Can't Rewind Now We've Gone Too Far
by Basser

Summary

At age nineteen, Sherlock Holmes dropped out of university to become a drug addict.

Notes

So what started out as a silly idea about Sherlock being in a band when he was younger (see my other fic "Internet Killed the Video Star", which spawned this) somehow managed to mutate itself into this long, dark, horrifically introspective exploration of the process of developing a drug addiction and growing up with brain abnormalities. It got really personal really fast, but then I guess that was probably just inevitable. Write what you know and all that.

Anyway! Thanks for giving this a look and I hope it's half as entertaining to read as it was to write.

(Oh and by the way, chapter titles are the lyrics to 'Very Busy People' by The Limousines. Because theme naming is fun.)
**Characterisation Notes:** Sherlock is 19, Mycroft is 26. Neither are yet as aloof or self-confident as they are on the show. Mycroft is still working his way up in the government and thus doesn't have as much free time to devote to being omniscient. Sherlock is still a genius but lacks the motivation to apply himself, so instead of going to uni early he started at a normal age (meaning 18 in Michaelmas '03, turning 19 just before Hilary '04, story begins during Trinity term). He isn't really sure whether he's trying to rebel or conform and thus tends to vacillate between the two. No mind palace yet (though perhaps a proto-version) and he still hasn't figured out how to delete things on purpose. And drug addicts aren't emotionally stable people, so don't be alarmed if he shifts from optimistic the one moment to miserable the next. Also he swears a lot, on account of being a teenager. I think it's kind of funny to be honest but might seem out of character.

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1. We'll End Up Numb

It started with an experiment.

His hypothesis was as follows: *If the stimulatory effects of caffeine and/or nicotine improve focus slightly, then a more powerful stimulant will improve focus significantly.*

Obtaining the drugs hadn't been difficult. He was, after all, surrounded by university students. The boy in the room across the hall provided him with plenty of contacts, and he'd soon amassed a decent-sized sample set from which to conduct his tests.

First were the semi-legal substances. Ritalin was calming, languid. While he appreciated the lower volume his thoughts seemed to take he soon found that without his brain scratching itself half to death against his skull he lost all drive to do much of anything. He spent the afternoon watching a group of squirrels gather acorns outside his window. Quite tranquil. Serene. Unfortunately not much good for coursework.

Dexedrine was next. It gave him plenty of energy, incredible focus. He finished three papers and half his maths work before the urge to get up and *do something* drove him to clean his living space, re-alphabetise the bookshelf and write a treatise on perfume scents. Too much, he determined as he came down. Far too much. It would take him *weeks* to get his room back into some kind of acceptable (dis)order.

Methamphetamine hardly did anything. He out-smoked three tweakers (whose presence he'd only agreed to put up with for the use of their pipes) and found himself awash in a sort of bland contentment. Peaceful, but disinteresting. Too boring, he decided. Plus it required an enormous amount of product to work. He gave the leftover crystals to his erstwhile lab partners as payment for their assistance and spent the next hour watching them smoke themselves into varying states of psychosis.

Cocaine was the last drug he tried. Contrary to what the term 'snorting' might imply, he found inhaling the soft white powder much easier than expected. All it took was a light intake of breath to draw it up the paper roll and straight into his sinuses. The flesh along the way seemed to fall numb on contact, a sharp burning followed by total loss of sensation spreading outwards from his nose and down the back of his throat. He coughed instinctively, rubbed at his tingling cheeks and waited for something to happen.
Two seconds, three. Nothing. Was this going to be like the meth? How long should it take? Surely it would have kicked in by now. Maybe he hadn't done enough. Should he try cutting another li-?

His eyes widened and he abruptly stopped poking his face.

Oh.

Oh... hell. Bloody hell. Holy shit fucking-

It came on like an explosion. Blood was suddenly screaming through his veins, bright spots in his vision danced and faded and flared again. He collapsed bonelessly backwards onto his bed with a gasp as his body went haywire. But his mind... god, his mind did exactly the opposite. A million racing thoughts, the backdrop of normal consciousness, all seemed to stutter to a halt and shred like confetti. Torn fragments of ideas and feelings and long-past snippets of memory drifted down in flurries of snow, falling softly to cover his brain in a white blanket of silence. Calm, cool and pristine like a field in winter. January in his brain. He sniggered stupidly at the mental image and closed his eyes with a happy sigh. This. This was it. This was perfection. This was his.

When the initial high wore off he found himself left with an excess of bright, happy energy. He could do anything, the world was his to command. So he tidied his room and finished assignments, eradicated the latest batch of his brother's listening devices and waved cheerfully at the MI5 agent loitering in the quad outside, humming a jaunty tune all the while. Good lord, this was incredible. He had to figure out how to feel like this all the time.

As soon as Mycroft's bugs were all safely flushed down the toilet he set out to find the coke dealer again. He was going to need a lot more powder.

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Over the next few weeks he underwent a transformation. Buried in the soothing snowbank of a near-constant cocaine buzz he became a new person. A better person. No longer a freak, a psycho, a danger to be avoided. (Unless he wanted to be.) He could control himself now, didn't have to be so damned clever all the time.

Not that he stopped knowing things, of course. Quite the contrary actually, since it was far easier to focus on relevant details when didn't keep getting so distracted by streams of extraneous data. It was just that now he could consciously decide which facts to point out and which to keep to himself. When he saw things nobody else could possibly have noticed - even if they were amazing and smart and quite likely emotionally devastating for the subject in question - he didn't have to say anything. It was like waking up to find you'd been missing a limb your whole life. Only instead of finding himself miraculously able to walk or play piano he was just given the ability to control what came out of his mouth. Such a stupid simple thing, but it made so much difference.

Back before cocaine he'd lived in constant dread of speaking aloud to anyone. It wasn't that he minded the people (though most of them were idiots and a good majority were obnoxious about it) but that he absolutely hated the helpless resignation of knowing that no matter what he promised himself there was no way to stay in the moment enough to monitor what he said. Conversations by their very nature it seemed were incredibly boring. Everyone kept expecting him to pretend to care about so many things that weren't the least bit interesting; pets and children and the weather and stupid subjective rubbish like hopes and feelings. Acting like he wasn't bored out of his skull was bloody exhausting, and quite frequently damned near impossible besides. His head was just full of so much stuff, all connected in complicated impossible infinite ways. The slightest thing could have him a million miles away on a train of thought no one else could follow.
How could one possibly stay focused on someone's silly story about a cat after all when the chemical structure of taurine was so much more fascinating? And that led to sulphonic acids, laundry detergents, enzyme inhibitors, kidney disease... on and on because there was always something more interesting than listening to ordinary people talk about themselves.

But then out of absolutely nowhere it would be his turn to speak again, and he'd be thinking of nothing even close to what they were supposed to be talking about. So his choices were to reply with whatever was on his mind, which was always too tangentially connected for anyone to see the relevance of and made him seem insane, or try to hide the fact that he'd been daydreaming by responding with whatever the last conversation-related thought he remembered having was. Depending on how far off in his head he was this could happen more or less automatically, bypassing any sort of conscious approval and taking him as much unawares as the other person. More often than not he'd snap back to reality at the sound of his own voice pointing out a detail about another person's habits or appearance he'd noticed about a hundred mental cycles ago and resolved not to mention. When the only danger was offending people this was simply a bit of a nuisance. However he frequently had secrets or thoughts that really did need to stay private, and in many situations the complete lack of self-control could prove devastating.

So he took to texting and email whenever possible, since the extra step of reading over the message before he sent it assured his thinking-brain could never be overridden by his talking-brain. Drinking obscene amounts of tea and coffee also sometimes seemed to help, and he discovered that putting his body under physical stress could boost adrenaline and make it a little easier to concentrate for short periods. Cigarettes had thus been an experiment to test the hypothesis that stimulants were beneficial somehow, which he'd conceived of after coming across nicotine's effects in a biochemistry book. Swiping a pack off one of the house servants had been simple, hiding the resulting dependency from his brother had not. It didn't matter that Mycroft made him stop anyway since the negligible positive effect hadn't been worth the hassle of obtaining the foul things.

Starting up again at uni had been an act of desperation. There were too many people around and too many unavoidable conversations, and while nicotine didn't actually do much to stop his getting distracted by everything it at least put a damper on the whole reflexive responding-without-thinking business. In an environment where most would not hesitate to thump him for revealing their poorly-kept relationship statuses even this slight benefit became invaluable. More than worth the loss of lung capacity from having to practically chain-smoke to maintain it.

Of course in situations where keeping mum was not an option he was still pretty well screwed, since nothing seemed capable of controlling his general tactlessness. But he'd eventually learned to accept that. It was just one of the facts of life: water is wet, grass is green, Sherlock Holmes says rude things and gets punched.

But cocaine... cocaine had changed the facts. In the shimmering white snowfield nothing could move without his knowledge, everything was too clear and clean and uncluttered to let him get sidetracked by stray thoughts. Moreover it was finally possible to stop, sit down and carefully arrange each sentence without worrying about unintended words and tangents butting in when he said them. Statements finally came out exactly as he'd planned, nothing slipped in without being approved first. Suddenly how he presented himself was within his power to decide; he could be heartbreakingly eloquent or callously vulgar, a Shakespearean actor or a polite vicar. He could behave literally any way he wanted. He could even pretend to be normal.

And he soon discovered something amazing: people liked normal Sherlock.

Well, strangers did anyway. The folks who knew him already - Sebastian, Adric and Natalie and others he saw regularly at meals or lectures - seemed more disturbed than anything by his new
Regular Human persona. He supposed that was understandable - it was after all quite a big change, and since he was careful masking the signs of his developing habit there could be no discernible cause for them to attribute it to. He kept the act up around them anyway because their befuddled expressions every time he said something polite were entertaining to watch, not because he gave a toss what they thought of him.

No, the people he actually cared about fooling were the new ones. People he'd just met, the strangers and casual acquaintances who didn't know he was actually a freakish sociopath under the false charisma. He smiled his Normal Smile and said his Normal Things and they smiled back and didn't seem at all offended. A few even asked to see him again, as if they wanted to have a second conversation, or even a third. As if they wanted to be friends. As if they liked him. It was such a new and strange way to interact with the world. Not interesting in the sense that chemistry was interesting but it captured his attention regardless, it was fun.

He thought he might finally be beginning to understand what the rest of humanity saw in this whole being social thing.

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One Friday night at supper he shocked Seb speechless by asking if there was anything on for the weekend. After a few rather tiresome minutes of convincing the other boy he wasn't planning to run an experiment involving poisonous gas on any crowds of students Sherlock managed to get himself invited to his first social gathering. It was exciting, but probably not for the right reasons - he was mostly just looking forward to compiling more data to add to his ongoing study of normal human behaviour.

That night he carefully ensured his brother's spies were all busy following someone who looked a lot like him and had been paid to wear his coat for the evening. Clad in a school hoodie, dark jeans and plain trainers (more or less his default outfit since leaving Eton, those horrid uniforms had put him off formal attire for a good decade) he joined up with Sebastian and another boy he didn't know the name of at the door to the residence hall and set off across town to try his hand at the world of university keggers.

The club was both very loud and very crowded, conditions that if he were sober would have driven him into an overstimulated meltdown within minutes. Luckily for him and everyone else though he was nowhere near sober. He'd done two massive lines before they left, figuring the dim lighting would be enough to hide his dilated pupils and any ensuing nosebleed could be attributed to being elbowed in the crowd. And in a rare moment of foresight he'd even thought to bring extra cocaine in case he was out long enough to start coming down. All in all he felt very prepared.

Seb didn't stick around to introduce him to anyone, which was just as well as the econ student's customary method of presenting Sherlock to people tended to be something along the lines of 'this is the freak who lives in the room next to mine, he's a massive prick' and Sherlock wanted to make a better first impression than that. He wandered the maze of bodies like an explorer in an uncharted jungle, cataloguing everything and taking reams and reams of mental notes. It was all so fascinating. People dancing and laughing and talking to each other. None of it looked like it was all that difficult. How had he ever thought himself incapable of this?

Pretty soon he was chatting up a trio of giggling fresher girls - not because he found any of them particularly attractive, but because he'd decided an interactive approach to scientific observation would best suit his purposes and they'd been nearby. When one of them broke off from the rest and dragged him over to a dark corner he followed, wondering what on earth she thought might be over there that would interest anyone. Once obscured from the sight of other partygoers she whipped
around and shoved him roughly against the wall, and for a panicked second he thought he'd said something to offend her without realising again. He opened his mouth to apologise (for what? he hated not knowing what he'd done, cocaine was supposed to fix this what had-) and suddenly her lips were pressed against his.

Oh.

He blinked, feeling her fingers tangle in the curls of his short hair as her lithe body pressed closer. She was...? Hm. Well... alright then. Kissing. Apparently they were kissing. Sherlock desperately called up everything he knew on the subject and determined he was woefully ignorant. He decided to just improvise. Couldn't be that difficult, right? He wound his arms around her waist and reciprocated the best he could. It all felt extremely uncoordinated and probably wasn't anything close to correct, but luckily it didn't seem to matter much because despite the hour the girl was incredibly drunk.

Snogging, he decided, was not nearly as enthralling as everyone made it out to be. After a few minutes of sloppy making out he was starting to wonder what the actual point of all this was, since this couldn't possibly be an end of itself. Far too boring. Then one of her small hands suddenly moved out of his hair and found its way to the front of his jeans. The unexpected contact to a very sensitive area startled him into breaking away, and he stared down at her as she knelt down to fumble with his belt buckle, blond ringlets fluttering as she giggled drunkenly. Oh, he realised. That was the point. Well then. He... supposed he could give it a try. It was part of the experiment after all. Had to at least make an attempt. For science.

He frowned as she continued to be thwarted by his belt. This should... probably be a lot more exciting. Human males were supposed to get all hot and bothered by the mere thought of sexual contact with a woman, weren't they? But he really wasn't aroused in the least. He was also getting a bit annoyed by the girl's constant, shrill giggling at her own inebriated state as she utterly failed to comprehend the mechanics of a simple square frame buckle. A 'bit annoyed' in this case translated into a prodigious feat of irritation, considering the enormous amount of cocaine in his system. She would be absolutely unbearable if his high wore off. And who knew how long this whole business would take, considering he wasn't even slightly erect? No, no. Too much risk, he decided. It would take forever and he refused to be caught anywhere near this woman when he began to sober up.

Catching her hands before she could figure out the fiendish contraption at his waist Sherlock made a token attempt at pretending he'd gotten an urgent call on his mobile, then strode quickly away. He stopped on the other side of the writhing knot of bodies that made up the dance floor and glanced through to where he'd been, seeing the girl had already moved on and found another bloke to snog. The two seemed happy enough, so he made a mental note about promiscuity in women and wandered on. He stopped at one of the folding tables dotted around and appropriated a bottle of water, downing half of it in one go. Cocaine had the bothersome tendency to make his mouth extremely dry. Receiving a donation of saliva from some plastered girl had admittedly alleviated the problem somewhat, but was also vaguely disgusting, so Sherlock quickly drained the bottle and grabbed another one as he set off toward the bar he'd spotted. Maybe alcohol would make girls more interesting. If nothing else it would be useful to know how he reacted to it while high.

He ordered a vodka mixer at random and sat on one of the tall stools facing the crowd, letting his eyes wander over the throng of bodies and deducing, deducing, deducing. The girl near the speakers slept with nearly the entire rowing team over the course of last term; the one dancing next to her keeps a yorkshire terrier but only puts up with its incessant yapping because it belonged to her late mother; the boy over by the stairs is dating three different women at once, one a professor and none the girl he's currently flirting with; the two girls to the left think they're fraternal twins but their mother had an affair and one of them is an illegitimate half-sibling.
Sherlock forced himself to stop as the bartender set down a glass of clear red liquid on the bartop behind him. Apparently it was open bar (some wealthy lad's birthday, no doubt) so he grabbed it without worrying about paying and spun back round on the stool to observe some more.

He took a careful sip of the drink, not entirely sure if his taste buds had recovered from the cocaine numbness yet. They had. He scrunched his face up instinctively at the disgusting half-rotted taste. Ugh, he could always taste the alcohol.

"It's not so bad if you just chug the whole thing," a voice said from beside him. Sherlock forced the childish grimace off his face and turned to find a very handsome young man had claimed the next stool over.

"I'm fine," Sherlock replied tetchily, unwilling to give the stranger an excuse to ridicule him for not being able to handle a vodka cranberry. He attempted to take a larger swallow of his mixer to illustrate the point and ended up immediately spitting it out again in revulsion.

The other man chuckled warmly, shaking his head. "You're alright, mate. Here try this one."

He was holding out a stout glass half-filled with some light blue concoction. Sherlock found himself flushing slightly as he realised the man was offering to share a glass he'd already drunk from - something like indirect kissing, he imagined. His groin gave a vague stirring at the implications, making him stop short and blink in confusion as he reached out for the glass. Wait. Waaait wait wait, he'd just had a woman grab his crotch without so much as a flicker of arousal and now he was getting excited at the mere thought of sharing a drink with someone? And was it just him or had he described the man as handsome earlier?

Oh good lord I'm gay.

He froze. How the- how had he not- no, he couldn't be. Surely he'd have realised sooner. He was nineteen for Christ's sake, that was far too old to just now be discovering an orientation. People noticed those kinds of things during the early adolescent years when their hormones were raging... and he'd spent that period of his life in an all-boy's boarding school, for god's... he wouldn't have been able to help noticing if he was... was attracted to... oh. Oh.. dear. Sherlock's eyes widened. Various buried memories began to shake themselves loose from the snowbanks in his head.

Fourteen years old, trailing unobtrusively behind an older boy named Micah Allen and trying not to blush when the senior referred to him as his 'pet genius'; doing the other boy's assignments even though they were boring because it made Micah smile and pat his head and say 'good boy' in a way that was somehow not as condescending as it should be; discovering confusing feelings and a lot of unidentifiable desires which he'd attributed to puberty and shoved firmly to the back of his mind where they whispered terrible things in the darkness; refusing to sleep at all during the holidays lest his brother deduce the content of his dreams; becoming a target for bullying the following year when Micah left for Cambridge, fair game now that he no longer 'belonged' to an upperclassman; spending the rest of that half learning the hard way how to defend himself, Father finally getting fed up with his slipping grades and informing him he had until next hols to improve; forcing himself to overcome his aversion to the horrific stillness of study hall because he didn't want to find out what the unspoken consequences of failure would be; no more time after that for any thought besides 'shut up' or 'focus' or 'idiot' repeated over and over ad nauseum...

A hand suddenly broke into his flashbacks, waving in front of his face. He blinked.

"Alright?" the man next to him asked with an odd sort of half-smile. Sherlock realised he had frozen with his hand still halfway out to take the offered glass and was now leaning awkwardly to
the side with his mouth half open, staring at nothing. He snapped himself forcefully out of the swirling eddies of recollection and grabbed the other man's drink, taking a much larger swallow of the blue liquid than he'd intended.

"Ugh!" he immediately sputtered, clapping a hand to his mouth and nearly retching as he shoved the glass back to its owner. Oh god it was even worse than the cranberry - some kind of appalling mix of pineapple and melon juice with the foul rot of liquor permeating everything like a disease. How did people stand this stuff?

The stranger was laughing good-naturedly at his violent reaction. "No good, eh?"

"That's disgusting," Sherlock moaned, digging into the front pocket of his hoodie for the plastic bottle he'd stowed there earlier. Unfortunately the lukewarm water did very little to remove the cloying aftertaste of decayed fruit; he grimaced at the flavour still clinging to his tongue.

"Yeah I'm not too fond of it either," the man said, grinning. "But hey, it's better than straight shots. What's your name, by the way? Don't think I've seen you around before."

"Oh, er.. no, you wouldn't have. I've... been a bit busy with coursework lately, not much time to go out." Not entirely a lie. He pasted on his Normal Smile and held out a hand in greeting. "Sherlock Holmes."

The man took his hand and Sherlock resolutely ignored the stirring in his pants as warm, calloused fingers closed around his. No amount of cocaine in the world could quell the vivid images his brain was conjuring up right now concerning those fingers. "Victor Trevor," the man said. "Very nice to make your acquaintance," he added with a wink, and Sherlock abruptly realised he was being flirted with.

Brilliant! I mean, er... how fascinating. He decided he should really flirt back. The experiment was still on, after all.

"And yours," he replied in the same teasing tone of voice as the other had used, smirking slightly to add emphasis. Ha, flirting was easy.

"This place is a bit loud for a conversation, don't you think?" Victor pointed out with a false air of nonchalance. "What do you say we find somewhere more... private to talk?"

More stirrings. This was looking much more promising than the girl had been. "After you," Sherlock said, indicating the other man lead him. The two of them abandoned their drinks and made their way upstairs.

They didn't end up doing much talking.

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He saw Victor several more times over the following weeks, the steadfast young man becoming what Sherlock guessed was his first real friend. Not his boyfriend, because people didn't date sociopaths and neither of them were much for exclusivity anyway, but they did shag several more times in several interesting places. As far as Sherlock was concerned it was the perfect relationship. He didn't have to worry about Victor breaking up with him over something he said because they weren't together, and he could use whatever persona he wanted around the man because Vic had figured out his act within the first hour of their meeting (to be fair, Sherlock had been a bit too distracted to worry about his cadence at the time) and didn't seem to mind when Sherlock flipped rapidly between various characters. He'd been building a small repertoire of them and needed the
They even struck up a bit of a cooperative association at bars. Vic would spot a likely set of
targets, Sherlock would deduce their orientation (his 'party trick', as Vic called it - he'd tried to
explain it wasn't a trick and got an eyeroll and a lesson on figurative colloquialisms; Vic was
apparently reading linguistics) and together they'd conspire to seduce every gay man in the
establishment. The sea of disappointed faces when they ended up leaving together at the end of the
night was extremely entertaining for no real reason he could identify. Vic would laugh though, and
he would too. It was simply... fun. For the first time in living memory Sherlock found he was
genuinely fond of another person's company.

The rest of his life seemed to improve just as dramatically. Studying was easy now that he wasn't
constantly compelled to check his surroundings for cameras. Lectures were dull, but he could sit
through them without feeling suffocated by the stillness. And the inconspicuous men his brother
assigned to follow him from building to building stopped being aggravating and started being a
source of entertainment. Mycroft was wasting taxpayers' hard-earned money to pay various agents
to tail him around the city, he figured it was his civic duty to at least create a bit of a challenge for
the poor sods. Sherlock very swiftly became the worst mark ever.

He started taking the most convoluted routes he could possibly think of, twisting and turning and
ducking in and out of alleys whenever the mood took him. Whenever his pursuer was forced to
break cover or risk losing him he'd invariably stop short, turn to face them with a winning smile
and perform a deliberately incorrect military salute before walking off again. Once or twice he
even managed to get himself flipped off doing this, which was incredibly funny considering the
distinguished military histories of those typically sent to shadow him.

Eventually he deduced that the Follow-Mr Holmes'-Baby-Brother-Around-Oxford mission was
seen as something like a work holiday for more experienced agents, and a safe training venue for
rookies. With this in mind Sherlock began keeping a close eye on the approximate rank of his tails
and modifying his behaviour according to seniority. Veterans got either the dull routine or an
unpredictable combination of both circuitous and direct paths depending on how haggard/bored
they looked. Newer recruits invariably ended up dogging him around the most complicated pattern
imaginable. After the fourth junior agent got lost he stopped seeing anyone with less than ten years' service shadowing his movements, which was gratifyingly amusing if a little disappointing. Not that it mattered in terms of his privacy of course - he could lose them all equally easily when he needed to - he'd just liked feeling as if he was making a contribution to the training regime.

The thought of being watched used to be enough to drive him mad with paranoid anger - his focus
on school would shatter as he fought to get out from the path of what he perceived to be constant judging scrutiny. Not so anymore. Now it was just a sort of silly background event. All these people scurrying about in some massive undercover operation to watch a nineteen year old swot about in the lab and write essays, it was almost comically absurd. Especially when considering that somehow, for all their being a bunch of proper paramilitary spies, they couldn't even seem to outwit said nineteen year old.

Granted that was hardly fair to them, as he was a genius. But still. Not one of them had caught him buying or using drugs (which he knew because Mycroft had yet to descend from the heavens to smite him), none had managed to tail him all the way to a bar (it seemed he knew Oxford far better than they and could always find a misleading alley) and none had picked up on his frequent trysts with strange men at said bars (because, again, lack of smiting. Or a snarky phone call. He wasn't entirely sure which was more likely but neither had occurred so it was a moot point.)

It was all rather pathetic.
Contemplating the switch from insufflation to injection had ostensibly been an innocent idea to curb nosebleeds. They kept happening more and more frequently lately and for far less explainable reasons. It only made sense, therefore, to find a different way to use the drug before someone figured him out. Simple problem solving, really. That was what he told himself. He knew the real reason was because his tolerance had risen too much to let him feel the rush from snorting lines anymore, and he missed the giddy feeling of a snowstorm in his brain.

Sherlock wasn't stupid; he understood what he was doing to himself. His mind and body were already showing signs of breaking under the strain of being on a near-constant coke high. Victor had mentioned several times how starved he'd begun to look, bones sticking out sharp under too-pale skin. He often forgot to sleep for days on end, too buzzed to feel tired but afraid of the inevitable crash if he let himself come down. Going too long without the drug brought on a crippling miasma of miserable desperation and guilt, a vicious migraine and the feeling of being trapped in a thick, soupy fog. It was easier to keep going till he passed out, and that was usually what happened. He hadn't ended up in hospital yet but it was only a matter of time. He had to slow down. Start taking smaller doses and wean himself off like he should have done months ago. But it was so close to the new term and he'd need to be-

No. Shut up. He was too good at nearly convincing himself; had to stop listening to that insistent little voice.

Adopting an even more addictive route of administration wouldn't be an appropriate solution to anything, he told himself firmly. It would, in fact, be monumentally stupid, breathtakingly dangerous and quite probably borderline suicidal. He wasn't going to try it. Never. Not for anything.

The thing about cocaine though was that while you were high it made everything seem like a good idea. Even dangerous, monumentally stupid things. And despite his rising tolerance Sherlock still managed to spend the majority of his waking hours (of which there were now far more than was strictly reasonable) halfway to completely shitfaced.

So without really thinking it through one afternoon he swiped a few syringes from the medical department as he went to survey the cadaver storage area (which he wasn't technically allowed anywhere near, being a chemistry student, but that was irrelevant). On a whim the next day he looked up instructions and safety precautions on a drug-users' forum, having borrowed (not necessarily with permission) a stranger's laptop so Mycroft wouldn't see the search history. And on a quiet Tuesday night the following week he casually shook his ever-present tail (at the moment a former SAS who now did desk work and low-priority missions for MI5, owned a grey tomcat and recently widowed after a marriage of nearly twenty years, called Darrell, distinctly uncomfortable that Sherlock knew all this) and found a dark alcove behind one of the science labs where no camera could see. He'd just try it once. Just to see if it was any different. An experiment. For science. Then he'd never do it again.

As the needle entered his vein he had a vivid realisation that he'd gone too far. He would never be able to rewind from this moment. The moment when Sherlock Holmes had, officially and without any possible question, become an addict. Everything from now on would be a long, slow spiral to the end. He wanted to pull the needle out but it was too late now, wasn't it? The plunger was already down.

A pervasive sense of dread filled his chest as his ears began to ring... he was going to die.

Seconds later he no longer cared.
Sherlock made it a month before the inevitable happened. The night had been going poorly; he had the new term on, six different papers he'd been trying to write and an experiment running that simply refused to react properly, plus Seb was being an annoying git and trying to drag him off to some bar and fuck off you stupid toser I'm busy. Seb left him with a parting shot about psychotic junkies (Wait, what!? When did he-? Oh, hell, the track marks. Fuck. Well whatever, who was he going to tell, stupid bastard.) and Sherlock flipped him off before storming back into his room to try and get some work done.

He yanked down his sleeves angrily (why did he keep forgetting not to roll them up?) and surveyed the messy space. Disaster zone; clothes and books everywhere. His peacoat was on the floor, expensive wool probably wrinkling but fuck it, who cared. Glanced behind him, at the desk.

His pre-mixed 7% solution sat tranquil and innocent in its unlabelled Erlenmeyer flask on the stained wood. Shouldn't, but... no, he should. These essays were important. He checked the position of Mycroft's cameras (still pointed where he'd left them) and quickly fished a needle out of the false bottom of his desk drawer. He drew up a moderate amount of cloudy liquid from the flask into the syringe. Maybe just a touch more than usual, since he really needed to focus. Not too much though. Just a tiny bit. He'd be fine.

Ten minutes later he was pacing. Nothing was going right. Couldn't focus couldn't slow down couldn't think. This wasn't working, he needed more cocaine. The snow was melting in great patches from the soft white of his mind field until the whole thing was mottled and ugly with mud. Impossible to think around mud. Another quick flurry would fill in the gaps and leave it pristine again, then he'd be able to work. Just one more hit. It had only been a quarter hour since the last but surely he'd be alright? It was only a 7% solution after all, and his tolerance was so high - he'd barely even feel it. He'd just take a few more milligrams. It would be fine.

Five minutes later he hit the ground gasping as a savage blizzard tore through his head.

Sherlock awoke with a deep groan. His head hurt. No, scratch that, everything hurt. It took him a few minutes to muster up the energy to open his eyes. When he finally managed it was only to immediately screw them shut again at the sight of a round, pale face looming over him.

"Pis'sf'm'croft," he slurred indistinctly. Despite having just woken up he felt exhausted. In his head the snow had all melted. Brain was full of slush now - nothing but a vast lake of frigid wet slop sloshing back and forth. It was painful and wet and way too fucking cold.

"And a very pleasant evening to you too, little brother," Mycroft's voice quipped in a tone of bland civility. "I trust you slept well."

Sherlock cracked one eye open and fixed his unwelcome guest with a baleful glare. Mycroft's voice may have been civil but the rigid posture and tightly drawn face betrayed how utterly furious the man was under his careful demeanour. Under normal circumstances Sherlock might have congratulated himself for that - managing to piss off his emotionless statue of a brother so spectacularly was a rare accomplishment, after all. At the moment however he was having a hard time finding the enthusiasm. He felt like he'd been run down by a bus, and his brain might as well have been swapped for a toaster for all the good it was doing him. He slowly shifted himself around until he managed to manoeuvre into a sort of half-sitting slouch against the pillows, shivering violently. With a scowl he tugged the thin hospital blankets as far up as they'd go and set about resolutely ignoring his sibling.
Mycroft sighed very slightly when it became clear Sherlock wasn't going to acknowledge him. "Perhaps you could explain something to me," he continued in his artificially pleasant voice. Leaning away briefly he retrieved a thin sheaf of papers out of a pale beige folder sitting on the bedside table and made a deliberate show of scrutinising the text, despite having doubtless already memorised it. "I seem to have a report here claiming you were admitted to the hospital following a series of severe seizures, which according to the attending physician appear to have been induced by a blood cocaine concentration in excess of two and a half milligrams per litre - an amount I'm assured is, to use his exact words, 'bleeding ridiculous'."

Sherlock rolled his eyes to the ceiling. As amusing as it was to hear Mycroft swear he found he was distinctly not in the mood for his brother's usual prevaricating bullshit. "Do you really," he intoned dully, forgetting about the silent treatment he'd planned on.

"I do," Mycroft replied, tone light. "It's very troubling, because the implication appears to be that you've been abusing a highly illegal and dangerous substance behind my back for long enough to develop a tolerance. You and I both know that you would never be so stupid, however, so the only possible explanation is that someone in this hospital is fabricating toxicology results. I have no idea why anyone would do that. Perhaps you'd like to weigh in on the matter?"

Sherlock sighed heavily. His brother was such a condescending prat.

"It's not my fault your spies are idiots," he muttered, ignoring Mycroft's specious sarcasm to answer the question he knew was actually being asked. "Wasn't even a challenge to hide it. They never check the camera coverage after first placement, just have to shift them by degrees until there's blind spots." He wasn't sure why he'd explained that - now he'd have to find another way to fix the cameras. But Mycroft's face pinched in that particular way that meant he was seriously peeved and oh right, that was why. Hah. Naught-two Sherlock.

After a brief staring contest (during which Sherlock may have allowed a bit of a puerile smirk to creep onto his face, which may have been specifically designed to piss off his brother, which mightn't have been the best decision in the long run) the affable politicians' demeanour suddenly evaporated into a look of cold steel fury. Mycroft tossed the papers sharply back onto the table, leaned forward in his chair with a false air of nonchalance and locked eyes with his younger brother. Sherlock's decent mood vanished as he tried not to let himself recoil too obviously. For all his sibling's roundness and pomp the man really was capable of being quite terrifying when he was angry.

"For god's sake Sherlock, what were you thinking?" Mycroft nearly snarled. Sherlock refused to flinch.

"It was just a slight miscalculation," he replied more quietly than he'd meant to, eyes sliding away from his brother's gaze to look at the far wall instead. Not because he was intimidated or anything like that, just... bored of looking at that fat face. Right. "I simply overestimated my tolerance, that's all," he explained in what he hoped sounded like flat disinterest.

Mycroft looked distinctly unimpressed. "You know that's not what I meant."

Sherlock shrugged, shivering under his blanket. Fucking hell, could Mycroft not feel how frigid it was in here? Was his fat insulating him? For fuck's sake, the man must be part whale. His mind abruptly switched gears on him again as he cast his eyes around in search of a thermostat or some other kind of gauge.

"Focus, Sherlock," Mycroft snapped. Sherlock startled slightly and flicked his eyes back to his
brother's face.

"What?" he asked irritably.

"You nearly died, do you even realise that?"

"Of course I do." Who cared? Dying was boring. More pressing was the fact that his teeth were actually chattering now and it was proving quite difficult to huddle effectively under the blankets with all these tubes and wires sticking every which way. He glared at Mycroft through a violent shudder. "Look, if you're quite through being concerned would you mind getting someone to turn up the thermostat? It's bloody freezing. I'm aware you can't even feel it through your blubber but do try to remember not all of us were switched at birth with a walrus."

Mycroft's eyebrow raised ever so slightly at the convoluted insult but he made no other movement, apparently choosing to completely ignore his younger brother's really quite reasonable request. Sherlock was royally pissed off. What, the bastard was going to just let him freeze? Fucking git! With a fierce scowl he shifted about and finally managed to extricate his left hand far enough to flip his brother off over the top of the sheets.

With an alarmingly quick motion Mycroft's hand suddenly shot forward and grabbed Sherlock's fingers, who yelped as the hand shifted to latch onto his bony wrist with a deft motion and yanked his arm out from under the covers. Ignoring the string of rather creative expletives this elicited Mycroft carefully turned the limb over to expose the underside of the forearm. His expression rapidly darkened as he studied the pattern of tiny scars and puncture wounds scattered over the pale skin.

"How long?" the older man asked icily, letting go of the too-thin wrist. Sherlock jerked his limb back under the covers with a sullen glare.

"None of your bloody business," he retorted.

"I'm checking you in to a rehabilitative facility."

Sherlock's eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't dare. Father would have a fit."

"If it's a choice between Father's disapproval and your death, Sherlock, I would gladly choose the former."

"Disapproval?" Sherlock repeated scathingly. "Mycroft, he'll be furious. I'll be lucky if I'm just disinherited."

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before you began injecting cocaine directly into your bloodstream," his brother sniped back. Sherlock huddled in on himself and scowled at nothing. Mycroft had no idea what he was bloody talking about. As if he hadn't reminded himself of every single horrible scenario a thousand times, as if he'd chosen to let it get this far. And how, exactly, was he meant to have talked himself down when not even the knowledge of certain death had stopped him? A deep pit of anger was forming in his stomach. Mycroft could go fuck himself.

"Honestly Sherlock, why-" the man started again.

"Why? Because I couldn't bloody think, that's why!" Sherlock cut him off in a half-screeching snarl. The wild-eyed glare he shot at his sibling would probably have been more effective had he not still been swaddled up in his blanket like a child.

Predictably Mycroft just sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose delicately in a condescending
look of exasperation. "Ah yes, of course. My security team 'distracting' you again, I imagine?"

"Obviously!"

"And you felt an illegal stimulant was your best solution to the problem."

"Yes!” Sherlock snapped. "Yes, I bloody did! I tried everything else, Mycroft!"

"Oh?” his brother asked drily, lowering his hand to fix him with a flat stare. "Like what, pray tell?"

Sherlock bristled. "Oh I don't know, like perhaps asking you outright to stop spying on me so much? Telling you how much the cameras bloody bother me and having you completely ignore me like usual? Getting rid of them myself only for you to say I was being unreasonable and threaten to go to Father if I didn't stop destroying government property? Any of that ringing a fucking bell, Brother Dearest?"

Mycroft opened his mouth to reply but Sherlock didn't let him get farther than "Sherlock you know why I have to-" before he was shouting again.

"But of course you didn't listen, did you?” he ranted in a vicious snarl. He didn't want to hear his brother's stupid reasons. He'd been given all the excuses before and was bloody sick of it. The lake of slush in his head had begun to bubble and steam with righteous fury. "Why would you? After all nothing that bothers me is actually a problem, is it? No, it's just Sherlock being a stupid freak again! Let's all ignore him until he decides to get over this silly little eccentric phase! Surely he'll have to figure out how to function like a normal human being eventually. Why should anyone bother being the least bit helpful in the meantime?"

"That's not-" Mycroft started. He looked rather alarmed by the unexpectedly emotional outburst. Sherlock was aware he was breaking every rule of decorum they usually held firm like a protective barrier between them, but he was too far past the point of caring to stop. His head hurt and everything hurt and he was so fucking angry and he wanted Mycroft to understand.

"No! Shut up!” he screeched. "Look, I was sick of being so fucking useless while you ran about with your perfect grades and your perfect manners and your perfect bloody life so I did my best to ignore the spying but I just couldn't, because I'm not like you and I can't just quit seeing things so I asked you to stop but you just went oh Sherlock you pathetic idiot why would I ever do that-"

"I didn't-"

"Shut up! So since I couldn't change the environment the only option left was to change myself and guess what I bloody succeeded! All it took was one little chemical! And if I recall correctly, you seemed to think it was a massive improvement! After all I seem to remember getting a nice little congratulations on my recent upswing in grade point average from a certain oblivious whale of a sibling a few months back. How did you even think I managed that? Did you think I'd just gotten over being driven mad by your cameras? Were you all smug and satisfied because it obviously wasn't really distracting me, I'd just been whining like usual?"

"Of course not," Mycroft said faintly.

"Liar," Sherlock spat. He'd worked himself out of his blankets with furious gesturing during his tirade and the chill on his arms was raising goose pimples. He also felt vaguely sick. Mycroft seemed a little shell-shocked, so rather than maintain the staring contest they'd habitually fallen into Sherlock instead curled forward miserably over his knees, hugged his arms to his chest and shivered for all he was worth.
"... fuck's sake turn the bloody heat up," he mumbled after a moment of silence. To his surprise, Mycroft obeyed. The thermostat was hidden behind the bedcurtain somewhere to his right, judging by the footsteps. Seconds later the sounds of a baseboard heater clunking to life filled the room.

Mycrofile moved back to his bedside but didn't resume sitting. "The room was being kept cold because they needed to keep your core temperature down," he explained quietly. "Cocaine-induced hyperthermia. But I'm sure you knew that."

Sherlock didn't reply. He heard his brother step away again, a cupboard on the other side of the room opening and closing, and suddenly another blanket was being tucked around his shoulders with more care than he was prepared to process. A horrifying pricking sensation collected behind his eyes, but he sniffed forcefully to ward it off. He was not going to cry in front of his brother. His sinuses were throbbing slightly from the abuse but he ignored them in favour of glaring at the bed railings. Why were they up? And the velcro cuffs... had he been restrained for some reason?

"You're bleeding," Mycroft cut in abruptly. Sherlock blinked and looked down at the sheets. They were indeed becoming speckled with blood.

"Oh," he realised, his nose had started up again. He shrugged. "Happens."

"I'll get a doctor," his brother muttered, sounding slightly nauseous. Sherlock raised his head enough to see the older man's face and quirked an eyebrow at the sight of Mycroft's rapidly paling complexion.

"... Does blood bother you?" he asked curiously, eyes narrowing in interest. He tried to remember if his sibling had displayed any hints of haemophobia during their childhood, but came up blank. As far as he could recall neither of them had ever been hurt badly enough for it to come up. Not even Sherlock's frequent excursions up trees and straight into multiple hazardous situations had ever necessitated much more than a sticking plaster and a kind word from the nanny. By the time he got to far enough along in school to start getting beaten up in earnest Mycroft had been away at university and he'd been at Eton.


"I don't care."

"Well I do," his brother snapped, and turned smartly on his heel to walk right out the door. Presumably he was off to flag down half the hospital staff to come stuff gauze up his little brother's nostrils. Sherlock rolled his eyes and scoffed; figured the man who ordered assassinations left and right would be put off by a simple nosebleed. What a ponce.

A movement by the wall caught his attention, and he looked over to see one of the curtains blowing in a faint breeze. The window was slightly open. Intrigued, he craned his neck but couldn't quite manage to see outside. He looked down at his body with irritation and tried to gauge what exactly he was hooked up to. Heart monitor? No, just the pads. The leads had been disconnected by someone. He'd probably been pulling at them in his sleep. That just left the IV and pulse-ox metre. He ripped the tube out of his right arm and tossed the pulse-ox to the side. A pillowcase made a decent enough rag to stop up his leaking nose as he climbed out of the bed and shuffled over to the window, clutching the extra blanket around his shoulders. He nudged aside the curtains and looked out.

Ground floor. Mycroft had put him on the ground floor.
**Getting sloppy, Myc,** he thought snarkily.

It was the work of less than two minutes to locate a set of hospital scrubs from the linen cupboard, change out of his thin gown and hoist himself out the window. He padded silently around the building, keeping a lookout for sentries (not a single one; Mycroft must not have had time to set things up properly, explained why he'd been so tense). He quickly made it off the hospital grounds well before anyone had a chance to stop him and headed for his college. With any luck he'd be back at the hall before the first cravings set in.

The slight twinge of guilt at the thought of how distraught his brother would be when he returned to the room to find it empty made him consider turning back for a split-second. He resolutely shook the feeling off. **Who cared if he worried Mycroft? Bastard deserved it.** Sherlock kept walking.

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For the second time in as many days Sherlock awoke in a strange bed in a strange room. Not a hospital this time, but something very like one. There was a clinical air about the place. Smell of antiseptic. Starchy sheets. Tubes and wires and bed railings. Not normal.

He wasn't entirely sure how he'd gotten here. For some reason he had a dark, slightly paranoid theory that his brother had something slipped into his cocaine while he'd been busy walking back to Brasenose. There was after all a rather troubling blank period in his memory stretching from around the time he'd made it back to his room and found his stash exactly as he'd left it (suspicious..? maybe, he'd been too desperate to give it much thought) to, well... waking up here. Wherever **here** was.

As rooms went it was pleasant enough, he supposed. Everything was done up in tasteful greens and goldenrods - colourful but understated. Perhaps a hint of wealthy refinement in the artwork and furniture. Quite classy. If he weren't feeling rather like a passenger train had been rerouted through his skull he might have even taken a moment to appreciate the design aesthetic. As it was, however, the room and every single object in it were conspiring to slice viciously at his nerves. Wave after wave of intense, pointless fury ran in a vicious monologue through his aching head.

-

**landscape paintings are hackneyed what a sickening shade of green who the fuck chose that trim that chair can piss right the fuck off christ what an ugly tile pattern why the lace curtains for fuck's sake what is this a care home how much is that fat bastard paying for this I hope it's bloody exorbitant-**

He grit his teeth against his own shrieking thoughts and curled into a tight ball under the covers of the unfamiliar bed. Too much. Feelings, thoughts, sensations. All the things usually muted by the blissful serenity of cocaine were rushing straight back into his consciousness like a tidal wave of perception, and he could no longer swim. He'd spent too long courting a false sense of normality, believing in a fantasy world of self-control while all his careful coping mechanisms atrophied and died under a smothering blanket of white. Now the snow had melted and left a field of skeletons in its wake. No tricks left - just him and the screaming jet engine of his own overactive brain.

-

**ets smell of bleach someone wearing expensive cologne here not long ago the nurse is left-handed around five foot four room too bright nobody thought to close the curtains don't lift head stay out of the sunbeam migraine ow ow ow someone talking in the next room angry paranoid arguing with a doctor what day is it surely not Friday shit I never got that essay done Thompson's going to be furious should have started it earlier too distracted by Victor wonder if he got that bloke from the rugby team to come out yet christ my head hurts couldn't they at least have left some paracetamol wish I had my violin wait no I don't too loud ugh the last person in this room was a heroin addict**
His hand shot out from under the blanket, grabbed a pillow and shoved it roughly over his head. It didn't help. God, was this really his natural mental state? How had he ever functioned? So many thoughts scattered every which way and all of them so vacuously inane. Details registered in a constant buzz of unwanted knowledge through his consciousness but none of them made even the slightest glimmer of sense over all the cacophonous noise. Everything was too close, too loud, too... too. Christ, he needed a hit. Needed to slow things down before he went completely mad. Just one. A little bit would do. The tiniest speck. Forty milligrams. No... twenty. Ten. Five! Anything. Coffee, a cigarette, any kind of stimulant just make this stop stop stop dear lord stop turn it off.

But no. No, of course he wouldn't get drugs here. It had taken far too long but he finally realised where he had to be. Rehab. Mycroft. Bloody fucking bastard Mycroft. He had spiked his drugs - cut in some sort of sedative and... and what? Abducted him? From his own bloody room? At two in the morning?

My brother is a psychotic despot, he thought savagely. Another spike of pain shot through his skull and he instinctively curled tighter around himself in search of comfort. A tug at the back of his hand caught his attention. Tape, iodine scent, plastic tube. IV line? Why? No, wait, obvious - more drugs. Mycroft again. Never content to leave him to his misery. Had to be sedatives. Causing the migraine? Probably. Get it out. Out out out. He uncoiled just enough to shift his other hand around and ripped the tubing fiercely from his flesh without even bothering to peel back the tape first. Blood oozed from the torn vein and he tucked it tightly under his chin to stem the flow. Refolded his body around the injury, closer than before. Small, safe. Nobody could get him. He'd stay like this forever.

Over the next few hours he heard several nurses come and go. They all stopped to talk to him, polite and kind and trying to coax him out of his cocoon. He ignored them. He was never moving again.

When he finally gave in and emerged (because it was getting stuffy, not because they'd offered him a glass of water and a cigarette) the staff seemed to collectively shift their efforts towards giving him medications. He refused everything. Not because he thought it contaminated; the crippling paranoia of earlier had thankfully run its course. Now his obstinance was down to pride. Sherlock was a genius, he didn't need their stupid pills. His body was his to command, his brain a masterwork; a little silly withdrawal wasn't going to defeat him. He didn't need anything. (Of course when he'd actually said as much they pointed out that he'd been happy enough to accept the cigarette. He'd pointed out that they could go fuck themselves.)

He was just settling into another round of sullen brooding when a new nurse stepped into his room. He glared venomously, eyes flicking up and down to pry all the secrets from her form. The last woman had run out in tears after he listed off every last one of her failed marriages (jewellery, hairstyle, shoe brand, obvious) and this one looked to have been sent in as backup. Happily married, at least two children, mid to late forties, no pets, no illnesses... damn. She was too well-adjusted to torment. He scowled as she deftly fixed the new IV he'd been fitted with (they said it was just fluids, he didn't believe them because if that was true why did they seem so insistent on constantly replacing it), then walked away to fill a paper cup of water from the sink in the en suite. He waited until she was a full three metres away from him before reaching down and tearing out the tube again.

She sighed as she turned back around and saw what he'd done. "Please stop doing that."

Tiny hint of irritation, mostly just exasperated. Professional, he thought. Used to this behaviour.
Some kind of nursing veteran. Twenty year career? No... thirty. Look at the shoes. Hm, necklace, tan lines... Oh, she was talking again.

"Mr Hope, I know you're upset right now and believe me that's very understandable," she was saying. Sherlock only just barely heard her over the chattering of his own thoughts. He realised she'd produced a pink and red capsule from the pocket of her scrub top and was holding it towards him. "If you'd just take your medication I promise you'll start to feel better."

"What did you call me?" he asked instead, deliberately ignoring her request. A slight movement out the window caught his attention and without really meaning to he shifted his head to look outside. Leaves falling from a stand of poplar trees; yellow, red, brown, fluttering in the late autumn chill. A large bush of winter honeysuckle just beginning to bud under the windowsill. *(Shouldn't put shrubbery in front of windows, invites thieves. Who would steal from a rehab clinic? I would, resolve to do so at earliest convenience.)* Beyond that were fields and gardens, a stream, several acres of extensive landscaping. Very posh, if a bit rustic. He had a vague feeling he might be somewhere in Kent.

"Mr Hope...?" the nurse replied, her confused voice interrupting his musings. Sherlock turned back to blink at her. Why did she keep calling him that-?

Oh, he suddenly realised. Oh, right. Fake name. Mycroft had booked him under a pseudonym so Father wouldn't find out. How... kind. Almost made up for the drugging and kidnapping.

Wait, no it didn't. Mycroft was a bastard.

The hand with the capsule had moved forward again and was now nearly butting into his chest with its insistence. He graced it the barest of glances before looking away.

"I'm not taking that," he informed the nurse. Studied the clouds; stratocumulus. Dull. Grey. British.

"It's nothing dangerous, dear. Just to help the anxiety."

"I'm not anxious." He wasn't. He had been rhythmically clenching his jaw against the pounding in his skull for the last hour, but that didn't mean anything. His head just hurt, the movement helped. He stopped doing it anyway, to prove he could. *There, see? Not anxious.* He glared at the fields outside and didn't notice when half a second later his teeth clamped together again.

"Still grinding them dear," the nurse pointed out rather blandly. Sherlock shot her a venomous look and forced his jaw to loosen.

So what? Just a habit. Not indicative of any sort of mental state. What does she know anyway.

She was speaking again. *Good god, woman, shut up.* "The medicine will honestly help, love. It's a-

"-beta blocker," he finished for her. Obvious. He'd seen the capsules plenty of times in the hands of fellow musicians. Used to calm the nerves, soothe stage fright. He'd never bothered with the stuff. What was the point? Adrenaline made him play better, on the rare occasion he even experienced it during a concert. Stage fright was for ordinary people.

The nurse had shut her mouth and was now staring at him determinedly. She really didn't seem inclined to back down. Sherlock sighed. *Ugh, sod it. Just make her leave."

"Fine then, give it here," he muttered dully, holding out a hand for the medicine. She flashed him a relieved smile and handed over the pill and cup of water. He let her check under his tongue to be sure he'd swallowed, then waited patiently for her to exit the room. As soon as she was out the door
he made his way over to the window (ripping out his IV on the way again; bloody meddling nurses), pried the capsule from behind his back molar with his tongue and spat it out. He watched the casing slowly dissolve in the damp garden soil below and wondered vaguely if it would soothe the frayed nerves of the honeysuckle bush.

After a few minutes staring Sherlock sighed gustily, scrubbed both hands through his hair in agitation and leant down to rest his elbows on the windowsill. The cool October air raised goose pimples on his flesh but he made no move to cover his arms. Let them freeze, what did he care. Escape, he assumed with a sort of resigned objectivity, was probably not an option. Not after his stunt at the hospital. Mycroft would make sure to post an entire regiment of guards, with cameras, bugs... he turned his head suddenly and peered behind him as if he could spot the devices through sheer willpower. Quickly turned back around. Wouldn't do for anyone to catch him looking nervous. What had he been thinking about...? Oh, escape. Right. Impossible.

Well. Perhaps not if he had cocaine (cocaine god need to think need the snow back god damn it why can't I just have a little aren't they supposed to titrate you off these things). With the calm focus and heightened energy of his snowfield he could probably engineer a plan to evade whatever measures his brother had taken to keep him trapped here. Where he'd go after that he had no idea, considering everyone he knew was either back at Oxford or connected to his family, but it was a moot point anyway since without the drugs he had no hope of leaving. Planning was impossible; his thoughts kept splintering in a million different directions, he felt more exhausted than he'd ever been in his life and he had no motivation to do anything beyond sit here and marinate in the nebulous mix of swirling hatred and misery that now consumed his brain. Mycroft was just wasting money guarding him. Sherlock couldn't even- no, no he wouldn't leave. By... by choice. Yes, that was his plan. He'd annoy Mycroft and confuse the hell out of the sentries and camera operators and the listening agents and whoever the fuck else his brother had hired to watch him by being all nice and compliant in his lovely little off-putting green room with the lacy curtains and not trying to get away at all. Mycroft would waste resources and the agents would be bored and overpaid. That'd show 'em. Right.

He grumbled indistinctly at his own stupid thoughts and bent himself nearly double to lean his forehead on the windowsill, arms hanging out into the chilly air and brushing lightly against the damp leaves of the honeysuckles. Everything was shit, he decided. Every. Single. Thing. He wanted coke. He wanted the beta blocker back. He wanted... god, he didn't even know what he wanted. A normal brain. A brother who wasn't a lunatic. A father who wasn't a lunatic. A mother who didn't ignore him. A boyfriend who was actually a boyfriend and not just some bloke he occasionally slept with. Some decent chips with vinegar. (Wait, was he actually hungry? When was the last time that happened?)

Eventually he gave up on thinking in general as a bad job and meandered back to his bed. He'd just go back to sleep, that was easiest. Maybe when he woke he'd be sane again. He sincerely doubted that but it was always good to stay optimistic. He curled into a ball under the pea-green duvet and tried to silence his brain long enough to drift off.

When he finally managed to fall into a light doze his dreams were all about dying. An avalanche rushed down the mountain toward him, impacted like a freight train with a noise like a jet engine and every bone in his body broke simultaneously with a horrifying symphony of cracks. He screamed in pain and awoke with a start.

Fuck, alright, no more sleeping. A bleary-eyed glance at the clock told him he'd been out for around half an hour, and that was plenty of rest. He sat up, kicked the covers off and leant against
the headboard to stare fixedly at the trees outside, thinking he'd keep himself awake by counting leaves as they fell.

Around the two hundred mark his eyes started to drift shut. At two-hundred-sixty he finally allowed himself to list sideways and lay in a curled heap on the pillows because sitting up was too much work. He was cold; the window was open and the blankets were on the floor. But that was fine, since he wasn't sleeping anyway. Perhaps he might shut his eyes for a moment, though... they were fatigued. Understandable, as he'd been watching leaves for an hour. He let his lids slide closed. Just for a minute.

This time he dreamt of freezing solid, trapped in a block of ice while blood and flesh gradually coagulated into tiny slicing crystals. Death was slow and silent and agonising. Every time it finally took him he would return again, trapped in an endless cycle of freezing and thawing and freezing again.

He slept for hours.

««

Sherlock (and/or 'Sherington', Mycroft was evidently a bit shit with pseudonyms) wasn't quite sure if it was more pathetic or depressing the way the doctors were so easily convinced by his acting. All it took was a few carefully-chosen words, the right physical actions and a few fabricated personal quirks to keep them all completely ignorant of the true state of his mental health. Pretend to respond to medications, participate in therapy and recreation and whatever the hell else they threw at him; do it right, play the part. It was harder to coordinate without cocaine but still not completely impossible, especially with literally nothing else around to occupy his mind. So he became Sherry, the sanguine, affable biology student who thought he might like to be a veterinarian some day but unfortunately had a crippling phobia of rabbits. He threw in a fake girlfriend to pine over, a best mate who liked books (he hadn't realised whilst inventing the obligatory 'friend who assists in making bad decisions' for his character that he'd accidentally given the therapist a perfect description of Victor, which was appallingly Freudian of him but now he was stuck with it) and a gratuitously tragic backstory involving dead parents and a mentally disabled brother.

Pretty soon the staff started referring to him as one of their best patients. They all thought him a pleasant young man who'd simply made a poor choice at some party and got carried away, and his peers in group therapy (which he wouldn't have attended even under threat of torture as Sherlock, but the entire point of Sherry was to be misleadingly oppositional to his true nature so he forced himself to go anyway) seemed to think he was a bit of an airheaded ponce but nice enough to be around. He hadn't breathed a word about all the snow imagery (mostly because he found it distinctly embarrassing to admit that his internal metaphors were so generically obvious) nor of the way cocaine made his thoughts slow down and organize and fall in beautiful perfect patterns. No, Sherry was a bit too dense for all that, he just liked the drug because it made him 'feel brilliant'. Hardly an adequate explanation for imbibing something like fifteen kilos of the stuff over the past four months in Sherlock's opinion, but the staff seemed to accept it with the same gullible confidence they afforded everything else. It was all so pitiful. Fuck's sake, these were supposed to be doctors. He was inventing symptoms and motivations out of thin air with ever-increasing levels of sarcasm, how could they not see how fake he was? Was it honestly possible to be this stupid?

Well, it would hardly matter for long. He fully expected to get caught out. Because no matter how many psychiatrists and nurses he managed to fool with his silly acting lark he knew his brother would be able to see straight through it in seconds. Mycroft's first visit would put an end to this persona of a bland affable idiot and force Sherlock to concoct a new set of lies to keep the doctors
chasing their tails. Maybe he'd be a hedonist next, and then perhaps develop psychopathy. He figured he and Mycroft could turn it into a sort of game: Sherlock would make up a personality, his brother would call him on it and tell the doctors, then they'd start the cycle all over again. Mycroft would pretend to be angry at him for not taking his treatment seriously but secretly the older man would be amused, like he always was when Sherlock was being clever. It might even be fun.

Sherlock would never admit to looking forward to seeing his sibling but he did find himself anticipating Mycroft's first visit. Just a little. Because he was bored, mostly, and Mycroft was always good to alleviate boredom. He was also getting incredibly sick of pretending to be Sherry and a new personality would be a welcome change. So he waited.

And waited.

And waited.

It took three weeks for him to finally accept that Mycroft was not going to visit. Or call. Or even text. Sherlock knew what was going on: his brother was giving him the silent treatment. He was disappointed and expected Sherlock to come groveling to him and apologise for being so utterly stupid as to get hooked on cocaine. Well, forget it. He didn't even like Mycroft. The stupid tosser could go and die for all he cared.

He refused to try and initiate contact, knowing if he so much as breathed a word of complaint about the lack of communication he'd just get one of those tight, condescending smiles and some sort of perfectly plausible-sounding explanation. Mycroft's snobbish voice drifted through his head at the mere thought. 'Far too busy keeping Father out of the loop, Sherlock. You should really be more grateful. I could have just told him the second I found out, but I didn't. Now you owe me. Not to mention I've got my hands full fooling Mummy into thinking her youngest has taken ill with malaria, and do you even know how difficult it is to fabricate the proper documentation for a potential epidemic pathogen? Obviously nothing too challenging for someone like me, but still so incredibly tedious. Plus I've all these complicated laws to write, nations to topple, worlds to rule, you know how it is - there's a million million people out there for me to concern myself with who aren't you, you useless waste of oxygen, yet I persist in spending incredibly valuable time and resources protecting you regardless. But do you ever show even the slightest ounce of gratitude? No, no of course not. Such a selfish child. It's really no wonder our parents always liked me best. In fact I think you were really just an afterthought, weren't you? Some kind of failed backup plan perhaps; not as good as the original but still something to go on should the worst happen to me. You're probably not even legitimate, are you? All that business with Mummy and the stable hand. Do you remember? No, you wouldn't. It was before you were born. Obviously. You really do tend toward the gypsy traits you know, nothing like Father and I. Think how upsetting that must have been for poor Siger, seeing his wife pregnant when he hadn't even been home for months. Really explains why he always seemed to hate you so mu-' SHUT UP MYCROFT SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP

With a snarl he clamped his hands over his ears and slammed his face into one of the overstarched pillows on his bed. A long, pathetic whine tore itself from his throat, muffled by the pillow so it came out more of a strangled 'mmmphf!'. It was the middle of the night and as usual his brain was screaming along too fast for him to sleep.

He absolutely had to stop thinking about his brother. Actually to be perfectly honest he absolutely had to stop thinking about anything. It all just twisted into self-loathing diatribes, leaving him depressed and angry and too fed up with the world to even bother with anything. The staff never noticed, of course. Why would they? His mask was perfect. The only person who'd have even the slightest chance of seeing the truth was one Mycroft bloody Holmes, and he was no longer
interested in associating with his pitiful younger sibling. With him out of the picture Sherlock's secret identity was guaranteed safe.

So really he was glad Mycroft wasn't going to visit. Nobody to call him out on his lies. Plus it was far easier to focus on keeping his increasingly-elaborate characterisation of Sherry straight without having to worry about a whale with a brolly fetish showing up and ruining it all. It wasn't like he'd ever miss the pompous git. Sherlock was a sociopath, he didn't do things like miss people. He didn't miss Victor after all, and they were almost-but-not-really-because-who-the-hell-would-ever-date-you-boyfriends, so all in all he was fine. He was. Just. Fine.

He shoved his face further into his pillow and wondered if it would be possible to smother himself.

««

In just three short months Sherrington Hope was pronounced fit to return to society. Sherlock Holmes was not, mostly on account of none of the staff having ever so much as met Sherlock Holmes. If they had he would have been retained indefinitely.

On a dreary Wednesday morning he was told by the nurse that his family would be by to pick him up in the afternoon. By 'family' he understood she meant Mycroft, so while he waited in the lobby later for the familiar black towncar to pull up he occupied himself by absently wondering how he was going to react to finally seeing his brother again. Anger would be appropriate, he supposed. Maybe relief if he was going to be a sap about it. Happiness was extremely unlikely, but he ceded it remotely possible. Very remotely.

The most probable scenario was probably going to be simple indifference. After all emotional responses generally required at least a semi-reactive cognitive state, and Sherlock's mind had gone quite thoroughly numb something like a month and a half ago. Not the comfortable anaesthesia of cocaine but something dark and stagnant, spreading like rot through every corner of his head until nothing could move for the filth. His brain was literally decaying. It had rebelled against the forced dormancy by declaring war against itself and now the battlefield was strewn with putrefying corpses.

Sherlock briefly screwed up his face in disgust at the imagery. Ugh, what was with him and strange abstract visualisations of his mental space? And why was it always either a field or a lake? It would really be better to use some sort of building. Then he'd have a bit more permanence at least, perhaps organised places to keep all his cluttered internal stuff. Should try erecting a tower. Have to wait until the corpses cleared out though. And the mud. The rot. Maybe he was getting ahead of himself.

A noise caught his attention and he looked up as the clinic door opened, catching sight of the smart suit and puffed cap of one of his family's valets. Personal staff instead of a government employee? That was new. Might even have been interesting, had he had any capability to be interested by anything anymore. The most feeling Sherlock managed to dredge up was a faint wave of irritation at the fact that his brother was apparently too much of a lazy arse to walk the ten metres to sign him out himself, but it faded quickly. Too much effort. The manservant handed over a stack of papers, spoke with the receptionist a moment and then initialled a log book before turning to Sherlock and sparing his outfit the barest of distasteful glances.

Sherlock looked down at himself but could see nothing particularly troublesome. Jeans, white t-shirt, navy Oxford hoodie, a pair of still decently-new trainers and the dove grey wool peacoat Mycroft had given him two Christmases ago which he only ever wore because it was easy to hide drugs in the lining (not that there was anything in there now, much to his annoyance). They were the same clothes he'd had on the night of the overdose, which he supposed ended up being sent
here out of the convenience of having already been in a hospital bag. Perhaps a little casual, but he hardly felt the need to dress up just to meet his brother. Besides, the only clothing the clinic provided was their stupid uniform of loose-fitting activewear and that was hardly a better alternative.

He conveyed his thoughts to the valet with a bland lift of his eyebrows, and with a very slight look of exasperation the man turned and beckoned him to follow.

The shiny black town car they approached practically screamed 'pompous ass' in its conspicuous display of wealth, and despite the stifling cloud of dysphoria in his head Sherlock felt a jolt of irrational anger flash through him. Bloody Mycroft, with his stupid bloody cars and stupid bloody valets and stupid bloody... bloody everything. The only reason Sherlock was even here was because that fat meddling whale hadn't been able to keep his nose out of other peoples' business. It was all his brother's fault.

An insult jumped to his lips and as he slid into the back seat he was already speaking. "You're a fucki-"

The slur died in his throat as he caught a proper look at the man sitting in the opposite seat. That... wasn't Mycroft.

... Oh Christ. The valet shut the door and walked around to start the engine, locks clicking down automatically. He was trapped.

The man across from him flashed a tight, false smile.

"Sherlock," his father said mildly. "It seems we have... matters to discuss."

««

Mycroft Holmes had expected, at half past one in the afternoon, to step into the reception area of the unassuming clinic to find a rather understandably pissed-off younger sibling already there glaring at him, perhaps even displaying a rude gesture. He'd have accepted the behaviour willingly. He had, after all, essentially abandoned the boy. It hadn't been his intent to do so, but between the tabloid scandal, American elections (absolute farce this year, good lord), terrorist threats, and a bloody tsunami last month he'd quite run out of time to do much of anything beyond the demands of his position. As much as he hated to admit it, Sherlock had been put on the back burner. He'd assuaged his guilt with the thought that at least the boy was safe, and that considering how Mycroft had gotten him to rehab in the first place would probably not want much to do with him for awhile anyway.

But instead of his scowling baby brother there was only a receptionist, who calmly informed Mycroft that the only patient by the name of S. Hope had been collected nearly an hour ago. Mycroft allowed an affable smile to flit across his face. It did an admirable job of concealing the very uncharacteristic stab of dread which shot through his gut at her words.

"By whom, may I ask?" he asked her politely.

"Hm, looks like a Mister, er... Siger Holmes, sir?" the woman replied after a slight pause to look up the information. Mycroft's pleasant expression never wavered, even as he felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. "Seems to have had all the necessary paperwork," she continued. "Perhaps a scheduling mixup on your end?"

"Ah.. yes... of course," he confirmed in a voice only slightly strained. He flashed her a tight smile.
"So sorry for the confusion."

The woman smiled and assured him it was no problem as Mycroft turned to walk out of the building. There were a million and one troubling questions to answer, chief among them being how in hell’s name had Father found out. Before he could tackle any of them, however, there was a much more pressing matter to attend to.

He flipped open his phone as he stepped outside and spoke the instant he heard his assistant connect on the other end.

"Locate my brother immediately."

««

It took nearly five hours to track Sherlock down. The damned clever teenager had removed the batteries from his phone so he couldn't be traced, then led them all on a merry chase through alleys and parks, side streets and gutters, up fire escapes and along rooftops until even Mycroft's team of MI5 agents lost track of where they'd been. The only way they'd even have a chance at this rate was for Sherlock to stop, so Mycroft reluctantly gave the order to stand down. Sooner or later the boy would have to rest, they'd make sure they were ready.

Three-quarters of an hour passed before they had a confirmed position. Mycroft refused to let his underlings go in ahead of him (it was his little brother, for god's sake, not some terrorist) and so he found himself striding alone down a filthy London alley, expensive suit contrasting sharply with his surroundings as he hastened towards a shuddering figure outlined by the half-light of the street lamps. Sherlock was sitting slumped against the brickwork at the far end of the truncated street, all tremors and exhausted panting - not particularly surprising as he'd just spent the better part of an afternoon running pell-mell across London. Mycroft crouched down upon reaching the apparently insensate form and gently snapped his fingers a few times in front of the boy's pale face to try and rouse him. His baby brother's unnaturally dilated eyes blinked open, startled, and flicked up to meet his gaze.

"Oh! Heeeeeeey Myc, fancy seeing you here," the boy drawled. A slow, perverse smile spread across his face as he shifted to lean his head back against the wall. His every movement was just... wrong. Mycroft withdrew his arm and gripped the handle of his umbrella tightly, forcing his face to remain impassive. His brilliant mind kicked into confused overdrive, trying and failing to reconcile his internal paradigm of Sherlock with this... this stranger wearing his brother's skin. Abruptly he realised he'd never actually seen his brother high before.

If he starts seizing in front of me I will absolutely have a panic attack, Mycroft determined with a sort of detached air of certainty. That would be disastrous for my reputation, my subordinates would never fear me again. Quickly he decided this was a far easier motivation for his analytical brain to accept than the truth of being horrified and sick with worry for his baby brother, so he
latched onto the sociopathic indifference like a shield. Crouched down still, he straightened his back as best he could and assumed an air of authority.

"Sherlock, you require medical attention. You must come wit-" Sherlock just laughed.

"Mycroft, darling," he interrupted. "As much as I would love to go with you to A&E or back to rehab or wherever the hell you're planning to dump me next I'm afraid I'm really going to have to decline. I'm simply far too busy, you see," he quipped breezily, indicating the alley around them. Mycroft raised his eyebrows slightly. The lofty wrongness in his sibling's voice had set his insides squirming again, but he refused to acknowledge it. He glanced around at the bins.


"Nevertheless," he continued, remaining calm, "I am taking you to a hospital."

"Hah! Like hell you are." Sherlock laughed. "That was a really good trick you know, sending Father to collect me," he went on fluidly, changing the subject without the slightest warning. Despite himself Mycroft cringed. Of course he would think...

"Sherlock, I swear to you I have no idea how-"

Sherlock paid him absolutely no attention.

"I actually thought it was you at first, you know! Nearly called him a fucking cunt before I noticed who it was. Can you imagine, swearing at Father! I'd have been killed on the spot! Mind you I very nearly was anyway, he was pretty well livid. Got myself disowned. Have you ever seen Father really angry, Myc? It's bloody terrifying. But then no, I guess you haven't, have you? You're Mycroft, perfect boy genius. Nobody's ever angry with you. But then no, I guess you haven't, have you? You're Mycroft, perfect boy genius. Nobody's ever angry with you." Sherlock's detached, airy voice had begun to shift down into something low and bitter. "Me, of course, I just keep on fucking up."

"Sherlock..." Mycroft cut in, face drawn and probably gone chalk-white by now. A parallel section of his brain had kicked into high gear at the word 'disowned', already running through the cost/benefit analysis of several different revenge plots to enact on their father. In truth he'd already been planning to remove Siger Holmes from their lives for quite some time now, the man was a walking definition of clinical psychopathy and entirely too clever for anyone's good. But he'd been hesitating to start because the task would no doubt prove difficult, dangerous, and time-consuming, and he had enough on his plate with the government and his brother. So for once in his life Mycroft had let himself procrastinate. Now look what had happened. He could practically feel himself forming a complex.

Sherlock was speaking again. "You know frankly I'm surprised this didn't happen sooner. I mean if I were him I'd have done it the moment I started Eton. Fairly obvious I'd never measure up to their perfect little firstborn by that point. Though now I'm thinking you should really just have me assassinated; clean break and all that. Save me the trouble of killing myse-"

"Sherlock!" Mycroft suddenly barked, appalled. Surely he wasn't-!

His brother snickered at his reaction.

"Oh dear, you are upset aren't you? Well, don't worry your pretty little head Mycroft. I'm not suicidal. Just self-destructive. You've a few months at least till you find me facedown in a gutter. I expect I shan't feel a thing, if it makes you feel any-"

"Enough," Mycroft finally snapped. He let his expression harden into a look of cold steel. No
more. This was absurd. His brother needed help. Deep, uncomfortable emotional discussions could wait for later. When they were both in their right minds. When Sherlock wasn't off his face on coke and Mycroft wasn't beside himself with worry and guilt.

"You will accompany me to my car," Mycroft informed his brother, standing up from his crouched position. Sherlock was eyeing him warily. "If you cannot walk I will have one of my men carry you."

"Make me." The teenager's deep voice seemed caught somewhere between petulant and defensive. Mycroft fixed him with a stern glare.

"Do not attempt this game with me."

Sherlock paled slightly at his tone. Mycroft had deliberately made himself sound like Father. He hated to be so crassly manipulative but it was the fastest and most reliable way to get his brother's attention. The boy scowled. "Fine, sir, whatever you say."

Sherlock made to push himself up from the ground, shaking limbs still weak and uncoordinated after his mad flight through London, and quite predictably stumbled. Mycroft's hand shot out on instinct to grab hold of his sibling's arm before he could fall. He was alarmed when Sherlock jerked away violently at the contact.

"Don't touch me!" the boy screeched.

Mycroft pulled back immediately and frowned. Eyes flitted up and down as he quickly scanned his brother's appearance for any clues he hadn't been able to see while the young man was slouched against the wall. Hair tangled in back trainers recently scuffed jeans frayed dirt rubbed into knees dried stain on right coat sle-

"Oh," he murmured suddenly, eyes widening in realisation. Sherlock bristled.

"Fuck off!" the boy snarled. Abruptly he rammed both hands into his elder brother's chest, and Mycroft stumbled back in shock. Sherlock had shoved him. One of the two bodyguards he'd allowed to keep watch at the mouth of the alley had already rushed over and caught him before he could hit the dingy alley floor. Mycroft managed to right himself just in time to see his second guard charge towards Sherlock, following standing orders to restrain anyone who might pose a threat to his employer. Anyone except his brother.

"Stop!" he ordered sternly, but it was too late; the man had already pinned the aggressor against the wall. Sherlock half-screamed in panic, struggling madly, and in less than a second he'd wrenched an arm out of his captor's grip and jabbed a bony elbow straight into the man's trachea, following it with a swift abdominal blow and a kick to the side of the knee. The MI5 agent crumpled. Mycroft was somewhat less than thrilled to find half of his security detail taken out in under a minute by a drug-addled teenager, but had little time to be annoyed as within milliseconds Sherlock had turned around and bolted off toward the mouth of the alley.

"Grab him!" Mycroft commanded the remaining guard. The man lunged forward and caught a handful of peacoat, wrenching the young man somewhat violently backwards like a dog on a chain. He then caught hold of Sherlock's forearm and swiftly twisted it behind the boy's back in a secure and efficient grip. Sherlock kicked and struggled like a wild beast for several seconds before finally sagging in defeat, panting.

Mycroft's expression was stricken. "I'm sorry. You left me no other choice," he explained. He couldn't let Sherlock escape again, not in this state. Even if it took having him restrained like a war
criminal.
Sherlock was glaring venomously up at him through his fringe.

"I *hate* you," the boy whispered.

"Sherlock..."

Suddenly the teenager was animated again, kicking against the immovable block of a man behind him as he lunged toward his sibling with an incoherent snarl.

"This would *never* have *happened* if you'd just kept your *fat* *fucking* *face* out of my *fucking* business, Mycroft! *You* destroyed *my* *life!*"

That was far too close to his own self-recriminating thoughts for comfort. Uncharacteristically he snapped back without thinking. "*I was trying to keep you safe!* *You're* the one who chose to do drugs like... *like* some *common person!"

He immediately regretted his words. Sherlock stilled.

"... Mycroft Holmes," he announced after a pause, voice frigid. "*You* are officially my arch-enemy."

Mycroft blinked. He... *what?* Leave it to Sherlock to say something so utterly ridiculous in the middle of a tense emotional conflict. He'd almost forgotten the boy was high as a kite. "... Don't be dramatic," he admonished hollowly.

Sherlock sneered at him. The alley was silent for a brief second.

Then out of nowhere the boy flung his head back with as much force as humanly possible. The back of his skull connected with the guard's nose in a sickening crunch and he twisted in the loosened grip to ram a knee into the man's crotch, ripping his arm free as he did so. The second he was free he was running.

"Sherlock! *Stop!*" Mycroft shouted and scrambled—*scrambled!*—after his brother.

His personal assistant shrieked in alarm as Sherlock shot past her. Mycroft just managed to get to the mouth of the alley in time to see the boy wave her stolen phone over his shoulder with a vicious grin.

"*I'll* be sure to ring you, *Myc!*" he called merrily. He spun around to face them and flipped a sarcastic salute before taking a brisk turn and disappearing once more into the maze of London's streets like a rabbit to its warren. It could be *days* before they'd ever find him again. Perhaps weeks. *The* boy might be dead before the end of the night.

For the first time in many years, Mycroft Holmes swore.

««
Sherlock awoke hours later under a tree somewhere in Regent's Park, having only the vaguest recollection of how he'd got there and feeling like he'd been hit by a bus. The PA's phone was gone—either sold or bartered, he couldn't remember—and he'd acquired half a gram of cocaine, three syringes, and a packet of cigarettes in its place. His body was a mass of sore muscles and bruises. His left arm ached and his head felt like shards of glass had lodged in his brain. He was tired, cold, and most definitely no longer high.

Sherlock groaned as the glare of early sunrise shot stabs of pain through his abused skull. He raised a hand to shield his eyes from the dawn. Brand new day. Fresh start, new beginnings.

God, what utter shit.

Turning away he blindly tapped out a cigarette and searched his person for a lighter. He eventually found one hidden in the lining of his coat along with two more syringes and about six quid in small change. He shook the coins out and slipped the rest of his needles and the baggie of coke through the small slit in the seam, then leaned back against the tree to smoke. He'd have to do another hit soon if he didn't want to freeze. For now, though, he was content to enjoy the sunrise.

The sky shifted from pink to orange as he watched the trees sway in a light winter breeze. He wondered what time it was. Was it worth risking replacing his phone batteries to find out?

Eh, he decided, might as well. Fuck Mycroft if he wanted to trace him. Sherlock would just run away again. He fumbled the battery pack out of his pocket and jammed it into its slot on the back of his mobile. The tiny screen lit up with a welcoming chime while he irritably tapped out another cigarette. Stupid thing took forever to boot up.

There, finally. He squinted at the glowing numbers in the murky half-light. It was 7:54 in the morning on the 6th of January, 2005.

His mouth quirked into a wry, bitter smile. Happy birthday to me.

Sherlock Holmes' first day of being a twenty year old was mostly spent pickpocketing. He wandered the streets of Camden and took advantage of his current well-fed, healthy, respectable appearance to put unsuspecting tourists at ease while he nicked as many valuables as possible. Distracting teenage girls was particularly easy, so he soon found his pockets stuffed with a small collection of brightly-coloured mobiles and patterned clutch purses. He'd have to find somewhere to sell the phones. The wallets he simply looted for cash or jewellery and dumped in a bin outside a souvenir shop.

Sooner or later he'd have to find a dealer again. A half gram of coke was a decent amount, but probably not enough to get him through more than a few days at the rate his tolerance was building up again. He shuddered at the memory of the man he'd met the night previous, skulking in a dark alley not far from the station where his father had unceremoniously dumped him. The dealer had been called Racer (some stupid pseudonym to do with his long-past love of horse racing, Sherlock hadn't been in any kind of mood to deduce beyond that) and he'd been... extremely accommodating.
Sherlock's lack of money hadn't bothered him at all, in fact he'd seemed almost thrilled about it. Obviously a very closeted homosexual, probably became a drug pusher just to have an excuse to demand sex acts from other men without calling his masculinity into question. Sherlock didn't much care about the man's psychological profile, however. He just wanted to freeze his overactive mind before he drowned in his own screaming thoughts.

It had been quick, rough and very unpleasant, but luckily nothing particularly demeaning. Sherlock had done much worse before and for far less immediately explainable reasons, so the actual act didn't bother him all that much. It was more the loss of control over the situation and general lack of mutual consent that prompted him to endeavour to put the whole episode out of his mind the second it was over. The tiny amount of cocaine he'd received in return helped quite a bit (particularly as his tolerance seemed to have partially reset during rehab) but it was Mycroft's little spy game soon thereafter that provided the best distraction. After all it was easy to avoid thinking of the horrible things you were willing to do for drugs whilst dashing about over rooftops dodging agents, and for awhile he'd even had a little fun with the lot of them.

But then, of course, he'd collapsed. Not even Sherlock Holmes could keep up a foot chase through the streets of London for five bloody hours, after all. And Mycroft had shown up, been a huge arse like usual, and then went and touched him. Sherlock had still been amped up from the coke and the adrenaline and the maybe-not-quite passing out in an alley only to find his older brother who he hadn't spoken to in three fucking months, you bastard standing over him and yes, alright, he'd panicked. For a split second his brain shorted out and it hadn't been Mycroft's hand on him but Racer's, about to shove him roughly to his knees for another go. He'd recoiled on pure instinct. Of course Mycroft had noticed. He'd have to be an idiot not to. So Sherlock had lashed out.

Which of course prompted one of Mycroft's stupid bodyguards to go and tackle him (admittedly knocking over a high-ranking government official had not been the best of ideas, even if said official was his arse-faced older brother) and that had felt far too much like an entirely different set of memories for comfort so Sherlock had struggled like a maniac. Actually bested the idiot, too, which was quite brilliant. But of course there'd been another one, and he got caught again. Though to be fair getting the chance to properly bitch out Mycroft had been well worth having his arm wrenched. The look on the git's face!

Arch-enemy, he remembered calling the older man. Yes, he definitely liked the ring of that. After all, Mycroft had kidnapped him, trapped him in a wretched clinic for three months and refused to speak to him out of some juvenile sense of spite. Then he'd cornered him in an alley and tried to cart him off to hospital when he was (probably) perfectly fine and then had his goons tackle him like some common criminal. Definitely an enemy. An arch-enemy.

But enough of that. He dismissed his reminiscing and set about lighting the last cigarette from his packet. Luckily he had more than enough cash now for another pack, though he'd wait until after he'd scored some more coke to buy it. There was just enough money to buy another half gram outright, and he might be able to throw in one of the nicer stolen phones to bump that up to a full gram or even two. Seeking out a new dealer was tempting, but he already knew Racer and was close to his haunt, so he resigned himself to dealing with the weasel-faced closet case again. At least he had cash this time.

"Eeeey, back agin' I see," Racer drawled as Sherlock walked toward him. They were in a shadowed back alley, with the last rays of the setting sun casting dark shapes around them. (Sherlock couldn't help a stray thought flitting through his head that this had actually been a pretty decent birthday, all things considered. He had after all spent most of it wandering around high.)
"I need a gram," he said, and drew out a wad of cash along with one of the nicked mobiles. Racer chuckled.

"Anovver phone, eh? Must be quite th' theif, love."

Sherlock tried not to scowl at the term of endearment. "If you don't want the mobile just take the cash and give me half a gram instead."

"Oh nah, nah... I'll take th' phone alright. It's jest, well... I'm afraid th' price's gone up again, love." Racer was eyeing him with a lecherous grin. Sherlock felt vaguely ill.

"It's been one day," he bit out, already knowing the argument was pointless.

"Lot's 'appened today."

"Bullshit."

"Look, love, I think we both know what yer gonna have to do."

"Fuck you," Sherlock spat, and rammed the phone and wad of bills back into his jeans pocket as he turned on his heel. He still had enough coke to last the next day or so; he'd be able to find a new dealer before he ran out. Fuck Racer and his sick little fetish.

Behind him the older man was chuckling. "Ye'll be back, love. Ye'll be back."

Sherlock flipped him off over his shoulder. "Not likely."

Racer grinned.

««

Sherlock was in trouble. None of the dealers he spoke to would sell to him, all of them scarpering off the moment they saw his face or stammering some kind of pathetic excuse about running out. As if a dealer would run out of cocaine. Eventually he'd figured out what the problem was, and he was much less than thrilled about it.

"You're some kind of kingpin," he accused angrily by way of greeting as he strode into Racer's usual alley. "You've scared them all off dealing to me."

"Ain't nuffin of th'sort, love," Racer said breezily. "Just got one o'them personalities, y'ken?"

Sherlock was not in the mood. He shoved his hands as deep into his jeans pockets as he could and scowled at the concrete. His head was killing him. He really didn't want to do this. "At least let me have a hit first," he mumbled.

Wouldn't let himself be the victim here, had to have some control. They both had something the other wanted, after all.

Racer gave him an easy grin. "Then I'll have t'keep well away from yer teeth, won't I?"

Sherlock paled. That wasn't what he'd meant to... "No."

"Can't see that y've much choice in the matter, love."
Sherlock was breathing a little faster than usual now, but he refused to let himself look as unsettled as he felt. If nothing else the adrenaline was clearing away the fog from his mind. "I'll... I won't... actually bite it off," he muttered rather stupidly. Racer didn't seem to hear him. The lithe, dark-haired man had unfolded himself from the bin he'd been perched on and languidly made his way over to Sherlock.

"Too much risk now, love," he whispered in Sherlock's ear. The younger man tried to keep his breathing even.

"I haven't agreed yet," Sherlock pointed out shakily. "Back off."

"But yer goin' to."

The breath on his ear was disgustingly humid. Sherlock had the sudden, absurd thought that he wanted his brother.

No I don't. He shoved the thought out of his mind. Mycroft didn't care about him. Mycroft had abandoned him in a clinic for three months and then let Father find out. He certainly wasn't going to save Sherlock from this. Not when it was his own fault to begin with for getting so dependent that he was willing to... to...

He swallowed. Racer was right, he needed the drug too badly to worry about things like his dignity.

"Fine," he whispered.

"Tha's what I like t'hear," Racer chuckled darkly, biting Sherlock's earlobe. Sherlock flinched back but the older man's hands came up and gripped his biceps, forcing him to the wall so he couldn't get away. The bricks dug into his back, Racer's teeth on his throat were sharp and slick and he just wanted to scream. But he refused to show fear, refused to be any more the victim than he had to be.

Some primal defence mechanism seemed to kick in and Sherlock's whole body went limp and pliant, gaze distant. His physical shell might have to endure this but he certainly didn't. He retreated to the frosted mud-spotted landscape of his mind and curled up under the boughs of a willow tree he'd planted there a few nights before. It wasn't a tower - he hadn't had time to start figuring out how to erect one yet - but it was something.

When it was all over he emerged from his hiding place to find the landscape of his mind scorched with the bitter fire of helplessness. Racer was tossing a baggie at him, and he caught it on reflex. He was sore in places he didn't want to think about, but thankfully clothed. The one advantage of having two semi-separate minds to handle speaking and thinking meant his body could handle itself well on autopilot. He didn't even need to be conscious to keep himself presentable.

"Come back soon, love," Racer was cackling lecherously as Sherlock turned on his heel and left.

He didn't respond. It was worth it, he assured himself. After all he had cocaine now, didn't he? That was all that mattered.

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The next two or three days passed in a blur. That might have had something to do with not having come down once during any of them, but at the very least by the time he was forced to return to Racer again he was so fogged from lack of sleep he hardly felt anything. He took that as a positive and refused to let himself fall anywhere below a buzz thereafter. His arms began to look like pin cushions. The snow in his head piled over and over itself until the drifts climbed well past the top of his willow tree, burying it in frost. He didn't care. The snow was easier to hide in than the
branches had been anyway.

It was nearing midnight on the 9th of January when he found himself (found) himself was the correct term, as he had barely any recollection of the journey there or of making the decision to go) picking the lock on the back entrance of a darkened community sports centre, a vague idea of taking a shower and perhaps finding a machine to launder his clothes in driving him along through the fog. It was dark, but he'd stolen a small torch from somewhere and held it in his mouth as he worked. Simple 5-pin tumbler lock, not wired to any security devices, practically an invitation. Now if only his fingers would stop fumbling.

After an inordinate amount of time the lock finally gave way. Sherlock pocketed his makeshift picks and stepped through the door into some kind of staff break room, holding the torch low to avoid shining out the windows. Nothing of interest, so he continued on through the lobby and made his way to the member's area in back, pulling the hood of his sweatshirt up to shroud his face against the prying eyes of the cameras. Couldn't risk being identified and arrested. The thought of Mycroft finding him, of deducing how far he'd been willing to... no, no absolutely not. Sherlock would die before he ever let his brother set eyes on him again.

He stopped in the tiled washrooms and pushed his hood back to scrub a hand through his greasy hair (there would be no surveillance anywhere near the changing rooms after all), looking around as he did so. Banks of showers to his left, lockers for long-term paid members plus some washing machines and a few dryers to his right. He stripped off his peacoat, paused for a moment as he felt the weight of the drug paraphernalia in the lining shift. Should he do another hit first, or have a shower...?

No, shower first. He'd already done one... er... not too long ago? Probably? He couldn't precisely remember when it had been but was almost certain it was within half an hour, so he should be fine. Sherlock tossed his coat onto a nearby bench and emptied his jeans pockets in a small pile on top. Dead phone with its battery pack, several quid in loose change, around a hundred pounds in bills of various denominations, and a collection of foreign currency swiped from tourists which while useless were interesting to look at. He balanced his cigarettes and lighter atop of the haphazard stack of money along with his current set of lockpicks (hairpins and a screwdriver, inelegant but effective) and turned to the business of figuring out how exactly to work a washing machine whilst half-delirious.

Load setting should be... small, right? He was only washing one outfit. But it was jeans and a sweatshirt, so maybe... The dials seemed to blur in and out of focus and he decided it probably really didn't matter in the slightest so long as he made sure the water wasn't hot enough to shrink anything. Flicked the knobs to whatever seemed normal enough, stripped off and grabbed a towel from the stack of clean linens to the side to wrap himself in as he started the machine then went off to rifle through peoples' lockers for shampoo and soap.

Cracking combination locks was usually entertaining enough, but without the ability to concentrate it quickly degenerated into little more than a frustrating waste of time. The spin dial seemed to stick on every bloody number physically possible, digits constantly getting lost amongst the snowbanks when he tried to memorise them. After the third pass forgetting half a dozen sticking points he finally relented and appropriated a pen and scrap of paper from the equipment sign-out sheet in the far corner, resigning himself to doing things the Ordinary Way.

His maths were convoluted and sloppy and probably made very little sense to anyone who wasn't sleep-deprived, but he nonetheless figured out the possible combinations within a few minutes. The lock clicked open on the fifth try and he swiped a bottle of shampoo and some sort of fragrant soap (strawberries...? did he really want to smell like- oh, sod it who cared), then went to have a shower.
When he returned (tossing the anonymous woman's belongings back into her locker without bothering to close it) he felt quite a bit better. Incredibly tired, but better. Should do another hit, wake himself up a little but ugh... so much bother, so many fiddly steps. Could smoke but, no, wait... the detector would go off - didn't want a load of firemen showing up to find him starkers in a sports centre. No caffeine around, hadn't been hungry in days, so no food either.

With a heavy sigh he used the last of his energy to switch his clothes from the now-finished washer to a dryer and turned it on to what he hoped was a normal setting, then after a moments' debate clambered up to sit on top of the machine in his towel. He'd get his drugs in a minute, for now he just wanted to rest a bit. Not sleep, no... never sleep again if he could help it. Just stop walking around so much. The noise and vibration of the dryer would keep him awake, so it was safe to stop for awhile. Stop and think.

Right, so... he needed to come up with a plan. Had to find a new dealer somehow. One without such a wide sphere of influence, and more importantly one lacking a fetish for forcing young men to... to do things. Ugh, alright wait, stop thinking. At least about... about that. Didn't remember it anyway, right? Was under the willow tree the whole time.

Sherlock frowned at himself and raised his knees up to wrap his arms around them, pillowing his chin on his forearms. The dryer was up against the wall so he leant his shoulder on the tiles and huffed a sigh as the machine shuddered warmth and white noise below. It was soothing in a strange way, but he couldn't fall asleep. Had to keep thinking.

What he really needed was blackmail material. Then he could twist the situation to his advantage and stop being manipulated so easily. Racer had to have something, everyone did. Just had to look, probably a detail he'd seen already, couldn't remember... have to catch it next ti-

Sherlock scowled. No. No no no no. There wouldn't be a next time. He had to stop interacting with Racer immediately. Find another source of cocaine and wash his hands of the hateful bastard once and for all.

... But Racer was an experienced dealer. He knew all the pushers in this area, had networks. The man was going to be exceedingly difficult to avoid completely if Sherlock wanted to continue with his habit. Leaving the district might not even work, since who knew the extent of the dealer's contact base? He could have influences all over London. Might find him, might... might...

Sherlock's thoughts trailed off to land with a muffled thump in the snowbanks. His internal sight was obscured by white in every direction, cognition was becoming impossible. With a light groan he looked down to the dial on the dryer below him and saw that only five minutes had passed. Good lord, this would take forever. He needed more cocaine. Should get up to get his coat. But it was so far... maybe... just another five minutes sitting here.

The end-of-cycle buzzer startled him awake with a gasp and he nearly tumbled off the dryer.

Wait, where-? What! He cast his gaze around wildly, but it was only the dark tiled changing area, no leering dealers or disappointed brothers in sight. The last few hours came back to him and he rubbed both hands roughly over his face in an effort to wake himself up, sliding off the machine to stand before he could nod off again. Shouldn't have fallen asleep. At least his clothes were dry now, so he could stop being half-naked.

Sherlock got dressed. The super-heated metal of the rivets in his jeans scorched his skin, but that was fine as the pain kept him focused long enough to dig out his coke supplies. Wasn't possible to mix up an exact 7% solution but he got close enough considering the circumstances. Even managed to hit the vein on his second try (which should probably have felt like less of an
accomplishment but sod it, he’d take what positives he could get right now). Enormous snowbanks filtered down in the ensuing gale to rest more evenly across the landscape. His willow tree stood frosted and motionless, icy but no longer buried.

A thought he’d had before falling asleep shook itself free of the white dunes in his head, making him smile with a sudden idea as he gathered up his things and made his way out of the back entrance of the community centre.

Contact base! Yes, that’s it - his suppliers! I’ll go straight to the source. A narcotics distributor must have plenty of dark secrets. I’ll deduce like usual and then use my knowledge to blackmail them into selling to me directly. That way I can avoid the bastard entirely. Yes, this is an excellent plan.

The fact that he was feeling so optimistic meant he was very high, he knew. Must have mixed up a bit more than 7%. Didn't matter, though; it was a good plan. All he'd need to do was tail Racer until he found the man's distributor, then work from there until he had his own personal supply secured. It wouldn't be difficult, he was a genius after all.

Sherlock hummed quietly to himself as he left the sports centre. It seemed the short rest had refreshed him somewhat, and for the first time in a great long while he thought he might even be a little hungry. He adjusted his path to take him past an all-night chip shop, tapping out a cigarette with a smile as he walked.

Things were finally looking up again.

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As he’d predicted, tailing Racer had been depressingly easy. The man skulked about the back streets of Camden for a few hours before finally taking off towards the river. They crossed at Waterloo and walked along the embankment for awhile (Sherlock careful to keep well out of sight) and ended up turning across the train tracks to wind up in Stockwell, where the ferretlike dealer ducked into a ramshackle half-abandoned house off Clapham Road.

Sherlock lit a cigarette and loitered a good distance away where he could see the front door, glaring menacingly at any passing thugs who looked like they might make a go for his expensive peacoat. It hadn't taken long to lose the semi-healthy appearance from rehab (four days without eating more than a packet of chips would do that) and he was now back to his usual wraithlike, half-starved appearance. Coupled with the dark sleepless bruises under his eyes and the dilated pupils he cut an imposing enough figure to avoid being harassed.

He smoked his way through half the cigs in his packet and observed the drugs den Racer had disappeared into. The building was an old brick Victorian townhouse, three storeys and in obvious disrepair, garden choked with weeds, all bordered by a low crumbling brick wall which sported a large gap where a gate had once been. Despite the air of neglect the place was still clearly inhabited - a welcome mat had been put out not too long ago and the lights were on in multiple windows. The property was most likely inherited, he deduced, and belonged probably to a young man who had been the sole surviving and/or only eligible heir to his parents’ modest estate. Instead of making an investment and quite probably turning a profit on the sale of the house despite its dubious location he'd instead chosen to convert it into a headquarters for his distributing business.

Sherlock waited some time for Racer to exit the building. Once he was sure the man had gone he stubbed out his current cigarette and made his way up the short garden path to knock loudly on the peeling green paint of the front door. Sounds of swearing drifted from inside and a young man appeared in the entryway.
Sherlock’s heart seemed to shudder to a stop for a moment. The man was perhaps half an inch shorter than himself, with a scruffy mop of sandy brown hair, wide hazel eyes and a thick smattering of freckles across his cheeks. He was wearing a pair of dark-wash jeans and a faded school football shirt. Despite smelling strongly of cannabis and sporting the glassy, bloodshot eyes of the perpetually-stoned boy was well-muscled, most likely still had the habits of his football training to keep him in shape and a decent metabolism to stave off whatever weight he might gain from pot smoking. His skin was just beginning to fade from an old tan, with a very light dusting of dark brown stubble framing an angular jawline suggesting he’d only recently fallen out of better upkeep. Overall the effect was really rather unfairly handsome.

Sherlock found himself staring.

"'Ello?" the man said after an inappropriately long silence on Sherlock’s part. "Y’need sommat, mate?"

_Oh brilliant_, Sherlock thought dully as he caught the accent, _he's cockney. You're smitten with a chav._

He cleared his throat and set about steadfastly ignoring his treacherous body's urges telling him to snog the stranger immediately.

"I need to see the boss," he said, hoping to sound more believable by keeping his motives vague.

"Oh, aye? Sorry, 'e ain't in righ' now. Should be round soon, though. Yer welcome ter stay an' wait if ye want."

Bloody _hell_, that was a thick accent. Sherlock took a brief second to parse, then nodded evenly. He was fairly sure he was being invited in to wait for the ringleader.

"That would be lovely, thank you," he replied in as close to polite as he could get without outright acting.

"Well c'mon in then!"

The man smiled and stood back from the entryway to allow his guest to walk past, then shut the door behind them. Inside was a small sitting room with scuffed hardwood flooring and a collection of mismatched area rugs scattered around randomly. A very small, threadbare couch was the only piece of furniture, and it was placed in the middle of the space facing an incongruous widescreen television which was held up by milk crates. An old DVD player and a secondhand Xbox were wedged into the crates along with a small collection of games and movies.

Through a doorway to their right was a small kitchenette, and the dashing young man made his way in that direction as he gestured for Sherlock to have a seat.

"Fink we might 'ave some tea round 'ere sommere. Give us a mo', eh?"

Finally out of the man's line of sight, Sherlock scrunched his face up in displeasure at his surroundings. It smelled of smoke and weed and unwashed men. He eyed the sofa distrustfully for a moment, but quickly decided he'd most certainly touched worse lately and moved to sit on the lumpy cushions. It wasn't bad actually, for a skip couch.

The telly was paused in the midst of some video game and he studied the menus curiously. Something about mission objectives and checkpoints. The game screen itself seemed to be dominated by a strange-looking gun and several different gauges detailing things like character health and ammunition supplies.
"Bah!" the other man exclaimed as he reappeared. Sherlock jumped slightly, he'd been engrossed with trying to figure out the game's objective and hadn't noticed his host reenter the room. "I was wrong, sorry mate. Ain't got nuffin but water. Here ya go."

"Thank you," Sherlock said as he took the glass offered to him. He sipped his water (ugh, tap) and wondered how long he'd have to suffer through petty small talk with this unfairly good-looking stranger before the boss returned.

"Wanna go a round?" the man suddenly asked. Sherlock very nearly choked on his water.

"E-excuse me?" he sputtered. Wha-? How did he-!? Surely he hadn't been that obvious!

"Th' game," the boy clarified with a gesture to the television and a slightly devious smirk, like he knew exactly what Sherlock had thought he'd meant. He ducked down and produced an extra controller from somewhere behind one of the milk crates. "We could 'ave a match while we wait fer Corey t'git back."

"Oh." Oh. He'd meant a round of... oh, yes. Right. Of course. God he was an idiot.

Sherlock took an embarrassed sip of water and willed his heart to slow down as he eyed the bulky controller now being thrust in his direction. Video games were pointless wastes of time. He should tell the other man as much. Should say he wouldn't be caught dead playing one. Should list a million other more productive things to do.

"Er... sure." Damn his hormones.

"Brill!" the boy exclaimed as he plugged in the second controller.

"You'll have to show me what to do, though," Sherlock said in a rush, not sure what he'd just got himself into. "I've never played one of these before."

"Serious? Bloody 'ell!" The man looked shocked, like Sherlock had just said something profoundly unsettling. "Never?"

"Never," he confirmed. His and Mycroft's childhood hadn't exactly been conducive to idle leisure activities, after all, and he hadn't had the time nor inclination at uni.

"Well then I guess yer in fer a treat, mate! Here, take this."

Without warning Sherlock found his drink being forcibly replaced with an Xbox controller. He resolutely did not blush as the other man leant in very close to him and moved Sherlock's fingers into the correct positions with his own lightly calloused hands, jabbering a stream of instructions almost directly into his ear as he did so.

"Now y'pull the righ' trigger ta shoot an the left one ta lob grenades," he was saying, cockney almost too thick to comprehend. Sherlock made a determined effort to listen despite the rather distracting tightening of his jeans at their unexpected proximity to each other. "Use this stick 'ere ta move about and th' other one to move th' camera."

"I'll be rubbish at it," Sherlock warned, voice coming out slightly strangled. He quickly cleared his throat and forced himself not to stare at his companion as the man sat down next to him and began flicking through various menu screens with his own controller.

"Tha's alright mate, nobody's great their first go!" He glanced sidelong at Sherlock with a friendly grin, then frowned as he seemed to realise something. "Oh, bugger! I never got yer name! Knew I
"It's Sherlock," he answered automatically, then immediately fought back a grimace. Damn it, he'd meant to use a pseudonym.

"Cheers, Sherlock! Th' name's Eric," the other said cheerfully, face turning back to the screen. He didn't seem inclined to shake hands or anything which Sherlock found himself absurdly grateful for; he didn't think his composure could quite handle any more touching.

Eric was speaking again. "Alrigh' let's just do basic Slayer on Blood Gulch. Since it's yer first time an' all I'll even letcha take th' warthog."

Sherlock blinked and cast a baffled glance sideways. "I have... no idea what any of that meant."

Eric laughed and clapped him on the back. "Ye'll see, mate! Just wait!"

There was a short pause as the game loaded up.

"By th' way, love yer soap. Strawberry's me favourite."

Sherlock finally lost the battle to avoid blushing.

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"No! That's ridiculous! I clearly shot you!"

"Overshield, mate!"

Sherlock was fuming. They'd played through two matches already and he was well and truly sick of being shot in the bloody head. Eric seemed to have some sort of sixth sense for knowing exactly where Sherlock was going to be and how to aim to score an instant kill. It was driving him mad.

"Y'keep dickin' around in th' caves like y'think I ain't gonna find ya," Eric said with a grin as once again Sherlock's space marine met a grisly end.

"I was trying to employ an ambush technique," he snapped as he waited for his character to respawn. It was the last round of the match. After he died this time Eric would win. The other boy had yet to lose a single life, much to Sherlock's irritation. Somehow despite his assertion that he'd be rubbish he still couldn't quite bring himself to accept how utterly terrible he was at this game. It wasn't fair. He wasn't used to being bad at things. Was this how ordinary people felt all the time? No wonder they were all such prats.

"Y'were tryin' ta camp me is what y'mean, and doin' bloody awful at it." On-screen Eric's avatar was jumping up and down on Sherlock's corpse.

"I don't care what stupid term you have for it, I was ambushing you. And it would have worked beautifully if you didn't have this absurd compulsion to chuck grenades everywhere you go."

"Grenades'r the gift of life, mate," Eric muttered sagely. Sherlock just scowled. He'd respawned finally, and this time he was determined to get at least one kill before the match ended.

They'd been chasing each other all over the map for about five minutes when the front door burst open. Eric looked behind him at the sudden noise and Sherlock took advantage of the opportunity to fire a hail of bullets at the other boy's unmoving character.

"Hah!" he exclaimed as the screen congratulated him on his first kill. Eric looked back around and
huffed.

"Oi! That ain't fair!"

"Crenshaw!" a voice barked. Sherlock startled and nearly dropped the controller. He'd been so focused on actually scoring a point he'd barely registered the sound of the door. "Get off your arse and give us a fuckin' hand, will ya? Bring your little friend, too. There's a load a shit out here needs liftin'."

"Fuuuck, fine!" Eric groaned and stood up, setting his controller on the couch cushions. He glanced down at Sherlock. "Y'cool wit helpin' out? I know y'said you was here t'use th' boss but there prolly is a lot o' shit to carry..."

"That's fine, I'll help," Sherlock said quickly. He had a fair idea of what kinds of 'shit' needed carrying and was eager to get more information on the specifics of the organisation and its processes.

Eric smiled with relief and the two of them made their way outside. They were greeted by the sight of a large, off-white courier van pulled up parallel to the kerb. Two young men were standing by the rear bumper, one a rather scrawny dark-skinned boy with close cropped hair and the other an overweight ginger with a copper-blond crewcut and a face that seemed more freckles than skin. The latter man was squinting closely at a PDA.

The man who'd come in the door to collect Eric emerged from the house a few steps behind them with a notebook and a calculator clutched in his hand. Sherlock eyed him carefully as he pushed past them. Average height, clean-shaven with a mop of extremely curly brown hair and wide eyes of a muddy brownish-green colour. Abdominal muscles clearly defined under an overtight black t-shirt. Athletic, obviously quite vain about his appearance. Biceps and forearms larger than normal, abrasions and a collection of sticking plasters on his hands, unusual scuff pattern on thin-soled, sturdy shoes. Some kind of climbing enthusiast. Parkour? Most likely. Not a drug user, so what was his motivation for being here? Had to be money. Either in business partnership with someone or hired for his organisational skills.

"Who's this bloke then?" Sherlock's current target of interest asked of Eric as they all gathered around the van. The thin black boy had opened it and the inside was revealed to be stacked full of boxes wrapped in plain brown butcher paper.

"Eh? Oh, tha's Sherlock," Eric said, jerking a thumb back to where Sherlock was hovering slightly behind him.

"Special friend a' yours?" the black boy asked with a mischievous grin. Eric glared and opened his mouth to reply when the overweight man with the PDA interrupted them.

"Shut the fuck up Ben, nobody wants to hear your dumb arse talk," the man snapped, tucking away his device. He cast an appraising eye over Sherlock's frame. "Corey didn't say nothin' about hiring a new guy."

"It was a bit short notice," Sherlock said vaguely, filing away the names.

The ginger shrugged. "Whatever, not my fuckin' problem. Got any muscles under that poncy jacket?"

Sherlock frowned and tucked his hands into the pockets of his decidedly not poncy peacoat.

"Yes," he replied, thinking it might be best to just speak as little as possible until he'd had more
c Cocaine. It'd been nearly two hours since his last hit and he could feel the drug was waning quickly. His snowfield was more like a light dusting of frost, chilly but not cold enough to freeze errant thoughts in place.

"Well good, you can help these faggots move product. You got any idea what we're doing here?"

Sherlock glanced at the interior of the van. "Moving drugs," he said. Then his mouth just kept going, "the larger parcels contain marijuana. The smaller are most likely an assortment of heroin, cocaine and amphetamines partitioned by type. The square ones contain medical needles and the rectangular flat box is full of money." Damn it.

All three men were staring at him. Sherlock nearly swore at himself but managed to keep his face impassive. He felt like banging his head against the nearest wall at his own body's treacherous stupidity. Why did I do that? This is going to be a disaster. I need more coke. Would it be rude to excuse myself to go shoot up? Probably.

Suddenly Eric burst out laughing. "Hah! Sherly's psychic!"

"Please don't call me that," Sherlock muttered. He hated the name Sherly. And describing him as psychic was just grossly inaccurate.

The muscular parkourist seemed a little unsettled. "How... how did you know all that?"

Sherlock debated on whether to explain but was saved the trouble by the fat ringleader. "Obviously somebody fuckin' told him, dipshit," the man snapped irritably. He then spun around to shove a pudgy finger into Sherlock's chest. "Look here Mr. Public School, we're not paying you to be smart. Just to move product. So get. fuckin'. moving. That goes for all of you!" he yelled the last to his three minions as well.

The other men grumbled and set to work while Sherlock tried an approximation of an apologetic smile toward their apparent leader. All he got in return was an irritated glare as the fat redhead moved off toward the cab of the vehicle, busily dialling a number on the mobile he'd pulled from his pocket.

"Ey don't worry 'bout him, mate. He's always like that," Eric said cheerfully. "Here, you take these." He'd hopped into the back of the van and was holding a stack of three small boxes towards Sherlock. The other two boys were further in, debating which of them would have to carry the needles.

Sherlock tried to think of a way to ask for names without looking like he wasn't actually meant to be there, but his new cockney acquaintance beat him to the punch. Eric was quite good for introductions, apparently.

"So the fat un's Devin," he said as they carried their respective stacks of boxes into the ramshackle house. "He's a right prat but not too bad once y'get used to 'im. Black kid's Benny, tweaked up on E mosta th'time but pretty chummy for it. An' the crazy bloke with th' jewfro is Charley."

Sherlock blinked. "The... jewfro?"

"Yeah." Eric quirked an eyebrow at him, realising his confusion. "Oh, geez. Y'know, like..." He shifted the packages in his arms and used his now-free hand to make a vague explosive gesture toward his hair. "Poof! Like an afro. Only s'on a Jew. So it's a jewfro."

"That's..." Sherlock trailed off, having no idea what to say to that bit of knowledge. Was this really the state of modern slang? "Er.. right then," he finished lamely. Eric snickered at him.
"Yer a pretty weird bloke, y'know that? Y'ain't never played Halo, ain't got no idea what a jewfro is." Eric paused to open the door with his free hand. The other two boys were trailing along behind them, now bickering over rugby teams. "And whatever that was with sayin' what was in th' boxes before anyone said. How'd y'even know that anyhow? Did Corey tell ya?"

Sherlock had no idea who Corey was, besides a vague deduction of his being in charge. Thankfully he didn't say as much.

"Nobody told me. I just... looked," he half-mumbled instead. The need for either cocaine or another cigarette was getting really quite desperate, but he couldn't afford to give anyone insight into his dependency. Racer had made it quite clear that such vulnerabilities were an all-too-exploitable weakness.

"Looked? At what? It was all just paper boxes!" Eric sounded a bit awed, which was ridiculous. Sherlock hadn't done anything but notice details and talk without thinking. Which he only did because he wasn't high enough to shut his brain off.

He cast a sidelong glance at his erstwhile companion while they stowed the boxes in a spare room and deliberated on what he should say. Explain his methods, and look like even more of a smartarse... or keep silent and look like just a regular arse?

Not really much of a choice, is it? he mused. Of course he was going to pick smartarse.

He took a deep breath. "The tape on some of the larger boxes had tiny bits of cannabis leaves stuck to the undersides and as marijuana is relatively light it would have to be in the largest container one of the small parcels had powder residue around the corners obviously somebody forgot to seal a bag and as to exactly what the rest were that was a guess but a good one as there's really only about three street drugs worth trafficking at present the needles were in an easily-recognised box from a medical supply company which had to mean they were hypos because there's nothing else medical you would couple with narcotics in that quantity and the flat rectangular box being singular and set slightly to the side where it was more readily accessible meant that it had to be something small and light which needed to be moved first so it had to be paper money or documents but the ginger man was checking a spreadsheet on his PDA meaning most if not all the paperwork is digital leaving cash as the more probable option and anyway a paper trail would be suicide for a drug smuggler so yes definitely cash and by the way the cocaine is cut with something it's too heavy for a rectangle of that volume I would guess talc or lactose but someone should really do a chemical analysis for anything more toxic before it hits the streets I could do it if you want but I'd need access to some basic laboratory equipment and a few reagents."

He cut himself off and stood panting, slightly out of breath. Eric was staring at him. So were Ben and Charles, who had walked into the storeroom almost the exact moment Sherlock started speaking. The space was dead silent for several moments.

"Bloody 'ell!" Eric exclaimed finally.

Sherlock took a tiny step back. "Sorry," he muttered, habitually bracing himself for a blow. The confined space and the all-male company were giving him rather unpleasant flashbacks to Eton.

"Wait, you think the coke's cut?" Charles asked, setting down the box he'd been carrying and moving toward him. Sherlock wanted to retreat but forced himself not to. Nobody needed to know how unsettled he was. He straightened his back and unconsciously channelled Mycroft in an attempt to convey an air of calm authority.

"Yes, the weight is wrong. It should weigh slightly less than a kilogram, instead it's verging on one
and a half. Clearly one of your suppliers has become untrustworthy."

"Devin's gonna have a fit!" Ben piped up almost gleefully. "He's been trying to catch that coke runner out for ages!"

"Are you some kinda genius or sommat?" Eric had sidled up closer to him, and Sherlock clenched his jaw in an effort to quell a sudden attack of claustrophobia. Between the three other men he'd become quite effectively boxed in.

"I simply notice details," he explained in an even voice, cadence still mirroring his brother's.

"Well 'notice' some of the rest of the coke boxes and tell Devin how pure that shit is, we've been having trouble with the supplier for bloody ages." With that, Charles turned on his heel and headed back out of the house. Ben spared a second to flash Sherlock a lopsided grin and ambled after his friend.

Sherlock let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding and dropped Mycroft's mannerisms immediately. He was vaguely disgusted with himself for having used them in the first place.

"Eric, where's the loo?" he asked the other man casually.

"Wha'? Oh." Eric had been staring at his face. Sherlock tried not to glare. "It's up th' stairs, to th' right." He jerked his thumb behind him to indicate the direction with one of his usual dopey smiles.

Sherlock thanked him politely and made his way up to the room in question, Eric going the other way back out to the van after Sherlock assured him he'd be right down. This impulsiveness was getting ridiculous, he needed to refresh his dose before he completely sabotaged himself. The field hadn't yet thawed completely but it was only a matter of time until the frost melted and mud formed.

The bathroom was small, cramped, and smelled strongly of dettol. He took a moment to wonder who in the house was conscientious enough to bother disinfecting anything but quickly dismissed the thought as irrelevant. A quick dig through his coat lining produced an almost-empty baggie of cocaine, one of his least-dulled needles (by now he'd used all of them several times, though he'd been sure to at least make an attempt to wash the blood out), a small bottle of saline eye drops and the broken off end of a metal spoon.

He turned on the tap as hot as it would go and set about rinsing the spoon and needle. Not exactly sterile, but good enough he supposed. It wasn't as if he particularly cared about sepsis after all. He tapped what was left of his half-gram into the spoon, dissolved it in a decent amount of saline and drew the cloudy mixture carefully into the syringe through a clean cigarette filter. Barely a 3% solution, but better than nothing.

The needle was so blunt it was like trying to stab himself with a fork tine. Somehow he managed, and soon enough everything was fine. He pulled down his sleeve over the fresh injection mark without bothering to find a plaster (the material was dark anyway, no one would see the blood) and leant over the sink as the initial high hit. The dosage was too small to even to make his ears ring, but he still felt a decent bit better. More focused, in control. He smiled at his reflection.

"Showtime," he told it. He stowed away his supplies and walked out of the room.

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It turned out Devin was not, in fact, the ringleader. That distinction fell to his older brother Corey,
who was a relatively short, balding man with a thick blond beard and piercing blue eyes. He was portly (though nowhere near as rotund as his younger brother), but Sherlock suspected the small pudge of fat around his midsection disguised a not insignificant amount of abdominal strength. Overall he had the look of a street thug gone slightly to seed. Which was, Sherlock soon found, exactly what he was.

"Who's this then?" Corey asked almost as soon as he caught sight of Sherlock hovering by the now unloaded courier van with Eric and the others. The man had driven up in a sports car and was clad in a well-cut suit - obviously doing quite well for himself with this little venture.

"Oh, 'ey there boss!" Eric greeted cheerfully as the man neared them, flinging an arm around Sherlock's shoulders and thumping him gently on the chest. Sherlock wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or pleased by the contact. "This'ere's Sherlock!" Eric informed his employer, "He's like a genius or sommat. Said 'e was here t'see ya."

"Good afternoon," Sherlock intoned formally. He extricated himself from Eric's hold and held out a hand, which the older man shook without much thought. Sherlock filed away whatever information he could glean from a quick, unobtrusive scan of the man's body. *Mid-thirties, keeps a flat in Mayfair, no pets, string of ex-girlfriends, accustomed to being in charge, ruthless businessman, former street fighter, had italian for dinner.*

Corey was eyeing him critically. "A cokehead, huh?" He said this with the air of someone commenting on another person's hairstyle. Sherlock blinked - as far as he'd seen in the mirror earlier his pupils weren't particularly dilated, nor was he shaking. What little cocaine he'd had hadn't been nearly enough to cause such obvious signs. He assumed there must be some other tell and resolved to find out what it was as soon as possible. For now, though...

"Is there somewhere more private we could speak?" Sherlock shot a subtle sidelong glance at Eric, who was still standing next to him. Corey looked to the boy and rolled his eyes slightly.

"Crenshaw, get the hell out of here. Tell the others to take off too," he ordered. Eric pouted slightly but did as he was told. He flashed Sherlock a thumbs-up and clapped him on the back as he walked away.

"Huh. Don't normally act so friendly, that kid," Corey commented blandly. "Better watch out, think he might fancy you."

Really? Brilliant! was what Sherlock wanted to say, but what came out of his mouth instead was, "I'd like to propose a deal."

*Thank god for cocaine,* was all he could think.

"Would you now?" Corey raised one blond eyebrow and eyed Sherlock up and down appraisingly. "And what's a public school dropout got that I might want?"

"First of all, I didn't drop out of public school, I dropped out of Oxford." He stressed the institution's name significantly, hoping the prestige would win him at least some respect. Corey didn't seem particularly phased. Sherlock frowned. "And secondly," he continued, "I am, as Eric mentioned, a 'genius'. My primary area of expertise is chemistry, which as I understand it is a skill set you're currently lacking. I am fully capable of performing toxicology analyses on all manner of illicit substances using very little equipment. Think of how much you could raise your prices if every gram were guaranteed pure."

Corey seemed to be considering. Sherlock held his breath. Making himself useful would be a far
"Exactly what sort of equipment are we talking here?" Corey asked eventually. Sherlock fought down a triumphant grin.

"For a very rough estimation just methanol and a decent scale. If you want the exact percentage and identification of the cut I would need a titration setup and some basic chemical reagents."

"And you know how to purify too, I take it?"

"Of course."

Corey made a 'hmm'ing noise. "Well, we got plenty of scales. Don't suppose you're carrying methanol or whatever around with you, then."

"It's easily obtainable," Sherlock assured breezily. "The secondary school nearby almost certainly keeps a stock in the chemistry lab, if you'd like to avoid the paper trail."

"You want to steal from a bunch of kids?" Despite his tone Corey looked more amused than affronted.

"If you're bothered by ethics simply make an anonymous donation to the school fund later to purchase replacements. Doubtless they could use new equipment anyway, this isn't exactly an upscale community." Sherlock glanced meaningfully at the rundown house beside them with a raise of his eyebrows. Corey just shrugged.

"If you want to bugger off and break into a school that's your business, lad. You'll have to find your own lockpicker, though. Far as I know none of my boys are thieves."

Sherlock tucked his hands into his coat pockets with a quirked brow. "Not remotely a problem."

"Oh aye? Hm, right." Corey rubbed one thick hand over his balding crown, then stuck both hands in his pockets and fixed Sherlock with a calculating stare. "Well, what is it you want then?"

"All I ask is that you agree to sell to me directly."

Corey smirked. "Had a little trouble with your dealer, eh?"

Sherlock's stance stiffened defensively but he kept his tone even. "I'm willing to pay full price in addition to the analysis work. The deal is distinctly in your favour."

"Alright, alright lad, don't get all stroppy." Corey laughed. "I'll admit it'd be good to have a boffin around for the technical bits. Tell you what, you get me accurate numbers on that cocaine cut and I'll let you buy whatever you want, how's that?"

Sherlock nodded. "Excellent, thank you."

"Well, go on and break into wherever the hell you're going to," Corey said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Take Crenshaw with if you need a lookout or something. Little blighter needs to get out of the house once in awhile."

Sherlock resolutely quelled an upsurge of something alarmingly like glee at the prospect of dragging Eric along with him, and instead raised an eyebrow delicately.

"You seem... strangely paternal towards your tenants," he pointed out. He'd already deduced that the three boys he'd met earlier lived in the ramshackle house in exchange for working for the
distributor.

"And you seem strangely posh for an addict," Corey retorted. "Guess we're none of us what you'd expect." A chiming noise sounded from his trouser pocket and he pulled out an expensive mobile. He continued talking even as he composed a response to the text he'd just received "Listen lad, it's obvious you're planning to kip here if you can." Sherlock opened his mouth to protest, but Corey ignored him. "So here's a quick rundown of the rules: you get caught, it's on you. You don't do what I say, there'll be consequences. Overdose or otherwise incapacitate yourself and you'll get dumped at the nearest A&E if - and only if - there's a car around or you can walk. Otherwise you're shit out of luck; no ambulances allowed anywhere near this place. I don't give a toss about house upkeep, just that it stays standing, and cleaning's your own goddamn business. Got all that?"

Sherlock blinked, nodding vaguely. "Er, yes," he added when he realised the man was still looking at his phone. Had he just become a tenant?

"Good." Corey sent his message and tucked the mobile away. He flashed Sherlock a rather sardonic grin. "Welcome to the crew, lad." He clapped him roughly on the back and walked away in the direction of his car. Sherlock was left standing alone on the pavement.

He'd done it. He was in. All he had to do were a few simple chemical tests and he'd not only have a steady supply of cocaine but a place to live as well.

He allowed himself a relieved grin. Now to find Eric.

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Bringing Crenshaw was a mistake, Sherlock decided. It wasn't that he disliked the man particularly - he was after all extremely nice to look at and despite the cockney accent was somehow not a complete moron - it was just that Sherlock hadn't counted on having to deal with him whilst crashing.

He blinked at the lock he was fiddling with and scowled as his vision refused to focus correctly. His migraine was getting worse, and the landscape in his head was starting to look more like a swamp than a field. Eric, predictably, was not helping.

"It's sorta weird how y'know how t'do all this shit," the man was saying from his elbow as Sherlock picked the lock on the back door of what they were reasonably certain was the local school's chemistry lab.

"Well I mean it's like... why? Why do y'know how ta pick locks an' break an' enter an' shit? You sound like y'grew up in Chelsea or sommat and yer coat's worth like, a hunnerd quid at least."

"Closer to a thousand. And why would having money keep me from learning how to pick locks?" Sherlock asked, voice irritated. One of the tumblers was stubbornly refusing to catch, which might have had something to do with the fact that he was still having to use a hairpin as a lifter and a small screwdriver as a tension wrench. He resolved to obtain a set of proper lockpicks as quickly as possible.

"But y'could just buy anyfin' you wanted. So why would you bother learnin' how t'pick locks?"

"Maybe so I'd know how to unlock things?" Sherlock responded in a sarcastic deadpan. The
tumbler he was working on finally clicked into place and he made a small satisfied noise as he moved on to the last one.

"But what would y'need ta unlock?"


"Mike-roft?" Eric parroted curiously.

"My brother," Sherlock hissed, hoping his acidic tone would convey a not-so-subtle hint that Eric should drop the subject. Of course it didn't. Eric was the most oblivious human on the planet.

"Oh, neat! Older er younger?"

Sherlock clenched his jaw and cursed whatever gods made him attracted to such a vacuous fool.

"Older," he bit out. "Now shut up."

Surprisingly Eric obeyed him for the next several minutes. Sherlock finally managed to catch the last tumbler and the lock clicked open, revealing a darkened room full of lab benches and chemistry supplies. All of the equipment was used and fairly obviously secondhand, but in decent working condition. Sherlock appropriated several boxes of glassware, a few bunsen burners and a stir plate, placing them all into a convenient plastic tote. Then he went in search of the chemical storage room.

Upon finding it his face immediately fell into a pout. The selection was dismal.

"This is all rubbish," he whinged as he scoured the shelves. Perhaps a decent spread for a school chemistry lab but nothing approaching what he was used to. Luckily he didn't really need anything fancy just to titrate cocaine. That didn't stop a sullen frown from stealing over his face, however. "They haven't even got sodium thiosulphate. What kind of chemistry class doesn't have sodium thiosulphate? Did they run out?"

"I dunno what th'fuck that is mate," Eric informed him as he shouldered into the little room behind Sherlock. He looked around at all the bottles and jars with a vaguely dazed expression.

"It's a crystalline compound that reacts stoichiometrically with iodine."

"Stoitchio... wha'?"

Sherlock sighed. Sometimes it seemed like he was the only person who actually cared to know things that mattered. "Nevermind," he said dismissively. "Here, hold this." He handed his partner-in-crime a plastic tote bucket he'd found and began placing bottles into it.

"Is this stuff dangerous?" Eric asked with a look of faint trepidation as the tote in his arms began filling with various containers.

"Only when mixed improperly," Sherlock assured offhandedly. Eric looked relieved.

Sherlock paused and regarded the small bottle of perchloric acid in his hand for a second.

"Oh, wait. This is dangerous by itself." He tossed the bottle casually into the bucket, where it bounced off a glass jar and rolled to a stop. Sherlock was already back hunting around the shelves.

Eric's face went faintly green.
When they got back to the house Devin was waiting for them.

"Corey said to give you this," he said irritably, holding up a baggie of white powder. Something alarmingly desperate kicked into gear in Sherlock's subconscious, but he forced himself to calmly set his box full of equipment on the counter in the small, cramped kitchen before reaching for the baggie.

"Ah, ah, ah," Devin said, twitching it out of reach. Sherlock grit his teeth as Eric walked into the room behind him carrying the box of chemicals. "Cor' says I'm to make sure you don't use any. You get as much as you need to do your little experiment and that's it, understand?"

"I'd get my little experiment done a lot faster if you'd let me have enough coke to stop crashing," Sherlock pointed out irritably. Seeing the powder so close yet out of his reach was torturous, so he determinedly turned around and set about pulling out glassware.

"He said you'd probably say that." Devin grinned wickedly. Sherlock scowled. His migraine flared white-hot for a moment and he stopped to lean over the counter, setting down the burette in his hands before he broke it.

"Geez, give him sommat at least Dev," Eric's voice cut in. "He's got a buncha deadly bloody chemicals an' whatnot. Ya wanna strung-out junkie fuckin' around wit' mustard gas in here?"

"I can't make mustard gas, I don't have anything sulphurous," Sherlock pointed out in a vague monotone. Both men ignored him.

"Corey says he ain't to be getting high," Devin snapped. "If he kills us with his little chemistry setup he won't get any coke, so we're fine."

"But..."

"Leave it, Eric," Sherlock bit out. He hardly needed some cockney pothead standing up for him. Besides it wasn't as if he hadn't been through this before. The migraine was pushed away to the far corners of his field and he picked up the burette again, sloting it into a ring stand. He would push himself through on willpower alone.

"If you're going to hang around monitoring me you might as well make yourself useful," he quipped irritably to Devin. "Weigh up 600 milligrams of powder, plus or minus no more than five milligrams. Write down the exact weight to as many decimal places as the scale will go."

"Six hundred?" Devin squawked indignantly.

Sherlock whipped around with a savage glare. "Either you weigh up the correct amount or I attempt to mix a different normality of perchloric acid than I'm used to and kill us all by adding the wrong amount of acetic anhydride because I am bloody crashing off cocaine!"

"Alright, alright! Jesus," Devin conceded, throwing up his hands. He stalked off into the other room, presumably to find a scale to use. Sherlock huffed indignantly and turned back to his box of pilfered lab equipment.

"Could y'really kill us widdat stuff?" Eric asked nervously from over by the table.

"Absolutely," Sherlock confirmed in a dull voice. He pulled out the stir plate and a one-litre beaker from the equipment box and placed them in the sink, opening the window all the way before
striding over to grab up the bottles of perchloric and acetic acid from Eric's container. Eric followed him back over to the sink, where Sherlock dropped the magnetic stir bar into the beaker and poured several hundred millilitres of acetic acid in after it.

"What're y'doin'?"

Sherlock set his jaw against the desire to kick Eric in the bollocks. "Making a point one normal perchloric solution," he ground out.

"What for?" Eric was staring at the swirling liquid like he thought it might somehow combust.

"Do you actually want to know or are you just trying to make conversation in some misguided attempt to be friendly?" Sherlock snapped back. He turned to dig out a small graduated cylinder and measured out perchloric acid.

Eric grimaced slightly. "Er... both?"

Sherlock heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Alkalimetric titration." At Eric's blank look he rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "This solution is acidic. It will react with cocaine, which is alkaline."

Another blank look. "Alka-wot?"

"Oh for god's- basic. The opposite of acidic?"

"Oh! Like milk an' lemons!" Eric suddenly exclaimed. Sherlock shot him a withering look.

"Milk and...? Ugh, whatever. Look, when you mix an acid with a base they neutralise each other," he continued, latching on to the excuse to talk as a distraction from his aching head. "The reaction will occur at different rates depending on the chemicals in question, so if you happen to know exactly the rate at which a certain acid will neutralise with a certain base you can find out how much you have of one or the other by adding them together until one is completely gone. Understand?"

As he spoke he'd been carefully pouring perchloric acid into the beaker, and Eric retreated a few steps as the mixture bubbled slightly. "Uh... is that stuff safe to be mixin'?"

"Oh relax, it's only an explosion hazard when its hot," Sherlock answered irritably, dumping the rest of the perchloric in. The mixture hissed as it reacted, then calmed. "Hand me the acetic anhydride."

"Th' what?"

"Aceti- oh never mind." He stalked past the other man and plucked the chemical he needed out of the tote, then returned to pour out thirty millilitres into a clean beaker.

"Six hundred one point, er..." Devin returned with a cup partially full of white powder, squinting at a scrap of paper in his hand. "... point naught three seven."

"Lovely. Set it where I can't see it," Sherlock ordered. He dumped the anhydride into the mixture in the sink and ignored it as it reacted, instead moving on to setting up the titration burette.

"So yer gonna add that stuff to th' coke until the coke... what like, dissolves?" Eric asked hesitantly. Sherlock ground his teeth and resisted the urge to stab himself in the eye with the ring stand. He was not about to attempt to explain halochromic pH indicators to someone who didn't know what an alkaline was.
"Just shut up and let me work," he growled. Eric seemed to get the hint and backed off to sit on the kitchen table, watching curiously as Sherlock (after closing his eyes with a wince) dumped acetic acid into the cup of cocaine. He set the concoction aside to dissolve, moved back to the sink and turned the stir bar all the way up on the perchloric solution. Then he simply stood and stared at it ruefully.

"Well?" Devin asked as nothing further seemed to be happening.

"It has to mix for an hour," Sherlock grumbled with an unhappy pout, tucking his hands into his coat pockets. He fixed Devin with a sullen look.

"Well that sure sucks for you, don't it?" Devin responded snippily. "Come find me when you've got numbers and maybe we can talk. Until then you can fuckin' deal with it, Public School."

Sherlock sneered as the rotund man turned on his heel and left, then bent double to set his forehead on the counter with a sigh. He was absolutely exhausted. Every thought felt as if it were struggling along through a vast bog, plus his headache was back. The thought of taking a nap was tempting, except he'd almost certainly have nightmares and didn't want to wake up screaming in the midst of a bunch of strangers.

"Wanna play Halo?" Eric piped up. Sherlock groaned.

"No," he mumbled.

"Wanna sit on the couch an' watch me play Halo?" the other boy suggested fatuously. Sherlock lifted his head to shoot him an unimpressed glower. Eric just shrugged.

"I guess," Sherlock conceded. It was better than falling asleep with his head on the kitchen counter after all. He trailed moody after the sandy-haired man and glared around at the sitting room when they entered. The familiar feeling of absolute hatred for the world was back, and he wondered what on earth he was even doing in a place like this. Hadn't he been at Oxford three months ago? What had happened?

You fucked it all up, that's what happened, his brain told him viciously. He scrubbed a hand through his hair and tried not to look as miserable as he felt.

"I'll keep th' volume low, yeah?" Eric offered as he sat down and flipped on the telly. Sherlock remained standing for a moment, unwilling to sit in case he fell asleep. Something in the far corner by a long-dead potted plant caught his eye and he ambled over to it.

"What's a guitar doing here?" he asked dully. It was leaning up against the wall, no case in sight. Acoustic, body stained a dark chocolate brown with some kind of electrical pickup apparatus on the side that meant it could probably be hooked into an amplifier. He poked it with his foot.

Eric was blushing slightly. "Oh, uh... that's mine. D'you play?"

"No." Sherlock picked it up by the neck anyway and carried it over to the couch. Needed something to keep himself from sleeping and/or thinking. And while a guitar was significantly less elegant than a violin it at least provided something to focus on besides the quagmire in his brain. He shuffled his peacoat off as he walked, tossed it on the back of the sofa then flopped down next to Eric with the guitar resting awkwardly against his stomach.

The strings seemed at least mostly in tune, just a bit flat from having not been used recently. He guessed at the correct notes and brought them back up to pitch as Eric alternated between turning on the Xbox and staring at him.
"You don't play but y'know which strings are which?" he asked in wonder.

"I do have ears," Sherlock replied snippily. He fiddled around on the frets of the highest string for a moment, locating the equivalent to a violin's first position, then mentally adjusted for the other strings and began idly plucking out a Vivaldi concerto.

Eric was gaping at him.

"What?" Sherlock snapped. He was not in the mood to be stared at like some sort of sideshow. Without really meaning to he switched from the La cetra piece he'd been playing to Winter's allegro.

"I thought y'said you didn't play?"

Sherlock ignored him in favour of attempting to do both the melody and harmony parts at once. It didn't work well.

"This is a stupid instrument," he griped.

"Well yer kinda... doin' it wrong?" Eric didn't sound too sure about that, but shrugged. "Yer supposed t'play chords."

Sherlock studied the fingerboard for a moment, considering, then placed three fingers on different strings and strummed all but the low E string, hitting every note of a basic arpeggio at once. "I don't see how that's any better."

"Did ya just figure out how ta play a C major by starin' at th'strings for like two seconds?" Eric asked with something like exasperation. He'd finally turned back to his video game, sensing Sherlock's irritation with being watched.

"I've been playing violin since I was three," Sherlock explained disinterestedly, working his way through the rest of the major chords. The reclined position was making it hard to keep his eyes open despite the instrument to focus on, but he was far too tired to bother trying to sit up. He let his hands drop and blinked blearily at the television.

"Y'can go t'sleep if y'want," Eric said with a sidelong glance. "I'll wake ya up in like an hour."

Sherlock pressed his lips together. "Don't want to."

He hadn't slept more than an hour since waking up in Regent's Park nearly four days ago. After everything that had happened since then... well, it would be a miracle if he didn't have at least one nightmare. And there were some things he emphatically did not want to dream about, especially in front of a near-stranger.

"No offence mate but y'kinda look like y'could use th'rest." Eric's on-screen avatar was running through some sort of space ship, shooting aliens with an assault rifle. Sherlock watched the colours bend and shift. He was so bloody tired.

"Not sleeping," he slurred slightly. His hand came up to grip the guitar neck again, but instead of grabbing hold he just ended up accidentally dislodging the instrument from its place across his stomach. Eric paused his game with one hand and caught the guitar with the other before it could hit the hardwood, shooting Sherlock an annoyed glance.

"Go t'sleep mate," he said somewhat sternly. "Fore y'break everythin' in the house."
Sherlock mumbled something about stupid cockney morons as his eyes slipped shut against his will. He was unconscious within seconds.

Eric smiled softly as he set his guitar down on the floor beside the sofa and straightened back up to regard the man half-sprawled against the other arm of the couch. The lanky cokehead was just about the rudest, most arrogant sod he'd ever met, and yet...

On a whim he set his controller aside and grabbed the grey peacoat off the back of the sofa (pausing slightly to marvel again at how expensive it was - *a thousand pounds*, really?), flipping it over the other man's chest as a makeshift blanket. Sherlock didn't so much as stir, but Eric had met enough stimulant addicts to know the skinny prat probably hadn't slept in days and wasn't too worried.

He settled back on the couch and picked up his controller again, keeping one eye on the clock on the far wall and an ear to the man sleeping next to him. If Sherlock started to dream he'd wake him up, otherwise he decided it wouldn't hurt to leave the poor bastard for at least an hour or two. Those chemicals weren't going anywhere after all.

"G'night, Sherly," he muttered quietly, and unpaused his game.

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3. And We'll Get Sick

He was seven and a half and he'd stopped talking three months ago. His brother had gone away to France that year, no longer content to stay and study within the confines of the British school system. Sherlock desperately missed the company. Because even if Mycroft didn't seem to quite understand his younger brother (he never saw the way things could be so interesting no matter how mundane, didn't care about knowing why, why, why) he was still smart, and kind, and liked having him around. Or at least pretended to, which was more than anyone could say for Mummy and Father.

They were having a dinner party. Sherlock wasn't invited, as he wasn't allowed near dinner guests anymore. That was fine with him of course because dinners were dreadfully boring, but it did mean he never got to interact with anyone now besides the tutor and the nanny. The nanny who thought him a lollygagger and a daydreamer and the tutor who told him he was lazy when subjects were too dull to hold his attention no matter how hard he tried to concentrate. He didn't like either of them, so he hid. Ducked between the willow's drooping leaves and climbed up the gnarled trunk to sit on the highest sturdy branch. No one ever looked for him there. He wasn't entirely sure anyone besides his brother ever looked for him at all, to be honest, but that was alright because he didn't want them to.

It was peaceful in the willow tree. The fact that he could fall and break his neck at any moment was the right kind of scary, the kind that slowed the world down and made things clear and bright and interesting. He watched the servants move about the grounds through gaps in the leaves and wondered how long he'd be able to stay up here this time. His record was a day and a half, after which he'd been forced to come down for food. Today he'd brought a knapsack with supplies nicked from the kitchen, and books and a blanket. Maybe he could make it a week.

He was just settling in to read about Blackbeard some more (pirates, he'd decided last month, were bloody brilliant) when a voice from below interrupted him.

"You can't stay up there your whole life, you know," Mycroft called half-sternly. Only half, because he sounded a bit amused and that negated most of the admonishment. Sherlock tilted his head to look down at his brother. The older boy was at the base of the tree, peering up at him with his usual expression of mild exasperation.

Sherlock shrugged. "I can try."

It occurred to him to wonder what Mycroft was doing here, since he should have been at a boarding school in France, but he quickly dismissed the thought as irrelevant. He instead set his book aside to fix his brother with a challenging stare. After a second's hesitation Mycroft sighed.

"I really do hate climbing," he grumbled and Sherlock smiled, because the older boy had nonetheless hoisted himself up to the lowest bough and begun making his way up the lattice of branches. Mycroft was the only person he knew who would actively do things he didn't like just to keep Sherlock out of trouble.

"You hate moving in general."
"Yes, because it's pointless to waste time and energy running about when you can order other people to do it for you," Mycroft sniped back, the teenager managing to look arrogant despite his precarious position clinging to the base of a gnarled willow branch.

"You'll get fat if you don't run about sometimes," Sherlock pointed out. "It's unhealthy to be so sedentary."

"Oh like you're one to talk about health," Mycroft quipped with a roll of his eyes. He'd finally made it up to Sherlock's level and settled himself uncomfortably on a thick branch beside his younger brother. "You started smoking at what, fifteen?"

"Fourteen. You didn't notice until the year after because you were too busy to come home for the holidays." It was a little ridiculous to be talking about things that would happen in his teens while in the body of a child, but he didn't bother to question it. He looked out over the grounds instead. Mycroft did as well, and they sat in companionable silence for several minutes.

"I'm going to try to stay up here a whole week," Sherlock eventually announced. He heard his brother heave a light sigh from beside him.

"You'll get sick," Mycroft replied in a tone of weary resignation. The boy had learned quite early on of course that arguing with Sherlock rarely had any positive effect, but he made the effort anyway because he felt obligated to point out when his little brother was being ridiculous.

Sherlock quirked a bitter half-smile. "Yes well you're the only person who would care, and you're at school in Bordeaux so I don't see why that should be a deterrent."

"If you'd have just said something, I would have come home more often," Mycroft told him, voice gone quiet and a little sad. Sherlock scoffed.

"No you wouldn't have," he muttered darkly. "You had more important things to do than keep me company. You always have more important things to do." After a pause he added, "It's... it's lonely here without you, Myc."

This time it was Mycroft's turn to scoff. "Lonely? Sociopaths don't get lonely."

Seven year old Sherlock blinked away tears and nodded. "I... right, of course they don't."

He brought his legs up to his chest and shivered as the blue sky above their heads was obscured by a veil of dark stormclouds. A sudden blizzard kicked up, burying the rolling fields of grass in a thick, smothering blanket of snow. Sherlock's blood was slowly freezing solid in his veins. He looked over to his brother and found the older boy's gaze on him.

"I do care, you know," Mycroft whispered, lips curved in a soft, regretful smile.

"Myc, I..." Sherlock started, but the rest of his sentence trailed away. It was too late, his brother had already disappeared. Sherlock was left alone in the tree, surrounded by nothing but frozen white in all directions.

He wrapped his small arms around scuffed knees and choked a single, quiet sob.

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"Sherly, mate. Oi! Wake up, y'silly prat."

Sherlock jerked awake with a slight gasp, eyes shooting open only to wince closed again at the
harsh light from a television screen directly in front of him. He waited a few seconds, then opened one eye carefully to squint at the face hovering above his head. His brain felt like it was crawling along through a thick vat of treacle, making thoughts difficult to form and leaving him completely at a loss as to who it was he was staring at.

Mycroft? his brain supplied, but he shook the thought away. No, too thin. And too... brown? Brown eyes, brown hair, brown stubble, brown brown brown brown. He opened his other eye and blinked groggily. He didn't think he knew anyone with that much brown. Victor's hair was brown-ish, but his eyes were blue, and he never had stubble.

"Victor?" he mumbled anyway, because he couldn't think of who else it could be.

"Nah, mate. It's Eric," the face said, and prodded him in the side. "Yer in Stockwell, 'member?"

And like a set of floodgates opening Sherlock suddenly did remember. He groaned lightly and sat up. The peacoat slid off his chest to land with a soft thump on the floor, making the thought of cocaine jump first and foremost to his consciousness. Half a second later he grimaced as he remembered he didn't have any.

"Can I smoke in here?" he asked tiredly, rubbing at his face in an effort to dispel the looming cloud of exhaustion. Should find out what time it was. Didn't care enough. Still dark out, so it obviously hadn't been too long.

"Yeah mate, go for it." Eric had picked up Sherlock's coat from off the floor and set it on the back of the couch almost reverently, probably still in awe over the price. Sherlock rolled his eyes slightly and tapped out one of his last three cigarettes. Didn't have another pack; he was going to be in a lot of fucking trouble soon if he didn't get that analysis d-

"Ah! My perchloric solution!" he exclaimed suddenly, springing up. He paused on his way to the kitchen to light the cigarette clamped between his lips (some things were just more important) and hurried in to look into the sink. The 0.1N solution was swirling sedately away in its beaker. He put a hand to the side of the glass to feel the temperature. Warm, but not hot. It had finished reacting.

"It done?" Eric asked from behind him, having followed at a more leisurely pace. Sherlock blew a cloud of smoke in roughly the direction of the open window (being careful to avoid getting ash in the perchloric) and nodded.

"Do you have any rubber gloves?" Even as he asked he began opening cupboards under the sink, searching. There didn't seem to be all that much in the way of cleaning supplies.

"Ehhh... I don't fink so."

"Never mind then," Sherlock huffed. Well, perchloric burns weren't all that bad anyway. He switched off the stir plate and debated on the best way to go about transferring the liquid, finally settling on fetching a smaller 200mL beaker and pouring enough acid mixture into that to fill the burette.

"What're y'doin now?" Eric piped up. Between the cigarette and the nap Sherlock was feeling quite a bit less crabby, so he found he wasn't quite as eager to kick the man for asking stupid questions.

"Putting this in that," he said flippantly, indicating the small beaker of 0.1N perchloric now in his hand (he'd managed not to get any on his skin while pouring it, somehow) and the long glass burette clipped into the ring stand on the other side of the counter. "To put in that," he added before Eric could ask, pointing at the now-dissolved cloudy mixture of cocaine and acetic in the cup by
"An' mixin' all that stuff'll tell ya how much coke's in there?"

Sherlock nodded. It really was amazing how much better he felt for a little sleep and nicotine. Not that the headache had gone away, but at least he was more prepared to deal with idiots. He filled the burette, fetched the stir plate from under the perchloric solution (managing to find another, smaller stir bar attached to the underside of the ring stand) and set up the cocaine mixture underneath.

"There should be a dropper bottle labelled methyl violet in the box of chemicals," he told Eric. The other man turned and dug around carefully before producing a small amber container.

"This'un?"

"Yes. Add one drop to the cocaine mixture." Sherlock had moved off to locate the scrap of paper with the powder weight on it and was now hunting for a pen in one of the counter drawers. At Eric's hesitation he rolled his eyes. "It's a coloured dye, Eric, it isn't dangerous in the least."

"'F'you say so," Eric muttered. He squeezed a single drop of the indigo liquid into the cup with ridiculous, excruciating care, wincing as the chemicals combined. Of course nothing happened besides the concoction turning bright purple, as it was meant to. "Oh, hey! Neat!" Eric exclaimed.

"I told you it was fine." Sherlock waved Eric out of the way and bent down to check the level of solution in the burette, then adjusted the stir rate on the cocaine mixture. He paused to rub his forehead, straightening up and leaning back on the kitchen table for a moment. It would be an enormous pain to screw up at this stage, and he still hadn't finished smoking his cigarette.

"Y'can do that explainin' thing again f'ya want," Eric offered quietly from where he was hovering by the counter. Sherlock looked up to find a light blush on the other man's face and gave him a slightly confused stare.

"Explaining thing?"

"Well just... y'were explainin' how it all worked earlier an' I kinda thought... it were kinda interestin', y'know? A bit." Eric pressed his palms together in some kind of nervous gesture and Sherlock raised an eyebrow. Talking out loud might help him focus, but it could also be incredibly annoying.

"You'd have to promise not to interrupt me."

Eric opened his mouth to agree, then snapped it shut again to nod emphatically instead. Sherlock bit back a smile at the stupid way the man's hair flopped over his eyes. Instead he stubbed out his cigarette and clapped his hands together. This was actually the easiest part, so it shouldn't be too difficult to explain. Why a cockney pothead from Stockwell wanted to know about chemical titration was a mystery, but he couldn't exactly begrudge a willing audience to one of his science lectures.

"Alright, well. You should already know the basics. Acid neutralises base," he gestured to the burette full of 0.1N perchloric and the cup of cocaine. "The liquid you just dropped into the cocaine mixture is an indicator which changes colour based on pH, so- oh hell, please tell me you know what pH is."

Eric gave him a strange, half-sheepish smile but seemed determined not to speak further. Sherlock rolled his eyes and sighed very slightly.
"It's a simple scale to determine the acidity of a substance. A pH of seven indicates neutrality, anything below that is an acid, above is a base. The methyl violet indicator will remain purple at pH levels above 1.6, as soon as the acidity drops below that it will turn green. So we simply add perchloric acid until the pH falls below 1.6, and this will tell us how much cocaine is in the solution."

"Wha'? How?" Eric blurted out, then clapped a hand over his mouth. Sherlock shook his head with a small smile and set about checking the exact level of solution in the burette. He jotted the number down on the piece of scrap paper Devin had written the cocaine weight on and turned back to twist the burette's stopcock far enough to let a steady drip fall into the cup below. Eric forgot his earlier question to stare in awe at the burst of green swirling away into the violet liquid every time a drop hit.

"It's going to be a very rough estimate, of course," Sherlock went on, watching the chemicals mix with significantly less wonder than his companion. "In ideal conditions the perchloric solution would have reacted for over 24 hours, and should be far more accurately normalised. There's no way to know exactly how much neutralisation potential it has at this point, but it should be close enough for- oh, hell I forgot the blank. Where did I put the-?"

He turned and hunted around for the acetic acid, and grabbed up a clean beaker to prepare a blank sample. Eric was still busy staring at the titration setup so Sherlock didn't bother to explain what he was doing.

"It's not turnin' back ta purple as quick now," Eric spoke up after a moment. Sherlock glanced over at the solution and saw that, indeed, it was nearing its endpoint. He strode over and turned the stopcock so that a single drop fell every second or so. Together they stared at the swirling liquid. Three or four drops later the entire concoction turned a bright green, and Sherlock turned the drip off to let it settle. When no purple crept back into the hue he glanced at the burette and noted the level on his scrap paper.

"Hm, not very pure at all," he commented idly, then shooed Eric out of the way to run his blank. It came out roughly where it should have been, which was frankly remarkable considering the conditions he was working with, so he wrote down the correction factor and switched off the stir plate to go over his numbers.

"Y'gotta do maths?" Eric asked with a look of horrified pity. Sherlock raised an eyebrow at him.

"Obviously," he answered. "I'm assuming you don't want to know how this part works, then," he added drily as he bent over the counter to write out digits and symbols rapidly.

Eric shook his head vehemently. "No way, I bleedin' hate maths."

"Pity, it's an elegant subject."

A few seconds later he had his results, more or less. They could be a lot more accurate but he figured nobody here was particularly likely to call him on fudging the equivalence point. The cut was also narrowed down to one of a very small subset of soluble, non-interfering substances as well, so there was that answered. A thrum of desperate anticipation shot through him with the knowledge that he could finally, finally get more cocaine and stop feeling like his brain was trapped in a pit of sludge. "Where's Devin?"

"Uh, prolly upstairs, he don't usually kip here but he's got a room on th' secon-"

He didn't stay to hear the end of Eric's sentence, just bounded up the stairs two at a time and
knocked loudly on the only door with a light on behind it. He stood rhythmically clenching his jaw and was just about to knock again when Devin appeared in the doorway.

"What?" the man snapped tiredly. The pattern of indents on his face suggested he'd fallen asleep on a spiral notebook. The sight might have been humorous had Sherlock cared to acknowledge it.

"Thirty eight percent cocaine with a plus or minus five percent margin of error would have been less but a kitchen is a rubbish laboratory and the adulterant is probably lactose powder," he ratted off impatiently, thrusting the scrap of paper he'd written his calculations on into Devin's chest along with a crumpled fifty pound note. The man took the items with a confused blink.

"What's the money fo-?" he started, then figured it out and cut himself off with an eye roll. "Oh, right. Christ. Fine, just wait here."

Sherlock complied, practically bouncing on his feet as he looked in to see Devin place the money and scrap paper on a desk and retrieve one of several small baggies of powder he'd apparently been weighing up.

"Don't use it all in one go, huh?" Devin said sarcastically as he tossed the packet across the room. Sherlock caught it with a slight sneer and left without bothering to reply.

His coat was still downstairs, so he rushed down and whipped it off the back of the sofa. A brief thought of obtaining a fresh needle entered his mind but he dismissed it as he returned up to the second floor bathroom. Would take too long, too much effort, and he'd been fine last time with an old one.

He only had two fags left now so instead of sacrificing one for a clean filter he simply dug out the one from earlier in the day (which he'd habitually stored between the cardboard sleeves of his cigarette pack) and reused it. Shouldn't even have bothered with the filter anyway, knowing the cut was soluble. Pointless motions of habit. Not exactly a habit he needed to try and break himself of, true, but irritating nonetheless. Though to be fair everything was irritating right now.

The needle was painfully blunt and his veins were practically impossible to hit anymore, but on the third try he drew back the plunger and saw red mix with white.

Finally, he thought, and drove the mixture into his bloodstream.

Eric was still in the kitchen when Sherlock made his way back downstairs. The man was sitting on the scuffed dining table, intently studying the label on the bottle of methyl violet indicator. He looked up with a smile as Sherlock entered the room.

"Hey, Shers, y'get yer c-" he started, but cut off with a widening of his eyes as he caught sight of Sherlock's pupils. "Whoa, okay yeah guess ya did."

Sherlock blinked, turning to catch his reflection in the glass of the open window. Even in the dim, murky image he could see his irises had been practically swallowed by black, making him look even more freakish and otherworldly than he usually did.

"Hm, should go away in a bit," he remarked offhandedly and turned back with an unconcerned shrug. Everything was so delightfully languid, snow soft and pristine coating the world with miniature crystals of soothing ice. He honestly couldn't remember why he'd ever been upset with anyone or anything at all.
Eric was giving him a strange look, so he tucked his hands in his sweatshirt pocket (the peacoat was now hanging on the back of a chair, as he was much too warm to wear it despite the still-open window) and leant back casually against the counter with an affable smile.

"Problem?" he asked pleasantly.

Eric made a valiant effort to force the disconcerted expression off his face before speaking.

"I uh... I thought coke were supposed t'make y'all... chatty or sommat," he said hesitantly, fingers fidgeting with the dropper cap on the bottle of pH indicator. Sherlock reached out and plucked the container out of his hands before the idiot could spill dye all over himself, absently noting the slight colouring of Eric's cheeks as their skin brushed for an instant.

"I believe that is the normal reaction, yes," Sherlock replied, screwing the lid back tight on the bottle and placing it behind him on the counter. He replaced his hands in his hoodie pocket and stared expectantly.

Eric blinked, confused for a moment, but quickly caught on to the implication with a short laugh. "Oh, a' course. Right. Yer not normal."

"Not in the least," Sherlock confirmed breezily. He eyed Eric's hands as the man's now-empty palms pressed together in an unconscious habit, then let his gaze wander the rest of his body, picking up clues. After a few seconds' analysis he smirked.

"So I guess this means yer done with sleepin' fer awhi-?" Eric was saying, but his words choked off as Sherlock abruptly pushed away from the counter to close the space between them. They were inches apart now, Sherlock peering down at him with a look of idle fascination.

"S-Sherlock?"

"Stand up," the lanky addict ordered in a smooth, unhurried voice. Eric gave him a confused look but obeyed, cautiously sliding off the tabletop to his feet.

"What's-?" he started to ask, but Sherlock cut him off by placing one pale hand on Eric's chest, palm pressing flat over the sternum. His smirk widened into a smug grin.

"Are you frightened of me?" Sherlock asked lowly, amused by the way the man's heart rate kicked up a notch at the sound of his voice. He'd noticed from the start, of course, that Eric was nervous around him. But he hadn't been in any mood to bother confirming why until now- until the blissful quiet of cocaine let him morph intent into perfectly-coordinated action, gave him such effortless poise and enveloped his fragile self-confidence in an impenetrable shield of ice.

God, how he'd missed this. Missed feeling right.

"Course I ain't," Eric asserted with a steady voice, brows furrowing in a light warning glare as if he thought Sherlock might challenge him. His stance shifted steadfast, but the racing heart and dilating pupils betrayed his discomfort.

"Good," Sherlock muttered imperiously.

Without warning he curled his fingers to fist in Eric's shirt, pulling the other man's face to his in a forceful kiss. Eric made a surprised noise but didn't pull away.

Sherlock only held it for a few seconds before he let go and took a step back, slipping his hands in his jeans pockets with a quirked brow. Taking complete control was no fun- far more interesting to
give people their own choice of fate. Eric could either take the reins and reciprocate, or pretend it never happened. It was entirely up to him.

The other man was leaning heavily on the table, looking a little dazed.

"Did y'just kiss me?" he asked blankly.

"Yes."

"So y'do actually like me," Eric pressed, recovering somewhat to stand upright again.

Sherlock shrugged noncommittally. "You're mostly tolerable."

Eric gave him an exasperated look, and Sherlock smirked, canting his head to the side with a provoking tilt. *Make your decision, Crenshaw.*

The next second he was against the cabinets, Eric's hands pinning him by the shoulders as the man proceeded to snog the hell out of him.

By the time they broke apart they were both panting for breath. Eric was laughing, clutching Sherlock with a frankly adorable blush on his freckled cheeks. Sherlock was smiling too.

"I knew y'were a bleedin' poofter!" Eric exclaimed breathlessly.

Sherlock quirked an amused grin and opened his mouth to respond...

Only to abruptly realise he couldn't.

His expression morphed into a look of startled confusion. Where Eric's breathing had steadied out after a second or two Sherlock's panting gasps were just getting shallower, lungs seeming to lock up while his heart fluttered behind its ribcage like a frightened bird. Gooseflesh suddenly broke out on his arms and legs as the ambient temperature dropped like a stone.

Eric's expression shifted instantly to alarmed worry. "Sherlock? Wha's wrong?"

Sherlock shook his head wordlessly, fixing Eric with a look halfway between bewilderment and panic. Out of nowhere he began shivering too violently to keep standing. Luckily Eric still had him by the shoulders and controlled his descent to the floor as his legs gave out.

The second he hit the linoleum Sherlock gave up on not hyperventilating. *What the hell is happening? Sepsis? No, no no no blood poisoning shouldn't come on this quickly! Something else in the cocaine, something I didn't notice? Poisoned! Father must have changed his mi- his thoughts were cut off as a bolt of pain spread flashfire through his skull, making his already unsteady breathing catch and trip over itself.

Suddenly Eric's anxious face lit up in recognition. "Oh Christ! Y'gave yerself th' shakes!" he exclaimed with a bark of relieved laughter.

Sherlock squinted up at him with a furious glare.

"Aw don' look like tha'," Eric admonished with a consoling smile and a pat on his shoulder. "Y'ain't never got cotton fever afore? Guess ya haven't been shootin' up long."

Sherlock had no idea what the idiot was talking about and didn't particularly care. He was too focused on trying to keep breathing and avoid passing out or vomiting in response to the pain in his
head.

"Well c'mon, let's find somewhere t'put ya," Eric was saying sympathetically. One of Sherlock's arms was pulled free from the ball he'd unconsciously curled into and he found himself being hauled up to his feet, supported by Eric. The other man was craning his head to look into the sitting room. "Eh, sofa's a bit small, yeah? Y'think y'can manage stairs?"

No response but another angry glare- he was not enthused by the forced standing position Eric had him in.

Eric just smiled. "Yeah ye'll be fine, mate, c'mon."

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It wasn't exactly how he'd imagined finally getting another bloke in his bed after all this time, but Eric found he didn't mind too much. Sherlock had curled up under the duvet like an angry cat and refused to come out, so Eric grabbed his old secondhand laptop from the bedside table and sat on the other side of the mattress. One of the neighbours kept an unsecured wireless signal, so he managed to get on the internet without much fuss.

"It says 'ere there's like germs or sommat in cotton that get in yer blood an' make y'sick," he informed the shivering lump of blankets beside him as he scrolled through a website on drug use. "I seriously can't believe y'aven't got th' shakes afore though, mate, all'a th' heroin guys that come through 'ere've had 'em like a million times."

"I can't understand your stupid accent." Sherlock's voice was muffled by the duvet but the irritated tone was clear enough regardless. Eric's face shifted to a small smile. Not that he wished the shakes on anyone (he'd never had them himself, being too afraid of needles to even consider injecting himself with anything, but he knew plenty of junkies who described the experience as horrific) but he was honestly quite relieved to have the sarcastic git version of Sherlock back. Being subjected to constant low-grade insults and a lot of eye rolling was far better than the terrifying preternatural calm from earlier.

"Yeah y'can, yer just lookin' fer sommat t'bitch about," he replied easily, making no attempt to improve the clarity of his speech. Sherlock made a noise that sounded quite a lot like a growling tabby but didn't respond. Eric reached over and sarcastically patted the spot where he figured the addict's head probably was (the man was completely cocooned, Eric wasn't sure how he was even breathing in there but chose not to comment) and earned himself an annoyed grumble about stupid cockney idiots. He smiled again. Yes, this version was much better.

Perhaps he'd just been watching the man a bit too closely over the last few hours (to be fair to himself he hadn't exactly seen much action in the last year, and a tall, gorgeous genius appearing on his doorstep was extremely difficult not to stare at) but Eric thought he already had a pretty good idea of the lanky boy's natural disposition. The chilling, languid smoothness of Sherlock on a cocaine high had just been wrong. It was like the man had been possessed by some kind of demonic spirit that stripped away his core and left a distorted shell in its wake.

Because if there was one thing Eric was sure Sherlock should never be, it was still. Even while crashing the man seemed full of a barely-restrained cloud of manic energy. It kept his gaze searching out details and fingers constantly twitching for something to pick up, to examine and dissect and understand. Eric got the feeling the only reason the other boy wasn't a complete jittery mess all the time was because he'd somehow trained himself not to fidget. He seemed to habitually hold his body locked into a rigid, unnatural poise, but it would wane in and out depending on how distracted he got. It had gotten to the point where he'd been practically vibrating with activity on
their way to steal chemistry supplies. Touching trees and fences, breaking off twigs, fiddling with loose threads on his jacket and eyes darting around to study everything and everyone they passed. He'd seemed a lot more comfortable that way, but of course every time he caught Eric looking he'd tuck his hands into his coat and go stiff again with this weird, angry expression on his face like he was annoyed with himself for messing up.

The constant struggle for self-control showed up when he spoke, too. Eric wasn't exactly brilliant (especially with the pot, but he'd much rather be stoned and stupid than sober and terrified so he took it as a trade-off) but he fancied himself a pretty decent judge of character. And anyway Sherlock was a lot easier to read than he probably realised. All that rudeness and lofty attitude was obviously just a ploy to mask the fact that the guy was terrified of talking to people.

Eric hadn't missed the way Sherlock had stiffened up after his crazy-brilliant explanation of how he'd known what was in the courier van yesterday. Then he'd gone on to apologise almost immediately, took a tiny step back and tilted his head like he was expecting someone to haul off and punch him for being too clever. Not exactly the behaviour of a truly arrogant sod. But then seconds later he'd put on some kind of act, pretended to be someone else to hide his discomfort. That had been kind of cool to watch, actually, if a bit creepy. And it made Eric feel a little fuzzy inside that Sherlock had dropped the character just as soon as the other two left. Like he didn't think he needed to hide when they were alone together. It was probably just an unconscious decision but Eric found it sweet anyway.

When he'd come back from the loo he'd obviously just done a hit, though nobody but Corey seemed to notice. Eric had been a bit creeped out by the way Sherlock's mannerisms seemed to lose all their restless uncertainty. He'd turned from the slightly awkward but well-meaning toff to some kind of frighteningly cunning, impassive robot. Eric didn't like it a bit, but luckily the stuff wore off quickly and he'd soon had the acerbic tactless git back.

And then tonight... well, if he'd thought Sherlock on whatever tiny bit of coke he'd had left was creepy it was nothing compared to the properly-high version. The guy had been utterly relaxed, every movement precise and deliberate and just... just wrong. It honestly looked like he'd been replaced with an android. Eric normally didn't have much problem with peoples' drug-induced altered personalities (he'd be an enormous hypocrite if he did, after all, considering how he was without pot) but Sherlock had been so unrecognisable he'd had trouble not getting freaked out. But then, well... alright, the kiss had been pretty distracting. And, he'd reasoned, just because Sherlock was strangely self-controlled at the moment didn't mean he wasn't still the same lanky, awkward, oddly-attractive supergenius prat, so snogging him back had been an easy decision to make.

Not that he hadn't been absurdly, shamefully relieved to see the guy go pale(-er) and start freaking out about not being able to breathe. Eric refused to admit it but when Sherlock's face fell into that panicky expression his first thought had been something like thank god, he's still in there. (The second thought of course went more along the lines of damn it he's gonna die before we can fuck but nobody really needed to know that.) Thankfully it was only the shakes, though apparently Sherlock was the only IV drug user who'd never had them before and spent the entire trip up the stairs quietly flipping out about it.

"How long is this supposed to last?" Sherlock's grumpy, still slightly out-of-breath voice interrupted Eric's musings, and he looked over to see the dark-haired boy peering over the edge of the duvet with a scowl.

"Couple'a hours. Most people try ta sleep through it I think."

Sherlock didn't look too enthusiastic about that. With another violent shiver he snapped the
blankets back over his head and sighed irritably.

"Of all the bloody times to shoot myself full of plant bacteria," he muttered from under the layers of fabric.

"Yeah, that weren't really romantic," Eric agreed with an amused grin.

"Wasn't," Sherlock grumbled.

"Eh?"

"It wasn't very romantic." The cowlicked black hair was visible again as he poked his head out of his nest of blankets to glare balefully. "If you're going to insist on speaking so often you could at least make a passing attempt to employ proper grammar."

Eric just shrugged, turning back to his laptop. "It's proper 'nuff."

Sherlock looked like he wanted to argue but a fresh round of shivering set in and he instead burrowed back under the duvet with a groan.

"Just go t'sleep, mate. Ye'll feel better in th'mornin'."

"No I won't, I'll feel like shit," Sherlock mumbled.

Eric rolled his eyes but didn't reply. With a slight sigh he turned his laptop off and set it down next to the bed. It was almost two in the morning.

"Look, I don' care what you wanna do but I'm goin' t'sleep," he told the miserable lump beside him. He yawned and got up to dig a pair of cotton pyjama trousers out of the basket of clean laundry he hadn't bothered to fold yet. After a brief deliberation he tossed them at Sherlock instead.

"Put those on an' take yer bleedin' shoes off, fer fuck's sake," he said by way of explanation as Sherlock's head emerged again with a confused glower at the clothing. Without waiting for an answer Eric turned back to find a t-shirt and changed out of his football shirt, deciding he'd be fine sleeping in boxers, and went off to brush his teeth.

When he returned Sherlock had actually listened to him and was now curled up under the duvet somewhat less miserably, with his jeans and trainers abandoned on the floor next to the bed. Eric shook his head with a smile and climbed under the covers on the other side after switching the lights off.

"G'night Sherly," he said for the second time that day.

"... Good night, Eric."

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When Sherlock awoke it was to find himself wrapped around another person. He was briefly thrown by this, as he was fairly sure he would have remembered shagging someone last night, but quickly ascertained that they were both clothed and that the other person was Eric.

The sandy-haired man was lying on his back, snoring lightly with one arm flung out to the side and the other resting loosely around Sherlock's shoulders. Sherlock had no recollection of latching onto the man but assumed he'd simply clung to the nearest source of warmth during his sleep. At least Eric didn't seem inclined to mind at all, and the position wasn't all that unpleasant. In fact it was
really quite comfortable, if potentially embarrassing for the both of them. Should roll back to his own side. He closed his eyes and told himself he'd move in five minutes.

Less than one passed before he'd drifted off again. Fuzzing in and out of the field in his mind until he opened his eyes once more to find himself alone, sprawled across the mattress diagonally with the duvet somehow tangled around his legs. Everything felt blurry and slow; even the thought of getting up to find cocaine seemed utterly outside of his capability. He lifted one arm experimentally only to immediately let it flop down again, groaning.

A light weight hit his back, startling him awake again. (Wait, when had he gone back to sleep?) He twisted around to try and see what had been dropped on him but only succeeded in turning his head far enough to catch sight of Eric standing by the side of the bed.

"It's like noon, mate," the man muttered around a joint. His face was quirked in a small, slightly exasperated smile, probably because Sherlock was blinking blearily up at him like a child.

Sherlock mumbled something that should have been 'what did you drop on my back' but which came out more like "whmhpbf?" He frowned at the unintelligible sound and considered lifting his head so as not to be speaking into a pillow, decided that, yes, he should probably do that... and then didn't. It was simply too much bother at the moment. Instead he closed his eyes and felt the world begin to fade out again.

The vague presence that was Eric shifted and suddenly the slight weight was gone from his spine. A moment later a small collection of items was dropped on the pillow in front of his face, jarring him back into semi-consciousness. He blinked myopically at the pile and eventually recognised his drugs paraphernalia. A confused expression must have crossed his face then because Eric rolled his eyes.

"Been hangin' round junkies fer like a year, mate," he said by way of explanation for how he'd found the items. Sherlock made a noise equal parts understanding and befuddlement and finally got round to properly lifting his head. He leant heavily on his elbows and pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes in an attempt to wake himself up.

The field wasn't even a field- it didn't seem to be much of anything, actually, as he didn't even know where it had gone. Everything was hazy dripping melted into puddles of half-formed thoughts, and all he wanted to do was sleep forever. Was this withdrawal? He didn't remember it ever being so exhausting. But then, he'd mostly slept through it last time... or... wait, hadn't he? Oh god, he couldn't even remember. Fog, everywhere.

"My brain's stopped working," he slurred tiredly. Shoulders aching, but he'd already decided further movement was unwarranted and made no effort to shift his weight off the joints. In fact despite the discomfort he very nearly fell asleep again.

"Yeah, that's sorta what happens when y'go on a coke bender," Eric intoned blandly.

Sherlock didn't have the energy to be annoyed by the sarcasm, but he managed to flip the other boy off anyway in some sort of instinctual reflex.

"You too mate," Eric responded with an easy shrug. "Anyway Shers, not that I think y'need more drugs in ya-

Sherlock interrupted with a mumble that might have been I definitely do, which Eric ignored.

"- but Corey wants t'talk to ya later an' I'm guessin' ya'd rather be halfway awake fer that. I got ya a
new needle an' some'o the boiled cotton wool Luce left here last time so at least ya prolly won't get th' shakes again."

"Thank you," Sherlock said in a dull monotone. After a second he heaved a heavy sigh and fell over sideways to roll onto his back, arms flopping bonelessly to land on the mattress with a thump. Unfortunately he'd now put another few inches between himself and his supplies, making the distance seem insurmountable. He tilted his head and stared morosely at the little pile.

"Too far away," he lamented pitifully. Eric blew out an exasperated huff of pot smoke and fixed the pathetic sod on his bed with an unimpressed stare.

"Yer really bloody lucky I been with a speedfreak afore, y'know that? Chuck didn't even think it were possible t'sleep for more'n twelve hours straight. He'd a just left ya."

Sherlock tilted his head back to frown at the man standing above him, eyes straying to the nearly-gone joint and narrowing in confusion at the lack of rambling stupidity. "Why aren't you stoned?" he asked blankly. Eric rolled his eyes again.

"'Cause this joint's mostly tobacco," he replied. He reached out to pluck the baggie of powder off his pillow. "So are y'gonna use this or am I gonna have ta shove it up yer nose?"

Sherlock scrunched his face up in displeasure. "Hydrochloric acid," he mumbled.

"Right, just gonna pretend that makes sense some'ow." Eric plopped the packet gently on Sherlock's sternum, then patted the dark curls in a sarcastic gesture of comfort. Sherlock shot him a glare that probably ended up looking more like a sullen pout, judging by Eric's bemused snort.

"I'll come back in like ten minutes t'make sure y'did' fall asleep again."

Sherlock watched the young man leave the room with a bleary-eyed stare and a short sigh. He really, really wanted to go back to sleep. Corey or whoever could just go fuck themselves. For a few seconds he even allowed his lids to drift shut, muscles falling limp once more in unconsciousness.

_Sherlock Holmes, wake up this instant!_ his brain scolded in a tone alarmingly like Mycroft's. His eyes snapped open to glare at the ceiling.

_Get out of my head, you fat whale!_ he thought back angrily.

_Stop acting childish,_ it continued in his brother's arrogant voice. _And remember, arguing with yourself is the first sign of insanity._

"Shut up, Mycroft," he growled to the empty room. With an abrupt movement he launched himself into a sitting position before he could succumb to the temptation to shut his eyes again, catching the baggie of cocaine as it fell off his chest. Dense fogbanks of fatigue still loomed compelling at the edges of his field, but he retreated to the willow tree. Branches thick with leaves in the dense spring thaw veiled the world, a single shaft of focus illuminating nothing but the task at hand.

Dangerous to mix up dosages like this, without thought or conscious action. Impossible to worry about it though, so he wasn't bothered when the memory of exactly how much he'd tapped out flitted away through the clouds. Before he'd really gotten a chance to process anything he was knocked flat by a harsh ringing in his ears and the thundering of his own heart.

He lay half-gasping on the mattress, managing just enough presence of mind to slide the (thankfully sharp) needle out of his vein before the snowstorm blinded him. _Don't seize,_ he willed
Bargaining with his own body was perhaps even more objectively crazy than arguing with the imaginary voice of his big brother in his head, but it still seemed to work. The blizzard calmed somewhat and he was left shivering in snow-cold, but not overwhelmed. At some point he'd curled up in the tangled blanket with his arms wrapped around his head. Needlessly dramatic, he decided, and so shifted them to instead lie loosely across the sheets while the rest of his body slowly re-acclimated to the presence of the chemical. Relax, bit by bit. No danger of falling asleep anymore, so he let his eyes slip closed and just focused on breathing.

"Y'alright?" a slightly anxious voice broke in from somewhere above. Sherlock blinked out of the trance he'd inadvertently fallen into and flicked his gaze sidelong up at a rather concerned-looking Eric.

"Perfectly fine," he assured evenly, confident tone at odds with his prostrate position and the intermittent waves of muscle tremors.

Eric didn't look very convinced. "Too much?" he asked with a worried frown.

"Hm, perhaps just a tad," Sherlock answered lightly again, somehow managing to keep the shakiness out of his voice. His heart was thumping a mile a minute, an acute sense of dread telling him he was absolutely, definitely going to die right this very minute. He wasn't, of course. His heart was healthy enough and not in actuality going all that fast (perhaps 110, 120 bpm at a stretch, perfectly reasonable) and there was little risk of stroke or aneurysm at his age. Informing his body of all this didn't seem to do much to convince it to stop panicking on him, however.

"D'ya need any, er...?" Eric started, trailing off with a helpless shrug when Sherlock just blinked up at him.

"I'll be fine in a moment."

"Alright, well... I were gonna go an' get sommat ta eat, f'ya wanna come with," Eric said hesitantly. Sherlock considered declining, then decided that being alone whilst teetering on the edge of a stimulant-induced anxiety attack was not the best course of action and forced his uncooperative body into a sitting position.

"Downstairs?" he asked, hoping he wouldn't have to worry about getting dressed. Eric nodded, watching him warily. Sherlock paused a moment, then resolutely stood up on the bed. He teetered slightly but managed to step down to the floor without so much as stumbling. "Lovely," he exclaimed, pleased with his success.

He tucked his hands into his hoodie pocket (apparently he'd slept the whole night in his sweatshirt-the thing was hopelessly wrinkled but he figured it didn't much matter) and smiled.

"Let's be off then." And without bothering to change out of Eric's pyjamas he turned and made his way downstairs, the other man trailing bemusedly after him.

"Oh hey, he's alive!" Ben exclaimed cheerfully as they walked into the kitchen. Apparently it was lunchtime, as both the other men were sitting at the small table with half-finished sandwiches on paper plates in front of them. Charles was holding a folded newspaper in his left hand and glanced
up from the article he'd been reading with an offhand greeting, raising an eyebrow at Sherlock's attire. He paused, then seemed to decide not to comment and returned to his paper with a shrug.

"Told'ya he were fine." Eric smiled toward Ben and elbowed Sherlock lightly in the side, making the lanky boy stumble slightly. Still not entirely steady on his feet. He gripped a chair back to right himself and glared at Eric, opening his mouth to say something like don't shove nearly-overdosed addicts you moron before the object hanging off the back of the chair usurped his attention.

"You left my coat down here all night?" he asked with a frown at the item in question.

Eric just shrugged, unconcerned, and all but forced Sherlock to sit in the seat he was holding onto for support before bustling off to find something to eat. Sherlock pulled the peacoat off the back of the chair and bundled it in his lap protectively.

"Oh relax, Holmes. Nobody's going to steal your coat," Charles intoned in a bored voice. Sherlock's head snapped up at the sound of his surname- he'd been careful not to give it out so far, so how...? Quickly though his gaze narrowed as he felt the weight of his wallet in the lapel pocket shift.

"No, but evidently you have no problem going through it in search of my ID," he growled, pulling out the thin leather billfold and flicking through it to make sure he hadn't lost anything. Luckily he never bothered keeping cash in it, but one of his cards was missing. With a scowl he glanced up, taking a brief second to scan the two men across from him for data, then held out his hand to the shorter one. "My bank card will do you little good Ben, considering the account it's tied to no longer exists."

The dark-skinned boy opened his mouth to deny the theft but snapped it shut again as Sherlock's expression darkened. Between the enormously dilated pupils and untidy hair Sherlock figured he must look half-crazed, which suited his purposes just fine.

Ben made a slightly sheepish face and slipped the card out of his jeans pocket to pass back to its owner. "Sorry," he muttered. "Force of habit, yeah?"

Sherlock snorted as he replaced the card. "You've been committing identity theft for less than two months, hardly enough time to develop habitual behaviour patterns."

"How did-?"

"Fingernails," Sherlock offered vaguely. To be honest he'd mostly just taken a stab in the dark based on the level of wear on Ben's clothing and the speed with which he'd backed down once accused, but it was far more impressive to pretend he'd spotted something inscrutable and mysterious than to admit to guessing. To his amusement Ben glanced down at his own fingers with a baffled expression and began studying them intently.

"So I looked up your family," Charles spoke up, disinterested tone tinged with an undercurrent of smugness. "Seat in the House of Lords, peerage title, estate in the country. Real proper aristocrats."

He looked up to catch Sherlock's reaction and seemed a bit disappointed when he was met with nothing but an unimpressed stare.

"Congratulations, you've learned to work the internet," Sherlock offered blandly.

Charley frowned in vague consternation but continued. "It's all a bit tragic, ain't it? Poor little rich lad gets hooked on coke, runs away from home-"

"I didn't run away from anything," Sherlock quipped, not really all that annoyed but knowing the other man would probably shut up more quickly if he acted like he was. Cocaine was really a
wonderful chemical, he thought idly. "If you must know I was disowned. For perfectly valid reasons, might I add." He said the last with an air of chilled apathy, slipping just enough of a dangerous edge into his voice to hint at a string of violent offences rather than the truth of simply having been a bit of a fuck-up. Hopefully Charles would assume he'd killed his brother or something and resolve to keep his distance.

"Whoa, what'd you do?" Ben asked, finally giving up on his fingernails to lean forward eagerly.

"He's tryin' ta make y'think he killed someone or sommat but 'e really just got kicked out fer doin' drugs," Eric cut in amusedly as he took the remaining empty seat at the table. He took a bite of his half of the sandwich he'd just made and smirked when Sherlock glared over at him.

"How would you know?" Sherlock spat somewhat petulantly. "I could be a murderer."

Eric just smiled. "Yer like th'least dangerous person I ever met, mate."

Sherlock's eyebrows shot up. "I'll have you know I took out two MI5 agents last week."

Eric shrugged. "Ya prolly didn't hurt 'em that bad though."

"And I knocked over a high-ranking military intelligence analyst." Eric didn't seem impressed.

"Why would you be fighting government agents?" Ben piped up dubiously. Sherlock opened his mouth to spin some sort of epic yarn about being on the run from the British monarchy, but was cut off as Charles rolled his eyes with a scoff.

"His big brother works for the Ministry of Defence or something. Probably tried to cart him off to rehab," the curly-haired man explained drolly. "Shoving your sibling and running away from his bodyguards doesn't count as a fight, Holmes."

Sherlock frowned, managing to abstain from rising to the obvious bait by reminding himself that he was more than capable of rendering Charley unconscious if he so chose. The idiot was just making the usual assumptions about wealthy families having no concept of violence. Before he could come up with a suitably clever comeback however Eric was prodding him in the side.

"What?" he grumbled when the insistent poking didn't let up. Eric pointed at the half a ham sandwich on a paper plate in front of him.

"Eat'cher food."

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat it anyway."

Ben made an exaggerated gagging motion at their admittedly domestic-sounding bickering while Charles smirked.

"Guess we know Crenshaw's type now," the curly-haired man intoned in an amused voice, eyes sliding down to focus back on his newspaper.

Ben snickered. "Yeah, tall dark and posh."

"Sure moves fast, though," Charles continued. "Letting him wear your trousers after just one night, Eric? Blimey."
Eric's freckled cheeks coloured in a blush as he picked up on the unspoken implications. "Wha- I... no, tha's not- I.. I mean, he just needed somefing t'sleep in, an' we're, um... we're about th' same size so-"

"Shared your bed too, huh? I was wondering where he slept last night," Ben put in, grinning wickedly.

"It wasn'... he was sick! An' th' sofa's too small, it were jus'- we didn't do nothin'!" Eric stammered, palms pressing together in his usual nervous habit. Sherlock rolled his eyes at the display. What was the big deal? The other two obviously had no problem with homosexuality, and if he was going to be living here he and Eric would no doubt end up shagging at some point. Honestly the fact that it hadn't happened last night was mostly just down to piss poor luck and some malicious plant bacteria.

"I believe snogging counts as doing something, Eric," Sherlock pointed out with flat disinterest, poking dubiously at the ham sandwich in front of him. Charles smirked at his paper while Ben's grin widened even further. Eric went bright red.

"You... s-sod the lot of you!" He crossed his arms defensively and sunk down low in his seat to scowl at the tabletop. After a few seconds listening to Ben's sniggering he shifted his gaze to instead glare at Sherlock with uncharacteristic sternness. "Sherly, eat yer bleedin' lunch fore I goddamn make you."

"It's processed," Sherlock whinged. "And besides, eating is boring. Chewing and swallowing, digestion, it's nothing but a massive waste of t-mmph!"

Eric had evidently heard just about enough and physically shoved the sandwich half in the other boy's mouth to shut him up. "Quit talkin' an' eat yer bleedin' food," he ordered. Sherlock sputtered indignantly and somehow managed to swallow the bite he'd inadvertently taken without choking. "You're trying to kill me with cheap pork byprodu- mfph! Stop that!"

"Eat it," Eric pressed, sandwich poised threateningly for another attack. Ben was cackling across the table, and even Charley was snickering a bit.

Eric's and Sherlock's gazes locked in a silent staring contest for a few seconds before Sherlock sullenly snatched the food and took a reluctant bite. The ingredients were all cheap and oversaturated with preservatives, but Eric was eyeing him menacingly so he forced himself to ignore the taste.

"After this you're taking me to find cigarettes," he grumbled. Eric rolled his eyes.

"There's a Tesco down th'street. Finish eatin' an' we'll go."

Sherlock hmphed, but finished his sandwich.

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On the way back from the shop Sherlock managed to go through nearly half a pack of his newly-purchased cigarettes without even realising it. He glanced down at the plastic bag swinging from his wrist and frowned at the single carton he'd bought. There'd been enough money for more, but he was trying to be somewhat frugal since he didn't know when he'd get a chance for a run back out to the tourist districts to pickpocket again. Eric of course had no such reservations and had taken it upon himself to purchase a bottle of flavoured vodka for no particular reason besides a cheery exclamation of 'Strawberry booze, mate! Brill!' As they walked along the street the freckled man
was industriously picking at the bottle's plastic seal trying to get it open.

Sherlock shot him an exasperated look. "It's barely one in the afternoon. Why on earth do you feel the need to drink vodka?" he asked, fighting the urge to snatch the bottle out of Eric's hands and open it for him.

"I just wanna see if it actually tastes like strawberries 'er not."

"It most certainly doesn't," Sherlock assured him, then finally gave in and grabbed the other man's hands to twist the cap off properly. "Stop trying to break the seal and just twist it like a normal cap, you idiot."

Eric made a small 'ohh...' of understanding as he realised what he'd been doing wrong, then simply shrugged and took a swig.

"Ey, it's pretty alright actually!" he exclaimed with barely a wince for the burn. Sherlock grimaced in disgust. *God*, straight vodka. Who the hell would drink that willingly? "Y'wanna try it?" Eric asked, brandishing the bottle toward him.

"Absolutely not," Sherlock snapped. Then, because Eric looked a bit put out, "... oh alright fine."

He took the proffered bottle but didn't take a drink right away, instead choosing to sit on the low wall bordering the ramshackle disaster of a house Eric (and now apparently Sherlock as well) called a home. The weather was chilly but the sun had chosen to make an unseasonable appearance, making the shoddy garden halfway decent-lookin' in the pale light. As Sherlock glared at the bottle (it was going to taste *horrible*, ugh why had he agreed to try it...) Eric took a seat directly next to him and shuffled up against his side playfully.

"Ah just drink it mate, it ain't gonna kill ya."

"How would you know? It might," Sherlock grumbled back, finding he didn't particularly mind their unnecessary proximity and shifting so they could sit more comfortably side-by-side. "I am after all coming off a massive quantity of cocaine."

"Booze don't make coke worse, it makes it last longer," Eric replied promptly, then hesitated. "Er... wait, at least I *fink* so. Maybe that were speed. Coke might'a been th'one what gives ya an heart attack."

"Comforting," Sherlock responded blandly. Luckily for him he already knew full well what mixing cocaine and alcohol did, though in his experience it bore little resemblance to either of Eric's predictions. Usually it just put him in a slightly delirious state of confused pseudo-normality. And seeing as how he wasn't particularly eager to ruin his buzz he took the smallest sip of the clear liquid he could manage. Then immediately spit it back out in utter revulsion. "Oh for- ugh!"

He leant forward and gagged, still holding onto the bottle, while Eric started laughing. In an act of desperation he jammed his still-lit cigarette between his lips and inhaled, hoping the smoke would overpower the horrid taste of rancid strawberries.

"Ah, don't do that, Shers, ye'll catch yer breath on fire!" Eric exclaimed, trying to quell his chuckling at Sherlock's reaction to the alcohol.

Despite the lingering disgust Sherlock smirked slightly at the mental image as he handed the bottle back. "Oh yes, a fire-breathing cocaine addict, just what the world ne-" he cut off abruptly as he caught the faint *beep* of a digital camera and whipped his head up to catch sight of a girl standing across the street from them. "Who the hell are you?" he snarled, thinking she might be some sort of
paparazzi out to find dirt on the 'disgraced' Holmes heir.

"Oh, 'ey Mandy!" Eric greeted happily. He screwed the vodka bottle shut again and waved at the girl now walking toward them. "Tha's just Mandy," he explained to Sherlock, noting how warily the other boy was watching her. "She's datin' Chuck."

"Why is she carrying a camera?" Sherlock hissed back, voice full of mistrust as he glared at the too-rapidly approaching woman. Evidently she'd heard him, because she answered with a wide smile.

"Cos I'm a photographer, silly!" The girl drew level with them and threw an arm around Eric in a half-hug. She tried to get one around Sherlock too, but he scooted out of her reach and quickly swung his legs over to stand up on the opposite side of the wall with a feral expression. No way was he letting some chavvy bint with a camera fetish touch him. The girl didn't seem too put off by his antisocialness, though. "New boyfriend, Eric?" she asked with a giggle.

"Er..." Eric glanced over his shoulder at Sherlock, who shot him a wide-eyed glare that hopefully conveyed something along the lines of for god's sake just say whatever makes her go away faster. The freckled man raised one eyebrow slightly in a confused look and shrugged in Mandy's grip as he turned back to face her. "I guess?" he tried.

Mandy nearly squealed in delight. "Aww, Eric! You lot get all the best lookers!" Then to Sherlock's horror she let go of his acquaintance (or wait, friend?... boy friend? Was that official, or-?) and vaulted the wall to get to him. He barely had time to sputter a don't you bloody- before he was being crushed in a suffocating hug.

"Argh! No! Off! Get off!" he shouted, shoving at her. The girl had a grip like a vise though and refused to be dislodged. His face was smothered in her chestnut hair as a pair of oversized hoop earrings dug into his collarbone, the edge of her camera lens jabbed uncomfortably into his sternum and despite the cocaine buzz he was quickly becoming overwhelmed with unwelcome sensations. "Eric!" he screamed half-desperately.

Thankfully the other man got over his renewed fit of laughter in time to catch the note of genuine distress in Sherlock's voice and strode over to pull Mandy away from him. "Alright, love, yer scarin' th'man," he admonished in a friendly voice. Mandy giggled again.

"Aw, I do have that effect on blokes don't I?" She winked at Sherlock, who'd taken the opportunity to dart sideways so Eric stood between them. (Not that he was hiding, of course, just... taking precautions.) Eric glanced bemusedly behind him at the not cowering at all Sherlock and turned around to face Mandy again.

"So what're y'doin' here, Manda? 'Nother date night?"

"Eric, honestly!" the girl chided. "There's a show tonight! You didn't even remember, did you?"

Eric paled. "Ah... shit, right... damn." Sherlock watched in interest as the other man's hands came together in his nervous habit. "T-tonight? Y'sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, silly!" Mandy laughed and clapped him lightly on the shoulder. "You mean Charley hasn't hunted you down for practice yet?"

"Was just about to, actually," a voice said from the house, and Sherlock glanced around Eric's head to see the front door open to a rather stern-looking Charles. "It's been on the calendar for a bloody month Crenshaw, honestly."
Eric shrugged helplessly. "Fergot t'check I guess. Been kinda, er... busy."

"Yeah I can see that," Charles said drolly, eyeing Sherlock's unnecessarily close proximity to the other man as he not-cowered away from Amanda. Eric glanced behind him, frowning as Sherlock backed up several steps and tucked his hands in his pockets as if he'd meant to do so all along. He'd dropped his cigarette somewhere during the whole being-hugged fiasco and made a show of lighting another one while Eric turned back around.

"So uh, wha' time are we-?"

"Show's at six," Charles interrupted. "And practice is now, for fuck's sake. Ben just left and we're heading to the pub to get set up after we pick up Ami."

"Ah, but..." Eric's palms pressed together as he looked back to Sherlock. "Er, Sherly's gotta meet wit' Corey so maybe I should-"

"Corey's meeting us there later."

Eric bit his lip. "Oh."

"Eric, don't get all shy again!" Amanda exclaimed from beside them, tone a mix of fondness and slight vexation.

"I ain't shy," Eric retorted. He seemed to notice what his hands were doing and whipped them away from each other to tuck them into his jeans pockets. Sherlock raised an eyebrow as he saw them immediately clench into tight fists beneath the fabric.

"You're all in some sort of band?" Sherlock spoke up before Amanda could respond. The question was partly to figure out what the hell the others were on about, but mostly an attempt to shift the subject of conversation away from Eric before the poor bastard had some sort of anxiety-induced aneurysm.

"Yeah, it's for the business," Charley replied. "Dealers pay us to let 'em case the audience for new clients, gives old customers a chance to meet with their suppliers in a more public setting. That kinda shit, you know. The band's just how we pull more kids in."

Sherlock felt his expression shift into something like vaguely-impressed disgust. The whole setup was rather clever, but... "Gathering a bunch of impressionable young people together for the express purpose of getting them hooked on drugs is decidedly unethical, you realise that."

"Of course it's decidedly unethical," Charles parroted the words in a poor imitation of Sherlock's accent. "Cause y'know god forbid the blokes running a distribution ring operate under anything but the highest code of honour."

Sherlock shot him a flat look in response to the insipid sarcasm but the other man just rolled his eyes and strode over to wind an arm casually around Mandy's waist with a peck on her cheek. She let out an annoyingly high-pitched giggle and leant sideways into her boyfriend's embrace.

"Anyway Crenshaw, get your shit together and meet us there in like twenty minutes. I don't care what your little boyfriend does but just make sure he stays the fuck out of everyone's way with his poncy toff nonsense, got it?"

"Poncy toff nonsense?" Sherlock repeated, his imitation of Charley's Essex accent much more accurate than the other man's pathetic attempt at RP had been. "Perhaps you might consider staying out of my way with your lowbrow pikey nonsense?"
Eric shot him an aggrieved look while Charley froze, seemingly unable to decide whether to be seriously offended or not. Amanda, for some reason, broke into another round of giggling.

"Oh my god, Eric, he is just too adorable!" she tittered breathlessly. Sherlock's gaze snapped to her with a look of vague horror. What the- adorable? He was not, in any way, under any possible circumsta-

Before Sherlock could gather his wits enough to say something scathing in reply Eric reached back and grabbed the sleeve of his peacoat, physically dragging him along as the other man moved off toward the house. Sherlock had little choice but to follow or risk having his arm dislocated.

"Alright seeya there then Chuck mate, cheers Mandy!" Eric was calling over his shoulder, ignoring Sherlock's fiercely indignant expression and futile attempts to tug his arm free. Once at the front porch Eric whipped around, shoved Sherlock through the door ahead of him and slammed it shut on the bemused couple outside.

"What was that for?" Sherlock whinged as Eric finally let go of his coat. He rubbed at his slightly wrenched right shoulder and tried not to sulk too obviously. To his great chagrin Eric proceeded to ignore him in favour of lighting a joint he'd procured from his pocket.

"Dammit, gotta find me bleedin' guitar case..." the man was muttering to himself. He pushed lightly past Sherlock to fling open a hall cupboard which he rummaged around inside for a few seconds before closing it again. "Bloody 'ell."

Sherlock's face pulled into what was most definitely not a sullen pout as he tucked his hands into his pockets. "There's a black instrument case leaning against the left-hand side of the chest of drawers in your room," he pointed out irritably.

Eric's head whipped around and the man blinked at him through a cloud of pot smoke. "How did- wait, when were y'even awake enough t' notice-?"

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "Genius, Eric."

"Oh right, course." Eric shook his head but didn't quite smile. He glanced up the stairs behind him. "Alright well... s'pose I'll go'n fetch that. Then I guess we're goin' t' the bloody pub."

"You don't enjoy performing for a crowd, I take it," Sherlock said blandly.

"Ain't too thrilled 'bout it, no." Eric took a drag of his joint and started up the stairs, Sherlock trailing along after him as he had nothing better to do.

A stray thought flitted through the light snow in his head, making him smirk to himself. "Maybe you need a beta blocker."

Eric, of course, couldn't possibly have understood the reference (nor for that matter the terminology) and looked back at him with a confused, faintly irritated look. "D'you ever make sense?"

Sherlock shrugged, still smiling at his own personal inside joke. "Not really."

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The pub was a dive bar several streets over called the White Weasel. Its front entrance was located in little more than an alley between buildings, panelled door opening onto a set of stairs leading to an interior which had quite obviously just been a low-budget refurbishing job of a storage cellar.
Still, though, it held a certain curious charm. Eric stalked through the main room ahead of him to a
doorway set into the far wall as Sherlock ambled at a more leisurely pace through the deserted
seating area.

Scuffed wooden chairs, pub tables that had definitely seen better days... and strangely the ceiling
and crown moulding were both painted a deep, hideous burgundy. The colour clashed horribly with
the dull brown of the brickwork below it but did at least serve to offset the yellowish palette of the
various faded photos of miscellaneous ermine tacked haphazardly to the walls. He stopped to blink
curiously at a large mural of an albino polecat which had been painted directly onto the brick wall
opposite the bar. Stylistically at least the painting was quite good. However someone had
inexplicably come along later with a felt-tip marker and added in a little tophat and monocle,
rendering the otherwise realistic piece rather silly and cartoonish.

"Sherlock, oi!" he heard Eric call from the far end of the room. He looked over to see the man
gesturing for him to quit staring at the dapper mustelid and hurry up.

"Why has that ferret got a tophat?" Sherlock asked as he turned and strode over to the door Eric
was holding open. Eric gave him a confused look before catching on with a brief grin.

"Oh! That's ol' Raniel. Dunno who gave him th' hat, prolly one'a th' old timers. Looks proper
dashing wivvit though, don't he?"

"It has a name?" Sherlock tried to glance back at the mural but his sight was blocked by the door
swinging shut behind them as they walked down a short hallway beyond. The flooring had
switched abruptly from the rough hardwood of the main bar area to cheap berber carpeting in the
same hideous shade as the ceiling; it made the hallway seem vaguely reminiscent of the interior of
someone's intestinal tract.

"Well yeah, th'bloke who painted it named 'im or sommat. People do that."

"And 'people' also like to add tophats and monocles to artistic works for no discernible reason?"

"Er, well, drunk people do. And y'know, school kids an' stuff." Eric shrugged. "I dunno Sherly,
people's just people. They do weird shit."

Sherlock hummed to himself but didn't pursue the matter further. They walked through a doorway
at the end of the short hall and came nearly face-to-face with Devin on the other side.

"There you queers are!" the fat man exclaimed irritably.

"Hello Devin," Sherlock greeted blithely, voice smooth and unconcerned. As a precaution against
possible nervous breakdowns in an as-yet-unknown pub environment he'd done another hit before
leaving the house. Mixing the dosage correctly whilst taking the low purity into account had
proved somewhat fiddly however, and in erring on the side of caution (he'd rather be too high than
not high enough while entering a new social situation, after all) he'd managed to overdo it just a
tad. Between the larger-than-expected dose and the cumulative effect of a new high on top of the
lingering buzz from his last hit he'd fallen into a state of rather peaceful, airy tranquillity.

"Fuckin' hell you're high," Devin remarked, apparently catching sight of his pupils. Sherlock
hummed a vague noncommittal sound in response as he glanced around the room they'd entered.

It was a small space, with walls and ceiling done up in the same reddish-maroon as the rest of
the building (did the establishment just not own any other shade of paint?) and pushed along the far
wall was a severely out-of-place cream coloured leather chesterfield sofa. Amanda was perched
rather inelegantly on one of the hard cushions alongside a petite girl with long, honey-blonde hair done up in dual plaits. They were both huddled over the view screen of Amanda's camera, giggling as they clicked through the photographs. Charles was sitting on an instrument case on the other side of the room, hunched over a battered-looking notebook and muttering quietly to himself. Ben was nowhere in sight.

Sherlock's study of the surroundings was suddenly interrupted as Eric grabbed him by the hand to lead him around Devin and toward the couch where the two girls were sitting.

"You're always dragging me everywhere," Sherlock commented distractedly as they walked, still too high to be much in the way of annoyed by anything. "What's wrong with just politely asking me to follow you?"

Eric seemed to take no notice of his words. The man actually seemed to be a little miffed over something or other, which was odd as Sherlock couldn't recall having done anything in the last few hours that might have upset him. Must just be Eric's anxiety acting up, he decided.

"Ami, this's Sherlock," Eric announced as they came up to the girls on the couch. They looked up, Amanda with a juvenile grin at the sight of their still-linked hands (which Eric dropped immediately upon seeing her expression, to Sherlock's vague disappointment) and the blonde girl with a pleasant smile. "Sherlock, that's Ami. It's short fer Amélie 'cos th'weird French shit's too hard t'pronounce."

"Eric!" Amélie chided gently, a small smile tugging at her glossed lips. The girl had a dozen or so piercings up the edges of both ears, but aside from that looked like she'd be right at home in Kensington. Her clothing spoke of modest wealth and her bearing suggested one or both parents were either involved in politics or held some sort of high-powered international position, possibly in banking or fashion. And of course the way her pupils appeared to be locked in a state of unnatural pinpoint contraction and the slight dreamy weave to her posture betrayed the fact that she was extremely high on opiates.

"Bonjour," Sherlock greeted, not bothering to offer a hand to shake as he really didn't feel like touching anyone at the moment. The girl was almost completely out of it anyway so she'd hardly be sticking him for manners.

"Oh! Très bon! Very good pronunciation," Ami exclaimed cheerfully, her smile a bit hazy but still apparently lucid. Must be a habitual user. "Most people say 'boon-joo' or something stupid like that."

"Ami love, dinnit I tell you he was a right dish?" Amanda cut in, elbowing the other girl playfully in the side. Ami's cheeks tinged pink and she giggled, which subsequently set both girls to tittering together. Sherlock's face pulled into a look of perplexed discomfort, and he glanced sidelong at Eric to find the other man looking back at him with a nearly identical expression.

If they had nothing else in common, Sherlock mused, at least they could both agree that women were unfathomably strange.

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The following few hours might have been excruciatingly dull for Sherlock if not for the blissful quiet of cocaine. They'd consisted mostly of wandering about the pub trying not to 'get in the bloody fuckin' way' (as Devin and Charley both put it) whilst listening halfheartedly to the four musicians that comprised the distribution ring's unnamed band practice a series of strange-sounding songs and do sound checks on the pub's small stage. He'd at first tried to continuously
hover somewhere in the vicinity of Eric, considering he had little desire to interact with anyone else present, but that plan had been vexed once he'd gotten bored and begun fiddling with the settings on one of the smaller backup amplifiers. It turned out that creating a feedback loop in the device was ridiculously easy, requiring little more than a microphone jack and a single well-timed high E from Eric (who was now refusing to admit to his part in the experiment, the bloody traitor). The minor explosion had gotten Sherlock banned from the stage by Charley and Devin, and set off a fresh round of giggling from the girls.

One of said girls had then been assigned, to his immense displeasure, to 'babysit the poufy toff while we get try and get some fuckin' shit done' (this delivered in the inspiring words of Devin.) And that was how he'd found himself seated backwards on an uncomfortable pub chair, legs stretched out on either side of the straight seat back with his chin pillowed on his forearms atop the headrest as he stared dully at the stage. Beside him Amanda was industriously snapping photos of the walls and the tables and windows and everything.

"Why are you photographing a light fixture?" he grumbled, furrowing his brows as she came dangerously close to overbalancing on the chair she was standing on. He wondered if she might be about to answer his silent prayers by falling and breaking her neck.

"Cos it's pretty!" the girl exclaimed. She teetered on the chair again, and then for some inexplicable reason chose to steady herself by throwing out a hand to rest on his head, of all bloody places. "Lookit these lines here, see, where it makes a shadow? The pattern's gorgeous!"

"Stop touching me this instant," he snapped. Amanda looked down at him, blinked once in confusion, and then infuriatingly smiled and ruffled his hair. It took every ounce of Sherlock's cocaine-bolstered self control to keep from springing up and throttling her on the spot.

"Aww, Sherry! You're such a prickly li'l hedgehog! It's adorable!"

Ugh, and there was yet another thing he was coming to hate about her- she'd decided to use the nickname Sherry for him. Out of every bloody idiotic variation of his name he'd ever been saddled with, why did she have to choose that one? It brought vividly to mind the long months in rehab, those wretched group therapy sessions and the fleet of incompetent nurses all cooing oh that Sherry, he's such a good lad! over and over. If he never heard that name again as long as he lived it would be too soon.

"For the last bloody time will you stop calling me that."

"Callin' you what? 'Sherry'?” she asked, inadvertantly pressing his head down so his chin stabbed painfully into his arms while she used him as a climbing aid to get down from her precarious perch. She beamed winningly at him when he glared up at her. "Why not, don't you like it? I think it's cute!"

He raised his head the instant the pressure of her bodyweight came off it and slapped her hand away from him. The only reason he hadn't belittled her into a sobbing mess already was because he didn't want to deal with the inconvenience of Charles trying to deck him for making his horrible excuse for a girlfriend cry. Unfortunately that deterrent was rapidly becoming less and less effective as the minutes in her company dragged on.

"You may refer to me as Sherlock, Sher, Holmes, or if you absolutely must, Sherly. Any other variations on my name are unacceptable."

She laughed. "Well you keep callin' me Amanda, love. Seems like it's only fair game I get t'call you Sherry."
"Amanda is your name," he bit out angrily.

"Only on me birth certificate." The girl flopped down into the chair beside him and reached up to flip her shoulder-length hair out from under the camera strap she'd replaced around her neck. "Look, just call me what I like and maybe I'll call you what you like, yeah?"

He was so tempted to dub her Chavvy Bint and be done with it, but a glance at the stage told him Charley was keeping a close watch on them. The muscular man would no doubt vault down to thrash him if Amanda looked the least bit upset. And while Sherlock was confident he could win in a fight against the older boy (he'd scrupulously memorised every possible weak point of the human body, after all, and read literal volumes of fighting techniques during secondary school) he was wary of developing any bitter adversarial relationships with his new housemates this early in his tenure. He'd spent long enough at Eton living in silent fear of nighttime attacks, being falsely accused of all manner of wrongdoing and catching violent, disproportionate retribution for every minor misdeed he committed. Call him a coward, but Sherlock found he just wasn't willing to go back to that sort of lifestyle yet.

He set his jaw. "Very well... Mandy."

"Thank you very much, Sherlock."

They stared each other down for some seconds, Sherlock glowering venomously and Amanda-smirking like the smug, vapid idiot she was.

"Oi, Public School!" Devin's voice bellowed, drifting toward them from up by the stage area. Mandy's smirk widened into an amused grin when Sherlock automatically glanced over at the other man. He immediately snapped his eyes back to her face with a scowl.

"Don't you bloody dare," he hissed.

"Dare what, Pubby?" she asked innocently.

Sherlock's acid retort was cut off by Devin striding up to them with a sour expression on his round face.

"Fuck's sake, Public School, you fuckin' deaf?"

Sherlock sneered up at him. "What? Sorry, didn't quite catch that."

The ginger rolled his eyes. "My brother wants to talk to you. He came in like ten fuckin' minutes ago, dumbarse."

"Oh." Sherlock really hadn't been paying much attention to the door, mostly because he couldn't see it at all. He and Mandy were tucked next to a small stand of unused tables in a far corner of the establishment in an apparent effort to get Sherlock as far away from the stage and its expensive sound equipment as possible.

"Over by the bar," Devin said with an irritated eye roll and a dismissive flap of his hand in that direction. He was obviously eager for Sherlock to get out of his sight. Feeling much the same sentiment Sherlock stood and tossed Mandy a perfunctory parting glare (she just smiled sweetly in response, ugh) as he strode off.

When he found the distributor it was only to stop short at the sight of who he was with.

"Ah, and here he is now!" Corey was saying... to Racer. Sherlock resolutely kept his features
"Over here lad, then, don't be shy!" Corey laughed, beckoning him over.

Racer's eyes had lit up with recognition and were now fixed on him with a leering grin. Sherlock did not want to venture within twenty feet of the wretched man, but he hardly had a choice. He stopped short of the proffered bar stool at least and stood with his hands tucked into his coat pockets in what he refused to acknowledge as a defensive posture.

"Good evening, Corey," he intoned, determinedly ignoring Racer's gaze on the side of his face.

Corey was looking back and forth between the two of them. Suddenly a knowing smirk appeared on his round, freckled face. "Ah, so that's-

"I assume you're planning to ask me to purify a portion of your stock," Sherlock interrupted rather more snappishly than he'd meant to.

Corey's smirk never wavered, but he did clear his throat and continued in a more sedate tone. "Aye, lad, that's the long and short of it. Lactose ain't too bad a cut, of course, but it won't do to be selling off impure shit to those that pay for the good stuff. You got all you need to purify five kilos?"

Sherlock considered for a moment, then nodded. "Easily."

"Brill then, you can get started tomorrow. As for tonight..." Corey trailed off, shooting a friendly, slightly conspiratory look at Racer. "Well, you've got some options, I guess."

Sherlock didn't like the sound of that. He allowed himself a brief, decidedly not wary glance at Racer (whose expression seemed incapable of settling on anything besides a lewd grin) then looked back to Corey. "Options?" he hedged, hoping for the best.

"Aye," Racer spoke up finally, meaning Sherlock was forced to shift his gaze back to the bastard's face lest he give away his discomfort even more obviously than he already had. Luckily the cocaine kept his hateful glare confined to a passably-polite expression of mild distaste. "Y'kin either cock about watchin' th' show or y'kin earn some dosh helpin' me an' me boys out."

Well that wasn't much of a choice. "I'll watch the show," Sherlock answered immediately. No amount of money was worth spending a minute more in the abhorrent man's presence. Besides he could always replenish his dwindling funds later with a quick trip out to the tourist districts.


"I'm quite alright, thank you," Sherlock replied archly. Then, to Corey, "Will that be all?"

Corey nodded, smirk still firmly in place. "For now, lad. Go on then and find your little boyfriend. I'm sure he's in a right state by now."

Sherlock didn't stick around to find out what Corey meant, or how the distributor even knew about he and Eric's not-quite-yet-relationship. (Presumably Devin had texted him about it.) He gave his landlord/employer a quick nod of acknowledgement and turned on his heel to leave.

As per Corey's recommendation (though not because of it, of course) Sherlock did indeed seek out Eric almost immediately. Nobody else in this stupid bar was halfway tolerable, after all. The cocaine in his system kept the tense, angry expression off his face, but Eric seemed to pick up on his disquiet regardless.
"Bad news?" he asked, left hand resting on the neck of his guitar as he fished yet another joint out of his pocket with the other. "Bugger," he muttered, apparently realising he'd misplaced his lighter.

Sherlock produced his cheap blue plastic one and handed it over without being asked. Eric looked up with a smile of thanks and lit his joint as Sherlock answered.

"No, perfectly fine. He just wants me to purify a few kilograms of cocaine."

"Then what 'appened?" Eric was frowning at him, watching as Sherlock accepted his lighter back and tapped out his dozenth cigarette of the (thusfar scarcely four hour long) day.

"Nothing," he snapped. For once Eric seemed to get the hint and let the subject drop. The other man was having anxiety troubles of his own, Sherlock noticed. As soon as the lit joint was safely between his lips he was pressing his palms together again. They stood in silence for a brief moment before Sherlock finally sighed. "I'm sure you'll do fine, Eric, stop worrying."

Eric startled slightly and looked up. "Y'fink so?"

"Absolutely," Sherlock assured. "It's pointless to get so worked up about a silly band performance anyway."

Eric bit his lip and let his hands drop away from each other. "Yeah," he mumbled quietly. "Yeah... guess yer right."

"I'm always right." Sherlock met Eric's slightly annoyed look with an imperious stare, daring him to challenge the assertion. A further moment of silence passed between them, before Eric broke off to shake his head with a small grin.

"Yer a right prat, Sherly," he said, chuckling.

Sherlock smirked. "I do try."

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The band actually turned out to be fairly decent. Not that Sherlock had much of anything to compare it to, having little to no interest in any music that wasn't orchestral, but at the very least they all were all in tune. Eric seemed to be a fairly capable guitarist as well, even if he did tend to shrink back toward the amplifiers and huddle over his instrument whenever his solo parts came up. Amélie made up for his lack of showmanship however by moving enthusiastically in time with the music, making her blonde plaits sway in graceful arcs under the stage lights and rather obviously betraying the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra under her black lace camisole with every quick switch in direction. It was clearly calculated to capture the attention of the predominantly-male audience which had trickled in group-by-group over the last few hours, though Sherlock really couldn't see the attraction in a couple of bouncing mammary glands.

He'd stripped off his peacoat some time ago and stowed it in the back room with Eric's guitar case, figuring he'd rather avoid the possible hassle of a confrontation should some drunk street thug decide to try and jump him for it, and sat at an unused table near the back of the room with his hands tucked in his hoodie pockets. Mandy, to his great chagrin, was sitting next to him.

"Woo! Go Charley!" she was yelling. Thankfully Sherlock had thought to do another hit of cocaine before he put his coat away, or else her shrill screeching combined with the dull roar of a room full of drunken morons might have pushed him to commit homicide. As it was he was mostly high enough to block it all out. *Mostly.* Every so often a spark of burning irritation would burst through his careful shields of ice, and he'd have to force himself not to punch someone. Now was one of
"Shut. Up." he bit out. Mandy didn't seem to hear him, just yelled again with a burst of drunken laughter. He contemplated shoving her off her chair and claiming she'd fallen by accident, but decided the cost of having to actually touch her outweighed the benefit of silencing her annoying bleating for the five seconds it would take her to get back up again. As he looked away with a pained grimace an abandoned-looking booth on the other side of the pub caught his eye.

"Where ya goin', Sherry!" Mandy shouted as he got up to leave. He snapped some excuse about needing the loo and resolutely marched off through the throng of young twenty-somethings, dodging bodies as he made his way to the booth. It was back in the corner a ways, meaning he could probably conspire to hide behind the tall dividers until all this nonsense was over.

As he neared salvation a flash of dark hair and pinched, pale features caught his eye, and he nearly bolted out of the way of Racer walking past with a group of his cronies. The men were busy passing out samples of what Sherlock was reasonably certain was some sort of heroin/cocaine mixture, precisely calibrated to convert as many people as possible into addicts after one hit. He'd made a few passing attempts to warn some of the attending idiots off trying it, but his dilated pupils and half-emaciated appearance seemed to have rendered his advice more than a bit hypocritical. After the third group of twats told him to "quit tryna keep all th'good stuff to yerself, mate!" he'd given up and left them all to their fate. Bloody morons.

Sherlock ducked hurriedly into the booth and pushed back as far as he could toward the wall, waiting for the sound of Racer's raucous laughter to fade. As soon as it did he let out a breath. If that weasel-faced bastard was going to be at every show he might have to reconsider his nebulous decision to try and be supportive of Eric by attending these stupid things in the future.

"Er... um... this... this booth is, er... I-I mean," a quiet voice stammered, startling him quite badly as he'd thought himself alone in the little alcove. He whipped his head around and saw that a petite girl with mousey brown hair was huddled on the seat across from him, so unobtrusive he'd failed to even notice her. A glass full of some fizzy orange drink was clutched tightly between her hands.

"Sorry, I'm sharing your booth for a bit," he informed the girl. She didn't seem the type to protest, and he was not going back out there with the possibility of Racer still being anywhere nearby.

"Oh," she muttered. "Er... alright then. H-hello."

"Hello," he replied dismissively. "Er... alright then. H-hello."

"Hello," he replied dismissively, not really interested in interacting any more than he had to. Females bored him at the best of times and this one in particular appeared exceedingly drab. He turned his head away to look up at the faded photograph of a weasel pinned to the wall next to them instead, drumming his fingers idly on the tabletop as he wondered why the pub couldn't seem to be bothered to fit any frames for their artwork.

"Er... I'm Molly," the girl spoke up again after a pause.

Sherlock blinked back over at her. Why on earth would she think he cared what her name was? "... Okay."

"What's... what's your name?" she asked hesitantly when it became clear he wasn't going to say any more than that. In lieu of answering he flicked his gaze quickly over her features, fixing her with a slightly confused look in response to what he saw.

"You're some sort of medical student, what are you doing at a shitty pub in Stockwell?"
Molly looked a bit startled. "I'm... I'm not a medical student," she muttered warily. Probably thought he was going to try and mug her or something.

"Yes you are," Sherlock asserted. "You've got indents on your thumb and index finger from using a scalpel, the skin of your hands is dry from wearing gloves all day, there're faint needle marks in the crook of your elbow suggesting some sort of phlebotomy practice and your blouse was purchased from a shop in Whitechapel. You're obviously an undergraduate at Barts. I'd say... second year of pre-clinicals? Can't be the first if you've done IV work already and you don't look old enough for third year."

The girl was staring at him wide-eyed, mouth open in shock. "That's... h-how did..."

Sherlock rolled his eyes and huffed a short sigh. He'd literally just explained himself, why did she look so bloody awestruck? "I suppose a few of your friends must have dragged you here," he continued in a bland voice, leaning his elbows on the table and resting his chin on one hand. "You agreed to go because you're curious about illicit substances, but you lost your nerve once you arrived and now you're hiding from the pushers while you wait for the performance to be over."

Molly shook her head slowly, then to Sherlock's vague horror suddenly choked on a small sob as her eyes filled with tears. "It- it just seemed interesting but th-then I thought what if I have a heart attack and I d-didn't know if anyone knew CPR and it was so f-f-frightening so I ran back here and hid!" she wailed, beginning to cry in earnest. "Oh god I'm such a wimp!"

Sherlock hurriedly leant away from her with an alarmed expression. Argh, what the hell was he supposed to do with a sobbing girl? He couldn't even deal with emotional displays in the gender he actually dated! "Don't cry, er... Milly? It's... fine. I mean, you're fine. Everything's... fine."

"It's not!" she sobbed. "Jenna was right, I'm too much of a coward to do anything!"

"Well I think you might be a little drunk, so... that's something," he offered.

"No I'm not!" Molly cried. She took a sip from the glass she'd been clutching with a morose little hiccuping noise, then held it up toward him. "It's orangeade! God, I'm so pathetic."

Sherlock really had no idea what to say to that. Instead he turned his attention to tapping out a cigarette and lighting it while the girl worked through the rest of her crying fit. After a few moments she seemed to calm somewhat, and Sherlock had an idea.

"Here," he said suddenly, plucking the fag from his lips and holding it toward her filter-first. "Nicotine. You can tell Jenny or whoever you tried something potentially addictive."

Molly's eyes flicked from the slightly-damp cigarette end to his face and back again, her cheeks flushing a bright red. "Er... y-you... I mean... what about..."

"I haven't got any diseases, if that's what you're worried about," he snapped. Molly went even redder, if that was possible, and hesitantly reached out for the fag.

"How do I...?"

"Just inhale," he explained with a slight eye roll. Molly paused for a few seconds in trepidation, then warily raised the filter to her lips and took a tiny drag.

Immediately she started coughing violently and nearly dropped the cigarette. "It- it tastes awful!"

"You get used to it," Sherlock informed her, leaning forward to snatch the lit fag out of her hand.
before she could set the booth on fire. As if demonstrating his point he inhaled a much larger lungful of smoke than she had and blew it lightly toward her face. She waved a hand in a futile attempt to clear it and let out a watery little laugh.

"T-thanks," she muttered, wiping her tear-streaked face with a forearm. "For letting me try, at least."

Sherlock just shrugged. "You should just get a taxi out of here, your friend's probably off her face by now."

"I... I guess so," Molly sighed. After a moment's debate she finally stood with a small smile and grabbed her purse up from where it had been resting beside her on the seat. "Er... maybe I'll see you again sometime?"

"Doubtful," Sherlock intoned, raising his eyebrows to convey just how doubtful it was. After all he was likely to be dead of overdose within a year or so, while the little mousey girl was bound to move on to some sort of promising medical career. The only place they'd ever meet was a morgue.

"Oh, right... alright. Well... bye." The girl gave him an awkward half-wave and walked away through the crowd.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, stretched his legs out to rest his feet on the now-vacated seat across from him and leant forward over the tabletop with a bored sigh. All memory of the girl's face flitted out of his head within seconds as he closed his eyes and decided to focus on trying to build his mind-tower again.

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Half an hour later the blaring stage music finally stopped, and Sherlock was roused from the semi-comatose trance he'd fallen into by Eric insistently tugging at his arm, saying something about needing a drink before he 'bleedin flipped his shit'. Sherlock obligingly trailed after the other man toward the bar, deciding he could probably do with some sort of caloric intake anyway. He ordered a plain cranberry juice while Eric paid several pounds for what looked like a large glass of iced chocolate milk.

"What on earth is that?" Sherlock asked, sipping at his juice. Eric took a swig of his own drink and grimaced slightly, presumably at the burn of whatever alcohol was in it.

"Chocolate white russian," he answered. "Wanna try?"

Sherlock shook his head firmly. "Absolutely not. The last drink you gave me tasted of decayed strawberries."

Eric quirked a grin at him, taking another long draught of his cocktail. "Well this'un ain't got no fruit innit, maybe it'll be better?"

"Maybe," Sherlock conceded, but made no move to take the glass. Eric pouted a little.

"Still don't wanna try?"

Sherlock huffed. "I'm quite comfortably high, thank you, why would I want to ruin that with alcohol?"

"Cause it'll make this place halfway fun stead'a crowded an' hot an' gross," Eric explained. As if illustrating his point he knocked back the last of his drink and immediately ordered another one.
"Besides, bein' th'only sober person inna room fulla drunks is bleedin' awful."

"Given current evidence I find it hard to believe you've ever been in such a situation," Sherlock quipped blandly. Eric shot him a look which really didn't convey much of anything for the mix of annoyance and slight befuddlement. Sherlock figured the other boy was already feeling the effects of the alcohol and rolled his eyes, preparing to withstand an onslaught of drunken stupidity.

"Do y'ever quit bein' so goddamn smart all the bleedin' time?" the other man suddenly burst out angrily. "I mean seriously, Shers, I like ya an' all but yer a real bloody prat sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Sherlock replied, tone dripping with sarcasm. Eric's face pulled into a frustrated expression.

"All th'time," he amended. "Fuck's sake, can't ye just try bein' normal for five goddamn minutes an' git plastered like th'rest of us?"

Sherlock hunched over the bar, glaring sidelong at Eric. "Normal?" he repeated. "That's what you want, is it? Normal Sherlock?" He leaned back and fixed the other man with a level, probably slightly terrifying stare. Even through the snowbanks he was becoming more than a little bit angry, and he wasn't entirely sure why. A feeling not unlike betrayal had begun to blossom in his chest. Stupid Eric. Stupid alcohol. Stupid people.

Eric, for his part, had the good sense to look slightly abashed. He stuck to his point regardless however, apparently already tipsy enough to lose his usual compulsion to be amenable to everyone. "Well, just every once in awhile it might be nice t'not be th'dumbarse tryin' ta figure out what th'fuck yer talkin' about alla fuckin' time."

"There's not exactly much chance of that happening," Sherlock sniped back archly. Nonetheless, he raised a hand to get the bartender's attention. "Three vodka shots," he ordered, pulling out a few bills from his pocket and slamming them on the bartop.

"What're y'doin'?" Eric asked, expression confused as he watched Sherlock pick up one of the shot glasses with a vicious (and perhaps very slightly trepidatory) glare at the clear liquid within.

"Being normal." And with that he slammed back the shot. _Ugh, christ it was vile._ But he fought down the grimace and immediately drank the other two. Eric looked a little flabbergasted.

Eric asked hesitantly as Sherlock let his head sink down to land on the bartop with a soft _thump._

"Alright?" Eric asked hesitantly as Sherlock let his head sink down to land on the bartop with a soft _thump._

"I feel sick," Sherlock mumbled, voice slurring very slightly.

"Y'just kicked back like half a bottle a vodka," Eric pointed out. Sherlock flipped him off, then groaned as the movement made his head spin. "Er.. try drinkin' some more juice, maybe?"

That sounded like a fucking _stupid_ idea, but he tried it anyway. To his surprise the juice actually did help marginally. Well, alright, _more_ than marginally if he was being honest. By the time he'd finished the glass he'd somehow transitioned into that rare stage of drunkenness where he was just as stupid and irrational as the rest of them. Eric seemed ridiculously thrilled by this and bought him
some sort of strawberry-flavoured milk cocktail in celebration.

Sherlock was much less enthusiastic about the situation. Despite how often he seemed inclined to giggle like a schoolgirl being drunk really wasn't all that much fun. His natural lack of inhibition when it came to saying or doing stupid things had been the catalyst for the ruination of his entire bloody life in the first place, so why on earth would he want to go and induce such a state? Every time his body did something without his approval- swayed on the spot, said something stupid, laughed at a joke that wasn't even the least bit funny- he'd be shot through with a thrum of sick dread. No matter the evidence to the contrary he'd find himself thinking he'd somehow reverted for good, that cocaine would no longer fix whatever was wrong with his brain and he'd be stuck like this forever. It was horrifying.

But as much as he hated being drunk he could hardly play take-backs at this point. He was, if not completely plastered, at least quite well on his way. And Eric for some reason seemed bound and determined to send them both under the bloody table by the end of the night. Not liking the sound of that outcome Sherlock had been trying to discreetly dump out most of his drinks on the floor (earning himself dirty looks from the bartender in the process), but it was becoming rather difficult to remember to be subtle about it.

"Bl- bleedin' hell Sherly y've shpilled more'a that shit'n y've drank!" Eric slurred.

"I'm trying, er... trying not to get anymore drunk," Sherlock replied, then immediately grimaced. "Shit, wait, wasn't s'posed to tell you that."

Eric blinked at him with a bewildered expression, leaning heavily on the bar. "Why don'cha wanna git anymore pissed?"

"Because I don't like it, it makes me feel like I'm... like I'm screwing up constantly." He snapped his mouth shut and frowned at himself. "Bloody hell, see?" he continued angrily, levelling an unsteady scowl toward Eric. "You see? Why did I s... why did I say that? I shouldn't have said that. Bloody alcohol."

Sherlock set his glass on the bar with a loud clink!, followed by his head which he pillowed in the crook of his left arm. Eric was just staring at him. Sherlock wished he'd stop - he already felt like enough of a freak as it was without people gawking.

"Fucking hell..." he moaned into the fabric of his sweatshirt. He was severely regretting his decision to order those vodka shots.

"Ey... I don' think yer sc... think yer screwin' up," Eric half-mumbled from beside him. Sherlock raised his head to squint blearily at the other man.

"You've known me for two days," Sherlock pointed out. "You hardly have the persp... perspic... perspicaci... oh fuck it. You don't know what you're bloody talking about, you wanker."

Eric suddenly clapped a hand to his mouth, snorting in a valiant attempt to reign in an abrupt fit of sniggering.

"What?" Sherlock snapped irritably.

"Ya... ya said wanker," Eric sputtered gleefully. What little composure he'd had left him in a rush and he collapsed sideways against the bar in hysterics. Despite his mood Sherlock started up too.

"Oh f-fuck you!" he exclaimed through gasping laughs. "I was- hah! I was being maudlin!"
"I d-don' even know whaddat means! Hahahaha!"

They collapsed toward each other in peals of raucous laughter. God, Sherlock really hated this. There was nothing for it, though. Maybe if he just kept drinking more he'd pass out and wake up sober again. That was probably an absolutely bloody terrible idea but he really wasn't in any fit state to come up with a better plan.

With this in mind Sherlock extricated himself from the clutching hold Eric had on his shoulders and picked up his half-finished mixer.

"I though' y'said y'weren't gittin more sloshed!" Eric burst out in a voice of false betrayal. "Y'liar!"

"I'm an... an adult and I'll lie whenever I damn well please," Sherlock responded snootily in the best imitation of his brother's voice as he could manage between fits of sniggering. He took another swig of his mixer, then spun around on his bar stool to face Eric. "By the way, you are bloody gorgeous. If we're both going to be massively inebriated I might as well say as much while I've got impunity."

Eric's mouth fell open. "Y'... y'think I'm good-lookin'?"

"Of course I do," Sherlock snapped. "The accent, however, could use work."

All at once Eric was laughing again. "F-fuckin 'ell, Sherly, y'can't even go five bloody minutes wivvout-"

"Wivvout wot?" Sherlock replied in a rather decent imitation of cockney he thought. Eric started laughing even harder.

"Aw fukkit commere y'bloody awkward prat!" the man suddenly yelled, and grabbed Sherlock's face in an extremely uncoordinated kiss.

They were both still laughing too much to actually snog properly, and Sherlock had to grab the bartop with the hand not holding his drink lest he topple over backwards off his stool. Dimly he thought he heard the sound of a camera beep through the dull roar of the other patrons, but he wasn't sober enough to care.

As they broke apart (and somehow regained their balance) Sherlock took the chance to ask something that had been bothering him for some time now.

"Are we dating?"

Eric blinked at him. "F'ya want ta be."

"I..." Sherlock hesitated. He'd never actually had a proper boyfriend before. Victor had been close, but... "Eric, I'm... you should know I'm a sociopath."

Bewilderingly, Eric just laughed. "No yer not, mate."

Sherlock felt like he should argue. After all he had little in the way of general human empathy, was completely hopeless in all but the most basic of social situations and practically guaranteed to be a terrible long-term romantic partner. It was only fair to let Eric know before the other man made a decision he might regret.

The alcohol in his system seemed to have other ideas, though, and instead of defending his self-diagnosis Sherlock just smiled softly.
"... I know," he murmured, and finished his drink.

««
4. Of Having Sex

He'd tried sex without cocaine exactly once.

Back when he'd still been doing lines, testing his new limitations under the drug's influence and trying to figure out the dose. Withdrawal hadn't been so bad then (just a sort of dull fatigue, nothing like the intolerable desperation it grew into over the following months) so he frequently took breaks from the chemical to give himself a chance to sleep and eat on a more normal schedule. It was during one of these breaks that Victor requested assistance with his physics paper.

Victor, being a linguistics student, wasn't taking a physics course. Neither of them felt the need to point this out to the other, and the night thus rather predictably ended up heading in a quite different direction to studying. Sherlock was perfectly fine with that. He rather enjoyed the rush of endorphins, and if nothing else the excitement would probably distract him from the nebulous cloud of withdrawal-induced fatigue he'd been trapped in over the last day or so.

Within minutes, though, it had become very clear things weren't going to go as planned.

"Fuck! Get off!" he'd screeched, jerking away from Victor's sudden, unexpected touch with enough force to smack his head against the headboard. Snogging had only just barely been tolerable - his thoughts kept getting sidetracked wondering about the average microbial content of human saliva but he'd been mostly able to keep himself focused enough to enjoy it. Touching, however... he curled forward over himself protectively, thankful they hadn't gotten to the removing clothes bit yet as it meant he could tuck his exposed arms against the fabric of his t-shirt and tear fitfully at the material in an attempt to calm himself down. Too much. Far, far too much sensation.

"What? What's wrong?" Victor asked, bewildered. He'd have had no idea, of course, that Sherlock was currently in the midst of withdrawal. Nor that cocaine had been the only thing keeping the cacophony of his world filtered down to a manageable level. Sherlock himself had practically forgotten what it was like, not having the snowbanks to act as a protective barrier between him and physical reality. Plus he'd never so much as attempted contact on this level whilst sober, had no idea what to expect.

Probably just a bit more feeling than usual, he'd nebulously theorised, along with the vague notion that he might become slightly overwhelmed. He certainly hadn't counted on the lightest touch producing so much stimulation it morphed into actual, physical pain. Like a freight train hitting his brain, lighting up every single panic centre simultaneously and forcing him to recoil before he even knew what was happening. It had hurt. Not like a wound but something deeper, more primal, a visceral and utterly intolerable cascade of signals. No, christ no... this was not going to work.

"It's nothing," Sherlock muttered into his little ball. "I just..." He raised his head to speak more clearly, but immediately regretted it. Suddenly every miniscule detail of the room was vying for his attention. Victor's breathing was far too loud and the lights flickered, buzzing flourescent as the blinds on the window rattled ever so slightly and noises from the hall the smell of laundry detergent deodorant the books papers scattered about and all he could think was how close it all was. "... got startled..." he finished in a quiet mumble.

Victor was saying something but he couldn't hear it, too busy staring into the middle distance.
When this sort of thing happened it was usually easier to just tune the world out than to try and make sense of the jumble of conflicting signals the environment threw at him, so he frantically willed his brain to shut off... but for some reason he couldn't anymore. It had simply been too long since he'd needed to - didn't remember how. He'd been right on the verge of hyperventilating when Victor waved a hand in his face to get his attention, making him jump.

"Sherlock? What's going on?" the other man asked carefully. Sherlock blinked at him, mind racing, utterly incapable of coming up with a plausible excuse for his behaviour. How did one explain they were sensing too much? And of course even if he managed to convey the concept it would only bring up the question of why he'd never seemed to have any problems until now, which would come around to the cocaine...

Abruptly he shook his head, lurched sideways to clamber off Victor's bed and headed for the door to the hallway. "I'll be right back," he tossed over his shoulder. His and Victor's colleges were right around the corner from each other, he'd be able to get to his residence hall and back within ten minutes. He grabbed his peacoat and left.

Less than a quarter hour later he'd returned, all smiles and an easy apology now that his brain was once more comfortably muted under a thick blanket of snow. And if Victor noticed the way his pupils seemed to have doubled in size... he didn't say anything.

"Oh goddamn it, the queers are sloshed," Devin grumbled as Sherlock and Eric walked (well, stumbled more like) toward the back room.

"Inebriated," Sherlock clarified very seriously. "The proper term is inebriated."

Eric started sniggering, nearly causing both of them to topple over. They'd managed to stay upright through a rather complicated system of mutually hanging off each other's shoulders.

"Oh hey guys!" Ben exclaimed from the door behind Devin. "Haven't seen you two all night!"

"Benny, love!" Eric practically crowed. "Benny, I got Sherly fuckin' smashed!"

"I'm not... not that smashed," Sherlock objected. His argument fell a bit flat however, as he still couldn't seem to stand under his own power. Ben looked between them and laughed.

"Good on ya, Eric," he offered. Eric beamed.

"Oh yeah, good on 'em. They're gonna get fuckin' mugged to shit walking back to the house, but good on 'em," Devin put in irritably. He turned and pushed past Ben into the back room, returning a second later with Eric's guitar case and Sherlock's coat. "I'm not fuckin' escorting you shirtlifters back, I got shit to do."

"We don't need an escort," Sherlock snapped. As if trying to prove his point he pushed himself away from Eric to stand on his own. Predictably they both stumbled sideways into the wall within half a second.

"I'll make sure they get back," Ben said, smiling at the now silently bickering drunks. Eric was less than pleased with the sudden loss of stability and Sherlock was refusing to re-institute their previous leaning arrangement out of some sort of misguided sense of pride. Devin rolled his eyes with an annoyed grunt and handed the items to Ben, then stalked off with a mutter of 'fuckin queerarse homos.'
"Aw, that were a bit mean," Eric mumbled unhappily at Devin's retreating back.

"It's alright, the girl he's going home with has chlamydia." Sherlock, regaining his footing somewhat, took a mostly-steady step forward and accepted his coat back from Ben. Getting it back on however was a bit more of a challenge.

"I fink yer tryin' t'use th'wrong sleeve," Eric pointed out. He didn't even bother to ask how Sherlock knew about Devin's date, which was just as well because Sherlock really didn't remember how he knew either.

Ben just chuckled warmly at the both of them and slung Eric's guitar case over his shoulder. "Alright, well, I guess we should get going."

Sherlock managed to get his peacoat on in the proper direction and he and Eric trailed obediently after Ben, linking arms in an attempt to not fall sideways. The effect was more than a bit fruity but Sherlock figured it didn't much matter. They'd been snogging at the bar, after all. Anyone with half a brain should know they were gay by now.

The chilly night air did a fair enough job at dispelling most of their giddy stupidity. Within minutes Eric at least was superficially back to normal (even if he did burst into a fit of drunken giggling every once in awhile) and Sherlock, well... Sherlock's definition of 'normal' worked on a bit of a sliding scale, dependent mostly on how much cocaine he'd had. 'Buzzed' was the ideal (though slightly difficult to maintain) state. 'High' could get a bit uncomfortable but was generally worth tolerating. 'Crashing' was terrible for everyone involved... and 'sober' was to be avoided at all costs.

At the moment, he was verging toward sober. Sober, irritable, and bloody nauseous.

"Oh fuck alcohol," he moaned, leaning into Eric's shoulder as they walked. He was having to work much harder than he'd like to avoid being sick all over the pavement. "Why the hell did you let me drink so much?"

"Y'seemed 'appy enough earlier," Eric said, shrugging with the shoulder not currently being used as a pillow.

"I wasn't happy, I was drunk. There is a massive difference."

"There is?" Ben put in, looking back at the two men trailing along after him with an amused grin. "I thought drunk and happy were pretty much the same thing."

"Me too!" Eric exclaimed cheerfully. Sherlock scowled into the rough fabric of Eric's faded brown overcoat.

"Well bully for you then, if that's how your stupid biology works," he mumbled irritably. "Some of us have slightly more complicated neurochemistries."

"He's half-smashed and hung over and still uses five syllable words," Ben pointed out, laughing. "Seriously Eric he's like some sort of- oh shit, hang on."

The scrawny boy's phone had begun to ring loudly from his jeans pocket, making Sherlock flinch as the sudden screeching tones of some poorly-rendered pop song shattered the otherwise tolerable background noise of Stockwell at one in the morning. Eric apparently felt the movement through his shirt because he looped both arms around Sherlock and patted his back in a consoling sort of half-hug. Mercifully though the noise didn't last long, as Ben answered his mobile within half a second of checking the caller ID.
"Yeah? Ah *shit*, really? Fuck, I'll be right over. Nah man, it's fine. Yep. Sure, meet you there," He flipped his phone closed and shot Eric an apologetic look. "You think you guys can make it back on your own? One a Racer's runners just scarpered on him."

"Aye, we're fine," Eric replied reassuringly. Sherlock grumbled something to the affirmative as well but didn't bother lifting his head to make himself audible. Not moving, too nauseous. A brief thought crossed his mind to wonder what good he'd realistically be in this state if they *did* happen to get jumped between here and the house, but he ignored it. Presumably Eric could hold his own in a fight or he wouldn't have answered so promptly.

"Brill, sorry 'bout ditching on you." Ben unslung Eric's guitar case from his back and handed it over, making Sherlock growl in annoyance as he was dislodged from his makeshift pillow.

Eric somehow managed to get the case's strap over his shoulder and secured in time to tug Sherlock (who had started to move away in a huff) back against his side. "S'alright mate. Do wot y'gotta, yeah?"

"Haha, yep! Seeya!" Ben grinned and waved as he turned to jog back the way they'd come.

"Ugh, of *course* he works for Racer," Sherlock griped irritably. He made a single halfhearted attempt to push himself away from Eric but gave up and let his head flop back onto the other man's shoulder as the movement made his head spin.

"Y'know Racer?" Eric asked curiously. They'd begun walking again, Eric with one arm pinning his friend (... boyfriend? did it still count if both parties were plastered at the time of agreement? *Sherlock had no idea how these things were supposed to work, honestly*) to his side and the other steadying his guitar with a loose-fingered grip on the shoulder strap. Sherlock's hands had somehow once again made their way into the pockets of his peacoat.

"No," Sherlock replied entirely too quickly. He frowned at himself. Since when was he such a terrible liar?

Eric huffed a short breath, predictably unconvinced. "*Sure* y'don't."

"I just bought cocaine from him a few times, *that's it.*"Sherlock asserted in a low half-snarl, grimacing at the way his voice seemed to crack at the end. Ugh, he hadn't meant to sound so... *vulnerable*. The combination of alcohol and having gone more than ninety minutes without cocaine was poking massive holes in the wall of apathy he generally relied on to keep his emotions in check. He scowled and ducked his head, trying to wrestle his mind back into some semblance of order.

The soft white of his field was marred by strange vortices of spinning nausea and a dark, creeping *something* he couldn't quite identify. Rot, maybe? A resurgence of the stagnant mire from rehab? But no, it was different somehow. Festering and painful like the blackened skin around a burn. It seemed to be emanating from the place he'd buried his experiences with Racer; oozing sickly from the mound of half-melted snow. Ugh, but that was stupid - he *didn't care* about Racer and his little control fetish. All that... stuff... didn't upset him. It wasn't anything he hadn't done before, and more importantly he'd *agreed to it*.

His shoulders tensed involuntarily as he scowled at the pavement. *Stop thinking*, he ordered himself firmly, shoved the whole topic back under the rock it had escaped from. The only reason it was bothering him was because he wasn't high anymore. Just needed more cocaine, then he could bury the problem and get back to forgetting anything had ever happened.
Suddenly Eric came to an abrupt stop, forcing Sherlock to as well since they were still tangled up in a strange half-hug. Sherlock raised his head to see why, only to find himself being turned rather forcefully toward the other man.

"Sherlock." Eric was staring him right in the face. It was more than a bit unnerving, so Sherlock dropped his gaze and studied the man's torso instead. Brown canvas jacket, partially unzipped with a football shirt underneath - horizontal stripes of faded blue on white, logo in the upper corner, some youth team... *Stepney F.C.*? Christ, he really was dating a chav. "Oi, lookit me."

Sherlock flicked his eyes back up with a slight glare. "What?"

Eric opened his mouth like he was about to say something, but then seemed to think better of it. With another huffed sigh he simply grabbed Sherlock's face and kissed him. "Yer alright, yeah?" he said as he pulled away, patting him on the cheek with a fond smile.

Sherlock jerked his head away from the pat with a childish grimace. "I'm fine. Stop treating me like a fluffy animal. All this patting and dragging me about, honestly."

Eric grinned and reached up to ruffle his dark curls. "Y'are kinda though. Fluffy that is."

Sherlock scowled. "I am not-"

"Cute too," Eric added, cutting him off with a teasing smile. Sherlock huffed and tried very hard not to pout. Apparently he failed as Eric laughed and kissed him again, more deeply this time.

"We're in the middle of the pavement in Stockwell at one in the morning, this is not the ideal place to be snogging," Sherlock mumbled into the other man's mouth.

Eric just shrugged. "Th' house is like, twenty minutes off."

"Hm. That is rather far," Sherlock conceded. "Still, though-"

He didn't get to finish his sentence, as Eric had apparently had enough of conversation and tugged them both backwards against the brick wall of a boarded-up townhouse behind them. They were in a back street somewhere, though Sherlock's still half-inebriated state left him at a loss as to exactly where. Near Clapham or Bedford, he assumed, but-

His meandering thoughts were cut off as Eric deepened their kiss, pressing Sherlock gently to the wall by his shoulders. The feel of rough bricks digging into his back through the thick wool of his coat sent a sudden, sickening bolt of panic shooting through his nervous system. Memories and sensations burst up like fireworks through the light dusting of frost that was all he had left of his snowfield. *Slick teeth pale fingers leering eyes cackling laughter-

"No!" he yelped, shoving Eric roughly away from him. The other man stumbled back, looking shocked.

"Sherly?"

"I..." Sherlock hesitated. What was *that*? A flashback...? His face pulled into a vicious scowl. For *fuck's sake*. He was acting like some sort of pathetic, traumatised rape victim.

"F'ya don' wan-" Eric started, but Sherlock cut him off with a growl as he grabbed the other man's jacket and whipped them around so Eric was pinned against the wall instead. There. No more bricks, no more unpleasant mental associations. Problem solved.
"I'm fine," he hissed lowly, not entirely sure if he was addressing himself or Eric. He was fine though, honestly, just because some perverted dealer had... ugh, no. He shook his head with a quick jerking motion, burying the thought before it could finish. Ridiculous, had to stop thinking about it. Needed a distraction.

Snogging Eric was the quickest available, so that's exactly what he did.

"Shermmph!" the man shoved halfheartedly at his chest, but gave up after less than a second and simply reciprocated. "Yer shovin' me bleedin' guitar case inter me back, y'prat," he grumbled when they were forced to stop for breath.

Sherlock blinked down and saw that, indeed, Eric's guitar was trapped between his spine and the bricks. "Oh... sorry."

"No yer not."

Sherlock shrugged. "You're right, I'm not."

Eric rolled his eyes but simply unclipped the strap, letting the case drop gently to rest behind his knees. Then he tugged Sherlock's face back to his. "Prat," he mumbled.

"Moron."

A shadowed back street in Stockwell was really not the best place for snogging (nor anything else, for that matter), but being as neither of them were entirely sober they didn't much care. All Sherlock could think of was how long it had been since he'd felt another human's body heat against him as they struggled briefly for dominance. Eric won, mostly because Sherlock was becoming too distracted by the tightening of his jeans to focus on gaining the upper hand at snogging.

Eric chuckled into his mouth. "Don't take much t'git you bovvered, do it?"

"Shut up," Sherlock growled. He had no idea how Eric was planning to coordinate this, considering where they were and how bloody cold out it was (middle of January at one AM, brilliant timing) but the sound of two belts being undone and a sudden, rather unexpected hand around him answered that question. A very undignified, strangled noise escaped his lips as they pressed together.

"Christ," Eric mumbled. "Been ferfuckin'ever-"

Sherlock was incapable of speech, having had to break off their kiss to press his face into the other man's shoulder with a choked gasp. It dimly registered that he'd bitten down on the thick canvas of Eric's coat collar, which was more than a little embarrassingly girlish but fucking hell he hadn't been expecting- and he only barely had enough of a coke buzz left to- argh fuck it was like walking a knife-edge between pleasure and agony.

"Eric," he squeaked inelegantly, not entirely sure if he was trying to get him to stop or keep going. His brain had gone up in a firestorm... somewhat troubling, as fire was usually reserved for fear or pain, helplessness but this wasn't- he had no idea what- argh. A brief thought of retreating to the willow entered his head but he couldn't muster up the concentration to manage it. Trapped with his senses, the world closing in too fast and too close in a chaotic maelstrom of nerve signals.

Eric was kissing him gently on the side of his neck, mumbling something like quit thinkin' so much. Sherlock tried, he really did. Focused all his senses on the fabric he was biting, clenching between his fists as he gripped Eric's arms. It didn't work entirely but it was enough to stop him falling into a full-on panic attack, and seconds later it was over. He released Eric's coat with a
shaky breath and immediately went boneless against him.

"Alrigh'?" Eric asked, voice a bit tremulous as well but undoubtedly amused. He supported Sherlock's sudden dead weight and slid them both down to rest awkwardly next to his guitar case against the wall.

"Not enough... cocaine," Sherlock mumbled, face still buried in Eric's jacket. "Brain overloaded."

"Wha', like a computer?" Eric was trying to be subtle about doing up their belts, which was more than a bit pointless as there was no way Sherlock could fail to notice a single bloody thing in this state. He slapped the man's hands away and fastened the buckle himself.

"I don't know, probably," he snapped, grimacing as he failed to avoid sounding upset. He really wasn't, just... a bit overwhelmed. With a short sigh he leaned back and scrubbed a hand over his face. Eric was watching him with a confused, wary expression. "It's fine, Eric, really. Just... make sure I'm high next time."

Eric huffed. "I don't like it when yer high. Y'git all creepy."

"Creepy...?" Sherlock repeated blankly, fingers unconsciously moving to fiddle with a loose thread on the sleeve of his coat. His head was swimming - thoughts and sensations all jumbling together in a confusing mess. He felt rather like a snowglobe that had been shaken and set down the wrong way up. "... I don't get 'creepy', I get normal."

Eric glared at him. "No y'don't, y'git like a goddamn robot and it's weird as hell."

Sherlock frowned at him. "I do not get like a robot." Through the slowly settling flurries of leftover snow and adrenaline he abruptly noticed what his hand was doing. He glanced down with an annoyed look and clenched his fingers into a tight fist to stop them fidgeting. Alright no he definitely needed more cocaine. The headache and dense fog of withdrawal hadn't risen up to claim him yet (probably had endorphins to thank for that) but his impulsive nature was forming pools of slippery mud throughout the frosted landscape of his mind. Had to cut it off before he ended up mired in swampland.

"Yeah y'do," Eric asserted, cutting into his thoughts. "Like a bleedin' android."

Sherlock scowled. "Well you're just going to have to deal with dating an android, because I'm doing another hit before I drown in imaginary mud," he replied tetchily. Eric gave him a strange, bewildered look for the 'imaginary mud' comment, then bit out a short sigh and leant back against the brick wall with his arms crossed. He made no move to interfere as Sherlock retrieved a capped needle from his coat lining. The syringe was already partially-filled with the solution he'd mixed up earlier, being far more convenient to carry around that way.

He pulled back his left sleeve and huffed irritably as he squinted at his veins in the half-light from a nearby street lamp. They were practically invisible. This was going to be a massive pain.

Eric looked down at Sherlock's distinctly vein-less arm and rolled his eyes before reaching up and plucking the syringe out of his hand.

"Hey!" Sherlock yelped indignantly, trying to snatch it back.

"Relax, geez," Eric grumbled as he jerked his hand out of Sherlock's reach. "Gimme yer other arm."

"Why?" Sherlock asked warily, tucking his arms against his chest. Eric just grabbed his right wrist
and pulled the limb toward him.

"Cos y'ain't got no veins left on that'un an' I don't feel like sittin' out here for half an hour waitin' for ya t'find one."

"Oh." Sherlock watched as the other man shoved the sleeve back and tapped at the crook of his elbow, then bit the cap of the syringe off and slid the needle into his arm with a quick, efficient motion. "Why do you know how to-?"

"Bin wit' a speedfreak, 'member?" Eric cut him off irritably, pulling the plunger back slightly to make sure he'd actually hit a vein. The solution in the syringe went pink with blood and he slowly pushed the plunger back down with an annoyed expression. "Dunno why I keep endin' up with stim users, seriously s'like th'stupidest kink ever."

Sherlock hurriedly used his free hand to pull the needle out before Eric could inject the whole damned syringe into him. "Bloody hell, not all of it. Are you trying to give me a seizure?"

Eric capped the needle with a shrug and a slightly apologetic smile. "Maybe?"

"Hospital trips are not romantic."

"Yeah well," Eric replied offhandedly. He handed the hypo back and tugged Sherlock around to lean against his chest while they waited for the high to kick in. "I'm a shitty romancer, ain't gonna lie."

"Me too," Sherlock admitted. His ears were starting to ring, heart rate picking up as the chemical permeated his brain.

"Then I guess we're bleedin' made fer each other," Eric muttered.

Sherlock made a vague affirmative noise as the snowstorm whipped frigid through his skull.

Eric really had given him a bit too much, but Sherlock was doing his best not to let on to that fact. It was a bit difficult when his thoughts felt like they'd been set on hyperdrive. At the very least he felt mostly confident he wasn't acting anything like an android... though what exactly the alternative was turning out to be he didn't know.

They were finally back en route to the house after their brief detour, having turned toward Clapham High Street rather than remain with their original route through the labyrinth of residential back roads. This would add around ten minutes to the journey but came with the benefit of more functioning street lamps and a slightly reduced chance of being stabbed for their wallets.

As they walked along Sherlock abruptly thrust one of his hands in Eric's face and flapped it around a bit. "Look at that, see? I'm not a robot. Robots don't have compound synovial joints."

"Er... okay," Eric replied, blinking at the arm in front of his nose. "But I didn't say y'were a robot, just y'act like one."

Sherlock tucked his hand back into his coat pocket and frowned. "I'm not acting like a robot now, am I?"

"Nah, guess not. Now yer kinda actin' like a nutter." Eric grinned as Sherlock shot him an affronted look. "Which's fine, I mean, y'ain't bein' creepy or nuthin'. Just annoyin'."
"Well if you would make up your bloody mind-" Sherlock huffed. He'd been trying to avoid 'acting weird', whatever that meant, and in doing so had admittedly ended up a tad on the manic side. But honestly it was either that or frigid apathy, he wasn't even sure he had a middle ground between the two. "I could just imitate someone," he offered. "Then I wouldn't be a robot or annoying... well unless I imitated Mycroft in which case I'd be both."

"Mycroft's yer brother, right?" Eric asked curiously. "Th' government spy bloke?"

Sherlock snorted at the sudden mental image of Mycroft's tubby arse trying to break into a foreign embassy. "He's most definitely not a spy, that would require about a hundred times more physical activity than he's capable of."

"What's he do then?"

Sherlock shrugged dismissively. "Controls people. Officially of course he's an intelligence analyst, but that's just the title he uses to fool the public into thinking he isn't secretly running the entire Joint Intelligence Committee. I mean honestly he uses MI5 agents like they're his own bloody personal staff, it's ridiculous."

Eric shot him a baffled sidelong glance. "Is yer whole bleedin' family a bunch'a crazy goddamn geniuses?"

"No," Sherlock replied promptly - then paused to reconsider. "Well... perhaps? I'm not sure if Mummy's a genius or not. Should I act like her, maybe? She's a bit boring."

"How 'bout you just act like you 'cept with less talkin'?" Eric suggested with a roll of his eyes. He'd nicked one of Sherlock's cigarettes earlier and was finally getting around to lighting it now that they were nearing the main road with its functioning street lamps.

"You talk all the bloody time," Sherlock grumbled irritably.

Eric blew out a cloud of smoke as he shoved his lighter back in his jeans pocket. "Yeah but when I talk I ain't high as shit on coke."

"That's hardly fair."

"Life ain't fair."

Sherlock huffed in annoyance but shut up anyway. He considered following Eric's example and smoking a cigarette but quickly decided being amped up on cocaine and nicotine on top of whatever endorphins and alcoholic byproducts were already swimming around in his system would be unlikely to improve his behaviour. Instead he bounced slightly as he walked and cast his gaze around for something to study.

"There's a group of men over there who're trying to decide if we're worth attempting to mug," he pointed out after a moment's silence, forgetting he was supposed to be shutting up.

Eric didn't seem to mind his lapse in memory, however - he whipped his head around to look in the direction Sherlock had indicated. A group of three men in their mid- to late-twenties were grouped together by the street corner ahead of them, staring as they advanced along the pavement.

"Y'sure?" Eric asked quietly.

"Of course I'm sure," Sherlock quipped, too high to be much in the way of concerned about the possible danger. "Look, the one with the giant ears is keeping track of our movements while the
bloke with the knife concealed in his front left trouser pocket is signalling to the one with the fake gun that he shou-"

His words were cut off as Eric grabbed him round the middle and clapped a hand over his mouth. "Jesus Christ shut th'fuck up."

"Oi! What'd 'e say 'bout me ears?" one of the thugs suddenly yelled. Sherlock realised he'd been speaking loudly enough to be overheard.

"Oops," he mumbled around Eric's hand.

"Oh fer fuck's sake," Eric groaned. Then more loudly, "Sorry mate! He's tweaked t'shit on coke, didn't mean nuffin' by it!"

"He said me gun's fake!" the other thug snapped. The trio began advancing on Sherlock and Eric, who'd stopped in the middle of the pavement some five metres away.

"It is fak-" Sherlock found himself nearly smothered to death as Eric's hand pressed more firmly over his mouth in an attempt to shut him up.

"Oops," he mumbled around Eric's hand. "Serious-ly mate he's off 'is bleedin' face, don't worry 'bout it," Eric said placatingly.

"Off his face on coke, y'said?" the third - and thusfar silent - hoodlum asked, a calculating look creeping across his gruff features.

Eric seemed to realise he'd made a mistake and backtracked quickly. "I meant, ah, speed! Dexies, y'know? Didn't know how many t'take an' now he's off th' walls."

"He don't look like he's on speed," the other man replied dubiously. "He looks like he's on coke. An' wit that accent..." His face suddenly split into a knowing grin. His two companions caught the look and started cackling.

"We got ourselves a li'l rich lad 'ere!" the one with the fake pistol exclaimed.

"Yeah! Lookit 'is bleedin' coat!" the third crowed. "That's like a hunnerd quid a'least!"

"It's a thousand," Sherlock mumbled irritably behind Eric's hand (which had mercifully let up enough for him to be able to breathe.) "Why do none of you chavvy idiots know how much clothing costs?"

"What'd 'e say?" the big-eared thug snapped. The three men had advanced down the street and were now standing in a semi-circle in front of them.

Eric bit out a resigned a sigh and dropped his hand from Sherlock's mouth. "He said yer all'a buncha chavvy idiots an' his coat's worth a thousan' quid not a hunnerd," he clarified in a rush, grimacing. "Christ, see? I told you he's high as shit... an' also kind've a dumbarse." He shot Sherlock a scowl (which was met with nothing but a blank, innocent look) then turned back to their would-be muggers. "Anyhow we're wit' Flanagan's crew so y'prolly don't wanna fuck wit' us, aye?"

The tallest thug pulled the knife from his pocket and flipped it around idly between long, agile fingers. "Flanagan? Th'fat ginger bastard? What makes y'think I give two shits 'bout 'im?"

"'Cos 'is brother's got all th'pushers in Central London on his client list," Eric snapped back hotly. "Includin' goddamned Racer, so back th'fuck off."
The man just scoffed. "I kin take Racer any damn day. 'Specially wit a thousand quid off some rich lad's poney coat."

"My coat is not poney," Sherlock cut in. "It's a perfectly normal wool peacoat, honestly. Just because you morons all wear cheap knockoffs-"

He was quite rudely interrupted by a fist flying toward his face from the thug standing nearest them. Eric's shout of alarm beside him morphed into a startled cry as Sherlock instinctively jerked sideways, ducked the punch, and tugged them both out of striking range of Big-Ears in one fluid motion. Abruptly the whole group stopped to blink at each other - all five of them (including Sherlock, who was still more than a little out of it) taken off-guard by the perfect dodge of a surprise attack.

"Hah!" Sherlock exclaimed after a brief pause. High as a kite and more or less drunk and he still managed to out-class a bunch of street th-

He didn't get a chance to finish his thought as he was subsequently punched in the head. "Ow! Fuck!" he yelped, clutching his suddenly-wounded forehead. There was a cut just starting to bleed above his eyebrow - the man must have had a ring on of some sort. Without pausing to think he ducked a second blow aimed toward his nose, then launched himself at the idiot's now-unguarded midsection, managing to catch the man's solar plexus with his shoulder. He then immediately straightened up and used his momentum to fling an elbow down on the back of his winded opponent's skull. The man crashed face-first into the pavement with a startled shriek and a sickening crunch as his nose met concrete.

Sherlock smirked but didn't get much time to celebrate his victory - the sound of a pained cry caught his attention and he whipped his head around to see that the other two muggers had gone for Eric. Fake-Gun had managed to get the freckled man in a choke hold of some sort while Knife-Wielder brandished his weapon with a wicked grin. Sherlock snarled like a rabid animal and flung his fist toward the back of the ringleader's head, only to find himself having to pull back quickly and dodge as his attack was anticipated and countered by the other man spinning around and attempting to stab him in the midsection.

"Bit violent fer a rich lad, ain't ya?" the thug asked cheerfully. Sherlock's reply was to make a grab for the hand holding the knife, thinking he'd break the bastard's wrist, but the wiry man saw it coming and danced out of the way with an amused cackle.

"Oi, whad'ya want me t'do wiv this'un, Ace?" Fake-Gun cut in, voice strained as he tried to keep hold of a fiercely struggling Eric. Sherlock quickly abandoned his standoff with the knife-wielding thug in favour of whipping around and attacking the other man with a quick blow to the side of the head. The mugger's skull jerked sideways with enough force to dislodge his grip, and Eric broke free with a bark of surprise.

As positive as that outcome was it unfortunately meant that Sherlock hadn't been watching the other assailant. The sound of rushing footsteps alerted him just in time to twist his body to the side, barely managing enough of a dodge to take the knife to the edge of his left arm instead of straight through his back.

"Shit," he hissed angrily, clamping a hand to the slash wound as he stumbled backwards. Hurt like hell, but didn't feel like it was bleeding too badly. Probably superficial then. He glanced over at Eric and huffed in annoyance as he noted the idiot's complete lack of defensive posture. The other boy was just staring at their attackers with a horrified, panicked look. So much for being able to handle himself in a fight.
The knife-wielder was laughing at them. "Hah! Yer pretty good there, toffee-nose! Light on yer feet, I like that!"

Sherlock flicked his eyes back to the thug and sneered. "So nice to be appreciated. Care to back down, then?"

"Nah," the man grinned. "I got me some skills too, f'ya didn't notice."

"'Skill' is a relative term," Sherlock replied archly. Behind him he could hear Big-Ears - the one with the broken nose - beginning to stir, and the man he'd just punched in the ear was struggling to his feet as well. This wasn't looking too good.

He took a brief second to consider his options: go down swinging, and probably end up dead, or...

Without making any attempt to signal his intentions Sherlock removed his hand from the sluggishly bleeding cut on his bicep, shot past the leering thug in front of him and grabbed Eric by the forearm. He'd meant to make a sprint for one of the open back streets to their left, but was forced to skid to a halt as the path was suddenly blocked by Big-Ears.

"Fucker! Y'fuckin' brode me dose!" the man snarled at him though the hand he'd clamped over his bleeding face; the other was clenched in a tight fist. Sherlock glanced around as he heard the other two thugs come up from behind. Beside him Eric seemed to be seconds away from hyperventilating, palms pressing together fitfully as he stared around them like a frightened rabbit.

"Eric you are bloody useless," Sherlock growled as he quickly tugged the freckled man back toward a wall in the only direction available for retreat. He deftly maneuvered Eric behind him and stood with his fists raised defensively as the three men surrounded them.

"I ain't a fuckin' fighter you psychopath! I'm a goddamn gay stoner!" Eric hissed back over Sherlock's shoulder. "What th'fuck were you expectin'?"

"Well at least make an effort!" Sherlock snapped. "And I'm not a psychopath!" Then suddenly the man to his right lunged forward with an incoherent bellow, forcing Sherlock to step to the left so he could catch the blow and counter it with a knee to the man's abdomen. Unfortunately that left his injured left bicep open to attack - he cried out in pain as the thug he'd inadvertently shifted toward managed to land a punch directly on the wound.

"Sherlock!" Eric screeched. Sherlock ignored him in favour of whipping around and ramming his fist into the other man's already-broken nose, knocking the idiot out cold with the fresh agony of a multiple compound fracture on top of the previous break. He took a step back, shaking his bruised hand, only to abruptly find out exactly what Eric had been screeching about when he realised the other boy was no longer behind him.

"Eric?" he barked in alarm, whipping around. The third thug ('Ace', he vaguely recalled him being called by his associate) had his friend in an armlock, knife poised threateningly at the younger man's throat.

"Lookin' fer this?" the man asked beguilingly, yellow teeth flashing through a wide, perverse grin.

"Let him go," Sherlock growled. He took a step forward but stopped short as the man pressed the edge of his knife to Eric's jugular, eliciting a strangled whimper.

Ace grinned. "Or wot?"

"Or I'll kill you." Sherlock's stance was taut with fury and adrenaline, but his voice came out deadly
calm. It registered dimly in his mind that he'd shifted into a perfect imitation of Father - flat and emotionless, with a hint of frigid steel. It was the most dangerous persona in his arsenal. "If you don't release him immediately I will relieve you of your weapon, puncture both your lungs and watch you drown in your own blood."

"Jesus fuck!" Eric squeaked in alarm. Ace paled as well, clearly unnerved but determined not to show it.

"J-just try it, toffee-nose," he challenged with a very slight stammer to his voice.

Sherlock sneered. In a sudden flash of inspiration he quickly scanned the man's appearance. A dark smirk crossed his face as details coalesced. *Perfect.*

"Do you want to know why she left you?" he asked quietly, menacingly.

"W-wot?"

"She was tired of living like a beggar," Sherlock went on. "She wanted more, she *deserved* more. You couldn't provide for her. She wasted years of her life waiting for you to shape up. To *change*. But you never did, did you? You just let her wallow in her misery, watching as she raised your children, never offering a shred of help. And they were your children, weren't they? Not the neighbour's like you pretended. How often do you get to see them now, hm? Twice a month? Twice a *year*? Little Michael's going to grow up without a father, just like you did."

"*Holy f*ckin' Christ!*" Ace exclaimed. He whipped his knife off Eric's throat to brandish it shakily toward Sherlock instead. "Whath'f*ck! Who- wh-what... what th*f*ck are you!"

Instead of answering Sherlock shot forward, wrenched the knife from the man's fingers and thrust it directly into the thug's face, stopping just short of stabbing him in the eye. "*Let. Him. Go.*"

With a terrified yell the man jerked backward, wrenching Eric's arm with the abrupt motion and causing the younger man to cry out in pain. Sherlock snarled at the sound and lashed out with the knife, but the thug had already shoved Eric roughly away from him and turned to flee down one of the darkened side streets.

"*Fuck!*" Eric yelled with a pained grimace. He stumbled forward into Sherlock, who immediately dropped the knife to catch him, they sank to their knees as he cradled his left wrist protectively with his good hand. "Oh fuckin' *fuck* I think he fuckin' broke it. *Fuck!*"

"Let me see it," Sherlock ordered. A groan from one of their fallen assailants to his right suddenly caught his attention. He glanced over with a wary look and instead moved to heft a loudly protesting Eric to his feet. "Actually on second thought let's get out of here first."

"Fuckin' *hell,*" Eric moaned as they made their way toward a well-lit shopfront some ways down the street. He was leaning heavily on Sherlock's shoulder - the injured one, as it happened, but Sherlock wasn't about to say anything. Eric was upset enough as it was. At least the pain was doing a fair job of keeping his cocaine-and-adrenaline-addled brain focused. "Why th*f*ck did y'ave t'go an piss those guys off?"

Sherlock flinched as Eric's agitated movements put pressure on his wound, but quickly masked the expression before the other man could see. "They would have jumped us whether I pissed them off or not," he replied in what he hoped was an indifferent tone rather than a strangled choke.

"Y'don' fuckin' know that, christ!" Eric half-wailed. "Y'just wanted t'piss off a buncha blokes cos yer a goddamn mental case!"
"I'm not a mental case," Sherlock snapped irritably. He tried to shift his arm out from under the brunt of Eric's weight without letting on how much it hurt to do so, but gave up after the first attempt shot a bolt of pain up his arm. *Fuck,* he'd just focus on ignoring it. "And I *do* know they would have jumped us, because they were a load of bloody *street thugs* and I look like I've got money." He paused for a second, grinding his teeth in an effort to centre himself, then added blandly, "Also you've said the word 'fuck' eight times in the last two minutes."

"*Fuck you!*"

"Nine times."

As they neared the shop it became clear the business was closed for the night. Sherlock grit his teeth in irritation. The next well-lit building was blocks away so rather than pressing on he lowered them to the kerb to catch their breath. After briefly checking his shoulder (bleeding still, but not overmuch; his peacoat would stain horribly) he turned to the business of coaxing Eric's wrist free from the man's white-knuckled grip so he could examine it.

"I think it's just dislocated," he decided after a few moments of gentle prodding at the rapidly-swelling limb. Fingers still functional, grip seemed weak but no loss of sensation so that ruled out nerve damage at least. "Radio-ulnar, maybe?" he hedged uncertainly. His knowledge of medical science was relatively basic compared to the depth of expertise he held in more interesting topics. General human anatomy was all well and good but when it came to things like first aid and surgical techniques he'd never cared enough to retain the material... yet another situation where his ability to obsessively stockpile thousands of obscure facts about fascinating topics while discarding information he found dull proved itself more of a curse than a blessing.

Instead of answering properly Eric just mumbled something indistinct about blood. He was curled up over his knees miserably, looking pale and shivering in the cool night air. Sherlock desperately hoped the man wasn't going into shock; he'd have *no idea* how to deal with it.

He fidgeted nervously with a loose thread on the sleeve of his coat as he regarded his miserable companion. "What did you say?" he asked after a pause, vaguely recalling that keeping the patient talking was supposed to help somehow.

"I said y'got blood all down yer face," Eric repeated more clearly. He raised his head a fraction and gestured toward Sherlock's forehead with his good arm. "From a cut or sommat."

"Oh." Sherlock grimaced slightly and raised a hand to rub at the drying trail of blood leaking from the cut on his forehead. "...Yes, I'm aware," he replied as he let his arm drop back down, where his fingers immediately started worrying at the thread again. "It's only a scalp laceration."

"Prolly needs stitches," Eric muttered, then huffed a tired sigh. "We should find an' A&E."

Sherlock's face twisted into a displeased wince. *Ugh,* he *really* didn't want to go to hospital. Especially via anything resembling public transportation. But Eric could be seriously injured, so...

After a moments' hesitation he grumbled an annoyed *sod it all* and resignedly dug his mobile and battery pack out of his jeans pocket. Using his phone was a *massive* risk, but calling a cab was the easiest and least exhausting way to get to a hospital and he had no idea where the nearest phonebooth might be. At the very least he had the benefit of it being the middle of the night; if he was lucky he could make the call and remove the battery again without his brother so much as noticing the signal return.

The operative phrase there being *'if he was lucky'.* More likely he'd end up in MI5 custody within
the hour... he figured he should probably warn Eric ahead of time.

"If you see a black towncar anywhere nearby within the next twenty minutes, run," he ordered gravely as the mobile in his hand booted up with a cheerful chiming noise.

"Why?"

Sherlock scowled as he quickly dialled the number for a taxi service. "Because my brother will have a triangulation on my wireless signal in around thirty seconds, and he's not above having you sent to Belmarsh on fake terror charges if he thinks it might get me to cooperate with him."

Eric lifted his head and fixed him with a faintly horrified look. "Yer family is seriously f*cked up, Shers."

"I'm quite aware, thank you," Sherlock deadpanned. Finally the line connected. He quickly ordered a cab to meet them at the shop they were sat in front of, then hung up and immediately flipped the phone over to remove the battery.

Before he could even get the back cover off the device started ringing. He sighed angrily and turned it back over to glance at the caller ID on the lid display.

'MYCROFT HOLMES - PRIVATE LINE.'

"Of bloody course," he growled.

"Maybe y'should just answer it?" Eric suggested before Sherlock could hit the 'ignore' button, staring down at the letters flashing on the tiny LCD screen with a wary expression. "I mean cos otherwise he's gonna come out here wivva buncha agents all guns blazin', right?"

Sherlock glowered at his mobile. "He's going to do that anyway."

Nonetheless, he reluctantly hit the key to accept the call, then pressed a second button to put it on speakerphone - if he had to endure his brother's insanity Eric might as well endure it along with him.

"What do you want?" he growled at the handset.

"Hello to you as well, Sherlock," Mycroft's bland voice responded, tone dripping with polite sarcasm. Despite the late hour he sounded wide awake - probably pulling another all-nighter coordinating some massive government conspiracy. "Evidently I can take the city morgues off notice."

"I'm not dead you prat, I just needed a cab." As he spoke Sherlock glanced over at Eric, finding the other man watching him bemusedly. He was still cradling his wrist but no longer looked quite so ready to pass out. Probably a good sign.

"I'm sure you'll understand my fearing the worst, considering the circumstances."

Sherlock bit out an angry sigh and turned his attention back to the phone. He could hear Mycroft shifting on the other side of the line, leaving a room, opening a door. Probably walking into his office for privacy. Been in a meeting, then? Some sort of conference? Most likely a liaison with Asia if the time was any indication.

"I'm fine, Mycroft. Leave me alone."
Mycroft hmm'ed dubiously. "Calling a cab to take you to King's College in the middle of the night doesn't strike me as an indication of fine-ness," he intoned. "What on earth are you doing in Stockwell, by the way?"

"None of your bloody business," Sherlock growled. "And stop tapping my calls!"

"Seriously fucked up," Eric muttered beside him. Sherlock shoved him lightly with a silently mouthed 'shut up!' - the last thing they needed was Mycroft getting all snarky over him hanging about with 'commoners'.

"Who was that?" Mycroft asked curiously. Sherlock's face pulled into a slight grimace. Of course the git heard.

"Nobody. Just a friend." He shot a sidelong glare at Eric and got a not-quite-apologetic shrug in return.

"A friend?" his brother repeated, tone condescendingly incredulous. "Has he known you for more than an hour?"

Sherlock's gaze flicked back to his mobile with a vicious scowl. "Fuck you."

"Apologies, Sherlock," Mycroft replied blithely in a voice that didn't sound the least bit contrite. "It's simply a bit... unexpected is all. Are you absolutely sure he's not just trying to steal your wallet?"

Sherlock raised a hand and flipped off the phone on the off-chance his brother had tapped into the camera function. Beside him Eric's eyebrows had furrowed in a vaguely affronted look.

"That's hardly necessary, I was only making sure you'd taken all possibilities into account," Mycroft's over-patient voice responded. Sherlock lowered his hand and glared at the phone for a split-second before covering the camera with his thumb.

"Go choke on a croissant and die you fat bas-" he started angrily, but Eric cut over him with a hissed "tell 'im no kidnappin'!" Sherlock reluctantly bit back the rest of his retort with a cross huff and put his hand over the microphone.

"I know, I'm getting there. Now shut up before he gets a voice match on you," he grumbled to Eric, who went slightly pale and clapped a hand over his mouth with a nod. Sherlock rolled his eyes and uncovered both the camera and microphone to address his brother once more. "Alright look, I'm bloody tired and I don't want to deal with your bullshit right now. Just tell me what I have to do to convince you not to send a team of agents out to abduct me again."


"Never what?" he half-snarled at the mobile. "Never have me drugged and spirited off to some godforsaken clinic in the middle of the night? Or maybe you'd like to try cornering me in an alley again? That went so well last time."

Mycroft's voice cut off in apparent chastisement. Sherlock could hear the man nervously tapping a pen against his desk on the other end of the line. "... Fair enough," he conceded after a moment. "I assume you're planning to bolt again if I attempt to have you brought in?"

"Too right."

His brother breathed a short sigh of resignation. "Very well, if there's no other choice... I suppose
leaving the battery pack in your mobile would be sufficient for now."

"Fine," Sherlock snapped.

"As well as actually carrying it with you, and keeping it charged," Mycroft added mildly, pre-empting Sherlock's plan to just toss the device in a bin somewhere.

Sherlock rolled his eyes and huffed an irritated breath through his nose. "I don't have a power cord."

"I'm sure you can locate one."

"By which you mean you're going to bloody send one to me through some sort of sinister government parcel post?" he sniped. Eric was now staring blankly between his face and the phone's LCD display, looking somewhat torn between awe and horror as the conversation proceeded.

"I was thinking more along the lines of your simply purchasing one from a shop, but whatever you think is best."

"For fuck's sake, Mycroft-"

"Your cab is pulling around the corner, by the way," his brother interrupted. Sherlock flicked his eyes up and saw that, indeed, there was a taxi heading toward them. "I hope you don't mind but I've already taken the liberty of paying the fare," the man added in a semi-polite drawl.

Sherlock growled in irritation and stood to signal the cab before it drove past them. "Does the ministry know much money you waste psychotically stalking your sibling?" he asked his brother acidly, hitting the button to turn the speaker function off so he could clamp the mobile between his shoulder and ear while he bent down to help Eric up.

"Oh most certainly," Mycroft quipped. "There's a budget set aside and everything."

"Brilliant," Sherlock grumbled. "I'm hanging up now. If you send one of your goons after me I'll shove my mobile up his arse and you can trace it backwards through his digestive tract."

"Charming as always, little brother."

In lieu of replying Sherlock simply flipped his phone shut with a loud snap! and glared venomously at it. "Stupid git," he muttered.

"At least we ain't gettin kidnapped," Eric put in consolingly.

Sherlock sighed. "You aren't. I probably will be." They managed to clamber into the back seat of the waiting taxi without injuring themselves further. As soon as the doors were shut the cabbie took off toward the hospital, having doubtless already been fed instructions by whatever shady method Mycroft had used to identify the car and pay in advance.

"Wh- serious?" Eric asked. "Even after y'agreed ta let him track ya an' shit?"

"The only reason he agreed to compromise is because he's busy with something," Sherlock explained in a dull, tired voice. Mycroft had still been in his office at half past one in the morning, so obviously he was embroiled in some sort of massive government operation which had kept him late. His need to get back to whatever he was doing was the only explanation for why he'd backed down so fast. Sherlock leant his head against the window with a short huff and stared out at the
passing streets. "As soon as he's finished supplanting whatever government position he's decided to usurp this month he'll get back to the business of making sure I can't so much as breathe without him knowing about it," he continued. "He's probably got a satellite tracking our movements already; doubtless a team of agents will be in position to monitor me by morning."

Beside him Eric was slowly shaking his head in disbelief. "I take back everyfin' I said 'bout you bein' a nutter," he muttered. "Yer brother's way worse."

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They made it back to the house around three in the morning, having gotten in to see a doctor suspiciously quickly (Sherlock's stream of grumbled complaints about his brother's meddling had been cut off by a well-timed kick from Eric during their ridiculously brief wait in the examination room). The slash wound on Sherlock's arm had needed stitches, but the cut on his forehead had just taken a couple of butterfly bandages and some gauze. Eric's wrist, meanwhile, had somehow been x-rayed, reduced and splinted in just under than an hour. (Sherlock had briefly considered sending Mycroft a text to thank him for arranging that at least but then immediately discarded the notion as absurd. A single kind gesture did not make up for two decades of being a git.)

"Six weeks in a fuckin' cast, goddamn it," Eric was grumbling as he dug his house key out of his jeans pocket.

"At least you won't have to play in the pub band for awhile," Sherlock offered with a vague shrug. He scrubbed a hand through his hair with the arm not currently benumbed by local anaesthetics and tried not to yawn too obviously. The creeping exhaustion of early withdrawal was stealing across his mindscape, making the world start to go foggy again. Should probably do another hit before he ended up having to deal with migraine on top of a stab wound and scalp laceration.

"Eh yeah, I guess there's that," Eric conceded. "Devlin's gonna be pissed right th'fuck off though."

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "So? He's an idiot."

Eric quirked a small smile. "Hah, yeah 'e is. But he's also an idiot who gets ta decide f'I got a place t'live 'er not."

With a sigh Eric kicked the door shut behind them while Sherlock stared blankly around the darkened hallway waiting for his eyes to adjust. One drawback of existing with one's pupils in a state of perpetual dilation was the tendency to end up temporarily blinded by even relatively dim light sources, and he'd (rather stupidly, in hindsight) been staring at street lamps and lit shop signs out the cab window for the entire trip back from King's. At the moment his visual field was little more than a mishmash of fluorescent white afterimages over velvet black and grey blobs.

"If Devin attempts any sort of eviction you have permission to use my brother as a threat," he told Eric in a slightly distracted voice as he stood watching the drifting photonegative of a chip shop's neon 'OPEN' sign slowly fade.

"Oh aye?" Eric asked amusedly as he moved off toward the stairs without bothering to turn on a light. Sherlock followed closely behind him lest he trip over any unseen obstacles. "Well I s'pose datin' the little bro of a creepy government agent's gotta 'ave some perks."

Sherlock felt himself flush slightly at the word 'dating', finding himself unsure how to respond. He still wasn't entirely convinced they were classifiable as a couple yet - not because of any concrete reasoning or evidence, but because it almost seemed like it had to be some sort of trick... he kept half-expecting Eric to finally sober up and announce he'd just been kidding the whole time.
Paranoid or not the doubt left Sherlock wary of making any rash presumptions about their relationship status. Instead of replying properly he settled for making a vague noise of agreement in response to Eric's statement as they ascended the stairs to his room, fingers unconsciously tugging at the loose thread on his sleeve again.

"Y'should cut that string off fore y'pull th'weave apart," Eric pointed out, glancing behind him while he flipped on the light in his room. Sherlock's gaze flicked down to his hand and he quickly jerked his fingers away from the thread with a glower.

"I don't need to cut it, I just need to stop fiddling with it," he huffed. Slipping his peacoat off he set about checking the extent of the damage incurred by his injury. The left sleeve was marred by a large patch of blood spreading piebald around a ragged tear. "Ugh, the coat's ruined anyway," he mumbled. He wasn't really sure if he was upset by that fact or not; on the one hand it was his favourite coat, on the other its obvious quality had been the catalyst for its getting ruined in the first place... but then on a third hand he also didn't exactly have another one.


"One can only imagine how you came to have such knowledge," Sherlock intoned in a sarcastic deadpan as he set the coat aside to check his sweatshirt.

"Ah come off it, I ain't a slasher or sommat," Eric huffed, rolling his eyes. "Little sister used t'git nosebleeds. All down 'er jumpers an' everything, huge damn mess." He smiled slightly to himself as he turned to tug his splinted arm carefully out of his overcoat and hang it on his closet door.

Sherlock paused in his assessment of the state of his hoodie sleeve (stained as well, but not as obviously thanks to the darker colour; and the fabric would need to be sewn where it had ripped) to regard the other man curiously. "You have a sister?"

The smile abruptly vanished from Eric's face. "Had," he replied curtly. After a second's silence he seemed to shake himself and turned back around with a yawn, scrubbing his uninjured hand through his hair tiredly. "Look Sherly, I'm like seriously stoned t'shit on whatever th'fuck they doped me up wit' for that whole bone resettin' thing. Les just go t'sleep an' we'll talk about whatever in th'mornin, yeah?"

Sherlock wrinkled his nose. "But I slept yesterday."

"And...?" Eric shot him a confused look... which after half a second morphed into flat exasperation. "Oh. Sleepin's s'posed t'be a daily thing you nutter."

Sherlock huffed and flapped his hand dismissively as he turned to dig through his coat lining. "For you maybe," he quipped. "I, however, have cocaine."

Eric threw his one good arm up with a resigned sigh and turned back to the bed. "Whatever floats yer boat, Sherly. Just don' start bitchin' when y'crash again."

"I won't." Sherlock promised, shaking out the pre-loaded syringe from earlier. "Er... good night," he added somewhat awkwardly.

Eric yawned again and moved to turn the light off. "G'night, mate."

Sherlock watched as Eric kicked off his shoes and jeans and curled up under the duvet on his right side with the sling still pinning his left arm in place. His breathing indicated he'd fallen asleep almost immediately.
Regardless, Sherlock waited a few minutes to be sure, then cautiously moved over to the bed and sat down on the unoccupied side of the mattress. He wasn't *entirely* sure if he was welcome to stay in the room while the other man slept... but then at the same time he didn't really feel comfortable enough with the other tenants to go wandering about the house uninvited. They might see it as an invasion of territory or some equally incomprehensible social slight. Eric at the very least seemed more likely to simply get annoyed by his presence rather than resort to outright violence to get rid of him, as Charles or Devin likely would... so best to take his chances staying put.

He leaned his back against the headboard and stretched his legs out on top of the duvet as he hunted for a vein in the dim half-light from the window (still couldn't see a bloody thing, but he wasn't about to turn the light back on). It took a few attempts but he finally found one, injected the last bit of pre-mixed solution from the syringe he'd been carrying around all night. It wasn't really enough to do much more than stave off withdrawal, but then he didn't exactly need to be high right now. Once the slight rush wore off he cast about for something to do. Eric's laptop was sitting on the floor by the side of the mattress, so he scooped it up and turned it on.

Not locked, thankfully, as he didn't have nearly enough information on the other man to make a guess at his password. The desktop background was a small, grainy mobile photo of two little girls beaming ecstatically into the camera. Identical twins - primary school age judging by their school uniforms, perhaps eight or nine years old. They were tangled together in a slightly awkward hug, matching manes of curly blonde hair partially obscuring their freckled faces as they each held two fingers up behind the others' head like rabbit ears. The one on the left sported a tiny spot of faded blood on the white collar of her polo shirt.

Sherlock stared at the image for a moment, then glanced over at Eric sleeping next to him. A light frown crossed his features as he looked back to the screen. Under ordinary circumstances he'd be jumping at the chance to hunt for data, perhaps opening all the image folders in a flurry of rabid detective work... but something was holding him back. Idle curiosity seemed like a poor justification for intruding on Eric's privacy. Strange, since he was usually perfectly happy to pry into peoples' personal lives for no reason whatsoever. Maybe it was because he actually cared what Eric thought of him... or perhaps he just didn't want the man to wake up and punch him for snooping around on his computer. Difficult to tell.

After another few second's staring Sherlock simply huffed and pulled up the internet browser instead. Sod it, he'd just find a chemistry article to read.

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Somehow over the course of the next hour or so Sherlock managed to unconsciously shift himself close enough to Eric to have his side pressed up next to the man's back while he read. The contact was *entirely* unnecessary (and probably a little uncomfortable for the other party, considering Eric hadn't any room to so much as roll over like this) but for some reason despite being annoyed with himself for carelessly instigating the situation Sherlock still couldn't quite bring himself to move. He couldn't help it - he liked the sensation of body heat against his thigh and the even, steady movement of Eric's breathing. It was very calming.

Quite a different sort of calm to cocaine though. The snow still coating his internal space after his last hit kept him collected, focused, but it was the rigid stillness of ice rather than a placid lake. Emotions were so muted in this state he sometimes had trouble remembering he even had them at all - everything just blended together under the frost into a matte background of featureless complacency. But physical contact... dull, uninteresting, plain old *touching* did something to his mental space that was unlike any drug he'd yet tried. It was... warm. Not the searing heat of helplessness or anger which sometimes scorched across his landscape, but a gentle sort of perfusion
of quiet sunlight. Tranquil, but not in a boring way. He liked it.

Of course as nice as this was, cocaine still won out. Besides the fact that keeping in constant physical contact with people was both ridiculous and unfeasible there was the added complication that the effect only seemed to take hold if he was actually comfortable with the person he was touching... and very few individuals had ever managed to find their way into that category. In fact for the vast majority of his life the list of humans permitted to touch him without provoking an acute anxiety response had begun and ended with his brother. Back then it hadn't even been a list, just a rule: if Mycroft, do nothing; if other, panic.

The directive hadn't had any cause to change for well over eighteen years, and then he'd gone off to uni. Well... more specifically had gone off to uni and discovered cocaine. Prior to his fateful experiments with stimulants he'd been scrupulously walled off from any and all contact with his classmates. Then, over the course of his last few drug-fuelled months at Oxford, the List of Allowed Touching had quite suddenly gone into a state of near-constant flux - growing and shrinking as the heady combination of cocaine and alcohol temporarily stripped Sherlock of his usual inhibitions. Strangers were added for a few hours here and there, perhaps a whole night, then immediately struck off again as he forgot them by the next morning. Only Victor had ever achieved the dubious honour of a permanent placement. Sherlock's comfort around him had somehow persisted even in the absence of mind-altering substances. He'd thought it something of a miracle at the time, enough that since leaving Oxford (and especially after meeting Racer, though he refused to think about that) he'd rather given up hope of ever willingly touching another person again.

But Eric, it seemed, had inexplicably managed to earn a place as well. Sherlock honestly wasn't quite sure how it had happened. After all, they'd only just met less than 48 hours ago. And the freckled idiot wasn't exactly the type of person he generally preferred to associate with. Still... the man was quite kind, and not a total waste of oxygen, and... well...

With a quick shake of his head Sherlock pressed his lips together and forced the growing flurry of thoughts from his mind. Too much introspection, he'd drive himself (further) insane if he wasn't careful.

The online article about forensic chemical analysis he'd been haphazardly skimming through was suddenly not very interesting, so he closed the laptop's lid and set it aside. He really wasn't sure what he wanted to do. His cocaine buzz had settled into that strange, meandering state where he knew he wanted to focus on something, but couldn't for the life of him figure out what. It was very frustrating. With a quiet huff he glanced briefly at the slumbering form beside him, considering the benefits of curling up under the duvet with Eric. Couldn't exactly sleep in this state... but lying down might be nice.

A minute later he was stripped down to his boxers and one of Eric's t-shirts he'd pilfered from the hamper of clean-smelling clothes (his own had been worn for a good three days straight now, and was badly in need of a washing.) He climbed under the covers, and after only a moment's hesitation wrapped his arms around the other boy's chest (being careful to avoid jostling the cast on the injured wrist). On a whim he buried his face in the man's sandy hair. It smelt of marijuana, hospital antiseptics and cloying smoke from the pub, with just a faint trace of some generic shampoo scent underlying the rest. Not all that objectively pleasant as far as scents went, but something in him liked it anyway. Perhaps it was just the fact that he was warm and comfortable, making everything seem nicer than it should have been.

As he'd expected, actually falling asleep was impossible; he was still far too high. But with the soothing rhythm of another human's breathing pushing steadily against his chest and the somehow-
not-terrible scent of pub smoke and weed in his nostrils he found himself lapsing into a meditative, trancelike state. It occurred to him that this would be a perfect time to get around to building that tower.

The willow tree had so far proven itself useful enough, but it was something of a symbol of his childhood and therefore came bundled with a lot of associated memories. He wouldn't do away with it (not yet at least) but he'd much rather create a structure less steeped in past experiences. A tower would be best - he'd always liked being up high, and the stonework would hopefully resist erosion by his frequent, turbulent changes in mood. It should also be possible to put different things on different levels; facts in one place, memories in another, and so on. Then he could just walk up and down the steps and find whatever he needed, no more digging about in the snowbanks looking for buried information.

Quite suddenly he frowned to himself. *God*, listen to him. Treating his silly little mental abstractions as if they were tangible places and things. For perhaps the millionth time in his life he wondered if he might be mad. Surely brains weren't actually meant to function like this? He had a *field* in his *head*, for god's sake. With shifting weather patterns to represent emotions, and a bloody great tree in the midst of it all where he went and hid when the world got too stressful. It couldn't possibly be normal.

And sure, yes, of course he *wasn't* normal. He was a *genius*... but, well... so were Mycroft and Father. What were the odds that his brother had a... a sodding *mental office building* (or something equally boring, surely) in which he stored all his collected volumes of dull political strategies and techniques for being a nosey, patronising git? Or that Siger kept some kind of horrifying *mind dungeon*? The very idea was absurd. Neither of them would ever indulge in something so pointless as an imaginary landscape in their heads. No, Sherlock was fairly certain he was alone in this. A freak among freaks.

He huffed a sigh into Eric's hair and gave up on the tower before he'd really even started. Sod it all, he'd gone and worked himself into another brooding sulk. Why couldn't his moods ever seem to stay consistent?

At least the dysphoria probably meant his high was wearing off, so he might be able to sleep. A quick lift of his head to squint at the alarm clock on the side table told him it was going on six in the morning. He had no idea what time the occupants of the house usually got up. It hardly mattered anyway, he supposed, since Eric certainly wouldn't be awake for a good while yet. The idiot was out like a light on whatever cocktail of drugs they'd given him. Sherlock blew out another short sigh and lowered his head back down to press his face into the mop of sandy brown hair. Dimly he realised this would be his second time sleeping in as many days.

*Christ*, he thought with a small smile as he drifted off. *I really have gone mad.*

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And We'll Get Fat

5. And We'll Get Fat

Mycroft was seven years old when his brother was born.

He’d known the child was illegitimate from the start, of course. It wouldn’t have taken a genius to figure out, but the fact that he was one rendered the fact rather blindingly obvious. The biology textbook in the library quite clearly stated that human gestation was nine months from the time of conception. And nine months ago Mycroft’s father had been in Peru on a business trip. The young boy wisely said nothing, however, preferring to keep his silence rather than upset his mother any further.

Because she did seem upset. Mummy had never really been the happiest of people, but for the last few months - as her tummy swelled bigger and rounder and the looming date of Father’s return home after having spent the last year abroad drew nearer - she began to show signs of depression. Fatigue, altered mood, lack of interest in hobbies or pleasurable activity... Mycroft had memorised the entire list from his copy of the DSM-IV and knew without a doubt that his Mummy fit nearly all of them. What he didn’t know, however, was how to fix it.

"The foetus is considered full term between weeks 37 to 40, and by this time has developed all necessary structures for life outside the uterus," Mycroft informed his mother. They were sitting in her room, leaning against the pillows on her enormous featherbed. Mycroft had his favourite biology textbook propped open over his lap.

"That’s nice, dear," Mummy murmured softly, apparently not listening to him. She was halfheartedly sketching a design in her drawing pad - some sort of flower. It looked almost like a lily but some of the structures were spaced incorrectly.

"Mummy, lilies have six stamens arranged symmetrically around a central pistil, not seven." He’d read that in the chapter on plants. Mummy glanced down at him with a strange expression, then sighed and flipped her pencil over to erase one of the lines.

"Of course," she muttered, "silly me." Mycroft watched interestingly as she added a few lines here and there, repositioning the remaining reproductive organs. The end result was an almost anatomically accurate reproduction of the flower of a Lilium auratum. He told her as much and she flashed him a quick, sad smile. Despite the undertone of melancholy it was the happiest he’d seen her in days, so he grinned back.

"How you manage to fit so many facts into that little head of yours, I’ll never know," Mummy said, voice layered with quiet amusement. She set her drawing pad aside and reached out an arm to draw him closer to her, resting her head on his. Her long, dark curls fell over his face and he pushed them out of the way, only for her to playfully shake them back again.

"Mummy!" he squealed indignantly. She just chuckled as Mycroft huffed and crossed his arms over his chest like he’d seen the groundskeeper do when he was annoyed by gophers.

After a few seconds' hugging she raised a hand and flipped her hair out of both their faces. The moment of levity seemed to melt away as she sighed again.
"I'm thinking of naming the baby Sherrington," she told him quietly, "after his grandfather."

"Grandfather's name is Ingolf," Mycroft pointed out. They both knew she hadn't been referring to Siger's father; he felt it wise to pretend to be fooled regardless.

"I meant my father, dear," Violet corrected. Mycroft, of course, had looked up their family genealogy several months ago and knew that his maternal grandfather was called Alphonse. He said nothing, however.

"Or perhaps a derivative would be better...?" Violet continued thoughtfully. "Sherrington is a bit of a silly name, I suppose."

"I thought you liked silly names," Mycroft grumbled.

"Oh hush. Mycroft is a perfectly respectable name," his mother admonished. "Your father thought it up... you should be proud to have it."

As he stared at the keyhole an idea occurred to him. "Sherlock!" he exclaimed. Mummy startled a bit, having evidently been lost in thought, and looked down at him.

"Pardon, dear?"

"Sherlock," Mycroft repeated. "As a derivative of Sherrington. It still has the 'sher' but doesn't sound so much like the name of a country parish."

His mother blinked at him, then up to the door. A smile flitted across her porcelain features as she apparently caught on to where he'd gotten the 'lock' part from.

"Sherlock..." she hummed to herself. "Yes, I like it."

Mummy chuckled again, pressing him closer to her side in a hug, and Mycroft beamed.

Less than a week later he found himself pulled out of primary school in the middle of the day, bundled off in one of his family's expensive towncars to the hospital where Mummy had been taken. By the time he was finally ushered into the private suite his mother was already sitting upright, a tiny bundle in her arms. Father was standing by the bed with his usual unreadable expression.

"Hello Father," Mycroft greeted. The man inclined his head very slightly toward him and turned his attention back to Mummy. Apparently they were in the midst of a conversation.

"Your decision to go through with the birth was... courageous, if foolish," Father said in his low, emotionless voice. Mycroft cautiously made his way to the side of the bed opposite his father and craned his neck to look at Mummy. She looked exhausted, and yet... happy, somehow. Her face was flushed with exertion and the rush of endorphins from delivering. In her arms the tiny baby was sleeping peacefully, its tuft of dark curls sticking cowlicked out from the soft hospital blanket.

"You can't take everything from me, Siger." She raised one hand and softly brushed the newborn's...
fringe from its forehead before pressing a kiss to its brow. "He's your son now, whether you like it or not. I've already arranged for the paperwork to go through."

Father curled his lip slightly. "Yes, Violet, I'm quite aware. 'Sherlock', really?"

"That's right. Sherlock Holmes." She lifted her head and smiled down at Mycroft. "It's a lovely name, isn't it dear?"

Mycroft shot a timid glance toward his father - expressionless as ever, but some instinctual sense of danger told him to avoid taking sides here. "It's... a name," he hedged uncertainly. Mummy's face seemed to fall, then twisted in irritation as she caught on to the source of her son's discomfort. After a second she huffed an angry sigh and rounded on Father.

"Siger, leave us," she snapped.

Father's eyebrows shot up. "You presume to order me?"

"I presume," Mummy growled, "to have a moment of well-earned privacy with my sons. You're perfectly capable of orchestrating your disgusting little schemes from the hallway. Now leave."

Siger snorted very slightly, but nonetheless stepped away from his wife's bedside and strode toward the door. He paused with his hand on the knob. "Take care of your mother, Mycroft," he droned in a voice which was as close to sarcastic as Mycroft had ever heard from his father. Then he was gone.

Mummy seemed to deflate, her features softening in obvious relief. "Christ, that bloody-" she abruptly cut herself off with a shake of her head; her dark curls brushed gently across the sleeping child in her arms. "Never mind," she sighed after a moment. Smiling down at Mycroft, she patted the blankets beside her. "Come up here and meet your brother, dearest."

Mycroft obligingly clambered up onto the mattress beside her and sat in the space between her and the bed railings. He stared down at the baby with interest. Its head was very large for its body, skull rounded and distinctly lacking the strange, lopsided cone-shape he'd seen detailed in the obstetrics book he'd found in the library last month. "Was it born by caesarean section?" he asked curiously.

Mummy shifted in surprise and blinked down at him. "How did you figure that out?"

"Its head isn't deformed," he explained patiently. After a second's hesitation he reached out and prodded the baby gently on the nose. The tiny face wrinkled in annoyance but it didn't wake up.

"You're such a smart little boy," Mummy said, smiling again. Mycroft couldn't help a stray thought crossing his mind that this was the most he'd seen his mother smile in months. She turned her gaze back to the infant. "You'll have plenty to teach your brother when he's old enough, I'm sure."

"Will he be a genius too?" Mycroft asked. For some reason Mummy started chuckling.

"Oh goodness, dear, I should think so," she exclaimed with a quiet laugh. "After all his father was-" she cut off again, then shook her head with a small, wistful smile. "Well, maybe I'll tell you when you're older."

Mycroft huffed but said nothing. He wasn't sure where this unspoken agreement to pretend they weren't both fully aware of the situation had come from, but he wasn't about to break his mother's trust by pressing for details. Instead he stared down at the baby with a dubious look.
"He doesn't look like a genius," he said slowly. Because really, the thought of this little pink ball of pudge and fluffy tufted hair carrying on any sort of intellectual discussion struck him as highly unlikely. He knew all about the process of maturation, of course, but at this stage of development it all seemed very far away and difficult to believe.

Mummy laughed again, a pleasant, tinkling sound. "No, he doesn't does he?" she flipped one of the baby's curls away from its brow again. "But he's only small, my love. Give him time."

"I guess," Mycroft conceded.

Mummy shifted her torso toward him and lifted the little bundle of sleeping infant a fraction away from her chest. "Would you like to hold him, dearest?"

Mycroft cringed slightly - from what he'd read babies were supposed to be disgusting. "Do I have to?" he mumbled. Mummy just smirked and held the child with one arm while she used the other to move Mycroft's into the correct position to support it.

"Yes you do," she quipped matter-of-factly, smiling as Mycroft suppressed the urge to whinge about the unfairness of being given the illusion of choice when there really wasn't any. "Now mind his head, dear."

And with no more warning than that, Mycroft found himself cradling an armful of newborn. He stared down at it and watched as the infant's eyes blinked open - enormous in its tiny face, with irises of a pale grey-blue. They locked gazes for a split-second. Mycroft furrowed his brows as the little creature seemed to give him an appraising look... then abruptly opened its mouth and shrieked.

Mycroft jerked his head back away from it with a terrified expression and looked to his mother, who was holding a hand to her mouth in a poor attempt to hide an amused grin.

"Mummy!" he cried indignantly at the sight. The baby was screeching its ruddy head off and Mummy was just laughing? "Mummy it obviously doesn't like me! Take it back!"

"Oh hush dear, he's only a little frightened that's all," she replied with a chuckle. With a pleasant smile she reached out and softly smoothed the baby's hair back with a quietly hummed rendition of Vivaldi's Spring. Mercifully the infant stopped screaming seconds later. Mycroft wrinkled his nose as it fell to squirming fitfully against his chest instead.

"Mycroft dear... I want you to promise me something," Mummy spoke up, suddenly serious. Mycroft glanced away from the wriggling bundle in his arms with a questioning look.

"What?" he asked.

Mummy lifted her hands, placing one on the top of each of her sons' heads. "Promise me that you'll keep your little brother safe, even if I can't."

"Why wouldn't you be able to-" Mycroft started, but Mummy's face hardened into a warning look and he shut his mouth. He looked back down to the baby. It was blinking at him owlishly. With the giant eyes it looked a bit like a frog. "... I promise," he mumbled finally.

It wasn't that he had any problem with agreeing to protect his sibling (half-sibling, some dark part of his mind muttered grumpily)... but for some reason the act of officially instigating such a pact felt ominous. Maybe it was just the way Mummy was looking at him, like she'd been waiting all morning to hear those words. Like she'd been worried.
"Thank you, Mycroft," she murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. "Now how about we give Grand-mère a call, hm?"

She moved to take the baby and Mycroft handed it over with relief. As he followed Mummy's instructions and grabbed the telephone from the bedside table to dial his grandmother's number he glanced over. The infant was still staring at him.

He stared back for a moment... then tried a smile. The little face scrunched up comically like it was trying to reciprocate but couldn't quite manage. Mycroft grinned as his mother laughed.

Maybe having a baby brother wouldn't be so bad.

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Mycroft was ten years old when his brother started following him.

It was the second-to-last week of holidays before the Autumn term. Father was out of the country again on a business endeavour, and Mummy had been holed up in her room with migraine all day, leaving Mycroft to entertain himself. This meant he was free to spend the afternoon studying in the manor's large, well-stocked library.

He'd just popped off to the kitchens to get a drink (he didn't mind asking the servants to fetch things for him, but he'd noticed that if he occasionally did simple things for himself - pouring his own juice, picking up his room - then the staff would be more inclined to go out of their way to assist him with anything he asked of them, including larger tasks than they were normally employed to handle. What exactly those larger tasks would entail he wasn't sure yet, but he felt it prudent to foster their loyalty anyway in case the need should ever arise.) and was now walking down the hall to the library, minding his own business, when he became aware of a presence behind him.

He stopped short, glanced around at the potted plant he'd just passed, and bit out an irritated sigh. The ficus tree was staring at him.

"Sherlock I can see you through the branches," he informed the toddler peeking at him from behind the stout, well-manicured topiary.

Sherlock startled slightly and ducked behind the planter, then after a split second his tousled head of dark curls bobbed up again as he rushed out from his hiding spot with an ecstatic grin on his tiny face. Mycroft noted with alarm that the child was clutching an enormous dead toad between his hands.

"Myc'off look what I got!" he chirped happily, thrusting the amphibian in his brother's face as he hopped up and down like a kangaroo. "Look look look look loo-!"

"Yes I see it!" Mycroft snapped. He hurriedly leant away from the unfortunate animal with a grimace of disgust. Ugh it was dripping. "Why are you wandering around unsupervised? Were's the nanny?"

Sherlock lowered his toad slightly and pouted. "She was boring," he whinged, bouncing on the balls of his feet in agitation. The toad's legs flopped around with his movements - Mycroft's face twisted in revulsion at the sight. "Boringboringboringboring so I asked t'go outside an' then I found a frog look!" He shoved the carcass in his brother's face again. Mycroft cringed as a bit of pond scum flew off and landed on his shirt.

"Sherlock, that is a dead animal," he said slowly. "We do not play with dead animals."
"Why not?"

"Because they may have diseases." As he spoke he cast his gaze around somewhat frantically for the nanny, but saw no sign of her. He looked down to Sherlock instead. Suspicious smudges of dirt on his knees and face (to be fair his brother managing to coat himself in dust or mud wasn't exactly an uncommon occurrence, but this was rather more filth than usual), bits of grass and spots of flower pollen stuck to his slightly-too-big jumper, twigs caught in his wildly tangled hair. The boy must have lured poor Mrs. Hartford into one of the back gardens and crawled under a hedge to evade capture... again. This would be the third time he'd managed to escape from under his caretaker's nose in less than a week.

Sherlock was frowning up at him. "It doesn't have diseases Myc'off," he asserted. Before Mycroft could object the toddler launched into an explanation: "It doesn't cause it wasn't dead 'til I saw the groun'keeper's cat attack it an' then it died cause th'cat broke its neck but I chased her off an' now I got a frog see!" He brandished the amphibian yet again with an excited grin, then a split-second later seemed to remember he'd been clarifying something and continued with, "but it can't have diseases cause if it was sick then it wouldn't've been all normal before th'cat killed it an' also cause dead things don't start dec- deco- er... what's th'word when dead stuff breaks up?"

"Decomposing," Mycroft supplied in a faint voice, slightly bewildered by his brother's rapidfire monologue.

"Decoposin!" Sherlock repeated enthusiastically. "Right, it's not decoposin yet so it hasn't got diseases so I can play with it all I want an' look!"

"Alright, yes! I've seen it!" Mycroft cried as the toad launched toward his face again. "Stop shoving it at me!"

"But it's neat!" The toddler was bouncing again. Mycroft fought the urge to grab the boy's shoulders and force him to stay still - the little monster would no doubt take advantage of the required proximity to try and thrust the frog down his big brother's shirt or something equally horrid.

He took a cautious step back out of range of the animal's flailing legs and tried to force the disgust off his features. "'Neat' is not the word I would use to describe a dead toad," he said flatly, then before Sherlock could start in with a rebuttal, "We're going to go and find the nanny now. And then you're taking a bath."

Sherlock abruptly stopped bouncing and hugged the toad to his chest in horror. "No!"

"Yes."

"Don't wanna!"

Mycroft sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off an encroaching headache. "Sherlock you're covered in filth and clutching a fresh carcass. There is no way you're not going to end up taking a bath."

The toddler scowled and looked down at his frog. After a second he glanced back up at his brother through the tangled strands of his fringe with a calculating expression. "If I take a bath... can I go with you?"

"How do you mean?" Mycroft asked, raising an eyebrow. He reached out and hovered a hand slightly above his brother's head, unable to determine how exactly to go about herding the boy in
the probable direction of his current caretaker without actually having to touch him.

Sherlock seemed to catch on to what Mycroft was hesitating about (with frankly alarming speed for a three year old, but then he'd always seemed to know far more than his age should have realistically permitted) and turned around to amble toward the garden entrance under his own power. "I don't wanna go with Nanny again she's boring an' she said I don't pay attention but I do pay attention only she's really really boring an' she never does anything int'restin' so can I go play with you instead?"

"You think I'm likely to be any more interesting than Mrs. Hartford?" Mycroft intoned disbelievingly. Sherlock's definition of 'interesting' tended to include things like, well... things like dead toads. Mycroft's went more along the lines of classical music and quiet evenings in the library. He was fairly certain their tastes did not intersect.

Sherlock shrugged. The toad's head flopped forward in his arms (he was holding it to his chest like a teddy bear now - utterly horrifying, but Mycroft wasn't about to risk touching the animal to remove it). "You talk t'me like a person."

Mycroft's brow furrowed. "And how does the nanny talk to you?"

Sherlock scowled and tugged at one of the toad's forelegs as he walked. "Like a stupid baby." He sniffed, blinking rapidly as his large eyes abruptly pooled with tears. "An'... an' she says I'm a troublemaker but I'm not! I didn't mean to break her stupid 'broider loom or tear all th' threads out it just happened!"

Mycroft sighed. Mrs. Hartford had been working on an embroidery pattern for the last four months, only to find it torn to bits by her over-curious charge in the space of five minutes. She'd understandably been far less than pleased. "Well I'm sure Mummy will find you a new nanny if you ask."

"I don't want a new nanny!" Sherlock wailed, rounding on his brother. The toad's eyes bulged slightly as he squeezed its midsection in agitation. "How come I can't just stay with you?"

"Because I have to go to school during the day. There'd be no one to watch you," Mycroft explained patiently. After a moment's hesitation he reached out and patted his little brother gently on the head. Sherlock didn't seem inclined to attack him with the carcass, so he felt relatively safe in moving to stand slightly closer to the toddler.

"You're not at school now," Sherlock pointed out with a sudden frustrated scowl - he'd snapped from distraught and nearly crying to childish annoyance in less than a second. Yet another instance of his tendency to flip chaotically from emotion to emotion without warning (or, frequently, any discernible reason). For perhaps the hundredth time Mycroft wondered if there might be something seriously off-kilter in his baby brother's head. True, toddlers weren't exactly the most stable of age groups... but surely cycling through thirty different moods in half a minute wasn't normal?

Mycroft huffed a short breath through his nose, dismissing his musings. Much as he hated to admit it Sherlock actually did have a point. "That's true, I'm not," he conceded reluctantly. "I... suppose you could sit in the library with me today. If you're quiet. And only after you take a bath."

"Yay!" Sherlock cheered. Without a second's delay he whipped around and scurried down the hall to the door, stood on tiptoes to reach the knob, and disappeared into the garden. Mycroft watched him go with a bemused expression.

"What did I just get myself into...?" he muttered to the empty hallway.
Sherlock spent nearly every evening and holiday thereafter trailing around behind his brother like a hyperactive second shadow. Despite the annoyance of having to deal with more or less nonstop chattering from the little boy Mycroft found himself really quite pleased by the arrangement. Sherlock's brain was like a sponge, soaking up information without the slightest bit of effort. And where he generally ignored the nannies and tutors (Mummy had decided, during one of her rare periods of liveliness, to have Sherlock homeschooled until secondary. Mycroft couldn't exactly disagree with the decision - subjecting some unfortunate primary school classroom to the storm of restless energy that was his younger sibling would be nothing short of an act of abject cruelty to everyone involved.) he seemed to hang on to Mycroft's every word with a sort of fanatical devotion.

It wasn't long before they were holding impromptu lessons every day on subjects ranging across all manner of topics from chemistry to politics to botany. Sherlock latched onto the physical sciences like a dog with a bone, and by the time he was five years old could rattle off the entire periodic table of elements both frontwards and back.

And as Mycroft watched his brother grow from a toddler to a child, gaining knowledge with the momentum of a speeding bullet train, the young man realised something very important: he loved his baby brother. More than anything. The promise he'd made to his mother all those years ago still stood firm, but now it was more than a promise - it was instinct. He'd protect Sherlock with his life if he had to... and be glad to do it.

He'd been sitting on the grass underneath a large willow tree on the grounds of the family estate when the revelation first hit him. He raised his head from the book he'd been reading and glanced over at the five year old attempting to catch grasshoppers a few feet away.

"Sherlock," he said, hooking a finger between the pages of his book to mark his place as he lowered it to his lap.

"Huh?" His brother didn't even look up, too busy staring intently at the unfortunate insect he was about to pounce on.

Mycroft watched the boy for a few seconds more - edging ever closer, preparing to strike. Between the childishly fierce expression and mop of flyaway curls he looked a bit like a fluffy kitten. "I love you," he said finally.

Sherlock suddenly shot forward, but the grasshopper was faster and flew off through the boughs of the willow to safety. The child pouted after it for a moment before looking up at his brother. "I love you too, Myc," he replied offhandedly. After a pause he suddenly hopped to his feet with a wide grin. "Hey! Can we go see if there's any frogs in the pond?"

Mycroft huffed a bit. Going anywhere near the duck pond with Sherlock usually meant ruined shoes and at least one water stain on his shirt. Nevertheless he set his book down and stood up. "Alright," he agreed resignedly.

Sherlock beamed and grabbed Mycroft's hand to drag him off. The older boy let himself be led with a small smile. Yes, he loved his brother. No matter how annoying or irrational the boy became, or how undeniably insane he sometimes seemed, that simple fact would hold true.

««

Mycroft was fourteen years old when his brother stopped talking.

Continuing his secondary education in France had been Father's idea, and one Mycroft had wholeheartedly agreed with. British schools were too structured, too reliant on test scores and endless reams of useless trivia. He was much more interested in *people* than he was in facts, in
learning to control and manipulate their natures to suit his needs. France had been a positive experience so far in that regard, and he was eager to continue touring as many foreign countries as his family's robust fortune would allow.

Unfortunately this did have the side effect of keeping him away from home for most of the school year. Travelling to and from the continent was too inconvenient to make more than a few trips per season, and anyway he utterly detested both train rides and flying. Too many people, all pressed up against one another like sardines in a can, and the motion sickness... ugh, no, he'd much rather remain in one location, thank you.

Sherlock had *not* been pleased by this. He'd practically thrown a tantrum when Mycroft had announced his departure last autumn, and it'd taken the combined efforts of the nanny and three house servants to wrestle him into some semblance of calm again. Mycroft had promised to write, however, and call (though Sherlock had never appeared to be too fond of speaking on the phone) so honestly it wasn't like he was abandoning the boy. They'd just be separated for awhile. And if Sherlock slowly stopped returning his letters, or came up with pretences to limit telephone conversations to mere minutes, well that just meant the seven year old had found something more interesting to occupy himself with. It was a good sign.

The sky was grey with a light drizzling of rain as Mycroft stepped out of the sleek black towncar after his father, who'd picked him up from the airport earlier that day. They'd had a pleasant conversation on the way back, going over everything Mycroft had learned in France and what steps he could take to put that knowledge into practice. As always Father had been a bit frosty, but unerringly courteous and seemed quite legitimately pleased with his son's success overseas. It was nothing like the cold, uncaring apathy Sherlock had (very hesitantly) described in one of his letters a few months back. To be fair though the boy *did* have a penchant for being over-dramatic, so the wary mistrust he'd gathered from his brother's writing had probably just been childish exaggeration.

As they neared the house he instantly knew something had changed. Mummy was standing in the entryway, smiling serenely in the way she always did now. A slight haziness to her expression suggested she wasn't entirely lucid (must have increased her dosage of Valium again) but otherwise she seemed fine. Sherlock, however...

The boy was standing ramrod straight, to the left of and very slightly behind Mummy's skirt as if he'd stopped himself from hiding behind her at the last minute, with his hands tucked behind his back in perfect imitation of Siger's usual idle posture. The sight was unnerving.

Over the last few years Mycroft had grown used to defining his brother as a hurricane in child-form. The boy was on a neverending quest to seek trouble, dashing about the house like a lunatic, climbing trees and furniture, taking things apart, opening drawers and cupboards and poking his head curiously into any crevice that seemed large enough to fit (which had resulted in more than a few incidents of getting himself trapped between the stair rails, much to the nanny's displeasure.) It was practically impossible to get him to stop talking long enough to follow any sort of order, and on the rare occasion someone got him to remain in one spot for more than five seconds he'd inevitably start up twitching and fidgeting as if enveloped by a storm of manic energy.

Which made his sudden stillness all the more alarming. Mycroft stared at his baby brother. The little boy didn't meet his gaze, eyes riveted to the stone slabs of the flooring beneath him. He wasn't moving a single muscle. It was incredibly unsettling to witness. Disturbed, Mycroft glanced up at his father.

"Is Sherlock... on some sort of medication?" he hedged, hoping his parents had perhaps finally
taken his advice and had his sibling tested for ADHD. Father's deep disdain for the psychiatric profession rendered that scenario rather unlikely, true, but he supposed more unexpected things were known to have happened.

Siger just chuckled. "Oh no, nothing of the sort. I simply had a short conversation with the boy about manners. Coming along quite nicely now, isn't he?"

The unspoken implications were ominous, but Mycroft instinctively knew better than to press for details. "He seems much... calmer," he conceded instead. Siger made a vague sound of agreement and touched Violet's arm lightly as they reached the entryway. It was an offhanded gesture, meant to appear affectionate but somehow it came off as more of a warning than anything else. Mummy, medicated as she was, just hummed lightly in recognition.

"Welcome home, dear," she said to Mycroft, who'd come in behind his father and handed his coat off to one of the servants. "Did you have a pleasant holiday?"

"I was at school, Mummy, not on vacation," Mycroft reminded her. She just hummed again, evidently disinterested, and moved off toward the dining room after Siger.

Mycrof frowned and glanced down at his brother. Still not moving, though he had seemed to relax a fraction or two once out of Siger's sight. Mycroft tried not to dwell on what that might mean.

"Did they increase Mummy's dosage again?" he asked lightly, hoping to kick off one of Sherlock's rambling monologues. As annoying as the boy could get with his nonstop chattering his powers of observation were really quite fascinating - Mycroft had always rather enjoyed listening to him piece together facts and scenarios from the unlikeliest of details.

Strangely, though, Sherlock just shrugged. A short silence stretched between them, Mycroft waiting for some sort of elaboration and Sherlock still staring at the floor with a shuttered expression on his small face.

"Sherlock...?" he tried again. His brother finally glanced up at him, then looked away. Mycroft noted a small bruise where the boy had been biting his lip. "Are you alright?" he asked.

Sherlock nodded.

"Did something happen while I was at school?" Mycroft pressed. Sherlock shook his head.

"Then why are you refusing to speak to me?"

Another shrug, this one accompanied by a slight glare his direction. Suddenly it clicked. Ah, so that was it. Sherlock was angry with him for leaving, and had decided on the silent treatment as his punishment. Nothing but a childish tantrum after all. A small sigh escaped Mycroft's chest as he smiled with relief. For a moment there he'd thought Father had done something drastic.

"Well, shall we go and get washed up for dinner, then?" Mycroft asked pleasantly. Sherlock shot him a slightly quizzical look - probably wanting to know why the line of inquiry had been dropped so abruptly - but then huffed a short breath through his nose and nodded grudgingly.

"Oh don't be petulant," Mycroft admonished lightly as they made their way toward the restroom. "Just because you don't like the feeling of soap doesn't make it any less important to stay clean."

Sherlock scrunched his face up in displeasure but nonetheless allowed his brother to needle him into washing his hands properly. The whinging "Myc!" that nearly made it past the boy's lips when Mycroft flicked a bit of water at him was extremely reassuring. That settled it, his brother was fine.
Father must have simply given him a lecture on social etiquette - Sherlock had probably been bored senseless, but had taken the lesson to heart enough to try it out on his big brother. Everything was perfectly normal.

And if Sherlock snapped back to rigid attention the second they entered the dining room where their parents were, and if he refused to make so much as a single noise while in the presence of their father... well, what could Mycroft say? He wasn't exactly about to complain that his brother had suddenly become less irritating.

The rest of the holidays passed without incident. Soon enough it was time for Mycroft to leave again, his next school term having been relocated to Germany. As he left the house and walked toward the waiting car he was stopped by a small hand grabbing his trouser leg.

"Sherlock, honestly," Mycroft muttered, sighing. He smiled toward their parents still standing in the entryway (Sherlock glanced back over his shoulder at Father, looking wary but seemingly determined) and crouched down to his little brother's height. "What is it?" he asked.

Sherlock opened his mouth, looking like wanted to say something, but snapped it shut again. He fidgeted nervously for a second, then abruptly flung his arms around his big brother's neck in a desperate hug.

Mycroft smiled, returning the embrace. "I'll be back before you know it, don't worry."

Sherlock nodded wordlessly against his shoulder.

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Mycroft was twenty-two years old when he caught his brother smoking.

Holidays at the Holmes estate were never really what one might call 'festive' - Father generally liked to host a Christmas or New Year's party to keep up appearances, but between social events the manor remained as pristine and lifeless as it usually was. Mycroft hadn't really seen much point in taking the time out of his schedule to return home last year. Between his final year at Cambridge and his new position with MI5 he'd been practically drowning in work. Sherlock had made his displeasure more than apparent, however, having hung up on his brother more than once when Mycroft tried to apologise and refusing to reply to his emails with anything besides a long assortment of vicious (and really rather creative, truth be told) insults.

And so it was that Mycroft found himself standing in the entryway to his family home the next year, his father's hand on his shoulder as the man instructed the servants to have the table set for a formal meal.

"We really needn't go to the bother," Mycroft said as the last valet bustled off. "It's not exactly a special occasion-"

"Nonsense," Siger intoned, cutting him off. "You've made quite a name for yourself, child, and it's only proper to bring the family together in acknowledgement of your success."

Mycroft smiled slightly, feeling himself flushing from the praise. "If you insist, sir," he conceded.

"I'll fetch your mother, then," Siger said, his voice uncharacteristically jovial. It was a tad strange. But then again Mycroft had noticed his father getting quite a bit more animated over the last few years. He'd sometimes wondered if it had anything to do with his brother - was Siger... learning from Sherlock? The thought seemed absurd. However there could be no denying that Father did tend to act rather a lot like his younger son when he was being... well, not quite happy, but
whatever his approximation of the emotion was. It was slightly unnerving to watch. Like an overdramatic teenager had suddenly taken up residence in the body of a middle-aged businessman.

He quickly turned his thoughts away from the topic, however. There would be no use dwelling on such idle speculations. Though speaking of his brother... "Is Sherlock home already?"

Siger flapped a dismissive hand. "Oh, I expect so," he replied indifferently. "Doubtless he's off skulking about the grounds somewhere. Perhaps you wouldn't mind locating the boy?"

Mycroft smiled and turned to retrieve his umbrella from the hat stand he'd hung it on. "Certainly."

"Wonderful. Until dinner then, Mycroft my boy." His father patted him on the shoulder once more and moved off toward the grand staircase, presumably to locate Mummy.

The smile dropped from Mycroft's face as he huffed a short sigh. His father hadn't ever been what one might call affectionate toward him (or anyone, for that matter), but at the very least he'd taken a legitimate interest in Mycroft's welfare as a child. Sherlock, it seemed, had fallen off the man's radar entirely - it was like he didn't care about the boy in the slightest. Still though, Father was a busy man these days. Perhaps it was just a case of extenuating circumstances. Best not to jump to conclusions.

He flicked his umbrella open as he walked out into the slight drizzle of mid-winter rainfall. Locating Sherlock when they were at home was essentially just a matter of checking three places in order - the tree, the pond, and his bedroom. The odds were invariably stacked in favour of the tree, so Mycroft turned to make his way leisurely across the grounds to the clearing where the ancient willow stood towering over the surrounding landscape. Sure enough, he could just barely make out a dark shape amongst the leaves on the topmost level of sturdy boughs.

"You can't stay up there your whole life, you know," he called as he ducked between the willow's dropping leaves and shifted his umbrella so he could peer past the edge to look up through the lattice of gnarled branches.

"I can try," a flippant voice drifted down. Suddenly Sherlock's face was visible through a gap in the foliage. "What are you doing here?"

Mycroft frowned as he gazed up at his brother's features. There were dark circles under the boy's eyes from lack of sleep, and high cheekbones stuck out prominently on his pale, too-thin face. The outer edge of his left eye socket was marred by a large, fading bruise.

"What happened?" Mycroft asked, gesturing to his own face to illustrate his meaning. Sherlock rolled his eyes.

"What do you think happened?" the fifteen year old quipped. "I got punched in the face, idiot." His head disappeared behind the tangle of willow branches for a moment, then seconds later Mycroft heard the sound of him dropping down on the other side of the tree. There was a wet squelch and a short yelp as he apparently slipped on the damp grass and fell.

"How many times have I told you to climb down rather than jump?" Mycroft bit out irritably. He moved around the willow's trunk and regarded his baby brother sprawled inelegantly in the mud-spattered grass.

"Climbing's boring," Sherlock mumbled, face-down on the lawn. He huffed into the wet mulch, pushed himself up on his arms and then hopped to his feet. There was a large splotch of mud now stretching across the boy's face, but Mycroft was more interested in the rest of his brother's
appearance. The teenager had shot up another few inches since the last time they'd seen each other and now resembled a beanpole more than any sort of reasonable human anatomical configuration. His black school jumper was rolled up to the elbows, the white buttonup underneath already hopelessly discoloured with mud, bark, and grass stains. At the very least he'd deigned to change out of his uniform trousers and dress shoes before embarking on his tree-climbing excursion, though the alternative of dark jeans and scuffed black-and-white plimsolls was rather unexpected.

"Father agreed to let you wear jeans?" Mycroft asked dubiously.

Sherlock smirked. "Oh, sure," he replied with a flippant wave of his hand. "I mean I didn't exactly **ask**, but he hasn't said anything about the receipt, so..."

"Would that possibly have anything to do with his not having **seen** the receipt?" Mycroft inquired flatly. Sherlock had a remarkable knack for figuring out ways around their father's meticulous financial monitoring systems to sneak forbidden purchases.

The boy just shrugged. "Maybe. How should I know?"

Mycroft rolled his eyes but didn't press the matter. "Well, find something else to wear. Apparently we're having a family dinner."

"Are we? How **lovely**." Sherlock sneered over his shoulder as he turned to push his way through the damp curtain of willow branches, pale hands moving to tuck into his trouser pockets as he went. Mycroft followed, making a gesture indicating they could share his umbrella... which Sherlock of course completely ignored in favour of letting himself get soaked by the rain.

The teenager spun on his heel to walk backwards in front of his elder brother as he continued speaking. "So! This delightful little get-together wouldn't happen to be in **your** honour, would it?" he asked, voice layered with sardonic charm.

Mycroft sighed. "It was Father's idea," he confirmed in a resigned tone. "I had no part in the decision."

Sherlock raised an eyebrow in sarcastic disbelief but said nothing. Mycroft's gaze flicked to the bruise spreading faded green and purple across the side of his brother's face once more.

"You've been fighting at school again?" he asked with a disapproving frown. The amount of disciplinary letters he'd intercepted over the last few years of his brother's education could have papered the entire Holmes manor twice over. Honestly sometimes it seemed like Sherlock was just **actively refusing** to get along with his peers.

"Eh. Wasn't much of a fight," Sherlock quipped offhandedly. "I mean I told him his girlfriend was shagging his best mate and he decked me. That was it, really."

"It wouldn't kill you to be **tactful** for a change, you know." Mycroft watched as his brother's expression darkened, pale face pulling into a scowl as he whipped back around to walk properly once more.

"We can't all be manipulative bastards like **you**, Mycroft," he responded in a vicious snarl. Mycroft sighed at the sudden shift in demeanour. Frivolous to angry in mere milliseconds, **as usual** - Sherlock hadn't ever really grown out of the mercurial moodswings of his toddler years. Between this apparently natural instability and the ravages of puberty the boy had developed into a veritable maelstrom of wild, unpredictable emotions.

"I'm merely suggesting you refrain from informing people of things which will obviously distress
them," he explained calmly. "Deducing a fact about another person's life doesn't automatically necessitate your calling it to their attention."

Ahead of him Sherlock's shoulders hunched. "I know that," he muttered toward the grass.

"Do you?" Mycroft asked dubiously. "Because from what I understand the last twenty infractions on your school record were all down to your telling classmates uncomfortable truths about their home lives."

 Abruptly Sherlock spun around to face him again. "I can't help it if they're all idiots who can't see what's right in front of their faces!" he snapped. "Fuck's sake Myc I'm not trying to piss them off, it just happens!"

"Language, Sherlock," Mycroft admonished. The teenager just glared and raised a hand to flip him off. Mycroft's eyes flicked immediately to two patches of discoloured, yellowish skin marring the sides of his brother's middle and index fingers. "What's on your skin?" he asked sharply. The stain pattern looked like... but no, no that was ridiculous. His brother was fifteen for god's sake.

Sherlock startled, gaze catching his own fingers, and quickly clenched his hand into a fist which he then shoved into his jeans pocket. "Nothing," he replied far too quickly. "It's... from chemistry class. Nitric acid. Keratin breakdown, causes temporary yellow discolouration."

Mycroft frowned, not the least bit convinced. "Oh? And how exactly did you manage to spill acid along the sides of only two fingers?"

Sherlock glowered. "I just did, okay? Piss off."

Without waiting for a rebuttal the teenager turned and practically bolted into the manor through the side entrance they'd come upon. Mycroft sighed heavily as he closed his umbrella and followed his brother indoors.

Dinner was a quiet affair, full of polite conversation between Mycroft and his parents. Sherlock of course kept silent as the grave, as he always did when he found himself occupying the same room as Siger. He'd changed his outfit to a dark purple buttonup with black slacks, washed his face clean of mud and even appeared to have made a passing attempt at taming his mop of dark curls. (Probably in an effort to be allowed to keep his hair at its present length; Father invariably forced him to cut it short when it grew much past his ears, citing it as looking too unkempt.) The look was overall rather charming, even if Sherlock didn't seem too enthused by it.

"How have you been getting along with your piano playing, dearest?" Mummy asked with a soft smile toward her eldest son. She seemed much more lucid than usual, which was a pleasant surprise. Mycroft figured she must be in one of her more cheerful periods - her moods tended to run in cycles lasting from a few months to a year. Depressed to outgoing to depressed again. He'd long since grown used to it.

"Well enough," he replied lightly. "I haven't had much time to practice lately, but the deficit doesn't appear to have caused too much of a loss in skill."

Across the table Sherlock was using his fork to prod disinterestedly at his filet mignon, expression caught somewhere between tense discomfort and boredom as he hunched over his place setting. Mycroft frowned when he realised his brother hadn't eaten more than a few bites the entire meal. Was he trying to starve himself? Or just having another one of his sulks over some flavour or texture he found disagreeable? Honestly the boy was thin as a rail already, he could hardly afford to be picky about his food.
"Sherlock," Father suddenly cut in. The teenager went rigid and flicked his gaze sidelong toward the head of the table. "Sit up properly and eat like a respectable human being."

"Yes sir," the boy mumbled and immediately did as he was told. Siger spared him a single annoyed glare before turning back to Mycroft.

"Sounds to me as if a recital is in order, my boy," the man said genially. "What do you say to some after-dinner entertainment?"

"Oh yes!" Mummy exclaimed happily. "I haven't heard my boys play a duet in simply ages."

"A duet?" Sherlock spoke up suddenly. He turned his head to fix his mother with a pained look. "Mummy why do I have t-"

"Sherlock," Father snapped again, voice dangerous. "Were you asked to speak?"

Sherlock hunched down in his chair but quickly straightened up again as Siger's gaze darkened. "Sorry sir," he muttered nervously. Mycroft glanced between them with a worried frown. His father and brother had never really been on the best of terms, admittedly - but this seemed almost... alarming somehow. He'd never seen Sherlock behave this timidly toward anyone. Suspicions he'd buried years ago began to rise unbidden to the surface of his mind once more, making his stomach clench with apprehension. But no, no. Surely not. Sherlock would have said something if...

His thoughts were interrupted as his father turned to him once more. "Well, Mycroft?"

"A recital sounds delightful," he responded without thought, forcing his expression to remain placid despite the dark theories blossoming through his consciousness. Across from him Sherlock was scowling into his dinner plate. "Saint-Saëns?" he asked his brother pleasantly.

"Fine," the boy grumbled.

The rest of the meal passed without incident, and barely an hour later they found themselves in the main drawing room. Sherlock was attempting to tune his violin as violently as possible, perhaps in the hope that a string would break and give him a plausible excuse not to play. Unfortunately for his apparent plan however he'd evidently been using the instrument mere hours before, meaning the strings hadn't had a chance to shift so much as a step out of pitch. He fiddled with the fine-tuner on the D regardless, nudging it flat to sharp to flat again as Mycroft set up his sheet music on the piano stand.

"This is bloody stupid," the boy muttered to his brother. Their parents were on the other side of the modestly-sized room being tended to by a servant with a tray of drinks and after-dinner desserts.

"If you'd like to play a different piece..." Mycroft started, thinking Sherlock was annoyed by the choice of music. They'd decided on Op. 28, which was a notoriously difficult violin composition.

"What? No, god," Sherlock snapped, looking up. He noted Mycroft's more or less ready state and reluctantly twisted the peg to bring his D string back up to pitch. "Rondo is fine, I don't care. I meant this is stupid. Why do we have to get up and play a sodding concert just because you decided to show your fat face this year?"

"Because our parents asked us to," Mycroft clarified patiently. "It's supposed to be a bonding activity."

"I don't want to bond with you," Sherlock griped. "God, this is nothing but an exercise in pointlessn-"
He was cut off by Father loudly clapping his hands together on the other side of the room. "Ready when you are, boys!" he called merrily. Mummy was sipping gingerly at a glass of brandy beside him.

Mycroft shot Sherlock a quick look to be sure he was ready (to which he received an annoyed scowl over the top of the boy's violin) before moving his fingers into position for an A minor chord. "Just think of it as practice," he murmured over the introductory notes.

Sherlock scoffed but nonetheless played his part flawlessly. Mycroft glanced over from his (relatively simple) harmony arrangement as the teenager practically attacked his instrument during the 32nd note intervals. He really was a spectacular violinist. Mycroft felt a bit inept in comparison, rusty as his piano technique had become over the last few months.

The song ended with a flourish and Sherlock, despite his earlier objection to the performance, actually broke into a small smile when their parents applauded.

"Bravo!" Mummy cried enthusiastically. Father afforded them a few polite claps, then stood to walk over.

"Excellent technique, Mycroft," he intoned. "Sherlock, you missed a few notes just before the interlude, and your scales were a bit flat."

Sherlock stiffened, the smile dropping from his face, then hunched over to pluck at the violin now held tucked up against his stomach. "Yes sir."

Siger gave a single, short nod, then turned toward the large grandfather clock on the far wall. "Goodness, is it that late already?" he exclaimed with a false air of surprise. "I'm afraid I'll have to dash, everyone. I have a call with a business partner."

"Good night, Father," Mycroft offered. Siger nodded once more and strode out of the room. Sherlock's expression darkened into a sullen glare as he watched the man leave. Against his abdomen his fingers were fitfully plucking a series of jarring, dischordant notes from the lower strings of his violin.

"Oh that was lovely, dears," Mummy crooned from her spot on the elegant floral sofa across from them. "How about another one?"

Mycroft glanced over to his brother, but the boy was still glaring in the direction their father had gone. He quickly pasted on a pleasant expression and turned back to his mother. "I think I'm a bit too tired to really give it my all at the moment, Mummy," he said, adding a note of apology to his voice. "Perhaps tomorrow night?"

"Perfectly understandable, dearest," Mummy replied affectionately. "I could do with some rest myself. Until the morning, then!"

With a gentle smile she rose and strode across the room, planting a single kiss on each of their foreheads (Sherlock screwed his face up in childish displeasure at the contact) then glided blithely out the door toward her quarters. The two brothers were alone once more.

"That really was an extraordinary performance, Sherlock," Mycroft said as he closed the piano cover.

Sherlock just shrugged. "Whatever," he mumbled. He set his violin in its open case without bothering to remove the chin rest and loosened the bow only a fraction before placing it inside as well.
"You shouldn't leave your bow like that, the fibres will stretch," Mycroft pointed out as he rose from the bench. Sherlock was already stalking off toward the main doorway.

"Then I'll have it rehaired, who gives a shit?" he snapped. Before Mycroft could so much as reprimand him for his language he'd vanished out into the hall.

Mycroft sighed and plucked up Sherlock's violin bow to loosen it properly. He placed the implement gently back into the case and after a brief second's deliberation turned to follow his brother. Doubtless he'd gone off to do something ridiculous like climb the tree again despite the late hour. Mycroft had an obligation to at least make sure the boy hadn't broken his neck.

Sherlock wasn't in the tree, however, and so Mycroft was forced to trudge all the way out to the pond in the murky twilight of a nearly-set winter sun. As he neared the small body of water he stopped dead in his tracks at what he saw.

His baby brother was sitting half-slouched on one of the large, decorative stones that circled the pond, arms curled around one leg as the other kicked against the side of the boulder. His chin rested on his knee as he stared out over the softly rippling water... with a lit cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Sherlock Holmes!" Mycroft barked angrily. His brother startled, slid off the boulder to land in a stumble on the moss below and whipped around to face the unexpected intruder.

"Myc! Jesus Christ what the fuck are y-" he suddenly cut himself off as he realised what the older man was glaring at. The boy snatched the fag out of his mouth with a guilty wince and ineffectually tried to hide it behind his back. "Er... I mean. H-hello Mycroft. How's... how's your day been?"

Mycroft stalked over and plucked the cigarette out of his brother's hand. "What is this?" he asked icily, holding up the item between them.

"Erm... a cigarette," Sherlock mumbled.

"And what exactly is a fifteen year old doing with a cigarette?"

Sherlock's face scrunched up as he tried to come up with a plausible lie. A second later he seemed to give up and just grit his teeth. "Smoking it, obviously," he admitted in an irritated deadpan. "Can I have it back, please?"

In reply Mycroft dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. "Where did you get them?"

"I only had the one," Sherlock responded immediately. The lie was far too easy to spot. Mycroft grabbed one of his brother's hands from where they'd tucked protectively into his trouser pockets and pulled it free quickly enough for the packet of cigarettes to come tumbling out after it along with a cheap plastic lighter.

"Hey!" his brother exclaimed indignantly.

"These are the cook's brand," Mycroft accused.

Sherlock sneered at him, masking anxiety with disdain. "Are they? What a coincidence."

Mycroft just frowned deeply and, in his anger and frustration with his brother's behaviour, uncharacteristically snapped out the first thing that came to mind; "I'm telling Father."
The effect was as spectacular as it was telling. Sherlock's face morphed into an expression of utter terror as all the blood seemed to drain from his features. "W-what?" he stammered. "For- for what? For smoking? No, you can't! I mean... y-you don't... have to tell- fuck, just punish me yourself, why would you-" His words came out in a tangled jumble, voice tripping over itself as his breathing picked up speed. Mycroft noted with alarm that his brother's pupils were dilating in a panic response.

Any notion of denial concerning a possible unhealthy relationship between his sibling and father quite immediately vanished. Mycroft found himself sick to his stomach with guilt and a sort of vague horror. This... this was very bad. How had he missed the signs? Oh lord, he'd been too busy with work...

"Sherlock," he cut in quietly. The boy was pressing his fingertips together hard enough to turn the skin white, holding them up to his lips as he blinked rapidly at the ground. He was still breathing far too quickly. Mycroft frowned as his brother seemed to take absolutely no notice of him. "Sherlock, look at me," Mycroft tried again, more insistently.

Sherlock blinked up at him, eyes suspiciously wet. "You can't tell Father," he choked out.

"What will Father do if I tell him?" Mycroft hedged. Sherlock shook his head violently and backed up a few steps to press his back against the decorative boulder he'd been sitting on earlier. His hands left his lips to tangle in his hair instead as he sank down and curled up into a ball.

Mycroft swallowed reflexively, trying to come up with something appropriate to say. There was nothing. He simply wasn't meant for this kind of... ergh. He resolved to simply drop the topic as quickly as possible, finding he'd actually much rather not know the specifics - though they were easy enough to guess anyway. All that really mattered was that his brother was... ugh, no he hated to even think of the word... more important was figuring out what he could do about it.

"Calm down. I won't go to Father," he assured the near-panicking teenager in front of him. Sherlock blinked and flicked his gaze up to stare in disbelief, then wariness. He knew there would be a modifier to that statement - they could read each other far too well by now. "... If you agree to quit," Mycroft dutifully added, doing his best to keep his voice authoritative and free of the wavering tide of guilt creeping through his chest. Stern, aim toward stern. (Ah but no wait, not too stern, because... well he's going to know you know in about half a second anyway, though that's still no reason to... bloody emotions!)

As expected, Sherlock's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "That's it...? That's all you're going to do, make me quit?"

"You'll also..." Mycroft started, but had to break off to clear his throat. He gave himself a fraction of a second to regain his composure, then continued. "You'll also be moving to London with me. So I can, er... monitor your progress more easily."

They stared at each other for a tense moment. The lie was palpable. Sherlock looked like he wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry.

He finally settled on neither. "I wasn't aware your office had a spare bedroom," the teenager muttered in a voice which fell rather drastically short of the intended tone of withering sarcasm.

Mycroft let his expression settle into one of bland exasperation, though inwardly he was beyond relieved. Back to their usual sniping, no sign of an encroaching emotional discussion or ugh... confessions. No, just sarcasm. He could deal with this.
"Hilarious," he replied drolly, forcing the relief out of his features. "We will remain at the manor until Christmas, after which I'll arrange to have your things moved to my flat in the city. You'll live there for the remainder of the holidays, and every school break thereafter."

"What if I don't want to live at your stupid flat?" Sherlock grumbled, trying very hard to sound annoyed. More than a bit pointless, since Mycroft could see straight through the disinterested facade to the hesitant gratitude hidden beneath.

He played along regardless. "I believe I've already put forth the alternative."

Sherlock wrinkled his nose to cover a frightened wince. "Suppose I haven't much choice, then." He began picking idly at one of the buttons on the sleeve of his shirt, head ducking down to hide his face. Mycroft could nonetheless read the tiny smile by the way his ears and hairline shifted.

"Not much, no," Mycroft quipped. He bent down to retrieve the packet of cigarettes and lighter, then held them in his palm for a moment in deliberation. After a short pause he turned and tossed them into the duck pond with a light underhand throw. Sherlock looked up at the sound of a splash and frowned at the cardboard packet bobbing lazily on the pond's surface.

"That was a bit dramatic." The boy shifted his eyes - dry once more, thank goodness - up to his brother. "Weren't you going to return those to the cook?"

"I'll reimburse him," Mycroft responded. He gestured for the teenager to get up and follow him and was pleased when Sherlock actually deigned to obey him for once. "You'd have just pickpocketed them if I'd kept the packet on my person."

Sherlock smirked, tucking his hands into his trouser pockets. "Maybe."

A short silence stretched between them as they walked back toward the house. As they came to the side entrance Sherlock stopped. Mycroft turned and found the boy staring off into the darkened grounds.

"Thank you, Myc," he spoke quietly. Mycroft hesitated, his hand on the door handle. There were a million things he could say, a million things he wanted to say, but he didn't know how. Didn't know what words would be appropriate, what his brother would accept or what might push the boy further away. Of all the men and women he'd ever manipulated, predicted and controlled... Sherlock remained an enigma, forever leaving him at a complete loss.

After a short deliberation Mycroft reached up and put a hand on his brother's shoulder to steer him indoors. "Don't thank me yet, you've still got nicotine withdrawal to look forward to," he said flatly, dispelling the moment of candidness with sarcasm. It was simply the only safe course - they were too used to sniping at each other, exchanging veiled insults and witticisms to mask their true feelings. Any deviation from the norm would just leave them both embarrassed and uncomfortable.

Sherlock glanced over at him. A flash of something like disappointment seemed to cross his young face before he huffed and rolled his eyes. "What fun," he responded in a bland voice. Then, sardonically, "By the way, did you know you're getting fat again?"

Mycroft glanced down at his own midsection (maybe a little rounder than usual, but not that much more) and frowned. Admittedly he had been neglecting his diet of late, but it was hardly fair to expect him to find the time to count calories between government work, sowing influential networks of business contacts and making sure his brother retained some semblance of sanity throughout the emotional landslide of puberty. He looked back up to find Sherlock smirking at him.
"Oh, shut up," he snapped, self-consciously adjusting his suit jacket. "You're a beanpole, it's hardly a fair comparison."

Sherlock just shrugged and turned to head toward his room. "Whatever you say, Whale Boy."

Mycroft rolled his eyes. Just what he needed, a new nickname. "Good night, Sherlock."

"Night, Mycroft." His brother flipped him a sarcastic salute, and walked off down the hallway.

««

Mycroft was twenty-six years old when his brother overdosed.

It was going on seven in the evening when he got the call informing him that Sherlock had been admitted to the hospital. Within minutes of receiving the report he was on his way to Oxford from his flat in London, not bothering to so much as set up a security crew or proximity monitoring around the institution in his haste. His PA would take care of it, he'd thought, surely. Forgetting, of course, that she was out on holiday this week. By the time he arrived at the hospital he'd realised his oversight, but by that time it was too late to do much of anything about it. Well, no matter, it would be permissible this once. No threats to his safety had been identified anywhere in the area for a good fortnight, and the trip was short notice enough to thwart any would-be assassins. It was all fine.

When he arrived Sherlock was already stabilised, lying motionless in the stark white of a hospital bed with cooling packs draped over his chest. Mycroft didn't have his usual clout here, nobody so much as batted an eye when he listed his position or clearance level, and he was forced to wait patiently by his baby brother's bedside while the hospital lab ran toxicology analysis.

It was the first time he'd seen Sherlock in months, and the change in the teenager's appearance was startling. The boy had never exactly been what one might call robust - his metabolism appeared to run at approximately the same rate as a meadow vole's, and he'd always been absurdly sensitive to the taste or texture of certain foods which cut down on what he was willing to eat - but now... god, Mycroft could practically see his brother's skull. Cheekbones protruded more sharply than ever, and there were dark circles under the young man's eyes giving the impression he hadn't slept in days, which along with the translucent, paper-white skin made him look like nothing so much as a wasted corpse. It was horrifying. How had he missed this? Such a stark change, he should have seen...

But lord, no, it did make sense. He simply hadn't been watching. Work had been too hectic lately, and Sherlock had seemed to be adjusting well enough to university life to be allowed some measure of independence... some measure. Much as Sherlock protested the invasion of his privacy, a degree of monitoring was unavoidable. Mycroft had simply become too powerful of late, there were all manner of organisations who were quite willing and able to abduct a teenager from the relatively unprotected campus of Oxford. And of every possible weakness Mycroft had scrupulously cut out of his life over the course of his climb through the ranks of MI5, Sherlock was the one point of leverage he could never erase. If someone captured his brother, Mycroft would fold. There was no question, he would do whatever they asked without hesitation. A single assigned agent and surveillance equipment felt like far too little protection for such a potentially devastating bargaining chip. But Sherlock had practically begged him to mitigate the 'spying' (as he termed it) and so Mycroft had relented to the bare minimum.

And the insufferable teenager had, predictably, managed to undermine the entire setup. Mycroft stared dumbly at the toxicology report which had just been thrust into his hands by a rather tall, obviously overworked attending physician.
"Two and a bloody half," the man was saying angrily, Australian accent thick with some kind of incredulous outrage. He'd been on shift for over fifteen hours now, and had been just about to head home when this newest emergency arrived to keep him late. His blond hair stuck up at odd angles suggesting he'd just been woken up from a short kip on a sofa in the doctor's lounge, and the faint smell of tobacco overlying the aroma of stale coffee betrayed the fact that the man was only coherent thanks to a liberal dose of caffeine and nicotine. Mycroft deduced all this habitually, though his attention remained fixed on the sheet in front of him. "Two and a half milligrams per litre of cocaine, bloody christ."

"I take it that's... rather a lot?" Mycroft asked, his voice coming out far more shellshocked than he'd been expecting. He just couldn't seem to wrap his head around this. Sherlock had been... but how?... and why? The boy had been doing so well, he thought-

"Rather a lo-? It's bleeding ridiculous!" the physician exclaimed, cutting into his thoughts. "You're damned lucky your son's even breathing right now, sir."

Mycroft blinked, finally lifting his eyes from the computer printout. "Brother," he clarified vaguely. "He's my... younger brother."

The doctor didn't even pause to look abashed, just flapped a hand dismissively. "Brother, then. Either way he's done a right number on himself. Four seizures that we know of, 'least two of which were down to hyperthermia - controlled for now, thankfully, but we're keeping the room cooled for at least the next few hours in case the antipyretics don't take - and he's more or less emaciated. Got no body fat to speak of. Which is of course more than likely what triggered the repeat episodes. Drugs kicked off the first seizure, malnutrition took over and kept the whole bleedin' cycle locked in. You're looking at a good few months before he's anywhere near a healthy weight again, and that's only if you can manage to keep enough of an eye on him to avoid a relapse."

"A... relapse?" Mycroft muttered, feeling slightly overwhelmed - a distinctly foreign sensation within his hyper-competent mind. But good god, what was he supposed to do in this situation? His baby brother had nearly died. It wasn't a circumstance he'd been mentally prepared to deal with.

The physician shot him a flat look. "Yeah, a relapse. Your son-brother, sorry- is a cocaine addict. Has been for a fair few months at least, to have built up enough tolerance to manage this."

"That's not possible," Mycroft asserted. "I've been-" he cut himself off before he could say something ridiculous like 'spying on him', and cleared his throat instead. "... I would have noticed."

"Well it looks like you must've missed something, sir," the doctor told him, voice layered with weary exasperation as he strove to retain what was left of his dwindling sense of professionalism. "There's really no other explanation for this kind of blood concentration. By rights he should be dead."

Mycroft shook his head slowly and lowered himself to sit in the chair by his brother's bedside, still staring at the report. The physician breathed a short sigh and scrubbed a hand through his cropped blonde hair.

"Look, mate- sir, that is. He'll be out for another hour at least. When he wakes up he's gonna be sore as anything - every muscle in his body's been overworked to hell and back. And he's gonna be crashing. That means exhausted, moody, probably pissed right the hell off, massive headache. We've got medics on standby to calm him down if he gets too worked up, but I'd just as soon let him get clear of the cocaine before we start pumping him full of benzos. Just try to be understanding, right?"

That proved to be more difficult than he'd imagined. He tried, really he did, but the boy's flippant attitude set a spark of fury alight that proved impossible to keep in check. Mycroft had snapped at his brother, fallen back on his usual cold facade to deal with the confusing, conflicting emotions of rage and worry and guilt. He shouldn't have, he knew that now. Sherlock completely shut down in response to verbal or physical reprimand, he always had. It was an instinctual, defensive response, drilled into the boy since childhood; one that should never have had cause to even exist if Mycroft had only been a little more observant. The knowledge of his continual failure to accomplish a task so simple as protecting his younger sibling only made him more frustrated, more prone to sharp sniping jabs picking at topics he knew shouldn't be touched upon.

But then... something rather unexpected happened. As the doctor had predicted, Sherlock was extremely moody - moreso than ever, really, and apparently far past the point of caring to maintain the implicit buffer of sarcastic apathy they'd always relied upon to keep their emotions walled off from one another. His face when he'd been screaming... shouting, ranting pouring out all the things he'd been keeping tamped down under the usual mask of aloof, frivolous nonsense. For the second time in as many hours Mycroft had found himself speechless. The phrases his brother had willingly used to describe himself... 'stupid freak', 'fucking useless'. Not to mention the decision he'd been forced to make - to conclude that the only option, the only way to cope with his situation was to change himself... using drugs. The notion was so outlandishly horrifying as to seem absurd. Who would ever want to change their brain?

Mycroft had grown up under a shower of constant praise for the way his mind worked. Told he was a genius over and over, striving to live up to new expectations he continually set for himself with each new accomplishment. But Sherlock... lord, Mycroft had never given it much thought before now, but Sherlock had experienced almost exactly the opposite. Still a genius, yes, but an eccentric one. Not an object of envy or respect as Mycroft had always been but instead one of sordid curiosity - everyone lining up to gawk at the strange, erratic oddball with more smarts than sense. And the more Mycroft attempted to understand his brother the more he began to realise how badly he'd failed the boy by never taking the time to assess the state of the world through his eyes.

The chaotic flipping of moods which had always seemed so silly, had struck Mycroft as perhaps a touch annoying but never anything to worry about... what must it be like to live with that? To never know what emotion would steal over your thoughts next; to find yourself suddenly angry, scared, elated or miserable with no obvious cause, no way to predict your own behaviour or to prevent your actions? And the way his brother seemed incapable of ignoring certain stimuli: the rattling of window blinds or the consistency of foods, how he utterly hated the feeling of soap on his skin or the smell of toothpaste... he wasn't simply being petulant, throwing a fit for the sake of being irritating - he literally couldn't stand those things.

A deep sense of guilt began to take root in Mycroft's chest. When one looked at it that way, practically Sherlock's entire existence had been a constant barrage of fear and uncertainty, unable to trust anyone or anything, not even himself... and no one had ever taken so much as a second to notice. No wonder he'd become addicted, cocaine had probably given him the first sense of security and control he'd ever known.

In light of these revelations, the sight of his baby brother's face marred by twin streams of sluggishly-flowing blood from his nose had set Mycroft's stomach turning. He'd never been too overly fond of blood in the first place - disgusting, potentially disease-ridden and prone to forming abhorrent lumps of clotted mess, it should stay firmly inside the body where it belonged. But he'd always been able to repress the urge to be sick on the rare occasion he found himself confronted with the substance. Not tonight, however. His emotional state was too frazzled, too worried about
the lack of military protection and his failure to help his sibling and... and lord, just everything. And now his brother was bleeding and he very suddenly needed to be out of the room. Sherlock was derisive, of course he was, but Mycroft really didn't care. He left on some flimsy pretence of locating a physician and quickly exited into the hallway.

Once outside he took a brief moment to compose himself, then dutifully tracked down the on-duty nurse. She seemed a little nonplussed, which he supposed was understandable considering the only complaint he'd come to her with was a cocaine addict (a cocaine addict who was also his little brother, for god's sake, and honestly how had this even happened) with a benign nosebleed. Not exactly a massive emergency, but something in his demeanour must have betrayed his general state of distress because she wasted only a few scant minutes replacing the contents of the file she'd been working on before rising to follow him back to his brother's room.

Which... was empty.

Mycroft very nearly swore, but held his composure for the sake of the nurse, who'd immediately gone into crisis-mode and rushed to contact security via the room's private phone line. Well, that would never do. The thought of Sherlock, nosebleed and all, being taken into custody by a squadron of uniformed officers was nothing short of obscene. It would drive him into a full-on panicked breakdown. After all the teenager was already in the midst of withdrawal, emotionally distraught, crashing off an enormous amount of... oh. Oh lord. Sherlock was crashing. Of course. Mycroft took a millisecond to solidify the plan already in place in his mind, then retrieved his mobile from the lapel pocket of his suit jacket.

"Agent Pierce?" he asked when the call connected. After a short confirmation, he continued. "Are you equipped with sedative rounds? Excellent. My brother will be arriving to his residence hall within the next quarter to half an hour. Before he gets there you are to enter his room, locate an unlabeled beaker or phial containing a cloudy white mixture - yes, Pierce, it's cocaine. I'm well aware. Break the seal on a single cartridge and add a few millilitres from the canister into the solution. Yes, thank you. I'll be in touch shortly."

He hung up his phone and tucked it back in his pocket, then bit out a short sigh. This was not how he'd wanted to go about doing things, but his brother had really left him no other choice. At the very least rendering the boy unconscious should go some way toward mitigating the initial unpleasantness of withdrawal. Following that, well...

He turned to the nurse, who'd been hovering for the duration of his conversation with his employee and had now fixed him with a look of faint horror. Evidently ordering a government agent to arrange for one's sibling to inadvertently tranquillise themselves was one of those things ordinary people found distasteful. Mycroft filed this fact away for future reference, then set his mind to more pressing matters.

With practised ease he allowed his expression to shift into a polite smile, tucking his hands casually behind his back. "Terribly sorry for the bother, but would you happen to have a list of local rehabilitation clinics on hand?"

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Mycroft was twenty-seven years old when he decided to destroy his father.

Well, that sounded dramatic. The simple truth was that Siger Holmes was a psychopathic, criminally-inclined, ruthless and potentially devastating enemy to the British monarchy, and it was Mycroft's responsibility to see such a threat neutralised. The fact that said threat happened to share
half of his genetic code was irrelevant. As was the fact that Siger had, over the last twenty years, systematically dismantled his youngest son's sense of self-esteem to the point of driving the child to chemical dependency, and had then saw fit to further traumatise said boy straight into a possibly-fatal relapse. No, Mycroft's decision had nothing to do with any of those things. He was simply removing the ringleader of one of the largest political extortion rings in world history. That was all.

Mycroft sighed slightly to himself as he regarded the young man across the table from him. A mousey sort of fellow, not in looks but demeanour. He was huddled over himself nervously and seemed to feel a need to adjust his glasses every ninety seconds, regardless of whether or not they'd shifted in that time.

"And you're certain you can provide documentation for these transactions?" he asked the informant dubiously.

The dark-haired man nodded; a jerky, twitching sort of motion. "H-he asked me to design a letterhead, logos... it was a fake airline, I'm sure of it. And then the... the payment came from the Holmes estate, it says so on the bank statement, see?" He reached out and pointed to a line on the paper between them, then like clockwork drew back to adjust his glasses again.

Mycroft regarded the document in front of him sceptically. It clearly showed a payment of several hundred pounds having been wired to one Conrad Achenleck on the fourteenth of October, a date which coincidentally fell less than one month prior to a staged aircraft disaster in one of the smaller African countries. The details matched up quite well, but Mycroft was having a difficult time believing his father would be stupid enough to wire funds from his private account for a job which would so obviously lead back to him. Some sort of trap? Was the young graphic designer a spy, a plant meant to lure Mycroft into a false sense of security while Father orchestrated a counterattack? He flicked his eyes up to stare at the antsy young man in front of him, looking for signs of subterfuge... there was nothing. The fellow was quite obviously nothing more than a simple artist who'd found himself caught up in something much bigger than he'd anticipated. Still, one could never be too careful. As evidenced by their meeting in the middle of the night, in a wing of the building not generally open to the public, with every security device in the room disabled. Mycroft was taking no chances with this.

After another moment staring (during which Mr. Achenleck grew ever more anxious and obviously disturbed) Mycroft allowed himself to relax, leant back into his chair and steepled his fingers. The pose was slightly melodramatic, but then he'd never denied sharing some characteristics with his brother.

"Thank you for calling this to my attention, Mr. Achenleck," he intoned smoothly. The graphic designer gave him an odd, befuddled look - most likely because he hadn't, in fact, called the transaction to anyone's attention. Mycroft's field agents had traced the letterhead to his work through a complicated paper trail of font matching and vector analysis. Still, no need to let the other party know that. "Rest assured your assistance has proved invaluable. You will be comp-"

His words cut off as his mobile vibrated in the lapel of his suit coat. First instinct was to ignore it - he was in a meeting with an informant, after all - but a microsecond later he'd already pulled it out to check. This was his private line, texts usually indicated that an issue of critical importance required his attention. Their over-anxious guest would just have to wait.

The text was from his assistant. 'S.H. SIGNAL ID 0124HRS SW LDN'

He blinked once, not sure if he was reading the message correctly. An identification? Now? It couldn't be... but a second later he'd pressed his third speed dial, held the mobile up to his ear and
waited as the ring tone picked up. Attempting to call was a long shot, but...

"Er... are we... done, then?" The young man across the table asked, looking distinctly uncomfortable. Mycroft ignored him. He had more important things to focus on - like for example the fact that the line had connected.

"What do you want?" his baby brother's voice grumbled. Mycroft very nearly smiled in relief. He hadn't had a single confirmed report of Sherlock's whereabouts in well over five days now - had almost given up hope of ever seeing the boy again.

"Hello to you as well, Sherlock," he greeted in as bland a tone as he could muster, careful to mask any possible emotional undertones. "Evidently I can take the city morgues off notice," he added drolly. Sarcasm was good, sarcasm was safe. And he needed to keep things safe, because he absolutely did not want his brother to hang up on him. Not before he determined the boy's state of health.

On orders from his assistant, one of his employees entered the room to deal with their informant while Mycroft stood and walked toward a spare office. Sherlock's voice was slightly distorted, miscellaneous background noise of London at one in the morning filtering loudly through the connection. Speakerphone, then. Why? Was he unable to hold the phone, or-?

His question was answered as soon as his assistant appeared with the report from the automatic phone tap on the boy's mobile, which Mycroft dutifully cited to his sibling. The quiet 'seriously fucked up' muttered in a cockney accent which followed, the sound of rustling clothing, someone being shoved... his brother was with someone. And evidently he trusted the individual enough to allow them to listen in on their conversation.

Sherlock's claim of having found a friend seemed... dubious. The boy had never gotten along with anyone, as far as Mycroft could tell. Was he being taken advantage of? An enterprising thief gaining a rich boy's trust to make off with his bank card?

"Fuck you," was all his brother had to say to such concerns. Mycroft fought the urge to sigh as he heard the boy's clothing shift. He was more than likely making a rude gesture toward the phone, perhaps thinking Mycroft had somehow magically gained the ability to tap into camera devices within the space of a few minutes. He responded as if he had, because he was not in the habit of admitting his shortcomings, and heard Sherlock cover the camera with his hand. Paranoid, or honestly not aware of the limitations on Mycroft's phone-tracing abilities? Perhaps a little of both, he decided.

Still though, his little brother sounded well enough. And this cockney companion of his didn't seem to be taking any action which would indicate corrupt motives. Against all odds, Sherlock was fine. More or less. And... apparently didn't want to be abducted again. Mycroft absently retrieved a pen from the desk in front of him and tapped it against the wooden tabletop as his brother snapped at him. Alright, fair enough, he had been behaving a bit like a... well, like a 'lunatic' as Sherlock would no doubt put it. Leaving his brother out on the streets, high on cocaine and hanging about with god-knew-what types of people was by no means a palatable course of action, but lacking a decent alternative (Sherlock would only run if confronted again, that much was obvious, and Mycroft had little desire to put the boy through that kind of scenario a second time) he supposed he would have to settle for simply knowing his location.

He gestured for his PA to locate the cab (she already had, as it turned out - extraordinary woman) and had her pay the fare in advance while he exchanged a series of somewhat-less-than-pleasant jabs with his younger sibling. By the time Sherlock hung up in a huff Mycroft was convinced his brother would be alright on his own for awhile. Long enough to take care of a few more pressing
issues, in any case.

"Have we got a full trace on Father's transaction history yet?" he asked his assistant as he lowered his mobile. She tapped a few buttons on her PDA while he stared thoughtfully at the device in his hand.

"Not yet, sir," she replied. "Did you want me to arrange priority A&E for your brother?"

"Please." After a short pause, silent but for the clicking of his PA's palm pilot, he added, "And his friend as well, if you would."

The girl didn't even look up. Just nodded once, then turned to leave the room in search of a stronger signal. Mycroft was left alone in the office.

He breathed a short sigh. Well, the night hadn't been a total waste. No closer to bringing his father to justice, but at the very least he now knew his brother was alive. Not safe, perhaps, but breathing, lucid, and capable of defending himself. That would have to be reassurance enough for the time being. Mycroft flipped the cover of his mobile down and regarded the lid display wearily. Half past one in the morning. He really should head home and try to get some sleep.

Before he could so much as rise from his chair, however, his phone began buzzing. He glanced down from where he'd been about to tuck it back into his lapel pocket... and froze. His features smoothed blank as he slowly flipped the phone back open.

"Mycroft, child, how lovely to hear from you," a deep, emotionless voice droned on the other side of the line.

Mycroft leant back in his chair. Apparently the night wasn't quite over yet.

"Hello, Father."
From Eating Candy

6. From Eating Candy

"Cortana is a harlot."

"Ah shaddap yer just bitchin' cause y'blew yerself up again."

Sherlock scowled at the television screen as he navigated his over-armoured space marine through some alien-infested space ship for what felt like the millionth time. He was leaning against Eric's right side, feet propped up on the back of the shitty skip couch while the other man tried to walk him through completing the story missions on his pathetic excuse for a hobby activity. It wasn't going well.

"Bloody grunts!" On the screen Master Chief had yet again managed to find himself overrun by three-foot-tall blue monsters.

Eric huffed an annoyed sigh. "I ain't never gonna see th'end a this bleedin' game am I?"

"I don't see why you care what happens to some prissy computer programme and her meathead lackey anyway," Sherlock snapped as he frantically swapped through guns looking for one that wasn't out of ammo.

"Oh fer fuck's sake don't use th'needler!" Eric cried, then threw his head back in exasperation as Sherlock's sub-par weapon completely failed to save him from the horde of pygmy aliens.

Sherlock glared venomously at the telly as the corpse of his character flew into a wall and collapsed, having taken a plasma bolt to the face.

"Right, sod this," he exclaimed after half a second, dropping the controller before his avatar could pop back to life at the beginning of the section. He was not in the mood to go traipsing about that bloody spaceship again. Eric raised his head and pouted slightly as Sherlock extricated himself from the strange leaning/hugging arrangement they'd ended up sprawled in and stalked off toward the kitchen to check on the progress of his purification setup.

"Y'checked that shit like ten minutes ago!" Eric called after him grumpily. "Git back here! I wanna see what bleedin' 'appens with th'Flood!"

"Here's a guess: they all die!" Sherlock quipped back sarcastically. "Because it's a game about shooting things until they die!"

"Not fer you it ain't!" Eric griped. "Fer you it's a game 'bout blowin' yer dumb arse up with plasma grenades!"

Sherlock huffed. The fact that he continued to be terrible at Halo despite having spent the better part of the day playing it (at Eric's behest, since the other man couldn't exactly manage an Xbox controller with his arm in a cast) was becoming a point of serious irritation. It didn't help that he'd actually become slightly (very slightly - and mostly out of abject boredom) interested in the storyline, meaning his utter failure to avoid being slaughtered by Covenant forces was doubly frustrating as it impeded any possible progress through the narrative.
He resolved to ignore Eric's annoyed grumbling from the other room for now, and instead grabbed up a glass stir rod from his small collection of nicked chemistry supplies and carefully stirred the large beaker of cocaine and acetone mixture on the counter. Drawing a small amount of liquid up the side of the beaker he sighed irritably as a trail of fresh crystals formed. This bloody setup was taking ages to finish reacting. Ordinarily this would be an excellent time to start another set of cocaine through the process, but his stock of powder was being severely limited until such time as he could prove his method was functional. That meant hours of wasted productivity waiting for the initial test run to complete.

"That shit done yet?" a voice asked from the back entrance to the kitchen. Sherlock straightened up and turned to regard Charles stepping indoors. The older man's cheeks were flushed from the cold but he wore a short-sleeved shirt - most likely he'd been out climbing.

"Another half hour or so, then it needs to be filtered a second time and dried."

"It were another 'alf hour last bleedin' time y'checked it!" Eric's voice cut in from the sitting room. Apparently he didn't feel like getting up from the couch - rather understandable as he was still doped up on a combination of oxycodone and a probably-unhealthy amount of marijuana. "Quit fuckin' wit' it and maybe it'll get done faster!"

"Oh shut up!" Sherlock snapped.

Charles rolled his eyes. "You two are goddamned adorable," he said blandly.

Sherlock resisted the urge to flip him off (though the acid glare he shot the other man's direction probably got the message across regardless) and walked back into the sitting room somewhat reluctantly. He didn't want to go through another round of get-shot-by-aliens-like-a-bloody-idiot, but there really wasn't much else to do.

Charley trailed into the sitting room after him, shooting an unimpressed glance at the television before moving to sit on the ledge of the bay window. Sherlock attempted to take up a more dignified pose on the sofa than he'd been sprawled in previously but ended up being tugged sideways by Eric again. After a brief struggle (which Eric won, having the benefit of a functioning hunger response and thus far greater muscle mass than Sherlock's half-starved frame could manage) he gave in with a short grumble and resumed sitting with his legs propped on the back of the couch and his back to Eric's chest.

"So did y'find anovver guitarist?" Eric asked Charley as Sherlock unenthusiastically picked up the Xbox controller again and resumed his doomed trek through a Covenant spaceship.


Eric winced. "Ouch. Dead or in rehab?"

"Ugh, dead of course." Charley threw up his hands in exasperation and leant back against the windowpanes. "I don't know who the fuck would be stupid enough to inject shit right into their arm like that. I mean seriously how moronic do you have to be, right?"

Sherlock cleared his throat loudly as he felt Eric's chest quiver in a badly-suppressed laugh behind him. Charley shot them a confused look.

"What?" he asked blankly, then a second later seemed to catch on as his face shifted into vaguely-offended disbelief. "Oh bullshit. Nobody shoots up cocaine, that'd be retarded."
Sherlock glared at the television as he narrowly avoided being blown to bits by a grenade-flinging grunt. "For a narcotics distributor you display a breathtaking lack of knowledge about your product."

Eric was snickering slightly in an attempt to avoid bursting into laughter, so Sherlock elbowed him in the stomach.

Charley scoffed. "Hey, I'm just in it for the money. I don't give a shit what you dumbarse junkies do to your bodies." After a pause he leant forward slightly and added, "... Wait, seriously? IV coke?"

Sherlock rolled his eyes and hit the button to pause the video game. He set the controller down, pushed back the left sleeve of his sweatshirt and held his forearm up toward the other man with an annoyed glare.

"Jesus!" Charley exclaimed, looking somewhat horrified by the collection of track marks. "How the hell can you do that to yourself?"

Sherlock ignored him in favour of tugging his sleeve back down and returning to his ill-fated mission to rescue Captain Keyes. He felt Eric huff a light sigh behind him.

"Snortin' coke fer too long gives ya really bad nosebleeds an' shit," he explained patiently. "Switchin' to needles means y'can keep usin' wivvout meltin' yer face off."

Charley made a disbelieving noise. "Why not just stop using it?"

Both Eric and Sherlock shot him withering glares. Charley held his hands up in surrender and leant back against the windowpanes again with a not-quite-apologetic shrug.

"Hey, I'm just saying it's an option," he continued. "It's not like you're on anything proper addictive. It's just coke, not heroin or whatever."

"Did you have an actual reason for being here or are you just attempting to insult as many individuals as possible before sundown?" Sherlock snapped acidly, turning back to his game. On-screen Master Chief had somehow managed to avoid any grievous bodily harm for going on five minutes now. He decided to focus on keeping that winning streak going rather than waste brainpower entertaining thoughts of stabbing Charley in the eye with a used needle.

Charley sighed. "Yeah, yeah. I was gonna ask you guys if you know any other guitarists."

Eric shrugged. "Got me, mate. Whitley was th'only bloke I knew."

"Holmes...?" Charley pressed, sounding a little desperate.

"I highly doubt anyone in the Oxford University Orchestra is available for irregular engagements with a nameless pub band," Sherlock responded blandly.

"Right, well thanks for being useless," Charley grumbled. He scrubbed a hand down his face tiredly. "God this is going to be a huge pain in the arse... half the pushers already paid for the next show."

Suddenly Eric seemed to perk up. "Oi! Sherly! You can play guitar!" he exclaimed excitedly, nudging Sherlock's shoulder with his good arm.

Sherlock scowled. "Absolutely not."
"Wait, he can?" Charley asked, sitting straighter to glance between them. "Seriously?"

"No," Sherlock snapped.

"Yeah he's got like alla th'major chords down an' I think he were fuckin' around with th'minor ones earlier," Eric replied, completely ignoring his boyfriend's protests. "I could teach 'im the progressions real easy."

"Christ, that'd be a lifesaver." Charley glanced at Sherlock, who was glowering viciously at the television as he shot down yet another squadron of Covenant forces. "Holmes, seriously if you could-"

"I am a concert violinist," Sherlock growled. "I am not going to perform your idiotic music to entertain a pub full of pathetic shiftless twats."

"Sherly, c'mon," Eric whinged. "Don't be a prat."

"I'll stop being a prat when you all stop being idiotic," Sherlock snapped. "I was principal second in the London Youth Symphony at age thirteen and concertmaster at fourteen. And you want me to get up and produce a series of banal chord progressions in time to an off-tempo drumline. No. You're both morons."

"Just cause yer good at violin don' mean ya can't help Chuck out," Eric pointed out irritably. "Yer just bein' a prick cause y'don't like him."

Sherlock bared his teeth angrily at the screen as another bunch of aliens fell victim to his assault rifle. "I'm being a prick because you're asking me to degrade myself for the sake of a bunch of-"

"Fucking hell never mind!" Charley burst out, throwing his hands up. "I'll find someone else, jesus!"

"Chuck..." Eric started, but the older man had already gotten up in a huff and headed off toward the stairs. Eric glared down at Sherlock. "I fuckin' hated playin' in th'stupid band an' I still did it, so what's yer fuckin' problem?"

Sherlock frowned at the screen. "It's degrading, unpleasant, and a blatant manipulation of impressionable youth. I want no part in it."

"Like you care 'bout impressionable youths," Eric accused irritably. "Y'said y'were a bleedin' sociopath, 'member?"

"And you didn't believe me," Sherlock snapped. "Choose a position and stick with it."

Abruptly Eric snorted with amusement, making Sherlock blink in confusion.

"What?"

"Choose a position," Eric repeated with a slight snicker.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "Shut up."

Purifying five kilograms of cocaine using a shoddy kitchen and secondhand lab equipment was proving to be slightly more time-consuming than he'd anticipated.
Sherlock frowned irritably at a large plastic funnel (pilfered from an automotive repair shop nearby) full of ever-so-slowly filtering liquid. He was sitting on the kitchen table, watching absolutely nothing happen with anything. He'd come around to that step in the process where his little assembly line of reduce-dry-dissolve-filter-crystallise left him without anything to do. Finding a more interesting activity to occupy his time (as in, anything besides continuing this or attempting to play Halo again) was tempting, but he couldn't get up and leave because the freebase concoction might bubble over. And he couldn't take a break from reducing the cocaine to freebase unless he wanted the rest of the steps to get out of sync and leave this whole business taking twice as bloody long as it was already going to.

He was sat cross-legged on the tabletop, scowling into his lap as he re-counted his money for the third time in ten minutes. Thirty pounds, sixteen pence. Not exactly a fortune. He'd been meaning to go back out to pickpocket tourists again, but over the last few days he'd somehow managed to find himself just as busy as he'd ever been at Oxford.

First it was the purification setup - accumulating all his supplies and getting the whole business operating efficiently, finding ways to work around the fact that he was using a bloody kitchen as a laboratory and trying not to melt holes in the cheap plastic countertops. Then there were the arguments with Devin over how much powder constituted 'too fuckin much' (Sherlock had eventually gotten his way and now had unrestricted access to the entire stock of cocaine, though with the express caveat that if any turned up missing he'd be in serious trouble.) And on top of it all Eric was down one arm and needed help with practically everything. Even finding enough time to keep his cocaine levels steady throughout the day was proving difficult.

Speaking of which... he glanced at the old secondhand clock on the kitchen wall and calculated it had been nearly an hour and a half since his last hit. He'd be crashing soon. And this stupid freebase concoction was nowhere near finished cooking, so he couldn't leave. He huffed to himself and fished around in his hoodie pocket for a needle. During a break yesterday he'd taken the opportunity to properly mix up several syringes full of 7% solution, freeing him from the time-consuming task of mixing every individual shot.

He was just shaking his head to clear it of the residual effects of the cocaine rush (getting progressively less intense, his tolerance was rising again) when he was startled by the sound of the doorbell.

Not that he identified it as a doorbell at first - it was more of a tortured, half-screeching symphony of cracked tones. The fresh dose of cocaine kept his brain cushioned from the pain such a noise would usually provoke but he winced anyway out of habit.

"Sherly! Git th'fuckin door," Eric groaned from the direction of the sitting room. Sherlock frowned and leaned back on the kitchen table so he could see through the doorway to where Eric was curled up miserably on the sofa watching a DVD.

"But I've got to watch the-" Sherlock started.

"No, fuck yer science horseshit. Go git th'door," Eric growled, cutting him off. "I ain't gettin' up wivwout bein' sick."

Sherlock sighed and untangled himself from the lotus position he'd been seated in. He reluctantly lowered the heat on the freebase concoction - ugh it was going to take forever now - and stalked into the other room. A glance over the back of the sofa as he passed confirmed Eric was indeed half-asleep and almost definitely not capable of walking at the moment. That didn't make Sherlock any less annoyed about having to leave his chemistry setup unattended.
The doorbell continued its intermittent ringing for the entirety of his trip to the front entryway, meaning that by the time Sherlock flung the door open he was scowling with a combination of frustration and a blossoming headache.

"What?" he snapped.

The boy on the other side took a small step back in surprise as he dropped his hand from the buzzer.

"Er... hi," the young teenager said uncertainly. He was a small, scrawny lad with a head of close-cropped brownish hair, dark eyes in a pale, thin face. The smell of aerosol paint and stains on his fingers marked him as a vandal of some sort, while the short stature and awkwardly-proportioned body frame along with a swatch of a blue school blazer under his overcoat meant he was no older than his early teens.

Sherlock fixed the boy with a flat stare. "No."

"I... what?" The teenager was blinking up at him with a mixture of confusion and vague terror.

"I said 'no,'" Sherlock repeated irritably. "You're a fourteen to fifteen year old graffiti artist from one of the neighboring districts who recently dropped out of school to become a homeless vagabond due to troubles at home and issues with bullying and now you're scouring the area looking for a group to get in good graces with in an effort to obtain protection from street gangs. No. Go away."

The boy's mouth dropped open.

"Fuckin' christ Sherly I said git th'door not give 'em a speech," Eric's voice drifted in from the hall. Sherlock glanced back over his shoulder to see his maybe-probably-boyfriend making his way woozily toward them. Eric stopped just behind Sherlock and threw his good arm over the taller man's shoulder to steady himself as he leant against his side for support.

"Who're you with and whadda y'need?" he asked the boy in front of them in a tired monotone.

The teenager looked between them for a second, evidently trying to judge what he should say, then finally shrugged. "Ain't with nobody, and I need somewhere to kip that ain't freezin."

Eric sighed and let his head drop onto Sherlock's shoulder. "Sorry mate, this ain't no charity house. Yer gonna 'ave t'find sommere else."

"I heard I could maybe get a job here," the teenager tried again, looking nervous. "I mean like, running drugs or something? You guys do that right?"

"Yer like thirteen, kid," Eric mumbled.

"He's fourteen," Sherlock corrected automatically. The boy flicked his eyes away from the man draped over Sherlock's shoulders to give him a disconcerted stare.

"Fourteen, whatever," Eric replied. He lifted his head again and blinked blearily at the teenager. "Y'should jes go back t'school. This ain't no place fer tykes."

Suddenly the boy glared. "I can't fuckin' go back to school, you shitheads!"

"Why not?" Sherlock asked at the same time Eric said "bullshit."
The teenager apparently chose to ignore Eric and focused on Sherlock instead. "I got kicked outta the place fer tagging. They said I was vandalisin' shit but fuck's sake they've got nothin' but grey walls far as the eye can see, I figured it could use some colour, yeah? And anyway they don't teach nothin' but borin' shit nobody needs to know. Who cares if the earth goes round the sun, right? I got better shit to learn about."

Eric suddenly huffed an annoyed sigh and threw his good arm up as if to walk away, then seemed to think better of it and collapsed against Sherlock again. "Right, no, sorry kid. Yer gonna 'ave t'find sommere else." He turned his face and buried it against Sherlock's shoulder with a mumble of, "Sherly, git my arse back to th'sofa."

"Why did you walk out here if you felt sick?" Sherlock asked irritably. He shot a bland look and a half-shrug to the boy still standing on the front steps, who flipped him off before turning to stalk out of the garden.

"Cos y'were doin' that thing where y'talk a mile a minute about a buncha crazy bullshit an' I hadda make sure y'weren't about t'git punched in th'face by a dealer."

Sherlock rolled his eyes as he closed the front door and wound an arm around Eric's torso to prop him up as they made their way back to the sitting room. "I am capable of defending myself, you know."

Eric smirked slightly. "Yeah but mosta th'dealers ain't."

"Fair point," Sherlock conceded, quirking a smile.

They managed to get Eric re-settled on the sofa with a minimum of fuss. Before Sherlock could make his way back to the kitchen however Eric tugged him down by the drawstrings of his sweatshirt and kissed him.

"Can't y'quit fuckin' about wivvat stuff fer a bit?" he wheedled, trying to drag Sherlock onto the couch with him.

Sherlock failed to keep his balance against the insistent tugging on his hoodie and ended up sprawled half on top of the other man. "Eric for god's sake-" he grumbled into the fabric of Eric's t-shirt, trying to shove himself back into a standing position.

"Y'been workin' fer like ten hours straight," Eric pointed out in a voice somewhere between annoyed and sulking. "Y'gotta take a break sometime."

"No, I really don't," Sherlock retorted. "The sooner I finish the sooner I can move on to more important things."

"Like what?"

"Getting more money, for one." He finally gave up trying to extricate himself from Eric's hold and let himself go limp with an irritated huff. Even one-armed and stoned the other boy had the advantage in strength - his frame was made up of far denser muscle mass than Sherlock's constant near-emaciated state could ever facilitate.

Eric blinked. "I thought y'were rich or sommat."

Sherlock turned his head sideways to fix Eric with a flat glare. "Ignoring the fact that I was disowned," he said irritably, "it would be utterly suicidal to attempt to withdraw the amount of cash I would need to purchase a steady supply of cocaine and cigarettes from my trust fund without
access to the proper resources to fabricate purchase documents."

"Er... wot?" Eric asked blankly. Sherlock bit out an irritated sigh and reminded himself that the other man was completely stoned.

"Father keeps track of every single transaction made with the family fortune," he explained regardless. He was at that stage of cocaine buzz where he just felt like talking for some reason. And if Eric was going to insist on keeping him trapped here he'd just have to put up with it. "If my brother or I used our trust fund accounts to purchase anything Father didn't specifically approve we'd be punished." Sherlock suddenly frowned to himself. "... well, I'd be punished. Mycroft probably just got a lecture or something, stupid git."

Eric's brows furrowed. "Punished how?"

A deep bolt of something like primal fear burst through the otherwise pristine landscape of Sherlock's snowfield. He buried his face in Eric's shirt again before the other man could catch his half-panicked expression. "Doesn't matter," he asserted in as flat a tone as he could manage. "The point is no I'm not rich. And I've never been rich, not personally. My parents however are multi-millionaires, and I used to be exceedingly good at finding clever ways to nick money from them. I can't do so anymore without access to a bank account, and thus the entirety of my fortune at the moment totals thirty quid and some change. Which is not enough to buy both cocaine and cigarettes, and so I am as one would say 'screwed' unless I get out to the tourist districts within the next few days to pickpocket pedestrians."

Eric made a disapproving noise and patted Sherlock on the back. "Well maybe Devin'll give ya a discount or sommat."

"Right, because that seems likely," Sherlock responded sarcastically.

Eric shrugged. "Y'never know."

Sherlock huffed into the other man's shirt and shoved himself sideways, managing to slide out from under Eric's grip and land more or less gracefully on the hardwood.

"I have freebase cocaine cooking," he explained in response to Eric's pout. "You should go back to sleep."

Eric sighed and rolled over to face the back of the sofa, flapping his good hand in some sort of 'go on then' gesture. Sherlock obligingly meandered back into the kitchen.

Barely an hour later he was immersed in the distinctly uninspiring task of chopping freebase crystals into powder. It was boring. Extremely boring. But unfortunately quite necessary - leaving the chemical clumped up in crystalline form would protect possible adulterants from reacting out of the solution. Knowing that didn't make him any less irritated by the task, however.

Eric was sound asleep in the other room, though even if he weren't he wouldn't have been much help with only one good arm and a brain full of opioids. Sherlock looked up from the plate he was hunched over and stared in the direction of the sitting area anyway. Not that he was getting lonely or anything, but it would, he thought, be nice to have some sort of conversational partner. Maybe someone to ask what he was doing. Explaining how things worked always made them seem less dull, somehow.

After a few seconds' staring he huffed to himself and set back to chopping. Barely a minute passed, however, before he was distracted again. Someone was outside.
The razorblade in his hand froze in mid-air as Sherlock cocked his head to the side. Footsteps, the sound of... aerosol? Low muttering, a young man's voice. Sherlock put down his cutting implement and turned to regard the door to the house's small back garden. A half-second passed before he smirked to himself. **Brilliant.**

««

Rhys was having a shit day.

First he'd bolted from home like a dumbarse. Didn't even stop to get a different jumper - no, he'd just tossed on his coat over his school shirt and ran off. Mum was being a bitch again as usual, and as much as he told himself he was used to her coming back all hours plastered to shit - that he didn't care how much she screamed at him and yelled and threw dishes - he still didn't like being alone with the woman. She'd been in a particularly foul mood today, so he'd figured what the fucking hell, right? Street life couldn't be any worse than having some drunk bitch on your case all the time.

Of course he wasn't about to just go out and try to sleep rough in the middle of goddamned January. No, Rhys wasn't a moron, he knew how shit worked. And the first thing anyone did when they struck out on their own was find someone to watch their back. He'd been wandering around the city for the better part of six hours, asking around for any crews that might be hiring. And that was how he found himself standing in front of a shitty rundown drugs den in Stockwell.

Nobody answered when he knocked, so he rang the doorbell. Probably a lot more times than he really needed to, but they were drug addicts, right? Not like they'd give a shit about manners. He was just getting ready to start hollering when the front door was wrenched open.

"What?"

Despite himself, Rhys balked. The man in the door was a good few years older than himself - and damn near three foot taller. Lean and willowy, with a short mess of tangled black curls and an impossibly thin, pale face. Rhys couldn't even tell what colour the man's eyes were supposed to be past the biggest damned pupils he'd ever seen in his life. As the frighteningly-tall drug addict fixed him with a steady, almost psychopathic glare Rhys began to think he might possibly have made a mistake.

But fuck, it wasn't like he could go back now. "Er... hi."

Things didn't go that great. The creepy addict had turned out to be some kind of genius or something, rattled off every detail of Rhys' life in half a bloody second. (Psychic, maybe? No, no that was retarded. Just... really smart. Probably.) Rhys tried not to dwell on the conversation as he stalked away and headed toward the back alleys of the district.

He had a couple cans of paint on him. Nothing fancy, just some corner shop shit, but he figured he might as well do something with the last few hours of life he had left before he goddamn froze on the streets. He wasted about an hour or so tagging a rundown house with a rough sketch of some kind of dark archangel/demon thing. It only occurred to him when he was halfway through that he'd painted a pretty good approximation of the frightening junkie from the drugs den. Frowning to himself, he lengthened the dark hair a tad (keeping it curly, because fuck it, angels just looked weird without curly hair) and added a long, dramatic coat. There. Still pretty recognisably the junkie, but at least he could claim plausible coincidence now. Last thing he needed was the guy's stoner boyfriend coming after him thinking he had some kind of dumbarse crush on the guy.

He added a few more highlights to the black-feathered wings and stepped back to regard his work.
Pretty fuckin' awesome, if he did say so himself. Not like anyone would ever know it was his. He never signed his shit - who cared? He wasn't getting paid for any of it, and it wasn't like anyone could rip the fucking bricks off the wall and sell it as their own. He shrugged to himself, idly tossed his can of paint a few times, and tried to decide what he wanted to do next.

As he stared at the gaunt face of the archangel he'd painted an idea started to form. Those fuckheads at the drugs house had shooed him off like a goddamn stray cat. Didn't even give him a chance to explain himself (well, the terrifying one nearly had, but then he'd gone and deferred to his boyfriend like a bloody ponce). Fuckers deserved some artwork, Rhys figured. And hey if one of them came out and stabbed him, that'd get him packed off in an ambulance and he'd get to spend the night somewhere warm. Win/win, right?

With this in mind the young man made his way back to the dilapidated townhouse. It took less than a minute to scale the ramshackle back fence, and with a mischievous grin he located a likely-looking blank expanse of wall and set to work.

He was just putting the finishing touches on his masterpiece (a rendition of the creepy junkie and the stoner guy as cute animals - he'd gone with a stupid-looking otter for the junkie and a fluffy bunny for the stoner) when a voice from the shadows by the townhouse's back door nearly gave him a heart attack.

"I look nothing like an otter."

"Jesus fuckin' fuck!" Rhys screeched, whipping around and taking a stumbling step backwards. He shakily brandished his paint can in the direction of the intruder.

The lanky addict was leaning on the frame of the open back door, hands tucked into his hoodie pocket as he regarded Rhys with a flat, bemused stare. A lit cigarette dangled from his lips as he turned his over-dilated gaze back to the artwork on the wall.

"I will concede that Eric bears some resemblance to a rabbit, however," the junkie continued languidly.

Rhys said nothing. He was too busy backing slowly in the direction of the fence he'd jumped earlier. Despite his half-formed plan to get sent to A&E he found he really didn't want to press his luck with a bloke who seemed like he probably knew fifty different ways to kill you with a biro.

The addict was watching him again, noting his growing proximity to the fence. "I wouldn't do that," he drawled. "I'm about to offer you a job."

Rhys froze and regarded the man warily. He didn't look like he was taking the mick, but then again Rhys hadn't yet seen much more emotion on the guy's face than your average tombstone. He was like a fucking statue. A really goddamned creepy statue.

After another few seconds' staring the junkie sighed. All at once the icy demeanour seemed to evaporate as he rolled his eyes and took the cigarette out of his mouth to flick the ash off.

"Chopping up freebase is boring," he said, sounding almost... what, whingeing? Rhys found himself distinctly wrong-footed. The man had gone from terrifying to fucking childish in about half a bloody second. "Assist me and I'll convince Eric to let you sleep here."

"Y-you will?" Rhys slowly lowered his can of paint and stared at the older man - who was now frowning at him with obvious impatience.

"Are you going to stand out here asking stupid questions or are you going to agree?" he snapped
irritably. Then without another word he pushed off the doorframe and went back into the house.

Seeing no other course of action, Rhys reluctantly followed.

Inside was a kitchen which had seen *far* better days - the majority of which presumably had not been spent doubling as a laboratory. Rhys stared around at the intricate collection of beakers and funnels dominating the countertops and stove.

"I'm purifying cocaine, it's *unbelievably* dull," the addict informed him as Rhys stepped into the house. "I'm sick of doing the dullest bits, so you'll be doing them instead."

The man pointed offhandedly to a plate with a razor blade and a half-chopped-up lump of crystals and powder. Rhys shut the back door behind him and blinked at the little pile.

"Is that crack?" he asked blankly.

The junkie shot him a flat stare. "It's freebase. I *just* said I was purifying cocaine." He rolled his eyes, then turned around with a flip of his hand. "Nevermind, you're an idiot, it's to be expected. Chop up those crystals into as fine a powder as you can manage, and *don't* lose any."

Rhys startled at the word 'idiot' and opened his mouth to retort, but the older man beat him to it.

"Don't bother trying to defend your intelligence. You'll only make yourself look foolish."

"Well aren't you a ray of fucking sunshine," Rhys grumbled to himself. "What are you then, like the world's smartest crackhead?" he added more loudly as he moved to sit at the kitchen table where the plate of freebase was.

The man scoffed. "Crack is *disgusting,*" he asserted. "I'm a cocaine addict. One who also happens to be a genius." He paused, tilting his head as if thinking. "Or perhaps a genius who happens to be a cocaine addict...?" After a few seconds he shrugged and went back to whatever he was doing with the beaker in his hand. "I suppose it doesn't matter."

Rhys eyed the man curiously. He was carefully pouring some sort of chemical into a plastic filter funnel. The sleeves of his dark hoodie were rolled up, clearly showing several dozen track marks in various stages of healing, the bones of his wrists sharp in what looked like near-starvation. Rhys didn't know much about hard drugs - he and his mates had done pot a few times back at school, but none of them had ever had the money (or guts) to go for anything stronger. Looking at this poor bastard, he couldn't help but feel somewhat thankful for his lack of experience.

A few minutes went by in relative silence. Rhys dutifully chopped up his plate of crystals as fine as he could, and the addict busied himself with whatever crazy chemistry shit he was doing.

"So what am I supposed to call you?" Rhys spoke up finally.

The junkie blinked over at him. "Hm?" Apparently he hadn't been listening.

Rhys rolled his eyes. "A name. You know? I'm Rhys, by the way."

"Oh." The cokehead regarded him for a moment, then turned back around with another shrug. "Call me whatever you like, I don't care."

"Oh yeah?" Rhys grinned somewhat childishly. "What'd that other guy call you then...? Shirley, was it?"
"I might point out that I made no guarantee that I wouldn't *injure you* in response to whatever title you choose," the man responded blandly.

Rhys paled somewhat. "Er... right."

Swallowing reflexively, he turned back to his task. Silence fell in the kitchen once more.

<<

A few hours later, Sherlock was surveying the results of his efforts. Nearly four kilograms purified, the last kilo well on its way, and all within a day and a half of starting. Recruiting the tagger had been a brilliant idea, really. One of his better ones.

He glanced over at the boy, who he'd dismissed for a meal break some twenty minutes ago. Rhys was apparently not too keen on wandering the house by himself (despite Sherlock's assurance that he and Eric were the only ones there - Charley had gone out to hunt down another guitarist and Ben was nowhere to be found) and was sitting at the kitchen table munching contentedly on a sandwich he'd cobbled together for himself. Sherlock, of course, hadn't eaten in... what, a day? He frowned slightly as he turned his gaze to the cupboards beside him. Not hungry in the slightest. Eh, he'd just smoke another cigarette.

"You know you've smoked like nine fags in two hours, right?" Rhys spoke up suddenly. Sherlock glared at him over his hands as he flicked the spark on his lighter.

"And...?" he mumbled irritably.

Rhys shrugged. "I dunno. You're gonna get like fuckin' lung cancer or something."

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "I regularly inject *cocaine* into my bloodstream, I'm hardly about to concern myself with the state of my lungs."

Rhys' reply was cut off by a loud stream of grumbling from the sitting room. They both looked up as Eric appeared in the entryway, looking tired but no longer quite as incredibly stoned as he'd been earlier. The man rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"Please tell me y'didn' get chemicals in th'fuckin' orange juice," he mumbled in Sherlock's direction.

"Not that I'm aware of," Sherlock replied. Eric made a half-dubious noise and made his way to the fridge. He opened the half-finished carton of juice, apparently deemed it safe, and took a swig before turning to regard the rest of the room. His eyes almost immediately settled on Rhys.

"Sherlock," Eric said flatly.

"Eric," Sherlock responded in a bland monotone.

Eric sighed. "Why's th' kid in our kitchen?"

"I'm doing all the boring shit he doesn't want to do," Rhys supplied.

Sherlock shot him a slight glare. "He's my *lab assistant*."

Eric glanced between them a few times, scrubbed a hand tiredly through his hair, and sighed. "Fukkit, I don' even care," he grumbled.

"I'm almost finished, by the way," Sherlock informed the other man.
"Oh aye?" Eric asked, yawning again. "Tha's good, s'pose." A few seconds' silence stretched between them, before Eric finally turned his head toward Rhys with a calculating look.

"Oi, kid. You play Halo?"

Rhys grinned. "Hell yeah."

"Well thank fuck fer that," Eric exclaimed in a tired huff. "C'mon then, yer playin' through th' bleedin' story mode fer me."

"Hey! He's my assistant!" Sherlock cut in.

"Not anymore, I'm borrowin' 'im."

And without waiting for a rebuttal Eric marched over, grabbed Rhys by the arm with his good hand and physically dragged the teenager off toward the sitting room.

"That's not fair!" Sherlock groused after them, but to no avail. Eric had already abducted the boy.

After a moment's sullen glaring he frowned to himself and turned back to his chemistry setup.

Bugger all, now he'd have to chop crystals again.

<<

A young couple stood together on the pavement, staring up at Tower Bridge with the typical awestruck expressions of a couple of tourists.

"Haha, damn! Tacoma Narrows ain't shit compared to this!" the girl exclaimed in some utterly nondescript American accent, bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet as she grinned up at the structure. Short brown hair teased into a semi-vertical mess through the liberal application of hair gel, multiple ear piercings, light application of eyeliner but no other cosmetics. Sherlock noted all this habitually as he allowed himself to drift closer to the two tourists. As expected, they completely failed to note his approach - too absorbed with the landmark in front of them.

"It's bigger than I thought it would be," the male counterpart agreed, voice significantly less exuberant than his girlfriend's. He wore thin wireframe glasses and a dark green pullover. Definitely the more sensible of the pair. "Also stop swearing so much, we're in public."

"Why the fuck does being in public mean I shouldn't swear?" the girl retorted.

"You're making us look like loud, annoying tourists."

Sherlock snorted slightly to himself, privately agreeing with the sentiment even as he sidled up nearer the girl. The pavement was decently crowded; people filing past in scattered groups while the two tourists stood oblivious near the railings at the side of the street.

"So!?!" the girl exclaimed. "Dude I'm in fucking England! Shit's exciting! I'll swear like a motherfucker if I goddamn want to."

The boyfriend heaved a resigned sigh. Sherlock took the opportunity to take a step forward and purposefully bump into the girl from the side. At the moment of contact he slipped a hand into her half-open messenger bag, grabbing the first thing that felt like a wallet and tucking it up into the sleeve of his coat.

"Oh! Terribly sorry!" he cried with a false air of surprise. The girl stumbled slightly into her
"Ow! Fuck's sake!" she snapped, whipping her head around to glare at him. "What the hell!?"

"Sorry," Sherlock said again. He flashed an apologetic smile and tucked his hands into his pockets - safely depositing the nicked wallet as he did so.

"It's cool, we're fine," the boyfriend assured. Sherlock nodded, stepped around them and continued down the pavement.

"What a dick!" he heard the girl yell after him.

Rolling his eyes, Sherlock took a moment to ensure he'd walked far enough to avoid being chased down by the American couple should they realise their loss, then drew the thin leather billfold out of his coat pocket. Sixty pounds, along with around thirty American dollars and, somewhat bafflingly, an unscratched lottery ticket. Out of idle curiosity he dug a coin out from his jeans pocket and rubbed the foil from the surface of the thin paper card. Evidently he'd just won twenty dollars from the Washington state lottery.

"Ey, Professor!" a voice exclaimed. Sherlock looked up from his inspection of the rest of the contents of the nicked wallet (driver's licence for the state of Alaska, employee identification badge granting access to some sort of mining site, proof of medical insurance, membership card to a place called 'Costco' - the third of its kind he'd seen so far, leading him to deduce the establishment must be some manner of chain specialty shop) and caught sight of Rhys jogging toward him.

"You're still calling me that?" Sherlock asked blandly as he studied the girl's insurance card, mentally comparing it to those he'd pilfered from other Americans. The line marked 'copay' was lower than average - good coverage, then? It would obviously have to be, coming from a mining corporation... that was how it worked, wasn't it? Companies provided medical coverage for their employees? He made a mental note to research the structure of American health insurance when he returned to the house. The whole system appeared to be a tangled mess of fascinatingly backwards policies and regulations.

Rhys gave no indication of having heard the older man's question, just launched into excited babbling. "I got like eighty quid off some fat Aussie fuck, lookit this dumbarse plastic money they got!"

The boy produced a handful of Australian banknotes and shoved them in Sherlock's direction, grinning stupidly. Sherlock rolled his eyes.

"Yes, I've seen Australian currency before."

Rhys was not put off by his lack of enthusiasm. "How much've you got then, Prof?" he asked as he shoved the wad of bills back into his pocket.

Sherlock took a moment to mentally tally his earnings so far. "A few hundred pounds. Enough to be getting on with, I think. We should head back."

Rhys pouted up at him. "We've only been out a few hours!"

"Yes, and it's nearing noon. Eric will be wondering where we've got to," Sherlock replied offhandedly. As they turned to walk down the pavement together he discreetly dropped the American girl's wallet, making sure to leave it in a conspicuous enough area to be hopefully picked up by a passing pedestrian. The cash (and lottery ticket) he pocketed along with the rest of his pilfered currency.
"You know, for bein' some creepy sociopath you're sure attached to your boyfriend," Rhys pointed out with a wry, mischievous grin. Sherlock set his jaw in an irritated expression. For all that the boy had proven himself useful Sherlock was still finding himself having to smother near-constant impulses to strangle the little moron.

"I'd also like to replenish my dose of cocaine before I start crashing," he said in a bland monotone, disguising his annoyance with the teenager under an expertly-applied mask of cool indifference. Rhys scoffed.

"I bet you don't even need that stuff." The boy bounced on his feet a bit as they walked, tucked his hands into his coat pockets in a mirror of Sherlock's posture and flashed him a smug look. "You just like the whole mystery of bein' addicted to sommat. Makes y'seem like more of a badass."

Sherlock deadpanned. "Yes, Rhys, I maintain a constant near-life-threatening blood concentration of an illegal narcotic because I think it makes me cool. Excellent deductive skills."

Rhys just shrugged. "Man I didn't say it had to be a conscious thing or nothin'. Maybe you just like the metaphor - walkin' death, whatever."

"You are aware you're meant to be a shiftless teenaged runaway?" Sherlock snapped, shooting the boy a sidelong, vaguely annoyed look. "Psychophilosophical inquiry is just a tad above your station."

"Hey, I might've been dealt a shit hand so far but that don't mean I'm retarded," Rhys retorted with an arrogant jut of his jaw. "I read that Nietzsche crap you know, god is dead and all."


"Better'n a nihilistic cokehead."

Sherlock narrowed his eyes in annoyance but chose not to respond to the barb. Instead he concerned himself with scanning the crowds around them for possible MI5 agents. It had been nearly three days since the telephone conversation with his brother and he had yet to see a single operative assigned to track him. The lack of spying was... well, not exactly ominous, but at the very least decidedly strange. It just wasn't like Mycroft to back down so easily. Without really meaning to Sherlock came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the pavement, pondering. What exactly had his brother gotten involved with?

"Professor?" Rhys piped up. Sherlock blinked down at the shorter boy and found the teenager looking up at him with a curious expression. He realised he'd stopped for no apparent reason and resumed walking, glancing away from Rhys with a faintly annoyed huff as he did so.

"You come up with the stupidest nicknames," he informed the boy. Rhys just shrugged and flashed him a blithely unconcerned grin in response.

"Y'ain't stabbed me yet so I'm guessin you like it," the boy quipped back. Sherlock rolled his eyes again as they turned towards Stockwell.

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When they finally returned to the house it was to find a very annoyed Eric waiting for them in the entryway.

"Sherly fer fuck's sake!" the man snapped as soon as they set foot in the door. "How hard is it t'leave a note or sommat? Thought y'got yer arse kidnapped!"
"Rhys and I went to Camden," Sherlock explained in a disinterested tone, unable to indulge in his desire to apologise to Eric while the teenager was still hovering behind him. He decided to go for the next best thing and attempted to explain his actions instead; "I assumed we'd have returned before you awoke but the trip ended up taking longer than expected."

"Yeah, cos someone kept stopping every five minutes to look through peoples' wallets for stupid bullshit medical cards," Rhys put in irritably. Sherlock glared at him.

"I was comparing relative rates of coverage between American insurance plans, it seemed like a potentially interesting field of research." For some reason he felt an urge to walk over and hug Eric (an impulse he attributed to the fact that he was coming perilously close to crashing off his last hit of coke and hadn't eaten or slept in going on thirty hours now; certainly nothing to do with the nebulous cloud of vague worry for his brother that had begun to accumulate over the course of the walk back from Camden) but Rhys was still standing nearby. Not wishing to leave himself open to being taunted by a fourteen year old he restrained himself to a simple offhand nod in Eric's direction as he moved off toward the stairs.

Eric glanced between Sherlock and Rhys with a frown before pushing himself away from the wall he'd been leaning against and following his boyfriend down the hall.

"Oi! What am I s'posed to do then?" Rhys called after them. Sherlock heard Eric make an annoyed grumbling sort of sound from behind him.

"I dunno, kid, watch telly or sommat! We ain't yer bleedin' parents!"

Rhys laughed. "Yeah? Maybe I oughta call me mum and tell her I got myself adopted by a couple'a queer junkies."

Eric bit out an irritated sigh as they ascended the stairs, ignoring Rhys as the boy made his way into the sitting room. Sherlock glanced back at the other man.

"Why are you following me?" he asked blankly.

"Cos that little bugger annoys th'piss outta me."

Sherlock shot him a quizzical look. "I'd have thought you'd be used to the antics of young people, considering you raised your-" he cut himself off as Eric frowned and pushed past him into his (their?) bedroom.

"Just cos I took care of a couple'a little kids fer half me life don't mean I like all kids," he snapped, then turned and regarded Sherlock carefully for a moment. "Y'saw me laptop screen."

"Yes," Sherlock confirmed. There was really no point in lying. "But I didn't look at anything else," he hastened to add, finding himself concerned for some reason that Eric would be angry with him for prying into his business. "The assumption that you were their primary caretaker was just conjecture."

Eric huffed and rolled his eyes. After a moment's pause he quirked a small half-smile at Sherlock, obviously noting the other man's discomfort.

"Ey, I ain't gonna get all pissed off just cause y'figured sommat out about me," he assured in a friendly tone. Sherlock tucked his hands into his coat pockets and remained standing at the doorway, unconvinced.

Eric's face fell a fraction at his lack of response. "Do people really just haul off an' wail on ya fer
"bein' too clever?" the man asked quietly after a moment. Sherlock kept his face impassive.

"I'm capable of defending myself," he replied stiffly.

"Just answer th'question."

Sherlock looked away, hands shifting uncomfortably in his pockets, then shrugged. "Sometimes," he conceded.

Eric sighed, shaking his head. "People are shitheads."

This time it was Sherlock's turn to smile. "Not all of them."

Eric grinned and closed the space between them in a few short strides, reaching up with his good hand to tug Sherlock's face toward his. Their lips had barely touched when a voice from downstairs interrupted what could have turned into a very promising round of snogging.

"Oi! Who let this fuckin' kid in here!?"

Sherlock bit out an annoyed sigh as Eric let his head drop forward onto Sherlock's shoulder in resignation.

"Guess we should prolly go rescue th'kid," he muttered unenthusiastically.

"We could just let Devin kill him," Sherlock suggested. Eric smirked, then smacked him lightly on the chest in admonishment as he drew away.

"C'mon now, that ain't nice," he chided, turning to head toward the hallway. Sherlock followed him. "Though, yeah, I'm tempted an' all," he continued blithely as they made their way down the stairs. "But then someone'd have t'clean up th'blood an' I ain't in no shape t'be buryin' a body anyhow."

"Did you faggots tell this kid he could stay here!?" Devin snapped the second Eric and Sherlock appeared in the doorway to the sitting room.

"Yeah, mate," Eric replied easily, cutting off the less-than-pleasant remark Sherlock had been about to deliver by jabbing an elbow lightly into his side. "Didn't he tell ya who 'e is?"

Behind Devin's bulk Rhys was standing awkwardly by the sofa. The teenager shot Eric a quizzical look and mouthed something like 'what the fuck are you on about?'

Devin glanced over his shoulder, quirking one copper-blond eyebrow at Rhys. "Who is he, then?"

Devin stammered, looking suddenly pale. He looked back at Rhys again, who made a valiant effort to hide his confusion behind a semi-confident grin. "You're Vince Wechsler's brother?"

"Uh... yep!" Rhys confirmed nervously. "Good ole Vince!"

"He's checkin' out th'place for his bro, maybe start a deal on th' smack in a few months." Eric shot a rather smug, sidelong look at Sherlock, who smirked back. For all his semi-stoned nonsense Eric could be delightfully devious when he wanted to be.

"If you'd like us to escort him off the premises regardless..." Sherlock put in helpfully. Devin
sputtered and turned back to face them.

"No, no, I... no, that's fine," he assured quickly. He cleared his throat and waved a not-quite-dismissive hand over his shoulder in Rhys' direction. "Just... stay as long as you need to, kid. Tell Wechsler we've got a shipment coming next month should be a good one, if he's looking to expand his business a bit."

"W-will do." Rhys raised his eyebrows questioningly at Eric, who subtly signalled him to sit back down. Devin failed to notice the exchange, being too busy arranging his expression back into something approaching furious authority.

"Hem! Anyway," he snapped as he strove to draw himself up into what he obviously considered a threatening posture. "Holmes, Chuck says you can play guitar."

Sherlock regarded the older man blandly. "And?"

"And we don't have a fuckin' guitarist thanks to you queers gettin' yourselves mugged like a couple a nancies, so you're gonna play in the show this weekend!"

"Am I now?" Sherlock asked. Eric had moved over to the sofa and tugged Rhys over to sit down with him, obviously feeling a need to ensure the teenager remained at least passably in-character until such time as the older man could fill him in on the details of whatever role he'd concocted for the boy. Sherlock glanced over at his boyfriend and found the man glaring at him over the back of the couch.

Devin glanced between them, then moved forward to stand mere inches from Sherlock's chest, glaring up at him. The portly idiot stood at barely five seven, meaning Sherlock towered over him by nearly half a foot.

"Look, Holmes, I'm bein' nice to you right now. Real nice. Piss me off and that's gonna change right quick, we clear?" he growled. Sherlock made a concerted effort to stop himself bursting into laughter. Compared to the subtle, frigid calm of Siger Holmes in a rage Devin seemed like nothing so much as a petulant toddler.

"Of course," he quipped.

Devin regarded him carefully. "So you're playing."

"No."

Devin bared his teeth. "Look here Holmes you fuckin' fairy faggot, you're gonna play in the goddamn band or-"

"Or what?" Sherlock suddenly intoned, letting his expression harden into a mirror of his father's usual cold indifference. He hadn't done a hit of cocaine recently so his pupils weren't abnormally dilated, but his face was still gaunt and there were almost certainly dark shadows under his eyes from lack of sleep. The effect was apparently daunting enough to cause Devin to falter.

"Or..." the older man trailed off. After a second's staring he seemed to shake himself and straightened his posture once more. "Fuck's sake..." He ran a hand through his crewcut and huffed angrily to himself. "Alright, look, Public School. This ain't no time for a fight, I, er... I might hurt ya and then you wouldn't be worth shit." He crossed his beefy arms in a vain attempt to seem more menacing.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow in condescending disbelief, expression still locked in one of Father's
imperious stares. Devin's eyes darted away from his gaze as the man tried and failed to avoid looking intimidated.

(Eric and Rhys, meanwhile, were watching them over the back of the sofa.

"You know your boyfriend is like the most terrifying psycho I ever met, right?" Rhys murmured quietly to the man beside him. Eric was staring at Sherlock, expression caught between amusement and a sort of horrified fascination.

"... I know," he muttered back.)

At the sound of a mumbled exchange Sherlock flicked his eyes toward the couch, frowning as Eric's brows furrowed in obvious disapproval. They held each other's gaze for a moment before Sherlock sighed. Ugh, fine. But damned if he was going to back down without at least getting something worthwhile out of this whole absurd mess.

"Free cocaine," he said, turning back to Devin.

"What?" Devin's eyes snapped up to meet his. "Free co-? For what? Playing guitar? Fuck you!"

Sherlock kept his stare level. "I'll be interested to see how you manage a stage performance with nothing but a drum kit and a bassist."

Devin ground his teeth in annoyed anger. "I'll give you a... a ten percent discount."

"Free," Sherlock insisted.

"Twenty percent!"

"Ninety."

"Twenty five, Holmes, and that's the best you're gonna fuckin' get!"

Sherlock regarded Devin for a moment longer, making the shorter man's face twist in slightly disturbed frustration. Finally Sherlock huffed a sigh and let Father's chilly poise melt out of his posture. Devin took a small step back in confusion as the man in front of him switched from coldly intimidating to sullen in less than a second.

"Fine," Sherlock agreed with only the barest hint of a whinging pout in his voice. He tucked his hands into his coat pockets and turned to walk away into the kitchen. As he made it out of view of Devin he let his face fall into a vicious scowl. Sod it, he really hadn't meant to go along with this stupid nonsense. But he hadn't had a hit of coke in going on a few hours now, and between the rising headache and impulsiveness he'd quite run out of patience to continue arguing. Well, at the very least he'd gotten a discount out of it.

He tugged his peacoat off and dug around in the lining until he produced one of his half-filled syringes. Whatever, he didn't care. It was all fine. Playing in the band would be unbelievably irritating, yes, but he had cocaine.

And cocaine, as always, would get him through it.

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Days later he was in the pub again, irritablely tuning Eric's guitar while the man babbled on about chord progressions and keys and other things of absolutely no consequence whatsoever. Sherlock
was bored. The songs were boring, practice was boring, his housemates were boring. The only thing keeping him from tossing Eric's guitar aside and marching straight out the door was cocaine.

Cocaine was making this bearable. Cocaine was keeping him here. And cocaine was the reason he'd agreed in the first place. Because no matter how useful he might have managed to make himself, there was always the threat of being cut off if he refused to follow his employer's orders. Devin had conceded to a discount only because Corey hadn't been on hand to mete out threats. Sherlock was under no illusion that he'd retain his relative privilege of buying as much powder as he could want the second he stopped being cooperative.

And so he found himself standing on a shoddy stage in a shoddy pub, sweating uncomfortably under the heat of the lighting and debating the merits of removing his sweatshirt. His track marks would be clearly visible... but then again he was about to play lead guitar in a nameless rock band for the sole purpose of luring in a fresh crop of drug users. In light of that, he decided, having an arm full of needle scars probably didn't matter in the least.

He stripped off his hoodie and tossed it over an amplifier as Eric was beckoned off toward the bar area by a widely-smiling Ben. Amélie and Charles were busy over by one of the amplifiers, trying to get the pickups organised correctly, and in a fit of boredom Sherlock picked up Eric's guitar and slung the strap over his shoulder to make another attempt at the Saint-Saëns piece he'd been trying to transpose.

After the third time mucking up the allegro he huffed to himself and dug out a cigarette, watching the other two band members idly as he lit it. Amélie was trying to convince Charles to stop trying to colour-code the stage wires. Sherlock rolled his eyes and rested his left arm on the guitar neck, staring blankly out at the empty pub tables and wondering what was taking Eric so long.

A series of soft beeps suddenly caught his attention, he turned his head looking for the source and finally realised it was coming from behind him. He whipped around just in time to catch a camera flash in the face.

"Amanda you bloody harlot!" he snarled, trying to blink the stars out of his eyes. Overdilated as they were he'd probably be seeing spots for hours.

"Aw, Sherry! That was gonna be a brill one!" the horrible woman pouted. "Now it's all blurred, hang on, I'll delete that one..."

She fiddled with her camera for a brief second while Sherlock tried to melt her skull with the heat of his glare, then brought it up again.

"How many times do I have to bloody tell you to stop photogr -" he was cut off by the camera flash again, and with a vicious growl clamped his cigarette between his lips and flipped her off. She just giggled and took another photo.

"Sherly, be nice!" Eric admonished with a laugh as he walked up to them.

"She's taking photos of me again!" Sherlock cried as he pointed angrily in Mandy's direction. She flashed Eric a winning smile and snapped a picture of him as well.

Eric grinned for the photo, then waved Mandy off with a small chuckle. "Mandy, c'mon. Y'know he don't like it when y'take pictures of 'im."

"That's what makes it fun!" Mandy exclaimed with a laugh. She winked, snapped one last photo of Eric (with a scowling Sherlock in the background) and sauntered off.
"I utterly detest that woman," Sherlock spat as Eric hoisted himself up on the stage.

"Aw, she ain't that bad."

Eric walked over to plant a kiss on Sherlock's cheek, then drew a small green-and-orange package out of his jeans pocket.

"What's that?" Sherlock asked curiously.

"Some kinda foreign sweets or sommat, Ben's mate brought a buncha stuff back from Asia." He tipped a few colourful bits of candy into his hand - they looked a bit like tiny, multi-pointed stars - and held them up to Sherlock. "Want some?"

Sherlock wrinkled his nose but took one of the pastel confections anyway. It disintegrated almost the instant it touched his tongue.

"This is just sugar," he realised after a moment. Eric shrugged.

"Yeah pretty much," he conceded. "Kinda good though, eh?"

Sherlock didn't reply, just grabbed the bag from Eric to study the packaging. Large, white letters in a friendly Japanese hiragana typeface along with the usual nutrition facts (as he'd suspected - nothing but sugar). Eric grabbed another handful from the packet, not resisting when Sherlock stole a few.

"Can y'read that shit?" the freckled man asked with a raise of his eyebrows.

"It says 'konpeitō'," Sherlock informed him. He'd taught himself to read the basic Japanese alphabets several years ago in a fit of extreme boredom during one of his many holidays spent more or less alone in the Holmes manor. Unfortunately he'd lost interest with the language well before learning much in the way of useful vocabulary.

"An' in English?"

Sherlock shrugged. "I don't know. It's probably just a brand name."

"Oh." Eric moved to sit on one of the amplifiers behind them, scooting over to let Sherlock take the spot next to him. For the next few minutes they simply stared out over the pub tables together as the bag of star-shaped sugar bits slowly disappeared in intermittent handfuls.


"Y'actually remember th'words?" He glanced sidelong at Sherlock and popped a sweet into his mouth with an amused grin.

Sherlock scoffed. "How could I help it?" he griped irritably. "We've only practised these terrible songs about a million bloody times now."

"Eh, well at least they're all pretty easy, yeah?"

"They're boring," Sherlock whinged. "Honestly, the compositional structure is the most simplistic tripe I've ever heard."

Eric rolled his eyes. "Yeah well..." He shrugged. An idea seemed to occur to him and he glanced over at Sherlock with an amused smirk. "Hey, y'know, they might sound a bit better wit' more'n just Chuck doin' the singin'." His smirk widened into a playful grin. "Yer a great singer, Sherly,
y'should do backup vocals."

"Not a chance in hell," Sherlock snapped. Then, after a pause, he shot a quizzical look toward Eric. "Wait, how..."

"Heard ya in th'shower," Eric said, flashing him an impish grin in response to the unspoken question. Sherlock half-choked on the sugar-star he'd been eating and very definitely did not blush.

"I do not sing in the shower," he asserted with a flustered glare, even as he thought back desperately to the activity in question trying to determine if his statement was true or not. Eric just giggled.

"Uh huh," he agreed blithely, not in the least bit convinced. "Well somebody was singin' some French song th'other day an' it were really good."

Sherlock tried and failed to force the embarrassed expression off his face. Oh lord, he had been trying to remember the words to an old French folk song, and the best way to remember a set of lyrics was to... ugh. In lieu of responding to Eric's jab he snatched the bag of sweets out of the other man's hand and began digging through the package in search of the few remaining green-coloured ones.

"Y'know all th'colours taste th'same, right?" Eric pointed out with an amused grin.

"I remain unconvinced," Sherlock snapped. He managed to collect the last of the green candies, stuffed them all in his mouth at once as an excuse to avoid further conversation, then crossed his arms sullenly in front of his chest.

Eric shook his head with a laugh at his partner's behaviour.

"Yer somethin' else, Sherly."

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Sherlock really wasn't sure how it had happened. One minute he'd been derisively pointing out every possible point of compositional failing in Charley's music set, the next Eric had piped up about the backup vocals and the minute after that Sherlock had been beset by what felt like a bloody flock of people demanding he sing behind Charley on the chorus.

"Oh, yes! It'll sound great!" Ami gushed with an excited giggle. Beside her Mandy was clapping her hands like some sort of demented sealion.

"Do it, Sherry!"

Sherlock shot a look toward Eric, hoping to find backup, but the freckled man was just grinning mischievously around a lit joint. Sherlock glared at him.

The onslaught proved to be more than even his cocaine-bolstered patience could tolerate. After nearly five minutes of high-pitched wheedling from the girls (interspersed with the occasional jab from a sniggering Ben and Charley's disinterested opinion of 'it don't fuckin' matter to me') Sherlock had finally had enough.

"Alright!" he half-snarled, shoving Mandy's hand off him where she'd latched onto his arm like a leech. "Fine! I will sing the bloody chorus, just stop bothering me!"

Mandy stumbled back a step, shaking her slightly-wrenched wrist (Sherlock hadn't meant to
actually harm her, but *fucking hell* if she was going to go and *bloody grab him* that's what she should damn well expect. After a short pause to make sure her arm was alright she looked back up to him with an enthusiastic grin.

"I knew we'd convince ya!" she crowed happily. Ami cut in with a triumphant cheer, and predictably both girls fell to giggling again. Sherlock fixed them both with the most venomous glare he was capable of.

"Welp! Glad that's settled then," Charley spoke up from the other side of the room in his usual bored tone. "Shall we?"

The curly-haired man gestured to the door of the back room, where they'd all gathered to wait for the pub to fill up (sans Devin, who was out consulting with his brother over something or other). Sherlock bit out an annoyed sigh and reluctantly nodded.

"Break a leg, Sherly!" Eric called in a merry tone. Sherlock whipped around with a furious, hopefully-menacing growl.

"This is all your doing."

Eric just grinned.

««

Sherlock was seething. He was bored, uncomfortable, frustrated, and above all else *bloody pissed off*. Not just with this stupid band nonsense but with absolutely *everything*. The stage and the pub and the whole *fucking world in general*.

He hated these songs and he hated Charley's stupid lyrics and he bloody *hated singing*. Plus he could barely see anything past the glare of the stage lights, and the amplifiers were *too loud* and the idiots in the crowd kept *screaming* and *ugh*. He had to get out of here. Out out *out*. More than that, though, he needed cocaine. A two-and-a-half hour show with a barely five minute intermission between songs left very little time for certain rather essential drugs-related activities. Which of course meant that Sherlock was crashing. Hard.

The second the set was over he ripped Eric's guitar strap from his shoulder, vaulted off the short stage and stalked off through the crowd toward the back room.

"Ey, mate! Brilliant vocals!" some pissed thug yelled as Sherlock passed, clapping him on the back with a drunken laugh. Sherlock turned his head just far enough to *snarl* at the unfortunate man (who snatched his hand away as if burnt and quickly backed off) before resuming his trek to his goal. Back room. Peacoat. Cocaine.

He was less than six feet away from the door when another hand (on his shoulder this time) made him whip around in abject frustration.

"What!?” he yelled... straight into Eric's face.

"Whoa, calm down." Eric held his uninjured hand up placatingly. Sherlock's furious mood deflated somewhat as he struggled to force the vicious glower off his features.


"Christ, yeah I noticed." Carefully the other man put his hand back on Sherlock's shoulder. When the action didn't elicit another attack he gently steered him toward the hall door.
Sherlock huffed a short sigh and rubbed at his forehead in an ineffectual attempt to ease a growing migraine. The transition from the loud pub to the marginally-quieter hallway helped somewhat, and he leant sideways into Eric as they walked.

"Ugh, I can't believe you ever put up with this nonsense," he groaned. "What an utter farce."

Eric patted his shoulder. "It ain't that bad," the man said soothingly. After a brief pause he continued, "I'm sorry fer eggin' everyone on like that, by th' way."

Sherlock made a questioning noise, not in any sort of fit state to decipher what the man was on about.

"When Mandy an' them were tryin' ta get ya t'sing," Eric clarified. "I should'a done sommat, I dunno. It were just funny t' see y'all -"

His words trailed off as they reached the end of the hall. Both of them stopped short at the sight that greeted them through the open door of the back room.

"Holy..." Eric muttered, hand dropping away from Sherlock's shoulder.


The cheap berber carpeting before their feet was stained dark red with a pool of slowly-spreading blood, emanating outward from the crumpled body in the middle of the room. A glance at the dark skin, close-cropped hair and chequered trainers told Sherlock it was Ben, though the face was too badly damaged to make out any of the man's usual features.

"Oh jesus christ I'm gonna be sick," Eric moaned, clapping a hand to his mouth. He'd gone deathly pale and seemed to be leaning on the doorframe for support. Sherlock glanced over at him, determined there was nothing he could do, then cautiously made his way closer to the body. A quick brush over the carotid artery with his fingers confirmed what he'd already suspected.

"He's dead," he stated simply. "Has been for a few hours at least, judging by the -"

He cut off as Eric made good on his threat and vomited against the wall. Sherlock wrinkled his nose at the sound and straightened up to dig his mobile out of his jeans pocket. Even as he dialled 999 he was staring down at the fresh corpse with a look of undisguised intrigue. Something deep in his subconscious told him this was wrong. He shouldn't be interested by something like this. He should be every bit as disturbed as Eric was right now. But... he wasn't. He was fascinated. All at once the world seemed to slow down on him, thoughts calming and headache ebbing away without aid of so much as a drop of chemical intervention. This was... this was exciting.

Ben's nose was smashed into his skull and his eye socket had been fractured in several places, suggesting a direct assault with a hammer or other blunt instrument. Had to have been someone fairly strong to wield a weapon with enough force to produce those injuries, ruled out a woman, crime of romantic passion significantly less likely. The door had been open as well, standing slightly ajar as if it had been smashed open in a fit of rage (and on that note were there - yes, a dent in the plaster, someone had definitely been chasing him) and the location of his demise, right in the centre of the room, no attempt to hide the-

"Oh fuck me," Devin's voice exclaimed from the hallway. Sherlock glanced over his shoulder to see the portly drummer standing at the door looking shocked, a horrified Charley behind him.

"Ben!?" Charley choked out in a voice of sickened disbelief.
Sherlock realised he'd never actually got round to pressing 'send' on his mobile, too distracted by the corpse. "Should I call the police?" he asked now and held the device up with a look toward Devin.

The question seemed to snap the man out of whatever sort of shock he'd been falling into. He opened and shut his mouth a few times before finally shaking his head.

"N-no," he stuttered. "No, just... just wait. I gotta find my brother." And with that he turned on his heel and practically bolted back the way he'd come.

"Holy fuck, holy fuck, holy fuck," Charley began muttering to himself. The man had slid down the wall beside the door and now sat next to Eric, both of them staring at the body before them in shock. Sherlock frowned as he slipped his mobile back into his pocket. He... really had no idea what he was expected to do. Should he fake being disturbed, maybe? But, no, they'd already seen him unaffected. Putting on an act now would only make his behaviour seem more obviously unnatural. Seeing no reasonable course of action he turned to study Ben's corpse instead.

Minimal onset of rigor mortis, slight capillary pooling, dead for at least two hours - slightly after the show started? Killer must have planned to use the band to cover up the noise, means it was someone in the audience, a regular most likely, knew when to time it for maximum opportunity of escape. One of the pushers then, who was missing? Did anyone come back here after the performance started? Damn it, couldn't see past the stage lighting. A flash of something metallic by Ben's outstretched hand caught Sherlock's attention, and he shifted forward to see more clearly. What's that...? Foil? Wait, don't touch it - murder investigation. But... yes, yes, definitely foil. Traces of powder; heroin residue. Packaging off one of Racer's samples? Ben doesn't pass those out, he works with pre-existing clients, not high enough in the pecking order to be trusted with so much product. Must have grabbed it during the scuffle. Was there a scuffle? Had to be, Amélie's instrument case was upright when we left, someone knocked it over. Murderer chased him back here, slammed the door with enough force to dent the wall, then assaulted him with a blunt object. Pipe or hammer. Ben grabbed the assailant's trouser or coat pocket at some point and caught a bit of foil. Any other...? Ah, yes, denim fibres under the fingernails, must be old fabric to have come away so easily. So whoever did this is well-muscled, wearing faded jeans, just slightly taller than Ben judging by the angle of the blows, either one of Racer's pushers or a recipient of one of their drugs samp- wait, no, no, can't be a client, they don't give out drugs to returning patrons, only a regular would have known about this room or how to time the murder, so it must have been-

"Sherly?" Eric's voice interrupted Sherlock's internal monologue and he turned his head to see the freckled man watching him with a pale, frightened expression. He tucked his hands into his jeans pockets and straightened up from where he'd crouched down next to the dead body.

"The murderer was one of Racer's dealers," he explained smoothly, trying to keep the slight hint of smugness out of his voice. A flash of something like pleased excitement shot through him at the knowledge that he'd pieced so much together from random details. It was a feeling not unlike the one he'd gotten from the Carl Powers incident - that story he'd read in the newspaper so many years ago and spent a solid month trying to puzzle out. Only this was so much more electrifying, because the evidence was right here and there was a murderer loose, and, and... "Five foot eleven inches, at least twelve stone, pronounced upper body strength, keeps his undistributed samples in the front left pocket of his jeans which are significantly frayed at the seams," he rattled off quickly.

"S-sounds like McDowell," Charles muttered in a faint voice. Eric, for some reason, fixed Sherlock with a furious glare.

"Ben's fuckin' dead an' yer busy doin' yer freak deducin' thing!?" he choked out, sounding almost
scandalised. Sherlock's brows furrowed at the use of the word 'freak'. Despite his brain's insistence that he'd become used to the moniker over the course of his school career the insult still stung. Particularly, it seemed, when said by Eric.

"I just-" he started. But Eric shook his head violently, cutting him off.

"No! Christ, Sherly, d'you even care?" He tucked his good arm around his midsection, eyes very determinedly fixed on Sherlock's and avoiding the sight of the corpse. "Someone just got killed an' yer just starin' at 'im like he's a goddamn... a goddamn puzzle!"

"Well it is, sort of," Sherlock pointed out, feeling like he should try to explain himself but having absolutely no inkling as to where he should start. "There's... details, and things. Clues. It's interesting."

"Jesus Christ." Eric ducked his head down to his knees and, alarmingly, began to sob. Charley put an arm around the other man's shoulders and shot a look in Sherlock's direction that quite obviously said 'leave'.

Sherlock hesitated, but Charley's look hardened into a scowl and he finally relented. With one last glance back at Ben's body he turned and made his way through the open door to the hallway.

Devin was jogging briskly toward him.

"My brother's clearin' all the dealers out," he puffed. "And the police are on their way. If you got any shit on you you'd better fuckin' trash it quick cause they're gonna wanna talk to the blokes that found the body."

Sherlock nodded. His coat had a few loaded syringes tucked into the lining, but he made no move to go and retrieve the garment from the room he'd just left. The odds of it being searched were low anyway, and even if he did find himself being arrested he could always count on his brother to have the charges dropped. Devin pushed past him into the room (presumably to pass his message on to Eric and Charles) and left Sherlock standing alone in the hallway.

The brief thought of Mycroft brought a sudden, rather absurd impulse to the forefront of Sherlock's mind. It occurred to him, as it had several times in the last few days, that he had seen absolutely zero evidence of his brother's meddling since their midnight phone conversation last week. Decidedly strange. And he wasn't worried, of course, that would be ridiculous. But... well, maybe a quick text wouldn't go amiss. Especially considering the circumstances. Fair warning and all that.

His phone was in his hand before he'd really even had a chance to think about it.

To: MYCROFT HOLMES - PRIVATE LINE
'About to be questioned by police, may require bail.'

A brief deliberation - did he really want to give Mycroft the idea that Sherlock might be preemptively asking for help? - but no, it was bland enough to be interpreted as sarcasm. Mycroft would reply with some form of exasperated comment, giving Sherlock assurance that his brother was perfectly fine and that all was well between them. (Or at least as well as it had ever been, which was admittedly not saying much.) Without giving himself time to think it through further Sherlock hit 'send', stowed the mobile in his jeans pocket, then turned to peer through the still-open doorway into the room behind him.

Ben lay motionless in a pool of blood, eyes staring sightlessly out from his ruined face. Sherlock regarded him blankly.
Eric's right... I don't care. He felt his expression shift into its usual neutral facade as he studied the pattern of impacts on the victim's skull. Three blows, each spaced approximately one and a half inches apart, obviously placed by a right-handed assailant. The clinical detachment with which he noted such facts quite abruptly turned inward, and he saw his lack of reaction through the lens of his own careful scrutiny. This... wasn't normal. He wasn't normal. Not in terms of genius but in terms of insanity.

Because sane people did not walk into a room containing the corpse of an acquaintance and immediately start scanning their surroundings for details without so much as a pause for any sort of emotional reaction. Sane people did not calmly text their brothers about bail whilst waiting to be questioned by police. Sane people... sane people cared.

Sherlock's eyes flicked away from Ben's injuries, meeting what was left of the dead man's gaze. He waited for his brain to come up with some sort of appropriate reaction to the sight before him. Regret, horror, shock.

But seconds passed... and he felt nothing.

There is something very wrong with me, he finally determined. A sense of vague resignation accompanied the thought. Well, what had he expected? People had been telling him he was mad for years. Refusing to believe them had been nothing but hubris on his part - a vain hope that somehow, by some grand unknown metric, he could be normal.

He tucked his hands into his pockets and took a few steps back to lean against the wall behind him, still staring into the eyes of the corpse in the other room.

... something very, very wrong.

««
As We Drink Ourselves To Death

After nearly a decade with the Met, Greg Lestrade liked to think there was very little that could honestly surprise him anymore.

That was, of course, until he met Sherlock Holmes.

It hadn't been much of a case – just a simple murder investigation. Seedy pub full of drunks and drug addicts, someone got in a fight, poor kid took a hammer to the face. Awful as it was these sorts of things happened all the time in London, and at this point in his career Greg was more than used to it. He stood with his hands in his trouser pockets as he regarded the mutilated corpse of one Benjamin Jones, age 22, lying motionless in the middle of a back storage room. Too young. Too young. But this was all too often the outcome when stupid kids got mixed up with the wrong sorts. Tragic, yet depressingly common.

Greg sighed very slightly to himself and turned away to leave the room, giving the forensics team space to do their job. He headed down the hallway (mostly empty save for a few officers milling about, keeping the area cordoned off) and emerged into the main pub area. The majority of his investigation team were dotted around the tables, busy conducting field interrogations of the scant few pub patrons who hadn't fled to the streets the second the squad cars pulled up.

"Sir!" a voice called. Greg turned to find one of his younger detective sergeants jogging towards him, a faintly disturbed look on his face.

"What's up, Dimmock?"

"Er… sir, this kid…" Dimmock jerked a thumb back over his shoulder, where a very tall, very bored-looking twenty-something was leaning against the far wall watching them. "This kid says he knows who did it."

Greg quirked an eyebrow. "So take his statement and add the name to the suspects list."

"No, no, it's…" Dimmock shook his head and scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Look, sir, I think it might be best if you just talked to him yourself. You'll see what I mean."

Greg sighed very slightly to himself and tried not to look too annoyed with his subordinate. First instincts told him it was just a rookie officer getting spooked by some kid playing mind games, but this was Dimmock. The sergeant was young but he generally had a good head on his shoulders.

"Alright, fine," Greg ceded. He fished his notepad from the lapel pocket of his jacket and started toward the young man, Dimmock at his side. "What's the name?" he asked his underling.

"Sherlock Holmes, sir. Just turned twenty, refuses to give an address or phone number."

"Probably homeless then," Greg guessed in a slightly melancholy undertone as they came close enough to the kid to make out his features; he knew a street junkie when he saw one. The boy was tall, around six foot, and ludicrously thin. The navy blue Oxford hoodie he wore was a bit ragged but decently well cared-for – a tear on the left sleeve had been sewn shut at some point, and it seemed to have been laundered recently. The jeans had the look of having once been expensive,
and the tops of his trainers sported plenty of scuff marks but hadn't yet faded to that off-tan colour of old rubber. Not been on the streets for very long then, Greg surmised. That or he took exceptionally good care of his clothing.

The young man was stood leaning against the far wall opposite the stage with his hands tucked into his hoodie pocket, watching Greg and Dimmock approach with an expression somewhere between abject boredom and irritation. At the very least, Greg thought, he looked sober. That was good; he hated trying to deal with intoxicated witnesses.

"I'm not going to repeat what I said," the kid informed them the moment they were within speaking range. "Either you take my advice or you don't, recruiting a series of ever-higher persons of authority to question me won't change facts."

Posh accent, Greg noted, and imperious tone. Some wayward trust fund kid, then. Explained the Oxford sweatshirt and nice jeans.

"Evening, Mr Holmes," Greg greeted semi-formally. He pasted on a not-quite-sincere smile and casually flipped open his notepad as if he hadn't heard the boy's earlier statement. "Care to tell me exactly what happened here tonight?"

Holmes fixed him with a flat look. "I've told three separate officers the exact same story. Get one of them to repeat it."

"I understand, Mr Holmes, but I'd really prefer to hear it in your own words," Greg explained, slipping just enough sympathy in his voice to hopefully win the witness over. Holmes did not look impressed. Greg resisted the urge to let an annoyed expression flit across his face – god he really hated dealing with these spoiled rich kids – and instead tried to maintain an air of professionalism.

"Look, I promise this'll be the last time. I'm the Detective Inspector in charge of the case, there's no one above me to repeat yourself to."

Holmes rolled his eyes and bit out an aggravated sigh. "After the band's set finished I went to the back room to retrieve an item I'd stored there. I was met at the door to the hallway by my-" he cut off suddenly, darting a glance across the pub. Greg followed his gaze and saw a freckled young man with his left arm in a sling being checked over by one of the medics. He identified the kid as the one who'd started having a panic attack during questioning and nearly passed out. Holmes' eyes flicked back to stare at the floor in front of his feet and he seemed to shift uncomfortably before going still again.

"Eric joined me," he continued in a flat voice. "We walked down the hallway and saw the corpse through the open door of the back room. Eric was… distressed, significantly enough to be indisposed, so I checked the body for signs of life and found none. Then our housemates arrived and the police were contacted."

"And that's it?" Greg pressed, wondering why Dimmock had bothered calling him over here for what sounded like a perfectly normal witness statement.

"Tell him the rest of it, please," Dimmock cut in. Holmes huffed an annoyed sigh and tilted his head back to thump gently against the brick wall behind him.

"You were taking notes, why don't you tell him?" the kid groused. "Isn't it supposed to be your bloody job to notice such things anyway, detective?"

Greg glanced at Dimmock and raised an eyebrow questioningly. The younger officer grit his teeth and dug out his notebook, flipping it open to a page covered in hastily-scrawled notes.
"He, er… he said he noticed a trace of heroin residue under the victim's fingernails-"

"No no no! Foil! There was foil with heroin residue clutched in the victim's hand!" Holmes interrupted, his head snapping back upright with a fierce scowl at Dimmock. "Did you listen to a word I fucking said?"

"Well it was a bit difficult to take accurate notes with you talking a mile a minute!" Dimmock retorted in a flustered tone. Holmes sneered and turned his gaze to Greg.

"Your underlings are bloody incompetent," he informed the older man imperiously. And then with a long-suffering roll of his eyes and a heavy sigh he proceeded to launch into, quite frankly, the most incredible train of logic Greg had ever heard in his life. Something about strike angles and foil wrappings and denim fibres, and then somehow a complete physical description of their killer along with approximate age and a probability distribution of likely current whereabouts. Greg found himself speechless.

"Shut your mouth, you'll catch flies," Holmes snapped when he was finished talking. He drew a long breath through his nose (Greg quite suddenly realised the kid hadn't inhaled once during his entire speech) and took his hands out of his hoodie pocket to cross his arms in front of his chest with a glower. "I hope you've got a better memory than he does because I am not repeating all that again."

Greg snapped his mouth shut and cleared his throat rather awkwardly. "How… how did you-?"

"Oh piss off!" the kid suddenly exclaimed, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "Every single time, for fuck's sake! I just explained exactly how I came to every sodding conclusion. Were you even listening?"

"Right, no, no… I was listening!" Greg backpedaled, holding his palms up in surrender. "It was just… a bit overwhelming, sorry. So you're definitely sure it was this McDowell bloke that did it?"

"Yes, he's the only one that matches the physical characteristics and had the opportunity. As for motive I have no idea, but it was probably something to do with drugs." After a pause Holmes sighed irritably and looked away (in the direction of the freckled boy, Greg noted). "Are we done here?"

"Not, er… not just yet." Greg cast about for a plausible excuse to keep the young man from leaving. "We, uh… need some sort of contact information. A phone number or family member who can get in touch with you if we need to speak to you again."

Holmes ground his teeth in annoyance. "I already told your sergeant, I don't own a pho-"

He cut off as a chiming noise sounded. Greg raised his eyebrows as the boy whipped an expensive-looking flip mobile out of his jeans pocket. He opened the lid and studied the screen intently, pale features pulling into a worried frown in response to whatever he'd read.

Greg cleared his throat loudly.

Holmes glanced up at him with a scowl and quickly rattled off his mobile number, which Greg dutifully wrote down.

"I should probably warn you that all conversations going through this particular device are recorded and monitored by the British Secret Service," Holmes quipped blandly as he snapped his mobile shut and replaced it in his jeans pocket. Greg raised an eyebrow in disbelief. Was the kid some sort of paranoid schizophrenic?
Holmes apparently read his thoughts from his expression. "I am not mentally ill, though in the absence of definitive proof I'll leave you to believe what you like. Just be aware that anything you say to me over a telecommunications network will inevitably find its way into the hands of MI5 at some point."

"Er… sure." Greg tried not to let himself look too obviously skeptical. "Thanks for the heads up."

Holmes flipped a hand dismissively. "Of course. Are we done?"

Greg glanced sidelong at Dimmock and, getting no response besides a tiny shrug and a baffled expression, turned his gaze back to the kid in front of them.

"For now, but I may need you to come into the station and give a statement to be recorded. Just be sure to check your voicemail, alright?"

Holmes had already begun walking away before Greg had even finished his sentence, waving a hand over his shoulder as if to say 'yes, yes, of course'.

And that was the last Greg saw of the kid for months.

««

"Did you give Rhys my mobile number?"

Eric looked up as he approached, and almost immediately Sherlock regretted asking his question in such a snappish tone. Eric looked bloody exhausted. Shellshocked, even. Sherlock stopped awkwardly in his tracks a few metres away and stood uncertain, waiting to see if Eric would be offended by the rude tone of voice. He honestly hadn't meant to sound so frustrated; it was just the too-busy atmosphere and looming cloud of withdrawal making him nervous, antsy.

Eric didn't get upset though. Instead he just… sighed.

"Yeah. Thought it'd be best if th'kid had a way to ring us if sommat went down at th'house. Sorry, shoulda asked first." The man flashed him a tired smile, clutching an orange medic-issued blanket tighter around his shoulders, and Sherlock felt the stirrings of something very much like guilt take root in his chest.

"It's… no, it's fine," Sherlock muttered. He cleared his throat and plucked his mobile out of his pocket one-handed to brandish it in vague explanation of his next sentence. "Er… apparently the milk's run out."

Eric chuckled very quietly, shaking his head. "That kid's a bleedin' lil twat."

Sherlock tried a smile. "Indeed."

After a moment's hesitation he crossed the distance between the two of them in a few long strides, took a seat next to Eric on the stage steps. Not close enough to be touching – the situation was still too uncertain. Eric had gone from familiar and trusted to… not enemy, not by a long shot… but the affection Sherlock felt for the other man had now become tainted with a creeping sense of animalistic wariness. The man had used that word, after all. And in Sherlock's experience, the usage of that word almost invariably led to violence, hatred… rejection.

He didn't want to be rejected, not yet. But things had spiralled out of his control; he'd reacted entirely the wrong way to something Eric (and the rest of humanity, really) felt very strongly about. If there was a clearer way to broadcast his abnormality to the only person in the world
whose opinion of him Sherlock actually cared about he didn't want to know it.

The silence between them was stifling. Eric sat huddled over himself, blanket pulled tight around his shoulders, staring into the empty space between his trainers and the wooden slat of the stair below them. Sherlock glanced sidelong at him and tried very hard to ignore the distracting murmur of sounds and coloured movements of the investigation team all around them.

Finally he could bear the tension no longer.

"Are you… alright?" he asked hesitantly.

Eric huffed out a laugh that was more of a sob. "No." He raised his good hand to rub at his face, shaking his head wearily. "No… I ain't alright, Shers."

Sherlock bit his lip – an entirely too-vulnerable expression, so he stopped immediately. Instead his fingers began tugging at the fabric of his sweatshirt sleeve, the motion hidden by the front pocket where he'd habitually buried his hands. He had… absolutely no idea what to do. What was he supposed to say? *I'm sorry?* But he wasn't… not for the right reasons anyway, and Eric knew it. Sherlock was only uncomfortable right now because *Eric* was upset, a fact which only served to highlight his own inherent selfishness. A man had *died* tonight. Murdered, in as horrific and violent a manner as possible. And all Sherlock could muster in the way of relevant emotion was a cloud of neurotic worry about the possibility of his boyfriend hating him. Even he, with his chronic lack of social skills or tact, could see the fault in that.

Knowing his feelings were *wrong* didn't do anything to make his mental landscape rearrange itself, though. No, he had just as little control over what his brain did as he always had. At the moment far less, actually, because he'd now gone a record five waking hours without a hit of cocaine. Withdrawal had settled in with dense fogs of fatigue and self-doubt, the white-hot edges of a migraine pulsing through his head in intermittent bursts.

He very carefully schooled his features into a blank mask against the pain, however. Refused to let on to any hint of discomfort. What would be the point, after all? His peacoat was still in the back room – he hadn't been willing to claim custody of it in case the police had already searched the item – so he hardly had any way of solving the problem. All he'd be able to do was complain. And Eric was clearly in no mood to listen to Sherlock whinge about such a petty concern as crashing off coke.

Minute after agonising minute passed by. Eric was still staring at the stairs, good hand now tangled in his hair rather than clutching at the blanket. Sherlock glanced over at him again and out of nowhere found himself stifling the irrational urge to grab the man by the shoulders and shake him.

A bolt of frustration shot through his chest. Suddenly all he wanted to do was yell, scream at the other boy questioning what!? *What do you want me to do!? How should I act, what should I say? I can be anyone, Eric, can pretend to be anything at all. Just tell me what's right, tell me what's expected. How am I supposed to know? Why is it so easy for you, where did you learn? How did I miss so much?*

But he only kept still. Silent and motionless but for the constant worrying of his fingers on the frayed sleeve of his hoodie.

Beside him Eric took a long, shuddering breath… and began to cry.

*I'm sorry,* was all Sherlock could think. *I don't know what to do… I'm sorry.*
Eric was drunk.

Ordinarily that fact wouldn't have bothered Sherlock – the other man was an adult, after all, and entitled to his own decisions. It was just that trying to speak to a drunk Eric frequently felt very much like interacting with a complete stranger, and Sherlock wasn't sure if he was comfortable with this new person the man had become. All the predictability was gone – Sherlock no longer knew with any certainty what his friend would do or say. And while he (unwillingly) tolerated a certain amount of inevitable uncertainty within the confines of his own mind Sherlock found he absolutely did not like having the same feeling of helpless confusion in regards to other people.

Especially in regards to Eric.

Eric was supposed to be friendly, kind, safe. Utterly predictable but in a way that somehow felt comforting rather than boring. Always a slightly silly mix of jokes and devious smirks and occasional innuendo. But at the moment he was precisely none of those things… and Sherlock hated it.

"You shouldn't mix alcohol and oxycodone, there's potential for fatal respiratory depression," Sherlock pointed out, glancing over his shoulder to see Eric washing down one of his prescription pain pills with a swig of what looked like whiskey. They were in the kitchen, Sherlock working on a new method of reliably determining the ratio of MDMA to amphetamine salts in the distribution ring's latest acquisition of ecstasy while Eric prepared some sort of macaroni dish for lunch. Not that Sherlock was in the least bit hungry, but he'd been lectured about his dwindling weight often enough lately to know he'd more than likely force himself to eat anyway.

"So?" Eric snapped with a slight scoff. "Ain't nobody gonna care f'I die."

That stung. Sherlock frowned and turned fully to face the other man. "I'd... be upset."

"Yeah? For how long? Like two seconds? Then it'll be all cor, lookit' th'pattern a chunks in his sick, y'kin tell exactly 'ow many bleedin' drinks 'e had!"

"I wouldn't be able to determine that from vomit alone," Sherlock replied before he could think to stop himself. "I'd need a blood analysis and an accurate estimate of weight first."

Eric rolled his eyes angrily and turned back to whatever he was doing at the stove. "Christ, yer fuckin' batshit."

There was no levity to the sentence, no joking smile – just frustration, annoyance... complete sincerity. Sherlock looked away.

"Is it really so important that I care about death?" he asked quietly after a moment. His hands toyed idly with an unused pH strip as he spoke. The mixture of oils and acid residue on his fingers shifted the pigments of powder on the paper's surface, pink and tan to hazy goldenrod - evidently his skin had a pH value of around six and a half.

"Yeah, Sherly, it kinda is," Eric replied in a curt voice.

Sherlock set aside the now-useless pH strip and looked back up to his boyfriend. "Why?"

Eric sighed. "People need t'care about death, Sherly," he hissed lowly, still facing the stove with his back to Sherlock. "They need to, cos that's what keeps 'em right. Th'ones who don' care, those're th'ones who... who stab little kids in their fuckin' necks, bleed 'em dry like a couple'a stuck pigs an'..."
then leave 'em in th'middle of their goddamn bedroom fer their big brother t'find when he comes home from work."

Sherlock stilled. "Your… sisters were murdered?" he asked in a somewhat hollow monotone. He hadn't considered… he'd thought perhaps a messy divorce, a childhood disease, not…

Eric shook his head with a grimace like he was fighting back tears. "Mum was like you, Sherly. Didn't give a single shit when 'er last boyfriend got killed. Talked about me dad dyin' like it were a bleedin' bedtime story." He finally turned back to Sherlock with a watery glare. "She didn't care… an' when she finally snapped it weren't just her bein' a weirdo no more, were it? Bailey an' Rosie ended up… I shoulda got 'em out sooner, shoulda realised our mum would…" He shook his head with a choking noise and reached out for the bottle of whiskey he'd abandoned on the counter.

Sherlock took a step forward and snatched up the bottle before the other man could grab it. Eric had taken an oxy some five minutes ago, had already been tipsy and half-stoned before that, and Sherlock had little desire to see someone he cared for passed out on the linoleum.

"I'm not like your mother," Sherlock said, deftly shifting the whiskey behind his back before Eric could make a lunge for it. Eric half-snarled and locked eyes with him in a vicious expression.

"Yeah? An' why th'fuck should I believe you? Y'told that thug the other week you was gonna stab both 'is lungs an' watch 'im drown in 'is own blood."

Sherlock took a small step backwards, shaking his head slightly. "That was just a threat, I wouldn't… I'm not a killer."

Eric was staring at him with an unreadable expression. "What about yer dad?" he asked lowly. Sherlock's heart seemed to stop cold in his chest.

"What?" he muttered, though he already had a feeling he knew where this was going.

"F'you could kill yer dad… would you?" Eric clarified, his face a flat mask of disappointment and anger. "Y'never really talk about it but it's damn easy t'guess what went on, ain't it? You hate th'guy. So would y'kill him?"

Sherlock could feel his breath catch slightly as he stared at the other man. He'd been backed into a corner and they both knew it.

After an interminable silence he finally swallowed. "Yes," he admitted in a quiet voice. "If I had the chance."

Eric seemed to choke on another strangled sob. "An' that's why I said yer a goddamn freak, Sherlock. Murder ain't a fuckin' thing y'can just talk about like it's a means t'an end. Y'can't say you'd kill someone like it's all up t'you to decide who lives an' dies."

Sherlock's expression grew frigid at the sound of an all-too-familiar insult. Behind his back his grip on the bottle of whiskey tightened.

"You've never met my father," he bit out in a sudden spike of cold anger. "You'd agree with me if you knew him."

"No I fuckin' wouldn't," Eric retorted savagely. "There ain't nobody deserves t'die!"

"Your mother!" Sherlock's voice was creeping up in volume, on the verge of shouting really, but he didn't care. "Wouldn't you destroy her, given the opportunity? Slaughter her, like she slaughtered
your sisters!?”

Eric grit his teeth and shook his head. "No. I'd chuck 'er in th'fuckin' madhouse where she belonged. It weren't her fault what her fucked up brain made her do." He paused to shove his good hand through his hair in agitation. "When people do shit tha's wrong they should get caught. Sent t'jail t'do their time, or hospital if that's what they need. Killin' em won't solve a single goddamn thing."

"That's a simplistic worldview and you know it," Sherlock snapped. The bottle of whiskey sloshed as he brought his hand around in a furious motion, gesticulating as he always did when he was upset. "Sometimes there's no other choice, if killing a man prevents the suffering of others then the death is inherently justified."

"Is that what yer brother says when he orders people shot?" Eric retorted acidly. Sherlock snapped his mouth shut with a quick intake of breath, realising but unwilling to admit that, indeed, he'd just quoted one of Mycroft's explanations of his government duties verbatim. "Y'know, just cause he's older'n you don't mean everythin' he says is right. Big brothers can be bad people too."

"He's not a bad person." Sherlock repeated the words with a sneer for the childishness of the phrasing. "Perhaps he's just smarter than you, did you ever think of that? Your moronic little average brain can't process the bigger picture, too cluttered by your empathy and kindness. Caring… caring's not an advantage!"

Eric regarded him quietly, a stormy expression still pulling at his features. "Did he say that too?"

All at once Sherlock snarled, whipped around to walk out of the kitchen before he did anything he'd regret. His grip on the glass bottle in his hand was white-knuckled and painful, but he didn't loosen it. Just marched resolutely toward the door, ignoring Eric as the man yelled something angrily and followed after him. Sherlock had longer legs, though, and made it out the front door and through the garden well before the other could catch up.

Eric jogged the last few metres and stopped short at the open door. "Sherlock!"

There was no reply. Sherlock had already disappeared into the streets.

««

He took a swig of whiskey and immediately spat it out again, grimacing at the taste.

God damn it, can't even drink like a normal person, Sherlock thought savagely to himself. He was walking quickly down Clapham street – storming really, but that was a stupid, overdramatic term – still holding Eric's half-finished bottle of liquor. It was absolutely freezing and he hadn't bothered to grab his peacoat on the way out, but fuck if he cared. He was still feeling the effects of his last hit of cocaine anyway, along with the swirling fires of hurt and frustration and rage, and that was plenty to keep him warm.

Fucking Eric, thought he knew everything about the world and life and about Sherlock. Utter bullshit. After all how could Eric possibly know the first thing about Sherlock when Sherlock himself had no idea why he did or didn't feel things and why the sightless eyes of a dead man failed to affect him?

And then to go and bring up Mycroft… call him a bad person? Ridiculous. Yes, Mycroft was an annoying git and a meddling arse and an absolute prat, but he did important work, he kept people safe. Not all people, no… but he still tried, did the best he could… even if it had taken him fifteen
bloody years to realise that Father was…

Argh but no that wasn't fair! That wasn't Myc's fault, he'd been busy. Working towards more worthwhile goals than defending his useless brat of a little sibling - protecting the country and dignitaries and royalty. What was Sherlock compared to that? That was why he'd never said anything, never complained. Mycroft had better things to worry about, and Sherlock wouldn't, couldn't be the one to pull his brother away from what was obviously a driving passion. One word and Mycroft would have swooped in to rescue him at any time, Sherlock knew that without a doubt. But it would have come at a price. Ruined plans, interrupted meetings. And even if Mycroft said it didn't matter it always, always did.

Even as a child Sherlock had been able to sense the note of irritation in his brother's voice every time he'd phoned the man to ask why he couldn't come home for the holidays. A spark of masked resentment. Because they both knew that while Mycroft had grand designs for his life and the world, there would always be something holding him back; one pathetic little human connection tying him down like a chain. Sherlock couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when he'd become aware of the restrictive nature of his role in his brother's life - he'd been young, that was all he knew - but it had terrified him. All he could think was that Mycroft would one day grow tired of his shackle, cast Sherlock aside with a stern reminder that caring is not an advantage and leave him to face the world alone.

So he'd done everything he could to limit how annoying he was. Father had punished him for ignoring table manners when he was seven, the first time he ever remembered fearing for his life… but it was the mention of Mycroft that drove him to silence. Father had said something about how your brother and I are irritated by your nonstop chattering and Sherlock had immediately shut up. Not just for that moment but for months. Nearly a full year where he spoke only when spoken to, using the barest minimum of words and limiting himself to body language as often as was feasible. And Myc had seemed worried at first but then he'd smiled, joked that this is the quietest holiday I've ever had and so Sherlock kept it up for as long as he could.

Of course eventually the terror wore off, transformed bit by bit into festering hatred and anger and frustration. No matter what he bloody did he would always find himself in violation of some rule or another, so Siger's lectures and punishments stopped being something to be avoided and instead became an inevitable part of life. It turned into a cycle – teased and bullied at school, tortured and tyrannised at home. Nowhere was safe. Mycroft was the only person in the entire universe who could be counted on to be supportive and helpful and there.

But it wouldn't last, surely. Eventually his brother would realise what a burden Sherlock was and abandon him. Because Mycroft valued logic above all else, and logically there was no reason to care what happened to his overdramatic screw-up of a little brother. And if Sherlock had figured that out then it could only be a matter of time before it occurred to Mycroft as well.

It had seemed to Sherlock that the loss of his only guardian might not be as painful if it happened all at once, like pulling off a plaster. So he'd switched from being as unobtrusive as possible to doing everything in his power to push Mycroft away. Insults and yelling and destroying his things… but none of it worked. Mycroft would get annoyed, yes, sometimes even angry. But he never left. Never, and it was infuriating because the longer Myc withstood Sherlock's onslaught of appalling behaviour the more Sherlock began to believe his brother might actually be impossible to drive away.

The concept of unconditional love had never been something Sherlock took seriously – his mother's love was only ever valid if she was lucid enough to remember who he was, after all, and the thought of Siger expressing affection for another living being was ludicrous. But Mycroft…
Mycroft might *actually love him*, and that was a terrifying thought. Because if he let himself believe that and turned out to be *wrong*…

No. Mycroft *hated* him, that was that. Sarcasm and bitter sniping and cruel jokes, that was their relationship. Not love. They detested each other. Absolute *hatred* and neither would care if the other went away because it *didn't matter*.

Nothing mattered.

With a sudden, incoherent scream Sherlock whipped around and hurled the half-empty bottle of whiskey at a brick wall. Glass shattered with a satisfying crash, the liquor inside burst out and splattered to drip in sluggish streams to the pavement below. He took a single step away from the destruction he'd created and simply stood staring. His arms hung slack at his sides, chest heaving puffs of frozen air in thin clouds before his face.

Whiskey slid in slow rivulets down the bricks, rich amber mingled with red. It looked like sickly pale blood.

Blood didn't bother him.

It never had, really, because when you were a child like Sherlock being raised by a man like Siger you got used to losing the stuff frequently. Not to mention school, where he'd always sported an ever-changing, continuously-updated collection of cuts and bruises. Blood was a fact of life. Allowing oneself to become upset at the sight of it would be foolish.

Death didn't bother him either. Hadn't since he was about twelve, in fact, crying over a dead cat. Mycroft had been there, when the kitten Sherlock had stupidly allowed himself to get emotionally attached to was killed by a wild fox. *Calm down, Sherlock, it was only a cat.* Derisive, contemptuous… but *right*. Absolutely right. Sherlock had been an idiot. He'd ignored the cardinal rule of his existence – *trust nothing*.

There was no such thing as permanence, nor security. Such concepts were illusions clutched by idiots who couldn't see how heartless and cruel the world really was. Seeking comfort in a dumb animal was only cathartic for as long as the creature survived. But all things inevitably died, and soon enough whatever comfort you'd gained from the relationship would shatter into a million splinters of pain and grief instead. It was the same with people. They always either left or attacked him, taunts and threats, revealing with a laugh and a sneer that they'd actually just been egged on by a friend to pretend to be nice to him before they went back to being bullies like everyone else. Don't trust a *single one*, nothing but a bunch of liars. He forced himself to learn to be completely self-sufficient instead. Relying on nothing but his own mind because the alternative would only ever result in disappointment.

But even that strategy had failed in the end, hadn't it? Avoiding disappointment, that had been the goal. But wasn't he *always* disappointed? With his life, the world… with *himself*? Things he said or did or felt or *didn't* feel, always wrong or stupid, seemingly out of his control. And his *decisions*…

Slowly he raised his left arm, crooked his hand to look at the veins of his wrist peeking out under the hem of his sweatshirt. A single pinprick marked the place where he'd attempted to use the delicate carpal vessels to shoot up, the larger veins of his forearm too weakened by the constant stress of injection to risk puncturing.

A flash of realisation hit him – he *hadn't* been relying on himself. Cocaine had become his crutch, a wall of ice he hid behind because he was too scared of the world to stand on his own. Always running from the threat of rejection, frightened by the thought that people would hate him, attack
him, mock him.

But why?

Mycroft needed to be liked. The man was a chameleon to the bitter end; he'd rather bite off his own tongue than drop the mask of careful perfection that earned him the respect of kings. Sherlock had tried to play perfect too. Imposing and aloof like his big brother and father always were. It hadn't worked, and without any other example to follow he'd thought himself a failure for not being able to erect the same careful barriers between his mind and reality.

Now suddenly he found himself wondering why he'd ever wanted to be like them in the first place. Cocaine had brought him as close as he'd ever been to the studied poise of his brother, the closest he'd ever gotten to normal. But he hadn't been any happier that way.

No, the happiest he ever recalled being were in these last few weeks with Eric. Laughing and playing stupid video games, drunken snogging and uncoordinated sex in back alleys in the middle of the night with no care given for dignity or composure. And yes, in the end Eric had rejected him like everyone else… but maybe that was just inevitable? Maybe Sherlock simply wasn't a likeable person.

Did that really have to be a bad thing? Did he have to let it bother him? Or could he cut out that worry, erase the desire to belong like he'd erased his reaction to death? If he could find a way to accept his inherent freakishness and just do what he liked, be what he liked, without giving a damn whether anyone else supported him or understood... christ, but wouldn't everything be so much easier? No need to keep trying to force himself into a mould that never fit. He'd simply shape his own reality.

He let his hand drop to his side once more and looked back to the wall. The whiskey had stopped dripping, a shining wet stain above a pile of broken glass.

There was some kind of poignant metaphor in that, probably, but he wasn't in the mood to dwell on it. Instead a mantra of sorts had taken up the majority of available space in his head. A single sentence looping round and round, repeating but gaining volume each time.

*I'm Sherlock Holmes…* it said, echoing off half-melted drifts of snow and sheets of thawing ice.

*… and I'll be whatever I want.*

<<

Sherlock didn't know how long he stood staring at the drying whiskey stain on the wall in front of him, but by the time his mind finally deigned once more to register the world around him he found the sky had begun to darken with rolling storm clouds and his thin frame was shivering violently. With a grimace he snapped fully out of his trance, hugged his arms close for the scant warmth and took a few steps back to take shelter under the awning of the building behind him. Freezing rain was beginning to pour from the sky, washing away the evidence of his emotional breakdown and chilling him to the bone in the process.

He longed for his peacoat – not just for the warmth it would provide but for the half-dozen loaded syringes tucked into the lining. Yes, cocaine might have been his crutch, but having illuminating epiphanies wouldn't make withdrawal any less hellish. And anyway didn't being whatever he wanted include the option of being a drug addict? If it didn't it would have to, at least for awhile yet. Quitting cocaine would be a long, arduous process; something which quite frankly he didn't feel up to dealing with right now.
Thinking he might have stashed a needle somewhere on his person he quickly patted down his pockets. All he found was a half-smashed packet of cigarettes and a nearly empty lighter, but *fuck it* that was good enough for now. He straightened out one of the two salvageable fags from where it had been partially crumpled and swore vehemently at the cheap plastic lighter until it consented to hold a brief flame. It winked out after half a second but that was long enough to get the stick alight, which was all he'd needed anyway.

Warm smoke filled his lungs and helped to drive away some of the cold. Nicotine chased through capillaries up to his brain. He'd been a smoker for far too long to feel much in the way of a head rush anymore, but the familiar, repetitive motions took up the slack in calming his psyche. Soon enough the world ceased to feel quite so much like it was shattering to pieces around him. He leant back against the brick wall behind him to simply watch the rain fall.

The fleeting moment of tranquility was broken by the sound of running feet and splashing puddles. Sherlock leant a bit to the side to glance up the street and found the rain-soaked form of Rhys dashing along the pavement toward him.

"Professor!" the boy yelped, spotting him. "Jesus fuck where the fuck have you been I've been fuckin' running around looking for your dumbfuck arse for fucking *ages*!"

"Five 'fuck's in a single sentence is a bit much, don't you think?" Sherlock asked blandly as he relaxed back against the wall. Rhys slid to a halt and stood panting in front of him. The teenager made a wild, indecipherable flailing sort of gesture and pointed back the way he'd come.

"They're doing a fuckin' drugs bust or something! At the house! There's like a million cop cars and shit all down the bleedin' block!"

A sudden stab of adrenaline tore through Sherlock's chest. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah I'm fuckin' sure!" Rhys half-wailed. "What the fuck are we supposed to do!? Run? Is this when we run off, yeah, like outlaws!?"

Instead of answering Sherlock pushed off the wall, tossed his half-finished cigarette into a puddle and took off running down the road in the direction Rhys had come from.

"Whoa whoa, hey! Wrong way! Wait!" the teenager called after him. Sherlock heard the sounds of the boy's footsteps following him, falling behind thanks to Sherlock's longer strides, but he didn't slow down. Had to get back in time to keep Eric from being arrested; the man would never survive a prison sentence. Not of the length he'd be facing. Couldn't abide the thought of him panicking under some detective's ruthless interrogation technique, either, nor of how he'd fare in the midst of hardened prisoners. Too awful to even imagine.

As Sherlock ran some illogical impulse drove him to dig his mobile out of his jeans pocket. Mycroft had never responded to his text; maybe the stupid bastard would deign to answer a call instead. His brother had to be directly involved in this, after all - timing was far too perfect to be a coincidence.

"You sodding fat *fuck*!" he yelled into the handset as the over-polite tones of Mycroft's answerphone instructed him to leave a message. "If you wanted me brought in you could have bloody well managed it without *fucking over my friends*!"

With a vicious snarl he snapped the mobile shut, not even registering precisely what he'd said, and sprinted the last few metres to swing round the side of a townhouse just down the street from the distribution ring's headquarters. He stopped short at the sight of three squadcars pulled up to the
kerb around the house.

"See!?" Rhys exclaimed from behind him. The boy caught up in a few exhausted steps and leant against the bricks beside them, panting. "I f-fuckin' told you! Now let's get the fuck out of h-

Sherlock stopped listening, too focused on the man he'd just spotted loitering by the side of one of the police vehicles. Close-cropped hair - military cut - dark suit, leather gloves, transparent earpiece. Holding himself like a soldier but clearly not in active service judging by lack of tan lines or recent injuries… had to be an MI5 agent. Mycroft was dead bloody serious this time.

Suddenly the man seemed to startle. He took a mobile device out of the label pocket of his suit, looked down at the phone, then glanced up… right in the direction of Sherlock and Rhys.

A bolt of panic shot him through as Sherlock instantly realised the cause – he was still being traced. Mycroft's lackeys would know exactly where he was at all times so long as his phone retained sufficient power to broadcast a signal. Quickly he backed away around the corner, tugging Rhys with him, and hurried to remove the battery from his mobile one-handed.

"What the fuck's going on!?" Rhys yelped as Sherlock physically dragged him along the pavement.

"My phone's being tracked by a government agent." Finally the battery was free. Just to be safe he popped out the SIM card too. Then in a split-second decision Sherlock stopped short and shoved the phone along with its power cell into Rhys' hand.

"What…?" Rhys asked, baffled.

Sherlock pocketed the SIM card and took a step back. "I have to leave, you can't come with me and I probably won't be returning. That model's worth a few hundred pounds at least, sell it and find a place to stay."

Without waiting for an answer Sherlock shoved the boy into an alcove to their left, then ducked back out into the street. He flipped a jaunty little wave to the agent just now coming round the corner.

"Looking for me?" he quipped with a deliberately infuriating grin.

"Mr Holmes?" the man replied, looking slightly startled. He swiftly regained his composure and produced an ID badge from his trouser pocket to brandish with his next words. "Sir, you need to come with-"

"Yes, yes, come quietly or the entire Secret Service will be down on my head. I \textit{have} been through this before, you know."

"Well then, if you'd please just follow me…" the man had stopped a few metres away in response to his quarry's apparent compliance, which was exactly what Sherlock had been expecting him to do.

Sherlock tucked his hands into his pockets and smirked. "You've been warned I might become violent, I imagine?"

The man was watching him warily. "Yes."

"Excellent." In a flash Sherlock darted forward, aimed a punch directly for the other man's head. At the last moment he jerked his fist back and twisted out of the way, then took advantage the man's momentary confusion (vaguely threatening banter, surprise attack, expecting a fight that never
came) to instead dart to the side out of reach and sprint down the pavement.

The MI5 agent yelled something after him but Sherlock was already too far away to hear it clearly. Rather than look back he simply focused on running, knowing the man would miss Rhys in his haste to pursue the primary target. If all went well Sherlock could… aha! a fire ladder hung off the side of a building in front of him, and he quickly scaled it to reach the rooftops. Tiles slick with rain, but he ignored the danger and pressed on until he was well out of sight. With any luck the agent would assume he’d continued to run down the pavement, wouldn’t even think to try climbing.

After a few minutes of frenzied roof-hopping Sherlock felt safe enough to stop and take stock of his location. He was still within sight of Clapham Road, clinging somewhat precariously to a heating unit on the top of a business some hundred metres from where he’d started. The rain had soaked straight through his clothes ages ago and withdrawal was beginning to make him tremble with fatigue. Didn't care, though - better things to do than wallow in self-pity over his miserable condition.

He squinted through the storm, trying to find the right… aha! That way! With only a slight slip in the puddles on the roof Sherlock made his way to the awning and hopped down to a lower part of the building, then finally to the street.

After a short pause to get his bearings he took off again. Vauxhall was only a scant mile or so off, he could make it across the river in twenty minutes.

The rain began to fall in earnest. Sherlock ignored it.

He had business to take care of.

««

Bursting through the front doors of Thames House, soaking wet and shivering with a furious expression on his face and the gaunt, half-starved frame of a crazed drug addict was not, in all honesty, the most reasonable plan of action Sherlock had ever concocted.

He was a bit past the point of giving a damn though, and so with nary a pause for the startled adults around him he stalked toward the front desk where a secretary was seated.

"My name is Sherlock Holmes, I am classified as a priority one protected asset and I demand to speak to my brother immediately." He punctuated his sentence by slamming his ID card onto the counter in front of her, which he'd thankfully been carrying around in his jeans pocket rather than his peacoat ever since realising the presence of his billfold alongside several syringes full of cocaine would be enough to charge him with a drugs offence.

The woman jumped slightly, leaning back, but quickly recovered her composure. "You need to speak to…? Oh, er… I'm… sorry, sir, but Mr Holmes is in a meeting at the moment."

"Fuck his meeting!" Sherlock snarled. "Tell him his little brother is requesting an audience and if he doesn't get his fat arse out here right bloody now I'm going to tear his fucking head off!"

The secretary blinked once, then coughed nervously. "I'm… I'm afraid you'll have to wait in the lobby, sir. I'm not authorised to interru-"

She cut off with a small shriek of alarm as Sherlock lunged forward. A few of the men milling around nearby started toward them to restrain the dripping-wet junkie accosting their secretary, but Sherlock had already gotten a glimpse of the office dossier on the woman's desk and whipped around to sprint for the side door. Mycroft had a corner office on the third floor, of course he
Sherlock ran for the stairs.

Breaking into the headquarters of MI5 should probably have been significantly more of a challenge than simply running in like a maniac, but he seemed to have caught the advantage of surprise on his side. Nobody expected a psychotic cocaine addict to come crashing down the hall during the middle of an otherwise-dull workday, after all, so he managed to duck and twist his way around the scant few agents who tried to stop him. Finally he crashed into the stairwell and rocketed up the stone steps to the third floor.

Nameplates and numbers flashed by as he ran down the hallway. At last he spotted an etched plaque bearing the words "MYCROFT HOLMES" on a rich mahogany door at the end. He burst into the office at a dead sprint.

"Mycroft!"

The man in question startled and looked up to the door, visibly surprised.

"Sherlock! How-?" he started, but cut himself off. Abruptly his eyes flicked to the only other occupant of the room – the figure sitting across the desk from him. Sherlock turned his gaze to the man as well and felt his furious expression drop into a look of cold shock. What...?

Siger Holmes set down an ornate teacup he'd been just about to drink from and turned to regard him bemusedly.

"Ah, Sherlock," the man droned with an affable smile. "What a pleasant surprise."

Sherlock stared at his ex-father for a split second more, then shifted his eyes back to Mycroft with a questioning (betrayed!) look. His brother's face seemed to flash pained regret for an instant, but within milliseconds the flat mask of emotionless poise returned. Mycroft turned to their father with an air of unruffled composure.

"It appears you were correct, sir," he commented blandly as he leant back in his chair.

"Of course I was," Siger intoned with a false chuckle. "The boy is utterly predictable. You know that as well as I do."

Sherlock's gaze shot back and forth between the two men, his hand still flat on the wood paneling of the door where he'd shoved it open. He was soaked to the bone and shivering, but he doubted it was the rainwater making his chest feel as if ice were creeping up through his lungs. This isn't happening... it's not what it looks like this can't be happening no christ no...

Finally his eyes settled back on his brother. The man was watching him impassively.

"You..." Sherlock started, but that was as far as he got before an unexpected hand on the side of his head and a prick at his throat cut him off. He jerked forward in surprise and whipped around to see a dark-suited man draw away from him holding an empty syringe.

Sherlock clapped a hand to his neck, felt the blood oozing from his carotid artery. He blinked once and turned back to stare at Mycroft in disbelief.

"Myc..." he muttered blankly, stupidly. The drug was already permeating his brain, the world seeming to slow down as colours bent and blurred together.
As he watched his brother's face Sherlock imagined he saw guilt written there… but the grey haze beginning to creep around the edges of his vision made it hard to know for sure.

The world went dark.

««
Mycroft forced his expression to remain neutral as he watched his baby brother's eyes (full of confusion, pain, betrayal... lord no don't dwell don't analyse don't think about it) go hazy and roll back into his head. Sherlock's hand fell away from his neck as the boy's too-thin, haggard body crumpled beneath him to fall in a heap on the expensive carpeting.

The agent who'd been assigned to incapacitate the intruder stepped forward and placed two fingers on Sherlock's wrist.

"Pulse is stable, sir," the man announced after a pause. Siger smiled serenely and set down his untouched tea.

"A well-orchestrated attempt to hide him from me, I'll give you that," he said with a slight chuckle to his voice. Mycroft took a microsecond to ensure his face betrayed no emotion whatsoever before responding.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

Siger smirked. "Oh come now, child. Let's not forget who held your position before you, hm? You've had passive tracking on his wireless signal for well over a fortnight."

"A signal is no guarantee of whereabouts, as I'm sure you're aware," Mycroft responded evenly.

Siger just smiled.

"Quite true, my boy. Unless you've expressly ordered him to carry his mobile at all times, which you'd have done the moment you re-established contact." He leant back in his chair with a look very close to smug amusement. "If it were anyone else I'd have assumed immediate disposal of the device regardless of instructions. But with Sherlock, of course, we have to take into account certain... emotional aspects." Siger shook his head, smirking, and looked back at the heap on the floor which was his former son. "Trusts his big brother not to betray him. How touching."

Mycroft held his tongue - biting back the childish retort (I wouldn't have!) before it could escape. Turned his mind to other matters instead. Assessment of plans, predicting outcomes... Sherlock had quite obviously dodged the agent Mycroft had sent to intercept him. Should have known it would happen, of course; perhaps sent in more than a single man. But on short notice and under scrutiny it had been the most he could do. At the very least he'd hoped his brother would deign to exercise a modicum of foresight for once in his life and take to the back streets again, evade Siger's pursuit just as efficiently as he'd always slipped out from under Mycroft's nose.

But then no, clearly that was far too much to ask. As their Father had so succinctly put it, the boy was utterly predictable. In a flash of anger he'd go straight for the source to accost the perceived instigator, take physical action rather than pause for five minutes to stop and bloody think. And that, of course, led directly to a sopping-wet teenager (no, wait, he'd turned twenty now, hadn't he?) bursting into Mycroft's office in the midst of a clandestine meeting, shouting like a lunatic. Bursting into his supposedly-secure office which was located in the middle of MI5 headquarters, no less. Of all the ways to make an entrance.
With this thought Mycroft leant back in his chair slightly and regarded his father. "You arranged for him to be allowed access to the building."

It wasn't a question - it didn't need to be, they both knew what had to have happened. Siger smiled benignly and confirmed the statement with a small incline of his head regardless.

"Of course. Why go to all the bother of chasing down and cornering the boy when he's willing to present himself on a silver platter?"

Mycroft had no real answer for that - nothing he could articulate, in any case. More than anything he was finding himself angry. With himself, for allowing what should have really been a simple investigation-leading-to-arrest to blossom into something more befitting a spy drama than anything; with his father, for... well, for being his father, mostly. Siger Holmes was a force all to himself, Mycroft had accepted that long ago, but it would be nice once in awhile if the man could be just a tad less of a raging psychopath. And above all angry with Sherlock, for failing to have any sense of self-preservation whatsoever. Granted he could hardly be faulted for that, considering the circumstances, but still the utter lack of common sense remained aggravating.

Everything was building up into a very uncharacteristic tangle of raw emotion. Not something Mycroft could afford right now.

Leaning forward slightly he rose from his seat, allowed the usual wall of frozen apathy to guard his words and actions before he turned his gaze to the body on the floor of his office.

The room was silent - everyone waiting for his decision to inform their next move. Siger sat slightly to the side, unruffled as ever and smiling with the air of a man watching a mildly amusing play. The agent (not one Mycroft recognised - most likely MI6, recruited through one of Siger's old contacts... perhaps not even a government employee, have to keep watch on him) stood at attention above his downed target, hands tucked neatly behind his back in a parade rest posture. And Sherlock, of course, lay unconscious at their feet - soaked through by the rain, paler than death, and far too thin.

Mycroft regarded his little brother for perhaps a microsecond longer than necessary, (causing Siger's smile to deepen into a smirk) then turned toward the window behind him.

"Have the boy transported to a holding cell," he ordered in a bland monotone. "I will deal with him later."

"North block, second level," Siger put in before the agent could act on the instruction. Mycroft didn't bother to relay the (technically invalid) locational order - it hardly mattered what he said at this point, Father had obviously been planning this for quite some time and would ensure things went his way. The most Mycroft could hope for was that the distraction of abducting Sherlock had been sufficient to keep Siger's attention away from more important matters.

As if reading his thoughts, Siger rose and made his way around the desk to stand by his son.

"You allowed this to happen," he intoned quietly. "Don't forget that, child."

And with that he turned, flipped a nonchalant wave over his shoulder (which Mycroft could see in the reflection off the windowpanes)... and was gone.

Mycroft waited a few seconds to be sure the man had really left, then, his poised stance deflating, rubbed a hand down his face and sighed.

 Damn it, Sherlock... was all he could think.
Consciousness did not come gradually.

No, one moment he'd been staring at his brother's face, watching the haze of grey creeping around the edges of awareness like static on a television. It seemed to Sherlock that he'd blinked - just the once - and immediately found himself sprawled across a hard surface. Plastic, cold when he shifted his hand, the barest hint of cushioning. He reluctantly opened his eyes (when had he closed them?) and regarded what appeared to be a hard slat of an institutionalised mattress under his face.

It took a moment to register the significance. Not that he really had any idea where he might be, but as bits and pieces of the last few hours (?) began to coalesce in his head the picture became clearer. Hard, easily-washable mattress, grey cinder walls, heavy bolted door. He was in a holding cell of some sort.

With a very slight groan he attempted to push himself into a sitting position – more difficult than it really should have been. His head felt like a lead weight hanging off his neck, brain reduced to nothing so much as a dense coagulation of fog and swampland. Sticky, viscous mud and clinging wreaths of mist circling round the intermittent vortices of sickening nausea. No room for thinking, just the vague, subconscious directive to get upright.

Finally after what seemed an eternity he managed to sit up. Braced himself with his arms and slowly looked around him. Cell, definitely. No identifying features whatsoever – at least none that he could make sense of right now. He stifled another noise of discomfort and raised a hand to his head. What the hell had he been drugged with?

Didn't feel like an opiate, though to be fair his experience with such substances was rather limited. That left… wait, fuck, he didn't actually know what alternatives that left. Of course he didn't - he was a bloody stimulant addict, why would he care about depressants? Fucking idiotic thing to even be thinking about.

The upsurge of pointless, desperate anger at so stupid a topic told him he was very definitely in the midst of a cocaine crash. Nothing in the way of a headache, though, so he'd either slept through the initial withdrawal symptoms or whatever he'd been knocked out with had been an analgesic of some sort. Not that he particularly cared either way – no, more important was finding out what the hell was going on.

He carefully leant back against the concrete wall behind him, ignoring the way his vision twisted and bucked with the movement, and made a token attempt to drag his legs into a lotus position. Couldn't quite manage – muscles didn't seem too enthusiastic about working correctly – so instead he made due with tucking one leg under his thigh. A sharp corner poked into his flesh through one of his pockets. Cigarette packet. They'd left it on him? Nicotine would help the nausea, probably. Assuming he could even manage to light a fag in this state... or retrieve one, for that matter.

His arm was frustratingly unresponsive but he forced it to reach down and retrieve the little cardboard box from his jeans pocket. Alright, one step covered. Next...?

Oh, right. Lighter. Found it, other pocket. Oh fuck's sake, it was out, wasn't it? He flicked the spark experimentally regardless, was irritably unsurprised when nothing happened. Why the hell had he even been carrying around a near-empty lighter?

With a slight growl he attempted to chuck the useless thing at the far wall. It only flew about half a metre. Muscular weakness. Distressing. Not much he could do about it, however, so he just scowled impotently at the cheap blue plastic case resting incongruous against the hard grey cement
in front of him. Whatever, fine. So he could barely move and nicotine was not an option. Didn't matter, focus on other things. Figure out how he'd gotten here - think.

Facts first: Mycroft. Been in a meeting with Father? Why? Working together? Unlikely, they were on opposite sides of legality. More likely a plot of some sort. Both attempting to manipulate the other for political gain. But set in motion by whom? Mycroft had a vested interest in destroying Siger, thanks to his rising position with MI5, but he hadn't made any moves to do so yet. No reason to start now, of all times. Siger, on the other hand, could very easily have been developing a new criminal venture of some sort for which he required Mycroft's cooperation. In that case conspiring to have Sherlock on hand as a bargaining chip made sense.

But then again, the drugs bust on the distribution's headquarters had to have been orchestrated by Mycroft - Siger didn't have enough influence in domestic intelligence to deploy MI5 agents. Why would Mycroft want to drag Sherlock into the thick of a squabble with Father? He'd only be inconveniencing himself. Unless it had been some sort of attempt to... no, that didn't... but then... or wait... ugh christ why the fuck did his family have to be a load of bloody scheming masterminds?

Sherlock groaned to himself again and thumped his head gently on the wall behind him, which turned out to be a poor idea as the action made his vision seem to fuzz out for a moment. He blinked a few times to clear it, realising as he did so that he'd somehow ended up collapsed over onto his side on the stiff cushion. How in hell had that happened? He didn't remember falling.

Scowling, he pushed himself upright again. Head swimming with nausea, but he ignored it. Christ, this was getting ridiculous – someone would no doubt be coming through that door any moment to... well, he wasn't really sure. Collect him or interrogate him (about what?) or any of a million other things. All depended on who'd decided to capture him and why. Whatever the case he needed to be at least somewhat capable of defending himself should things take a poor turn. That meant staying upright, moving, keeping his blood flowing so the drug would clear out of his system faster.

Should probably try to walk, then. Door had a large viewing window, wired glass, reinforced – anything of interest outside? Hallway, might be useful information. Worth a shot anyway. He stared determinedly at it and without giving himself a chance to think further forced his legs to haul his body into a standing position.

Floor.

That was his very next thought – also unfortunately his very next sight. He blinked at his hand splayed out on the concrete beside his face, feeling as if a section of memory had been surgically removed from his brain. That or the universe had quite suddenly decided to stop behaving in a logical manner. Stand up then floor? Didn't make sense, not right at all. There were supposed to be intermediate steps in there somewhere.

After a few seconds' staring at his own hand he eventually came to the conclusion that, in all probability, the universe had not in fact chosen to take a holiday from logical progression of action. No, the problem was that his head was scrambled. And while that perhaps should have been somewhat comforting (drugs would wear off, after all, while the universe likely wouldn't deign to return to normal circumstances once changed) Sherlock instead found it rather terrifying. For god's sake all he bloody had was his brain. What was he if not his intelligence? Without wits and logic he was nothing, just a common worthless lunatic, burden on society - and oh god, wait, but what if this was just the final stage of a process they'd started ages ago? He'd been steadily losing hold of his mental stability at an ever-increasing pace over the last few months, after all; had that really all
been down to the cocaine? They'd knocked him out that night before rehab, remember - no idea what he'd been duped into injecting himself with, could have been anything...

On from anger to paranoia, then, and while in a strictly clinical sense Sherlock understood what his mind was doing right now – buckling under the combination of cocaine withdrawal with an unknown substance, lack of nicotine and god knew what else – it still didn't help to ease the gnawing fear that he'd been permanently damaged somehow. With a grimace he shut his eyes. Alright, no, stop thinking in circles... calm down, breathe. Take a moment to reorient. Soon enough the world would filter back down into a more manageable state, just had to wait for his brain to reboot. Everything was fine.

"Having a rough time of it, are we?" a voice broke in to the otherwise-oppressive silence of the holding cell, and Sherlock blinked out of the inadvertent haze of twilight sleep he'd somehow drifted into upon closing his eyes. He craned his neck to regard the cell door (realising as he did so that he was no longer quite as horrifically dizzy as he had been, and that his joints were now feeling stiff and achy rather than fluid and unresponsive - sedatives starting to wear off, then... how long had he been lying on the floor...?) and spotted a dark-eyed, brown-haired young man watching him with a look of amusement. Sherlock scowled.

"Fuck off," he mumbled irritably. Without really even registering what he'd said he set about shoving himself into something approaching a sitting position. A careful shake of his head didn't produce the same spinning nausea as the action had earlier, was even able to raise a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose with a grimace against a blossoming headache without much issue. And oh good god, there was the cocaine withdrawal - fucking hell, he'd almost preferred the sedative. Maybe if he antagonised the guard or whoever it was they'd knock him unconscious again.

"Well that's not a very nice way to say hello," the unidentified man at the door said with a slight whingeing pout to his voice. Sherlock scrunched his face up in confusion and finally turned his head to get a proper look at the stranger. It wasn't just a young man, he realised, but a very young man - around Sherlock's age, perhaps even a year or so his junior. And through the wired glass of the door's reinforced windowpane Sherlock could see that the boy was clothed in a casual blue buttonup and trousers. Expensive, yes, and visibly bespoke, but not a uniform of any sort. This wasn't a guard - he wasn't even an employee.

"Who the hell are you?" Sherlock asked somewhat blankly. Not the most eloquent line of questioning, true, but then his head was still muddled.

The boy in the window grinned, shrugging his shoulders with a slight bounce. "Oh, nobody."

Sherlock scowled at the non-answer and set about grabbing up his lighter from the floor in front of him, then his cig packet off the cot behind. Both useless to him at the moment, unfortunately, but he felt better having them in their correct places in his jeans pockets regardless. He resolved to ignore the grinning twat in the window for now - either it was someone's wayward son attempting to rile up inmates (and that begged all sorts of questions concerning where exactly this was) or a hallucination of some sort, and Sherlock had little desire to interact with either option.

"More interesting, I think, is who you are," the stranger went on when it became clear Sherlock wasn't about to pick up the thread of conversation. His over-perky accent carried a hint of an Irish lilt. "A twenty-something junkie in the custody of MI6? Rather strange. And you're a British citizen too, obviously, so not likely a terror suspect... maybe even related to someone. Actually, did you know you and Mycroft Holmes have the same eyes?"

Sherlock's gaze snapped up at the sound of his brother's name, and he glared as the boy in the door grinned even wider.
"That's a yes, is it?" he crooned with a slight snicker to his tone. "So big bad Mister Holmes had his own little brother locked up? Oh, that's tragic."

"What are you, then, the warden's son or something?" Sherlock finally got round to hauling himself to a standing position (using a not-insignificant amount of assistance from the steel frame of the cot beside him, though he chose to ignore that little detail).

"Hah! No, I wish though!" the boy replied with a chuckle. "Can you imagine the sort of things you'd have access to with a dad in Military Intelligence? Oh, well, actually I guess you don't have to. What was Siger Holmes when he retired, some sort of senior MI6 commander?"

Sherlock just glared again, though this time with a slight hint of confusion creeping into his expression. Siger, as far as he knew, had been an unrevealed asset for the majority of his government career. (Most likely because admitting to employing violent psychopaths in key foreign affairs capacities would not have been an advisable public relations tactic.) And yet this person appeared to know accurate information about his prior rank. And had also at the very least an approximation of Mycroft's physical appearance, detailed enough to identify shared family traits. Strange. Even somewhat worrisome, perhaps, though of course Sherlock wasn't exactly of a mind to give half a shit about his brother's possible security leaks.

"Oh I know all about the Holmes family." The boy in the window once again seemed to read Sherlock's thoughts. "Well, almost all about them. I didn't know who you were, of course... looks like they cut you out of a lot of documentation. But isn't that fascinating? A whole son they kept out of sight! Though, granted, I can see why. Oxford dropout, drug addict... not exactly much to write home about, are you? Plus I'm pretty sure you're gay and that can't have helped anything."

Sherlock fixed his unwelcome visitor with a flat stare, carefully masking the sense of creeping unease his words were beginning to instil. This stranger knew far too much about him and his family, all apparently out of nowhere. And, yes, there was always the possibility that he'd looked up the details in a file system somewhere... but for some reason Sherlock was getting the distinct impression that he hadn't. It was unnerving. Also vaguely irritating - stupid bastard thought he knew everything, did he? Well, two could play at that game.

"And you're the son of a self-made businessman, moderate wealth though you try to give the impression of having more means than you really do, high intelligence and the ability to con your way into and out of dangerous situations - obviously you aren't meant to be in here, but the fact that no one's raised an alarm yet means you either slipped in undetected or fabricated a reason to be allowed access - and you've dropped out of university too, only you still keep up the pretence of attendance to appease your parents who know nothing of your illicit wanderings through secure facilities and in fact think you're a pleasant young man with an interest in... mathematics, I'd guess? Not an applied field, something theoretical."

The boy laughed, clapping his hands and bouncing on the balls of his feet like a giddy schoolgirl. "Oh, yes! I like you, you're fun!"

Sherlock grit his teeth against a burst of hot pain through his skull at the shrill tones of the other man's voice. "Wonderful," he bit out. "If you're quite through watching me like a goldfish I would be much obliged if you'd either open the door or fuck off."

The young man blinked, then looked down at the door in front of him with a half-startled, somewhat-bewildered expression, like he hadn't even realised it was there.

"Oh!" His confused expression split into a grin again. "You want out? Hmm... alright, hang on."
Sherlock let himself fall back to sit heavily on the cot once more as the irritating stranger disappeared from sight. He huffed a tired sigh to himself. Well, this was just *brilliant*. Taken into custody by the bloody *government*, under sedation no less, and now about to break out of a secure holding cell with the aid of what for all intents and purposes appeared to be a complete lunatic. This day just kept getting better and better.

Without even thinking about it he fished his cigarette packet out of his pocket, then scowled at the single, un-lightable fag rattling around within.

What a fucking stupid way to quit smoking.

"Ta-da!" he exclaimed happily. "Sorry about the wait, took some doing with the overrides. But then you know these people don't ever really have half the network security they think they do. *Especially* when they leave their terminals logged in over their lunch break - can you believe it? Message windows open and everything! Idiots, *honestly.*"

Sherlock stepped forward and regarded the other boy carefully for a second, then exited the cell. No alarms went off, no guards came running... no, just an empty corridor lined with numbered doors, all lit with industrial bulbs spaced evenly down the hall.

He glanced around, then over to his erstwhile partner-in-crime. "What were you doing here in the first place?"

The young man grinned as he shut the cell door, then tucked his hands into his trouser pockets and began to stroll down the hallway. Sherlock followed.

"Oh, not much. Just looking around, really." He shrugged. "Dad always drags us off to London over the holidays, *family vacation*, I guess. Boring as anything. Thought I'd see what trouble I could get into while everyone's off down the shops."

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. "So you broke into a military holding facility... because you were bored."

"Yep!" the stranger chirped happily. He spun on his heel to grin at Sherlock, raising his hands to indicate the space around them. "Isn't it brilliant? All I had to do was forge some paperwork, pretend like my Dad worked here, then I just found a computer and... well, that wasn't so easy, actually, but I got it sorted. The thing is you can't just switch off *all* the security, then they'll know something's up. Got to go in bits and pieces."

"Obviously." Sherlock tried not to sound as blankly bewildered as he was beginning to feel. For some deranged reason he found himself wondering suddenly if this was how other people saw him; rambling on about seemingly-incomprehensible nonsense, acting as if things like *hacking into a bloody MI6 network from inside the building itself* were just another amusing diversion.

A brief burst of denial - no, no, surely not, he wasn't nearly this strange... but, then, after a seconds' deliberation he was forced to come to the conclusion that, indeed, this was quite likely an accurate
example of how he tended to appear to the average human being when not off his face on cocaine. The knowledge was somewhat distressing. Although, sadly, it did explain rather a lot; this little bastard was bloody irritating. If Sherlock was half as much of an annoyance... well, it only made sense for people to seek out ways to shut him up, didn't it? Couldn't blame anyone for wanting to end a load of rambling nonsense. And if violence happened to work well for that purpose... well, whose fault was that? He was the one who'd decided to respond to pain by going quiet and unobtrusive, after all. No one but himself to blame. So really then it had all been justified, hadn't it. Always known it was.

He quickly shook his head to dispel a buzz of self-loathing before it could fester any further. Ugh, this always happened when he was crashing - lack of dopamine, serotonin and god-knew-what-else rendered his brain prone to anxiety attacks, bouts of maudlin dysphoria, depression. Wouldn't work this time, though... no, not when he was aware of it. Just because his mind liked to function in an uncontrollable scattered mess of thoughts and emotions all the damned time didn't mean he couldn't at least make an effort to keep hold of the reins.

"You know, you don't seem very pleased with your freedom," the hacker suddenly said with a pout, interrupting Sherlock's vicious internal diatribe. "Actually you look a tad grouchy. Did you want to go back to your cell and have a nap, maybe?"

Sherlock glared at him. "I'm coming off multiple classes of drugs and I haven't had a smoke in..." he paused, realising he actually had no idea what time it was and no means of finding out; "...far too long. I'm not going to be pleased with anything."

"Oh. Well... fair enough, I guess." His companion shrugged. "Just seems like you could show a bit more gratitude to the dashing gentleman who so graciously decided to facilitate your escape from MI6 custody."

"Thank you," Sherlock responded in a supremely unimpressed deadpan. The other boy grinned, apparently pleased with himself, and sauntered on ahead of him.

As they walked along the hall Sherlock again pulled out his lighter, scowling down at it as he flicked the spark. Nothing. Not that it would really be a good idea to attempt to have a smoke in the midst of escaping from a military prison anyway... but good god the lack of nicotine was starting to make his skull feel like it had cracked in half. Maybe if he just ate the tobacco...?

Ugh, no christ. He wasn't that pathetic.

"I think there's a shipping exit this way," the other boy said over his shoulder. "Though I can't imagine how on earth you're planning to dodge your brother once you're out. I mean you do realise Mycroft Holmes is just about the most powerful man in the world right now?"

"He is not," Sherlock countered irritably, slipping his useless lighter back into his jeans pocket. The hacker hmm'ed in disagreement. "No... I'm pretty sure he is. I've been trying to figure a way to get close to him for ages, you know. Practically impossible to get within a hundred metres of the man."

Sherlock scoffed. "I ran into Thames House and up to his office without much trouble, can't be that difficult."

"Right, and that obviously ended really well for you." The boy rolled his eyes, then his expression shifted into something a bit more thoughtful. "Though, granted... getting yourself criminally detained is a rather good way to come into contact with the higher-ups. But then of course you'll
only ever get the attention of someone like Mr Holmes if you're related to him..." He trailed off for a moment, then looked back toward Sherlock with a vaguely menacing smirk. "... or if you associate with someone related to him."

Sherlock narrowed his eyes in suspicion - was that some sort of threat, or...? But his thoughts were derailed as What's-His-Name quite suddenly stopped in his tracks and grabbed Sherlock by the forearm to tug them both backwards against the wall.

"What-?" Sherlock started, but the other boy put a finger to his lips in a shushing motion. A meaningful glance above them drew Sherlock's attention to a security camera panning directly over their heads.

"Can't disable everything, remember?" the hacker whispered, a childish grin playing at his lips. Sherlock nodded his understanding as they watched the camera continue to scan the hall.

"We're in a blind spot?"

"No, I've just got a thing for standing stock-still against walls." Complete deadpan. Sherlock frowned at the insipid sarcasm but managed to bite back his retort. Now wasn't exactly the opportune moment for trading barbs.

A few more seconds passed before Sherlock's companion apparently deemed the coast clear and tugged them both towards a branch in the hallway a few metres down from where they stood. Sherlock obligingly hung back as the shorter boy stuck his head round the corner to check for further surveillance.

"Whoops! Wow, alright, maybe not that way..." he exclaimed suddenly in a startled half-mumble, jerking his head out of the line of sight of the other hallway. Sherlock backed up a step as the other nearly collided with him in his haste to retreat.

The hacker turned to shove lightly at Sherlock's chest in indication that they should go back the way they'd come. "Nevermind, we'll just try the south... oh, er..." He abruptly cut off and glanced at something over Sherlock's shoulder. His dark eyes flicked back to meet Sherlock's questioning look, expression shifting into a strange, half-delighted, half-guilty sort of wince. "Seems we've been rumbled, honey."

Sherlock shot the other boy an alarmed glare and made to turn around. Before he could complete the motion however he was stopped dead in his tracks by the feeling of cold metal on the back of his neck. Gun barrel.

His eyes widened and he looked back to his erstwhile companion, who responded with a vaguely sheepish smile and a shrug.

"Hands up, no other movements," a voice commanded in clipped military tones from behind Sherlock's back. He really didn't need to be told twice. In front of him the insane boy had obeyed as well, pale hands rising aloft over his shoulders as yet another manic grin began to spread across his face. He eyed what was presumably the government agent holding Sherlock at gunpoint.

"Oh dear, done the rounds early have they?" he asked the man with a bit of a false pout to his voice. "Seems someone missed you!" he added to Sherlock in a mock-conspiratory stage whisper, nearly giggling. Sherlock fixed him with a furious glare. They'd just been caught red-handed trying to escape, why the hell was the idiot laughing!? First chance he got he was going to bloody strangle the little-!
"Hm, sounds as if we've had a small incident."

Sherlock felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. A new voice had come drifting around the corner from the hall ahead of them, and he'd recognise its low, flat timbre anywhere. He tried to ignore the sensation of blood draining from his face and forced himself to look up as Siger Holmes stepped around the corner from the hall Sherlock and the other boy had just been about to head down.

Sherlock's ex-father stopped in the middle of the walkway and raised a single eyebrow at the two youths frozen before him. An older, besuited gentleman stepped into view a split-second later, having apparently been walking alongside Siger in conversation; the distinguished cut of his suit coupled with the clear, wired earpiece and lapel pin marked him as a probable military official of some sort. His expression mirrored Siger's look of bland incredulity as he too took in the scene.

"Your boy been making friends, Siger?" the man asked casually after a pause, an amused smirk beginning to pull at the edges of his thick moustache.

Siger appeared to be significantly less entertained by the situation. His gaze slid away from the still-grinning hacker to meet Sherlock's eyes with a frigid glare. "It would seem so."

Every corner of Sherlock's mind was screaming at him to stand up straight, glare right back, be *defiant* - Siger held no authority over him. Not legally and not physically; that old handicap of Sherlock being too small to defend himself was a thing of the past. He could fight, now. Perhaps not quite as skillfully as Siger but he could still hold his own, do some damage. He wasn't just a frightened little boy anymore.

Reminding himself of this didn't seem to matter in the slightest, though, because with no drugs to bolster his confidence and trapped with a gun to his neck he felt his body shrinking into an instinctive cringe. Horrifying. Especially so when he found himself having to smother the ridiculous instinct to start stammering apologies (*he refused to admit how close he'd come to blurring out an alarmed 'sorry, sir'). Normally he'd not be this cowed - he *knew* he was capable of standing up to his father (*though admittedly doing so had never ended well*), but despite every attempt to put on a brave front it seemed the combination of stimulant withdrawal and general mental stress had forced some sort of behavioural default. He'd become trapped in the submissive mannerisms of his childhood.

The government official at Siger's side had apparently chosen to ignore the man's near-cowering ex-son. Instead he was busy eyeing Sherlock's lunatic partner-in-crime with an appraising look.

"How in hell's name did you get in here, lad?"

The hacker shrugged, his mad grin shifting into a deliberately-infuriating smirk. "Magic."

The official raised his eyebrows and glanced sidelong at Siger. "Not one of yours, I hope?"

"I know nothing of the Irish boy," Siger replied in a bland monotone. "Doubtless a worthwhile source of inquiry, however."

His companion nodded, stroking his moustache thoughtfully. After a pause he gestured to someone standing behind the two young men. Sherlock felt the cold steel of the gun barrel leave his neck as the agent instead pointed it toward the hacker.

"Ooh, am I to be *interrogated*?" he exclaimed cheerfully as the gun levelled on his face.

Siger's military associate raised his eyebrows again, but apparently didn't deem that question worth answering. Instead he looked back to Sherlock.
"You'll be taking custody of this one, I expect?" he said, addressing Siger even as he continued to study Sherlock's face. Sherlock tried not to swallow convulsively as he caught sight of his ex-father's offhand nod out the corner of his vision. He hoped his expression didn't look quite as helplessly terrified as he was beginning to feel.

"I was planning to collect him in a few moments anyway." Siger's voice was its usual emotionless deadpan. No attempt at faking levity - usually not a good sign. Another half-seconds' staring at Sherlock (who felt himself begin to shrink backwards despite all determination not to) passed before he turned to extend a hand to his companion. "Much obliged for the assistance concerning the new enterprise, Montgomery."

Montgomery shook the proffered hand with a warm smile. "Always happy to help an old friend, Siger." As their hands dropped he shot a quick nod to the armed agent, who stepped forward and prodded Sherlock's erstwhile companion into taking a step forward.

"Now, lad," Montgomery said with an appraising look to the boy. "I'd wager we've quite a few questions for you."

The lunatic grinned. "Oh, I'm sure."

As he was herded away down the hall by the agent the hacker twisted backwards and flipped Sherlock a teasing little wave, adding a wink for good measure. Sherlock returned his enthusiastic grin with a wide-eyed glare. What the fucking hell!? Was that madman pleased by all this...? He'd been planning to get them caught the whole time, hadn't he!? Little bastar-!

His furious thoughts were quite abruptly cut off as Siger took a calm step forward and laid a hand on his ex-son's shoulder. A spike of ice-cold adrenaline seemed to shoot through Sherlock's body from the point of contact. Muscles stiffening he flicked his gaze back to his father's face.

"Lower your hands, child. You look like a fool." Siger's tone was deceptively casual but carried a clear note of dangerous annoyance. Sherlock immediately did as he was told. He tried to take a step back - get out from under the unwanted contact - but his retreat was halted by Siger's grip tightening on his shoulder. Fingers dug into a pressure point at the joint between Sherlock's spine and scapula with clinical precision and immediately a bolt of white-hot pain shot up the side of his neck. He flinched, frozen in place, and failed to force the wince off his features before his father's grip mercifully loosened once more.

Siger seemed to snort to himself in vaguely bemused irritation. Without removing his hand from Sherlock's shoulder he turned to walk back the way he'd come. Sherlock found himself being forced into step alongside him. Their pace was deliberate and unhurried - apparently they were in no rush to get wherever they were headed. Between the slow gait and sudden frigid silence it felt very much like being led to the gallows.

"You realise Mycroft will never cooperate if you kill me," Sherlock blurted out after a few tense seconds' walking. For some idiotic reason he found himself terrified by the thought that perhaps he really was being marched off to his death.

He caught Siger's look of mild exasperation out of the corner of his vision. "I'm well aware of that."

"Then why-?" Sherlock started, but couldn't get any further before cutting off with a startled choke of pain - Siger had hit the pressure point again, more firmly this time. Sherlock cringed and grit his teeth. Argh, fuck... alright, so maybe he should just keep his mouth shut. Rebellion in the face of impossible odds was all well and good but there had to be a point where defiance morphed into stupidity.
As they neared the end of the hallway Siger stopped at a terminal set into a recess by a large set of double steel doors. A swipe of an identification card from his pocket flicked the red lights on the electronic locks to a flashing green, and he hit another button to open them before forcing Sherlock through alongside him.

"Your brother cares very deeply for you, Sherlock," Siger informed him in a bland monotone as they continued through what looked like a suite of conference rooms. "This is a weakness he's permitted to fester, hindering his efficacy as an impartial overseer. And I, for one, do not intend to sit idly by as my heir's career is allowed to stagnate in deference to his illogical concern for a delinquent half-sibling."

"So you are going to kill me," Sherlock supplied before he could think not to. Another flash of pain raced up his neck and he grimaced even as he mentally swore at himself for the slip-up. *Fuck's sake,* could he honestly not manage to shut up for five bloody seconds!?

"Unfortunately, no. Revenge is not a path I wish to engender." Siger flipped the ID card out of his pocket once more and swiped it through a reader by the side of a wood-panelled door they'd come to. He put his hand on the knob and turned to meet Sherlock's wide-eyed stare with a false smile of geniality. "Far better to beget realisation than to force retaliation, don't you think?"

Sherlock didn't get a chance to answer, nor to even figure out what the hell that was supposed to mean, as in the next second he found himself shoved through the doorway ahead of his father. They'd stepped into a large conference room - to one side of them were windows looking out over the river (... so they were still in Thames House? or perhaps a building nearby...?), to the other a large bank of television monitors. Dominating the middle of the space was a large mahogany table, around which were seated a handful of imposing, dark-suited intelligence officials.

The youngest of the men rose from his seat... Mycroft. His eyes found Sherlock's, who held his brother's gaze as steadily as he could manage whilst the hand on his shoulder tightened into the pressure point again.

If Mycroft saw his little brother's pained half-wince he didn't acknowledge it. Instead he looked to Siger with an expression caught somewhere between incredulity and anger.

"What are you doing?" he practically snapped. His fellow officials seemed to be observing the family squabble intently, faces morphing into varying levels of interest or disapproval.

Siger just smiled. "Negotiating."

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Mycroft met his brother's gaze, carefully keeping his expression neutral against the emotion he could see cracking through the boy's stoic façade - fear, confusion... *pain.* Sherlock's flinch when Siger tightened his grip wasn't pronounced, barely perceptible even, but to Mycroft it flashed like a beacon. Fraternal instincts jumped at the thought of his baby brother being hurt, sent signals screaming to attack the perpetrator. But that would never do, would it. He'd be at every disadvantage. And so he resolutely quelled the urge to launch himself into a rampage. Thoughtless violence would solve nothing.

Better to remind himself that he'd planned for this. Or, well... if not *this,* exactly *in the middle of a meeting, really?* at least he'd successfully gathered all the necessary resources. Father had foolishly preoccupied himself with Sherlock, assuming the boy to be the key to forcing Mycroft's hand, leaving himself blind to several crucial events playing themselves out directly under his nose. Mistakes allowed to slip through only because, for all his calculating schemes and infallible poise,
Siger was sorely lacking in one critical advantage to this mind-game of theirs - empathy.

Siger's mind worked on cold logic, robotic to a fault. If protecting a sibling became too much of a detriment, simply cast them aside. He'd be dumbfounded as to why Mycroft hadn't done so already. Which meant that this little stunt - dragging Sherlock, visibly terrified, into a clandestine meeting, attempting to embarrass Mycroft in front of his peers - had most likely been calculated to induce a realisation of some sort. Drive the point home that this pathetic emotional bond Mycroft shared (however unwillingly on Sherlock's part) with his brother was nothing more than fragile human weakness.

As if he weren't fully aware of that already.

Two decades of sleepless nights and worried circling self-analysis had long ago brought Mycroft to a definite conclusion regarding his brother - Sherlock was a mitigating factor in his life. No one had ever taken control of the world, shaped governments, or ruled kings with a baby brother to fret over. It was tantamount to having a child. Everyone who knew of the existence of his sibling would deduce immediately that such a relationship took emotional precedent over matters of international security. It was leverage of the most devastating variety; forcing him to stay his hand when ruthlessness might be the better option, to work around negotiating parties rather than mercilessly dispatch any and all threats to the nation. His tether.

But along with that understanding he'd also come to a decision: he needed to be reigned in by compassion.

The thought of one day losing himself to the demons of his own ambition had troubled Mycroft for much of his younger years - one read the stories of great kings, pharaohs, men with untold and incredible power. Each and every one of them succumbing eventually to the cruel insanity of complete dominion. Power corrupts, it was said, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. What, then, could he ever hope to accomplish with his burgeoning desire to control an entire nation? Was he fated only to drive himself mad?

He aimed for the ability to ensure safety - to know that never again would anyone he cared for suffer needlessly, assistance just out of reach for the simple fact that no one had noticed. Mycroft would be the one to notice. Always, forever, and whether they damned well liked it or not. During the course of pursuing this goal, however, he'd somehow lost hold of the very impetus which drove him. He strove to protect those he cared for... and yet somewhere along the line he'd stopped caring for anyone.

Mummy was a lost cause - depressed, half-mad, more scattered than ever in the wake of whatever Siger had done to her after Sherlock's birth. Seeing her lucid had become a rarer and rarer event, until finally she'd become no more than a broken husk of a being, floating about the manor like a ghost. He cared for the memory of who she'd once been, perhaps, but no longer for the woman herself.

Father, of course, had never really required even a passing thought of protection. Back when Mycroft had still idolised him it had been with the fervour of a child looking up to their hero - a devotion born of awe, not parental love. And a bond which, ultimately, crumbled away in the light of understanding.

This left only Sherlock. His one remaining thread, keeping him tied down through this love for an insolent, over-dramatic, emotionally unstable, utterly brilliant baby brother. And somehow the very fact that he was incapable of controlling the boy served to keep him anchored to something like sanity.
Mycroft's peace of mind over the years had slowly come to rely on the knowledge that, no matter what - no matter how absolutely he seemed to able to bend and shape the world to his will - there would always be at least one person on whom his authority had no effect. If Sherlock didn't feel like following orders, he wouldn't. Simple as. No amount of threats or coercion on Mycroft's part could ever change that. *Absolute power corrupts absolutely*... a truth, perhaps. But as long as Sherlock lived there was *no such thing* as absolute power. There was only the majority; control everyone you like, Sherlock Holmes does as he bloody well pleases. A continual reminder of Mycroft's personal fallibility.

To a lesser mind, perhaps, that might have seemed like weakness. Certainly to someone like Siger it must appear the height of folly to allow such a relationship to continue to sway thoughts and actions. Mycroft saw it for what it truly was, though - not a broken shield but the tempering of steel. An obstinate rock in the form of a rebellious child, against whom the destructive power of Mycroft's manipulative skill could be either blunted or honed, but never effectively wielded.

In no way an advantage, then... at least not in the sense that it allowed him to gain ground in his career. Exactly the opposite, if he were to be perfectly honest. He'd turned down quite a few promotions to positions overseas for the simple fact that being forced to relocate so far from London would put him out of reach of his brother. But that was acceptable. Because in certain cases, he believed, and few and far between... a disadvantage could serve to keep one grounded. Keep one human.

So it was with very human anger that he rose from his seat and met his father's gaze.

"What are you doing?" he snapped in a low growl, voice tight and clipped. Knowing Siger would most likely attempt a threat of this nature did nothing to quell the upsurge of protective rage at actually *witnessing* it. Having to see his little brother helpless, shrinking in on himself with poorly-concealed fright, pale and faintly trembling in the grip of their father.

Siger's cruel answering smile was all Mycroft needed to see to erase any doubt concerning which plan to proceed with.

"Negotiating," the man said simply. Beside him Sherlock seemed to have defaulted to some sort of stoic, white-faced shock. Mycroft couldn't even imagine how stressful this all must be - no drugs, no cigarettes, thrust into the midst of a situation he had no real hope of understanding (*science and observational deductions were all well and good, but the boy really had no instinct for political machinations*) and probably reliving a collection of very traumatic childhood memories to boot. Hopefully the combination wouldn't trigger a panic attack.

Turning his thoughts from his brother before any of them could become apparent on his face, Mycroft instead carefully regarded Siger.

"I've already informed you of my decision."

"Indeed you have," Siger replied with a flippant smirk. "And I've informed *you*, numerous times, that I don't support it."

No one in the room had any clue what they were talking about - which was entirely by design, of course. The subtext of the conversation alluded not to an individual event, but to many, scattered over the last few months and years. Siger could be referring to any of a million different choices Mycroft had made in the name of protecting his brother. Every time he'd chosen Sherlock over his career, put family before progress, failed to forcefully reign in his erratic misanthrope of a sibling despite having all the resources necessary to do so at his disposal. He'd made no secret of his intention to maintain this for the remainder of his natural life. And Siger, for his part, made no
Mycroft’s recent activities, however - namely his launching an investigation into Siger's affairs rather than uphold the unspoken truce of non-interference between them - had apparently been the final straw. The obvious message on Mycroft's part being that, despite Siger having until this point explicitly remained clear of Mycroft's political sphere when conducting business, freeing his son of any obligation to oppose him, they were now enemies. At odds not because of any grand scheme nor criminal infraction on Siger's part, but simply because he'd endangered Sherlock. As political actions went that motive was childish, vengeful, foolishly emotional... all concepts Siger could neither understand nor accept. Putting an end to such weak-willed lapses in judgement would have seemed the only logical course of action in his mind.

But of course one could never simply kill Sherlock - Siger may not have been capable of truly comprehending the force driving his son's inexplicable attachment to his sibling, but he was quite equipped with the intellectual faculties necessary to analyse it. He understood the potential danger of Mycroft enraged, stripped of his last tether to emotive empathy. Murdering the younger son in cold blood would lead to nothing but a swift and brutal retribution. Perhaps a hollow threat, once, but no longer. Too many in military intelligence had turned on Siger in recent years - Mycroft had no qualms about exploiting his inside knowledge of his father's activities to shift loyalties. And so the population of statesmen willing to work with Siger had dwindled. The man was left mostly to rely on his legacy of authority within MI6 as his main defence; and one did not, as a general rule, trust spies to protect them.

Better, then, to attempt to force Mycroft to come to a realisation of his own weakness. Perhaps he'd deign to dispose of the hindrance himself, or, having finally seen the error of his ways, agree to put all thoughts of his brother aside for the benefit of his career. In either case Siger would be spared, Sherlock would be taken care of, and Mycroft would be redeemed. A perfect resolution for all parties involved.

These were the sort of outcomes only a mind like Siger's could find remotely probable.

A mind like Mycroft's, with frigid logic tempered by low-burning emotion, could see the truth. The real conclusion, inevitable, inexorably creeping toward them as the seconds ticked past.

Siger Holmes would die.

Keeping his countenance neutral, Mycroft pushed back his chair and walked around the conference table. Peers watching him with obvious disapproval - a family squabble in the midst of a security meeting, how disgraceful - but he ignored them. Each and every one of the men gathered were well-represented in Mycroft's personal file of political blackmail, after all; he could dispatch the lot of them with a few well-chosen words if he so chose. And the majority, of course, knew this. A further majority were also currently not of a kind disposition towards Siger Holmes, a circumstance fostered by careful cultivation on Mycroft's part, and thus were unlikely to intervene on his behalf. They'd sooner let a literal fight play out than risk putting a stop to something Siger might lose. Holmes the senior had perhaps taught his son a bit too well in the art of manipulation.

With deliberate slowness Mycroft strode toward the door to the meeting room. He kept his eyes locked on Siger's gaze, well away from any sight of Sherlock's ghost-white face.

"What, then, is your negotiation?" he asked his father in a tone of faux amicability.

Siger raised one eyebrow delicately. "I should think that would be obvious."

Subtext, again - addressing a thousand different conflicts at once. Mycroft tucked his hands behind
his back and sighed very slightly in a gesture of not-entirely-false annoyance. With studied detachment he glanced away toward the monitors on the far wall.

"Of course."

"If you'd prefer a demonstration..." Siger intoned. His falsely jovial tone was becoming marred with a dark streak of impatience - he hadn't expected Mycroft to draw things out.

"Fuck," Sherlock hissed, grimacing as Siger's grip tightened once more and refused to let up. One of his hands twitched involuntarily as he fought the instinct to reach up and claw at the pressure on his brachial plexus.

Despite himself Mycroft glanced back toward them, expression darkening. "That's quite enough," he snapped, looking to his father. "The point's been made."

"Has it?" Siger flashed him a flippant smile. "And yet we continue our impasse. No, I'm afraid I rather doubt your sincerity." Still, his hand relaxed once more.

"And how would you have me prove myself?" Mycroft replied in as flat a tone as he could muster while coiling wisps of anger crept through his chest. Keep calm... it's going to work...

As expected, Siger chuckled darkly. The man turned his glacial blue eyes to one of the men seated to their right. "I believe my associate here has the answer to that."

Mycroft feigned surprise as he turned his gaze to the newly-exposed double agent. "Rutherford?"

A silent nod as the senior agent rose from his seat. With no pomp whatsoever he drew a small pistol from a holster concealed within his coat.

"An old contact of mine, I'm afraid," Siger confirmed with a smirk. "Quite loyal, if you'll pardon the abstrusity. He knows what's to be done. Simply give the order, child."

Beside him Sherlock seemed to have at least partially caught on to the implied meaning in that statement - his eyes widened in a bolt of terror as he glanced from the gun in the agent's hand to his big brother's face. Mycroft carefully avoided the boy's gaze.

"Indeed," he murmured, keeping his eyes instead locked with Siger's. "Rutherford... if you would be so kind."

Out of his peripheral vision Mycroft saw Sherlock take a tiny step back - thwarted by Siger's grip on him - as the agent obligingly raised the gun toward the young man's face.

Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck fuckfuckfuckfuck-!

Sherlock's thoughts weren't arranging themselves particularly eloquently at the moment. A pistol trained on his head for the second bloody time today, the iron grip of Father's hand on his shoulder, lingering stabs of pain from the abuse to the nerve cluster there... and hell quite frankly the fact that he was about to die should have been a fucking relief at this point. At least he'd know this pileup of absolute shit his life had become would finally be at an end.

But the imminent expectation of a bullet tearing through his skull was not, he found, providing any sort of comfort at all. Actually it was completely bloody terrifying. He didn't want to die - he'd never wanted to die. What was there after this, after all? Nothing. Forever! Fuck the notion of
heaven or hell - useless fairy tales. No, the tenuous collection of misfiring synapses he called a consciousness would simply be obliterated and then he'd cease to exist. NO! Not alright. Not in the fucking slightest.

All he managed in the way of self-preservation, though, was a tiny step back. The movement was immediately halted by Siger, and with that Sherlock's body seemed to just give up entirely and accept its fate. Brain screaming at him to move, fight, run away you stupid bastard get the hell out! but his muscles simply refused to cooperate. Instead he was left staring dumbly at the barrel of the pistol before his face, deafened by the rush of his own heartbeat in his ears.

An interminable pause seemed to stretch through the room - mere seconds warped into hours through the distorted lens of Sherlock's racing, panicked thoughts. Would this be the rest of his life? Would his perception of time just continue to slow, preserving his last fleeting instance of awareness for as long as possible? Jesus fucking christ he hoped not - this was torturous.

In a sudden rush, however, time seemed to reorient itself. Back to normal for a brief instant as, inexplicably, the man lowered his pistol, flipped it so he was holding the barrel... then handed the weapon to Mycroft.

"Thank you, Rutherford," Mycroft intoned blandly as he accepted the firearm.

Sherlock was too busy staring at the transaction like a dumbfounded idiot to register the look of smug amusement on Siger's face.

"Oh very clever," Siger crowed, chuckling. In a rare moment of mercy he released his grip on Sherlock's shoulder, instead choosing to bring his hands together in a few claps of sarcastic applause. "Turned my best against me, child. I'm simply bursting with pride."

The second Siger's fingers were off him Sherlock found himself being yanked rather forcefully aside by the agent standing to his right - Rutherford or whatever the hell his name was. Meant to bundle him out of danger, probably, but in terms of protection it didn't do much good as the movement seemed to startle Sherlock's reflexes out of whatever shock they'd been frozen in. Instead of letting himself be passively dragged off he wrenched himself out of the man's hold with a lightning-quick twisting motion, then stumbled back away from the lot of them to press his back against the wall, panting. Fuck if he was going to let anyone else get their hands on him!

Mycroft spared his brother's uncoordinated retreat the barest of glances before locking his eyes back on Siger's face.

Siger was smirking. "So this is your solution, then? Surrendering wholeheartedly to weakness?"

"No," Mycroft replied, voice frigid. With fluid detachment he raised the gun to Siger's forehead. "This is not a solution."

A pause, seconds once again spiralling off into convex distortions of themselves. Sherlock's heart felt as if it were trying to crack his ribcage in two.

Mycroft's eyes narrowed. "This is revenge."

The explosion of a gunshot.

Then... silence.
For a time it seemed as if the entire world had frozen. The body of Siger Holmes jerked once as the bullet entered his skull, then, hideously slowly, sank to the floor and collapsed. A handful of seconds trickled by in which neither movement nor sound broke through the torpid glass of the room's collective shock.

Finally someone spoke.

"A bold move, Holmes." One of Mycroft's colleagues leaning back in his chair, smirking. Others joined in with body language, shifting postures, political games and grand plots beginning to form. None looked particularly fazed by a murder having just been perpetrated in front of them. Happy enough to have the blackmail fodder, perhaps; or pleased by the removal of a mutual threat. Load of cold-blooded lunatics, either way.

Sherlock couldn't have cared less if he tried. All he was capable of focusing on right now was his brother's face. Beyond that the murmur of rising conversation and jagged details faded to nothing but static.

Mycroft remained still for a moment longer, then quietly closed his eyes. Opening them once more he turned to the agent beside him, handed the gun over with a curt nod, and walked over to where Sherlock still stood motionless against the wall. Words weren't needed - just a light touch to the arm, a silent we're leaving communicated through some unidentifiable signal, and without even knowing quite what was happening Sherlock found himself herded through a door opposite the one he'd come.

It felt very much like wading through a dream. On one level he knew what had just happened - he'd been standing right there, after all. But at some point his brain seemed to have just given up on processing information. The thick swampland of his long-melted snowfield had coagulated into tar, smothering anything even remotely resembling conscious thought. Mycroft wanted him to go somewhere... follow Mycroft. That was the furthest extent of cognition possible.

Flashes of being in a lift, of trailing along after his brother until they reached a door of some sort, an underground carpark... nothing really made sense, but that was fine. For the first time in his life he wasn't thinking about anything. It was as if the screaming crescendo of the last few hours had finally broken him for good; all the cluttered minutiae of his brain had poured away through the torn cracks of his mind field, leaving blessed quiet behind.

The silence couldn't last, though. Soon enough, with a sensation like shattering glass, reality rushed back in. Sitting in the backseat of a towncar. Mycroft beside him staring thoughtfully out the window, his face calm and posture relaxed, somehow managing to avoid betraying any hint of emotion after having just murdered his own father...

And with that realisation came the firestorm.

He took a sudden, sharp breath - meaning to speak, he'd thought, but the words never formed. Instead he inhaled again, and again, each breath cutting shorter and shallower until he found he'd begun to hyperventilate. The sticking vat of tar in his head lit up with streaks of shock, fear, stress, running along like the sparking wisps of electricity before a lightning bolt. Then all at once the sludge ignited in a fireball of sheer, unadulterated panic.

"Sherlock?" Mycroft's careful mask of cool indifference abruptly dropped as Sherlock brought his legs up on the seat to curl into a ball and clutch at his hair, burying his face against his knees. This hadn't happened in a very long time - having his brother there to witness such complete breakdown of all vestige of dignity or composure. "Sherlock, breathe."
Mycroft actually sounded worried. Sherlock would have laughed hysterically had he any breath left to do so. What in hell did Mycroft have to be worried about? The man could kill a man in cold blood without so much as a slap on the wrist in repercussion. No trial necessary, no evidence or investigation. He was judge, jury and bloody executioner.

"Y-you killed your own f-father," Sherlock managed to gasp. "You... you just fucking shot your dad in the face!"

"Because he..." Mycroft started, but his explanation cut off when Sherlock lifted his head with a glare of wild-eyed fury. After a pause Mycroft's anxious features had hardened back into their usual facade. "It was necessary."

"Necessary," Sherlock repeated in a gasp that fell drastically short of the intended tone of disbelieving scorn. "Bleeding necessary!"

Mycroft's cold mask thawed once more - he seemed a little confused now. "You're upset by his death?"

"Yes! No, I'm... I don't... g-get fucked!" Sherlock was quickly losing any shred of eloquence he'd ever had. Nothing he could do, though, as his respiration refused to slow down and the firestorm was only gaining more ground with each passing second. A flash of freckles, of warm brown eyes and a stupid accent flickered through the growing inferno and with the last of his coherency Sherlock whipped his hands off his head and screeched at his brother. "No one deserves to die!"

Mycroft's expression was quickly becoming alarmed. "Sherlock, you need to calm down."

"I am bloody calm!" he shrieked, nearing the verge of hysteria with every gasping breath. "I'm perfectly fucking f-fine!" Even as he yelled the assurance, though, he could feel something going wrong: not enough oxygen, too much adrenaline, every single signal in his nervous system spiralling out of control. He was going to have a heart attack or a stroke or burst an artery oh god oh god oh god stop stop stop we're going to die in the back of a car with a murderer turn it off stop!"

"Sherlock!"

His brother's hand on his arm. Trying to provide comfort, ground him, something but whatever the intent it only made things worse. Mycroft was far too much like Siger, now... in so much more than just appearance. He'd calmly shot his own parent in front of his colleagues and then been allowed to walk out like nothing had happened - what was stopping him from dispatching of Sherlock with equal ease? Nothing but an overdramatic, useless crazed addict of a sibling... remove the hindrance, only logical next course of action, oh god he was going to die.

In a flash of terror he jerked himself forcefully away from his brother, pressed against the car door like a frightened animal. The abrupt movement turned out to be the last straw for his brain's tenuous grip on consciousness.

Limbs heavy and numb he felt himself begin to pitch sideways, then knew no more.

<<

Sherlock awoke to the smell of leather, of books, expensive fabric. Faintly somewhere a whiff of alcohol. For a moment he imagined himself back home - wasn't this the exact scent of Father's study? Oh christ, what had he done now? Had he been knocked out? Was he dead?

It took more effort than he'd have liked to admit, but with the assistance of a bolt of adrenaline he managed to open his eyes and shove himself into a sitting position. A frenzied glance around - but,
no, no... not the Holmes manor. Alright... well, good. That was good.

... so where, then?

That question was answered almost immediately as, looking to his left, he spotted his brother sitting in a very familiar leather armchair.

Mycroft smiled as their eyes met - Sherlock's gaze wide, confused, Mycroft's a simple look of weary exhaustion.

"I thought the flat might be a better alternative to a hospital," the man said quietly, setting down the barely-touched glass of scotch in his hand. "I've already had you checked over by a personal physician, of course. No damage done."

Sherlock stared for a moment more, then glanced around to the rest of the sitting room. Not much had changed since he'd last lived here. *(And how long was that, now...? A year? Less? It seemed like an eternity.)* A few new additions to the bookcase, another pointless bauble of a gift from some foreign diplomat on the shelf. A picture-perfect showroom display for a man with more power and money than he could possibly find any use for.

Abruptly he found himself disgusted by the decadence. "Your flat looks like a bloody catalogue photo."

For some reason Mycroft smiled and leant back into his chair. He huffed a tired sigh before speaking. "Yes, I suppose it does."

Silence stretched between them for a few moments more. Finally Sherlock spoke.

"I'm not staying here."

Mycroft's smile faded as he glanced sidelong toward the window. He took another shallow sip of scotch before responding. "These... habits you've developed-"

Sherlock cut him off before he could finish. "Are none of your business." A brief urge to smack the scotch out of Mycroft's hand, but he repressed it. Behaving childishly would get him nowhere.

Mycroft had turned his gaze back to his little brother. "I cannot sit idly by and allow you to kill yourself."

"Oh, you're interested in protecting family members now, are you?" Sherlock snapped with a vicious sneer. "Not planning on blowing my brains out as well? Don't forget to pencil in Mummy for next week, can't have anyone feeling left out."

A dark frown, but Mycroft didn't react any further than that. He simply set his glass down and steepled his fingers - melodramatic pose, probably thought it imposing or sagacious. Didn't realise he was mirroring a habit of Father's. Sherlock glared venomously. Nearly an entire minute passed by in tense silence.

Finally Mycroft sighed and looked away. "At the very least allow me to reinstate your trust fund. I won't abide you living on the streets."

Sherlock very nearly allowed a dark smirk of victory to cross his face. Attempting to restrict his activity would be an exercise in pointlessness, and they both knew it. Despite the dense mire of hatred and exhaustion and anger seeping like fog through Sherlock's brain the concession to his ability to undermine anything Mycroft might do to curtail his freedom brought a certain sense of
accomplishment. Finally proven himself impossible to control, then - a force of his own, no longer worth the trouble to even attempt to reign in.

About bloody time.

"Unrestricted cash withdrawal," he demanded immediately. No way in hell was he about to let himself be tracked through a purchase trail; it would be cash or nothing.

"I have no say in banking procedures." Mycroft's expression was slowly verging back toward its natural state of bland exasperation, tinged with a hint of fatigue. Long day, apparently. Sherlock might have empathised, had he any sympathy left.

"You have say in bloody everything, you manipulative fuck." A tense pause as he shoved himself to his feet and took a second to regain his equilibrium. As soon as he could see straight again he took a step away from his brother and fixed the man with an acid glare. The scene before him was appalling.

Immaculate suit with a tasteful, understated tie, shoes matching the fine leather of the armchair, over-shined dark oak furniture, the unrestricted classism of the room itself and above all the glass of bloody scotch... all of it together formed a perfect living snapshot of the now-late Siger Holmes, mirrored in the too-similar face of his son.

Another stretch of almost painful silence stood between them. A burning wave of anger had begun to creep through Sherlock's chest at some point. Culmination of stress, fear, betrayal... loss. Everything leading to a single sense of hatred for the one man who'd had the most chance to stop any of this, to notice, to help... and who in the end had instead chosen murder as the best solution.

Kill Siger and it all goes away, does it? Out of sight, out of mind? So much easier to lift a gun than to seek compromise, the simplicity of politics over taking the time to talk, to ask after him, to just stop and realise... fuck's sake, just...

With a noise of frustration Sherlock shook his head. No, fuck this. Fuck everything - he needed a bloody cigarette. He turned away from his brother and stalked toward the flat's front door.

Hand on the doorknob, however, and he found himself pausing to look back. Mycroft was still sitting in his armchair, for once in his life making no move to interfere with his little brother's actions.

Sherlock hesitated only a second before stepping through into the hall. A quiet mutter - just loud enough for Mycroft to hear - and he was gone.

"Father would be proud."

««
Very Busy People

The last thing Eric expected was to be released.

Why would he? After all, there was no one willing to post bail - no friends or relatives around to take pity on him. And above all else there was no question of his guilt. He'd been with the distribution ring for months, was listed in all their (scant, but still very much present) documentation as an employee and a tenant. There was absolutely no way he wasn't going to find himself imprisoned for a very, very long time.

So when the guard came by his holding cell with a plastic bag in one hand and a set of keys in the other, Eric wasn't quite sure what he was anticipating.

"Alright, kid, you're out," the man said gruffly. Eric just blinked.

"I'm... wha'?...?" he trailed off, but the guard just shook his head with something like irritated exasperation and unlocked the cell.

"Out, kid," he reiterated. He didn't seem keen on arguing any further, so Eric gave up on further questioning. Probably off to meet with a lawyer, or something... he wasn't quite sure how the whole system was supposed to work, actually. Probably best to just keep his head down and do as he was told. Obligingly he followed the man out of the cell and to the front office of the jail.

When they got there a woman was waiting for them. She looked the inmate up and down, then glanced to a clipboard in her hands. "Eric Crenshaw?"

"Er... yeah," Eric answered, finding himself growing very confused. "What's...?"

He was cut off before he could finish his question by the guard shoving the plastic bag into his arms and walking away. Eric startled, nearly dropping the parcel, but managed to keep hold with his good arm and blinked back over at the woman.

"It has come to light that the circumstances of your arrest were based on false evidence," she informed him in a clipped, no-nonsense voice. "You have been cleared of all charges and are free to go."

And with that she nodded once, tucked her clipboard under her arm, and walked away.

Eric was left standing in the front lobby of a London jail, still dressed in a regulation inmate jumpsuit, feeling very, very confused. Anxiety began to creep up his spine - what exactly was going on here? Was this some sort of trick? Entrapment, to see if he'd actually leave? Could the police even do that...? As he bit his lip his hands drifted unconsciously toward each other, but the nervous habit was thwarted by the cast on his left arm and the plastic bag gripped in his right fist. He blinked, glanced down. Oh, right... he... should probably see what was in there.

Still shaking with nerves he held one handle of the bag and let it flop open, glanced inside.
Clothes. Not his usual faded attire but an entirely new set - jeans, a shirt (striped, he noticed, in blue and green - his favourite colours) and underthings. There was also a coat. A... very familiar coat.

Oh god.

Frantically he glanced around for somewhere to sit before he keeled over from shock. There! A bench by the wall. Taking a seat on the hard wood he gingerly set down the plastic bag, then drew out the dove grey woolen peacoat from where it had been neatly folded at the bottom of the bag. An envelope fell out from one of the pockets as he held it up over his lap. Stunned, Eric carefully set the coat down on his knees and lifted up the small square of paper.

Taped to the front was a note:

'Find something productive to do with your life.

P.S. You're not a total moron.'

Eric choked on something very close to a surprised half-gasping laugh, and with shaking fingers opened the envelope. It was stuffed with £50 notes. He immediately dropped it in shock - letting it fall on top of the coat bundled up in his lap - and covered his mouth with his hand to stifle a sob.

With a watery smile he slowly took his hand from his mouth and swiped the back of his arm across his eyes instead, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Sherly, you bleedin' prat," he muttered to himself. Hands still trembling he carefully tucked the envelope away into the pocket of the peacoat, shoved everything back into the plastic bag, and stood up.

First a restroom or somewhere to change his clothes. And after that, well...

He had a life to find.

««

A light dusting of snow covered London in a white veil, powder-thin flakes drifted down from the clouds above. Sherlock stood upon the frosted grass of a hill and stared silent out over the city.

His last hit of cocaine had begun to wear off nearly half an hour ago.

He wasn't doing another one.

Instead he lit another cigarette, adjusted the knapsack on his shoulder. A box of nicotine patches rattled in the side pocket. He'd bought them as a stopgap measure, emergency backup in case withdrawal got the better of him. Two or three patches, augmented by caffeine... terrible for blood pressure, yes, but doubtless a better solution than the alternative.

It had taken a herculean effort of subversive tactics on his part to orchestrate the release of Eric, obtain a fake identity, and ensure his safe departure from England all while dodging the ever-watchful eye of his brother. Impossible under ordinary circumstances, but with Mycroft occupied covering up the death of their father and his trust fund reinstated he'd managed to collect everything without incident. Amazing what iniquitous doors could be prised open with obscene amounts of cash.

He'd spent the majority of it, of course - black market passports and bribed travel visas didn't come...
cheap. Gave the rest to Eric. Let the freckled dolt figure out what to do with it all; Sherlock certainly had no further use for it. Thirty pounds for small travel expenses, nothing more. He’d travel light, and he’d travel frugal. A pocket full of disposable income would only pave the way for poor decisions down the road.

And a long road it would be. He held no illusions about his own fortitude when it came to cocaine. Already he could feel the desire for more creeping up his spine. The last hit. No more. Forever. It was a daunting proposition; almost monolithic in its finality. Wisps of self-doubt clawed whispering through his brain, an incessant chatter of nervous static. We can’t survive without it, what’s the point of stopping now, just buy another half-gram, you can get more money, no one will ever know.

He would know, though. And while a feeble deterrent at best that would nonetheless have to provide enough accountability to keep the impulse in check. These last months had been a lesson in the value of isolation. For perhaps the first time in his life he’d felt a tangible connection to others - networks of tangled threads like spider's silk weaving him in, however briefly, with the rest of humanity. Victor, Eric… all whom he’d known or been known by, their good graces bought with a false front of normality and parroted affable demeanour. But it had all been a mask, hadn’t it? They’d accepted him for his ruse, nothing more. A barrier of ice keeping his aberrant motivations hidden.

Break through, however, and the truth lay bare: his was a mind unfit for integration with society. It was time he accepted that. No more games, no more hiding.

Sherlock Holmes was a pillar all to himself. A fortress, impregnable. Relationships and friends… even family would be banished to the cold wilds beyond the edges of his mindscape. Too easily had he been drawn in with honeyed words and promises of acceptance. But in the end the hope would always prove a false light, and with the severance of ties a piece of himself would die as well. Each loss chipping away at his resolve to fight until nothing could survive within his psyche but a hollow shell of hatred and self-loathing.

He wouldn’t let that happen. There was more to life than such pathetic desires to belong… there had to be. Other sources of happiness, of fulfillment - ones that didn't involve all the mess and illogical suffering inherent to human ties. And if none existed… well then he’d damn well create one. Because what good was genius, after all, if one didn’t use it to shape their own reality?

Sherlock would find a better path to meaning. Or die trying.

The cigarette winked out in his hand, ember blown asunder by the winter wind. Rather than re-light it he simply dropped the butt into the snow. It was time to leave anyway.

As he walked toward the city a break in the clouds uncovered the sun. Winds calmed and flakes slowed their fall. By the time he made it to the train station the pavement had already become slick under his feet with half-thawed slush.

Patch by patch the city revealed itself in swaths of grey and brown.

The snow was melting.

Chapter End Notes
A/N:
Did I really make you wait two months for that? Yes I did. I'm sorry. Originally it was going to be much longer, but I ended up cutting most of it because...

THERE WILL BE A SEQUEL.

It's in the process of being written at the moment and will detail how Sherlock met Mrs. Hudson, among other things. I don't expect it to be quite so ridiculously long as this fic but then one never knows. Be on the lookout for the first chapter to be posted in a few weeks.

Thanks, thanks, and thank you a million more times everyone who's read, followed, and especially reviewed this work. I'd have given up long ago if not for all you lovely people! I hope to see all of you again with the next installment!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!