Ex Files

by 7PercentSolution

Summary

A collection of one shot stand alone ficlets of varying lengths that cover aspects of Sherlock's world. Not in chronological order, nor linked, but together adding up. Varying points of view, but mostly John's at the start. Each chapter informs and illuminates some aspect of character or an event in their back story.

Notes

tags and characters will be added as they come up.
Extraordinary

Extraordinary

ex-traor-di-nar-y/ik'strɔrdn,erē/

Adjective:

1. Very unusual or remarkable.
2. Unusually great.

Even before John moved into Baker Street, he knew his flatmate was odd. If the rapid fire
deductions about his own past in the lab at Bart's weren't enough, Mike's comment, "Yeah, he's
always like that," confirmed it. After the events of the 48 hours that followed, John was sure that
his flatmate was also extraordinary. Who else could have deduced the existence of a pink suitcase,
and figured out where it was hidden, as well as the password of a murdered woman, and flushed
out a full blown serial killer unless they were rather unusual?

He had been surprised by not just the willingness of the police to work with the consulting
detective, but also their rather unusual relationship. Clearly, both Sergeant Donovan and the
forensic specialist Anderson loathed him- probably because they felt threatened. But, John was
struck by the Detective Inspector's comment, thrown over his shoulder as he went down the stairs
at Baker Street, "Sherlock Holmes is a great man. One day he may even be a good one."

All his life, John had cultivated an air of being ordinary. To succeed in his life, it had been
important to judge himself in relation to others- family, school, university, as a medical student, a
doctor, an army captain. He wore his clothes to reassure people that he was what he appeared to be:
good- the lab coat, the military uniform, the jumpers were all part of building respect with others.
He defined himself in the eyes of others as dependable, loyal, trustworthy, honest and capable. If
others saw him that way, it confirmed his normality.

Yet, his new flatmate saw him differently. Right from the beginning. A person with a
psychosomatic limp that could be cured simply, when every other physical therapist had failed.
Someone who loved the battlefield for the adrenaline kick (Seen enough trouble?...like to see some
more?) Sherlock had known John's extraordinariness almost from the moment he met him. And he
had drawn out those hidden depths – John's willingness to push boundaries (could be dangerous),
his skills with a weapon (where's the gun?). What John liked the most about his extraordinary
flatmate was how he recognised John was extraordinary, too.
Explain

**explain /ɪkˈsplæn/**

**Verb:**

1. Make (an idea, situation, or problem) clear to someone by describing it in more detail or revealing relevant facts or ideas.

2. Account for (an action or event) by giving a reason as excuse or justification.

The personal blog of John H. Watson was originally set up at the request of his therapist. It was a chore, a pain, an annoyance for him, because it constantly reminded him that "nothing ever happens to me." Until he met Sherlock, that is.

After that, he had an endless supply of things to write about. And he found that he enjoyed it. Above all else, it gave him a chance to slow down and think through the stuff that happened on their cases at such blinding speed that half the time he was left scratching his head wondering how the pieces fit together. One thing he had discovered was that once a case was over, Sherlock lost all interest in it. Apart from being an absolute magpie, and never throwing away any piece of paper or scrap of evidence about past cases, Sherlock's attention would instantly move onto the next case.

The whirlwind that was his flatmate found explaining his deductions to be the most tedious part of the case. The work was the solution, the explaining the nuisance. He frequently ridiculed those who could not understand the significance of his pronouncements (*What's it like in your tiny minds?*) or his frustrations at being forced to explain things that to him were blatantly obvious (*Oh, do keep up, John*).

John, on the other hand, liked to re-run scenes, chew things over, reflect on them, make sense of them. His blog was therapeutic in that way. Only later, when he began to realise that he had a following, that people commented on his site, and that cases were coming to Sherlock as a result of the blog- well, then he had even more incentive to capture what was happening, to explain it in terms that he as well as others could understand.

Initially, Sherlock was scathing about John's blog. "Did you like it?" John had asked eagerly. "Ummm, no," was his flatmate's brutally honest reply. It wasn't factual or scientific; it offended the detective's sense of precision. It confused him; he once accused John of pandering to the masses; "it's… entertainment", he sniffed, clearly annoyed that John's blog attracted far more views than his own site.

Over the months, John realised that he wasn't just explaining, he was translating the cases from *Sherlockian-* a strange shorthand which most ordinary mortals could not speak, let alone understand- into normal language that people could get.

What pleased John the most about his ability to explain Sherlock's cases was the fact that the detective was beginning to see the value of the explanation (*I'd be lost without my blogger*). And that explained more than anything else why John liked doing it.
Exhaust

exhaust /ɪgˈzəʊst/

Verb: Drain (someone) of their physical or mental resources; tire out.

Noun: Waste gases or air expelled from an engine, turbine, or other machine in the course of its operation.

John had been sharing 221b with Sherlock for nearly six weeks when he began to suspect that his flatmate not only suffered from insomnia, but that he had a real phobia about sleep. No matter how many times he stayed up late, watching some old film on the box, Sherlock never went to sleep before him. The detective was always up before him, usually dressed and bouncing with energy (Another case, John, no time to waste with trivia) or, on the days when cases did not appear, Sherlock would still be engrossed in an experiment, playing the violin or stretched out on the sofa reading some obscure journal about inorganic chemistry of insecticides (poisons that kill bugs can kill people, John; you'd be surprised how many murder weapons can be found in a garden shed).

In fact, in the six weeks he'd been at the flat, John had never once seen Sherlock asleep. The detective would often be lying in his characteristic pose- eyes closed, fingers under his chin, steepled as if in prayer- but no sooner would John peer over to see if this had turned into a clandestine nap than the baritone voice would scathingly comment, "please stop thinking too loudly, John; the sound of your rusty gears turning is enough to disturb my train of thought."

"Why don't you like sleeping, Sherlock?"

"Tedious. A total waste of time. My brain just freewheels when I am sleeping, and that is pointless."

"Yeah, but that's kind of my point. Everything needs a bit of down time or it wears out. Even transport has to re-charge the batteries occasionally and refuel. Not eating and not sleeping properly is more than a bit not good, you know."

"I manage."

Then there was the time when John had come in hungry and fixed himself a plate of beans on toast, working around Sherlock's experiment that was taking up every square inch of working surface in the kitchen. He'd offered some beans to Sherlock who had snorted and said "No, dried legumes are not something I enjoy."

A couple of hours later, John was reading quietly when a fart slipped out. Sherlock just commented, "and that's the reason why." John started giggling. "Well, you're the chemist, so you should know why it happens."

"Yes, John. Raffinose, a complex sugar. When combined with soluble fibre and digestive tract enzymes, it causes colonic fermentation resulting in flatus. Both signs of digestion that take blood and energy away from the brain. Bad for the brainwork, to say nothing of the atmosphere. The reason why it smells is due to volatile amines and short chain fatty acids. Bovine flatulence is a principal cause of rising CO2 emissions, but theirs is a chemical reaction that produces more methane. Humans only produce methane when there is archaea bacteria present in the gut."

"Well, I can't say that I knew much of that before. You may not know about the solar system, but..."
you are just a mine of knowledge about obscure trivia, aren't you?"

Stung, Sherlock looked up from his experiment with a frown. "Not so trivial, John. You can use raffinose decay periods to track time of death in human bodies."

"Given you know so much about how the human body works, you should take better care of your own."

"Who says I don't?"

Yes, well, actually that was the problem. Sherlock had managed to cope with a diet and a sleep regime that John was certain would half kill a normal person. Adrenaline has its advantages in dealing with both starvation and sleep deprivation, but sooner or later, the doctor was sure biochemistry would win.

So, it was not actually a surprise when John came home one evening after a pub night out with Mike Stamford to find a silent and dark flat. Sherlock's coat and scarf will still on the coat hook, so he wasn't out. The doctor chuckled to himself; at last, Sherlock must have headed for his bedroom to sleep.

John flipped on the lights in the kitchen and foraged for a cup of tea before bed (always balance alcohol intake with water- basic biochemistry learned in med school). When the tea was brewed, he moved into the darkened sitting room and headed for his chair. Just as he sank down into it with a contented sigh, he glanced across the room. A bundle of what..blankets?...on the floor caught his eye, which then slowly took shape as the crumpled limbs of a detective.

John was on his feet in a moment and then kneeling beside his comatose flatmate. A quick set of fingertips on a pulse point reassured him that Sherlock was alive; bending down closer, he could hear a regular pattern of deep respiration. He sat back on his heels in amazement. Sherlock must have literally fallen asleep, stopped in mid-stride and collapsed onto the floor.

"Sherlock!" John tried to rouse the sleeping man, without success. He was sleeping the way children do- with that total abandon, oblivious to any noise, touch or stimulation. He had never seen an unsedated adult do that kind of deep sleep. For a moment, he had a wicked thought of firing off his gun to see if that would wake the detective. No, that would be too cruel. Grabbing the blanket from the back of his chair, he pulled the younger man's arms and legs out into a more comfortable position. Stuffing a cushion under Sherlock's head as a makeshift pillow, he smirked. 

*Biochemistry 1, Sherlock 0.*
I've never been one for fancy food- a meat and potatoes kind of guy. Or, in my later incarnations, a ready meal, take-away kind of eater. When I was in university, medical school, and then the army, food was prepared for me in cafeterias, canteens, and even army rations handed around if we were on patrol. All I had to do was show up and something nutritious was put in front of me to eat. I've never claimed to be a cook. Yet, as a doctor, I know the importance of a balanced diet and reasonable nutrition. So I do try to eat fruit, fibre, slow release sugars, and watch the amount of both calories and saturated fats I consume.

"Sherlock, when are you planning on eating something today?"

"I don't plan to eat; too tedious."

Along with a lack of sleep, my flatmate's eating habits annoyed me. I tried lecturing him, even tried to interest him in a case of anorexia that I had been treating at the surgery. I thought if I intrigued him about it as if it were a detection case, I might be able to get some insight into why he had such a dysfunctional approach to eating, or at least discover if there were any extenuating circumstances that explained his antipathy.

"I am not some angst-ridden teenage girl, John, so you can stop your feeble attempts. Clearly, you were a better trauma surgeon than you are a psychiatrist."

It was frustrating. I hated being a nag, so I tried various tactics. No one can resist the smell of cooking bacon, can they? Well, it appears that one six foot and one inch tall detective can. I popped four rashers of streaky bacon into the frying pan, and dropped four slices of white bread into the toaster.

I put the finished sandwich on the coffee table beside where he lay stretched out on the sofa, and tucked into my own with gusto. I casually asked him how much he weighed.

"My body mass index is 18.6, as that is what you are really trying to deduce. Within an acceptable range, and I am likely to live a longer life span than most, that is, if some villain doesn't get me before illness or old age. Do not interfere, John. I eat enough, and have a reasonably balanced diet, but I don't eat as a matter of routine or habit. Western society is fixated on over-consumption. I prefer to manage my body's appetites rather than slavishly indulge them."

I looked down at the half eaten bacon sandwich on my plate. It was delicious, but I suddenly had a guilty thought. Did I really need this?
"What is it about eating that makes you dislike it so, Sherlock? I mean, it's one of life's great pleasures."

"I have hypersensitive senses. What you call 'taste' is an assault on my tongue. That sandwich in front of you, for example, to me it would be a mass of conflicting sensations- the refined wheat carbohydrates and the salt in the bread, mixed up with the saturated fats in the butter, and the grease, not to mention the bacon itself."

He sat up, looking suspiciously at the sandwich in front of him on the coffee table. "The reason why you like cooked bacon is a basic chemical process, called the Malliard reaction, named after the French scientist who in 1912 figured out how amino acids in the lean pork and reducing sugars in the fat react due to heat to produce new compounds that the normal tongue interprets as dozens of different flavours. There are other chemical reactions, involving the tetrapyrrole rings of the muscle protein myoglobin."

John looked down at his sandwich again, seeing it in a new light. "So, for you eating isn't about enjoying food; it's another chemistry experiment?"

Sherlock sniffed. "It's not much of an experiment, John, given that everything is already known about the process. That's what makes eating so tedious. Every time I put something into my mouth, the chemical analysis starts in my head. I can't turn it off, it's just a part of being hypersensitive. It makes eating such a bore. Been there, done that, let's move on to something more interesting."

"Do you want to eat that sandwich then?"

"Now that you've gone to the trouble, I might as well, but only if it will stop you from being a nuisance about my eating habits. Now that is an experiment worth conducting."
Extreme

Chapter Summary

extreme (ex|treme): /ɪkˈstriːm, ɛk-/

adjective: reaching a high or the highest degree; very great; not usual; exceptional; very severe or serious;
denoting or relating to an activity performed in a hazardous environment and involving great risk

It took me only a night to realise that Sherlock is a man of extremes. From the first time I crossed the threshold of 221b, I have been drawn into what can only be described as a whirlwind. From the moment he danced around in circles about a serial suicide murderer, to the panic when I looked through the window to see him about to take that damn pill, he has kept me on the edge of disbelief. He doesn't do things by halves. (If it's worth doing, John, it's worth doing). So, whether it is lying on the sofa doing nothing for eight hours at a stretch (It's not "nothing ". John; I am THINKING, which is something that not enough people do) or leaping over the rooftops of London in pursuit of a suspect, when he decides to do something, the consulting detective throws himself into it completely, regardless of the risks.

If he chooses to take on a case, he devotes himself to it, not stopping to eat or sleep until it is over. And by "over", I mean solved. He doesn't give up until it is solved. He takes it personally if for any reason a solution can't be found (mentioning the Speckled Blonde case still sends him into a sulk that lasts for days). That's why he is picky about the cases he takes on. (I won't leave the flat for anything less than a six, John) I didn't get it at first, but when I realised just what taking a case on means to him, then I began to realise that he has to ration his workload or he'd simply self-combust.

The frenzy of a case is exhausting to someone like me, who chooses to trail behind, caught up in the wake of Sherlock's frenetic activity. He takes extreme measures- willing to test out his theories with no regard to his own safety (the only way to prove the cabbie was the murderer was to get him to try it on me). When he is bent over his chemistry kit at 221b, I've had to gently remind him that he shares a flat with me, and our landlady does object when our kitchen bears the scars of numerous explosions, acid leaks and chemical burns. When he was willing to risk experimenting with bottulinum spores in the shoe laces of Carl Powers' trainers, he didn't think twice about the risk he might be taking of infecting himself, me or Mrs Hudson.

I didn't understand why some cases appealed to him and others didn't until about the third time he solved one of New Scotland Yard's cases within five minutes of walking onto the crime scene, only to complain loudly to Lestrade about wasting his time and then stalking off muttering "boring" under his breath.

When the cases are complicated, extraordinary and perplexing, when no one has the slightest idea what is going on, or what to do next in a case, that's when Sherlock loves it. His glee is infectious. The more extreme the case, the more bloody, the better in his eyes (It's Christmas!). Some of the
NSYers accuse him of being a cold-blooded monster, getting off on gruesome cases, but that does Sherlock a great disservice. It's just that on a really difficult case, he is able to let rip, to apply his full capacity, unhindered, unleashed. Like a maestro about to produce a masterpiece, he just can't help but get excited by the prospect (*The Game is on!*)

It's amazing to watch, and it must be extremely satisfying to be able to find a case that pushes him to the extreme limits of what he is able to do. For once, those hypersensitive senses can be opened up full throttle: his acuity of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste are pushed to their very limits to observe what others cannot perceive, because we filter so much of what we experience out of our brains. Instead of being a crippling burden, that hypersensitivity is suddenly a gift; all that deductive power is transformed into a power of good, instead of a social handicap. He swirls around a crime scene like someone possessed and in a way he is- taken over completely by his abilities to know things that normal people just can't understand (*You see, John but you do not observe*). Well, I have observed this much. We are all better off for having someone like Sherlock able to use his unique talents so extremely effectively.
"Anything in? I'm starving."

No reply. John knew that his flatmate was stretched out on the sofa, sulking. He started to head for the fridge, but hesitated. The memory of what happened last week was still very fresh in his mind— the not so fresh severed head that had been sitting on the shelf staring out at him when he opened the door.

When John had complained, his flatmate had calmly replied "where else was I to put it? Don't mind do you?"

What was he supposed to say? That it wasn't "normal"? Well, Sherlock would just look at him puzzled, that little crease between his eyebrows showing just what he thought of that comment. On what planet did John live, if he thought Sherlock cared about being normal? He had tried the "it's unhygienic, Sherlock" argument when he had found yet another a beaker full of eyeballs in the microwave. And which were still there four days later when he tried to re-heat a lasagne ready meal.

But Sherlock was a chemist, and knew all about bacterial growth rates; in fact, the eyeballs experiment was just that- to see how long it would take for an intact eyeball to start rotting at different temperatures. (It's crucial to disprove a murderer's alibi, John). And his flatmate was forever pointing out that there was no difference between keeping a piece of human pancreas in the fridge from keeping a slice of calves liver for John's dinner in the fridge. (Both are offal, John.) Yes, both awful; John didn't like liver, of any kind.

So, despite the shock of regularly seeing human body parts in various states of decay in the refrigerator, John had come to understand that this was just one of the idiosyncrasies of living with Sherlock. He tried to get Sherlock to obey some basic rules- first, label everything clearly. He didn't want to tuck into a ham sandwich one day only to discover later that it had been a slice of a cadaver's preserved thigh muscle. Second- try not to cross-contaminate perfectly good food because you want to use it for an experiment with something dragged home from Bart's mortuary. That was after he found a rotting thumb stuck into his jar of strawberry jam. (But, John- the jam is a perfect substitute for the sort of pectin and agar gel used in a petrie dish).

No, what really exasperated John was the fact that Sherlock didn't understand that the doctor wasn't a mind reader, so wouldn't know that the ham he had just used for his toasted sandwich was the very thing that Sherlock was going to use to test his latest acid solution. And when the detective complained, that John was going to have to go to Tesco to replace it, again. Now that really was
exasperating.
Within a few days of arriving at 221b, John knew that he was sharing a flat with someone who could be defined as a "mad scientist". His early suspicions after the first meeting in the Bart's lab were quickly confirmed when the kitchen table suddenly sprouted a whole labyrinth of tubing, flasks, and the highest spec microscope he'd ever seen outside of a hospital lab. Sherlock had not mentioned this when covering his list of foibles, along with playing the violin and not talking for days on end (flatmates should know the worst about each other), so presumably he didn't see it as an issue. At first, John was just a bit annoyed about the lack of clear counter space in the kitchen, which made tea making something of a juggling act.

"Sherlock, I have managed to get over the fact that you keep human body parts around (These are human eyeballs, Sherlock, in the microwave.) But, it would be helpful if you could just leave enough space free for me to put a cup down at the same time as the kettle is on."

"Hmmph. If you want to make yourself useful, hand me the plastic container from the fridge that has the left ears."

John obliged, but before he had even turned around toward the kitchen table, the dry comment came "Not the box of right ears; the left ears are under the coleslaw."

The doctor sighed. "No, I'm late for work, so I am not going to ask you the obvious questions of a) what's the difference between right and left ears, or b) what on earth are you doing with them?"

Sherlock looked up at John, perplexed. "If you say you aren't going to ask me those questions, but then you do, does that mean you do or you don't want to hear the answers?"

"Text me- I'm already late for my last appointment with that bloody therapist."

Sherlock sniffed. "You should have fired her last week; what good did she ever do for your psychosomatic limp or PTSD?" But, the detective realised he was talking to an empty flat, as he heard the front door downstairs bang shut behind the doctor.

9.38am Did you know that none of the 6.7 billion humans on earth have the same shaped ear? SH

9.40am But, are the right and left ones different?
9.41am Shape finding algorithms are being written to determine this now. Question is whether the right ear programme is better at 99.6% accuracy or the left one. SH

9.42am Why does it matter? Aren't DNA and fingerprints good enough?

9.43am CCTV is a larger database than either DNA or fingerprint, so identifying bodies will be much easier. SH

9.45am Great, so Mycroft will be able to figure out it's us on the CCTV just by catching a glimpse of our ears?

9.47am John, why do you think I wear my hair this long? Have you ever seen my ears? SH

John smirked. Maybe Sherlock's experiment served a useful purpose after all.
"What's wrong with you, freak? Can't you see that the victim's mother is in a terrible state? How dare you be so cold; you're like a bloody machine!" Sally was so angry that for a moment I thought she was going to actually hit Sherlock.

The crime scene was like something out of a Hollywood film set- blood and gore so over the top that it had to be a fake. The horror was that it was real, and what was even worse, the victim was a teenager whose body had been found by her mother.

After I'd been sharing a flat with Sherlock for some months, I had become used to people assuming that Sherlock "didn't do" feelings. Anderson and Donovan could not resist making some snide comment at almost every crime scene where our paths crossed; yet Sherlock never replied to the jibes directly. He would just turn his deductive skills onto them and ridicule their intelligence, some aspect of their character or their on-again, off-again relationship.

Sherlock cultivated this image, consciously and deliberately. Emotion is the grease on the lens; the fly in the ointment. He would never pass up an opportunity to distance himself from it. Sentiment, he would sniff.

At first, it was easy to think that he lacked empathy, the ability to understand and relate to other people's emotions. It's called alexythemia- something I studied in the psych rotation at medical school; it means an inability to understand, process or describe emotions.

In fact, it was once thought to be the defining symptom of autism. It's also a key determinant in a lot of diagnoses of personality disorders- particularly psychopaths. That's why Sally thinks Sherlock is a psychopath, and why it sounded plausible when Sherlock told Anderson that he was a high functioning sociopath.

It took me a while to realise that just because he doesn't choose to display emotions, or that he loudly dismisses their value to him, that didn't mean he doesn't feel things. He does, often and deeply. He just chooses not to display or discuss his emotions, his empathy. Over the months, I have come to know Sherlock well enough to be able to read his emotions even when he isn't signalling them in a way that most people would pick up: his distress when the old blind woman was killed for trying to describe Moriarty's voice, his pain when Sebastian Wilkes revelled in saying how university students hated him for being able to out who was sleeping with whom, his regret when his deductions embarrassed Molly at the Christmas party, his anger when Mrs Hudson was assaulted by the CIA moron, and a dozen other occasions when the mask would slip just a tiny
fraction.

I once asked him why he told people he didn't feel emotions, and he looked at me with that little perplexed wrinkle between his eyebrows. "John, you're a doctor, you can figure this one out without any help from me."

That made me think. When a wound causes pain and is festering, a surgeon will excise it, that is, remove it. Far from not feeling, Sherlock's whole public persona was an attempt to excise his sensitivity. Would caring help me to rescue them? If not, then I won't make that mistake.

When people accused him of being unfeeling, he is actually trying to avoid feeling so much that it incapacitates him.
Explosive

Chapter Summary

Ex-plo-sive /ik'splōsiv/

Adjective: Able or likely to shatter violently or burst apart, as when a bomb explodes.

Noun: A substance that can be made to explode, esp. any of those used in bombs or shells.

Synonyms: detonating

Chapter Notes

This was written way before Series Three, when John's experience with Bonfires became much more up front and personal.

BANG!

Startled, John looked up from his chair, and turned around to eye Sherlock, who was bent over his lab equipment.

"What are you doing?" It was said in a stern voice that combined concern, curiosity and a little bit of criticism. It was the sort of tone that you use with an adolescent whose activity you don't quite trust.

"Nothing," came the answer, almost instantaneously.

"Didn't sound like nothing to me," muttered John, who caught the slight whiff of cordite in the air of the flat.

"Don't you have somewhere to go? Maybe Tesco to get some more milk?"

"Are you trying to get rid of me so you can blow up the kitchen or something?"

"No, but it is supposed to be a surprise for tonight, so I need some privacy, or it won't be."

John thought about that. "Sherlock, most of what you do is a surprise to me. Is this one going to be especially explosive?"

"That's what I need to experiment with, so go away."

"Only if you promise me that when I get back, the kitchen will still be intact, and you won't have had to call the fire brigade." He had to go out anyway, as a few days ago he had invited a few people around for drinks tonight before they went off to Regent's Park to watch the Bonfire Night fireworks display. While Sherlock was not keen on the people side of it, he had readily agreed to
go to the fireworks. "Are you sure you want to go, John? Explosions can trigger traumatic stress reactions from military people who've been wounded in action."

"That's very thoughtful of you, Sherlock, but it hasn't had any effect on me for the past three years. In any case, fireworks are beautiful, and they sound different from a mortar or sniper's gun, so I think I can cope."

Once the front door shut behind John, Sherlock sprang into action. He shut the curtains and turned out the kitchen lights- he had to test the colour. This year he was trying for a combination of purple and turquoise- quite challenging. The first needed a combination of strontium and copper salts, the latter just a particular copper halide.

He'd already tested the gunpowder element: that was the easy part. He wanted a bang that excited people, but wouldn't terrify; no need to drive Mrs Hudson to her herbal soothers. His mix consisted of 75% potassium nitrate (KNO3), 15% sugar (unconventional, but a good substitute for chemical grade carbon), and 10% sulfur. The rapid expansion of gases resulting when the fuse conducted heat to the chemicals led to the bang; the challenge was finding a wrapper that made the most satisfying noise when it burst apart. He'd managed that last week, when both John and Mrs Hudson were out. This year, he would put up with the social occasion that John had arranged. Better to have an audience to appreciate my efforts, he reasoned.

oOo later that night oOo

John passed the wine glass to Molly, who joined Mrs Hudson by the fireplace. They hadn't lit a fire, because they would be going out. Greg Lestrade was sitting in John's chair, and Mycroft had arrived to sit in Sherlock's chair. The 'British Government' would not be able to attend the fireworks in Regent's Park; regrettably, "pressing matters in the Far East" meant he would confine himself to a glass of wine and then would be off back to work. Looking around the flat, John felt pleased that for once, it looked tidy. Sherlock had even cleared away the lab kit from the kitchen table, which now had a suspicious looking object on it, covered in a black cloth. They had about ten more minutes before they would need to leave the flat and walk to Regent's Park, when Sherlock asked everyone to hold onto their glasses, as he was going to turn off the lights and "start things off".

With the curtains closed, no streetlight came in from Baker Street, so it was quite dark. Molly giggled nervously. Greg asked John whether he had a fire extinguisher ready. "Oh ye of little faith, Lestrade," came the dry comment from a detective's disembodied voice. He heard a match being struck over in the direction of the sofa, and then suddenly their eyes were dazzled by the spitting sparks flying off from a sparkler. Not just any sparkler- it was the exact shape of the smiley face spray-painted on the wall, and it lit up the darkness. John, Greg and Molly laughed; Mrs Hudson watched the sparks and said in a worried tone, "I hope that won't singe the wallpaper or leave scorch marks on the couch, or I really will take it out of your rent."

As the sparkling smiley died down, John could hear another match being lit in the kitchen. Sherlock retreated quickly, and then there was a loud bang, a flash of silver and then a whirling bright flare of purple, with turquoise sparks flying off in all directions, danced in circles across the table. It lasted for almost twenty seconds before a final series of crackles and another loud bang.

When the lights came on, Sherlock looked at Mycroft, who smiled. "Yes, Sherlock, I get the reference to colours in the Holmes coat of arms. And your skill at packing the gunpowder to produce two separate bangs is …definitely improving."

"You actually made that, Sherlock? You didn't buy it from one of those contacts of yours in Chinatown?" Lestrade seemed incredulous. "That's good enough to be professional."
Sherlock sniffed. "I am a professional at incendiaries, Lestrade. Just ask Mycroft about what happened to the garden shed on Guy Fawkes night when I was nine years old, if you don't believe me." But John could tell that his flatmate was actually pleased with the detective inspector's comment.

He couldn't resist teasing. "Sherlock, surely Bonfire Night is a rather frivolous social event that is beneath the notice of a serious scientist."

It was Mycroft who answered first. "On the contrary, John. The failure of the Gunpowder plot in 1605 was incredibly lucky. In a 2005 simulation 36 barrels of gunpowder were exploded to see what effect it would have had if it had gone off properly. The results were quite astonishing- if it had gone up as planned, not only the Houses of Parliament but Westminster Abbey as well would have been destroyed, and severe structural damage caused to houses three streets away. The Government would most certainly have fallen if it had been successful."

"I didn't think you were interested in politics, Sherlock," Molly commented. "Well, that's ...what I got from John's blog anyway…that you don't know stuff like who is the prime minister and all."

"I'm not interested and I couldn't care less about politics. But Guy Fawkes Night is a wonderful excuse to use chemistry to blow things up. Creating firework colours is a complex endeavour, requiring considerable art and application of physical science. Excluding propellants or special effects, the points of light ejected from fireworks generally require a complex calculation balancing oxygen-producer, fuel, binder (to keep everything where it needs to be), and colour producer. Any idiot can manage outdoor fireworks, but indoor versions are particularly challenging." He paused here, "mostly because one's flatmate and landlady are likely to complain if there is too much burning material or smoke. I used to think that took all the fun away, but now I realise it just makes it more challenging and therefore worthy of my attention."

John smirked. "Well, Guido Holmes, put your coat on and let's go, or the fireworks in the park will start without us."

Sherlock slipped into his Belstaff coat and put on his scarf. "On the way, I shall I tell you of the occasion when I burnt Mycroft in effigy at the top of our family bonfire. Now that was a particularly fun occasion, as I had to make it fat with extra padding, and I stole some of his favourite clothes to dress the effigy. You should have seen his face when he and Father realised what I had done- absolutely explosive!"
I've been a soldier. A doctor, too, but I've spent a lot of time in the company of people who used swearing as a way of conversation. Expletives are the salt in army food, the spice of parade ground banter, the vinegar of mess room dinner gossip, adding piquant flavours to a military life spent in the company of men. Yes, of course, the new British army included women, even serving in combat zones. And the RAMC had its fair share of extremely competent women medical professionals serving both behind and on the battle lines. But, I'd found that even if they looked like butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, most of them could out-swear even the hardest of squaddies on a bad day.

So, when confronted by trouble or difficulty, or just having a bad day at the surgery, I don't hold back when safe behind the doors of 221b. The only exception is when I know that Mrs Hudson is within earshot, in which case I restrain my natural enthusiasm. Well, I would mind my manners in front of my mother, so it seems sensible to do so for our landlady, in deference to her age. But when she isn't around, I've been known to turn the air blue. Whether I spill a cup of tea, or find (yet again) that one of my jumpers misappropriated by a certain detective to test his latest theory about how a criminal relied on acid eating through wool fibres for his alibi, well, Mycroft's surveillance teams might be learning a few new words to add to their reports.

My flatmate is on occasion somewhat perplexed by the richness of my profane vocabulary. After one such tirade by me lasting almost a minute long, uttered in the face of yet another burned piece of toast, Sherlock could no longer rein in his curiosity.

"John, in the interests of scientific enquiry, does your swearing serve some psychological function? By using such terms, does your recovery time improve? Is there some exponential relationship between the vulgarity of the word and your sense of emotional release and emotional well-being?"

That made me realise that I couldn't remember Sherlock ever swearing. No, when he wanted to let loose his irritation with the world and the idiots who occupied it, he just tore into someone for what their clothes told him about their sex lives, or how the scuff on their shoe revealed some deep seated gambling compulsion or sexual perversion. But, profanity? No, it just wasn't Sherlock's thing.

I sniffed. "Well, Sherlock, not all of us are posh gits who went to public school and Cambridge. I suppose swearing has been bred out of the upper classes in this country, but to normal people, we rank and file members of the human race, we use expletives to add emphasis to our words."

Far from being insulted, his eyes took on that forensic keenness usually reserved for crime scenes. "Does that emphasis have some quantitative measure? You know, like chilli peppers' heat is rated by the Scoville scale, which identifies the levels of capsicum present and the organoleptic reactions caused. Does one 'fucking' equal four 'friggings', I wonder?" He said this with an utterly straight
I couldn't help but giggle at the thought. An entire dictionary of swear words assembled by Sherlock based on clinical research.

"I am being serious, John. There is merit in trying to establish scales of understanding the degree of emphasis involved. I am sure it is culturally derived, but expletives vary dramatically from sexual references, to blaspheming, scatological references, words used to demonstrate disgust. And then there is the whole vocabulary relating to animal names, racial and ethnic slurs, vulgarity and offensive slangs, as well as taboos. Surely in the interests of precision, users would value an understanding of which provided the greatest degree of emphasis."

My mind boggled- (Excuse me, Lestrade, but was that 'bloody' epithet worse or milder than the term "asshole" when applied to Anderson's forensic skills?) It would lend a whole new layer of meaning to crime scene conversations.

"So, why Sherlock don't you use expletives?"

"Expletives are designed to give emotional emphasis, John. What part of your experience of me suggests that I would want to engage in an emotional outburst? Why would I waste space in my mind palace with such emotional trivia?"

"Bloody typical of you, expletive deleted, then."
Policemen (and women) are a surprisingly 'matey' lot; they not only work together, but they often socialise together, too. So, it wasn't really that surprising to discover that the New Scotland Yard team often ended up in a pub after work, especially if the crime scene they'd just left was a particularly difficult or gruesome one. I'd seen similar in the army. The worse the day job is, the more you cling together to let off steam before going home. No one wants to bring the horror back to your family or loved ones; you just don't talk about stuff like that at home. Around a table in a pub with your colleagues, it's easier to get it off your chest, put it into context, and just relax. You don't even have to like each other.

I hadn't been tagging along behind Sherlock for long before Lestrade made his move. "Fancy a pint, Doctor Watson? The team's heading to the Feathers down the road for a quick one."

I watched the swirl of a dark coat as Sherlock stood up and handed the last of the evidence bags to an annoyed looking Anderson. "Don't lose these, and be sure to use the enzyme reagent this time. You completely botched the last one, and if it hadn't been for my ability to get him to confess, the case would never have come to court." His distain was apparent, as was Anderson's annoyance.

I looked back at the DI. "Somehow, I can't picture Sherlock propping up a bar with Anderson, can you?"

Lestrade snorted. "You clearly haven't known Sherlock for long, have you? He never goes to a pub. Probably too common for him, the posh git. Anyway, he'd spend his time deducing what the other people in the pub got up to in their spare time. He doesn't drink beer, and says that social occasions are 'tedious.'"

I laughed, "yep, that sounds like Sherlock alright."

Lestrade chuckled. His comment wasn't snide- just honest, and delivered with surprising affection. It made me realise that the times I had seen him at crime scenes watching Sherlock with a slightly bemused expression on his face.

"You like him, don't you?"

"Yeah, well, I respect his abilities and although he can be totally impossible, I've come to understand just a tiny bit of what goes on in that strange brain of his. I've got time for him, though, Lord knows, most of the Yard can't stand him."

I enjoy a good pint as much as any man, and the company of the Yarders was appealing after the
evening's work. I didn't have a date tonight, so why not? But, I didn't want to leave Sherlock out, and it made me feel awkward if I said yes, when the crime scene team wouldn't even ask him. It seemed, I don't know, sort of disloyal. "Won't he feel excluded?"

"Really, John, he won't mind. I bet he'll make some snarky comment about pubs having as much appeal to him as the outer ring of Dante's inferno."

Yeah, that sounded like him, too. Clearly Greg knew Sherlock better than I did.

While the SOCO crew finished up, Sherlock came back to me and the NSY Detective, and set off on his rapid fire deductions. "The presence of the red cashmere thread on the victim's coat is conclusive; Lestrade, you need to find her brother- he will be able to tell you whether it's her fiancé or the work colleague whose jumper the thread comes from. Both have motive, both had opportunity, and both have a cashmere sweater that colour, but only one of the two will have sold him the counterfeit drugs that he's been flogging on the internet for the past year. He's the accessory in the murder we've been looking for, and if you threaten him with taking the full blame, I'm sure he will give up his accomplice."

Greg looked incredulous. "You got all that from a red thread?"

"Oh, do keep up; you're supposed to be one of Scotland Yard's best detectives, so surely that much would have been obvious to you?"

Greg smirked at him, and said "Well, Sherlock, you know that I owe my reputation at the Yard for having the best case clear up rate because I let you into the crime scenes. So, maybe my skill is just in choosing to include you on my team."

I saw my chance. "As a part of that team, Sherlock, do you want to head down to the pub with me and the rest of them?"

"Why would I want to do that?" He seemed genuinely puzzled.

"To celebrate closing the case?" I said tentatively. "I mean, it wouldn't be right to exclude the star of the show, the person who actually cracked the case, would it?"

Sherlock looked askance. "It's only exclusion if a person wants to be a part of a group and is denied entry. I have no wish to be a part of that group, John."

The tall brunet thought about it a bit more. "So, John, when you've finished doing whatever it is that you like doing at a pub, please remember to leave them behind when you come home at closing time. I wouldn't want any of them showing up at Baker Street. I have strict standards you know, and generally prefer to exclude idiots."

I smirked, "Well, I think I should take that as a compliment. See you later, Sherlock."
Exacerbate

Chapter Summary

ex-ac-er-bate /ig-zas-er-beyt/

verb (used with object)

-to increase the severity, bitterness, or violence of (disease, ill feeling, etc.); aggravate

-to embitter the feelings of (a person); irritate; exasperate.

Ever since that first exchange I witnessed between them at the crime scene where I shot the cabbie to stop Sherlock from taking that damn pill, I have never, ever, really understood what it is about the two Holmes brothers. Harry and I have our disagreements, and yeah, I get it that relationships can become very tense. Siblings carry around with them the ball and chain of years of arguments, grudges, slanging matches and competition for parental love. We've got history, as the saying goes. And, it can be very strange to be expected to like or love someone simply because of the fact that you share some genes. We don't choose our families, and I think that for a lot of us, if we had the choice, we certainly wouldn't select each other as friends.

But, all that doesn't matter, in the end, because family is family. And when Harry calls me, drunk again or in tears about a breakup with her latest love life, I can't say no. Because family has a prior call on your commitments. That's probably genetic, too; somewhere back in our primate evolution it made sense to help someone out who shared your genes, over a perfect stranger.

Put the pair of Holmes brothers in the same room, however, and all that seems to go out the window.

On the one hand they are so obviously chips off the same block- too intelligent for their own good, arrogant, scary and both the product of a family that obviously had wealth and status, but not a lot of love shared between them. You don't get called the Iceman if you had a normal emotional childhood, do you?. Sometimes I think Mycroft was born in a three piece suit. And Sherlock? Well, he defies description. I can just see a twelve year old version of him shouting at Mycroft, "Caring is not an advantage," and storming off in a huff, slamming the door as he goes. Come to think of it, he did that last week, so maybe age isn't an issue here.

They squared up to each other at that crime scene like two boxers. Mycroft's quick jab "Has it ever occurred to you that we should be on the same side?" provoked a left hook from Sherlock: "Funnily enough, no."

So, what was the "petty feud" that Mycroft referred to and why was "mummy upset"? They've never confessed to what it was, and in all honesty, I've been afraid to ask. It was enough that Sherlock called his brother his arch enemy, and that was on the very first night we met up at Baker Street.

Over the past three years, I've watched their bickering turn progressively nastier. The real turning
point? Oh, that's easy to pick out- when their usual verbal warfare was exacerbated by something else that I've never got to the bottom of- probably because my security clearance isn't high enough. When I went out to give Irene Adler and Sherlock "a bit of space", I came back to an empty flat. I'm not sure what I expected them to get up to, but disappearing wasn't top of the list, unless Irene managed to drag him off to a bedroom as she kept threatening to do. Hours later, when Sherlock finally appeared, he wouldn't say anything other than "It's over, John; I've unlocked the phone and Mycroft has it…and her, probably trying to find out about Moriarty before he lets her loose to face the wrath of her clients when she no longer has any insurance." He then just disappeared into his room, and *the woman* was scarcely ever mentioned again. And I've not wanted to exacerbate the problem by raising it again, since neither of the Holmes brothers will talk about it- to me, or to each other, from what I can tell.

It's got to the point now where they hardly exchange words now. There was a brief flurry of text and telephone exchanges around the time of our trip to Dartmoor, but as soon as we were back, the war of silence resumed. And now that Moriarty's trial is about to start, there's no sign at all of Big Brother. And that's got me worried, it really has. Because no matter how difficult things get between the two Holmes brothers, I just can't help but think they need to stand together against what is coming, or it's going to all end in tears.
"Excuse me". I put as much annoyance as I could into the phrase.

"What for?" came the calm reply almost instantaneously.

"I need to get to the kettle."

"So?"

"You're in the way, Sherlock. You're always in the way when you sit at the kitchen table to do your experiments."

He didn't even look up from the microscope. "Where else do you suggest I do them? Your bedroom perhaps?"

"No need to get sassy. Just move it, pull your chair in so I can get by."

"For good posture it is important to sit a reasonable distance from the table. As a doctor, you should know that, because you have to deal with the skeletal consequences all the time from your patients." He didn't move, he didn't look up, he just reached out for the next slide and slipped it under the microscope lens.

"SHERLOCK!"

Now he looked up, a look of incomprehension on his face. "What's the matter with you?"

"You are between me and a cup of tea. And there you are in the way, faffing about and playing with your toys. After the day I've had, you are risking a lot when you are between me and the only thing that is going to restore my mood."

"Is that any excuse for being rude?"

"Rude? RUDE? I'll tell you what's rude..." and I set off on a long list of offences that Sherlock was guilty of, starting with putting a half-rotten slab of human thigh on a plate in the microwave (How was I to know that you thought it was steak, John? It's an experiment to test how muscle fibre burns at a differential rate to soft tissue.)and running through a half a dozen other misdemeanours before ending with his consuming the last of the milk this morning, just after I had poured a bowl of cereal.
I was in a mood, and he wasn't helping.

"John, all but the last of the 'crimes' you are accusing me of committing relate to my scientific experiments. They are important for my work. They contribute to the knowledge of crime scene analysis, and could conceivably change the course of justice. I don't think I have to apologise for them, when they can either free an innocent person, or put a guilty one behind bars."

"So, that's your excuse, is it?"

"Yes, what's yours?"

"Mine? What do you mean?"

"What's your excuse for being so grumpy and taking it out on me?"

Actually, he had a point. I'd had a miserable day at the surgery, starting with one patient throwing up on me (Winter vomiting sickness, John. Never a pretty sight, especially when you bring it home on your shirt) and another one accusing me of not taking her complaint seriously (Statistically speaking, John, serial minor symptoms usually indicate a more significant undiagnosed condition. Were you listening but not hearing?) As a doctor, however, I am supposed to be able to deal with all this and keep smiling. He was probably right; because I was tired, I was just having a go at him, because he was here and I could.

"I'm sorry Sherlock. You're right."

"Apology accepted. It's a good excuse."

He stood up and stretched behind him to turn on the kettle.
He'd been winded from all the running— a fifteen minute full tilt sprint up and down fire escapes, rooftops and back alleys. That was his excuse anyway. He'd been grabbed by one of the suspects when he stopped to catch his breath, watching Sherlock disappear down the alley in a swirl of that Belstaff coat. Annoyed by being caught flat-footed, John rammed his elbow back hard into the abdomen of the stocky man who had tried to strangle him. There was a gasp of pain, and then the thug sank down on one knee, as he struggled to catch his breath. *Paralysed his diaphragm.* This brought the man's chin down to a level that John could easily reach. One quick punch and the thug was out for the count. John grabbed the plastic zip cuffs out of his back pocket, and secured the man's hands behind his back, in one swift movement before standing up to look around to see how Sherlock was getting on.

Down at the far end of the dead-end alley, Sherlock was squaring off with two of the others suspects. John grimaced. *Why do they always assume he's going to be harder than me to take down?* It had become a noticeable pattern, if the fight was the two of them against three criminals. The taller detective always drew the two, because the others would believe a man as short as John would be easy enough for one of them to subdue. Of course, they always underestimated the smaller man, and suffered the consequences. The doctor's military training made short work of most people who tried hand-to-hand combat with him. Somehow, the boxing lessons Sherlock had at public school seemed to be less than useful against criminals who didn't fight by Queensbury Rules.

Sherlock had learned to stall for time, so that John could re-join him and even up the odds. Except that wasn't happening now. The bigger of his two opponents standing at the farther end drew a pistol. John was a good fifty feet away and started to run.

He needn't have bothered. Sherlock exploded into action and executed a series of sharp stiff arm blows to the nearer of the two men, and as he staggered, the detective aimed a vicious 180 degree spin kick at his knee. John could hear the crack of bone and cartilage even at his distance. Sherlock spun away without a backward glance and attacked the man with the gun, who had only just begun to draw it up into position to fire. "*No!*" John shouted to try to distract the assailant who was moving with menace toward his friend.

Once again, John was amazed to watch Sherlock take the gun wielding criminal down with professional ease. His manoeuvre involved a close hold, coming inside the gun arm, which was...
slapped away to the left sharp, followed by a slap to the man's right ear, startling him for a second, which was long enough for Sherlock to aim a swift knee into the suspect's groin. It was followed by a stiff armed blow to the forearm of the hand carrying the gun which clattered onto the alley floor, his hand numbed and useless. Sherlock then moved in a blur, and by the time that John was within ten feet, he had the suspect helpless in a highly unusual head lock.

"I need to know when, where, what and most important who. I can break your neck with one move, so you'd better start talking". The detective wasn't even out of breath, but the big man he had pinned was clearly terrified.

"The drop is tomorrow at three o'clock, down at the factory on Mile End Road."

"Who's going to be there?" Sherlock asked mildly. He shifted the choke hold, applying slightly more pressure on the carotid artery, as John picked up the Russian's weapon - it was a brand new Strizh pistol, one from the consignment that they'd been chasing for weeks.

There was a hesitation. John watched as Sherlock just shifted his arm around the neck of the suspect again and began to apply pressure, pushing the man's head to the right. This ground the neck muscles into the bones of the vertebra putting pressure on the top of the spine, provoking a strangled cry.

"Alright! Alright! Don't …" the suspect cried out. "There'll be three boys from the manor," he was wheezing now, "picking up the material from the van- and probably a lookout or two. They ain't suspecting any trouble, so it should be easy to get him. He'll be collecting his fee." The thug dragged in a deep breath, then grimaced as Sherlock renewed his grip. "Ahh, for Christ's sake, let me go." At this, the man's eyes caught sight of John and there was pleading in them.

John was surprised by Sherlock's sudden display of deadly martial art skill. Where the hell did that come from? His friend had never shown such deft handling of the physical side of his crime work.

Later, when the suspects had been collected by Lestrade and his team, John and Sherlock shared a taxi back to Baker Street. The suspect's tip-off about tomorrow's meeting had been gratefully received by the New Scotland Yard detective. "This string of murders has been driving us crazy. The Russian gun trafficking ring has been working their way through our police informers like a hot knife through butter; nice to get our hands on their hit man tomorrow. Thanks- now get out of here- and I don't want to see you two anywhere near Mile End Road tomorrow afternoon. This is a job for SO19, so stay out of it, please."

Now in the back of the cab, John found himself looking at Sherlock again, wondering where the tall brunet had acquired those martial art skills. His friend was in his usual post-case withdrawal - eyes vacantly watching London by night go by the window on his side of the taxi.

"Sherlock, those were pretty interesting moves you used against your two suspects. Is there something you aren't telling me?"

"Hmm?"

He was still looking out the window. "Sherlock, you normally wait for me before tackling two suspects. But tonight you didn't even need me. Where did you learn those manoeuvres?"

The brunet turned to his friend. "I can't assume you'll always be with me, John. And despite all the brainpower in the world, there are times when the body needs exercise, too. I need to be able to take care of myself. I've been building up my fitness and muscle weight, and working out with someone who is teaching me Bartitsu."
"Bartitsu? What's that? Never heard of it."

"No reason why you should. It's something developed by Edmund Barton Wright at the end of the 19th century. It combines a lot of things that you'll be familiar with- jujitsu, judo, kick and regular boxing, fencing and some you might not be, such as French Savate and Swiss Schwingen. Think the full range of mixed martial arts on steroids."

"Who is teaching you?"

"A professor is researching the techniques and needs a sparring partner. I consulted him some while ago when a body turned up at the Barts Morgue with an unusual bone break pattern. He was most useful, and is proving to be so again."

John thought about it, and asked the next obvious question. "Why this attention to your 'transport', why now?"

"There are no rules in bartitsu. It's street fighting at its most pure form. The fact that it isn't well known is useful- no military training ground graduates will have been drilled in how to defend themselves against it, and it's unknown in the criminal fraternity. I need to be ready, John. And, given Moriarty, it is wise to prepare for the worst."

The thought sobered John. The sense of foreboding that had been hanging over them since the pool felt just that little bit sharper in focus tonight. He decided he should do the same, resume his nightly army exercise routine and take off a few of the excess pounds accumulated from too many take out meals. A regular run might help his stamina. A few sessions at the firing range wouldn't hurt either. As John's army instructors always drilled into him, nothing beats a sensible exercise of advance preparation and risk management. The mood in the taxi was sombre all the way back to Baker Street, with both men lost in their thoughts about what the future might bring.
Expression

Chapter Summary

expression /ɪkˈsprepʃən/

Noun: The process of making known one's thoughts or feelings, the conveying of opinions publicly without interference by others: "freedom of expression", a form of speech.

I've always been a smiler. My mother used to say that. Harriet cried a lot and fussed, her face in a perpetual pout or scowl. But, me- mum said I slept through the night from the time I came home from the hospital and was always a "cheery little lad", to use her words. I didn't much like the 'little' aspect of that phrase; been sensitive about my height since school, when I realised that other boys seemed to be growing faster than me.

That led me to smile when bigger boys underestimated me, and suffered the consequences. A smile of triumph, that. Family also taught me that smiling was a way of defusing others' anger-usually at each other, rather than me. I ended up being the peacemaker all too often in my family, trying to stop my parents and Harry from coming to blows, yet again. I could use my smile to keep both sides onside, and not lose their trust. I swear at times it was like lion taming- and a smile there keeps dangerous animals at bay.

Later, when I started dating, girls would say it was my smile that convinced them to say yes. Something about being friendly and accessible, keeping them feeling comfortable. I ended up wearing a smile like I would a new jumper, to attract a bit of female company. First impressions count.

A good smile is a professional asset for a doctor, too, it kind of goes with the bedside manner. You learn to deliver reassurance through your facial muscles. It becomes an act, in part, because you often know too many of the risks that you don't necessarily want to pass onto patients or their families too early. So you learn to hide behind that smile.

The army does that to you, as well. Officers can't go around wearing a face that is too expressive; might scare the squaddies too much if they really knew what you were thinking. So, the older I got and the more senior the position, the more my smile became a way of deflecting others, keeping them reassured when I might actually be feeling something different. Especially after I was invalided out of the army, and got lost in depression whilst trying to adjust back to civilian life. The smile got trotted out then whenever someone wanted to pry just a little too much. It reassured people, no matter what might be going on behind it.

I had not realised how automatic my use of a smile was until I had spent a number of months sharing a flat with Sherlock. Unlike me, he doesn't smile often. In that way his expressions are actually more honest than mine. Oh, I've seen him use it as a tool of questioning, or to get something he wants out of a suspect or just a person who has something he needs. It was really weird to see him suddenly become charming, solicitous and apparently happy- all as part of a
disguise. He's a great actor, in fact, a better one than his brother, who smiles a lot more, but whose smiles never seem to reach his eyes somehow.

I became more aware of Sherlock's genuine expressions the longer I spent time with him. The little furrow between his eyebrows when he was trying to puzzle something out that he didn't understand about someone's behaviour, or the odd sideways look at me when he was checking if something was a little 'not good'. I learned his excited manic smile- that's a bit like a kid on Christmas morning, but for him of course it was usually in response to some particularly complicated and gruesome case that had just been handed to him by New Scotland Yard.

Then there is the little smirk he gave when he was amused at someone's stupidity- Anderson's or Donovan's, which he would then proceed to expose and correct in that oh-so-superior tone of voice. Think of "I told you so" on steroids- always guaranteed to raise my blood pressure a little, that one, because it seemed designed to provoke a negative reaction.

Then there was the real, genuine...amazing smile that he gave just to me. A little tentative at first, as if he was afraid to let a truth out. And then when I couldn't resist but smile back at him, his would blossom and, my God, it just took my breath away. He did it three times that first night, the first was when I got the giggles about his "welcome to London" and I pulled Lestrade's ID out of his hand. The second was when we ended up in the hall at Baker Street and we could hardly catch our breaths, he joked about me invading Afghanistan, and we just laughed together. And then after I shot the cabbie to stop him from taking that pill, and I told him he was an idiot- he gave me that same smile, almost as if he couldn't believe my reaction. His smiles that night were an expression of that instant connection we made, so much so that he could state with total confidence to Mrs Hudson that I would be taking the flatshare, knowing that I would.

I have always valued the real smile so much, and now that he is gone, I find it hard to remember the last time I saw it. What pops into my memory instead is the embarrassed smile he wore at the press conference when the Yarders gave him the deerstalker hat, and I made him wear it for the cameras. Or the wicked smirk he gave when he timed just how long he could get away with using Mycroft's ID at the Baskerville facility. He didn't smile much when Irene was around, whatever he might have been feeling. In fact, in the last months, he seemed sad, but like an idiot, I didn't realise what that meant.

And so now, I have very little to smile about. I still wheel it out as a way of reassuring others than I'm coping. But it isn't real, not anymore, it's just an expression.
I'm not sure what I was expecting. Mike had laughed and said it was the second time that day someone had said "who would want a flatmate like me?" and then he led me off to Barts. So, on the way I couldn't help but wonder what, or rather who, he was taking me to meet. Likely to be a medical connection, given Barts- probably a colleague, another consultant, maybe someone his age recently divorced, looking for cheap accommodation in central London while paying alimony and maintenance to a wife and kids in the suburbs? Or maybe, a post-graduate student? Of course, Barts is full of other people- doctors of all shapes and sizes, nurses, technicians, administrators. So, most likely, someone medical.

By the time we went up the stairs past the teaching classrooms and through the doors of a smaller laboratory, my mind was already turning towards researcher. But what I saw once I got in the room was not what I expected.

To start with, the kit had changed since my day, and that's what I said under my breath to Mike. The place had all the usual chemistry stuff, but with a hefty dose of IT, too- computers, chemical analysis kit, electron microscopes, centrifuges- things that in my day as a Barts student were simply too big and expensive to let youth play with.

And the only person in the room, in the far corner bent over a light box using a pipette to do something to a petrie dish, didn't look like anything I expected to see in a lab. To start with, any idiot knows you don't wear a suit when you're experimenting with chemicals. That's what white lab coats are designed for- something you can wash again and again, and eventually replace when you spill something horrible on it. As med students, we wore scrubs as much as we could get away with- made you feel more like a doctor (medical camouflage) and the hospital laundry took care of it too, meaning you didn't waste money.

That was the other thing that caught my eye. The guy at the end of the room wasn't just wearing a suit, it was an expensive suit. I may not dress in Armani, but I know a reasonable amount about
men's clothing. Going to Sandhurst for my ten week RAMC Officer's training course was a real
eye opener. Of course, we all wore uniforms, but off duty, off base was a different matter, and the
clothing people wore told you everything you needed to know about a person.

So, the tall slender man at the end of the room wore his suit as if it had been made for him.
Probably was, I realised when he spoke.

"Mike, can I borrow your phone? There's no signal on mine."

That was an English public school accent- somewhere home counties, if I wasn't mistaken. I had an
ear for accents; it helped no end when meeting new people as a doctor and an Army Captain, to get
a person placed in my mind. And it fit the suit, too, because the request was delivered in that
slightly offhand manner typical of someone born into money and privilege.

Because I know Mike, and he had brought me here to meet this guy, I was curious. So, I decided to
see what he was like.

"Uh, here, use mine," and reached into my back pocket to pull the phone out. I didn't move toward
him, because, quite frankly, my leg was giving me a bit of gyp after all the walking back from the
park.

"Oh, thank you." He cast a quick glance at Mike and then came toward me. As Mike introduced
me as an old friend of his, the young man took the phone from my outstretched hand, flipped it
open and started to type at a blistering speed. Closer up, and watching him move, I realised he was
younger than I had first thought, maybe 30? A bit old to be a post-graduate student, a bit young to
be a colleague of Mike's. A puzzle, then.

And then he asked the most unexpected thing.

"Afghanistan or Iraq?" while he typed away.

"Sorry?" I could see Mike smirk.

"Which was it, Afghanistan or Iraq?" He gave me the briefest of glances and I got my first really
good look at his eyes- a strange sort of grey green, set in a very pale face, framed by unruly and
long dark hair. Definitely not a military man; no, just about the antithesis, so how would he know
about my service? I can recognise a fellow army man by the way he holds himself, the haircut, the
clothing- we get to recognise one another after spending years in each other's company. But, this
guy was clearly nothing to do with the armed forces.

"Uh, Afghanistan; how did you…"

The door behind me opened and a young woman came in wearing a white lab coat, carrying a cup
of coffee.

As he handed me back my phone, the young man spoke up. "Ah Molly, coffee, thank you" and
reached for the mug. Then he looked puzzled. "What happened to the lipstick?"

"It wasn't working for me." She seemed a bit shy and uneasy. Rather sweet- and clearly a bit
attracted to the young man. I'm good at ready female body language- it's a favourite hobby of
mine, enjoying the landscape. But his reply showed that the girl's feeling wasn't reciprocated.

He turned back toward his experiment and said "Really? I thought it was a big improvement. Your
mouth's …too small now," and he waved his hand rather dismissively.
So, gauche as hell. I felt sorry for the young woman, who just muttered softly "OK, then.", as if resigned to being treated like a doormat. So, he had no idea how to be polite to the fairer sex; in fact, was rather socially inept. A geek?

Then he asked me something even more unexpected than his first question.

"How do you feel about the violin?"

I stalled for a second, looking at Mike for confirmation that this question was aimed at me, rather than him. The young woman beat a hasty retreat and left the lab, so I asked, "Sorry, what?"

He was looking down at his experiment. "I play the violin when I'm thinking. Sometimes I don't talk for days on end. Would that bother you?" He looked up at me. "Potential flatmates should know the worst about each other." And then he gave me a weird smile, the sort of smile that nearly passed for normal, but didn't quite make it in my book. It made me wary.

I looked back at Mike, confused. "You... you told him about me?"

Mike shook his head, "Not a word."

"Then who said anything about flatmates?" I was a little annoyed. It was as if I hadn't been informed about what was going on, so I shifted a bit on my feet. Old habit that- when I feel uncomfortable, I get my weight settled over the balls of my feet-it's the fight or flight instinct at play when you get faced with the unexpected.

"I did." It was delivered with total confidence, as he shouldered on his expensive overcoat and did a public school boy thing with his blue scarf. "I told Mike this morning that I must be a difficult man to find a flatmate for. Now here he is, just after lunch with an old friend, clearly just back from military service in Afghanistan....Not a difficult leap."

There was something smug in his tone that irked me slightly. "How did you know about Afghanistan?"

He didn't even bother to reply, except to say "I have my eye on a nice little place in central London; together we ought to be able to afford it. We'll meet there tomorrow evening at seven o'clock." Then with an apologetic smile, "Sorry, got to dash. I think I left my riding crop in the mortuary." And with that slightly alarming comment, he swept by me and headed for the door.

Now, there is one thing that gets me really annoyed, and that's being taken for granted. I may be small, but it usually only takes one occasion before people realise that I am worth a bit more consideration than at first glance they might think I am due. So, in a firm voice, I asked "Is that it?"

It was enough to make him turn away from the door, and ask warily "Is that what?"

"We've only just met, and we're going to look at a flat." I loaded it with enough scepticism to make it clear I wouldn't be taken for granted. Was this guy an upper class twit?

"Problem?" There was a tiny bit of uncertainty.

I just looked away and laughed. "We don't know a thing about each other. I don't know where we're meeting, I don't even know your name."

He looked at me as if seeing me for the first time. Then he proceeded to tell me just how much he did know about me- even down to the psychosomatic limp, my therapist and Harry's fight with Clara that had led to her gift of the phone. It was delivered at breakneck speed and in a factual tone
that showed he knew, really knew these things about me. As I was mentally reeling, he ended it with a slightly quiet comment "That's enough to be going on, don't you think?"

As I was digesting this, he walked out, leaning back briefly around the door to say, "The name is Sherlock Holmes, and the address is 221b Baker Street." Then he did the most unexpected thing of all: he winked. "Afternoon", he said to Mike, and then in a swirl of long coat, he was gone.

I looked at Mike in amazement. "Yep, he's always like that." From then on, I knew to expect the unexpected from my extraordinary flatmate.
John tried not to twitch. He tried to project an air of calm, cool, professional detachment. After all, he was a medical man, a trauma surgeon with battlefield experience. It just wouldn't do to let his emotions out. Might distract the trauma team from doing what they needed to do.

But, he was finding it hard, very hard. He was usually the one around the table, making decisions, taking action, saving a life. Now, as simply the patient's advocate, he knew he was lucky to even be in the room, a place reserved normally for family members only. The resus team had taken pity on him, because they knew him and the patient now lying comatose on the table.

Various emotions were warring with one another inside John's head, while he struggled to maintain his face in neutral. First and foremost, this wasn't just another patient, another list of symptoms and conditions to be dealt with, in that peculiar atmosphere of calm authority that normally characterised his work as a medical professional.

The bomb had been small, targeted and deadly. Not the first time that night, John wondered what the hell Sherlock had been doing to get involved with something that the CTC branch of the Metropolitan Police should have been handling rather than Lestrade's Homicide team, but it was too late to be thinking about what might have been prevented if he'd been home to ask his friend the obvious question (*Sherlock, why would they want you to get involved?*) He guessed, and Mycroft confirmed it on the phone, that this was something outside the detective's usual remit. The Security Services and their brethren across the Thames at Vauxall should have been on the case, too, not the world's only consulting detective. Now a certain minor official in the British Government was on his way home from the latest G20 summit meeting in New Delhi, anticipated back at Heathrow in four hours.

In the meantime, his brother was lying on a hospital trolley with a load of doctors trying to figure out if the fragment of wooden door frame from the crime scene now embedded in Sherlock's back could be extracted without damaging the detective's spine. And there was another neurologist examining the head CT scans and tutting about the consequences of a possible hairline fracture that
might or might not be there. It promised to be a long night...

Seventeen hours later, and the scene had moved on. Now John was sitting in a hospital room, waiting for a certain person to recover consciousness. The piece of wood had been extracted, and the prognosis was good - there was a chip out of the transverse costal facet of the 11th thoracic vertebra, but miraculously, the penetration was not leading to any spinal swelling or neural damage. A ligament had been nearly sliced through, but the surgeons had sorted it, and John hoped that Sherlock's left hand would not be troubled too long, a six week break from the violin was the likely consequence. An MRI had been done, and the suspected skull fracture had not in fact materialised - just a concussion, no cerebral bleeding or obvious swelling. All in all, a result. But, until he woke up, John would not breathe a sigh of relief. It should have happened before now, and the delay was weighing heavily on John.

Mycroft had come and gone. Consultation with the doctors confirmed that Sherlock's life was no longer in danger, and his brother wanted to get to the bottom of what had actually happened at the crime scene. Sherlock wasn't the only one injured: Lestrade's scalp laceration from flying glass had been sutured in the Emergency Department, and he'd been sent home. One of the crime scene DCs had been admitted for more serious leg injuries caused by the blast. Mycroft wanted to know if the people behind the bomb included a certain Irishman, but John had been unable to shed any light on that - because he'd been on a late locum shift rather than with Sherlock.

John didn't have much to think about during those long seventeen hours except play lots of "what if".

What if he'd been home instead of taking that locum shift? Would asking the right question at the right time have made a difference, and kept Sherlock at home? (Don't be silly, John, it was a case, and an interesting one at that)

What if he'd gone with Sherlock, and spotted the fact that it was a set up for the bombing? (And you think you would have seen something that I didn't see? Since when are you more observant at crime scenes than I am?)

What if, he'd been there on the scene to see to Sherlock's injuries quicker, rather than having to wait for the ambulances to arrive 17 minutes later? (Really, John, I know you're a good doctor, but I wasn't bleeding out, and the injuries weren't made any worse by the wait.)

This sort of internal dialogue was filling the silence in the room, with John knowing exactly what Sherlock would have said, if he had been awake to say it.

John drew his hands through his hair and scrubbed at his eyes. He was going to have to go for another coffee soon. He sighed. "So, just wake up now and say it".

"mmph. Say...what?" The mumble was slurried and quiet, but it was definitely there and John's smile erupted.

"That you're an idiot, that's what."

"Why?"

Now John switched into doctor mode and started on the GCS questions.

"Do you know where you are?"
Sherlock's eyelids fluttered and then slowly opened. *Eye opening in response to speech, that's a three.*

He groaned. "In a place I hate- hospital."

"And do you know why you are here?"

Silence. The moment lengthened, and John began to worry.

Eventually, Sherlock answered. "Has something to do with the canister... I should have realised why it was there on the table."

*Conversational, but showing signs of disorientation and confusion?* John mentally assigned that a 4 for verbal response.

"I could smell that it was sulphur, just didn't put it together properly, because it didn't seem to have anything to do with the body. Stupid, really stupid. I mean one pot desulfurisation of light oils by chemical oxidation and solvent extraction with room temperature ionic liquids is a classic activity of home-made bombs."

John re-adjusted the score up to the maximum of five.

He smirked. "Ok, Sherlock, you know the drill. Put your finger on your nose for me, so I can rate motor response."

Instead, he got a rude gesture involving a middle finger. "That'll do."

"So, am I good to go? When can I get out of here?"

"Only if you promise me to stay out of crime scenes involving bombs for at least the next 48 hours."

Sherlock looked annoyed. "What happens if there's another one, John? Deduction says this is likely to be a serial offender with a grudge against the Met. I need to get back to the scene before Anderson destroys any more useful evidence."

John was adamant. Crossed his arms and stared down at the bed-ridden detective. "Nope. You don't get out of here unless I can extract a promise from you that you will take it easy for at least three days. You've got a hell of a concussion and need to be under observation for at least 48 to 56 hours. If you won't promise to uphold my rules, I won't let them release you."

"Oh, hell! Arguing with you makes my head hurt."

"Then take these tablets of paracetemol and be quiet." Sherlock huffed, but took the pills. And John extracted some pleasure and comfort from the situation that for once, his friend was doing as he was told.
**Exterminate**

Chapter Summary

exterminate /ɪkˈstɜːrməˌnæt/

Verb: Destroy completely; kill (a pest).

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John smacked the rolled up newspaper down on the kitchen countertop, trying to crush the scuttling insect. It was annoying, deeply annoying. He was up again in the middle of the night fixing himself a cup of tea in his tiny flat in the modern block. Turning on the light and reaching for the kettle disturbed a roach that ran at great speed for the cupboard disappearing into a tiny crack just as the paper smashed down. *I just don't get it; why is it that this new building has roaches and 221b didn't?* It had always perplexed him how Sherlock could leave decaying body parts out on the kitchen table in all his bizarre experiments and yet they had no roaches. Despite the place looking like a rubbish tip with piles of paper everywhere and the detritus of various cases (*A harpoon? Why do you need to keep a harpoon, Sherlock?*), the flat at 221b had never had an infestation of insects. Now, seventeen months after he'd moved out of Baker Street, he was conducting a battle of chemical warfare against ants, roaches and silver fish.

This flat was immaculate. He kept it clean with a military precision, a sense of hygiene borne of both military and medical disciplines, and a childhood spent with a mother who judged herself by the state of her kitchen floor and bathroom sink's cleanliness. His kitchen table was clean enough to eat off without a plate, his fridge did not smell of anything but baking soda, every item in the kitchen cupboard labelled and the stock carefully examined every two months for anything out of its best before date. Yet, nothing seemed to shift the bugs.

He vacuumed, he mopped floors, he scrubbed windows clean. He disinfected bathroom tiles, the rubbish bins. He knew it was irrational, making work to fill up time that would have been spent in the old days on cases, on keeping Sherlock fed and watered enough to stop him from falling over at crime scenes. And even worse, it gave him no pleasure to look around the flat and realise that it had no soul, no life, no personality. It was as empty as his soul now. He missed the jack knife stabbed into the mantelpiece, the dregs of ash in the fireplace, the sink full of dishes that Sherlock never, ever washed up, the ring of soap scum around the bathtub after Sherlock spent yet another hour in there (*It helps me think, John*). The debris of two bachelors living side by side in comforting messiness, and having Mrs Hudson standing with her hands on her hips, tutting at them "Look at the state of this place! I'm not your housekeeper, you know." He missed it. All that had been destroyed one afternoon when he had looked up to find his friend standing on the edge of a roof.

Sherlock wedged his elbows tight against the window frame and raised the binoculars to his eyes. This was the third night of his vigil, but he did not expect there to be a fourth one. He no longer saw the state of squalor in the flat that he had been renting for the past week. If it made him wish for the comfort of Baker Street, he tried not to recognise it. If its emptiness reminded him of the absence of his one and only friend, then he tried not to notice. He attempted to ignore the scent of
unwashed hair, cigarette smoke and stale sweat that characterised his worn workman's clothing— all part of the disguises that he had worn every day and night for the past seventeen months.

The roaches no longer hid from him, because he kept the lights off at night, to see better into the office block across the street. He'd laid the bait there almost a week before, leaving enough time for the plot to ripen to its full potential. He was running on nicotine, coffee and adrenaline, relying on their stimulation to keep him going while the drama unfolded.

Tonight the second largest criminal gang in Minsk would make its move against the four men that made up Moriarty's network in Belarus. The consulting criminal's people had been well chosen— the best of a criminal underclass whose sophistication had made any pretence at legitimate law enforcement incredibly difficult. The four men had bribed, blackmailed and extorted their way into positions of near impregnability, where they could advise organised criminals with impunity, creaming off a hefty percentage of the profits. Illegal trading in arms, drugs, cigarettes and currencies were a staple element of the country's GDP, the black market in people trafficking one of the growing business sectors. Above it all, the four men sat serenely protected by Moriarty's signature piece— a band of dark angels, people in high places whose discretion could be counted on to protect the work of the Irishman's local office.

It had been one of Sherlock's most challenging targets. He'd been working his way through the Irishman's network, slowly. Thirty two countries had an outpost, with anywhere between 5 and twenty "consultants". Now, seventeen months after his 'death', Sherlock was half way through his campaign of extermination.

He had refined the technique over time. His first attempts had been somewhat ham-fisted, until he realised that the best way to destroy the network was either to set one part of Moriarty's network against another, or, as here in Belarus, to get the criminal clients to rise up and strike against the consultancy and its protective angels. In the process, internecine wars between rival factions and gangs took their toll, much to the delight of law enforcement authorities all over the world. The preceding month had been Russia's turn, where the gun battles between rival gangs had filled the newspapers for weeks. Eventually, Moriarty's Moscow office had been shut down and the state authorities presented with a fat packet of intelligence about the Irishman's clients amongst the Russian Republic's criminal networks, along with a list of the dark angels within national and local government who had been protecting the criminals for years. All it took was someone with the eyes not only to see, but to observe what others had been missing for years.

As if that wasn't enough, other fat packages of intelligence arrived simultaneously on the desks of the security forces in France, the USA and Britain, detailing the operations of Russian networks in their countries. "It's Christmas!" had been Mycroft Holmes' reaction in Whitehall, a view shared in Levalloise-Perret, Paris and Langley, Virginia.

When he had set off on his campaign to protect his friends, Sherlock had not realised that it would turn into an all-out war of extermination. But the more he dug, the more he found that Moriarty had put into place a "dead man's switch"— if he died in his confrontation with the detective on the roof of St Barts, then he was going to have his revenge on everything and everyone that Sherlock valued. The snipers had been the easy part, but soon he had realised that squashing those bugs would never be enough to allow him to return from the dead. Nothing less than total destruction of the web would do.

So, as he focused the binoculars on the two men exchanging angry words in the room across the street, he ignored the roach crawling across the window sill. Some pests were simply too small to care about, when his friends' lives were at stake and therefore his future.
"Show me which card is the angry face, Sherlock." Violet Holmes had put down four picture cards, each showing an example of a different emotion on a photo of the same man's face.

Her five year old son looked up at her with those amazing grey-green eyes. They reminded her so much of her own mother, Michelle Vernet, that sometimes when her younger son looked at her, she had to stop her own blue eyes from filling with tears. She would have loved you, little one; she could have loved you for your wildness, your untamed spirit, your refusal to see things the way ordinary boring people see things. She had adored her mad, creative, artistic mother. Totally unsuitable as the wife of a minor British aristocrat, but it had been a love match that rather scandalised the Sherringford family.

She loved it when he did that, looked up at her, really looked at her. When he did that at times it made her catch her breath for the intensity of that look, made all the more special because he didn't do it for anyone else. Except Mycroft, and she thanked God for that, for so many reasons. For both of her sons needed each other in ways that neither of them would ever really understand.

She pointed back down at the cards. It didn't work, he was still looking at her. She took her finger and put it on his nose. "Follow my finger with your eyes, Sherlock and let me show you something interesting."

She was hoping that the new drug would make a difference to her son's level of concentration. Memantine was a dopamine agonist, her husband had explained to her its neurological affects, but she wasn't a pharmaceutical chemist and most of it had gone over her head. All I care is whether it works; we've tried so many different drugs to alleviate the worst aspects of his behaviour. The self-harming, the high threshold of pain, the lack of understanding of physical risk leading to repeated injury- it had been a hard five years just teaching Sherlock to understand what his body was telling him, and what all that sensory data meant.

According to the latest specialist that she'd had examine him, Sherlock was doing well in terms of developing communication skills, that is, in terms of autistic children. "An example of the success of your teaching and devotion to the exercises, Mrs Holmes. They are working, I can assure you."
And at the heart of it was communication. Two years ago, Sherlock just ignored almost everything that was said to him. His replies were seldom that- they almost seemed random, as if he was more involved with a conversation going on in his own head than responding to what someone might be saying to him. He almost never initiated a conversation with her, but at least he did talk to her and react, even if his response might come five minutes later, after a lot of other things had been said to him. She had learned, slowly, how to deal with the fractured timeline of his responses. And it was getting better. Mycroft said it was. Because she was with Sherlock so much, it was hard to see changes, because they were so tiny and incremental. Mycroft was now spending a lot more time at the prep school getting ready for boarding at Eton, so when he came home in the late afternoons, he would often see things differently. She appreciated that, and him, for it. And he and Sherlock talked, which was nothing short of a miracle.

She was struggling today to get Sherlock to concentrate on the cards, because he was more interested in what he had been doing before- which was lining up the crayons in perfect colour order; he'd learned the rainbow colours and now wanted everything to be ordered like it. Blue could not be next to yellow, green had to be between them; violet had to be between the red and the blue. And each crayon had to be the same length; if it wasn't, then he would spend ten minutes colouring a sheet of paper furiously just to shorten the length so it matched the others. He'd spent half the morning doing that.

Two sons, opposite sides of the spectrum. With Mycroft, he'd been so interested in everything, his brain like one giant sponge, that half the time she'd worried that he couldn't concentrate on things long enough. She'd had him tested for ADHD, but been relieved when the doctors said that he was fine- just learned so quickly that he was onto the next thing before most people realised he had learned what he needed to learn. "Why know more, mummy; I know enough about that, now I need to learn more about something new, something useful." That was Mycroft.

Sherlock focused everything on what he was doing- over-focused, to the point where he got seriously annoyed if you tried to get him to do something else. Just wanted to be left alone to learn everything there was to know about crayons as colours. She'd had to stop him from eating them. "But, mummy, I need to know if yellow tastes different from red; they sound different. They look different but they don't smell different. Why is that?"

"We are playing the faces cards now, Sherlock. If you do that with me, then you can get back to the crayons later."

He looked down at the cards, without any change at all in his expression. She had learned to handle that. No cheeky loving smile that Mycroft used to wheedle some treat or privilege. There was no guile in her younger son. But he needs to learn how to interpret faces, if he was to avoid upsetting people. Managing his own expressions would have to wait until he understood what they meant on other faces. Then she could teach him to mimic a facial expression, using a mirror, so he could see what he was doing, as if it occurred on someone else's face. It had been strange teaching him gestures, conditioning his muscle memory to do things consciously that other children just did without thinking.

"Which one is the angry face, Sherlock?" He was now studying the photos with his usual intense stare. "Try to identify the differences in the faces. We talked about this yesterday. Look at the mouth. Are the edges of the lips going up or down?"

At that moment, the door to her study opened, and her husband came through. Sherlock did not look up at him, and he did not look at his son.

"You need to get ready, Violet, the car will be here soon, and it will take us at least an hour to get
up to London for the curtain at 8pm."

She looked down at Sherlock. "Come on Sherlock, you can do this. It doesn't need that much thinking, just find the angry face."

"I don't know why you bother, Violet. It's just a waste of time. Let the professionals sort it out, that's what they are paid to do."

Now she looked at her husband with that tired little smile he was so used to seeing. "You know he responds to me in ways that others can't replicate." But there was a strain in her voice that the little boy could not miss. He began to get anxious; why was it so hard for him to do this for mummy? He knew she wanted him to hurry.

He started to rock; it helped him concentrate on the faces.

"Really, he's just getting worse. He just looks so gormless when he does that." He huffed in annoyance, and then reached down to grasp his son's spindly shoulder. "Come on, Sherlock. Put those cards away and let your mother get ready; she has something Important to do." Violet wasn't sure if Sherlock's flinch was in response to Richard's firm voice or his touch. *Does it matter?* She watched as the little boy wiggled free from his father's grasp, and returned to staring at the cards, flapping his hands in distress.

"Damn it, Violet. You need a break from all this mind-numbing stupidity." She sighed, and reached down to take her son's hands in hers. Softly, she asked "Now, Sherlock, what did I tell you about your hands? Can you remember the finger game? Show it to me now."

Her son obediently started moving the index finger on both hands to touch first his thumb, then the thumb to each of the other fingers in order, quickly and in synch, both right and left hands together. "I can get this, mummy, just wait a minute, please?"

Ignoring his son, he turned to his wife and hissed, "do I have to remind you how important this evening is? We are entertaining the Secretary of State for Health and his wife at the Royal Opera- we must not be late. I need you to give her a good time, and that means not spending your time telling her about this little example of genetic malfunction. Why not brag about how well Mycroft is preparing for Eton? She needs to be impressed, and we need to be seen as impressive, not pathetic." With this he glowered down at the boy, who for once looked up and saw his expression.

Sherlock looked down at the cards. He picked up the third one out of the four, and handed it to his mother. "This one, mummy; this one is the angry one."

She smiled. "How did you decide that, Sherlock. What was the clue?"

"It looks like father."

Her heart broke a little at that, as she hugged him.
As Sherlock's physical health improved, his mental state deteriorated. John kept telling himself that it was to be expected. Cocaine detoxification's principal side effects are increased anxiety, agitation and depression. It was a strange mix.

John's own depression after he returned from Afghanistan had been different. According to his therapist, his had been classical, text book stuff: listless, wanting to sleep a lot, failing to take any interest in anything, the feeling that things were hopeless. He didn't need her to tell him that; being invalided out of the army was just devastating. In one blow, he lost his profession, his career, his vocation, his friends, his purpose in life. He felt he had a right to be depressed, given the circumstances. He'd earned it the hard way, after all. The shoulder injury and the PTSD had robbed him of everything he valued, his entire sense of who he was. And, yes, it had led to 'suicidal ideation', something you hope that you only ever read about in a medical textbook

As a doctor, he'd studied depression along with other psychiatric conditions. But living through it was rather different than reading about it. John had never treated anyone professionally for the mental illness. He was a surgeon, a battlefield trauma specialist. His patients were rarely conscious by the time he went to work, and they rarely woke up before they left his care. So, psychological aspects of their injuries were not part of his world- until he became a patient.

Sherlock's depression was completely different, and John had to discover what it meant for his
friend, because it was so different from his own journey. Landmarks in this strange territory of Sherlock's mind soon became apparent. Intolerant of himself and of others. Irritable, on edge, and anxious. Whereas John had wanted to curl up and sleep all day, Sherlock couldn't sleep. The psychiatrist had offered anti-depressants and things to help him sleep; Sherlock just spurned them. "I need to think, John, not to be drugged into some stupor. That's what Mycroft wants me to do, just cave in and let others decide what's best for me. Well, I'm not playing that game."

As a result, he paced. He wouldn't eat, or when John did finally manage to get something down him, it often came back up a while later. Vomiting was also par for the course for detoxing. Of course, it made Sherlock feel even more wretched and angry. He shot an accusatory look at the nurse who arrived with the next meal, and just told her to piss off. When she didn't, he unleashed his deductive talents and explained to her in no uncertain terms that she would never get a promotion until she stopped pretending that her supervisor didn't know about her bulimia. The food tray she had delivered was missing at least two items, which she had consumed (look at the stain on the left side of her uniform collar, John). The breath mint she'd eaten to try to disguise the scent of vomit after breakfast wasn't working. She'd be better off leaving and starting somewhere else, and looking on the internet for ideas about how to hide her eating disorder. She fled, which of course was what Sherlock had wanted in the first place. The meal went cold, untouched.

The psychiatrist had explained it to John. "As he gets physically better, he's become more belligerent and uncooperative. He won't agree to any therapy sessions, just says it's pointless twaddle. But, if he doesn't change his behaviour, then we can't let him out. It's a vicious circle. No, actually it's worse, a deepening downward spiral."

"Talk to him, John. You're the only one he is connecting with at the moment. His mood is so vicious that I can't trust him to be civil to anyone else."

"What makes you think he won't be nasty to me? I've been on the receiving end of that hostility before, and it isn't exactly pleasant."

"Then yell back. He seems to take it better from you. And a friend can get away with saying things that we professionals aren't allowed. So, feel free to let rip, if you think it will help him."

Standing outside Sherlock's room, John wondered whether he needed a chair and a bullwhip- it felt like he was about to take on a caged lion. He hoped their friendship wouldn't end up in tatters, torn by the sharp claws of Sherlock's frustration.

oOo

An hour later, Sherlock was standing with his back to him at the far side of his room; John was leaning against the hospital bed, with his arms crossed. His chin was lifted and tilted a bit to the left. He was pissed off at his friend, and not afraid to show it.

Through clenched teeth the tall brunet said, "So, you've decided to join forces with my archenemy, have you? Cosy up to the other medicos in one happy treatment team under Mycroft's thumb to determine that I'm not fit to be released?"

"Sherlock, just stop this. You KNOW that I am on your side. I'm not convinced by anyone here that you won't be able to leave here soon, and I don't buy Mycroft's argument that you are safer in here than outside. But I do know that it is too early. Your physical injuries and the pneumonia are still an issue, as are the side effects of the detox. Just be patient for a while."

"What's 'a while'? That's what Mycroft uses for his indefinite detention orders, so if you can't be more specific then I will assume you are part of the conspiracy."
"Conspiracy? Now you are giving away evidence for those who want to diagnose paranoid delusions."

Sherlock just resumed his pacing.

"Sherlock, agitation ticks another one of their boxes, so I suggest you stop."

The taller man just increased the length of his stride.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Sherlock! Stop pacing long enough to tell me what is really the matter."

Sherlock just glowered at him. "So, false imprisonment isn't sufficient cause?"

John considered. "I've seen you lie comatose on our couch for days, when there are no cases. You get bored and restless, but it usually takes almost a week before you start getting frantic. Then you find ways to distract yourself, experiments on body parts, blowing up something in the kitchen, harassing Molly in the morgue- that keeps you occupied for a while longer. So, why are you so wound up now? You've only been able to get out of bed since Tuesday. What's wrong with giving yourself a little time to recover?"

"I need sensory stimulation, John. I just cannot be locked up here, going round and round in ever decreasing circles until my brain consumes itself. There is a worm in there that is just munching its way through everything in my mind palace. I open a room and it's just dust inside. Mycroft knows this, and he is doing it on purpose to drive me crazy."

He really needs to stop saying that, or a diagnosis of paranoia will be justified. John decided to take a different tack, a detour to see if Sherlock would focus on something else. "I thought SPD means that you need to stop stimuli? I mean, don't you need to block stuff out?"

"I can't. Doesn't work like that. The only way I can manage all this stuff coming in is to be able to find a thread, a reason, a point to it all. That's why cases focus me, ground me; without something to think about, I just drown in all that data. Can't control it unless I have a purpose, a reason to process and organise the information."

"Would it help if we could organise some chemistry kit, let you do some experiments?"

Sherlock snorted in derision. "Like that's ever going to happen. Glass? Chemicals? Nope- they won't trust me to use them 'appropriately'- might hurt myself, so they won't take the risk."

"They? Now you're really starting to sound paranoid."

The tall brunet turned sharply and crossed the distance between himself and John. Now up close and seriously intruding on John's personal space, he said through gritted teeth, "It isn't paranoid. Mycroft and I have disagreed, and surprise, surprise, here I am in an institution that has electronic locks on the doors, and I can't walk out. It isn't the first time; he has done it before. Is that being paranoid? No, it's being honest. If he could get away with it, he'd put me in chains and shackle me to a wall. Except these days, Big Brother does the modern equivalent- he gets doctors to prescribe anti-depressant drugs that will keep me in a stupor. And if I keep refusing to take them, then eventually, he or his minions will threaten me with restraints, a padded cell and then a strait jacket."

John stayed calm. He had to get Sherlock focussed on something, anything other than how annoyed he was at his enforced captivity. "What about some cold cases, I could try to wheedle a few out of Lestrade, and maybe bring some scientific journals; use the time to catch up on your reading?"
Sherlock fisted his hands into his hair, on either side of his head, and just screwed his eyes tightly shut. "What makes you think I can control this long enough to concentrate on anything? I can't even read a newspaper at the moment without losing the plot half way through a wretched article." He moaned in frustration.

"I need to get out of here. I need to get back to solving cases." Sherlock was now almost quivering with barely supressed rage. "It's all bloody Mycroft's fault. He's punishing me, locking me up here because I dared to defy his orders. He can't do that; he can't just order me about like I'm one of his employees. He dared to say that I was under house arrest and not to leave Baker Street. What bloody right does he think he has?"

"He's your brother. That gives him a right to care."

Sherlock just glared at John. "He cares about his safety net, John. His reservoir of spare parts. I'm part of his great contingency plan. That's why he cares. And when he threatens to lock me up because something I'm doing threatens his little plans, then I just have to escape. I won't be used like this; I can't. I'd rather die."

John's face showed his growing concern. Sherlock's face had become flushed, he was breathing rapidly. There was a fine sheen of sweat forming on his upper lip. Classic symptoms of a panic attack. His friend was dealing with the consequences of hormones released from his fight-or-flight reaction to his situation.

John reached up and took hold of his friend's wrists, exerting a strong firm pressure on the left one, while confirming the elevated pulse with the right hand. Sherlock looked down at him, drew in a ragged breath, but he did let go of his hair and lowered his hands. Another ragged breath. "I've got to get out of here, John." Then a sigh. "I just don't know what to do."

"One step at a time, Sherlock. Have you got a headache? Are you nauseated?"

Sherlock nodded, so John steered him back onto the bed. "Lie down, you need to let your muscles relax and get some blood back into your brain."

John made him close his eyes. "OK, I get it- you hate hospitals, because doctors don't understand what is going on with you. You want to be more in control of the situation; well, the best place to start is to be in control of yourself. But that means we need to talk, properly, without you working yourself up into a ranting frenzy. We need to explore what the options are, rationally, calmly."

Sherlock considered this for a while, but said nothing. John took that as a yes, and carried on. "Ok, deep breathing and a time out are called for. I'll be back later. When dinner is delivered, eat something. You can exercise more control if you've actually got the energy to do it. Keep refusing food, and you will just end up justifying those doctors wanting to restrain you and force feed you. So, confuse them by doing the unexpected thing. You're usually good at that, Sherlock."

oOo

John's next attempt to explore his friend's distress came later, after the day shift nurses had packed it in, and the night shift started. All the night staff really wanted was peace and quiet. Most of the patients they worked with were drugged to get them through the night with the minimum of bother. But, John had been told that while some of the food had been eaten from the dinner tray, none of the sleeping pills had been touched. He could hear Sherlock moving around in his room even before he opened the door.

"Not sleepy then?"
Sherlock had stopped in mid pace. "What part of anxiety makes you sleepy?"

"What are you anxious about?"

"Well, let's see. Shall I start with the fact that while I am locked up in here, Mycroft is about to make a huge mistake, thinking he can take on Moriarty, and win. He's an idiot. That's enough to make anyone anxious. There are consequences when Mycroft is doing stupid things, not just for him and for me, but for everyone in this country and beyond. He could ruin his reputation as 'Mr Infallible' if he's not careful. Oh, and then there's the simple fact that if I don't find something else to do except walk in circles, I will most certainly do something mad, bad and dangerous."

John smiled. "You're not Oscar Wilde."

"He ended up in Reading Gaol, doing hard labour on a treadmill. I am beginning to see the similarity between our situations. Actually, I say that, but on second thought, he was the lucky one; at least he had a fair trial. Mycroft has appointed himself my judge, jury and executioner."

"Sherlock, as tedious as this is, it won't kill you."

That stopped the pacing. Sherlock's shoulders slumped a bit. "Actually, it could," he said softly. "At least, it nearly did twice before."

"What are you talking about?"

"Locking me up makes me very depressed. Feeding me a diet of anti-depressants makes me even more depressed. I am NOT NORMAL, John, and those bloody drugs do things to my brain that they don't do to other people- at least, I hope not, because there would be a lot more dead people if they did. One of the preconditions for release from Mycroft's jails is for me to agree to take these wretched meds and to stay on them after release. As soon as I get out, I stop. Two fingers to him. They don't work anyway; I just end up even more depressed. I may be out of his rehab clinics, but I am not free from his surveillance and interference. It just makes me so angry."

"The last two times I've been released by playing along with Mycroft's game, I have ended up taking an overdose of cocaine within two months after leaving. Intentionally. I'm not talking about the usual thing, the he's-clean-now-so-when-he-takes-the-dose-he-used-to-take-it-is-too-much-for-his-system-to-cope-with kind of overdose. No, I meant it. Malice of forethought, with no hesitation. Just wanted to end it all." This confession was delivered at a staccato, blistering speed.

John had to remind himself to keep breathing. He's just admitted trying to kill himself twice. How the hell do I respond to that?

The silence in the room just lengthened. Finally, John just said quietly, "Well, you must have been seriously off your game. The Sherlock I know would be successful if he really wanted to die. Or, was it the cry-for-help kind of overdose?"

Sherlock turned back to look John in the eye. "Neither. I was unlucky. The first time the dealer skimped on the quality, so while I thought I had taken enough to fell an ox, it had been cut with so much crap that it took longer. Long enough for someone to find me, unfortunately. The second time someone returned to the house he'd just left for an entirely unpredictable reason, so I was found. Five minutes more and I would have been successful."

The thought of not ever having the chance to meet Sherlock shook John to the core. There'd have been more than one casualty then. "Why? Why did you want to do it in the first place?"

"You don't know what it's like here, do you?" He gestured to his own head. "You can't possibly
understand what it's like to be me. And, on those two occasions, I decided that I didn't like being me anymore and I didn't want to be there for Mycroft anymore. Simple, really."

John decided. "Well, I hate to dent that sense of being the only one in the world, but… I've considered suicide, too. I've been depressed, Sherlock; you will have seen some of that the very first time we met. I'm sure you deduced that fact along with the psychosomatic limp and the drunken brother who was actually my sister. She was the reason I didn't carry through with it for the first year after I was invalided out of the army; didn't want to be yet another burden. But, the second year was worse, and somehow, I'd reached the point where I didn't really care anymore what she might think. Selfish, but then that's depression for you."

"Your Browning."

"Yes, the gun. That's why I kept it. You have no idea how many times I looked at it and wondered whether I should use it one last time."

Sherlock was watching John's face, all through the confession. "So, what stopped you from carrying it out?"

"Well, I bumped into an old friend I hadn't seen in years and he introduced me to a madman who wanted someone to share a flat. Didn't have much time to think about it after that."

John gave a small smile at his friend and was relieved to see a faint ghost of a smile appear on Sherlock's face in reply.

"It'll be different this time, Sherlock. You aren't alone anymore."

John pointed to the hospital bed. "Now try to get some sleep, which generally means getting horizontal on a bed instead of wearing a path on this floor. I need to do the same, so I'm ready for whatever these idiot doctors try to throw at us tomorrow."

There was a silence that filled the room. John thought about the various bits of his map of Sherlock that had just been filled in during their conversation. A few formerly uncharted areas, the here be dragons places, now seemed a little less hazy in his mind.

Then Sherlock just said quietly, "thank you, John."

"No, I'm the one who needs to thank you, Sherlock. Good night."
Exile

Chapter Summary

exile

noun:

a prolonged, usually enforced absence from one's home or country; banishment

a person banished or living away from his home or country; expatriate

Greg Lestrade handed Sherlock his third black coffee of the morning. A hand reached out from the pile of blankets. He sat up, as the blankets puddled around his waist. Still clutching the spare duvet around his thin shoulders with one hand, he took a sip, with his eyes still closed. Dishevelled long dark hair made him look a bit feral, but Greg considered it a step forward. When Sherlock had arrived on his doorstep late last night, soaked to the skin, shaking like a leaf, and muttering incoherently, the Detective Inspector took one look at him and told his wife that they were going to have an unexpected house guest camping overnight on their sofa.

Over her protests, he bundled the young man into the bathroom, with strict instructions. Strip off his clothes, get in the shower and warm up, before hyperthermia really set in for good and he would have no choice but to take him to the hospital. At the mention of that word, Sherlock had growled he'd rather die, but the fit of coughing that followed only alarmed Greg more. The soaking wet jeans, t shirt and hoodie had been thrown in the washing machine as his wife argued about the stupidity of doing this. She threatened, cajoled and argued, but Greg just got on with it, telling her that he had no intention of letting the young man die of the cold on the streets of London. She stormed off and told him that he could "share the fucking sofa with the cretin" if it mattered so much to him. He followed her into the bed room and rustled in the closet for every available blanket, duvet and throw he could find. He pulled a set of warm pyjamas out of his drawer. Without a word, he dragged his pillow off the bed from where Louise glared at his every move.

He'd force-fed the young man the tomato soup that he warmed up in the microwave. Every time Sherlock opened his mouth to protest, he was confronted with a spoon of soup. Every time he refused, he was told in Lestrade's best *don't mess with me; I'm bigger and tougher than you are* command tones saying "Eat, or it's hospital!" Over the years, Greg had learned this was the warning of last resort. Nothing else seemed to work. He tried not to use it too often, but in this case, if he couldn't warm the young man up enough, it was not far from the truth.

He was woken up this morning by an angry wife who stalked through the living room with a small suitcase. Her last words to Greg were uttered through gritted teeth. "I am not overly fond of your willingness to give strays a place in our home. I'm going to my sister's for the next two days. If that person… isn't out of this house by the time I get back, then you and I will have to have words about who is going to be leaving for good." She slammed the door on the way out, which woke up something in the lump of blankets on the sofa enough to groan.
Greg stood up and groaned himself. He was getting too old to sleep in an arm chair. His neck and shoulders hurt like hell, and his back would not straighten. "I'm going to try to get functional by taking a hot shower. If you can be bothered to move, you can fix us both a coffee."

He got out of the shower, shaved and brushed his teeth and dressed in some fresh clothes, by which time he was feeling more human. He headed to the kitchen, but neither saw nor smelled evidence of any coffee. The hand he put out to pat the side of the kettle came back cold.

He walked back into the living room and looked at the pile of blankets, which had not moved an inch since he'd departed forty minutes ago. "Sherlock."

No reply.

"SHERLOCK!" This time, Lestrade thought the blankets just might have flinched.

"Don't make me try to wrestle all those blankets off you. It's time to get up, or at least tell me that you've survived the night. If I'm going to sacrifice my wife's good will for you, then you'd better tell me that you haven't died in the night so my act of generosity wasn't a total waste of time."

The blankets shifted and a tousled head peered blearily out. "I thought virtue was its own reward. You really want me to say 'thank you'?" This was uttered in a rather croaky voice, as if the very thought of it was ridiculous.

Greg looked carefully. Pupils were normal and equally reactive. The face looked a little flushed, and the raspy words made him worry about chest infections. He stomped off to the bathroom and came back a moment later with a thermometer.

"Stick that in the appropriate place and keep it there until it beeps. If you don't do it, then I will consider an insertion in another portion of your anatomy where a temperature can be taken."

A thin hand emerged from a blanket and took the thermometer. Sherlock's face screwed up in displeasure as he contemplated the thermometer after what Greg had said. "Has it been sterilised?"

Greg laughed. "Yes, your lordship. You won't get infected by common folk germs. Just stuff it in the cake-hole and be quiet for a while. If that is remotely possible."

Sherlock looked sourly at Lestrade, sighed and then complied.

_He must be under the weather if he's done this without more of a fight._ Over the years, Greg had developed a sense of when Sherlock was off his game, a sort of scale of sarkiness. A few times, he'd been in such a bad way that all the bratty arrogance and intellectual superiority stuff just melted away and left a shockingly vulnerable Sherlock who just looked like he expected to be shouted at, abused or kicked out. It hurt him to see that Sherlock, and to know the depths of despair that the young man must have been driven to before that truth would leak out.

_Beep._

Greg removed the thermometer and grimaced at the reading. "Right. Two paracetemol and water coming right up. You have a low grade fever of 38.3. Let's make sure it doesn't get any worse."

He returned with the tablets and water and held them out to a glowering Sherlock. "Take them, or leave."

Sherlock sighed. But he did take them. Then he just looked away from Greg. "What?"
Lestrade was sitting in the armchair, just staring at Sherlock, who still wouldn't meet his eye.

"What?!"

The older man made a decision. "God knows, Sherlock, I've not spent a lot of the time we've known each other sticking my nose into your business, even though you can deduce almost everything about me if you wanted to. But, this one has got me stumped. Why did you turn up on my doorstep, soaking wet and sick? What's happened?"

"I got evicted three nights ago."

"Geez, Sherlock, you only moved there six weeks ago. What did you do this time to get banished?"

"It's not like the last time. No experiments in the kitchen went wrong; I swear! I wasn't high or buying drugs, either, so you can get that look off your face right now. You know I'm clean. No, it turns out that the landlord doesn't like me playing the violin. I did ask before I signed the lease. Just seems he doesn't like WHEN I want to play."

"Which is in the middle of the night, no doubt." Greg took the lack of a reply as agreement. He sighed, and then asked in a weary tone, "What have you done with your stuff? Your violin?"

"It's in a safe place. I can't keep it with me when I am sleeping rough; it's not good to expose it to the elements and someone might nick it if I fell asleep. I keep it at a left luggage at Kings Cross Station. I can retrieve it easily when I want to busk."

Greg just looked at the young man in front of him. "There are hostels, you know. Shelters that will keep you warm and dry when the weather is doing its usual autumn forty days and forty nights of rain routine."

"Nooooo, I can't stand those places. They drive me wild with their rules and fixations on rigid routines. Lights out, sleeping—when I don't want to or can't possibly. The smell of the food, the cabbage, the other people; I want to throw up the moment I cross the threshold and smell that boiled cabbage and sweaty feet scent. And, if they don't smell of that then the places just reek of disinfectant. I'd rather be on my own."

Greg just pursed his lips in disapproval. "What you'd rather do, and what you might have to put up with are two different things."

Sherlock just shook his head. "It's the people. I can't stand them. The other 'residents', as they are euphemistically called, and the administrators, I honestly don't know which is worse."

Greg just sighed. "What are you going to do?"

"Once I feel better, I will busk enough to earn another deposit. The landlords always refuse to return my deposit; well, not just mine, anyone like me loses their deposit, because they know we can't take them to court. It'll take me a couple of weeks. Then I might go back to Montague Street. I didn't get kicked out there; left of my own accord when Mycroft got too nosy."

Lestrade pondered the problem. "That means two weeks or more of living rough on the streets while you earn enough to pay a deposit. In this weather, that could make you seriously sick. I know your brother must live in a house that's big enough to share. I don't suppose you'd consider it, even for two weeks?"

Sherlock's eyes grew enormous. "You must be joking, Lestrade. I'd rather sleep on a bed of nails than do that again. I was forced to spend time in Mycroft's townhouse when he wouldn't leave me
at school or university during the breaks. He hated it, I hated it; we hated each other. After uni, and then again when I was released the first time from Rehab, he insisted on sharing again. It was open warfare, and eventually he exiled me to a rented flat. That didn't work out either, because the insufferable git kept trying to run my life from a distance, being just as annoying with his rules as he had been when I was under the same roof with him."

His shoulders slumped forward and he blew his nose again. The pile of tissues by the sofa had grown during the night into a mound of sizable proportions.

"I will never, ever willingly do that again; rather end up in a morgue."

As if to emphasise just how horrified he was at the thought, Sherlock put his coffee cup down, and burrowed back into the blankets, disappearing from view again.

Greg sighed. "Well, playing ostrich won't help. Something has to be done, because I can't keep you here for more than another two days. You heard her; this is a very short lease, I am afraid. Let me lend you the deposit money."

The bundle of blankets just groaned. Then a muffled voice said "No, Lestrade. I am not a charity case. It wouldn't be professional. I won't accept your money- and if your wife found out about it, she'd never let you forget it. Just leave me be, Lestrade. Once I shift this cold, I will be out of your way again; I promise."

The next day, over a toasted cheese sandwich and a bowl of mushroom soup, Greg scrutinised Sherlock. The fever was down, and his nose and eyes looked less red. He was coughing less. On the mend, then. Sherlock had dressed in his newly washed and dried clothes. He was still wearing the duvet around his shoulders. Greg had offered a wooly jumper, but Sherlock refused. The DI guessed that there was something more comforting in the duvet, but Sherlock would probably dismiss that as sentiment, and give him a little mini-lecture on the TOG differentials of duck feathers compared to sheep wool.

"Sherlock, we need to have a serious discussion. Your brother obviously has money. That hand-tailored three piece suit costs enough to pay a deposit on a flat in Mayfair, let alone your sort of bedsit. That smugness is old money talking. So, rent can't actually be an issue. My guess is that you don't like the strings that come attached. Why don't you have access to some of that family money?"

"Because Mycroft has power of attorney over my financial affairs- and he uses it to try to blackmail me, to extort behaviour he wants from me. I won't do it. If the price of getting access to my money is slavery, I willingly accept exile to the streets of London than pay his price."

"How much time have you spent truly homeless?"

"Why does that matter to you?"

Greg shook his head. "Don't deflect. Just answer the question."

Sherlock gave it a moment's thought. "If you count it all together it's nearly four years, even if the longest stint has only been 8 months."

Greg was shocked. He had never realised it was so long. "What a waste!"

Sherlock looked at him oddly. "Why would you say that?"
"To be banished from home, from family, from friends- I don't know, even away from food, and warmth and shelter. It must be awful."

Sherlock looked at him puzzled. "It's nothing of the sort. Yes- it takes more effort, but food and shelter can be found. There are people who I know and respect amongst the homeless- sometimes I think that there are more there than in the so-called normal world. All in all, sleeping rough has its benefits, which often outweigh the disadvantages."

Greg looked askance.

"When I am sleeping rough, I am truly free, Lestrade. You have no idea what it means to have been looked after all my life. People making decisions for me, telling me what to do, when to do what they want me to do, ordering me about, saying what I mustn't do. Family, doctors, carers- 'normal' people run their lives to a clock of conventionality. Being homeless means total freedom for me. I don't have to pretend to be someone else, live up to someone else's standards of behaviour. Best thing of all, people leave me alone. No one makes eye contact with the homeless on the streets; suits me perfectly. Once I convince other homeless people that I can defend myself, they ignore me, or interact with me on my terms. Far from being an exile from 'normal' life, in fact, it is amazingly liberating."

He wouldn't look at the DI, but he did carry on talking. "Don't think of me as an exile- no one has banished me. In my case, it's a voluntary expatriation- I chose to leave the conventional life, in exchange for freedom."

"So what pulls you back?"

"The work, Lestrade- it's always down to the case work. Without a fixed address, cases won't come to find me and you won't work with me. And eventually, life on the streets gets boring. So, as long as there is interesting work to be done, I will put up with living more conventionally."

Greg considered that. "So, if I were to hand you now a half dozen of the oldest, coldest cases the Yard has got on its books, would you accept payment for giving us a few leads?"

Sherlock locked eyes with him for the first time since the conversation started. "Oh, God, YES!"

Greg smiled. "Good, that's a deal. Welcome home, Sherlock."
Sherlock got up, washed, shaved and dressed with a new-found enthusiasm. Today was liberation day. He was due to leave the clinic and start his new life. And this time, unlike the previous occasion, leaving was not just a matter of escaping the restraints of clinical staff and the routines of therapy, medication and so-called 'rest' that he loathed with such a passion. He would not be rushing back to resume where he had left off. For once he was not fleeing, but rather going forward to something new that he really wanted to happen.

He'd been trapped in the limbo of rehabilitation for months. Only after Lestrade's intervention was he able to negotiate the terms of his release with Mycroft and Doctor Cohen*. With the DI's support, he'd finally got agreement that he could try to establish himself as a 'consulting detective'. He didn't want to be a 'private detective'- that had too many sleazy associations with sordid cases of domestic mishaps and marital infidelities. He'd thought long and hard about the kind of case that he wanted to work on. "Serious cases, nothing boring" was how he described it to Lestrade.

With only a few cold cases from New Scotland Yard to keep him busy for the past month in Rehab, he'd had plenty of time to think about what he would need to do in order to establish his reputation. And a list of requirements had been handed to Mycroft at one of their rather tense meetings.

Sherlock still did not trust his brother. After years of fraternal warfare, the two felt their way warily in this negotiated truce. Mycroft was concerned that Sherlock would fall into old habits. Sherlock was equally concerned that his brother's interference would sabotage his efforts. Conversations took place once a week for the month before his release date.

"I've prepared a budget- I have to make some up-front investments if this is going to work- so you're going to have to loosen those purse strings of yours. I need monthly rent and expenses for a one bed flat rather than a bed-sit and in a Central London neighbourhood that won't terrify clients who want to meet me there. It has to have a decent standard of furnishing, too. I need a full spec laptop, and a smart phone. I'll get a website designed. Then there's business cards, stationary, a business bank account. And, I will have to look professional, so some proper clothing."

Mycroft scanned the papers his brother had given him. "You'll need a haircut, too. You look like a
sheepdog.

Sherlock smirked, "Is that jealousy talking, or are you genuinely concerned about my image?" He'd teased his brother mercilessly for years about his receding hairline and thinning hair. Luckily, Sherlock took after his mother's side of the family, whereas poor Mycroft suffered from his father's genes.

Mycroft glared at him. "It will be nice to see you in some decent clothing. I've always thought you would scrub up well, if you could be bothered. Go to New & Lingford. Put it on my account."

The younger man sniffed. "I won't go near your personal tailor, though- you still dress like someone out of a 1960s film."

"These are classics, Sherlock. They will always be above fashion. And they fit my image."

"Not mine. You won't catch me in a three piece or a tie. I'm not planning on skulking along corridors of Westminster or Whitehall."

"I'm sure New & Lingford can deal with your taste. Just don't go mad."

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "I just need to look the part, Mycroft. Otherwise, you know I couldn't care less about clothes."

"You are really serious about this, Sherlock? It's not just a passing fancy?"

Now it was Sherlock's turn to scowl. "How many times do I have to tell you?! This matters to me. I want to do this. It's the only thing I am truly suited to do. Lestrade thinks I can do it, why don't you have any faith?"

"You know he can't pay you, Sherlock- not on a salaried basis. Maybe on one or two cases he could justify an external consulting fee, but it won't pay the bills."

Sherlock crossed his arms and glared. "Since when has that been an issue? Mother's inheritance came to me- only you've never let me have access to it. I don't need a salary any more than you do." He growled. "Face it, Mycroft, with all of father's money sitting in your bank account and investment portfolio, you'd be happy to pay the British Government for the privilege of wielding all that power behind the scenes. Family money means you don't need the salary, so why can't I have an opportunity to do the same?"

"You'll keep proper accounts then?"

Sherlock snorted. "No, just like you, I'll instruct the family accountants and solicitors to do what they are paid to do, but on my account, rather than yours. I am competent to do that, Mycroft; it's just that I could never be bothered to do it before now. Didn't seem much point."

Mycroft looked at his brother, really looked. For the first time in years, no maybe even for the first time ever, Sherlock looked determined. The bored, slightly distracted air that his younger brother had projected for years seemed to have been replaced with a new steely attitude, a no-nonsense kind of exterior image. He found it hard to reconcile with the irresponsible drug addict persona that Sherlock had been cultivating for the past five years since he left university. Maybe this time, things will be different. I hope to God that what's going on in that head of his means that the interior matches the exterior.

As if he had heard his brother's internal monologue, Sherlock said quietly, "Appearances are not always deceiving, Mycroft. This time, things will be different, provided that you will honour your
agreement and just let me get on with it."

Chapter End Notes

*Author's note- if you want to see how this intervention occurred, read Got My Eye on You, Chapters 18 and 19.
Examine

Chapter Summary

examine [ɪgˈzæmɪn]

vb (tr)

1. to look at, inspect, or scrutinize carefully or in detail; investigate medically

2. to test the knowledge or skill of (a candidate) by written or oral questions or by practical tests

3. to interrogate (a witness or accused person) formally on oath

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: I am indebted to Ariane Devere's Live Journal transcripts of the Study in Pink; obviously, the dialogue from the episode is the property of Moffat/Gatiss and Hartwood Films, as well as the BBC. This chapter inevitably relies almost entirely on the transcript for dialogue, but I hope adds value from the insight into Mycroft's thinking.

Whenever Mycroft Holmes' personal phone number rang, it was automatically transferred to his PA if she was on duty. The caller ID would be examined to identify how it should be answered. He gave that particular number to very few people, but there were times when he would be otherwise engaged, and unable to answer- even to them. Better to have his PA respond if she thought the caller merited it, and to filter the call to find out if he actually needed to be interrupted or whether it could wait. He'd instituted the new protocol when Sherlock managed to interrupt a very important liaison meeting between MI5, MI6 and GCHQ directors with a rant about being bored. Over the years, Mycroft had tried to impress him with the importance of not crying wolf too often, if he ever expected help when he really needed it.

So when the call came from Greg Lestrade while Mycroft was in a COBRA meeting about the latest terrorist hostage plot, she fielded the call. She remembered all too well the time the DI had rung with the news that Sherlock had overdosed on cocaine and was on his way to St Thomas' Hospital. So, she picked up quickly.

"Detective Inspector, how may I help?"

"I need to talk to Mr Holmes right now." The tone of his voice wasn't panicked, so she decided it wasn't life threatening.

"Mr Holmes is in a meeting that cannot be interrupted at the moment, but I will pass on a
message."

"You can tell Mr Holmes that his brother is meeting his new flatmate at Baker Street in less than an hour. I need Sherlock's help NOW. There's been another murder and I need his eyes on this crime scene without further delay. So, tell him that I intend getting Sherlock involved tonight. He can vet this guy later."

She waited until Mycroft Holmes came out of the meeting to pass the message on personally. He looked surprised momentarily, but recovered his poise almost instantly. "Thank you. I'd like you to contact the Surveillance Team and get them to identify this proposed flatmate. Dig out his background," and here he looked at her sternly, "and I do mean ALL of the possibly relevant material. As ever, I trust your discretion, but dig deeply, please."

He consulted his watch. "Then organise a meeting at one of our usual neutral territory venues- very private, please- and arrange a pick up. Do it personally, my dear. If the Detective Inspector is going to let Sherlock off the leash, I want to make sure that this flatmate is real and acceptable. I trust your judgement, so take a good look at this person yourself. I wouldn't put it past Sherlock to hire an actor to play a part, bribe a drug dealer or dress up one of his homeless people to do this. He is getting quite frantic to get back to the case work, I fear. So, financial checks, too."

"Of course, sir. Can I take it that your meeting with the Counter-Terrorism Team will be over by 8pm?"

"Yes, they do witter on, but I am sure I can make my excuses and escape by 7.30. Thank you, my dear." Given how often she changed her name to protect her real identity, he had over the years adopted the affectionate mode of address, which she knew he did not mean either patronisingly or personally. It was, as he was, logical, polite, and very sensible. He disappeared down the corridor linking the Cabinet Office Permanent Secretary's office with Number10.

By the time the Surveillance Team managed the pick-up of the proposed flatmate, she realised that the man's location in Brixton meant that he had also been at the crime scene where another Surveillance Team had eyes on Sherlock. Interesting. Why would Sherlock involve someone he scarcely knows? She read the file on her lap again. More important, why would an ex-army doctor, invalidated out due to PTSD and a shoulder wound be interested in going with Sherlock to a crime scene? She texted Mycroft, who was travelling independently to the warehouse site she'd selected. When he emerged from the Counter-Terrorism Team meeting at the Ministry of Defence, his driver handed him the file marked Doctor John H Watson, into which she had placed all the relevant data, including information which had been located by a quiet examination of a certain therapist's computer records.

The team managing the cameras tracked the doctor from the crime scene and eventually got him to pick up a phone. The car pulled up and the door was opened. A short blonde man climbed in, a bit awkwardly given the cane, sat himself down and looked at her, puzzled.

"Hello."

She decided to play a straight bat, and see what he would make of it. She gave him her most charming smile for a moment and then returned to her texting.

8.04pm Target acquired. Remarkably calm.

She realised he was watching her with a slight bemusement. Clearly not feeling threatened, the
doctor asked, "What's your name, then?"

She had to think for a moment about what the day's pseudonym was. "Um…Anthea."

She decided he was no fool when his reply was to ask "Is that your real name?"

So, she answered truthfully, "No."

He looked at the rear window to see if anyone was following them. And then offered rather politely. "I'm John."

She tried to hide a smirk. "Yes, I know."

When he asked whether there was any point in asking where they were going, she told him 'no' with a smile and then returned to her texting.

8.05 He's rather sweet. Sensible questions, but accepts no for an answer. Should be onsite in ten min.

When the car rolled to a halt, Mycroft was standing rather theatrically lit in the headlight beams, as was the chair between him and the car. He watched as John limped forward. The *psychosomatic injury, worse than I would have predicted.* Interesting, given the medical report. He gestured with the tip of his umbrella to the chair.

"Have a seat, John." Mycroft delivered this in his mild, inoffensive tone. But, the fact that he used the man's first name, without offering his own would be heard and understood, he hoped.

Mycroft examined the man. Hair cut short, but not in the last ten days, so not a homeless person roped in by Sherlock to impersonate a roommate. The file had a substantial backstory, and he wondered whether Sherlock could be bothered to do as much work to fake such a thing. The man's clothes were well worn, but well cared for. Clean and ironed properly- in keeping with a military sense of projecting a good image, even on an army pension, and under financial pressure. *Could be the real thing, but being paid by Sherlock to take on a role?*

As he came to a stop a few paces from him, Mycroft continued the examination. A shade below 1.7 meters tall, so well under average height. That would be noticed in the army, in fact, commented on by his peers, no doubt, for most of the man's life. From the lofty heights of his own 1.85 meters, exactly one inch taller than his baby brother(Thank heavens; he'd be insufferable otherwise), Mycroft knew that the life of a shorter man could be bound by bullying or verbal abuse, but he saw no signs of it in the quiet calm approach. Nor in the first words uttered by the man.

"You know, I've got a phone." The man was looking around the warehouse. "I mean, very clever and all that, but, uh…you could just phone me. On my phone." He was repeating the point, to make the subtext clear- he wasn't particularly impressed with the grandstanding, in fact, a trifle annoyed. Mycroft found that interesting. *Not easily impressed, not easily distressed.*

Despite clearly limping, the blonde man had walked straight past the offered chair. Mycroft decided it was time to reveal a bit.

"When one is avoiding the attention of Sherlock Holmes, one learns to be discreet, hence this place."

He pitched his tone of voice a little less politely this time, letting a little more steel show. As an army doctor sent home after traumatic injury and still suffering from PTSD, Watson was showing surprising resiliency in the face of pressure. *Time to remind him of his disability.*
"The leg must be hurting you. Sit down." Not quite an order, but not a polite suggestion either.

The doctor didn't miss a beat, "I don't want to." As in, you can't intimidate me, whoever you are. That piqued Mycroft. Not many men failed to react to his more overt displays of power. This one was just looking at him with curiosity.

"You don't seem very afraid."

The reply was almost instantaneous. "You don't seem very frightening."

That amused Mycroft. "Ah, yes, the bravery of the soldier. Bravery is by far the kindest word for stupidity, don't you think?" He gave the doctor a probing look, but there was no reply. He can stand his ground then, and wait for me to come to him. No peremptory demands for information, no outrage at being abducted. He decided to turn the screw tighter and get straight to the point.

"What is your connection to Sherlock Holmes?" He studied the man's face. If there was a lie, now would be when it came to the surface. If he claimed to be a friend, or have some other connection, Mycroft would know it to be lie, in light of the material in his file. Instead, what Mycroft saw was honesty.

"I don't have one. I barely know him. I met him…" The man looked away for a moment, then appeared surprised as if he had lost track of the time. "…yesterday."

Mycroft decided to give a more direct thrust, to see if questioning his motives might rattle him more. "So, since yesterday, you've moved in with him, and now you are solving crimes together. Might we expect a happy announcement by the end of the week?"

The question was a loaded one, and one which perpetually worried him- Sherlock could attract the attention of predators of all sorts, and his question was carefully constructed to flush out any sexual interest. He watched the man's pupil size very intently, but there was no dilation.

Instead, a counter-attack. "Who are you?"

Mycroft considered. Oh, very interesting! Watson was attempting to turn the table, and question the motives of his interrogator.

He decided an ambiguous but slightly threatening reply was appropriate: "An interested party."

"Interested in Sherlock? Why? I'm guessing you're not friends?"

That deserved a sneering laugh. "You've met him. How many 'friends' do you imagine he has? I am the closest thing to a friend that Sherlock Holmes is capable of having." If he was actually a doctor, then the unsaid point was now on the table- Sherlock is not neuro-typical, and you, as a doctor, should be aware of that.

The man came back with a question that asked Mycroft bluntly, if he wasn't a friend, then what was he? A surprise counter-attack, again questioning Mycroft's motives. You look ordinary, Doctor Watson, but you are behaving anything but ordinarily. He decided to put Watson to the test, and answered, "An enemy."

"An enemy?" That was the first question that raised the doctor's hackles. He didn't like the idea of speaking to an enemy of Sherlock, clearly. Mycroft clarified, "In his mind, certainly. If you were to ask him, he'd probably say his arch-enemy. He does love to be dramatic."

As if sharing the joke, but turning it back on Mycroft, John looked around pointedly at the
warehouse. "Well, thank God, you're above all that."

Touché. Mycroft found the doctor's sense of humour to be …interesting. But he frowned nevertheless; no need to let him know.

A mobile phone went off in the doctor's pocket. He immediately dug into his pocket and ignored Mycroft to look at an incoming text message. *And very, very cool under fire, too,* thought Mycroft, who sarcastically commented, "I hope I'm not distracting you." Very few people ever ignored Mycroft.

The short man didn't bother to look up, but the casual reply was almost instant, "Not distracting me at all" before pocketing his phone slowly.

Mycroft was left in something of a quandary. The potential flatmate had not crumpled under interrogation. He had happily accompanied his brother to a crime scene, so clearly knew something about what he would be taking on by agreeing to share a flat with his brother. Or, might he be having second thoughts? So he asked sharply,

"Do you plan to continue your association with Sherlock Holmes."

The man's answer was not only a trifle cool, it was almost defiant, in an understated way. "I could be wrong… but I think that's none of your business."

Mycroft's retort was more threatening. "It could be."

That sealed it for the doctor. "It really couldn't."

Mycroft decided enough was enough. He was rather annoyed that the man seemed incapable of being intimidated. He pulled a notebook from his jacket pocket, and made a point of consulting it, even though he knew by memory every word of the file and the text messages he had received about Watson. He asked if the doctor were to move into "two hundred and twenty-one B Baker Street" whether he would be willing to accept money to pass information on about his flatmate. He pointed out the fact that John was not a wealthy man, and that the information need not be anything that he would be uncomfortable in sharing, to spare any ethical concerns he might have.

The doctor did something rather unexpected. Ninety-nine people out of a hundred would have asked about the sum of money involved, even if they had no intention of taking a bribe. But the doctor just turned the tables again, and asked about why Mycroft would want to do such a thing.

He replied, "I worry about him. Constantly." In part, this was to see if the doctor would be able to hear the honesty. The blonde man didn't; he was still suspicious, so replied sarcastically, "that's nice of you."

Mycroft decided to test whether the doctor would be willing to keep their conversation confidential. "I would prefer for various reasons that my concern go unmentioned. We have what you might call a …difficult relationship."

The flow of conversation was interrupted again by the flatmate's phone trilling a text alert. Once again, the man dug his phone out and gave it his undivided attention. Mycroft made a mental note to ask his PA to get a download organised so he could see what was keeping him preoccupied.

"No." The one word answer made Mycroft track back to the offer he had made of money.

"But I haven't mentioned a figure."
Watson put his phone away. "Don't bother."

Mycroft laughed. "You're very loyal, very quickly." He was probing for a reason why this ordinary looking person would be loyal to Sherlock. Could they have some sort of relationship that had escaped the notice of his surveillance team?

The man shrugged off the implied innuendo. "No, I'm not. I'm just not interested."

Once again, Mycroft was perplexed. He examined the man again. No tells, no shifts of body language, he was projecting calm honesty. Time to shake up that complacency. He pulled the notebook out of his pocket again. *Let him know that I have access to private information about him.*

He gestured to the notebook, "Trust issues, it says here."

That caught the short man's attention. His eyes narrowed. He recognised the phrase. An exploratory feint came back, "What's that?"

Mycroft pretended to consult the book again. "Could it be that you've decided to trust Sherlock Holmes of all people?"

"Who says I trust him?" The answer was given too quickly, and for the first time Mycroft detected not only nervousness, but also a trace of deceit in the reply.

Mycroft looked speculatively at him. "You don't seem to be the kind to make friends easily."

That pushed him into retreat. "Are we done?" The subtext was clear. He no longer wanted to continue the fencing.

Mycroft skewered him with a penetrating gaze and said softly, "You tell me."

Watson looked at him, and then turned his back on him and walked away.

Mycroft realised in that moment he was dealing with someone who would not be intimidated, but neither would he let his own curiosity put him into danger. He knew the value of a tactical retreat. But, Mycroft couldn't let him get away, so he pressed home his advantage.

"I imagine people have already warned you to stay away from him. But I can see from your left hand that's not going to happen."

That had the desired effect. Watson stopped, his shoulders tensing and then dropping. He did not turn back, but he shook his head a couple of times. As if he expected the comment. When he turned to face Mycroft, he let his anger show on his face.

"My what?"

Mycroft replied calmly. "show me." He nodded towards Watson's left hand, and then planted the umbrella on the floor and leaned casually on it like a man who was used to having his orders followed.

He watched as Watson shifted his weight, as if preparing for a battle. He raised his left hand, and stood still. Mycroft realised that the doctor was acknowledging the truth of what his intelligence had yielded to him, but was not going to be intimidated by its use. He was making the taller man come to him, if he wanted to actually examine the offending limb.
Mycroft strolled forward, placing his umbrella on his arm and reached for the hand. But Watson pulled it away, with a warning growl, "Don't."

Mycroft looked down at him, tilted his head and raised his eyebrows, as if to emphasise the trust issues diagnosis.

Watson realised that he was betraying possibly more than he wanted to by withdrawing, so he very reluctantly lowered his hand, holding it out flat with the palm down- a standard position for a medical examination.

Mycroft did not react like a doctor, however. He took the shorter man's hand in both of his own and looked at it closely. Broad hand, short fingers. Strength in the muscles. A surgeon's hand, despite its inelegance, remarkably capable of intricate manoeuvres. And absolutely rock steady in his grip.

"Remarkable."

The hand was snatched away and a defensive, "What is?" came shortly after.

Mycroft turned and walked a few paces away from the blonde doctor. "Most people blunder around this city, and all they see are streets, and shops and cars. When you walk with Sherlock Holmes, you see the battlefield." He turned back toward Watson again. "You've seen it already, haven't you?"

The doctor would not be distracted. "What's wrong with my hand?"

Mycroft locked eyes with him. "You have an intermittent tremor in your left hand." He saw the tiny nod of acknowledgment. "Your therapist thinks it's post-traumatic stress disorder. She thinks you're haunted by memories of your military service." He watched as Watson's eyes narrowed, but he did not contradict the diagnosis. Again, he was surprised at the man's hidden reservoir of strength. Mycroft waited for the anger to take shape behind the eyes watching him warily. His gaze became fixed and a muscle twitched in his cheek.

Now.

"Who the hell are you? How do you know that?" It came out angry, furious even, at the breach of privacy that would have been needed for Mycroft to get access to that data.

Mycroft smirked. "Fire her. She's got it the wrong way around. You're under stress right now and your hand is perfectly steady." He watched as Watson glanced down at his hand, as if seeing it for the first time. His eyes returned to looking forward, but not at him. The military training had kicked in, and he'd got himself under control again.

That made Mycroft's smile broaden. Quietly, he said. "You're not haunted by the war, Doctor Watson…you miss it." He leaned closer to him, willing the man's eyes to meet his own. When they did, Mycroft whispered, "Welcome back."

Then he turned away just as the doctor's phone went a third time. Mycroft grinned to himself, must be Sherlock, undoubtedly annoyed that the flatmate wasn't responding. He twirled his umbrella casually and called over his shoulder, "Time to choose a side, Doctor Watson." He carried on walking.

He heard a car door open, and his PA said cheerfully, "I'm to take you home."

There was a pause and then Mycroft heard her ask, "address?"
As he walked into the shadows that cloaked his own car from view, he heard the doctor's reply, "221b Baker Street, but I need to stop off somewhere first."

The words and the tone of voice told Mycroft all he needed to know; his brother's new flatmate had passed the examination.
Express

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Express

Verb: convey (a thought or feeling) in words or by gestures and conduct

Adjective: Definitely stated, not merely implied.

"Sherlock, you can't just assume that people will know what you want. Show me which book you want. Point to it. You have to express yourself physically, if you can't find the words to get people to understand you. We can't read your mind."

Her seven year old son appeared not to be listening. He was bent over a book he had just slammed shut. His knuckles were turning white, gripping the edges of the book so tightly. She was afraid that at any moment, he would explode and hurl the book across the room in rage. This level of frustration was becoming more common, and it was something his mother worried about. Four months ago, his developing verbal skills had stalled, and she was beginning to worry about regression. The specialist had just told her that some autistic children just "plateau" for a while before moving on, but this seemed more significant.

He'd been happy to talk "at" people he trusted: Mycroft had rolled his eyes at yet another 'lecture' only last month at Christmas when he was home from school; this one was all about the butterflies that Sherlock had found hibernating in the conservatory. She had words with Mycroft afterwards, and stressed how important it was for him to be patient with his brother.

"He needs to learn how to hold a conversation with people. That means you need to help him get over his anxiety about talking."

"But, mummy- ninety minutes? He hardly drew breath. He wasn't at all interested in what I had to say about butterflies. In the end, the only way I could get him to shut up was to get him my Field Guide to English Butterflies and Moths- which he will now devour and then spout back at me. He is turning into someone who could bore for Britain on some subjects."

She looked sternly at her elder son. "Mycroft Holmes, is Eton turning you into a rather cruel person? Is this what passes for 'cool' amongst you young people these days?"

He had the decency to look a bit embarrassed.

She continued. "I know he isn't easy. Tell me about it, young man. I am with him all of the time, and when he isn't talking to me, he isn't talking – to anyone. And you know how important this is. So, find ways to get him to engage with you. You're the only other person with whom he makes a real effort."

And Violet had to admit, that was part of the problem. Mycroft was now away at boarding school, and his visits home were fleeting. As much as she and her husband missed their eldest son, she knew that there was someone who missed him even more. Sherlock had not formed an attachment to anyone other than herself and Mycroft. For a short time after Mycroft went up to Eton College, Violet wondered whether Sherlock and his father might find a way to connect. But neither wanted
to even make the effort to try. If anything, missing Mycroft just made them even more tetchy
around each other.

"It's like talking to the wall, Violet. I have no idea how you can put up with it. He's just so…
damaged."

She had sighed at that. "You don't have the patience, do you? He is actually very bright; he just
wants to do what he wants to do, and won't bend to your will." Or anyone else's, she had to admit to
herself.

On the other hand, Sherlock had taken to not entering any room that contained his father. And if
Richard Holmes walked into a room where Sherlock was, the boy escaped as quickly as he could
get around the tall man. The specialist had called it an 'avoidance strategy' for handling anxiety,
and it was definitely preferable to the alternative, which was getting aggressive because he was
frightened or upset. Try telling that to a husband who thinks he is the centre of the universe, and
everyone has to do what he says. The past five months had been stressful for the three of them left
behind; Mycroft had always played an important balancing role in the family.

Sherlock wouldn't talk to his brother on the phone. She had tried that. He just didn't get it. That
confused her, as he rarely looked at people when he did talk, so she thought he would find it easier.
But there was something about not being physically present that upset Sherlock, and he had thrown
the phone away from him in anger after a half stuttered attempt to say something to his brother.

She looked down at the dark head of wavy hair bent over his book, holding onto it for dear life,
and worried. His eyes were screwed tight, and the grip on the book had not relaxed. She was
beginning to worry about him going into meltdown. Right, time for some distraction therapy.

She reached behind her into the bright red shopping bag with the black logo- Hamleys- and pulled
out a 14 inch tall stuffed teddy bear. Not just any teddy bear, this was a handmade English
Merrydown bear, jointed, furred in mohair and looking as smart as could be. She sat him on the
floor between her and Sherlock.

"Hello, Albert. You haven't met Sherlock yet. He's my younger son. A bit shy, doesn't like to talk
much. But he's very smart. A bit like you, actually."

Sherlock had opened his eyes and was watching her through his peripheral vision. He looked
straight at the bear, however. There was no expression on his face, but she could tell that he was
looking, really looking at the stuffed toy.

"Why don't you introduce yourself, Sherlock?"

"Why?"

"You can do it; we've talked about this before. Just say hello, tell him your name, like you did
when you met Aunt Agatha for the first time at Christmas. It's important when you meet new
people."

"It's a bear, not a people."

"The word you need to use is person, not people."

"Still a stuffed toy, not …person."

"Try."
"It's not real. It can't talk, so why?"

"This bear is special. He talks, but not out loud. He talks so only you can hear it in your head. Only you. No one else can hear him. I can't- just you."

Sherlock's face showed his confusion. "I can't hear anything in my head."

"That's because you aren't listening right. You need to imagine what he says. Remember, we talked about imagining things? This is what happens now. You imagine what he says, and the words will be there in your mind. You don't have to hear them to know they are there."

Sherlock thought about this. Hard. He seemed to be concentrating, so Violet continued.

"Can you imagine what he is saying right now?"

"Not saying anything....asking."

"Oh, he's asking a question?"

Sherlock nodded.

"What's he asking you then?"

Sherlock took his time to put the words together. "He wants to know why I am angry."

Oh. For a moment, Violet just stopped and breathed. This was the first time Sherlock had ever said to anyone that he was angry. That he wanted to express an emotion. And the only reason why he was doing it was because he had imagined the conversation in his head, and that the bear had said it, not him. He didn't have to say it was him feeling that way- the bear said it. For the past three years, all the experts she talked with had said that there would come a point where her son either would or would not be able to understand another person's point of view in a conversation as being distinct from his own perception of it. Abstract thinking- a key stage of psychological development, and her son had just done it. A part of her wanted to get up and dance down the hall, but she held it all in, for the sake of not frightening her son in his first tentative step toward expressing his feelings. She took another deep breath, and carried on.

"And what have you told him in your head?"

"Yes."

Not the answer she was looking for, so she tried again. "You've told him why you are angry?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because he asked."

"And if I asked?"

"It's different."
"Try describing the difference."

"With him, it's in my head. Not words…don't need to …say them out loud. That's when the words get messed up. My head goes faster than my mouth. I say things wrong, things I don't mean. You, Daddy, Mycroft...you get upset. You think I don't know, but I can see it. That makes me angry."

He looked at the stuffed toy. "He doesn't get upset. His face is always the same. He's not scary. I like that. Makes it easier." He reached for the bear- and she gave it to him.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: there must have been a predecessor or two to the Skull! FYI: Albert is my English teddy bear, handmade in the Cotswolds. And a very clever bear indeed.
Chapter Summary

Author's Note: I couldn't resist! Surely their conversation carried on after Sherlock left?!

Exchange

( /iks'CHanj)

Noun: The act of giving one thing and receiving another (esp. of the same type or value) in return, as in, an an exchange of civilities, words or views.

"No, I don't think so. Do you?" Irene Adler looked startled. She raised a hand to stop John Watson from following the sound of the text alert to where Sherlock had been hidden. Her words echoed slightly in the cavernous turbine room of the Battersea Power Station.

She locked eyes with the doctor, who stopped his forward momentum. He was now within a few feet of her, and she could see emotions chase across his face in rapid succession.

Taking advantage of his momentary halt, she continued "Well, that's something I didn't suspect. Does he often follow you around without you knowing?"

John gritted his teeth. "Well, I wouldn't know, would I? He's as good at tailing someone without them knowing as he is at evading surveillance."

She gave a tiny smile. "Yes, I knew about his ability to avoid prying eyes, but why would he take to following you?"

John gave her his poker face. "Maybe he was worried about me being kidnapped?"

She smirked. "Hmm, yes, I can see that. You could be fooled into thinking it was Mycroft Holmes's usual modus operandi, but he would be able to tell the difference. And, he would have reason to want to keep you out of Moriarty's clutches."

Suspiciously, he snapped, "What would you know about that?"

"Oh, a great deal more than you can imagine. Sherlock Holmes and I have much more in common than you think, Doctor Watson- we share a common enemy in the shape of Jim Moriarty. Kate has been kidnapped and used to try to ransom that phone from me. He would fear that tactic being used on you, to extract something from him that Moriarty wants."

John could not resist. "And what do you think Moriarty wants from Sherlock?"

Irene gave him her full attention. "I don't think, I know. And so do you: his soul, his intelligence, his body. Moriarty is …rather possessive in the extreme, don't you think?"

John just gave a rueful laugh.
"I'm going to assume that bothers you." She was watching him, and for a moment, wondered what it was like to live with a man who could read everything about him. He obviously didn't like that level of scrutiny from her.

"Why do you care?"

"Ooh, you are jealous!"

This provoked a sigh from the blond man, who was flexing his left fist, as if it had cramped. Before he could repeat that he had said earlier about them not being a couple, she interrupted.

"Don't. I'm not talking about what you two don't get up to in a bedroom. That's boring, and you are right, it's none of my business. I'm talking about the fact that you are the only person of significance in his life. That brings a responsibility, John Watson. What do you intend doing with that?"

"You ask that as if the answer was any of your business."

"It is. He is. Just answer the question."

"No. Just leave him alone. Leave me alone. Go back to wherever you came from, Ms Adler. Life is complicated enough trying to deal with Sherlock, not to mention Moriarty."

She smirked. "Oh dear, I've provoked the army in you; was that a 'get-your-tanks-off-my-lawn' threat? You still don't understand that tactical alliances can be of mutual benefit."

John's patience level was exhausted, and he turned away as if leaving. She surmised that he was now thinking about Sherlock, and trying to understand what his friend would make of their conversation.

"Time to choose a side, Doctor Watson." She didn't know why that made him falter for a split second, but he recovered and moved off in short military strides.

She continued, "If you care about his survival, then make your real feelings known. He doesn't know how much or why you care. He assumes no one does. He's a bit sweet like that. But, to protect you, he's liable to do something silly if you aren't very clear with him."

He whirled around and the intensity of his anger surprised her. "I think I liked it better when you were dead, Ms Adler. Just…leave…him…alone." Then he turned again and marched off, the sound of his shoes marking a military tempo on the concrete floor.
It was Christmas Eve, the time when Mycroft traditionally retreated to the country. Now sitting alone in front of a log fire in the study, he swirled the generous measure of single malt whisky and enjoyed the aromas released by the motion. He enjoyed this time of year. Quiet, surprisingly few international crises to get people excited. It gave him time to think and ponder strategic things on a more contemplative level. A bit like the truce called over the trenches in the First World War, most of the people hell bent on destruction and mayhem tended to ease up for just a few days. And those whose job it was to fight the fires their enemies liked to start could breathe a few minutes of peace. He stretched his feet a little closer to the fire.

And then his phone went off in his suit pocket. His PA knew better- and was currently in the heart of the Kent countryside with her family. Irritated at the very idea of being interrupted, he pulled it out and glanced at caller ID, and scowled- his brother. Why on earth would Sherlock be calling him on Christmas Eve? And worse, why was he calling, instead of his usual texting?

"Oh, dear Lord. We're not going to have Christmas phone calls now, are we? Have they passed a new law?"

"I think you're going to find Irene Adler tonight."

There was something in the flat tone of delivery that alerted Mycroft to a subtext. He decided to probe. "We already know where she is. As you were kind enough to point out, it hardly matters."

"No, I mean you're going to find her dead."

And then he hung up, leaving Mycroft looking at his phone in annoyance. He stood and walked over to the mullioned window. That fact, if it were true, seemed to matter to Sherlock. *When did that happen?*

He put in two calls in rapid succession. There was always a core of duty staff whose discretion could be counted upon. The police reports would be closely monitored and hospital mortuaries would be contacted urgently to see if a body fitting the description could be located. He doubted that Sherlock was wrong. There was something very definitive about his statement- and the fact that he did not elaborate showed more than anything else that he did not want his brother deducing anything about how her death would be felt.

Not for the first time, Mycroft regretted ever involving Sherlock in the case of Ms Irene Adler and
her wretched photographs. What was supposed to be an easy assignment, one well within Sherlock's currently compromised capacities as he recovered from the stint in rehab, had turned into something much, much more. He'd given it to Sherlock because it was more in the way of a private case; the HRH element made it slightly awkward to use his own resources. Given the increased scrutiny his department was under these days, it made sense to keep this one off the radar and not in his budget reports. Yet, Mycroft could hardly turn Her Majesty's request down; some obligations ran deeper than the pockets of Whitehall mandarins and Government ministers.

He recalled the session at the Diogenes Club with Sir Thomas Weston, when the man had the gall to try to insinuate that Sherlock was seeing The Woman in a personal capacity, because he had seen them meeting at the Gilbert Scott Bar at St Pancras Hotel. Just when Mycroft had the Permanent Secretary on the back foot, he'd come back with the idea that Sherlock could be generating blackmail material to tarnish Mycroft's reputation, and urged that he should be keeping his brother on a tighter leash. *If only you knew just how damned hard that is.*

To make sure that Mycroft got the point, Slider* had gone on to comment that it "Wouldn't do to get the tabloids excited about what he gets up to in his spare time." That comment alone, floating dangerously near blackmail, made sure that Mycroft was taking punitive action-. As a result, the man's name had been quietly withdrawn from the New Year's Honours List; no KMCG for Weston, and as a result, no chance ever of the coveted GCMG*, despite the fact that he might have been eligible for it, given his stint as UK Ambassador to Russia. The Old Etonian would feel that loss, and know who was responsible for depriving him of it. Good, he deserved it.

Petty feuds aside, Mycroft was feeling more vulnerable himself these days. The cock-up with the CIA operation at Belgravia didn't help matters, and the plans for Bond Air were only slowly grinding forward. The fiasco with the missing MOD code had been kept from the public's attention, and most of the COBRA members were still in the dark about it- but the CIA knew. He had always thought of Elizabeth Ffoukes as an ally, so the fact that she knew was not an issue. But, even her service leaked at times. All in all, he was ending this year in a bit of an uncomfortable state. Sherlock rocking the boat could not be tolerated, when things were so unstable. And out there, taunting him with dead bodies delivered to the doorstep of MI5, was Jim Moriarty. Despite his best efforts, Mycroft was no nearer to apprehending him than he'd been six months before.

Using Irene Adler as a way of getting to the Irishman had proved a dead-end- literally, if Sherlock was to be believed about her death. He would have to try again. Find another route into the man. As he took a second sip of the whisky, his phone went again.

"Yes?"

"A body fitting your description has turned up. Fingerprints and DNA match."

He sighed. "Have the body transported to St Bartholemew's mortuary. I will view it there."

Then he made the third call of the night, to John Watson.

oOo

The doctor was in the kitchen getting Jeannette another glass of wine when his phone went off. Above the general conversation, and the sound of the Christmas carols that Mrs Hudson had put on the radio, it was hard to hear. But he recognised the caller ID, so answered.

"Hello, Mycroft."

"I assume Sherlock is not with you?"
"No, he's sulking in his bedroom. What's going on, Mycroft; why does he think Irene Adler is dead?"

"I don't know, I was hoping you might be able to shed some light on that."

John looked startled. "He's not said a word about her to me, not for more than a month. But... something's spooked him."

"We are searching for a body now. If he's right, I think this will require some delicacy. I'll let you know."

Ninety minutes later Mycroft was in the mortuary, standing alongside the Pathologist, a Miss Molly Hooper. When Sherlock got into the car at Baker Street, he'd been tight-lipped and tense. Mycroft could read the body language without trying, and he decided to wait before probing what it actually meant. The drive to Smithfield was made easier by the almost total absence of traffic. In the wee hours of Christmas morning with the snow coming down, almost every living soul had somewhere else to be. He spent the journey looking at his brother, who did not return the compliment, instead focusing on the view out of the tinted window on his side of the back seat. To an outsider, there was little to reveal what the brunet was thinking. To Mycroft, there were a half dozen tells that showed the depth of his brother's agitation, from the way his thumb continuously rubbed the first knuckle on his index finger to the tight muscle in his jaw. What others might think was a relaxed slouch his brother knew was just that little bit too exaggerated to be real. He was doing it to try to mask his reactions.

Oh, Sherlock, what have you done? Could it be possible that you actually care about The Woman? Why? What could she possibly mean to you?

He texted John.

1.56am She IS dead. How much do you think he cares? MH

1.57am Offer him a cigarette. If he takes it, he cares. JW

1.59am Check the flat for anything 'recreational'. MH

As the two of them walked into the morgue, Mycroft finally broke the silence. "The body was found in Belgravia- in a back alley. The only one that fitted the description. Had her brought here – your home from home." If his brother was going to be somehow unsettled by the death of The Woman, Mycroft could at least give him the comfort of familiar surroundings, and a person with whom he was used to working. Given that the fingerprints and DNA matched those on record, the identification was a mere formality. This viewing was all about his need to understand Sherlock's reaction to her death.

"You didn't need to come in, Molly." Sherlock's baritone was a quiet monotone.

Mycroft deduced some new awkwardness between the two. Especially when the Pathologist replied, "That's okay. Everyone else was busy with... Christmas." The she gestured to the form of a body lying under a sheet on the table.

"The face is a bit, sort of, bashed up, so it might be a bit difficult." She pulled the sheet down only as far as the shoulders.

Mycroft's eyebrows went up at the sight. Someone had taken a great deal of exception to the
woman's face, which was no longer recognisable- high cheekbones smashed in, nose crushed- the raw bloody mess was quite shocking. "That's her, isn't it?" He needed his brother to accept the death.

Sherlock gave a quick glance, then his eyes found Molly's. "Show me the rest of her."

Grimacing, Molly walked along the side of the table, pulling the sheet back as she went. Sherlock looked along the length of the body quickly, then turned and started to walk away, as if he wanted to be anywhere else but in that room. A quiet "that's her" came over his shoulder as he fled into the corridor.

Mycroft gave a polite "Thank you, Miss Hooper" and turned quickly to follow Sherlock. The fact that his brother had made the identification based on the naked body spoke volumes. He would have to have words with his surveillance team. Sherlock's reaction suggested that he had spent time with her, time that had not been logged or observed. And that led his thoughts into dangerous territory. His brother's attitude towards the 'fairer sex' had always been remote and uninterested. But, clearly, he was willing to make an exception in the case of Irene Adler.

"Who is she? How did Sherlock recognise her from ... not her face?" Mycroft had no wish to feed her curiosity or to indulge his own with speculation. The paperwork would be forwarded so the case could be closed; Miss Hooper would know soon enough. He smiled politely at her, and then left. Through the morgue's circular window, he could see Sherlock standing at the window, watching the snow coming down.

Sherlock did not turn around. No eye contact then. Why does this woman's death distress you? Mycroft closed the gap between them, reaching over his brother's shoulder with a cigarette. He said softly, "Just the one."

Sherlock's control cracked, and he snarled, "Why?" There were a multitude of questions in that one word. It could be an accusation- as in, why did you put me in harm's way? Or frustration, as in why is she dead? Perhaps it was a complaint- as in, if you're willing to feed a nicotine addiction, you must be admitting responsibility, so why did you let her be killed? As always with Sherlock, it was the silences in between the words they said to each other that carried the most meaning. The cigarette could be interpreted as a peace offering or a gesture of atonement, given to expiate Mycroft's role in setting him down the path to Adler. Mycroft knew that his brother's normal reaction would therefore be to spurn it, because accepting it would be an admission of need, a confession of his pain, or acceptance of Mycroft's regret.

But there was no hesitation. Sherlock took the cigarette.

Damn. Mycroft decided to lighten the mood. "Merry Christmas," knowing that of all the people he could say that to, his brother would understand the irony involved. He dug in his coat pocket to find his lighter. He realised the true extent of his brother's distress by the disjointed sentences that followed.

"Smoking indoors – isn't there one of those ... one of those law things?"

As Mycroft lit the cigarette for him, he decided to be gentle. "We're in a morgue. There's only so much damage you can do."

He watched as Sherlock inhaled deeply and then blow the smoke out again. It was the action of a man who wanted the full nicotine buzz as quickly as possible.

Mycroft had questions that needed answering. "How did you know she was dead?"
"She had an item in her possession, one she said her life depended on. She chose to give it up."
He took another drag on his cigarette.

So, the phone with its payload of photos was in play. Mycroft was duty-bound to ask. "Where is this item now?"

But, before Sherlock answered, the two brothers heard the sound of crying. They glanced down the corridor at the pair of double doors at the far end. A family of three was huddled together, clearly grieving the death of someone close to them.

Perhaps it was their blatant display of emotion that provoked Sherlock's reaction. "Look at them. They all care so much." To Mycroft's ears, it came out as almost contemptuous. He's angry with himself.

Mycroft's assessment was confirmed when Sherlock went on to ask "Do you ever wonder if there's something wrong with us?" It was oddly reassuring, and Mycroft knew exactly why Sherlock was saying it. He decided to acknowledge the fact that his brother obviously did care about the Woman by repeating something from their shared childhood. "All lives end. All hearts are broken. Caring is not an advantage, Sherlock." He hoped the warning would be enough.

Sherlock blew out another lungful of smoke, then looked down at the cigarette in disgust. "This is low tar."

Flippantly, Mycroft retorted, "Well, you barely knew her." The criticism about his brand of cigarettes was just another part of the smokescreen his brother was erecting.

His retort provoked a huff. He watched Sherlock stride off down the hall. His question about the phone had never been answered, only deflected. Mycroft decided the phone was less of a concern than his brother's state of mind. It could wait.

Sherlock's "Merry Christmas, Mycroft" floated back up the hall. The irony was underscored, so he offered the only consolation he could. "And a Happy New Year." Things will get better Sherlock, if I have anything to say about it. But, first he had to make sure that Sherlock didn't plan to use his emotional turmoil as an excuse.

He pulled out his phone and hit speed dial. When Watson answered, Mycroft simply said, "He's on his way. Have you found anything?"

"No. Did he take the cigarette?"

"Yes."

"Shit." Mycroft could hear him talking to someone else in the flat. "He's coming. Ten minutes."
Then he heard the voice of the landlady, "There's nothing in the bedroom."

"Looks like he's clean. We've tried all the usual places. Are you sure tonight's a danger night?"

"No, but then I never am. You have to stay with him, John."

"I've got plans." Mycroft stopped in his tracks. Watson's serial dating as a way of demonstrating to the world that he and Sherlock were not lovers- it was inconvenient. So, he just made it clear. "No." and ended the call.

When he got to the street outside the hospital, Mycroft realised that Sherlock had taken his car- probably spinning some credible story to the driver. He sent a text asking the driver to return once
he had dropped off his brother back at Baker Street. Then he smiled. Sherlock was telling him something. If he'd wanted to buy drugs, or simply to walk off his anger, he would have spurned the car. By taking it, he was telling Mycroft that he'd be alright. Reassured, he didn't mind waiting. He'd use the time to make a few New Year's Resolutions. Top of the list- get Moriarty, before he inflicted any more damage on Sherlock.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: *"Slider is a nick name see Crossfire for the reason why. GCMG- a UK honour, the distinguished Order of St Michael and St George. KCMG is Knight Commander of the order, GCMG is superior, Knight Grand Cross of the order. In Whitehall circles, the first is known as "Kindly Call Me God", the second is "God Calls Me God". Needless to say, Mycroft would be a GCMG.

If you want to see this scene from Sherlock's point of view revealing what he actually thought, read my story Crossfire, esp. Chapter Thirty- Close Quarters
**Excruciating**

Chapter Summary

Excruciating /ik'skrooSHe atiNG/

Adj Intensely painful. Mentally agonising, very embarrassing, awkward or tedious.

Synonyms: painful- agonising -harrowing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Excruciating /ik'skrooSHe atiNG/

*Adj* Intensely painful. Mentally agonising, very embarrassing, awkward or tedious.

Synonyms: painful- agonising -harrowing

The Harrow school doctor was used to boys being boys. Not wanting to admit that they weren’t feeling well. Especially in fifth form year. Remove* boys went through a magical metamorphosis over the summer break. They left their second year as boys, but came back to Harrow in September as half-way to being young men. Voices broke, bones pushed into growth overdrive actually ached. He’d seen it all. Boys panicked about the changes in their bodies, boys angry and emotional, hormones playing rough with blood chemistry. Boys so shocked by the sprouting of hair in odd places, the outbreak of pustules on their faces, the strange mood swings from frenzied activity to total sloth, sleeping fourteen hours on the trot. Some sexual issues, worries about orientations, the terror and the delight about what their bodies were pushing their minds into thinking about all too often. Doctor Ellison thought he'd seen it all in his twenty years work with the school.

But, he was now trying to deal with one fifteen year old who had simply stopped talking, according to the Bradby’s House matron- and eating by the look of it. The wall chart put Holmes at 179 centimetres, or five foot ten and a half. Ellison was old enough to still think of height and weight in old measures. On the scales, the boy weighed only 59 kilos, so not quite 130 pounds, less than he had four months before when he was a shocking two and three quarters inches shorter. That translated now into a body mass index of 18.4.

As Holmes stepped off the scales, Doctor Ellison asked him when his birthday was. There was no response. "Oh, for God's sake, Holmes, I can check your record, you know. Just spare me the histrionic silence, will you?"

"Sixth January." The flat tone gave nothing away.

That was within an acceptable range for his age, but only in the lowest 5th percentile. Sometimes it was just a case of weight catching up to a growth spurt, and usually boys caught in that maelstrom were ravenous. But, according to the matron, Mrs Richards, this one wasn't eating anything much at all.
He sighed. "Right, shirt off, and step out of your greys."

Holmes looked at the floor. Ellison then realised what he'd asked, and snorted. "Sorry. You'll need help with that." He gestured to the sling on the boy's left arm which was protecting a plaster cast that went from his elbow right over his fingers, so that he was effectively one handed. Getting the shirt off would be very tricky, even though the sleeve had been cut and re-hemmed so it stopped above the elbow. At least the trousers were too big for him and would probably fall down the moment he released them from the black braces. "Come over here; I'll help you get sorted."

Holmes didn't move. Then a very quiet, "I'd rather the nurse did it, please, sir."

Now that was odd. Most school boys were used to undressing in a locker room full of other boys, games instructors and coaches. Given the choice, most fifteen year olds would not feel more comfortable doing so in front of a female. In fact, most were hyperconscious of their bodies in front of the opposite sex. But this one was different. He wondered why. "Right. I'll step out of the room and ask Nurse Schaeffer to help you."

The school nurse came in. She had helped him out of his bluer when he'd first arrived, with one arm in it and the other just draped over the sling; the jacket now hung on its wooden hanger behind the door, his straw hat atop it. She took a look at the boy and smiled. "That cast must be a right pain. Slip off the right brace and I'll undo the buttons." Once done, she unclipped the left brace from the back of his trousers. "Can you manage the front clip with your right hand?" He could. "Bend your right arm, please." She slid off the right sleeve. "I'm going to unbuckle the top of the sling. Can you support your cast with your right hand, please?" As he did so, she removed the rather sophisticated sling. Definitely not standard NHS. She knew that he was supposed to be attending weekly sessions at the London Wrist and Hand Unit at the Wellington Hospital. The House Matron had given her a copy of the schedule of appointments with Doctor Ian Winters. He was making quite a name for himself as a specialist with musicians. She wondered if Holmes was one of the music scholars.

She pulled the shortened sleeve gently over the cast and then put the shirt on another hanger. By the time she turned back to the boy, he'd managed to get his trousers off- a bit big for him they must have slipped off easily without the braces. That's when she noticed the yellowish brown bruising. And the darker reddish rings around his right wrist and his ankles. She didn't say a word, but he saw her looking, and turned away, moving over to the other side of the medical examination bed, and clumsily backing up and onto it so he was facing away from her and the door. But she could still see the bruises on his back. She left the room and shut the door behind her, before going over to Doctor Ellison at the desk and starting to tell him about what she'd seen.

When the doctor came into the room, he said in quiet voice, "I need to take your blood pressure and listen to your chest." He fitted the cuff onto the boy's thin upper arm, and it gave him a chance to look more carefully at the healing scars on Holmes' right wrist. 123 over 85; perfectly normal. When he used the stethoscope to listen to his lung function, he was able to examine the yellowing bruises on his bony back. Lungs sound fine.

"Tell me about the accident, Holmes. How did you break your wrist and the bones in your hand?" Doctor Ellison tried to make the question sound both professional and casual in the same tone.

"Do I really have to talk about it?" For a fifteen year old, he sounded very weary and resigned.

"Yes, I'm afraid you do, Holmes. I need to know what happened, so I can write it in your notes."

Eventually he got a flat monotone reply- "My horse. There was a fire, and he died. I was trying to free him. My arm and hand got smashed between the horse and the side of the stall."
The doctor thought about it. "And the bruises?"

"He was a big horse and didn't realise I was trying to help. He was hurt and scared. In the stall, I got…bashed about rather."

Ellison tried to imagine the scene. "How did you get the cuts in your wrist and ankle?"

"Rope burns. I tried to get a lead onto his bridle to control him. Wrapped it around my wrist at first, because I couldn't hang on with just one hand. Then I clipped the other end to the stable door, low down. I was trying to stop him from rearing. But he pulled too hard. It got tangled up on my wrist. I managed to get it off, but he fell and so did I. When he got up, the rope got caught around my ankles." The boy's eyes were closed and he was breathing roughly, a bit too quickly.

"Sounds horrific."

"It was."

"The fire- were you burned anywhere?"

"No. It was in the ceiling. Just smoke inhalation. Couldn't breathe very well for a while. But that's healed now."

"Yes, your lungs sound fine, now." It all sounded logical. A horrible ordeal, no wonder the boy didn't want to talk about it.

"Matron Richards says you haven't been talking or eating much. Is that because of the accident?"

The boy looked down at the floor. "Kind of got out of the habit, sir. My sore throat made talking difficult at first. And, well, didn't feel like talking much."

"Any nightmares?"

A nod. "A few."

"Well, that's to be expected."

"Fewer, sir, since getting back here. School work gives me something else to think about. I just want to forget it all."

"What about the eating?"

This provoked a little snort. "Food's not exactly brilliant here, sir. Always takes me a little while to get used to it again. I'll be alright."

"When you are recovering- and your bones healing- you need to eat, Holmes, even if it is a bit of a chore. So, just do it, will you? I'm going to ask Nurse Schaeffer to give you a meal card. You'll have to get the dining hall staff to mark the card with what you've taken and that you've eaten it. Stick with it for a month, and we'll put some meat back on those bones. Show it to Matron every day. She's helping you get dressed every morning, isn't she? Must be a bore." He tried to make it sound casual. No need to make matters worse. "I also think you should see Doctor Snowden. He comes in once a week to see boys; I will book you an appointment for next week."

For the first time since he'd started the examination, Holmes turned to look at him. "What sort of doctor is he? I've already got sessions at the Wellington to sort out my hand."

"Snowden is a psychiatrist; you can talk to him about what happened."
Holmes's face showed what he thought of that idea and he looked away. "Don't need that. I've already got one. Really, there's no point to seeing anyone else."

"What's his name?"

"Her name. Doctor Esther Cohen."

"You will talk to her about it then?"

"I suppose, but nothing I do or say will bring him back again, Doctor Ellison. I just want to get on with my school work. The less…fuss people make, the easier it will be to forget about it."

The doctor nodded. He could see the merit in that. He'd speak to the School Nurse and the House Matron to keep an eye on the boy, but it seemed that Holmes was on the mend.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: If you are interested in what happened in the fire and why Doctor Ellison is making a serious diagnostic mistake here, read my story Musgrave Blaze. This fills in a little gap between it and the sequel, De-frag.

"Remove" is the name used by Harrow School for second year boys, usually aged 14-15. "Shell" is first year (13-14), then the words revert to more normal usage- Fifth Form (15-16) and then Lower Sixth Form(16-17) followed by Upper Sixth Form(17-18) after which most go onto University. In my universe, Sherlock entered Harrow at 13, but sits his A levels a full two years early. For the story of Sherlock's admission to Harrow, check out Periodic Tales, chapter 25.
Mycroft looked over the crowd of dark-clothed mourners. His practiced eye easily separated those who felt obliged to be there from those who were drawn by curiosity or perhaps some degree of loyalty. His father had not inspired such feelings in many; he was a man more feared than loved, more respected than admired. His father's Norwegian relatives huddled together en mass for comfort. They were interested parties, not mourners, more like vultures descending to see what possibilities for a meal lay with the recently deceased. His father had little time for those he had left behind. "Scroungers" he called them. Mycroft preferred Sherlock's collective noun. For years, he'd called them "the Vikings."

"We have but a short time to live. Like a flower we blossom and then wither; like a shadow we flee and never stay." The vicar's doleful voice was whipped away by a sudden gust.

The service had been as short and spare as possible, on Mycroft's orders. His father was an atheist, who only tolerated the Church of England for his wife's sake. The family chapel on the estate grounds only held thirty people, with the vicar from the village church holding the brief service and the interment. There would be a memorial service in London in two days' time; Mycroft had made sure that his father's business connections and contacts knew. He anticipated a good turnout there at St Mary le Strand - both curiosity and self-interest would motivate a lot of people to come. The Holmes business interests were worldwide and the network of people dependent upon it would ensure that the church on the Strand would be full.

"In the midst of life we are in death; to whom can we turn for help, but to you, Lord, who are justly angered by our sins?"

The word 'sins' made Mycroft recall the time five years earlier when he had stood by his mother's graveside. Then every member of the estate staff attended, and from the village and the surrounding county's great houses a contingent came too, there was genuine affection and also a sense of occasion. His mother's 'sin' had been an early death. He still mourned the loss, and felt her absence now most keenly. She'd have made a better fist of this funeral, made sure that the arrangements were executed with her usual blend of ruthless attention to detail leavened with a sense of decorum and softened by her love of the family traditions.

"We have entrusted our brother Richard to God's mercy, and we now commit his body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust: in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ..."

He watched as the black casket was lifted. The body had been flown back from Jakarta, arriving...
almost at the same time yesterday as Mycroft's flight from Bogata. He'd had a brutal series of flights, from Medellin, to Bogota, then to Frankfurt on Lufthansa before finally getting to Heathrow. With layovers to wait for departures, he'd been on the move or in the air for seventeen hours. Jet lag meant he hadn't slept at all last night, and he was feeling distinctly under the weather. Too many of the private funeral arrangements had fallen on other shoulders- his father's solicitor, his corporate PA and the estate manager. He wondered who had chosen the casket that was now being lowered. Already, he knew that the staff at the house were wondering about their futures. Mycroft's responsibilities overseas could not be shed easily; he knew that they would know his return ticket had been booked for less than a week after he landed in the UK.

Under Mummy's control, the funeral of her husband would have been an occasion to remind the assembled that the estate would continue, irrespective of who was in charge. There would be comfort in that. As he cast his eye around the people gathered at the graveside, he knew that the general mood was of uncertainty, division and suspicion about what was to come.

That made Mycroft even more aware than ever of what had fallen onto his shoulders. The title had passed to him on Mummy's death five years before, along with the estate. He'd left the management of it to the very competent agent. The staff knew what they were doing; the tenant farmers managed the agricultural side so that it was less of a drain than most landed estates. His father had kept his nose out of the estate's business. All he cared about was being able to use the house and grounds for his corporate hospitality purposes. But now, with his father's death, he would need to reassure the estate people that nothing had changed. He was more concerned about the other side- there were big decisions to be made about the Holmes' business interests, and the very considerable amount of money involved made Mycroft wary.

"Yet, Lord God most holy, Lord most mighty, O holy and most merciful Saviour, deliver us from the bitter pain of eternal death."

His father's death was sudden- a traffic accident in Jakarta. The consulate had contacted him in Colombia; he remembered the bland words of the British accented voice saying, "It was a head on collision at speed; death was instantaneous. He wouldn't have suffered at all." But, his mother had suffered a lot in her last two months, in pain and worried about who she was leaving behind. It had been a cold but sunny day in January as the assembled mourners said their goodbyes to the Violet Holmes, the Viscountess of Sherrinford. His mother was interred in the family vault in the Chapel. Mycroft took some grim pleasure in seeing his father buried outside in the churchyard. The vault was reserved only for the title-holder. Spouses and other relatives had to make do with outside.

The other difference between the funerals of his parents was standing beside him now. When his mother had died, the ten year old Sherlock had been so distraught that his father refused to let him attend the funeral. Mycroft remembered his father's dismissal. "I don't want any snivelling. If he can't control himself, then he can't be there."

"Lord, you know the secrets of our hearts; hear our prayer, O God most mighty; spare us, most worthy judge eternal; at our last hour let us not fall from you, O holy and merciful Saviour."

He felt his brother beside him shift his weight and fidget a bit; his left thumb was rubbing a steady rhythm against the knuckle of his first finger. But, his face was set. There were no tears at all for his father. The grey clouds were spitting, and Mycroft's hand was getting a bit tired holding up the umbrella so that it provided some shelter to the two of them. It wasn't much good in any case; the wind kept gusting and blowing the drizzle sideways under the umbrella. The elder Holmes was still coming to terms with the changes in Sherlock, which had shocked him when he first saw him get out of the car yesterday. He was easily five inches taller and somehow even thinner. The boy's voice had broken, to be replaced by a rich baritone. After fifteen months of not seeing his brother,
Mycroft kept being surprised by the physical changes in Sherlock. His dark suit jacket sleeves were too short, too much white shirt cuff was showing. And his hair was in desperate need of a cut. _Eton would never have been so lenient in my day._ But then Harrow has different standards.

The time had come for the final act. As the eldest son and heir, he would go first. He handed Sherlock the umbrella, and walked to the head of the grave where a basket of long-stemmed white roses lay. He picked up one and dropped it into the open grave, then returned to Sherlock and rescued his umbrella from his brother, who was fumbling it a bit in his left hand.

Then the Norwegian contingent stepped up taking a rose and said their farewells. Some spoke in Norwegian, his father's first language. Strange, Mycroft had never wanted to learn it, and his father told him not to bother. 'Pointless bloody language. Learn Mandarin or Spanish- far more useful.' There's been no love lost between Rikard Sigur and his home country. He'd changed his name by deed poll on his eighteenth birthday. A child refugee from war-torn Norway, after ten years of schooling in the UK, he passed for a native born Englishman.

"May God give you his comfort and his peace, his light and his joy, in this world and the next; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always."

There was one white rose left when Mycroft glared rather pointedly at Sherlock, who finally stirred. The tall youth walked to the edge of the artificially green matting that lined the edges of the freshly dug grave. He stooped to take a handful of the muddy earth. Then he went to the grave side and threw the dirt in with just enough force for it to make an audible thud on the wooden casket. Mycroft rolled his eyes. Perhaps justified, but the theatricality of it would be a talking point, no doubt, when the guests gathered at the house after the funeral.

When the assembled group responded "Amen", Mycroft knew that his brother would not be joining in.

oOo

Later that night, much later, Mycroft took a moment to stretch. He'd been on his feet for at least half the day and then mewed up close with relatives, estate staff and local people. The reception back at the house was designed to re-assure. He hoped that the message would get through to the staff. He'd spoken personally to the housekeeper, the gamekeeper, the estate manager, the head gardener, each of the tenant farmers. All were told that their positions were secure. He'd be back in the spring on a longer leave, and decide how best to deal with things. In the meantime, it was to be business as usual. And he promised them all that he would be returning home sometime- just not soon.

He'd left some decisions to Mrs Walters. Her advice was sage: "The house won't need much in the way of domestic staff. It probably makes sense to just bring in the occasional cleaner from the village. I suggest that the maid, Miss Foster, be offered a chance to look after the London Townhouse. I assume you'll want to keep it ticking over, so Sherlock has somewhere to go during Exeats and longer vacations. I'd like to keep Cook on here- she's getting old. Wouldn't be fair, m'Lord, to turf her out of the tied cottage. But, when she wants to retire, I'll not replace her until you come back home."

His father's butler had already tendered his resignation, which had spared him the need to tell the man to go. He'd give him a sensible reference, but anyone reading between the lines would know that he wasn't suitable material for anyone other than a foreign businessman. He'd learned too many bad habits working for his father. Lord knew he had no need for such a person. Mycroft Holmes, second secretary of the British Consulate in Medellin, Colombia did not need a butler, and
he had no intention of returning soon to assume a role as a member of the British aristocracy, where such servants were a given.

With the staff sorted, he'd then turned his attention to the relatives. None of his mother's side had attended the funeral. There was no love lost between the Sherrinfords and the Sigur family. The French contingent in particular had loathed the man. Condolences- in the form of telephone messages, cards, letters- even an old fashioned telegram from Great Aunt Arabella in Edinburg were duly read by him in his father's study, and replies dictated onto his father's memo recorder. He'd take it up with him to London tomorrow, and get the company's PA to type them up and send them on his behalf. That hour and a half spent in the study had depressed Mycroft. He vowed to change all of the furniture and the paintings on the walls, re-decorate the room completely. It smelled of his father's cigarette brand, a loathsome menthol. And it reminded him far too much of the times he'd been brought in to perform the dutiful son role.

That made him wonder where Sherlock was. He went downstairs to find Mrs Walters.

"I don't suppose you've seen Sherlock anywhere?"

She gave him a rather pained smile. "Sorry, no. The lad bolted out the kitchen door as soon as he got back here from the Service. Grabbed a piece of bread and an apple on the way out, so I don't think he's likely to turn up for dinner."

Mycroft grimaced at that, but then laughed ruefully. "Can't say I blame him, much. If I could get out of a meal with the Scandinavians, I would, too. What's on the menu?"

"Scallops to start with- I know they're your favourite. At least you can enjoy the meal, if not the company. Then lamb- my guess is that it will have been some time since you had that in South America. Followed by Eton Mess, for old time's sake."

He smiled and gave her a peck on the cheek. "You are a life saver, Mrs Walters. Almost makes me look forward to it, despite who I have to share it with."

He remembered why he had come down in the first place. "Any ideas where Sherlock might hole up? He avoided me all day yesterday, and I don't really have time to play hide-and-seek this evening."

He could see that her loyalties were torn. In the end, though, she nodded. "Aye, you do need to talk. My guess is that a couple of hours after supper, the cold and wet will drive him indoors. You'll find him at Frank Wallace's. I know he spent the night there last night."

Mycroft reassured her that he wouldn't tell Sherlock how he found him. His brother trusted very few people, and he didn't want to create any bad feelings.

Which is why when he knocked on Frank Wallace's cottage door, he gave a smile to the gamekeeper when the man opened the door. It was a filthy night, wind blowing and raining hard. All through dinner he'd wondered about Sherlock being out in the storm.

"M'Lord." Frank's greeting was cautious.

"I need to talk to Sherlock, Wallace. I know he's here."

The ginger-haired man spoke quietly. "Aye, he's here. Came in leaking wet- his clothes are in the tumble drier now. He's by the fire, trying to thaw out." He stepped aside and let Mycroft into the tiny hall- more an enclosed porch. "I'll take your coat and umbrella, else you'll drip everywhere." The gamekeeper hung them up on a peg by the door.
Mycroft's tone mirrored Frank's when he said very quietly. "I know this is your home, and I won't ask you to leave, but I do need privacy."

"I'll make myself scarce. Time I locked up the kennels anyway, and then I'll potter in the kitchen. Fix yourself a scotch; it's a decent malt. Bottle's on the mantle-piece." With that, the gamekeeper swept his own mac off the peg by the door and was gone into the night.

When Mycroft went into the low beamed sitting room, he saw Sherlock perched on a stool near the log fire, his bare legs drawn up, hands around his knees. He was wearing one of Frank's old shooting sweaters, miles too big for him. His hair was still damp, curling up and frizzling a bit in the heat of the fire. Frank must have cranked up the central heating. The tiny room was snug and warm.

Mycroft sat in what was obviously Frank's seat- an old battered leather wing chair- and contemplated his brother, who had not even acknowledged his entrance.

"Sherlock, we need to talk."

There was no response.

"You've been avoiding me."

This brought a frown. He didn't look at Mycroft, but addressed his words to the flames in the fireplace. "No, you've been too busy being Lord of the Manor."

"Someone has to do it."

"And tomorrow you're off to London to play Chairman of the Board, no doubt. And then you'll be flying back to South America by when,... Sunday?"

Mycroft nodded. "That's why we need to talk tonight."

Sherlock didn't turn to look at him. "Do we have to? Why not just disappear, it's what you do. There's nothing I need to talk to you about."

"Well, sorry to be so troublesome." Mycroft let his sarcasm show, "but there are things that can't be avoided, especially if the Scandinavians are to be resisted."

Sherlock snorted. "How have you escaped the clutches of the Vikings? I was sure they'd hold you hostage tonight. Or have you agreed to pay the Danegeld?"

Mycroft smirked. His brother was not far from the mark. He decided to reply in the same mocking style. "They're taking their boats back downstream tomorrow, unhappy that their raiding party has not been successful. At least I know now the limits of their ambitions." He got up to fix himself a scotch. Clearly, Frank had been about to do so when he had arrived, the glass was ready, as was a small jug of water. He examined the bottle- well beyond the price range a gamekeeper could afford. Probably a gift from a grateful businessman on one of father's shooting days. He poured two fingers.

"I could always find another glass if you'd care to join me."

"I don't like alcohol. Dulls the senses, slows my brain down. And I can't stand the peaty scent of that brand; it's just too much." He waited until his brother was seated again. "So, what's so important that it's worth you getting wet for?"
"I will be seeing the solicitor in the morning when I get to London. I have to update my will."

Sherlock grinned at the flames. "Standing by a graveside gave you feelings of mortality, did it?"

"I'm serious, Sherlock. The Vikings won't be happy if for any reason you end up succeeding me before you reach 18, and even after that they will kick up a fuss and make life difficult. They are a greedy bunch."

"So, your work is getting more dangerous, is it?"

Mycroft took a sip of his whiskey to buy himself some time. How much should he tell his brother? It was too much of a security risk to tell the truth; his employer allowed no one- not even family- to know that he was anything other than a minor civil servant in the Foreign Office.

There was a huff. "There's no need to pretend, Mycroft, I figured out who you were really working for even before you left the country five years ago. But, clearly you are getting closer to the sharp end if you are worrying about wills. Well, don't bother for my sake. I don't want any of it- not the title, the land, the money. Give it all away to charity for all I care."

"Mummy would be disappointed."

"Nothing's changed then. She was never disappointed in you. Just in me. And, I'm surprised that father's will doesn't explicitly disinherit me."

Mycroft decided not to tell him that the deduction was right. "It doesn't matter what he wanted. I get to decide now."

There was no reply.

"Sherlock, what do you really want to do? I mean, have you any idea yet of what you'd like to do for a career?"

That provoked the tiniest of grimaces. "Well, two possible career paths bit the dust this summer, so I guess it has to be chemistry."

Mycroft was confused, and even using peripheral vision, Sherlock must have seen it. Without a word, he raised his left arm in the air, and let the heavy sweater's baggy sleeve slip down to reveal the full extent of the plastic thermocast around his left forearm, wrist and top of his hand. "Put paid to my violin career at the same time as it did me in for riding."

"Bones heal, Sherlock. If you wanted to do either, I'm sure you could."

"I don't- not anymore. However, I do want to take my A levels in January, so I don't have to waste any more time at school. I need to get something interesting to get my teeth into or I will die of boredom. The House Master agrees, so don't try to talk me out of it."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Where do you want to go to University? I could put a word out at Oxford."

"Cambridge. Oxford's crap at chemistry. If Trinity won't have me early, then I'll go to Imperial in London."

Mycroft was pleasantly surprised. It was the first proper adult conversation they'd had. For years, Sherlock had simply avoided talking to him except when he absolutely had to, and then it was with simmering resentment. His baby brother had grown up a lot in the past year. Made decisions, got focused on a future. It was refreshing. He felt relieved. Maybe this would work out after all.
Twenty two years later, Mycroft was remembering that conversation. If he had known then what
he knew now, would things have been different? Should he have somehow provoked the truth
behind the fifteen year old's calm demeanour? Would it have made a difference?

If only. It was a time for regrets. He was standing now in the family's chapel yard, eyeing the solid
black tombstone being pushed by workmen into the freshly dug trench at the head of the grave.
The grass had already started to grow over it, because getting the stone done had taken almost six
weeks. Hand carved, the gold lettering stood out from the black smooth surface, so black it
reflected Mycroft's shadow, despite the shade of the yew tree. No dates, no inscription just a name:
Sherlock Holmes.
Chapter Summary

Ever wonder how Mike Stamford heard that Sherlock wanted a flatmate? This is how the two people got to know each other in the first place.

**Expedient** /ɪkˈspɛdɛnt/

*Adj.* (of an action) Convenient and practical, although possibly improper or immoral

*Noun:* A means of attaining an end, especially one that is convenient.

Some weeks after moving into Baker Street, John decided it was time to ask Sherlock what might be a personal question. After the awkward moment in the Italian restaurant on their first night, when John had blundered into his "girlfriend" gaffe, the doctor had become a little more cautious. He realised that his flatmate was more than able to deduce everything about him, but he was still in the dark about the younger man, in so many ways. He'd come to realise Sherlock was being serious about the "sometimes I don't talk for days", and he never offered anything personal about his past or background. But John was curious.

He put a cup of tea down beside Sherlock, who was sitting at the table reading a newspaper. John sat on the other side and sipped from his own RAMC mug.

"So, how do you know Mike Stamford?"

Sherlock looked over the top of the Telegraph at John. "Who says I do?"

"Well, Sherlock. You were in his lab the first time I laid eyes on you, and have been pretty regularly since we first met. He doesn't just let any old stranger walk in and use his kit. That's a Bart's teaching room, and last I looked, you weren't a medical student. Secondly, you must have talked to him about your need to have someone to share a flat with, because otherwise he wouldn't have realised I was the second person that day to say 'who would have a flatmate like me?' So clearly, you have some sort of relationship."

That made Sherlock lower the paper. "Is that what he said? I didn't actually say that. What I said was that I had to find a flatmate, which was proving to be highly tedious, and I really would rather not have to bother." He picked up the mug of tea and took a gulp. "And I don't have a 'relationship' with Stamford; I hardly know him at all. It's just expedience that puts us together, occasionally."

"So, why did you 'bother' with a flatmate? I thought you needed the rent." The doctor was beginning to feel uncomfortable. Was Sherlock starting to regret the decision?

"I wasn't given a choice. Either I got a flatmate, or I wasn't going to be able to take this flat and I wanted to. So, it was necessary to find one. That didn't mean it was a process I enjoyed. So, I am glad that you came along; saved me a lot of bother." There was just the hint of a smirk on the man's face.

"Yeah, well, I'm glad it worked out for you." John was getting the feeling that his leg was being
pulled. "Luckily, this flatmate came with a gun, and didn't mind using it to save your life even before I moved in."

Now the smirk was replaced by a smile. "Yes. Occasionally what is expedient can also be convenient, John."

John smirked back at him. "You're deflecting, Sherlock. When you did your Afghanistan or Iraq thing that first time in the lab when we met, well, I was a little startled, but after you left, Mike said you were always like that. He clearly knows you. But why does he let you use the lab? What did you do to...I don't know...earn his trust to let that happen? He has to be sticking his neck out to let a non-employee in on a permanent pass. Or have I missed something here? Do you actually have research rights at the hospital, some sort of professional business relationship that you haven't told me about?"

Sherlock's earlier sarcasm around the word relationship made it clear that to John that Sherlock did not place Mike Stamford in the category of friend. John remembered Sherlock's brother on the subject. ("How many 'friends' do you imagine he has?") But the fact remained; a Senior Lecturer would not allow just anyone to use his teaching facilities. But before he could frame another question, Sherlock beat him to it.

"You, on the other hand, have known Mike Stamford for years. True, it's been a while, but he was part of your 'circle', as I expect you called it when you were at medical school together. More than a casual acquaintance, then; enough for him to stop you in the street years later and for you to be willing to talk to him, even though you weren't in the mood for reminiscing at the time."

That was true. He hadn't seen Mike for almost a decade; John had gone straight into the army after finishing his first three years at UCL, and finished his medical specialisation while being paid by the military. They'd been pretty tight when at medical school; quite a few beers, not to mention girls, had been involved, and the two had studied together as one of a group of four guys who liked to have fun as well as work at the books. John started to remember some great occasions....

"No, Sherlock. You're doing it again. Distracting me into talking and thinking about my relationship with Mike, instead of being truthful about how you know him yourself. Why are you trying to avoid the question?"

A pair of grey green eyes looked at him again, as if reappraising him in light of his ability to spot the avoidance tactic. "Perhaps, it is to spare the man's blushes, John. Have you considered that possibility?"

Clearly, John hadn't.

Sherlock put the paper down. "Oh, all right. As you do consider yourself to be Mike Stamford's friends, I hope he won't mind me betraying any confidences. He lets me use the lab whenever I want because I was of some use to him a few years ago. Fix me another cup of tea and I will tell you about the case."

oOo

Mike Stamford swiped his pass through the card reader by the door into one of the rooms on the Pathology Lab corridor. It was late, very late- almost midnight, but he'd spotted the light on in 'his' lab on his way past, walking from his tiny shared office in one of the Bart's buildings toward Farringdon Station on his way home. So he went back in and up the stairs. He wanted to see which of his new graduate students was burning the midnight oil. Frankly, the idea of any of them being here this late was a surprise; he'd met them all for their first supervision session, and been
singly unimpressed. *Yeah, well, what did you expect? You're hardly going to pull a potential Nobel Prize winner on your first term as a lecturer, are you?*

As he pushed the double doors into the room open, he saw a young man he didn't recognise, working the high spec microscope. Beside him on the lab bench was an array of glasswork and tech machinery that was…impressive. A distillation process that looked highly complicated, being subjected to some very intensive analysis.

"Who are you, and what are you doing in my lab?" Mike tried to make it sound friendly. He was new to the teaching staff, and didn't want to alienate someone who just might have a legitimate reason to be using the kit.

A pair of eyes came away from the microscope for a split second, but didn't look at Mike directly before returning to the lens. "No one."

Mike considered. The guy wasn't a medical graduate student- they generally wore scrubs or lab coats as a uniform. This man was in a button down shirt and rather smart looking trousers. His retort wasn't said in a sarcastic tone, but it was an unexpected response.

"Well, I know you're not one of my students, that's for sure. And you don't look like a medical student, so you'd better have a better answer than 'no one', or I just might have to call security. How'd you get in here?"

There was a sigh, and the young man sat back on the stool and looked at him with an annoyed face. "The same way you did- by swiping a pass through the card reader by the door."

Mike wondered if the guy was being purposefully obtuse just to annoy him. "And whose name was on that pass? Because it should only be open to people on my register and I don't recall meeting you in any of my classes. I'd remember you; you don't look like an ordinary student- too old- and you are too young to be an academic, so just answer the question please."

"If you check the swipe card readouts, you'll find it showing Sunil Gupta's in the lab right now."

"Well, I know you're not Sunil, so who the hell are you? And come to think of it, how did you get Sunil's card? Did you steal it?"

This brought a smirk. "I didn't steal it; I cloned it. Different process, and much easier. There is an entire industry of cloning University ID cards and swipe cards. I'm hardly the only one. Most of the lecturers turn a blind eye to it, because having the rooms register as occupied justifies their allocation by the Room Accommodation team, who always grumble if no one turns up to use the space. So, this lab is in a surprising amount of use. I don't mind, because I tend to work very late. Or early, depending on one's point of view- my best time is between 2 and 5 in the morning. I just thought I would get started early tonight."

Mike felt rather put out by the man's attitude; it was as if the bloke thought the lab was his.

When he stood up to fiddle with a stop cock on one of the distillate flasks, Mike realised he was quite tall. He kept talking while adjusting one of the chromatographic machine's knobs. "It can be a nuisance on occasion. There's the Wednesday gang, for example- four guys who use this lab all night every week. Now they're medical students, but it wouldn't do to get caught in here doing what they are doing under their real names, so they clone cards of those who are registered to use the room. Don't you ever look at the printouts? Didn't it make you suspicious that your rather
ordinary graduate students are putting such long hours in at unsocial times? I mean, really, your lot are more likely to be down at the pub than doing anything like this." He gestured at the glasswork set up beside him.

Mike came over to look at it more carefully. "You might have a point. This looks…interesting. Are you qualified to use this kit?"

Those strange grey green eyes were appraising him now. "I read chemistry at Cambridge."

Well, la-de-dah. Mike thought the young man's posh public school accent backed up that story to some degree. But it didn't excuse his abuse of lab access. "That doesn't explain what you are doing here."

"I'm using ultra high pressure liquid chromatography and time-of-flight mass spectrometry to derive a 15 minute protocol for quantitative analysis of 30 drugs in limited size post mortem blood samples." This was said in a single breath, delivered at the rate of knots.

Mike's brain caught up with what had just been delivered. "That sounds……interesting."

That comment was met by a snort. "I'll say. Given what your students are doing this term, I'd be surprised if you didn't die of boredom before Christmas. Much more fun to have someone who can argue with you about your approach to that research project of yours on the mortality rates for emergency cholecystectomy due to surgical complications of gallbladder perforation and gangrene. You need to consider how HIDA scans can make a difference, for example."

After a breath, he continued at the same pace. "For that, your Waters Acquity UPLC system is just about adequate, but you really need to argue for a new SYNAPT G2 TOF-MS apparatus. It's expensive but well worth it if you want to keep up."

Mike was reeling from the speed of delivery and trying to take it in. All he could manage was "Oh. Are you a pathologist?"

"No. I'm a consultant." Mike digested that, and then the younger man added quickly, "not that kind of consultant*. I solve crimes. I'm a consulting detective."

"What, with the Forensic Service?" He tried to keep his surprise from his voice.

That provoked a snort. "The forensic service is a useless bunch of paper-pushers who run standard tests that miss all the important data of a crime scene and its victims. No, I work on my own, for clients, sometimes for the police."

This sounded…interesting, but Mike was left with the fact that the guy was doing it in his lab, with his kit, using his supplies- and all without authorisation from him. That annoyed him. "So, you just thought you'd borrow this lab, did you?"

"Well, yes. Compared to what else is going on in here, this is the sort of work that should be done here."

"You'll have to explain that for me."

That provoked a smirk. "You are new, aren't you." It wasn't a question, rather a statement, with some authority behind it. It made Mike feel his inexperience. He'd only joined the teaching staff at Bart's six weeks ago when the pressures of marriage and two kids started to tell. His years after qualification in general surgery had proved to be rather boring- once you've done ten appendectomies, they tend to become rather repetitive- and the hours were a real killer. So, he'd
listened to his wife's pleas for the more predictable work-life balance of a teaching and research career. So, he'd put in a bid to do a surgical pathology project which, to his surprise, got funded. Only downside was that it came with teaching hours attached. It had to be said, he was finding dealing with the students to be challenging, and the paperwork associated with registers and lab hours were the most annoying. Everyone else on the academic staff seemed more adroit at getting the expensive kit bought, the best students to sign up to work with them, and better attendance at the their lectures.

The smirk on the face of the young man in front of him started to annoy Mike. "If you don't start making sense instead of just insulting me, then I will call security and get you thrown out."

The threat did not seem to worry the target of his irritation.

"All right then, let's dumb this down….first of all, swipe cards are a license to cheat on attendance. Hand your card to your mate, and have a longer lie in. Have you ever watched them swipe in? Almost every undergrad student in your class will have swiped at least two cards in addition to their own. That's why your students will do poorly on exams; they don't feel the need to turn up. Secondly, you clearly are not reading the swipe card readouts to realise you are being gamed, so they see you as a soft touch. That encourages them to rent out their card details to the cloners who sell them onto others who want access to the lab at all hours- such as the Wednesday Club, which, by the way, is four guys funding their way through medical school by manufacturing the latest dance floor drug of choice right here in your lab."

Mike's face blanched. "I can't make sense of the print outs; they don't tally with the numbers I count actually showing up. That's bad enough. But… drugs? How the hell am I supposed to police what students get up to in here?"

The young man crossed his arms and leaned back with a smile on his face. "Well, I just might be able to help on both of those. And write the budget pitch that will get us both some new kit- got my eye on an upgrade to a nanoAcquity UPLC system- really great at biomarker discovery and protein identifications, and I have just the argument you'll need. Quid pro quo, of course, in exchange for visitation rights when the lab isn't being used." He let that sink in, before following it with, "Have we a deal?"

Mike thought about it. "I don't even know your name."

"Sherlock Holmes."

oOo

"So, let me get this straight. You helped Mike bust an illegal drugs operation in his own lab, in exchange for an open-all-hours access?" John had listened to the Sherlock's story with increasing amazement.

"That was the easiest bit" Sherlock said dismissively. "Teaching him how to read the IT printouts proved much harder, and getting the department to cough up the money for the new kit, well, that took even longer, but we got there in the end."

"So, that was the start of your working relationship."

"Relationship? No, not really. In my experience, expedience wins over some bogus nonsense of friendship every time- it's a win-win arrangement."

John thought about it for a moment, then smiled. Yes, Mike, he really is always like that.
Chapter Summary

a bit of violin back-story

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ex Files

Exquisite (ik'skwizit)

Adj. 1. extremely beautiful and delicate, graceful

2. Intensely felt, acute, keen, piercing, searing

James Selby, the Deputy House Master of Bradby's, felt nervous on behalf of the thirteen year old, who was trying but failing to sit still on the hard wooden seat. The boy was all elbows and knees, fidgeting with that intensity that betrayed so much of what he must be feeling. They were both waiting in one of the Harrow Music Department's practice rooms, for the School's Director of Music and the Head of Strings- the master who supervised all Harrovians studying music in the string section of an orchestra. Well over a hundred boys between the age of 13 and 18 at the school played some form of a string instrument, and competition was quite fierce for the best teachers. It was rare for a new boy to be seen by one of the people due at any moment, let alone both. But Selby had heard the strains of violin music drifting down the corridor from an otherwise empty house. He'd chased the sound down and found the new boy in the recreation room, playing with his eyes closed and at so intense a level of concentration that he had not heard the door open.

Whatever criticism the Deputy House Master had planned as a rebuke for avoiding the cricket died as he listened to the boy's playing. The next morning he'd called the Music Director and the Head of Strings.

Watching Holmes now, however, Selby wondered if a 'command performance' was the right thing to do. Apart from his jiggling, the boy sat with his eyes down on the violin case he had on his lap. He had avoided eye contact since he'd left his room. Selby wondered what was going through his mind.

"Have you decided yet what you are going to play?"

The question was answered with a terse, "Yes."

Before Selby could probe any further, the door to the practice room opened and two men walked in. Sherlock jumped up from the chair a little clumsily and stood waiting as they came closer.

Master Selby did the introductions. "This is the Director of Music, Richard Hiscox, and Vladimir Stanslov, Head of the String department. Gentlemen, this is Sherlock Holmes. Unusually, he is
joining us in the summer term, but will start as a shell with the incoming cohort in September. Since he started last week at Bradby's, we've been busy placing him in the correct classes for his level of achievements, because we don't want him to waste this term. This session is to do the same for his music development, so I am grateful for your willingness to come along. I'm not an expert in this instrument, and it's only fair to get those who are to judge what he should be doing while he's here."

Sherlock had given both men a brief sideways glance, but was now keeping his eyes firmly on his violin case as the Deputy House Master explained things.

Hiscox took charge. "Right. Mister Holmes, we're going to sit down here and have a listen. I understand that you have completed a Level Seven exam. What was your mark?"

"Distinction, sir." He did not look up.

"And your marks for Level five and six?"

Now Sherlock did look up in their vague direction, with a puzzled frown. "I didn't take those, sir. I only took the exam because my teacher said I should. I started at Level Seven."

The Russian entered the discussion. "How long have you been playing the violin?"

"Since I was seven, sir." The eyes were now back on the floor, as if wishing it could open up and swallow him.

"Remind me which prep school you came from?"

The frown deepened, creating a little wrinkle between the boy's eyebrows. "I didn't attend a school. I'm home educated. I was taught to play by my mother to begin with and then by Pavlo Beznovieu. But he stopped last year- too busy. I don't like my current tutor; he's boring."

That made Vladimir sit up straighter. He said quietly to Hiscox, "Beznovieu is the principal with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. I was unaware that he took private pupils."

The Music Director's eyebrows went up. He took another look at the weedy looking boy who was now fidgeting with the clasp on the violin case, popping it open and then snapping it back in place, over and over again. Perhaps it was some family connection that had been called upon, or an over-inflated view of the boy's skills, by a family with enough money to entice such a tutor.

He subjected the boy to a stern look. "I hope Master Selby explained the drill. We ask you to play one piece of your choosing, and then we give you one of ours, that you are unlikely to have seen before. Have you brought your sheet music?" The director looked around at the empty music stands.

"I don't need sheet music for this." Sherlock opened the case and drew out his violin and bow.

Vladimir Stanslov leaned forward as soon as he saw the violin. "Can I see your instrument, please?"

Sherlock handed it over.

"Tell us about this." There was an air of scarcely suppressed excitement in the Strings Master's voice. He stroked the instrument's maple back. "I've never seen one of these." He turned to Hiscox. "They're rarer than a Strad…"
"It's a late Guarneri *Del Gesu* made in 1739, sir. It was my mother's. The bow is French, 1790."

"You've *learned* on a baroque violin then?" He could hardly contain his incredulity. "Surely you've played a modern one?"

"Just once, sir. Steel strings." Holmes' disgust was plain. "The fingerboard was way too long, and at a funny angle. The plastic neck rest just gets in the way. New violin makers just *ruin* the bridge by making it too tall"; this said with utter distain. The boy looked at his bow. "This is convex, the way it *should* be. Modern ones are *concave* and they feel…odd."

By now Vladimir was smiling broadly. "What are you going to play for us?"

"I started learning the Bach Second Partita this January. It was my mother's favourite piece." He stopped, but none of the three men interrupted the silence. Then in a quiet voice, the youth continued. "She's dead. Three years ago. But…I've forgotten too much about her and I want to remember her by playing it. The whole piece is longer than you have time for- Master Selby told me that you only have twenty minutes for everything. So I thought I would play the last movement, the *chaconne*. It's fourteen minutes long."

Sherlock tensioned the bow, and checked its tension. He put a folded white handkerchief on his skinny collarbone and then rested the violin on it. He turned his back on the men. He drew a deep breath and then stilled for another moment. Then he was off- a whirling figure of bow and fingers in constant motion as the music tore off in a great pace.

Two and half minutes later, he drew the bow across the final note and stopped. His shoulders slumped, and he swished the bow downwards in frustration. "Sorry. I messed up the tempo in the middle section, lost the slurring rhythm."

Vladimir Stanslov just looked at the boy's back. "Well, perhaps, you are being a bit hard on yourself there, Holmes. I thought it was exquisite. But do you always have to play with your back to the audience? Do you suffer from stage fright?"

Sherlock shook his head. He turned around, and the two men saw that the young boy's eyes were wet. "No- at least, I don't think so, but I've never played on a stage before. I just don't want to be distracted by other people. An audience gets in the way of the music and what it means to me when I am playing it. I don't care what others think."

Hiscox didn't say a word, but reached into the briefcase he'd brought with him, and handed over the sheet music to Stanslov, who asked "Have you ever heard of Arvo Pärt?"

"No."

"He's a modern Estonian composer. This is a piece called *Fratres*; in this version he arranged it for solo violin. We'd like you to read it now." He handed over the music.

Sherlock put his violin down and sat in the chair next to it. Opening the sheet music, he scanned through it for a few seconds, his brow furrowing as he read. "Why *this* piece?"

Stanslov answered. "It's the piece we set for the music scholarship test and all candidates were allowed to read it through once, before answering some questions and then playing it."

A few minutes later the boy closed the last page and looked up at the men. "You have questions?"

"Yes. Could you talk to us about it? What do you make of it?"
"Well, to start with, I've never played anything like it. The set of variations are on a six-bar theme, which goes from pretty frantic activity to...a kind of a full stop, with lots of rests and still parts. There are nine chord sequences, separated by a recurring pizzicato percussion motif and tons of vibrato. I hate vibrato. And I'd need a modern bow for that, because it will sound awful with mine. Each sequence seems to be mathematically derived? Is that right?"

Stanslov was nodding. "Yes, indeed. Do you like maths?"

"Yes. That's why I like Bach."

"Then you should be able to cope with this. Give it a go- even with your bow. Just the first four sequences, please."

Sherlock stood up and picked up his violin, walking away from the music stand. He turned his back on the men and proceeded to play the piece through the fourth sequence, and then stopped. Opening his eyes as he turned around, he made a face. "That sounded ghastly."

"No, actually, it didn't. It's supposed to sound like that. Forgive me, but I have to ask. Can you memorise every piece of music by reading it just once?"

Sherlock looked startled. "Wasn't I supposed to do that? I thought that was what you were trying to test me on."

"No, you were expected to look at the music while you played."

The thirteen year old just shrugged. "I don't have to. It wouldn't be any better if I did look at it- in fact it probably sound worse, because it would distract me. I don't like this piece much. I delete stuff I don't want to remember, and given what that sounded like, I think I will."

Hiscox turned to Stanslov. "Master Selby, I think we will get young Holmes here started on the Grade 8 syllabus, but my guess is he can take the exam in the autumn quarter. Vlad, I think you have a new joiner for the Nine, so you'd better send over to Bradby's the schedule for practices. We'll have to expand your repertoire young man, and that means you will just have to get over your prejudices and use a modern instrument as well as that beauty. I have some instructors in mind who can help with that. Pavlo is too busy with recording contracts and touring to give you the time you need."

And that is how a thirteen year old new boy joined Harrow's elite string orchestra, the Nine, oddly, given its name, made up of the twenty-two boys who were the best musicians in the school. And, over time, and with a new violin made in the twentieth century, Holmes learned to like the atonality of some modern compositions, which he learned to play with equally exquisite feeling, whilst totally disregarding anyone else in the room.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: listen to the Bach played on a Strad on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myXOrVv-fNk
Assumptions and expectations can complicate working relationships, as Lestrade discovers.

Exigent \ˈek-sə-jənt\

Adj. -requiring immediate attention : needing to be dealt with immediately
- expecting much time, attention, effort, etc., from other people

"Sherlock". Lestrade's hand reached for the consulting detective's shoulder, to slow his ascent up the stairs. They were on the third floor, with three more to go before reaching the Tower Hamlets flat where the suspect was supposed to be holed up. "We have to call for back-up; Shafiq is probably armed."

"Shut Up." The tall lanky form eluded his grasp, keeping the phone up to his ear. He charged up the stairs, two at a time, leaving the older Met officer in his wake. Not for the first time, Greg wondered how Sherlock managed to keep so fit that he could chase up a flight of stairs like some foxhound hot on a scent. The thrill of the chase; it's like rocket fuel for him.

"Hello?"

Lestrade heard the question in the baritone floating down the stairwell.

"Talk to me. Is he still in the flat?" Sherlock's voice betrayed no shortness of breath or anxiety. It was as if he knew that only a slightly bored tone would keep the person on the other end of the call from panicking.

Greg could not hear a reply, only his own ragged breathing as he puffed his way up the next flight of stairs. Where's John when you need him? The doctor was the only one able to stop a consulting detective in full pursuit mode- but Watson was on duty today at the clinic, so Sherlock had been unaccompanied when the case broke and the phone call had come through from the suspect's cousin, who was a young teenager at a local comprehensive. Fifteen years old, a street-wise, gum chewing fashionista and oh so different from the thirty year old cousin who had vanished overseas into an al Qaida training camp. He was officially "a person of interest" to the authorities, but whose whereabouts were "unknown", presumed to be overseas fighting with a cell in Syria.

The case was a long and convoluted one, and Sherlock spent six days to build up a picture of the back story. A theft from the local mosque, a robbery at the home of a respected Muslim community figure- then, in rapid succession, three seemingly unconnected murders- a male teacher at the neighbourhood primary school, then a newsagent the day after, followed this morning by the death of a young man, seemingly picked at random, from the shoppers at a busy East End street market. The local police had been baffled, but Sherlock had arrived, along with an overriding sense of urgency. "Important, Lestrade- they're all linked and I know who did them" was the only explanation given when Sherlock arrived at Greg's flat on Sunday and demanded he come with
Greg's wife Louise was not amused. "Just what am I supposed to say to mum and sis? I don't ask for much from you socially- just the occasional Sunday lunch with my family. And that is supposed to include you. They've driven all the way from Manchester. Sometimes I think you've invested more in that idiot pacing out in the hall waiting for you than you have in our marriage." It was yet another flashpoint in the slow-motion brushfire of their relationship. For a moment, Greg's loyalties were torn.

An insistent baritone cut across his thoughts.

"Come on, Lestrade. What's so important about a charred piece of beef and a soggy Yorkshire pudding that you'd miss this opportunity to catch a killer?"

Sherlock's glare made Greg reassess his priorities. He grabbed his coat. "Louise, sometimes social niceties are a luxury. Your sister will understand, she's a lawyer. Tell her these are exigent circumstances." It was a phrase straight out of a law court when there wasn't enough time to get a warrant. He knew better than to think that Lou's mother would understand, but that was a different story, and one he didn't have time for. He'd shut the door behind him before she could answer.

Sherlock had kept the taxi he'd arrived in waiting at the roadside. "No time for a police car; this will have to do." He threw himself into the back of the cab without a backward glance, and Lestrade jumped in, to hear the man advising the cabbie of the new address- "Spey Street, off St Leonard's Road, Tower Hamlets- and hurry. This is police business." The cabbie exchanged glances with Lestrade via the rear view mirror, decided that the second passenger at least looked the part, but before he could ask for confirmation, Lestrade showed him his ID. The cabbie then nodded, put the cab into gear and accelerated away.

"So, what's the breakthrough, Sherlock?"

"Hmmm?" Sherlock was on his phone, texting, if his flying thumbs on the qwerty keyboard were anything to go by.

"What are you texting?"

This was answered with a smirk. "I'm not texting. I'm *tweeting.*"

Lestrade stifled an urge to grab the phone away from the lanky man and force a better answer from him. "How have you linked the three murders, and why do you think there is a suspect in Tower Hamlets?"

"At eastendprincess. It's a twitter handle. She's trending amongst Asian teens at the moment."

For a moment, Lestrade's brain stuttered to a halt. "You're following a teenager on twitter and that's somehow linked to...to three murders? How the hell does that figure?"

"She's the one who put the three events together- without realising it. The teacher was at her school- but her cousin Shafiq also went there."

"As did half the residents of Tower Hamlets, Sherlock. So what?" Greg held on as the taxi took a sharp left turn onto Commercial Street. They were about fifteen minutes away from Tower Hamlets, given the Sunday morning traffic was mercifully light.

"Yes, but, then she tweeted about how the murdered teacher was universally loved by the trendies at the school but despised by the Islamicists, the gang rumoured to have organised the theft at the
mosque. It was what was stolen that provided the vital clue—five hundred leaflets for the diversity rally planned next week at the school. The dead teacher was a key figure in the borough tolerance programme and had organised it as a PR exercise to stop the local paper from reporting about Shafiq as ‘yet another example of UK-born Asian radical youth going astray.’ Mishal is quite adamant that her cousin is just an idiot that’s been misled, not a terrorist.”

"Mishal? Who's that?"

"The East End Princess," was the reply, impatiently delivered with an eye roll. "Shafiq’s cousin. Half his age, and twice as smart, if her tweets are anything to go by."

The taxi braked sharply as a bus came out from the kerb. They were on Whitechapel now—just for a block, before taking a right onto Commercial Road. Then it would be straight through Limehouse, past the turnings to Canary Wharf and taking the north fork of East India Docks onto Tower Hamlets.

Lestrade was still trying to link this to the al Qaida suspect as he tried to keep up with Sherlock climbing the stairs. When he was nearly at the top of the stairs to the sixth floor, the first sound Greg heard was the sound of a door lock being picked. *Shit- forced entry, no police warning. No warrant. No backup. God knows what a judge will make of this one.*

He came around the corner to see the tail of a long coat just as it vanished through the door of the third flat along the left. The DI drew yet another gasping breath, trying to keep the black spots from intruding into his vision, and grimaced at the cramp that had appeared out of nowhere to seize his left calf muscle. By the time he staggered through the open door, he was too late.

Sherlock had gone straight through the flat, out the sliding door and onto the balcony. Now he was standing on the brick parapet wall, levering himself up onto the roof above.

"SHERLOCK!" Lestrade put all the horror he was feeling into the shout; six floors up in the tower block, if Sherlock fell, there would be no surviving it.

"That's just so cool." A teenage girl with long straight black hair was holding her camera phone out to take a video of the consulting detective as he pulled himself up and out of sight. "Who are you?" she asked when she turned to look at him.

"I'm with him". He figured telling her he was the police would freak her if she was trying to protect her cousin. Lestrade gestured out the patio doors, "Where's Shafiq?"

She popped her gum and gestured upwards.

"How do I get there?"

She smirked. "What, can't keep up with a superhero?" Before Lestrade could respond, the young girl pointed back out the door of the flat. "Take the stairs…one more flight and you're there."

Not for the first time since he'd got in the taxi with Sherlock, Greg rued the fact that he'd left his own phone on the kitchen table. He'd be in such a rush to avoid Louise's anger that he'd made the most basic mistake. And Sherlock had spent the whole ride to the East End doing something on his phone, deflecting Greg's increasingly urgent demands that he call for back up.

He looked at the young girl and said in as stern a tone as his winded lungs could muster, "Call 999, tell the police there is a murder in progress and give them the address."

"Oh my god," she squeaked. Her eyes widened in excitement, but she nodded and bent back over
the phone, saying to herself "it's just like something on the telly."

As he hauled himself back out onto yet another flight of stairs, Lestrade hoped his colleagues would forgive the description. He couldn't risk asking the girl to call the counter-terrorism squad— he didn't have time for an argument; Sherlock had said she didn't believe her cousin to be one. He knew describing it as a murder in progress would mobilise the police faster than any other description, apart from terrorism. And I just might murder a consulting detective for excessive risk-taking behaviour when I finally catch up with him.

As he reached the penultimate step, he realised the door to the roof was already ajar. Then he heard a gunshot, and came to a very rapid decision. Proper police procedure dictated he must stop and wait for armed back-up. To hell with that. He cautiously pushed the door fully open and waited for a second bullet. When none came, he went through and crouched down to peer around the corner.

At the far edge some twenty feet from the door, he saw Sherlock wrestling with one Asian man, both of them down on their knees. To Greg's horror, there was another Asian man who was scrabbling on his hands and knees after a gun that lay on the roof not ten feet away.

"STOP, POLICE!" Greg's shout came out by reflex— anything to gain a moment of surprise to delay the second assailant from reaching the gun. Perhaps, if they knew that Sherlock was no longer outnumbered, then they would not try to kill him.

He charged forward, but knew he would not make it in time. The terrorist reached the gun and lifted it toward Sherlock and the other Asian, now tangled up in each other's grip. Greg could only hope that the second man would not shoot for fear of hitting his colleague.

Sherlock shoved his assailant away from him to create clear space between them. "Shoot!" The baritone command was clear. Greg was confused by it, but he did not falter as he reached for the man with the gun.

He grabbed the man's arm just as the trigger was pulled. For a split second, the terrorist attacking Sherlock hesitated, as if waiting for the bullet to hit home. Then, when he realised that the bullet had not hit him or the consulting detective, he struggled to his feet and turned to run. Within seconds, he'd crossed onto the adjoining roof and thrown open another stairwell door, disappearing down it. Greg concentrated on the man with the gun, slamming him down face first onto the roof and wrestling the weapon from his hand. As he reached into his jacket pocket for a pair of handcuffs, Sherlock drew himself to his feet.

"You IDIOT!"

Lestrade clicked the second cuff onto the suspect's other hand and rocked back onto his heels, looking up to see a furious consulting detective.

"That's an innocent man you are cuffing, you moron. The terrorist is the one you just let get away."

Baffled, Lestrade looked down at the man he'd cuffed.

"That's Shafiq. He's innocent. Well, of everything but stupidity and a change of heart. Take the cuffs off and check to see if he's wounded; I think he took the bullet that the terrorist fired."

Sherlock was now pacing. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. As Greg unlocked the cuffs and helped Shafiq sit up, he heard one side of a rapid-fire conversation.

"Yes— he got away. Track him on CCTV cameras- St Leonard's Road, and the A12 Blackwall
tunnel approach. Or, if he's smart, he might cut under via Abbots Road. He's no longer armed, so just get him into custody."

Greg helped the man he'd just uncuffed sit up. "Are you injured? Where?"

Shafiq's eyes showed both pain and fear. He reached into his jacket and then pulled out a bloodied hand. "Shoulder. That bastard shot me. If it wasn't for your friend pushing me aside at the last minute, I'd be dead." He sank back down on the roof, his eyes wide with shock.

Sherlock knelt down beside Greg and lifted the jacket to look at the wound. He snorted in derision. "You'll live. A through and through, if I'm not mistaken. Lestrade, use your handkerchief and apply pressure." He then stood up again, lifted the phone again to his ear, and told whoever was on the other end to send an ambulance.

Later, once the ambulance had delivered the wounded man to the London Royal Hospital at Mile End, Lestrade took Sherlock aside in the Emergency department corridor.

"Okay, I've kept quiet long enough, Sherlock. An explanation, please. You have pushed me right to the edge this time. You expect too much of me, you know."

This provoked a smirk. "A confession of ignorance, Lestrade?"

The DI growled his reply through clenched teeth. "I came around that corner on the roof expecting to find you dead, or to take a bullet myself in the process, you wanker. You owe me an explanation!"

Sherlock's smirk was replaced with a cold glare. "It really is simple. Shafiq is, as his cousin Mishal said in her tweets, a misguided idiot. He went off to the training camp with his head filled with visions of martyrdom, but when he came back, found it rather different than he expected. The mosque burglary was his- trying to prove that he was man enough to the cell leader. He also broke into the home of the community leader- again, typical escalation when a new recruit is 'blooded'. But when he realised that he might have to do something nasty, he tried to quit. The cell reacted by threatening him that with each passing day, another innocent victim would be killed unless he did what he was supposed to do- which was carry a bomb. The murdered school teacher was carefully targeted- he'd mentored Shafiq when he was growing up. The dead newsagent was the first man to give Shafiq a job. When their deaths still didn't convince Shafiq, the cell killed an innocent shopper- and told him that with each passing day, another murder would occur."

Lestrade listened with growing incredulity. "Just how did you piece this all together?"

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "The tweets, Lestrade. Amidst all the drivel his cousin Mishal was tweeting were some that were directed at Shafiq. You just had to figure out what they meant, which I did. He did, too- and showed up at the flat to hide out. When Mishal stopped tweeting, I realised that he must be there. After that, it was just a case of finding where she lived."

"So how did the cell find out he was there?"

"Possibly because they were reading the tweets, too. Just because they are fanatics doesn't mean they can't recognise the value of an open communication system. It's one way to evade surveillance by GCHQ."

At that moment, three men in sharp suits came around the corner, looking for someone. Beside him, Lestrade heard Sherlock sigh and mutter "Mycro's minions, no doubt -always too late to be
of any real use. Shafiq is lucky that he didn't rely on the my brother to help him out of his predicament. Now that I've delivered the package, he will give him protection in exchange for information."

The DI's smirk matched that on the face of the consulting detective. "Yeah, I guess that it's a case of all's well that ends well. But, next time, Sherlock, just give me more of an explanation. You're an exigent idiot. I'm not John Watson; I need a little more to convince me to give the time, attention and effort you demand."
**Exculpate**

Chapter Summary

Exculpate /ˈɛkskʌlpɪt/

Verb: To show or declare that someone is not guilty of wrongdoing.

During the hiatus, Sherlock's reputation was rehabilitated in a public inquiry. This story is that of one of the witnesses called- Greg Lestrade.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Please state your full name for the record."

"Gregory Thomas Lestrade."

The court reporter off to the side of the room started typing, as the chairman opened the questioning. "Mister Lestrade, could you please identify your current position with the Metropolitan Police?"

It was the fourth day of the inquiry, but the first opportunity that he'd had to attend. His bastard of a boss was not willing to authorise leave, and he was still working under a cloud, so he had to be cautious. Throwing a sickie would be a little too obvious, given the press coverage that the inquiry was getting. When he was called by the inquiry to give evidence, even the DCI couldn't stop him from appearing- it was a legal obligation.

Greg cleared his throat and began. "I'm a Detective Inspector with the Metropolitan Police. I am currently assigned to the Major Crimes team, investigating thefts of over a million pounds."

"And when you knew the deceased, you were in a different position. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir. I was in charge of one of the Murder Investigation Teams- for twelve years."

The man to Sir Patrick Lloyd's left leaned forward to speak into the microphone. "You were suspended from that role, weren't you, because of your willingness to involve a civilian consultant without the approval of your superiors?"

Lestrade's shoulders tightened. "That's one interpretation. Another one is that I was suspended while the internal police inquiry could confirm whether proper procedures had been followed. Once that had been done, I was reinstated in the Homicide and Serious Crime Command, first to the Homicide Assessment Team and just recently to the Major Crimes team." Lestrade did not like the tone of Mark Evans QC, one of the three men on the inquiry panel. If the newspaper reports were to be believed, he was a man who liked the sound of his own voice, and was enjoying the chance to question just about everyone's motives in the effort to clear Sherlock's name. Not for the first time, he wondered if Evans had once been in the pay of Moriarty's old network.
Sir Patrick resumed his questioning. "Please tell the inquiry how you involved Mister Holmes in your murder investigations and the nature of your work with him."

Greg had spent hours—no, make that days, weeks, months—trying to figure out what he was going to say. That there would eventually be a public inquiry he had never doubted from the moment he'd been suspended, the day after Sherlock died. *Truth will win out, Lestrade; it's just my job to make it more visible.* He could still hear the comment in Sherlock's baritone, as the tall young man strode about on yet another crime scene, seeing things that no one else noticed. *You were right, Sherlock—first with the police investigation and now in public.*

The trouble was, this inquiry had taken ages to get started. It had been sixteen months since the consulting detective's death. *Why had it taken so long?* The police inquiry had dragged on for months and months. He'd almost come to the conclusion that it was the 'friends of James Moriarty' who must be stalling things. Media attention dragged on—the anniversary of the death of the 'celebrity detective' who was a fraud let the whole pack of lies out again. Then, suddenly, the police published their report and that there would be a public inquiry to investigate just how the press and police system had failed so spectacularly to treat Sherlock fairly.

"I've already told the police internal inquiry those facts, sir, in detail. You've seen their findings, enough to prove conclusively that Sherlock Holmes was not a fraud."

"Yes, of course, Detective Inspector, we have seen the police investigation. But, for the record, this panel would like your personal reasons for involving him in your crime scenes."

Without thinking, Greg blurted out, "Because my job is to solve crimes and bring the guilty to justice. Sherlock Holmes was more able to do that than any other person alive." Somewhat belatedly, he added in, "Sir."

"Are you saying that you never had any doubts…any misgivings that he might have been perpetuating the crimes himself, in order to gain the public fame that solving them would give him?"

"No sir, never."

Evans butted in again. "Why is that, Detective Inspector? We've been led to believe, by people on your own team, that there were doubts."

Greg snapped, "There are two reasons why I believed in Sherlock Holmes. The first one is simple. You didn't know him, sir. He didn't give a toss about what other people thought of him. So the idea that fame or attention was something he sought by faking crimes so he could solve them—well, it's just plain wrong. In fact, I know that he loathed all that…publicity. The police enquiry has proved that none, I repeat, none of the cases on which Sherlock worked were anything other than properly conducted- and successfully solved, I might add."

Sir Patrick's calm voice interrupted Evans before he could react to Greg's comment. "Thank you, Detective Inspector. Do you have an opinion as to why it took the police investigation so long to come to that conclusion?"

This was like asking Lestrade to walk across a tight-rope over a chasm, with no safety net. If he said what he believed, it would probably destroy his future career with the Met. On the other hand, he couldn't just sit and say nothing—that would be like excusing the appalling delays in repairing Sherlock's reputation. And he didn't feel particularly willing to be part of that particular conspiracy.

"I believe…" he hesitated for just a moment, searching for the right words, "I believe that certain
persons thought it was expedient to delay when they came to realise just how wrong their initial view was."

Evans' sneer could be heard in his voice. "Certain persons? You mean the Chief Superintendent of Detectives."

Greg had to tread carefully. Disloyalty was a kiss of death in the police. But, he'd never had time for the man. "That's not a matter for me to say, sir."

Sir Patrick intervened. "Just help us understand why you think the delay was unacceptable."

There was something in the man's tone that annoyed Greg. "It took nine months to get through them all and prove his innocence. Somehow, I always thought a man was innocent until proven guilty. Sherlock Holmes had to prove that he was innocent on every single case. And he wasn't even there to defend himself, so, yeah, I think that was wrong and unnecessary. And probably the result of people who wanted to protect Moriarty's reputation more than seeing justice be done."

Sir Patrick responded quietly. "We are aware of those facts, Detective Inspector. The main purpose of this enquiry is to examine how the man known as James Moriarty and Richard Brook was able to manipulate the press, the police and the criminal justice system."

Lestrade decided to say what he'd been feeling for weeks, ever since the Chief Superintendent of Detectives had resigned. "I can't answer about the press or the criminal justice system, but as for the police, I believe that the resignation of the Chief Superintendent of Detectives, on the day the internal investigation reported, shows you where some of the guilt lies. I think that someone should be investigating the possible connections between Moriarty and the Chief; I think he was told to take a hard line."

The DI locked eyes with the chairman, who did not flinch. Sir Patrick frowned, "That is not a matter for us to consider, Detective Inspector; if the police decide there is enough evidence to warrant investigation and the Crown Prosecution Service thinks there is a case worth pursuing, then that is a matter for them. We here are tasked with dealing with the facts that are known. As you are aware, testimony was given yesterday in closed session, with witnesses from the Security Services about the crime scene on the roof of the hospital. We now know that two people died that day: Mister Holmes in a fall from the roof, and Moriarty or Brooks, who died from a gunshot wound. Those facts are not contested, Detective Inspector. One of the question remaining is, who was he- Brooks or Moriarty- an actor hired to play a role or a criminal master mind?"

Greg's eyes narrowed. "I don't know what the witnesses yesterday might have said; after all, they've been allowed to keep their testimony secret. But, I do know beyond all reasonable doubt in my mind that James Moriarty was the criminal who created the fiction of Richard Brook. Brook was the fake, not Sherlock. And the man who was prosecuted for breaking into the Tower of London, the Bank of England and Pentonville Prison was James Moriarty- who was behind the whole plot to discredit Sherlock Holmes and to drive him to his death." By the time he finished his comment, he was stabbing the table with his finger, to give added emphasis to the strength of his words.

He took a deep breath, which the microphone picked up. The Met legal team had briefed him to answer only the questions put to him, and to steer well clear of any personal views- if he valued his chances of getting off burglary cases and back into the murder team. To hell with that. Sherlock was my friend.

So, Greg ploughed on. "And I believed that the media had an agenda- put there by James Moriarty- to destroy Sherlock Holmes, no matter what he did."
The panel member sitting to the side of the chairman shifted in his chair, attracting Sir Peter Lloyd's attention. The civil servant nodded and let him speak. "Yes, Mister Lestrade; that is what I would like to probe a bit deeper." Jason McClellan was a grey haired, stocky man, a former newspaper editor and one-time chairman of the Press Complaints Commission. Unlike the young QC or the former civil servant, McClellan had a look of someone who had drunk too many pints of beer and spent too much time chasing down tabloid newspaper headlines. Lestrade had freaked out when his name was announced as a member of the judicial enquiry into the case of James Moriarty, AKA Richard Brooke. *It's like giving the people who pushed Sherlock onto that roof another chance to defend themselves, when he no longer can.*

McClellan cleared a throat that sounded like he had smoked too many cigarettes. "You are aware that the PCC has investigated a claim brought by a group of people calling themselves the We believe in Sherlock Holmes campaign, into the actions of one particular newspaper. The journalist in question was cleared of any misconduct; she took the story provided by the man known as Richard Brook in good faith."

Greg tried to control his temper, but something angry slipped into his reply, "Good faith? She relied almost totally on Richard Brook for her so-called facts. Brook was a creation of James Moriarty. Perhaps, if she had done a proper job before publishing such rubbish, Sherlock Holmes might still be alive." There was a murmur of agreement from the public in the seats behind him.

Sir Patrick glared at the conversations that had begun. "I will remind the members of the public that this inquiry has the right to eject anyone who disturbs the process. Please be silent at all times."

Greg used the break in proceedings to turn and look behind him, scanning the seats to see if he could find a certain face he really wanted to see there. He recognised Philip Anderson in the back row, but failed to find John Watson. Maybe he was upstairs in the gallery, but Greg couldn't see. Reluctantly, he returned his attention to Sir Patrick as the man continued, "Detective Inspector, your personal opinion about the media is not relevant, nor admissible as evidence. You have been called here because you have eye witness testimony relevant to the case. I would be grateful if you could confine your remarks to what you saw on the rooftop of St Bartholomew's Hospital on the afternoon in question."

Greg settled himself for a moment, and then started. "I was the first officer on the scene. I and my colleague DC Dimmock saw the body on the roof before the Security Service arrived and took control of the scene. I saw the body- and yes, he was definitely *dead* - of James Moriarty. He had killed himself by putting his gun in his mouth and committing suicide."

The QC Evans leaned forward. "How is that possible to know until after a post mortem, after forensic examinations and ballistic tests. How could you *know* that he committed suicide? Is it not possible, in fact, more probable that he was shot by Sherlock Holmes, who then in fact committed suicide? I know that the police investigation has proved Holmes wasn't a fraud, but the evidence is growing that he was a killer. What you suggest is not logical. If Moriarty had killed himself, then there would be no reason for Mister Holmes to jump."

Lestrade was shaking his head. "The gun was still in Moriarty's hand. I saw that clearly, before the Security Service team arrived."

The QC fired back, "You're speculating. You weren't on the roof at the time of the shooting. In any case, the gun could have been put into the victim's hand after he had been shot, by Holmes. I repeat, if the victim had shot himself, then there would be no reason for Holmes to kill himself."

Greg had thought long and hard about what he had heard on the recording on Sherlock's phone.*
He could only speculate that Mycroft had been listening to what Greg had heard on the phone, and he had no idea if the recording had been played in the closed session with the security services- if it had, then no one outside of the three members of the panel heard it. He'd not had any contact at all with Mycroft Holmes since his brother's suicide, so he had no idea whether he would approve of the truth coming out, or not. What he was about to say was risky in the extreme, and he had no idea what its effect would be. But it annoyed him that people could think that Sherlock had killed someone.

Evan after deciding that he would make public what he had heard on the phone, Greg had agonised over whether he should name the three people named by Moriarty in his threat. He didn't give a toss about having his own name known, but worried about the effect on both Mrs Hudson and John if they came to know it. So, he decided to keep that quiet. After all, what difference would it make now? It could make both an old woman and a grieving friend feel even worse, if they thought they had played any part in causing Sherlock to jump.

"You're wrong, Mister Evans. I know because I heard the conversation between Moriarty and Holmes. It was recorded on Sherlock's phone, which I picked up from the roof. He had every reason to jump- but it wasn't because he was a fraud or because he had killed anyone. He did it to save lives. Moriarty threatened Sherlock Holmes that if he wasn't seen to jump from the roof, then three people would be killed- assassinated. Moriarty said, "Three bullets, three gunmen, three victims'- those were his exact words. Three people would die if Moriarty's people watching didn't see Holmes jump."

This caused uproar in the public court. Journalists grabbed their phones, some of them scuttling out of the room to phone in a story, others stabbing away at what must have been twitter. According to Donovan, the hashtag #believeinsherlock had been trending in London for days.

Sir Patrick banged his gavel repeatedly, "Sergeant-at-arms- remove anyone using a mobile phone in this room. You all know the rules." The talking did not abate, so the senior civil servant banged the gavel again and shouted into the microphone, "Silence! You WILL come to order!"

When the noise abated a bit, he carried on. "Detective Inspector Lestrade, do you have proof of this conversation?"

Deciding that actually playing the recording might end up a career limiting move, he decided to avoid the question. Greg leaned forward to the microphone, hoping his voice would carry over the conversations going on behind him in the public gallery. "If you have not already done to, then you will have to ask the Security Services that question. I believe they have the proof you need."

Sir Patrick gave a tight nod. "Thank you, Detective Inspector. I will discuss with their representatives what can and cannot be revealed in open session. And, unless any of my colleagues have any other questions, that will be all we need to hear from you." He turned to the other two members of the panel with a rather stern look, as if daring them to argue. Clearly, the man had his instructions to keep to the prepared brief. Apparently, this was about repairing the damage done to Sherlock's reputation, without opening up too many cans of worms about Moriarty in the process.

Lestrade stood up and strode out of the room, as he heard Sir Patrick call out, "May we have the next witness, please? Miss Kitty O'Reilly."

Seventeen days later, Greg was waiting outside of the court for the Inquiry to publish its report, when Philip Anderson bought him a coffee and tried to tell him, yet again, that Sherlock was still alive. Maybe because he was still angry about the whole thing, still in pain about his own role in arresting Sherlock and letting the police get away with it- whatever the excuse, he let fly what he thought.
"Guilt, that's all this is. You pushed us all into thinking that Sherlock was a fraud, you and Donovan. You did this, and it killed him, and he's staying dead. Do you honestly believe that if you have enough stupid theories, it's going to change what really happened?"

Just as he started to walk away from Anderson, phones started going off in the hands of the waiting journalists. Greg already knew what the report was going to say- it would exculpate Sherlock Holmes of any wrongdoing. As the reporters started to talk in front of the cameras, he looked at the media frenzy and wondered what Sherlock himself would have made of it all. He could hear a sarcastic baritone: Moriaty manipulated us all, Lestrade, even now. There was something in that thought which made him turn around and go back to Anderson. No point in making things worse for the man. They were all equally guilty of letting Sherlock down.

Chapter End Notes

As ever, I am indebted to Ariane Devere for her transcripts of the broadcast episodes. She is a heroine of Fanficdom for her efforts.

*This is covered in Got My Eye on You, The Great Man, just posted on Ao3.
Extrapolate

Chapter Summary

Long before Mycroft talked about "the other one" at the end of HLV, I wrote about a sibling. And please note that in my universe, the Holmes Parents are dead (again, because this was written way before Mofftiss decided it would be "cute" to bring in BC's parents). This is the back story of the half brother, Fitzroy S Ford, who is the villain in my stories.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

\textit{extrap\-o\-late} \(\text{\textbackslash ik\-'stra-p\-o-,l\-\textbackslash a\-t}\)

verb: to project, extend, or expand known data or experience into an area not known or experienced so as to arrive at a conjectural knowledge of the unknown area.

Mycroft Holmes approached the pigeon-holes in the Porter's lodge of Balliol College. He'd been expecting some post for some time—papers relating to the establishment of his brother's trust fund. It was important to ensure that, if anything happened to him, his father would not try to wrest control of the Sherringford assets away from Mycroft's legal heir, Sherlock.

But, apart from a small envelope with the college seal on it, his pigeon-hole was empty. He took out the envelope and opened it standing there, while the tide of students moved in and out of the Lodge around him. He didn't have time to go back to his rooms, before the walk up The Broad to All Souls College.

The note was from the Master's Office, a quickly written scrawl from the man himself:

\textit{Join me for Sherry at noon today}

It was signed "Kenny". As if the handwriting alone wasn't enough. Or the printed words at the top of the notepaper- "The Master of Balliol College"- weren't obvious enough. Mycroft sighed. He would have to miss the lecture of Robert O'Neil, Chichele Professor of The History of War. He ran the University's Graduate Strategic Studies programme and was well connected with every Western government with an interest in geo-politics. A name to conjure with. For a second year undergraduate to be invited to attend a postgraduate and academics-only lecture series at All Souls College was rare enough; to miss even one of the seven would be…noticed.

He wondered if Sir Anthony Kenny would accept an excuse. It was eleven forty now, and the lecture started at twelve thirty. Perhaps if he explained to the Master's secretary that the invitation clashed, she would pass on his apologies. When he got to the outer office, she looked up from her computer screen with a smile. "Oh, Holmes- good- you got the message in time. He will be delighted." She stood up and came around her desk. "I'll see if they're ready for you now."

Whatever he was about to say about the lecture dried up in his mouth. \textit{They}? He knew well enough that the Master routinely invited a group of students in for a glass of sherry and a conversation
before lunch on Wednesdays. This was a Friday, so it was unlikely that there were other students involved. He wondered if this might be a reprise of an unfortunate meeting orchestrated by his father during his first year at Balliol. That had been a cataclysmic confrontation, leading to Mycroft becoming Sherlock's legal guardian.* He stiffened and asked the secretary bluntly, "Who else is involved in this meeting, Mrs. Handley?"

She gave him a reassuring smile. "Sir Anthony has an alumnus in with him, someone who has come up to Oxford today just to meet you."

Mycroft didn't know anyone who might fill that description and his curiosity was piqued. But his need to attend the lecture warred with it. "Unfortunately, the timing is difficult; I'm expected to attend a lecture at All Souls that starts at half past twelve. Is there any way this could be re-scheduled?"

She looked surprised. "No, not really. Mister Ford is rarely in the country and has made this trip for the express purpose of meeting you."

He didn't know anyone of that name. Now he felt torn. He didn't want to be rude, but on the other hand, he didn't want to jeopardise his attendance at the lecture. "Is he here now? Perhaps if I could see them briefly now, I might still make the lecture."

She raised an eyebrow. "I'll announce you're here," and disappeared into the inner office. A moment later, the door opened and she beckoned him in. As he crossed the threshold, he realised that the Master was sitting in one of the two leather armchairs in front of the fireplace, in the other was a man in his early thirties he had never seen before. Sir Anthony smiled and stood up.

"Ah, Holmes. Glad you could make it." He crossed to the side-table and poured a small crystal sherry glass full of what Mycroft knew would be the Master's favourite- an almacenista Palo Cortado. He handed the glass over as the second man languidly slouched back in his chair, holding his own glass of the same. Mycroft noticed that the Master did not seem to have a glass of his own.

"Have a seat." Sir Anthony gestured to the leather chair he had just vacated. Mycroft's hesitation must have been noticeable. "Let me introduce you to someone rather special. He's asked me to arrange this meeting, and I am happy to oblige. I have a luncheon appointment with the Vice Chancellor, so won't be joining you. In fact, I have to get going now, or I shall be late." Mycroft did not sit down, but turned his attention to the man seated in the other chair.

Kenny continued, as if unaware of Mycroft's unease. "This is Mister F.S. Ford; 'Fitz' to his friends. He graduated a decade ago and has gone on to do some rather remarkable things. I will leave him to explain more." And with that, the Master grabbed his briefcase and was out of the door before Mycroft had a chance to say another word.

"Oh, do sit down. I know his manners are deplorable and all that, but really…" the slightly American-accented voice had a barely suppressed laugh in it. ". . . you look a little shell-shocked."

That irritated Mycroft, so he turned to look at the man, to really look at him for the first time. He'd be about the same height as Mycroft if he had been standing. Dark brown, nearly black hair cut short, with dark blue eyes. Not handsome, but not plain either. A striking man, but hard to put a finger on what it was that made him so. For some reason, Mycroft felt that he might have seen him before, even though he knew that they had never met.

As it was, slouched back, with his right leg crossed over his left knee, Ford looked utterly comfortable. The sherry glass was half empty. The cut of his navy blue suit was expensive- but not tailor-made. The pale blue shirt and the understated tie were of a similar quality- good but not eye-
catching. Not British by the look of them, nor were the leather loafers.

Mycroft sat down in the Master's chair. Unlike the other man, he kept his feet on the floor and his posture formal. No handshake in greeting had been offered, so he did not do so either. Rather stiffly, the nineteen year old said "Mister Ford, I have an important lecture that I should not miss at 12.30. So, whatever brings you here needs to be done before 12.25." It was rude, and he knew it, but he didn't care. He'd been manoeuvred into this meeting, and didn't like the feeling in the room.

The man was smiling, but watching him with equally forensic scrutiny. Before he could reply, however, Mycroft decided to interrupt. "You're not actually American, but have spent a lot of time in America. You like to think that you can pass as one of them. What would such a person want with me? Enough to warrant a special trip to Oxford?"

That made Ford smirk. "He said you were sharp."

"Who? Not Kenny."

"And why not Kenny?"

"Because he wouldn't recognise intellectual acuity if it was standing an inch in front of him."

The smirk turned into a laugh. "You're right, but I won't tell on you. It was Robert O'Neill. And, by the way, you're in that lecture series because I asked him to invite you to them- and he knows you won't be there today. So you can sit back and relax. This will take a little while."

Whatever Mycroft had been thinking about the mysterious Mister Ford was suddenly put to one side. He went very still, keeping his face utterly unaffected by the information he had just been given.

"Good, you know how to control yourself. Lesser minds would have been firing questions at me by now. O'Neill said you were patient."

Mycroft did sit back a bit more in the leather chair, and he took a sip of the sherry. His eyes never left the face of the man in the opposite chair. He looks familiar, but why can't I place him?

Aware of the scrutiny, Ford gave him what Mycroft decided was a smile designed to reassure him. It was followed by a conspiratorial wink. "Sir Anthony has his uses. He's told me about your exemplary work. Says you're 'going places'; he believes he can spot political potential, that one."

Mycroft decided to join the conversation. "He's a former Cabinet Minister. His instincts have been honed by twenty years of in-fighting in the most hostile political party environments. That doesn't require intellectual gifts, just political acumen."

"In both of which you consider yourself well endowed, Lord Mycroft Holmes, Viscount Sherrinford."

Mycroft didn't answer. To agree would be conceited, to disagree would be false modesty. He preferred to keep his opinion to himself.

Ford smiled. "And you know when to keep silent, too. That's a useful skill, and rare in one so young."

Mycroft was getting irritated. He would like nothing more than to end this and go to the lecture. O'Neill was speaking on the new power struggles going on in the South China seas- naval posturing between Vietnamese ships and the Chinese fleet had taken place in the summer, and he
wanted to know the Australian academic's assessment of it.

"Oh, just relax, will you? If you want, I'll get O'Neill to give you a private tutorial."

Mycroft wondered how the man was able to know what he was thinking. Am I really that easy to read? The only one able to deduce his thought processes this well was Sherlock- if he could be bothered.

"Anyway…” Ford took a sip of his sherry, "…it's all claptrap and gunboat diplomacy for domestic consumption; neither Viet Nam nor China want to do anything other than rattle the bars of the American Pacific fleet."

Mycroft responded. "So the Pacific region isn't your speciality then. What is?"

"Я предполагаю, что Вы говорите на русском языке?"**

"Yes. But I would prefer to continue in English. You are…involved in some way in studying the dissolution of the Soviet Union?"

"Yes, it will be all over by Christmas. Gorbachev will dissolve the union and hand over the Kremlin to Yeltsin. Now the interesting part- all those nuclear weapons in the wrong places, nuclear materials- uranium, plutonium- just begging to find their way into the black market and private hands. That happens to be my current area. Something of a dilemma, don't you think?"

"No one ever said democracy was safer than tyranny." Mycroft's reply was cautious.

The older man snorted. "Perhaps. But polonium in the hands of terrorists? That can be delivered in the form of a dirty bomb no bigger than a suitcase- and that threatens every Western democracy. The Cold War's over; we now face the prospect of Holy Wars, wars of national liberation, wars of madmen. The control of dangerous materials- I should include bacterial and chemical warfare substances in there too- well, that all gets rather compromised in times like these. It needs men like me."

Ford was now watching Mycroft carefully. "Aren't you even the slightest bit curious to discover what Sir Anthony meant by 'the rather remarkable things I've got up to since leaving these hallowed halls'?"

Calmly, Mycroft locked eyes. "You'll tell me if it's important."

That made the older man give a knowing smile. "You tell me. Go on…show off. Tell me that I have not made the wrong decision to have this meeting."

Mycroft wondered why this particular man had been sent. He had not expected the call to come this early- had thought it more likely that he would be approached in his final year at Oxford. He took another sip of his sherry and then put the glass down on the side table beside the Master's chair. He folded his hands in his lap. "I expected this to happen. What I don't understand is why you are the recruiter."

"Recruiter…for what, exactly? Spit it out; time to be open."

Mycroft gave a little sigh of exasperation. "Oh, very well. You are not English, American or French- even though you have spent time in all three. Your accent is carefully schooled, but you can't eliminate everything. Right now you're putting emphasis on the American because it suits you to be seen as someone who has spent time in America. So not MI5, rather, the Security Services. Probably a stint at Langley as liaison, if I am not mistaken.
"The fact that you know Robert O'Neill well enough to push him into putting me onto his lecture register suggests that you are senior enough to win his deference. Familiarity with his positions on naval manoeuvres in the South China Sea suggests that you have worked with him before. Probably an appointment when he was Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. It would serve as a useful cover." He was watching Ford as he delivered the deductive stream in rapid-fire monotone that was just a trifle bored. When he mentioned the IISS, he saw what he was waiting for- a tiny dilation of the pupils.

Mycroft smirked. "Ah, I see. O'Neill recruited you." That much he could extrapolate from the known facts. There was a tiny nod of affirmation from the man sitting across from him by the fireplace. "But none of that explains why you are talking to me now. O'Neill is far better placed to do this himself than a person I have never met before. I respect him. So, before this goes any further I need to know, who are you?"

Ford stood up and put his glass on the mantle-piece. He moved until he was just a few inches inside what would be considered a polite distance from where the undergraduate was seated. It made him loom over the younger man.

"Let's face it; you'll accept recruitment no matter who delivers the invitation. Now at last, you are asking the right question. I have something much more interesting to discuss- something more 'personal'." His previous lackadaisical attitude was suddenly replaced by an intensity of purpose. There was a physical tension in his posture, like a predator waiting to pounce.

Mycroft did not move. A different young man, intimidated by the sudden change in demeanour of someone conversing with him, might have instinctively felt the need to stand up, too, to minimise the difference in their heights. Mycroft needed no such transparent measures. His confidence was born of centuries of aristocratic heritage. He sat his ground, and waited.

"This is the part I've been waiting for…well, for a very long time." Ford returned to his seat. He composed himself and then said quietly, "Did you ever wonder why it took so long for your mother to get married? I mean, you know she was a catch- a wealthy heiress, only child, with a title. Minor aristocrat with her looks and pedigree should have been snapped up by any one of a dozen suitable male equivalents. Yet, somehow, she marries late at 33 and to a rather uncommon commoner, a boring Norwegian chemist. It wasn't a big wedding. You will have wondered about these things as you grew up."

Whatever Mycroft had been expecting, this wasn't it. Why is he bringing up family history? Of course, Mycroft had wondered about his mother. She had a debut season in 1957 that turned men's heads all over London and the Home Counties and filled the newspaper society columns with speculative talk of suitable matches. But, a year later she rebelled and went to the south of France to stay with her mother's relatives. "To study French" was the official line- Violet had gone to university in Nice, against her father's wishes. She spent four years away. He'd asked her about it once. "Oh, it was the era of rebellion. 1960 was the most exciting time to be alive- I didn't want to spend it locked up in dreadful stuffy aristocratic circles. God, how boring." Yet, all that had changed when her father died. She returned to England and became Viscountess, marrying a decade later.

All that flashed through his mind in a moment, but left him unable to extrapolate where the conversation was leading.

Ford was watching him, barely able to keep from grinning. "Figured it out, yet?"

Mycroft waited, but now he knew that he would not be able to suppress the tension that was in his shoulders.
"Oh, I haven't all day if you're being dense about this." The man's grin vanished. "My full name is Fitzroy S. Ford. The initial S stands for 'Sherrin'. Put it together. *Our* mother had a sense of humour when it came to names."

Fitzroy. A name French in origin, meaning son of a noble person. Used since Tudor times in England to refer to the bastard sons of kings. Fitzroy Sherrin Ford. *My mother had a child before she married.* This time, he knew that his shock could not be hidden. In those last two months of her life, Violet Holmes had spoken to Mycroft every day on the phone. A lot of it was family business, but personal things crept in, too. He was all too aware that her time was running out. The pancreatic cancer that was killing her robbed him of a future when he could have asked these things in a more casual way. He could not stop himself from blurting out, "She would have told me."

Ford laughed out loud. "Oh, no she wouldn't. I was the mistake. The one who nearly got her disinherited. She was banished to France in the hope that the news wouldn't get out. They had wanted an abortion. When they didn't get that, they wanted to take me away at birth, give me up for adoption to some unknown family in Provence who'd know nothing of my origins. She refused. She hung onto me all through her university years down in Nice. But, the Viscount died and tradition called, so she went running back to Parham. Left me behind- four years old and an abandoned bastard. I was palmed off to a couple whose discretion could be bought, who then emigrated to the west coast of America. Money came until she died, but nothing else. Not one call, not one card or letter. And I forgot her. I was only four at the time she abandoned me. At that age, memories fade pretty quickly. I got told a pack of lies all through my childhood about being an orphan. The money came through an anonymous trust fund. It wasn't until I was in my teens that I got a tad curious and started to dig."

He leaned forward in the chair, his hands on his knees, his expression intense. "There were enough rumours around about what she'd got up to in France that it scared away any proper aristocrats, so even when she returned from France, she was seen as damaged goods. In the end, she had to settle for that Norwegian fellow. Made a lot of practical sense- she got access to his money to keep the estate afloat; he got access to her social circles- which went back to what they were once she was safely married and behaving. A marriage made in heaven, don't you think?"

He was watching Mycroft's face, and there was a cruel look in his eyes. "By the time I put the pieces together, you were four years old. The heir apparent, the apple of his parents' eyes. Shame that illness of yours threw a scare into them, so they decided to have a second child. That didn't turn out so well, did it?" There was just the trace of a sneer.

Still reeling from the revelation, Mycroft knew that his control would not be up to shielding his reaction to all this. The snide reference to Sherlock annoyed him, but he decided diversion might buy him enough time to get himself back under control.

"Who was your father?" Common sense was kicking in; Mycroft needed to know if there were other parties sharing this knowledge.

That brought the smirk back. "Never fear, *your lordship*. He doesn't know about me. He was just one of many midnight flings of a socially naïve debutante, who decided she wanted to keep the baby rather than resort to a backstreet private abortion."

"But you know."

"Yes. One of the privileges of my current position is that I have access to information. A paternity test without the subject's consent? It can be arranged." Another smirk, followed by, "I'm not the only one in the family to have tried that one; your own father resorted to it soon after Sherlock was diagnosed as developmentally challenged; didn't like to think he was capable of such defective
genes. That tells you more about the state of your parents' relationship than mine did."

The casual air of superiority from the man grated like a rasp against Mycroft's hold on his emotions.

"What do you want?" This was flatly said, with more than an ounce of distain.

That provoked a laugh of derision. "Don't even think of going there. This isn't blackmail. I am not after money and I can't be bought off. But..." The man sat forward in his chair. "You need to know that I intend being second in line. You obviously have the better claim. But, the UK law about illegitimacy changed in 1975- that's four years before our little brother was born. I'm going to hazard a guess that it's unlikely you will produce an heir. So, just know that whatever legal arrangements you put into place, remember that I will stake a claim when you're dead. There will be...others in the family who will support my claim when they know the truth. In their eyes anything is better than having someone like Sherlock take the title and the assets."

Ford stood up again and deposited his sherry glass on the Master's side table, next to the decanter. "So, brother mine, thank you for the opportunity to share a little bit of personal history that won't be shared with anyone else in the Service. Our paths will cross again; I'll make certain of that. Keep an eye on you; put in a good word here and there. But, while you are rising up the food chain in the business, just remember that there is somewhere someone who knows your family's little secret."

It pained Mycroft no end that he now recognised where he had seen that smile before- it was his mother's smile.

Chapter End Notes

*the back-story to this is told in Periodic Tales, Caesium.

**I assume you speak Russian?
Extort

Chapter Summary

Extort

Verb - obtain (something) by force, threats, or other unfair means.

When Sherlock was sixteen, he lived as a homeless person on the streets, sparking a race to find him between Mycroft and Fitzroy Ford. The back story of who "won" and what the results were are covered in Periodic Tales, Holmium Part Three. This Exfile covers the result.

Chapter Notes

Please Note: this contains swear words, drug abuse and slightly dubious consensual underage sex. Don't like? Don't read.

Also, in my universe, Mycroft Holmes is the Viscount Sherringford, in line with Conan Doyle canon that Sherlock comes from "minor aristocracy".

He settled back into the black leather recliner and took a brief look down river. The third floor flat alongside Albert Bridge on the south side of the Thames had glorious floor to ceiling plate glass windows that gave him a superb view of Chelsea, across the river. Fitzroy S Ford allowed himself to feel aggrieved at the sight. On the north side was old money - wealth, privilege and an elite who ruled the country. Not with their aristocratic titles so much now, more the result of education, breeding and opportunity. All of which he had been denied by an accident of birth. The south side of the river where he lived represented new money - those with sharp elbows and even sharper wits that gave them an edge in the more meritocratic parts of society. By all accounts, he'd done well for himself. But it wasn't enough. He wanted it all. And there were just two people between him and everything he wanted.

Not for much longer.

Ford reached over and pressed the rewind button. He just had to hear it again, unable to hide the smirk that blossomed on his face. Jenkins had really outdone himself on the edited tape. Of course, the private investigator didn't know why the voices he had captured on the tape were important. Nor did he know the real name of the man who called himself Parnell, who had ordered him to do it. Quite sensibly, he had also made sure that Smith did not argue with the man he called Jones, who insisted that he use a particular flat in Richmond Terrace. He wasn't to know that the place had cameras installed and was wired for sound. He only knew that he had to put the security guard and the kid in there.
That suited Fitzroy Ford just fine. Nobody else was able to put all of the pieces together. He'd had a very pleasant yuletide season watching the video coverage as his younger half-brother succumbed to the temptations laid before him. The decline and fall of his half-sibling amused him. Merry Christmas and a happy New Year, little brother. I'm your secret santa.

The tape re-set itself to the beginning, and he pressed Play.

Jenkin's voice came on, a little self-conscious, with his Welsh accent. "This is a recording of edited highlights over a three week period. The voice of the person identified as "Lars" belongs to the younger son of Richard and Violet Holmes. The voice of the older man is Steven Mason. The events take place at Flat 5A, Number Ten, Richmond Crescent, London N1."

He had learned his script well; it didn't sound at all like he was reading. Fitzroy had enjoyed crafting the narrative that would be used to splice the juicy bits together. Each section was a blade thrust; each revelation exposed the boy's weaknesses. Ford kept imagining Mycroft Holmes' reaction at each point in the eleven minute tape recording.

The Welshman continued. "The young man was employed to audit the books of a West End criminal- to examine the records and identify irregularities."

"Lars, you've been at that computer all day. Time for some R&R." Ford smirked at the sound of Steven Mason's voice- definitely that of an older man. He knew that Mycroft would eventually track down the fact that the Mason worked for the Met and that they had recordings of his voice from interviews when he was interrogating drugs suspects. The fact that the voice prints matched would confirm his identity.

Just another nail in the coffin of your little brother.

Now it was Sherlock's turn. "In a minute. Just got to finish this bit. It's really amazing. Did you know that Smith is getting ripped off to the tune of over ten thousand pounds a week by the Silvertown crew? The fence in East London is just raking it in. He's hiding it through a VAT scam, but Smith doesn't realise that the figures are being manipulated before the money is banked, recorded and then taxed."

Ford's smirk broadened. That was certainly an admission of guilt- an accessory to tax fraud; criminal conspiracy at best, if not worse.

There was the sound of tablets in a bottle being shaken. "Come and get it." Mason sounded high already.

"What's been delivered?"

"Something new. So, let's experiment some more," was the older man's reply.

Ford pressed Fast Forward. He'd already listened to the sections of their antics over Christmas and New Year, which passed in a binge of drugs and sex, the highlights of which he had heard enough times to be able to quote by heart. One time, when Lars had been bouncing off the walls on meth, Steven had got him to smoke some weed, and the kid had slept for almost twelve hours, much to the annoyance of the older man. It was interspersed with violin music. He didn't realise he was recording his very own soundtrack. Ford had to admit, the kid could certainly play well.

The last section of the tape was his favourite, perhaps because he had actually been watching the video camera in real time when the events unfolded. As it turned out, it was incredibly lucky that he'd also posted Jenkins to watch the flat's front door. He was there to keep an eye on when Smith's delivery boy arrived. Jenkins was to intercept the package of ID and license, because Ford wanted to know what new identity Sherlock was being given. He had no intention of losing track of the
boy when he was about to be cut free and dumped on the streets.

When the tape counter reached 9 minutes and twelve seconds, he stopped it and pushed *Play* again.

"How are you feeling?"

"Why?"

"Because I need you to talk; I have to get a recording of us having sex."

There was a youthful baritone groan.

"Come on; you were okay with the photographer. This is the last part of it. And the advantage is that no one else has to be in the room."

"NO."

"Yes. Or you won't get any more of what you're in need of, if your current mood is anything to go by."

"I might go cold turkey, just to spite you."

The older man laughed. "As if that's going to happen."

"Hmmm." There was the sound of rustling sheets. Then a muffled, querulous question: "Why? What are you doing with these…artefacts?"

"I told you; the photos paid off a debt of mine. The sex tape will, too. The drugs have to come from somewhere, you know. I did exactly as you said- no faces, no ID; no one's going to know. He was a great photographer."

"Pervert."

"No, tasteful. The black and white prints are amazing, like something that could be in a gallery. You're just such high class totty, you'll never be a street rent boy. You could use those photos to propel you straight up into the championship league of male escort."

"No. Not going there."

"When you're high, you don't seem to mind, might as well make a fortune out of it. You could, you know. I know people who would pay a fortune for a session with you. Even this tape's going to make money." There was a mechanical sound of a button being pressed. "And we're recording."

"Since when did you become a pimp? Bugger off."

There was the sound of bedsprings. "I'd rather bugger on."

"Go away. I'm feeling too much at the moment. I'm getting bored with this. Up, down, all around- as nice as it all feels, it doesn't seem to serve much purpose."

"That's because until now, you've just been playing. Time to join the adults, my boy. Let me introduce you to IV Cocaine."

"What's so different about that? I already like cocaine; it's the only one that makes me feel normal."

A little chuckle. "This will make you feel *infinitely better* than normal."
"Hmmm? Prove it" was the breathy reply.

"Step one- prepare the liquid suspension." The microphone picked up random sounds, a clink of a spoon in a glass, other odd noises. "Cocaine dissolves easily in water. No cooking involved; not like heroin."

"Thank God. Heroin's boring. It put me to sleep." Lars petulance was evident.

"Only you, my boy. Most of the world seems to like it. But, hey, different strokes for different folks. Open the packet."

There was a crinkle of plastic being torn, suggestive of a new syringe being removed from its wrapping. "Most of the time, you will need to filter it through cotton wool to remove whatever insoluble stuff the dealer might have used to cut it. But, this is medicinal grade, hot stuff, so I'm using a seven percent solution. Start with a small dosage, that way you can build on it. You do it; you'll want to do this yourself in the future."

A pause, then Mason again. "OK- stop there; that's enough."

There was the sound of rubber snapping. Ford could picture the tubing around Lars' upper left arm being tightened.

"Now find a vein." A chuckle. "With skin like yours, that is not hard, my boy."

"What makes it different from snorting it?"

"Ever the scientist, eh? Well, for starters, this goes straight into your brain. It's the biggest rush known to mankind. For me, no other drug compares."

"Then why don't you do it more often? You haven't since we got here."

"How would you know?"

"No marks. You've been told not to, haven't you? Why?"

"Sometimes, you see too much. Let's just say I've been saving this until you were ready to join me."

Sherlock's voice had a slight tinge of anxiety. "I'm not overly keen on needles; is this going to hurt?"

"Just a tiny prick of pain before pleasure."

There was a snigger. "Not like yours then."

"Well, I'm not one to brag."

There was a moment of silence.

There was a little grunt. "I think I'm in."

"To be sure you're in the right place, pull the plunger back a tiny bit to get a flash of blood. If you don't get the flash, for God's sake, don't push the plunger, or you'll have a pop. That's a waste of good stuff and it can hurt like hell if it gets infected, and it will take ages for your muscle to absorb it."

"Right, there's the blood. Now what, do I push the plunger fast or slow?"
"That depends on the rush you want. Take it steady the first time."

"Okay, here goes."

This was his favourite part of the tape. Ford counted it down. *Five-four-three-two-one.*

"OH!" It was both a gasp and a shout, followed by a series of rapid pants. The reaction of the boy was more ecstatic than any previous orgasm caught on the recording devices. The sound of bedsprings was followed by Sherlock's voice, as he moved away from the bed. "This is … just… amazing. I…" he ran out of words. Then another breathy "OH!" followed.

Mason was laughing. "Thought you'd like it. Come back here…now do me; come on, practice makes perfect." There were more stray sounds, then a deep "Hmmm. Oh, baby, do it to me." A groan of pleasure.

Then the bedsprings creaked again, presumably as Mason got up. "If you thought it felt good after a nose full, just hang onto your hat." There was the sound of a zip being pulled.

Ford drew a deep breath of pleasure. He wasn't sure why, but he'd found the next two and half minutes of the tape deeply arousing. Listening to the two of them fucking wouldn't normally have had any effect. He wasn't gay. But, perhaps because he knew how this was going to end, it just kicked his own sex drive into action.

Amidst the rhythmic sounds of the chair being smacked back against the kitchen counter with each thrust, there was suddenly a gasp. A half strangled cry of pain from Mason, and then the clatter of the chair going over. Ford had the advantage of the video recording to know what had actually happened, as the older man collapsed, pulling free from Sherlock and staggering one step backwards before falling heavily, dragging the chair down with him.

*Serendipity.* Mason suffering a mild heart attack was just *perfect.*

There was a groan. "Oh, God that hurt. What the fuck?" Mason's speech slurred. "I've got to lie down." Then a brief pause, followed by, "What'r you doin?"

The live recording stopped and Jenkins' voice returned. "Steven Mason was found dead in the flat on 8 January; cause of death was cardiac arrest caused by an overdose of cocaine. The post mortem and ongoing forensic investigation have revealed a set of unknown fingerprints on the syringe from which he received the final, fatal injection. Mason's own fingerprints were not on the syringe. The police are treating this as a murder inquiry." The tape ended and he pushed rewind.

Of course, that's not what actually happened. Ford had the pleasure of knowing the truth, because he'd been watching the video recording. In his mind's eye, he saw the boy kneel in panic beside the gasping figure on the floor, then help him onto the sofa, before checking his pulse.

"You need help. Where's your phone?"

The security guard was panting. "No- the damn battery's dead; charger's busted. Smith's… supposed to be ...delivering...new one tonight."

"Give me the key; I'll go, and phone a 999 when I've found a phone. I'll leave the door open."

The older man squeezed out between ragged breaths, "Why?"

"To let the ambulance crew in, you idiot; you've just suffered a heart attack. I'll get help."
"No, this will pass; it's just a spasm. You can't go out; give me back that key."

"You need help. But when it comes, I can't be here. So, this is goodbye."

Sherlock pulled on his clothes, then knocked over the side table, ripped the carpet up, and yanked a paper from its hiding place. Then he grabbed a few things from the desk, unlocked the door and left it ajar when he ran down the stairs, carrying his coat.

Ford had been on the phone even before the boy went out the back door of the flat. "Get in there fast, Jenkins; you've got no more than fifteen minutes before the ambulance crew get there. Do exactly as I tell you." His instructions were clear. "Put on gloves, pick up the syringe, fill it to the brim and inject it into Mason. If he's still conscious and offers any resistance, then knock him out first. Remove the cameras and the bugs- and make sure you get the tape recorder by the bed. Then shut the door behind you."

Jenkins hesitated. "You're asking me to commit a crime here- forcible injection of a banned substance." He didn't know that Mason was ill.

"Don't worry. The gloves will ensure that the boy will get the blame, not you." Ford knew that in his weakened state, Mason would not survive the second injection, particularly if the ambulance crew had to wait for someone to break the locked door open.

This is how it's done, Mycroft. First lesson of tradecraft -in the middle of an operation, be ready to take advantage of events when they turn in your favour.

Ford knew that whatever Mycroft's reaction was to the seduction and corruption of his little brother, incriminating Sherlock as a murderer would drive home the point. It had been so easy to frame the boy.

Once the tape finished rewinding, the recorder clicked off. Fitzroy gave a contented sigh. No matter how many times he heard it, the pleasure was doubled by imagining Mycroft listening to it for the first time.

Ford stretched languorously, enjoying the feeling of well-being. He planned on keeping one of the six copies sitting on the desk for his own pleasure. It would be good to replay it from time to time. Ford might even use it to remind his half-brother of the facts of life every so often, if Mycroft proved to be reluctant to co-operate. The others would be safely spread around the world, partly as insurance, a sort of dead man's switch, should Mycroft get any ideas that killing Ford would be a solution.

Just one more little detail to take care of.

He sat down at the glass and chrome desk and pulled on latex gloves before picking up the sheet of paper on which Jenkins had written his dictated words. It was crucial to hide his own identity, should Mycroft try to suggest that Ford was behind it; so the other man's writing delivered the threat by proxy.

Jenkins' handwriting was not brilliant, but what could you expect from a Cardiff comprehensive education? Even the pen and paper used were ordinary, stuff you could find at any WH Smith, but the words were far from ordinary.

Dear Mister Holmes,

Ford smirked at that. He enjoyed the idea of stripping his half-brother of the hereditary title. It would annoy him.
Enclosed you will find "Hearing"- the fifth sense. Have a good listen. Know that a copy of this and the four photographs have been strategically dotted around the world, each with the same instructions. On the occasion of my death, if not before on my order, these will be sent to the appropriate authorities in Britain (and in the USA, of course) who will have a view about the compromised security they imply for you. They will also be simultaneously published in newspapers of several different countries, lest you attempt to concoct some elaborate explanation that actually managed to satisfy your masters in Whitehall. A free press is really so useful.

He smiled at the thought. After all, his friend Magnussen had media outlets across the whole world, and would not hesitate to use them on Ford's behalf, even if the British press tried to block it. He decided to emphasise the word "so", picking up the pen that Jenkins had used and drawing a thick bold line under it, before resuming his reading.

Perhaps more important, the materials will also be sent to certain parties in Norway, who will not be amused at the idea that the next in line heir of their relative, Rikard Sigur, is capable of the acts herein described.

This is both my insurance policy and my bargaining chip. Your reluctance to support a particular cause has been noted. Upon receipt of this letter, such behaviour will now stop. The Five Senses are my way of ensuring that you are (and even more important, are seen to be) my willing partner in the future.

He left the letter unsigned. There was no need. Mycroft would know exactly who it had come from, but without a scrap of proof. He would try, and Ford would watch his efforts with great delight, seeing the knife twisting deeper with every passing month and year.

That was what made this so delicious. Ford could extort Mycroft's co-operation at will, knowing he was secure and protected for the foreseeable future. The half-brother who stood between him and his inheritance was now a junkie on the streets of London and quite likely to die of an overdose. If he took too long at it, Ford would find someone willing to administer the fatal dose. If by some miracle, the idiot survived, it didn't matter. To protect Sherlock's exposure as a murderer, Mycroft would do as he was told. And at every step along the way, he would be digging himself even deeper into the hole in which Ford intended to bury him. When the time was ripe, Ford would reveal the fact that Mycroft had been blackmailed for years by an unknown foreign agent, pushed into betraying his country's secrets to protect his junkie brother. In a single blow, his career would be over, his reputation in tatters. Then a suicide would be arranged, allowing Ford to claim what had always been his by right.

*Lord Fitzroy, the Viscount of Sherrinford.* The title had such a delightful ring to it.

He folded the letter and slipped it into the envelope with the tape recording.
Chapter Summary

Extemporaneous /ɪkˈstɛmpəri/  
Adj - spoken or done without preparation; spontaneous, unscripted

Chapter Notes

what happened next on the doorstep of 221b

"Anyway, time to go and be Sherlock Holmes again."

John saw Sherlock's momentary hesitation as he spotted the deerstalker hanging in the peg by the door, and with a smirk pulled it on over the unruly dark curls.

With that, Sherlock opened the front door of 221b and stepped out to face the crowd of journalists and camera men. Flash bulbs went off and the shouting started, each journalist jostling another in their eagerness to get the first question of what was an impromptu doorstep press conference.

John came out and stood beside and slightly behind his friend. Calmly, but when he wasn't looking at Sherlock, his eyes were searching the crowd, his hands behind his back in an echo of parade rest. He was watchful, aware of the threat that the press could be. Many of them were the same people who had covered the 'fake detective' story, delighting in the man's fall, or at least maximising the sensational aspects in order to sell newspapers. Then when the inquiry exonerated him posthumously, those same journalists had described his suicide, but never once did they criticise their own role in his demise. And now, he expected they would lionise the reputation of the same man whom they had once tried to destroy. John would never, ever trust the press again.

Sherlock was trying to get himself heard over the din of their shouted questions. "I will answer your questions as best I can. Please do me the courtesy of telling me who you are and what media you represent." He gestured, "You first" to one whose microphone wore BBC livery.

"I'm Kathy Shelton, BBC News. Welcome back to London, Mister Holmes. I'm sure I can ask the question that is on everyone's mind- how did you fake your own suicide?" Over the woman's shoulder, the camera man took up position to capture the response on film.

"How doesn't matter; I have been told that the more important question is why. I did it so I could go undercover to destroy the criminal network set up by James Moriarty, before it could wreak any more damage. That work was done in secret and cannot be discussed except to say that it was successful. Next question." He pointed at another journalist.

"Tom Whitehead of the Express- why can't you tell us? Were you working with British
"No, I was not working for any country's intelligence service, and certainly not for the British Government. It was a private investigation over which I had sole responsibility. Do I really need to explain the meaning of the words "secret" or "private" to your newspaper readers?" This provoked a ripple of laughter from the other journalists.

A CNN reporter elbowed his way past the BBC camera man, and asked brusquely, "Did you kill Moriarty?"

"No." Sherlock skewered the man with an icy stare. "He killed himself, but I wasn't in the country when the investigation proved that."

The CNN man jumped in again with another question. "At the public inquiry a police officer said you jumped to save the lives of three people who would be killed if you didn't go off the roof. Was that true?"

Sherlock paused for a second, and then answered, "Yes, in part. The other reason was so that I could go undercover, as I just said."

"Was John Watson one of those people?" This was shouted by a young woman in a tight skirt and vee necked blouse. John wondered if she was from a tabloid or maybe one of those horrid gossip magazines.

"Yes." Sherlock looked sideways at John, who gave him a tiny smile of reassurance. "Yeah, big git. I knew - not because you'd ever say anything like that, but if Lestrade hadn't, I might have found it harder to forgive you."

A shout from another reporter cut through his thoughts. "Who were the other two?"

Sherlock snapped his head around to glare at the young man who asked the question. "None of your business. Next question."

"But…"

"Next question." Sherlock pointedly turned away from the man and pointed at another.

"I'm not Kitty O'Reilly; she doesn't work for the Sun anymore. Charlie Barber's the name. Were any of the so called facts of her story about you right?" There were a few snide chuckles at that backhanded attempt to distance himself from his disgraced predecessor.

A slight smile appeared on the face of the consulting detective. "She spelled my name correctly." This was greeted with more laughter. "Some of the facts about my life were correct; some were not. I have no intention of telling you which. Do your research." He pointed to another camera team.

"Sara Whately of ITN, you may remember me, Doctor Watson. Nice to see you again. Will you be moving back to Baker Street?" The journalist asking the question was a blonde with a short spiky haircut and an attitude to match.

All eyes were on John, who shifted uncomfortably to find himself the focus of attention. "No, … I'm living with my fiancé now."

She carried on, "I have to compliment you on your great acting skills. You never let on about the fake suicide. Everyone thought your grief was genuine; is that why you didn't testify at the inquiry?"
John remembered her vaguely from the first days afterwards; she'd caught him on the doorstep of the flat, and he'd just kept repeating "no comment." The memory of it all made him cross, so he shook his head firmly. "I had nothing to say to the inquiry that wasn't going to be said better by others. And I didn't know that Sherlock was alive until ten days ago."

For just a moment, that answer seemed to surprise the journalists, and there was an abrupt pause in the shouted questions. Then the pack picked up the scent again, and the baying resumed. One voice was louder than the rest, so Sherlock gestured to the bloke.

"Mark Townsend of the Guardian. Do you have a view on why it took the police and the justice system so long to clear your reputation?"

"I wasn't aware of the inquiry, because I was out of the country at the time."

"What brought you back to London?"

"The British Government. I was asked to help uncover an underground terrorist plot, which I did. Next question."

John was impressed. Sherlock was back in charge again and trying to ensure that each of the reporters got their chance, but answering as succinctly as possible. For a man who had once been slapped with a contempt of court judgment for not knowing when to shut up in the witness box of the Old Bailey during Moriarty's trial, Sherlock was now showing a remarkable degree of self-control. Despite the tone of some of the question, he was answering truthfully in reasonable soundbites, but giving nothing away that could be used to create even more sensational headlines.

Sherlock turned to the next reporter.

"David Barrett of the Telegraph. Can you tell us more about that? We understand that Lord Moran has been arrested, accused of a modern day Gunpowder Plot to blow up Parliament."

"As you can appreciate, I am unable to say anything that might prejudice the case of a man who is still presumed innocent until proven guilty." The irony of that statement was not lost on some of the journalists, who had the decency to look a bit shamefaced.

"Last question."

"But, you did play a key role in stopping the plot- at least according to the anti-terrorism squad. That unidentified source called you 'the hero who saved London'."

"I'm not a hero. I just solve crimes- or in this case, play a small part in helping other people stop a crime from happening."

"So, now that you are back, will it be business as usual with the Metropolitan Police?"

"You will have to ask them that question, as it is not up to me." He took a breath, then "Thank you. I've answered your questions, so leave me in peace. I will give no further interviews, answer no further questions, grant no exclusives, so don't waste your time or, more important, mine by trying to contact me again. Good afternoon." With that, Sherlock turned back to the door, and went in, with John right behind him. He slipped the coat and hat off, hanging them on the hooks by the door, before turning back to look at John. "Was that alright?" a little uncertainty had crept into his eyes.

John smiled, nodding. "Yeah, alright is one word for it. No, actually, that was… amazing. Did you get media training or something when you were away?"
That earned him a tiny smirk. "No. But I did have a lot of spare time on my hands to think about what I might say, if I ever managed to get back. Their questions were easy enough to deduce. It might have looked extemporary, but I can assure you, there's been plenty of thought gone into each answer."

John gave him a steady look. "Did you rehearse the questions they'd throw at me?"

"No. But, then I didn't imagine you'd be on the doorstep with me." He started to take the first step up the stairs.

"Sherlock, wait."

The taller man turned and looked down at John.

"You asked me once why I cared about what the press said about you."

Sherlock nodded. "I remember."

"Well, in part it's because I didn't want them to do... what they did."

That brought a somber look from Sherlock. "John, I am sorry. I should have realised they would ask you awkward questions. I should have told you to stay inside."

John just smiled and shook his head. "No... that's not what I'm saying. You still don't get it."

"Get what?"

"I care, not just about myself; I care about you, because we're in this together."

Sherlock sighed and, looking down at the step, then he ruffled his hair in irritation. "Do you think they will leave us alone?"

"Yeah, but only until you solve the next huge crime. Then they'll be back again. So, I guess we will just have to get used to it."

"What a nuisance."

The doctor watched him go up the stairs in his usual two steps at a time. Following in his wake, the thought suddenly came into his mind, Couldn't agree more, Sherlock, but It's a price I am willing to pay, for having you back.
**Chapter Summary**

ex officio

[Latin, From office.] By virtue of the characteristics inherent in the holding of a particular office, without the need of specific authorisation or appointment.

**Chapter Notes**

If you are like me, and wondered how it was that Mycroft Holmes could think of the Queen as a "very old friend" to whom he had to make a "long and arduous apology" for Sherlock's failure to retrieve the blackmail photos of a princess, then the story above is an explanation of how he began the journey to becoming "The British Government." It also explains why Mycroft would speak to the Equerry on first name basis when he met John and Sherlock at the Palace. The story of Sherlock and Mycroft's attendance at a Buckingham Palace Garden Party is mentioned in my story Side-lined, Chapter 22.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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He picked out the envelope from the post lying on the hall table. The quality of the stationery caught his eye first, then the formal address:

*Lord Mycroft Holmes, Viscount of Sherrinford, 2 South Eaton Place, Belgravia, London SW1W 9JA*

Very, very few people ever used his formal title when they wrote to him. The address had been written by hand, exquisitely penned by someone who was a professional, he deduced. He left the other mail alone and took the single envelope into the study. There, under the brighter light of the desk lamp he would be able to scrutinise it more carefully. Mycroft flipped the envelope over and saw to his surprise an embossed design that he instantly recognised.

Oh. And in the same moment, he realised that while this was an official correspondence, it was neither an invitation to yet another state function that he would politely decline, nor was it some bureaucratic missive. The shape of the envelope was all wrong for either type of communication.

He sat down at the desk and used the ivory handled letter opener to make a surgical incision across the top of the envelope. The antique brass dagger had been his grandmother’s – the French one in this case, and he believed it had come from ivory taken in the Congo during Victorian times.

Drawing out a single sheet of the finest English stationery, he opened it to find a different handwriting inside. The penmanship was barely adequate, rather loose and scrawled, not the anonymously perfect style of the secretary who had addressed the envelope. Even before he read a
single line, he had spotted the signature, and drew a breath.

Elizabeth R

Without the slightest of flourishes on the R, this wasn't the head of state signing some act of Parliament or Royal Charter, but rather a personal signature. The capital E looked more like a Greek sigma, the zed had a strange tail that curved to the left, making it look more like a y than anything else- the dot of the i hovered somewhere vaguely in the middle- but not over the letter itself. When she lifted the pen to cross her t, it caught the h as well. This was not the first time he had seen it; he recognised the signature from a letter to his grandfather in the 1950s, when the old Viscount was still alive. His mother had shown it to him when he was young.

In an instant, Mycroft's eye passed over the red embossed Royal seal at the top, and the simple Buckingham Palace address of the headed paper. In the space of a second, he had read the simple message.

*I would be pleased if you would attend a private meeting with me at eleven fifteen on the morning of the seventeenth of June, at Buckingham Palace.*

Startled, he wondered what could possibly be on the agenda for such a meeting. At least seven reasons came into his head, and he began to consider each one- very carefully. First and foremost was whether this somehow heralded a new attack- perhaps on his title to the peerage- from a man who had grown tired of waiting to claim what he saw as his birthright*

oOo

Three days later, Mycroft arrived at the Privy Purse door of Buckingham Palace. This was the business end of the building, rather than the grand state rooms that were on show to the public. He was ushered through the offices of the Royal Household and then into the more formal, red carpeted areas of the building before being taken into the anteroom of the Queen's Audience Room on the first floor of Buckingham Palace. Her selection of venue for their meeting was noted; and it made him even slightly more nervous, if that was possible.

He was greeted in the anteroom by Sir Guy Acland, a retired Army Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Artillery. Mycroft knew of him as the Queen's Equerry and Deputy Master of the Royal Household, but they had not met before. The fifty year old whose sandy coloured hair was now greying gave him the once over, and he wondered what lay behind the slightest hint of bemusement in the man's watery blue eyes that now peered at him from his metal rimmed glasses.

At twenty four, Mycroft Holmes was a self-possessed and confident young man, with an air of gravitas tinged ever so slightly with an arrogance that only extremely bright people can carry off without appearing to be foolish. He'd calmly met with ambassadors and ministers of foreign states, dealt with senior executives of corporations, held his own in the world of intelligence where grey hairs were earned through long experience or the sharp end of field work. He'd rarely felt nervous in their presence. He could hold his own in such company.

But this was different. The Queen commanded respect of an entirely different order, and he'd not been able to deduce why she would summon him into her presence in the way that she had done, despite some very hard thinking over the past three days. Mycroft had decided that he was rather prone these days to see the threat of Fitzroy Ford behind everything dire, but in this case, it felt rather unlikely. If it had been an issue of contesting entitlement to the viscountcy, then an official communication would have been more likely. Yet, the note had been clearly personal. For one of the first times in his life, Mycroft felt totally unable to predict what was going to happen or how to prepare.
A quiet knock on the door, and Sir Guy led him in. Despite its grand name, the Audience Room was a rather pleasant living space. Mint green walls, adorned with tasteful white plaster decorations of the 18th century were softened by light gold brocade sofas and chairs. It was not intimidating, unless you realised as Mycroft did that this was where heads of state met the Queen, and the Prime Minister sat down with her in his regular visits—weekly, if they were both in London.

Sir Guy introduced him simply, "Lord Holmes, Your Majesty." He stood back and let Mycroft take several more strides into the room.

The Queen was standing, and he was struck yet again at how tiny she was. One point six meters, or just under five foot four in the imperial measures that she would be more comfortable with; at seventy, she was of the generation for whom metric calculations would be tiresome. He gave the briefest of smiles, and did the regulation bow that his mother had taught him when he was twelve. "You'll need to do this properly at state occasions, so best learn it now," the Viscountess had told him.

"We meet again, Lord Holmes." The Queen gave him a lovely smile in return.

"I am honoured, Your Majesty." He took her offered hand in the gentlest and briefest of grips. He had often thought of the pain of greeting so many people who would abuse her hand with too firm a shake. No wonder she preferred carrying a bouquet of flowers when on official duties; it spared her the embarrassment of refusing to let her hand to be squashed by some over-enthusiastic commoner. His mother had taught him that, too.

The Queen glanced over his shoulder at the Equerry. "Thank you, Sir Guy. I can manage on my own now, thank you." Acland gave Mycroft another curious glance, and then left, shutting the door quietly behind him.

She sat in one of the brocade arm chairs, and gestured "Please do sit down. I am afraid that I am feeling my age a bit more these days. Any excuse to rest my ankles is welcomed."

Mycroft obeyed, taking his seat. As the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece chimed once to announce quarter past eleven, he eyed the tray of fine china on the coffee table between the sofa and the chair.

"May I pour you a cup of coffee, Ma'am?"

She smiled. "Yes, please. That means we need not be interrupted by a footman. Black, with one sugar."

He obliged, concentrating on the act, willing his hand to pour steadily and not to shake as he then dropped the lump of brown sugar from the silver tongs and gave it a brisk stir, without a sound of silver spoon against the side of the cup. His mother had taught him that, too.

When he handed the cup in its saucer to her, Mycroft saw the smile in her eyes take hold on her mouth. She was amused, but he could not determine why.

"Ma'am?"

"I was just remembering the twelve year old Mycroft Holmes I met half your life time ago. Your manners were impeccable then, although your little brother's left something to be desired."

He blushed, but recovered quickly. "I had hoped that you might not remember his…escapade."

She laughed. "I've endured more garden parties here than I care to remember, and most of them
pass rather uneventfully. But when that little scamp decided to tie two of my corgies together with a lead and then a footman tripped over them, well, that does rather stand out in one's memory."

He sighed. "I suppose a long memory is an occupational hazard of being one of the longest reigning monarchs in history, Ma'am."

"It is one of my life's pleasures – seeing young people grow up well."

He thought of all the amazing people she would have had the pleasure of meeting in her extraordinary lifetime- Churchill, Kennedy, Mandela. Mycroft hoped to hell that she wouldn't ask about Sherlock; he would find it hard to lie, but would not want to upset her with the truth. He could hardly tell her that the 'little scamp' was now in rehab, a recovering drug addict who'd just spent six months living rough on the streets of London.

She continued, "Of course, there is also what I am told by my grandchildren I should call a downside to that. I've also been saddened by the death of so many of the people that I have looked up to in my life. Your grandfather was one of those. The Viscount was so very kind to my mother and the King during the war. She asked me to say to you how sad she was to hear of your mother's death seven years ago. She said Violet was such a lively girl, and your grandfather truly doted on her."

He was startled at the fact that at ninety five, the Queen Mother would have even remembered the Sherrinfords. Her longevity bode well for the lifespan of her daughter, a fact for which he was very grateful.

He looked up to see the Queen's gentle smile. "And now, no doubt, you are beginning to wonder why I asked you here today."

Not trusting his voice, he nodded.

"Given your current position, I assume you are aware of the regular briefings that I receive from the Foreign Office about events in the Commonwealth and of course my weekly meetings with the Prime Minister."

"Of course, Ma'am." He watched as she took several more sips from her coffee, and used the moment to follow suit. He was suddenly aware of a slight tension in her posture that worried him. Had something he'd been involved with at the new Security Liaison Service attracted attention of the MOD or the Prime Minister? If so, why would the Queen be aware of it? Nothing of his work would have appeared in any briefing. He controlled his demeanour so she would not be able to see anything other than his earnest attention.

But, if anything, her smile increased, as if willing him to be at ease. "Lord Holmes, I am about to confide in you something that I hope you will keep most confidential." There was the slightest touch of mischievousness in her tone.

He put his cup back in the saucer and sat up, carefully concealing the surprise that he was feeling.

"Lately, those briefings have become…rather infuriating. On the one hand, I think the officials and politicians believe that at the advanced age of seventy, somehow my aptitude and appetite for information has declined. The content of what I am being sent…well, quite frankly, I learn more from reading the newspapers or watching the BBC than I do from what I am being given. But, on the other hand, they send pages and pages of too much detail- as if drowning me in data is another way to keep me from asking difficult questions. What material they send provides neither strategic insight nor the details that really matter. It has become the worst of all possibilities- too anodyne to
be of any use, yet cluttered with useless data."

He suddenly put the pieces together. "I understand, Ma'am. Would you like me to use what in my business is called a back channel to suggest that...em...a superior service could be delivered?" It would be harmless coming from him. He was in no way connected to the Royal Family and a word from him would not cause any... political issues to arise between officials, the Government and the Queen, who would be far too polite to make her criticisms known. The circumspection of the Queen and her careful relationships with the political system formed the bedrock on which the constitutional monarchy rested. His estimation of her rose again- it was an extremely astute manoeuvre on her part. He was well enough connected to be able to deliver the message without ruffling too many feathers.

The Queen smiled again. "Actually, I was going to suggest something slightly more..." She paused. "...something more personal."

Now he was truly perplexed, but he kept his face neutral. "How can I be of assistance, Ma'am?"

She returned her empty cup to the mahogany coffee table, and then clasped her hands in her lap. Looking up at him with her chin slightly lifted, she announced, "I should like to receive a regular international affairs briefing from you. I would like you to provide the strategic oversight and the relevant facts that others are leaving out."

Stunned, he managed to say, "Ma'am, I am sure that there are others much more suited to such a role than me."

"I am the better judge of that than you are, young man." There was a hint of the regal matriarch in that comment, and he wondered, not for the first time, what it would have been like to have been a child to such a parent, whose sense of duty to the country had been a solid presence for a generation. Too many people assumed that her world was filled with public engagements, opening hospital wings, hosting state banquets and performing the ceremonial duties of a monarch, fulfilling her role as a national treasure and resident tourist attraction. His mother had told him that the Queen was an enigma. "Most people just see the royal persona, committed to public duty that keeps her in the public eye well after most people would have retired. But, Elizabeth hides a razor sharp intellect behind a façade of maternal charm; people dismiss her private life as full of children and horses. Your grandfather knew better- and I trusted his opinion. She's no lightweight."

The Queen continued in her I-know-best tone, "On that same occasion when we first met, I remember that you kept a very bored daughter of mine entertained, telling her the most informative deductions about the various guests that July afternoon. Anne took quite a shine to you, said you were the most perceptive person she'd ever met at a garden party."

"She was very kind to me, Ma'am. But I was just a child then and it was a long time ago."

Now the Queen smiled. "Not by my calculations. In just over a decade, you have gone on to turn quite few heads in the back corridors of international politics. Your recent promotion and the new job mean you have assumed a level of responsibility – and have access to information- that might surprise some, but not me."

He lifted an eyebrow. She was very well informed.

"What topics would you want to be covered, Ma'am? I am not an expert in many areas."

She looked at her now empty cup on the side table, and he instantly got the message. He stood and refilled it, giving her time to reconsider. The whole idea was preposterous- she could call on any
one of the most experienced heads in the foreign service to support her; they were, after all, her civil servants.

As she took the offered cup, Elizabeth gave him a steely look. "Lord Holmes, I want you to save me from the so-called experts. I trust your intelligence to know the difference between what I need to know, what I should like to know, and what I can safely ignore. What is sadly lacking these days is a discriminating mind. I think you have one. Perhaps we should just try this out a few times, to see if my instincts and yours align."

The Queen took a sip of her coffee, and then continued, "From what I've heard about you, you should be able to predict what I am being told officially; so do your best to…" She paused, as if searching for the correct phrase. "…fill in the gaps, with what is really at stake. Make it brief, please; I have to read far too many things these days. Government and Commonwealth briefing papers, together with the Royal Household affairs; it's just an extraordinary amount of material. I've had to increase my private secretarial staff just to cope with the volume, and too many of the new staff worry about not telling me everything-so much so that I risk drowning in paperwork. In short, Lord Holmes, I would be grateful if you could use that acumen and intelligence of yours to provide me with the big picture- and just enough detail that they keep from me or try to hide in a pile of useless information."

She paused, as if realising something. "It means you will need to know the Court calendar and my engagements- I will rely on you to choose material relevant to the next week's work. If I have particular questions, I shall write to you, as I did when I asked for this meeting. Could you manage a written report once a week? It should be addressed to my Equerry to ensure privacy. I will ask Sir Guy to ensure it reaches me wherever I might be. Face-to-face meetings will be more difficult, as my schedule is so full these days. And it might attract unwanted attention."

Mycroft recognised a decision when it had been made for him. "Written correspondence would be an honour, Your Majesty."

She noted his use of the full title, and gave a wry smile. "Before you agree, I should make it clear that this cannot be official; there can be no formal recognition or remuneration- that would attract the attention of too many people who will argue with my choice. We must be discrete; I have no wish to embarrass either you or the official channels of communication. It means that these briefs are not to be shared with anyone- not even your superiors at the Security Liaison Service. I must stipulate, in fact, that they remain totally unaware of your activity on my behalf. Only my Equerry will know of our clandestine communication."

"You can count on my discretion, Ma'am."

Now the smile and the mischievous twinkle re-appeared. "I do hope your handwriting is better than mine. We shall have to avoid the complications of electronic copies and computers. I must insist on old-fashioned hand-written versions, which are not to be photocopied. After I read them, they will be destroyed. and I require the same of you when I send you something."

He nodded. "Sensible precaution, Ma'am."

"Good. I look forward to receiving your first effort at the end of this week." She put her cup down and sat forward. "Lord Holmes, may I call you Mycroft? It seems appropriate, if we are to be pen pals."

He finally smiled broadly. "Of course, Ma'am."

As she got up, he stood and the clock struck a second chime. The door to the Audience Room re-
opened, and Sir Guy entered. "Your next appointment is here, Your Majesty, the Ambassador of Sri Lanka."

"Goodbye, Mycroft."

He bowed his head again, and said quietly, "Goodbye, Ma'am. A most interesting conversation. Thank you."

As he walked back towards the Privy Purse entrance, below the corridor's windows, Mycroft could hear the first sounds of the changing of the guard. In exactly fifteen minutes, the Queen had changed his life forever.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes:

* This is the story of the third (half) brother, told in my stories in Periodic Tales (Plutonium and Holmium) and also in Ex Files Extort. It is also based on accurate and detailed research into Royal Protocol, an issue with which I (surprisingly) had to become somewhat familiar about in real life. I am indebted for insight into this from a former member of the Royal Household, who must remain nameless.
Extradite

Chapter Summary

Extradite

Verb. Hand over (a person accused of or convicted of a crime) to the jurisdiction of the state in which the crime was committed. Or, how Mycroft managed to get Sherlock out of Serbia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"U ovdje"*. Mycroft’s grasp of Serbian should have been sufficient to attract the guard’s attention. The tone of command was more important than fluency, in any case.

When there was no reaction, he walked behind the unaware guard and shouted in his ear, "Vojnik!"

"Jest, ser!" The young man ripped the earphones out and blushed bright pink. The pop music that hissed out of the dangling white earphone annoyed Mycroft. What were the soldiers of today coming to, when they had to drown out the sound of a brutal interrogation with the latest global pop song? He let his scorn show, as he gestured into the interrogation room.

"Javnost ga."

The young man went into the room and put his rifle down, pulling an old fashioned skeleton key from his pocket and unlocking the first of the iron manacles that held the prisoner suspended. The bloodied man fell to the floor, his legs too weak to hold him upright. When the guard unlocked the second manacle, the prisoner curled into a ball, waiting for what must have been the traditional booted kick in the ribs that signalled the end of another interrogation session.

"Uzeti ga; JA sam uzimajući ga sa mnom."

That drew a puzzled frown on the face of the young guard. "Gde? Zašto?"

Mycroft gave him a look of stern amazement. For a private to question the authority of a senior officer was…outrageous. Fortunately, Mycroft was well used to intimidating juniors with just a look, and the young soldier paled visibly. Then, he shouldered his rifle, bent down and hauled the prisoner to his feet, dragging the half conscious figure out of the cold cell.

Mycroft stalked past them, leading the way up the stairs. The guard struggled to get the prisoner up the stairs; in the end, he was forced to half carry him. At the top of the second flight of stairs, the prisoner lost consciousness, and the guard was forced to put the bloody man over his shoulder and stagger on.

Mycroft swept into the harsh florescent lit guardroom that was between him and the exit.
A middle ranking officer was the only one on duty and he sprang to his feet. "Ser, vi ste uzimajući zatvorenika?"

Mycroft turned to him and marched up closer, until his physical presence intruded on the officer's. "Ima. Šarić je trgovinu ga za zaštitu. JA sam da ga u Beogradu."

That surprised the officer. "Gde?"

"On je diler droge koju je poslao Rumuna. To je vlade da ga izruči na zapad-u zamenu za veću pomoć- plaća vaša zarada."

The officer stepped aside.

"Mu pomoći da se sljam u vašem automobilu."

And that was that. The driver waiting outside for Mycroft popped open the boot, and the unconscious body was unceremoniously dumped in and closed. Then Mycroft slipped into the backseat, and the car with government plates drove away from the castle grounds.

The driver left the mountain fortress and headed back to the town of Ianjica. From there the mountain roads to Uzice and the little Ponikve airport would afford more privacy. About forty minutes after leaving the castle, the driver took a small lane off the main highway, went up the mountain track for another five minutes and then stopped. It was dark in the forest. Both he and Mycroft got out of the car. In the frosty night air, their breath clouding, they opened the boot.

"Christ, Mycroft, I'm bloody freezing to death, you bastard." This was delivered in little more than a whisper, but it was enough.

"Don't bring Mummy into this, Sherlock." He handed his shivering brother a woollen blanket taken from the back seat, to cover his bare back. "Try to stay warm…and do keep quiet. We are by no means home and dry. It's another two hours to an airport, and then another two hours' flight on a plane that is entirely too small to be comfortable. At Dubrovnik we can relax a bit, and pick up better transport."

This travel itinerary provoked a groan from the dishevelled man. A voice that was rough and broken managed to get out "Alright for you, sitting up there in comfort. Care to swap places for a while?"

"Sorry. Appearances must be maintained. You're being extradited. Apparently, you are wanted for crimes in the UK. The papers are good, but you are definitely persona non grata here with anyone other than the Justice Minister, who happens to be on our payroll. So, I can get you safely out of the country; if the drug barons and their corrupt friends in the police don't get you first, that is. So, do be a good boy and snivel quietly."

The driver seemed to be more sympathetic. In the light of the tiny torch he was carrying, he handed across a cup of hot sweet tea from a thermos. Sherlock cupped his hands around the metal cup and whispered, "Hvala vam na pažnji!"

That provoked a giggle from the driver. "You speak Serbian like a Kosovan." His English public school accent betrayed how he was recruited.

The first swallow hot tea went down a parched throat and there was a sigh of relief. "Leave the thermos, will you?"

"Time to get the show on the road, brother mine. Back in your box."
Sherlock gave him a filthy look, but complied.

The car drove onto the tarmac of the small Ponikve airport near Uzice. The driver showed papers to the airport security guard, who opened the chain linked gate, allowing access to the row of small planes. The Cessna was parked third along the row- easily identified because it was the only one that had a pilot in the seat. The plane door popped open, as the car backed into the space between the parked planes. No need to let prying eyes see who the prisoner was being transferred to the plane. Aware that he might be seen by binoculars from the tiny control tower, Mycroft went up the two steps to sit beside the pilot, while the driver half carried Sherlock and helped him into the seat in the back. There was another blanket which the driver arranged around the half conscious passenger, and then strapped him in the shoulder seat belt. Sherlock groaned and promptly passed out.

Mycroft turned around to look over the seat. "Thank you, Markovic; your services are gratefully appreciated, as is your discretion." He eyed his brother's filthy long hair and his chin down on his chest.

"Of course, sir; always happy to oblige. Anything for a fellow Old Etonian." Doors were shut and the driver backed the car out of the way, allowing the little propeller driven plane to bounce down the potholed tarmac. The pilot exchanged pleasantries with the tiny control tower and then in a ridiculously short distance down the runway, the light aircraft lifted off the ground. Once out of radar contact with the airport control tower, the pilot dropped his altitude to barely a thousand feet and banked hard to the left. Moments later, they were headed toward the coast.

Mycroft leaned over towards the pilot, almost shouting to be heard over the noise of the propeller. "Are we safe from detection?"

"The Minister's reach is a bit tenuous here, so we're flying under the radar to be safe. Unregistered aircraft, disabled transponder. An AWACS or NIMROD will pick us up, as well as satellite. But, the Serbs don't have access, so we're OK. I bribed the controller when I filed the flight plan- they think we are smuggling drugs. Pretty common practice, so even if they do spot the turn, they will assume we're heading for Italy with a cargo of cocaine. Saric does it all the time."

The noise of the plane made conversation difficult, and Mycroft was not in the mood. His horrid uniform itched; the coarse wool and the sweat of its previous wearer blended with the smell of petrol and motor oil. He'd taken off the ridiculous hat. Flying at tree top height was also a rather bumpier experience than he liked. He shut his eyes and tried to shut out the rest of the sensations that were irritating him. Within moments, he was asleep.

He woke up when the pilot banked and started to climb steeply. The man slipped earphones back on- and was now talking to someone on the radio, while he reached over and hit a few toggle switches. Mycroft saw the wingtip lights come on. Then in Croatian, the pilot announced a call sign and a flight plan for landing at Dubrovnik. The plane was rising now to a proper altitude, leaving the treetops behind.

"Ten minutes, sir."

Mycroft looked over the back seat. Sherlock had not moved. His head was still down, chin on his chest. His neck is going to be sore. He almost winced at the thought that among all the other injuries inflicted on his brother tonight, sore neck muscles would hardly be noticed.
The landing was somewhat surprising. After two hours of night flying over dark forests carefully
dodging the occasional small settlement, they suddenly came out over the sea and turned a sharp
left, heading north over the ocean towards a brightly lit city in the distance on the coast. Well
before they reached it, however, the plane turned back inland and then Mycroft spotted the
airport's landing lights. The descent was quick- they were low by Mycroft's usual standards; jets
made a quicker climb to commercial flight levels of 17,000 feet and above.

Moments later, they were taxiing over to a hanger alongside a row of parked executive jets, away
from the main terminal. While the prop plane idled, two men emerged from one of the jets - both of
whom Mycroft recognised. For the first time since crossing the border into Serbia three days ago,
he took a deep breath and relaxed his shoulders. He thanked the pilot and got out onto the tarmac,
grateful for the chance to stretch his legs, watching as the two men lifted Sherlock out and carried
him up the steps of a Citation jet- officially the fastest mid-sized private jet, capable of 600mph
airspeed. He followed them up and the steps were retracted almost immediately. He threw the
wretched hat onto a seat, and shrugged off the uniform coat as fast as he could manage it.

"Good evening, sir."

"My dear, you have no idea how glad I am to see you. Have you brought some clean clothes?"

Not Anthea smiled. "They're in the washroom, sir. I assume you want to change before we take
off? According to the pilot, we've got about ten minutes before our departure slot."

Mycroft walked by the place where his unconscious brother was being put onto a stretcher that had
been strapped in place between two facing seats. A third man was hovering, the doctor that
Mycroft had brought with them. "Just in case," he had told his PA. *Just this once, I hate being proved right.*

He shut himself into the small WC and began to strip. It was not easy for a man of his size to
change clothes in such a confined space, but he was desperate enough to get rid of the disguise that
he would have done it in a phone booth, if necessary.

The boots came off first. The puddle of clothing under his feet grew- to go undercover, everything
had to be local. He ran some hot water into the stainless steel basin and washed as much as he
could reach. His PA had thoughtfully ensured his brands of soap and deodorant were on hand.
Once dried, he pulled on the silk boxer shorts and the 100 percent pima cotton vest, then the silk
and cotton blend socks. He brushed his teeth. Looking at the face reflected back in the mirror, he
rubbed his chin. Shaving would have to wait, but like his brother he had been blessed with a sparse
beard, and the discomfort was minimal. As he put on his clothes and then his hand-made brogues,
he thought of the bloody filthy mess that was Sherlock, and wondered how he could have stood it.

As he placed the folded handkerchief square into the top left pocket of his jacket, he realised the
plane was in motion. He went out and looked up the aisle. In the jump seat by the door, where a
stewardess would normally be seated, his PA was watching him. One of his agents was seated
facing her, already strapped in. The other one who had lifted Sherlock out of the Cessna was a
trained field nurse, and he was busy inserting an IV line into Sherlock's right arm. The doctor was
taking Sherlock's blood pressure.

As he passed the stretcher, Mycroft asked, "Prognosis, Doctor Radley?"

"I can't tell much, yet. His vitals are a bit shaky. He's badly dehydrated. BP is higher than I'd like."

"Continue once we are airborne." Mycroft willed himself not to look at his brother's face as he
walked by and dropped into a forward facing seat, and put on his seat belt, just as the small jet
made the turn onto the main runway.

While the plane accelerated, he cast his mind back to the conversation that started this journey, eighteen days ago. He'd been in Elizabeth Ffoukes' office at Vauxhall.

"We don't know what to do. The terrorist threat is credible, but all sources have turned up empty. No humint, no signal traffic. Not a peep. It's got the boys and girls on both sides of the Thames in a tiz. My God, Mycroft, even you- all you've turned up is a date- November. That's less than a month away!" It took a lot to rattle Elizabeth Ffoukes, but she was clearly rattled. "Whatever is going on, it's so deep underground that no one can figure it out."

He turned back from the window overlooking the Thames. The tide had just turned. "There is someone who could, you know."

A silence fell. Her face softened, and she said quietly, "I don't know where he is. We...ah...lost the trail in Tibet. He disappeared into China. That was almost eight months ago. Not a peep since."

That confirmed what Griffin** had told him. He'd take almost two months to figure out that Sherlock had gone north to Nepal after absconding from the hospital in Mumbai. By the time he traced him to the Tibetan monastery, almost four months had elapsed, and the man was gone. The abbot was silent on the direction that Lars Sigurson had taken, and no amount of persuasion changed his mind. A few tentative scouting exercises turned nothing up, so Mycroft had recalled Griffin.

The debrief took place in private, at Parham.

"Describe what happened." Mycroft's order was directed at Albert Griffin, who was wearing the country tweeds that blended in well with the rest guests on the shooting weekend. Now, after the other guests had retired for the night, Holmes had brought him into his private rooms and handed him a brandy. "I want...everything. Every step of the way, from Locarno to Mumbai." Mycroft had been starved of information about Sherlock's progress. For once in his life, the elder Holmes had been outmanoeuvred by the younger Holmes. It still rankled. Being recused from the operation on the orders of the Prime Minister rubbed salt into the wound. Not even MI6 knew what was really going on, unless Sherlock bothered to tell them. "Deniability," is what Sherlock called it. "Idiocy," is what Mycroft called it.

Griffin summarised the seven months he had managed to keep on Sherlock's trail in the next half hour- the incidents, the stories behind the mysterious packets of intelligence information that had arrived in the in-boxes of various intelligence services heads across the world. But never Mycroft's own. He was being kept in the dark, on Sherlock's orders.

"Once he acknowledged your presence, did he talk much?"

Griffin shook his head. "Lars Sigurson is one of the most silent men I have ever met. He spoke only when it was necessary for the work. He never initiated a conversation with me, rarely acknowledged my presence. After Locarno, I think that he stopped trying to hide things from me, but he never volunteered any information about where he was going next. He just...well...made it easier for me to follow him. He really only tolerated me at a distance."

"And you weren't there when he was injured in the knife fight in India."

Albert Griffin looked into the flames of the fireplace. "No, I regret to say I wasn't, sir. If I had been, I might have been able to prevent him getting stabbed, or at least realised the extent of the injury and done something about it before he became ill with infection. He rather overlooked his own
health. I didn't realise how serious it was until he collapsed."

"He's never been one to think about risks until too late." Mycroft tried to keep the bitterness out of his tone.

Looking at the MI6 DG that afternoon nearly three weeks ago, Mycroft had decided to take a risk of his own. "Let me find him then, Elizabeth. Tell the PM that the recusal is over. Needs must. This terrorist threat takes priority over whatever plans Sherlock is privately pursuing. Lord knows, he's been at it long enough. Time to come home."

"You're assuming he'd come if asked. I'm not so sure that his priorities and yours match."

"Leave that to me. The needs of the country are more important. Just tell the PM that and let me loose from this absurd situation."

It was testament to the seriousness of the terrorist threat that he had his answer from her within minutes of leaving Vauxhall. The text he opened in the back of the car on the way to the Diogenes Club was brevity itself:


Even so, it took him another fourteen days before his intelligence sources came up with the goods.

"Drugs dealing in the Balkans?" His eyebrows had risen.

"Yes, sir. The trail leads to the Serbian, Darko Seric***. His cocaine operation is the largest in Europe. The Dutch AIVD received a tip off from an anonymous source that the man is under the protection of someone called Baron Maupertuis. Turns out the baron's in charge of a financial empire linking up the Netherlands with Sumatra in Indonesia. The source suggests that the Dutchman does the money laundering not just for Saric- but just about everybody who's anybody in the cocaine business. We think the source is Lars Sigurson. Just why the former Norwegian manager of Moriarty's network would turn a former client in, we don't know. But he's in Serbia- been spotted in Uzice. Maybe he's trying to muscle in on a former client. Rumour has it that Saric's men have captured him."

"Then we will have to move fast." Mycroft turned to his PA. "If someone else has taken the trouble of confining him, then we have a fighting chance of recovering him. We will need a legal story, to deal with any political fall-out if we are discovered. You know the extradition arrangements that will suit, so get started." His PA knew; she was the only one.

As the jet lifted through the cloud ceiling over Dubrovnik, he realised she was watching him now. And her eyes betrayed her concern. To the rest of the personnel, the man now lying strapped to the stretcher was simply the most valuable intelligence operative the British had- a Norwegian double-agent called Lars Sigurson, who had single-handedly destroyed Moriarty's criminal network. But his PA had been involved in the thirteen scenarios that got Sherlock off the roof of St Bart's alive. Mycroft had trusted her with the most important secret of his political career- that despite the PM's insistence that he have nothing to do with the plans of Sherlock to fake his death and go undercover, Mycroft had actually agreed to help his brother.

It was neither rapprochement, nor reconciliation. An armed truce was a better description. After that most peculiar incident in Devon, the two Holmes brothers met three weeks later. At the estate, of all places. Sherlock had a good excuse to be there- the funeral of Frank Wallace brought him back to the house.
The old gamekeeper had retired the previous year; arthritis after a lifetime's exposure to the elements had claimed his health. He'd moved from the gamekeeper's cottage to another smaller property on the estate- leaving the kennels and the work to his assistant. It was a fall and a broken hip that did him in; complications and pneumonia meant he never came home. Mycroft managed to visit him once, to hear Frank complaining that if he were a dog, they'd "do the decent thing and put me down." Despite an optimistic prognosis, the gamekeeper just gave up and died three days later.

Sherlock showed up at the funeral at the last minute- stood in the back of the chapel, as if uncomfortable with the surroundings. He stood silent at the internment, but left before the graveside service was over, striding away across the grounds into the solitude of Northpark Woods. At the reception back at the house, Mycroft had been left to see to the estate workers and the shooting syndicate members who had come out to show their respect for the gamekeeper.

Hours later, in front of the fire in his private rooms, the door opened and Sherlock slipped into the leather chair opposite his brother.

It was left to Mycroft to start. "I'm glad you came."

"I didn't do it for you."

"I know that, but your being here allows me to collect a debt. You owe me for Baskerville."

Sherlock snorted in derision. "You got what you needed- exposure of a secret research project started by the CIA, carried on clandestinely here under the noses of the military police. I'm sure you just loved rubbing the nose of the Defence Liaison in that little mess. I don't owe you anything more than the discovery."

MyCroft sighed and sipped at his malt whisky. "Just stop this feud. I can be helpful."

"Since when?" Suspicion was an undercurrent in the baritone.

"Since now. Your chances of living through this will improve if we work together."

Sherlock's face was unreadable. Then a barely perceptible nod. "That's true. But only on my terms."

"Whatever you wish, brother mine."

That made Sherlock look at him. Whatever he saw must have led him to decide to talk. "Moriarty's going to come after you in a big way- something splashy, headline grabbing- a way to demonstrate what he sees as your failure to control him."

"Tell me something I don't know." Mycroft was well aware of the Irishman's enmity.

His brother leaned forward in the chair. "Well, I'm going to get there first. Elizabeth has delivered three cases that will put me on the front pages. Think of it as covering fire. I get to distract him, while you get me data more on his network. Everything you can."

"I've been told I'm not allowed to do that. Your little power-play earlier with Lady Smallwood means I am officially recused by the PM as having a conflict of interest."

That provoked another snort. "Since when has that ever stopped you? This way, at least I can get some of the benefit of what I know you are doing anyway."

Mycroft took another swallow of the whisky; this one nearly a gulp. "And what's in it for me-
this sharing of intelligence?" He put some sarcasm on the word.

It had no effect on Sherlock. "I will tell you what I plan to do- but only just before I do it. If I need your help, I'll ask for it. But otherwise, we are to maintain the appearance of a rupture. Feed his ego, make him think that he can divide and rule."

*Not that far from the truth, brother mine.* Mycroft was not quite ready to forgive his brother for the embarrassment of being out-maneuvered in front of Elizabeth Ffoukes and Lady Smallwood, not to mention the PM. "Do you really know what this will cost you, Sherlock?"

The younger man sat back in the chair and turned toward the fire, unwilling to look at Mycroft. Then, quietly, "yes…almost everything. But, that is better than the alternative. I want to live through this; and I want to have the chance to come back, if it is remotely possible. That's all. The plan will work. You will just have to trust me, Mycroft. I know that is hard for you. But, really there is no alternative."

After a moment's silence, Sherlock had got up and left the room without looking back. And that was the last time Mycroft had seen his brother face-to-face until tonight, in that wretched castle cellar. Almost twenty seven months. The longest they had ever been physically separated since the day Sherlock was born. Even when he'd been on assignment overseas, he had managed to get back twice a year to see his little brother. It wasn't much to a teenager, but it had mattered to Mycroft that he did it. Even the dark days on the streets of London, or lost in addiction, Mycroft had not abandoned his brother. Being forced to be apart was something that had distressed Mycroft more than he would ever admit.

The angle of ascent suddenly decreased, and he could hear the engines being throttled back. Cruising altitude- the pilot switched off the seatbelt sign, and he could hear the two men behind him immediately get up and cross to their patient. He would resist watching them examine the injuries. He'd seen the damage being done. Up close and personal, as if the interrogator had been trying to impress the bigwig from Belgrade with how tough he was on a turncoat drug dealer. Being forced to watch Sherlock being beaten was perhaps the most difficult hour of his career in the service. It had taken every ounce of his cold logical unsentimental side that he could muster. The visual horror was only outstripped by the sound of his brother's painful grunts as the blows struck home. Mycroft had nearly lost his control when the guard had hit Sherlock in the throat, reducing that voice to a whisper. Even then, Sherlock had not given up. He watched him take his guard apart psychologically until the man fled the room.

*Extradition- an appropriate cover story, brother mine, for the crime you committed by taking this mad journey of yours, against my wishes.* Mycroft's reluctant help in the final rooftop showdown had been hastily constructed and managed by Sherlock. Once he was off the roof, there was no further contact. He never did figure out how Sherlock left the country. Elizabeth Ffoukes would have been involved, no doubt. And the American side of Moriarty's network had been taken apart at the seams over the next five months- the USA, Canada, Mexico and then into the drug countries of Latin America. The intelligence that ended up on her desk showed Sherlock's usual finesse and thorough attention to detail. Mycroft had only been allowed to see parts of it. That…was like salt in an open wound.

Behind Mycroft came the sound of overhead lockers being opened and medical equipment being brought down. He watched his PA's face. She was observing their ministrations.

"My dear, could you please check with the pilot how long before we cross into Italian airspace?"

She nodded and picked up the phone on the wall beside the stewardess's jump seat. He watched the question being asked. She never stopped looking up the aisle at what the doctor and his assistant
were doing. Mycroft could deduce their activities from the sound of their work, and the expression on his PA's face. She put the phone down, and broke off her observation to turn her eyes to his. "Seven minutes."

"Did you hear that, Doctor Radley? You have seven minutes to decide whether we can make it back to London non-stop, which will take two hours, or whether we need to find the nearest Italian hospital, which is due west in Pescara and less than a half hour from here."

He heard a grunt of acknowledgement behind him, and then busy activity. He heard a hiss of compressed air, and imagined the mask being fitted onto his brother's face. He hates the scent; let's hope he stays unconscious. Mycroft watched the chronometer on the wall above his PA's seat. When it reached six minutes, he stood and turned around.

"Time to decide, Doctor Radley."

The doctor pulled the stethoscope from his ears and stood up to face Mycroft. His expression showed his indecision. "He has a stable airway, is breathing with the mask reasonably well. There is no sign of head trauma. The wounds on his back are nasty but manageable on board. I wish I had access to a portable x ray or an ultrasound. He's been beaten badly, but you knew that. There is damage to the ribs- but it's hard to tell if the bones are bruised, cracked or broken. There is some internal bleeding- which appears to be soft tissue, but I can't tell if there is organ damage. The bleeding isn't severe enough to indicate anything major- so far. He's so dehydrated that it's hard to know if there are renal issues, or simply that he hasn't had enough to fill his bladder."

"Perhaps I did not make myself clear." Mycroft let the steel show in both his tone of voice and the expression on his face. "The choice is twenty to thirty minutes away from a hospital or two and half hours away. The latter will be a better, more secure hospital, but it is further away. Your advice is required, now."

The doctor swallowed. "Safety says get him to a hospital as quickly as possible." But Mycroft could hear the man's caution. "But, he is stable, so the alternative is possible, just a little bit riskier."

Mycroft turned back to Not Anthea. "Tell the pilot to get back to London as quickly as possible." He returned to his seat. Not once had he looked at his brother. He was not sure he could make such a decision if he had done so. Sentiment clouds judgment; caring is not an advantage, Sherlock.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes:

*To any Serbian readers, I apologise for the failings of Google Translate. In English the dialogue is "In here"/"Soldier!/"Release him"/"I'm taking him with me"/ "Where? Why?" /"Sir, you are taking the prisoner?" /"Yes, Saric is trading him for protection. I'm to take him to Belgrade."/ "He is a drug dealer sent by the Romanians. It is up to the Government to extradite him to the West- in exchange for more aid- that pays your wages."/"Help him get that scum into the boot of the car."
** To understand who Griffin is, read my story Still Talking When You're Not There, Chapter Five

***Darko Saric is real. Google to find out how this notorious drug lord was captured.
Chapter Summary

Extenuate /ɪkˈstɛnjʊɪt,ɛk-/ 

Verb: (of a factor or situation) acting in mitigation to lessen the seriousness of guilt of an offence.

Chapter Notes

For those of you who believe Mycroft is as much (or more) of a sociopath as Sherlock, you won't like this. And it won't make a lot of sense if you haven't first read The Shooting Party and the Ex Files Special- Exhibition, because of the involvement of Lady Caroline Herbert, The Countess of Pembroke, and her daughter, the Honorable Lady Arabella Herbert. They are two of my favourite OCs, and seem to have struck a chord with many readers, so this is a one shot to you all who, like me, appreciate the Mycroft that inhabits my stories. Not everyone is a goldfish.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She was packing her carry-on case when her phone vibrated, making a mooing sound against the wood of the bedside table. For a moment, the noise confused her, until she remembered that she had left it on silent mode during her meeting with the Wilton House manager. *Oh, go away. I have too much to do.*

The phone stopped vibrating- it must have gone to voice mail. She resumed folding the silk blouse. And then the phone started vibrating again. Annoyed by someone who wasn't taking no for an answer, Caroline leaned across the bed, plucked the handset up and took a quick look to see the number.

*OH!* She instantly connected the call. "Mycroft. You're back! How are you? Did it go all right?" He'd been away for almost two weeks, somewhere that he couldn't tell her about doing something that he wouldn't discuss, not even in abstract terms. And he was uncharacteristically tense about whatever it was. That in itself was rare, but the fact that he'd not been able to tell her when he would be coming back was even more worrying.

"Good evening, my dear."

His voice was as calm as ever. It made her smile. She had missed him. There had been times though, when she wondered why. The past two years had been something of a disappointment for her. She'd felt him holding back, stepping away from their relationship. Paradoxically, this was the time when she had hoped for something of a thaw, that the loss of his brother might make him
more able to commit, partly for comfort. She'd been surprised by how coldly he'd taken his brother's death. It confused her, made her question whether he had a heart at all. In her darker moments, she wondered whether he was capable of loving anyone, or whether he was just so conditioned now to be devoid of emotion that he was simply using her. Had she become a convenient tool, a comfortable ornament? When she was in that kind of mood, she stayed away, lest she be seen as useful a part of his disguise as his sartorially correct three piece suits: elegant, classical, communicating a vast context of meanings to others he was seeking to influence without having to do anything so gauche as speak of them.

But, then when she was with him, these fears would vanish. He was attentive and his lack of demands on her suited her perfectly. *Maybe it's me.* She wondered if her own ambivalence was simply being reflected back. They both seemed to be waiting for something, but she wasn't sure what.

Then nearly a month ago, something seemed to change. In a late night phone call he told her that he had to go overseas and would be out of touch for an indeterminate length of time. The unspoken nature of his absence had worried her, although she'd never admit that to him. *He has enough on his plate without my petty worries distracting him.*

"I hope I haven't interrupted anything?" His voice brought her out of her reverie. She looked at the impossibly large pile of clothes on the bed, and the small suitcase that she was allowing herself. "No. Nothing important. I am attempting to squeeze a week's worth of clothes into an impossibly small carry-on bag- packing for New York."

"You are still on then for your flight tomorrow?"

She noticed that he had not answered her earlier questions, and thought about his. "Yes. If I am not on that flight, Ara has sworn to disown me. She has arranged a serious flat-hunting exercise."

There was a pause on the other end of the line that worried her, so she continued. "Of course, you know that she is being a drama queen. I can easily put her off another day or even longer if there was a reason. Is there a reason?"

"That depends on you. I need to see you if at all possible before you go. It won't take long, but it is…important."

Her eyes widened. From Mycroft, the hesitation and then the use of the word 'important' were tantamount to a full-scale nuclear alert. "Whatever's the matter? You sound … actually, I don't know how to describe it. What's going on?"

There was an audible sigh at the other end. "That is what I need to talk to you about, so there is no point in doing so until we are together. Can you get to the townhouse this evening? Why not stay over so you can get to Heathrow from there."

She could, so of course she would. "Are you on your way there now?" There was enough ambient noise in the background to make her think that he was in a car.

"I should arrive in less than thirty minutes, depending on traffic."

She had a sixth sense that he had rung her from the airport. If so, then it was *really* important.

"Of course, I will be there as quick as I can." She glanced at her watch. "I make it five thirty now; should be with you by seven thirty, unless the M3 is a nightmare."

"Don't drive yourself, please. And don't hurry. It's nothing that won't keep until you get here.
safely."

*Curiouser and curiouser*. He must have deduced that she was concerned, and worried that it would distract her, or lead her to drive faster than she should. And in that moment, she realised that she would have, too. There was something in his tone of voice that was just…not right.

"Okay. I'll have Willoughby drive me. See you soon. Bye."

He didn't reply, and the connection was broken.

She took one look at the pile of clothes, swept half of it aside and started stuffing the rest into the roll on bag. If she ended up short of something, she'd just buy it in New York. *Decisions are easy when you don't have time to waste.*

Mycroft disconnected the phone and sat back in the Jag. He consciously tried but failed to release the tension in his back, put there by hours of flying from the Balkans. He had tried to catch as much sleep as possible, but it had not been easy. The jet had been met at a private hanger by a medical team; they'd patched up the damage as best they could and said that the patient could be looked after at home, so long as proper medical supervision was available should any complications arise. Mycroft surmised that Sherlock would be better off waking up in a place he knew, somewhere safe, and above all else, anywhere that wasn't a hospital. And he needed his brother to be functional as soon as possible. It had taken longer to wrest Sherlock from the clutches of the Serbs than he had planned. Intelligence said the *event* would be in November, and that was literally just around the corner. As soon as they touched down, he'd been on the phone to de-brief Elizabeth Ffoukes, and catch up with what had happened while he had been away. It wasn't good news. In fact, it was even worse than he feared. The terror attack was imminent; she wanted Sherlock at work as soon as possible.

He'd argued, trying to buy a little bit of time, to no effect; "No time to lose, Mycroft. Do whatever is necessary." Elizabeth was speaking on behalf of the highest authorities, and he had to conceded defeat. *I can't protect you, little brother; I'm sorry.*

Mycroft was not looking forward to that conversation with Sherlock. But, before his brother woke up again, Mycroft also needed to deal with Caroline.

It was now or never. The ambivalence of the situation struck him forcefully. On the one hand, he was glad he'd managed to catch her before she left for New York. He certainly did not want her to read about this in the newspapers. On the other, the conversation they would be having tonight would not be easy.

While his attention had been quite rightly focussed on Sherlock's condition on the flight back from Serbia, he was also aware that his brother's return to "life" would surprise a lot of people, not least Caroline.

*My day of reckoning;* now he was going to have to explain to her just why he had lied to her for the past two years. She would be disappointed in him. He knew that. It just might be the end of their relationship. He tried to imagine what it would feel like from her point of view- and failed.

He knew that what he had done was necessary- in the national interest, as well as being done to protect Sherlock. In theory, he'd had no qualms about keeping the secret, because he knew the cost of letting the truth out would have been his job, and quite possibly Sherlock's life. He valued both too much to risk either by an indiscretion. Not that he thought she would be as unreliable as to blurt
the secret out. But, people's behaviour changed when they possessed knowledge. Could Caroline be trusted to lie to Ara, for example? And even if she did lie, Ara's powers of observation reminded him of Sherlock's. So even a lie wouldn't protect the secret; if Caroline knew the truth, then Ara could, too.

He knew that her daughter was the principal pivot in Caroline's life. He'd understood that her loyalties lay there first. The love that might be shared between two mature consulting adults could not compete, and he did not try. Caroline had once told him that his acceptance of that fact was part of the reason she preferred his company to any of the other men who had sought her attention after she was widowed. "I respect your priorities, and you respect mine." He hoped she would be as sanguine after this evening's revelations.

Her daughter's prior claim was at least half of the reason for his keeping this secret to himself. Could discretion be assumed in one as young as Ara? It was a slippery slope, and one he had learned from a very early age not to go anywhere near. For the same reason, he had made sure that Sherlock never knew about his half-brother, nor what had happened to him.

But he deduced that as soon as Caroline knew the truth, she would realise that she wasn't even second chair in the orchestra of his loyalties. Queen and country first, then Sherlock. Sometimes, he'd wondered what the order might be if he'd ever been forced to choose. His brother, perhaps. God knows why. The thought set off another one: the voice of his father telling him that Sherlock would be his weakness, if he let him be. Unbidden came the memory of his mother's response to her husband's demand that Sherlock be institutionalised: "Over my dead body." It had driven a wedge so powerful between Mycroft and his father than they had never reconciled.

And yet, on three occasions, he'd been the one to sign the section papers that hospitalised his brother. To Sherlock, he had become the arch enemy- well, at least until Moriarty arrived to usurp that role.

*Why do I care so much?* It pained him that Sherlock never understood how much it hurt to have to confine him. He'd never stooped to the trite cliché "I'm doing this because I love you", but for the life of him, he knew he was the only one who did care enough about Sherlock to make the difficult choices, even when it cost him his brother's affections, such as they were.

**Baggage.** Thinking of Caroline trying to pack her carry-on case made him think of all the times he'd gone away, carrying his worries about Sherlock with him. All during the early years at school and university, then the job, the postings overseas, there was never ever a time when he was not aware of his brother's need to be cared for.

He had no idea how to explain that to Caroline. She would only see that he'd kept the secret of Sherlock's survival from her, even as he indulged his own needs for her company. He thought she might now see his interest in her at best as merely convenient or comfortable, at worst, grossly manipulative.

And when she ended their relationship, Mycroft would feel it keenly. Over the nearly six years he had known her, Mycroft had come to appreciate her as someone who understood the limitations that his occupation placed on any relationship. That he was going to miss her fiercely was testimony to how compatible they had become. It was a quiet relationship, but a deep one, and one he would bitterly regret losing.

*Brother mine, both you and I are paying a high price for this plan of yours.*

Not that he'd say that to Sherlock's face. He needed to keep Sherlock focused on the problem at hand. That meant keeping him from understanding the full consequences of his 'death' on John
Watson. No doubt, his brother had planned a hero's return, where everyone greeted him with open arms and congratulations. Sherlock had always been prone to such misunderstandings. Mycroft would need to work hard to prepare him for the inevitable fallout when he realised that people's lives had not stopped when he disappeared.

This was no time for personal recriminations. He'd brought Sherlock back from Serbia because he was needed. The terror plot was eluding everyone; his brother was the only one who might be able to put the pieces together in time. So, whatever the cost, his physical wounds had been seen to at Brize Norton, and the unmarked van behind the Jag was carrying an unconscious patient back to South Eaton Place. The service's medical team had to get him back on his feet by tomorrow afternoon. Whatever the mental consequences of his time in the Serbian prison, they would have to wait. There was no time to waste.

The last stages of her two hour journey passed in a crawl through London traffic; every red light seemed to increase her levels of impatience. She came in from the mews entrance, because stopping on South Eaton Place was difficult at the best of times, given the parked cars that lined both sides of the street. She knew that those in front of Mycroft's townhouse were there permanently, planted by the service to stop anyone else from getting a car bomb anywhere near his house. The lane behind the townhouse was easier. Willoughby promised he would park the car and bring her case in immediately, before heading back to Wiltshire. But Caroline was in too much of a hurry to do anything more than give her brief thanks and then bolt out of the Bentley. The electric door latch on the Mews entrance buzzed as she approached- cameras would have spotted her arrival and the security officer on duty would know to let her in.

She went through the hall, past the garages on her left; the floor above was the staff quarters. She didn't wait for anyone to greet her, but went straight through, and hurried across the open courtyard, where she could see Miss Foster waiting to let her in the lower ground floor entrance. As soon as she was in the door, Caroline saw the housekeeper's flushed and excitable manner- so uncharacteristic that it actually startled her into blurting out, "Whatever's the matter, Miss Forster?"

"Oh, you'll know soon enough, Lady Caroline; please go up. His Lordship is in the study waiting for you."

Alarm bells started ringing even louder. The housekeeper's behaviour was unusual to say the least, as she was usually the epitome of calm. But she didn't seem sad. Caro hung onto that thought, but it made her climb the stairs to the main floor even faster. The door to the study was open, and she could hear the sound of a fire. She pushed it open.

"There you are, my dear. You made good time."

Even before she looked at him, she could hear the exhaustion in his tone. She came over to his chair and he stood to embrace her. The hug was…different, although she would be hard pressed to explain why and how. It unsettled her, and she pulled away so she could see him. He looked, well…shattered, so tired that he wasn't even trying to put up a façade of normality.

"Mycroft…" She said his name tenderly, "What's happened? I've spent the last two hours going over every conceivable disaster that could have warranted this."

He smiled, and even through his tiredness, she saw that his pleasure was genuine. Her shoulders beneath his hands relaxed a bit. And his beneath hers loosened, too.

"Not a disaster. More like… an event." He stepped back, and took her hands in his. Nodding to the
other chair, he asked, "Can I get you some tea? Or something stronger, perhaps?"

She gave him a bit of a glare. "No, you can give me an answer." She tightened her grip on his hands.

That's when she realised that as well as being tired, he was nervous. Even anxious. In all the years she had known him, those two behaviours were something that she had never seen in him before. It startled her, even scared her. *What is he afraid of?* Nothing in her experience of him had prepared her to see him like this.

As soon as she thought of one reason why he might be nervous, she immediately dismissed it. Mycroft was not the sort to be nervous about proposing. If and when that moment came, he would be rational, logical and calm. Even if she decided against it. Her mind was not made up- not for sure. Nor would it be, until the moment came. Some instinct told her this was definitely not it.

The silence lengthened, as the man in front of her seemed unable to say anything.

"Well?" She said it softly, as if to reassure him, and then realised the absurdity of it all. Mycroft was *never* in need of reassurance; he was the most self-contained person she knew. In a way, it was part of his appeal. They enjoyed each other's company to an extraordinary degree, but she did not feel any neediness on his part. That suited her perfectly.

He drew breath as if to speak, but then stopped. A look of surprised frustration crossed his face. Finally, he said with an air of puzzlement, "I thought I would know how to say this, but now that the moment has come, I'm not even sure how to begin."

Her concern must have telegraphed through her hands, as he gave a slightly pained look.

"My dear, I think it is best just to show you. And then deal with what happens next." He broke his hold on her and started for the study door, probably knowing that her curiosity would make her follow.

Mystified, she followed him up the stairs. Caroline started to turn left at the top of the landing, towards the master bedroom, but Mycroft's hand on her shoulder turned her in the other direction.

"Down here."

He crossed the hall heading for the second bedroom on this floor. It was the official "spare" room. Sometimes Ara occasionally occupied it if she was visiting her mother while she was at the townhouse. The door suddenly opened and out came a nurse, in uniform. "Oh, Mister Holmes." The middle aged woman gave a smile. "Still asleep. The sedation won't wear off for another couple of hours."

"We need to have some privacy for a short while, Miss Merriweather; please tell the doctor, as well." He walked past the nurse, Caroline in his wake, and into the room. The room was dark, only a single dim red light was on in the corner away from the double bed.

"Shut the door, please."

There was something so soft, so caring in his tone that it startled her, but she complied without thinking, and then said nothing for a moment, letting her eyes adjust to the gloom. That's when she spotted the IV pole and the tubes, looking incongruous in the bedroom. Then Caro heard the muffled beep of a machine, and connected that sound to a medical monitor on the other side of the room. She stepped closer to the bed, to see if she could identify who was the recipient of such care.
She saw the long dark curls on the white pillow first, and wondered who the woman was. *A relative that Mycroft has never told me about?* For a moment she wondered—was this a Rochester moment? Like Jane Eyre, was she about to come face to face with a wife that she had no idea existed?

Mycroft had picked up the red lamp—actually a night light of some sort, and brought it closer. In the strange light, she leaned over to look more closely at the sleeping figure. Her head on the pillow was turned away and still in shadow, but there was enough to pick up an angled cheekbone, the dark lashes on pale skin. *Not a wife; she looks like Sherlock.* So a blood relative then; could it be Mycroft had a sister that he’d never mentioned?

She looked up at him. "Who is she?" Softly, so the sleeper would not awake.

Mycroft gave her a peculiar smile. "Look again, my dear. Carefully."

She traced the soft curve of the lip, then down the sleeper's neck where she spotted the Adam's apple. *A man!* Then, like one of those optical illusions she'd always loved looked at as a child, the face resolved itself into a familiar form, one she recognised.

"Sherlock?!...how?" She turned a pair of startled eyes towards Mycroft and whispered, "How is this even possible?"

Mycroft put the lamp down and gestured towards the door. "I'd rather not risk waking him. We can talk next door."

By the time she had made it into the master bedroom, the initial shock had worn off, to be replaced by a great number of questions.

As soon as he shut the door, she turned. "He…survived the fall? Has he been recuperating ever since? *Why didn't you tell me?*

"Sit down, my dear. I promise to tell you everything I am able to tell you."

That caveat added a twist that made her hesitate before asking another question. She sat down on the edge of the bed, while he went over to the window, as if he needed the space to collect his thoughts.

"He didn't…no, actually, that's wrong. He *did* jump from the roof, just in a way that meant he wasn't injured. It was necessary that the world believed him to be dead, and that he'd killed himself."

"Why?" Caro said this in genuine confusion.

"Because Sherlock has spent the last two years working undercover, destroying the criminal network that James Moriarty had built."

"Moriarty…" Caroline was so stunned that her brain was only slowly catching up with what Mycroft was saying. Then the significance of what he had said connected. "Sherlock was working for you?" She breathed this out in disbelief. The tectonic plates of her understanding suddenly suffered a massive seismic shift. She would have never thought he would put his brother into such danger. He was watching her, and must have deduced her thought processes, because his next words addressed this very issue.

"No. I didn't agree with this idea; it was too risky for him, for the country. But, I was over-ruled. He went behind my back and then ensured that he was working for *no one.* Total deniability; no
government has ever been involved. He's just acted independently, and dished up the intelligence to whomever he deemed worthy whenever he wanted to."

"How could anyone stop you from stopping him?"

He gave her a pained look, before looking away. "Little brother knows me too well. He anticipated my every move and blocked it. I could not stop him, and I was not allowed to know anything about what he was doing. Mind you, I think the powers that agreed to this did not anticipate just how little he would keep in touch. They created something of a Frankenstein monster."

"But, you kept an eye on him, surely?"

That made him look out the window again. "Not formally, not regularly, but there was occasional evidence of where he'd been, usually well after the fact, but…” He seemed to stop and count. "Until thirty one hours ago, I had not seen Sherlock for more than two years. And my people were expressly forbidden from spending any official resource in keeping tabs on him."

"But you knew he was alright?"

The dark blue eyes that turned back to her were steely. "Rarely. Months would go by with no news. Eight months ago, he disappeared from everyone's radar. It was only three months ago that he re-surfaced, having survived whatever it was that took him…out of commission for five months."

She digested that fact. And the realisation that came with it that for those months, Mycroft must have feared, no-believed- the worst. And during that time had said nothing to her, nor revealed any of his distress to her. It shocked her, that he could keep his feelings so buried, so under control.

Caroline tried to imagine what not knowing would mean to Mycroft. He had told her about Sherlock's first 'disappearance' when he was sixteen, and the troubled years of homelessness and drug use in his twenties. She'd had huge sympathy for him, knowing that she couldn't possibly cope if anything like that ever happened to Arabella. Sherlock was the most important person in Mycroft's life. She knew that, and accepted it. Because of their family circumstances, Mycroft had been forced at a young age to be father, mother and brother to Sherlock, and the burden of responsibility had shaped his character. She had often wondered if the reason why he was so good in his job was due in no small measure to his unshakeable commitment to protect his brother when they were both growing up.

It was the disconnect between this image of him in her mind and the cold, almost callous reaction to his brother's death that had so confused her, making her question everything she thought she knew about him. And now I know it was all a front. But the idea that he could keep this from her rankled a bit.

Then she started to think about the timeline, and what happened three months ago. "The public enquiry that cleared his name…you engineered that?"

"I couldn't possibly comment."

She smiled, for the first time. "That's straight out of my father's phrasebook, that one."

He raised an eyebrow. "Happens to be true, nevertheless."

Then, thinking past the shock of seeing a man asleep who she had thought to be dead, Caroline recalled the medical equipment and the nurse. She swallowed. "Who hurt him?"

There was no reply. She tried again, "how badly injured is he? Is that why he's come home?
What happened?"

"He'll survive. The physical injuries look worse than they are."

Caroline heard the subtext in his use of the word 'physical'. Her eyes widened. "My God, Mycroft-Did you…?" She ran out of steam, and backed up in her thinking. She had learned much from her father about the oblique art of questioning someone who could tell you very little about the truth. Phrasing was everything, and inference, deductions, reflections all played a part. She tried a third time. "That's where you've been- trying to rescue him? From what?"

He frowned. "I can't tell you. Nor can I tell you why I was finally given permission to bring him home. Suffice to say that needs must. And he will have no time to recover. We need his particular skills now, no matter what his state of health is."

Caroline was shocked by the hard edge of steel in his tone. "So, it's not over. You've been allowed to bring him back so, what...he can be used to do something?" Then she qualified her statement, "...something even more dangerous."

She saw the pain in his eyes and the tiniest of nods.

"I have been unable to solve the puzzle, and because of my failure, he has been recalled. If anything happens to him now, it is my fault. Do you have any idea how that makes me feel?"

She tried to imagine it- and failed. "You've argued against this course of action."

"Whatever I would prefer wasn't taken into consideration." He came and sat down beside her on the bed, but wouldn't look at her. She could see his exhaustion as he said, "I remember someone once said, 'the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or of the one.' I wish it wasn't so, but...there it is."

Caroline stifled her initial reaction to try to comfort him. She was still reeling from trying to make sense of all this. In the space of a half hour, her understanding of the man she thought she loved had been shaken. That he had to keep secrets from her was a given, and she had no quarrel with that. She'd been raised in a family where this was a requirement of their daily lives. No one knew that the father who collected her from boarding school looking every bit the Foreign Office diplomat was actually an MI6 manager. She'd learned to not ask.

But, somehow this was different.

"At least, I now understand why you were so angry with him in the last few months before..." She stopped, a little hesitant now.

He finished the sentence for her, "Before he jumped off the bloody roof and started all this off. Yes. I was annoyed that I could do nothing to stop him."

"And it also explains what happened at Ara's exhibition, when you got so angry."

"I nearly told you then. A moment of weakness, I fear. It would not have helped, burdening you with this knowledge back then. There was no certainty that he'd survive. In fact, just the opposite."

She thought about that. Mycroft had cut himself off from her, to protect her. "I could have helped you bear the burden."

"It would have been unfair of me to do so."
She shook her head. "No, actually the reverse. If we are to love one another, then sharing this sort of pain is part of it. It has to be. I can deal with not being told the specifics, if extenuating circumstances make that necessary. But, that doesn't preclude emotional honesty. That's something else entirely."

He sighed. "All I can do now is apologise, and explain what I can as some measure of mitigation. It's why I needed to see you tonight."

Practicalities reasserted their hold on her thoughts. "I suppose it's going to be made public then? Soon?"

He shrugged. "I can only assume so. My brother is rather well known to the public. Once he starts circulating again, it's bound to get out and the media will go a bit mad, I expect."

"Can I tell Ara?"

Mycroft nodded. "Yes. She should learn it from you before the papers. Just tell her to keep it to herself until it does become public."

"She'll be astonished and then in the very next breath say she'd told me so, years ago. Ara kept going on about something fishy, as she called it, about the whole Moriarty thing."

"Oh, he was real. And Sherlock has paid a very high price to rid the world of him and his network, even if it hasn't been at the cost of his life."

She reached across the distance separating them and put her hand on his shoulder. It was a gesture of comfort. "He's not the only one to have paid a price, Mycroft."

He looked up and gave her a somewhat pained smile. "I regret that you, too, have felt the consequences, my dear."

"I wasn't talking about me. I was talking about you."

He took her hand in his and eyed it as if it were something extraordinary. "It will be a high price indeed if the deception means that I lose you. Too high a price."

She smiled. "Mycroft- that's the closest you've ever come to saying that you love me."

He didn't reply for a moment. "Sherlock has taught me to be wary of loving anyone too much."

"And yet you do- love him. Even now."

"Do you really need to ask that?"

In that moment, she realised her fears had been baseless.

Mycroft put his hand out to touch her cheek gently. "Can you forgive me?"

"Of course. She stood. "Right, get back in there so you will be with him when he wakes up. When and if you need me tonight, I will be here."
*Author's note: If you want the back story to why Mycroft knows this particular phrase, check out Periodic Tales, Chapter 9
Exhort

Chapter Summary

Exhort /ɪɡˈzɔːtˌɛɡ-/ 
Verb to strongly encourage, put pressure upon or urge (someone) to do something.

Chapter Notes

If you are a Mandarin Chinese speaker, please forgive my use of Google translate; I am reliably informed it is awful!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Oh, Mister Holmes."

"Good evening, Mrs Hudson." Mycroft examined the landlady standing in the hall of Baker Street. She seemed anxious, and her tone of voice was projecting worry, so he decided a placatory smile might help. He was always rather dismissive of the woman, but Sherlock seemed to value her presence, so for his brother's sake he tolerated her rather mundane character. He'd let himself in with a key, after straightening the doorknocker. He assumed that the neighbourhood children liked to twist it awry; perhaps they were back to playing their usual tricks now that they knew their celebrity neighbour had returned from the dead.

Mrs Hudson was wittering. He tuned her back in "...s always nice to see you, but I am rather hoping you aren't going upstairs to visit Sherlock."

He tilted his head and allowed his face to show some surprise. "And just why wouldn't you want me to visit my brother? The opportunity to do so is still...rather a novelty. And given that John Watson no longer lives here, I thought my brother might welcome the company."

The elderly woman twisted her hands a bit. "Yes, of course, far be it from me...but he's just finally managed to get to sleep, and it seems a shame to wake him- even for you."

This drew a puzzled frown from Mycroft. "It's not even nine o'clock, Mrs Hudson. I don't think he's been to bed at this hour since he was a small child. Why would you assume that Sherlock is asleep in what he would assure you is still the early evening?"

"He's not slept for three days- or nights, so, as he has finally got there, I think it best to let him get some rest."

He blinked. "And just how would you know that he hasn't slept for seventy two hours? I wasn't aware that you had a camera in his bedroom." The comment was slightly acerbic. But he had not had time to re-install cameras in the flat. In the absence of a specific threat like Moriarty, he'd been
reluctant to assign surveillance duties to anyone on his team until there was due cause. Budget
constraints and all that.

The woman raised her right hand and pointed to the ceiling. "This is an old house, Mister Holmes.
And old houses have floorboards that creak when someone walks on them. Sherlock has been
pacing almost constantly ever since that press conference outside the front door. Back and forth;
sometimes it's slow, from the bedroom into the kitchen and then the living room. Other times, it
sounds like he's..." She ran out of words for a moment, trying to find the right one. "Well, like a
lion in a zoo, back and forth, back and forth."

She frowned. "Before you say I'm just an old lady imagining things, let me tell you that because of
my age I don't sleep as well as I used to. So, I know that he's going all night." She crossed her arms
and looked a trifle annoyed. "You know, I've missed having him and Doctor Watson here for the
past two years; this house seemed awfully quiet. But the pacing is rather tiresome. So, I hope I can
persuade you not to wake him up."

"Has he been playing his violin?"

"No. I haven't heard a single note since he returned. And he isn't talking, either. I've taken him up
tea the last three mornings, and only once has he bothered to say 'good morning' or even
acknowledge my presence. He was better at that during the week before all that business with the
bomb in the underground. At least then he talked."

"I was here, Mrs Hudson, I can recall that fact." He considered the evidence. "I regret that I shall
have to disappoint you. I am going to go up and look in on him. If he is truly sound asleep, then my
presence will not disturb him. If he is awake, then I will endeavour to find out why he is
determined to wear a path on your floorboards. Good evening, Mrs Hudson."

With that, he headed up the steps. He heard her sigh behind him and walk back to her flat,
muttering not quite under her breath, "You try sleeping under all that racket, Mycroft Holmes."

The landlady wasn't wrong. His brother was not in the living room, but his bedroom door was ajar.
Mycroft smiled at that. Ever since he'd been ten years old, Sherlock detested sleeping in a room
with a closed door. It probably came from his time at the hospital, where his father had sent him
after their mother had died. He'd been institutionalised for months, before Mycroft found out where
and got him out.* That was yet another reason why Mycroft had worried about the after-effects
of his brother's confinement in Serbia. Sherlock had not told him how long he had been held in the
cell at the bottom of Baron Maupertuis's castle.

He pushed the door open enough to be able to peek in. There was a small bedside lamp on, but
Sherlock was definitely asleep. Mycroft listened to the breathing pattern, and realised that his
brother was in NREM sleep, probably slow wave. Good; that will help.

Even in the dim light, Sherlock's dark hair on the pillow was a sharp contrast to the paleness of his
pallor. Mycroft came further into the room, knowing now that his brother would not wake for some
time. Only after REM would he become more aware of his environment. He slipped his jacket off
and sat in the chair to contemplate his brother.

Mycroft was something of a connoisseur of watching his brother sleep. He'd acquired the habit
many, many years ago when the infant would not settle, and the nanny was exhausted into a state
of stupor by the restless crying of the second son. The eight year old heir would slip into the
nursery when he heard Sherlock crying late into the night. Nanny would be walking up and down
carrying the bundle, bouncing him gently and talking to him in a soothing voice.
"Nanny, let me look after him for a while. You take a break."

"You are a little angel of mercy, Mycroft. I'll be back once I've had a cup of tea." She would lay the crying baby back in the crib on his back, and slip out.

He'd sit by the side of the crib and reach through the bars, putting his hand on the chest of the crying baby. Perhaps it was his scent, or the weight of the hand. He was never sure what it was, but Sherlock's cries would slow and then after a minute or so, stop altogether.

No need for that tonight. The few times that Mycroft had sat vigil over his adult brother's sleep were more traumatic. Usually in a hospital room. Twice when the 'sleep' wasn't sleep at all, but the unconsciousness that followed an overdose attempt. The first time he had sat there in disbelief, wanting it to be an accident, a drug-induced stupidity in measuring doses. The second time, he knew better. And then there were the other times that involved hospitals, events that Sherlock blithely dismissed with a wave of his hand. "Occupational hazard," he called it and told Mycroft to go away.

It was just over two weeks ago that Mycroft had found himself by his brother's bedside again. This time, it was in the South Eaton Place townhouse. Sherlock had been moved there while still unconscious. For some ridiculous reason, Mycroft thought it would be better for him to wake up there, in familiar surroundings, instead of some hospital. The doctor had said the beating in Serbia looked worse than it was.

"Severe bruising, two cracked ribs, mild concussion. The wounds on his back are deeper, but we've cleaned and stitched them up. He's dehydrated and a little malnourished, but nothing some home cooking won't repair quickly. Bed rest for two weeks should do."

"We don't have two weeks. I need him up and functioning tomorrow." The whole point of getting his brother back to London was now becoming screamingly urgent.

"Then he will need seriously strong pain management."

As reluctant as he had been, Mycroft had to prioritise the needs of national security over his brother's normal recovery period. So, dosed up on morphine, Sherlock was at the Diogenes Club thirty six hours after landing back in the UK.

Since then, it had been almost non-stop activity. Until three days ago, Sherlock had been in a whirlwind of private case work, rescuing John from a bonfire, and solving the underground bomb plot. Mycroft had little time to assess his brother's state of health, except on one visit. That had led to a game of "Operation", with Sherlock using it to prove that his physical dexterity had recovered to the point where it was better than Mycroft's, and then that silly game of deduction on the client's bobble hat. **He is so fiercely competitive.**

Sherlock had accused him of being 'lonely'. He'd denied it, of course. The only thing Mycroft had missed was the opportunity to reassure himself that Sherlock was alive and functional. Denied that for two years, he had taken real pleasure in watching his brother's unique abilities solve a plot that no one, not even he, had been able to uncover. That it had saved countless lives and stopped a heinous terrorist atrocity aimed right at the heart of Britain's government was even greater cause for celebration. Mycroft was relieved that Sherlock had returned.

His reminiscing ground to a halt. Sherlock's breathing pattern had suddenly altered. The deep, regular respiration was now shallow, juddering.

"讓我走!"
It wasn't quite a shout, but said with real anger. Mycroft was not surprised by his brother's somniloquy. As a child, Sherlock had often talked in his sleep. What was worrying is that this conversation was in Chinese. Mycroft wanted to know more- who had provoked this exhortation to 'let him go'?

Mycroft leaned forward, to be sure he caught everything.

"他們不會支付贖金"

Someone in China had held his brother for ransom? Sherlock was telling them that whoever his captors had approached to pay wouldn't do it.

"我沒什麼看頭。破碎。沒有一個"

Sherlock was using the mandarin imperative, trying to convince them that he was not worth ransoming. This sentence was said with real despair, and Mycroft was surprised at his own reaction. If I had known, I would have paid, brother mine. You are not broken or useless, and you are not alone.

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. Nothing in the file of Sherlock's escapades over the previous two years gave any indication of his being captured and held in China. If he had been shouting in his sleep in Serbian, Mycroft would have understood. That had been traumatic enough. But, clearly, if Sherlock's subconscious mind was still trying to work out what happened in China, it must have been worse.

Just how much worse became clear a moment later. There was an explosion of movement from the bed; Sherlock sat bolt upright and pushed himself back against the headboard. His eyes were open, but he was not aware of Mycroft, even though he was in his direct line of sight.

"你怎麼殺我？"

"Sherlock, wake up. No one is trying to kill you. You're safe, back in London."

"我想知道!"

Sherlock was oblivious; totally unaware of Mycroft, and gripped tight in a night terror.

The elder Holmes recognised it; Sherlock had suffered them before, in the summer of his tenth year. He'd come home to Parham from the Kings Court Clinic, and seemed to be a little worse for wear. Mycroft had spent the summer vac, home from his first year at Oxford, trying to cope with his brother's interrupted sleep patterns. Doctor Cohen had given him advice on what to do. "First of all, try to get him into a routine. Bedtime is set in stone, even if he doesn't go to sleep. From what I can tell from the Kings Court records, he was usually awake and out of bed several times a night. That needs to stop, if you can manage it. If he talks in his sleep, just let it happen, don't try to wake him. Call me if he gets into sleepwalking, that's more serious."

Fortunately, the ten year old had stayed put. But then the night terrors began. The psychiatrist warned him. "It's no use trying to talk to him when he's in that state. And don't try to wake him up. That's the classic definition of a night terror- to be oblivious of anyone else. Parts of his brain are awake, but others aren't, so he won't recognise you. If you try to physically restrain him, he is liable to fight back and could hurt himself- or you."

While he had laughed back then at the thought of the ten year old posing much threat to him, Mycroft knew that as an adult, Sherlock was more than capable of inflicting damage. Two years working undercover in the criminal underworld would have sharpened his already formidable skills.
of self-protection.

But to do nothing was difficult. Sherlock's eyes were shocked open with fear, the irises blown wide and he was panting.

"現在。現在就做。不要讓我等待"

He was begging someone to do it now, to not make him wait. What form of torture had he gone through, so that he would literally beg for death? Mycroft was horrified, and despite Esther Cohen's advice, he got off the chair and approached the bed. As he put one knee on the mattress and reached for his brother's shoulders, Sherlock's head suddenly dropped onto his chest, and he crumpled over onto his side. Mycroft grabbed him and realised as he did so that Sherlock had lost all muscle tone. Almost without thinking, Mycroft pulled him way from the headboard, and into a recovery position on his left side. When the twitching started, he was ready.

The seizure was brief- by his watch, less than thirty seconds. When it stopped, Mycroft checked his breathing. Normal- a nocturnal seizure that Sherlock would not remember the next morning. He felt the mattress to see if his brother had lost control of his bladder. Fortunately, not. He would have hated to have woken him up to get him changed and the bed sorted. That summer when he was seventeen and Sherlock ten, the sleep disorder had led to seizures on a half-dozen occasions. The ten year old had been mortified by the bedwetting.

Esther Cohen had been sanguine about it, and told Mycroft not to worry. "He's always been epileptiform on nocturnal EEGs. The ECT will not have helped."

When did this start again? He put a pillow under his brother's head, and pulled the sheet up. Then he sat and watched for the rest of the night.

oOo

"What are you doing here at this hour?"

Sherlock was standing in the doorway to the kitchen. Mycroft had heard him get up and use the loo. But on his way back to bed, he must have seen that the light was on in the kitchen. Now, with his dressing gown half off one shoulder, hair mussed up and looking totally knackered, he was giving Mycroft an angry glare.

"Waiting for you to wake up, brother mine." Mycroft glanced up at the clock on the kitchen wall, registering that it was nearly seven am, and returned his eyes to his laptop screen. There was a pot of tea beside him on the kitchen table. "It's still fresh, shall I fix you one?"

"Why are you here?"

Mycroft didn't answer, just got up and opened the cupboard to take another mug down. He busied himself with making another cup of tea.

Sherlock's voice was querulous. "You haven't slept. What's been keeping you up? Another terrorist plot you want me to save you from?" There was a trace of a smirk in that last sentence, but Mycroft didn't turn around to see it.

"You are the reason, Sherlock." He stirred the milk and two teaspoons of sugar into the tea.

"Me?" What's that supposed to mean?"

Mycroft turned around and handed him the mug, which Sherlock took, albeit a bit suspiciously.
"How are you feeling?"

Grey green eyes scrutinised him as Sherlock took a big swallow of the hot tea. "Fine. Why do you ask?"

Mycroft gave a sad smile. "Because you're not fine. That tea will have burned the side of your cheek and tongue. You bit it last night when you had a mild seizure."

"Don't be absurd. I'd remember something like that. What game are you trying to play?"

"No game. Wish it was." This was softly said. "I came to see you last night, only to find you asleep. According to Mrs Hudson, this is a remarkable event, up there with winning the lottery. Her floorboards have been creaking constantly for three days and nights because you weren't asleep."

He snorted. "And you'd believe the ramblings of a woman who resorts to cannabis to help her sleep?"

"In this case, it rings true. And the subsequent talking in your sleep, followed by a night terror and then a seizure, none of which you will admit to having- well, yes, I can trust my own eyes. I was there in the room when it all happened. You are far from fine. " He was now leaning back resting his bum against the kitchen table. He was tired, and he was sure his face showed it, along with the fine stubble on his chin. He needed a shower, a shave and fresh clothes. But Sherlock looked even worse.

"What happened in China?"

His brother pulled petulantly at the dressing gown so that it sat properly on his shoulder. He put his mug of tea down and tied the sash belt, as if it would give him some more dignity.

"You've seen the file. Elizabeth released the full details of what I sent her, I am sure."

"I'm not talking about the intelligence work. Who captured you and tried to ransom you? That little incident wasn't in the file. What did they do to you? How did you escape?"

"What do you know about any of that?"

"Only what you said in your sleep, and then shouted about in your terror. Why did you try to persuade them to kill you?"

Sherlock didn't answer, just kept drinking his tea. Then he re-filled his cup and walked pointedly around his brother into the living room. He sat down in the leather chair, tucking his feet up. He looked at the fireplace, as if willing it to provide some warmth. The flat was always cold in the mid November mornings.

Mycroft followed and sat in John's chair. He still thought of it as such, even though the doctor had not live at 221b for two years. "I'm still here. And I still want an answer."

"You're the one who always told me that wanting is not the same as having. Why do you think it only applies to me, but not to you?"

Silence fell. Mycroft realised that Sherlock was not going to tell him. He studied his brother's face. He looked tired. It made him remember that summer, when Sherlock would wake up from his horrid nights looking totally exhausted. The day that followed would be a silent one, with neither of them willing to talk much.
Mycroft sat forward, his hands on his knees. He had no choice but to hope that stern exhortation just might get through his brother's thick skull. "I want you to listen to me very carefully, Sherlock. I've never put an agent in deep cover for more than nine months. It's not healthy. And when they come back, they have a long period of de-briefing and recovery. It takes time to adjust back to normal life. My people can help. I know we had to push you to get on your feet quickly after Serbia, and I'm not going to apologise for that. Necessity is cruel. But, that's over, so there is time now. I want you to see some people."

"See some people? What do you mean, 'see'? Who?" He looked confused.

"A counsellor- someone who has worked with people who have done the sort of tour of duty that you've just finished."

"Don't be absurd, Mycroft. No one you've ever asked me to 'see' like that over the years has ever made the slightest bit of difference and you know it. The very idea is insulting."

"Then don't tell me you're fine, Sherlock. That is equally insulting."

They seemed to have reached an impasse. Mycroft tried again. "While you were away, how did you keep yourself going? It was a punishing work rate for someone on their own. Apart from your little retreat in Tibet, it must have been relentless. Did you tell yourself that when it was over, you'd come home and things would get back to the way they were before Moriarty?" He gestured around the room, "You and John Watson, together again in Baker Street, solving your little mysteries?"

Sherlock's face hardened. He didn't look his brother in the eye as he spat out, "Don't even try to do this, Mycroft."

"Nothing's the same. You're not the same. What you experienced changes you. I know. I've been there. Fieldwork involves unexpected sacrifices. And when you get home, you discover that you can't recover the time that's been lost. People have changed; they don't understand the sacrifice because you weren't there. I'm sorry."

Perhaps it was the unexpected apology that made Sherlock look at him again. "What do you have to be sorry for? I'm the one who chose to do it. That said, Moriarty didn't exactly give me much choice in the matter, because I wasn't prepared to sacrifice John and the others. I made my own choices, which I seem to recall you disagreed with, rather violently."

"I wasn't talking about this time. I was referring to my own choice- to join the service and go overseas at a time when you were…in need. It was selfish of me."

"Shut up. You ALWAYS went away. From the moment you went to Eton, you left me behind. Oxford? Belize? Didn't matter a bit. I didn't need you." He waved his hand dismissively. "I didn't need your help over the past two years, and I don't need you here now. Go away. Isn't it time you got back to running the country?"

Whatever answer Mycroft would have given that dismissal was side-tracked by the buzz of a phone. Sherlock was up out of his chair in a flash. He picked up his phone from the table and thumbed the screen into life. "It's Lestrade."

He put the phone up to his ear. "What have you got for me?"

Mycroft couldn't hear the conversation, but its effect on Sherlock was instantaneous. His brother stretched his neck muscles like some boxer about to enter the ring. Mycroft watched anticipation bloomed on Sherlock's face.
"That sounds more interesting than that pathetic Whitechapel skeleton. I'm on my way to Tilbury." Sherlock turned away, and was halfway down the hall to his bedroom, when he shouted out. "See yourself out, Mycroft. We both have work to do."

Chapter End Notes

*For that story, you will have to read Periodic Tales
Exalt

Chapter Summary

Exalt (ig-zolt)

Verb 1. To raise in rank, character or status; elevate  
2. To glorify, praise or honour  
3. To fill with sublime emotion; elate  
Why Sherlock says "No" to Mycroft.

"No. Absolutely not."

John walked in on yet another one of those peculiar non-conversations between Sherlock and his brother. This time rather than discomforting Sherlock by sitting in his chair, Mycroft Holmes was sitting in John's seat. His umbrella was on the hook by the door, along with the tailored tan covert overcoat with its velvet brown collar. So, staying a while then.

Mycroft's gaze was unwavering. He fixed Sherlock in its trajectory, as if daring him to break eye contact. Sherlock was not flinching; his jaw was set and his stormy grey green eyes were telling John everything he needed to know about his former flatmate's mood. He's not going to budge on this one, Mycroft, whatever it was you asked him to do.

John sighed and headed for the kitchen. "If either of you two would care to shift your attention for a moment, I could fix you a cup of tea while I get mine."

No reply. As if breaking concentration for a second was a weakness that could be exploited. John filled the kettle with enough water for one cup. "No need to stand on ceremony then; just forget that I'm here." John said this to the kitchen wall, knowing that neither of the Holmes brothers would bother to acknowledge his presence. "I'm used to being ignored."

Over the years he'd lived at Baker Street before Sherlock had ended that relationship on a rooftop, he'd learned to read Sherlock's moods from the tilt of a head, the quirk of a lip, the furrow between his eyebrows. After Sherlock's return, he'd not seen the Holmes brothers together- but he could tell that Sherlock had been pushed into a corner by his brother. There was something petulant in the younger man's slouch in the leather and chrome chair. It was a practiced projection of nonchalance and disinterest, laced with a hefty dose of irritation. John had come to realise that Sherlock did not like working for his brother, no matter how intriguing the case, and that did not seem to have changed despite whatever had happened while Sherlock was away. But, if it was a case that Mycroft had brought, then Sherlock might have been willing to extort something in exchange for taking it on. But the rejection in that "no" was absolute, not an opening salvo in a negotiation.

Not a case, then. John poured the boiling water into the tea pot and watched the loose leaf tea swirl.

A quick glance into the living room showed him that Mycroft's pose was almost the opposite of
Sherlock's slouch. Feet primly set together, back straight and head held high. His posture was impeccable and authoritatively big brother-ish. The set of his shoulders faltered for a moment as he reached behind him to remove the cushion that John habitually kept there. Being short, the doctor often needed the additional lumbar support, because chairs were deeper than his legs could comfortably accommodate. When the union jack came into Mycroft's view, he looked down at the British flag and smirked. "Well, clearly someone thinks that Queen and Country mean something."

Sherlock snorted in derision. "That's his problem, and I don't suffer from the same defect."

The two brothers resumed their silent staring match. John removed the tea bag from his RAMC mug, which he had left behind when he left Baker Street, topping it up with milk before proceeding into the living room. He sat at the table, and snapped open his Evening Standard newspaper. The silence behind him wore on. After ten minutes of trying and failing to concentrate on the front page article, John sighed and gave up. The silence was too disturbing. It positively shouted at him, worse than their usual verbal sparring. If this went on much longer, he was going to have to go home to Mary and explain that he'd been ignored.

John folded the newspaper, turning his chair so he could see the two men. Then like watching a tennis match on the telly, he looked first at Mycroft, and then at Sherlock, and then Mycroft again. Non-verbal signals were being communicated between the two brothers, and John didn't like what they were saying.

"Alright- do I have to get Mrs Hudson up here to be a referee? What's going on? If looks could kill, I'd need to call Lestrade to report not one but two dead bodies."

Mycroft broke the silence first. "My brother is being an obstinate idiot."

John smirked. "So, what's new?"

"In this case, he isn't doing so just to spite me; he's insulting...someone rather important."

"What, more important than you? Does such a person exist?"

This provoked the tiniest of smiles to creep into Sherlock's eyes.

Mycroft gave one of his little expressions that wasn't really a smile at John's jibe. "I am a minor official in the British Government. And I am used to Sherlock's insults. After all, I've had to endure an entire lifetime of them. But, this time, he is insulting someone...who should not be insulted. Someone who wants to thank him for what he's done. And like the idiot he is, he wants to snub her thanks. That's unforgivable. Mummy would not have approved."

Sherlock's eyes widened. Then he sneered. "Don't bring her into this. That just shows how desperate you are. This isn't about me. You don't want a refusal by me to rebound against you."

Mycroft sighed. "I am only pointing out that this matters. It is only right that you accept recognition for a job well done from someone who wants to express her appreciation."

This comment provoked a sneer. "Don't exaggerate. Some committee looked at a nomination-probably sent in by you or one of your minions. That's how it's done. If you thought the Queen was doing anything more than rubber-stamping- or, rather, touching someone's shoulders with that ridiculous ceremonial sword- then you are more naïve than I thought."

John looked puzzled. "A nomination for what?"

Mycroft glared at his brother. "It's bad form to discuss it in front of a third party."
Sherlock scoffed. "What do you call yourself then? A deus ex machina?"

Undeterred, the elder Holmes carried on. "I warned her that you might need persuading. That's what I am doing now. And I can assure you that this was one of the Palace's own nominations. She is…grateful… for the service you rendered in the bomb plot under the Palace of Westminster. Actually, she wanted to do something earlier after you helped in the case of those rather unfortunate photographs on the camera phone. I dissuaded her then, but I could not this time. You must accept high praise from the highest in the land."

"There are lots of ways to demonstrate gratitude- a hamper of nice goodies from Fortnum & Masons was how she thanked you last Christmas. Of course, you already have enough titles to fill a library shelf, and she knows you're overly fond of cake. In any case, if it was the Science and Technology Honours Committee, for services rendered to forensic science, I might be tempted for more than a nanosecond. But, this…" Sherlock waved a piece of paper. "This is…civil service cronyism at its worst. The State Honours Committee dishes out knighthoods to every ancient bureaucrat at the end of his career who hungers for a load of initials after his name, in some warped sense of compensation for a lifetime of stultifying boredom in some ministry or another."

Mycroft rolled his eyes. "Sherlock, whatever justifications have been offered regarding the one thousand or so other persons on the New Year's honours list, I can assure you that the committee saw a nomination that was personally annotated by someone whose wishes must be obeyed. They did, and so will you."

Sherlock levelled a lethal look at his brother. "Then you get the pleasure of telling Her Majesty that I didn't do it for her. Far from patriotic impulses, the only reason I took both of those cases was the same as any other- because it they weren't boring. To accept any kind of bogus title as recompense would be hypocritical; I won't accept it under false pretences."

Undaunted, Mycroft continued. "As to which of the five honours committees agreed to the proposal, it was the one that considers the services related to the criminal justice system."

"Oh, the same one that just awarded a knighthood to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, for simply managing to survive three years in the job without being sacked by the Mayor of London?" Sherlock's voice dripped with sarcasm. "You aren't exactly building a strong case, Mycroft, given who else is on the receiving end of such an exalted status symbol. I have no wish to demean what I do by accepting such a thing. Solving the case is the only motivation or recognition I require. How many times do I have to tell you? I don't care what other people think."

Sensing that he was on a losing side, Mycroft called for reinforcements. "John, you wear your medals with pride. Explain to my brother just what kind of a statement refusing the knighthood would be. He really has to accept it."

John nearly choked on the last of his tea. "Nope, Mycroft. You are not roping me into this little brotherly battle. I wear my medals as a tribute to the men who didn't make it out of Afghanistan, not because I think I did anything to merit special mention. Sherlock's motivations are his own."

"Two against one, Mycroft. Time to beat a hasty retreat and lick your wounds." Sherlock could hardly keep the triumph out of his voice.

The elder Holmes finally broke eye contact with his brother, and looked away. A muscle twitched on the side of his jaw as he stood up and, without another word, gathered his coat and umbrella and marched down the stairs, his disapproval clear with every heavy step of hand-made English brogues.
John took occupancy of his chair, which was still warm. He pushed the union jack cushion back into its customary place. "That little refusal is going to cost you a lot of good will, Sherlock. Are you really sure you want to provoke him so?"

"I don't believe in the British honours system, John. And turning it down will hardly cause a ripple at the Palace. The only reward I need is the thought of him having to grovel in front of the Queen, apologising for me. Now that really does elate me."
Exempt

Chapter Summary

Exempt /ɪɡˈzɛm(ɪ)ˈɛɡ-/  
Adj. to free a person from an obligation or liability imposed on or by others.

John finds there is a difference between forgiving someone and yet still being angry with them.

Chapter Notes

In the Sign of Thee, there is a brief exchange between John and Shloto, which I remind you of, using the incomparable ArianeDeVere's transcripts on LiveJournal.

SHOLTO: No more need for the trick cyclist?
JOHN: No, I-I go now and then. Sort of a top-up.
(Sholto nods.)
JOHN: Therapy can be very helpful.

Ella leaned back in her chair, her long slender legs crossed at the ankles. John sat across from her, as always, the two chairs lit this time by autumn sunlight coming in the large windows.

"So, it's been six months. Why now?"

This time, hearing those words again, John gave a little smirk. Then he decided to repeat the words he'd said almost two years before, "You've read the papers. You've watched him on telly. You know why I'm here." Only this time, he got it out smoothly, and with just enough self-deprecating humour to lighten the delivery.

The tone brought an answering smile to her face. Then her smile faded. "Actually, all I know is that he is back. What I don't know is how you feel about that fact."

"Happy." That was said almost instantly. Then a long pause.

She gave an encouraging nod. "And?"

"Angry… and sad, too." He broke off his gaze at her, and looked out on the last few leaves being stripped off the trees by a stiff breeze.

"Tell me why those. The happy part is…well, more obvious. Your best friend is still alive."

His eyes returned to hers. "Angry? Well, let's start with the fact that he lied to me. He let me watch him die, and let me grieve for him, when he was still alive."

"You haven't forgiven him that."

"Yes, I have. It's taken two weeks, but at least I know why it had to happen…the way it did."
"Do you accept his explanation?"

"He's never told me, not directly anyway. But I know now it was to…" John looked down at his hands in his lap. He had clasped them to stop any tell-tale reactions. He took a breath. "…to protect me, at least in part."

Ella decided that her patient needed to know that she had followed events in the news. Sometimes, it was important to see what the patient would reveal themselves, but in this case, she wanted to probe his feelings. John Watson rarely let anything loose of what he felt. Both the army and being a doctor meant he'd bottled up a lot of things. His childhood, his relationship with his sister— all those things had to be pulled from him. He rarely volunteered anything. Even in the early days, there was an anger about him— frustration about the injury, pain and loss of his profession and being invalided out of the army. But he rarely ever admitted any of it. *Stiff upper lip is his middle name.* She'd started the course of therapy assuming it was depression, only to slowly tease out of him his anger— no, more than that— his *rage* about the PTSD. She had never really broken through with him on that subject. It was as if he had never forgiven himself for it, as if it was a conscious choice, a weakness. Intellectually, he knew better. He was a medical professional, after all, used to dealing with trauma. He knew that physical wounds heal faster than psychological scars, but still couldn't get past his thought that he was somehow exempt.

So, the therapist said quietly, "I heard about that some months ago— the inquiry, when the Detective Inspector said that Holmes had jumped to save the lives of three people. You were one of those three. How did that make you feel?"

His eyes snapped back to her face. "Angry— at James Moriarty for putting Sherlock in that position."

"He's dead. Your friend is alive."

The doctor gave a tiny nod, but his jaw was tense.

"You're angry at Sherlock, too. Why?"

"For not telling me. Not letting me help. *Two years…*" He closed his eyes at this last phrase, pinching the bridge of his nose. When he resumed, he just set his jaw and repeated, "I have forgiven him."

"John, forgiving him doesn't mean you've stopped being angry with him. Has he told you what he did during those two years?"

"No. All I know is what he told the reporters— that he spent the time taking apart Moriarty's criminal network."

"Have you asked him?"

John shook his head.

"Why not?"

His gaze altered, his eyes hardening.

He sat back in the chair a bit, his posture became more defensive. "I'm not sure I want to know."

She wasn't going to let him off the hook. "Why not?" She repeated the first question, but now with the added request of wanting to know what John was trying to avoid.
"Because I think it was awful." He flexed his clasped hands, a tight knuckle cracking.

"In what way?"

He unclasped his hands, his left one doing a slight dismissive wave. "In every way. Sherlock without any of his safety nets is too scary to contemplate. Once I could get past the fact that he survived the jump, I think I am more astonished that he survived the two years alone. He doesn't understand risk. He would have put himself in harm's way- and not just physical injury. I'm scared to ask, because…" He ran out of steam for a moment. Then he continued "…I'm not sure how comfortable I'd be with the answers. I also think that's why he's not telling- because he knows that I won't like what he tells me."

"What would be your worst fear about what happened while he was away?"

He looked increasingly uncomfortable about the whole topic of conversation. "Does it really matter?"

"Yes, it does. If you care about him, then you need to know. It might be why you are still angry; you might be assuming the worst, when it's not true. Doesn't he deserve the right to give you the truth?"

"I don't think he wants to talk about it. You don't know him. He's not the sort. Emotions? All just sentiment to him." He sniffed, projecting what he thought Sherlock would do if pushed on the topic.

She couldn't let him off the hook. "What's the worst case scenario?"

The silence was profound.

"John, if you value your friendship, you need to be honest with yourself. Start there. Then maybe it will be easier to find a way to talk about it with him."

No reply. She furrowed her brow, but waited.

Finally, he drew a deep breath. "He did…what he did alone, because he wouldn't want to be constrained by legalities, morality and all that sort of thing. He's said to the press that he was working undercover- that means he was working as part of the criminal network itself- breaking it up from the inside. Oh, he'd argue it was the only way to keep them from targeting anyone- he'd throw words around like deniability and efficiency, as if that's all that counted."

He stopped; then said very quietly, "I'm afraid that he would have liked it." He gave a sort of shaky smile, and puffed a bit. "I've always thought he'd make a bloody good criminal."

She looked somewhat askance. "This is the man who just saved London from an underground bomb. The same one who just broke up a slavery ring at Tilbury? The man lionised in the press. And you are afraid that he might not be the hero he is described as being. Why?"

"He once said that there was no such thing as heroes and if there were, he wouldn't be one."

"And you believe him?"

"Now more than ever."

"It sounds like you don't trust him to know the difference between right and wrong."
"I'm not sure he does. He's blurred the lines often enough."

"Do you trust him now?"

The question seemed to throw him for a moment. "Well, he saved my life last week, so it seems a little churlish to say I don't trust him now." He frowned, "But, he's come back changed."

"In what way?"

"He's quieter. Harder. More self-contained. He's still the insufferable git that he always was-manipulative, arrogant, egotistical, socially inept as ever, but... something's missing."

She let her confusion show, tempting him to fill the silence with something more.

He put his hands out on his thighs, palms down. "I don't know exactly. He's not enjoying himself like he used to. Everything seems more driven somehow. When I do see him, he's just so self-possessed, cock-sure, almost defiantly so. I'm not sure he'd listen to me if I told him something was just not on."

"When you first saw him, and realised he was alive, what did you do?"

He licked his lip. "I tried to throttle him, then I punched him, and finally I head-butted him and gave him a bloody nose."

She drew a breath, trying not to show her surprise. "You were angry."

He nodded.

"Are you still now?"

"Less so. Now, I'm more sad than angry."

"You need to explain that to me."

"He's changed. I've changed. I'm engaged to be married to a wonderful woman. Nothing is the same. It can't be. What Sherlock and I had is... gone. It was easy back then. It's not now. I'm not sure yet what has taken its place."

"If the papers are to be believed, you worked with him on the Underground bomb case. How was it different?"

This provoke a rather wistful smile. "In some ways, it was just like old times- a whirlwind of action, watching him put together the pieces that no one could- and then finding it, defusing it. Yeah- he was also a dickhead along the way, shamelessly manipulating me at times. But, I forgive him. I haven't risked that kind of crazy roller-coaster ride in, well, two years...But at the end? I went home and crawled into my comfy bed and slept next to Mary as if it had never happened. That was two weeks ago, and now I learn about this latest Tilbury thing the way you did - watching the news. It was different when we shared a flat."

"How's Mary handling his return?" Ella had seen John a half dozen times over the two years. First grief counselling, then for depression. This was followed by sessions to address occasional flare-ups of PTSD, some of which were due to triggers relating to Sherlock's suicide. The last six months had been a positive step forward. Forming such an important relationship with Mary was crucial to his mental health recovery. They'd discussed his self-doubts and trust issues- commitment was something new for John, but he'd been willing to give it a serious try. She hoped that the re-
appearance of Holmes would not destabilise things.

Her question brought a genuine smile from the doctor. "She's been brilliant about him. Right from the start. Somehow, they spark off each other well. I would never have predicted that. He always tried to sabotage my dating, but this is different. She actually likes him. And, weirdly, he seems to like her, too."

Ella smiled, relieved for his sake. "Well, they both have you in common. It stands to reason that if you care about them the way you do that they would see things in each other to like. But, it may be that they feel an obligation, a responsibility not to put you in an awkward position."

He looked confused. "What do you mean…what position is that?"

"Of having to choose."

He shook his head. "It isn't like that. Sherlock and me…we weren't a couple. That's not…it's just not right. He's my best friend. She's my lover, soon to be my wife. The two are not mutually exclusive."

"And yet…you sound like you missed not being involved in the most recent case. You said that you learned about it the way I did, in the papers. You aren't…as close as you were once."

He looked annoyed. "Well, I don't live with him anymore, do I? So of course we won't spend as much time together."

She leaned forward a bit. "How did it work before? When you were sharing the flat, did he ask you to help him on cases?"

"Sure. Well, I say that, but it's not like he asked. He just assumed."

"But, he solved cases without you?"

"Yeah, when I was working or on some cases that were, well- not my thing. I never liked art cases, for example- no real need for a medical opinion there."

"Is that why you think he involved you? For your medical expertise?"

"Yes. And if it was dangerous, and he needed back-up. I could be useful that way to him. He was…better when I was involved. I could soften some of the rough edges of how he deals with people, remind him when he'd stepped over the boundaries. And I kept him safe, when he took too many risks."

"That's a big responsibility to take on your shoulders."

"I didn't mind."

She smiled. "John, you need to be honest with yourself. Was it case of not minding, or was it really more because it made you feel important to him?"

He snapped, "Well, clearly I wasn't, because he felt able to go off and do his own thing for two years without a by your leave."

"So, he released you from your obligations, your responsibility to protect him. He exempted you from caring. Maybe that's why you are still angry."

He glared. "I was wrong. He didn't need me then, and he doesn't appear to need me now."
"Maybe he's afraid that if he is open about his need, you will reject him. If he is as astute as you say he is on the blog, then he will have figured out the fact that you are still angry with him."

He snorted. "You don't know him. He doesn't do friends. You know he's on the Spectrum; it was in the papers just before he faked his death. Relationships are transactional. He thinks he's exempt from any social conscience. I get that now. Finally, it took me two years of trying to come to terms with who he was and why he killed himself, only to find out that he hadn't. Now I know the truth. It wasn't useful to have me go with him on his campaign to destroy Moriarty's network, so he didn't bother to tell me about it. He doesn't think the normal rules of decency apply to him."

"You sound angry about that."

"Do I? Really, it's more that I'm sad. Sad that I don't seem to be useful to him anymore. Sad that what brought us together in the past doesn't really seem to be there now."

"Yet, he did what he did to protect you. He's confessed that in public. Not exactly transactional."

John shrugged his shoulders. "Mixed messages, I guess."

"Are you waiting for him to come to you? To ask you to get involved?"

He frowned. "Well, how else would it work? If he doesn't tell me what's going on, then how am I to know?"

"You have a full time job now; you live with your fiancé. Maybe he's afraid of intruding or taking your attention away from Mary. Have you thought that he might be releasing you from your obligation, your sense of responsibility for him? Maybe he doesn't want to expose you to risk the way he did before, because you've made a commitment to someone else and he's honouring that."

"You don't understand him. His mind doesn't work like that."

"John. Sherlock is important to you. You have to bridge the gap. For your own sake and for his."

She watched him close down. Like a fortress, the drawbridge went up, his expression and body language just shut her out. He glanced at the clock. "Well, I've taken enough of your time. Thanks for seeing me on such short notice." He started to get up.

"Do you want to make another appointment now? We could carry on with the discussion next week." Ella was frustrated that every time she seemed to be on the edge of a breakthrough with John Watson, he dodged the bullet.

"No, I don't think that would be useful." And she watched him stride out of the office, with almost military precision in his gait. She wondered how long it would be before he came back for a top-up.
Expel

Chapter Summary

Expel /ik'spel/

Verb 1. Officially make someone leave a school- throw out ("he was expelled and sent home")

2.. Force out something, especially from a body. ("he expelled a shuddering breath")

A !kidlock backstory, this is Sherlock at Harrow, trying to cope with his differences when he is surrounding by neurotypical boys. It isn't easy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sound of bare knuckles on a wooden door echoed a bit in the small room, and made Esther Cohen glance up at the clock on the wall.

*His time management is improving.* "Come in," she said, loud enough to be heard in the corridor outside.

The door opened to reveal a tall boy, smartly dressed in blue woollen jacket, a black silk tie, grey trousers and wearing the ubiquitous straw boater hat that marked out every boy at Harrow. Behind him was a smaller version of the same, but she couldn't see him clearly. The taller boy walked confidently into the room, and the smaller one followed meekly in behind him.

Brown straight hair, a cheeky smile on a freckled face- she guessed the taller one might be fifteen or even sixteen. Returning her smile, he asked, "Excuse me, but are you Doctor Cohen? I've been told to deliver him here."

She nodded. "Yes, I am; please come in." She leaned a little to the left to see that the smaller boy's shoulders were a bit hunched. All she could see was the top of his straw hat with its dark navy blue ribbon, because his eyes were firmly on the floor. But the dark curling hair that poked out beneath the boater betrayed its owner- Sherlock Holmes, her patient.

Esther was curious about the taller boy. "And you are?"

"Brian Rigby, M'am. Or, I should say, Doctor. I'm his shepherd."

"Shepherd?" She smiled. "I wasn't aware Sherlock was a lamb."

Rigby frowned as he looked back at the smaller boy. "Every Newbie gets one. Two weeks of being shepherded around by an older boy. Supposed to show him the ropes, get him used to the place and teach him the rules. Once he takes his test next week, he's on his own." His frown deepened. "That is, if he passes; I'm not sure about that after this week's performance."
He turned to the smaller boy and said sternly, "I'll be back to collect you and get you to the Chemistry Schools. Don't try on your own. You know what happened last time."

The psychiatrist was curious; "What happened?"

The teenager rolled his eyes. "He got lost. He's done it twice in the past week. And that made him late for class, and made me late for class trying to find him." Rigby looked at Sherlock again. "Right- I'll be back in fifty minutes; got a Latin cram session on." And the boy was gone through the door, leaving it open.

Esther got up to shut the door, walking around the still, silent form of the smaller boy. Once she'd shut it, she turned and saw at what Sherlock's posture was telling her. She started to worry.

She had always known it would be hard for Sherlock to adapt. Being home schooled, and rarely away from familiar places and faces, the thirteen year old would find Harrow a daunting challenge. In part, this summer term was a trial run, to get him used to things. In September, if this term went well, he would then start officially along with the rest of the first year boys. By then, he'd be more used to the routines that all the other boys would have learned at prep school. And by then they would have figured out where to put him academically speaking. He would be the only new pupil entering Harrow at Level Nine already in possession of six GCSEs- an achievement that should put him in classes with sixteen and seventeen year olds preparing for A levels. But, for the sake of his social development, he would be treated as an entering Shell, and be expected to participate in Bradbys House life with all the other thirteen year olds.

Today was the first of her weekly sessions with him. She'd agreed to come to the school regularly, in part to give Sherlock a familiar face to see- someone who had been part of his life on and off for the past three years. While his brother was still overseas working at the Belize consulate, Mycroft had wanted that, and knew Sherlock would not want any of the Parham staff to visit.

She sat back down in the chair and pointed to the other one across from her, but then realised that he still hadn't lifted his eyes from the floor. "Sherlock, please take off your hat and sit down."

There was no verbal reply, only a rapid shake of his head, which made the hat slip a bit to one side. He reached up and firmly pushed it straight.

"It must be uncomfortable. Why don't you take it off?"

"Can't."

"Can't, or won't?"

"Can't." And then he spoke as if reciting, "All boys are required to wear their hats when going to or from lessons." Sherlock sighed. "The only time they are allowed off is in classrooms. This isn't a classroom."

"No, it isn't. In here with me, the school rules don't apply." She had decided to meet him in the Harrow School medical facility. Doctor Cohen had cleared the sessions with the Harrow School's contracted psychiatrist and the psychologist, as a professional courtesy, briefing both about her patient and why consistency of therapy meant she should remain Sherlock's doctor. The room was a sparsely furnished one, used for counselling- two chairs and nothing else to distract.

"I'll get into trouble….they'll find out."

"No, they won't. I'm the only one in here. You can take off the hat."
"But, I'm on my way to and from lessons."

"No, you're not; you're with me."

He shook his head. "I've finished History class and this is on the way to Chemistry. I don't understand how it could be anything else but that, so the rule applies."

Esther tried to understand it from his point of view. "While you are in here, you are not on the way to anywhere."

Sherlock seemed to consider it. She knew he had a literal approach- and was rigid in the application of rules.

"Go on. This is a time-out space."

A little sigh, then he reached up and slipped the boater off, holding it in front of him. But he wouldn't make eye contact. She could see that under the hat, his hair had been squashed and his forehead was red; a fine sheen of sweat on it dampened the curls. It was late May and the temperature was finally heading up into decent figures.

"Now take off that jacket; you must be hot."

"I'm not supposed to do that, unless I am getting into eccer clothes."

Esther was confused. "Ekker…what's that?"

"Sports kit. There are thirty eight items of required clothing, each with its own rules of when and where you wear it. To do it wrong means I get a punishment, called jerks. That starts in two weeks, so I have to follow all of the rules all of the time by then."

"My room, my rules. Take off the jacket."

Conceding defeat, he slipped it off and held it awkwardly, along with his hat. The white shirt looked too big for him, and the light grey flannel trousers were held up by a pair of black suspenders.

She got up and collected both items of clothing from him, slipping both onto the back of the chair. Then she looked back, expecting him to sit. That's when she realised he was shaking.

"Sherlock, what's wrong?"

He didn't answer.

"You can tell me; let it out. I promise no one else will know."

Esther was beginning to think that she may have asked too much of Sherlock, expecting him to be able to cope with all the new experiences here at the school.

"I can't." It came out as a whisper.

"Why not?"

"How can I be sure you won't tell?"

"Sherlock…nothing you do or say in here with me gets told to anyone. It's called doctor-patient confidentiality."
"Not to Mycroft? Or…Father?"

"No. Not to them, not to your House Master, not to anyone."

He still wouldn't look up, but the shaking seemed to ease fractionally, and his shoulders relaxed a tiny fraction. Esther wondered what she could do to keep the momentum going. Whatever Rigby might think, she didn't for a moment believe that Sherlock would fail the exam, so that might be a good place to start.

"Are you worried about passing that test next week?"

There was a snort, "Of course not. It's just facts- history and tradition of the school and the rules. I remember everything I've read about it. That's easy." A hand drifted up to flap derisively at the question.

"Then what is bothering you, because clearly something is."

For the first time, Sherlock raised his head, but it was to stare at the hand that had not stopped flapping. He scowled and grabbed it with his other hand, pulling it to his chest and keeping it captive there, still fluttering. He muttered, "Sorry; please don't tell anyone I did that." He looked back down at the floor, his posture again a picture of misery.

She felt like she was coaxing a turtle out of its shell, and he'd just pulled everything back inside. Quietly, in her most reassuring tone, Esther tried again. "For the last time, Sherlock, I'm not going to tell anyone anything. In fact, if it would help you relax, then do exactly what you want right now. Take lots of deep breaths, and force out what it is that you are keeping locked in. Flap, turn around in circles, go sit in the corner and rock. Do whatever you need to do."

"No, I mustn't." This came out in a scandalised tone, but at least he wasn't whispering.

"Why ever not?"

At first, there was no answer. She waited, patiently.

Then suddenly, he blurted out, "If I don't control it all the time, then I might do it when I'm with the others, in class or in the house, in front of others and then they will know."

"Know what?" Esther needed Sherlock to deal with his differences, to accept them. The anxiety and pressure he was building up pretending to be otherwise would surely make it impossible for him to cope. These weekly sessions were part of that process- a safe place, a haven where he could find ways to integrate processes into his school routine that would keep him going between sessions. His mother had taught him so many ways to channel his autistic behaviours into more socially acceptable activities, but after her death three years ago, his development had faltered, according to his brother. Which in part was why Mycroft had agreed to Sherlock coming to a mainstream public school.

"What is the it you have to control?" She knew, but needed him to say it.

He looked up for the briefest of moments, the first time he'd made proper eye contact, and then tore his eyes away. She could sense his anger and frustration, but the tone that emerged was flat, without inflection. "You know- the stuff you just said I should do. The things that make me defective."

"I don't say that, nor should you. Stimming in private is a way to soothe your sensory overloads and help keep you balanced."
"Father says those things are the reason why I'm not good enough to go to a normal school, why I am always going to be useless. Doing them is wrong, not normal, not even in private. If I do them here, if they find out that I'm not like the other boys, I will be expelled."

"Sherlock…that's not…"

He cut her off. "You don't understand. There's no such thing as private here. I am surrounded by people, all the time. If I lose control and do anything like that, I'll be kicked out, sent home in disgrace. And it's going to happen, I just know it. I'm going to lose control. Have a meltdown, right in front of people in a classroom, or on a sports field. I nearly did when I went into the Shepherd Churchill Dining Hall for the first time- the noise was unbelievable and the smell of the food disgusting; I ran away from it and Rigby had to come find me because I got lost. Mycroft is right; I'm too stupid. I will always ruin everything. When they expel me, Father will send me away to a special needs school and I will kill myself." Sherlock's voice got faster and faster with every word, panic rising in every syllable, until it ended in that final horror. He'd gone from emotionally flat to outright panic in the space of thirty seconds, everything that had been bottled up for the past five days came pouring out in one explosive burst.

Esther tried to calm herself, because she would be no use to him if she didn't. Unlike most thirteen year olds who might use the phrase as just a piece of histrionic hyperbole, Sherlock was someone who had already tried to put it into practice. It was no idle threat- just a statement of his utter panic.

The psychiatrist knew she had only seconds to calm the boy's ragged breathing before he tipped straight into a full-blown panic attack. "Sherlock, listen to me. Turn around, go to the wall and push it- now." It was a firm command, directive and simple. It would help him get his proprioceptive sensory perception under control again, a form of deep pressure that could cut through the anxiety - and re-direct all that adrenaline into something more useful.

He went to the wall and tentatively put his hands on the wall.

"Push! As hard as you can; really lean into it!"

He bent his knees and leaned, putting his full weight into it, straining his muscles as if the wall itself could be moved. After a few moments, the psychiatrist was relieved to see that he was no longer shaking, but focussed on the muscular effort he was putting into the movement.

Esther came up beside him, and spoke quietly. "It's an isometric exercise. Take a deep breath in, and bend your elbows until your chin touches the wall." He followed her instructions. "Now exhale and push out again, so your elbows are straight. Hold each position for five seconds. Keep doing it."

After five repetitions, his breathing was sounding more normal, and he seemed calmer.

"Okay? You can stop now, but only if you feel better."

The boy stepped away from the wall, calmer, but kept staring at it, confused. "Why does that work?"

Esther grinned. "Go find it out for yourself. Do the research- ask your physical education instructor about isometric exercise. Then if anyone asks you what you are doing, you can tell them that you are building up your strength. This is a sporty school, so taking exercise is normal."

She pointed to the chair and this time he was able to sit down. She decided that she needed to probe this anxiety more, but not before she established some foundations. It was always easiest to start
Sherlock talking about facts; feelings were the harder part.

"What classes are you taking this term?"

"Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Maths." Then a breath, "Computing, Tech, Music. Tomorrow I have History and Geography; did English yesterday, Latin and Greek. I've tested out of French... so the House Master suggests Mandarin. Oh, and there's Religious Studies- that's a waste of space."

Esther knew of his fascination for the sciences, and hoped that the curriculum would be challenging enough. "What's been the best class so far?"

Without an instant of hesitation, Sherlock replied, "Chemistry. The labs are so well equipped. And Mister McGarry, my teacher, is brilliant. He's put me straight into the sixth form and he's giving me lots of extra stuff, too- the maths in the reactions*."

Esther breathed an internal sigh of relief. The work in his special interest might see him through the other things he didn't like. She needed to know just how bad those were. "And which class is the worst?"

He made a face. "English. Mister Burrows hates me."

She gave him a stern look. "It seems a little too early to come to such a conclusion. You couldn't have had more than a single class so far."

He shook his head. "He does. We didn't... um... start very well."

"Tell me."

So, he did.

Yesterday, Rigby had taken him to the classroom. English was at the Copse building- at the top of Grove Hill. He'd had to push Sherlock into the room, because there was a great clatter of noise as the as the tide of boys poured in, put their hats onto the shelf along the wall and grabbed their seats. Burrows didn't teach the fourth form in a lecture theatre; he preferred to use chairs with the arms that folded down to form a little desk.

"What have we here, Mister Rigby?"

"Newbie, Sir; name is Holmes."

"Thank you; you may go now."

Rigby disappeared, leaving Sherlock clutching his book bag. The Master turned to the rest of the class as the boys quieted down and opened their notebooks. He was about to start the lesson when he realised that Sherlock had not moved. He stopped and frowned at the small boy. "Take a seat, Holmes. It's rude to keep people waiting."

Sherlock looked confused. He put his book bag down, and walked up the nearest aisle to an empty chair, and then picked it up, bringing it back down towards the front of the room. "Where am I supposed to take it, sir?"

The class erupted into laughter.

Burrows raised his voice- "That will be enough, gentlemen!" He scowled at Sherlock, and said tersely, "Not a good way to start things, Holmes. Something of a class clown, are you? Well, it
won't work here. You can take that chair, collect your books and move yourself out into the corridor, where you will remain for the duration of this lesson. Impertinence is not acceptable. You are lucky that you are still in the grace period; otherwise you'd be written up for a punishment." He pointed out the door.

Sherlock had mimed this gesture as he told her the story. "I was expelled from the room for the whole hour."

"Oh dear." Esther could see how Sherlock's literal understanding could lead to such a misunderstanding. "Did you get a chance to explain later?"

Sherlock nodded. "But, he didn't believe me. And when I told him that I had already got an A in the English GCSE, he said I had to stay in the fourth form". He said it in the deeper voice of a teacher who would not be moved. "I told him that I've already studied A Midsummer Night's Dream; that's the text this term. He said he didn't care; I had 'more to learn than how to pass an exam. I should report to class again next week, and leave my attitude at the door."

He sighed. "It's a waste of time."

She gave him her sympathetic smile. "And what about outside of class? What's the best thing so far?"

Sherlock looked away, and then shrugged. "I suppose it's the music. There's a music room at Bradbys, so I get to play my violin more than I thought I would be able to- and the tutor they've given me is better than the one I had at home." His face betrayed little real enthusiasm; even after three years, she found his expression still muted and hard to read if you didn't listen very carefully to the words. He had his emotions not just back under control, but positively dampened down to almost nothing.

Now the hard part. "What's been the worst part of the past week, when you're not in class?"

He closed his eyes. "Everything." A flat statement.

"What specifically?"

"People. The boys…mostly the boys. They're…" he struggled to find the word before it came out, "…horrible."

"In what way?"

He blinked again. "Every way."

"Sherlock, try to explain it. Give me examples."

He looked at the clock on the wall, and she could see that he was trying to hurry it along- anything to avoid this conversation.

"They're stupid. And they talk about stupid things. They aren't interested in anything that's important. They're smelly, loud, aggressive. And I don't understand what they are saying. Then they laugh at me, and call me stupid."

"Give me a for instance; tell me a specific incident."

He rolled his eyes, but didn't speak.
"Try". She said it with more determination. "It's important."

"They look at me and say things, as if I knew what they are talking about- sports, video games, television, stuff that makes no sense to me. They talk about other boys. And then they laugh at me because I say the wrong things. I don't know what they are talking about or why they waste their time with such stupid stuff. It's like they're speaking a foreign language, and I don't have a dictionary. So, I've stopped talking to them. They're all idiots."

She thought it would help to give him a better sense of perspective. "In five days you haven't had time to meet all eight hundred boys, so you are generalising, based on those you have met so far. That's not very scientific of you. Are most of the ones you've met in Bradbys?"

When she got a nod, Esther went on, "What have you done this week in terms of house activities?"

He snorted. "The Deputy House master has a morning meeting with all the Shells; that's boring. And in the afternoon on Wednesday he tried to get me to do some cricket catching practice with the other Shells. I hate cricket. Catching the ball hurts my hand, and makes it harder to play the violin. What I don't understand is that the Masters don't give me a choice; they say I have to do this stuff."

Esther could hear the resentment of a boy who had been home-schooled and allowed to do what he liked.

"Tell me about your room-mate."

"He's the worst of the lot." This was said with more heat. While she was pleased to hear the emotion, she couldn't help but be disappointed about what had caused it. Esther had worried a great deal about Sherlock having to share a room, had even tried to talk to the Bradbys matron to see if it could be possible for him to have a single, only to be told there were no exceptions. All first years had to share; and half the second year, too.

"How?"

There was no reply, other than a series of rapid eye blinks. It was his tell; words were failing him.

"What's his name? Describe him to me." If she made it specific enough, Esther hoped she could get him talking.

"Billy Cranford. He's fat. He sneaks food back in from the hall and stinks up room with it. The smell makes me feel sick. I can't block out the sound of him eating; it's worse than a pig in a trough. Crisps are his favourite; the rustling of the bags is maddening when I'm trying to read. He's not supposed to- it's against the rules. I told the matron and then he got angry with me and said I was "snitching", whatever that is, and yelled that boys didn't do that. I told him the rule is the rule; he can't be an exception any more than I can. Why does he think he can break rules, when I have to follow them?"

It was as if once he got started on the subject, he couldn't stop. "His side of the room is always a mess, full of stuff all jumbled up- I can't bear to even look over there, it hurts my eyes so much. He farts and thinks it's funny; his sports kit stinks. He's put weird posters on the walls over his deskmen wearing shorts and he laughed at me when I didn't recognise them. 'Football mad'- that's the term I heard the Deputy House Master call him. I can't concentrate with all his slobbishness. He never studies. He keeps letting other boys come into the room; his 'mates' he calls them. They all lie about on his bed and talk rubbish, loudly, laughing at stupid things. Their idea of humour is revolting." The litany of his roommate's faults came streaming out in a fast torrent, driven by anger.
and frustration.

Well, she had asked. A typical fourteen year old- just Sherlock's bad luck.

"I can't bear the sight, the smell, the sound of him. I can't sleep at night, because he's thrashing about in his bed. He snores. I end up counting his breaths, and hoping he'll stop but he never does. Sherlock drew a shuddering breath. "I got into trouble last night, because I couldn't stand it anymore, and took my duvet down to the recreation room and tried to sleep there."

"Oh, dear, what happened?"

"Matron found me in the morning, and she ticked me off. Said I had to learn how to get on with people, be more tolerant of their differences. Bradbys boys are supposed to be 'well-rounded'- well, Billy certainly qualifies as round because he's so fat. She said I had to learn how to cope with people like Cranford, who was a 'perfectly normal boy'. I asked her why no one was tolerant of my differences, why was I the one who always had to bend?"

Esther kept herself still, despite an almost overwhelming urge to hug Sherlock. She knew it wouldn't be welcome; he had the aversion to physical contact that came with his hypersensitivity. But, he was in need of comfort and acceptance, and she found herself wanting to give him that validation.

"It was a good question, a fair one. What did she say to it?"

He looked back down at the floor. In a stern voice, no doubt mimicking that of Mrs Allen, he intoned, "Bradbys boys had been sharing rooms for more than a century and if it was good enough for all of them, then it is good enough for you." He looked down at the clock, again. "If I can't learn to put up with him, then I won't be good enough for the school, and they will make me leave."

She wondered if Bradbys had ever had a boy like Sherlock before. Probably not, but that didn't help him much. He would still be expected to fit into the mainstream, even if they knew that he was on the Spectrum, even if she broke her promise to not tell them about it. Esther thought about it for a moment, and then came to a conclusion.

"Sherlock, tomorrow I am going to send a package to Mrs Felton, and I want you to collect it after classes. Inside the box will be a couple of things that are going to help you deal with your roommate."

He looked up at her, making proper sustained eye contact. "How? You can't tell her about…" he faltered, and looked away again,"…about it. You promised! She'll make a fuss, and then she'll be expecting me to do things wrong, and tell other people. Then the boys will find out, and they will be even more horrible to me. Mycroft said this was the test- I have to pass as normal. If people find out I'm not, I will be expelled, because I am not like them."

She sighed. Esther hated Richard Holmes for destroying his second son's sense of self-esteem just as thoroughly as he had bolstered his elder son's sense of entitlement and privilege. And Mycroft was being a harsh taskmaster if he was holding Sherlock to the same standard that he'd been able to reach at Eton, with his ability to blend in with the crowd, and to rise above it. To be made to feel so unloved for simply doing what Sherlock knew would calm the sensory storm seemed positively cruel. Yet, she couldn't blame the young boy for his anxiety. He had thought it through and knew that if the boys found out why he was different, they would be even more cruel to him. Bullying would send him down a spiral of social failure and depression, no matter how intelligent he was or clever at the classwork. It was the biggest risk she and Mycroft had taken with Sherlock, putting
him into Harrow.

Esther decided that the best strategy was to let him know that at least one of the adults in his life had confidence in him, and was willing to back that with practical advice.

"No one is going to expel you, Sherlock. You are smart enough to do everything the teachers throw at you. As long as you obey the rules and find ways to cope with the boys, you will manage. I have faith in you. Give yourself a chance- it's only been five days." She returned to her instructions. "In tomorrow's box you're going to find three things: a set of earplugs to wear at night, and a jar of Vicks Vapour rub. You take a bit of it on your finger after you turn off the light, and you put it on your upper lip like this." She showed him.

"Why?"

Esther gave him a conspiratorial look. "I learned this when I was doing anatomy to become a doctor. Cadavers are very smelly, and I kept thinking I would throw up. A smear of the rub will keep your nose too busy to think about your roommate's scents. If there are boys in the room during the day, put the earplugs in and ignore them. With your long hair they won't be noticed. And if it gets really bad when you are trying to concentrate on your schoolwork, that's when the third item will come in handy- a pair of noise-cancelling headphones, so you can listen to music at the same time, and drown out the sound of them. If they try to make you talk, tell them you're working on your music and to leave you alone."

"They won't think that's weird?"

"You might get a reputation for being a swot- that's someone who studies a lot and gets good grades- but that's ok. That label will allow you to be quiet, bookish and keep yourself to yourself. Because to them you will be boring, they'll learn to leave you alone. Being alone will protect your privacy. Think of it as camouflage, Sherlock. It will work, I promise, but you have to find ways to let yourself be yourself, too."

He was looking at the clock again. "I have to get dressed. If Rigby catches me out of uniform he has to report me."

Esther nodded her permission and he got up, putting the heavy woollen blue jacket on again, buttoning it and straightening his tie.

"Sherlock, take this and put it into your pocket." She handed him a small, round black disk on a short black leather cord. He took it and examined it carefully. One side was rough, a bit like alligator or crocodile skin, the other smooth. The edges were bevelled on one side, and indented, almost like a bottle cap, on the other. In the centre was a hole.

"What is it?"

"Stick it in your left trouser pocket, and then put your hand in. Explore it, feel the six different textures. There are over five thousand different sequences for you to put those textures together. Use it to calm yourself whenever something is getting to you."

He made a face. "It's a stim toy."

"No one but you and I will know that. If anyone asks, make up a story about it being your family's lucky charm. Lots of boys have them; it won't mark you out as being different, so relax."

Sherlock slipped it into the trouser pocket. "You're sure?"
She nodded. "Yes, Sherlock: just as I am sure you will manage to cope with whatever this place has to throw at you. You are clever enough to figure ways to work things out. And I will help. Once a week, you can come here and talk about whatever you want, and I will help you to the best of my ability. You are not alone."

There was a firm rap of knuckles on the door, and Esther called out "Come in" to Rigby as Sherlock slipped his hat back on and picked up his book bag.

"Ready?" The taller boy was impatient to get started.

Sherlock stuck his hand in his pocket, and expelled a shaky breath.

"Yes, I think I am."

Chapter End Notes

Autism is not something to be silenced, nor should behaviours that bring comfort and control be stigmatised. At the time when Sherlock was going to Harrow, this was not understood, and behaviour modification would be assumed to be the "right" way to "treat" autism. I prefer to celebrate neurodiversity and continue to write my Sherlock stories as a way of showing the extraordinary skills of an extraordinary man, whose brain is wired differently.

*If you want the story behind this, head for Periodic Tales,
Excoriate

Chapter Summary

Excoriate

[ik-skawr-ee-ey]

Verb- to denounce or berate severely; flay verbally

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Excoriate

[ik-skawr-ee-ey]

Verb- to denounce or berate severely; flay verbally

The log fire crackles and brings a smile of gratitude for its warmth. Lady Caroline's drive from Wilton has been long, but now she can relax in the embrace of Mycroft's private rooms at Parham. It was rather par for the course; on the 23rd of December the roads were bound to be horrid. Traffic on the A30 and then the A272 had been excruciatingly slow, clogged with people dashing off to do last minute shopping. Some cars had probably been on their way to the family Christmas, driven no doubt by an army of well-organised no-last-minute-rush women. Still, that route was infinitely preferable to the nose-to-tail parking lot called the M25 and M27 at this time of the year.

She'd not minded it really; the go slow pace meant she could enjoy using the hands-free mobile to talk on the phone with Ara. Her daughter had only arrived at Heathrow this morning, and she wanted to catch up on the news of her life in New York. The only irritation was the drop out of signal that kept interrupting things around Petworth.

"How is Ara?"

She smirks; "was I being that obvious?" There is a tease in that question.

Mycroft smiles. "Yes. There is a certain look you get when you are thinking of her."

"You'll be able to see for yourself tomorrow; she's due in Pullborough on the eleven twenty three train. She's agreed to spend the holiday with us – at least until Boxing Day evening, when I expect the siren call of her friends in London will take her away again. She's celebrating New Year's Eve with quite a few of her Uni friends, no doubt regaling them with stories of how much better it was last year in Times Square."

"She's rather taken with New York, isn't she?"

"Hmm- I sometimes wonder if that is because she enjoys having three and half thousand miles of water between us."

"Nonsense. She's past that teenage I-hate-everyone business." No sooner has he said that when she
sees a shadow pass over his face, almost too quick for her to notice. But she did see it, and knows instinctively what has caused it. "Have you decided what you will tell her about Sherlock?"

He shakes his head. "No, because I don't actually know myself. The reports I am getting are second hand and rather uninformed. This new therapist of his is using a distancing technique- making him exchange recordings before meeting in person. She's supposed to be sending me one from him tonight, before I see him tomorrow morning. I should be back in time to have lunch with both of you, however. And I am definitely spending Christmas Eve and Christmas Day here with you and Ara."

"Don't – please. Spend the time with him. He needs that."

"He won't see it that way- would prefer, no doubt, to have an ocean between us."

"That doesn't matter. What he wants and what he needs are two different things. And, you need to see him."

"Do I?" A little pained smile forms for a moment, and then vanishes.

He is saved from any further explanation of that evasive statement by a discrete knock and then the arrival of Mrs Walters.

"Dinner is ready, M'lord. Because Lady Caroline is here, I won't have you indulging your bachelor tastes. I've put you in the proper dining room."

The housekeeper has aged, but the extra years just seemed to strip away the unnecessary accoutrements of middle age. She must be in her late seventies, but there is no diminution of energy or drive. She is not stooped, but straight as a ramrod- a posture born of determination and pride that no amount of arthritis would ever dare to challenge.

Caroline had once suggested to Mycroft that he might think about raising the idea of retirement with her, and his face had paled and his eyes had widened with shock. "It would kill her. No, I could never be brave enough to suggest such a thing."

They have a relaxed supper, and speak of other things. They never lack for topics of conversation- from domestic politics or international relations, where she would defer to him or on the latest art and music on in London, where he would defer to her. Between them there is also their shared interest in estate management. Even so, she can tell whatever is bothering him about Sherlock is still there. His mind has always amazed Caroline for being able to compartmentalise, to keep so many things going all at once without any outward evidence of any inner turmoil. But, over the years she has come to know anyway when one of those thoughts is not being obedient, when it keeps rising to the top and needs to be manually forced back down. Sherlock is usually the one behind those thoughts.

They make their way back in front of the fire, enjoying a postprandial brandy when his phone buzzes in his tweed jacket pocket. He fishes it out, lifts his chin and then holds the phone a little further away. She thinks she might suggest he gets his eyes checked. All that computer work of his must be starting to take a toll.

He sniffs. "It's the therapist. This is the recording that she promised- Sherlock's views on our reunion after his disappearance."

Caroline remembers the night that she had spent at South Eaton Place, when Mycroft showed her that Sherlock was still alive, returning from the dead*. She had always wondered what their
conversation must have been when Mycroft rescued him from…wherever it was. He had never told her.

Her thoughts are interrupted by the realisation that Mycroft is still looking at the screen, hesitating.

"Oh, I'm sorry- do you want to listen in private? I'll go upstairs and get myself unpacked." She starts to get up.

"Don't you dare." It is lightly said, but she can hear the real stress behind it. Why is he dreading this? He continues, "I will need a little moral support, I think." He gives her a rather pained look. "Safety in numbers and all that."

She raises a quizzical eyebrow, but keeps her seat as he pulls a small side table to the space between them, and puts his phone down on it. Then he swipes the screen twice.

Sherlock's baritone begins, "So, this is my version of the events, when you crossed my path nine weeks ago in Eastern Europe. First of all, let me set the record straight, Brother. There was no 'rescue'. I wasn't in need of your assistance then, and I'm not now…**"

Caroline listens in growing horror at Sherlock's vitriol as it pours out over the next eight minutes. The tone of voice is pure acid, a corrosive commentary that is designed to strip away any pretence of fraternal affection.

She takes a quick look at Mycroft to see what effect this tirade is having. He is looking into the flames, watching the fire consume the seasoned wood as he listens. For once, he is not hiding behind a fixed facial expression that gives nothing away to the outside world. There is pain; she expected that, but the sadness is even harder for her to witness.

"…So I have no qualms about cheating, and listening to your recording before I did mine. I'm so glad I did. Merry Christmas, Mycroft."

The recording stops. Mycroft raises his eyebrow at his phone, and then reaches over and switches it off. Then he rises in one smooth movement and walks over to the window with his brandy glass. He pulls aside the heavy brocade curtain from the leaded glass window and looks out. In daylight from here, she knew he would be able to see the manicured lawns of the west side of the house. At night, there will be less to see.

She gets up to follow, standing beside and slightly behind him. Then she puts her left hand onto his right shoulder- a gesture of consolation. "I am so sorry, Mycroft. That must be hard to bear."

"Don't trouble yourself, my dear. It's nothing new. I am the arch enemy, and hatred has always been the easier emotion for him."

"No, that's not hatred. If he didn't love you, he wouldn't be so angry. He's angry because he's in pain." Caroline remembers something and makes a decision. "Wait here. There is something I brought with me; it's in my case upstairs. I won't be a moment."

oOo

Caroline’s words about anger raise a ghostly echo in his mind. Mycroft heads back to his chair by the fire, and remembers the first time he heard them.

He’d waited outside Mummy’s door for a moment before going into her bedroom, trying to get his distress under control. Calm yourself! This was so what she did not need right now. But the argument he’d just had with his nearly ten year old brother had been loud enough to be heard on the
floor below, so it was likely Mummy knew without even having to admit it to her.

It was Christmas Eve. He'd come home as soon as the Michaelmas term ended on the 5th, because she wouldn't allow him to come home any earlier. Her one concession that horrible day in November when she told him she was dying of pancreatic cancer over lunch at the hotel had been her agreement to a daily telephone call. By the third call, he knew she was rationing that conversation to no more than forty minutes- but he wasn't sure whether that was for her sake or his. In either case, the early talks were something of an ordeal, until they found a way to talk sensibly about her impending death. He learned in those weeks how to read her deteriorating state of health and her pain levels just from her voice. On his mother's instructions, he kept the truth from his brother, and did not try to explain why Sherlock's comment, "Mummy's being boring", was not something she needed to hear.

For the past three weeks, now released from Eton and face-to-face with his mother, Mycroft could no longer pretend. There would be no remission; the ravages of the cancer were plain to see. There was a renewed sense of urgency that overcame her tiredness. She'd send the nurse away and spent her times alone with him going over what needed to be done with the estate. "I'm sorry, Mycroft- a sort of crash course in the burdens that are coming your way; I had hoped to have more time to explain all of this once you'd had a chance to enjoy your university years."

He had just nodded. "Needs must, Mummy. But, with one caveat- you mustn't tire yourself out. I'm sure I'll be able to pick up what I need to…later." It had felt so awkward and horrible to say that word when they both knew that it meant after her death.

This time, as soon as she saw him walk in, her face fell.

"So, he's figured it out then?"

Mycroft nodded. "I'm sorry, Mummy; I tried. But, he's too observant. And when he blurted it out over lunch, Father just said that he was stupid for not realising it before now."

"What did your father say, exactly?"

He shifted a bit, wondering whether he should lie to spare her.

"The truth, young man." Mummy was still able to read him easily.

He said, "Of course she's dying, you moron. Looking after you has worn her out." The bitterness of his father's words had shocked him. Sherlock had just got up and run from the room.

His father had thrown his napkin down in disgust. "Go after him, Mycroft. Make sure he doesn't go in and bother her."

As he recited this, she closed her eyes; he thought the pain was probably not the cancer this time, but something worse.

When she drew breath, and opened her eyes, Violet patted the bed beside her. "Come sit here, Mycroft; it's time to have this conversation. I've been procrastinating long enough."

She looked close to tears; if so, then they would be the first she had shed in front of him since he'd been home.

"As horrible as this is for you, and for your father, I am not afraid for you both. You are fortunate in that you take after him. There is calmness in you, a rationality and determination that you both share." She looked wistful. "You need to understand that those are good traits to have. I know that
his infidelity has distressed you. More you than me, to be honest. I always assumed it would happen. And I have not stopped loving him because of it. That's something you will learn. Love is unconditional. That's why it hurts so much when things go wrong. And they have gone wrong between him and me. There are lots of reasons for that, and they are not all his fault. I want you to remember that."

"I know you love him; that's why I felt he had betrayed you."

"Don't. Please don't hate your father; not for that. There are many things that we've done to each other over the years, but I will never forget the fact that he loved me when no one else would. And I loved him for it. I still do."

That comment shocked him, and his confusion must have shown.

"I am no angel, Mycroft, and there are many things I would have done differently if I could live my life over again. I haven't always made the right choices. But, there is one thing I don't regret at all about your father. He gave me two wonderful children, and for that alone, I owe him all the love I have." Sadness was now there alongside the physical pain in her voice. Without being asked, he poured a fresh glass of water from the carafe on the bedside table and handed it to her. He tried to ignore the serried ranks of prescription drug bottles on the table.

After a swallow, she gave the glass back to him. "It's going to be hard for you both- what happens next. After the funeral, you must return to Oxford. Throw yourself in and just get on with it. I wish I could be there to enjoy it with you, but when you do miss me, just remember this- I've always known that you will succeed. I know you in a way that no one else does. You are the best of me, and you will do me proud. I have no doubts at all about that." He seized on the smile she gave him, storing it away as something he would take out from time to time, to cherish.

By now Mycroft was struggling to keep his own tears from escaping. He tried to breathe through his nose, and dug the fingernails of his right hand into the fleshy part of his palm. The pain kept him grounded. She needs to say these things; I mustn't add to her worries.

"Your father won't deal with my death well. He will be angry. If that makes him run off to the London townhouse, or disappear on more overseas business, just let him. It's better than the alternative. If he stays here, I am afraid that he may take his anger out on Sherlock."

His eyes widened. Mycroft had always known that his father did not deal with Sherlock well, but he'd not thought it was this bad.

She nodded. "Yes, since you've been away, things have deteriorated. I've tried to protect him from… that disappointment, but without me here, I worry about Sherlock. He will miss me in a way that neither you nor your father will understand. I fear he will take it out on you."

"I don't understand."

She drew a shallow breath and said in a faux stern tone. "I'm not that far gone, Mycroft. The argument you've just had. It's because Sherlock told you in no uncertain terms that you had to 'fix' me, and you tried to explain to him why you couldn't."

As ever, she'd nailed in one. Sherlock's outraged reaction to his explanation, followed by the accusation that he was "just like Father; you want her to die." That had cut through him like a knife and made him snap. He snarled back that Sherlock had to "grow up and stop being stupid. I love mummy just as much if not a whole lot more than you do. If I could die in her place, I would. But, it doesn't work that way. People die from cancer all the time, and no matter how much either of us
might want it to be otherwise, there isn't going to be a happy ever after ending."

He couldn't dare tell her this. When Sherlock had just wailed and then smacked him as hard as a
ten year old could, Mycroft had felt ashamed. Still wailing, Sherlock had then fled upstairs.

She patted his hand. "You need to understand things from his point of view. You are his elder
brother. You are the perfect one; the one your father loves...so obviously. You can fix anything
and you know everything." She gave a sad smile. "If I had a pound for every question he's asked of
you, and you've answered, we wouldn't need to worry about the cost of refurbishing the clock
tower. All little brothers look up to their older brothers, but in his case, you are the only other
person he has ever loved, apart from me. He loves you with a ferocity that sometimes scares me.
When you left for Eton, I thought he was going to die of a broken heart."

"Father said he just had temper tantrums."

She snorted. "What does Richard know about what Sherlock feels? Your brother has more empathy
in his little finger than your father does in his whole body; he just can't express it. He's angry
because he's in pain. Both physical and emotional pain. And he doesn't know how to let it out, so
the frustration makes it come out as anger. You're just in the way- a bit like a lightning rod. You
have to learn to look past it, Mycroft."

"I fear it will get worse as he gets older. And I won't be there to help him." Her voice cracked at
that point, and she had to stop for a moment.

When she could resume, it was to whisper, "I am so afraid for him. Even if he gets through this,
the experts tell me that adolescence is terrible for people like Sherlock. And the inability to explain
what he is feeling is the reason why nearly half of adults who have his condition will consider
suicide at some point. It's the way he is- he can't express things, emotions. They scare him, make
him terrified, and that makes him even angrier. The pressure just builds up to the point where he
goes into meltdown. It's very, very hard to remember that fact when he is at full throttle, but the
thing that starts it off? It's almost always that he wants...no, he needs to be loved but doesn't know
how to be lovable."

Now she was crying, and he was losing the battle to hold onto his own tears. "When I am gone,
you will be everything to him. And that is a horrible burden. I know that. It isn't fair. Your father
will point out that to you endlessly and tell you to ignore Sherlock and get on with your life. I have
to disagree with your father. Just find ways to connect with Sherlock, spend time with him, on
weekends, in the vacs. You will be his lifeline. Above all else, let him be angry with you; it may be
the only thing that keeps him going."

She was struggling to get the words out, but kept going. "I'm only going to ask one thing of you. I
don't care if you decide that all this..." she waved a hand almost dismissively at the room "...is not
for you. Renounce the title, give the money away to charity, and let the whole damned thing go;
I don't care. Just promise me that you will not hate your brother, that you will give him the love
that he has to have to survive."

He had promised her.

oOo

Behind him, the door opens and Caroline returns. He has poured them both another finger of
brandy and left it on the little table between the two chairs. As she sits down in chair, he can see
she is wrestling with wrapping paper, trying to remove the tape to slide out a book.
"It's not for you, actually. I bought it for Ara. She used Susan Sontag's book On Photography for her dissertation and kept reading bits of it to me. But there is a quote in here that you need to hear." She started leafing through the pages.


"Ah, here it is. The section is titled 'Flayed', and this is what it says. 'It hurts to love. It's like giving yourself to be flayed and knowing that at any moment the other person may just walk off with your skin.'

He sniffs. "I won't be repeating that quote when I see him tomorrow- might give him too many ideas." He rolls his eyes in mock horror, and takes a sip of his brandy "Re-wrap the book. Ara is young enough to need that kind of advice. Anyway, I'm more sympathetic to Oscar Wilde who said "The heart was made to be broken."

Caroline smiles. "I prefer Wilde's other comment- To give and not expect return, that is what lies at the heart of love. And, who knows about Sherlock? Maybe, someday, he will surprise even you on that score."

Chapter End Notes

* To hear the full text of Sherlock's recording to Sherlock, you will need to read Magpie: One for Sorrow, Chapter 19, "You Enjoyed It"
"Welcome back, Mister Holmes. Did you have a good holiday?" The cheery voice of the Ambassador's PA cut through the hum of the air conditioning. Outside, it was unseasonably hot for Mexico City in May, but in here, it was like a refrigerator.

"Yes, Mrs Harris." Both of them knew that he had not been on holiday, but rather on a clandestine visit to first Miami and then Washington DC. But the fiction had to be maintained; it was part of his cover.

"How was the weather? I hope there were no rough seas." The cover story was that Mycroft had gone sailing in a small craft, fishing off Baja.

"Hot, humid." He sometimes wondered why they kept up the façade when there was no one else listening, but then it was just possible that a bug had been planted and not found since the last sweep. In fact, Washington had been a delightful 75 degrees and full of spring sunshine.

She smiled. "Well, welcome to the icebox, then. It's already been in the low nineties outside this week; I think this summer's going to be a scorcher."

Mycroft had spent the previous three weeks working with the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives on intelligence developments related to a seismic shift in the drugs cartel business. Once the American Federal forces started to crack down on the direct Caribbean routes to Miami, business was now starting to flow through Mexico. What was once a sideshow and a backwater was being predicted by Mycroft as the next theatre of the war on drugs. He'd spent time with BATF, the CIA and the FBI to make sure they were aware of what was going on.

Anita Harris was bilingual, half Mexican-half British and married to an embassy second secretary. That she was in on a Saturday when the Ambassador was happily enjoying the sunshine and sea breezes on the Yucatan peninsula did not surprise Mycroft in the slightest. She was the power behind the throne, and managed the work flow of some seventy five members of staff, including those like him who were more than they appeared to be on the surface.

Her kindly dark eyes were now resting on his face, which he suspected showed some of the tiredness he was feeling. "You didn't need to come in, you know. It's the weekend. His nibs won't be back until Tuesday. Why not take some time off?"
"I've come in to pick up some files and any post."

That made her smile. "Yes indeed. Your usual packet from London and TWO letters this time, the first one came the day you flew out and the next one just came in today." She unlocked a filing drawer and pulled out a sealed padded envelope and handed it over. He broke the seal, signed across the torn seal and took possession of six slim files. She then took out of her desk drawer two old fashioned airmail letter envelopes and gave them to him. One was conspicuously thicker than the other. That was the first thing Mycroft spotted, and that observation set off a small alarm bell in his mind.

"There was also a call for you while you were away, from your brother's school. I told them you were on a boat in the Western Caribbean, so I think that's why the second letter came."

The alarm bell started to ring louder.

He tucked the two letters in with the six files that he would be needing over the weekend as he wrote up his "eyes only" report for the Ambassador, slipping the lot into his briefcase, before locking it and then headed out to the embassy car that would take him the fourteen blocks to his apartment on the corner of Descartes and Darwin streets. He always found his address to be slightly amusing- amidst the huge swathe of Spanish and Mexican street names, he had ended up in a flat on the intersection of two streets named after European notables.

The second floor one bed apartment itself was nothing remarkable; totally in keeping with a junior policy analyst's pay and status. That it was more securely locked and protected would only occur to a professional. Should anyone manage to gain access, their presence would be detected and recorded by a number of highly sophisticated surveillance devices, one of which was made to his own design and unknown to British intelligence.

The rented flat's furnishings often grated against his aesthetics, but, again, appearances needed to be maintained. There were only two elements that he had insisted on- excellent air conditioning and a very good power shower. After taking advantage of both, he poured himself a scotch in the price bracket that would match his cover. The sacrifices I make. Still, with a few ice cubes made from bottled water, it was tolerable.

He stretched out on the sofa, opened his brief case and took the files out. The airmail envelopes sat there in the briefcase, accusing him of neglect. He rationalised; whatever might have happened while he was away, a few hours more wouldn't make a difference. If it had been really serious, then they would have tried to telephone again, or someone from Parham would have called.

Mycroft immersed himself in the latest intelligence reports. Various senior people higher up the food chain were keeping him fed with quality material, way above his pay grade. He instantly recognised the tell-tale touch of FS Ford- the information sheet about Russian mafia links spreading through Eastern European countries and starting to tie up to cartels in Mexico. The swap between heroin coming from the east and cocaine coming from Latin America was stepping up a gear.

This was what he was really good at, putting the pieces together, random bits of data that added up to a bigger picture, usually missed by both the specialist intelligence gatherers whose noses were too close to the minutiae to be able to understand its significance, and their superiors who lacked enough fluency in the detail to be able to understand their consequences. He had managed while in Washington to impress several contacts with his unique ability to straddle both sides of the business- enough, he hoped, to be able to start planting seeds about the need for a dedicated cadre of such able people. It was his escape tunnel from operational work, and a chance to leapfrog the tediously slow promotional crawl up the management ladder to a point where he could make any
significant contribution.

It was almost four hours later that hunger took him out of the flat and two blocks away to the Las Mercedes restaurant. They did a chargrilled fillet steak that was superb, and had a tolerable wine list. He was a regular, and the proprietor greeted him with a smile.

"Buenas noches, Senor Holmes. La mesa de siempre para uno?"

He nodded and was shown to a banquette that was against the back wall, giving a fine view of the rest of the diners, and no opportunity for anyone to look over his shoulder at what he might be reading.

He ordered a starter of fresh fish, his medium steak, and a half bottle of Californian cabernet sauvignon- not as good as the French Bordeaux on the wine list, but the prices were out of reach for a man with his cover. He opened the first of the airmail envelopes, pulling out two typed pages of headed stationery displaying the navy crest of Harrow School. But then the plate of escabeche snapper arrived and he set the letter aside to tackle the dish while it was hot.

Sherlock's first school report, sent to Parham at the end of his year as a Shell, had been something of a shock to Mycroft. Having never seen any of his own reports sent to his parents, he had little idea of what to expect. Unfortunately, his father had opened the letter sent to Parham, and by the time it reached the embassy in Belize, the Harrow report was also carrying a yellow sticky note in his father's handwriting- "I told you that this was a waste of money; the sooner he gets into a special needs school, the better."

The carefully hedged wording and the rather standard stock phrases of that first report annoyed Mycroft almost as much as his father's comment. Despite his brother's rather unique situation of studying an A level curriculum in subjects way above the heads of the other first year "Shells" who were a good two years away from their GSCEs, Mycroft got little in the way of insight about what his brother was actually doing at school. The Deputy House Master who was responsible for the first year pupils was a rather kindly man, and no doubt found Sherlock rather perplexing. His note had just said, "Despite his obvious academic skills, Sherlock is a reserved member of the cohort and needs encouragement to engage socially." That understatement had made Mycroft laugh out loud, but, reading between the lines, if Sherlock had been incapable of coping with Harrow, then the Deputy House Master would have not have minced his words quite so carefully.

Even so, he had written to the House Master reminding him that he was Sherlock's legal guardian, and asking him not to send any reports to the estate. Instead, he asked the school to provide a monthly report in the second year which would cover more than the usual commentary. His letter made it clear that his brother was a "rather unique case of someone who did not need much in the way of academic teaching, and yet a very great deal in the areas of social interaction", so he hoped that it would not be an imposition to provide this in detail. Mycroft asked specifically for an indication of any difficulties in his brother's behaviour and his accommodation of the school's routines. "Do not seek to spare any blushes, please. I must rely on you to be utterly honest with me, rather than feel obliged to resort to the usual opaque reassurance that parents look to receive from you."

The first of the new reports had arrived three months ago and it was written personally by the House Master, Geoffrey Goodison. As Mycroft devoured the perfectly cooked fish, he remembered the man's initial assessment:

As a Shell, Sherlock spent his first year at Harrow studiously avoiding any subject that he did not already excel in, and resisted almost all efforts to engage him in the extracurricular part of Bradbys life. We have a saying here that a busy boy is a happy boy, so we try to engage the Shells
in a wide range of activities, but I think Sherlock is exceptionally adroit in avoiding as much of that as he can get away with- and resenting it when participation is enforced. He did not willingly join in on any of the Yarder sports with the other Bradbeians. This does not help him integrate well with the other boys.

I am trying a new approach this year, of which I hope you will approve. To start with, we won't allow him to take any class whose curriculum he has already mastered. He was tested as performing well above seven of the available options on that basis, and is now having to come to terms with subjects that are quite new for him- including art, religious studies and geography. Next term he will be taking drama, as well, for which he seems to have a natural affinity, given the amount of histrionics that the new subjects have provoked.

That last comment had made Mycroft smirk.

In terms of non-academic work, there were times last year when I felt he had put down roots into his bedroom floor, and we regularly had to dig him out. Once torn away from his books, Sherlock would flee to his favourites- the violin and his riding. At least the latter has the advantage of physical exercise, and his decision to bicycle to the livery stable three times a week means his physical development has improved. That said, eating is a problem as he finds the noise and confusion of the Servery difficult. The Matron has had to resort to a meal card notated by the server to see that he gets a reasonably balanced meal; he has his favourites and will not experiment. Even an appeal to his scientific interests in experimentation does not seem to work!

This first proper report had not pulled any punches, but was delivered with a knowing and even affectionate wording that Mycroft found infinitely better than the generic platitudes that had been offered before.

The skeletal remains of his fish were whisked away by the waiter and his steak arrived. He decided to apply the same standards to his brother's situation that he would to any of intelligence gathering exercise- read materials in chronological order, lest assumptions be made. As he flattened out the pages of the thinner first letter so that they would remain open as he ate, he read the first sentence:

This second term has not started well for Sherlock.

Mycroft took a cautious bite, and read on.

On several occasions, Master Hemming has had to exclude him from the Religious Studies class for calling into question certain points of the curriculum and the manner in which it is being taught. He has managed to offend the CofE, Catholic, Jewish and Muslim boys equally- rather ecumenical in his approach, I fear. Sherlock has decided as well to boycott daily Chapel as a result, claiming that an atheist should not be compelled to attend if he has "scientific objections". While we cannot compel him to attend the services, the spiritual component of our educational offering is too central a part of school life to be avoided entirely. Sherlock therefore sits sullenly once a week with a pastoral mentor, where little is said. For the religious studies class, he will be finishing the term through one-to-one tutorials, where he can dispute in private the finer points of scripture, without derailing the rest of the class. The RE master is prepared to be a martyr to the cause.

Around a smirk, Mycroft resumed eating his steak with some relish. This was not proving to be bad news.

Academically, Sherlock continues to astonish in the core science subjects- Biology, Chemistry and Physics, keeping up with and even excelling against the Sixth Formers. His work is regularly sent up, far more so than any other Bradbys boy this term. He is fluent in French, Italian and Russian.
His Latin and Greek delight the Classics master. Musically, he is a regular performer with the Nine, and took a solo piece (a Bach Partita) in the recent Parent's Sunday concert. When he can study on his own terms, and get the extra stimulation and challenge he craves, then he is remarkably successful.

I wish I could say the same about his ability to get on with the rest of the boys. When he is bored or forced to engage in something he does not wish to do, then he quickly becomes destructive. Conflict between Sherlock and a number of Remove boys came to our attention and we have tried to deal with it quickly. His sharp acuity and perception are his principal defence mechanisms, but it can exacerbate things. Most fourteen year old boys will resort to a bit of argy-bargy when provoked, but it is rarely designed to hurt. I fear that Sherlock's verbal reactions can cause the level of intent to rise, however. We are keeping an eye on this, and will take steps to ensure it does not become any worse. If necessary, Sherlock may find it easier to spend the third term taking a time out at Gayton House. Putting some distance between him and his enemies (alas, he does attract them) might be beneficial for all concerned. I will keep you posted.

Mycroft put the letter aside and attacked the rest of his steak. He had no illusions about how obnoxious his brother could be, however kindly Goodison might describe it. The more anxious Sherlock became, the sharper his tongue. One of his sarcastic comments or some penetrating insight into something his tormentors would rather have kept private would be enough to get him thrashed when the beaks weren't there to protect him. To some extent, growing up on the Estate had protected Sherlock from the consequences of his verbal aggression - few of the Parham workers' children were allowed to take matters into their own hands before their parents intervened and told them the realities of life. It just wasn't on to assault the titled family members, if the workers wanted to keep their jobs. But, this may have encouraged Sherlock to think that he could always get away with it, and life outside of Parham wasn't willing to cut him the same slack.

Mycroft had worried about bullying. He knew his brother would attract negative attention like a magnet. Sherlock was simply too intellectually aggressive not to get into fights. He had rather naively hoped that the academic challenge might keep Sherlock's attention otherwise engaged. He decided to wait until after the meal to read the thicker letter. The fact that it had come a week before it was due did not bode well.

Concern over what was to come in the second letter cast a pall over the rest of his meal. He finished the wine but decided to skip dessert. The evening brought a light breeze which moved the humid air, so he chose to take the scenic route through Chapultepec Park before returning to the flat. The unopened letter was still there, weighing heavily in his linen jacket pocket, when he let himself back in to the cool flat. He closed the curtains, put on a CD of Bach partitas for violin, and opened the fat letter.

Five sheets - handwritten this time - on the Bradbys House Master's own headed stationery.

After the opening salutation, Goodison cut straight to it.

You will recall my last letter mentioned that Sherlock was experiencing some conflict with a group of boys. In the three weeks since my last letter, the problem escalated dramatically. I regret that I was not able to reach you to discuss this before taking steps, but I hope that this letter will make amends. When I attempted to telephone the UK contact (Mrs Walters), the call was intercepted by your father, who wanted to know why I was calling. With hindsight, I should have thought twice, but given the circumstances, I gave him a brief précis. His reaction was to laugh and say that Sherlock had it coming, and that I should not bother to contact you.

Mycroft closed his eyes for a moment. He was able to conjure up an image of his father on the
other end of the phone, almost gleeful at the news that Sherlock was in some sort of trouble. He had not been shy on the subject of sending his second son to Harrow. It had been one of their typically terse telephone calls, made no easier by the fact that Mycroft was in Belize City at the time. He'd been in his grotty flat, where the wheezy air conditioning had just failed again, this time due to a power cut. When the phone had rung nevertheless, Mycroft's first thought was thank heavens it was an old analogue system, which meant it could cope without power. Then he heard the tell-tale hiss of a long distant connection, before his father's voice came on.

"Mycroft, are you there?" There was a faint echo as the signal bounced its way across the Atlantic via satellite.

"Yes, father. What can I do for you?" He kept his tone neutral and professional.

"That Doctor Cohen woman- she's been on the phone to Walters to say that Sherlock's being taken off to school next week. It was like pulling blood from a stone, but I finally got out of her that she's managed to lie his way into Harrow. What a farce! He'll last two weeks. Did you have any idea about this, or is it a hare-brained scheme thought up by a pair of women prepared to spend your money?"

Mycroft had actually held the phone away from his head for a moment, as he struggled to keep his temper. A moment passed.

"Hello? Hello? Have we lost the blasted line?!" Richard Holmes voice sounded tinny through the earpiece in the receiver.

"I'm here, Father. And, yes, I know about Harrow. I am prepared to give it a try, given that Sherlock is."

There was a laugh from the other end. "You are going soft in the head- all that humid air must be rotting the brain I once respected. He won't last; you know that. If he doesn't piss off the teachers, then the boys will eat him alive. You know how they treat anyone who is different. Sherlock isn't different- he's defective. They will crucify him. My God, Mycroft, you endured Eton; can you imagine someone like Sherlock in that kind of environment? It's hopeless."

"I'm sorry, Father, that you think so. In any case, it is not a matter for you. This is nothing to do with you, because Sherlock is no longer your responsibility. So, please don't inter…." There was a burst of static and then the harsh wail of a broken connection. He replaced the receiver with some force and sat in the darkness, fretting about the difficulties in managing a responsibility for his brother that he had never asked for, nor expected to be exercising from such a distance.

The lights in his current flat flickered, calling him back to the present. Then they dimmed, as if conspiring to remind him of that call almost two years ago. He looked across the living room to the place where his torch was ready. Power outages were less likely in Mexico City, but they still happened. After a few moments, the lights came back to full intensity, and he resumed reading the letter from Geoffrey Goodison.

*My telephone call to Mexico City coincided with your absence and I was told you were not contactable for at least two weeks. In some respects, this is just as well, because I can now give you a fuller account than I would have been able to then.*

*Sherlock went missing on the night of May 3rd. The regular bed check at lights out revealed his absence, and a search of the house did not find him. You will not be surprised that there are routine procedures which are followed in such cases- a thorough search of the school grounds and buildings was conducted, but did not produce a result. The local community policing units were*
advised.

He was found at nine thirty the following morning, in the woods at the edge of the school’s golf course. He had been bound and gagged, as well as tied to a tree, that was not visible from the fairway which had been walked during the search in the dark. I regret to say that whoever had done this to him had also urinated on him. He was physically unharmed apart from abrasions on his wrists from where he was tied. He was checked by the school doctor and then sent to bed. Throughout the examination he was totally non-communicative.

Clearly, he would not have been able to do this himself, so an investigation was started to try to find out what had happened. We attempted to get from him what had happened, but he did not speak. Mrs Walters was called, and came to the school, but he refused to speak to her either. After sleeping for the first day, he simply requested that he be allowed to return to his studies. He gave no indication of distress, but simply said he would not say anything about what had happened. He said that he had broken the rules for being out of the house after hours, and would do as many Doubles and Jerks* as I saw fit to require of him in punishment. I said I could not punish him for what others had done to him, but only for his refusal to tell what had happened. I set him 100 lines of Veritas vos liberabit, alternating with Veritas Omnia Vincit**.

You will appreciate how difficult a situation this is. We spoke to several of the possible suspects—those boys with a known antipathy for Sherlock— but no one would admit to being involved. Without evidence from Sherlock, we were unable to proceed.

Mycroft turned the next page.

Three days later, one of our chemistry masters, Robert McGarry, came to me with an extraordinary file. It documented every instance (127 in total) with corroborating evidence of how his lab partner for the past fifteen months had plagiarised work produced by Sherlock. McGarry said that Sherlock had come to him and given him the file, saying that he had been blackmailed into allowing Jenson, a 17 year old Sixth Former from West Acre House, to copy his work. Jenson had threatened to destroy Sherlock’s violin if he did not comply. The Master had become suspicious a few weeks ago because Jenson’s class work was top quality but his testing on the mock A levels was so poor. But McGarry thought it might have been exam nerves, which Jenson had admitted to when pressed.

I asked your brother why he had not been willing to come forward months ago; why had he waited until being assaulted? Sherlock’s reply was that he was not willing to risk his violin, or stop playing it in the house. But, a week ago Jenson had asked him to steal the A level exam from the master’s office, and give the answers to him, so that he might pass. Sherlock had refused. He also said that he had taken the precaution of sending his violin to Florian Leonhardt for some restoration work, and that this is what had provoked Jenson into physical threats. Sherlock said, “The rest you know.”

I have asked him why he didn’t say any of this when we asked. His reply was succinct: “Without proof, it’s his word against mine. And people will want to believe him, not me. So, the proof had to be overwhelming.” Until he had finished gathering the data, it was, in his view, pointless to say anything.

Jenson has been expelled for academic misconduct and behaviour that broke just about every school rule of decency. He has been forced by his parents to write an apology to Sherlock.

This letter is my apology to you. I have already done so to Sherlock. Jenson’s behaviour was despicable and he should not have been allowed to get away with it for so long. The only defence I can offer is that had we even the slightest idea that this was occurring, we would have taken steps

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* Doubles and Jerks: a punishment for breaking rules.
** Veritas vos liberabit, Veritas Omnia Vincit: Latin phrases meaning “Truth shall set you free,” and “Truth conquers all,” respectively.
before things got to this point.

Your brother is quite remarkable. His reaction has been utterly phlegmatic and practical. He does not appear to harbour any particular grudge or hatred towards Jenson, despite what happened. When I asked him why, his answer was typical: "I can't be bothered to waste any more energy on it; he doesn't matter. Now, can I please go back to class? We are supposed to be doing an experiment that I don't want to miss."

Sherlock is amazingly resilient. His focus is unshakeable, and I believe that this will ensure that this incident does not derail his further progress. Of course, we will be keeping a watchful eye on him for the rest of the term. We have not moved him to Gayton House; the other boys in the house with whom there had been occasional conflict seem now to be somewhat in awe of Sherlock's ability to have so thoroughly scuppered Jenson's horrible scheme. They tread rather carefully around him now- and that delights Sherlock, who has never asked for anything more from them.

I have asked Sherlock whether he would prefer to leave Harrow, given that we let him down. He said that he would rather not, as "that would be letting Jenson win." I agree. Sherlock is an asset to the school, and it would be a shame if he were to leave us prematurely. However, I know that this will be a decision that you, as his legal guardian, must take, and I will respect whatever you decide.

Yours faithfully,

Geoffrey Goodison

Mycroft read the letter again, just to be sure he was reading between the lines enough. Mycroft thought that, all things considered, he would rather Sherlock not leave, either. To move him now would be to suggest that he wasn't able to look after himself, which Mycroft never, ever wanted to force him to accept. He made a mental note to call Sherlock during the next Exeat, two weeks away, just to see if he had any second thoughts. But, having feared the worst, Mycroft was somewhat relieved that his little brother seemed quite capable of getting himself out of trouble when it came looking for him. And that was probably the most useful lesson he'd ever learn at the school.

Chapter End Notes

*Doubles and Jerks- Harrow's standard punishments. The first involves writing out lines in long hand; the second is physical exercise that takes place at 5.30 in the morning.

**Veritas vos liberabit is Latin for "The Truth will set you free." Veritas Omnia Vincit is Latin for "Truth conquers all".
"Why did you run? That's what I don't understand. Let's start there." Mycroft was trying to keep his voice calm. He really needed an explanation for his brother's behaviour. Shock at finding his chemistry master dead would have been horrible, but it wasn't enough to explain his brother's decision to remain on the streets of London long after the shock must have worn off.

Sherlock was just looking at him ask the question. He was sitting in one of the small visitor rooms, slouching in one of the soft chairs. His grey green eyes were a bit dull, his focus a little off. Under the influence of drugs. But Mycroft didn't mind on this occasion, because these were antidepressants prescribed by Doctor Cohen, unlike the drugs Sherlock had consumed during his six months on the street. When the hair follicle test results had come back, the evidence was plain: he'd been exposed to cocaine, heroin, codeine and morphine, marijuana, amphetamines, crystal meth, ecstasy- all in the last ninety days. The whole gamut; Sherlock had managed to experiment with just about every easily available drug on the street. Mycroft needed a statement from him about that, as well. A slip up or curiosity was one thing; this suggested a systematic self-destructive streak that scared him. Mycroft needed an explanation, so he did something he hated doing; he repeated himself. "Why?"

"Why?" His brother's question was slightly slow. It was as if Sherlock had to summon up the interrogative from some dark dusty corner of a long-neglected part of his memory palace. But, Mycroft reasoned, it had been almost six weeks since his brother had spoken to anyone. Doctor Cohen had telephoned this morning to say that Sherlock was talking again, and did he want to see him? At last, maybe now some progress will be possible.

Mycroft tried to understand what his brother's question meant. "Why…what? Why, as in, why am I asking? Or are you saying you don't know why you ran?"

This provoked a slow eye roll, and sarcastic drawl, "Any minute now, you're going to tell me to stop being stupid. You always tell me that when you don't understand what I am saying."

"So explain yourself."

The slightly vacant look was replaced by something sharper. "Why, as in, why would you care what the reason was? It's irrelevant to you why I ran. Why I chose to keep running."
"Far from it, brother mine. If I can understand the motivation, I can deal with it to ensure it doesn't happen again."

That provoked a snort of derision. "You've already dealt with it by locking me in here. Job done, result guaranteed. No risk of this little nasty family secret getting out. I've been swept under the carpet. Oh, you will dress it up by saying this keeps me safe."

"Well, there is something to be said for keeping you clean, fed, warm and, yes, safe from exposure to drug dealers and those who would exploit your weaknesses to abuse your talents." There was a sharp tone to his statement as he found it hard to keep the bitterness of the last six months out. Mycroft drew a breath and calmed himself to add more neutrally, "there are a whole host of other ways to keep you safe without incarceration, provided that you were willing to give them a try. The proper question should be 'why are we having this conversation? And I hope the answer to that is that now you've decided to start talking again, you are ready to try recovery.'"

Sherlock smirked. "Recovery? What a lovely little concept that is. To you, recovery means I stop being a nuisance, and start fitting into your three piece straight jacket of conventionality. Sorry, Mycroft, but I'm not going to 'recover', because that suggests I was once 'normal' and this," he gestured to himself, "is something temporary. Hello- this is me we are talking about- not some other inmate of this lunatic asylum. The only difference between what this lot are force-feeding me and what I prefer to use myself if given the chance is that one is legal and the other isn't. Either way, I'm still drugged."

If there was a hot button to be pressed with Mycroft, it was the subject of drugs. He leaned forward and said through gritted teeth, "I've just spent the better part of three years trying to stop the flow of illegal drugs from Latin America into this country, not just because it ends up snorted up the nose or injected in the veins of people like you. There are other issues- organised crime, corruption, money laundering. As horrid as I find your abuse of cocaine, it is only a symptom of a much bigger problem. This isn't all about you, Sherlock. The difference is, you I can force into rehabilitation. I wish every victim, every social consequence of drug abuse, could be fixed as easily."

This provoked a laugh. "Easy?! That's not a word I associate with this torture chamber. No thanks. I don't want to be fixed; I am not broken." Those grey green eyes were now examining him with something of their old forensic acuity. "You're tired. What's been keeping you up at night? Too many spies in the ointment?"

Perhaps stung by the venom in Mycroft's comment, Sherlocks question was decidedly waspish in tone.

"You are a major cause of insomnia. But, it was only partly true that his worries about Sherlock kept his mind working overtime. To be blunt- which he couldn't and wouldn't do- it was another sibling that was causing him even more grief at the moment.

The past six months at the new Security & Intelligence Liaison Service had been a real eye-opener. So much so that his eyes remained open at night when he should be asleep. His post as the number two in the Strategic Oversight department meant he was high enough up in the management structure to be able to see what was going on, but low enough to escape the dogfight currently being waged over its direction. FS Ford led one camp- the interventionists- and Sir Andrew Middleton, the man at the top of the new service led the other- the watchers. Mycroft's boss, Drew Hillier, was a watcher. By nature, all of the staff in Mycrofts's department should be, too.

But Ford was using Mycroft as his own set of eyes in the enemy camp, pulling information from a reluctant participant who would rather not choose sides. The S&ILS was still so new that the thirty
four staff members were still writing their own job descriptions. Sometimes, Mycroft wondered if it would survive. The S&ILS was supposed to be the one able to cross between, join up the dots, stop the silo mentality in the established services, yet so much time was being wasted on ideological infighting that it was losing momentum. It was frustrating and at the same time disheartening. He had once smugly thought the whole idea of S&ILS had been his own, one that he had successfully planted in the ears of several key contacts in the Prime Minister's office and the Cabinet Office.

When he'd first got to London from Mexico City, it had taken Fitzroy Ford all of two days to disabuse him of that idea. Mycroft was at the Diogenes Club- he'd just been accepted as a member, and was eager to enjoy the refuge that it represented. He looked up from his evening paper to see a pair of dark blue eyes staring at him, above a sardonic smile. Ford gave him a little mock salute, then gestured to the side meeting room, where conversation was permitted.

He followed the older man into the room, trying to control his sense of unease. Fitzroy poured a brandy for himself, then a single malt scotch for Mycroft, adding just the right amount of water. Has he been watching me?!

"Of course, I have been observing you, Mycroft- even down to your taste in Scotland's finest. You're too valuable an asset for me not to take the trouble. And…" as he raised his own glass in a toast, "…because we both share something more in the way of DNA than the rest of the world knows, I assume you've been trying to reciprocate the interest. You must have deduced my hand behind some of that fine material I've been sending you while you've been doing time in the tropics. Well, have a drink on me; after all, it was my vote that got you into this place when some other voices said you were too young."

Every one of Mycroft's senses were screaming at him to decline the scotch being offered to him, to cut the man off and try to ensure that the two of them had nothing more to do with one another. His half-brother must have deduced that from the minute hesitation that Mycroft let creep into his body language.

Fitzroy laughed out loud, delighted at having discomforted the young man. "Oh, don't look so mortified. I owe you at least this membership in exchange for your doing so well in convincing people to set up the S&ILS. Most helpful. I don't suppose that Hillier told before you accepted the post that I was tipped to head up the Operational Oversight department. Well, what a pleasant surprise for you."

It had been a surprise. Not pleasant; rather, exceedingly nasty. A shock in fact to realise that he had been so skillfully manipulated by Fitzroy that he had not even noticed it. The arrogance of his thinking that the new service had been his brainchild, that Mycroft's own work to get the right people at senior levels on board with it had in fact been the result of Ford's drip feed of data over the past three years. It had come to him in a blinding moment of revelation, just how much his half-brother had used him. Ford did not have the contacts in the inner circle that Mycroft did. So, he'd used Mycroft to do what he couldn't do himself.

Five months later, now sitting in the visitor's room of the Priory hospital in Southgate, Mycroft could hear Ford's chuckle in his head. "Great minds think alike; mine just got there a whole lot faster than yours did."

"Good God, Mycroft. It must be serious if you can't even think of one of your usual put-downs." Sherlock's sarcasm cut through Mycroft's thoughts about Fitzroy.

He just said mildly, "you have no idea."
This made Sherlock sit up in the chair and shoot him a filthy look. "Well, sorry to be such a nuisance, to take up any of your valuable time. I've do have an idea. Just tell these idiots to let me go, and I will get out of your thinning hair. Leave you to...do whatever it is that is so important that it is keeping you up at night."

"Oh, you've played a part in that, never fear, little brother. And you do need to get yourself out of here. That means playing by the rules and getting straightened out. Cambridge agreed to defer your entry; they don't know about your little 'walkabout', or about this place. You've got five months to pull yourself together and get on with it."

Mycroft's motivations were not entirely unselfish. As much as he wanted his brother to succeed in life for his own sake, he was also becoming aware of the personal downside to his brother's failures. Sherlock was the reason why Mycroft had caved into Fitzroy's demands over the past six months. That conversation five months ago at the Diogenes Club laid it all out so clearly.

"So, you are describing yourself to Sir Andrew as an advance party. He's due back at Christmas, but you've beaten a hasty retreat to England to do a bit of searching. Tsk, tsk...I hear our little brother has gone missing. Slipped his leash and got himself lost in London. Shame that, wouldn't do for such a delicious bit of news to get exposed, now would it? It could compromise his inheritance and your security clearance."

The older man swirled the brandy around in his glass before taking another mouthful. "So, brother mine, do listen carefully to the voice of reason from your older and wiser half sibling. You will continue to provide me with the inside line on the watchers. Keep your nose clean with me, and I will make sure your brother's secret stays safe. One breath of this reaching other ears means I will destroy you both with a few revelations, and then claim what is mine."

Mycroft knew Fitzroy's agenda involved pushing Sherlock aside in the line of accession. Should anything happen to the current holder of the Viscountcy, Ford intended to stake a claim. Given Sherlock's current debacle, he'd have every chance of succeeding in such a claim. That made Mycroft vulnerable in more ways than one- being killed in his line of work was always a possibility- and he wouldn't put it past the man to organise such a thing if he thought he could get away with it. That also made Sherlock doubly vulnerable.

As if reading his thoughts, Fitzroy had taken another sip of his brandy before going on, "Of course, if I were to find the boy first, well, who knows what might happen? I might strip him of his identity, his wealth and privilege, pack him off to the south of France and then see how he gets on with life. I managed it, after all, without ending up on the streets. Oh, but I forget, he isn't quite the same chip off our mother's block as we are, is he? Doubt he'd survive for long."

It was the moment when Mycroft realised that finding Sherlock was the most important thing he would ever undertake in his professional career. Because if he didn't, then he wouldn't have a long career. Only when Sherlock was safe would he be able to start building the case against FS Ford. It would have to be watertight, irrefutable and backed up by so much evidence that the powers that be would have to believe him, no matter what Ford said. And it would all have to be done so stealthily that the best mind in the British intelligence system would not see him doing it. No wonder I can't sleep at night.

Sherlock sniffed. "And what's the alternative, if I don't play by your rules? Do you just lock the door and throw away the key? You'd like that, wouldn't you? No more annoying little drag anchor on the illustrious career you have planned for yourself. No little embarrassments. Why don't you just admit it? Let me go- I'll change my name, renounce anything and everything you want me to, sign any piece of paper. Your secret will never be exposed. Just let me make my own choices."
Mycroft stood up and looked down at his little brother with a frown. "It's not that simple. I wish it was, but it isn't. I don't have the luxury of pretending that you don't exist. So, my advice is simple-just do it, Sherlock- co-operate. You are the only one keeping yourself in here, so do whatever these people tell you to do in order to get out. For once in your life, think things through. The sooner you are out and behaving yourself at University, the better for both of us."

Having said what needed to be said, Mycroft got up and left the room, followed by a pair of grey green eyes. He didn't want to deal with the questions that he saw in them.
Execute /ˈɛksɪkjuːt/

verb: - put (a plan, order, or course of action) into effect;
- carry out a sentence of death on (a legally condemned person)

Ever wondered why CAM's list of "pressure points" for Sherlock included the word "Redbeard"? This story is consistent with MY universe, written BEFORE series four. If it was just a case of a family pet being put down due to sickness or old age, then how would someone outside of the family know about it years later? Somehow, it had to be "public" knowledge, or something had to have happened as a result of it-something which created a public record, a pressure point. And why would Mycroft use the word to warn Sherlock not to "get involved" between John and Mary? This is the explanation of something that happened during Sherlock's childhood at Parham.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As she waiting for someone to pick up on the other end, Mrs Walters took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. She knew better than anyone that Sherlock's ability to disappear didn't mean that he was actually in danger, or that he had left the estate grounds. That had happened only once before two years ago, out of the hundreds of times that he'd just conveniently vanished whenever there was something that he would prefer to avoid. Still, that one experience, when the nine year old walked sixty five miles from Parham to Eton to find Mycroft* was always enough to make her anxious. That was before the Viscountess had died just over a year ago. Now she thought of herself as Sherlock's surrogate maternal figure – not that he would recognise her as such. And every time he disappeared, she felt another grey hair sprouting.

If Sherlock had left Parham this time, then it wasn't like he was trying to find Mycroft. The Viscount was not even at Oxford this term. The last contact telephone number was somewhere in Costa Rica. He'd be no help this time, not to his brother or to her, for that matter. He was doing a term abroad- some research related to his final year dissertation.

It didn't help ease her mind that the cause of Sherlock's disappearing act was the same this time as it had been two years ago- an argument with his father. The two of them rarely met these days; the de facto cease-fire negotiated by Mycroft between Richard Holmes and his younger son generally kept the two from face-to-face contact.**

When the telephone was finally answered on the eighth ring, she felt a momentary surge of relief. She'd been doubtful that the gamekeeper was actually in to answer the phone. "Oh, Mister Wallace, thank goodness I've managed to catch you before you went out."

"Well, technically, I was out- in the Landrover and just about to turn the key when I heard the
phone. What can I do for you, Mrs Walters?"

"I don't suppose Sherlock is with you?" She couldn't help but keep the anxious hope from creeping into her question.

"He's done a runner again?"

"I'm afraid so; he and Mister Holmes had an argument."

Rather world-weary, Frank Wallace asked the obvious, "What was it about this time?"

"You know that Mister Holmes won't have a dog in the house. Well, I'm not sure you know about the new bookkeeper? Cheryl Downing started a couple of months ago. She's been working in the Estate Office, and without knowing any better she started bringing her dog into work. Turns out he's been getting upset about being left at home in the cottage all day, so she's been keeping him in the office with her. And, naturally, Sherlock spotted him. An Irish setter- all lollopy and the two of them are suddenly best pals. The bookkeeper didn't know the house rule; she encouraged them, said it gave them both a built-in playmate."

Wallace interrupted. "And Holmes found them together…in the main house somewhere?"

"Yes, indeed- yesterday. In Sherlock's bedroom. He'd sneaked him in up the back stairs. But then the dog got excited and started barking when they were playing. Well, you can imagine the rest. He's forbidden even to see the dog now. And Mister Holmes told Mrs Downing in no uncertain terms that if he ever spotted the dog anywhere on the estate other than inside the fence around their cottage garden that she could look for a new job and a new house. The poor woman was terrified; you know how he can get."

"Have you spoken to her? Sherlock's probably over at the cottage now."

"Well, I'm not daft, Frank Wallace- obviously that was the first place I tried. But, according to her husband, it's her day off and she's out shopping in Littlehampton today. Left the dog with him, but he says the setter is an escape artist, and has disappeared from their back garden."

Wallace sniggered. "Well, he might have been assisted on this occasion by a certain eleven year old boy who is also a relative of Houdini. I'll take a look around, on my way up to the pheasant pens in the Northwood."

"It's not a joking matter, Mister Wallace. Sherlock's playing truant- missed both his chemistry lesson and his violin lesson- and you know he doesn't ever miss those. I'm just worried he might have run away again."

"Oh… right. I'll take a quick drive around and see if I can spot him. If not, then I'll call in some help and we'll do a full scale search, but we'll have to move fast; the light will start fading in a couple of hours."

Mrs Walters twisted the cord of the phone in her hand. "All that assumes he wants to be found. If Sherlock is in one of his not-listening-to-anyone moods, you might have more luck calling the dog. According to Mister Downing, its name is 'Reddy', but Sherlock calls him 'Redbeard'."

That made Frank snort. "Hasn't dressed him up with a black eyepatch, has he?"

She let her smile carry over into her tone of voice as she answered, "Not yet, but it's early days- or at least it would have been before his father forbade him to ever see the dog again."
Her advice made sense, so he stopped in at the tied cottage off Rackham Street to see if Mister Downing used a dog whistle. It would help if he did; even if Sherlock was playing hard to get, it would probably not apply to a well-trained dog.

"Well trained? You've got to be kidding. Have you ever seen my wife's dog?" Gareth Downing was a rather ordinary looking man- middle height, a bit of a stomach that spoke of too many hours spent in front of computer screens. And he seemed to have a permanent scowl on his face, which got ever worse when Frank introduced himself as the Parham gamekeeper.

"That bloody dog has been nothing but trouble. Come in, come in." He beckoned Frank into the cottage. "So, it's got out and been seen bothering the game birds? I warned Cheryl that if that happened, it would probably get shot."

"We don't do that sort of thing at Parham. But, I do need to find him- any ideas where he might run off to?"

"As if I'd know; I don't walk the animal, or should I describe what my wife does as more a case of having her arm pulled off when it's on a lead? On the days I get stuck with it, I just shut it out in the garden. I'm an IT consultant and I work from home three days a week- that is, when it isn't driving me mad by barking its head off out there. That bloody dog is about to get cited as the cause in our divorce papers."

"So, no whistle then?"

That provoked a look of disgust. "It won't come when it's called; hasn't a clue what a whistle is. If it gets off the lead, she spends hours trying to entice it back. Eventually, food does the trick."

As he walked further down the hall, Downing pointed into the lounge of the tiny cottage. "Just take a look at that sofa. That's what that bloody dog did yesterday, when Cheryl said it had been banished from Parham House. I'm not surprised, given how destructive it is."

Frank peeked in and saw the remains of the side of the sofa. The foam under the fabric had been torn off in big chunks, and the fabric shredded into strips. He gave a rueful look to the man in commiseration. "You should see what damage a bored Labrador can do- once chewed a hole right through a kitchen wall. That's why we keep them in the kennels."

The man snorted. "Yeah, we've got a kennel and a run; made her put it in when she decided to drag me away from London. 'Last chance to make our marriage work', she said. Only she goes off to work up at the house and leaves me with the dog barking its head off all day in the garden."

He turned to face Wallace, his arms akimbo on his hips. "I agreed, reluctantly it has to be said, to a King Charles spaniel - she selected a puppy and everything, but when Cheryl went to pick him up, she came back with a monster- a bloody great big red setter. Turned out the breeder was trying to get rid of him, and she fell for it. 'The scowl on his face said it all. 'Cheryl won't have it sleeping outdoors; she loves that dog more than she loves me, if truth be told."

Frank felt decidedly uncomfortable. He really didn't want to know about the guy's marital problems. "Look, I'm sorry to bother you. I'm not actually after the dog, but I think he may be with the boy that I am looking for. He's disappeared- and we think he may have taken the dog with him. Have you seen anyone talking to the dog?"

Downing nodded. "Skinny kid, lots of dark curly hair?" When Frank nodded, the man continued, "Yeah, caught him hanging around a few days ago and told him to bugger off. The kids around here…they come up from Amberley and just skulk about. I can't stand the countryside; there's
nothing for these louts to do, so they make their own fun by making a nuisance of themselves. At
least in London they hang about on their skateboards."

"Have you seen him today?"

When Downing shook his head, Frank apologised for disturbing him and left. As he got back into
the Landrover, the man stood at the porch and called out, "I'll tell Cheryl you were here and asking
about the dog. I swear it's going to cost her the job. I told her last night to get rid of it. If you find
him, you can take it straight to the pound. Do us a favour, please."

Wallace drove north, and decided to check out Rackham plantation. There were feeders up there to
be seen to, and it would give him an excuse to walk around and see if he could find any sign of
Sherlock. The pheasant shooting season had ended a week ago, but the birds who had survived the
season would be fed until they started nesting in March. He took the track off the Greatham road,
into the trees, and up to the top of the little wooded ridge. He then parked, and switched off the
engine. After re-filling the hopper of the grain feeder and checking the water container, he stopped
and just listened. The trees were bare of leaves, so sound carried surprisingly far, especially on this
little hill. He could hear birds, including the tock-tock call of male pheasants, but nothing else.

Frank moved on, this time up the road to Greatham Common. The trees were more open here, he
could use his binoculars. A bit of movement caught his eye, something moving in the shrubby
undergrowth some five hundred meters away from where he parked up, and for a moment the
patch of red suggested an Irish setter, but then the wind must have carried his scent, and an antlered
head jerked up to look in his direction, before bolting into the trees. He sniffed. Frank would have
to tell the deerstalker that the fallow deer from Wiggonholt were starting to find their way onto the
estate. Parham's deer park had a semi-domesticated herd, well-fenced from the rest of the estate, to
avoid interfering with the shooting parties. But it was a hospitable environment, so the native deer
tended to head for the estate at the end of the winter when foraging was scarce.

Frank decided he had to start thinking the way Sherlock would. He'd want to be far away from the
house, and in a place where his father was unlikely to see him and the dog together. *Ah, think like a
pirate*-pirates like water. He realised then that Sherlock was most likely to be at the Wassel Pond,
up at the top of Northpark Woods. Unlike the pond by the house, Wassel was wild and overgrown,
and about as far off the beaten track as one could get at Parham. Frank threw the Landrover into
gear and headed up the track through Sparrite Farm.

He parked up more than a quarter of a mile away, just off the main east-west track that bisected
Northpark Wood. He walked up the hill and used the binoculars to see if he could spot the pond
that lay below the hill, up tight against the north wall of the estate. But, the trees here included a lot
of pine, yew and evergreen holly. He'd have to get closer.

Stalking Sherlock was a bit like stalking a wild deer. Both were skittish, and tended to startle at the
unexpected sound of a breaking twig, cracking beneath a heavy gamekeeper's boot. And when he
had a mind to avoid contact with humans, he was the very devil to capture. Frank had no one to
blame but himself for that. He'd helped make Sherlock into a creature that moved through these
woods as if he was a native species, teaching the inquisitive boy about the wildlife and the fauna of
the estate. Like a deer, Sherlock had his habits, though, and his fondness for water made it likely
that Frank would find him.

The last thirty yards down the hill he took very slowly, making sure he had cover. He stopped and
put the binoculars up, using the crook of a broken, dead branch to serve as a tripod. What he saw
made him smile.

Sherlock had made a raft, and he was on it, with the dog, about a third of the way across the pond.
With his more experienced eye, Frank could see that the logs used were a bit too small in circumference to give a stable platform relative to the weight on it, but the lashing had been done well. *Nice to see him using all those knots I taught him.* The boy had used baling twine. The blue plastic woven material was easy enough to pilfer—any of the six farms on the estate would have had a plentiful supply left over from the harvest, and he had a dozen rolls of it himself in the pheasant sheds—useful for repairing the nets and chicken wire on the pens. It was also tough as old boots and easy for the boy's small fingers to manage.

Sherlock was using a long piece of straight hazel—probably brought up from the coppiced stools along the edge of the Rackham plantation—to pole the raft along, trying to steer it into the middle, where there was deeper water. Wassel Pond was fairly shallow as far out as about four meters from the reed bed encircling the shores, but in the middle managed to reach a respectable three meters in depth. Unlike the pond by the house, this one wasn't managed, so there were all sorts of snags—hidden fallen branches and odd rocks at the bottom; and the drainage was poor, so it was murky. Not the ideal conditions for a boy to swim in—especially if the early February temperature made it positively dangerous. And Sherlock was struggling to make the unwieldy craft obey his steering.

Redbeard was the complication making their journey perilous. The dog wasn't particularly heavy—most Irish setters were about thirty kilos in weight, which was more or less what Sherlock weighed. The trouble was that the dog wouldn't sit still or lie down, but was standing—somewhat unsteadily it must be admitted, and then moving from side to side of the raft. The shifting position not only made it hard to steer, but also strained the slender logs against their lashings, as the weight moved to accommodate the changes in their levels in the water.

The dog was scrabbling, its claws failing to get any purchase on the moving surface of the raft. Then the setter lost its balance and went off the side of the raft with a big splash. Sherlock managed, just, to stay on, using the pole to steady himself enough so that he didn't fall in. The dog was swimming, its front paws thrashing the water.

Frank could hear Sherlock's soprano voice shouting, "That's it, Redbeard— you can swim. Pirates can *always* swim." At the sound of his voice, the dog paddled around and headed back towards the raft.

Dropping his binoculars, Frank was already in motion, praying that what was about to happen didn't actually happen.

But it did.

He was almost to the water's edge when the dog tried to get back onto the raft, heaving its front paws onto the side, and totally unbalancing the ramshackle craft which dipped low into the water on that side. Sherlock slithered and slid about on the heaving wet logs and then Frank watched in horror as he went off the stern of the raft and disappeared in a small splash.

The gamekeeper was knee deep, pushing his way through the reeds when he heard a cough and splutter. As he parted the bulrushes, he could see that Sherlock had surfaced, but the dog was now coming up towards the boy. He shouted, "Just swim away from him, Sherlock. Don't let him get near you." He thought the dog might try to clamber onto Sherlock and in the process shove him under.

Sherlock's pale face was covered by his long wet hair, plastered across his eyes and Frank could hear his gasping breaths. *He can't see the dog.*

"Swim towards me, Sherlock; follow my voice." He pushed himself deeper into the water, his boots filling and being sucked down into the mud. He tried to remember what Sherlock was
wearing- would wellington boots be slowing his progress? The sodden jacket must be hampering his swimming because the boy was struggling, trying to swim in his direction but not making much progress. The dog was gaining on him.

"Kick your feet free of the boots, keep following my voice." He tried to keep the panic out of his voice as the water reached his chest. The water was cold, and he started to realise that Sherlock's normal confident swimming strokes were becoming really laboured.

oOo

"You know that pirate captains are not supposed to walk the plank." Frank handed over the second cup of hot chocolate to the puddle of blankets, boy and dog that were sitting about as close to the fire as they could get without actually being in it.

He tried the lame joke as a way of trying to get Sherlock to talk again. When he'd got him ashore and then tried to pick him up to carry him back to the car, the first thing that Sherlock had said was "I'm not going without Redbeard." Covered in mud, the dog had finally managed to clamber out of the pond and came when Sherlock called to him. Scooping up the boy who was now shivering, Frank started up the hill, with the dog following them.

"I can't go home. Don't take me there. Father said he would shoot Redbeard if he was anywhere near the house."

"Then we won't endanger your first mate, I promise." Frank put Sherlock into the passenger seat and fastened the seatbelt, before bundling the soaked dog into the back compartment. There was a dog guard for just this purpose- kept the Labradors and spaniels out of trouble. "I'll drop him off back at the Downing's cottage once I've got you home and warm, young man."

Sherlock's anxiety went through the roof and he started to rock in the seat. "No. The man there is going to send him away. She won't be able to stop him. I had to rescue Redbeard; he wants to put him in prison."

"How do you know that?" Frank put the car into first gear and moved off down the track, keeping one eye on Sherlock.

"I heard him shouting, telling Redbeard that he was going to do it. That's why we had to run. I can't go home, and neither can he."

"Well, how about a compromise? We'll all go to my cottage, and I'll tell Mrs Walters that you're going to stay with me tonight. But that's only if I can get you warmed up enough to stop shivering. I can't have you coming down with hypothermia."

Sherlock's eyes looked dull. "Hypothermia- that's Greek- means too little temperature. Is that why I am cold?"

Frank turned up the heater in the car full blast, and hoped it would be enough.

Almost an hour later, he had relaxed enough to sit down and extend his own feet to the fire. The boy's sodden clothes were in the washer-dryer, and he was now clad in an old pyjama top of Frank's that reached to his knees. The dog had been hosed down enough to be allowed in- that had been demanded, despite his wish to put him in the kennels with the other dogs. Sherlock had dug his heels in, insisted that Redbeard had to be brought into the cottage.

"You know I don't let the dogs in here."
"Redbeard's not one of your dogs. He's my friend and I want to be with him." When Frank had tried to reason with him, Sherlock had just grabbed the blanket and started to head for the door.

"You're not really going to go out there? Sherlock, it's freezing."

Frank had not counted on the stubborn streak that ran right through Sherlock. It was only when he went out and watched the bare-foot boy un latch the gate of the run and crawl into the kennel at the back that he finally relented. "For God's sake, Sherlock- I didn't pull you out of the pond to have you catch pneumonia by sleeping out in the kennel! Get out here immediately."

There was no reply.

Frank went back into the house, brought out a bowl of dog food and called to Redbeard. The dog's hunger drew him out, and the gamekeeper took him into the kitchen. A silent Sherlock followed, and Frank parked him back in front of the fire. "The dog stays in the kitchen."

The instant he went upstairs to change his own sodden clothes and find something warm for Sherlock, he heard the dog's nails clicking on the wooden floor of the hall. When he got back downstairs, the two of them were sitting in front of the fire together.

Sherlock's hair had gone curly in the heat. The dog sat beside him on the floor, leaning into the boy. Sherlock had thrown a blanketed arm around the setter. Frank wondered if the animal's body heat was helping to stop the shivering. *He's my friend.* To Frank's knowledge, Sherlock had never used that word before. He didn't have the heart to separate them. But he also had to figure out what was best to do next.

Sipping on his own mug of hot chocolate, he asked quietly, "So, what was the plan? You built that raft over the last couple of days?"

There was a nod. Sherlock kept looking into the fire. The silence was broken only by the crackle of the flames.

Frank tried to think it through. "Ah, you were practicing. Getting Redbeard used to being on the raft in the pond. Then when you thought he was ready, what? You'd get the raft down to the river…." Frank smiled. "So that's the reason you made the logs so light- because anything heavier would be too heavy to drag down there?"

His deduction was rewarded by another nod. Encouraged, Frank went on. "So, the two of you would go down river on the raft." It wasn't a mad idea. The Arun would take them past Arundel and to the sea at Littlehampton. If they tried to walk it, they'd be spotted. Dogs weren't allowed on the local buses, unless they were guide dogs. If they tried to get on a train, the station master would probably stop them- especially if he didn't have the money to pay for a ticket. And the dog would attract attention, making it hard to escape notice.

Frank found himself respecting the boy's thought processes. So many people on the estate thought of Sherlock as a vulnerable child, but the gamekeeper was beginning to realise that there was a lot more in that brain than most people realised. "Where would you launch it?"

Sherlock's brow creased. "The most obvious place- the shortest distance between Wassel and the river; that's one thousand one hundred and seventy three meters northwest. I paced it out. Cutting through the fields is easy, and there is only Greatham road to cross, so I wouldn't be seen."

"What was the final destination?"

There was no reply for a moment, then after a sigh, "You won't let me do it now, so I might as well
tell you. The plan was to get off the river at Lyminster. There's a big caravan site there - lots of them get stored there over the winter. I'd break into one we'd have shelter, until I could figure out how to get enough money to get us to Dover - and then I'd smuggle us aboard a lorry going across the channel."

That surprised him. "And what then?"

"France. My mother had relatives there, in the south. They might agree to hide me, and Redbeard. They don't like Father any more than I do."

"And all this to be able to keep the dog?"

A nod.

Frank shook his head. "That would be theft, Sherlock. The dog belongs to the Downings, not you. You really want a dog of your own. You know, I've said it before - I could easily set a pup aside for you from the next litter of Labradors. I know you can't keep it at the house, but you could come here and play with him; train him up and then get to work with him during the shooting season."

"No."

It was emphatic, and followed by a derisory sniff. "I don't want a puppy. I want to be with Redbeard. That's different."

"Why?"

"Because he's my friend. He doesn't tell me what to do; he looks to me to tell him what to do."

That pulled at Frank - spoke of a child who resented being looked after, surrounded by people who were paid to care. "Would you like to have a friend - another boy - to play with?"

"No, of course not." There was anger and distain in equal measure.

That surprised him. "Why not?"

"Because the boys around here are horrible. Mrs Walters tried to invite some of the estate workers' children to meet me after Mycroft went back to Oxford - they were all stupid."

Frank stifled a snort of laughter. "Well, Sherlock, red setters are not exactly the brainiest of dogs."

"Redbeard's loyal. That's what counts. He's better than any boy, because he doesn't try to bully me, or call me names. He just accepts me for what I am. He likes me."

As if the dog could sense Sherlock's rising levels of anxiety, Redbeard leaned in again and licked Sherlock's face. That made Sherlock smile and he hugged the dog. "I like him."

oOo

"Welcome home, sir."

"I want to go straight to Parham, Wilson."

That raised an eyebrow. "I've been told by your father to take you to the London townhouse."

"And I'm too tired to face him. Parham, now." Mycroft put on the tone of voice that his mother once called authoritarian. "It's useful now and then to make the point that you own the title and are
not to be argued with, but it mustn't be abused." His mother's advice had stood him in good stead in the two years since her death. He still felt her loss so keenly, even more so when he'd been away and returned home to realise that she wasn't there, and never would be again. He was grateful that Wilson heard the tone, and headed west away from London to connect up to the M25 southbound.

Mycroft was exhausted. The bus from Managua to the Costa Rican border had taken twelve hours-necessary to maintain his cover as an undergraduate research student. The four hour car journey from the border to the airport in San Jose was used for a gruelling debrief, after which he was escorted onto the first of two connections needed to get first to Houston, Texas, before starting back to Heathrow. The whole experience had been tedious in the extreme. He never managed to sleep properly on a plane, and this was the longest trip of his life. All in, the journey had taken over thirty two hours. Add to the inevitable jet lag the amount of energy he'd spent in the previous six weeks, and it was no wonder that he knew he would fall sound asleep in the back of the Bentley that had come to collect him.

As the car joined the M25 anticlockwise, as his eyelids grew heavy he replayed the best memory of his six weeks abroad- the moment when he knew which career he wanted to pursue.

"Señor Holmes, I wish to thank you for all your assistance."

The sixty year old woman who had said this had taken both of his hands in hers, and for a moment, he thought she might try to kiss him, which had alarmed him slightly. But, then she smiled. "You British have made my people very, very happy. I wish there was some way we could thank your country publicly." She made a gesture of open arms towards the window, which would be flung wide in a matter of moments to tell the waiting thousands of her supporters that they had just won an election that no one had thought would ever even take place.

"You know that can never happen, Señora." He tried to keep the alarm out of his tone, and then her mischievous smile made him realised that she was teasing him.

Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, the editor of Nicaragua's La Prensa newspaper, had just been told by the election officers that the votes had been counted and the results would be announced in less than an hour. Against all the odds, in defiance of the polls published by the Ortega administration in Nicaragua, the woman chosen by fourteen opposition parties to lead their coalition had just won the first free democratic elections ever held in the country. She'd won fifty five percent of the presidential vote, and her coalition party had just won the majority of seats in the National Assembly. One chapter in the history of this troubled nation was about to come to a close, and a new one was about to begin.

Three days later in the back of the chauffeur-driven car, Mycroft was still positively elated at his having been there in the right place at the right time. This is history being made, and I've been a part of it. But, of course, there could be no question of making public any of it.

She had given him a knowing smile. "Of course you are right. As my husband used to say, the power behind the throne must never be acknowledged in public, lest it damage the reputation of the king."

He remembered nodding, "Or the Queen, in your case, Señora. He would have been proud to see you here at this moment, the first woman to be elected president anywhere in the Latin and Central Americas."

"How old are you, Señor Holmes?"

He felt embarrassed to admit his youth, but had answered anyway. She deserved the truth. "I'm
eighteen."

She smiled. "In the year you were born, the corrupt Somoza regime assassinated my husband and stole Nicaragua’s future. I thought Daniel Ortega might save us, but I was wrong; his Sandinistas have put us through Marxist hell. The Americans had their own agenda, and we could not accept their help. But, thanks to the role of secret intermediary that the British have played, we have found our own way to freedom. Tell your colleagues back in Costa Rica that I will not forget the help of Britain in our time of need. And I thank you, young man, for being our Hermes, the messenger of the gods, without whom we might not have reached this point."

"You are too kind, Madam President. I am just a convenient means of transport."

She tutted. "Modesty is attractive in one so young. But I do not discount the way you have helped translate the 'between the lines' meanings of what the British were saying. The cultural differences between our countries might have led to misunderstandings. Never underestimate your contribution, young man."

For her, the past six weeks had been a difficult diplomatic and intelligence battle, one made even more complicated by the bellicosity of the Americans, who for decades had fuelled their own version of guerrilla warfare in the region. Nicaragua was surrounded by countries willing to play host to the American financed Contras who attacked the Sandinista regime for the better part of a decade. It made diplomacy tense and communications difficult when everyone suspected everyone else.

Mycroft had studied this period intensely, in preparation for his research trip. All through the 1980s years of covert and illegal funding authorised by President Reagan had been opposed by the US Congress, but had gone underground instead. Earlier Congressional legislation choked off funding to CIA operations in the area, and then when an attempt was made to re-route assistance to the Contras through the National Security Council’s budget, another amendment was passed to block this, too.

In the end, to circumvent the rules, a tiny team of State, Defense, CIA and NSC officials known as the "208 Committee" or "Policy Development Group" headed up by Oliver North found a secret way to sell arms to Iran, and then used the profits to fund the Contras against Nicaragua. The scandal broke in Washington DC in 1986 when a Special Prosecutor was appointed and the echoes of Watergate were heard around the Potomac. Four years later, the investigation was still ongoing.**

Mycroft had found it fascinating- first, how a small and determined group behind the scenes could be allowed to get away with it for so long, and second, what an awkward position the British found themselves- one wrong move, and they could alienate everyone. It was a conundrum- which American faction should they back? The Reagan administration had supported Mrs Thatcher’s response to the Falklands invasion in 1982; the ten week war to regain the islands would not have been possible without their help. But reciprocation came in the UK’s public support of the American 'invasion' of Grenada, in Operation Fury- scarcely a year later. The British intelligence community thought that debts had been repaid; and the allies were all square now. To back one president, who could not run for a third term of office, would be pointless. So, the British had looked for other ways to solve the problem.

The British reaction to the Iran-Contra affair was the subject of Mycroft's final year dissertation- and he was using the start of the Hillary term to do the initial research for it. He had received permission to be away for the start of the new term- four weeks of classes that his tutors did not mind him missing.
But, when just after Christmas Mycroft had arrived in Central America, he never dreamed that he would be thrown quite so quickly into the deep end. Peace talks organised by El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras and Guatemala in the autumn had been the reason why Mycroft chose to come out to Central America now. The election process in Nicaragua was fraught, but just about peaceful enough to pass muster as free and fair, and he was allowed a visa. Initial thinking by most Western observers was that the Nicaraguan citizens’ hatred of the Americans was more than enough to help the incumbent Daniel Ortega to beat off the opposition. The Americans fumed from the side-lines, unable to influence developments.

As the Second Secretary of the British Embassy in San Jose explained to Mycroft, "You're perfect for this. No one will suspect you, given your age and recent arrival. You can move in and out of Nicaragua on your own passport and visa, sponsored by the British Honourary Counsel in Managua, but you will be our courier to the opposition groups. They can't be seen to be talking to us, but you won't be noticed. Your tutor has recommended you; says your discretion can be counted on. Think of it as an internship, Lord Holmes- a chance to do a great service to your country and to the cause of freedom."

For the second half of December and all of January, the Sandinista president didn't spot the help being given and gratefully received by the opposition, through letters and information brought to them by a young Oxford University student. The full weight of the British Foreign Office was being carried on the shoulders of the rather astute young researcher, who was able to pass on the information that the opposition leader needed to know, along with some personal advice about which levers to pull, which buttons to press, the egos that had to be stroked, and those who could be safely ignored. It had been dangerous work- but thrilling.

Fortunately for Mycroft, the Embassy Officials back in San Jose never realised that their courier had been seized upon by Violetta Barrios de Chamorro as something of an advisor, too. And Mycroft was determined never to tell anyone about it either, as he was sure he would be accused of going above and beyond the call of duty. The Foreign Office was full of egos- people who would be quick to accuse him of meddling way above his remit. It was enough to put him off the idea that he'd once had of joining the Foreign Service. The six weeks had intrigued him and directed his interests towards the more covert methods of influence.

The car journey from Heathrow to Parham was just over an hour, but he slept through all of it, and woke only when his father's driver tapped him on the shoulder. "We've arrived, your lordship." There was something in the tone of his voice when he said the title that made Mycroft hear the undercurrent. Wilson's loyalties lay with Richard Holmes, not the son of the Viscountess who had inherited her title.

It didn't matter a bit. He was so pleased to be home that he couldn't care less. Mycroft went into the main entrance, and was greeted by Mrs Walters, who had a big smile.

"Welcome home, M'lord. I am so glad to see you back here, safe and sound."

"It was just a research trip, Mrs Walters. Nothing exciting."

She didn't look convinced. "Nevertheless, overseas is always dangerous."

As tired as he was, he smirked. "Someday I am going to get you to come with me on a trip to the south of France at least. Maybe this summer. It is positively Victorian that we have not managed to get you out of the country."

"Here's my place, M'lord. I have no wish to be anywhere else. Not even London, if I can avoid it."
Wilson was bringing in his suitcases behind him, as Mycroft looked over Mrs Walters' shoulder into the great hall. She saw the look and the smile faded. "You're looking for your brother?"

Mycroft nodded, a frown forming based on her reaction. "Is everything alright?"

"Sherlock's here, but he's not wanting to come down. Your father will be here shortly- he rang from London once he knew you were coming here. Wilson will be going to pick him up at Pulborough for the 14.48 arrival. We'll get you settled in the Yellow Room with a nice cup of tea first, M'lord, before the telling of it. I think you should hear it from me, before your Father's version."

In his fuddled state, Mycroft could only wonder at what "it" was. If his father and Sherlock had come to argue again, his duties as peace-maker would be needed once more. "Better make that a pot of strong coffee, Mrs Walters. It sounds like I will need it."

Fifteen minutes later, Mycroft put down his empty cup and looked up at the housekeeper who had just re-entered the room. She always had an uncanny knack of knowing just when someone had finished and was ready for company.

He gestured to the antique Georgian Hepplewhite chair that he had pulled out from his mother's desk. "Please, Mrs Walters, sit down and tell me what has happened." He knew better than to ask her to sit on the sofa. That would be too familiar. She always insisted on standing in the presence of his mother or father. With him, she was more willing to bend the servant's rules; after all, she'd known him since before he could walk.

"While you were away, Sherlock formed an attachment to a dog. Not one of the Estate's gundogs, but one that belonged to a member of staff. Her name was Cheryl Downing, a bookkeeper who came to work here in the summer, for the Agent Mallinson. She didn't know your father's rules about dogs in the house and Georgian Annex, so she brought her Irish setter to work with her, to the office under the Clock Tower. That's where Sherlock got to know him and, well…they became inseparable very quickly."

A dog. For a moment, Mycroft had trouble understanding how someone else's pet could be the cause of any problem. Rather shortly, he decided to cut to the chase. "Father will be here soon, and if there is more to this little domestic saga, I need to know it." As if to underscore the urgency, his mother's carriage clock on the desk chimed the three quarter hour. It was made by the famed Parisian clock maker Henri Jacot in 1886 and had belonged to his grandmother.

Walters nodded. "It's just that he's missed his mother so much. And with you away, he's surrounded- the house staff, his tutors, but he doesn't really get on well with anyone. Not even with me; he tolerates me, but that's about it. When I realised that for the last six weeks, he'd actually been happy and seemed to be settled in himself more, I thought maybe time was beginning to help mend things. I didn't realise that it was because of the dog."

He could see where this was going. "And father caught him with the dog, in the house? Yes, I can see that would be a problem."

She nodded. "The dog was banned, and the bookkeeper was told that she would lose her job if your father ever saw the dog outside of their cottage garden fence. He ordered me to tell Sherlock never to go near or lay eyes on the setter again. Wallace tried to distract him with a puppy from the kennels, to be visited there, but Sherlock wouldn't have it." She took a deep breath. "The boy took matters in his own hands. Six days ago, he stole the dog from the Downing's garden and was planning to run away with him when Wallace found them, up near Wassel Pond."

Mycroft rolled his eyes. To go from the exalted position of being in the middle of history being
made to the mundane role of acting as mediator between his father and Sherlock- well, it just summed up his current frame of mind and exhaustion. "Isn't he rather too old to be running away? It's not like he could get very far dragging a dog behind him."

"M'lord, that's..." She stopped, and he saw her indecision. Her back was ramrod straight. He did not envy her the role of Sherlock's protector in this house. Whatever 'no-contact' agreement he had extracted from his father***, and no matter how often he waved his legal guardianship of Sherlock in his father's face, managing the relationship between Richard Holmes and Sherlock would never be easy. For a member of staff trying to fight the fires every day, it would be even worse. At least he had Oxford.

"What happened?" He said it gently, seeing her distress in her posture.

"Your father found out the next day. He went to Frank Wallace's cottage, and took Sherlock and the dog to the police station in Pulborough to report the theft. He was determined to make Sherlock hand the dog over to them. When the constable offered to take the dog back to the rightful owners, your father insisted that the Downings were called and that they come to the station. He said they had a right to press charges and Sherlock needed to learn the lesson."

Mycroft sighed, closing his eyes. He could imagine it. His father would never, ever give Sherlock the benefit of the doubt. A simple misdemeanour would be blown out of proportion; his father would not be able to resist using the situation as a tool to belittle and hurt his younger son. What part of 'no contact' had his father misunderstood?

"And what was Sherlock's response?" He kept his eyes closed, as the weariness of the past two days of travelling threatened to catch up with him.

"I tried to comfort him, but he was very distressed about the whole thing. You know Sherlock is terrified of your father. He wouldn't look at anyone or say anything; the poor thing just clung onto the dog like he was about to be sent to prison."

Mycroft opened his eyes again. "I assume the Downings did not press charges."

"Well, one would have thought so, but unfortunately there was a difference of opinion. Mrs Downing, the bookkeeper, called the idea ridiculous, but her husband hates the dog apparently and thought that if he took a hard line, she might agree to get rid of it."

"Oh Lord." Leave it to Sherlock to get involved in the breakdown of someone's marriage. This was getting more convoluted by the moment. "Give me the rest of the sordid details. Are you telling me that my brother has been charged with theft?" He would not put it past his father to inflict that on Sherlock. He was going to have to contact his solicitor and get him involved in reinforcing the contractual arrangements- or he'd have to ban his father from Parham. God help me, I think solving a decade long civil war in Central America is easier than managing Sherlock and Father.

"No charges were made in the end; Mrs Dowler agreed to what her husband proposed- no prosecution in exchange for getting rid of the dog."

"Well, thank goodness for that. I would hate for Sherlock to be saddled with a criminal record at the tender age of eleven."

He cast an eye on the clock. It was a ten minute drive from the station to Parham, so his father would be here any minute. He sat up on the edge of the sofa, getting ready to stand. But, Mrs Walters wasn't moving. He sank back, and said wearily, "Oh God, there's more."
She nodded. "Your father was taking Sherlock back to the car from the police station; Wilson had turned it and was ready to pick them up on the opposite side of London Road. The Downings were in the carpark arguing about the dog, and well, it wriggled out of its collar and charged across the road towards Sherlock."

Mycroft knew how busy the London Road was, and could see in his mind's eye what happened next. "It was hit by a car. In front of him."

She nodded.

After a moment of silence, Mycroft asked the inevitable question, "How did Sherlock react?"

"The dog wasn't killed outright, but its back legs and pelvis were crushed- it was screaming in pain." Her eyes filled at the memory. "The Downings took it to the Arun vets on Lower Street. Your father made Sherlock go in, too, and made him watch as they put the dog down." She looked down at the floor. "Sherlock was crying, yelling, but Mister Holmes held him there. I tried to tell him that it was too much for the poor boy, but…well, I was told to mind my place."

The slow burn of anger that had been building as she spoke now ignited and woke Mycroft up. He had come to expect his father's brutality to his brother, which is why he had put the 'no-contact' arrangement in place. This was the perfect example of why. To add to that crime, his father had also threatened Mrs Walters, a person who embodied all that he valued in Parham.

"Mrs Walters. Rest assured that he has no authority over the staff here. If he ever tries anything like that sort of threat again, or is in any way rude to you on his occasional visits to this house, then I want to know about it."

"I'm sorry, M'lord. I wish I did not have to tell you all of this and spoil your homecoming."

His tired mind finally caught up with the timeline. "You said this happened five days ago. What's happened since?"

"Mister Holmes left the next morning on a business trip to Italy. He returned to London yesterday. Sherlock hasn't spoken since he left. He's barely eaten, won't get dressed or attend his lessons with the tutors. I've been hoping that your return might snap him out of it."

Mycroft got up. "Thank you Mrs Walters. I appreciate your candour." He went toward the stairs and started to head up them to the next floor, where in the east wing, he knew he would find Sherlock.

"Mycroft!" His father's ebullient baritone carried up the stone steps. "Welcome home, son! Come down and tell me all about your adventures."

He turned to look at the man, whose eyes were happy to see him, until they took in his frown.

"Not now, Father. I have to see if I can repair the damage you have caused by your refusal to uphold the terms of our agreement." His words were calm, but carried that tone of authority his mother had taught him.

The look of pleasure on Richard Holmes' face was replaced by a scowl. "Wonderful. That cretin is going to spoil your homecoming, too, is he?"

Mycroft turned away. He could not bear to see his father's face after those words. Staring up at the portrait of the fourth Earl of Sherrinford at the top of the stairs, he said, "I would appreciate it if you could be gone from Parham before I come down again."
"It's my house, too, Mycroft. I have rights to be here."

Even without turning to look, Mycroft could imagine his father's face- the slight flush of red on his cheeks, the dark blue eyes sparking with fury beneath the thinning ginger hair. *I am so tired of all this.* From somewhere he found the strength to reply calmly, "You've forfeited those rights by breaking our agreement. I will come see you at the townhouse in a few days. Good afternoon, father." He kept going up the stairs.

oOo

"Hello, Sherlock."

Mycroft was standing in front of the single bed in the darkened room. Sherlock was sitting in his pyjamas, with his back against the wall, staring into space. He had not acknowledged his brother's presence yet.

"I've told father to leave. It will be safe to come down in about fifteen minutes. Then you can tell me what you've been up to."

No reply.

"Have you read the Christmas presents I left for you?"

That got him a nod.

Mycroft had given him a copy of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***. He had not read the American author's works himself, but his tutor at Balliol had recommended it as fine writing for a boy who was getting too old for pirate stories. "Which of the three did you prefer?"

There was a shrug, and then a more thoughtful look formed on the boy's face. "Yahoos are ridiculous, but I liked the Houyhnhnms. Tom Sawyer's a bit silly, but Huck's information about the raft was...useful."

Mycroft wondered what the reference to the raft meant and made a mental note to find a plot synopsis. "Did you like your birthday present?"

Sherlock turned his face towards Mycroft and looked at everything except his eyes. Dully, the boy muttered. "Mrs Walters says I am supposed to say thank you." A moment later came a quiet "Thank you."

Mycroft sighed. At least he was talking, if not exactly enthusiastically. The high specification microscope was something that one would expect to find in a university science lab, rather than in the possession of an eleven year old boy, but he'd been assured by the chemistry tutor that Sherlock was more than capable of putting it to good use. But, had he heard some reproach in his brother's tone?

"I'm sorry to have missed your birthday and Christmas, too."

Sherlock shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I hate them both; I'd like to forget them."

"Well, I'm sorry to have missed the holidays, but it was the only six weeks I could get away. I'm back now."

That provoked a frown. "No, you're not. You've been gone since the last week of September. If it
isn't Oxford, it's London, or overseas. It doesn't matter anyway. You'll leave again- you always do."

Sighing, Mycroft pulled out the chair from the lab bench that ran the length of the room- an addition that Sherlock had asked for last summer, and he'd agreed to have built into the bedroom, provided Sherlock agreed not to store any hazardous chemicals there.

"I've just heard about your own adventures, with the dog."

"He's dead."

It was said in a cold, lifeless monotone that was painful to Mycroft's ears, and it brought back echoes of the way Sherlock had spoken when he returned from the clinic in early summer. They both had reason to hate the so called 'festive' time of the year. it would never again be so for both of them. Only a year ago, their mother had died on the 16th of January. The memories were still all too fresh- wounds that needed to heal would have been re-opened by the loss of the dog.

"Father was wrong to have taken you to the police, and wrong to have made you go to the vet."

Sherlock shook his head slowly. "It wasn't Father's fault that the dog was hit by a car. It was mine. Redbeard wanted to be with me, not them. He died trying to reach me. It's my fault."

Mycroft almost flinched at the thought. Sherlock still blamed himself for his mother's death, and now he was shouldering the burden of this, too, no doubt reinforced by his father's accusation and the punishment of having to watch the dog being put down.

"Blame is never that simple, Sherlock. Father, the bookkeeper, her husband- they all played a part. It was everything and everyone. Blaming yourself alone is not fair."

"Redbeard would still be alive if I had never been his friend. He died because of me. Father was right- I was wrong to have gotten involved in the first place."

Sherlock's eyes fell on the books that were sitting on the lab bench. "I think I don't like fiction anymore. They're all fairy stories- real life doesn't have 'happy endings', and it's wrong to think that they do. Why do grownups lie to children and make them read lies? What's the point?"

Mycroft wished he had a better answer. But he also knew that his brother would be able to detect a lie. "Perhaps it's because adults want to protect you from the truth."

"I don't want protecting." There was anger and defiance in the boy's reply. "Tell me the truth."

"It's what I said about Mummy. All lives end, all hearts are broken, Sherlock; caring is not an advantage. It's something grown ups learn."

Sherlock nodded. "Then I want to grow up right now."

Something in Mycroft's heart broke at that point. You and me both, Sherlock.
**The Iran-Contra affair is one of the more unusual examples of what happens when intelligence slips free of proper governance. The Special Prosecutor took six years to produce the report which finally came out in 1992. Six people were indicted, several prosecuted and two convicted. All of the accused were pardoned by President George Bush, who was a former director of the CIA, and Vice President at the time of the clandestine activity. Laurence Walsh, the Special Prosecutor later commented "What set Iran-contra apart from previous political scandals was that a cover-up engineered in the White House of one president and completed by his successor prevented the rule of law being applied to perpetrators of criminal activity of constitutional dimension." In all the controversy, it was surprising how little attention was paid to the detrimental effects of the US's interference in Nicaragua's internal affairs.

****the plot line of Huckleberry Finn is rather too close for comfort to Sherlock's own experience- an abusive father, running away, danger and near death experiences. If Mycroft had actually read the book, he would never have given it to his brother.
"Do you have any idea what kind of narcotics he's taken?"

The absurdity of the question was made even more surreal by the context. Mycroft was standing in the Resuscitation Room of the Worthing Hospital Accident & Emergency Department. The paediatric consultant had just explained why a doctor in scrubs who Mycroft assumed was an anaesthetist was squeezing a bag and into a mask clamped over Sherlock's nose and mouth to breathe for him.

"Narcotics? Don't be ridiculous. Why on earth do you think he's taking drugs?"

"It's the only possible explanation of all the facts. At 10 breaths a minute, he's not breathing properly on his own. His blood pressure is too low, so we've started an IV, pushing fluids. He's deeply unconscious and, most telling of all, his pupils are pinpoints. The only possible explanations for all of these are either a pontine stroke or an overdose of opiates. And pontine strokes don't often happen in children."

The explanation shocked Mycroft into momentary silence. Then he found his voice again; "But, he's only eleven years old…"

"Constricted pupils don't lie, and the tox card test we've done on his blood shows clear evidence of opiods. We'll have to wait for a full GC/MS test to find out whether it's heroin or morphine."

"That's just not possible."

The doctor squeezing the bag shrugged. "It's not that rare. These are the 'naughty nineties'. You'd be surprised at what kids get up to at school. One of his friends could have supplied them- kids love to experiment."

"Not possible," Mycroft repeated. "He's home-schooled. And he has no contact with other children." The junior doctor gave him an odd look, so he felt compelled to explain. "He's autistic; doesn't deal well with other people, especially children."
"Someone else in the house, then? Prescription drugs? Sometimes kids get their hands on someone else's medication. But that would probably show paracetamol- and there was none."

The consultant was looking at him now, in a slightly wary appraisal, and then said, "Or he might have found someone else's stash."

"Not mine; I can assure you that I have never used drugs." Mycroft delivered a self-righteous glare to accompany his steely retort. "However, there are over seventy people employed at Parham, and I cannot vouch for them all." At this point, his gaze shifted to Mrs Walters who looked as shocked as he felt.

The junior doctor by the side of the trolley injected something into the IV line. "In two minutes, when he wakes up from this naloxone, we'll be sure. It's an opioid antagonist- stops the narcotics from working."

Mycroft glanced at the clock on the wall- 9.28 am. Time stood still.

Mycroft's mind was moving too slow, and he had to make an effort to concentrate long enough to make sense of all this. Only three days back from Nicaragua, jet lag was still an issue for him.

The car phone had rung in his father's car on his way back to Oxford. The man himself was on yet another business trip to the USA, so Mycroft had contacted Wilson, the chauffeur based at the London townhouse, and got him to come down to Parham last night. The alternative- a train journey- would have taken him nearly three hours- into London, then onto Paddington, changing at Reading for Oxford. The driver would get him there in half the time, so he could spend an extra night at home and still make his 12.30 seminar.

When Mycroft had left the house this morning, Sherlock was still asleep. He'd looked in briefly, but let him sleep.

If only I'd tried to wake him then. At the time, his reluctance to wake Sherlock had been half cowardice, half pragmatism. After their first brief exchange upon his arrival, Sherlock had not spoken to him again, or to anyone else for the past three days. The boy's tutors had been stood down; regular lessons postponed. It would appear that Sherlock's disastrous experience with the death of the red setter meant he was on strike.

Never in his wildest nightmare had he thought Sherlock might have been distressed enough to do something like take drugs. It raised a memory of the time last spring when Esther Cohen had called him to say that Sherlock had done just that- taken an overdose of antidepressants in order to escape the Kings Court Clinic*.

Before he could say any of that, the doctor asked the anaesthetist, "Any improvement in respiration?" When the question was answered with a shake of the head, the older man leaned over and pinched Sherlock's ear lobe hard. There was no reaction.

"Let's try the same dose again and see if that does anything." The consultant's calm order was immediately implemented by the junior doctor, and the clock watching resumed. For a moment, Mycroft hoped that the lack of response would prove that his brother had not taken drugs, but that train of thought led him to wonder what a pontine stroke was.

A minute later, the silence was interrupted by the beep of a monitor and the nurse looking at the ECG read-out. "Arrhythmia." Another beep occurred before the consultant could respond, and the nurse called it out, "...and now it's definitely VT."
The consultant swore under his breath. The anaesthetist looked up at the junior doctor and asked, "Exactly how much naloxone did you give him?"

Mycroft didn't understand what the letters VT stood for, but he heard the worry in the doctor's tone of voice.

Something rattled and Mycroft looked back at Sherlock. His brother's hand had twitched and banged into the bar on the trolley, but his eyes weren't open yet.

"Good."

Mycroft could hear the junior doctor's relief in that one word.

"He's waking up. Let's start him on a naloxone infusion - sixty percent of the total dose he's just had per hour." The anaesthetist stopped squeezing the airbag and loosened the mask.

Then Sherlock's hand grabbed onto the bar, and he started to pull himself upright. Coughing and gagging, he pushed the mask away from his face and spat out a strange piece of plastic. Then with his eyes still shut, he collapsed back down, his body relaxing again.

"Sherlock, can you hear me? Time to wake up!" The consultant's voice was loud and insistent. He rubbed a knuckle across the boy's sternum.

Sherlock's eyes snapped open, and all hell broke loose.

He pulled away from the consultant's touch, thrashed violently to the other side of the trolley and smacked into the bars with a great crash. His eyes were totally unfocused, shocked wide with terror. Throwing his arm up in a panic, the cannula on the top of his hand caught on one of the ECG leads and ripped out. Blood started dripping down the flailing arm, as the monitor's pulse beeps escalated dramatically.

"Whoa there! Take it easy; just calm down." Nurses and doctors stepped in on both sides to restrain his arms, just as Mycroft interjected, "Don't touch him!"

Their training already fully engaged, five of the medical staff ignored Mycroft's instruction, and took hold of Sherlock to stop him from hurting himself. The result was pandemonium, as the terrified boy started screaming at the top of his lungs, wrestling violently to get away from them. When a flailing fist connected with one of the nurses' faces, she let go and suddenly he was halfway over the bars and off the trolley, while at the same time yanking at ECG wires.

The consultant grabbed a syringe and started filling it. "Hang onto him while I get lorazepam in him." Mycroft realised the time for talking Sherlock out of fighting had passed, and waded in, grabbed his brother and shoved him back into the bed. He watched the doctor stab the syringe into Sherlock's right upper arm, held down by the anaesthetist's weight on the bony shoulder and one of the nurses trapping the forearm against the bars.

For the next four and a bit minutes, they just held on as the fight slowly went out of the screaming boy.

When they finally stepped back from the trolley, the anaesthetist lifted an eyelid. Sherlock's pupil was now very dilated.

"Right." The consultant was back in charge. "All that palaver might be result of a hallucinogenic. God only knows what he's managed to get into- ecstasy or even LSD, as well as the narcotics. An RSI and intubation is the only option until the drugs wear off enough to wake him up safely. And..."
get that IV back in with the naloxone infusion."

The resus team got back to work with the rapid sequence induction and intubation.

The consultant stood aside from the trolley and glared at Mycroft. "We need to talk. Was that little display of energy typical of his autism? Do you know if he has any atypical or paradoxical reactions to drugs? Does he have any other medical problems? Taking any medicines?"

"I don't know. I've been away from home since the summer, and overseas for the past month." Mycroft looked to Mrs Walters, who shook her head and said "Only melatonin to help him sleep. That's it." Mycroft resumed, "I can contact the psychiatrist who has been treating him over the years; she'll have a better idea of his medical history in terms of drugs reactions."

The consultant nodded. "Well, the good news is that he won't remember a thing about this when he does wake up. And once he gets sorted here, he's going straight up to ICU where the ventilator will do his breathing for him. We'll keep him under until tomorrow morning at the earliest, then extubate and use lorazepam at a lower dose to keep him calm when he wakes up."

The doctor looked back at the team working, keeping an eye on their progress. "How severe is the autism?"

Mycroft sighed. How to sum up his brother? "He's high functioning in many areas. Highly intelligent, too. But he has sensory issues, and communication is…um, problematic at times. He doesn't like being touched, but he's never been violent or aggressive to hurt anyone but himself, even in meltdown." He looked at the nurse, who was rubbing her chin. "…at least not intentionally."

The consultant noted something on the clipboard. "Overdoses can so easily be lethal in children; there's truth in the saying "one pill can kill". We've stopped the narcotics from killing him, but he's not out of the woods yet. The naloxone infusion will take care of the opiates, but we've no idea what else he might have ingested, and he's in no position to tell us." He tapped the clipboard with the first drug test results. "It's not ideal to sedate without knowing what he's already taken. So, I want you to go back home and do your best to find out what it was. It's really important- not just what it was, but how much, how long ago, even how it was taken- swallowed or inhaled. If you find any evidence that it was deliberate, we need to know that, too. Until we know, we have to keep him on a psych hold. We will run tests to find out the drugs at our end, but they take a week."

Mycroft's mind made an important connection. "I can get it done faster."

That got him a raised eyebrow from the doctor. "How?"

"I have access to laboratory services that you don't have. Just get me a couple of blood samples and tell me what tests you need." His father's pharmaceutical companies would be able to do something in a rush, time they did something useful for the family, other than make money. He tried to remember which American time zone Chicago was in- six or was it seven hours behind? In either case, it was the middle of the night.

Good; it will serve him right to be woken up for once; at least he can't claim to be in a meeting at this hour.

He had a number of calls to make, so he went back to the car and used the phone there. Rachel Simmonds was his father's PA, and provided the phone number. "He's in Deerfield Illinois. That's 25 miles north of Chicago, staying at the Marriott Suites Hotel. But, it's the middle of the night there."
"I know."

The hotel reception was clearly manned even at night, and put him through to Room 212. He found himself wondering how big the place was when it took six rings before the call was picked up.

"Hello."

His father sounded both cross and slightly out of breath.

"Father; it's me. I trust this isn't inconveniencing you?" His imagination was willing to put another person in the room being the cause of the delay in answering.

There was an intake of breath. "What's happened, Mycroft? Why are you calling at this hour?" He wasn't angry; the tone was more worried.

"I need your assistance. I'm at the Worthing Hospital and I need a contact name at one of your UK laboratories, someone who is willing to conduct a private blood test faster than the NHS is able to do so."

"Are you unwell, son? You were looking a little peaky when I saw you at Parham- that field trip of yours to Costa Rica was too tiring. Damn it, you should have come straight to the townhouse and not wasted time with your brother. What's wrong; what do the doctors say?" There was clear concern in Richard Holmes' voice.

Mycroft took a tactical decision. "I won't know until the test is done. Can you advise me of the person I should contact for a rather complicated blood test?"

"Yes, yes, of course, but I'm not going to send you to one of my chemists- they aren't diagnosticians. No – you go straight to Dr Richard Kaczmarski at the London Clinic, on Devonshire Place. They can get any test done that you need within hours. I'll get Rachel to phone ahead and set up the appointment. Get Wilson to take you there. And tell me the results as soon as you know them. Should I fly back?"

"No need for anything so dramatic, father. It's just a blood test." He hoped that his nonchalance would carry enough weight to calm the man down; now that Mycroft had got when he needed, he didn't want to rouse his father's suspicions. Distraction was called for. "Why are you in America? You just got back from Italy."

"I'm here working on a deal for Fujisawa Pharmaceuticals; they've bought Lyphomed. It's a nine hundred million dollar deal – and one of my company patents is involved, so I want to make sure we get our rights protected in the merger. But if you need me to get home, I can drop everything."

Mycroft realised that his tactical decision to mislead his father into thinking the test was for him meant he was going to get more co-operation. Sadly, if he'd said it was Sherlock, the reaction would have been different. That fact annoyed him no end, but now was not the time to address that problem. So, he continued to mislead, saying calmly "Not necessary. It's just important to get this done today. Tell the clinic that I won't be there for another couple of hours. I have to get the specifics of what I need from the hospital, and then go back to Parham to collect my things and say goodbye to Sherlock. I'll go onto Oxford after the test."

"Wilson can just nip in to collect your things from Walters on the way past. Get up to London as quickly as you can for the test and call me when you get back to Oxford. Don't waste any time on Sherlock."

And there, in a nutshell, is our childhood. He made his excuses to get off the line, and then called
Professor Robert Adams to tell him that he wouldn't be making that seminar today. Regrettably, "a family emergency" would keep him away for a few days yet. Unlike his father, Mycroft knew where his priorities lay.

oOo

The next call was to Doctor Cohen. Mycroft made that in the car on the way back to Parham. He explained what he knew about what had happened to Sherlock and then had to ask the obvious question, point-blank:

"Do you think this is another suicide attempt, like the one at Kings Court?"

There was a pause on the line, and Mycroft wondered if he had lost the signal. Car telephones were not the most reliable, especially when the line of sight masts had to deal with the South Downs, up which the car was climbing.

"Yes, Doctor Cohen- but I missed anything you said. Reception's not brilliant."

"Right, I'll repeat it. I haven't seen Sherlock myself since September, so a lot of this has to be conjecture. But, what happens next matters. The ICU will keep him sedated a bit when he next wakes up- that's probably tomorrow morning now. I will be there to see if he needs a psych assessment. From your description, Sherlock was just…silent and sad about the dog's death. At the clinic, he was diagnosed as clinically depressed- which is why they had him on lithium and they used ECT. That provoked anxiety and agitation which led, in my view, to his conscious attempt to escape from what he saw was an intolerable situation. I'm not picking that up from what you said now. We need to ask the question when he is calm and able to answer."

There was another burst of static, then the signal resumed. "…mustn't think the worst; there may be another answer. It would help…” The signal cut out again, and Mycroft closed his eyes in frustration.

"…what he took."

He cut in, hoping that his reply would reach her. "Doctor Cohen, when I know the answer to that, I will get back in touch. Goodbye for now." He put the phone receiver back in the cradle and glared at it. A useful invention, but someone was going to have to get more masts put in if the signal quality was to be consistent enough. That led him off on a tangent of thought, wondering how the police and fire services managed to communicate in times of emergencies. If they were as dependent as he was on the phone system working while on the move, then it was an issue that the government needed to consider fixing- soon.

oOo

"So, we have something of a treasure hunt on our hands."

He and Mrs Walters were standing in Parham's Great Hall, facing the ten house staff, wondering how on earth they were going to find what Sherlock had taken.

The housekeeper was explaining what was needed. "I've already looked in his bedroom, while the ambulance was here, because they seemed certain he must have taken something- but there was nothing there."

Mycroft added, "We need you to help us; we'll split up in pairs and take one of the wings on each
floor. We'll start at the top. You need to search thoroughly for anything that looks like a medicine bottle, tablets, syringes or a packet of powder—really, anything out of the ordinary. He's likely to have hidden it, so look in drawers, behind things, out of sight.

A little intimidated by Mycroft, one of the house maids asked a question, but directed it to the Parham Housekeeper instead; "Mrs Walters, could he have taken something…um…one of them chemicals—you know, the bottles in his room?"

She nodded. "Good thinking, Daisy, but I did check to see if anything had been moved since yesterday afternoon. You know he doesn't like anything moved, so I'm quite aware of exactly what's there. And, no, it didn't look like he's hidden anything like that amongst his chemistry things." The prim grey-haired woman looked up at Mycroft, and then asked, "…but better safe than sorry? Perhaps we should send them off for testing?"

Mycroft considered, then shook his head. "Unlikely. We are looking for some kind of narcotics—that much we know from the drug test at the hospital. I have to leave for London in an hour to get the next test done on the blood samples, which may give us more clues. If we don't find anything in the house, then we'll go onto the annex. Frank Wallace has got the grounds staff looking in the outbuildings." He turned to the servants. "I want you to try to think like Sherlock does—try to imagine what he would do; go first to the places you know he likes—especially when he's trying to hide. If any of you have seen him recently anywhere unusual, then now's the time to say it."

"Begging pardon, your lordship, but I've seen him somewhere strange—a couple of weeks ago, it was." Daisy spoke again. "He was coming out from behind the tapestry—in the long gallery. There's a cupboard there, built into the panelling."

Mrs Walters looked surprised. "That's locked. It's always locked."

Mycroft's eyebrows rose. He was already in motion, heading for the stairs. "Then we'll start there. The rest of you start your search in the other rooms."

As they climbed the first flight of stone steps, Mycroft asked the housekeeper. "Which tapestry?"

"The Susanna***."

Mycroft knew it well—it was a large, quite striking seventeenth century Belgian tapestry, and unlike most of the embroidery in the house, his mother had been responsible for buying it soon after she got married.

He'd reached the second floor before she caught up with him. Pausing to catch his breath, he puffed out, "I didn't know the storage behind the tapestry was still in use. What's in there?"

"Your father has been using it for his files recently and told me to keep out," Mrs Wallace replied. "I haven't been in there for years anyway. Your mother used to put your tricycle in there. Do you remember? You used to tear up and down on the wood floors when it was too wet to play outside."

Yes. An image came back into his mind, from an old filing cupboard in his Mind Archive. He was very young; pre-Sherlock for certain. With the memory came a voice he missed so much…

"We'll hide it back here. Daddy won't know."

"Why?"

Violet ruffled his hair and smiled. "Because he wouldn't approve, my darling. Too noisy! You know how he hates it when he can't work. It will be our secret—mustn't tell."
Mycroft closed his eyes…sometimes the pain of his mother's death crept up on him and just sideswiped him. The tricycle memory retreated, to be replaced by another, more current one.

"Promise me, Mycroft. You will look after him, won't you?"

The image of his brother lying on the trolley in the hospital resuscitation room screamed failure at him, making his chest hurt.

_Do something._ Mycroft strode down the long gallery, ignoring how the painted leaves on the ceiling changed from green to brown. He took one side of the heavy oak chest, Mrs Walters took the other. "Are you sure you can manage? I'll get some help."

She just laughed. "I've been moving this thing away from the wall since you were able to walk- and your mother took the other side. Although how a twelve year old is able to do it on his own, I can't imagine."

That made him stop. "Oh…" Mycroft looked down and realised that instead of pulling it out from the wall, Sherlock probably just shoved it along the floorboards. There would be less friction or resistance, and no lifting. He went over to Mrs Walters' side and then spotted the scratch on the wooden floor less than a foot behind where she was standing.

"He's smarter than we give him credit for- just pushed it along. Stand aside and let me try."

The polish of centuries meant that the chest slid remarkably easily along the wooden floor- easily enough for a boy. Mycroft stooped to where he could get his hands on the bottom edge of the tapestry.

"Where is the key? You said it was locked."

Mrs Walter went across the long room to the tallboy bureau- a fine piece of Jacobean furniture. The third drawer from the top – probably just within reach of Sherlock- yielded a tiny skeleton key. Mycroft took it and ducked under the tapestry. The door cut into the panelling opened easily and his nose detected the tell-tale scent of WD40- a recent application.

Behind his right shoulder came a question, "Shall I get a torch, m'Lord?"

The space was pitch black, so he started to reply in the affirmative when his eye spotted a small object set against the panelling to the left, less than a foot from the door, and just visible. "No need- he's left one rather conveniently here."

Dust motes danced in the beam of the torch as he played it over stacks of boxes and trunks, nearly to the ceiling. The wall of boxes started barely a meter away from the door, leaving only a narrow corridor. Mycroft walked along and saw his father's neat handwriting on a filing box- _Jan 1989_. He wondered what could have attracted Sherlock to such a place.

"Oh, look; down there- at the bottom of that stack, it's her ladyship's trunk." Mrs Walters had followed in behind him and her finger pointed further down the line. He walked to it, with her in his footsteps. She sighed. "So, this is where he stored her things. I wondered."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he wouldn't let me touch her things, after the funeral. He locked her bedroom door and said I wasn't to go in at all. It was after you'd gone back to Oxford, and he'd sent Sherlock away. It was his butler, Wilson, who came down from London and helped him sort through the bedroom.
Masses of her clothes went to charity; I remember that. All the things from her childhood—clothes, her toys, things her mother put in the attic, even her favourite books. Your father just gave them all away. The only thing he kept aside was her jewellery; you got that from her solicitor, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yes, of course. So, what's in this trunk?"

"I don't know. But I am glad that he didn't get rid of everything. He went through the house and took it all away as if he couldn't bear to see anything that reminded him of her. He even re-decorated her bedroom and the Morning Room that was her favourite. When he was done, it was like she'd never lived here. Poor Sherlock, when he got back from that awful clinic he spent hours wandering the house looking for some sign of her."

In the torchlight, he could see four cardboard boxes of his father's files on top of the trunk, wedged tightly in by the boxes either side. He could barely reach the top one, and couldn't get his fingers between it and the next box to pull it out. Pushing it seemed easier; perhaps there was space between it and the back wall, allowing him to tip it up. Mycroft gave it a shove and it slid backwards, disappearing into the darkness and then landing in a great crash.

"Mrs Walters, there appears to be a space behind these boxes. I'm going to climb up and over, but I'm going to need to take the torch with me. Will you be all right in the dark?"

"Yes, m'Lord. My eyes are getting used to it now— I can wait. Do you think there is something back there?"

"Possibly." He was now able to reach over the next filing box down from the top and pulled it towards him, placing it down on the ground. The next three boxes followed, and then he clambered over the trunk, awkwardly slipping on the papers that had spilled out of the box he'd pushed over. Once he got his balance sorted, he shone the light down the hidden space.

"Oh, Sherlock…" It came out almost as a whisper, but it was loud enough that the housekeeper asked, "What is it? What've you found?"

The light of the torch reflected back from a mirror, propped on another trunk. It was the mirror that had been on his mother's vanity table, a three panelled French art deco piece that belonged to her grandmother. In the reflected light, he could see other things. His mother's favourite shawl, a bronze coloured paisley from India, draped over a smaller box with a silver candle holder on it and a box of matches. On the trunk in front of the mirror, a bottle of her perfume, a tea cup and saucer with a spoon. There were cushions from her bedroom, off the Edwardian walnut framed nursing chair that was still there, low enough for a little boy to be able to clamber up into a maternal lap. One of the cushions had a dent in it, just the size of an twelve year old's bottom.

He drew a shaky breath. "It's a shrine, of sorts. Some of Mummy's things, out where he can see them, feel them, and remember."

"Oh, the poor mite. He does miss her so."

Then Mycroft was down on his knees, opening the small wooden box that served as a table for the candle. He put the torch between his teeth, so his hands could push through the collection of oddments—letters, a book of poetry, a brooch from her riding jacket, handkerchiefs, a bottle of her shampoo, another of conditioner, one of skin cream, a bar of her soap from Florence. Then he spotted a glass bottle and pulled it free. A third full of a clear liquid, the shape of the bottle reminded him of a cough syrup rather than a toiletry. When he turned it around to read the plain label, he knew he'd found what he was looking for: up to 50mg, every twelve hours.
But there wasn't a doctor's name, no sign of a dispensing chemist shop or prescription details. *Most peculiar.*

oOo

"Explain it to me, please, Doctor Kaczmarski."

"Despite what the hospital thought, the standard GC/MS test came up negative for heroin, morphine or codeine. That's the good news. I've faxed the results to Worthing, so they can record it as a false positive and delete it from your brother's records. No need to put something like *that* in the public domain."

The doctor that his father had sent him to see was one of those Harley Street physicians- public-school educated, probably Oxbridge, and just the sort to be greatly concerned over appearances, exercising the utmost discretion on behalf of a client whose drugs test had shown a positive for narcotics. The well-dressed consultant continued, "Their EIA test did show antibodies for opiates, so we've tested for other things. Initial thoughts were it was most likely oxycodone. But that turned out to be negative, too. Eventually we realised it's something called hydrocodone- and that's decidedly odd."

"Why?"

"Because it's illegal in the UK; you certainly can't get it prescribed by any doctor, despite what you found."

"Does the blood sample match the syrup in the bottle? It's this hydrocodone, too?"

"Yes. We tested it, too, though how your brother got it, we just don't know. It's certainly not a street drug in the UK. It's a semi-synthetic opioid derived from two of the naturally occurring opiates codeine and thebaine. It's usually combined with paracetamol and marketed in the USA as Vicodin and a dozen other trade names."

"An American drug?" Mycroft felt a glimmer of understanding starting to form.

"Well- I can assure you that *this* version is definitely not on sale, either here or in the USA, legally or illegally. We've never seen anything like this formulation of it - the FDA over there would never have approved it."

"Why not?"

"First of all, it's got no paracetamol- well, acetaminophen to be precise- and that's what stops Vicodin from being abused- take too much of that and it destroys your liver. Take the paracetamol or ibuprofen out, as this sample has, bump up the concentration to a 50 milligram dose as the bottle said, and this stuff would be five times stronger than anything on the market- and as addictive as hell. It's got the diagnostic pathology team here really intrigued because it's got some sort of weird slow release mechanism they've never seen before. Instead of crashing the system with an instant high, and probably killing the recipient in the process, it's been engineered to release slowly over twelve hours****, otherwise the boy would have been very dead within minutes of taking it. Whatever it is- it's highly illegal both here and in the US, and very… experimental."

The glimmer grew brighter, and understanding followed. His father must have produced something to help deal with Violet's pain. Pancreatic cancer was hellishly painful, and her husband must have used his labs to concoct something special, something better able to deal with the pain in the last few weeks of her life. It was illegal, and so unlabelled.
Oh, Sherlock. Why did his brother take it?

oOo

"I'm sorry, m'Lord to wake you up at this hour, but it's your father on the phone." Mrs Walters was in a dressing gown, and standing in the doorway of his bedroom at Parham.

A quick glance at the bedroom clock showed it was 2.12am. Mycroft got his own dressing gown on and went down the hallway. There was an extension in his father's bedroom; he'd take the call there.

"Hello, Father."

"Mycroft. Why didn't you tell me it was Sherlock, not you? I called Doctor Kaczmarski. I don't like being lied to."

"I didn't lie. You assumed, and I did not see a reason to enlighten you."

"Don't play games, Mycroft."

Perhaps it was the hour of the morning, but he decided the time for being polite had passed. "The fact that it makes a difference to you that it was Sherlock rather than me is the reason why it seemed more sensible to leave you to your assumptions. How can you be so blasé?"

There was an intake of breath. "I'm not blasé. Not at all; that idiot brother of yours stuck his nose in something he shouldn't have. If he's so stupid as to take a medicine that wasn't prescribed for him, then he bloody well gets what he deserves."

"He nearly died, father."

"It just goes to show that you need to put him into a secure institution where he can be looked after round the clock. Neither you nor the staff at Parham can control him. For God's sake, if he's not getting into things he shouldn't, the moron's ridiculous chemistry experiments are going to burn the house down at some point. He's a danger to himself and to others. The sooner he's locked away, the better."

Mycroft rubbed his forehead and tried to stay calm. "We're not having this conversation now, father. What matters is that I found the evidence - the bottle of experimental hydrocodone, according to the London Clinic. Was it something you concocted for mother?"

There was a pause on the line, filled with the static of the transatlantic cable. Then Richard Holmes' baritone snapped out, "Whatever may or may not have helped your mother survive the last six weeks of her life without being in agony is not the issue. I've made sure the Clinic will deny all knowledge of the contents of the bottle you brought them today. It's been deleted from their records - they won't even mention it, nothing apart from the blood sample, in which they found no heroin, codeine or morphine. They've sent a report to Worthing to that affect - and nothing more, do you hear me? Whatever you found, destroy it immediately."

"And might that be because it is extremely illegal and might cause you some difficulty in explaining it should the authorities find out about it?" He was not afraid of his father.

"Mycroft…" It was like the warning growl of a cornered animal. "You were at Oxford until the Christmas before she died. You have no idea how horrible it was to watch her suffer. I don't regret doing everything in my power to make her final days more bearable. I have no idea where your brother found it; I gave explicit instructions to Wilson that every bottle be destroyed. All records of
its manufacture were expunged from the lab files. If you were to try to make anything of this, I will deny all knowledge of it- and there will be no evidence to justify an investigation. Don't be a fool- public disclosure would benefit no one."

"Knowing what it is will help the doctors treat Sherlock, so I have no choice but to tell them."

"And what good would that do? If he's had naloxone, then it would have dealt with it."

"You know he has atypical reactions to drugs. If I don't tell them the truth, then there could be repercussions."

"Wrong. The hospital doctors won't recognise the chemical construction of the drug- it's not available in the UK, nor even in the USA yet, in this slow release form. No drug trials have been authorised. It's invisible…and irrelevant to his treatment."

Regrettably, Mycroft realised that his father was probably right. Now that the naloxone had stopped the hydrocodone in its tracks, finding out why Sherlock had taken the drug was actually more important than what he took, now that the effects had been dealt with. But he loathed dropping this…negotiation, for that was what his relationship with his father had become. What could he extract from his father, in exchange for letting this illegal drug matter slide?

"Very well, Father. I have to focus on what is best for Sherlock, since you clearly have no intention of doing so. In exchange for not revealing the drug details, I will expect you to stay away from Parham for the rest of January and February. Let him recover in peace."

"Done. I have enough business trips already planned to sort out this Japanese deal that I'm not likely to be in the country long enough to care. My only regret in this is that you have once again allowed a sentimental attachment to your brother get in the way of our relationship. Destroy that bottle. Goodbye for now, Mycoft."

The line went dead, followed by the howl of static from a transatlantic call abruptly severed at one end.

oOo

When Mycroft got to the hospital the next morning, he was directed up to the paediatric ward- Sherlock had already been moved there as soon as he woke up and was extubated. Looking down the room, he could see only one bed had the curtains pulled around it, and guessed it would be Sherlock- an attempt to shield him from the sensory stimulation from the other patients.

Dr Cohen was in there with Sherlock, and she gave him a taut smile of greeting but then turned her attention back to the boy on the hospital bed. "Maybe you'll talk with your brother, given that you won't talk with me." Esther pulled the curtain back enough to slip through, murmuring as she passed him, "he's still on diazepam, to ease the anxiety."

Mycroft found the idea bizarre that the flimsy curtain pulled around the bed actually gave any measure of privacy; anyone with a set of ears would be able to know what was happening. So he had to be careful; Doctor Cohen would certainly be listening, and he didn't want to compromise her professional ethics by revealing too much about the drug.

Grey green eyes were warily scanning him. Surprisingly for one who had just been accused of mutism, it was Sherlock who started the conversation, "Why aren't you at Oxford?"

"Because of this." Mycroft pulled out from the canvas bag he'd brought with him the medicine bottle with the odd label on it. He held it up so his brother could see it- and the fact that it was now
empty. He'd taken the precaution of pouring the contents down the sink and washing the bottle out.

Sherlock was still too young to hide his surprise. "Where did you find that?"

Mycroft snorted. "Where you left it, obviously. It doesn't take the Brain of Britain to know what it was; the question is why would you take medicine that wasn't for you? Or didn't you realise that? You do tend to make silly mistakes on occasion." He kept his tone as light as he could, under the circumstances. He didn't want to frighten the boy into silence.

Sherlock frowned. "I'm not stupid. I know it wasn't for me. Mummy told me that often enough. But she took it for the pain, and she said it helped."

"Are you in pain, Sherlock?"

The eleven year old looked away. Silence fell. The boy picked at something on the sheet, then scratched his arm, rather aggressively. "These sheets make me itch. Can I go home now?" His tone was an abrupt mix of irritation and petulance.

"Not until you answer the question. The doctors here are worried that you might be trying to…do what you did to get out of Kings Court." Mycroft found it hard to say the word 'suicide', as if mentioning it might plant a seed that he devoutly wanted never to sprout.

Sherlock snorted. "That's stupid. I didn't want to die; I just wanted to stop thinking. Mummy said that her medicine was good for that. Thinking too much made her sad; and she said she didn't want to waste any time being sad. I don't either."

Mycroft could feel the muscles across his shoulders relaxing. At least it wasn't suicidal ideation. "Why are you sad?"

His brother was still avoiding him by looking down at the offending sheet. He shrugged. "What's there to be happy about?"

Mycroft tried not to wince at that and decided to take another tack. He pulled the second item out of the bag, and put the paisley shawl down on the hospital bed. "I thought you might want this."

Sherlock reached out and stroked the soft cashmere, closing his eyes for a moment.

"Was yesterday the first time you took the medicine?"

The boy shook his head.

"How many times, when and how much? Why was it different this time?"

Sherlock seemed a little dazed at the barrage, and muttered, "Too many questions…"

Mycroft knew he had to be patient, but it was hard. "Then let's start with when was the first time and how much did you take then?"

"A week after I found it, half a spoonful."

Mycroft rolled his eyes. "When was that, Sherlock? I need a date."

His brother's brow furrowed. "It must have been in August."

"Can you be more precise?"
He watched the boy's lower lip quiver a bit. His right hand let go of the paisley shawl, and he started rubbing his thumb against his index finger. Even through the haze of the diazepam, Sherlock was stressed enough by the question to have to resort to stimming.

"I overheard you on the phone. I wasn't trying to, really. You were talking to Father about me, and telling him what was going to happen when you had to go back to Oxford. It made me scared, so I ran up to my hiding place. Mummy said she took the medicine when she needed to stop worrying about what was going to happen. Well, so did I, so I took a bit."

"Did it work?"

Sherlock nodded. "What you said didn't matter anymore, so I guess, yes it must have worked."

"How often have you taken some since then?"

There was another shrug.

"Be specific; it is important."

"Whenever I get angry or upset."

Mycroft thought about it, and recalled his brother's volatile mood in September, before he went up to Oxford. "As much as once a week?"

Another nod.

"How much each time? Still just a half teaspoon?"

Sherlock bit his lip. "More. A spoon by the end of September. It didn't seem to work unless I took more."

_My twelve year old brother, the drug addict._ "And how often have you been taking it recently?"

Sherlock shrugged. "Whenever I need it."

"And you've been needing it more and more, haven't you? The drug is addictive, Sherlock; and in a large enough dose, like the one you took yesterday, it can kill you."

"It didn't kill Mummy. The cancer did. The medicine helped her."

"You have to stop this foolishness. There is no more of Mummy's medicine, and Doctor Cohen is going to figure out how to stop you feeling like you need to keep taking it."

"Why? It's the only thing that makes me stop being sad. Why do you want me to be sad?"

Mycroft shook his head. "I don't want you to be sad, but the drug doesn't solve anything, Sherlock. It's artificial. I should explain addiction. It means you have to keep taking it, and more and more each time, as your body gets used to it, for it to have the same effect. Eventually you need to take so much that it kills you. It didn't matter for Mummy when she became addicted to it, because she was going to die anyway. But you shouldn't have taken any, none at all."

Sherlock didn't answer.

"Why did you take it again yesterday, and in such a large dose?"

Sherlock wouldn't look at him.
Mycroft sat down in the chair beside the bed. His eyes were now on the same level as his brother's, but even so, Sherlock avoided looking at him.

"Was it because you heard me talking to Professor Roberts about going back to Oxford?"

"Why should that matter? You're always leaving. I'm always alone now."

Mycroft considered this. "You have Mrs Walters and all the Parham staff, not to mention the five tutors and your violin instructor. That's not alone."

"You don't understand. Those people- they're just there because they are paid to look after me. I don't like any of them. None of them are my friend. Redbeard was. He cared about me. And now he's dead, because of me."

Mycroft sighed. "I will talk to Frank Wallace so he'll let you select a puppy from the next litter."

Sherlock slapped his hand down on the bed in frustration. "You don't understand. I don't want a puppy! How can you not understand? You're supposed to be the smart one."

Mycroft gave him a condescending look. "I am the smart one, Sherlock. I'm not the one who took someone else's medicine because I was sad."

Then suddenly, the boy's anger was replaced by stunned surprise, and he stared at Mycroft as if seeing him for the first time. "OH! You don't know what it means, because you don't have any friends."

Mycroft's eyebrow rose on his forehead. "Of course I have friends."

"Who?"

"People I know from Eton and now from university, people who are useful. Fellow students, professors, important contacts in Central America who have given me access and trusted me in ways you cannot begin to understand."

Sherlock shook his head. "You don't understand- they aren't your friends. You use them and they use you. That's not friendship. That's why you never get sad."

"You have no idea what you are talking about, Sherlock. Worrying about you all the time makes me sad."

"Why? You don't care about me."

"Yes, I do."

"Then why do you always go away? You always leave me. So you can't care about me."

"It isn't that simple, Sherlock."

The two brothers looked at each other across the gulf of their seven year age difference, and ran out of words.

Chapter End Notes
This is the very beginning of the reason why Mycroft always wants a list.

*The story is covered in Periodic Tales.

**In real life, Parham House has the finest collection of Tudor and Stuart embroidery in the UK- even better than the Queen's! The tale of Susanna would have particular meaning for Violet Holmes as it recounts the Old Testament story of a beautiful woman spied upon by two elders, who demand she have sex with them or they would accuse her of adultery. She refuses, is tried and convicted but Daniel saves her from execution.

*** Richard's concern is based on the fact that Mycroft had childhood leukemia when he was six- but at this stage Mycroft is unaware of the fact. The story is told in Sidelined.

**** OxyContin, the extended release formulation of oxycodone, was not released until 1996. The "-contin" suffix is a pharmaceutical patent, and used on Hydrocodone now. Back when Violet Holmes was dying of pancreatic cancer, it would be experimental indeed, and illegal to use it on a human subject, even in testing, because drug trials on human patients had to be authorised by the Department of Health in the early 1990s. Despite widespread Medical advice against it, the FDA in America in 2014 licensed Zohydro, an extended release prescription painkiller that is made of pure hydrocodone, not mixed with acetaminophen. Hydrocodone in any form remains a Class A drug outlawed in the UK.
Exhaustion

Chapter Summary

Exhaustion

Noun  1. A state of extreme physical or mental tiredness; 2. The action of using something up, or the state of being used up.

It is ACD Canon that Irene Adler marries Godfrey Norton, and through an amusing mix-up Sherlock is roped into being a witness, his identity hidden because he is in disguise. This is my version of that scene, and it takes place after Sherlock's imprisonment in China.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He is basking, like some thin-skinned, cold-blooded reptile, letting the heat of the sun melt away the cold that has been in his bones since China. His eyes are closed, but the brightness of the sun turns the colour of his eyelids orange. That, too, is comforting. This light is steady and natural, the likes of which he has been deprived for so long.

There is a gentle offshore breeze blowing, just enough to keep him cool. It’s carrying a potent combination of pine resin from the Casuarina pine trees planted between the villa and the inland sea large enough to be called an ocean. Salt picked up by the wind from the little white caps out in the bay is tickling his nose.

He is still exhausted, used up, empty.

The sound of backless shoes slapping against a heel alerts him that someone is coming. The poolside tiles are hot, and everyone wears shoes here. But, these are not flip-flops. He can tell from the sound that these are expensive and that the stride is too short to be a man.

Something comes between him and the sun; his skin reacts instantly, and goose bumps break out. The colour on the back of his eyelids turns from pleasant orange to black. This is not a cloud, since clouds do not make a habit of wearing an expensive French suntan oil.

There is a tutting, and he can tell from the distance and the mouth that made it that the Woman is standing between him and his celestial provider of warmth and consolation.

“You’re going to get burned.”

It’s said in English, but with a Russian accent. She’s taken to it like a natural, reinforcing his opinion, formed what seems a life time ago, that she originated somewhere other than England.

He doesn’t open his eyes, just hums his displeasure at her intervention.

“You really don’t have the skin for this, Lazars.”
At least she’s keeping to the script now. And for that he is grateful. The man she used to know is dead, long gone, a not-quite-celebrity detective who committed suicide when the truth about his own crimes —and they were multiple— were made public in the tabloid newspapers.

“Godfrey, help me move this umbrella. I object to the smell of medium-rare Englishmen.”

The man who has been on a similarly towel clad lounger some four meters to the right of him now gets up. In his mind’s eye, he imagines the remarkably handsome fellow in his fifties, dark haired with aquiline features and a black moustache, as he rolls the concrete base of the sun umbrella into position.

The sun disappears entirely, and Sherlock opens his eyes in annoyance.

“Sit up. Let me apply the sun screen.”

Sherlock loathes sun screen. There is something disconcerting about the creamy texture and the artificial feel of the concoction of chemicals that make it disappear into his skin whether he wants it to or not.

A bass voice intrudes. “Don’t want to look like a lobster, do you? Might give one of the locals the wrong idea about who you are.” It’s an English accent, one that speaks of Godfrey's education at a grammar school and then a university. Not Oxbridge, however. What Sherlock has learned about him in the past three weeks is that he is a barrister, who had until recently been a member of the Inner Temple.

“Many Karelians do not tan,” Sherlock sniffs in response. But he does sit up and accept the glass of Borzhom sparkling water offered by Irina.

She smirks, “Ginger and freckles; who would have thought it?”

Sherlock has let his hair grow out, and brownish red curls are beginning to take tangible shape. It’s been five months since he shaved it at the monastery in Tibet. And there is less need of a blonde rinse here, because Lars Sigurson is temporarily retired as a disguise. But he has kept the beard, just trimmed it back into more than a reddish stubble, less than a flowing beard. What he’d had cut off in the hotel in Harbin had been truly disgusting.

Now he’s Lazars Ravilyevich Akbulatov, from Novgorodny, a Russian Karelian, currently a guest at the Black Sea villa owned by Yelena Yumasheva Barsukovna*. Sherlock finds it amusing that just down the coast of the Krasnodar Krai district is the town of Adler. “Did you plan that, or is it just one of those extraordinary coincidences?” he had asked her when he finally got his head around where they were.

It had taken some time for that to happen. He chooses not to remember much about being released into her custody after she’d arrived in Harbin and paid the ransom. She’d offered him a sedative, which he willingly took as they boarded the flight from Harbin to Ekaterinburg, and from there to Sochi. The airport was only fifteen kilometres up the coast from the Villa. Even so, he’d slept for two days and nights after arriving, waking only occasionally when a nurse changed his IV fluids.

When he finishes drinking the water, she tuts again. “You are still dehydrated.”

He just waves dismissively.

Godfrey is looking closely at him. “Have another glass. It won’t do, you know, if the witness collapses.”
Sherlock sighs. “Maybe, but do Russian Orthodox churches have loos?”

That gets a smirk from Irina. “Saint Monica church was built after Glasnost, so yes, I expect it has all mod cons.”

“As well as an obliging Orthodox priest.”

“Yelena has been generous to the church. And in any case, His Eminence has no idea that we are anyone but who our papers say we are. You, on the other hand, will find it more difficult to pass muster at the civil ceremony, if the delivery isn’t made on time.”

They are loitering by the pool, awaiting the arrival of a courier from St Petersburg. Yelena has promised that a new set of identity documents will arrive in time for the private wedding this afternoon. Lazars Ravilyevich Akbulatov, a Russian citizen born in the far north. The Karelian minority in Russia is a small and thus rarely encountered one; no one would really challenge his Russian accent if it was less than perfect. If he needed to, he could manage the local Petersburg accent, even the vocabulary used by the Tambovskaya gang when being a Bratva would help him, as it had when he’d managed to find and return the Turner watercolour.*

Irina Kapripova is getting married today to the English barrister who has been looking after the Tambovskaya’s interests in London: mostly property and commercial investments, sometimes the occasional extradition or citizenship application. Godfrey Norton speaks Russian very badly, if at all. It was what had thrown Irina in his path; Yelena relied on her translation skills.

The regular migration of oligarchs between Russia and London needs to be carefully managed these days, to avoid attracting the attention of too many prying eyes. If it isn’t the FSB or MI6, it’s another Russian oligarch competing for Putin’s favour and all too happy to cast doubts. It is a lucrative source of income from other Russian emigres, and no doubt allows some channelling of funds to be laundered through the money markets of London.

Sherlock knows it is a marriage of convenience, for both parties. While Irene wants children, she is still a lesbian, and a lover to Yelena. They had been brought together by Sherlock after Karachi, when each was mourning the loss of their lover. Yelena had set her London lover, Rachel Harmon, free, and Irene had put Kate out of harm’s reach after Mycroft had her arrested. Their lives were simply too dangerous to risk the women they loved. St Petersburg became a convenient bolt hole for Irene, and she had come to appreciate the security it offered, even if it came at the cost of her first love.

Sherlock can understand that. It was the motivating factor for him leaving London—to avoid risking the lives of the people that Moriarty had threatened to kill. They believe him to be dead, and in a way, Sherlock Holmes *is* dead. He has borne been many different names since then, changing aliases as often as his hairstyle and clothing. Being fluent in so many languages has been rather helpful to his role: disrupter in-chief of the criminal network established by James Moriarty.

On the fourth night of being at the villa, he had enough energy to talk to Irina, and they did, right through the night, sipping samovar tea and stopping every once in a while to listen to the crickets in the trees and the rattling of the wind through the palm fronds.

“Why marriage?” He had made it sound like some form of exotic sadomasochistic bondage act. Come to think of it, with the Irene of old, it might be.

She’d laughed. “Once burned, twice shy. I can’t go back to my old techniques of making my way in the world. It’s too dangerous here in Russia. And, people believe that Irene Adler died in Karachi, beheaded as the traitor who betrayed the secrets of the Taliban plot to blow up a British airliner
over the Atlantic. All I want now is a life where I can put my brain to use, while enjoying a life of comfort.”

Irene had explained just why it had taken so long to get the ransom together. “Not your fault, just rotten timing. The request came into the office, unseen by me or Yelena because we were both away. I was in Switzerland sorting out some bank accounts, and she was in London, secretly visiting at an artificial insemination service. It wasn’t an easy first trimester; she stayed in London under an assumed name until the baby was viable. When I got back to St Petersburg I saw the message, knew who had sent it, and made enquiries. It’s not every day we get a ransom request like that; it had to be carefully risk-assessed first.”

She’d refilled his tea cup. “When you’re done being super sleuth, it wouldn’t hurt you to do the same, you know. Go home. Find John and settle down. Before it’s too late. You’ve played it too close to the wire this time.”

“There’s work still to be done before John can be safe. Before I can even think of whether it makes sense to return to London.”

“He doesn’t want to be safe; he wants you.”

“Well, that’s all over. I won’t be the cause of his death. Not then. Not now, not in the future. You can’t talk; you gave up Kate.”

“She’s more sensible than John ever was.”

Having exhausted his willingness to talk about John, Sherlock had countered, “So, what has Yelena got you doing that can be remotely as exciting as what you once described as misbehaving?”

“Nothing in that category, thank God. She wants me for my mind, and she is rather possessive, so parlour games with others are no longer on the agenda.”

“She agrees to you getting married? She doesn’t strike me as the type who wants to share.”

“She has her own child on the way now; she’s almost five months pregnant. Godfrey was the donor. She was the one who first suggested marriage to Godfrey; keeps us together as a family, is what she said. I agree. It’s imminently sensible, and gives me security. Having a child whose half-brother is in one of the most powerful Russian families is something to keep me warm in my old age.”

He’d scoffed. “Old age? Yelena had better watch out; you’ll be terrorising the other mafia communities in no time, blackmailing the leaders for some sordid sexual misdemeanour.”

“Those days are done. I’ve hung up the riding crop. A Woman has a best use by date; femme fatales are rarely in their forties. To be honest, a lot of that whole scene was just exhausting. Besides, I like Godfrey. He’s sensible, fun, and very, very intelligent. Reminds me of you, only more sensible. Time to settle down…” She had resisted adding his name, but it hung there in the air between them—an unspoken past identity which bound them together.

That was six weeks ago. In the interval, he has rested and healed the physical damage of his incarceration in the Chinese prison. Weight has returned, wounds have healed, muscles have taken shape; Godfrey’s current love life is Yuri, a Russian triathlete who is keeping the Bratvas fighting fit, and he is happy to play physical therapist if it keeps him within touching distance of Godfrey.

Occasionally, Sherlock and Irene return to the terrace for a late night conversations. Watching the twinkling lights of the Oligarchs’ villas up and down the coast, they take advantage of their time
out to relax. Irina is no longer Irene as she had been; some of the harsh edges of making her way in a dangerous world have mellowed a bit. For Sherlock, a part of him feels totally liberated. Here he is Laraz, a nobody. Not the World’s Only Consulting Detective, not Lars Sigurson, heir apparent to Moriarty’s crown. The two of them talk as they please, without the baggage of their past lives interfering. She is a surprisingly funny and intelligent woman.

By mutual agreement, they no longer talk about John. Sherlock misses London terribly, and his life there with John. But it’s gone. He finds he can talk to Irene in a way because of all they have been through together means that communication is easy. He finds himself shocked to realise that she is a friend. Perhaps in a way that John couldn’t be. Things with John had been so…complicated. Too intense, too much, too dangerous. He refuses to think of that now. Deleted. What was cannot ever be the same again.

But, here on the east coast of the Black Sea, he is in a little bubble. He knows who she is; she knows who he is, and they both know where they stand with one another. One night, their laughter brings Godfrey onto the terrace. He reaches over the chair in which Irene is sitting and wraps his arms protectively around her. “Should I be jealous? You two laughing out here makes me wonder.”

It is said tongue in cheek, and for once, Sherlock has no trouble interpreting the emotion that is being conveyed. Godfrey seems to approve of their friendship, in a way that John had never understood. He’d been so… well, Sherlock doesn’t know how to put a label on what he had heard in John’s exchange with Irene at the Battersea Power Station.

Long ago and far away. He decides to embrace the sense of being happy. It won’t last. Perhaps that’s why he can let himself relax for just this moment.

If only the nightmares would stop. Whatever physical improvement has taken place, Sherlock is unable to stop the nightmares that come, unbidden. When he thinks of John Watson now, there is an aching hole, a void in his mind. Like some cardboard cut-out figure, the memories of the man he had leapt to his death for in order to save him need to be kept at arms’ length.

Oddly, he finds it possible to spend a whole day without a memory of John intruding. When they do, it’s as if being seen at a very far distance. He wonders what torture they practised to make him effectively delete John, who has become someone I used to know.

The horrors of being imprisoned, which included his senses being deprived, for as long as he had, are proving much harder to shift than the recollections of John Watson. Medical attention, food, the pool, and even just a time out have repaired the injuries to his body much faster than to his mind.

The time-out to recover is nearly depleted. Godfrey will be heading back to St Petersburg soon to collect Yelena. She will be taken to the UK for the last trimester of her confinement. The birth needs to take place there, to ensure citizenship rights. Meanwhile, Irene will need to “mind the store” in St Petersburg as she put it, while they are away. Running the family affairs of one contingent of the Russian mafia seems to come naturally to her. Then again, Sherlock has never underestimated her ability to re-invent herself.

So the Black Sea villa will be abandoned for the rest of the summer season, and he needs to return to his mission. Time to dust off the Lars Sigurson identity and tackle the last phases of the work. He has had help from the Tambovskaya in gathering several useful contacts. He’s off to the Balkans soon, the last and most dangerous bastion left in the old Moriarty empire. The connections between the Serbian and Albanian criminal networks and the South American Cartels are fiercely protected, and have as yet proved impervious. He now has some interesting data on Baron von
Maupertius and his money laundering activities on behalf of the Balkans drug dealers; he would need to act on it soon, before the Netherlands Sumatra Bank laundering huge sums decides to shift its funds elsewhere.

The air tickets are booked, and tonight is a candlelit farewell dinner with the three of them on the terrace overlooking the Black Sea. As they sip fine Georgian wine – smuggled across the border in violation of the current Russian ban (a fit of pique no doubt designed to irritate Georgia and keep them on their toes in the run up to the Winter Olympics in Sochi) – his companions explain his role in the marriage proceedings tomorrow.

“Yelena was due to come to be the witness. The ceremonies aren’t legal without one. But, she’s been held up by morning sickness. For her sake and that of the baby, we’ve asked her to stay in St Petersburg. We’ve paid a lot to get this private date, and don’t want to wait. You will stand up for us in her place,” Godfrey had explained.

“Why on earth do you two want to get married, least of all to each other?” Sherlock tries one last time to understand. He understands the logic for the relationship, but not the need for ceremony.

Irene answers for both of them. “As I said: companionship. And procreation.” She takes a sip of the wine. “To succeed a marriage needs to be between two people who are friends first. The sex is just an added extra. In our case, we can manage it, because we both want children. A child born to both of us will have dual citizenship, and that suits us, too.”

Sherlock uses the arrival of the villa’s catering staff to scrutinise Godfrey carefully. Yet, throughout the rest of the dinner, through the courses and the fine wines, all that his keen observational skills pick up is a comfortable relationship, one based on trust and respect. It seems that the two opposites attracted enough to make viable a relationship the likes of which they are now making permanent and official.

“Alright, tell me what I have to do.”

They discuss the process; the Russian Orthodox marriage ceremony will be private and short. Sherlock grumbles about the number of times things have to be repeated. “Three times?! Why isn’t one of these stupid crown rituals enough?”

“Trinity, my dear. Unlike you and your brother, it takes three to make a god in Russia. God, the Son and the Holy Spirit all get their bit of attention.”

Maybe it was the mention, even in passing of Mycroft that makes Sherlock bristle a bit. “No, my brother has fallen from grace, or perhaps I have. I have been cast forth to walk the earth.”

She laughs, delighted by his irreverence. “Just don’t mention that you are Lucifer to the Reverend Father. He might not be amused.”

“Why this mumbo jumbo?” Sherlock is still not convinced.

Godfrey answers for them both. “If you ever have children, you will understand. The church ceremony has legal force here, and we will do a civil ceremony, too; that’s easy—just a paperwork job in the town hall. Belt and braces, my boy. It’s important protection of our legal rights to remain in this country.”

Perhaps Godfrey realises what he is asking. He glances about to make sure there is no one in earshot. “Thank you, Sherlock. It really means a lot to me. You have been rather a surprise from the very beginning, you know. She’s told me the story of Karachi. Rather extraordinary, the whole
thing.”

The use of a name he has abandoned disturbs him, but before he can chastise, Godfrey gestures for silence as Yuri arrives, apologising for the interruption. “Your papers, Lazar. They have arrived by courier.”

He opens the package, flips through the passport and ID card, driver’s license. He will need to practice the signature a bit tonight. He rarely has to write Cyrillic these days, and it needs to more or less match those on the papers.

“Okay?”

He nods to Irene.

Godfrey leans back in his chair. “Will you answer me a question now? Why? Why did you save her, bring her to Russia and introduce her to Yelena?”

Sherlock has often wondered the same thing himself. It had been a quick decision, once he’d learned that his brother’s minions had released her. He objected to Mycroft using her as some sort of bait thrown to the wolves, to flush out Moriarty at best, or some other miscreants like the Taliban. It wasn’t fair to blame her for what the Irishman had done to them. He knows things about Irene that he chose not to share with Mycroft and those were what had driven him to take the necessary steps to ensure her survival.

He’d actually told Mycroft he was going to Rome. The local people assigned to keep an eye on him there were not the brightest crayon in the pack of European intelligence services, so it had been a simple exercise of using the Lars Sigurson disguise, combined with a willing member of the homeless network. The man—right height and body shape, even looked a little like him once theatrical make-up was applied— had been delighted to use his passport, wear his clothes, fly to Rome, stay in a posh hotel and arrange a meeting with various art authorities who were investigating the disappearance of two early Van Gogh paintings, stolen by the mafia in 2003.

While the theatrics happened in Rome, Lars Sigurson had left Heathrow on a flight to Frankfurt, changing there for a flight to Almaty in Kazakhstan, and then a short hop to Khwaja Rawash Airport in Kabul. He knew where to go, because Moriarty’s network was alive with data about her whereabouts; the Irishman was using her kidnapping and soon to be videoed demise as a warning to his network; don’t cross me, or you too will end up like Adler. As the head of the Norwegian arm of Moriarty’s network, Lars had been tuned in to the plot, even the timing of the online execution.

Yet. The practicalities of this situation are not what Godfrey wants. He wants reasons.

“It would have been a waste, which I abhor. Letting her be used as bait was reprehensible. Because I bore some responsibility for that state of affairs, I thought it only right to do what I could.”

Her soon-to-be husband raises his glass to salute Sherlock. “Without you, Irina would not be alive, she would not be here in Russia and I would never have met the woman with whom I intend spending the rest of my life. Thank you. It is most fitting that you are there with us to celebrate our marriage.”

Sherlock raises his own glass. “Then let me also add my thanks. Without the ransom being paid, and the sanctuary here to allow me to heal, I would not be alive to toast the happy couple.”

oOoOoOoOoOo
The candles have been lit; the couple’s right hands are joined. The priest has bored Sherlock to tears over a sermon and readings that stress how Saint Monica is the Orthodox model of “wifely forbearance”. The myrtle leaf and orange blossom crowns, united by a white ribbon have been passed over their heads three times. The three sips each from the cup have been taken. The priest has led them around the altar three times, gesturing to Sherlock that he, too, must follow.

Then the blessings start, with the priest turning first to Godfrey.

After almost eight weeks in Russia, Sherlock can translate without thinking, as soon the words are said: “Be thou magnified, O Bridegroom, as Abraham, and blessed as Isaac and multiply as Jacob. Walk in peace and work in righteousness, as the commandments of God.”

Sherlock finds it hard to believe that a money laundering barrister and a criminal mastermind in her own right are likely to work in “righteousness”, but to each, their own. His quarrel is not with them.

Turning to Irene, the priest chants “And thou O Bride, be though magnified as Sarah, glad as Rebecca and multiply like unto Rachel, rejoicing in thine own husband, fulfilling the conditions of the law, for so it is well pleasing unto God.”

Sherlock fingers the air ticket in his jacket pocket. Sochi to Belgrade on Aeroflot Rossiya, departing at 21.14 tonight. There are no direct flights so the three of them are going to Moscow first before splitting up. He’s booked an economy seat away from their first class section; he’ll be travelling as Lars Sigurson and will want nothing to do with them.

Time to get back to The Work.

Yet, somehow, maybe it’s the effect on his emotions of the choir’s music, but he finds himself wishing them the very best of luck. When the moment comes, he has no problems at all joining his baritone to the rest of the meagre number of participants in the final shout:

“Na zisete!”***

Chapter End Notes

That Irene Adler marries Godfrey Norton is ACD Canon, and through an amusing mix-up Sherlock is roped into being a witness, when neither the bride nor the groom recognise him, given he is disguised.

* If you want to know how Sherlock knows Yelena and why she would give him shelter, you will have to read Mister Turner’s Masterpiece, part of the Fallen Angel Series of stories.

**The stolen Van Goghs are real, by the way. 1882’s “View of the Sea at Scheveningen” and the 1884 “Congregation Leave the Reformed Church in Nuenen”, are from a period that was crucial to the post-impressionist master’s development as a painter.
*** Na zisete means "May you live!" Oh, and there really is a town called Adler on the Black Sea Coast, not far from Sochi.
**Excerpt**

Chapter Summary

Excerpt
Noun A short extract from a film, broadcast, or piece of music or writing.
Verb Take (a short extract) from a text.

This is an excerpt from Extricate; a little snippet, piece, clip or selection that never actually made it into the story as published. It covers the Cycling Weekend that Victor told his dad he would be doing instead of going to Colton Grange for his birthday. And it is a bit of romantic fluff for all of those who endured the pain and suffering of Extricate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Two drowned rats… What can I do for you?”

The barmaid is looking askance at them and Victor doesn’t blame her. They are soaked to the skin, muddy and freezing, dripping onto the stone floor in front of the bar. “The Broad Leys called ahead. You told them you have a room for tonight.”

“Yes.” The barmaid gives Victor the once over look that he is used to, and then she tutts. “Mind you, no normal double bed is going to fit someone your height. And there’s only the one room.”

“That’s okay; we’re university students. We’re used to sharing. Just somewhere warm and dry will do.”

“It’s only fair to warn you; we’ve got a party in tonight: a thirtieth birthday party, which is why the other six rooms are already booked. The only available room’s directly over the bar.” She points up to the heavily beamed ceiling. “And being listed means we’re not able to do much sound-proofing.”

Victor turns to Sherlock. “Got your ear plugs?”

Between his chattering teeth, Sherlock can only manage a shaky “yes.”

“Then we’ll take it. Any port in a storm and all that.”

“Right. Go out the front door turn right and then right again to the passageway where you can get access to the back. Lock up your bikes at the covered bit. They should be safe and dry there. Come in through the back door and take the stairs up to the first floor. Room Four.”

She hands over a key. “If I were you, I’d get in quick and get a hot bath before the other guests arrive- not enough hot water to go around if everyone tries at the same time. And a word of
warning—you’ll want to eat early because the kitchen’s going to be hellishly busy and most of the ordinary menu is off tonight because the locals are staying away. Not quite a private function, so I can get you something simple to eat before the party guests arrive at seven thirty. Chicken and chips okay for you? So be back down here by seven or you’ll go hungry.”

Victor nods, just happy to find food and shelter for the night.

They are on their way to Oxford for a long weekend: Friday through Sunday nights. One advantage of Victor resigning the captaincy and leaving the rugby team is that there is more time in his academic schedule, and he’s made arrangements with the lecturer to make up what he misses on Monday. Lucky for him, the man has a sense of humour. “Well, Trevor, I suppose you only get one twenty-first birthday in your life, so have a good one.”

In theory, the journey from Cambridge to Oxford should have taken between seven and nine hours, at an average cycling speed of twelve miles per hour. Unfortunately, theory and reality had collided with bad weather, poor visibility and a puncture near Stewkey. Then a wrong turn that cost them almost twenty minutes off their route had thrown yet another spanner in the works. When they’d realised that the storm clouds bringing sleet and wind were to the north, they changed their route and headed south to find shelter.

By the time Victor and Sherlock had arrived at the Broad Leys Inn on the outskirts of Aylesbury, they were cold, wet and hungry. Unfortunately, the inn was full, but they did call ahead to another place, The Bell, which is further in town—right on the market square, to be precise.

After locking up their bikes, they head back into the warmth of the pub. As Victor ducks below low hanging beams towards the stairs, Sherlock follows behind. He’s brought in the two sets of pannier bags that they’d rigged onto their bikes. At least they will have warm clothes to change into once they get out of their wet Lycra.

The first floor is like a lot of medieval buildings- a real rabbit’s warren of corridors, uneven floors and low doorways, but Victor eventually finds Room Four at the end of a paisley carpeted hallway. The door is open and when he pushes it, Victor has to start laughing. “Charming. Chloe would love it.”

“Where’s the heating? I need to turn up the thermostat.” Sherlock drops the panniers, toes off his cycle shoes and comes further into the room behind Victor. In one slightly aghast look he takes in the floral wallpaper, the pink carpet and the olde worlde mock-Tudor style reproduction furniture, complete with four-poster bed and flounced coverlet and valence that matches the rose bestrewn curtains. “Hideous,” he pronounces. “But warm. It’ll do.”

Victor circles around Sherlock, shuts the door, puts the key in the lock and turns it. “Sorry; this whole idea should have been put on hold when we heard the weather forecast. I’ll find the radiator valve and turn it wide open.”

Then he comes up behind Sherlock and envelopes him in a bear hug. “You’re freezing. Let me warm you up.” He can feel the boy shivering. “We’re both muddy and wet through. Let’s get out of these clothes.”

“I’ll be okay once I get into a hot bath.” Sherlock wriggles out of Victor’s hug and heads into the bathroom. It’s pink. Very pink. Tiles, basin, toilet and tub. Even the towels are pink. He turns the hot tap and sticks a hand under the flow, waiting for the long pipe run to deliver some semblance of relief.
Victor rummages around in the panniers, thankful that they are waterproof. He lays out a change of clothes for both of them on the bed. He slips off his new watch, a gift from his father; fortunately, it’s waterproof.

When Victor pokes his head into the bathroom two minutes later, Sherlock is still waiting for the hot water to arrive before putting in the plug. He is now struggling out of the wet Lycra that clings to his skin like it is glued there. “Let me help,” Victor offers. “Then you can help me strip off, too. Shame there isn’t room for both of us in that tub.”

Victor is still a little amazed that he has the right…no, the privilege… of this kind of intimacy with Sherlock. A week after their adventures in London, his relationship with Sherlock is still new and shiny; he’s terrified he will do something wrong to frighten Sherlock off.

As Victor pulls Sherlock’s cycling jersey over wet curls, matted by wearing a helmet for hours, the pale skin exposed is goose-bumped. Even so, he admires the view, because he can. And then he reciprocates by shedding his own top and then they are chest to chest in the small room. At least in here, Victor can stand up without having to bend his head to avoid beams. At some point, he is sure that he will clunk his head on one of them. He tilts Sherlock’s chin up so he can ask, “too cold for a kiss?”

“Let me put the plug in first.” Sherlock ducks out of the embrace and then drops to the tub, shoving the brass plug on a chain down to start filling the bath. A moment later, he is back chest to chest with Victor. “Where were we?”

In someone else, it might be seen as a flirt. In Sherlock’s case, Victor knows that he is innocent of all that; the boy’s natural pleasure in their relationship is genuine.

“I was about to kiss you.” And he does—a long, slow and romantic kiss. One of his hands finds its way to the back of Sherlock’s neck, the other drops around his back to the edge of the cycling leggings.

This, just this. It is so sweet, and Victor relishes every moment of it. When they come up for air, he can’t resist. “Allow me,” dropping to his knees and peeling off the wet Lycra from Sherlock’s waist right down to his knees. Freed from their Lycra prison, Sherlock’s penis and balls drop onto his thighs and he actually moans with pleasure. “You have no idea how good that feels.”

“Of course, I do.” Victor shimmies out of his own and breathes a sigh of relief, too. “Riding commando is all well and good, but six hours is enough. I hope I’m not too saddle-sore to be able to sit.”

Sherlock bends to pull his own leggings off his ankles and feet, and while he is down there, tugs on Victor’s so he can step free. Steam from the bath is beginning to fill the room, and for the first time in at least three hours, Victor is beginning to thaw.

“You first.” Victor grabs a towel off the rail and wraps it around his waist, enjoying the view as Sherlock tests the water, bending over and giving a fine view of that gorgeous arse of his. He stays in the bathroom, luxuriating in the heat, while Sherlock sinks into the water, moaning with pleasure.

They are still glowing pink from their hot baths when they get back downstairs for their meal. It may not be haute cuisine but at least the portions are generous, and Victor is so hungry that he manages to finish it in half the time that Sherlock takes. But he is happy to see that Sherlock’s
appetite is sufficient to the task, even if it does involve large quantities of ketchup.

“I didn’t know you liked ketchup; why haven’t you said so before now?”

Sherlock looks up at him across his nearly empty plate. “You never asked. It seemed presumptuous of me to request it, given neither you nor Chloe ever had it in the flat.”

“You could have put it on the shopping list.”

Sherlock shrugs. “Didn’t think that was my place.”

“Your place is with me. We’re together now. I want to produce things you like to eat.”

“You do. I have no complaints.”

“Oh? Well, there was that time I did a plate of calamari. After the first mouthful got spat out, you wouldn’t touch another one.”

“I didn’t complain.”

“No. You didn’t have to.” Victor thinks that his unfailing ability to take things literally is one of Sherlock’s endearing features. He is coming to realise that with Sherlock actions speak louder than words, and vows to pay more attention to how the boy reacts to the food that he puts in front of him. And other things, too. For someone who seemed to avoid being touched by other people, Sherlock has been surprisingly receptive to hugs, a hand on his arm, a rub of a hand through those curls, being in skin contact with Victor. It’s a revelation.

They are eating at a small table for two set into an alcove right next to the kitchen. It’s cramped enough that their knees would bump up against each other. To make it more comfortable, he slides one leg between Sherlock’s and then puts his other leg on the other side; in effect, he is able to squeeze Sherlock’s thigh at just the right pressure to bring a blush to Sherlock’s cheeks.

Not that anyone is paying the slightest bit of attention to them. In the main room of the pub, staff are setting up tables and chairs for the party. A longer trestle table to the side has salads and platters of ham and cheese with cling film over them. Balloons and streamers decorate the beams, and a disco turntable is being set up in the corner, just below where Victor guesses their bedroom is. There is a banner pinned to the bar—

*The Big Three OH! Happy birthday, Maggie*

The double doors from the kitchen swing open and a waitress comes through carrying a big cake.

Sherlock smirks. “How appropriate, given it is your birthday.”

Victor pretends to be scandalised. “Not my thirtieth; not that old yet! I dislike birthday cakes; too much sweet and rich butter cream icing. I can still remember my twelfth birthday party when I was allowed to invite some prep school friends over. I ended up eating too much cake and being sick.”

“I never had a birthday party, and I’ve never been invited to one.”

That confession shocks Victor. No matter how much he already knows about Sherlock, it’s stuff like this that occasionally blindsides him. He gives another slow squeeze of his legs against Sherlock’s thigh. “Well, today is my best birthday ever. You’re invited to my private party upstairs. Like I told my dad; I’d rather be with you than with anyone else. Finish that off and let’s get up there before the crowd arrives.”
The barmaid proves to be right. When he’s fully stretched out, Victor’s feet do hang off the end of the bed. Mind you, he’s not worrying about that at the moment. He and Sherlock are under the duvet enjoying a bit of mutual exploration. He is learning fast just how much stimulation is exciting and thrilling, and how not to push Sherlock right over the edge into avoidance. To Victor’s surprise, a firm touch seems better than a gentle one. It seems counter-intuitive. If someone is challenged by sensory processing issues, surely too much is worse than too little? But it’s only taken him a week to realise that the reverse is true. A firm grip or stroke seems to command attention and allows Sherlock to push aside other sensations.

Another thing Victor realises is that Sherlock is a quick learner. He watches and remembers everything that Victor likes, and then experiments with slight variations to see how far out he can push the envelope. No one has ever taken such time and effort with Victor. Chloe had been all about getting into bed and his role there was to bring her to climax. She’s explained it simply as a case of common sense. “Guys can come anytime they damn well please and as fast as they want, but girls take a lot more time and effort.”

The reverse is true with Sherlock. He reaches a climax very quickly and seems genuinely unconcerned about his own needs, so much so that Victor has to stop him from always focusing on what Victor wants. Like right now, when Sherlock has found that pinching one of Victor’s nipples between his thumb and a fingernail will elicit a throaty shout of pleasure.

Lucky for them, the music has started downstairs and it is certainly loud enough to drown out anything coming from their bedroom.

Despite the fact that the sensation is making his cock throb, Victor captures Sherlock’s hand and detaches it from his nipple.

“But you like that.”

Victor hums his agreement, “What do you like?”

“I like making you feel good.”

“Well, I like making you feel good too, so my turn now.” He keeps hold of Sherlock’s hand for a moment. “What do you like, really like?”

“I don’t know. Insufficient data to form a hypothesis.”

Well, it’s honest, but Sherlock’s answer complicates matters because Victor doesn’t want to suggest something inappropriate or unwanted. That’s the main reason why he hasn’t yet broached the subject of penetration. Given Victor’s size, and his total lack of experience, the thought of anal sex is worrying him. What if he hurts Sherlock?

“Oh, as you are the scientist, let’s start gathering some data. I’m going to try a few things and you are going to promise me that you will tell me if you are enjoying them. Don’t you dare let me do something simply because you think I want to do it. This is all about you. So that means you have to tell me. Talk to me.”

Sherlock pushes himself up on his elbows to give Victor a puzzled look. “Talk? About what?”

Victor can’t help a snigger. “About sex, about what you are feeling about what I am doing.”

“I’ve never done that.”
“First time for everything.”

“But, what do I say?”

“Tell me if it feels good.”

“It all feels good, everything you do feels good.”

Victor rolls his eyes, and ends up looking at the horrible pink canopy over the four poster. Hastily averting his gaze back down to the riot of dark curls, Victor realises he needs to elaborate in a way that Sherlock can grasp. “No- that’s not true. You made it clear by freaking out when I accidentally pulled your hair. It would have been easier if I’d known how sensitive your scalp is in advance.”

“It was an accident.”

“Next time, it might not be, when I do something that hurts you. So… here’s an idea. Tell me on a scale of one to ten what your reaction is to each thing I do.”

Sherlock gives it some consideration, a tiny furrow appearing between his eyebrows. “That means comparison. You will need to keep doing things so the comparison is valid. You’ll have to repeat everything in sequence whenever you add something new. The scale will keep changing until I have enough data to draw a valid conclusion.”

The next two hours of exuberant experimentation are played out against a background sound track of the greatest hits of the 1990s, with a few golden oldies thrown in for good measure. The DJ plays Rod Stewart’s raspy voiced version of *Maggie May*, which makes Victor remember that this is the name of the birthday girl. Then it’s Stevie Wonder’s *Happy Birthday*. Somewhere around the time that Victor has a fair list of Sherlockian pleasures, *Birthday* by Destiny’s Child follows on, almost inevitably. Victor recognises a lot because he’d been at prep school and then Greshams, both full of boys who wanted to be rock stars. And then there were the school dances, too. He knows for sure that he never, ever imagined his own birthday would be spent in bed with someone like Sherlock.

As the night wears on, midst the thumping beat of pop songs in which the party goers start joining in, a sliding scale of numbers starts to emerge. A stroke of Victor’s tongue up the shaft of Sherlock’s cock rates a six at the start, but once he adds in a lick at the glans, it drops to a four, the upward journey being demoted by the softly moaned seven. A finger rubbing at the perineum gets a four, which is hastily demoted to a two when Victor uses that same finger to probe into his anus. Sometimes, the number is whispered; on other occasions, it is much louder, and it makes Victor wonder whether he should have factored in a variable of volume, as well.

What he is discovering is that Sherlock is pretty tight down there, which worries him no end. A glance at his own achingly erect cock makes Victor wonder if he can’t get three fingers in that arse, he’s not going to be willing to try it. When two fingers in gets a lower score than one, Victor has a light bulb moment, a rather ecstatic epiphany—he’s approaching this the wrong way around. Victor is also someone who has acquired a taste for what he is experimenting with around Sherlock’s anus. Fingers, tongue and all- why not a cock?

“Sherlock, would you like to try something different for me?”

“Hmmm?”

“I’m going to go on my hands and knees. I’m going to hang onto the headboard, and I want you to come around behind and put your cock inside me.”
He’s watching Sherlock’s eyes, and they widen in surprise. “Why? Why would you do that for me?” This is said in a loud enough voice to be heard over the DJ’s current choice—a medley of Duran Duran’s greatest hits—coming up through the floorboards.

“Who says it’s for you? This is me wanting to explore my tastes, too. Think of it as a potential win-win. But you’ll have to talk to me. I won’t be able to see your face, and I need to know what you are feeling.”

“I’ve never done it before, might make a mess of it or worse, hurt you.” He looks serious.

“Oh, don’t worry. I will tell you what I’m feeling.” Victor slides away from Sherlock’s side, grabs the tube of lube and applies it liberally to himself before handing it over to Sherlock.

The crowd of party goers is getting into the groove downstairs. No doubt well-fuelled with alcohol and the exertion of dancing, they are beginning to sing along with the choruses. At no point do any of the dancers realise that the base beat behind Tina Turner singing *Whatever You Need* is being supplemented by the sound of the headboard of a four-poster bed being banged in time with the music. As Depeche Mode’s *Enjoy the Silence* blares out, no one can hear the word “TEN!” being shouted out repeatedly by two different voices.

Four minutes later, Victor imagines the thirty year old birthday girl is dancing with her fiancé singing rather drunkenly “Words are meaningless and forgettable. All I ever wanted, all I ever needed is here in my arms.” No one in the crowd hears Victor’s tenor voice upstairs singing the same lines, nor the perfect-pitch baritone that eventually joins in.

When Victor realises that he is awake rather than dreaming about the feel of Sherlock in his arms, he can’t resist smiling before he opens his eyes. By touch alone, he knows that in the night they have come into what is becoming their normal sleeping position. He’s the big spoon and Sherlock the little one. Both of them are bent at the knees to keep their feet warm under the covers. Victor’s arm is over Sherlock’s chest and his nose is buried in the boy’s dark curls, inhaling the scent of posh shampoo and conditioner.

The room is cold but he is in need of a pee, so he slides gently out of bed, hoping that exhaustion will keep Sherlock asleep.

Giving one stretch that smacks his arms into the overhead beam, Victor pads to the loo. While he’s there he realises that there is a “morning after the night before feeling” in his arse that is going to make cycling a bit painful today.

He moves to the window and tugs a curtain aside, to peek out. He gapes at the view; it’s a great excuse to climb back in bed.

Sherlock stirs and mumbles a query. “Victor?”

As he slides back in under the duvet and envelopes the boy again, Victor asks, “Who else? Who would you like it to be?”

“No one. Just you. What time is it?”

“Half past eight.”
“Oh.” Sherlock stiffens and then stretches languidly. “That means we need to get up and get breakfast. We have at least another two hours of cycling before we get to Oxford.”

“That isn’t going to happen today.”

“Why?”

Even though Sherlock is facing away from him, Victor can hear the wariness.

“Because it snowed last night. By the look of it, at least six inches. Biking in that mess is not happening. Besides… we have more experimentation to do right here, right now.”

“We’ve still got Saturday and Sunday nights booked at the B and B in Oxford. It might thaw by this afternoon.”

“Not if we’re lucky.”

Over a late breakfast downstairs, and a quick check by the publican of the local weather report, Victor is delighted to learn that the forecast is dire: more snow headed their way starting this afternoon. Fortunately, the publican tells them that the same room is available for Saturday night, before apologising. “It’s the big match—kick off is at eight pm; the place will be packed with locals to watch it on the big screen. Going to be a noisy night again.”

“That’s fine by us.”

They never make it to Oxford.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s notes: This one comes with a playlist. Tina Turner’s Whatever You Need is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7aB5n7NsvA

Depeche Mode’s Enjoy The Silence is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5Mv3WS3D-o The lyrics to both of these are just about as perfect as they can be for this particular story.
**Existential**

Chapter Summary

Existential  \((\text{ɛɡzɪˈstɛnʃəl})\)

adj.
1. of or relating to existence, esp a human’s existence
2. (Philosophy) pertaining to what is known by experience rather than reason

Chapter Notes

This takes place between *Magpie: One for Sorrow* and the start of *Magpie: Two for Joy*. Time to realise that all is not well for Sherlock, and that he is still dealing with “issues”.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John sits back in his chair, looking a bit shell-shocked. Sherlock still thinks of it as his chair, despite the fact that the doctor no longer lives at Baker Street. In Sherlock’s mind, the chair exists because John sat in it for the time they shared the flat. Even when he no longer sits in it, the essence of the chair being John’s has not changed. Seeing him sitting in it again is merely confirming the truth.

Diane Goodliffe has just left, after John’s first EMDR session*. “That is…one of the strangest things I’ve ever experienced.” John looks down at his left hand and taps the arm of the chair. “Something so… simple. It shouldn’t work.”

Standing by the window, Sherlock watches the auburn haired therapist cross Baker Street before heading towards the tube station on Marylebone Street. He watches until she is no longer in view. Turning back to John, he nods. “I agree. Completely and utterly amazing. The triumph of experience over reason. It defies belief that the human mind can be fooled so easily, just by the combination of sound and motion, combined with eye movement.”

“Does it really work?”

Sherlock shrugs. “It seems to help me. You appear to have taken to it well. Keep going; one session is not enough. She says I have further to go, too.”

John sits forward and gives Sherlock a long look. “I know you said you wanted me to do this here, but if hearing about how your fall traumatised me makes you feel uncomfortable…”

“John, everything about what happened makes me feel uncomfortable. But, seeing you here in Baker Street is…” He runs out of words. Sherlock has never been any good at explaining this sort
of thing.

John quirks a lip. “Yeah. It feels good, but I know what you mean. It’s weird, too. And the topic of conversation makes it feel even weirder.”

Sherlock wonders if John would have preferred privacy when working through his PTSD flashbacks, especially those he is responsible for inflicting. Listening to him recounting to Diane his horror at discovering Sherlock on the blood-spattered pavement outside Barts has been hard, really hard. He had underestimated the effect the Lazarus plan would have on John, but he’d never, ever anticipated him actually having to witness it.

“I’m probably the worst kind of company for you after one of these sessions; you’ve got all kinds of memories that are more than a bit not good and just seeing me is going to remind you of them.”

“Seeing you alive is a pretty good antidote. From what I hear, your memories are worse. Someday, you’re going to sit down and tell me just what the hell happened when you took Moriarty’s network apart at the seams.”

“It’s not a pretty tale. I doubt you would have approved of my methods.”

John cocks his head. “Yeah, maybe, but now you’re back on the side of the angels, aren’t you?”

The words rip through Sherlock without mercy. He gasps; his involuntary intake of breath is accompanied by the oddest sensation—as if he is standing somewhere else in the room, watching his body falling backwards, collapsing hard into the sofa. His vision tunnels and it feels as if his head is stuck in a metal band that is tightening every second. As his chest constricts, it is as if he can feel his heart thumping against his ribs. There is the strange whooshing in his ears, tidal waves thrashing against the shore in time to his pulse.

“Sherlock? Are you alright?”

The words sound far away, and from above. John’s worried face looms large in his tunnelled sight for a split second, and then rushes away to become tiny, at the far end of a tube, as if he’d turned a telescope around. Is this face real? The sudden shift in perspective makes Sherlock’s stomach churn and he thinks he is about to vomit. Dizziness takes over, forcing him to close his eyes to limit sensory data coming in. Where is he? Is this some trick of his imagination, locked up in the dark cell? His arms and legs tingle, and he feels the bone aching cold in them. Yes, this must be Harbin. He wonders if he is finally losing his mind. Is this what insanity is like?

When he opens his eyes, he is looking at Moriarty. The Irishman reaches out and shakes his hand. His face has that sneer. Sherlock can hear that dismissive tone of voice. “No, you’re ordinary. You’re on the side of the angels.”

Sherlock’s tongue unleashes his retort. “I may be on the side of the angels, but don’t think for one second that I am one of them.”

“Sherlock?! What’s that mean? Why are you saying that?”

John. It’s definitely John’s voice. What is John doing here? Not yet... He can’t be here yet. Sherlock has sent him off, away from Barts on a wild goose chase to protect Mrs Hudson, anything to get him out of the way before his showdown with Moriarty.

This is his moment, when he will confess to Moriarty that he and Lars Sigurson, his loyal lieutenant in Norway, are one and the same, that Moriarty has been played and that he is going to take the man’s network away from him.
That hand is grasping his so Sherlock pulls Moriarty close and whispers the words that he does not want heard on the phone which is recording their confrontation. “I am Sigurson.”

The effect on Jim is immediate. His eyes widen, “I see. You’re not ordinary. No…you’re me.” He laughs, oddly happy, his voice high pitched with incredulity.

“Sherlock, listen to me.”

No, this isn’t possible. John can’t be here yet. He was never on the roof. That happens later…after Moriarty thanks him and blows his brains out, just so he can win and force Sherlock to kill himself.

“Who’s Sigurson? You’re not making any sense.”

Sherlock stumbles about in his Mind Palace; someone has turned off all the lights and he can’t find what he is looking for. He grabs the first line of words that goes floating by and says them out loud. “I am you—prepared to do anything; prepared to burn; prepared to do what ordinary people won’t do.”

“You are me? Who are you talking to? Sherlock?!” Two hands have taken hold of his shoulders and are shaking him a bit.

For some reason, Moriarty isn’t responding properly, so Sherlock repeats what he said. “I am you. You want me to shake hands with you in hell? I shall not disappoint you.”

In his mind’s eye, he knows that he has to die so that John, Lestrade and Mrs Hudson can keep living. Sherlock walks over to the edge of the roof, gets up on the ledge and jumps.

“His pupils are equal and reactive.” Doctor Esther Cohen is peering into Sherlock’s eyes, using a penlight to see if she can understand what has happened. “What happened?”

“We were talking about the EMDR session. I watched her do one with him then it was my first one. Diane had just left. And then he collapsed onto the sofa and said some foreign name, and then some stuff that didn’t make any sense, said he was me. It was like he didn’t recognise me. I tried to call Diane, but she must have been on the underground by then, so I rang you. And he’s just sat there ever since, staring off into the distance like that.”

“I don’t think it’s an absence seizure. More likely he’s disassociated. Something you said may have triggered a flashback; can you remember?”

“I wanted him to tell me about what happened when he was away, taking apart Moriarty’s network. Diane had said it’s good for both of us to talk about these things. Christ, I wouldn’t have said a thing if I’d thought this was going to happen!”

“It’s important to remember what you said. Exactly, if possible.”

“I’m not him. I don’t have a photographic memory!” John’s so worked up now that he’s almost shouting. “This can’t be happening.” He is pacing in front of the fireplace. John’s only just starting to get over the fact that he’d become a trigger for Sherlock’s PTSD; the idea of it starting to happen again is almost too much to bear.

Esther is holding Sherlock’s wrists, which are lying loose in his lap. There is no resistance offered when she moves them about, so she releases them. “Try to stay calm, John. We’re going to need to ground him here. First thing, shut the curtains and turn off that lamp. His sensory issues complicate
matters. Get me a blanket, and give me the sweater you are wearing.”

John does as she asks, then peels off his sweater, confused by the last of the orders, but willing at this stage to do anything. Then he remembers; “Angels. I asked him if he was on the side of the angels, and that’s when he freaked out.”

She’s draped the blanket around Sherlock’s shoulders, and then takes a sniff at the knitwear John’s handing her. “Good. You were scared enough by what’s happened to sweat. The scent will help.” She balls it up and holds it under Sherlock’s nose. “Sherlock. Listen to me. John needs you. Come back.”

For a moment, nothing happens and then suddenly Sherlock’s blinking away like mad and grabbing at the sweater. He drags it to his lap and then buries his face in it.

Esther doesn’t turn but says softly, “John. Try Diane again on the phone; she might be out of the underground system by now.”

Fumbling with his phone, he hits redial and is relieved to hear it being picked up after the second ring.

“Hello, John. Are you okay? Having some after-shocks or side-effects?”

“No me,” he replies tersely. “It’s Sherlock. I couldn’t reach you, so I called Doctor Cohen. She’s here now, says he’s dissociated.”

“Oh, no!”

John can hear PA announcements in the background. “You’re at Waterloo?”

“Yes. Right. Change of plan, I’m heading straight back to Baker Street. Good call to get Esther there. I’ll get a taxi, so I can keep on the phone. Can you hand it over to her?”

“She’s busy. I think he’s re-surfacing.”

“Hold the phone out so I can hear what’s happening.”

As John steps closer, he sees that Sherlock’s shoulders are shaking.

Esther speaks calmly. “Sherlock. It’s all right. You’re safe. We’re in Baker Street. John is here with me.”

The shaking stops, and Sherlock slowly sits up, but he won’t look at either of them.

“Tell me what you are feeling, right now. Give me the words.”

A mumble.

“Try again. Louder, slower. Just three words.”

“Mortified…. Embarrassed… scared. What happened?”

“It’s okay, no need for any of that. It’s just us. You’re safe.”

“Why is this happening again?”

“I can’t answer that until you tell me something about what happened. Try to explain it.”
“I thought the sessions with Diane were working.”

John can hear the disappointment in Sherlock’s voice, and it pulls at him.

Esther is utterly calm. “They are. And they will continue to do so. But unexpected things can trigger problems. The fact that you’re back now is proof that progress is taking place.”

John can hear Diane’s tinny voice on the phone, so he pulls it to Esther’s ear and bends so he can hear it, too.

“Get him the violin.”

“What's happening to me?” Sherlock still won’t look at them. He is jamming the thumb nail of his left hand hard into the fleshy part of the thumb on his right hand, enough to draw blood.

Esther says, “I’m going to touch you, Sherlock. You need to stop hurting yourself. Just focus on my grip.”

She takes his wrists again, dealing with the inevitable flinch with a firm touch that John hopes will ground him. He's on his hands and knees, opening the violin case, wishing he felt as calm as Esther Cohen is sounding as she continues, “It’s a reaction; John said something that has triggered a flood of memories that you didn’t want to deal with. So you dissociated. It’s okay. You’re back now. You’re safe.” Esther leans forward, speaking in a very matter-of-fact, calm way. “You’re going to be all right. I’m not an EMDR therapist, but I’ve got Diane on the phone now, and she’s listening in. She says I should give you your violin and get you to practice what she’s been doing with you. Are you willing to try?”

When Sherlock can manage a nod, John hands him the violin. He feels as shattered as Sherlock looks. “Do you want me to leave?” His distress is raw, an open wound.

Sherlock shakes his head. Cradling the violin, he plucks at three strings.

“Diane says you are to try to explain what you felt like when he said some words. I’m going to say them again now. Ready?”

Sherlock plucks the G string and nods.

“You’re on the side of the angels, aren’t you?”

Sherlock feels the words cut again, but this time he’s ready and struggles to get control again. Once he can manage to find the breath for words, he mutters, “Moriarity. He used that phrase on the roof. When John said them, I…” He stops, glances at the strings, then back at her, and then back at the strings, while trying to control his breathing. Finally, he starts again. “I had to stop being me, and become Lars.” His voice breaks, and distress comes oozing through the cracks.

“Explain it. Information, I need information. Tell me what’s happening, what you are seeing in your memory.”

“I’m back on the pavement, lying in the pool of blood, pretending to be dead and I am slipping away, being drawn out of existence, going down into a black hole. Like my very essence is being sucked out; I’m going to disappear and all that I am will, too. It’s…terrifying.” He can barely whisper this last word, and his fingers keep plucking the three notes. As if his life depends on it, Sherlock is snatching a quick look at his finger as it catches the string, and then away across the room. But he won’t make eye contact with John who is watching him.
Esther’s calm voice resumes. "Those words seem to provoke a personality dissolution. You feel like you're separate from yourself, that you're not you anymore. But you are. You're fine. You're here in this room, you're safe. Breathe. Keep looking at the violin string and focus. Find your way back to John."

“I can’t. I have to destroy my existence or John dies. Hands are grabbing at me and then lift me onto the trolley. I am dead. I have to act dead. This is planned, all planned. But John isn’t supposed to be here.” His anguish squeezes into the words.

“That was then, this is now. You are in Baker Street, and all of that happened years ago. Come back to the now.”

“Can’t. I’m dead. Being alive will kill John. It’s Lars who has to get off of the trolley in the morgue."

“Lars was a disguise. A persona you needed to hide in while you were away. But you are back now, Sherlock. Lars is a figment of your imagination. Put him away; his job is done.”

“Is it? Really? Then who put John in the bonfire? Who’s trying to kill him? It can’t be Moriarty. He’s dead. So, someone else is out there. Someone I missed. I failed.” It comes out more as a cry than a word. “I need to go back and finish the job, make sure this time that no one can hurt him.”

John can’t stand it anymore. He crosses the room from where he’s been standing at the fireplace, and sits on the coffee table, his knees touching Sherlock’s.

“I’m here, Sherlock. I’m alive, the evidence is right in front of your eyes. Look at me.”

Sherlock snatches a tiny look at John before glancing back at his fingers plucking the violin strings.

John nods. “Yeah. I exist, in the flesh. I’m here and I need you to be here, too. Whatever or whoever the hell it is who did that to me, we’ll find them. Together. That’s the best way. I can’t do it without you, and you can’t do it without me. It’s what you said, that first night—you and me, just the two of us against the world.”

Sherlock stops plucking the strings, and looks away from John. “Not anymore. There’s Mary to consider.”

John is stunned for a moment; how could he have been so tactless? But then he re-groups. “Okay, so it’s the three of us against the world. We’ll sort it out.”

Sherlock resumes plucking the G string. Only it’s now in a minor key, leaving John to wonder what that means. He’s not brave enough to ask.
Author’s notes:

* If you have not familiar with my stories, then this reference to Diane Goodliffe may not mean a lot to you, so I am tempted to chase you off to go plunder my back catalogue. But, if you have read them and just need reminding, or are in too much of a hurry, here’s a precis: Sherlock returned from the hiatus with a case of PTSD which developed through the story of A Pocketful of Rye, came to a crescendo in Devonshire Squires and then ended up with him in therapy at Hartswood Manor in Magpie: One for Sorrow. Diane Goodliffe is a therapist who uses EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) which is a form of psychotherapy in which the person being treated is asked to recall distressing images while generating one type of bilateral sensory input, such as side-to-side eye movements or hand tapping. For Sherlock, it was plucking on his violin strings. And there is plenty of medical evidence that it does work.
Double Exposure

Chapter Summary

Noun
1. In photography a double exposure is the superimposition of two exposures to create a single image, whose exposure values may or may not be identical to one another.

In the aftermath of Magpie: One for Sorrow, Sherlock returns to Parham House for Christmas, where another guest there makes her peace with him.

Chapter Notes

Arabella Herbert is the daughter of Lady Caroline Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke. We met her first as a teenager in The Shooting Party, where her budding skills as a photographer got her photo of Sherlock into Country Life magazine, and then as a professional photographer in Exhibition—an ExFiles Special. This encounter takes place immediately after the epilogue of Magpie: One for Sorrow, so it’s Christmas.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ara goes up the back stairs. She's not been to Sherlock's room at Parham before, but got the directions off Mrs Walters, who is still stewing about the mud on the carpet in the hallway.

Deal, wish I'd been there. Her mother had witnessed the prodigal son's return with Mycroft, coming into the house from the cold, and had come to tell Ara. She'd have given a lot to see Sherlock in his full mucky glory of feral mess; it would have given her something to compare with her images of him from the shooting party weekend almost five years ago. That memory brings a smirk to her face as she runs up the staircase. She's grown up in the interval; the gap is just under a quarter of her lifetime ago.

People change. The Honourable Lady Arabella Pembroke had grown into her skin a lot more in the interval, enough to be curious about what the years will have done to Sherlock. Perhaps very little; in her admittedly limited experience, once people reached the old age of thirty, time seems to stand still for them until total decrepitude takes over after fifty. But then, the past two years have not been exactly normal for Sherlock.

My muse. That's what the New York Times arts correspondent had called him, when visiting her one woman exhibition. "An entire floor devoted to a man whose suicide two years ago caused a ruckus and then a minor adjustment to the way the British tabloid media cover celebrity news." She'd almost choked on her Stumptown espresso, the finest coffee in Manhattan's flatiron district when she read that. She knew Sherlock wouldn't have given a damn then, and certainly wouldn't now, when his "resurrection" managed to capture the imagination in America as well as the UK.

She is carrying her Canon EOS 6D SLR up the stairs now, wondering how she can talk him into another series of photos. She wants to give them to Mycroft as a belated Christmas present.
As she climbs to the second floor, she remembers the moment when her mother told her that Sherlock was alive. She'd arrived in New York that late October afternoon from Heathrow, and come to Ara's shabby chic rented flat in Tribeca. Ara deposited her mum's hand luggage case onto the single bed in the curtained nook.

"Where are you going to sleep, my dear?" Caroline had looked around the studio with some dismay.

She'd pointed to the futon. "It's efficient, Mum. That's what counts. I do my work in a rented studio, and just camp here to sleep, wash my clothes and chill out." Ara had made an effort- the place was tidy and clean, single bed made, bathroom scrubbed, clothes hung up, tiny kitchen corner de-cluttered. More important than the size or decor, she could afford it (just) on the income she made from her photography. It was acceptable.

But not in her mother's eyes, if Lady Caroline's scarcely concealed distaste was evidence.

"Right, for tonight, I will slum it with you. Tomorrow, I will find a hotel room. No need to cramp your style, Ara. Oh, and I'm taking you to dinner- looking at that," she'd scanned the scarcely used pots and eyed the well-used microwave, "it would appear that you are in need of some properly cooked food."

"Mum…" It was the wail of every young woman who ever suffered her mother's criticism about her life style. Ara heard herself doing it, and cringed internally. This was not what she wanted to be projecting now.

Lady Caroline had turned to her and smiled. "Bring the particulars of the flats; you can tell me all about them over dinner."

"Apartments, Mum; that's what they call them over here." Ara had indeed downloaded a whole file of suitable places on her tablet. The question was whether her mother would consider them "suitable" enough to make the investment needed. Her trust fund needed her mother's co-signature on any payment over £10,000 until she was twenty-five.

Ara had realised her mother had been slightly on edge, but had decided it was probably at the thought of Ara setting down some roots on this side of the Atlantic, rather than playing understudy to the role of landed aristocracy. She'd inwardly groaned; she was not looking forward to this discussion.

Caroline had pulled a packet of Ara's favourite tea from her case and waved it. "Be a dear; I am dying for a proper cup of tea."

Once it was brewed and they were sitting across from each other on the futon, Ara was ready for the inevitable interrogation. Every time they met face to face, the conversation followed the same predictable format. Had she made any new friends? What was she doing socially? Did she have a new boyfriend?

"Boring."

This time, however, Ara had sensed her mother's nervousness and wondered what was causing it. "What's bugging you? You look like you're sitting on some big secret."

That had brought an acknowledging smile.

Oh! "Mum, has he finally proposed?" It was a regular tease between them.

Her mother had smirked. "No. Something even more extraordinary, my dear."
"You're pregnant?!"

Caroline had laughed out loud, and nearly spilled her tea. "No, of course not. Anyway, that's the sort of question I should be asking you, not the other way around."

"Why not you? You're still young enough to produce a little brother for me. I'm far too controlling to get into pregnant, Mum. You, on the other hand, are more prone to accidents. I should know; I'm one of them."

"Not an accident, Ara; just a miscalculation of timing." Caroline had once told Ara in an unguarded moment that she was born nine months and ten minutes after the wedding, conceived before the just-turned-eighteen Caroline had realised she needed to have taken the pill for a week before the wedding to be sure.

"So, what the hell is it?"

Caroline's face had sobered, and her posture had become more hesitant. "Something extraordinary. Really…it's hard to explain. If I had not seen with my own eyes, I might not have believed it. But, Mycroft was determined to tell me- and that I tell you here before the papers find out."

Ara's eyes had widened, and she'd whispered, "Oh, God. He's got involved in some political scandal?"

"No, please. Stop trying to second-guess this. You won't— not in a million years."

"Then bloody tell me. The suspense is killing me."

Caroline had looked away. "Killing… well, that's sort of an appropriate word. Only someone we all thought was dead…turns out to be alive. And is back in London."

Ara had blanked, and her face must have shown her confusion.

"Sherlock, my dear. Turns out, he never did kill himself. He's been working undercover, overseas for the past two years, and has returned to London."

Ara's brain had stuttered to a halt. WTF?. Sherlock… the man whose pictures she'd made her reputation on…was alive. "Oh My God." It crept out, unbidden.

Her mother had nodded. "For once, that rather overused phrase is warranted."

oOo

Now two months later, Ara is about to come face to face with Sherlock. In the intervening months, her mother had shared with her what she knew— that Mycroft had rescued him from somewhere overseas, and that he'd come back in pretty bad shape. Ara then devoured what the papers about his return, followed in rapid succession by his cracking the amazing underground bomb plot, the slavery ring working out of Tilbury, and then most recently, the case of the Agrikoliades shipping scam.

The internet was full of the stories of his exploits; there was more than just the hint of celebrity in his amazing story. The #SherlockLives fan base is going bonkers again on tumblr— and more than one of her images of him, pirated from the limited editions, has been blogged and re-blogged, steadily climbing up Google Image's search engine. Ara smirks every time she reads some gushing teenager's comments or tweets. If only you knew how little he cares about what you all think.
So, she's not contacted him. What on earth would she say? *Dear Sherlock, Remember me? The bratty teenager who teased you into letting her take your picture for Country Life?* She has no idea how to even begin. And she is more than a little hesitant, wondering why on earth he would even acknowledge her existence. When her mother rang to talk to her in December, Ara tried to winkle out some details, but it was hard going. All Caroline knew, and therefore was able to pass on, was that Sherlock had "problems" adjusting to being back, that John Watson had moved out of Baker Street years ago and had a fiancée, and that Sherlock was "not well."

Even as late as the day of her flight, when Caroline said they would be spending Christmas at Parham, she'd tried to cut off Ara's inevitable question. "No, Ara; darling, I don't know. I think it unlikely. He's being treated for injuries and illness at a house in Surrey. I don't think we will be seeing him."

And then the man himself had sneaked into the house late on Christmas Day. Ara should legitimately make herself known. By the time she's convinced herself that it was okay to do this, she's arrived at the top floor and comes down the corridor to the last door on the right. She knocks gently on a door that is just slightly ajar. "Sherlock?"

There is a faint reply, a "come in"- she's heard it for sure, even though it sounds muffled. Ara pushes open the door and steps into a completely dark room.

"Oh, God. I am sorry. You've gone to bed, and here am I waking you up and being a nuisance." She is flustered, unable to see anything in the dark, just thankful that her own blushes could not be seen.

"In here."

As her eyes adapt to the dark, she notices a faint light coming from the right, through another slightly opened door. Ara enters, following the sound of that baritone she still remembers as if it were yesterday.

She's crossed the threshold before she realises that this is a bathroom. Pinned by embarrassment to the spot, she registers the flickering candlelight on the white tiles, the steam rising from a roll-top bath tub, in which all she could see is a head of dark curling hair.

She splutters but can't get the words out, being hideously embarrassed.

"Hello, Ara."

She gulps, grateful for the dim light, and the fact that he hasn't turned to see her. She hastily hides the camera behind her back. *God, he'll think I'm a bloody pervert.*

There is a small splash. "It's nothing you haven't seen before in a live art class."

Actually, when her eyes adjust to the light, she realises that she can't see much from the threshold. The bath water is dark and the high sides of the roll top hide the details of the man's naked body. All that protrudes is his head and right arm. She spots a bandage on his hand, and realises that he is keeping it above water for a reason.

"Um…does that mean you're okay with having a conversation, or should I leave you in peace?"

"You've made the effort." He shrugs, setting off ripples in the bathwater. "But why are you here?"

"At Parham in general, or talking to you?"
"Both."

While she tries to untangle her tongue to put something together, he waves the bandaged hand. "Flip the lid down and have a seat. And you can put the camera down."

Another flood of red hits her cheeks as she follows the instructions. "Sorry…it's just kind of surgically attached to my hand these days. It's what I do." She looks down at the camera and wondered what the steam would do to the lens. *Interesting effect, wonder if he'd let me…*

"Still waiting for the answer."

She smirks. "Still impatient as ever then?"

There is a snort.

She sits on the toilet, which gives her a profile view of his face. "I'm at Parham because when I asked Mum what she wanted for Christmas, she said that she just wanted to spend it with me. As she had already said yes to being here, I couldn't argue. And it's actually convenient, because I want to give her a real present- a set of photos of Mycroft."

That provokes another baritone snort. "Why on earth would anyone want that?"

"Yeah, well- ours is not to reason why two people get together. I can understand what he sees in her, but then, I'm biased. I'm not so sure what she sees in him or why when he's off being the British Government, she misses him."

There is an answering sigh from the bath. "Well, tell them to get on with it. They're not getting any younger."

Ara tilts her head. "Why would you care?"

"I don't- not in that way. But, if my brother had a child of his own, he might let me be…more me and less him, if you know what I mean. I'd be off the hook. He'd have someone else to order around." She can see a frown forming on Sherlock's face, as he recants, "Actually, that's probably grossly unfair on any child. Who would want to inflict that on an innocent?"

Ara hears something interesting in that question. It is the same old barbed comment she'd heard five years ago, but it isn't delivered with any particular animosity. She braves a question of her own, "So, why are you here?"

"To annoy Mycroft."

Now it is Ara's turn to snort. "Well, then you've failed miserably. He's positively beaming downstairs. I think he wanted you to spend Christmas here more than Mum wanted me to be with her."

"I can't imagine why." Sherlock slides his head under the water, his curls disappearing, leaving only the bandaged hand above the surface.

When he comes up for air, she is ready. Six shots taken in rapid-fire succession. The water has sleeked back his hair, exposing the face in all its angled glory. The first two catch him just as his face breaks through the surface, the water still running off. Ara has used the fact that he is under water to switch to a no flash, dim light setting, which means two exposures a half second apart, with the digital pixels averaged to remove blur. She waits for the inevitable explosion. Doesn't matter. She glances down at the screen and sees what she is looking for—*he's a raptor.* She thinks
of an Osprey resurfacing after a daring raid to take a fish.

"Tell me why digital cameras make a noise that sounds like a shutter closing. I mean, there's no purpose. It should be utterly silent."

She breathes again, and answers lightly, "I think it's a generational thing. When the cameras first came out, people kept taking more than one shot, because they hadn't heard the noise."

Emboldened by his lack of anger at her use of the camera, she raises it again. "It's a bit like people wanting electric cars to still sound like they have a petrol engine. It helps warn pedestrians used to just listening, rather than looking."

Ara takes another picture, this one catching him just as he turns to look at her, peering over the edge of the roll-top bath. Emboldened by his apparent acquiescence to her camera, she asks, "Can you get your hand out of the picture?"

He glowers at the bandaged appendage. "No. John says I'm not to get it wet."

She can always photo-shop it out. "What happened?"

"I punched a window."

"Why?"

"The pain and blood loss triggers endorphins, which alter blood chemistry. I needed to stop thinking."

Startled by his answer, she looks up from the camera screen. "Sherlock Holmes...are you into self-harming?" Her surprise echoes in the bathroom.

He snorts and shakes his head. "I'm not a teenager, Ara."

"Yeah, but...um...are you alright?"

He sighs and lays his head on the back of the tub, looking up at the ceiling again. "I'm getting there."

She laughs. "You sound like me talking to my therapist."

"You? What on earth do you need a therapist for?"

She shrugs. "It's the done thing in NYC. Everyone has one. I talk to mine about 'daddy issues.'"

He sinks down into the water and blows some bubbles- a sort of raspberry of derision- before lifting his mouth clear of the water to say, "You were lucky enough on that score."

"He still died when I was young. And he wasn't exactly a role model for, well, for ever."

"A parent who is guilty of infidelity won't damage you, Ara. You are the most sane young person I know."

She smiles. "How many do you know?"

"More than you think. Of course, I suppose in comparison to my Homeless Network, you've had a privileged background."

"So did you. Yet you've spent time on the streets. Mum finally told me why she thought I shouldn't
spend time with you when I first met you."
"She was right, but homelessness was not the reason."
"What then?"
"A multitude of sins, but probably this one in particular." He turns over the arm that was resting on the edge of the bath, revealing the inside of his elbow. Even in the faint light she can see bruises that track up his arm.
"She told me about that, too. How on earth do you manage to be so…amazing…when you're using drugs?"
"In my case, the question might be better asked how I manage to cope when I'm not." He flips his arm back over.
"Is that where you've been? Rehab?"
"Not exactly. But I am clean again, so more able to cope with all this." He gestures around the bathroom, which Ara takes to mean Parham.

She takes another photo. "Listen, while you were away…I…sort of did something without asking your permission."

He smirks. "Hard to ask a dead man anything. What was it?"

"Well, I'm not sure I ever bought the idea of you jumping off a building. Seemed too…orchestrated. You'd just OD if you wanted to commit suicide, or provoke one of your criminal suspects into taking you out."

There is no reply.

"Anyway, while you were away I had an exhibition of my photos- a show at a gallery in London and then one in New York. There were lots of you. It was just after the public inquiry that cleared your name, so there was a real buzz, which was good for the show."

"Did it help your career?"

"Yes, of course. You're famous. I got the right kind of attention at the right time, and I haven't looked back. I sold out every one of the limited edition prints of my photos with you in them. It meant I could afford to stay in New York. And because of them new commissions are coming in and I've built a reputation that I'm comfortable with. So, thanks."

"Why do people want to buy your photographs?"

She smiles. It is a return to the conversation that the two of them had years ago, when she had spent three weeks at 221b, while on work placement as a crime scene photographer.

"It's who I am. It's showing people how I see." She raises the camera so she can see the screen, and zooms in, so that the sharp angle of the cheekbone, the straight line of the nose and the half-closed lashes filled the screen, their defined shapes softened by candlelight. "Think of it as my equivalent of your pocket magnifier."

He sniffs. "Yes, but I don't use it to create images for other people. It feels… a bit voyeuristic."

"I'm not paparazzi, Sherlock. I'm not here to invade your privacy. But photos of you are prized by
"others because not everyone is blessed- or should I say cursed- with an eidetic memory."

"I don't understand why anyone would want a photograph of me."

"It reminds them of you; it's part of memory."

"I don't understand that on several planes. Why would anyone want to remember me, and why would a photograph help them in that process?"

She sighs. How to express the inexplicable to someone who has a photographic memory? In the years since, Ara has often thought about it. She and he had spent hours on the topic, late at night, after John had gone to bed, debating the ideas. Since then, she's come to understand more what it must be like to be him.

Ara tosses her long blonde pony-tail back over her shoulder and says quietly, "I've spent some time researching the meaning of images and the role they play in memory. Not yours, I have to say; you work differently. But other people find their memories because of the emotions that arise from the image. Without emotion, the image goes in one eye and out the other- it doesn't take root in the brain. Think of it as an auto-delete function. You weren't born with one, but most people are. Without emotion, images we see can't be remembered."

He lifts his chin and she takes another shot, catching his I'm-thinking-seriously-about-this look.

Finally, he admits in a slightly grudging tone, "You're right. I don't tag my visual files with emotion."

"Always knew you were different. I put photos of you into the public domain because people need to be reminded of you- the real you, not the one made up by the tabloids."

"Why?"

She puffs out her cheeks in exasperation. "Because we thought you were dead, you berk. The photos helped everyone remember you. And, well, I felt a duty to put the truth out there. Not in words- I can't write worth crap. But my photos are an expression of you, what I see in you. People who didn't know you except through what the media had said learned something of the truth about you through my photos."

He doesn't reply.

She feels a little exposed, and wonders if he is annoyed by the idea of her photos of him being made public. A little self-consciously, she says "In your absence, I asked the others if it was okay to include in the show the ones of you."

"What others?"

"Your brother, Lestrade- some were from shots from the crime scenes when I was on work experience."

"Not John?"

She shakes her head. "He never replied to my invitation. I don't think he's seen them." Ara isn't sure what to say, but she wants to know. "Is he okay?"

"He's getting there."
She has to ask. Ara still remembers the photo she’d taken of Sherlock when she made him look at John. The shorter man had been busy moving a lamp at the time, and had not seen that way Sherlock’s face changed when he looked at the doctor. "I heard he's got engaged to a woman he's living with now. How do you feel about that?"

There is a sigh. "Now you sound like my therapist."

She takes another photo, this one catching his expression that is half way between petulant and sad, then adds quietly, "I'm still waiting for an answer."

He splashes the water with his left hand, an act of frustration. "Why does everyone assume the worst of that fact? We were never a couple. If it makes him happy, then why on earth should I be anything other than pleased for him?"

*Oh, Sherlock.* Ara realises that the man is still as blind to what Watson is to him as he'd been six years before, when she'd watched them during the shooting party.

"He must have been glad you came back."

"Eventually."

She realises that one word said a lot. "Made your peace, then?"

"I was never at war with him."

"What happens next?"

"You go next door and turn on the red lamp on the lab bench, while I get out. The water's gone cold."

She recognises that the conversation has come to an end, and gets up to follow his instructions.

Chapter End Notes

if you have read my material on Fan Fiction, you might recognise this. An earlier version was posted as part of Express- a story that no longer exists, because I have cannibalised it and brought it into the stories of Magpie One and Two, where they belong. This one and another Ara related story were “orphaned” as a result, and are now re-born as Ex Files chapters.
The six men and two women came into the room in single file, taking their seats without conversation. Another woman followed, but sat behind them, on a chair off to the side, pulling out a stenographer's pad and pen. All of their eyes were on the shackled man standing in the centre of the room, facing them. The armed officers closed the door and there was the sound of an electronic lock clicking shut.

Lady Smallwood took the centre chair, and she opened her file, looking up at the dark haired man standing calmly in front of her. She did not comment on the fact that not only was he handcuffed but he also wore leg manacles that were secured to the floor. Despite these facts, there was a sardonic smile on the man's face.

She looked for but found only a few similarities: his dark brown hair was wavy and longer rather than the short cut that minimised a receding hairline. Their dark blue eyes were similar; both men showed a keen intellect that shone like an inner fire. But, above all, it was the man's confidence, his air of superiority that reminded her most of the man who had just taken his seat on her side of the table, three down on her left. According to Elizabeth ffoukes, Mycroft Holmes took after his father more than his mother, at least when it came to physical looks. By appearance, she would not have assumed they were related. Lady Smallwood decided that the handcuffed man looked more like Mycroft's younger brother, if the photos in the file were anything to go by.

Fitzroy Sherrin Ford allowed his smile to broaden as he contemplated him. A man who had been at the heart of the British intelligence services since the Security & Intelligence Liaison Service was first set up five years ago. A man who was privy to every secret not just in the UK but also in Britain's allies in Europe and the US. This man was not a defector, nor an embedded double agent working for some foreign power. As horrible as either of those prospects would have been, at least it would have been understandable. Somehow it was worse that Ford was a criminal—a person who had used his access to information to build himself a fortune, which he then used to sow chaos and disorder, almost on a whim, with no ideological rhyme or reason.

He was a psychopath—totally without remorse or empathy. "Borderline Personality Disorder" was
the psychiatric diagnosis on the top sheet. There had been a dissenting voice; one of those sent to
the prison cell to assess its occupant had declared the man to be a "Narcissist Personality".

She was inclined to agree with that conclusion. Fitzroy Ford did what he did "for the pleasure of it",
using his information to wreak havoc on the lives of people he didn't "like". The latest casualty had
been a Labour Government minister for Northern Ireland, whose indiscreet intervention on behalf
of an Indian businessman in search of a visa had been revealed to the press. Not illegal, or even
immoral, but in these days of political correctness, not tolerable. When the leak was finally traced
back to Ford who was in a holding cell awaiting this hearing, he'd laughed. "He was an arrogant
prick. Looked down his nose at me. Served the bugger right to be sent into the political wilderness.
My only regret is that he'll never know it was me who sent him there."

Elisabeth Smallwood looked down at the top sheet in the file. "This meeting of the Parliamentary
Oversight Committee is called to order. The minutes that will be made of this session will be given
to each of you and destroyed after reading, and I need to remind you all that no mention of anything
that takes place here can be made outside this room."

Her voice echoed slightly in the stone floored room. One wall was glass, looking onto a small
atrium that contained a Zen rock garden. They were in a special room in the brand new Portcullis
House, across the street from the Houses of Parliament. Opened only two weeks ago, the building
served as an over-spill office for the members of Parliament, and others who served them. The
Prime Minister, Tony Blair, had described it as "the physical expression of his desire to modernise
Parliament", which had caused Lady Smallwood to smile, given that it was his predecessor, John
Major, who had commissioned the building. She strove to be apolitical these days. Sitting on the
cross benches in the House of Lords, with no party affiliation, meant she could move from the
Foreign Office, into academia via Chatham House to this position, as Chair of a committee that the
vast majority of British people didn't even know existed.

This particular room did not appear on any formal or publicly available floor-plans. Very few MPs
or Peers of the realm knew of its existence. Totally secure, it was a room impervious to
surveillance. Counter measures, jamming devices and hourly sweeps all through the day and night
meant that anything—absolutely anything—could be discussed here, without fear of being
overheard or the conversation misused.

Placing her hands on either side of the file, she leaned forward and asked the question that no one
else had actually asked Ford during his interrogation.

"Your betrayal…” She stopped herself for a moment, trying to comprehend the damage to the
reputation of the British intelligence services that would happen if Ford's exposure became known.
It would take years to recover, especially with the Americans. "…just why?"

He smirked. "Because I could. You have no idea how fun it has been messing around with all of
you; such a great game."

Fueled by her outrage and anger, she snapped a reply. "The game is over, Mister Ford, and you've
lost. You do realise there can never be a public trial."

Her comment made the prisoner first smirk and then answer, "Of course not; you couldn't deal with
the public repercussions. It would create a crisis of confidence in the British intelligence services.
Not to mention the fall out in terms of relations with our allies. No, I can't say I expected the rights
of a proper citizen." The voice was quiet but firm, with traces of an American accent.

"That's just as well, given the fact that you are not a UK citizen," Elizabeth Ffoukes, the deputy
DG of MI6 responded. Her boss, Sir Robert Greenway was currently in the USA, briefing the CIA
on the developments regarding a man they knew only as Halcon—one of Ford's aliases. "It has
taken us some time to unravel the circumstances of your origins, Mister Ford. You were not born
on British soil, but in France. Although your mother was a UK citizen, your father was not. That
took us a while to track down, but DNA doesn't lie. You lived most of your life in America. You
possess several different passports all of which are based on forged documentation. Technically
speaking, you are stateless. As such, we are able to extradite you to any one of a dozen different
jurisdictions where your crimes have been committed."

The man looked down at the plastic straps that bound his wrists. "I don't seem to be in a position to
argue, do I?"

To Lady Smallwood's right, Sir Edwin Fergusson leaned forward. The head of legal affairs for the
Security Service cleared his throat. "Mister Fitzroy Sherrin Ford, you are accused of three principal
crimes. First, that you did conspire with certain illegal terrorist groups in Northern Ireland to
conceal arms from the decommissioning process, in contravention of the Good Friday Agreement.
Second, that acting under the name of Halcon, you supplied classified information from the United
Kingdom to various criminal cartels, in Colombia and Mexico, in breach of the Official Secrets
Act. Thirdly, and most importantly, evidence has come to light that under the assumed identity of
an American business man, George Harris, you are guilty of seventeen counts of illegal trafficking
in nuclear materials, including five involving highly enriched uranium and centrifuge technology,
in contravention of the EU's non-proliferation legislation and the International Convention on the
Physical Protection of Nuclear Material. It has also been proved conclusively that you have played
a role in the work of Abdul Qadeer Khan, whose covert supply of uranium enrichment technology
from Pakistan to other parties, in North Korea, Libya and Iran, is in violation of the non-
proliferation treaties. It is this last series of crimes that takes precedence, under international law.
How do you plead?"

Ford snorted. "As this isn't a trial, I don't recognise your authority to ask that question. Nor will
I plead. It isn't in my nature to beg from anyone. In any case, the Convention does not criminalise
my activities."

Sir Edwin's reply was immediate. "The amendment signed by 43 countries although not yet past
the threshold of legal adoption specifically requires member states to criminalise activities of a
person who may not participate directly in the transfer of the material, but who 'organises or directs
others'. You have done so, and cannot dispute the evidence. Our country accepts the legal validity
of that amendment, as do four of the countries involved in your crime. We all agree that you, acting
as George Harris, fall into that criminalised category."

Ford rolled his eyes. "I hardly need remind you that the Amendment you speak of has not yet been
ratified by the required two thirds of members. So, is that one of the reasons for this little kangaroo
court? Can't face having the world's dirty linen aired in public?"

The MI5 official did not react. "Then there is the issue of the UN Convention for the Suppression
of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism. There is irrefutable evidence that you have broken the terms of
article 2.1 subparagraph 4(b) in that you 'contributed to the commission of one or more offences'
outlawed by the Convention."

Fitzroy Ford was staring at the man occupying the seat third in from the right as he sat facing his
accusers. "Has it never occurred to any one of you, bar one notable exception, that the evidence
you refer to could have been manufactured? I have been 'framed', gentlemen and ladies." He
nodded to the two Elisabeths, Lady Smallwood and Mrs ffoukes. "I exclude from that group the
one person in the room who has most to gain from such a fabrication."
Mycroft said nothing, but returned the prisoner's stare with one of his own. The silence lengthened.

Lady Smallwood intervened. "The evidence has been verified by a considerable number of authorities, including Interpol, the CIA, not to mention the security services of Moldova, Belarus, Georgia and the Russian Federation, as well as the Turkish authorities. The fact that the guilty party was a high placed officer in the British Intelligence Services is not known by anyone outside of this room, nor will it ever be. You are going to be swept under a carpet, Mister Ford, along with the dirt and debris that you have created through the abuse of your position for the past five years."

The blonde woman was softly spoken, yet her voice carried a strength to it that belied her delicate beauty. "You should know that there is no personal vendetta here. The individual you speak of was recused from involvement in the subsequent investigation." She had worked very hard to make sure of that fact. When Holmes had blown the whistle on his superior at the S&ILS, the dossier of evidence was meticulously prepared, but it was his statement to her that surprised her the most. "He will say that he is my half-brother, my mother's first child. He is correct. Do not let that deter you from whatever punishment must be applied."

Ford chuckled, and threw an amused glance at Mycroft. "You must enjoy it, brother, to be surrounded by sheep. And you're the shepherd guiding them all to the slaughter." He turned his attention back to Lady Smallwood. "Baah..." he bleated at her. "Poor little lamb. You just don't get it, do you? He's smart enough to have done all this without you being able to realise he's behind it."

Two pink flushes arose on Lady Smallwood's cheeks. She was annoyed, but continued resolutely. "The trafficking of highly enriched uranium is illegal, and you have been found to be 'involved'. That your career and your liberty are now over is not in dispute. What is yet to be decided is what we and others will do to you as a result of that involvement."

Ford smirked. "I can come up with a few suggestions; I'm open to negotiations. In return for my silence about this travesty of justice and information about the real perpetrator of these crimes you accuse me of, I would accept simple deportation."

Lady Smallwood allowed the steel in her voice to be unmistakable. "You have nothing of value to offer us, Mister Ford, which we do not already know." She gestured to the fat file in front of her on the table. "This is a most complete record of your work, your contacts, your crimes." Mycroft Holmes' painstaking research had been the most thorough dossier of intelligence against an enemy of the state that she had ever seen.

She took in the unrepentant expression on Ford's face. "The British Government no longer sentences to death criminals who commit treason—a shame in your case as you have betrayed the highest levels of trust in you. As it turns out, because you are not a citizen of this country, we've decided to pass on the question of your punishment. That will be left to others. You will be expelled from the country." She pressed a button on the edge of the table and the door unlocked. She nodded to the security guards entering. "You may take him back to the cell." One took the prisoner's arms while the other released the leg shackles from the bolt in the floor. He was led to the door.

Just as he reached it, Ford turned his head back to the row of seated people. "Bravo, Mycroft; to be honest, I never thought you had it in you to succeed in this little coup d'état. But, don't celebrate too early; you may be in for a nasty surprise. And the rest of you? Be careful—his ambitions are more dangerous than mine. Unless I can stop him, it won't be long before he is running the British Government without any of you realising it."

The electronic door lock released, and he was bundled out of the room.
Silence fell in the room, as if the very oxygen had been sucked out of the space.

Lady Smallwood pulled a single sheet from the file. "All that remains is for us to decide which of those countries shall have the honour of containing our mistake. Mister Holmes, I believe you have a preferred option?"

Mycroft’s voice was the epitome of calm. "We know, based on the evidence of his network, that Ford is perfectly capable of bribing his way out of most jails, even if we are able to keep his identity as one of our officers concealed from his captors. His contacts in Russia, Moldova and Belarus are simply too powerful to risk putting him under the care of those governments. And there is no Western country that will touch him with a barge pole, because of the constitutional need for a trial. And he would tell them who he is and what role he has had in our intelligence services. He must never be given the opportunity to speak in public or privately about what he knows about our activities and those of our allies over the past decade and a half."

"That doesn't leave us with much option, does it?" George Robertson, the Minister for Defence was the only politician in the room, and was the Prime Minister's eyes and ears on this hearing.

Mycroft tapped the sheet of paper in front of him. "Just the one. Fortunately, the Georgians are more robust in their attitude than their neighbours to the north. The terms of Ford's incarceration have been agreed with the Sakartvelos Dazvervis Samsakhuri; the director is Avtandil Ioseliani, a man I know personally."

Elizabeth d'oukes shifted slightly. "Can we really trust someone trained by the Russians?"

"Yes." Mycroft's quiet authority was so certain that Lady Smallwood found it comforting.

He continued, "A special area of the Gldani prison in Tbilisi has been commissioned, the single cell facility built and paid for by us. There he will be held for the rest of his life in solitary confinement, guarded by a cohort of prison officers whose recruitment has been supervised by us. Management of those staff is paid for and controlled by our own appointees. The Georgians will keep him secure."

"And quiet?" Robertson asked.

"Yes. Incommunicado—completely unable to contact anyone outside of our appointed prison guards. And we are able to ensure that he speaks to no one—not even to his guards."

Lady Smallwood leaned far enough forward to be able to see down the table to where Mycroft was sitting. "How can you guarantee this?"

"On route to Georgia there will be a brief stop-over in Turkey, where he will be subjected to an operation to remove his vocal cords. Once he arrives in Tbilisi he will be under twenty four hour surveillance and the evidence of that will be sent to me. My own man will be on site, and monitoring. Conclusive evidence of his continued incarceration will be sent monthly. I will take no chances, I can assure you."

"That fact that he is related to you…"

"…is something that will never leave the confines of this room, and all of you are constrained by the Official Secrets Act from mentioning the fact to anyone else, no matter what that person's security clearance is. Minister, I need to point out that this restriction includes the Prime Minister himself. No one, apart from the nine of us and Ford himself, knows that his crimes are attributable to the former head of the Operational Oversight Department. The man guilty of the crimes is being
held in a way to ensure he stays out of circulation—forever. Absolute discretion about his true identify is required from each of you, if we are to maintain international respect for our intelligence services. I will do whatever needs to be done to keep Ford out of commission, permanently."

His tone of voice left nothing to the imagination.

Elizabeth ffoukes asked the question that was on the minds of most of the people in the room. "And if he were to be killed, perhaps trying to escape from the Georgians, would that not put an end to this horror story?"

"No. Ford is not a fool. He has put in place 'protections'—contingency plans that would involve disclosures damaging to us and many other countries, if he were to die. Evidence of his continued existence must arrive at particular places at specific times or those disclosures will occur. Discovering the details of his contingency plan is what has taken me the past fourteen months of surveillance. Life imprisonment and permanent silence will have to suffice."

"Is any of this traceable back to us?"

The rather naïve question from George Robertson was rewarded with a pointed stare from Mycroft. "Of course not, Minister. That would be foolish in the extreme."

Lady Smallwood cleared her throat. "After the minutes are read and destroyed, there will be no written record of these proceedings, or of this case itself. The files in front of you will be taken and destroyed. A non-citizen will be flown out tonight and is no longer a concern of this country.

"There remains only one other item on the agenda. The appointment of Sir Andrew Middleton's successor. Mister Holmes, I know I speak for the rest of the individuals in this room when I offer my congratulations to you on your promotion. Our decision won't be communicated to the Prime Minister until the end of the month, but we thought you would like to know. You also have our thanks for not only finding the evidence of such treachery amongst our service, but for doing so in a way that minimises the impact on the reputation of our intelligence community."

She closed the file and stood up. "I thank you all for your participation; no further mention of this conversation will ever take place." Apart from Mycroft, the others followed suit as she left the room.

Mycrof remained seated and took a moment to savour not only the victory but the relief that came with it. It had taken him the best part of seven years to get the evidence, some of which was real and some carefully engineered. He could take no chances and was utterly ruthless in his determination to make sure that Ford was removed, but not killed. His half brother would not have been so kind, if their positions had been reversed.

Death is not an option. That much Mycroft knew for certain. Ford had boasted of it enough.

On no fewer than three occasions, he'd had his own people intervene to ensure that his half-brother was not killed by one of the other intelligence services who suspected his activities. In each case, he was lucky enough to have Ford escape being revealed as an operative of Her Majesty's Government.

It was testament to Mycroft's skills that he was turning this potential disaster for British intelligence into something more useful on both a professional and personal basis. To the Americans chasing the cartels of Mexico and Columbia, Ford had used the alias of Halcón. They were delighted to know that Mycroft had clipped the wings of this particularly troublesome falcon, and his reputation with Langley was now at a zenith. The MI6 DG was briefing Langley on the
extent of Halcón's treachery, and the success of the British in eliminating the common enemy.

The same was true for the intelligence services of Europe, which were singing the praises of the man who had brought to heel a particularly adept smuggler, bringing contraband nuclear materials through the Bulgarian corridor into Turkey and then onto Iran and Libya, fueling their covert nuclear weapons research. Ford's cover as the corrupt American businessman George Harris remained intact; no one apart from the people who had just left the room knew his true identity.

And now he would reap the rewards. Mycroft knew he would be a worthy successor to Sir Andrew Middleton, the head of S&ILS, who would retire in the spring. A narrative had already been started to explain why his second in command, Fitzroy Ford, was not being promoted. It was Mycroft's rumour which was now accepted as fact that the head of the Operational Oversight department had just resigned and left public life in a fit of pique for not being tipped for the top job. The equally senior Drew Hillier of Strategic Oversight was being put out to grass, too old and weary to be a viable candidate. The 'new blood' of a younger man would do to give some stability to the S&ILS, it was said, and Mycroft was just the candidate. His burnt offering of his bastard half-brother, sacrificed on the altar of national security, was what turned the tide of opinion in his favour. It was fortuitous that the post was in the gift of the men and women who had just left the room. None of them knew his personal reasons for wanting to see an end to Fitzroy Ford's freedom.

He collected the files on the table, securing them in a locked brief case. They would be burned, case and all, later that night at Parham. But first, he had a stop to make in central London.

oOo

The man sitting behind the gleaming glass and chrome desk was peering at him, somewhat myopically, through a pair of metal rimmed glasses. His watery eyes in the pale face reminded Mycroft of a particular kind of stork—a marabou, one of the scavengers of Africa's plains. Charles Augustus Magnusson was a scavenger of sorts, too—only the carrion he fed on was scraps of information about people.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me, Mister Magnusson."

The Dane gave him a glacial smile and then gestured to the black leather chair in front of the desk. "Be seated, Mister Holmes. Or should I call you Lord Holmes? You English aristocrats can be offended by a foreigner's failure to understand your archaic rules of social etiquette."

"I don't use the title, professionally."

The man took off his glasses and cleaned them, slowly. "So, this is a professional visit? You do intrigue me, Mister Holmes. What possible interest could you have in a businessman who owns a few newspapers?"

Mycroft sat and waited until the ritual glass cleaning was over and the angular face lifted to look at him directly. "I will be brief. You are in regular receipt of a small sample of fresh blood, which is tested to confirm the identity of its donor. Based on that confirmation, you continue to ignore a sealed package that was lodged with you some years ago by the man whose blood you are sent."

The Dane said nothing, not willing either to confirm or deny Mycroft's statement.

"That process will continue, even though you will no longer be paid by that individual. I have assumed that responsibility."

Mildly, the Dane said, "and why would you do this for your half-brother?"
That answered the first of Mycroft's unspoken questions. Ford had not used Magnussen simply as a data storage unit; he'd given the man some indication of the contents of the package sent to him for safe-keeping. He needed to know just how much else the media man knew.

"Because he is no longer in a position to do so. But the proof of life you need to stop you from taking further action will continue to arrive, I can assure you."

"How fraternal of you, Mister Holmes. The payment that you speak of... are you aware of the currency in which I am paid?"

"Illuminate me." Mycroft knew that it would not be money. Despite the considerable wealth that Ford had accumulated over the past five years through his illegal activities, the man sitting in front of him was worth several billion dollars.

"What do you think a newspaper man wants? Information, of course. Mister Ford was so obliging on that front. Each month, a little tidbit of information came along with that vial of blood. So useful. Will you be so useful, Mister Holmes?"

"You may be overestimating my access to such information; I am a minor civil servant."

Magnussen frowned. "That you choose to begin our relationship with such a blatant lie is... disappointing. Perhaps I should be the first to congratulate you on your impending promotion. Sir Andrew Middleton was ... rather easy to convince about the need to look the other way about some of my business activities. Will you be so amenable?"

Damn. The Dane had been blackmailing the former diplomat at the top of the S&ILS. Mycroft had suspected as much, but not had any proof. He believed it was part of the reason why Middleton had not taken action against Ford, despite his blatant insubordination. His boss must have been the one to pass on the news about Mycroft being his heir apparent; the news wasn't known to anyone else, apart from the others that had been with him at Portcullis House.

Magnussen continued with a rather predatory smile. "You English have a phrase I am rather fond of. 'Better the devil you know than the one you don't.' I knew Middleton. Will I know you as well?"

Cautiously, Mycroft answered "that depends on you. If you are intelligent, and remember that you are a businessman first and foremost, you will not cause too much damage to anyone important. Stay inside that carefully circumscribed boundary, and we will get along. Who knows, you might even be occasionally useful to us."

A wry smile emerged on Magnussen's lips. "That sounds like we might do business, Mister Holmes." A soft buzz of an intercom interrupted any further comment. He touched a switch. "Yes?"

A woman's voice answered, "Your four o'clock is here; would you like him to wait?"

"My guest is just leaving." He switched the intercom off. "You don't mind, do you, Mister Holmes? After all, it wouldn't do to keep Alistair Campbell waiting, would it? You English set such importance on punctuality." He stood up, and Mycroft knew the conversation was over.

As he went down to the mezzanine floor in the man's private lift, Mycroft knew that he would not be celebrating victory anytime soon. The monthly price paid for Magnussen's cooperation would need to be thought through very carefully. That said, sometimes information in the wrong hands could actually help secure some of the country's security objectives. He was willing to make a deal.
with this minor demon from Denmark, in exchange for casting out the devil incarnate, Fitzroy Ford.

Chapter End Notes

*: Alistair Campbell was Tony Blair's Director of Communications & Strategy. This back story, set in February 2001 is crucial to understand much of my current Magpie stories, and what happens in His Last Vow. Now you know why Mycroft's reaction to the idea of Sherlock going "after" CAM. And if you want to know what's in that package Ford lodged with CAM, then you will need to read Periodic Tales.
Excel

Chapter Summary

Excel
/ɪkˈsɛl, ɛkˈsɛl/
Verb Be exceptionally good at or proficient in an activity or subject.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"GENTLEMEN."

Vladimir Stanslov, Head of the String department at Harrow, contemplates the boys in the room. He hates raising his voice, but the seventeen boys need to have a stern taskmaster's voice to bring them back to order.

It's the end of the first day of their last term at the school. Most of the classroom session had been going over the results of the performance and composition exams from last term, reinforcing the learning outcomes that they will need to build on in this final term. A hubbub of giddy congratulations mixed with yelps of dismay had ensued when he'd been handed the work back.

"You can all read the comments on the work later. Instead, we now have to focus on the term to come."

The Master quickly outlines the two written assessments that will be due this final term, each of which is worth twenty percent of the final course mark. He passes out the photocopied sheets with the assignment briefs. The first is a written essay of three thousand words on an aspect of the history of their chosen instrument, which uses critical analysis to consider the development of the changing manufacture processes and the use of their instrument in the modern music repertoire. The second assignment is an essay also of five thousand words on a single piece by a particular composer of their choice, using score analysis to compare and contrast two performers of the piece.

That leads him into a general comment on the essays from last term. "There are many of you for whom the written word seems as elusive as a proper Baroque trill on a violin. I don't need to remind you that essay writing is a crucial skill for all of you sitting exams this term. You may not be going on to study music in your future lives, but you will need to improve your writing, so I have taken the trouble to give you extensive feedback on last term's efforts in the perhaps optimistic belief that some of you would actually like to improve this in your last term of school."

He taps the desk to get a few wandering eyes back to looking at him. "I'm going to say this one more time—FOCUS—it's not all about getting the marks you need to get accepted at your university of choice. There are more important things to learn."

Stanslov knows that this is an uphill struggle. The musicians in the class—the ones who want a professional career—may well work hard, knowing that what they learn in this last term will help their futures, as they move on to study the subject at university, a few at the Royal College or the Guildhall School. These students would have already been received a conditional acceptance for a place, contingent on their marks, so they have an even greater incentive to work hard.
For the rest of the class, however, final marks in music would make no difference to their university acceptances, so keeping them motivated is a never-ending challenge. Most of them will not care if they barely scrape a pass, because they aren't taking a performance exam or the A level. A lot of the wanna-be rock stars fall into that category.

He takes a deep breath. "Right, now onto the last assignment. Your final project is worth 60% of your mark for this year and replaces a final exam. The brief is a simple one, and yet I believe it should be a worthy culmination of your time here as a musician."

He puts up a slide on the projector screen.

The Final Project shall consist of

- An original music composition for your chosen instrument
- It must demonstrate (compare and contrast) two different styles and eras of composition technique, one of which must be pre-1900 and the other post-1990.
- A solo performance of the piece captured on a video produced and filmed by yourself without assistance of another.

Twenty percent of the marks will be awarded for each of the above components, and twenty percent for originality.

A hand goes up in the second row of seats; Vladimir recognises the lute player who is also an aspiring bass guitarist and passionate follower of Metallica.

Anticipating the likely question, he says, "Yes, Conway?"

"Can we do it as a group project, you know, as a band?" The eighteen-year-old manages to inject a breathless enthusiasm into the question.

The music master controls the urge to roll his eyes. "What part of the second word in the third bullet point do you not recognise? Solo means you, not you and your mates."

Vladimir comes in front of the lectern and leans up against the table, crossing his arms. "Before any of you ask—no, this is not an excuse for a multi-instrument piece with you performing several different types of instruments. And notice the word original. So, Conway, sorry but no; you may not record yourself playing a heavy metal electric guitar version of a Bach partita for violin transcribed for lute."

There is a ripple of laughter in the room, and Vlad knows that he's pegged his student in a way that the rest of the cohort recognises.

He continues to explain. "You may, however, record an accompanying percussion instrument, but you will have to perform it, too. Furthermore, the treatment has to be equal. So, for example, if you choose to contrast a classical sonata construction with a disco dance tune version of your composition, a keyboard instrument accompaniment is acceptable. But only one, so no drum kit, triangles, xylophones and maracas unless you seriously think any one of these were around in the pre-1900s version of your composition. And, the video will ensure that you won't be using sample libraries played through computer composition software. All instruments must be seen to be played manually."

"What I am looking for here is your take on the contrast between say how the trumpet was used as
a solo instrument in Jeremiah Clarke's day compared to a version of that same piece in the style of Leonard Bernstein's *Rondo for Lifey*. Think about your composition technique, gentlemen, otherwise you are going to drive yourselves crazy. And I am warning you all to avoid pastiche or transcription—originality of composition is crucial here."

He points over his shoulder to the last of the bullet points. "Do not neglect the video performance. I am not only interested in how you perform musically, I want you to take this as your opportunity to shine as a soloist, so display something of your ability to showcase *yourself* not just as a performer, but also as a video artist."

If last year's efforts are anything to go by, this was the part that the boys had enjoyed the most. MTV has a lot to answer for in terms of today's aspiring musicians.

"Before you ask, Struthers…" Vlad watches a number of smiles erupt. Steven Struthers has a regular summer job as a singer for a punk band that performs on the pub circuit in north London. "No, you may not include a vocal track and no instruments shall be maimed in the production of this video." The comment gets another ripple of laughter.

"The final hand-in has three elements: the video and the score, of course, but also a five-thousand-word report explaining your choices, including a timeline—with dates, gentlemen!—of how you assembled the final product."

The master has one more important point to make, because he is worried about timing. The final term runs from the end of the Easter break until the school breaks up in early July, and there will be a lot on the minds of the boys who will be doing their final A-level exams in May. "I know that some of you are the last-minute, seat-of-your-pants-types, so let me show you how you are going to get formative feedback at every stage."

The next slide is a series of deadline dates:

- **15 April**—pitch document handed in
- **28 April**—first draft score for one or both treatments
- **07 May**—video treatment, written document
- **15 May**—final hand-in of project report, video and score

"The pitch is a written document in which you select the two contrasting eras, the instrument, and initial ideas on your composition theme and treatments for both eras. If you can actually produce some initial, draft music for the main melody, this will get you early feedback to tell you whether you are on the right track or headed for disaster."

In the back row of seats, a hand rises. Vlad is surprised; Holmes is not one to ask questions; half the time he sits at the back with his eyes on a notebook ruled with a staff, lost in the music in his head. "Yes, Holmes?"

"*Formative* feedback… as in the final mark is summative, and not dependent on handing in any of the intermediate steps?" The boy's voice is finally starting to settle into a baritone pitch; at sixteen, he is the youngest of the cohort. Holmes had started the course last October when his voice had been breaking, leading to much teasing until he'd stopped talking at all.

The Master tries to suppress his annoyance at having to repeat his instructions. He wants the students to take advantage of interim feedback, and having to admit that none of the hand-ins can be counted in the final grade, will only encourage the last-minute brigade. Holmes has never missed a deadline over the previous two terms of the course, but he's never sought feedback apart from the assignment mark. While he may be sitting on an A grade, there are others in the class
who are not in that fortunate position.

He decides to play it heavy. "If you are foolish enough to avoid getting advice, then you are gambling with your mark. There are those of you in this class whose further progression—be it as a musician or on to university—may depend on your results here. Adhere to these steps and this timetable, gentlemen," he warns.

-Seven weeks later-

When he gets halfway through the pile of essays handed in by the boys in early May, Vlad has to stifle a sigh of disappointment.

The two pieces by Holmes are typical of the boy's brilliance. The first is an authoritative piece on the evolution of luthier products, which turns into a robust defence of the baroque violin over its modern equivalent. It is technically sound and informed by Holmes' own use of the Guarneri violin he owns. The second essay is even better: contrasting the performance of Itzhak Perlman on not one but two different violins (the Soil Strad of 1714 and the Guarneri del Jesu Sauret violin made in 1743) in comparison to the recordings and performance techniques of Yehudi Menuhin, who had also owned the Soil Stradivarius as well as the Prince Khevenhuller 1733 Strad, as well as three different Guarneri violins made in 1703, 1739 and 1742.

Out of all the students Vlad has taught, Holmes is the one who got away: after the disastrous break of his hand and wrist bones just before the start of this year*, the budding violinist had almost abandoned playing for good. Vlad had convinced him to take a composition course for the first term, and to resume playing in very brief stints of no more than a half hour for the past two terms; it was all he could manage with his damaged hand. Despite all of their joint efforts, the boy would never be able to recover the ability to rehearse and play to the level required of a concert performer. For a while, Vlad had tried to encourage him to take an academic interest and, as these two essays show, he has a natural affinity to the subject that the Master has rarely encountered.

Something had changed as a result of that injury. The boy's love of music now seems tinged with not just physical pain, but something psychologically sad as well. The passion had died somehow, and he'd gone in another direction. The core of joy is gone from Holmes' music, and his written work is now flawless but soulless. This loss is one of Vlad's principal regrets of this academic year; no, to hell with it, probably the worst disappointment of his entire teaching career.

"Your loss, my gain," Robert McGarry had said to Vlad after the chemistry master had told him that he had steered Holmes into Cambridge next year to read the subject.

Vlad sighs, grabs the mark sheet and writes in the two As on the line with Holmes' name. He wonders what the boy will be willing and able to produce as a final project. Vlad hopes he won't compose anything too lengthy to avoid being in pain, be that physical or otherwise.

-Two weeks later-

Vlad is on the homestretch of marking. It's part and parcel of the teaching he does, but sometimes he wonders whether the school head really appreciates how different it is for music masters. It's not a simple task of speed-reading essays and ticking off various boxes on a mark sheet with the occasional comment thrown in to show some interest. No, music involves performance and
assessment of that takes time in a different way.

In the days when Vlad had first started teaching at Harrow more than a decade ago, he'd had to sit through all of the live performances of the boys' final projects, trying to mark on the fly. It was hard back then to be consistent; his enthusiasm for a particular performance might be seriously affected after two or three hours of sitting through them all.

Now that the assignment has a video element, he can watch at home, replaying bits to spot problems or issues that might have gone unnoticed in the past. All that said, it's still time consuming, and he has to stifle his frustration. This May Bank Holiday Monday, he'd much rather have spent the afternoon enjoying himself out in the garden, taking in some early summer sunshine, relaxing with a nice cool drink. If he didn't have all this marking to get done, he'd be getting dressed and heading into town where there is a performance of Brahms violin concerto by Kung Hua Chung tonight at the Royal Festival Hall.

By nine o'clock, Vlad has come to the final one to be marked. He's taken them in the order the projects were handed in, so it's no surprise to him that this file is authored by Sherlock Holmes. He's been the last one to hand in every assignment over the past three terms. Never late, just right up to the wire. There had been fierce competition for access to the video recorders and then the editing suite at Harrow; Vlad had been concerned that the last-minute brigade might find they'd run out of time. Holmes has proved him wrong by turning something in.

He opens the video box and slides the cassette into his VHS recorder. Settling back into his recliner, the Russian takes a sip of his ice-cold G and T. Before he picks up the remote, he takes out the music score. It's always worthwhile getting a look at the notation before the performance.

By the time he is half-way down the first page, Vlad's eyes have widened slightly. As he had predicted, Holmes has gone for a baroque period violin sonata, but it is more complicated, more Italianate than the boy's usual taste. Instead of belonging in Bach's almost mathematical world of precision, this is more in the realms of Tartini or Pisendel—wilder, so quick it is almost frenzied in places, nearly impossible to play. A harpsichord continuo provides the backing of the allegro movement.

Vlad smirks. Looking at the score, it's as if Bach and Pisendel had met up in Dresden in 1717 and had an adventurous jam session with Vivaldi. Not pastiche, not at all. The early 18th century Germano-Italian love affair for the violin has produced a lovechild in the shape of Holmes.

But there is something more in here, too—the crazy sort of invention, the swings and undulations that remind him of no less than Allesandro Stadella.

Vlad wonders what the hell the modern version of it is going to sound like. He puts the score down, takes another longer swig of his drink and picks up the remote.

Four minutes and forty-seven seconds later, he hits re-wind. By the time he has watched it six times, he's started to work out how it was done.

The video opens on what can only be described as a warehouse, shot in black and white. The wall behind the concrete floor that can be seen on camera is white-painted boards about three meters in height. There is a very strong light source from the right, off camera. In silhouette, there is a shadow of a harpsichord and stool, unoccupied.

A figure walks on camera, carrying a violin and bow. He is dressed in the most amazing 18th century outfit—a dark waistcoat over lighter grey breeches, white silk stockings showing a shapely calf over black buckled shoes. The white powdered wig is tied neatly back at the nape of the young
man's neck, his top coat is a rich shot black silk, collarless, skimming the waistcoat down to the waist before flaring in pleats to the sides at the hip.

Vlad recognises Holmes, as if seeing him for the first time at home in his body wearing the proper clothing. There is a historical accuracy about the dress that surprises him, as the schoolboys are always in uniform or sports gear. Holmes looks less like the lanky young boy that Vlad has been used to seeing; now somehow the clothing transforms him into a young man who would not be out of place in a baroque palace.

The figure pulls a cloth from the very wide sleeve cuff that reaches almost to his elbow and sets it and then his Guarneri del Jesu violin on his collarbone. Holmes then turns his gaze to his right, looking back at the wall which shows his shadow standing next to the harpsichord. A shadow emerges from the opposite side to take a seat at the harpsichord. And yet, Vlad sees no real person doing that on camera, which makes him wonder how the video has been put together. The shadow is similarly clothed and be-wigged, if the silhouette is anything to go by. It flicks his tailed coat behind to sit on the stool and puts hands to the lower of the two keyboards, looking up at the violinist. With a deep breath from Holmes and a slight raise of his instrument—a soloist's classic signal to their company—the pair are off. A torrent of music begins pouring from the violinist and his shadowed companions. The camera pans left to focus more on the latter, the violinist's shadow working with the harpsichordist in perfect harmony.

The violin technique is pure Baroque: restrained use of vibrato, fingerings which result in few shifts, or small "creeping" shifts. Holmes chooses his moments for these shifts carefully, using open strings and points of articulation in the music where changes of position in the left hand could be made inaudibly. The bowing technique is strictly the "rule of the down bow", with any stressed beat—and in particular the first beat of a bar—being played with a down-bow. Vlad wishes he'd studied Baroque technique even more extensively than he had; it did not suit his preferred repertoire, but he certainly recognises the historically-informed performance he is being shown here. Holmes' down-bow stroke is naturally stronger than the up thanks to the action of gravity, which is even more pronounced with his French Baroque bow, stiff towards the bottom and middle and weak towards the tip. It isn't a problem in the composition that Holmes has written, which relies on strong rhythmic emphasis, making the contrast between up and down strokes a virtue.

As fascinating as the first iteration is, for Vlad the performance steps up into an entirely new gear at the two-minutes-and-twelve-seconds mark. Just as the baroque shadows are about to start the second repeat of the composition, a third shadow appears on the wall, entering from the extreme right, behind the real violinist playing in the flesh.

Just how he's managed to splice all these bits of himself together makes Vlad momentarily distracted, until he registers the fact that the new shadow is wearing what must be a form fitting top and flared trousers. The long curly hair is wild, a complete contrast to the bewigged performers. And the shadow is carrying a very modern violin, which he hangs up on the wall somehow. How does a shadow hang something on a wall when the real person isn't there? The silhouette of the instrument shows that it is only a partial outline shape of a violin, without a sound box, and merely the shadow of the neck and strings showing. Vlad's seen electric violins like this before, but they are very new and experimental. How'd he get his hands on one, let alone learn how to play it?

While he's musing over these questions, the camera zooms in on the shadow performers, and the real, waist-coated violinist disappears from view. The new shadow figure marches behind the baroque violinist's shadow to put his two hands on the end of the shadow harpsichord. He gives an almighty shove, and the instrument and its performer are pushed off the stage, their silhouettes disappearing, along with the music he'd been performing.
The baroque shadow violinist has faltered, his music coming to a halt, and he drops the violin off his collarbone and turns to stare at the intruder, his bow hand on his hip, clearly signalling his disapproval.

The modern shadow pays no attention, collects his violin, and then puts it to his shoulder. Glancing pointedly off to his right he gestures with the bow, and a new shadow comes on stage, carrying what appears to be an electronic keyboard with two levels of boards. The shadow sets it up and then bends over it, hands poised for only a moment before he starts to play. What follows is a synthesised version not only of the harpsichord piece, but there is now also a base beat line played on the top keyboard with the left hand.

Vlad smirks to realise that Holmes has managed to bend the rules a bit. Technically, his two keyboards on the synthesiser mirror the two keyboards on the harpsichord, but it is one way of getting around the "no drumkit" rule of the assignment brief.

The baroque shadow violinist tucks his instrument under his arm and wags the bow in a negative chastisement of the keyboard player. The modern violinist has started up a pizzicato rhythm that interleaves with the new base beat and then they are off! The music takes flight, with a completely different treatment—one only just recognisable as the original composition. The conventions of the eighteenth century are not just disregarded, they are torn apart, shredded entirely. The new shadow is not performing in a concert stance; he dances to the music, whirling and swirling, legs in motion, in steps that would befit a modern dancer. Vlad finds himself wondering whether Holmes had actually been able to play while this was being filmed, or whether he'd somehow dubbed the music into the images later.

The technical virtuosity of the video production astonishes Vlad, but not only that. Holmes has managed to exploit every aspect of the electric violin's new effects including delay, reverberation, compression and expansion of the tonal qualities. The musicality of the modern version of the composition is amazing, as is the choreography.

On the fifth replay, Vlad concentrates his attention on the baroque violinist's shadow. After watching the first wild two minutes of iteration of the modern theme, in the final half minute, the shadow puts his own instrument to his collarbone and plays his version of the composition, which fills in the gaps between the modern piece.

It shouldn't work, Vlad thinks as he shakes his head. The two styles of composition are so different that playing them together should sound utterly awful. Yet, somehow, it doesn't.

The written report attached to the video cassette box gives the whys and wherefores of how it was all put together, reinforcing the master's assessment that Holmes has one of the most creative and talented musical minds he's ever run across.

Vlad sighs again, writing on the front of the report:

A++ as ever; you continue to excel in a way that exceeds my expectations. Music is too important for you; it means too much to you for this to end. Please, do not abandon the violin! In the future, let it be your refuge, your solace. It has been a privilege to teach you, although I will admit that I have probably learned more from you than you from me. Best of luck with your future endeavours.

Chapter End Notes
*This is covered in my story Musgrave Blaze and the Ex File chapter called "Excruciate"

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