding day. I'll do what I can from here, but I'm not exactly operating at full strength right now, and in addition to everything else, a lot of people will be wasting your time by simply ringing you up for reassurance, I'm afraid.”

“Yes, Mr Holmes,” she replied with a resigned sigh. “And it's no trouble.”

Greg suspected that if she hadn't been so tired, she wouldn't have reacted so meekly.

They were a sorry, bedraggled lot, the three of them, but the evening was already a great improvement over most of the day they'd all had.

And what a crazy day it had been. Greg shook his head, then suddenly started laughing. “Christ, love,” he said, still chuckling. “I can't believe you have a kagemusha.”

Anthea lifted her perfectly plucked eyebrows.
Mycroft, though, schooled his face into perfect, expressionless calm. “A mountain does not move,” he declared with great dignity.

Then his and Greg's eyes met and they were both laughing, although Mycroft quickly stopped with a pained wince and Greg, looking abashed, caressed Mycroft's uninjured right hand.

Mrs Chowdhury shook her head, busy heating a good dollop of ghee and spices. “These two and their old films,” she said with a fond smile.

Over the next half hour, they observed the housekeeper prepare her perfect basmati rice on the island stove while Greg began to ask about Mycroft's injuries. The younger man started downplaying them, and so the DCI questioned Anthea instead. The PA ignored her superior's glares with a practised air and gave a precise account of all of his aches and pains, and an overview of the recovery process and the medication needed. Greg listened attentively and made extensive mental notes.

Luckily, there were no breaks or hairline fractures and just one major sprain, but there were quite a few abrasions, contusions and major bruises. The sprained left shoulder, bruised wrist and three bruised ribs were actually the worst of it, although Mycroft's entire body must be aching terribly, and the hit he had taken to the left side of his face had caused a mild concussion and was bound to be a constant source of low-grade pain that could possibly trigger further tension headaches. Still, the stubborn, proud man held himself with a poise close to his usual straight posture. Greg couldn't wait to put him into a relaxing bath and then bundle him up comfortably in bed. The Super had indicated that he'd give Greg the next day off if he needed it, and the silver-haired man was inclined to request it, just so that he could pamper Mycroft outrageously and assure himself over and over again that his love was only bruised and nothing worse.

Greg excused himself and combined a quick trip to the loo with a call to Superintendent Allan on the way back. The day had felt endless to Greg, but in actuality it was just barely dinnertime, and the Super was still in his office. As expected, he signed off on Greg's day of decreasing his overtime hours and wished him all the best. Greg felt a bit like a heel for taking advantage, but coming across as tired and a bit downcast wasn't all that hard; he just had to think of poor Mycroft's injuries. Still, he was glad when that call was over. He supposed he would have to visit Mr Poor Sod at the ICU tomorrow, to keep up the pretence and make sure he was warm and well taken care of, but Greg could always return home and hug the real Mycroft to his heart's content afterwards.

With a smile, he returned to the kitchen, intent on keeping a firm eye on the stubborn Mr Holmes and discreetly manoeuvre him upstairs before he could flag all too visibly. After all, protecting the man he loved also meant guarding his weaknesses and saving his prickly pride whenever he could.

Chapter End Notes

The film Mycroft and Greg are quoting is Kagemusha, 影武者 (direct translation: shadow warrior) from 1980, a historical drama directed by Akira Kurosawa. A kagemusha is a political decoy, a look-alike used to impersonate important personages. The film is set in feudal Japan in the Warring States period where a mortally wounded
lord orders his retinue to keep his death a secret in order to keep his enemies from exploiting the clan's weakness. The kagemusha is a thief with no particular moral principles, but the longer he impersonates Lord Shingen, the more he grows into his role and the warrior's code. Even after the lord's death is discovered and he is cast out, rather than return to his previous life, he chooses to defend the Shingen flag at the Battle of Nagashino. There's no Hollywood happy ending to be had, but it's a many-layered film with great character development that also portrays the intricacies and formal strictures of medieval Japanese society incredibly well. Mycroft would appreciate it for the politics and subtlety, a younger Greg would have enjoyed the very well-done action scenes, and I'd like to think that they'd both appreciate the film for its great storytelling and visual art.
Chapter 23

23.

When they had parted that morning, they had imagined this evening to turn out very differently, but somehow, Greg couldn't imagine being any happier than he was right now. The relief he still felt was powerful, and he was even more aware than before of how incredibly precious his time with Mycroft was.

The younger man was a bit self-conscious about undressing at first, but in the end, he was so exhausted that he didn't really feel all too embarrassed. Greg told him how gorgeous he was as he tenderly and carefully unwrapped his bandages. The swellings and bruises looked terribly painful, and Greg barely managed to keep his hands from shaking as he once again realised how close he had come to losing him before he had even had the chance to show him how deeply he was loved. He tenderly kissed Mycroft's undamaged shoulder and helped him into the tub.

The bath was warm but not too hot and fragrant with healing herbal essences, and he was all too happy to sit behind a relaxed, sleepy Mycroft and gently help him wash away the last traces of smoke and blood. The tub in the master bathroom on the first floor was large enough to host a small orgy in, and everything was built from the best of materials with only comfort and relaxation in mind. Greg was highly content with his bathroom on the next floor, but this was pure luxury, not ostentatious but simply extremely well designed. He pushed a discreet button, turned on the water jets and sighed deeply. His neck, shoulders and upper back had been one huge, painful knot of stress and anxiety for the entire afternoon, and now the muscles slowly relaxed under the the massaging pulses of water.

“That is a very sinful sound, my dear,” Mycroft said, his own voice low, deep, sleepy and incredibly alluring.

Greg thought that he would probably sound like that when they woke up in bed together and started the morning with a deliciously slow, lazy shag. He really hoped they eventually would, although right now he felt so deeply exhausted that it would be an effort to even get out of the tub. Some of that exhaustion was mental, but that didn't make it any less strong. And Mycroft must be feeling the effects of his evening dose of muscle relaxants right now; they tended to make people drowsy.

“So is your tone,” Greg lazily replied. “I'll be very happy to explore that when I can actually keep my eyes open.”

Mycroft chuckled. “Imagine we'd had champagne tonight, as planned.”

The slightly older man chuckled as well. “Combining heavy pain medication and alcohol; always a fun idea,” he said with mild irony. “I made a recording on my phone once of Sherlock stumbling around like an idiot when he was high. Not because thought it was funny, it really wasn't, but because I thought it might get him to stop when he saw how ridiculous and undignified the drugs made him act, what they reduced him to. Didn't work, though,” he added with a touch of melancholy. “He was still too deep in his addiction to care at the time.” Then he sighed. “I'm sorry, I don't even know why I even brought that up.”
“I know what you mean, though,” Mycroft softly said. “I could never see the humour in such video clips, either, because they're often nothing short of tragic. I wondered for the longest time why I couldn't understand them, what essential part I was missing because I couldn't manage to relate to the people who found those things hilarious, but in truth, there isn't anything to understand. People are simply crude and careless and cruel, Gregory. They will gleefully laugh at someone falling off a rooftop or down the stairs, as long as the canned laughter plays and the clip cuts off before the ambulance arrives.”

“Yeah, sometimes I ask myself why we even bother,” Greg rambled tiredly. “But there always are people who call the ambulance or help others up. Humanity is a very mixed bag.”

“I wonder, is that good or is that bad?” Mycroft asked, his voice a little slurred.

“Dunno,” Greg tiredly replied. “It's what we've got, isn't it? Just the one set of cards. Good hand, shitty hand... I'd rather play it than fold, y'know.”

Mycroft chuckled.

They drifted for a while until the water was getting cool and Greg realised that they were both about to fall asleep, at which point he manoeuvred them both out of the tub. His love was lethargic and allowed himself to be carefully dried with a soft, fluffy towel, his bruises to be treated with cool pain relief gel and his left shoulder and wrist to be bandaged again. Finally, Greg tucked them both into Mycroft's large bed and enjoyed listening to his love's deepening breaths as the injured man slipped into an exhausted sleep, his head on Greg's left shoulder and his left arm carefully draped across Greg's waist. The older man was too overtired to fall asleep at this point, and an irrational part of him was almost afraid of it. The image of the explosion site and the memory of that deathly pale double in his hospital bed, connected to the respirator, helpless to murder attempts or the simple chilliness of a sterile room, rose up and made him shiver uncontrollably, and it was only Mycroft's comforting warmth and scent and puffs of breath on Greg's shoulder and neck that centred him enough to finally allow him to finally slip into an uneasy sleep as well.

That night, they both had nightmares, but they also had each other.

By six o'clock, they were in the kitchen again, making tea. This time, there was no cake to decorate for them, but there were quite a few petit-fours left that Mrs Chowdhury had packed into an airtight container which were still good to eat.

When the English Breakfast tea had steeped, Greg took his love to the library and made him comfortable on the Chesterfield. The two men shared the same plaid again and watched the milk in their tea billow and spread, forming delicate, evanescent cloudy shapes.

“How do you take out the South-East wind?” Greg suddenly asked.

Mycroft twitched. After a thoughtful pause, he sadly answered, “She is still my sister.”

“And a danger to the public and, much more important to me, your health and your life,” Greg answered with perfect calm. “I don't know how she managed to get her hands on that DX-707, but she must have a very long reach.”

“I don't think she really wanted to kill us,” Mycroft calmly said. “If she had, we'd be dead.”

Greg shivered. “Then she was playing a very dangerous, perverted cat and mouse game. Just what you'd expect from a psycho therapist.”
They looked at each other, and startled chuckling.

“That was a truly awful pun, Gregory.”

“True, but it made you smile for a moment, love. I regret nothing.”

“She's supposed to be kept away from the public in the most modern, highly guarded, absolutely secure prison facility our country has,” Mycroft softly added.

“Well, the absoluteness seems rather relative right now,” Greg replied, but in a sad, worried tone. “She hurt you, she almost killed you. If your Azkaban can't keep her safely contained, then what's left?”

Mycroft chuckled at the reference to popular culture, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. “It's called Sherrinford, my dear. And I don't know, I really don't know.”

“Caring is not an advantage?” Greg softly, sadly asked.

“In some cases, clearly,” Mycroft sighed. “It was my uncle Rudy... he took me under his wing. You know that I'm rather intelligent, my dear.”

“Just a bit,” Greg smiled, but still a little sadly. “Only more than Sherlock and probably the rest of the world.”

“Not quite,” Mycroft contradicted. “I have a few equals around the world, some of them in positions very similar to my own. But where I am bright, Gregory, Eurus is incandescent. Even when we were children, her incredible intellect was perfectly apparent. She's an era-defining genius beyond Newton, a modern-day da Vinci.”

“Your parents didn't know how to deal with her, did they?” Greg hazarded a guess.

“You are correct, of course, especially because...” He paused to settle his thoughts. “While Sherlock and I have certain troubles regarding our emotions, Eurus hardly felt any at all, even as a child. Those few she had, she was utterly unable to understand, she couldn't even identify them properly. The only true emotions I have ever observed in her were curiosity and jealousy. She murdered Sherlock's childhood friend when the two boys were seven and she was six, simply because he had a best friend and she didn't. She turned it into an unsolvable riddle – a cat-and-mouse game, as you just called it – and couldn't be convinced to reveal the boy's location. My parents were completely helpless but wouldn't admit to it, and Eurus didn't even understand why we considered her behaviour wrong. For her it was on par with breaking Sherlock's wooden pirate cutlass or ripping apart one of my books. And she would do that, just to observe our reactions. Later she burned down Musgrave Hall, our home, at the age of six as well, and we only escaped alive due to luck and fortunate circumstances. That was the turning point where Uncle Rudy and I finally intervened. Eurus was homicidal, she had to be contained. My parents refused to understand; they wouldn't have agreed to her detainment, but she was... displeased with that. She set another fire, more systematically this time, and most of the other children and even the personnel died. She'd blocked almost every exit beforehand, which showed how her planning had advanced while there was no way to overcome her disregard of human lives. After the fire, Eurus showed not even a shred of remorse, nor did she in fact understand why she should care about creatures so clearly inferior to her, so Uncle Rudy and I had her transferred to a secure holding facility and told my parents that she had perished in the fire.”

“Fuck, Mycroft!” Greg exclaimed. “How old were you then?”
“Fourteen. I was at Eton in my final year.”

“Jesus buggering Christ! You might have had the intellect, but you didn't have the emotional maturity and fortitude to take that kind of responsibility, love,” Greg fiercely said.

Mycroft shrugged tiredly. “I had to; there was no-one else.”

“Christ.”

Mycroft gave a small, shaky sigh, and Greg wrapped his arm around him a little tighter, careful not to aggravate his bruises.

“God, my love, I'm so terribly, terribly sorry. Your parents failed you, and your uncle Rudy did as well,” he said in that same fiercely determined tone.

“He taught me everything I needed to know,” Mycroft objected.

“Bugger that. He took advantage of you. Instead of shouldering that responsibility like the grown-up he was, he let you carry it, didn't he? Instilled a sense of gratitude and obligation in you that he later used to steer and manipulate you, didn't he? And your parents did nothing to prevent him,” Greg angrily said, noticing that none of his conclusions were contradicted. “Is the bastard still alive?”

Mycroft smiled sadly. “No. He died several years ago, and I did miss him. Occasionally I still do, even though he was the one who taught me how to control my emotions at all times and wouldn't have appreciated the sentimentality in the least.”

“That absolute knob,” Greg muttered, but so softly that Mycroft could pretend he didn't notice if he didn't want to continue that debate. He didn't.

Instead, he leaned his head on Greg's solid shoulder and hummed contentedly when the older man started stroking his hair and scalp in that tender, lovely way was quickly becoming addictive.

“Looking back from an adult's perspective,” Mycroft finally said, softly, a little sadly, “I can see that there is some truth to your words, but I do still feel an attachment to my late uncle. He wasn't a bad man, Gregory; he did his duty to his country and his family in the best way he could, just as I attempt to do mine. Maybe he did manipulate me when he groomed me to be his successor. Still, I am remarkably suited to my profession, even if I say so myself, and I pride myself on being an asset to Queen and Country. What is more, though, Uncle Rudy provided me with an understanding that neither of my parents could give me, and I do believe that beneath his own pretences of detachment, he did hold a genuine affection for me.”

Those fucking useless parents again, so useless that they made that manipulative cold fish of an uncle look positively wonderful and caring in comparison. It made him want to throw things, but that wasn't what his poor, bruised love needed, and so Greg simply nodded and pressed a tiny kiss to Mycroft's forehead, smoothing out some of the thoughtful, worried lines in the process. “He must have cared for you,” he said with deep conviction. “I can't see it any other way. If he even perceived only half of the person you are, love, and he sounds like an observant man, he must have inevitably loved you and been proud of you as much as he was able to.”

For a moment, the taller man shivered in his arms, and he felt a touch of warm wetness against his clavicle, but he simply went on caressing that soft, feather-fine auburn hair with firm, gentle, soothing strokes.

For a long time, neither of them spoke.
Mycroft was caught up in memories of his past, and Greg tried to contain his rising urge to find and spit on Uncle Rudy's grave, give Mycroft's spineless, blind, self-absorbed parents a dressing-down that would leave their egos shattered on the floor and then find Eurus Bloody Holmes and put a bullet through her fucking era-defining genius brain.

“She was useful,” Mycroft softly said.

Greg blinked, for a moment not certain whom he was speaking of.

“With only minimal access to the news and some twitter traffic, Eurus is able to extrapolate and predict threats like terrorist attacks, helping us to prevent them,” he went on, and Greg realised he was talking about his psychopathic genius of a sister. “She's saved hundreds of lives already, millions of pounds in property and infrastructure and priceless amounts of perceived public safety, but every time she cooperates with the government, she demands a price. As I said, Eurus is more intelligent than I am, and even was as a small child. If you compare her to a Chess Master, Gregory, then I am a beginner who can predict perhaps three or maybe four moves while the whole game is already mapped out in her mind. It was bound to go wrong eventually. With her vast intelligence and manipulative abilities alone, she can do things to other people's minds that would have been considered witchcraft in centuries past and still supernatural these days.”

For a moment, Greg's still somewhat tired, overwrought brain provided an image of a smaller, female version of Sherlock with a huge carrot tied in front of her nose and a large funnel stuck on her head like a pointy hat, and an unwashed mob shouting, “A witch! A witch! We've got a witch!”

He felt the absurd urge to laugh and sob, and so he simply continued caressing Mycroft's soft, feathery hair.

“It's far too dangerous to allow Eurus personal contact with others except under very tightly controlled circumstances,” the slightly younger man went on, “but I thought that if I kept her contained, isolated, placated with trinkets and diversions, she could do no harm. It seems that I was terribly mistaken.”

Greg leaned forward and kissed Mycroft's nose with infinite tenderness. “Well, that's what it's always like for us mere mortals who can't calculate all that far ahead. Sometimes, we have to act in the moment without having all the information. All we can do is what we think is the best under the circumstances, with the information we have access to at the time. If more information comes to light later and puts a different spin on everything, well, that's too bad. There are things that still make me feel terribly guilty in retrospect, wrong choices I've made over the years, decisions that were logical to make at the time, but look – you have to make an educated guess sometimes, go out on a limb. Just standing there doing nothing is sometimes the worst choice of all. Being paralysed by indecision is something a leader can't afford, Mycroft. I know you hold yourself to a ridiculously high standard, love, but even you are not omniscient and not perfect. In spite of your intellect the size of a small planet, you're still human, love. Everything else is just hubris. Beating yourself up after the fact won't help anyone, least of all you, and I won't stand for it.”

Mycroft started shaking again; this time it wasn't just one shiver that was quickly controlled, but it was ongoing and quietly broke Greg's heart. He continued to hold Mycroft and caress his soft hair as the usually so painfully controlled man soaked the collar of Greg's dressing gown with hot, silent tears.

The silver-haired man wondered if he was the only one who had ever given this wonderful, deserving man even a bit of understanding or the space to let go of his tight control and simply let out his pain for once. He was very much afraid that was true, and his burning anger towards the older Holmses suddenly gave way to a boundless sadness for the lonely, emotionally neglected child that
still was part of the wonderful man he loved so dearly, a child loved and praised far too little and
with the highest of demands placed on him from a far too young age on. Greg didn't know if he
could ever make this emotional isolation up to Mycroft, but he would gladly spend the rest of his life
trying.

Chapter End Notes

Virtual biscuits to anyone who recognises Greg's ridiculous witch reference. :)


Later that morning, Greg visited John and Sherlock at The Princess Grace Hospital. A part of him was still worried about leaving them there to recuperate after the thwarted assassination attempt in the VIP part of the hospital's ICU the day before, committed by a doctor of all people, but John and Sherlock were no more hurt than the day before, possibly less. They were both awake and had the tops of their beds elevated to seating positions. Frustration had clearly set in, though; Sherlock was being especially trying, and John looked like he was counting the hours until he could curl his hands into functioning fists again.

Greg casually passed Sherlock's bed with a greeting, discreetly dropping something into his large hands, and sat down next to John's bed. Sherlock, looking slightly intrigued, now held a phone that was the exact same model as his own and unlocked with the same PIN code but was entirely secure.

“I've brought you some Danish pastries,” Greg said to John, putting a white box from an expensive Kensington bakery in his lap. Stuck to the box and hidden between it and John's body from possible cameras, was a yellow sticky note that said, “Keep a straight face, just in case.” Underneath it were several more.

“Thanks, Greg,” John said, keeping a straight face. There was much to be said, at times, for dealing with a military man.

“Has Sherlock driven you 'round the bend yet?” Greg asked with a grin.

John fiddled with the box, discreetly moving the notes so he could read them without displaying them to any possible cameras. “Nah,” he said. “Not for lack of trying, though.”

From the next bed, the dark-haired detective huffed contemptuously and played with the phone that looked just like his. There were texts on it that were the Sherlock-appropriate equivalents of John's post-its.

“Danish, sunshine?” Greg asked. “That hospital food isn't all that appealing, is it?”

The detective huffed again. “This is a private hospital, Gavin. The food is adequate.”

Now it was John's turn to scoff. “That's why you've barely touched it, right?”

Greg cleared his throat and peaceably said, “It doesn't take your usual sweet tooth into account, I bet. I've brought you pecan pinwheels with orange icing.” He wagged his eyebrows, John laughed and Sherlock gave a reluctant grin.

“Oh, all right,” he haughtily said, “I suppose I could do you the favour, Gordon.”

“Thank you most abjectly, Your Highness,” Greg replied with a tug on his forelock and a most disrespectful grin of his own.

Sherlock's lips twitched with amusement and he inclined his head, acknowledging the hit.

John opened the white cardboard box, fumbling with his heavily bandaged hands but managing.
Slowly, he picked up a paper napkin, wrapped the requested Danish in it and held it out to Greg, who dutifully ferried it over to Sherlock.

John had stuck one of the post-it notes into the napkin; it read, “Mycroft is not in a coma. Requests strategic meeting ASAP.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock said and bit daintily into his Danish, chewed with a pleased expression and swallowed. “That's surprisingly okay. Things could be worse, I suppose.”

“So when are they letting you two plonkers go?” Greg asked as he sat down next to John again, who had half wrapped another napkin around an apple and raisin Danish so he could hold it without getting his bandages full of food, and now offered the box to the DCI. Sherlock ate more of his pinwheel, sighed happily and started quickly consuming the rest. Pecan with orange icing was his absolute favourite, which Greg had found out a few years ago and occasionally used to his advantage.

“They would, but I can't really use my hands,” John grumpily replied. As it was, he barely managed to eat his Danish; his hands looked like he was wearing mittens, with only the thumb free and the other fingers all wrapped up together. “Sherlock just needs a bit of observation; I could easily do that at home if I could just use my fucking hands. Which I can't. Meanwhile, the silly bastard is driving me up the walls.”

“That's illogical, John,” Sherlock said with surprisingly little acid in his voice. “You'd need your hands to climb.”

They looked at each other and started giggling.

“What about outpatient care?” Greg asked.

Sherlock perked up, but John sighed, “Yeah, not quite in the range of my pay grade.”

“Why not take it out of Sherlock's trust fund?” Greg asked with a grin.

“Sherlock, you have a trust fund?” John enquired, eyebrows arched and thinking about how he was regularly paying for so many things from his own meagre wages.

Sherlock cleared his throat, sensing a lecture coming on. “Mycroft has to sign off on it, though,” he replied in an annoyed tone, “and I don't see how he can, refusing to wake up like the lazy lump he is.”

For a moment, Greg's eyes narrowed to dangerously gleaming dark slits, then he forced himself to relax his shoulders and his facial muscles. “Call Anthea, you wanker. It's not an unreasonable request, and knowing your brother, he has made provisions for situations like these,” he said, his tone fairly calm. “Call her, just don't be such a cock for once. Remember, your brother isn't around to see you posture. Or stay in the bloody hospital if you prefer,” he added with a shrug. “It's all the same to me.”

John huffed out an amused laugh and Sherlock shot his friend a quick, dark look, but, realising that he wasn't really being made fun of, quickly brushed the crumbs from his fingers and returned to clumsily typing on the new secure phone.

Greg picked a rectangular Danish with a cherry filling for himself and viciously bit into it. Apparently, even though he'd thought that he'd put the horror show event behind him, he still wasn't completely ready to forgive Sherlock. That might take a while yet.
John gave him a tiny slightly guilty, sympathetic smile. The older man nodded back.

“Want me to bin the napkins for you?” Greg asked after the three men had obliterated all the pastries.

“Sure, thanks,” John easily replied.

Both his and Sherlock’s napkins did end up in the bin, but the post-its magically disappeared into Greg's coat pocket on the way.

“Is there anything else I can do for you two idiots,” the older man asked with a grin, “or can I get on with my exciting, non-hospitalised life?”

“Piss off, old man,” John told him with a friendly grin.

Sherlock, still typing clumsily with his injured hand, only made a dismissive gesture, which had Greg rolling his eyes.

“Be good for the nice doctor, children,” he said and left with a laugh.

He was sure that if John’s hands weren’t bandaged, he would have given him the two-fingered salute.

As he closed the door behind him, he heard John grumble, “Why does no-one ever say that to my patients?”

His grin lasted almost to the doors of the guarded VIP section of the Intensive Care Unit.

Mycroft hadn't wanted Greg to visit his body double again, for two reasons. Firstly, seeing the poor sod in his artificially induced coma would upset Greg, and secondly, anyone observing him visiting might draw conclusions about their closeness that might put Greg in danger by association.

The DCI had objected on the grounds that his Super had given him the day off so he could mope around and take care of a comatose Mycroft, and his hospital cover was more important than Greg being upset, which would cease to matter after he was back home and had a chance to hug his love. Well, maybe get a kiss, too, or better yet several, and perhaps there could be a list involved. That had made Mycroft smile.

Their compromise was that Greg’s visit was to be a short one, long enough for a friend but too short for a lover.

In spite of the fact that he had been arguing for it, he was now feeling a distinct knot in his stomach as he passed the guards. Apparently, after yesterday's phone call he had been placed on an easy access list, and all Greg had to do was show his identification and they let him through. Then it was the routine of scrubbing, disinfecting and putting on sterile over-clothes again. The hallway was just as depressing as he remembered it, only that this time his phone didn't chime as he walked into the room with the comatose double.

At least the man was off the respirator now. Still, he had a clear oxygen mask on his face, which served well to camouflage any tiny discrepancies in appearance to the original Mycroft Holmes. As a matter of fact, he looked so much like Mycroft that the sick feeling in Greg's stomach intensified, no matter how often he told himself that this wasn't the man he loved. On this, his brain and his gut decidedly weren't in agreement, and his gut had the habit of not listening to logical arguments.

The monitoring equipment had been reduced to about half a metric ton, but the man himself was still
deathly pale. The blanket was gone again and he was simply covered by a thin hospital sheet, and of
course his hands were ice-cold. Grumbling about inconsiderate medical personnel, just in case the
room was bugged, Greg went to the closet again, found the blanket and covered the poor sod. Then
he sat down and read him the first two chapters from the English translation of a book written by
Wladimir Kaminer, a writer of Russian descent who had emigrated to Germany as a young man and
wrote clever, drily humorous books about the cultural differences and his general experiences.
Kaminer had a remarkable talent of seeing the often surreal, absurd and rather funny side in
bewildering situations that other people might have found stressful or upsetting, and Greg thought the
poor comatose sod could use a bit of that resilience in his current situation, if he could hear him at all.
Greg tried to let the wryly amused tone of the narrative carry over into his reading voice, and it was a
surprisingly good distraction.

Before he noticed, almost half an hour had gone by, and a nurse was smiling at him and clapping
softly. “That was great,” she said. “Do you do that often?”

“Unfortunately not,” he replied in a purely friendly tone that couldn't be mistaken for flirting. “I have
pretty long and irregular work hours, and sometimes I'm too tired to even read by myself. It must be
boring to lie here all by himself, though, with nothing but the machine noises for company. I'm not
certain how much he actually understands, but I think he may hear at least voices and their tone.”

The nurse nodded. “Yes, many people don't remember after they wake up, but some say they've felt
that the presence of friends and family helped.”

“Thanks,” Greg said with a small smile as he put the book away and stood up, then looked at the
identification card she carried. “Nurse Fitting, I've put a blanket on Mr Holmes again. I'm probably
not supposed to, but his hands are ice-cold, and he can't even tell anybody when he's freezing. Was
that all right?”

He made his voice as non-confrontational as possible, since a lot of medical professionals he had
come across over the years tended to put up their spines if they even so much as suspected their
competence was being called into question.

She simply smiled, though. “Yeah,” she said. “I'll make a note in the file so that the others remember
to keep him warm.”

“Thanks,” Greg politely said. “Is there any way to tell when he will wake up?”

She shook her head. “I'm afraid not,” she replied. “Mr Holmes' body has been through a lot, but at
least he's breathing on his own again. He'll wake up on his own time. For now, he can use the rest to
mend.”

They talked about the patient's condition for a while, then she asked him about the author and title of
the book he had been reading. Finally, Greg politely took his leave. Christ, was he glad to get out of
there. Hieronymus Bosch's medieval horror visions of grotesque demons torturing lost souls in hell
had nothing on the coldness, antiseptic smells and inhuman sterility of a modern hospital, especially
with Greg's personal horror vision in it, a pale, unmoving, nearly lifeless Mycroft Holmes. He
couldn't wait to get home and give his love a very long hug.
Chapter 25

25.

When Greg returned home from the hospital, it turned out that he needed the promised hug very badly, and Mycroft was ready to provide. He was, perhaps, a bit bewildered by the other man’s fierce desire to make certain that he was really, truly all right, but also perfectly happy to bestow all the kisses, embraces and reassurances needed.

Then Greg went upstairs to wash the lingering scents from the ICU away under a hot shower, and Mycroft went back to working on his laptop and texting on his phone, probably either Anthea or Sherlock. Unlike the detective, his Holmes preferred speaking to texting, but since he was supposed to be in a coma right now, occasionally having a friend read Russian Disco to him, Mycroft had to operate under a pseudonym and avoid any traceable use of his own voice. His beautiful, polished, articulate voice, Greg thought, then gave himself a small mental kick for behaving like a lovesick schoolgirl. But, then, did it really matter? As long as he didn’t embarrass Mycroft and was happy himself, he decided, he could admire that exquisite voice, as elegant and irresistible as the man himself, as much as he wanted to.

Happily, he went to find Mycroft again, who was ensconced in the library and had dozed off on the Chesterfield, slightly curled up to accommodate his long limbs. The painful dark bruise on the left side of his face was lightening slightly; before long, it would have all the colours of the rainbow, and the poor man would absolutely despise it. Greg smiled at him, pressed a tiny kiss to his forehead and settled down in an adjacent armchair with the biography he was currently reading. Chilly October rain was pattering against the windowpane, and the fire was flickering merrily in the grate. Greg switched on the reading spotlight for his seat but not the main lamp, leaving his love to rest in the natural half-light. The poor man's body had an explosion, many nasty bruises and sprains, some harsh medication and two nightmare-filled, short nights to make up for. Looking at him like this, so unguarded in his sleep, made Greg want to hold him and keep him safe forever. Half sighing, half smiling at himself and his unapologetic sappiness, he opened his book and started reading.

At one point, Mrs Chowdhury silently slipped into the room and served him a perfect cup of tea, just as he liked it, and he smiled at her in thanks.

A short while later, Mycroft made an adorable snuffling noise. Greg realised that he was close to waking and put his book away in favour of watching the man he loved with a deep feeling of awe and joy. It was as if Mycroft could tell somehow; he woke, lazily blinking his eyes open with a soft smile. His usually so perfectly styled hair was in slight disarray, showing a hint of a curl. He still looked the tiniest bit sleepy, and Greg’s breath caught almost painfully in his chest.

“I love you,” he softly said, those three words expressing best what he felt.

“And I you,” the slightly younger man replied, still smiling.

He sat up, struggling only slightly with his arm in the sling, and Greg stood up from his armchair. Mycroft managed, though, and so he simply sat down in the space now free by the taller man’s side.
“I don't want to be overbearing, love,” he hesitantly said. “But I'd also like to help, and I don't want you to feel that you have to ask for something that's already yours. And after all that you've been through lately, you've earned a little pampering.”

Mycroft smiled at him again, slightly but warmly. “I understand the conflict inherent in that, but as usual, your tact is impeccable, my dear.”

He leaned against Greg with his mostly uninjured right side with a content sigh, and the older man smiled. “Just tell me when I get it wrong, love. I'm not exactly unobservant, but I'm certainly not brilliant like you.”

“You are fine exactly the way you are, Gregory,” Mycroft firmly replied and leaned his cheek against the silver hair of the slightly shorter, stockier, more muscular man by his side with a content sigh. “And no-one has ever read me as truly as you do.”

“Then thank you for allowing me that privilege,” the older man softly said, enjoying their proximity.

“I don't think that was an entirely conscious decision,” Mycroft thoughtfully replied, then smiled. “It was simply you, my dear, in your entirety.”

Greg's breath caught. “This is the highest compliment I've ever been paid.”

His love smiled into his hair. “Good,” he simply said.

“Tea?” Greg asked after a comfortable pause.

“Please, my dear.”

“Thank you for opening the line of communication to Sherlock and Dr Watson,” Mycroft said as they enjoyed their tea together. Greg had brought the whole pot, as Mrs Chowdhury was busy making a shepherd's pie and salad for lunch. “Even Sherlock could not fault your discretion and, as you know, he is very quick to criticise anyone and anything.”

Greg nodded, hiding a small grimace. “He has a sharp tongue,” he agreed. “I don't mind it when he's right about something, but sometimes he just say things to be cruel, especially to you.”

“You find that hard to bear,” Mycroft observed with faint surprise, “even harder than when he attacks you.”

Greg nodded with a slightly sheepish smile. “Much harder. I've never liked it, but right now... I've had a talk with John and we've sort of cleared the air between us, but I still can't entirely forget what those two did to you. I'm afraid another one of Sherlock's disparaging remarks aimed at you would make me angry. There was one small thing he said at the hospital, even mild by his usual standards, but still so callous and unfair that I found myself wanting to throttle him. I'm sorry, love, I'm not quite myself right now.”

“It was probably a quip at my laziness, then,” Mycroft calmly said, but Greg could detect a trace of hurt.

Sherlock was such an utter arse sometimes. Greg took a calming breath. “Yes. To be fair, I believe he was truly relieved that you weren't actually in a coma. His words were something along the line of, that's surprisingly okay, things could be worse. Of course, he was also pretending to comment on his Danish at the time.”
Mycroft smiled at him gently. “You are a very resourceful man, my dear. And you actually managed to convince him to eat one?”

Greg smiled and leaned against his partner again, who put his cheek to the silver hair, as before. “Two,” he smugly replied. “Pecan with orange glaze, you know.”

“You devil,” was the amused reply.

Greg grinned mischievously. “Detective Chief Inspector and Tempter of Holmses in food matters, that's me.”

“Oh food matters?” Mycroft purred into his ear, his tenor suddenly deep and silky.

Greg shivered pleasantly. “Other things only in regard to one particular, closely defined Holmes. It's expressly written in my demonic contract; I insisted. Otherwise, they couldn't have paid me enough.”

Mycroft laughed, then winced slightly because his bruised ribs were hurting and resorted to a wide, amused smile instead. “Most excellent.”

“Yes, isn't it?” He sounded so smug that it made Mycroft smile again, which only made him look even smugger.

Their heads turned towards each other, their eyes met and held, and then they were both leaning forward, lips touching. It was neither tentatively adoring, ravenously sexual nor sweetly comforting; this kiss was shining joy, both light and deep at the same time with desire licking around the edges, a kiss that encompassed much and could tip in different directions. It was Mycroft who drew back a little, letting their foreheads and noses rest against each other.

“Dearest,” he said when their breathing was on its way back to normal. He sounded strangely regretful. “Sherlock and Dr Watson have been released from hospital, and I will have to meet with them this evening. You are, of course, welcome to attend, should you wish to do so.”

Greg tensed and bit down on his first instinctual response, which was a resounding “no”. “Mycroft,” he said in a tone of forced calm. “You cannot leave the house right now, or your ruse with that poor sod in ICU will be for nothing. You can't be seen.”

“True,” his love calmly replied, though he did look a little anxious.

“But what if they're observed entering your house?” Greg asked. “Why would they come here while you're in hospital?”

“We don't know for certain that... the other side even knows I live here,” Mycroft replied. “My name never appears on any paperwork connected with this house, and another place has in fact been set up and maintained as my ostensible residence.”

Greg laughed, but humourlessly. “Will that be enough to fool someone with the resources and influence to procure a DX-707?”

“Be that as it may,” the younger man said, “Anthea will arrange for some traceable communication that will indicate that they are, in fact, visiting you, my dear.”

Greg exhaled slowly. “This is... this is your safe place, love. Our safe place,” he said, struggling to express his thoughts and emotions, “the place where we can be ourselves. I don't want Sherlock and John here, not while you're still hurt and not at your best, not after what they did to you in your other home.”
Mycroft closed his eyes, sounding troubled, almost defeated as he said, “The meeting is necessary. I see no other way.”

Greg’s arm tightened around him for a moment in a hug but remained silent.

Mycroft gave him an insecure look, then realised that the older man needed a moment to gather his thoughts and leaned back against his solid, comforting warmth.

Greg considered their options. As much as he didn't want Sherlock and John in the house right now, that wasn't really practical, but there was always the upper ground floor. Although Mycroft technically had more space assigned to himself than Greg, they inevitably seemed to gravitate to either the shared library or Greg’s living room, both on the lower ground floor and near the kitchen. The only room that his love regularly used on the ground floor was his study, which was located on the right side of the house above the utility room. It had all kinds of added security measures and a high-tech secure communications set-up, and Greg hadn't even once stepped foot in it, because he respected Mycroft’s working space. The drawing room on the ground floor spanned the entire left side of the house from front to back and was as long as Greg's living room, the library and the hallway to the entrance in between combined. Yet it remained mostly unused, as did the sitting room right above the kitchen. They were both furnished and decorated with cool, modern elegance, and the only thing that either man found even remotely interesting about them was the piano in the sitting room. Mycroft kept those rooms in reserve for entertaining in a work-related capacity, which only happened very rarely. The furniture in the long drawing room had dust covers on it to save Mrs Chowdhury some work; the smaller sitting room was kept dusted for possible guests on short notice.

“All right,” Greg finally suggested. “How about this: We'll receive them on your upper ground floor, but the other floors are off limits. I especially don't want Sherlock and his vitriolic tongue here in our library. We can still light the fireplace up there, make it a bit more inviting, serve tea and digestives with all the trappings. But we'll keep the meeting confined to your formal work space and out of our private living space. We'll just have to remember to draw the curtains so you can't be seen from the outside, but since it gets dark early on, this won't be a problem.”

Mycroft exhaled, then smiled radiantly. “Gregory, that is a most elegant and highly practical solution. Thank you very much.”

Greg smiled back. He wasn’t a genius, and when Mycroft had said some time ago that their minds worked differently and Greg would always have an interesting perspective to offer, he had half suspected that the brilliant man was trying to mollify him. This, however, proved that he did have ideas and suggestions to contribute, which was... good. Now, they only had to get through the meeting that evening. But first, there would be a delicious lunch and more time together, and after the meeting they had a peaceful evening to look forward to.
Sherlock Holmes and John Watson arrived, as Mycroft had predicted, at the upper ground floor entrance. The one on the lower ground floor had been the servant's entrance in Victorian times, and so the detective, who could act as entitled as any spoilt toddler, would never consider it. John, of course, followed where Sherlock led.

With enough time on her hands to prepare, Mrs Chowdhury had given the sitting room a quick additional cleaning, although it had been perfectly all right according to Greg, and then had protested as always when he fetched the firewood. It was stacked on the wall of the garden shack that also held the lawnmower and a few other garden implements, and now, with the winter coming, also the lawn furniture. He knew that their wiry Indian housekeeper was stronger than she looked, but it seemed wrong to him to allow a tiny woman like her to carry the chopped logs inside and upstairs. He always took the wood for their bedroom fireplaces upstairs, too, and she liked to chide him for “not behaving like a proper gentleman”, but he also saw her tiny, pleased smile.

Now everything was prepared, the heavy curtains drawn against the gathering dusk – and anyone possibly observing Mycroft from the outside – a fire flickering merrily in the grate, tea and ginger digestives ready and Mycroft's laptop waiting.

Sherlock made his dramatic entrance five minutes late and John followed him calmly, back straight and with clear signs of discomfort. He also looked from Greg to Mycroft and back several times in a way he probably considered unobtrusive. The two of them would have put two and two together, of course, when the address that Sherlock gave to the taxi driver matched the one Greg had given John over the phone only three days ago, and John would have realised that Greg's mysterious housemate, the man he wished he could be more than friends with, was indeed Mycroft Holmes.

The consulting detective looked around as well, though his gaze lingered for a small while on the two hosts, taking in their closeness that spoke of familiarity at the very least. He also took in the two antique crystal chandeliers that were now retrofitted with warm LED lights and had replaced Mycroft's modern chrome and halogen lamps in the hallway, but he only pursed his lips thoughtfully and didn't comment.

Mycroft and Greg hadn't taken their seats yet, leaving the choice to their guests in order to disarm Sherlock's first likely attempt at a power play. In that way the youngest of them all was predictable enough, even to Greg after all those years. Usually, he would have simply smiled at his antics, but right now he still felt raw enough that they would scratch away at his self-control. There were two two-seater designer sofas on each side of the glass-topped coffee table and a club chair at each end, all in modern chrome and soft, buttery black leather. Wherever Sherlock chose to sit, Greg was determined to have John and himself directly across from and flanking Mycroft to give him the maximum distance from his abrasive brother.

His perceptive love understood, of course, what was going through his head, but only smiled tolerantly and a bit fondly. Being protected wasn't something the Invulnerable Mr Holmes was used
to, but that only provided additional motivation for a quietly determined Greg.

Their greetings went well enough, Sherlock's obligatory welcoming barbs lacking most of their usual venom. Perhaps, Greg thought, he had been underestimating the fact that not only was Mycroft injured and not at his best, but so were the other two men. Still, in any case it was better to be prepared.

John's hands were no longer bandaged entirely, but he still had large plasters on his palms and around several fingers. The stitches would have to stay in for at least a week, and he looked already tired from the time he had spent on his feet this day.

Sherlock moved with his usual sweeping grace, although a little more slowly and gingerly.

In the end, the four men ended up sitting on the two sofas, Sherlock and John next to each other, as were Mycroft and Greg on the other side of the table.

“Whatever became of “This is a family matter, Sherlock”?“ the dark-haired consulting detective asked, though more ironical than sarcastic even as he mimicked Mycroft's tone and lighter voice.

The older Holmes smiled his guarded little smile that never reached his eyes. “Your argument was quite convincing, Brother dear. To paraphrase you, Gregory stays.”

The consulting detective choked, eyes widening as he took in the evidence before him. Greg and Mycroft looked back calmly, unapologetically, and Greg started pouring the tea with all the elegant ease his mother had so painstakingly trained into him from early childhood.

“Sherlock,” John said, his tone warning as if he were afraid his friend would launch into a string of insults, but the younger Holmes brother merely blinked and seemed to be be processing that this wasn't simply a house-share or a mere friendship.

Greg didn't think any vitriol would be immediately forthcoming. Mycroft simply looked aloof, uncaring, although Greg could feel a minute tremble where their hands lay close to each other on the buttery black leather of the sofa.

“Mycroft,” John went on, his voice more uncertain now. “First of all, I want to apologise. What we did in Surrey was – not right. I don't know if words can make it better, but for all it's worth, I'm deeply sorry.”

The older Holmes brother looked at the short former soldier with the ramrod-straight back, blue eyes meeting blue-grey ones. For a long moment, their gaze held. When John started fidgeting under the expressionless scrutiny, Mycroft nodded.

“Thank you, Dr Watson,” he simply said. The apology was acknowledged, but neither was forgiveness extended nor familiarity permitted, at least not at that point of time.

John nodded back once, then went on, “And thank you for helping to arrange the outpatient service. A few days longer in hospital, and someone would have throttled Sherlock. It might even have been me.”

A small chuckle went around the table, dispelling some of the tension. Sherlock huffed and put his nose in the air, although a gleam of humour was visible in his eyes.

“That was mostly arranged by Anthea,” Mycroft deflected. “Still, I'm quite glad to see you both in a
state of rather good health under the circumstances, compared to that grenade's destructive potential.”

“Yeah, that could have gone so much worse,” John agreed with feeling, but at the same time there was a small gleam of the excitement still reflecting in his eyes.

“I don't know if you've had time to see before you were carted off, you mad bastards,” Greg said, “but nearly the entire outer wall of the living-room was blasted away. That wasn't a fun picture to see on the news.”

He tried for a smile, but there was an undertone in his voice that made Mycroft move his hand on top of his. Gratefully, Greg flipped his hand so they could link their fingers. He hadn't been certain how far exactly Mycroft was willing to go in the public acknowledgement of their relationship, especially where his vituperative little brother was concerned, but Greg was immensely glad of his comforting touch now.

John raised his eyebrows slightly at Greg, his gaze questioning, and the older man smiled back, not bothering to disguise the happiness in his eyes. Then he looked at Mycroft, his dark eyes becoming impossibly softer. Mycroft's lips lifted, barely noticeably but easily to see for Greg, his eyes warm as they rested on his love.

“Don't tell me you were worried about us, Gareth,” Sherlock said, but there was a tiny, teasing grin on his face.

“All right then, I won't,” Greg drily replied, a small answering grin lifting the corners of his mouth. His fingers, though, pressed Mycroft's for a bit of comfort. The truth was that he hadn't simply been worried but nearly out of his mind.

John, who had been awake and recalled clearly enough how stressed, almost devastated Greg had been, gave him a rueful look, and the silver-haired man shrugged in reply; water under the bridge and all that.

The consulting detective decided to ignore the by-play and snatched up a digestive instead. Momentarily distracted, he tasted, chewed, then said, “These are not too bad, actually.”

John shook his head at his impossible flatmate but tried one and agreed.

“Mrs Chowdhury makes them,” Greg explained with a fond little smile, his hand still warmly resting in Mycroft's.

“I still like gingernuts better,” Sherlock claimed even as he snatched up and ate a second one.

John giggled and shook his head again, and for a while they all busied themselves with their tea.

In the end, they debated for over two hours. Often, the two Holmes brothers would simply look at each other or communicate with just a few cryptic words, leaving the other two behind with their speed and strangeness of conversation. John wouldn't have put up with that sort of impoliteness usually, but now he seemed too tired to care much.

“Are you in pain?” Greg asked. “Because I've got all kinds of stuff here for Mycroft, ibuprofen or paracetamol, topical anti-inflammatory pain relief gel, cold packs and all that. If you need anything, even if it's just a break and a bit of rest, just say the word.”

“Thanks, Greg,” John said. “Explosions tend to take a bit of a toll on the body.”
“Yeah, they're bastards like that,” Greg agreed with a grin. “Thanks for the apology, by the way. I don't think Mycroft was expecting it, so he probably doesn't quite know how to process it right now.”

“That's kind of a sad thing, actually,” John thoughtfully replied.

Greg shrugged. “Well, how many people ever apologise to Sherlock and mean it? Except, you, you twit.”

John grinned but still looked thoughtful. “Point, mate,” he acknowledged.

They both looked at the brothers, so very different and also so unexpectedly similar.

“You're right,” John finally, softly said. “Mycrof – he does feel.”

Greg sighed. “And be very, very glad that he does. As far as I understand, that's your psycho thermostat's problems. She can mimic human behaviour well enough because she's scarily intelligent but has no true understanding and can't relate to people and their emotions at all.”

“My psycho therapist?” John repeated, then giggled helplessly. “Christ, that's so, that's so terribly fitting. So far into not even funny any more that it's funny again.”

Greg shrugged with a sad little smile. “When I have the choice between laughing and crying, I'd rather laugh. But that's us coppers, macabre to the end.”

“You have to deal with all that violence somehow, I suppose,” John replied. “Ella – she was my non-psycho therapist after I was invalided back home – told me once that humour is the most advanced and least harmful of all coping mechanisms.”

They had another spot of tea, Greg refilling all four cups, and John leaned back in his comfortable sofa and looked around curiously.

“So this is how you live now?”

Greg shook his head. “No, these are Mycroft's formal rooms for work-related dos. Kind of neutral ground, you know. Other than for a look when he showed me around, I haven't really been in here before today.”

John looked guilty again. “I suppose after Surrey – Christ, was that only three days ago? It seems like weeks... Well, anyway, I suppose I understand.”

Greg nodded in acknowledgement. John's obvious remorse made something in him soften, and he did think about showing his friend the comfortable area on the lower ground floor, but the greater part of him still felt the perhaps slightly irrational but yet very strong urge to protect Mycroft.

“Thanks, John,” he said. “Maybe another time, we can have a drink downstairs in the living-room.”

“Yeah,” the former soldier replied, looking a little sad perhaps at the beating their friendship had taken, but not offended. “Let's get this East wind shite out of the way first, anyway.”

“South-East wind,” Greg corrected him with a grin.

“Know-it-all,” Mycroft suddenly interjected, lips twitching ever so slightly as he turned his attention to the man at his side.

“Pot,” Greg replied, his eyes softening and warming immediately.
“Kettle,” the taller man said with a smile, repeating their earlier exchange word for word.

“Mon cœur,” Greg replied, switching his answer, my heart, to French. There was an amused smile on his lips, but his eyes were serious.

“Ugh! Are the two of you quite done with this sickeningly saccharine behaviour?” Sherlock demanded.

Greg grinned at him, unabashed. “Never.”

“Brother,” Mycroft cut in before Sherlock could get started on a tirade. “Remember the explosion and tell me, is life not incredibly precious, can it not be entirely too fleeting to waste even a single moment of happiness?”

“What happened to “Caring is not an advantage”, brother mine?” Sherlock asked, but he sounded curious rather than sarcastic.

“I have found reason to re-evaluate my premises,” Mycroft calmly replied. “You need not care for everyone, which would be impossible in any case. Ultimately, however, you cannot cease to care for the people who are truly important to you; you cannot escape the pain, no matter how much it hurts and how dearly you may wish to. Ultimately, whether caring is an advantage or not is entirely immaterial. Once I admitted that to myself, I found that the benefits of caring may indeed outweigh the disadvantages. No matter how ephemeral that happiness may turn out to be, every moment is precious in and of itself. That realisation was... utterly freeing.”

John was staring at the older Holmes brother with an open mouth.

Greg was looking at him with shining eyes, their hands still firmly entwined. Mycroft was addressing his brother, but Greg felt that he was also speaking to him, and his heart felt like it was going to beat its way out of his chest.

“All lives end,” Sherlock softly said, quoting to his brother the line he had heard repeatedly for so many years, his eyes searching.

“And only you decide how full your life is before it does,” Mycroft firmly stated.

“All hearts are broken,” Sherlock thoughtfully added.

“Possibly,” Mycroft calmly agreed. Then he added with a small, almost mischievous smile, “Could be dangerous.”

The solemn spell over the room broke as first John, then Sherlock started giggling.

“Mycroft,” Greg whispered, still looking at his love with wide, shining eyes.

The taller man shifted in his seat and turned his entire body towards him. As one, they lifted their hands to tenderly cup one another's faces, as one, they brought their foreheads together and let their noses rest against each other. They had no intention of kissing in front of Sherlock and John, but this was almost more intimate.

John cleared his throat uncomfortably.

Sherlock said with a faint grin, “Fuck Uncle Rudy, eh?”

“Oh, please, Sherlock,” Mycroft chided with a moue of distaste as he straightened up again.
“Really, Mycroft?” John sighed, always put off by the taller man's stuffiness.

The older Holmes brother regarded the soldier with a tiny smirk. “Honestly,” he said, very drily, “that would have been an appalling thought even while the man was still alive. Now, though...”

John choked, Sherlock snorted, his lips twitching, and Greg started laughing helplessly. It was in incredibly bad taste, of course, which no-one would have ever expected from the prim and proper Mr Holmes. Mycroft, though, his dear Mycroft had a wickedly funny, irreverent sense of humour, and he loved him all the more for it.

For a moment, Mycroft held his perfect non-expression, then started laughing himself, and suddenly they all were. He and Sherlock laughing together, that hadn't happened in decades. It was silly and carefree and freeing, and Greg looked at Mycroft, his eyes sparkling with happiness.

All in all, this could have gone much worse.
In the end, the four men came up with a rudimentary plan that Greg didn't like in the least. John and Sherlock, the two mad thrill-seekers, were all for it, of course. Mycroft would be going to Sherrinford as well, and that made Greg feel very cold and sick inside. With his stupid Priority Ultra clearance, the older Mr Holmes was the only one of the them actually authorised to enter the secret high security prison that was apparently failing spectacularly to contain Miss named-after-a-male-Greek-wind-god Holmes and her genius brain, massive ego and unsurpassed sulking abilities, and in all those three categories she was beating Sherlock hands down. Mycroft was closest to her in intelligence and perhaps the only one who had a chance at resisting her nearly superhuman powers of influencing other people's minds and bending them to her fucked-up will, and so Greg's every single argument to keep him away from Sherrinford failed.

Clearly, Eurus had enough influence at the high-security prison to come and go freely, and enough influence in the government, the military or with extremely dangerous and organised criminals to get her hand on one of those secret DX-707 grenades. The drone she could have bought over the internet from a well-stocked toy shop, but someone must have directed it for her that day at Baker street. There was no telling how many people there were – in London or elsewhere – actively working for her, or perhaps just observing. The gist of it was, they had to act in a way she wouldn't see coming. That meant that Mycroft would have to stay in a coma as far as the public eye was concerned, and Sherlock and John were to undertake some camouflage measures of their own. And Greg would return to his work and be a good little DCI and pretend that nothing was wrong, well, apart from his friend and house-mate being in a bloody fucking coma.

In the meantime, the three quixotic idiots would continue to heal and regain their strength, and then they would enter Sherrinford by unexpected means. Well, it seemed that Sherlock had always wanted to be a pirate. His gleeful grin at their ludicrous but surprisingly workable plan for getting on the island made Greg smile, though only for a second.

It wouldn't have been so bad if Greg could have joined them. The whole thing was insanely dangerous and probably going to go hideously wrong, but he'd rather die trying to save Mycroft than be the one who was left behind. However, apart from Mycroft himself, who was needed at Sherrinford, Greg was the one best situated to get them police support and, due to his own clearance, keep in contact with Mycroft's colleagues, the other three who together with him formed the core of the British shadow government. It made sense. It made terrible sense that Greg would be the one left behind. He tried to argue with John, even reminded him of Rosie, although that was a bit of a low blow. John had only got that stubborn expression on his face, and then, Greg still didn't know how the devious bastard had done it, extracted the promise from his friend that he would take care of Rosamund Mary Watson if the worst came to pass. Mycroft had even promised John to accelerate the paperwork to make timely provisions.
And Mycroft himself would still be going, even though he was a negotiator, an analyst and not at all a trained fighter, and Greg would still be left behind.

Bloody buggering fuck.

The next nine days were both heaven and hell. Mycroft had spoken about caring being an advantage in spite of the pain that might follow, and Greg had thought those words utterly beautiful at the time. Now that the fear of loss crept inside him slowly and insidiously, he saw the bitter side to the sweet. It was exactly as Mycroft had said, you couldn't stop caring simply because it was tearing your heart to pieces, even if you wanted to. And Greg didn't want to in the first place. He loved Mycroft, that wonderfully brave, idiotically stubborn, beautiful man, and would until he died.

Unfortunately, there were many unknown factors, which made planning extremely difficult. Still, Mycroft noticed that Greg seemed calmer when he could see that discreet preparations were being made and safety measures implemented outside of channels that could possibly be compromised. That was why Greg left work an hour or two early one day – well, strictly speaking, he went home exactly on time for once – to meet one of Mycroft's mysterious three colleagues in the small cadre that ran Great Britain for Her Majesty the Queen.

Greg didn't know who or what exactly to expect, and so he was slightly nervous when he stepped out of the shower that evening and put on one of his most elegant pairs of creased woollen trousers, one of his few tailored shirts in pale blue and a slate-grey pure cashmere jumper, all three if which he usually only wore on visits to his parents but never to work. He briefly contemplated a tie but decided that he was in his own home, thank you very much, and, feeling rebellious, left the first two mother-of-pearl buttons of his shirt open and ruffled his hair slightly before he stepped into the coolly modern sitting room for the second time that week.

Mycroft was impeccably dressed in one of his beautifully tailored grey three-piece bespoke suits, although he usually took of the jacket off at home and after his injury had been wearing shirts and ridiculously expensive, endearingly soft cardigans because of the sling. Now he was looking impeccably formal again, professional and distant in his Mr Holmes the Iceman persona, and even the medical sling didn't detract from his authority. It was black and minimalistic, and he carried it so confidently that he managed to make it look like a costly accessory. Since this meeting was related to his work, Greg hadn't really expected anything else. Though he did greatly enjoy a less formally dressed and more relaxed Mycroft, the sight of the tall, slender man in his bespoke suit, exuding carefully restrained power and control, still made his heart-rate pick up and knees go weak every time.

However, Mycroft hadn't completely slipped back behind his professional front; when his eyes rested on Greg, they were hints of warmth and affection in them that might be hard to read for the average person but easy to notice for Greg.


Greg smiled at his love, not quite as openly as he usually did at home but still with noticeable warmth, and turned to the slender blond woman, a very well-preserved mid-fifty, ready for a polite “How do you do.”

Instead, his smile turned into an impish grin. “Hullo, Allybeth! Fancy meeting you here.”
“Goodness, it’s Grégoire, the little pest,” she replied in the same disrespectful tone, her eyes full of sudden laughter. “Are you still alive? I was so sure you’d have met a sticky end long before now.”

Mycroft choked but managed to turn the sound into a tiny, discreet cough.

Greg grinned at her charmingly. “Still a very much bad boy, I assure you.”

“Bad boy indeed,” she scoffed, lips twitching with amusement. “Mycroft, there wasn't a day that my little brother and his hellion of a best friend didn't get into dreadful trouble. Do you remember the great pudding débâcle?”

Greg's eyes softened with fond memories. “That was one smoothly executed operation, even if I say so myself, and you never were able to pin it on Reggie and me. Innocent until proven guilty, that's what I say.”

“Reprobate,” Mycroft chided him with a tiny smile.

“Not true! We were wrongly accused!” Greg claimed, laughing. “Besides, there's the statute of limitations to consider, so even if you could prove it, which you can't, it wouldn't matter, anyway. So there.”

“He changed sides eventually, I assure you,” Mycroft said to Lady Smallwood in a deeply mournful tone, “even though you wouldn't believe it, looking at him now.”

She glanced at Mycroft, whom she had never seen so playful – which, compared to any other person, was still extremely restrained – and back at Grégoire, la petite terreur, who smiled at her stern colleague as if he had hung the moon and stars. Well, wasn't that interesting. Better leave it uncommented for now, though.

“I hear you are a Detective Inspector of New Scotland Yard these days,” she said instead.

“Detective Chief Inspector, actually,” Greg corrected her with a small sigh, “which just means lots and lots more paperwork and less fun out on crime scenes.”

“Going for Superintendent?” she asked, interested.

“Christ, no,” Greg replied with an expression of true horror. “That's even more paperwork, and no time in the field at all. I don't think I could even consider myself a proper copper any more.”

Mycroft's lips twitched. “You, Gregory, are being absurd,” he drily commented.

“Probably,” Greg agreed with another smile at him. “But I know what I want, and I know how to defend myself if threatened with a promotion.”

Then he smoothly turned towards Lady Smallwood. “Now, amusing as this is, I believe you are here for a reason, which I hope is in aid of keeping the indomitable Mr Holmes as safe as possible during his upcoming excursion to Sherrinford.”

“Quite,” she agreed, serious again. She wasn't really happy with the entire operation, and it showed.

“Then please tell me what I can do to help from my end,” Greg firmly said.

And with that, the planning began.
The really frustrating thing was the utter secrecy required. They could send in the Special Forces, but there was a small but real possibility that there might be avenues of communication already established that would alert Eurus that they were going to move against her. Even worse, she might find a way to take control of those highly trained, deadly operatives and turn them against them. Still, maybe all that caution and all of Greg's worries were overrated; maybe Eurus Holmes was as safely contained as they had believed for years. It wouldn't do to overreact, but neither would it do to underestimate her. What a fun little tightrope walk.

Also, no-one could really assess the threat of Eurus Holmes with any pretence of accuracy. Greg's gut instinct, which he usually trusted implicitly, told him to simply put a bullet through the woman's head, deal with the threat once and for all and the devil take the hindmost, but he couldn't exactly trust his instinct in this particular case, could he? Not when he feared that Mycroft was in danger and Greg would have done anything to keep him safe, including committing cold-blooded murder of what had to be the loneliest woman in existence, practically isolated from all human contact since the age of six.

And for that alone, Mycroft bore a huge mountain of guilt, deserved or not.

Was he more afraid of being proven wrong or proven right, Greg wondered. This whole mess was becoming a breaking point for the man he loved. Either he would be vindicated, his sister being the monster he had tried to protect the world from for decades, and in that case he was in the gravest danger from her. Or he was not, and Eurus was not as big a threat as they feared her to be. In that case, he would return home safely but still broken at the injustice he would believe to have done to one misunderstood six-year old girl with a magnificent mind and his brother's heterochromatic eyes.

Either way would be bad. Greg could only hope and pray to the god of cynical coppers who had seen too much suffering and cruelty in the world to believe any longer in a benevolent guiding presence for humankind that Mycroft would survive, and that Greg would prove strong enough and good enough to put his love back together again. It was a dreadfully painful thought. Greg was determined to do his best; in the end, that was all he could do.

That evening, he and Mycroft made love for the first time. His partner was still bruised, and so they had to be careful, more careful than a surprisingly assertive Mycroft liked. In a sudden bout of uncharacteristic petulance and sheer frustration, he threw his sling across the room, but his wrist and shoulder didn't cooperate at all, and the shock of his pain had the effect of a very cold shower on both men. Before frustration could really take hold, though, Greg gently but relentlessly kissed his love senseless and used that to good effect, playfully wrestling the taller man on his back and taking great care not to put any strain on the injured limbs and ribs. Then he languidly, lasciviously prepared himself while Mycroft watched avidly, breathlessly, eyes wide and dark with arousal again, and finally sank down slowly on his lover's magnificent erection, eyes fluttering closed and lips parted. It had been literally ages for him and the burn was slightly painful in spite of his thorough preparation, but he also felt a sudden completeness that went far beyond the merely physical. This was the culmination of his fantasies, becoming one with the man he loved, and it was so much better than he'd ever imagined.

“Gregory,” Mycroft purred, his beautiful, smooth tenor low and husky.

“Love,” Greg gasped, “so... bloody... perfect...”

He hadn't even realised that his eyes had opened again. Beneath him, his lover looked almost undone, blue eyes so dark they were nearly midnight in colour and fixed on Greg with an incredible intensity.
“Made for me,” Mycroft murmured, his voice all honey, smoke and desire.

“Yes,” Greg gasped. “For you... only ever you...”

He lifted himself up slowly, and oh Christ but that was good, and then changed the angle a bit as he lowered himself back down, and oh, that was Mycroft canting his hips ever so slightly, so perfectly, and ah! Yes, there, there...

And after that, there wasn't much room for thought for either of them.

Afterwards, they lay in each other's arms breathlessly, happily, exchanging languid kisses and caresses before Greg realised he was about to doze off. Reluctantly, he disentangled himself for long enough to fetch a warm, wet flannel and a soft towel from the bathroom, and cleaned them both with tender thoroughness. Mycroft was already drifting off to sleep, and Greg laid down close to him and covered them both with the duvet. Mycroft immediately shifted on his uninjured right side and put his head on Greg's shoulder and his left arm across his partner's waist, sighing with contentment. Greg kissed his soft hair with a smile and allowed himself to fall asleep as well, hoping that the lovely glow would keep the nightmares at bay for at least part of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Rupert Graves' first role in a film, as far as I know, was in Return of the Saint, 1978. He played a public-school boy (in the British sense) with that perfect cut-glass, upper class accent. That's a bit how I'm imagining a teenage Greg in my story, just a bit more mischievous.

As to the confusion over Lady Smallwood's first name, which is either Elizabeth (in Season 3) or Alicia (in Season 4), I thought, why can't it be both? In my backstory, she went through a youthful phase where she couldn't decide whether she preferred to go by her first name or her middle name, and her little brother Reggie and his best friend Greg, in the manner of annoying little boys all over the world, started calling her by a contraction of both names. They would have dropped it quickly enough if she hadn't cared, but since “Allybeth” never failed to get a rise out of her back then, Greg still remembers it thirty or forty years later.
Greg and Mycroft kept spending every night together, and although they had started out alternating according to their exact and very scientific experiment, which did include the making of a very thorough list with all its consequences, they soon ended up staying in Greg's bed. It was a bit ironical, since his bedroom was so much smaller, but the antique bed was large and lovely and he had treated himself to a fantastic mattress. Perhaps it was the fact that Mycroft's bedroom still bore the mark of his modern interior decorator and, although far less cool than his entertaining rooms on the ground floor, simply wasn't as cosy and charming as Greg's less spacious room filled with gently worn antiques. Mycroft said once that he felt almost lost in his large, empty room, and that was something Greg could understand very well.

Still, Mycroft's clothes and his incredibly luxurious bathroom, which they both favoured, were a floor down, which wasn't really practical.

One morning when they were walking downstairs, Greg carrying his clothes for the day, he said to his partner, “I've been thinking, love.”

“Did it hurt?” Mycroft asked with a tiny smile.

“Oi!”

“Sorry, my fantastically sexy and clever dear.”

“You're only saying that because you want a blow-job in the shower.”

“Hmm, to that, I would not be averse. However, you were going to share one of your deep and brilliant thoughts with me?”

“Flatterer! Yes, I know you don't really like your bedroom, but it has east-facing windows, which is nice in the morning, and that lovely bathroom and all your clothes nearby, so... Would you perhaps like to go back to the storage unit with me? There are still a lot of antiques that haven't found their way into the house, and if you find anything you like – or even if it's my own bed that you like – we could stick your modern stuff into the guest bedrooms or the storage unit and really make your bedroom comfortable. And perhaps you'd like to share it with me.”

He added that last sentence with a bit of uncertainty that made Mycroft pull him in his arms at once and kiss Greg until all thought left him.

“Yes,” he purred into his ear with his honeyed tenor. “I would indeed like that very much.”

Then he pulled Greg down the rest of the stairs, through the bedroom and the dressing-room into the wonderful, luxurious bathroom. They enjoyed themselves quite thoroughly in the shower, and only afterwards when Mycroft was starting to get dressed, Greg realised that during their passionate kiss on the stairs, his clothes had gone over the bannister and were probably lying somewhere in a heap on the ground floor.

The two of them laughed, and Mycroft kissed his lover again, this time much more tenderly and less demandingly.
“I think,” Greg said with a happy smile as he put on his dressing gown again in preparation for his climb downstairs on his retrieval mission, “that in a way, we've just agreed to move in together. We've sort of had it backwards, but still...”

Mycroft chuckled, then kissed him again. “Yes, friendship first, then moving in together, declaring our love, then getting to know each other closely and finally settling on an officially shared bedroom. But I do love you, Gregory, and more every single day. Let us share this, then, too.”

“I love you, too, Mycroft,” Greg replied as he comfortably leaned against the taller man, “so incredibly much. And I'm not accepting rent any more, by the way.”

“I'm not becoming your kept man!” Mycroft exclaimed with faux irritation, his eyes gleaming with laughter.

“But aren't you my gorgeous young thing?” Greg shot back with a pretended pout.

They stood in each other's arms, laughing happily, Mycroft in his pants, long socks, sock garters, vest and a still unbuttoned shirt and Greg in his dressing-gown, until Mrs Chowdhury knocked discreetly and called out to them that she was leaving Mr Lestrade's clothes in front of the door, and also a new shirt that wasn't crumpled.

That morning, Greg was so incredibly happy that even the thought of the things that lay ahead couldn't dim his joy.

And even though Mycroft didn't need his sling any more, the stitches in John's hands would be out in another day and Sherlock now had a discreet, state-of-the-art orthosis to stabilise his sprained ankle and showed no noticeable limp, that evening they returned to the waterfront storage house and picked out the perfect furnishing for the master bedroom they were going to share. Greg took pictures on his phone of the exact pieces they decided on, and Mycroft organised the transport the next day while Greg was at work.

That evening, when he came home from the hospital where he had read another two chapters of Russian Disco to Mr Poor Sod and was almost through the book, Mycroft hugged him as usual until the chill receded from his heart, and then led him to the first floor. The newly placed antique furniture had arrived and Mrs Chowdhury had spent all afternoon polishing it to a shine, in spite of Mycroft's protestations that there was no need to get it all done in one day. In the dressing room, an entire unit had been cleared out and was waiting for Greg's clothes, even though he didn't have enough to fill a third of it.

After everything was duly admired, they had a very lovely celebratory dinner together. In fact, because Mrs Chowdhury looked more than a little tired, Greg and Mycroft made a quiche together, the younger man fascinated by the simplicity of the process and the satisfaction of a perfect result. He was aware that Greg made it seem so easy because he knew the recipe so well, but he was also very good at explaining and making it enjoyable. While the quiche was baking, Greg cleaned up the kitchen and Mycroft went to chose the perfect wine, open the bottle and let it breathe. Greg desperately wished he had a Mind Palace like Sherlock so he could store every minute of this precious time when they worked and laughed together and everything was so easy and uncomplicated. As he wiped down the granite counter tops, a wave of melancholy threatened to drown him, but he fought it off, prepared to make the utmost of the time he had with the man he loved, be it only for a few days or several decades. When Mycroft returned with the wine, Greg welcomed him with a smile, and if there was a little sadness lingering in his eyes, it soon disappeared, melted away by Mycroft's presence like the last small heap of snow in the warm sun of spring.
That evening, Greg and Mycroft retreated much sooner than usual to the bedroom, now officially their shared bedroom. And they had the most passionate, explosive, incredibly hot sex, and later made the sweetest, most tender love to each other, in their now officially shared bed. They also had plans for the newly added Persian rug in front of the fireplace, the dresser, the chaise longue and several other pieces of furniture, and if they hadn't already exhausted each other so pleasurably and thoroughly, they might have been tempted to begin with their project that very night.

Greg did his best not to appear clingy or all too worried, but Mycroft was incredibly perceptive, and in all likelihood, he knew, anyway. He was also putting on a brave face for Greg's sake; it was better than dragging each other down.

Only the last evening before he was bound to leave for Sherrinford he reluctantly said, "Gregory, I am not a brave man."

Greg's first impulse was to give an instinctive denial, but he felt that there was more his love wanted to say, and so he remained silent and attentive and simply took one beautiful long hand between his.

"I have a desk job, my dear," Mycroft slowly, hesitantly went on. "I can condemn thousands to death with one stroke of my pen, but I have never had more than some basic self-defence training, periodically refreshed but nowhere near true fighting skills. I have never looked a man in the eyes as I killed him. I do not even know if I have the physical courage to do so. I am a coward, Gregory."

"No, love," Greg firmly said. "There is no man braver than you that I know."

"That is.. kind of you to say..."

"No, please listen, Mycroft. What you do on a daily basis requires its own sort of courage and moral strength, an incredibly great fortitude. You're faced with decisions so terrible at times that other people would crumble under their weight. So what if you've never killed a man in person. Killing is not a mark of bravery, Mycroft, it doesn't make anyone a better man. Some come out on the other side with their basic decency preserved, men like John, and others become less than human. No-one escapes such an experience unscathed, though. The only ones who can kill without remorse are psychopaths, sick people who lack the most basic sort of empathy and human decency. You are not like that," Greg very seriously said, looking at his love intently and willing him to understand the truth in every word.

"The very thought paralyses me," Mycroft admitted, turning his head in shame.

"I've killed a man once," Greg admitted, "back when I was still in Armed Response. It was a hostage situation. I took that shot, and afterwards I vomited my guts out. They told me that I'd saved several lives, but that still didn't change the fact that I'd killed a man. I couldn't bear to stay in AR. I transferred to Serious Crimes, and it still took me almost a year of therapy to learn how to deal with it. Do you think I'm a coward?"

"No, dearest. You are a good man, the very best of men," Mycroft replied, tightening his arm around the older man.

"And so are you," Greg firmly replied. "Better than me, even. You're going into a situation with such a lot of unknown factors with only two madmen as a backup..."

His voice cracked, and he turned slightly and pressed his forehead into the taller man's clavicle.
Mycroft caressed his silvery hair, but his hand was shaking. “I am afraid, my love, pathetically afraid. Terrified. Sherlock says I'm too lazy for legwork, but that's only half the truth. I lack his courage.”

Greg lifted his head and kissed Mycroft on his cheek. “And still you went to Serbia to rescue your brother in person, and you went to Baker Street to face Sherlock and John after what they had done to you only the evening before. You don't lack courage, my heart, you only lack their danger addiction and borderline passively suicidal streak,” he replied with a shaky little laugh. “Oh, Mycroft, my love. Any idiot can run laughing into danger. It takes a truly brave man to clearly see it for what it is, to fear it and yet go forward. You're incredibly brave, Mycroft. You're braver than John and Sherlock are, you're braver than I am. You're braver than anyone I've ever known, love.”

“You wanted to come with us,” the younger man reminded him.

Greg laughed again, another pitiful, shaky sound. “Because I can't bear the thought of you being in danger and I unable to help. I fear...”

“My dear?”

“I fear losing you more than my own death,” he whispered, defeated. “Oh, God, Mycroft, I wanted to spare you this maudlin shite, but... can you try to keep yourself safe? For me? Please?”

“I'll try, my love,” Mycroft replied, his own voice shaking as he hugged Greg tightly. “I'll make my absolute best attempt.”

“That's all I can ask,” was the soft reply.

They both slept poorly that night, but at least they could hold each other.

The next morning Mycroft left, not with the tick, padded bullet-proof vest that Greg had wished for him to put on, but at least with a very thin, unobtrusive, state-of-the-art bullet-resistant one under his shirt. They kissed before Mycroft left, lovingly but with an edge of despair that Greg wished he'd managed to keep away from their good-bye. But his eyes were dry and his look encouraging as his love stepped into the black Jaguar and was quickly borne away and out of his sight.

Then he went to work himself. He couldn't afford to act suspiciously in any way, he couldn't afford to crumble until that day was over, whichever way it would end.
Chapter 29

The absolutely worst thing, Greg thought, was not knowing.

He went through his day with a fierce sort of concentration that he didn't allow to slip for even a second. His back, shoulders and neck were in iron-hard knots again, and he knew that Sally had seen through his forced smile, but he performed as well as he could.

“Boss?” she finally asked at the end of the late morning meeting when she was the last to stay behind. “What's wrong?”

He gave her the ghost of a smile. “I can't tell you that, but thanks for asking.”

“Why not?” she demanded with a frown.

“Do you remember the vetting?”

“Yeah,” she replied with a tiny smile towards his mug.

He smiled back, but the expression dimmed as quickly as it had come. “I'm cleared to know,” he simply said, “and you're not.”

“Fuck,” she breathed.

“Quite,” he replied in a subconscious imitation of Mycroft's occasional dryness.

“Well,” she said after a pause, looking at the mug again, “I guess that's why you're the fucker in charge of us fucking fucks.”

He laughed softly, but his eyes were still worried. “Get out and let me do some fucking work, then, DI Donovan.”

She nodded at him. “Remember to take a break and have some fucking tea, boss.”

And then she was gone, and Greg wished for a moment that he didn't have to face the silence of his empty office, but then he went to work with a vengeance.

Meanwhile, on board of a small fishing trawler in the North Sea, two fishermen looked up incredulously at the tall man with the black curls, his expensive dark coat flapping dramatically in the wind and rain.

“My name is Sherlock Holmes.”

“The detective?”
“The pirate,” the man calmly declared.

It sounded ludicrous, but a shorter blond man with a gun in his hand and a determined look on his face was ready to back up the outrageous claim. They were off to Sherrinford, the place that “did not exist”, the place the older fisherman had so studiously ignored for his entire career. And now he was forced to purposefully steer his trawler that way.

Well, fuck that for a lark.

Mrs Chowdhury had packed sandwiches for Greg’s lunch, very nice ones with freshly baked rye bread and the lentil curry spread with tiny pieces of chicken that she made herself, and a bit of fresh lettuce. He liked that chicken curry spread as much as her cucumber one, maybe even a little more, but right now he was looking at the excellent food and feeling nauseated. It was a shame, really. In the end, he kept only the apple and put it in his pocket for later. The sandwiches he gave to Sally, because she looked hungry and already knew that he was off his feed. She smiled at her boss gratefully and repaid him by not asking questions he couldn’t answer.

At Sherrinford, Sherlock smashed in the lid of a coffin bearing a silver plaque that said “I love you”. It was empty, and he completely destroyed it in his frustrated anger. It was a bit of a cheap thing, probably made for cremation; the consulting detective broke it to splinters easily, although that only partly served to alleviate his intense frustration. Somewhere in London, Molly Hooper, her phone in hand, sobbed, heartbroken.

In a meeting room at the Yard, Greg was discreetly watching the clock on the wall. There were fixed times Mycroft was supposed to check in with his contact at Allybeth’s – Lady Smallwood’s – office. Greg hadn’t been notified that Mycroft had failed to check in around his estimated time of arrival at Sherrinford, nor an hour later. The next point of time, another hour after that, had just passed. Generally, no news was good news, but somehow Greg’s stomach was clenching and he was waiting for his phone to ring, the secure phone he had been given for especially this purpose. It was five minutes after the prearranged point of time, then seven. He was just admonishing himself for being paranoid when the phone rang.

He took one look at the screen, then quietly said to the Superintendent, “Sorry, sir, but I have to take that.”

Allan gave him a slightly worried look. Underneath his natural tan, DCI Lestrade was as pale as a ghost.

At Sherrinford, Sherlock held a gun in his hand, supposed to shoot either his best friend or his brother. If he failed to cooperate, the probability was far too high that Eurus might do the deed for him and possibly kill them both. The huge screen showed her magnified face, concentration, fascination, expectation and suspense written all over it. She could have been a child, watching a particularly dangerous circus act, or Sherlock examining fascinating things under his microscope. Eurus had created this situation, this experiment, but unlike Sherlock, hers involved living people, members of her own family, and she clearly saw nothing wrong with that. That thought, the extent of her lack of empathy, made John Watson sick to the stomach.
The two Holmes brothers, though, were looking at each other, communicating, as they sometimes did, with their eyes and the minutest of expressions of their faces and body language. Eurus was the most intelligent of them all, but Mycroft and Sherlock hand known each other for a much longer time; there were memories they shared that their sister lacked the context and maybe the emotional capacity to understand. John looked away and concentrated very hard on how sickened he felt by the entire situation. If they were indeed communicating, he couldn't afford to share even one second of understanding with them, because he was so easy to read that even a psychopath with only second-hand knowledge of human emotions could do it.

“She said earlier that she wanted us to interact,” Mycroft silently communicated to his brother. “What we actually do or do not do seems to be of secondary importance. She implied our culpability in the situation with the warden's wife, but what happened to the three Garridebs proves that we had no influence at all.”

A reference to Molly Hooper, pained on Sherlock's side, flickered up quickly between them but wasn't pursued.

“This is not mere torture for the sake of torture,” Mycroft silently continued. Sherlock concurred. “She's after our reactions, our emotional responses, the shock effect.”

“The sentiment, the drama,” Mycroft signalled. “We may not excel at the sentiment, brother mine, but the drama...”

“...we can easily manage,” Sherlock silently agreed. “Let's give her a worthy show, brother dear, and hope it's enough.”

“Break a leg,” Mycroft signalled, tapping his thigh in what looked like a minute nervous gesture, abandoned as soon as he realised he was making it. Sherlock managed not to smile.

All of this happened at breathtaking speed while John Watson looked anywhere but at the two brothers and nervously licked his lips.

“The prime asset has failed to check in,” Lady Smallwood's MI5 contact informed Greg.

“I need to go there,” he replied, pale but firm.

“Negative, sir,” the young man contradicted. “Backup plan B has gone into effect five minutes ago. We're initiating Bravo-Delta-2-1 now.”

“Bravo-Delta-2-1,” Greg repeated, “acknowledged. Initiating.” Still very pale, he turned to the Super and said in that same calm voice, “Sir, the two helicopters we've been talking about, we need both of them now.”

The Super simply nodded. “Of course. They're ready and waiting on the pad, DCI.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Greg turned back to his secure phone and said, “Transport is authorised and on standby. When can we expect the two teams? Oh, good. Meet them up there in five. Lestrade out.”
He picked up a dark blue canvas bag with the Met's logo on it which he had carried to the meeting with him. Among other things, it contained his bullet-proof vest, protective helmet and combat boots. “See you soon, people. Sir.”

“Remember your promise about the Christmas party, Lestrade,” Allan said with a small, slightly forced smile.

“Yes, sir,” Greg replied, his own grin only a pale shadow under his worry.

“Where are you going, boss?” DI Dimmock asked, concerned.

Greg gave him a grim, joyless smile. “To Azkaban, Michael,” he said, shouldering his dark blue canvas bag, and then he was out of the door. He was going to be in the helicopter that went to Sherrinford, come hell or high water, and not even a fucking Special Forces team was going to keep him away.

In the cruelly named “elimination round” – as if this were an inane game show! – Mycroft had found it horrifyingly easy to convince Dr Watson that he was the one who Sherlock would have to kill. The man was admirable in his resolution, but far too stoic in his emotional display to satisfy Eurus' sadistic greed for grand emotional displays, the more painful, the better.

The brothers exchanged another discreet, lightning-fast look.

Sherlock lowered the gun; he had no intention of shooting John, and even the thought of doing it made him feel sick. He let his face and body language reflect that fact as he turned away.

“God! I should have expected this,” Mycroft said, dropped his scary, fake genial smile in favour of his most arrogant, cold expression and prepared to spew hateful invective at his little brother. “Pathetic. You were always the slow one...”

He had successfully played Lady Bracknell, the self-important, poisonous old biddy, he could do this: be convincing enough, but not entirely too convincing for John Watson.

The debate at the helicopter pad was a very brief one. They had no time to lose, and apparently the team had been warned that DCI Lestrade was a bloody stubborn bastard. Greg smiled grimly as he took his seat among the men in black tactical gear; clearly, Allybeth had remembered his defining childhood trait and made provisions accordingly. The helicopter was incredibly cramped and loud; they wouldn't be able to talk. Not that Greg minded, he was far too worried for that, anyway. He opened his canvas bag and pulled out his own navy blue police bullet-proof vest.

The operative next to him shook his head and passed Greg one of those that the men themselves were using, along with a helmet equipped with a tactical headset. Gratefully, Greg nodded at him and silently put on the gear.

“Ignore everything he just said,” Sherlock addressed John. “He’s being kind. He’s trying to make it easy for me to kill him.”

John, looking pale, had turned to intently study Mycroft, though.
The older Holmes bother was wearing a small, apologetic smile as he smoothed down his hair.

“Which is why this is going to be so much harder,” Sherlock sadly added as he raised the gun with a steady hand.

On the screen, Eurus' eyes widened and she leaned forward greedily, finally completely riveted by their performance, even as Sherlock critiqued his brother's acting.

“You said you liked my Lady Bracknell,” Mycroft replied, slightly hurt.

“Sherlock, don’t,” John whispered, appalled, his eyes filled with pain.

Yes, Dr Watson, show her all those emotions shining through your stoicim with just the perfect amount of suffering. She is lapping it up like a cat the cream; only, adult cats are lactose intolerant. Bon appetit, ma petite sœur; enjoy your abdominal cramps.

“It's not your decision, Dr Watson,” Mycroft calmly, almost kindly said, then turned back towards his brother. “Not in the face, though, please. I've promised my brain to the Royal Society.”

A trace of black humour that my dear Gregory would have appreciated, although, were he here right now, he would be going out of his mind. Thank God for small blessings. Calm now, calm and collected and resigned and wistful. I would die to keep my baby brother safe, I truly would, but let's hope that this offering of pain is enough to appease the arbitrary, vengeful deity, if not the fictitious one far upstairs then perhaps the minor one next door, if only for the sake of my dear, beloved Gregory.

Sherlock's hand and voice shook ever so slightly, he closed his eyes for a moment, although his face was mostly composed. Beautifully done, little brother, so subtle, so convincing, so moving to anyone who has the capability to be moved at all.

“Where would you suggest?” Sherlock asked aloud.

“Well,” Mycroft replied with the same dignified sadness, “I suppose there is a heart somewhere inside me.” He opened the first button of his shirt and then straightened his ice-blue silk tie to underscore the physical implications of what they were discussing. Also, his gesture briefly drew Sherlock's attention to the tie. Outwardly, it was all expensive Italian silk, but inside there was a layer of thin para-aramid fibres. Look, Sherlock, and observe.

Eurus' eyes, magnified on the screen, were wide and attentive, and she was devouring the tiniest sign of pain like a starving creature presented with a banquet.

“I don't imagine it's much of a target, but why don't we try for that?”

There, let's try for a little self-deprecating humour again, some sadness and dignity. If this little drama of ours fails to do the trick, Sherlock, you will have to shoot me, do you understand? I have that bullet-resistant vest and the tie on. They're not padded and I have no idea how much use they will be at nearly point-blank range, but at least my chances are better than Dr Watson's. You'll have to shoot me.

But Sherlock was smiling in a painfully amused, anguished way that made Eurus react nicely.

Good, brother mine; deceive her with the truth. Only, Dr Watson, that trace of incredulity on your face, do try to control that. I can see that you recall our meeting in Gregory's house and what I said about sentiment. You have finally caught on but please, please don't spoil this, or at least one of us might still die at her hand. Fortunately, it's mostly shock, that expression of yours, and maybe Eurus
won't understand it even if she catches it. But she's fixated on Sherlock's pain and my own, now, isn't she? Ah, the bittersweet tragedy of our supposed final parting, and she is drinking it up like a greedy vampire. We have guessed correctly; this, then, this is what she wants.

“`I won't allow this,” John whispered fiercely.

Yet more pain for the vampire to glut herself on. Time to bring in a little guilt-driven anguish for a wider variety of flavours.

“This is my fault,” Mycroft admitted, his face stoic, and turned towards his brother. “Moriarty.”

Oh, but that little confession pleases her, because it shocks and angers John, although Sherlock has already deduced it a long time ago and is making no secret of that.

And that little graphic interlude with the dramatic colour shift to red and the late Moriarty's arrogant face on the screen, what cheap melodrama. But I suppose I have kept you from reasonably well-made theatre productions all of your life, sister dear, so I will accept some culpability on that account.

Holmes killing Holmes? That, of course, sister dear, is entirely in the realm of possibility, once we get away from your control and our hands on you.

“Goodbye, brother mine. No flowers, by request,” Mycroft said with a sad, fond little smile. It was one of his rare genuine ones; in the end, he did love his brother, and always would.

Now for the final part, Eurus, and please take note what makes a drama sublime.

Sherlock, his face anguished, said, “Five minutes. It took her just five minutes to do this to us.”

And his expression was truthful as well. Lap it up, you misbegotten little sadist, and choke on it.

Sherlock looked at John, then back at his older brother, and finally lowered the gun and turned away. “Well, not on my watch,” he firmly added, and now there was pure, absolute determination in his voice and his eyes.

Ah, and that visibly threw her. But Mycroft's vicious inner triumph quickly gave way to a sudden, terrible cold fear, because that determination in Sherlock's eyes was perfectly genuine; this was going to be no bluff.

“A moment ago, a brave man asked to be remembered. I'm remembering the governor,” Sherlock said with perfect calm as he put the gun under his own chin, mirroring the man's exact position just before he had blown his own brains out. “Ten.”

Mycroft's eyes screamed, desperate, “No, brother. Don't you dare! I love you.”

Sherlock's eyes sadly but firmly replied, “You would have died for me just a few moments ago. So will I for you, if it really comes to this. I love you, too, brother dear. And I have the gun.”

As he continued the countdown, Eurus yelled in denial, then tried to convince Sherlock to stop by dangling Redbeard's mystery in front of him, as if anyone cared about that any more at this point. It showed just how little she understood human beings.

Sherlock ignored her, which was entirely understandable, and continued with his countdown, which was nothing short of awful. Eurus' increasing desperation only showed her middle brother that there was no reason for him to stop forcing her hand.
Mycroft stood, horrified, his brain mapping out a myriad of scenarios, none of them offering a satisfying or even acceptable solution while he himself remained frozen in dreadful indecision.

When Sherlock had reached five, a small dart was released from a hole in the wall and hit him in the neck. He continued counting, the gun still pressed to the soft underside of his jaw, even as he pulled out the dart with his free hand, already visibly weakening. John Watson was hit next; the mostly empty room really offered no cover. Then Mycroft felt the sting in his own neck.

As Sherlock reached two, he wobbled and toppled over like a felled tree; clearly, the tranquilliser darts had made a reappearance. Had Sherlock still been conscious, he would have rolled his eyes and called that obvious and dull, with his most scathing expression of contempt.

As John Watson went down, Mycroft gave up his own fight against the drug, and then there was only silence.

Chapter End Notes

The directly spoken lines on board of the ship and at Sherrinford are quoted verbatim from The Final Problem (BBC Sherlock, Season four, Episode three). No copyright infringements are intended, no profit is being made from their use. The spin I put on the situation is my own.

Many thanks to the brilliant Ariane DeVere for her meticulous transcript of The Final Problem (http://arianedevere.livejournal.com/91118.html). I've watched that part of the episode repeatedly to get it right, but her work still helped me save a lot of time. Transcribing it all line by line, that's true dedication!
It took over two hours for the helicopter to reach Sherrinford, and those were the two longest and tensest of Greg’s life. There’d been a storm over the North Sea earlier and the wind still blew in choppy gusts, so the flight was hardly pleasant. Fortunately, Greg didn’t get airsick easily; throwing up in such tight confines would have probably caused a chain reaction of the most disgusting sort, and the Chief Super would hate it if he got the police helicopter back smelling of vomit.

Sherrinford, or Azkaban, as Greg had dubbed it in his mind, didn’t look all that impressive from the outside, but he knew from studying the schematics that most of the facility had been dug into the island’s rock beneath.

Greg expected danger, a fight in a convoluted urban environment with possible death around every corner. Instead, things were eerily quiet, the place almost deserted, the only sounds the whispers of the air conditioning and their combat boots on the floor.

According to the surveillance records, the facility helicopter had left with Eurus, Sherlock and John on board, but apparently not Mycroft, quite a while before the two Met helicopters had arrived. It was being tracked right now, with the second heli on standby to follow as soon as possible.

Greg staid with the team that was clearing Sherrinford. Whenever they came across an orderly, that person would lay down his weapon and put his hands behind his head in a clear gesture of surrender without speaking a word. At first, this had made the invading team nervous, but eventually it simply became routine. Still, the place never lost its inherent spookiness. Greg felt like he was in a horror film and something gruesome was about to happen every minute now, and they had even separated into smaller groups like the stupid teenagers always did before they were inevitably slaughtered. But then, he told himself that the stupid teenagers in those horror films weren’t trained killers armed to the teeth. He was with the hunters, not the hunted... but still, he couldn’t shake that feeling that something awful and shocking was going to happen any minute now.

The facility was meticulously clean and barren with either white walls or grey concrete, seeming miles and miles of practical underground sterility, the very definition of the Bauhaus tenet “form follows function”. And then they came across an area splashed in garish crimson, and it was a shock.

Greg had seen and smelled enough crime scenes to know that the splashes weren’t blood and the patterns of the droplets were all wrong, but there was something visceral about seeing all that blood-red splattered about.

“It's just paint,” he heard himself say in a detached voice.

The black-clad operative next to him nodded tersely in acknowledgement.
The “Yes, but...” remained unspoken between them. The psychological effect on all of them was undeniable.

Greg decided that the corridor no longer looked like Bauhaus but more like the result of Jackson Pollock getting extremely angry at being given only one single colour to work with for an action painting. That idle thought granted him some amused detachment, and for a while, it became easier to breathe.

Soon they reached the high security section where Euris Holmes had been contained.

Had been, because after all the built-in security measures they had to get through before this point, her cell was empty and the glass wall that should have kept her inside had been removed in a way that wasn't entirely obvious at first.

Another shock effect, Greg thought to himself, and even as the rational part of his mind realised this, all of his hard-won detachment went right out of the window. Maybe not a window, though; there weren't any windows down here, just endless, faceless concrete walls and the low, monotonous hum of the air conditioning.

Greg wondered briefly whether the mentally ill woman had watched one horror film after the other, coldly analysing and thinking of how she could recreate the effects. Then, because she both saw and observed but didn't really comprehend, she would have crammed as many shock effects as she could into the briefest possible time, somewhat ruining the overall spookiness. The really horrifying stuff, though, was the silence right now, the subtle or not so subtle hints, like the room that contained a coffin smashed to pieces. The waiting, the expectation of dreadful things to come that was slowly undermining reason, or in short, what Greg and the team were experiencing right now. An hour more of this, and they might all get so twitchy that they'd start shooting each other.

Then the Special Forces operatives were beginning to find dead people, Greg heard over his earpiece.

A woman, tied up and shot in a swivel chair in the governor's office, dried tear tracks on her face. She was identified as the governor's wife.

The governor himself, shot in another room, possible suicide under coercion.

Three men tied in harnesses, their remains smashed on the rocks below where the slowly incoming flood would soon begin to lap at their corpses, yet unidentified.

Greg forced himself into keeping a firm emotional distance at those news. He was with the team that was looking for Mycroft, following the signal of the transponder his love had swallowed before the mission. He had probably been searched and relieved of his phone, but the transponder could only be removed by... No. No, not going there.

Finally, finally, they found Mycroft, and Greg thought that his heart would break.

The tall, auburn-haired man who usually carried himself so proudly was sitting in a blank white high-security cell so much like Euris' that it was virtually undistinguishable, his suit rumpled, shoulders slumped forward and eyes bleak. At least he didn't seem to be physically injured.
“Mycroft?” Greg asked, his voice shaking.

The desolate man slowly looked up, and when their eyes met, a spark of life returned to those intelligent blue ones.

“Gregory,” he simply said, but he sat up straighter and squared his shoulders.

Greg stepped forward, but a black-clad arm in combat dress firmly extended into his path.

“Excuse me, sir,” the operative calmly injected, “but I have to make certain he's clear first.”

“Oh course,” Mycroft immediately agreed as he slowly rose from his cot in an intentionally non-threatening, dignified posture, stepped towards the glass screen and spread out his arms to his sides.

To anyone who didn't know him very well he would have seemed the very picture of dignified composure; Greg, however, noticed many tiny details that spoke of lingering horror, a deep worry and the medical symptoms of a state of shock.

The Special Forces officer pressed a combination of buttons on a keypad in the wall, and glass wall separating them moved aside with a hiss.

Mycroft was matter-of-factly and efficiently patted down and asked a number of cryptic questions that he answered promptly and just as cryptically, then released.

“Ready to take your orders, Mr Holmes, sir,” the operative respectfully said.

“Very well,” Mycroft replied just as calmly. “Status?”

He was back to dutifully acting as the Iceman for now, all analytical coolness and command. Greg, though, felt his knees buckle with sudden exhaustion. He sat down on a nearby chair with as much dignity as he could muster, utter relief flooding him as a focused, powerful Mycroft took control.

He knew that once the other man let go of his façade, he would crumble, but for now, he was ready to do his duty and Greg would do nothing to interfere. Once they reached a secure, private place, he would be there for the man he loved and catch him as he fell.

They soon moved to the former governor's office, the centre of command and communication; the dead body of his wife was still in the chair. Also, everything that had happened had been recorded on the security cameras, and Greg mechanically started securing the evidence. Probably it all would be swept under the rug; certainly, none of this would ever make an appearance in a public trial. Still, he needed a distraction, and perhaps his work would be appreciated when the SIS were reconstructing the crime. At least, treating this place like a crime scene allowed Greg to find his inner balance again. He asked the operatives outside to take as many pictures as possible and to mark the location before removing the three bodies from the water's edge. It would be difficult to secure any meaningful evidence in the falling darkness and rain with no police and forensics specialists on the spot and the flood coming in, but it was better than nothing.

Mycroft had claimed the seat behind the deceased governor's desk and was co-ordinating and analysing a wealth of confusing information and giving out further orders. Lady Smallwood had been notified. All the guards and orderlies, every single person stationed at Sherrinford down to the cook and cleaning staff, would have to be rotated out and subjected to intense psychological evaluations. Even the other prisoners would have to be examined; there was no telling what Eurus had implanted in their brains with her strange and worrisome mental powers.
Eurus herself would have to be apprehended or taken out, of course, and Sherlock and John retrieved. Mycroft worked precisely and dutifully, but it was clear to Greg that the last point was the one of the highest importance to him. The faculty's helicopter with John and Sherlock aboard, most probably still in an unconscious state, had been tracked. It was still in flight, and Mycroft immediately identified the direction.

“Musgrave,” he said, and only Greg heard the minute tremble in his smooth, controlled tenor. “She's taking them to Musgrave Hall.”

Greg frowned. “Wasn't that your home before she burned it down as a child?”

“That, and it is also the place where she murdered Sherlock's childhood friend. Sherlock doesn't remember Victor; he has rewritten him in his memory as an Irish Setter, Redbeard. Eurus' entire goal today was to cause and witness pain, and it would be reasonable to expect her to continue in that vein. Reinforcements are already on the way, but I must remain here for now, and I would appreciate you presence at Musgrave Hall for optimum damage control.”

Mycroft's eyes expressed what he wouldn't say aloud in the presence of the Special Forces operative who was also working from the office, typing on his notebook, and the two others who were just taking the governor's wife away in a body bag after Greg had declared the evidence secured. In spite of his cool composure and unfeeling words, Mycroft was desperately worried about Sherlock and John, and after the subtle horror of the facility, of the mere glimpse Greg had had of the psychological torture the madwoman had inflicted on the four men, he understood only too well. Sherlock needed someone he knew and trusted.

The last thing Greg wanted to do, though, was to leave Mycroft, especially in that cold, horrid environment, the place of his most cruel of recent memories, while he was already fighting to hold on to his composure.

Their eyes met and held, blue and dark brown, in utter seriousness.

“Please,” Mycroft softly said, and Greg was done for.

“As you wish,” he replied just as softly, quoting a film they had seen together, old but still a gem. It was as close to “I love you” as Greg dared to say under the circumstances. “But please leave this bloody island at the earliest possible opportunity, Mycroft,” he worriedly added. “You don't need to be on site to co-ordinate everything.”

Greg didn't like the thought of taking the only helicopter present at the place and leaving his love stuck on Horror Island, but reinforcements and replacement personnel were due to arrive and secure Sherrinford soon, and then, he hoped, Mycroft would be relieved.

The dignified, tall man gave him a pale ghost of a smile. “As you wish, Gregory.”

Fifteen minutes later, Greg was airborne again with a Special Forces pilot who was trained to fly in the dark, and the tiny dots of light that were Sherrinford quickly faded away into the darkness behind them. Worried as he was about what the psychopath might currently be doing to John and Sherlock, he was even more concerned about Mycroft and wishing desperately that he hadn't left him alone when he needed Greg, if only as a silent, unconditional support at his back.

He drew in a long breath, then exhaled slowly. There was still one thing he could do. Connecting his new secure phone to the tactical headset that he wore via Bluetooth, he placed a call.
“Hello, Allybeth, Greg here. Yes, Sherrinford's under control again, it was already more or less abandoned when we got there. Yes, I'm en route there now; apparently, it's the old Holmes family seat, abandoned after our charming little girl burnt it down in an attempt to murder her family. Please, just relieve Mycroft as soon as possible. Hell, plain and simple, a living horror film, and I'm not exaggerating. Yes, he's keeping his composure and coordinating everything, but I don't know how long he can hold it together, especially in that place. I have no idea, he doesn't seem compromised to me, but please, please, just get him out of there. I'm sure he can work just as well from somewhere else. Monitor his work if you must, but as I said, I don't think he's been compromised by the mark. The man has just been through hell, Allybeth, literally. Keep him busy until I get back. Of course he's not a bloody machine! If you're implying... No. No, I'm sorry for overreacting. Uninjured, but I think he's traumatised and probably in a state of shock, PTSD will be likely. No, he's keeping his mind and body in check for now. You know, the usual treatment for shock. Keep him warm, supply him with lots of hot tea, get a few bites of food into him, keep his blood sugar level up. Yeah, thanks. See you later. Bye!”

So that was that; now Greg could go back to feeling all helpless and worried again. Better, though, to plan for what he would do if he ever managed to lay hands on that sadistic she-demon of a sister; he could easily fill in the rest of the flight with that.

As the helicopter with Greg on board flew through the quickly falling dusk, a drugged, unconscious John Watson was being chained to the bottom of an old, disused well. There was only a little water on the bottom, but that could easily be changed; a small generator and a pump had been set up, ready to transfer the water from a nearby pond into the well. Eurus Holmes didn't smile. It didn't even occur to her; frankly, outside of social manipulations, she had never quite seen the point. She was softly, tunelessly humming to herself, though. Sixteen by six, Brother, and under we go. In the well, the water level was slowly beginning to rise. It seemed quite appropriate.

Chapter End Notes

Virtual bonus biscuits to anyone who recognises the film Greg and Mycroft were referring to!
This wraps up The Final Problem and is the most canon-divergent chapter of this entire story. See the end notes for my reasoning.

In the end, when Greg arrived at Musgrave, Sherlock had already found his mad sister in her former room and managed to get John's location out of her. At that point, the Special Forces in the second Metropolitan Police helicopter had arrived. With Sherlock's information relayed to them, they quickly managed to locate the well and the doctor, and in the nick of time, too. With the chilly water already up to his chin, John was displaying an admirable sangfroid, no pun intended, while at the same time tightly gripping the rope that had been lowered to him so he could hold himself up more easily. A policeman wearing riot gear and equipped with a heavy bolt cutter was preparing for being lowered down and freeing the doctor from the well.

Eurus Holmes had been injected with a sleeping aid and looked strangely harmless and peaceful on her stretcher. She was a delicate woman, not conventionally beautiful but with the potential to be striking; looking at her now, Greg found it almost difficult to believe that she had caused all that suffering and heartbreak, let alone the physical violence. Her eyelids were slightly puffy from crying.

“She was terribly alone,” Sherlock said, sounding sad and confused as he looked down on his sleeping sister. “I didn't even remembered her before today. Mycroft told me about her, of course, but seeing her was... different.”

“She's dangerous,” Greg quietly stated.

“Yes,” Sherlock agreed at once. “My sister has the emotional range of a very small toddler. She put John... and Victor... into the well because...” He closed his eyes for a moment, then went on, “She said to me, “I never had a best friend.” That was her reason. She felt alone, and she doesn't even understand that what she did was wrong. That girl on the plane she kept taunting us with, the only human alive and conscious on board of a flying airliner, that girl was symbolic of Eurus herself. She has all the intelligence in the world and not a scrap of sense. Compared to her, I'm a genius with emotions.” He barked a self-deprecating laugh, and Greg patted his shoulder sympathetically.

Then he went on, dejectedly, “She's only aware that something is missing in her life, and so she throws a tantrum like a toddler, only that her tantrums kill people. I don't know if there even is a realistic chance of teaching her. I promised to help her, I just don't know if I can.”

“Oh Sherlock,” Greg said. There really were no words, and so he gave the tall, usually so aloof man a brief but warm hug and then pointed him in the direction of the well John was just being pulled out of. It was true, compared to Eurus, even Sherlock was an emotional genius, and he was clearly very concerned now as he hurried towards his best friend as quickly as his long legs would carry him. After all the torture and suffering, he had still called Eurus his sister. Affection was clearly present, as was a large portion of guilt. Greg had no idea whether that was good or bad, but at any rate, he suddenly felt very proud of the man the young drug addict he had met so many years ago had grown up to become.
With a sigh, he sent a quick text to Mycroft that Sherlock and John were fine and Eurus was knocked out cold, and then went back to what he had been doing, acting as a liaison between the Special Forces, MI5 and the local police.

A short while later, Sherlock reappeared with John, who was wrapped in a grey blanket.

“Good to see you both made it out at least physically unhurt,” Greg quietly said as he walked up to them.

“Have you seen Mycroft?” Sherlock belatedly asked.

Greg nodded. “We found him locked into a cell at Azkaban.”

Sherlock frowned. “Azkaban?”

John giggled, but faintly; the poor man was wet, chilled to the marrow and, now that the adrenaline was wearing off, dead on his feet.

“A fictional high-security detainment facility on an island in the North Sea,” Greg explained.

“Ah,” Sherlock simply said, for once not offering vitriolic remarks about popular culture or general stupidity. “Do go on. How is he?”

“Working,” Greg replied with a sigh. “Trying to fix things. Apparently, the whole facility has been compromised. I asked... my contact... to have him taken away from that horrid place as soon as possible. When I left, he was keeping himself upright by sheer willpower. I didn't want to leave him alone, but he asked me to make certain that you're all right.”

“And so you came, Granville,” Sherlock said with a faint smile.

“It was important to him,” Greg simply replied.

The tall, dark-haired man nodded thoughtfully. “Mycroft... Make sure he's looked after. He's not as strong as he thinks he is.”

Greg firmly replied, “Yeah, I'll take care of him. Of course I will. Now get John into some warm and dry clothes and go home, you silly sod. There are two Met helicopters here that need to go back to London, anyway, and you're welcome to one.”

The DCI smiled at the two men, nodded and walked on. He still had quite a bit to do, and he couldn't wait to get home himself; he didn't want to leave Mycroft alone longer than he absolutely had to.

“Thank you, Greg,” Sherlock said.

Greg turned back around and looked at Sherlock, and John stared at his friend, too. For the first time, Sherlock had called him by his real name. Considering the laughter in his changeable eyes, that meant the annoying git had known it all along. Of course he had. Greg felt a silly grin spread over his face.

When a uniformed policeman confessed to being a fan of Sherlock and called him a great man later, Greg said, “No, he's better than that. He's a good one.”
A good while later, Greg sat in the second Met helicopter returning to London. He'd given back his gear to the Special Forces with his thanks, wrapped up the loose ends with the local police and overseen the transport of the still sleeping Eurus Holmes to the helicopter that originally came from Sherrinford and was now going back to the facility. The medic had made very certain, with an additional injection the sleeping aid, that Eurus wouldn't wake for several hours, long after she was locked up safely back in a high-security cell. Meanwhile, Lady Smallwood's people had arrived at Sherrinford and replaced the entire personnel. Mycroft, as Greg had been briefly advised, was en route back to London, or already in his office at Whitehall.

Mycroft was safe. In the end, that was what mattered the most.

Greg tried not to think about how pale he had been, how his elegant hand trembled minutely even as he pretended so hard to be professional, to be unaffected. Greg barely had an idea of what had gone on at Sherrinford before he'd arrived, but it must have been awful. Sherlock had looked traumatised, and so had John, and they were the two idiots who could be seen giggling at crime scenes or running, jumping or swimming after suspects in death-defying stunts. It took a lot to get through to those two borderline suicidal adrenaline addicts, but Greg was afraid that where Sherrinford was concerned, a lot was putting it rather mildly.

And then there was Mycroft, his beautiful, beloved, dear Mycroft who had tried so hard to keep his stiff upper lip that he habitually maintained in public without any effort whatsoever.

Christ, but the memory of the usually so poised man sitting in that cell on the narrow cot, shoulders slumped and head hanging low – and Greg hadn't even been able to hug him. There'd been those operatives in black underfoot and Mycroft had had to maintain his professional, invulnerable front, and Greg had known that he'd have to maintain his own control or he'd dissolve into uselessness himself, unable to do anything but hold on to the man he loved with the strength of desperation. And that had been neither the right time nor the right place.

It had helped to fall into the familiar patterns of his profession, secure the evidence, take a mental step back and regard Sherrinford as a crime scene and not something that had happened in his own, private life. Mycroft had done the same, regaining control not only of the situation but also of his life.

Now, though, Greg was shivering in his seat, both of his hands curled around the thermos cup of hot tea a kind soul had given him before take-off.

His adrenaline level had been up ever since the call that Mycroft had failed to check in at the appointed time, and his stress level had remained high for as long as his body had been able to sustain it. Afterwards, at the ruins of Musgrave, he'd plodded on with sheer, bloody-minded determination and done what Mycroft had asked of him, anything to make his love's life a little easier. But now he had nothing to do but to sit in the dark on his uncomfortable seat and think too much while the rotor blades overhead made their loud, monotonous thrumming noises and the pictures of Sherrinford played before his mind's eyes like snippets from a horror film. All of a sudden it wasn't enough to know that Mycroft was alive and at least physically healthy. He needed to be close to Mycroft, to feel his long limbs wrapped around him, he needed to breathe in his scent and feel the steady beat of his heart. He needed to make certain beyond the cold doubt, here in the dark, that they were both alive and well and together.

Soon, he told himself. Soon.

For the moment, he shivered and held on to his cooling tea and tried to tell himself that everything was all right.

Like fuck it was.
It was a sad day when he couldn't even lie to himself any more.

There were so many shattered pieces to be picked up and put together again. But at least they were alive to do it. Things weren't all right, but they were going to be. And every thrum of the rotor blades brought him closer to Mycroft, closer to home.

Finally, the second Met helicopter with Greg aboard arrived at London. The flight had certainly been shorter than any other mode of transportation, but still it had felt far too long. Physically, Greg was exhausted, but his mind was unsettled, restless and spinning in unproductive, unpleasant circles.

It had been dark for a while now and he had lost track of time, but Chief Superintendent Willoughby himself was still there when Greg slowly walked down the stairs with his dark blue canvas bag with the bullet-proof vest and helmet he had never worn.

“DCI Lestrade.”

“Sir,” Greg politely replied, not too chuffed to run into his superior's superior after a long and horrible day. He'd probably been notified when the second helicopter had landed.

“You look like hell,” the Chief Super said with a small grin.

Greg tiredly grinned back. “Under the circumstances, that'll pass as a compliment, I suppose,” he drily said.

Willoughby chuckled, then became serious again. “Was it bad?”

“Utter hell,” Greg stated with total seriousness. “One of the worst examples of perfectly planned and meticulously executed human cruelty I've ever seen in my entire career, sir.”

“I do not have the clearance to ask for any details, of course...”

“Yes, sir.” Greg politely filled the lengthening silence without giving away a shred of information, utilising his blank copper face.

The Chief Super's lips twitched with amusement. “However, you have been commended for your fine work.”

Greg blinked, surprised. “Really? By whom?”

“Lady Smallwood herself, Lestrade,” the older man calmly said. “You seem to have impressed the lads in black with your cast-iron stomach.”

Greg shook his head and grinned ruefully. “Great. I get a recommendation for not vomiting in the helicopter. That's the finest example of damning someone with faint praise that I've ever heard.”

Willoughby laughed. “Apparently, you also reacted calmly under significant stress, were exceptionally diplomatic and did valuable work as a liaison, but you do look pretty awful right now. I'd say go home, have a decent sleep and rest up for the next two days, Lestrade, but in fact you have been requested for a special joint project of a yet undefined amount of time with the Department of Transport.”

“Department of Transport, eh, sir?” Greg replied, not very much surprised, a sudden, tiny smile playing around his lips. “Ah, well, can't do anything about hat, now can we? All in the name of interoffice cooperation, yeah?”
The Chief Super smiled at him knowingly. “Go home before you fall on your face, DCI.”

“Yes, sir. Have a good evening, and... thank you.”

“Likewise, Lestrade.” The older man nodded at Greg and walked away, back in the direction of his office.

And Greg, well, Greg finally got to go home, and he didn't even have to write a report. Nobody at the Yard would be cleared to read it, anyway.

“done at the yard, coming home. where are you? greg” he texted Mycroft.

“Home sounds wonderful. I'll be there in about 45 minutes. MH”

“love you. hot bath, what do you say? greg”

“Heavenly to both. MH”

“looking forward to it very much. greg”

“Soon, my dear. MH’

Greg smiled, tired but content, as he read the last text, then called up Mrs Chowdhury's number to fire off one last quick text message.

“will be home in about 30 mins, mr holmes in about 45. don't trouble yourself with anything, we'll be fine. just saying everything's all right. greg lestrade”

Then he went outside and caught a taxi.

Chapter End Notes

Several of the directly spoken lines are quoted verbatim from The Final Problem (BBC Sherlock, Season four, Episode three). No copyright infringements intended.

Again, many thanks again to the brilliant Ariane DeVere for her transcript of The Final Problem (http://arianedevere.livejournal.com/91118.html).

In some parts, though, I have deviated from The Final Problem and rewritten that scene. To me, it just doesn't make sense that a woman who has proven herself to be a ruthless killer with nearly supernatural powers of controlling others after only a few moments of conversation would be placed in direct contact with so many law-enforcement and Special Forces personnel and even given the opportunity of absconding with a helicopter, just because she looked a bit tired and had shed a few tears. Let's not forget that Eurus Holmes is an incredible actress, or she could have never established herself as a creditable or psychotherapist as Sherlock's client. Even though she seemed sincerely sad at the end of TFP – for herself, not for her victims, mind you – there is no reason why she would allow herself to be taken back to Sherrinford and into captivity. If she wanted contact with her family, she could have had it on her own terms. At this time, there was no telling yet that she would actually withdraw into her own mind. Even in
the series, there's really no proof that she truly has; as I said, she's been shown to be an incredible actress, highly manipulative and very, very patient. On a different point, her own cell had the glass wall removed, so I think it follows that she would have placed Mycroft in a similar cell but not in her own, one which still had the glass divider. And once I had decided to change these things, I thought, what the heck. After that, the scene practically wrote itself.

I have no regrets about leaving out John Watson's spiteful “What goes around comes around” comment regarding Mycroft. I believe that with the background in my story, he wouldn't have reacted that way. He's prejudiced, has an anger management problem and is occasionally quite callous, but not stupid.
When Greg finally arrived home and stepped through the entrance on the lower ground floor, Mrs Chowdhury was waiting for him. She didn't say anything, she just gave the pale, tired man a long look, a brief, firm hug and then disappeared upstairs, calling out, “Your dinner is just heating up in the oven, sir!”

Greg smiled; her obvious affection was balm for his frayed, weary soul.

He briefly looked into the kitchen, where a spicy, creamy lamb casserole was being kept warm, and it smelled so deliciously that for the first time since breakfast, his stomach told him that not only it wasn't going to reject any food, it went so far as to outright demand it. Greg poured himself a cup of tea from the freshly brewed pot that Mrs Chowdhury had left him and ate a digestive to tide him over, took his time to pick a nice red wine to go with the lamb casserole and opened it so that it could breathe. Then he went upstairs, the thought that Mycroft would be arriving soon giving him new energy. The ridiculously huge bathtub in the master bathroom literally took forever to fill, even with three taps, and so Greg turned them all on and set them to what would be the perfect temperature after allowing some time for cooling.

Then he took the food and wine upstairs to the first floor, plates, cutlery, napkins and all. The tray had extendible legs and could be put next to the bathtub like a narrow but effective side table. The tub was still filling and not in danger of running over by a long shot, and the food was still so hot that it would, he hoped, keep warm under its cover until Mycroft arrived. He only had time to find the muscle-relaxing bath oil and a number of candles and carry everything to the bathroom before he heard the door downstairs. As quickly as he could, he hurried down the stairs, and there was the man he loved, leaning against the door, deathly exhausted now that he was finally home and inside.

Gently, Greg divested him of his expensive overcoat, scarf and shoes and led the unresisting man upstairs.

“Come,” he softly said, “let me take care of you, my love.”

Mycroft, when he finally let go, cried. He didn't speak a word, he didn't even sob, but there were silent tears running down his face, and he simply crumbled.

Greg undressed them both, Mycroft's largely unresponsive state a cause for worry to him. Under his bespoke shirt, tailored slightly more loosely than his others, was the thin, high-end bullet-resistant vest, a stark reminder of what they had gone through that day, and Greg's hands shook as he opened the Velcro fastenings and took it off. With Mycroft finally undressed, he manoeuvred them into the tub, his own back to the cool enamel and his beloved leaning back against his chest, almost weightless in the warm water. Greg held him tenderly, caressing him and whispering sweet, loving nothings. He was using that voice again, the soothing one reserved for traumatised victims, and that quietly tore at his heart even as he comforted the man he loved to the best of his abilities. Mycroft let his head sink back and Greg leaned his a little forward, and their cheeks came to rest against each other while Greg's arms went completely around his tall, lithe partner, holding him with all his tenderness and trying to convey all the love, comfort and safety that he could.
“There were moments when I didn’t think I’d make it out alive,” Mycroft finally said, his beautiful, cultured tenor sounding uncharacteristically rough.

Greg hugged him lightly but remained silent, giving the other man space to express himself.

“I didn’t want to die,” Mycroft confessed. “We’ve just found each other, my dear, and it would have saddened me so to leave you behind.”

“You are my light,” Greg softly said.

Mycroft lifted one of his love's hands, tanner, shorter and broader than his own, to his lips and kissed it tenderly. “And you’re mine. Your loss would destroy me utterly. I tried – I tried not to think about it too much – but there was a moment when Eurus demanded that Sherlock shoot either John Watson or me.”

A shudder went through Greg's body, and he kept himself silent by force.

“How do you measure the value of one life against the other?” Mycroft softly asked.

Greg waited for a moment, and when Mycroft didn't go on, decided that it wasn't a rhetorical question. “That's a very complex philosophical question,” he thoughtfully said. “Some believe that each human life is infinitely precious, and that no life can be weighed against another, or even any number of others. Personally, I believe that's one of those ideas that don't stand the test of reality when things really get rough. Still, the answer would be: You don't measure the value of one life against another, because you can't. Any way you decide will be both right and wrong. In plain English, you're buggered either way.”

“True,” Mycroft tiredly agreed. “But Sherlock would have never survived killing his best friend. That would be two people dead instead of just one, me. And I had my vest on; my chances were far better than Dr Watson's. I asked Sherlock to shoot me, Gregory. I'm sorry, dearest.”

“Oh, Mycroft,” Greg said, his voice gentle and full of love. “What a horrible conflict, love, but only you would have a pre-emptive bout of survivor's guilt. My poor, dear, wonderful man. Sometimes, having brain the size of a small planet only helps you overthink things.”

“I'm not wonderful,” Mycroft insisted, his voice full of bitter self-loathing, “nor was I even particularly clever or astute. I fell for that ruse...”

“The little girl on the plane?” Greg asked, remembering what Sherlock had told him and what else he had heard at the ruins of Musgrave Hall. His heart hurt at the acrimonious self-reproach in Mycroft's tone, but all he could do was listen and express his silent support through his touch.

“There was no girl, there was no plane,” the younger man replied, his voice harsh and full of self-condemnation.

“There was no plane,” Greg agreed. He'd wanted to let Mycroft talk more or less uninterrupted, get it all out, but he simply couldn't bear the way his love was tearing himself apart. “It was meant to be symbolic, but that simile fell ridiculously short. The fictitious little girl on the plane would have been helpless and placed in that situation by no fault of her own. Eurus, though, controlled the proverbial plane and killed everyone on board. She was no innocent victim, Mycroft, she was the murderer. Although I'm absolutely buying her massive bout of self-pity; it seems like one of the few emotions she's actually capable of.”
“But she was all alone for such a long time, and I condemned her to that,” the man in his lap bleakly disagreed. “I locked her away, made certain that she led a life in solitude with only the minimum of human contact. She never had the chance to grow.”

“No,” Greg sharply replied. “That was your Uncle Rudy. He was the adult while you were only fourteen, my love. He made that choice, but he still firmly placed that terrible secret on your shoulders and managed to make you feel guilty for it all, didn't he? And guilt is a powerful motivator and an excellent tool for control.”

“But she was, is, my sister!” Mycroft cried. “My uncle did not create her; he was only trying to control the mess. He did his best.”

“But you didn't create her either, did you?” Greg asked, then sighed. “Look, from what you've told me, love, it began long before your uncle intervened. The first people to fail you, all three of you children, were your parents. They saw all the signs in Eurus; they saw her utter lack of empathy, a conscience or remorse, and they failed to remedy or at least address that. Then things escalated. Your parents knew beyond a doubt that their daughter had committed an outright murder and arson with murderous intentions on a whim at the age of six, and done it so cleverly that none of the adults could ever hope to discover the body or prevent it from happening again. She was simply miffed because she didn't have a friend and Sherlock did. Next she was probably going to kill you because you had access to the Eton library and she didn't, that or burn your school to the ground with all the boys in it. Your parents were in possession of all the relevant facts and still refused to protect their other two children from her. They refused to take any sort of action, refused to take any sort of responsibility. By deciding not to act in spite of the pressing need, they dumped that responsibility on you instead, my love, their fourteen-year-old son, and you had been raised to such high expectations and with an enormous sense of duty towards your family and your country.”

“They didn't understand Eurus. She was so intelligent even as a small child, she was beyond anything either of them could fathom,” Mycroft said in a low, sad voice.

“And you could?” Greg gently asked.

“In all of my family, I come closest to her in intellect,” was the calm, resigned reply.

“Bollocks to that!” Greg exclaimed, then bit his lip and forced himself back into calm. “Sorry, love. It's just, you may have had the intellect to deal with the situation, but not the emotional maturity. Your parents could see the threat she was posing; anyone short of an Alzheimer patient in an advanced state of dementia could have seen it. That takes no advanced cognitive abilities, Mycroft. It's just that acknowledging it takes a moral backbone and a bit of integrity. You, a fourteen-year-old boy, shocked and traumatised, had more of that than your parents did. They fobbed off their responsibilities as parents on their child because they didn't have the moral fortitude to make the hard choices themselves, and then they basically handed you over to your uncle Rudy.”

Mycroft gave a short, mirthless laugh. “You make it sound like a slave trade. It was what I wanted, Gregory.”

“Your uncle might have been intelligent and very good at his job,” Greg disagreed, “but he was also cold. He gave you no emotional support at all, and your parents refused to support you as well. And you were too young to truly weigh your options.”

Mycroft made a protesting sound, but Greg went on, “Oh, intellectually, I'm sure you had it all figured out, and brilliantly so. But that isn't all there is to that kind of choice, is it? Think, Mycroft. Think about caring being an advantage or not, think of everything you have learnt since then, think of your mental and emotional growth and development. Consider all that, and then tell me seriously,
from your perspective as the the mature man that you are today, did you have all the information back then that you needed to make such a choice in a well-rounded manner?"

“Concerning myself,” Mycroft replied after a long, thoughtful pause, “no, I must admit that I did not. Still, I am at this place in my life today, and I am proud of my work, and most important of all, I have you. For that alone, Gregory, I would accept every hour of loneliness and doubt and pain along the way all over again.”

“Oh, Mycroft,” the older man whispered, overwhelmed. Words failed him, and so he simply tightened his arms around his love in a short hug and buried his face in the man's auburn hair. “I love you,” he finally said in a choked voice.

“And I you,” Mycroft gently replied. “But concerning Eurus... I may have been young when I took on that responsibility, my dear, but I have maintained my decisions over the years.”

Greg sighed into his partner's hair. “That responsibility should have never been yours in the first place, my love. There is a reason why doctors aren’t allowed to treat their own family and solicitors never take family cases to court. You lacked the necessary distance.”

“I'm wonderful at distance,” Mycroft wryly contradicted with an undertone that was close to self-loathing. “For decades, it was all I could do with any degree of proficiency.”

Greg wanted to cry. Instead, he gently caressed the younger man's hair, which was beginning to curl adorably on his forehead in the humid air of the bath. “And I think you were deluding yourself into believing that,” Greg gently but firmly maintained. “You do have an incredible sense of duty, my love. You never gave up on Sherlock, even when he was on a steep downward slope, even though he was continually refusing help and trying to push you away, even though he was succeeding in hurting you over and over again.”

“He never...” Mycroft protested. Then he sighed and relented. “Yes, my dear. He did hurt me, no matter how I tried to distance myself. I considered it a weakness I could not give in to, I could not even afford to admit.”

“And that was another responsibility your parents dumped on you by refusing to honour their duties to Sherlock,” Greg said, trying to keep his tone even. Ranting and raving about the many failings of Mycroft’s parents wouldn’t help his love in any way. “But back to your sister. One possible response to the monumental threat she posed would have been to eliminate her.”

He said that carefully, not wanting to hurt the man in his arms, but Mycroft was a thoroughly logical person, and that thought, unpleasant and painful as it might be, must have occurred to him at one point.

The younger man sighed. “Yes. It was seriously considered at one time. I convinced them, and myself, that she could be of use and I had it under control.”

“So you saved her life, actually,” Greg pointed out.

“A miserable, lonely life,” Mycroft sadly added, “that finally led her to those acts of indescribable cruelty.”

“But she also saved hundreds of lives, you said,” the silver-haired man thoughtfully replied, “with the information she gave you.”

Mycroft shrugged tiredly and sought refuge in a colloquialism that was startling to Greg in its very unusual informality. “Damned if you do, damned if you don't.”
“And here we are again,” the older man firmly said as leaned forward and gently kissed Mycroft's cheek. “I think we've already had a discussion about godhood, fallibility and flaying yourself for your choices after the fact.”

“My parents, my mother especially, will think nothing of flaying me, though,” the taller man replied with a hint of humour that still held a quite a bit of genuine dread.

“They don't have a single leg to stand on between the two of them,” Greg grimly insisted. “Christ, Mycroft! They were the ones who conditioned you to act that way, to value your brains and logical thought over anything else, and then gave you to your uncle to finish the business. They were the ones to completely fail three children where their emotional nurturing was concerned, and then failed to take responsibility, leaving both Eurus and later Sherlock to you to deal with because their own responses amounted to nothing more complex or useful than a heartfelt “oh dear!” and “how dreadful!”.” He spat out those exclamations contemptuously while he put his hand on his forehead, palm facing outwards, in a vicious, spot-on impersonation of a shocked and fainting Victorian spinster. It was accurate enough to tease a pale, faint smile out of his love. Then Greg went on, more gently, “You were only a traumatised youth, Mycroft, probably with an untreated case of PTSD. Both you and Sherlock retreated into your emotional distance as a coping and defence mechanism, didn't you? And they did nothing to help you, neither emotionally nor medically.”

Mycroft considered that for a while, then nodded reluctantly. “Yes, Sherlock certainly changed significantly after he lost his best friend. He was a very vivacious, outgoing and affectionate child before; you're right to say that he retreated into himself afterwards. I'm uncertain about myself, though. It seemed like a logical development to me at the time.”

Greg nodded. “Because you were forced to carry that terrible secret all by yourself. You couldn't trust even your own parents, and that was their fault and not yours. They didn't only fail to give you the most basic care after those traumatising events, they effectively isolated you and ended your childhood far too early. If anyone deserves to be yelled at, it's your useless, self-absorbed parents. In fact, let me talk to them, and I'll be happy to tell them exactly what I think of their behaviour, their moral standards and their integrity, or the lack thereof. In bloody fucking detail!”

The sound that escaped Mycroft was a painful combination of a laugh and a sob. “Dear one,” he said, his smooth tenor cracking. “Dear Gregory, dear heart, no-one has ever... no-one has ever been so completely, unconditionally on my side in my entire life. And against all reason, you continue to be.”

“Always, my love,” Greg said and kissed his cheek again lovingly. “Always. I promise.”

Mycroft turned around, straddling his slightly shorter lover, and their eyes held for a long, intense moment. Then they both leaned forward at the same time. Their kiss was incredibly tender at fist and then became increasingly passionate. Finally, Mycroft tore himself away and buried his head in Greg's neck and shoulder. Under his hands, Greg could feel his love's shoulders begin to shake again, and then he was crying in great, heaving, ugly, painful sobs in a way he had not cried since his early childhood.

Greg would have taken on the world to fight Mycroft's pain, but there was no tangible dragon to slay, only horrid memories and anguish both recent and accumulated over decades. There was nothing to do for Greg but to hold him and caress his hair, murmuring loving reassurances to him while his heart broke all over again for the man he loved.

Next to the tub, the food had grown cold and the wine warm. Neither of them noticed for a long
time, and then, neither of them cared. When Mycroft had cried himself out, he rested against Greg, silently grateful for his undemanding, loving caresses.

Finally, their stomachs decided that they had been neglected for far too long, and Greg plated them some food. The lamb casserole tasted almost as good as if it were hot, and the wine was a red one and only supposed to be two degrees below room temperature, anyway. Usually, the latter point would have made a difference for either man, but both of them were too worn out to care. Mycroft had never eaten anything in the bathtub before, and so they decided to treat it like a picnic of sorts, with the added bonus that the wetness was planned and there were no ants.

Their conversation turned idle, and when Mycroft laughed for the first time that evening, shaky but genuine, Greg considered it a personal triumph.

Finally full and extremely exhausted, they went to bed, their lovely old new bed, together.

The nightmares were back at full strength, but the two men were there for each other.
Hi, everyone! I'm sorry for not updating earlier. I had a crazy week. But everything is better now, and I have a new computer (the second one, actually, because the first one turned out to have a hardware defect) and I can post again! Sorry for the delay. And without further ado...

33.

“Gregory,” Mycroft hesitantly said the next morning, then paused. “You want to know what exactly happened at Sherrinford.”

“Yes,” the older man admitted. “But this is about you, my love. If you aren't ready to talk about it yet, please don't feel obliged on my account.”

His perceptive genius, snuggled into his side, softly replied, “But it's bothering you. You keep thinking about it.”

Greg sighed. “A part of me doesn't want to know, but I also want to understand what happened to you, love, and if I don't, I'll always wonder. I'm not an unimaginative man, and the snippets I've seen and heard make for a truly terrifying picture. They might even be worse than the truth. But I'll keep for a while. It'll be all right, love. I can always remember that you're here with me now, that you survived it and that you're going to be fine.”

For a moment, he buried his face into the crook of Mycroft's head and made himself notice the living warmth, the hint of the shower gel mixed with expensive cologne and underneath it all Mycroft's wonderful, beloved scent.

“I may have a solution,” his partner hesitantly suggested, “but it might be worse than waiting.”

“What is it?”

“Sherrinford is entirely under CCTV observation, both cameras and audio; she never had the devices disabled. Some occurrences, she has even recorded specifically with additional cameras. You have the clearance to see the footage – if you wish.”

Greg exhaled slowly. “Yeah. I'll... I'll think about it.”

“Do that, my dear,” Mycroft said and lifted his head for a kiss on the cheek.

He received several kisses instead, in increasingly interesting locations. For a while, they got lost in each other and forgot their worries.

Later that day, Greg did accept the Sherrinford footage on a USB drive. Anthea provided him with a
cohesive whole of all the relevant parts, and he made himself watch it all, every painful, horrifying moment of it.

Afterwards, he went to the library, where Mycroft was curled up with a book, a merry fire warming the room, and had read the same page multiple times without taking in a single word.

With one look at Greg, he put his book aside, rose and went to embrace the older man in a hug more fierce than gentle and without a care for his his remaining bruises. Greg was shaking, and for once the one more in need of comfort. They silently shared the horror without a word being spoken, then assured each other that it was over, that they were both safe and healthy and together. Their lips met, and as they took in the beloved taste and scent and pure feeling of the one they loved, a warm sense of sheer aliveness spread through them both, thawing the rest of the icy fear and making it melt away like so much dirty snow in spring.

“That was a dangerous game you and Sherlock played in the end,” Greg finally said, his voice scratchy. They were seated on the chesterfield again, arms around each other and as close together as it was physically possible.

Unexpectedly, Mycroft smiled. “You noticed.”

“Not immediately,” Greg admitted, “but soon, yes, and thank Christ that I did. It would have been so much worse to watch otherwise, even though I knew that in the end you'd all come out of it alive.”

“Still, you noticed,” Mycroft repeated and kissed him on the forehead. “You know me better than anyone else.”

“Sherlock understood,” Greg drily pointed out, a small smile returning to his still rather pale and shaken face. “And it's a good thing, or it wouldn't have worked.”

“He was serious in the very end,” Mycroft said, his own smily dying. “That was no bluff, he would have really shot himself.”

“Because he loves you, you silly sod,” Greg simply said. “He has a strange way of showing it, but he does, you know.”

Mycroft sighed, relaxing against him. “Yes. Yes, I suppose he does, doesn’t he?”

“How could he not?” Greg asked and kissed Mycroft's cheek. “You're very lovable.”

“T?” the taller man sighed. “I've been called many things, my dear, but lovable was never among them.”

“Never?” Greg asked in a very serious tone.

“Never,” Mycroft confirmed.

The slight sadness, but even more than that, the acceptance in his voice nearly broke Greg's heart.

“Well,” he calmly, firmly replied, “then they were all very blind, weren't they?”

Inside, he was imagining beating an unknown, faceless Siger Holmes to a pulp and pushing an equally generic Violet Holmes down a flight of very long, very hard stairs.

“Perhaps,” Mycroft said after a pause, sounding insecure, “I need to be with you in order to be...
lovable."

“No, you always are,” the older man firmly contradicted, then added in a lighter tone, “You probably don't allow many people to see it, though. It's hard to want to cuddle someone who hides in a steel vault inside a concrete bunker behind spirals of NATO wire, an outer wall several feet thick, land mines, machine guns and armed drones.”

But you didn't have those defences yet during your childhood, did you? Greg thought.

Mycroft chose not to comment directly, both on the spoken and the unspoken part. He simply shook his head with a sad smile.

“But those highly guarded treasures are often the most valuable ones,” Greg continued and kissed him softly on the lips. “Thank you so much for giving me the necessary security clearance, my love.”

Mycroft chuckled. “Well, in that case, I suppose the decision concerning your vetting was the correct one.”

“Hmm,” Greg agreed. He couldn't say more than that, because they were kissing again, small, soft, adoring kisses first and then hungry, open-mouthed ones that involved sucking and nipping and a lively duel of tongues with two winners.

They were both still alive, bruised but not broken, and their physical connection served well to ground them on many different levels.

All in all, the day after Sherrinford was a strange one; it almost went by in a haze. They spoke sometimes, but usually they simply sought each other's proximity, silently holding or just leaning against each other, often drifting off to sleep. Mrs Chowdhury watched over her two men, kept them supplied with tea and food and was generally as unobtrusive as possible. She hadn't asked, but it was clear that the day before had shaken them both to their cores. At first she'd counted herself lucky that her two boys had returned uninjured from whatever dangers they had faced, but now she realised that their wounds simply weren't visible at first glance, and wished they had come home with an arm or a leg in a cast instead. Bones would heal within six to eight weeks; what she read in their faces would take much longer to set to rights again.

She sighed as she unpacked the fresh butternut squash and the larger pumpkin she had bought at the farmer's market. This was clearly the time for comfort food. All Hallow's Eve was nearly there, too, and she wondered whether her employers honoured the trappings of the old Celtic festival that not even the Christian church had managed to usurp entirely. As a Hindu, she didn't really care, especially since the most prominent festivities in Britain were much more socially and commercially oriented than religiously. It was one of the things that Mr Lestrade had asked about in the beginning, and it was just like his usual considerate self to make certain that she wasn't offended about being involved in their celebrations. He had also made certain that the holidays she observed herself were reserved on the calendar as days off. He'd even shown an interest in her religious practices and gifted her with little bags of different-coloured powders for Diwali this year, the Festival of Lights. He was such a kind man, and so, although in a less obvious way, was Mr Holmes. It would be a small thing for her to carve a grinning pumpkin with a silly face to make them smile. At the root of this ancient holiday was the gratitude for a bountiful harvest that would sustain them through the coming winter, and giving thanks and respect to a divine being wasn't something that she objected to on any level.
“I’m not a man of physical courage,” Mycroft said to Greg that evening, repeating what he had uttered what now seemed like ages and ages ago, before he had left for Sherrinford.

Greg kissed him gently and repeated the essence what he had replied to a similar statement before. “No, you’re much more intelligent and braver than that.”

The taller man didn't look quite convinced, but he did lean in for another, more passionate, almost desperate kiss, and Greg was more than happy to obligé. There still was an overwhelming urge to prove to themselves and each other that they were both still alive and together, but most of all, there was love.

“I could never again be happy without you,” Greg murmured breathlessly. He'd said it before, but it was still true and would be until the end of his life. “Content, maybe, at the most. You are my happiness, Mycroft Holmes, and I love you.”

“And I you,” Mycroft murmured back, just as breathlessly, just as honestly. “You said, yesterday...”

“Yes?” Greg asked as he leaned against the man he loved. That had been a horrifyingly intense day followed by a weighty discussion, and he wasn't quite certain he even knew what exact words his love was referring to. He'd been so wrung out that he wasn't even certain that he remembered everything.

“Always,” Mycroft repeated, almost shyly.

A radiant smile spread on Greg's face. Oh yes, that he remembered, of course. “Yes. Always. I meant it, you know, my love. Always.”

“Always,” the taller man repeated, a slow smile appearing on his lips as well, his self-consciousness and slight worry receding as hope bloomed and his voice grew firm. “Yes.”

“I've loved you for so long,” Greg seriously went on, but his eyes glowing with happiness. “It took me an embarrassing amount of time to admit it to myself, and then it took me even longer to believe that a man as brilliant and wonderful and gorgeous as you could possibly love me back. But here we are. This is it for me, Mycroft, through good times and bad. No matter what happens, I will never love anyone but you.”

“I feel the same,” his love replied and tilted his head so his forehead and nose could rest against Greg's. “I've never expected this, never dared hope for it, but yes, here we are, and indeed, never will I love anyone the way I love you.” Then he took a deep breath and admitted, “This is frightening.”

“Yes,” Greg agreed, his eyes shining, “very. But it's also incredibly beautiful.”

“It is,” Mycroft concurred, still tightening his hold around the more muscular man even as a slow, happy smile spread out across his face and lit up his blue eyes like a summer sky.

Greg held him back just as tightly. “I don't want to rush you,” the silver-haired man said, hope in his eyes, “but would you perhaps consider... when you feel ready... eventually... Mycroft, would you possibly consider marrying me?”

“Yes,” was the immediate, joyful reply. “Yes, my Gregory, my love. I would be honoured to, and indeed see no reason to wait.”

“Good,” Greg murmured, relieved, happy, overjoyed. “Good.”

He quickly rose on his toes, just the little bit that was needed to bring their lips together, and touched
Mycroft's with a soft kiss full of promise and love.

“Christ, I don't even have a ring for you,” he gasped with a small laugh.

Mycroft smiled at him. “And yet it couldn't have been more perfect.”

The next kiss was initiated by him, and it wasn't even half as chaste. They exchanged a smouldering look and hurried up the stairs as quickly as they could without breaking into an outright run, holding hands, laughing breathlessly and feeling incredibly young and carefree again.

Then it was all lips and tongues and hands and flying clothes and absolute abandon.

They still had to take Mycroft's injured left shoulder, ribs and wrist into account, because severe sprains and deep bruises don't heal in only two weeks, or even four for that matter. However, they had become quite adept at compensating by trying out several different positions, more spontaneously than systematically, though. For the sake of science, they would have to work on that. Eventually. And once Mycroft was completely healed, that list would be expanded significantly. They had both grown very fond of updating their lists, after a sufficient refractory period, of course. Not that they were thinking about lists right now, or really about anything at all.

“I want to see you,” Mycroft murmured, his smooth tenor smokey, almost purring again. The voice alone was irresistible to Greg.

“Christ, yes,” he murmured back, his own voice husky. “Oh Mycroft.”

They had made it to the bed, and the older man lowered himself as smoothly as he could and spread his limbs out invitingly. Dimly, he wished he had even half of Mycroft's grace, but his partner clearly didn't find anything lacking, as he was eyeing him like a particularly delicious meal. Mycroft himself looked like a large jungle cat in that moment, sleek, beautiful, predatory and just a little dangerous, and there was no doubt that were his wrist and shoulder up to the challenge, he would have quite literally pounced with a growl. Instead he moved more slowly, deliberately, still all feline grace, and never took his intense blue eyes away from Greg's wide ones. Those usually dark brown irises were almost black now and virtually indistinguishable from his pupils, already incredibly aroused, almost lost, and Mycroft realised that if he wished, Gregory would be entirely at his mercy. Power was a fluid thing between them that passed back and forth playfully, easily, and sometimes it pleased him to be more passive and pampered, to be lovingly worshipped or passionately ravished; at other times, they were equally active in a harmonious give and take, or the roles were reversed. This night, he wanted to be possessing and fierce, wanted to make his partner lose all thought and reason and every single word in his head except for Mycroft's name and maybe a few monosyllabic pleas like “yes” and “more”. Somehow, Greg read this intent in his eyes, in his expression, and welcomed it unreservedly. In fact, seeing his usually so poised and self-controlled fiancé so unrestrained and passionate, only for him, made his knees go weak, and he was rather glad he was already lying down. And Mycroft made good on his silent promise to its fullest extent.
“Good morning, my dear fiancé,” Mycroft murmured as Greg slowly blinked awake.

Waking to that lovely honeyed tenor, still husky from sleep, was a wonderful thing, as were those elegant long limbs wrapped around him, and those wonderful, beautiful words. The taller man was resting on his right side, as he always did after the explosion, and was snuggled up to Greg's side, who was lying on his back. The silver-haired man had never been happier to wake up than now that they were sharing a bed. This morning, however, was special.

“Fiancé,” he happily murmured back as he reached out and cupped Mycroft's stubbly cheek with utter care. The upturned left side of his face was hardly bruised any more, nothing that couldn't easily be concealed by day with only a bit of light foundation, but in the morning light, a slight shadow of greenish yellow was still visible around his cheekbone and jaw. Since the explosion, it had reminded Greg how close he had come to losing the man he loved, and now, after Sherrinford, he was even more aware of it. Still, those lovely blue eyes were full of a very quiet, powerful deep joy that was nothing if not contagious.

They had beaten the odds; in spite of it all, they were still there and together, and they would be until the end of their lives, perhaps even beyond. Greg wasn't a particularly religious man, but the incredible love he felt for the beautiful man next to him seemed too deep, too meaningful and too great by far to be restrained to one human lifetime. And that wonderful, intelligent, passionate, loving man had decided that he wanted to spend the rest of this life with Greg by his side. It was almost overwhelming, and there were no words to express what he felt. His heart expanded almost painfully in his chest.

“Always,” he whispered, his own voice rough and deep.

“Always,” Mycroft agreed with a smile.

They bridged the minute distance between their lips, both of them leaning forward at the same time, finding each other, joining with each other.

Greg shifted so that he was on his side as well, and groaned as his body protested, reminding him quite firmly of the wild ride that had been last night.

“Have I worn you out?” Mycroft asked, half concerned and half endearingly smug.

Greg chuckled. “I'm not twenty any more,” he said, “but I'm not exactly worn out, either.”

In order to prove his point, he moved his hips slightly forward, and they both groaned as their morning glories came in contact with each other, and oh, that was lovely.

Mycroft's slender but surprisingly strong hand found its way to Greg's shapely, muscular behind and pulled him closer quite firmly, and as they slotted together as perfectly as two matching pieces of a puzzle, the previously enticing, tingling touch of their erections flared up into a full conflagration.

“My turn,” Greg announced with a deep, husky tone in his voice, and if Mycroft's ribs had been fully healed, he would have flipped his partner on his back with ease. Instead, it was more of a gentle
lowering with his fiancé's eager participation.

“Dear God, yes,” Mycroft purred as he pulled him down for a deep kiss and buried his long fingers in that wealth of thick, soft silver hair. Greg complied easily but was still careful to support his own body weight on his arms, well away from that lovely long torso underneath him with all that soft, creamy skin that right now still showed far too many bruises in all colours of the rainbow.

It was a good thing that they both didn't have to go to work, because neither of them intended to get up at their usual hour.

“My parents are insisting on a meeting with me,” Mycroft said during their belated breakfast.

Greg bit his lip, then simply nodded. He had already told Mycroft what he thought of his parents and their behaviour to their children in general and their oldest son specifically; a reiteration was neither necessary nor what the other man needed.

The smile he earned for his restraint was grateful, fond and sad at the same time.

“Would you like me to come as your backup?” Greg asked, keeping his tone light, almost whimsical. “To keep things civil?”

“Only yesterday, you were thinking about punching my father in the face repeatedly and pushing my mother down the stairs,” Mycroft replied with a small smile that didn't entirely reach his eyes.

“I'm not even going to ask how you know that,” Greg replied with a small sigh as he reached over and took that long, slender, perfectly manicured hand in his broader, tanner one in unspoken support. “My gorgeous genius.”

“You manage to look quite bloodthirsty at times, my dear,” Mycroft replied, his smile still small but more real this time, “although, of course, you would never physically hurt a person who was not an immediate threat. Still, I must admit, seeing you so angry entirely on my behalf makes me feel...” He paused with a thoughtful little frown. “I can't actually say precisely how it makes me feel. It was deeper and more complex than mere comfort. It's your support, along with a great loyalty which I have never experienced before you became such an essential part of my life. It makes me feel humbled and grateful and...”

Clearly, the man was struggling to express his emotions. That he was willing to do so just to give Greg the most honest answer that he could made the older man feel very humble as well, and also extremely happy.

“Loved?” Greg asked with a soft smile.

“Yes, safe and loved. You are my heart and my shield, Gregory,” was the expression that Mycroft finally settled on. “I've said so before I went to Baker Street that morning, and I still believe it. To know beyond doubt of your unconditional support lends me strength where my own might be failing. Thank you.”

Greg swallowed. “You do the same for me,” he finally replied when he could trust his voice again. “Just to know that you are with me, either in reality or just in spirit, in my heart, gives me strength, too. You are my light, Mycroft, and I love you.”

“And I you,” the taller, auburn-haired man replied with a gentle smile.
For a moment, they looked at each other, silent and open, and then as one went back to their breakfast.

“You're going to meet your parents today, aren't you?” Greg reluctantly asked after a while.

Mycroft nodded. “It's better to get this out of the way so I can stop worrying about it. I'll meet them at the Diogenes at half past ten. What do you think about a lunch date at one, my dear?”

“I'm all for it, love,” Greg agreed with a fierce smile. “Anything that will help you get rid of them, the earlier the better.”

“Have you ever been to Ariana?” Mycroft asked. “It's a lovely Iranian and Afghan place, a bit of a hidden gem. It's too cold to sit outside at this time of the year, but the food is exquisite and the ambience quite charming and not very formal.”

“Sounds great,” Greg agreed, very pleased to give his poor love something to look forward to during that dreary hour or two with the parents from hell. “I haven't eaten Iranian or Afghan food in ages. Do they make pilouw?”

“An excellent one, yes,” Mycroft assured him, looking a bit cheered up already. “Allow me to make reservations.”

Greg smiled at the man he loved – his fiancé! – as he made the call on his phone, speaking what seemed to be fluent and probably accent-free Persian. He wasn't surprised at all when Mycroft got a table even at such short notice, and probably the best one in the house.

Half an hour later they parted reluctantly with a gentle, chaste, loving kiss. Mycroft was impeccably dressed in an charcoal grey pin-stripe three-piece suit with a burgundy silk tie. It showed a bit of a French influence, not enough to risk the English look of careful understatement but sufficiently so to make him look sleek and slightly dangerous. It was a power suit, an armour that he wore for especially difficult negotiations, and Greg's heart hurt at the rigid way he held his shoulders and back.

Firmly he said, “Never again tell me that you aren't a brave man, my love.”

Mycroft gave him a pale smile in return, looking for all the world as if he were going to his own execution. “I love you as well,” he softly replied.

“Three hours, and we'll behaving lunch together in that lovely, exotic place,” Greg firmly said and rose on his toes to kiss the taller man on his forehead. “Remember that.”

“Thank you, my dear, I shall,” he replied, returning the small kiss with gratitude and love.

Then a black saloon car drew up, ready to take Mycroft to the Diogenes Club, and Greg watched him drive off, his own back stiff and shoulders tense, wishing there were something, anything at all he could do to make things easier for his fiancé.

The he sighed and quickly walked towards Kensington High Street. He had to be back in a bit more than two hours for Mycroft's chauffeur, Parker, to pick him up, and there were several shops he wanted to visit before that. It was better than pondering what his poor love was going through right now with those worse than useless parents.
It was no surprise when he found what he was looking for not in Kensington but in a small Notting Hill boutique. The ring was unobtrusive at first glance and appeared to be solid gold. At a closer look, there was a fine gold and rose gold mokume-gane inlay at the front, like ripples on a water surface, subtle and elegant like Mycroft himself. There was another gold ring with a mokume-gane inlay in fine white gold with the same delicate pattern, slightly less subtle due to the greater contrast between the two metal colours but still superbly elegant. He could easily imagine those two rings on their hands, and hoped that Mycroft would agree. On a whim, he bought them both and was given a card of the jeweller's who had created the rings, because they would have to be resized and inscribed if Mycroft liked them. Happy with his purchase, Greg went back to the house just in time for an unmarked black town car to pick him up.

Mycroft, when he got into the car with Greg at the Diogenes Club, looked – diminished, was the only word he could think of, not like the powerful, debonair man he usually was, but a lost young boy, belittled and unloved, the way he constantly must have felt during his childhood.

“And there is that bloodthirsty look in your eyes again,” he said, trying and failing utterly to joke.

Without a word, Greg leaned forward in his car seat, entirely disregarding Parker, the chauffeur, and pulled the taller man into his arms.

“I love you, Mycroft,” he said in a low and utterly fierce tone. “I love you with all my heart. You are wonderful inside and out, and they don't deserve you.”

“They are of the opinion that she's still their daughter and that is all that matters,” his fiancé murmured, his head buried in Greg’s solid shoulder.

The man who held him so tenderly simply snorted.

“And... Mummy is convinced that Sherlock was always the grown-up, compared to me,” he added in that same soft, slightly tremulous voice.

Greg couldn't help himself, he started laughing. “Sherlock? The former drug addict, the eternally selfish, petulant child prone to sulks and tantrums of epic proportions? That Sherlock?”

Mycroft's shoulders started shaking, and it was a painful combination of dry sobs and almost hysterical laughter. Greg simply held him silently, lovingly.

“She called me an idiot boy,” he went on after the shaking had stopped. “Limited. Said that I should have done better.”

“None of those things are true,” Greg replied with utter conviction.

“I know,” Mycroft sighed, still firmly wrapped in those strong, gentle arms. “I know, my dear. Only, when she looks at me like that, with all that disappointment and resentment, I feel like a little boy again, I can't help myself.”

“I know,” Greg replied as he gently stroked the taller man's back. “I understand. Those childhood patterns are deeply ingrained in the psyche.” He badly wanted to add a nasty comment about Mycroft's self-absorbed, cruel mother, but he knew it wouldn't help his love to feel better, which was the only thing that mattered right now.

“They want to visit Eurus at Sherrinford. I told them that she's beyond anyone's reach now, and that if she ever returned to a more conscious state, she'd kill again if given half an opportunity. They don't
care,” Mycroft bitterly went on.

For a moment, Greg imagined allowing Eurus to go home with her parents and let her do to them what she would; it certainly couldn't be any worse than they deserved. However, she'd be a pain to catch and contain again afterwards, and also, it wouldn't make Mycroft any happier, so there was really very little point in that.

“ Irrational,” Greg declared instead, manfully resisting the temptation to use stronger words. “ Utterly blind and resistant to facts.”

“I couldn't make them see reason,” the taller man murmured, his face still safely hidden where Greg's shoulder met his neck.

“Some people live in their own little world, love, and that's no-one's fault but their own. Your parents are old enough to know better. Leave them to their delusions, my love. Anything else would be tilting windmills,” his fiancé gently but firmly replied.

“I know,” Mycroft sighed. “It just doesn't seem to help very much right now.”

Greg shifted slightly to kiss those perfectly coiffed auburn strands. “Sometimes caring really isn't much of an advantage,” he said with a wry smile. “But you have me to help you through that. They aren't worth your consideration or your respect, but the fact that you give it anyway makes you very much human. And I love you exactly the way you are.”

“Thank you, Gregory,” Mycroft murmured. Then he lifted his head. “Sherlock tried to defend me, a bit half-heartedly, but he did make an attempt.”

Greg smiled at him and tenderly touched his nose to Mycroft's longer one. “See?” he asked. “It's not all bleak. Besides, Sherlock seems to be maturing a bit; perhaps we can finally upgrade him from a toddler to a young schoolboy.”

This actually made Mycroft chuckle, and most of the strain left his shoulders. Instead, they fell into a slight, barely noticeable slump that for the usually so controlled man spoke of a monumental exhaustion.

“Still up to eating out, love, or would you rather return home and have a quiet lunch in?” Greg asked. He didn't mind either way, and made that clear in the look that they exchanged.

His fiancé gave him a smile, still sightly strained but leagues better than only five minutes ago. “I'd like to eat at the restaurant with you, if you don't mind, my dear. I've been sorely looking forward to it for well over two hours now.”

Greg's smile, still gentle, now held a glimmering of pride in him. “So have I,” he simply said. “After all, we have something to celebrate, don't we?”

Mycroft laughed softly and more genuinely than since he had got into the car. “Yes, my heart, we certainly do.”

And with that, he left the thought of his parents behind him for the time being and concentrated on his future with Gregory, that wonderful man who loved him both fiercely and tenderly.
Once at the restaurant, Greg was surprised; Mycroft and he hadn’t really gone out as a couple before. They had dined together at cafés or restaurants as associates and later as friends, but after Greg had moved in at Phillimore Place, they had preferred to eat at home. Since Mrs Chowdhury’s dinners were always delicious and the atmosphere at home was cosy and relaxed, he didn’t mind in the least; their evenings, spent reading, talking or with even more pleasurable pursuits, were utterly perfect. Still, his fiancé was a highly sophisticated man with a taste for excellent food and wine but also an undeniable elegance. When Mycroft had called the restaurant “a hidden gem” and “not very formal”, Greg had still expected more formality than he was currently encountering, which was why he was wearing creased woollen trousers instead of jeans and one of his better jumpers, soft navy cashmere, with a formal, high-quality button-up shirt underneath. However, as Mycroft had promised, the ambience was lovely, and judging from the delicious smells wafting over from the kitchen and the other tables, the food would be as excellent as promised. Somehow, Greg thought with a happy smile, it made sense. Due to the representative duties that were part and parcel of his work, Mycroft was a master at setting moods, using his own clothes and his way of moving, speaking or gesticulating for that purpose, down to the tiniest detail. Some people took this precision for proof that he was vain, fixated entirely on appearances, but those were all really just a means to an end to the powerful man, perfectly crafted and finely honed tools. With Greg, there was no image he had to project, no impression of himself to create, manipulate or uphold; he could be what few people ever had had the honour of seeing, Mycroft Holmes at his most unguarded. He smiled and laughed, relaxed and enjoyed himself, and that made Greg’s heart fill to the brim with happiness.

“What are you thinking about, Gregory?” his beloved asked with an answering smile.


After the main course, and yes, the Afghan pilouw had been excellent, Greg took the two small jeweller's boxes out of his pocket and looked at Mycroft with a slightly unsure expression.

The younger man lifted his perfect eyebrows in a silent question, but his eyes were kind, even a bit expectant.

Without another word, Greg opened the two little lids. “I don't know if you like them,” he began, hesitantly.

“Oh,” Mycroft softly said as he looked down on the two rings, similar but different, and ran a slender, manicured finger over the subtle, intricate rose gold mokume-gane inlay that reminded him of the beautiful grain of exquisitely polished wood.

“Is this how you see me?” His blue eyes were blazing with powerful emotions as he looked up into Greg’s dark brown ones. “And this, matching but not quite the same, white gold to signify you?”

Greg nodded nervously. “I saw the rings today, and I thought, well, their shape is conventional, no
overly elaborate extras to get snagged or stuck somewhere, and still, this pattern, I mean, it's fine and unobtrusive, sort of, but also warm and unique. No two mokume-gane pieces ever turn out quite the same. Just like two people aren't the same but can still fit together exceptionally well, in spite of or perhaps because of their differences.”

He realised that he was rambling and stopped.

“They're utterly, wonderfully perfect,” the auburn-haired man replied with a pleased little smile. “I've never seen anything quite like these before.”

Greg's tense shoulders relaxed, and he returned the smile. “The rings will still have to be fitted and engraved, of course. I have the jeweller's business card, but I thought I'd ask if you like them first.”

“I do, unreservedly,” Mycroft firmly replied. “I would love for those to be our wedding rings.”

The older man felt incredibly relieved. Mycroft wasn't just humouring him, he clearly liked the rings. “I was actually thinking about finding an engagement ring for you,” he said, “or maybe an engagement fob for your watch chain, but then I saw these.”

“And you knew,” his auburn-haired fiancé softly added.

“I hoped,” Greg corrected him with a small, slightly lopsided smile. “This is something that has to suit both of us, and if there’s one thing that my botched first marriage has taught me, it's that honest communication is extremely important.”

“I don’t believe that honesty was lacking on your part, my dear,” was the thoughtful reply, “and neither was your willingness to take your spouse's wishes into consideration.”

“Thank you, my love,” the silver-haired man said, “but be glad that you didn't meet me when I was still an idiot of a young man. The Janet in my head, character, wishes, dreams and all, was quite a bit different from the real woman, and it took me a long time to take off those rose-tinted glasses.”

Mycroft frowned slightly. “She was dishonest with you,” he firmly pronounced. “She wanted you to see her in a certain light, and deceived you to that end.”

“To a certain degree,” his lover admitted. “But I also deceived myself. I'm not going to do you that sort of injustice, Mycroft. I want you, the real, entire person, strengths and weaknesses and all, and not a pale imitation.”

The taller man swallowed hard. Their table was discreetly placed, but they were still out in public, and showing the full range of his emotions in such a place simply wasn't acceptable to him. Still, he was grateful for Greg's hand on his and its steadying influence.

“Thank you,” he said in a low, slightly shaking voice. “You've seen me at my lowest, my dear, and at my coldest, and at my most pretentious and condescending. You haven't seen the entirety of my temper yet, though, because I only very rarely let it get away from me. When it does, I say terribly cruel, hurtful things... I will do my best not to unleash it on you, my dear. Should that happen, though, I can only pray for your perseverance and ultimately your forgiveness. I'm very perceptive, and although my mind works differently than Sherlock's, I have... I have the accursed ability to pick from my victim's subconscious mind precisely their greatest fears, their greatest insecurities, and present them as a twisted version of the truth. Should that ever happen to you, my love, do remember, please do remember that there is no truth about that except in your own mind, your own fears, insecurities and perceived but probably untrue or greatly exaggerated shortcomings.”

The shorter, stockier hand on his trembled slightly. “I'm not going to lie,” Greg softly said. “That
Mycroft lowered his head. “That is the worst of me,” he admitted.

In that moment, Greg realised with a pang that his fiancé actually expected him to abandon him, and he sighed and took that long-fingered hand between both of his. “Mycroft,” he firmly said. “Mycroft, love, look at me.”

Those blue eyes, when they reluctantly met his, were full of worry.

“None of that now,” the older man continued in the same gentle but firm tone. “I have my family’s temper myself, although I’ve managed to get a better grip on it over the years. What you just described is what everyone does when anger really takes over – do one’s best to tear the other person to shreds in whichever way possible, true or not. You’re just better at it, love, but essentially it’s the same. Just as you can’t honestly promise you that you’ll never hurt me, neither can I promise you the same. But I can promise that I love you, and that I will try not to let it happen, and if it ever does, I’ll do my utmost to make it right again, if you’ll only give me the chance to do so. And all the while, I’ll never stop loving you even for a second. You have my word.”

A slender, manicured hand came to rest next to his, and they now both held each other’s hands across the table. The relief in Mycroft’s eyes was almost painfully great. “And you have mine,” he solemnly replied.

Greg smiled at him. “Good,” he simply but truthfully said.

The slightly younger man smiled back, then lifted his doogh, a delicious yoghurt drink, in a toast like he would a fine glass of wine. “To honesty and forgiveness, then,” he said, “and no pretences.”

Greg lifted his own glass. “To honesty and forgiveness,” he echoed, “and no pretences.” Then he grinned. “We’re really going to get married. I’m so happy, my love.”

“And I, Gregory, dear,” Mycroft quietly replied.

They both looked at the lovely rings on the table between them, then looked up again and smiled at each other. They were sitting among casually dressed people, eating excellent food in a nice but very affordable restaurant that didn’t serve wine because its menu was entirely halal. Nobody who pretended to know Mycroft Holmes would have expected to find him in such an environment, and even less would they have expected to see him relaxed and smiling a genuine, pleased, happy smile.

It was perfect.

“Tell me about the jeweller,” the elegantly dressed man asked.

Greg took the business card out of his pocket and handed it over to his love. “It's a young woman,” he explained, “who has obtained a mastery as a goldsmith in three different countries, including Japan, but she doesn't have her own shop yet. She sells to boutiques and accepts commissions instead. I found those rings in a nice little place in Notting Hill. I'd been to Kensington High Street first, but...” He shrugged eloquently.

Mycroft smiled. “You, my dear, are still a rebel at heart.”

Greg grinned. “Ah, would you prefer black enamelled rings with little chrome-plated spikes, then?”

His partner chuckled. “That would be a sight. Yes, Mr Ambassador, I agree, it's quite an unusual piece. In fact, it's my wedding ring. My husband picked it out, you see, and I can't deny him
anything; he's exemplary between the sheets,” he said in an utterly dry, bland tone.

The silver-haired man laughed delightedly, his dark brown eyes dancing. “Exemplary, eh?”

“Positively divine,” Mycroft added with a small smile, his own eyes shining. “But perhaps my memory is overly fond?”

“Hmm,” Greg replied in a thoughtful tone. “I seem to recall the same of you, but we should make absolutely certain, just in case. Perhaps with a list.”

“Gregory, you devil.”

“Your devil, and I take that as a compliment.”

“How many lists do we have now, by the way?”

“I'm not exactly certain. Perhaps we should make a meta-list to keep track of them? Just to be thorough, you know.”

“And I do so enjoy it when you're thorough, my dear.”

“Hmm, likewise. And who's the tempter now, love?”

“You, my dear. Always you.”

“Always,” Greg echoed, and his teasing smile made way for a much softer one.

“That's done it,” Mycroft sighed, pretending to be put-upon, but his eyes now carried a decidedly mischievous spark. “We absolutely have to go home now.”

Greg grinned cheerfully. “Good, I'll get the bill and you'll get the car.”

“Bossy, Detective Chief Inspector.”

“Only efficient, Mr Minor Position in the British Government, and you adore efficiency.”

“And so I do,” Mycroft admitted, amused, as he took out his phone and called for Parker, his driver. It had been a lovely lunch, but he was somewhat eager to return home, and so, from the look in his eyes, was his fiancé.

Fortunately, Parker was an extremely discreet man who had been working for Mycroft for well over a decade. In the privacy his car with the black-tinted windows, he had seen the prim and proper, even upright man angry in a cold, terrifying way, injured and bleeding, slumped over with exhaustion and, on one memorable occasion during his brother's phase of heavy drug abuse, dispirited nearly to the point of tears. He had seen his superior busy on the phone with a frightening little smirk on his face, or calmly, deliberately reducing other persons in the car to quivering messes of fear. Serene quietness seemed to be the state closest to happiness that the so-called Iceman could ever achieve. It had only been during the last months that he had seen a genuine smile on that usually so controlled face. These days, he saw him holding hands with another person and looking at him openly in a loving way. The attractive silver-haired DCI looked just as besotted and almost ridiculously joyful. As always, the driver pretended not to notice, but inwardly, he was smiling. If there was hope for Mr Holmes, there was hope for everyone.
Chapter End Notes

In case you're interested in what mokume-gane is and looks like:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mokume-gane

There are a lot of pictures on the internet, of course, but you never know for how long they'll be there.

I often find entire rings in the mokume-gane technique too busy, so I think Mycroft's and Greg's rings will just have a small inlay on the front with an especially beautiful pattern. Of course, you're free to imagine them however you'd like. :)

A week after Sherrinford, both Mycroft and Greg went back to work. That was, Greg went back to work. Mycroft was on reduced duty while several psychological evaluations were taking place, one interview more gruelling than the other. The poor man looked like he had been flayed open alive every time every time he returned home in the evening, and still he was trying to bear it stoically. Frankly, it broke Greg's heart. After three evenings of picking up the pieces Greg decided he'd had enough and called Lady Smallwood the following morning from the Yard. Of course he didn't reach her directly; she was one of what Greg had privately started calling the Fantastic Four, the tiny cadre of exceptionally talented, dedicated, incorruptible and powerful individuals whose business it was to serve the United Kingdom and Queen Elizabeth II by running her government from behind the scenes. Who the other two were, Greg didn't know, and wasn't sure he even wanted to. There had been, once, a reference to a Sir Edwin, but that might or might not have been related. Anyway, he politely left a message with her PA and went back to his work, quietly fuming.

His team was glad to have him back, and although he was swamped in paperwork and meetings to bring himself back up to date, he enjoyed returning to work.

“What was that about the Christmas party the Super mentioned, anyway?” Michael Dimmock asked.

Greg flinched; there was a promise he'd had to make in order to be allowed to commandeer the two Met helicopters. “Yeah. Well. The higher-up muckety-mucks want a performance of some sort from our department at the Christmas party this year. I'm afraid we aren't going to get out of this.”

“Oh God,” Victoria Haversham groaned. “Isn't it enough that we have to suffer from those awful canned atrocities playing in the elevators every day? If I have to hear Justin Bieber one more time, you'd better lock me up preventively before I go on a killing spree.”

“Yeah, too much bloody artificial sweetness,” Sally Donovan agreed with a shudder. “Might need to go to the dentist after the Christmas season is over, have all those new cavities treated.”

The others groaned and nodded.

Paul Gregson, though, started grinning slyly. “Boss,” he said, his eyes gleaming. “Weren't you were in a punk band during uni?”

“Yes,” their DCI replied, a mischievous grin suddenly lightening his features. “I was terrible at vocals but not too shabby with the guitar. I'd have to practice a bit first, though, so I don't make a total arse out of myself. You, Paul?”

“Drums,” he said, grinning widely. “Sally?”

Her dark eyes glittered evilly. “Victoria, wanna do vocals with me, or can you actually play an instrument?”

“The piano,” she said, “and mostly classical with only a tiny bit of rock. Perhaps we can work it in, though. My singing voice isn't all that great. Michael?”
“Like the boss, but I've also tried my hand at the bass. Seems like we all need to polish up our skills and learn to play together,” he said with a wide grin. “And then we'll blow them all away. Merry Christmas!”

“Ho ho fucking ho” Greg replied, his eyes full of laughter. “You're the greatest team ever, do you know that?”

Sally pretended to wipe away tears, and Michael clutched his hand to his chest.

Paul laughed. “Let's fucking do this!”

The others cheered.

“Good meeting, Ma'am?” Sergeant Longfellow asked when the five of them emerged from the meeting room, grinning.

“One of the best,” DI Donovan replied with a grin that almost worried him a bit. His boss could really be scary sometimes, but she had nothing on the DCI.

To Greg’s surprise, he was called to the Chief Superintendent's office later that morning. Waiting for him were Superintendent Allan, Chief Superintendent Willoughby and Lady Smallwood herself. It was a surprise he didn't appreciate, especially not in front of his superiors who lacked the security clearance for the topic he needed to discuss.

Allan, seeing his DCI's less than pleased expression, hissed to him under his breath, “Behave, Lestrade. That's an order.”

Greg gave him a tiny, barely noticeable nod in acknowledgement and strode on to greet the highest-ranking person in the room with all the charm and grace that had been trained into him from early childhood on.

“Lady Smallwood,” he said with a perfectly polite, bland little smile as he shook her hand as smoothly and charmingly as he could, which was, even if he said so himself, quite a lot. “How pleasant to see you again. I trust I find you well?”

She eyed him sternly. “T tolerably. I'm sure Lady Blanche would be delighted to see that you have retained some manners after all, de Lestrade. I take it she is well?”

“She’s very well, milady, although I'm afraid she has given up on my manners at least three decades ago,” he replied with that same polite, charming, slightly contrived smile.

“Your mother was always a most reasonable woman, although one wouldn't necessarily be able to deduce that from looking at you. Grégoire, why are you disturbingly so polite?”

“I am under direct orders, Lady Smallwood,” he drily replied with a small lopsided smile that was generally considered to be disarming.

“Well, stop it, it's bloody disconcerting,” she snapped.

He blinked at her, pretending quite unconvincingly to be scandalised. “Allybeth! Language!”

“You,” she said, pointing at him. “Sit.”
He exchanged a glance with the Chief Super, whose office it was, after all, and received a small nod.

“As it pleases you, milady,” he drily said as he lowered himself into the third chair in front of his superior's desk. Those visitor's chairs were bloody instruments of torture, but at least Greg was used to them. He hoped, with something approaching viciousness, that the chair would be even harder on Allybeth's bony arse.

She gave him a quelling look, and Greg sighed. “Now that the pleasantries are exhausted, would you mind terribly enlightening me to the purpose of your charming visit?”

“What has you so wound up, Grégoire?” she replied, raising her elegant eyebrows.

“If you don't know that, Lady Smallwood, you're indeed one analyst short,” he replied, his tone suddenly cool.

She frowned. “So this is what your call was about. I should have realised.”

“I merely asked for a moment of your time concerning the consequences of that operation a week and a half ago. A simple call over a secure line would have been quite sufficient,” Greg calmly replied. “However, I must admit the fact that you chose the Yard as a meeting place does have me a bit worried.”

Instead of at home, he left unsaid but not unclear, where Mycroft would probably have been part of or at least very aware of their conversation.

“This request is not about you, then,” she stated.

“Of course not,” he replied, extremely calm, “at least not directly.”

The Super and the Chief Super exchanged a meaningful glance. That polite, almost decorous man with the cut-glass public-school speech and the formal yet circumspect way of expressing himself wasn't the Greg Lestrade they knew, but it did seem appropriate for a man who owned a house in Kensington and whose mother apparently was a titled lady, which made him gentry at the very least.

“The British government does owe you a favour, de Lestrade,” she said with a pinched expression.

“Well, Smallwood,” he replied, still infuriatingly calm, mirroring her mode of address, “if that's indeed the case, and if that's what it takes for you to allow me to speak about my legitimate concerns regarding a certain matter, I'm happy to cash it in. It needn't be during my work hours, however, nor at a time when it might be inconvenient for you. And please note that I'm officially simply Lestrade, and have been since the academy.”

She smirked at that. “Too fancy for you, Grégoire?”

He simply lifted his silver-grey eyebrows at her with an ease that could have matched Mycroft's.

“Oh my, but you are a veritable social chameleon! I should have recruited you for MI5 years ago,” she drily commented.

Greg gave a Gallic shrug. “This is the career that I chose, and I'm perfectly happy where I am,” he mildly replied. “Et ma chère, vous perdez votre talents diplomatiques. Mais tu étais toujours une petite fille très pétulante quand les choses ne se passaient pas comme tu le devais, n'est-ce pas? (And my dear, your diplomatic skills are slipping. But you always were quite a petulant little chit when things didn't go your way, weren't you?)” he added with a crooked little smile, not unkindly.
“Y tu es toujours une menace (And you are still a menace), petit (little) Grégoire,” she replied with a slight smile, her French as fluent as his. “Alors, est-ce à propos de ton petit ami? (Is this about your boyfriend, then?)”

“C'est à propos de mon fiancé (This is about my fiancé), madame,” he calmly replied.

She blinked, then nodded. “Je suis désolée (I'm sorry), Grégoire. I misspoke.”

“It isn't common knowledge yet,” he calmly replied. “You will, perhaps, now understand and forgive my concern. A few minutes of your time are all I would ask, Lady Smallwood, with all due respect.”

“Of course,” she replied, a little ruefully. “But drop that formality, it gives me the creeps. It makes me expect to return home and find chocolate sprinkles all over my clothes again, in my entire wardrobe.”

Greg laughed, a sudden, real, amused laugh. “Oi, that was Reggie! I wasn't even in Norfolk at the time, and I don't think I've ever even set foot in your rooms. I wouldn't have dared.”

“All too right you wouldn't have! But it still happened exactly one day after your letter,” she objected, her lips twitching.

“Piffle,” he declared piously. “Circumstantial evidence. Reggie and I wrote to each other all the time. Wouldn't have had to, either, if you lot had enrolled him at a decent school.”

“And not an inferior one like Harrow,” she said, dripping with sarcasm.

“Clearly not Harrow,” Greg replied with a superior sniff. “Charterhouse or nothing. Obviously.”

She shook her head with a smile. “You couldn't attend the same school, Grégoire, and you know exactly why. The infamous duo together, you would have been sent down in less than a year.”

“Lies, all lies,” he claimed, nose in the air. “I'll have you know, we would have been sent down in less than a semester.”

“You would have been, too,” she said, suddenly wistful.

Greg nodded, his smile slightly sad as well. It had been decades, honestly, but sometimes the abrupt and pointless loss of his best childhood friend still hurt.

Lady Smallwood sighed, then straightened her spine. “Gentlemen, please excuse our brief sojourn into the past. Chief Superintendent Willoughby, would you please be so kind to direct me to a room where I may enjoy a few minutes of private conversation with DCI de Lestrade?”

“Of course, Lady Smallwood,” Willoughby politely replied. “Lestrade, or should I say de Lestrade?”

“Lestrade is absolutely fine, sir,” Greg politely replied with his trained expressionless copper face, which would have been picture-perfect except for the annoyed gleam deep in his dark brown eyes.

“As you wish. The conference room three doors down is free, as far as I know.”

“Thank you, sir, and I'm sorry that this matter has encroached on my work time and yours. I assure you, that was never my intention.”

Willoughby sighed and made a shooing motion. “Yes, yes, and now off you trot.”

“Sir. Sir,” Greg politely acknowledged both of his superiors, then politely held the door open for the well-dressed, elegant woman who was following him after making her own perfunctory goodbyes.
“After you, milady.”

The door closed softly but very firmly behind them.

“Arthur, your French is better than mine. Do you have any idea what’s going on?” the Chief Super asked.

“They clearly know each other from childhood, through there seems to be little to no familiarity in the present,” the Superintendent carefully replied. “She called him a little menace, and he uses a contraction of her two first names. I didn’t catch it all, I’m afraid, but Lady Smallwood is under significant stress, and Lestrade is put out, apparently on behalf of his fiancé.”

“Ah,” the Chief Super slowly replied. “That would be the thing that isn’t common knowledge yet. Do you have any idea who this excitement might be all about?”

Allan gave his superior a cautious look. “If you’d keep in mind that our DCI’s security clearance exceeds both of ours, sir…”

“Yes, yes. Do go on, Arthur.”

“You have been informed of who he has recently moved in with?” the Super carefully asked.

“Oh. Ah.”

“And because of whom Lestrade nearly went off the rails when said person was caught in a suspicious explosion and ended up in intensive care? Whose bedside Lestrade has religiously visited every day while he was in hospital, sir?”

Willoughby nodded, looking a shade paler than before.

“The person who suddenly awoke from his coma on the day that MI5 unofficially borrowed our helicopters, and was released from The Princess Grace that very same day?”

“Bloody hell.”

“Indeed, sir. Under those circumstances, I’d say it doesn't do to speculate,” Allan firmly declared.

Apparently, two shadow titans of the United Kingdom were clashing, one of them currently weakened, and their easy-going, chronically underestimated DCI with the boyish smile was taking on the stronger titan all by himself in order to defend the one he had claimed as his. They both knew that in all likelihood he would get swatted like a fly, but matters like these were far above both of their pay grades. Besides, he had surprised them more than once lately, and there seemed to be tension, yet no outright hostility between the DCI and Lady Smallwood. Voicing his concerns, he had said. If he managed to limit himself to that and remain civil, there was quite a good chance they’d get him back more or less unharmed.

They both hoped for that outcome; Lestrade was their best DCI by leagues, not brilliant and lightning-quick like the mercurial younger Holmes, but thorough, determined, systematic and pragmatic. He was also so secure in himself that he never had to resort to pettiness or power plays to establish his authority, and he managed the difficult feat of a cooperative style of leadership, leading by example with deceptive ease. Also, he absolutely refused to be cowed or rushed, although that was sometimes frustrating to his superiors. Other DCIs might push their teams to solve and close cases more quickly and cut corners in the process, but one couldn’t argue with Lestrade’s
unsurpassed number of convictions in court. His DIs were picking up that unhurried but efficient precision, that desire to make cases as watertight as possible. One day, the man would leave a legacy as solid as he was himself, but until the day of his retirement, the Yard had need of him.

“I agree, Arthur. We'll best have been meeting about something else, then,” Willoughby decided.

Allan smiled mirthlessly. “Very well. I've brought the budget list that we still need to discuss, will that do?”

“Oh joy,” was the resigned reply. “Well, let's get it out of the way, then. After all, it seems we've already been debating the bloody thing for half an hour.”

The Superintendent grinned even as he took the dreaded number-filled sheets out of his case. At least his boss had a sense of humour.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! I've just come back from an Easter break with no internet access. I hope you haven't given up on me, and had a few nice days yourselves. On to the next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

37.

Lady Smallwood followed DCI Lestrade through the hallway with the detached, slightly stiff politeness between the barely acquainted. If she read the tension his shoulders correctly, she had been sorely mistaken to bring his superiors into this game, and he was still feeling vaguely insulted about the fact that she had. There was no sign of anger in his shoulders and gait but still something hard, unyielding, and she realised how badly she had miscalculated. She had expected him to want to cash in his favour in his own work hierarchy, cement or advance his own standing, but that clearly wasn't the case. He had all but scoffed at the idea of a favour, but was still willing accept it in order to use it on behalf of Mycroft Holmes. His fiancé.

She might have seen that coming after observing the two of them interact in their natural habitat, but she had clearly failed to take into account the depth and strength of a de Lestrade's attachment, the sheer stubbornness they approached life in general with, and even more so the matters of great personal importance. This could have been a valuable alliance, but she had misjudged, and now, things were going to become much more complicated. She had pushed him from a rational standpoint with a bias towards the interests of Mycroft Holmes into the role of a firm partisan, even more, into that of a relentlessly determined warrior. And Grégoire wasn't one of those silly knights in shining armour; his armour was dull and dented from countless battles and he himself a determined survivor who fought with every dirty trick he had accumulated during his long and bloody career.

He now swept by the empty conference room they had all but been assigned and led her into a small tea pantry instead, locking the door behind them with a firm click that she tried not to find intimidating. Then he filled the electric kettle, switched it on and kept the water in the sink running. He set out no mugs, either; this was clearly not about tea.

Clever. These background noises were almost impossible to filter out for anyone trying to listen in, from an ear to the door to an old-fashioned mechanical bug to complex modern observation techniques. Then he turned towards her, his strong jar firmly set, his dark eyes conveying a cold, cutting contempt.

A younger Greg would have exclaimed something along the lines of “What the bloody buggering fuck was that, Allybeth?”

The older one simply gave her a steady gaze that almost made her quail. Another detail about this rather tiny staff pantry was that it offered no seats, and he looked down on her petite form from his greater height without ever lowering himself to looming or crowding. However, Lady Smallwood was made of stern stuff; in her line of work, she had to be.
She lifted her hand in a way that indicated motion. “Commence,” she said in a clipped tone low enough to be barely heard over the rushing water and the beginning hiss of the kettle, taking back control over the situation with practised ease.

“You are submitting Mycroft to what amounts to an extensive and utterly pointless psychological torture on a daily basis. He's had enough of that already, he's had more than he can take, and I want you to stop it,” he bluntly said.

Well. There was something to be said about people who didn't beat around the bush; at the very least, it saved time.

She frowned. “Does he complain about his psychological evaluations?”

“Not with a single word,” Greg replied, his voice calm but his dark eyes dangerous. “I, however, have eyes in my head and a brain between my ears, for all that I'm no Holmes. I've been spending the last three evenings trying my hardest to put him back together again, Lady Smallwood. In all of our best interests, this must not continue.”

His tone, his choice of words and his use of her title told her how utterly serious he was. She sighed. “I'm not happy about it myself, Grégoire. However, you are aware how Eurus Holmes is able to mentally influence all people she comes in contact with. It is vital for the interests of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth that Mycroft Holmes remains uncompromised, or he cannot be permitted to retain his influential position.”

“Lady Smallwood, with all due respect,” he replied, coldly rational, “that's utter nonsense. You're sending in an elementary school child to evaluate a bright A-level student with the purpose of finding out whether he has been unduly influenced by a postgraduate university student. The procedure might have its uses generally, but under those special circumstances, it clearly doesn't work. To expect it to do so in this unusual case is nothing short of irresponsible; to rely on it is the height of insanity. So is allowing the elementary school child a butcher knife for carving the answers out of his victim's head. Oh, excuse me, I should have said patient,” he added with the purest vitriol.

She pinched the bridge of her nose and started pacing in the tiny space, three steps forward, turn, three steps back. Turn. Bloody hell, but he was right. He was right, but where did that leave them?

“There is no reliable way for you to ascertain whether Mycroft Holmes has been compromised or not,” Greg calmly, coolly continued. “He is utterly dedicated to his work and his country. If he had any idea himself, he'd give you the answer immediately. Using his trauma and psychological wounds to torture it out of him won't work, because he honestly can't tell. Eurus Holmes is the most intelligent of the three siblings, always has been. Mycroft honestly believed quite firmly that he had matters under control by confining her; it turned out that he didn't, and that she wasn't even confined but free to come and go as she pleased. He's not going to make the same mistake again by offering you a certainty where he himself has only questions and doubts.”

“But how do we find out whether he's safe to remain in his position?” she exclaimed, frustrated. “We need him, we need him desperately, but...”

“You can't risk building your house of cards with him at the base when he might collapse and take the whole structure with him?” Greg ironically finished.

She took in a deep breath, let it out, took in another. “Yes,” she finally said. “Cold as that sounds, but yes.”

“Well,” Greg replied with painful honesty, “the answer is that you can't ever know for certain. No,
don't give me that look, Allybeth. There is no reliable way to find out. Get used to the thought and start working from there.”

“Bugger it,” she sighed.

He gave her a pale grin. “Yeah.”

“Now what?” she sighed.

“Now,” Greg firmly said, “you call off your elementary school children psychiatrists. Assign him another one if you think that he needs to work through his trauma, but only in a true, confidential doctor-patient relationship based on trust and respect. Then have your minions review the footage from Sherrinford, from Mycroft's arrival to the point where he was evacuated. Go over it with a fine comb. Her known modus operandi is to influence her victims by involving them in debates, but she might use other means as well. Examine Moriarty's video messages, the lighting, even the patterns of the fake blood in the hallway for hidden messages. Talk to Sherlock Holmes; he isn't quite as clever as Mycroft, and emotionally rather stunted, but he's trained himself to be an excellent observer. Mentally, he's about fourteen to Mycroft's seventeen in our example, but still leagues above your elementary school children. Take into account, though, that he might have been influenced by his sister himself.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“Also,” Greg added, “I suggest you make one of those colourful little maps of what Mycroft actually does, and evaluate each area carefully in the light of three different questions. The first one is: How much interest would Eurus Holmes have to influence that particular area? Keep in mind that she operates on an entirely different level and that she's already proven that she plays extremely long games. That makes this the least calculable and therefore the least useful point of the three. The second question would be, how much damage could a compromised Mycroft potentially do in that particular area, and is there a way to build in safeguards? You may have to employ a few more people for that, but certainly that would be worth keeping Mycroft and his valuable skills and experience. Besides, putting these measures into place would offer another advantage. In case he should ever end up truly out of commission because some idiot tries to blow him up again, it would be much easier to manage his inhuman workload without him for a good while.”

She nodded in thoughtful acknowledgement but didn't interrupt, so he went on, “And the third question is, where do you need his particular set of skills and abilities most? Where is he truly irreplaceable? Are there any areas where he isn't truly needed, are there perhaps others outside of his current responsibilities where he could be better placed? When you've evaluated all that, you make a separate decision for every little colourful patch. Break his work into small enough units, fine-tune my off-the-cuff criteria, and it should be doable.”

“That's actually an excellent suggestion,” she thoughtfully admitted.

Greg gave her a lopsided little grin. “Don't look so surprised, Allybeth. I may not play in your league, but I'm still not an idiot.”

“No,” she replied with a small, crooked smile of her own, “you never were.”

Greg nodded but refused to be sidetracked. “So, as I said, restructure Mycroft's work,” he went on. “Invalid Eurus Holmes' calculations. Shuffle the deck, introduce elements of unpredictability. Defy anyone's expectations of a bureaucracy by actually doing something sensible and effective. Take some of his responsibilities away, give him a few new ones instead. If she's really done something to mess with his mind, she'll be expecting him to be distrusted, demoted, so don't settle for
the small, seemingly unimportant things when you assign him new areas. And for heaven's sake, take Sherrinford off his shoulders. The man has been forced into a terrible, unethical conflict of interests since he was fourteen, torn between protecting his family and his country, bound to eventually fail at either or both. Doctors don't treat their own family, Allybeth, solicitors don't represent them in court; it's considered a breach of professional ethics to the point that they can get struck off for it. There's a reason for that rule, and it should have been in effect in Mycroft's case years ago, ever since that horrid Uncle Rudy of his retired.”

“Rudolph Vernet?” she enquired. “His mentor?”

“Oh, that's his full name?” Greg asked with a skull grin. “Thanks. Do you happen to know where he's buried?”

She raised her sandy eyebrows at him. “Why would you want to know?”

“Because I want to spit on his grave,” Greg replied with utter calm. “I've been wanting to do that since I've understood how that cold bastard manipulated and bullied a brilliant, traumatised and emotionally neglected boy of fourteen into responsibilities that never were his to take, effectively ending his childhood and leaving him to grow up into the loneliest man on the planet. His own nephew, too.”

“It is a rather... lonely position,” she admitted.

“You've had your husband to support you, Allybeth,” he gently but firmly reminded her. “You still have your family.”

She gave a soft, bitter laugh, and he was sorry to see a flicker of grief in her usually so controlled eyes. It reminded him enough of Mycroft to make him soften towards her, but he tried not to let it show too much, because she would surely see and exploit it as the weakness it was, a weakness he couldn't afford while he was still in battle for the sake of the man he loved.

“He has you now,” was all she said, though.

Greg nodded decisively. “Yes, Mycroft has me now, and don't you forget that.”

“Dear Lord, no,” she wryly replied, composed again. “That's a mistake I won't ever make again, I assure you.”

They exchanged small, tight smiles; their positions were absolutely clear. It didn't necessarily make them opponents, as they were both aware, but there was no doubt where Greg's unswerving loyalties lay.

She sighed again. “While we're at it, I may just as well ask. Do you have an opinion on how to best deal with Eurus Holmes?”

“Yes,” he calmly replied.

She waited.

He said nothing.

The kettle switched off with a click and eventually stopped boiling, and he emptied the steaming water into the sink, filled it with cold water again and set it to boil once again.

“Care to share?” she finally enquired, a little archly.
“Not particularly, no,” Greg calmly stated.

She frowned slightly in thought. He’d consider his answer disloyal to Mycroft, then, Mycroft, who had argued so precisely, so rationally, so utterly tenaciously for the life of his younger sister. Admittedly, she had saved hundreds of lives in the course of her cooperation with the British government, but still she’d demanded things, piece for tiny, seemingly harmless piece, that had ultimately made the Sherrinford débâcle possible, perhaps even inevitable. In fact, the dangerous psychopath had subverted all the thorough measures put into place to contain her and walked around England unchecked for who-knew-how long before, sowing who-knew-what seeds for the future, getting her hooks into the military deep enough to obtain their top-secret Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch and who-knew-what else. Right now, Eurus Holmes wasn’t speaking, but nobody know if that was because she couldn’t or if she was simply playing another one of her deep, long games. Her brother Sherlock had visited her with his violin and had enticed a reaction out of the previously catatonic prisoner; they now played classical music together. Who knew how long that semblance of peace would last, and already the Holmes parents, especially Violet Holmes, were clamouring for their poor, damaged, mistreated daughter’s release.

The sensible solution for an uncontainable threat of that magnitude, as it had been on the table before in the particular case of Eurus Holmes, was a very unofficial elimination of the threat. Decades ago, on Mycroft’s recommendation, they had taken the gamble and indeed profited significantly from her input in the past. However, it was now clearly proven that Britain’s most advanced high-security holding facility had entirely failed to contain Eurus Holmes; she had manipulated her way out once, she could do so again at any time she chose. With a mind like hers, brilliant and utterly unscrupulous, there simply were no conceivable security measures that could ascertain her containment, and the danger she represented to Britain, perhaps the entire world, was incalculable.

Grégoire had mentioned the powerful conflict of interest Mycroft had been caught up in since the age of fourteen, and to this day still was. If they had put a bullet in her head back then, all this never would have happened. If they did it now, they might still have to deal with psychological time bombs she might or might not have left in people’s heads, but the additional ongoing threat would be gone.

Their eyes met, hers questioning, his calm and clear.

She knew Grégoire’s opinion now, as clearly as if he’d spoken it aloud. It was the opinion of an elementary school boy, by his own definition, but perhaps one in fourth form, almost ready to attend secondary schooling. A bright boy with an unshakable moral compass that yet allowed for some sort of pragmatic flexibility for the greater good. A man with excellent, practical ideas, grounded in down-to-earth life experience of a loving family, a failed marriage and a job where he had seen the worst and the best of what human beings were capable of. A man who would without a second thought risk his career and his life for the man he loved unconditionally, unapologetically, unshakably.

Grégoire de Lestrade wanted this burden to be taken off Mycroft Holmes’ shoulders, and it wasn’t an unreasonable request. The elimination of his own younger sister was not something her colleague ought to be involved in, a man who had gone through hell and was, by admission of his fiancé who knew him best, holding on by his very fingertips even now.

She gave him a brief but firm nod. An understanding had been achieved.

Greg straightened his shoulders. Mycroft would resent him for this, but he was willing to take that with all its consequences to keep the man he loved safe.

He moved over to the small sink to close the water tab, but then he turned back towards her before switching it off.
“She might have left suggestions planted in different people's minds during the time she was out and about, and set some triggers as dead-man switches,” he cautioned.

It made utter, cruel sense, to have Eurus Holmes' death set in motion a final chain of events that would ensure her revenge.

“There is no need to kill her,” she reassured him, truthfully. There were other options, from medical drugs – although how they would influence a brain so vastly different from the neurotypical norm, nobody could predict with any sort of certainty – to brain surgery, precise, efficient, devastating. It would even be interesting to observe by way of regular MRIs if and how those severed pathways would be replaced by new neuronal connections, which would make it a simple matter of scheduling a follow-up surgery a few years down the line if necessary. If done well, Eurus Holmes could even continue playing the violin with her family; no-one ever needed to know.

Their eyes met again, dark brown and cool grey, once more in perfect accord.

Then she took out her phone and cancelled the rest of Mycroft's psychological evaluations with few but decisive words.


“No, thank you, Grégoire de Lestrade,” she respectfully replied. “Sometimes it is indeed valuable to consider an outside perspective. The picture often clears up if one takes a few steps back. We'll work together to make this go as smoothly as possible, for Mycroft and for all of us.”

Greg laughed softly. “Good. Personally, I've never been one to admire Seurat and his colleagues,” he said. “Too many pastels, you know. The bloody pointillists were always much too sugary for my taste.”

“And what would you recommend?” she asked, a little archly.

He grinned mischievously. “There's a book by a Swiss experimental artist and comedian called “Tidying Up Art”. You should have a look at that; you might find it interesting.”

Later that day, she sat in her office smiling after watching Ursus Wehrli’s quirky, entertaining and thought-provoking TED talk, and then went to her favourite online bookshop to order a copy of his first picture book. His idea of tidying up art was brilliant, absurd and funny at the same time, she thought as she looked at Paul Klee's Farbtafel converted into surprisingly artistic stacks of neat little blocks meticulously sorted by colour. Perhaps they could reorganise Mycroft Holmes' responsibilities exactly that way.

In his own, carefully understated way, Grégoire was not only an educated but also a brilliant man, and blast it, but now she owed him yet another favour. Not that he even knew or would have cared, she fondly thought. Bloody people who were doing things just because they thought they were the ethical or even the most efficient thing to do, they threw off her calculations every single time.

Chapter End Notes
That TED talk with Ursus Wehrli really exists (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57eeP31s-Rs). Personally, I found it pretty hilarious. Warnings for a Swiss sense of humour, though. :)}
“You called Lady Smallwood Allybeth,” the Chief Super observed.

“It's an old childhood name, sir,” Greg explained, looking tired but content. “She's called Alicia Elizabeth, but she could never decide which first name she wanted to go by from one week to the other, so her little brother Reggie and I started calling her Allybeth. She hated it in the beginning, but eventually it became familiar. Until last month, I hadn't seen her for decades, and the old nickname came up again. She didn't seem to mind.” Then he added with a grin, “She still calls me **Grégoire la petite terreur**, the little terror, and here I am, almost all grey.”

“And now, is everything settled?”

Greg sighed. “I hope so, sir. It's all terribly complicated and messed up, and the most you can do in such a situation is your best and hope it doesn't all go tits-up anyway. I like to think I managed to make a constructive contribution today, but I certainly wouldn't want Lady Smallwood's job for all the money in the world.”

“On that we are agreed, **Grégoire de Lestrade**,” Willoughby said with a grin, trying not to show his relief that his best DCI had emerged unscathed from what could have easily become a devastating confrontation that ended his career. Clearly, there was no resentment left between him and Lady Smallwood after the matter had been settled.

Greg gave him his best comical puppy-dog eyes. “I'm never going to live this down, sir, am I?”

“Probably not,” the Chief Super drily replied. “Fancy man.”

Greg buried his face in his hands with a groan as his superior laughed.

When Greg arrived at home, Mycroft was already there, walking towards the door when he heard the alarm systems disengage.

They looked at each other, both of them utterly tired and incredibly happy to be back in each other's company. For the first time in four days, Mycroft didn't seem to be on the verge of a breakdown, and Greg smiled as he put his wet brolly in the stand and quickly shed his rain-soaked coat and shoes. He didn't even have the patience to put on his slippers; he immediately went to his love and they embraced, the tightness leaving both of their frames as they held on to each other and exchanged the first of many kisses that evening.

“Thank you,” Mycroft murmured into Greg's silvery hair. “Thank you, my dear.”

Greg tightened his hold for a moment, then relaxed again and lifted one hand to caress the taller man's cheek. “I just couldn't bear it any more,” he confessed. “You know that I wouldn't interfere with your work, love, I respect you too much for that. But those interviews, they were pointless and cruel, and you're... right now you're not operating at full capacity and can't really defend yourself. I
just... I couldn't bear to stand back any more and let that happen to you.”

“I know, my dear,” Mycroft murmured. “I'm not angry.”

“Thank Christ, love,” Greg sighed and pressed a quick kiss to his lips.

“How did you manage it?” the taller man asked, lifting his head and leading his fiancé towards the library, their place of comfort.

“Cashed in my apparent favour that I wasn't even aware of to get a few minutes to speak with Lady Smallwood,” Greg said, his arm still around his love's waist. “I didn't expect her to show up in person and at the Chief Super's office, though,” he added with a small chuckle. “She expected it to be a career move on my part.”

Mycroft chuckled as well as they settled on the Chesterfield together, comfortably wrapped in each other's arms. “It would have been the common favour to request. She doesn't really know you well enough to understand how truly extraordinary you are, my dear.”

“I just love you more than I can say,” Greg replied with a small smile as his tiredness slowly caught up with him. “Still, I wish she hadn't made such a production of it all before I managed to speak to her alone. Willoughby calls me “fancy man” now.”

That drew a chuckle from Mycroft and made him kiss the shorter man's silvery hair.

“How did you convince her to end the evaluations?”

“Pointed out to her how stupid and pointless they were,” Greg murmured as his tiredness slowly caught up with him. “Said that she was sending elementary school children to find out if a bright A-level student had been influenced by a university postgraduate. She was a bit petulant at first, but she had to cede the point.”

Mycroft flinched, then forced himself to relax again.

Greg's head shot up, and he studied the face of the man he loved with sudden apprehension. “I'm sorry, love, I shouldn't have said...”

“No, my dear,” Mycroft firmly interrupted him. “It is... unpalatable in the extreme, but you have, of course, hit the proverbial nail on the head. That is, after all, the crux of the matter. The only one who will ever know with any semblance of accuracy whether I have been corrupted or not is Eurus herself, who is not a trustworthy source in the least.”

Greg nodded. “It may be unpleasant, but that's the truth you all have to work with,” he said as gently as he could.

Mycroft drew in a deep breath. “Will I be... replaced?”

“Oh, love,” the older man replied as he lifted his head again and let the side of his nose rest against Mycroft's in a gesture of utter tenderness. “You are irreplaceable in so many different ways. I suggested that they closely analyse the complete footage from Sherrinford for signs of verbal or non-verbal influence, and evaluate every part of your work separately. They may build in some safeguards, give you more employees to share the workload with and exchange some of your duties for others, but in its core, my love, your work will probably still be the same. You're too brilliant and dedicated, they couldn't do without you.”

“You suggested this?” the younger man asked, sounding vulnerable.
Greg nodded. “I know how much your work means to you,” he replied, “and how highly you value Queen and Country. You wouldn't abandon your post, but you would also do anything in your power to prevent further harm from being done, especially by utilising you. You've been doubting yourself ever since Sherrinford, haven't you, love?”

Mycroft made a small, choked sound, and Greg shifted his position a bit to take him into his arms again, the taller man's head now coming to rest on his partner's broader and more muscular shoulder. Greg gently ran his fingers through that feather-soft auburn hair in slow motions that were soothing for them both.

“Well, they'll all work together to find the best, most secure way for you to continue with your duties, love,” he said, his baritone deep and smooth.

“Thank you, dearest,” Mycroft murmured, his voice almost broken. For a while, he relaxed under Greg's skilful, soothing fingers, then reluctantly asked, “Sherrinford?”

“That should have never been your responsibility in the first place,” Greg replied, kindly but very firmly. “That's a mistake that will be rectified, and a burden you'll no longer have to bear.”

The younger man lifted his head, and pained blue eyes met dark brown. “That wasn't for you to decide,” he said, sudden fierce hurt apparent in his tenor voice.

“No, it wasn't, and it still isn't,” Greg unapologetically replied. “But I'm not going to hide behind the chain of command, Mycroft. It was I who brought up that point, and I stand by what I did.”

“It wasn't your place!” Mycroft exclaimed, retracting his arms and putting a small distance between them.

Greg watched him with sad, accepting eyes.

“She's my sister! I know all too well what she has done and what magnitude of damage she's still capable of inflicting, and yet she's still my little sister,” he went on, sounding more tired, resigned and hurt than angry. For Greg, that was far worse.

“I know,” he calmly said, accepting the pain that his lover's pain caused him in return as his due punishment. “And I did tell Lady Smallwood that Eurus might have left suggestions planted in different people's minds with her death as the trigger, like undetectable dead-man switches.”

Those startlingly intelligent blue eyes blinked, then unfocused for a moment; Mycroft was processing and calculating possible future developments, probably to the nth degree.

“You... told her that?” he finally asked, sounding uncertain.

Greg returned his look calmly. “It seems like the sort of thing Eurus would do,” he said. “It's a distinct possibility, I didn't lie.”

Mycroft deflated and leaned forward again, and Greg, utterly relieved, took him back in his arms, running one hand down his spine soothingly.

“Thank you, Gregory,” he said, his voice muffled against the other man's shoulder.

“They won't kill her,” Greg affirmed, “but she'll never be let go, either. And she isn't your responsibility any more, my love, she never should have been. Let it go. You're free now.”

“Free,” Mycroft murmured, sounding incredulous and happy and sad and terribly tired.
“Free,” Greg firmly repeated, gently carding the fingers of his free hand through that lovely, soft hair again, his relief so strong that he could have cried with gratitude. This could have gone so much worse, and he was well aware of it. “I love you,” he added with a sigh.

Mycroft chuckled tiredly. “And I you. I'm sorry for taking it out on you just now, dearest. Under the circumstances, it is a logical development, and in fact I never believed they would allow me to retain my influence over Sherrinford and, indeed, my sister.”

“I knew you wouldn't take kindly to my meddling,” Greg honestly replied. “But you've borne that burden for far too long already, and I couldn't let that continue. I knew you'd be angry at me. It's okay, really. If our positions were reversed, I would have said much worse to you. Shouted, probably.”

“Thank you,” Mycroft repeated, humbly. “I don't know what I've done to deserve you.”

“You smiled at me,” Greg said, his eyes soft in reminiscence. “That first tiny little smile of yours, barely noticeable but still an honest, true smile – deep down, I knew I was done for in that very moment, and that I wanted to spend the rest of my life making you smile again.”

“You silly, wonderful man,” Mycroft replied as he relaxed completely into Greg's arms.

“You silly, wonderful man,” Greg insisted with a smile. “Always yours.”

Mycroft smiled back softly, then rested his head on Greg's solid shoulder and relaxed with a content sigh. They staid like this, silent and wrapped around each other comfortably, until Mrs Chowdhury knocked discreetly and announced dinner.

The housekeeper regarded her two charges with a bit of worry. Ever since that frightening evening when they came home physically uninjured but with their souls hurting, she had been paying special attention to them, and the last four days had been particularly hard on Mr Holmes. They both looked far too exhausted for seven in the evening, but something seemed to have changed, improved. Mr Holmes wasn't quite so weighed down any more, and the two men appeared to be holding hands not for comfort and support but simply for the joy of it.

Content, she led the way into the kitchen, glad that she had made a lamb roast with mint sauce and mashed potatoes, something very English and comforting, and then watched with motherly satisfaction as her two men enjoyed their food.

“Tell me more about your talk with Elizabeth,” Mycroft requested later when they were ensconced in the library again, watching the flames flicker and dance in the grate, “and why Willoughby is calling you a fancy man now.”

Greg groaned and covered his face again.

The taller man chuckled as he kissed the thick, silvery hair. “You are adorable when you're being dramatic.”

The DCI huffed, but there was laughter dancing in his dark eyes as he began to relate the meeting that had begun so unpleasantly in the Chief Super's office but that in retrospect had its funny side.
Greg played that part up a bit; he'd never been afraid of being the butt of a joke, and his love could use some cheering up. Still, he couldn't quite hide his slight sadness when he brought up his best friend though childhood and youth.

“Reggie?” Mycroft enquired, sensing a tale but also old heartbreak and loss. “You've mentioned him before, once, when Elizabeth was visiting. Her younger brother, I believe?”

“Reginald Grenville,” Greg elaborated with a sad little smile. “We were best friends since the age of four, I think. Our parents introduced us because we were both being raised bilingual, English and French. Reggie was because his parents were diplomats and I because, well, my family has been both English and French for ages on both sides. The other children outside of my family only spoke English, which was kind of boring. Reggie was happy at first because we’d be speaking a secret language together, but at home, both his and mine, everybody spoke it. It was a bit of a let-down, so we decided to do something about that.”

He smiled, his eyes in the past. “At that time, my mother had her heart set on a fashionable Japanese garden, and of course, no-one but a genuine Japanese gardener and his wife would do for that. His name was Hirayama Akira, but we called him Hirayama-sensei. We, that is, Reggie and I, convinced sensei to teach us Japanese, both the language and about the culture. Allybeth was mad as a wet cat because she couldn't understand us any more; she said that we were cheating, but our mothers decided that as long as we were willing to put in the effort to learn a new foreign language, they were fine with that. Of course, they didn't say that in so many words, because if we'd regarded it as work and not play, we would have stopped immediately. Annoying Allybeth was always fun, though. She was a bit of a bore, you know, the classic stuck-up older sister.”

Mycroft, who had been the classic stuck-up older brother and been called a bore by Sherlock more times than he could count – well, not could, because it wasn't above his capabilities, but more like did not care to count – magnanimously decided not to comment.

“What happened to Reginald?” he asked instead in a gentle tone.

Greg shook his head, returning to the present. “Traffic accident. He died before he even turned eighteen. It was so stupid, really, so pointless. He'd been out with a few school mates at the pub; they weren't even drinking, just having a bit of tea to warm up and playing darts. On their way back, they were hit by a drunk driver. Two of his friends were seriously injured. Reggie died before they even reached A&E. That was when I decided that I wanted to be a copper. In all those years, I've never regretted my choice.”

Even after such a long time, the memory hadn't quite lost its painful edge, and he gratefully curled up tighter into his love's embrace, gladly accepting the soothing touches.

“What career were you considering before that?” Mycroft enquired after a pause.

“Diplomatic services,” Greg replied, then he gave a soft laugh. “I'd even started learning Spanish. Can you imagine me as a diplomat? My parents could; it took them a few years to accept my new career choice as something that I really wanted to do and not something I felt driven to pursue out of grief for a terrible injustice that I couldn't prevent because I wasn't even there.”

“Actually, I can imagine it, too,” the taller man admitted with a small smile. “You like to put your light under a bushel quite a bit, my dear, but you're easily intelligent enough, and you can be devastatingly charming. You would have made a fine diplomat, finer than many I know. But I can also see why you would find your work at the Yard fulfilling. It's a very important role that you fill, and with such integrity and determination.”
Greg blinked up at him. “You mean that,” he stated with a hint of surprise in his voice and eyes.

His taller fiancé laughed softly. “Of course I do, my lovely idiot. When have I ever been dishonest to you?”

“Oi!” Greg exclaimed, but he didn't put any vehemence behind it; he was just protesting the fond insult, spoken almost as an endearment, in a perfunctory way. There was no real condescension in Mycroft's expression, after all. “And no, you never have, although, if we're talking about devastatingly charming, that would clearly be you and not me. You and your incredible mind and powers of observation combined with that beautiful, smooth voice, that silver tongue and the way you look so incredibly handsome in your suits – and out of them, too.”

The elegant man, now only in his trousers, shirtsleeves and braces, chuckled. “Incredibly handsome?” he asked, amused.

“Deliciously so,” Greg replied with a mischievous smile, although his soft, open expression left no doubt that he meant every word. “Irresistibly, in fact.”

“Prove it,” Mycroft purred.

There was no doubt in his blue eyes, only wicked expectation, and Greg didn't hesitate even for a second. Smoothly, he sank his fingers into that soft auburn hair he so adored and pulled the other man down into a kiss, tongues tangling sweetly, passionately.

“You smell so good, too,” he groaned, “and Christ! Your taste... so delicious...”

Their lips connected again impatiently, and Mycroft's nimble fingers found their way under Greg’s soft grey jumper. The second their lips parted again, the merino wool went over that silvery head with one smooth pull. Greg, making an incoherent noise of approval, pulled his arms free of his jumper sleeves and started popping open the little mother-of-pearl buttons on his lover's bespoke shirt. The expensive fabric was relentlessly pushed aside to reveal the incredibly soft cotton vest and even more exquisite, creamy skin beneath.

Mycroft was returning the favour, although less carefully. The shirt now under his hands was one of Gregory's older, cheaper polyester-cotton blends, and so he had absolutely no qualms about destroying the pitiful thing. Dimly, he thought how much he would enjoy giving his fiancé a replacement much more worthy of the magnificent man, but for now, thoughts weren't all that important for either of them. Cheap plastic buttons popped off and scattered, a pair of golden cufflinks and an exquisitely understated tie pin fell to the floor just short of the coffee table, shirts went flying, vests were disposed of, and the two men moaned when their bare chests finally came in contact with each other.

“Lube?” Greg asked breathlessly as he popped open the button of his partner's beautifully tailored, precisely creased woollen trousers.


“Mrs C?” Greg gasped, barely coherent, which was understandable, as his trapezius muscle was just being gently worried in the most pleasurable way.

“Time?” the taller man gasped back, only reluctantly releasing this lover's shoulder and immediately going back to that spot, sucking it relentlessly. There was going to be a magnificent love-bite later.

“Christ!” the older man exclaimed and attempted to focus on the carriage clock on the mantelpiece long enough to get a reading, then struggled to get the words out in spite of being very much
distracted. “Half... past nine. Should... be... upstairs... God, Mycroft!”

“Wait,” the taller man growled, rose smoothly and walked towards the door leading to the kitchen as gracefully as one could with a raging erection, holding his trousers up with one hand but making no move to close his fly again.

“Hurry,” Greg sighed, his only consolation for the sudden loss of his lover's body the magnificent view of his gorgeous backside. Mycroft was tall and elegant, and everything about him was beautiful, sleek and long, from his neck down to his toes. And he did have a wonderful, pert, plush behind that looked delectable in those dark woollen trousers and even better without them. Also, he had the most adorable freckles. Greg was determined to count them one day, but so far, he had always been wickedly distracted. Right now, he quickly shed the rest of his clothes, then looked around for something to cover the cool leather of the Chesterfield. The woollen plaid would be a little difficult to clean, but there was that moss-green polar fleece blanket that Mycroft pretended to despise. Granted, it was cheap, but it was also very warm and not at all scratchy, much more pleasant on bare skin than the rougher wool of the Scottish plaid could ever be. Besides, his love might take patriotic exception to defiling the Royal Stuart Dress tartan.

Quickly, Greg spread the green polar fleece over the couch and then lay back down, letting his legs fall open, one knee bent and resting against the back of the sofa with his foot flat on the blanket, the other leg slipping down with his foot on the floor. Then he stretched his entire body and put his hands behind his head in one smooth, lascivious motion.

Mycroft, who had just entered again with a bottle of expensive oil in one hand and a box of paper tissues in the other, sharply drew in his breath as he took in the extremely enticing sight, that fit, solid, lightly tanned body stretched out for his pleasure, the cheeky smile on that handsome face and those eyes, ah, so dark with passion that it was hard to see where the irises ended and the pupils began.

“Gregory,” he murmured, no, purred, his tenor at its lowest and smokiest.

The deep, visceral sound made Greg’s entire body shiver, his eyes fall closed and his lips part. And just like that, Mycroft's body decided that intellect was overrated, anyway, and he was across the room before he even realised that he had moved. A moment later saw him stretched out in the cradle of his lover's hips, chest to chest, lips to lips, and Greg doing his best to quickly rid his love of his very much unnecessary trousers and pants. Mycroft reluctantly lifted his hips to help and was shortly after rewarded with even more lovely skin contact. While he was still busy kicking off his trousers, the man beneath him started chuckling, and he looked up and met his eyes, startled.


“Only the best for you, my dear,” was the utterly dry answer.

Under the onslaught of Gregory's mirth, his expressionless face couldn't hold, though, and soon they were laughing together and then sweetly kissing each other.

“I love you so much,” the slightly older man sighed, looking up into Mycroft's beautiful blue eyes, now so stormy and dark.

“And I you,” the auburn-haired man seriously replied. “I never knew,” he reluctantly added, almost shyly, “that this could be so much fun, on so many different levels.”

“Only with the best of partners,” Greg replied as he caressed his love's cheek.
The desperate, almost painful urgency of earlier was gone, but it had left behind an incredible closeness, tenderness and warmth. The desire was still there, though heavier, slower and easy to get drunk on. Their movements were more languid now, more intoxicating. They came together with an aching slowness, sipping, savouring, deeply desiring, drifting, longing, loving in the best sense of the word, and it was almost two hours before they finally went upstairs, cuddled up in their bed together and fell asleep.

Of course, Mrs Chowdhury immediately knew the next morning what her two boys had been up to. They were very considerate in that they had cleaned up after themselves and aired the room to spare her sensibilities, but apart from yet another massacred shirt in the rubbish bin, there was that plastic shirt button under the overstuffed armchair and the dark green polar fleece blanket in the dryer. She shook her head, smiled fondly and calculated that she might have to buy new truffle oil soon, just in case. The alternatives had been the cold-pressed native olive oil, which obviously had been spurned, and the chilli oil, which would make for a rather, well, fiery experience. She put that bottle into the very back of the cupboard, just in case, and powered up her notebook. Perhaps there were some other interesting oils that she could order. For the sole purpose of cooking, of course. After all, a good housekeeper had to be prepared.
“Mycroft, love,” Greg asked over breakfast, “would you like to meet my family?”

A wealth of reactions and emotions passed through the other man’s intelligent blue eyes, almost too quickly for him to follow.

“No need to worry,” Greg added, commenting on one of them he had managed to recognise. “My parents are a bit stuffy sometimes, but they’re decent people. Papa is a rabid bibliophile; you won’t run out of things to talk about with him. And Maman, well, she can appear a bit snobbish and superficial at first, and you’ll definitely impress her with your manners, your elegance, your poise, your fluent French and all that, but she’s also a surprisingly good judge of character, and she’ll like you for who you are. And for making me happy, of course, but then, she’s my Mum.”

“Are you certain that they will – get used to to me?” the younger man asked, sounding slightly insecure. He was exceptionally good at impressing, charming, flattering or intimidating people in the line of his work, but his aim usually wasn’t to be liked as a person. For some odd, sentimental reason, however, he did wish to be liked and accepted by Gregory’s parents to an unreasonable degree.

The older man didn’t seem to entertain any doubts in that regard, though. “They’ll not just get used to you, they’ll adore you,” he said with the utmost certainty. “And I think you’ll like Sophia and Will. They’re not stuffy but also quite well-read and interested in a wide range of different topics. Will’s a lawyer and Sophia a social scientist. She’ll likely scrutinise you for a while, but that’s because of my epic failure at picking out my first spouse. I’m just her stupid big brother, after all, who needs to be looked after every once in a while.”

“She can’t be worse than Sherlock,” Mycroft said with a pale smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Greg smiled at him warmly. “She’s a woman, love. Her intellect is as fine as any man’s, but where emotions are concerned, she feels infinitely superior because she’s got two X chromosomes. Don’t ask me why. In some cases, it’s best to just smile and nod until you can get her back into a rational discussion, and then Bob’s your uncle.”

“That’s... surprisingly informative. I may have to try that strategy out on a few other females of my acquaintance,” Mycroft thoughtfully said.

Greg grinned at him. “Subtly, though, or they’ll think you’re patronising them, and that’s the worst faux-pas you can commit.”

“So I have previously noticed,” was the dry reply. “Very well, my dear. Since I am in the incredibly fortunate position of expanding my family, I might as well meet them. You’re the one who drew the short end of the stick, I’m afraid, dear Gregory. You already know Sherlock, and surprisingly you have managed not to throttle him so far. Eurus is right out, I suppose, and my parents... They are possibly even stuffier than yours, but with fewer redeeming qualities, I’m afraid.”

Greg leaned over the corner of the table and gently kissed him on the cheek. “For you, my heart, I will brave the legions of hell.”

This line with its suitably dramatic delivery made the younger man chuckle. “They’re nothing so
interesting, I'm afraid,” he admitted. “I'm all for putting them off until Christmas. Perhaps, your ire towards them will have cooled a little until then, and my own... reservations diminished as well.”

Greg sighed. They both knew that it wasn't reservations in his case, but vulnerability. “I love you, Mycroft. For you, I'll treat them with the utmost courtesy and not just the amount of courtesy they deserve,” he promised. “But I won't stand by and watch them disparage and hurt you. If that happens, I will not leave it undisputed. They may want me to leave their home after that,” he warned, his expression kind but very determined.

This time, it was Mycroft who leaned over and kissed Greg's cheek. “Thank you,” he humbly said. “Should that be the case, we'll be leaving together.”

They smiled at each other and finished their yoghurt and fruit salad.

“Hello, Maman? Yes, better than ever. And you? Great... Listen, Maman, you were right...” Greg laughed softly, happily. “Of course you always are. Well, I have good news for you, I'm not single any more, and I would really like you and Papa to meet Mycroft. Yes, he's wonderful...”

Sitting next to him on the couch, the auburn-haired man smiled at his fiancé's irresistible enthusiasm and happiness, happiness that he himself had brought him. He still wasn't used to that sort of situation, and he would quite possibly never be, but that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy it. Happily, he tuned out the rest of the one-sided phone conversation in favour of watching Gregory's expressive face and gestures instead, his heart swelling with joy.

“Hey, Sophia! Yeah, I'm fine. Better than fine, actually. How are you? Really? Wow, that's impressive for a one-year-old. Yeah, give them both my love. Listen, about dinner this weekend... No, no, I'm not cancelling again. Actually, I'd like to bring someone, if that's all right... Gold-digger? Honestly, sis, I'm not after his money!” Greg was pretending to be insulted, and Mycroft chuckled, amused. “No, he isn't after mine, either; I'm pretty sure he's got more than I do.

“Yes, a man this time... His name is Mycroft. Yes, my housemate, and you're not allowed to make him uncomfortable... Yeah, right, I know a fib when I hear one, it's in my job description. Okay, but only a little. Yeah, he can try, but I don't think he'd find out a thing, Will isn't even close to the security clearance he'd need for that... Wonderful, he's absolutely wonderful... Besotted, really! Besotted! What are you, a Victorian maiden aunt? Yeah, ta, you can stop clutching your maiden aunt pearls now. Language, little sister! What kind of example are you setting for your impressionable children! Ha, I bet little Dan's next word is going to be either “bugger” or “fuck”, or maybe “buggering fuck”, and it'll all be your fault. Moi? Certainly not, little sis! No, I don't even have – delay that, actually. Somewhere in a box I still have my old Rocky Horror outfit, and there was a pearl necklace, wasn't there? As if I would. What's that supposed to mean? Of course I've still got the figure, well, mostly, but I'm not parading in front of the children in a corset, garters and platform heels until they're at least thirty-eight! And by that time nobody will want to see me in a corset, garters and platform heels, except maybe Mycroft, so that's that.”

The aforementioned partner looked a little shocked at that outrageous statement. It certainly carried a cultural reference that he wasn't familiar with, and it caused laughter on both sides of the phone line. Then Greg's face suddenly softened.
“Yeah,” he said, his eyes shining as he looked at his fiancé. “Haven’t I said? His full name is Mycroft Holmes. No, sis, this is it. He's the one... Thank you. Yeah, I love you too, silly. Of course, Sunday at the usual time? All right, I'll bring dessert. Give my love to your little zoo, yeah? See you then. Bye!”

Mycroft smiled at him. “The one?” he asked, lifting his eyebrows.

“The one and only,” Greg replied, suddenly serious. “The one special person I will love until I die and, if at all possible, even longer.”

Mycroft's breath caught. He'd known, of course. He felt exactly the same, and they were getting married. Still, seeing the raw honesty in that handsome, beloved face still took his breath away. Unable to form words, he touched his hand to Gregory's cheek and leaned in for a deep, loving kiss.

“You are, too,” he finally whispered. “You are my one.”

Gregory smiled at him with such brilliant joy and kissed him again. Apparently, knowing was one thing, but being told, being shown again was still special and important and beautiful. It had nothing to do with logic, and paradoxically, that was part of its beauty.

The following evening, they went to visit Sherlock and John in Hammersmith. The entirety of 221 Baker Street was still being checked for structural integrity, and the workers would be busy with repairs for quite a while. Meanwhile, the consulting detective was staying at his blogger's house, and apparently, their newly restored friendship was holding up quite well even under the strain of daily tedium and a baby thrown into the mix. Greg wouldn't be surprised if the two friends elected to move back into 221 B together once the flat was habitable again. Seeing Rosie was always a joy to Greg; she was a sweet, attentive, curious little thing, already inching around like a caterpillar in preparation for crawling and making baby sounds that soon would start making sense. He wasn't sure if she'd recognised him, but she made no fuss about being picked up by the silver-haired man and had fun grabbing at his nose and playing with her favourite stuffed bear with him.

Of course, Sherlock and John already knew that Mycroft and Greg were together, but they wanted to tell them of their engagement in person, just as they would with Greg's family. They had only planned for a short stop, but Sherlock was surprisingly lacking in vitriol and seemed reluctantly happy for them, although he tried not to show it too much.

In the end, the four men decided to go out for dinner together, and Greg called Mrs Chowdhury, guiltily hoping that the food she had probably already prepared for them would keep until the next day. Mrs Hudson begged off because she was expecting her friend, Mrs Turner, for dinner at John's house in Hammersmith, but she congratulated the two men sweetly and seemed perfectly happy for them. She was also eager to keep Rosie with her, and besides, Mrs Turner had mentioned that she'd missed the baby.

The four men went to Angelo's to celebrate. Greg cheerfully ordered the canneloni, having missed Italian food a bit lately. Mycroft looked as if he were going to order a salad, but Greg put his hand on his fiancé's longer, slender one and gave him a tender look, a look that spoke eloquently, honestly of how gorgeous and perfect he was and that a diet was not required. Mycroft smiled slightly, almost shyly and ordered the spaghetti alle vongole instead, and the moment Sherlock opened his mouth to
make a spiteful comment, he was viciously kicked under the table. His startled, indignant look at Greg was countered with a first-rate glare, and the consulting detective wisely decided to shut up, at least for the time being. It wasn't as if the dish with baby clams and parsley cooked in white wine were even remotely fattening, and Mycroft's undeservedly poor body image certainly didn't need another beating.

John observed but chose not to comment. His view of Mycroft had changed lately, and while he might have found Sherlock's digs at his brother amusing when he still actively resented the meddling, seemingly cold, manipulative and untrustworthy man, now he didn't really think those comments were all right any more. He had never thought of Mycroft as possibly uncertain or vulnerable, but the subtext in that situation told a story that John had never really considered before, and the thought that the oldest Holmes might have developed an eating disorder because of his younger brother's constant, relentless belittlements didn't sit well with the doctor at all.

John Watson was good at many things, but hiding his thoughts and emotions wasn't one of them. Greg and Mycroft exchanged a small look, Mycroft's pained one giving way under Greg's tender one. Actually, the older man was quite pleased that the stubborn doctor was finally beginning to question his assumptions and was starting to observe and think for himself, but he couldn't help wishing John would do that in a way that didn't embarrass Mycroft. Sherlock was looking at each of them, one after the other, and finally threw up his hands, sighing dramatically. Mycroft and Greg looked at each other again and exchanged a smile. John rolled his eyes but grinned fondly at his friend. It was funny how they all could have a whole conversation without anyone saying even one word. It was also a blessing, perhaps, because after all, they were men, and discussing sentiment openly among the four of them would have been nothing short of painfully awkward.

Angelo came to the table, personally bringing their drinks and a candle.

"My brother and his partner have seen it fit to become engaged," Sherlock informed the friendly, portly Italian in an aggravated tone but with a twinkle in his heterochromatic, jewel-like eyes. "I can't decide who of them I pity more. Perhaps they simply deserve each other."

"Oh, Sherlock, sempre romantico," Angelo said with an indulgent grin. He knew the other man well enough to understand that his compliments usually came couched in insults. Then he turned towards the two older men with a beaming smile. "Complimenti, signori! This is indeed a happy occasion! I will bring the prosecco, un momento per favore!"

And he was off with a surprising speed and grace for his steadily increasing girth. "Antonia, ma ora veloce! Abbiamo un fidanzamento! Il fratello di Sherlock si sposerà! Tutto deve essere perfetto!" he enthusiastically called out to his wife in the kitchen.

Greg grinned. "Well, he certainly seems chuffed, but whoever said that being able to read Latin will help with understanding spoken Italian is clearly an idiot."

"Yeah," John agreed. "I understood prosecco and Sherlock and perfect, but that was pretty much it. He was going much too fast."

"I think he was saying Sherlock's brother and perfect," Greg said with a smile at his beloved, batting his eyelashes in a silly, simpering way.

That made John laugh, Mycroft smile and Sherlock groan.

"He actually said to hurry and that my brother is getting married and not I, which I believe to be an
extremely important distinction, and that everything has to be perfect,” the younger Holmes corrected them. “The subject of sentence number two exists independently of the state of necessary perfection for this evening mentioned in sentence number three, Gabriel, I assure you.”

“Thanks for clearing that up, Sherlock,” Greg very drily said, “and I agree it's an extremely important distinction. I still think, though, that il fratello, not you, is indeed perfetto, at least for me.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that it was clear that he was speaking the absolute truth.

“Come tu sei per me,” Mycroft replied with a startlingly unguarded expression for being out in public.

He and Greg looked at each other as though the entire world around them had ceased to exist and they were alone in that one eternal, ephemeral moment.

Sherlock turned his head away and huffed at all the sweetness and adoration. “Sentiment.”

John had to give him credit for his relatively mild reaction; he himself chugged down half his glass of red wine, which was probably much too expensive for that. It contained a fair amount of alcohol, though, so that was all right.

A moment later, Angelo was back with five flutes and a bottle of of sparkling white wine, and together they toasted the newly affianced couple, and Sherlock didn't even roll his eyes very much. All in all, it turned out to be a surprisingly relaxed evening with excellent food and only a few minor, almost friendly squabbles between the brothers.

Clearly, most of the vitriol had gone out of their regular interaction. It seemed to puzzle John, but Greg wasn't all that surprised. The way the brothers had worked together at Sherrinford must have shown them that they had more in common than they had admitted before, and that there still was a strong bond between them in spite of their unhappy past. In the end, they both had been willing to die for each other, so perhaps not everything about Sherrinford had catastrophic consequences, after all. And thank Christ for that.

John continued to observe discreetly, or what he thought passed for discreetly, and noticed that Mycroft seemed to enjoy his meal, although he left a good portion of the pasta uneaten. There was a generous side salad, though, which he completely polished off, and Greg didn't seem to be worried. So, John decided, it wasn't actually a fully developed eating disorder, but all those diets couldn't be healthy. Then he sighed and admonished himself to stop playing the doctor at a private dinner among family and friends. He just hoped that Mycroft hadn't read him, because that would have only embarrassed the man, and at the same time hoped that Sherlock had. One way or the other, at least Mycroft had Greg looking out for him, and John had never expected to be so glad of that.

Just as they were leaving Angelo's, Mycroft was unfortunately called into his office to avert a looming international crisis. Greg tenderly kissed him goodbye and, confronted with a sudden empty evening in front of him, dug out his old electric guitar, a vintage Fender Stratocaster. He'd saved for it and bought the used guitar from his own money when he was young and feeling rebellious, and he still felt that tiny spark of pride when he held it again, at the time his most prized possession. His fingers were stiff at first, his callouses long gone, but his muscle memory from years of practice was still there and he could feel his old skill beginning to resurface, though a bit grouchily, like a bear after a long hibernation. He was going to have to practice a lot to get back into shape, but it was
certainly doable.

Mrs Chowdhury found Greg absorbed in his practise of scales, chords, easy riffs and simple songs. With a smile, she set down a mug of tea and left him alone. At least he wasn't bored and moping, although she wasn't entirely certain if Christmas carols were supposed to sound like that. Then again, she supposed, as a Hindu, she didn't necessarily know.
Chapter 40

The next evening, Mycroft came home late. He brought in a small valise and five cardboard boxes, assisted by Parker, his driver, which contained the last of his personal possessions from the so-called cottage in Surrey which was actually a small manor, the one that Sherlock and John had invaded. He'd also left his personal key behind on the kitchen table. It was a gesture that signified a cutting of connections, and Greg silently supported him by helping him find a new place to hang five beautiful watercolour landscapes that his talented grandmother Yvonne Vernet had left to Mycroft, a woman he had clearly loved and admired but who had died far too early. They eventually found their new place in the couple's shared bedroom. There was no reason for Mycroft to ever return to the cottage again, and he seemed lighter and more cheerful for it.

Calling his parents to inform them that their oldest son was in a relationship wasn't even mentioned by either man, at least for the time being.

Lady Smallwood had taken up the points Greg had made with her other two shadowy, powerful colleagues, and Mycroft's entire responsibilities at work were being restructured now. At their core, they remained more or less the same, but with an additional system of safeguards newly installed. To be fair, those checks and balances were also implemented for the other three, and although it created more work all around and merited quite a number of new employees, it also decreased the possible impact of an attack on any or all of them. The fact that steady, reliable, dedicated Mycroft Holmes had come under suspicion of being compromised and might have been a loss for their team – or, for that matter, might have been killed by that DX 707 grenade on a drone – had shocked them all. None of the four were easily replaced, but the close call they had had meant that new protocols were created for each of them in case their responsibilities had to be taken over cleanly and seamlessly in the shortest possible amount of time.

Since the other three of his cadre were basically treated the same, Mycroft didn't feel demoted or disrespected, at least not too much. Still, after decades of impeccable service far above and beyond his duty, he couldn't help feeling slightly embittered and quite a bit frustrated with all those changes.

Greg noticed, of course, and felt horrible. He had only a partial idea of all the restructuring going on, but he knew that much of it was happening on his own suggestions.

“I'm sorry, love,” he said, “that you have to go through all this. It's my fault. I pretty much suggested those measures.”

“Oh Gregory, dear,” Mycroft gently replied. “It's due to you that I have a job at all.”

He looked so terribly tired and downcast, the older man thought miserably and shook his silver head. “No, not at all. They couldn't do without you; they need you too much, your intelligence, your expertise, your incredible dedication. That isn't something that can be easily replaced, and certainly not by one person. By ten people, perhaps, if they went through a long and complicated training.”

“Being irreplaceable is in and of itself a dangerous thing,” Mycroft calmly replied, “in regard to all four of us. Terrorism aside, any one of us could slip in the shower or be run over by a bus on any
given day. We had to tackle the contingency and replacement problem sooner or later; the current events just gave us a long overdue incentive.”

“But the safeguards were my idea,” Greg insisted and hung his head.

“Once again, my dear, they are being worked into the procedure for all four of us. I'm not being singled out, and it is overall a good idea and a significant increase in security,” Mycroft insisted. “In the end, my workload will become more manageable, permitting me an unprecedented amount of free time and the possibility of actually leading a personal life.”

Greg couldn't help but smile at this a little. “But you're put out and frustrated,” he said, still somewhat downcast. “And I'm the reason.”

“Changes are always upsetting, until they become the familiar,” his fiancé said with a sigh. “Think about the upcoming move of the Yard back to the Victoria Embankment. That will be a terrible hassle, don't you think?”

The older man gave him a pale smile. “Yes, but I can let off some steam by cursing the idiots who came up with that nonsense. And you can, too, you know, if you want to.”

Mycroft rolled his eyes and pulled his partner in a firm embrace. “Gregory Lestrade, I demand restitution,” he said, very firmly.

Greg, momentarily derailed, blinked at him. “You do? What kind?”

The taller man chuckled even as his stubborn fiancé slowly began to relax in his arms. “Kisses,” he said, “embraces, uplifting text messages at unexpected times during my frustrating work day. Copious amounts of excellent blow-jobs, an occasional culinary treat. Also, once things run smoothly again, a vacation for the duration of no less than a week where I demand to be shamelessly pampered. I'm certain I'll be able to think of more if given the time. In any case, we should make a list.”

Greg slowly started smiling. “That sounds like a very good idea.”

“See,” his fiancé cheerfully agreed, “we can deal with this in a most agreeable manner.”

He kissed Greg’s forehead, then said, more seriously, “My dear, just as you will be invariably put out when New Scotland Yard moves to the Curtis Greene building, allow me a bit of wallowing as well. These are simply minor frustrations, and soon everything will be back to normal. Many of those changes were long overdue, and now is simply a good point in time to implement them. Besides, dear, don't forget that without you, I might not have a job any more.”

“They couldn't really have been so stupid!” Greg exclaimed.

“They were afraid, my dear, and with good reason. The manipulations of Eurus are the stuff of nightmares, partially because they are so very incalculable. They were already debating whether I had become an unacceptable security risk,” Mycroft calmly said.

Greg twitched. “Do you mean...?” he asked, horrified, unable to finish the sentence.

“There is knowing too much,” the younger man calmly explained, “and then there is knowing too much on the scale of one of the largest server farms on the planet containing the most sensitive secrets of several governments.”

Greg made a small, tortured sound of denial and held on to Mycroft more tightly. He appreciated his
love's honesty, he really did, and he certainly didn't want to be coddled, but that thought was beyond awful.

The taller man calmly caressed his full silver hair and murmured to him, “It's all right, love. They were only consider it. They have to take every possible angle into account, you know, that's part of the work. They weren't on the verge of killing me or locking me up; I don't believe that would have happened.”

“But it could have,” Greg said in a choked voice.

“It could have,” Mycroft calmly agreed. “There was a 30.2 percent chance before you spoke to Lady Smallwood, and a 8.7 percent chance afterwards. I was aware of that; after all, I have established those guidelines for calculating risks myself over the years.”

The slightly shorter, more muscular man was shaking now, and Mycroft continued with his soothing strokes. “I love you,” he finally said. “I love you, my dear.”

“And I you,” Greg rasped, still clinging tightly to his partner. “If they'd wanted to take you, my love, they would have had to go through me first.”

“Gregory, you must understand – if I had at any one point come to the well-founded belief that I was indeed a liability to my country, I would not have hesitated to remove myself.”

“I would have gone with you,” Greg fiercely said. “Isolated tropical island, a cell in Sherrinford, to my death – I would have gone with you.”

Mycroft chuckled, although there was a hint of tears in his voice. “I would have voted for the tropical island,” he said, “although I do get sunburnt with regrettable ease.”

Greg chuckled as well, though it did sound a little rusty and pained. “Yes, you have that lovely milky complexion,” he said, trying to force more cheer into his voice for his beloved fiancé's sake. “We could have lazed around on the beach and gone snorkelling all day, maybe catch some fresh fish. As long as they allowed us to take our books and delivered sun-tan lotion, tea-leaves and nicely aged scotch regularly, it wouldn't have been so bad. Actually, do you think it's too late to get them to change their minds?”

The taller man laughed softly. “Oh, my love. You've dispelled my colleagues' blind panic with the light of your reason; there's no going back now. I'm afraid we'll have to work until we're both old and grey.”

“Ha!” Greg exclaimed, pointing to his mostly silver hair. “Halfway to the island already!”

Mycroft chuckled again, and then they kissed each other, fiercely, urgently, almost desperately, as though they both needed the reassurance that they were alive and together and that it wasn't likely to change in the future.

“I've never thanked you for what you did for me,” Mycroft finally murmured into Greg's hair.

The older man sighed. “I was afraid you'd see it as interfering, love, but I saw you come home from those so-called psychological evaluations day after day, and you were getting worse all the time, and I just couldn't bear it any more. It was all so pointless, and they were hurting you, and I couldn't just stand by and let it happen any more.”

“Thank you,” Mycroft murmured again. “I'm not used to relying on others; I didn't even think that anyone could or would help me. But you did, my dear, and I thank you for it. I'll learn to rely on you
more, as you can rely on me.”

Greg nodded. “We've both been alone for quite a long time,” he gently said. “It's a process for both of us. I should have asked you beforehand, but you were getting so dispirited, and I didn't want to get your hopes up on something that might not have worked.”

“I wasn't...” Mycroft sighed and rephrased. “I believe I was past the point where I could evaluate my own situation clearly and objectively. I was stuck on the assumption that I had to go through those examinations in order to prove that I still could hold down my job. You're right, though, they were pointless from the start. That simile about the elementary school children, the A-level student and the university postgraduate admittedly wasn't very flattering, but it was apt, concise and easy enough for an idiot to understand. Sometimes, my mind works in far too complicated, convoluted ways. You have a gift, my dear, of cutting through all the trappings and minutiae right to the core of the problem without letting yourself get distracted. That is a very valuable skill, my heart.”

Greg frowned. “But you don't get lost in details yourself. You see so much more than other people do, and you can factor everything into your calculations, all of it at once. That's part of your brilliance, love.”

The taller man nodded. “Yes, my dear, but I tend to think that all the complex factors that in the end make up the calculation deserve to be mentioned and explained, for transparency's sake. You know how frustrated you get with Sherlock when he presents you with a brilliant conclusion but you have absolutely no idea how he reached it.”

Greg sighed. “Oh yeah, that's definitely frustrating.”

“Well, I tend to overwhelm people with too much information if I'm not careful,” Mycroft said, “and sometimes I favour the complicated solution while a much simpler one escapes me.”

“Ah,” Greg said, “so you hit upon a solution that is too brilliant for just about everyone else to come up with, but you have a hard time explaining it to the goldfish.”

Mycrof chuckled. “A bit. But you have the ability to find the simple, sometimes more elegant solution that I missed. I think we work together very well.”

Greg smiled at him softly. “That's wonderful. I'm glad I'm special among the goldfish.”

Mycrof kissed his nose. “You, my dear, are nothing as common as a goldfish. You're at the very least an exceedingly precious prize koi.”

They looked at each other and laughed, immediately feeling the tension lighting.

“I'm so glad that you don't resent me for my brains,” Mycroft finally said in a soft, almost lost tone. “Most people do, you know.”

Greg leaned against him and nuzzled his taller fiancé's jaw with his cheek. “You're brilliant,” he simply said. “How could I not admire that? I love you exactly the way you are.”

“And I you, my dearest. And I you.”

“Always,” Greg assured him.

“Always,” Mycroft replied with a smile.
In her office at Whitehall, the woman who called herself Anthea at work sighed as she watched the footage. Sometimes these two were so sweet that she really should have her teeth checked for developing caries – not that her superior didn't deserve some happiness after all those lonely years – and then something so devastatingly serious came up. If her mentor had been removed from office, chances were that she would have been removed along with him. And while she regularly made significant sacrifices for her work and her country, she wasn't really certain she could match Mycroft Holmes' iron determination combined with his severe lack of self-preservation, or Greg Lestrade's loyalty, his genuine, unconditional devotion. She didn't doubt for a moment that he would willingly follow his fiancé into exile or death. And they were both so bloody sincere about it, even while they were joking. On the other hand, the DCI had excellent instincts, as he had proven multiple times already, and he had a kind heart. Only a few months ago, she might have considered such a trait a liability, but the truth was that he fought like a lion to protect those he cared about. He had seen Mr Holmes' increasing strain under those nonsensical and cruel psychological evaluations, had seen it so much more clearly than she had. To be fair, she had been running herself ragged at the time, cleaning up loose ends in the aftermath of the incident at what he had dubbed Azkaban, a designation that she secretly found quite humorous. Still, Lestrade – Greg now – had direct access to and a well-founded understanding of her boss, and she would do well to count him as a valuable ally in the future. Without his intervention with Lady Smallwood, everything might have gone down the drain before she had even realised the true extent of the danger. And if Mycroft Holmes ever crumbled, his protégée might still go down with him, although she was going to be accorded more responsibilities under the new safeguards and contingency plans. It still meant that the DCI and she were united in their purpose of keeping the brilliant man as safe and happy as possible.

For now, those two were engaging in laudable exercises devoted to their physical fitness, endorphin-fuelled euphoria and oxytocin-based pair bonding, and for that they deserved some privacy. Also, one thing she wasn't paid even remotely enough to see was her superior's pale, freckled bum. It wasn't a bad bum per se, actually quite nice to look at in those bespoke trousers of his, but she simply didn't think of him that way. The only part that was even remotely relevant was... ah, there. There went another of the DCI's cheap poly-cotton blend M&S shirts; no doubt Mrs Chowdhury would soon be finding little plastic buttons all over the bedroom and a destroyed shirt in the rubbish bin. Tomorrow, Anthea would be ordering another bespoke shirt for the DCI with the precise measurements her superior had provided her with. Perhaps she'd order a silk tie to match; certainly, after all that trouble lately, Mr Holmes deserved a nice view to cheer him up. As she switched off the feed, she wondered with a small smile when Greg would catch on.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! Sorry for the delay; a family matter came up.
But that's all settled now, so here's the new chapter.

On Sunday, Mycroft accompanied Greg to his sister's family, looking unaccountably nervous. He
had met with royals, third-world dictators, high-ranking diplomats and dangerous terrorists, cool as a
cucumber, but a lovely couple of his own age group and social class with two small children made
him feel insecure. Granted, the signals were tiny, almost unnoticeable, but Greg knew his fiancé well
enough by now to lean against him and give him an encouraging smile.

He would have given Mycroft a hug, too, but his hands were full with a large bowl of trifle that Mrs
Chowdhury and he had whipped up together before she left for her well-deserved day off. At least
he didn't have to go on the tube; he'd worried for his dessert many times in the past, but usually it had
made the trip all right. Now they were travelling to Hampstead in style in one of Mycroft's black
town cars, a driver named Parker included.

When they arrived, Greg tried to look at his family with the eyes of a stranger, trying to see what
Mycroft did – or at least part of it. Sophia Kingsbury née de Lestrade was a slender woman nearing
the end of her thirties who had managed to regain her figure after two pregnancies. She had similar
eyes to Greg's, perhaps a bit more like milk chocolate to his dark chocolate ones, and her hair was
was sensibly tied back, dark brown and still untouched by silver. She had a lovely, heart-shaped
face, a warm smile and the bearing of a queen in comfortable navy designer jeans and a cashmere
jumper. Will, an attractive, tall and slightly gangly man in his early forties, had wavy ash-blond hair
and humorous, kind grey eyes behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses that gave him the deceptive look
of a mild-mannered scholar. That first impression of a gentle, tractable man was, however, belied by
the keen intelligence in his eyes and the deliberate way in which he carried himself; Solicitor William
Kingsbury was a man to be underestimated at one's own peril. The children were two blurs
approaching at a dizzying speed. Lyra had a mop of brown curls and her mother's eyes, and Daniel
looked a lot like his father had at that age with white-blond hair that was probably going to darken to
ash-blond as he grew older. He was still at the stage where he had only two settings, one standing
still and the other running at full tilt on his stubby toddler legs. Lyra, not to be outdone, used her
longer legs to great advantage and managed to cannon into her favourite uncle first. She was yelling,
“Uncle Greg! Uncle Greg!”

Dan, not far behind, connected only a moment later, shouting “Unca Egg!”

Laughing, Greg crouched down and hugged and kissed them both happily, then got up, swung Lyra
up to sit on his shoulders, picked up Dan to carry him in his arms and on his hip with practised ease,
leaned forward to fondly peck his sister on the cheek and affectionately bumped shoulders with his
brother-in-law.
Mycroft looked on at the unfamiliar display with an almost wistful little smile, content to hold the bowl of trifle and use it as either shield or hostage if needed.

The terraced house had three floors, and although it was clearly smaller and more modern than Greg's in Kensington, it was still charming and homely, but in a practical way designed to withstand the ravages of Lyra and Dan, otherwise known as the screaming horde of chaos and destruction.

Once inside, Greg made the introductions. Precocious little Lyra had no trouble pronouncing Mycroft's name, and Dan decided to call him My. Since he was only a year old, the tall, auburn-haired man bore the butchering of his name with good grace.

They relocated to the large and comfortable kitchen and eating area where Will put the trifle into the refrigerator and checked on the roast in the oven while Greg played peekaboo with Dan while trying to listen to Lyra's involved story about pirates. Sophia and Mycroft were laying the table while animatedly discussing the changes this year's elections had brought to the way the political parties used the media. All parties were now circumventing the UK's broadcasting laws – under which political advertising was forbidden – by utilising youtube and the social media networks to spread their “attack ads”, and it was changing the political culture quite noticeably.

Greg smiled at the two of them fondly and ducked behind the back of his chair, only to pop his head out again on the left side, causing Dan to squeal happily when they made eye contact. Lyra wanted a cuddle and so he lifted her on his lap, while Dan, fearless, curious little tyke that he was, toddled over to the strange new man and demanded, “My, up!”

Mycroft blinked at him, and Greg almost laughed. As a rule, people didn't demand things of Mycroft Holmes. However, the plucky little human being seemed to impress the powerful man, and so he carefully lifted him up and placed him on his lap. For a moment, blue eyes met grey ones as the two of them earnestly studied each other. Then the little boy snuggled against Mycroft's chest contentedly while babbling a number of undecipherable syllables interspersed with words he was just learning, including “My”.

“Yes, I am Mycroft,” he said in his usual clear tenor, addressing the boy much as he would an adult, only a bit more slowly and clearly. “And you are Daniel.”

“Da-n!” the boy agreed, grinning widely and drooling.

To his credit, Mycroft didn't even flinch, but, Greg thought, the man had probably eaten goat brains with nomadic tribes somewhere without batting an eyelash, so a teething little boy shouldn't be much of a problem. Still, Sophia discreetly handed him a napkin to stem the flood and he gave her a small, grateful nod.

“Dada!” Dan said, pointing at his father with a happy grin.

Will turned around with a proud smile and waved, a thick red oven mitt on his hand. “Hi, my little man!”

The boy giggled and waved back, still a bit uncoordinated but with enthusiasm. “Hi!”

Then he waved at “Mama!”, “Lya!” and “Unca Egg!”, who all happily waved back.

“He's still a baby,” Lyra informed Mycroft from her perch on her uncle's lap, a wealth of tolerance and condescension for her little brother evident in her voice. “He'll get more interesting soon, I promise.”

“Yes, little brothers eventually do,” Mycroft seriously agreed, although there was a tiny smile
crinkling his eyes, and magnificently ignored Greg's softly muttered, “Yeah, like in that Chinese curse, may you live in interesting times.”

“I have a little brother, too. His name is Sherlock,” the auburn-haired man continued, maintaining his air of addressing an equal.

“Sherlock,” Lyra thoughtfully repeated. “That's a funny name.”

Mycroft gave her a conspiratorial grin and lifted his free hand to put his forefinger to his lips in the universal sign for silence. “I think so, too,” he informed her, “but don't tell him that. He gets stroppy when people make fun of his name.”

She laughed and nodded, and he went on, “I understand, though, because I have an unusual name myself.”

Lyra nodded seriously. “Me too,” she confided in a stage whisper, not having mastered the art of true whispering yet.

“It's not bad, though, having a very special name,” Mycroft said, “with few people to share it with. I know no less than fourteen Harries, but when I think of a Lyra, I'll only think of you now.”

The four-year-old nodded her curly head thoughtfully.

“Dinner is ready!” Will announced as he took the roast out of the oven.

Together with Sophia, he quickly got the food transferred into serving dishes and on the table, and everyone took a seat. Dan strongly protested being dislodged from “My's” lap, and the auburn-haired man offered to keep him there for the duration of the dinner, but Sophia shook her head and smiled.

“No, thank you, Mycroft,” she kindly said. “That's nice of you, but he's only just learning to feed himself. Believe me, you don't want Daniel dear too close to you when he's armed with mashed carrots and potatoes, most of which don't even end up in his mouth yet. Carrot stains are hard to get out in the wash. Trust me, I know.”

She lifted the protesting boy (“No, no!”) into his high chair with a smooth, practised move and affectionately kissed his little blond head.

“Hey, Danny bear,” Greg greeted the grumpy toddler with a wide smile. “You get to sit next to me, isn't that great?”

“Unca Egg,” Dan said, and agreed to have the bib affixed to his neck with royal condescension.

Lyra, who was proud to be able to sit in a “grown-up chair”, although with a thick elevating cushion under her little bum, claimed the place next to Mycroft and proceeded to proudly show him her very own child-sized cutlery with a zoo theme on the handles.

He duly admired the set and was hardly surprised when she started naming the animals and then the cutlery in French with an absolutely perfect pronunciation.

“Très bien,” he complimented her, switching to French himself with ease, which made her smile widely, and then conversed in the other language for a while.

“Lyra est une jeune fille très intelligente,” Mycroft remarked to the parents, making them all, Lyra and Greg included, beam with pride.
“Et mon petit Daniel, parles-tu français aussi?” he asked the smallest member of the family.

Chuffed at being included, Dan burbled something that could charitably be interpreted as “Oui”, yes, although it was a bit muffled through the plastic baby spoon he was sucking on.

“Mais c'est encroyable,” Mycroft complimented them all. “You speak better French than most of our British ambassadors.” He turned to Lyra, noticed her inquisitive look and explained, “Those are people that work for Britain and go to other countries to make sure everybody discusses the important matters reasonably and no-one gets into silly fights. At least they try, but countries can be as stubborn as real people.”

She giggled. “Countries get into fights?”

Mycroft nodded. “Yes. Some try to take things away from each other, and the other country gets stroppy, and then there's yelling, and, when things go really bad, hitting each other. We try not to let that happen, though.”

She giggled again. “Do countries get put into timeout, too?”

Mycroft nodded contemplatively. “Sometimes. We call it a trade embargo. It works like this.” He took the bowl of mashed potatoes and placed it next to him on the table. “I've got the mashed potatoes,” he said, “and your Uncle Greg has the green beans.”

Greg caught on and took the bowl of beans. “Aha!” he cried. “I have all the green beans on the table!”

Lyra giggled. “But silly, Maman and Daddy have some on their plates, too.”

“Yes,” Will said, “but only a small amount, and we're eating that. Sorry, Mycroft, you can't have my green beans.”

“And sorry, Greg, you can't have my mashed potatoes,” Sophia declared. “I need them myself. Go ask Mycroft, he has lots.”

“Mycroft, may I have some of your mashed potatoes?” Greg politely asked.

“Of course,” the younger man just as politely replied, and dipped the serving spoon into the mash. Greg held over his plate, and Lyra watched with fascination as Mycroft served him the food.

Greg started eating the mash.

“Say thank you, Greg.” Sophia intoned in the same voice she would use with her children.

The silver-haired man stubbornly crossed his arms, scowled and said, “No. And I'm not giving you any green beans, either.”

“Please?” Mycroft asked, widening his eyes appealingly, and Greg had a hard time not melting on the spot.

“He shared, Uncle Greg,” Lyra said in a bossy voice. “You have to share, too.”

Said uncle stuck out his bottom lip and kept his arms crossed. “No!” he said, very much in a tone that little Dan would use.

Lyra giggled, understanding that he didn't really mean it.
“No!” Dan happily exclaimed in agreement with his uncle.

“Well, then you're not getting any more mashed potatoes from me,” Mycroft said, sticking his bottom lip out in a pout, too. He was looking endearingly absurd.

“Ha,” the older man smugly replied. “I already have some, see if I care.”

“Sophia,” Mycroft said in a sad tone. “He's being very unreasonable.”

By that time, the two parents had appropriated themselves of the rest of the serving dishes and given the gravy boat to Lyra to guard.

“Well then,” the mother said with a smile at the dejected Mycroft, “if he doesn't share with you, I won't share with him.”

“But I want some more roast!” Greg protested.

“Tough luck, brother,” Sophia declared, sotto voce.

Greg looked disappointed, then turned towards Will. “May I have some carrots, please?”

“You were mean to Mycroft,” Will hesitantly said.

“All right, I'll give you some green beans,” Greg replied, lifting the bowl enticingly.

Will sighed longingly. “I really want some of those beans.”

“Will!” Sophia exclaimed, while Mycroft pretended to be even more dejected, shoulders drooping and all. “I know,” she said. “Let's have an embargo. We're not taking Uncle Greg's beans and not sharing our food with him until he agrees to play nice.”

Mycroft visibly perked up, straightening his back and shoulders and looking innocently hopeful. It was absolutely endearing.

“Yeah!” Lyra exclaimed with a grin. “Embargo!”

“All right,” Will and Mycroft agreed. “Embargo.”

“But,” Greg said in a tragic tone, “that means that I get nothing to eat but beans.”

“Until you apologise and share,” Sophia firmly said. “And that goes for dessert, too. See how much you like your precious green beans when we're all eating trifle.”

“Oh, all right,” her brother proclaimed, deflating dramatically. “I'm sorry, Mycroft. Here, have the beans.” He handed the serving bowl over, and Mycroft promptly passed it on to Will, having easily deduced that the man really wished to have some.

“And that's how an embargo works between countries,” he said, smiling at Lyra. “You can also have a situation like that in the business world, then it's called a boycott.”

“Boycott,” she repeated, memorising the new word. Then she asked, “Do countries really act like babies?”

Mycroft sighed. “You'd be surprised, dear Lyra, how sadly accurate that description is.”

Decades later, Ambassador Kingsbury-Jones would still remember the truth of her Uncle Mycroft's
words. But that is another story.

“I like your Mycroft,” Sophia later said to Greg as they were loading the dishwasher together. “He's good with the children, too, very approachable and not at all condescending, as so many adults are.”

Greg smiled happily.

“You're utterly besotted, Greggie,” she said with a smile.

“Pearls, you Victorian maiden aunt,” he shot back, his own eyes dancing with laughter.

She shook her head, pony tail swinging, and laughed, her brother joining in.

“I've told you about Sherlock, haven't I?” Greg finally asked.

She smiled. “The most brilliant and exasperating man on the planet, right?”

“Mycroft is smarter, but basically, yeah. The thing is,” her brother continued, “arrogant and acerbic as Sherlock is sometimes, he's remarkably patient and kind with children. I asked him about that once and he said that children are still curious, observant and open-minded, and no-one's trained the stupidity into them yet.”

The siblings looked at each other and broke into laughter.

“He sounds like an utter berk,” Sophia finally said as she wiped the now bare kitchen table clean, “but I suspect I'm going to like him, too.”

From the vicinity of Greg’s knee came a bright, happy voice. “Berk!”

Dan, now cleaned of the remains of his orange-coloured lunch, had sneaked back into the kitchen and looked incredibly proud at having learned a new word.

Sophia clapped her hand over her eyes, and Greg started laughing again even as he picked up and hugged the toddler. He really loved his family.

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