Congratulations, Mr. Holmes, it's a Ghost!

by EventHorizon

Summary

A punishing storm strands Mycroft in a remote inn where the residents are friendly, helpful, but not necessarily among the living. The one specifically not among the living takes a special interest in their guest and isn't shy about making that fact known...

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

“Mr. Holmes?”

Mycroft looked up from his work at the sound of his driver’s voice and frowned both at the interruption and the fact that the car had come to a halt when there were, quite obviously, not at their destination.

“Yes, Charles?”

“There is a slight problem, sir.”

“Am I supposed to guess its nature?”

“Whereas that could be entertaining, I believe I shall simply state it plainly. The bridge ahead is… no more.”

“Pardon?”

The pointing finger spurred Mycroft’s curiosity and he leaned forward to peer through the windscreen, which was no mean feat given the wipers were doing a shamefully poor job of keeping the torrential rain off of the glass.

“The bridge has been washed out, it seems, sir. What I remember of the map, it’s going to be a very long detour and I don’t see you making your meeting on time.”

Neither did Mycroft, truth be told. Though, he could not honestly say he was particularly upset about the fact. He’d not been happy to have to travel to an area so desolate it might as well be on the Moon to satisfy the paranoia of the asset they were trying to entice away from a certain, unfriendly government, however, needs must when the devil drives. Now, if only the devil was driving this vehicle, he might impose on the villain to fly him the remainder of the way so this business might be concluded. The demon’s hellacious heat might even serve to vaporize the battering rain so as not to soak his lovely new coat.

“Yes, I see your point. Very well, turn us around and phone the safe house to alert them to the situation.”

“Uhhhh…”

“Charles?”

“I tried that already, sir, but there’s no phone signal here in Narnia.”

Something Mycroft quickly checked with his own mobile, then huffed out a frustrated breath and tried to remember who he had distressed this week who might possess the power of witchcraft so as to vex him in this inconsiderate manner. Given the list of people who had unhappily crossed his path in recent days was a staggeringly long one, it was likely not worth the mental effort to whittle it down to a likely few.

“Yes, most amusing. Kindly put us in motion again, if you will, and… oh. That was not a helpful sound.”

Tires spinning in place and the thud of mud being launched to land squarely on more mud really was...
not the music one wanted to hear during a stately and sedate leaving of the scene.

“I… I do believe we might be stuck, sir.”

“Then make us un-stuck.”

“I left my magic wand at home.”

“I did not hire you for your wit, Charles.”

“Nor did you hire me for my ability to transport you with a spell like a wizard. Sir. But… I’ll see what I can do.”

It only struck Mycroft at that moment that the ‘what I can do’ involved his driver leaving the car and attempting to wrestle the very large and heavy vehicle into bending to their will. Perhaps some small bonus was in order for this level of valor. Or, at minimum, a warm brandy when they reached their destination. At the moment, however, he had a tapping at the window to which to attend.

“Yes, Charles.”

Good heavens, you already appear much as a drowned rat. Two warm brandies shall be yours for it never will be said that Mycroft Holmes is anything but fair and generous with the help.

“Could you clamber over the seat and take the wheel, sir? I need someone to give the car a bit of power.”

Did the help just utter the word ‘clamber?” One brandy was now removed from the reward and there would be no order given for slippers to be found to warm chilled and sodden feet. Let us hope, Charles, that you stowed a thick pair of socks in your luggage.

“Are you serious?”

“Would you prefer to get out and help me push?”

Good heavens…

“Clambering, it is.”

Setting aside his papers, Mycroft maneuvered his long, lanky body over the backrest and into the driver’s seat listening for the shout to give the car a little gas, the next shout to stop for all that was good and holy, and mud-muffled tapping on the driver’s side window.

“Yes, Charles?”

“We did not meet with success.”

“Such was my suspicion.”

“We… we passed a little inn or something a few miles ago, I suggest we make for it and see if they have a phone.”

“Utilizing the royal ‘we’ without actually being royal is somewhat an beheadable offense, Charles.”

“The road is getting worse by the second sir and, if you haven’t noticed, we’re on a bit of a downward slant towards that river, which is rising by the second. I’d rather not have to explain to
the PM how you believed yourself the captain of the ship and refused to leave your command while I watched you slide away towards a watery death. Sir.”

Mycroft’s erudite response to that flight of fancy was cut short by the car lurching into a slide that moved it a good three feet, which was three feet closer to the predicted watery death than Mycroft cared to find himself. Stepping out of the car and cursing at the loud squelch as his foot sank shin deep in mud, Mycroft moved around to the rear to gather his papers and valise, then help Charles gather their few pieces of luggage to begin the slog back towards what they both hoped was an actual inn and not simply an abandoned farmhouse. Though, at this point, anything with a roof was going to seem like a palace…

“Oh, look at you two! More mud than man at this point, I’d say. Come in! Don’t worry about the floor, I’ll tend to it later.”

Worrying about the floor was not the reason neither Mycroft nor his driver was moving forward. It was more a combination of soaked-to-the-bone cold, clothes forty times their normal weight from rain and mud – the mud being especially problematic since both had slipped and fallen too many times to remember and had mud in a myriad of unmentionable places – swirled with an overwhelming sense of relief that the structure was actually inhabited and, apparently, willing to accept bedraggled travelers.

“Th… thank you, madam. Our vehicle became disabled and we are hopeful for use of your telephone.”

“On a night like this, I’m not surprised. We get a few storms a year this evil and it’s a misery for any man or beast out and about when they rise up. Takes the phone lines to the ground, I’m afraid, and it’ll be a few days before they’re back in working order.”

Mycroft sighed painfully and tried, as he had since childhood, to use the power of his mind to alter reality to suit his whim, failing just as spectacularly as he ever did.

“Delightful. Is there a vehicle we might hire in order to see ourselves on our way?”

“Dear me, no. The lad who owns the garage in the village might have one to hire, but you’re not getting there anytime soon. The road will be its own river by now and, unless you’ve got wings or can tunnel like a mole, you’re not going much further in any direction. Well, we have rooms available and I’ll see you set with a discounted rate since it’s an emergency. Now, let’s see… where to put you… ah, here we go. Follow me and you can get out of those wet things. Do you have anything dry to change into, though?”

Such was a thought that had been at the forefront of each man’s mind as they moved zombie-like the last half-mile or so towards their goal.

“It is somewhat unlikely at this point, I’m afraid.”

“Not to worry. You’d be surprised how many guests leave things behind and I launder it up to keep for those who might have a need. I’ll find something for you and leave it outside your door. I’ll get the kettle on, too, and start something going for a nibble since it’s still a bit until dinner.”

It was a rare thing that made Mycroft Holmes want to weep with joy, but the sound of a hot cup of tea and clothing not plastered to him like a cold, soggy second skin was the nearest to heaven he’d experienced in decades.
“That would be most welcome.”

“That would be most welcome.”

“Your rooms have showers, too. No bathtubs, they take so much space, but a little shower is easy to fit in and it’s a blessing, isn’t it, to be able to have a nice wash when a body wants one?”

He was wrong. This was the closest to heaven he’d been in decades and Mycroft hoped there was an ocean’s worth of hot water available because that was what it was going to take to bring him back to life.

“A blessing is it, at that. After you, Miss… Ms… Mrs…”

“Mrs. Hudson, dear. The Mr. isn’t with us anymore, thank heavens, so don’t worry about bumping into his horrid self roaming the halls. Alright, then, follow me and leave anything you’d like me to see about washing and drying in the shower and I’ll collect it while you have a little something to put some color back in your cheeks.”

Uncaring, at the moment, if Mrs. Hudson did untold damage to his clothes during the washing and drying process, Mycroft was fully prepared to dump his entire supply of clothing into the shower and wrap himself with a sheet, if necessary, if it would see him warm and dry. Though, after seeing his surprisingly comfortable room with the thick duvet on the bed, the idea of wrapping himself in that sprang to mind. Or, at least, diving under it after he had scraped the mud off of him and sleeping for a thousand years. But, since that would lose him his tea, the diving and sleeping would have to wait for awhile…

“Here you are, dear. Your friend will be right next door. When you’re dressed, down the stairs and to the left is the dining room. I’ll have a tray waiting and a nice fire going. Nothing better than a warm fire on a night like this, don’t you think? Well, I’ll leave you to it. Come along, lad, and we’ll get you sorted next.”

Wondering if the woman was actually an angel sent to Earth specifically to comfort his thunderous agony, Mycroft smiled in gratitude and waited until Mrs. Hudson had escorted away his driver to let out the long, agonized groan he’d been holding in as he stretched near to the ceiling, then stalked to the tiny bath to strip and begin the extended process of de-mudding himself and raising his skin temperature above absolute zero.

Tutting that his lovely pocket watch would have to enjoy a holiday with his trusted watchmaker to resurrect it from its watery grave, Mycroft laid the corpse on the small wash basin, dropped his ruined suit on the floor and stepped into the shower, quickly filling the room with steam as he let scalding water rain down its grace on his shivering body. With all that steam in the small room, it was an easy thing to miss that one piece of it swirled with its own particular pattern that centered around the wash basin and that the drops of water on the face of his watch shifted as if a fingertip had drawn itself across the crystal of the dial. Not that Mycroft would have thought it anything other than a figment of his exhausted eyes and mind, of course. No other explanation was possible. At least, none that an intelligent, mature, strong-minded individual would ever dare to contemplate…
Chapter 2

Oh, dear heavens… there was bliss and there was ecstasy and there was *that* shower…

With crippling reluctance, Mycroft turned off the water and stepped out into the dense steam, breathing deep to fill his lungs with warmth, then began the process of drying himself, sighing only slightly in resignation that his normally-meticulous standard of grooming would have to be moderated somewhat due to the circumstances. However, given there was no one besides Charles to bear witness to that fact, he would weather the ignominy with grace.

Stepping out of the bath with his towel wrapped around his waist, Mycroft peeked out his door and smiled at the tray on the small table next to his room that held a set of neatly-folded clothing, a small decanter of something clearly alcoholic and one hefty crystal glass with which to indulge. Apparently, their hostess believed strongly in the tenets of hospitality and he was more than happy to honor her efforts to the fullest.

Bringing the bounty into the room, Mycroft first poured himself a stiff measure of what smelled like highly-agreeable whisky and took a long sip, savoring both the flavor and the heat that flowed down his throat. Yes highly-agreeable, indeed, and he very much looked forward to having a few more glasses before he finally met his pillow. And the clothing was in no manner disagreeable, either. A simple pair of gray trousers that, to his eye, would fit acceptably and a blue pullover with sufficient thickness to keep away the chill until he found the fire that was waiting patiently for him in the dining room.

Now, that was odd…

Turning more fully towards the mirror, Mycroft frowned and chastised himself for letting his imagination get the better of him. For the briefest of moments, he’d thought he’d caught a glimpse of… something in the glass. The faintest flicker of a figure at the very edge of his vision, but… perhaps it was the rather plush bathrobe that hung from the hook on the open bathroom door. Or, more likely, a flash of something by the window. Taking a few steps over to said window, Mycroft confirmed to himself that this was undoubtedly the source of his curiosity given the force of the blowing rain and the various bits that were carried along with it.

With that investigation completed, it was a quick moment to dress, admire that the clothes fit as well as he’d predicted, comb his hair, accept that he would have a more casual appearance tonight than he’d sported in public for years and take a final long drink of his night’s first whisky before striding out into the hall to find the dining room.

Which was easy to do, given it was a small inn and the crackling of the fire made the most welcoming of noises. And, equally as welcoming, was the pot of tea and tray of breads, cheeses, meats, condiments, fruit, and an assortment of biscuits that would certainly replenish his energy and settle the unsettled feeling in his stomach that was more a demand for the reassurance and comfort of food than to assuage any real hunger. How delightful, too, that he could pick and choose as he liked for he had decreed himself free from all… or most… attributes of his standard formality and there was none to chide him for the number of biscuits he put on his plate or the heft of the sandwich he built that made him nearly groan in pleasure with the first bite.

There was near-groaning, as well, with the second, which was followed by a slowly-savored sip of tea that was brewed perfectly to his taste and actually put a shudder down his spine from the pleasure. For all of his wealth and power, he had surprisingly simple tastes and well-prepared food, no matter how basic, and a truly proper cup of tea was equal in his esteem to a chest of the finest
jewels. It was the pity of his waistline that he was rarely able to indulge in such things as he would like, but today’s exertions counted as a veritable month on his treadmill, so indulgence was perfectly justifiable.

Well into his justifiable indulgence, Mycroft found himself joined by his driver who hesitated at the door of the dining room until Mycroft bid the man to take a seat at his table to share in the bounty.

“Thank you, sir. I had hoped I’d not have to sit at your feet and beg for scraps.”

“Nonsense, Charles. That would necessitate, at some point, a scratching behind your ears and that is an act to which I shall never stoop.”

“Thank heavens, because I do get a bit giddy from a good ear-scratching and that’s certainly not to the benefit of my performance evaluation.”

Mycroft had cut a vicious swath through the government’s drivers pool before finding one who was reliable, flexible and did not immediately make him want to bemoan the idiocy of the human race. Fortunately, Charles also was extremely talented at knowing when the employer-employee relationship had to be strictly maintained and when it was to the benefit of both of them to relax that barrier just a touch.

“Ooh… Mrs. Hudson does provide a healthy feast for her guests, doesn’t she?”

“I have no idea if it an excess due to our rather disastrous initial state or her standard policy, however, it is most welcome.”

And the generous plate his driver filled for himself made Mycroft feel all the better about his own nod to hedonism.

“I tried to get a phone signal again, sir, and I’m still not able to get so much as a bar.”

“I anticipated as much. I would not be surprised if whatever cell towers might be in the vicinity were toppled by the winds. It is as if a typhoon has visited and found the scenery to its liking.”

“Good thing about old structures, though… if they’re still standing, it generally means they’ll keep standing because they’ve seen the likes of this before.”

“True, and, I must say, the inn does seem well-maintained. I shall not worry, then, that I will wake under a pile of ancient timbers facing the Grim Reaper as he prepares to claim my soul.”

“That’s likely for the best, since I noticed Mrs. Hudson didn’t leave any clean pyjamas and the Reaper might be a prudish sort.”

Ah… yes, there was that…

“I haven’t given you any because you’re not ready for bed, you impudent thing. I’ll have something for you by then and nothing that will shock Mr. Reaper into needing a bit of a lie down before he can finish his job. Now, how is everything, gentlemen? Anything else you need at the moment?”

Mycroft smirked as his driver made a perfect ‘uh oh’ wince that was followed by a lightning-quick offer of a biscuit as placation to the newly-arrived innkeeper.

“Oh, I do like these. Don’t make them often, as they’re a bit of a fuss, but aren’t you, and I, lucky I had the urge this morning.”
“They are exceptional, Mrs. Hudson, as is your talent for satisfying hungry guests. And your tea is positively exquisite.”

“I blend that myself, truth be told. There’s not a great variety at the village shops and I do like a nice cuppa in the afternoon. My breakfast blend will really put the fire into you, so don’t worry about a groggy morning tomorrow. You’ll be bright-eyed in no time.”

Well, that was useful to know. Not that there would be need for bright eyes since both he and Charles would simply be languishing here with neither point nor purpose, but it was best to meet the day prepared than be caught unawares. At this rate, the downpour of cats and dogs was not insignificant and what an agonizing day of labor it would be to collect, corral and feed the inn’s new animal army.

“Most helpful, though I do harbor some hope that the storm shall abate quickly and we can secure transportation to continue on with our journey.”

“That’s a dashed hope, then, since these storms like to settle in for a bit and I suspect this one is going to need some time to completely vent its spleen. But, don’t worry about being bored, dear. That door to the right leads to the library and I’m sure you can find something to interest you in there. I’m rather proud of it, actually, and add to it when I can find something cheap at the second-hand bookshop that I think will keep a body entertained on a quiet night.”

Oh joy. A quiet evening with some mind-melting example of popular fiction. Well, his usefulness to the Crown was officially at an end. Perhaps Mrs. Hudson had need of someone to greet guests or fold towels. She seemed a kind person who would give help to a poor, mind-melted man finding himself in need of employment…

“Suddenly I am not so mournful of an extended stay. The lack of communication with… anyone… shall be troublesome, however, owing to the delicacy and importance of certain situations requiring my attention.”

“Oh, businessman, are you? Lots of big-money deals and takeovers and the like waiting on your word?”

“Government, actually. A minor role, however, one that does have oversight of a few items of importance that could suffer without my intervention.”

“OH! Government man… well, that’s different. I may have something… you, lad, you’ve got a strong back, come with me.”

Charles looked between his food and Mrs. Hudson, deciding his boss would likely not steal his food, but Mrs. Hudson would likely give his head a knock if he didn’t comply, and opted to save his skull rather than his sandwich. Although, after rummaging through the attic of the inn and hauling down the large piece of equipment, he was starting to reconsider his choice.

“Here you are, love. You probably know how to work it. I certainly don’t. But, there’s still a list of codes and such attached there on the side, so… have at it.”

Mycroft stared dumbly at the WWII-era shortwave radio that Mrs. Hudson was dusting off and calculated the probability that (a) it functioned and no, (a) was more than sufficient.

“I… my, what a venerable piece of equipment. However, I doubt that it has weathered the years well and still maintains its function.”

“Nonsense! This was built when things were made to last, not like today where they expect you
to buy a new toaster ever two years and make them out of three pence worth of plastic and a bit of fishing line. She’s as good as the day she was built!”

The sheer number of spiders and mice that would likely lose their home when this was connected to a wall socket and produced a fire to rival the one in the hearth flitted through Mycroft’s mind as he rose from his chair and took the dusty, cobweb-covered power cord in his fingers to carefully push it into the electrical socket beneath the table on which the museum piece rested.

“Ha! See! Lit right up, didn’t it! Now, you boys find some nice army base to talk to and I’ll see about the laundry and dinner. Let me know if they’re sending a battalion out to collect you, so I can prepare enough food. Nobody can put away a hearty dinner faster than an Army lad!”

As Mycroft and Charles watched the shortwave, both privately counting the seconds until it exploded, each man further wondered if the other fully understood that they were not going to be the one to touch it and endure the painful death of electrocution. After a few moments, however, with no explosion seemingly imminent, Charles cleared this throat and decided it was time to throw the victim towards the lion.

“Well, sir… you might as well give it a try.”

“Me?”

“I have zero reason to communicate right now with anyone for anything at all. So, yes… you.”

Since pouting and directing his driver to the deed like a king ordering a serf to empty a worrisome chamberpot was neither mature nor productive, Mycroft took a deep breath and let his finger run down list of ‘friendly’ contacts and noted that one air base was still in operation and, quite fortunately, was actively engaged in communications monitoring, though that particular function was somewhat of a secret. Now, the question was whether they would intercept any communications from a non-official source… oh, apparently, if one knows the proper ‘communications open’ codes, they rally nicely.

“This is an official military channel and unauthorized use is strictly prohibited.”

“Quite, however, there are few in England more authorized than me.”

With a quick passing-along of his security clearance and various identity-verifying codes, Mycroft was pleased to hear a loud gulp on the other end of the signal.

“Yes, Mr. Holmes, sir. Sorry, sir, but we do occasionally get someone who is larking about with a shortwave radio and making themselves a nuisance. Let me get the colonel for you, sir.”

“Of course.”

I shall wait here while my driver happily returns to his sandwich and my tea grows cold. Verily, this is a magnificent day…

“Mr. Holmes, Colonel Talbot here. How may I help you?”

“I require evacuation from an area with impassible roads and a washed-out bridge. There is a time-sensitive issue to which I must attend.”

“Oh.”

“That is not a gladdening ‘oh,’ Colonel.”
“No sir, I suppose it is not. I’m looking at the weather information for your location and… is this a life-threatening emergency, sir?”

“Not as such, no, though there are national security matters at hand.”

“I see…”

“That, also, is not gladdening.”

“There’s virtually no chance I can get a vehicle to that area, given the conditions of the roads.”

“A helicopter?”

“I… could do that, but, the winds would make it a highly-dangerous flight. If it’s that important, Mr. Holmes, I will dispatch someone, but I can’t guarantee they’d make it there or that they’d get you out and keep you among the living.”

Hmmmm… not something he had considered…

“When is the next window of opportunity?”

“From what I’m seeing? Tomorrow for poor chances, the next day for moderate and white-knuckled, the following for a dashed bumpy ride that will probably see you safely here.”

“The storm is that extensive?”

“More a case of slow-moving. Nothing is indicating a clear winner among the various fronts, winds and whatnot that would move this beast out of your area. My advice is to wait it out and I will get a bird out to you as soon as possible.”

Drat.

“Very well. I would not choose to risk one of your pilot’s lives, let alone my own, for a misguided decision. I will need you, however, to relay certain information for me that is highly-classified and return any reply.”

“Of course, sir. I’ll keep a man monitoring this frequency specifically while you’re in need of it.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Colonel.”

While Mycroft rattled off a stream of information and security codes, Charles debated with himself, then took out his mobile, which had been protected from the worst of the flood by the small plastic sandwich bag he’d found to nestle it in before they’d set off from the car, and snapped a photo of RAF Captain Holmes manning the wireless to share with Anthea when they were inevitably rescued. With a little photoediting fun, they could make this something very special. Though it would be a something that would never see the light of day beyond the two of them or they’d be executed, revived and executed a second time by the focus of their artistic efforts.

“Well, that went far more successfully than I would have dared hope, though an actual rescue would have been the best outcome of the effort. In any case, I suppose I can maintain some degree of functionality, given the access to communication, so the situation is not entirely a disastrous one.”

“And the food’s good.”

Oh yes, time to return to the pleasant things in life.
“That it is. Is the tea still acceptably warm?”

Charles felt the side of the pot and made Mycroft deliriously-happy by smiling.

“Definitely. And, I wager Mrs. Hudson will pop in soon with the offer of another.”

“Likely so. Very well… I shall enjoy my repast, then investigate what passes for literature in the library. All in all, not the worst possible fate at the moment.”

Besides, there was whisky in his room if things did take a turn for the worst, such as no fresh pot of tea, and that would smooth away the rougher edges of any of a number of ills.

“I agree. Especially since you’ll have to have that vacuum-tube, Marconi prototype in your bedroom tonight.”

“You are sadly mistaken, Charles. That honor shall be yours.”

“My security clearance doesn’t permit me to hear half of what could come floating out through the mystical waves, sir.”

“You may assess the need and wake me if needed to take the message.”

“I’m not especially intelligent and can’t be trusted with assessment-based tasked.”

“That is most cowardly of you, Charles. And untrue, as well.”

“Listen to the two of you, bickering like old women… if you’d like, I’ll keep an ear on this thing and let you know if anyone has a message for you. I don’t sleep much at night anyway, so it won’t be a bother.”

The males in the room knew it was shameful to let the aged innkeeper uptake the burden, but the lure of a night’s sleep, unburdened by the electrical hum and highly-probable interruptions by frantic checks from London that Mycroft Holmes was still alive and not a tragic victim of Noah’s flood was simply too powerful.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. And I will expect a suitable amount added to our bill to compensate you for your troubles.”

“Of course, dear. Already have a figure in mind for that. Now, how about a fresh pot of tea?”

One had to admire Mrs. Hudson’s efficiency and Mycroft prepared himself for the mountainous magnitude of the bill for their stay though, he had to admit, it was going to be worth every penny, if only for the quality of the tea and seemingly-unlimited hot water for the shower.

“That would be delightful.”

“I’ve got a fire going in the library, too, so feel free to pop in for a bit of reading and I’ll bring your tea in there. You look like the reading types, so go and make yourself at home.”

Tea. A library. A fire. It very nearly was like being in his own home, albeit with a likely lower-quality of tome available for reading. No, he would not, in any manner, be complaining about the bill.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. You are a very gracious hostess and we appreciate your gestures towards our comfort.”
“You’re welcome. Well, let me tend to your tea and check on the laundry. I think most of your clothes can be salvaged, so that’s a bit of good news for you.”

How that was possible, Mycroft had no idea, but felt no compulsion to investigate. Actually, he was feeling uncharacteristically relaxed and the idea of even a tawdry piece of fiction, a comfortable chair and a soothing fire was pulling him with a rather shameful force. And, though he might not be especially intelligent or talented with assessment, Charles read that pull on his employer’s face as clearly as Mr. Holmes’s nose…

“Well, I, for one, sir, am going to work on cleaning this relic from Michael Faraday’s laboratory and see if Mrs. Hudson needs any help. I haven’t seen any other staff on hand, perhaps because of the storm, so she might need a bit of assistance.”

Mycroft wasn’t so oblivious as to mistake the clear path to peaceful relaxation being laid out for him, one without the social obligation of conversation or other interaction with members of his species, and gave his driver an appreciative nod before rising and moving to investigate the library.

Which was not what he expected. This… was a library. Not a few cobbled-together shelves of musty, lackluster examples of literature, but a room designed to suit the tastes of actual bibliophiles. Dark wood, sound-dampening rugs and draperies, plush chairs and books… real books, as opposed to the rubbish he had envisioned. True literature, history, treatises on art and geography… yes, there were clear examples pandering to popular tastes, but they were not the sole occupants of the room and his heart soared because of it.

Turning at the tiny *clink* sound, Mycroft smiled even more broadly seeing the brandy service on a side table and refused to chide himself for reveling in the indulgence of his surroundings. No mobile clamoring for his attention, no flurry of panicked emails, no Sherlock… time purely for himself. What a rarity that was…

This sound was whisper soft, as if a finger had run along a heavy piece of upholstery, such as that adorning that particularly-comfortable looking chair nearest the fire. Yes, the perfect spot to sit, sip a little brandy and read... hmmm… what looked interesting…

Perusing the shelves, Mycroft saw many selections that piqued his interest, though, given the conditions of the night, he felt drawn to a compendium of Edgar Allen Poe tales and, as he drew it from the shelf, grinned slightly as the book seemed nearly to leap into his waiting hands. My, but his eagerness was positively a palpable thing!

One moment to pour out a measure of… yes… very fine brandy, one moment to reconcile his brandy with his soon-to-arrive tea, one moment to step to his waiting chair and one final moment to settle into it, ignoring the soft, satisfied sigh that escaped his lips as he nestled in for an hour or so of reading. And only he would know how lovely it felt to have his non-gelled hair catch a wisp of fire-warmed hair so it moved slightly against his ear. Truly a day for little snippets of sensuality, which were utterly lacking in his normal, daily life. Perhaps he should become stranded in remote inns, on dark and stormy nights, more often…
“Knock, knock… dinner’s in about an hour, dear, and I’ve got a slew of messages for you that you might want to read before then.”

Mrs. Hudson scooted into the library where Mycroft had blissfully been left alone after the arrival of his tea and handed him a small stack of messages scribbled on whatever scraps of paper she or Charles happened to find when the shortwave barked for their attention.

“Ahh… my, I’ve become rather popular it seems.”

Setting down his Poe, Mycroft thumbed through the stack and hid his appreciative smile at the various annotations Mrs. Hudson had made, such as ‘sounded like he was trying to hold in a gutload of gas,’ ‘this one’s mother can’t be proud of her with that snooty attitude’ and ‘like listening to someone trying to sing with a toad in their mouth,’ and knew immediately, without even reading the names, the identity of those she was describing. Much to his everlasting agony.

“Not a one of them really needed to speak with you, either. Mostly seemed to need their hand held for this or that and I told them to bugger off and find someone else to do that for them since you were very busy with other important things. Your lad was a bit nicer about it, but he gave them the polite what for and sent them on their way, too.”

The idea of hiring Mrs. Hudson as his PA flitted through Mycroft’s mind, however, since Anthea was also exceedingly proficient in sending bothersome individuals on their way and would end his life in a completely untraceable manner if she was reassigned to one of the bothersome individuals from whom she was blessedly unencumbered, he let the thought dissipate like smoke in the wind.

“Excellent. Thank you for your diligence in maintaining the sanctity of my small interlude.”

“I could see you needed it. Got your driver set helping me with the vegetables, because he’s the sort who likes to relax by doing little things, but you’re the quiet, thinking sort of relaxer.”

“Most observant of you. Very well, I suppose I should tend to some of these and then I shall surely be ready for what I know will be a truly delectable meal.”

“Listen to you flattering an old lady. Feel free to do it anytime. Alright, then, I’ll tidy up in here and you go on about your business. I’ll let you know when dinner is ready.”

Smiling somewhat sadly at the loss of his small sanctuary and the luxurious experience it presented, Mycroft nodded and rose from his chair, leaving the library in search of the shortwave to begin assuring Whitehall that the end was not, in point of fact, nigh.

“Poe… lovely choice for a night like this. However, that brandy was in the cupboard last time I noticed. Can’t argue with it, though… a bit of Poe, a nice brandy and a fire… couldn’t ask for anything cozier…”

If Mycroft was still in the room, he might wonder about Mrs. Hudson’s pointed look at the empty chair across from where Mycroft had been sitting and wonder more when an impish smile peeked out on her lips.

“Suppose I’d best get back to the actual work to see the guests fed, clothed and content. The cozy bit seems taken care of already…”

Chapter 3
Popping the Poe back on the shelf, Mrs. Hudson then put the brandy glass on the small tray with the empty teacup and laughed softly as she left the room to return to cooking. A moment later a person looking in just the right direction may have noticed the slightest fluttering of the drapes as if someone was taking a small peek out to check the progress of the storm. Which didn’t show any signs of letting up soon. In fact, it might be worsening…

Good.

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“Heavens, this is delicious, Mrs. Hudson. You are a marvel in the kitchen.”

Perfectly prepared lamb, vegetables roasted in exactly the manner he favored and fresh-baked bread that seemed to cushion the bit of butter he spread upon it like a feather on a pillow… perhaps it was a good thing he was not presented with such delights every day or he would truly match the various infantile jibes Sherlock delighted in hurling his way concerning his waistline.

“I’m glad you like it. Simple is what I do best, so I stick to that, but I do try to make it tasty. There’s berry tart for afters so save a little room for that if you’ve a taste for something sweet.”

A taste for something sweet? Given his druthers he could keep the sugar plantations of the world in a state of economic prosperity until the end of time.

“I shall set aside a very appropriate measure of my appetite for a truly healthy portion.”

“That’s a good, lad.”

Mycroft dutifully accepted his pat on the shoulder as if it had been bestowed by his grandmother and narrowed his eyes slightly at his driver who was openly enjoying his employer’s adoption.

“I washed the berries myself, Mr. Holmes, and sampled more than a few to know how perfectly sweet and tart they are.”

“How efficient of you, Charles. I am certain Mrs. Hudson appreciated both the help and the nod to quality control.”

“Learned a few things, too. My tart crusts are never a particular success, but I have wrung the secret from the master.”

“Oh, and what that might be?”

“A secret between master and apprentice. Neither of those are you, sir. My apologies.”

“Alas, I cannot fault the compartmentalization of information. I shall therefore simply have to enjoy the fruits of your labor while they are available.”

That would be, at minimum, breakfast tomorrow, lunch and most likely dinner. Then, surely breakfast the next day, at the very least. So many fruits and so much enjoyment… this was the best holiday he had relished in decades! With good liquor, good books and a soft bed… there were those who paid fortunes for resorts that offered not a whit of this level of comfort.

“Any news you can share about our original objective, sir?”

“Yes, actually. Our asset seems, oddly, to have been calmed by the knowledge that our little chat would not occur for several more days and, as a result, became quite chatty on certain subjects. I
suspect the information we require will be easily gained through collegial conversation with those overseeing him and that camaraderie shall smooth the way for allying him with our point of view.”

“Good, then the pressure is off to swim you there on my back or fashion some form of boat out of potato peelings and kitchen spoons.”

Hence his own flash of elation that this small respite had the potential of being just that – a respite. There was a level of pressure removed from his shoulders, a notable one, and that was a situation of which to take full and complete advantage.

And, that sense of ease continued unabated after he finished his meal, with a substantial portion of tart as the crowning glory, sent a few messages of his own via the shortwave, then visited the library for a new book, this one a compilation of Lovecraft stories to follow with the theme of his evening, and retired to his room to end the day.

It was absolutely excessive to pour for himself a whisky, given the amount of alcohol he had already imbibed, however… holiday rules would apply. Not that he had holiday rules, per se, mostly because he had not taken a true holiday since Victoria sat on the throne, but the theory was sound and he was a staunch supporter of soundly-reasoned theory. One good whisky, one quick change into the pyjamas Mrs. Hudson had somehow acquired and laid out for him and a slow slide between the soft sheets to lay, with pillows propping his back, in the bed and settle into read. Barring the whisky, this reminded him very much of his youth when he would take to bed early simply to avoid Sherlock’s shrieking and to lose himself in the power of a book. Those were the most satisfying evenings of his memory…

Though, this one held a special aspect that placed the evening squarely in its own category of enjoyment. Rather as for the library, there was a feeling of… oh, something he could not define, that made the experience all the more pleasant. Something in the quality of the situation that could not be explained by the furnishings or the architecture or the objects of decoration. There was an indescribable contour of the atmosphere that settled a deeper contentment in bones than he might otherwise predict. It was truly a curious thing… but one he would not stop to question. For once, he would simply permit himself to indulge…

Another hour or so of purely-for-pleasure reading, with slightly more whisky than he had planned, made the slide into sleep an easy thing once Mycroft set aside his book. Which, normally, would be fairly shallow and provided with a small degree of dreaming, however, that pattern broke cleanly when his mid settled into a deep, restful state and… a pleasant, pastoral dream, the likes of which he never experienced at home…

Stretching out in front of him was a large expanse of green, interrupted by a serene stand of trees and a babbling book crossed by a small stone bridge. It was the loveliest of scenes and an utterly peaceful one, at that, and he found his dream self simply sitting a moment in the grass to let the crisp, clean air fill his lungs and the soft breeze blow through his hair. And… there it was again. That indefinable feeling of… something… that made the experience seem fuller. Richer. Mycroft Holmes, the eponymous Iceman, did not habitually spare a thought for the bliss of things, for he so very rarely experienced such in his life, but in his dreams, apparently, things were far, far different.

Deciding a walk would be the perfect way to truly relish the moment, Mycroft rose and nearly turned to smile at the person standing next to him before remembering that he was alone in his dream. For a brief instant, though, it had seemed there was someone at this side, gazing at the beauty of the landscape with as much delight as was he. But, of course, that was nonsense, as his dream-eyes told him in clear, concise terms. Putting the curiosity aside, Mycroft strolled along across the grassy
meadow, admiring the small, colorful flowers that made a proud showing amongst the tall blades of grass and he lingered a moment at the edge of the brook, letting the water flow over his fingertips, water that was far colder than he would have expected, but so very clear that he could see every rock and pebble over which that water flowed.

Crossing the bridge, Mycroft stopped a moment to lean his elbows on the old stones and look down along the meandering path of the water, noticing the occasional darkening that indicated the presence of a pool, which brought a smile to his lips. There had been a brook on their property when he was a child and it had a few deep pools that, when he was very young, his imagination believed were places where the most magical creatures lived. Mer-creatures, sentient fish, rocks that told great secrets to those worthy to hear them… In fact, as he looked down, their property also had a large pool directly under a bridge, just as did this one of his dreams. Of course it would host a mer-troll who would pester any who tried to cross the bridge without paying a suitable toll and pity the person who found their pockets empty of even a farthing…

Perhaps that was the inspiration that brought these images to his mind tonight. A throwback to his childhood, when life was simpler and he’d had time for the simple things that brought him such pleasure. Taking a walk, with his little sketchbook in hand, drawing whatever image took his fancy. Reading a book with his back leaning against a willing tree. Letting his imagination build a story from the patterns of the clouds in the sky, the water beneath the bridge or…

“Look, there! A fish!”

Mycroft startled at both his outburst and by the fact that… it was an outburst. One to alert a companion, for again, for an instant, he had felt himself not alone. Felt as if there was a presence beside him, looking out over the water, as enthralled by the sights and sounds as he had been these long, wondrous moments.

Perhaps that was also part of this dream’s inspiration. The desire, deeply buried, long hidden and never admitted, that he would not abhor having someone with whom to share this sort of wonder. To enjoy together a quiet walk or a long evening of reading or chess… to spirit off to a tucked-away cinema to enjoy a classic film or discover an exquisite restaurant the vapid critics had yet to descend upon. He had long ago realized that he was not a man to inspire friendship, let alone affection, however, that did not destroy the immeasurably-small wish he held fast in his heart that there could be someone, someday, who might find his manner… acceptable. Someone he might phone to request a measure of company for no other purpose than to enjoy time spent with thoughts and ideas other than his own. Or… enjoy time spent with a shared affection that enlivened his small and darkened heart in the silly and fantastical fashion the great novels always painted with such vibrant and compelling colors. To come home to something other than the cold stillness of his opulent, empty house and be greeted with a smile given for no reason other than the giver was happy they were together again…

Sighing, Mycroft pushed away from the stones and continued his stroll letting himself slowly return to the peaceful place where the only thing that mattered was the gentle sensations of nature and the occasional, yet persistent, notion that… he did not walk alone. It was a foolish thing, but he began to cherish those few flashes of sensing another presence sharing his walk. His mind was, apparently, amenable to providing him all his heart’s desires tonight and, in defiance of his typical demeanor, he would not offer any form of rebuke.

And, lo! Ahead was the very inn in which his body rested, looking, however, fresher and more lively than it did when shrouded in darkness and blowing rain. Another message, perhaps? He had never felt so… open and relaxed as he had this one single day at this little, isolated inn. Although he never could be truly on holiday as his time could be at any moment stolen away for the most severe
and worrying of reasons, a few days, with open communication lines, was not unimaginable. Well, to his PA or anyone who knew him, it was the most unimaginable thing in the universe – Mycroft Holmes Takes a Holiday – however, he gave himself in this life so very little beyond the materialistic… could he give himself a few days, even once a year, just to… do this? Do… nothing. It was a heavenly thought…

Hmmm… and didn’t the smell of something delectable waft happily from the inn? Would his dream allow him to enjoy one of Mrs. Hudson’s hearty meals? Might as well peek in and…

Dream Mycroft opened the inn door and non-dream Mycroft opened his eyes in response, to see the sun higher in the sky than he recalled seeing it in years. And… ah, that was the reason. The smell of breakfast in the air… a far cry from the hastily consumed tea and toast that was his norm. Today, though, he could take time to eat that breakfast, lingering over every bite, rather than pushing toast into his mouth in between tapping messages on his mobile or issuing directives to whichever unfortunate was chosen to phone him at that early hour to alert him to whatever new crisis had appeared on the horizon. Ecstasy! Pure and unadulterated ecstasy… then a day of… nothing. Reading, listening to the symphony of the winds or… might Mrs. Hudson have a standard radio or even a venerable music player? She did seem the type to enjoy a spot of music and not one averse to allowing others to take advantage of her own entertainments…

Rising from his bed, Mycroft breathed deep and, for the briefest of moments, thought he caught the scent of sun-warmed grasses and crisp, clear water in the air. Smiling softly at the bit of sensory memory from his dream, the happily well-rested Holmes followed instinct and peeked out of his door to find another set of clean clothes on the hall table. As for yesterday, these were not his, but… he was glad for it. What he had packed were clothes for work and these were precisely not that. Another pair of casual trousers, these a pleasant camel color, and a rich green button-up with buttons the same camel color as the trousers. It was soft, slightly generous in cut and would offer incomparable comfort as he relaxed the day away, especially with the warm socks and comfortably-stretched mocassin slippers that would cradle his eternally-cold feet. Hedonism! It was rampant! And he could find nothing, in the least, wrong that…

“Look at you… someone had a good night’s rest.”

“Verily, Mrs. Hudson, I did. Your beds are most conducive to a sound sleep.”

“Wasn’t about to be miserly with something as important as that! A body needs its rest if it’s going to stay healthy and well. And a good feeding, too. Charles already ate and… he’s such a helpful lad… is working on fixing a few things around here for me. It was that or take on the stack of messages I’ve got waiting for you. Between you and me, though, I suspect he’s taken the easier job. You have a seat, dear, and I’ll have a nice plate of breakfast in front of you in no time.”

Sighing to gain fortitude, Mycroft took a seat at the dining room table, the one clearly laid out for him with a stack of notes on one side and a pen and small notebook on the other. However, a quick perusal of the missives said he could manage the various matters in an hour or so and then easily consider himself ‘off the grid’ until afternoon, when he could uptake another flurry of issues to satisfy his sense of duty and leave his evening free. It was a shameful thing to be somewhat gleeful about this communication dilemma, but he had no moral problem being shameful for the time being, so… bugger it all.

“Here you are… and good cuppa to start the day off right. More reading for you today, Mr. Holmes?”
“Most likely, yes. It is rare I have the chance to devote any appreciable time to that pursuit and it is one I do enjoy greatly.”

“Good, then, since it’s doubtful this storm is going to break today or even tomorrow. Let me know if you’d like a little something to listen to while you read. Some people like that, others don’t.”

How utterly fortuitous…

“Oh, do you have a music source, perhaps?”

“I do, at that. Nice old radio that works even in the worst of these rotten storms. Some dusty old albums, too, knocking about here somewhere. Classical mostly. I can rummage for them and the player that goes with them, if that’s more your liking that whatever the BBC is doing for today’s programming.”

Mental dance of joy…

“A little classical music to accompany my reading would be most appreciated.”

“I’ll get right on that after I do the washing up from breakfast. Now, you eat that while it’s hot or it’s naught but boiled tongue and turnips for your lunch.”

That was a threat of supreme potency. Best enjoy his scrumptious breakfast and… oh, were those fresh scones? With sweet butter and jam?

“Oh, no clotted cream, though… what a shame…”

Mycroft took a scone from the small platter at the center of the table, then startled as… that was odd. He was certain, or thought he was certain, that had been no cream on the table. Yet… now, there was a crock of it sitting next to the jam.

“What was that, dear?”

“I… I was simply remarking to myself about a touch of cream with…”

“Oh! I completely forgot to set that out and…”

Mrs. Hudson’s small ‘hmph’ seeing the crock on the table and her exasperated expression amused Mycroft slightly as he’d seen the same expression on his brother’s face when he found himself foiled by his own actions.

“Or… I thought I forgot to set that out. Memory must be going. Well, still plenty of it to see you and your man tended to properly during your stay. Let me know if you need anything else, dear.”

Mycroft’s plunging headfirst into his adoration of proper scones didn’t position him to notice the small finger shake Mrs. Hudson made, apparently, at an attractive pewter sconce on the wall. Not that he would have cared much, because he was already transported into the joys of culinary expertise and had no plans of returning any time soon. A few days a year… surely that would not be too much to ask of London and the various fools and dilettantes that paraded about the various halls of government. Such a small thing to take for himself as reward for holding together the seams of the world to keep them from fraying…
Ninety-four minutes to handle his stack of morning messages and zero minutes of regret that his relayed conversation to a particularly-odious MP was tragically cut short by some rather well-performed ‘zzzzzt,’ ‘scrssshhh,’ and ‘wheeeeen’ noises that could only be attributed to a flagrant intrusion of pesky static which ended the call prematurely. Quel dommage…

Five minutes to choose a new book from the library, the rousing 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, by the incomparable Jules Verne, two minutes to beg a cup of tea from Mrs. Hudson and another two minutes to settle himself in his chair by the jaunty fire, which was already burning merrily, and scarcely two seconds to release a soul-cleansing sigh. He currently inhabited a paradoxical cocoon, built by wild weather and homely comforts, and it was one over which he positively rejoiced.

Wriggling his toes in his cozy moccasin slippers, Mycroft paused a moment, then let the slippers slide from his feet so he could wriggle his toes more directly in the heat of the fire. There was something so magical about heat. The heat from a hot shower, for example, was far different than the heat from a healthy fire. They both warmed you, yet in entirely ways, producing a wholly unique sensation that satisfied certain urges or needs better than their counterpart. And the fact that he was ruminating upon something as nonsensical as the quality of heat said much about how free and relaxed was his mind. Unburdened, unencumbered… perfect for absorbing the imagery and prose of Verne in the most delightful way possible… and there were other of Verne’s tales waiting for him on the shelves when this one was over…

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“Just checking in, sir, to see if you needed me for anything?”

Oh yes… Charles. Your presence has been completely forgotten, but there is no insult to be taken from that… it is only that other things have taken the place of all persons and matters associated with work and those things are magical, indeed.

“Thank you, Charles, but, I have no need, at present, to interrupt your own impromptu holiday. Though, it does appear to be a… dusty one.”

There was more dust and grime on his driver than driver, however, the large smile the man was sporting said this condition was a welcome one.

“Good to know, since I’ve got a queue of projects that wouldn’t be happy if I was dragged away to go on safari to the nearest village to find a specific brand of orange marmalade without which the Empire would come crashing down around our ears.”

“Projects, you say? I hope Mrs. Hudson is not imposing upon your goodwill, as we are paying guests, after all.”

“Absolutely not! I volunteered to mend a few creaky boards and stop a leak in one of the sinks, then I did a little exploring in the attic and cellar where all sorts of need-repairing lovelies are currently living sad and pathetic lives. I’m good with my hands and do enjoy bringing things back to life after they’ve fallen on hard times. Normally I don’t have the time or the place to do much of that, so this is actually a treat for me.”

Treat to some, yet ghastly to others and Mycroft was squarely in the ‘others’ camp for this issue. However, to each his own…
“Well, then, do not let me detain you.”

“Thank you, sir. Mrs. Hudson is having fun today, as well, collecting messages from the people she feels deserve it, then telling those people to fuck off, in her mostly-polite manner, so she’s set for the rest of the morning, too.”

How jolly that the halls of government were now on bended knee to their hostess, pleading their case to have a message taken. That was a mental image to further warm his ever-frigid feet.

“Excellent. I shall collect the new stack at lunch to manage this afternoon.”

“Very good, sir. If you do need me for anything, Mr. Holmes, I’ll be… about somewhere. Ask Mrs. Hudson. She’s keeping me provided with energy-boosting tidbits, so she generally knows where I’m lurking.”

Speaking of… a small nosh would be truly welcome at the moment. Unfortunately… that meant donning slippers and leaving his lair. For now, the lure of the lair was too strong to resist...

“Carry on, Charles.”

“Carrying on, sir.”

Left alone again, Mycroft took a moment to stoke the fire and cast a longing look at the brandy before reminding himself that he wasn’t prepared quite yet to sink completely into a fully Bacchanalian lifestyle.

“Later, my dear brandy. Now, if I only had the power of mental telepathy, I could summon more tea and a pleasing selection of biscuits, however… even my omnipotence has its glaring limits.”

Re-taking his seat, Mycroft’s fingers opened his book and it wasn’t a minute before he was lost again in one of his favorite stories. When Mrs. Hudson appeared soon after, the elder Holmes had to wonder if he had developed telepathic powers and simply failed to inform himself about that fact. One fresh pot of tea and a very enticing selection of biscuits rested on the tray in her hands and the expression on her face stated very clearly that he was expected to return to her a very empty plate and pot.

“A little bird told me you might be a touch peckish.”

So focused was Mycroft on cataloging the biscuit selection and prioritizing them in terms of order of consumption, that he missed the small wink Mrs. Hudson made at the chair across from her guest.

“Then said bird has my eternal gratitude. I can think of no better interruption to my reading than one of your excellent cups of tea.”

“It’s strange how a quiet few hours can make you hungry, but it really can, don’t you think? Well, you finish this and if you need anything more, just let me know.”

Setting the tray down on the table next to Mycroft’s chair, Mrs. Hudson shot another wink at the nothingness and quickly took her leave so her guest could return to his resting. The poor thing needed it desperately, that much was painfully obvious. One of those fellows that worked themselves near to death and never took any time for himself. Well, he’d get plenty of that now and she didn’t seem to be the only one dedicated to making that happen…
There were only so many times one could ask themselves if one was dreaming before it became utterly ludicrous and he had likely taken a step clearly across the line, however… not a bit of him cared.

Taking a break from his book to savor his tea and biscuits that would make a master baker weep, Mycroft allowed his mind wander and admire the ever-changing patterns of the fire. It was a quality of the mind to make meaning of the meaningless, to see shapes, faces and objects where they do not exist, such as in clouds, but that did not make the activity an unenjoyable one. In fact, it was a delightful touch of whimsy and he found himself smiling at the patterns his mind imagined in the whorls and spires of the flames.

There, a witch, complete with cliché pointed hat, flew on her broomstick. And, there, a cat leapt to try and catch a bird that was too fleet of flight for its claws. A veritable legion of tiny imps cheered on their master as he gave a rousing speech, complete with arms raised in victory to punctuate his points. And… oh, now his mind was truly delving into fantasy…

At the center of the fire, two figures were dancing, gently embracing as they waltzed slowly through the flames. How content they appeared; how utterly happy to be there in the arms of the person with whom they were dancing. And, no, it was certainly not him, not bland, dreary Mycroft Holmes who was humming a tune to accompany their waltz. How many years had it been since he’d danced? Held someone in his arms and spun them slowly around the room, forgetting for a time that anyone else in the world existed but the person who was gazing into his eyes with a warmth that made his icy heart melt like snowflakes in the sunlight. Well, that had never happened, but he had imagined it could, the few times he’d taken a partner and let himself follow the urge to do more than stand stoically at a social function.

It might have been pleasant, though… pleasant and… pleasanter… such a thing…………………

“You dance divinely, my dear…”

And your body fits perfectly in my arms…

“You, too. I’m glad you like to dance. Haven’t done it in… what seems like forever.”

“A tragedy, simply a tragedy, for you are delightfully light on your feet.”

And move with the most sensual grace to the rhythm of the music.

“Well, my dance card will always have a spot for you, kind sir. May I… may I call you, Mycroft, if it’s not too forward?”

With your roughened tones and the beauty of your shy smile, I would not deny you a single thing, let alone my own joy from hearing my name fall from your lips.

“I would be honored. And… might I claim the same familiarity?”

“Please… it’s Greg.”

“Gregory… such a strong name.”

It marries well with your strong arms, which held me just a touch tighter when I spoke that name aloud.

“You flatter me, sir.”
“A job I am happy to perform. In fact... oh, let me see... you have the most entrancing eyes, Gregory. I could lose myself in their warmth for an eternity and never regret it for an instant.”

Good heavens, that was florid. But what did it matter when one was dreaming... and Gregory was smiling...

“And you, Mycroft, have a voice that slides like the finest silk into my ears. What that voice and those gorgeous lips could do to my thoughts doesn’t bear considering or I’d be immediately damned for indecency.”

As indecent as that tiny peek of tongue accompanying your slightly-smirking smile, Gregory, my dear? Oh, that does sound delightful...

“Now, look what you have done, you scamp. I shall have those very thoughts in my own head for a fortnight with no hope of purging them from my mind.”

“My very intention! I’ve been found out... I’d make a terrible spy, I suspect.”

“Alas, I must agree, however that, in no manner, diminishes my joy at being with you here and now.”

And that was purely and perfectly honest. Just a simple dance with someone who looked at him as if he, Mycroft Holmes, was someone special... it was joy. There was no other word for it.

“Then... you wouldn’t mind if I visited you again?”

“Mind? I would be most put out if you did not.”

“Alright, then... for now, though, let’s enjoy our dance.”

Your deliciously-wicked smile beckons me, dear Gregory, so that I don’t care a whit about propriety as I step further into your embrace and draw your body to press against mine so our dance matches the new, more intimate music that fills my ears.

“I agree...”

And I will continue to hold you against me as we move slowly around the dancefloor, bathed in soft light from candles that cast their glow upon our skin and throw our shadows onto the walls, where they dance with as much passion as do we. What a... oh dear... Gregory, where have you gone...

“Mr. Holmes? Nodded off for a moment did you, dear? I hate to disturb you, but your Anthea says you’re needed for something and she seems like a woman with a good head on her shoulders, so I suspect you’d best take care of it.”

Mycroft shook the remaining sleep out of his mind, but held on with all his might to the faint remnants of his dream that lingered in his memory. He had... danced. Flirted! Spent the most achingly romantic moments of his life with a handsome, mature man who... found him equally beguiling. He had never dreamed such a thing. Never had such sumptuous images in his mind, let alone embraced that sumptuousness with willing and open arms. It was to be expected that work would intrude on a vision as heavenly as that...

“Of course. Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. And, yes, Anthea is not an individual to make mountains out of molehills.”

“Didn’t think so. She and I have a little system going, so I know she’s smart one. Happy that
you’re having a little holiday, too, so she’s more than willing to keep those hand-wringers and all their whinging off your doorstep for the time being.”

Oh no. An alliance had been formed. Or… oh thank heavens! With two gargoyles at the gate, his little rest was certain to be as restful as humanly possible! It would be impolite to hurl a rude gesture at London and the collection of whingers and hand-wringers it harbored, but if he did it only in his thoughts, that could remain his little secret. In fact, he’d do it twice, for good measure.

“Her dedication to my well-being will not go unrewarded. I shall ensure there is a suitable bonus in her wages for that laudable bit of service.”

“I’m sure she’ll take care of it, herself, if you forget.”

Too true. And she did have a myriad of connections to tailor her wage statement to her liking…

“One can only hope. I suppose, also, that I should manage the rest of my messages while I am experiencing this surge of momentum.”

“I have them waiting for you. Along with another cup of tea. A strong one. You might need it.”

Watching Mrs. Hudson hustle out of the room, Mycroft sighed loudly and, for the smallest measure of time, felt that his sigh had been accompanied by another, just as regretful and resigned. It was gladdening to have the support, even if it was only from his chair, the books and the logs in the fire…

A somewhat tense few hours followed Mycroft’s small nap as the world had decided, as it ever did, to do something rash, but with the strangely cobbled-together communication pathway they had created, it was managed with only a moderate reduction in his normal efficiency. And, how nice for him that the shortwave had been placed in the inn’s kitchen so that a continuous supply of bracing tea was available, as well as the occasional freshly-baked this or that to keep his temper on even keel. Normally, it would be Anthea keeping him surreptitiously-supplied with an occasional piece of chocolate or biscuit, but Mrs. Hudson was easily up to the task as temporary, though equally efficient, PA.

“Oh my, that was a flutter, wasn’t it? I’m glad all I have to worry about in my day is that the butcher overcharges me for my meat or the potatoes are a bit mealy.”

“The flutter was a mild one, actually. The degree of inanity that is perpetrated across the globe is positively staggering and it visits me with the frequency of that particular relative you wish least to see, yet who always arrives on your doorstep just before dinnertime.”

“You poor dear. Had an uncle like that, so I do know your pain. Tell you what… I’ll keep that bastard off the stoop for the time being, so you can clear your head and take a few moments to stretch the knots out of you. Then, I’ll start setting out lunch, nice and proper in the dining room, and you can get back to your reading once your energy’s up again. I’ll make certain the fire’s freshened a bit, too, so it’ll be bright and cheery when you’re ready.”

Was it possible to stay here forever? Live life in cozy slippers, with warmth aplenty and meals that many a celebrity chef would sell their souls to the devil to be able to craft? No… no, it was not, but that would not dull his enjoyment of this small interlude in the slightest.

Rising and following orders to stretch out the knots, Mycroft walked while stretching and took a
moment to look out of the window at the still-blowing storm. Truly, he had never seen one so ferocious, but, then, London rarely saw any weather of appreciable personality. Which was a shame, really, as there was a beauty to it; a primal beauty that one had to admire if one had any trace of soul. And, surprisingly, he was finding there still remained a few traces of soul floating about in his chest. They were a tad shriveled and shrunken, but they did exist and the chance to feed on new experiences, experiences that were created precisely to feed the shrunken, shrunken scraps of soul, were making them regain their former fullness. One day, perhaps, if he was very lucky, they might again weave together and make him wholly human.

Smirking at his musings, Mycroft smirked even more knowingly when his thoughts were punctuated by a loud clap of thunder and a spectacular flash of lightning that lit the sky like a fireworks display. Then, he leapt back quickly from the window, feeling terribly foolish in the aftermath, because his meandering mind had thought there was a figure standing behind him, looking over his shoulder, as if to enjoy, as well, the weather’s drama. Dear heavens, but he was subject to flights of imagination in this little inn. But, given it was an ancient structure, with shadows in the corners and a gothic storm raged outside, it certainly fit the mood.

Stretching a little more to loosen the last of the tension in his muscles, Mycroft made his way to the dining room where he stopped short with a small gasp and… stayed stopped.

“There you are, Mr. Holmes. Charles is staying in the kitchen since he’s a filthy mess and refuses to shower before eating, so… are you alright, dear? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Not a ghost, but… a dream.

“That painting. The one on the mantle…”

“Oh! He is a handsome one, isn’t he? I’d moved him to the sideboard over there when I was dusting and just got around to moving him back. It’s a wonderful little thing, isn’t it?”

Was that… had he seen the image? He… he must have. Seen it and registered it on only the most cursory, insignificant level…

“Who… who is he? Do you know?”

“A policeman, it’s said. Or, at least, what passed for a policeman, chasing away the bandits and seeing other villains put in the stocks and the cells. His name is actually there under his portrait. A fine-looking man… not many quite that handsome about anymore. Rugged handsomeness… that’s the best type. The story is the painting was a gift from a landowner for finding the bastard who murdered his lady wife, which makes sense, since a common lad surely couldn’t afford something like that on his own.”

Mycroft slowly moved towards the small painting and gulped loudly seeing the script in the bottom corner of the painting – Gregory Lestrade. He gulped louder seeing the year – 1738. How… he must have seen the name, that was the only explanation. But… his eyes were not that keen! The sideboard was fully on the other side of the dining room, but… it was the only explanation. There was no other. There couldn’t be any other…

“Yes… a gift. Certainly a plausible tale.”

“And the handsome part?”

“I… oh, I… yes. I would agree wholeheartedly.”

Fully as handsome as when I danced in his arms and breathed in the scent of his skin when he held
“Then you’ve got a good eye. Well, he’s back in his proper place and you have lunch waiting. I’ll get started on your fire and see the brandy is fully stocked.”

With her agenda set, Mrs. Hudson left the dining room, throwing back one glance as she cleared the doorway and smiling widely at the sight of a transfixed figure who was still staring silently at the portrait. Fortunately, his lunch wouldn’t suffer too much if it waited for him to gather his thoughts and have his fill of a certain boyish grin and messy shock of hair that the artist, apparently, didn’t see fit to have the silly thing comb his locks when they had a sitting. Not that it mattered, it seemed… Mr. Holmes just might have a taste for a bit of mess and shock in his life, if the right person was sporting it…
Chapter 5

What a predicament… an exceptional book in his hands, all the time in the world to enjoy it, and his mind was having a devil of a time focusing to enjoy that world of time and the exceptional book. His mind preferred, instead, to wander back to his dream and let the images play over and over again as if he was watching them on a movie screen. Gregory… his mind had taken what could only have been a fleeting glimpse of that portrait and concocted a whole person around that flimsiest of information.

But what a person had been concocted! Not at all what he might have expected since… well, his imagination did normally tend towards individuals such as Gregory when, on the exceedingly rare occasion he indulged in a small musing about a romantic encounter, however… it had felt as natural as breathing. And he had reveled in it. Reveled in that small, stolen moment of… could it be termed romance? If he was to be honest with himself, it was the word to use. Not simply romantic, but actual romance. And with the promise of more.

The fact his dream was about a real person was unusual, in that he never dreamed about individuals from his life, let alone in this manner, but his mind embraced this person’s image and set him at the center of fantasy that still made his heart beat faster when he remembered their dance. Such a handsome individual, strong of body and clever of mind, who radiated sexual potency and smiled in such a way that declared to the four winds that he recognized that potency and, further, delighted in sharing it with a willing partner. Was there anything as arousing as confidence? Confidence that was grounded in true self-awareness and not bravado? Verily, there was not. And with his other attributes… oh Gregory, I realize that the only truth of you I know is your image, however, you are already the most alluring man I have ever known…

However, you are a phantasm and neither myself nor my life would attract your attention were you flesh and blood, so best focus on the tangible, attainable pleasures such as my book, my fire and… yes, it was time for a little brandy. Perhaps I shall visit with you again before we depart, perhaps I shall not… regardless, I will raise a toast to your memory and place you in my mind as the only man, in all my life, who has made me feel… remarkable…

“Yes, Charles?”

If his employer became any more comfortable, Charles worried that he’d have to port him around on his back due to lack of support stemming from melted bones. Mr. Holmes looked positively blissful with his book. He was nearly smiling!

“Just checking you’re alive, sir.”

“Then checks should be performed. Breathing? Yes. Senses functioning? Apparently so. I believe I can state, with corroborating evidence, that I remain among the living.”

“Zombie? They’re tricky buggers and I’d rather not let you loose on poor Mrs. Hudson, if that’s the case. She’d likely snap her rolling pin knocking you on the head and it’d be my head knocked next for letting you wander about and bother her while she was baking.”

“Hmmmm… I find myself having no particular desire for a dinner of brains, so I suspect I have not devolved, at this point in time, into that particular form of non-life.”
The number of people who believed Mycroft Holmes to be a humorless, acerbic individual equaled the number of water molecules in the ocean. Proof positive that lots of people believing a thing did not, in any manner, make that thing true.

“Alright, then, still-human sir, best prepare for at least another brain-free day here. The weather report isn’t supporting the idea of a getaway at any point in the immediate future.”

What a horrible bit of news. Truly, he was devastated. Hefty, plump tears were poised to roll down his face.

“Very well. I suppose keeping myself occupied for another day shall not be overly onerous. Mrs. Hudson seems to have established a highly-effective communications hub, so Britain will not fall in the interim.”

“She and Anthea have devised a ranking system for messages and, from what I gather, there is actually a rather rampant bribery ring rising around your office to get messages put higher on the scale. The ladies are splitting the profits 50-50 and Mrs. Hudson already has her eye on a new mixer for her share. One of those really big ones on a stand that does everything but the laundry.”

Should he simply place a statement in his will that, upon his death, Anthea should uptake his position, with all relevant clearances and financial considerations. Yes, likely so for the good of the nation. It would be his final act of service in a long and duty-directed career…

“Excellent. I am always one to encourage entrepreneurship, and the stimulus it brings to the economy.”

“I’ve already been informed, as well, that any profits from controlling the government in your semi-absence will not be deducted from our bill That, and dinner will be in an hour or thereabouts, so prepare for chicken.”

Mrs. Hudson would do wonders for the Treasury… however, too great an efficiency would have MP’s bawling and there were not enough staff on hand to manage that many crying babies or tend to the mountain of nappies that were certain to be soiled.

“Chicken, you say. Rest assured, I shall be prepared.”

With the pact cemented, Mycroft returned to his reading for a moment, then decided a shower would be a smart decision, as it would leave him with uninterrupted time after dinner, when he could begin on the enticing compilation of H.G. Wells that waited patiently on the shelf. Rising from his chair, Mycroft paused a moment and wondered if it was possible to return to his own library and recreate any measure of this coziness. It had all the relevant features; it simply had never attained this level of comfort. Perhaps it was time to modify it slightly. The chairs here were marginally closer to the fire and the lamps offered a slightly-dimmer glow. Possibly a bit... warmer… as well. Yes, there were tiny, subtle differences and sometimes that was all that was necessary to make a substantial difference in the nature of a thing. It was something to consider, at least…

Leaving his sanctuary behind for the time being, Mycroft climbed the stairs to his room and smiled that, again, he had been provided with fresh clothes that were not from his luggage. That was another thing to consider. Given the demands upon his time did not acknowledge the time when they demanded, he tended to stay somewhat ‘in uniform’ when at home. Maybe it was time to alter that behavior. It took a scant few minutes to change wardrobe if it was necessary, so why not allow himself to relax with something more comfortable to wear? Softer, warmer fabrics that would allow him to sit in a chair or, luxury of luxuries, recline on a sofa to enjoy his reading or a fine movie on the television. Another small benefit from this unexpected holiday… it was permitting him time to
evaluate matters to which he never gave a second thought and, hopefully, affect some useful and enjoyable changes in his day. No matter the size of the bill with which he was presented for this stay, it would be cheap for the gains he had made while here…

Onto the bed the fresh clothes were placed and into the bath Mycroft walked, dropping his current garments on the floor before stepping into the shower and let the wonderfully-scalding water flow over his body. At least this he had at home, though the size of his bath did allow for a spreading out of the heat so that it did not quite feel as encompassing as in this small space. And that was another thing on which to dwell. He had a rather spacious country home to his name, but the idea of a second one, small and cozy, was beginning to bloom in his mind. A tiny space where there would be no staff, no expansive rooms, no ceilings that required a tall ladder if one needed to affect a bit of dusting of the moulding.

A space only large enough for one. Or… if he was to allow his fantasies a moment to run free… two. A cottage, perhaps, where he and his lover could enjoy privacy and freely indulge the quiet pleasures of their affection. A welcoming space where a man with, say, Gregory’s beauty could share this shower… their naked body having to press against his in this small space so that every of their movements slid across his own skin in the most sensual of ways. A place where they felt no hesitation about taking their rising lusts to their bed to be celebrated or, even, enact them in this tiny space where they would laugh at the awkwardness as much as feel their blood boil from the passion.

Pausing a moment to simply let water passively wash away the soap, Mycroft reflected on how deep were the vaults in his mind this little inn had opened. If one had asked him, weeks ago, how he would react to this degree of self-revelation, he would, first, have argued the impossibility of the event and, second, stated most emphatically that there would be no measurable impact, should any revelation happen to occur. Now, though, he could say with conviction that it was… refreshing. The coldly-calculating, tightly-controlled Mycroft Holmes was feeling a brisk, crisp wind blow through him, dusting off bits of himself just as Charles was dusting off discarded, forgotten bits in the inn’s attic and cellar.

Discarded and forgotten… an apt description of a number of things in his heart and mind. Some by necessity, as it was nigh on impossible to do his work with a softness of heart, others by… cowardice. Fear of failure. Mycroft Holmes did not fail. He simply did not. Yet, that supreme record of success was reserved for matters not precisely… personal. There, he had met with failure. Or, better stated, he engaged in lackluster attempts at personal contact that could, from any perspective, be considered rewarding. Then again… it could not be said that he wholly invested himself in those attempts. Better to fail when you know you are not particularly trying than fail when you have truly put your all on the line. So many memories from his youth of snide comments, sneering laughter behind his back… large, bookish boys were ever prime targets for the boors and, though it should not matter, the wounds formed, grew and never fully healed.

Here, though, they felt not so deep or painful. Not so onerous of weight of stifling of heart. Perhaps he had simply needed some small amount of time away from the ever-present pressures of his day to set this crisp, cleansing breeze in motion and purge some of the dusty darkness from inside of him. To let him dream of something… and someone… he normally would have discounted out of hand. Yes, a small cottage might be the perfect thing to add to his portfolio of properties. A place to visit where he could leave behind his suits, ties, and valise to reconnect with the person he was or, more accurately, the person he wanted to be. The person who could do his work, do it effectively and, yes, ruthlessly, but return home and be greeted with a smile from a person who cared and for whom, along with millions of others, his effectiveness and ruthlessness served to keep safe and well.

Before his thoughts grew too fanciful or maudlin, Mycroft returned his attention to the actual purpose of being beneath an unending stream of hot water and finished his shower, then donned his new set
of clothes, grinning that Sherlock would have thrown an unbridled fit seeing the rich purple color of his shirt and how, unquestionably, it suited his complexion far better. He had forgotten, really, that he wore color well, given the years of black, gray, blue and white that had dominated his appearance. His only nod to other shades had been with his ties where he had not entirely shied away from a touch of vibrancy. Even his ‘casual’ clothing was drab and plain. Well, that was certainly something he could change. He looked… dashing with a splash of color enlivening his appearance.

“And, frankly, I wear dashing quite well.”

**Very well, actually**

“Thank you, my dear.”

Eyes widening, Mycroft whirled to look around the room, then huffed in annoyance at his silliness. The cool, fresh blowing breeze was also clearing the dust off his fertile imagination and the rest of him was painfully slow catching up to its creativity. Well, it was a price he would happily pay for wasn’t the notion of a handsome man watching him dress and commenting favorably on his appearance a marvelous image to carry in his head. A man as handsome as Gregory, especially. And, no, he was not affecting a slightly seductive pose for his imaginary companion to enjoy. That would be nonsensical. Oh, but he did seem to have a flair for seductive poses… this one was positively come-hither…

“What do you think, Gregory?”

**That you’re gorgeous**

His imagination even kept dream Gregory’s voice! How helpful of it… and didn’t his brightened mood embolden him to decide to send a few messages of his own before taking up those that waited impatiently for his attention. One positive aspect of a freshened mind was freshened perspectives and he now had several ideas for a few simmering issues that might keep their simmer from becoming a boil. Thank you, my dear, for your assistance. Perhaps you shall visit me again tonight when I again sleep… what a welcome thing that would be…

“Still as handsome as before, isn’t he?”

Mycroft pursed his lips in irritation, but mostly as a formality because, yes, he was standing there gazing at the portrait of Gregory Lestrade and there really was no denying that fact if he didn’t want Mrs. Hudson laughing raucously at him.

“Yes, he is. Do you…”

“Dear?”

“Do you know anything of him? Besides his name and occupation?”

“I daresay anyone living in the area knows his story, such a tragic one. But, they do make the most interesting, don’t you think?”

Tragic. Oh no…

“Might I know it?”
Mrs. Hudson waved Mycroft to have a seat at the dining room table and quickly took the one next to him.

“Well, according to the various tales, some more lurid than others, he was a good man. A very good and decent man, but handsome, too, and had a smile that could make a lady lose her knickers if he turned it on her. The tawdry tales say he used that to best advantage, but the more reliable ones say he was a bit of a flirt and nothing more. Whichever is true... he had the misfortune of catching the eye of a particular woman in the village. A woman that, according to even the reliable tales, had a reputation for... well, being a witch.”

“I believe that takes the status of ‘reliable’ cleanly off of the table.”

“Perhaps, but that bit all the stories have in common and... well, you’ll see, maybe, why they do. Anyway, she was a nasty one, too. Beautiful, though, they say. One of those beauties where it’s all on the outside and not a bit of it reaches inside to touch the soul. Not a bit, at all. Well, she set her sights on Greg and he was having none of it. Even had a row at the local pub and she yelled out for all to hear that if she couldn’t have him, nobody would.”

“Naturally. A more cliché pronouncement I cannot imagine.”

“Be that as it may, all the stories have that bit, too, so you can’t just toss it away like rancid butter. Anyway, that night, our Greg there goes home, alone, and that’s the very last anyone ever saw of him. A farmer passing by early the next morning saw his door open and looked in... fire dying in the hearth, all his things still there, but Greg was gone. And was never, not ever, seen or heard from again.”

“Ah. Hence, the tragedy of the story.”

“Needless to say, when he told people in the village they stormed over to the witch’s house and when they got there, she was riding off with the son of one of the merchants, the horse running as fast as no horse should be able to run. Inside the house, they found a silver lock of hair and a few trinkets that had belonged to Greg. All of that in one of those circles with all the strange writing and symbols and the like. Cast a spell, she did, and they never found her to learn what she did or... even where a body might be to give the poor man a proper burial.”

What happened three centuries ago shouldn’t make Mycroft’s heart ache, but it did and with a sadness that was difficult for him to express. What a terrible thing... of course, there was no witchcraft involved, most likely the woman’s new lover, this son of a merchant, murdered Gregory and disposed of the body, but regardless... what a terrible fate for what seemed an honorable and respectable man.

“Well, that is a tragic tale. A profoundly tragic one, at that. He... appears to be the sort who did a great deal of good for his community.”

“Oh, he did... very well regarded, he was. Well loved, too. Always willing to help, charitable to those less fortunate...”

Mycroft missed Mrs. Hudson’s quickly smothered giggle as she cut her eyes towards the window, his thoughts being solely devoted to what a terrible thing it was that people of integrity, of quality, should meet such horrid fates. It wasn't an uncommon thing, quite the opposite, in fact, but that did not make the truth of it easier to bear.

“It is good, then, I suppose, that he is remembered. Too many have their stories lost to time and disinterested ears.”
“Very true. Lots of the same families still here that were there then and... they remember their history. The good and the bad. Greg’s story is a bit of both; maybe that’s what makes it special.”

“And it is a mystery. People do cherish a good mystery.”

“That they do. Well, you sit right there and I’ll have your dinner out in a moment. There’s something chocolatey waiting if you send back a clean plate, so keep that in mind.”

Mrs. Hudson rose and gave Mycroft a pat on the shoulder, as the man seemed to be deep in thought, and left him alone for a moment while she put the finishing touches on the evening meal. For his part, Mycroft sighed and straightened his chair, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table so he could cradle his chin with his folded fingers. Everyone loved a mystery and a murder mystery was even more exciting to the mind. But, strip away the sensational aspects and it was a sad tale of someone dying a death they surely did not deserve.

As he spared a thought for a good man long gone, Mycroft’s conscious mind didn’t make note of the slight tingle on his shoulders, in exactly the places one would experience pressure if a person was laying hands there to offer comfort, so he had no idea why his lips rose slightly in a faint smile, but... he let it linger to help chase away his case of malaise. Gregory was very long dead, but his memory remained and that was more than many were gifted in his world so... he would dwell upon that rather than the reason the memory existed. It was a fitting reward for someone who was such a valued member of their community and did true good with his life.

And, no, he would experience no inappropriate, unseemly satisfaction that Gregory soundly rebuffed the vile witch and, further... did not seem to be a married man. That would be disgraceful. Utterly disgraceful. But, it did keep any known... rivals... from interfering with certain daydreams that might, might, occur about the constable with the handsome face and even handsomer heart... if only there were a man like that in his own life... how magical that life would be...
Ah, Mr. Wells… your storytelling never disappoints…

“Nor does my cozy nest. You are comfortable as well, are you not, Gregory?”

I certainly am

Perhaps it was the extra glass… or three… of brandy, but Gregory was most content to answer questions this evening. Yes, he felt much like the lonely child who conversed with their imaginary friend, but, like that lonely child, the sense of companionship was real. Or real enough to make the mind forget about loneliness for awhile.

“Excellent. It is a shame, however, that you cannot enjoy this rather marvelous brandy. Do you have a taste for brandy, my dear?”

Never tried it

“Ah, I do apologize. Not something that would be freely available to you at that time period. Ale or wine, then.”

Either

“I prefer wine, myself, though I have enjoyed some truly inspired beers in my day. I tend not to stock them at home, however… the rare occasion I can enjoy something inebriating, I opt for a choice that can be slowly sipped and savored, much like the brandy here or an excellent vintage of wine.”

Naturally, Your Highness

“Ha! Verily, I will admit to a touch of snobbery, especially with this degree of brandy in my veins. But… I shall also admit to not having opportunity to experience a great deal of the other side of the proverbial coin. I doubt much on that side of the coin would appeal, however, the occasional dip of a toe in the pool… coin pool… one of those in which you toss coins to make a wish… would likely not be lethal.”

Could be fun, too

“I agree. One day, perhaps. One day…”

Soon

“Would that I had your confidence. But… I have more than once I did, so that is a victory in its own right. Oh, but look at the time. Not that it matters much to me on any particular day, but I would hate to sleep through one of Mrs. Hudson’s delicious breakfasts. Shall you visit me, my dear, while I sleep?”

Want me to?

“Most certainly. It is a delight to look upon your features and share with you even the briefest moments of time.”

I’ll be there
“Thank you, Gregory. Now…let me mark my place and I shall continue with you, Mr. Wells, at some point tomorrow. And goodnight to you, my dear. If my mind does not bring you to me tonight, I am certain we shall chat again tomorrow. My day simply would not be complete without our extensive and verbose conversations.”

His imaginary friend had the most ear-pleasing laughter imaginable. It was foolishness, he knew, but there would be only a few days more to be foolish and he had decided not to waste a moment. Once in a lifetime opportunities were not to be passed by untaken for they did not appear again, no matter how much one might wish otherwise…

Rising and placing his book on the table beside his chair, Mycroft smiled at his slight wobble and reminded himself that overindulgence in exceptional brandy was another thing he would miss terribly when he left this little inn. A clear head was vital to his work and muddling it with spirits could leave him unable to function properly if the need arose. And… indulging in his imaginary friend would also not be conducive to proper function when he was, again, home.

It shall pain me terribly to leave you, Gregory, but leave you I must. Until then, though… I hope we meet again tonight, if only for a dance…

—

It was unsurprising that Mycroft quickly fell asleep when he bedded down for the night, nor that his mind brought him swiftly into the land of dreams. Even in sleep, what Mycroft Holmes desired, Mycroft Holmes received and he could not have been more pleased with the dream that was on offer this night. How indescribably splendid… the panorama from his previous dream laid out before him exactly as before. So peaceful, so restful…

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?”

So well provided with the most scintillating and welcome of companions… thank you for gracing me with your presence, my dear. I had hoped you would come…

“That it is, Gregory. A scene easily lifted from the painting of any of the artistic masters.”

“It’s one of my favorite spots, actually. Nice for enjoying a book or a nap when the body needs one. Those apple trees are very generous in season and don’t mind their wares being stolen by hungry layabouts.”

And thank you, also, Gregory for being so utterly charming and chatty this evening. So few nights do we have remaining to enjoy time in this manner…

“Are you saying I am sitting in this green and fragrant grass with a heinous, unrepentant thief?”

“Guilty! Though, it’s a touch ironic since I’ve taken my share of wage chasing down the selfsame buggers and helping them see the error of their ways.”

“Yes, but men of the law do make the most successful and effective of thieves, or so I have noticed.”

Your laughter… what it does to me… and to parts of me that shall staunchly go unmentioned.

“Smart… you are a very smart man, Mycroft. Smartest in the world, I suspect.”

“Undoubtedly true, but I strive to use my incomparable intellect only for the purposes of good.”
That laughter… Forget not my unmentionables, Gregory. Now is certainly not the time for an inconvenient erection. It would irretrievably spoil the pastoral splendor of the scenery.

“Ha! Sense of humor, too. You truly do make yourself hard to resist.”

“Then isn’t it a joy you are not resisting?”

No… no, Gregory, do not lose your smile…

“I am, actually. Wanted to completely, but… you were so amazing to me. You filled my eyes from the moment they saw you and I knew, at the very least, I had to talk to you, if for no other reason than to have a memory to hold with me once you were gone.”

How like himself and his own hopes and fears… well, it was not entirely surprising, given this was his dream. Projection… banal, but understandable…

“Have I, at least, given to you a sufficiently happy memory, my dear?”

Your returning smile negates a need for words, Gregory, but I would hear them anyway for your voice rivals your laughter for perturbing my perturbables.

“More than sufficiently happy. Something that will bring a smile to my face no matter how long I exist.”

“If I could, I would be more than a memory for you, Gregory.”

“You’d want that? To… continue to know me, I mean?”

“If such were possible… I would treasure the opportunity. I will confess…”

Since there is, truly, only me here to hear it…

“… that I have enjoyed your company more in this short bit of time than I have for far more prolonged interactions with others. Perhaps it is my own hopes clouding my perceptions, perhaps not… but I do mourn that I will soon abandon his haven and return to my typical life, where neither you nor the comfort I have found here shall be part of my days.”

“Oh… ok. Ok. That’s… I’m glad you told me. It means a lot.”

Your smile, Gregory… the sun itself has not the brightness of your smile…

“As does your gladness to me.”

“Which is why we’re very well matched, I suspect. Very well matched, indeed. What say… fancy a walk?”

“I would adore one. I have walked here before and it is a most pleasant place for a stroll.”

“Come on, then. Let my old legs hop me up here and… would you do me the honor, kind sir, of taking my hand and allowing me to help you stand?”

So chivalrous… and such a strong, pleasingly-rough hand you offer me. One that stimulates my skin in ways to birth the most scandalous thoughts in my mind. Oh, and you show no interest in unclasping our hands now that we are walking which… is a positively jubilant experience. Taking my hand, simply holding it in yours, is an intimacy I would not have believed so powerful, yet I find myself hoping we walk this way for a very long time, my dear Gregory. It is… it somehow
reinforces the connection I feel to you, unreal though it may be.

“Beautiful… it’s the way all days should be, don’t you think, Mycroft? Like a perfect summer’s day where the cares of the world just don’t seem to exist.”

“I agree wholeheartedly. And the landscape is well-provided with items of interest for all of the senses to enjoy. Sights, sounds, scents… all for experiencing by any who simply pause to notice.”

“Too many people don’t take advantage of that. Really stop a moment and pay attention to the wonderful little things around them.”

“A description, unfortunately, which is well-applied to me. Not by choice, but circumstance rarely allows me such indulgences.”

“Can you change those circumstances?”

“Hmmm… to a large extent, no.”

“In other words, to a small extent, yes, you can.”

You are so much more than a handsome face, Gregory, and I delight in that fact.

“You are not incorrect. The, as they say, stumbling block is motivation. It is easier to simply continue on with work, even when there is a moment available to set it aside and turn my attention in other directions. Perhaps it is that I have not given much weight, much importance, to the color of a flower or the smell of grasses on the wind… even the patterns in the flames of the fire in the hearth.”

“You know that, though, see it, and that means you can change it.”

My, but his subconscious was being persistent. Some part of him appeared to desire a measure of long-term change. Middle-age reflection on the years gone by and the ones to come? Regardless, it was certainly worth the thought that was being put into the issue. Middle-age was not old-age and he had quite a number of years yet ahead to live in something other than a sterile and perfunctory manner.

“That is true, I suppose. Though, I worry that when I return home, my resolve will falter as other concerns again creep back into my life.”

Pausing on the familiar stone bridge, Mycroft smiled that Greg leaned on it much the same way as he had during his last dream. And that copying the action himself seemed the right and proper thing to do.

“Won’t happen. I can promise you that, Mycroft.”

Having his mind offer unequivocal support to his resolve was surprising, yet it boosted Mycroft’s confidence that, just perhaps, he might, in some small way, affect change in his life to… make it more of a life and less of an obligation.

“Something to which I shall hold fast. And I have the reflection of your determined expression in my memory to call to the fore should I falter.”

Looking down, Greg laughed at what had been his clearly forthright and resolute image reflected in the gently-flowing water.

“HA! And there’s at my homely self staring up at us like it’s fit to be seen in public. Looks a
fright compared to your elegance and fine features.”

“Your roguish visage is breathtaking, Gregory, and you are well aware of that fact.”

“I am not! Especially not here. See that pool under the bridge… filled with all sorts of horrible and frightening things. There’s one staring up at us, for instance, from next to your lovely face. See! Now it’s snarling and showing its snaggly and ferocious teeth.”

“That it is you smiling.”

“Are you certain? You see something like that glaring up at you, you know an ill wind is blowing and there’s devilry in the air. Just a terrible sight that is, simply terrible.”

Was it immature to take such pleasure in utter nonsense? If so, he was proud to proclaim himself a child and continue on with the inanity for… heavens, it simply a world of fun.

“I have a certainty of 100% that is your image I see staring up into my eyes.”

“Blimey! Good lord, I’m a scary person! Oh, that’s a sad, sad thing to learn.”

Mycroft’s annoyed expression, which was utterly false in the first place, failed to hold for another second and his laughter was quickly joined by Greg’s to create, to Mycroft’s ears, a highly-pleasing duet.

“I shall promise, my dear, to quake in terror should I ever see such a dreadful sight again.”

“That’s alright, then. If I’m to live with such a horrible face, it’s good to know the horribleness will be properly honored. Make certain to lift your arm and do that back of your hand across your eyes thing, too. That really emphasizes the horrible horribleness.”

Sharing their laughter for another few moments, Mycroft let himself notice the glint of sunlight off of Greg’s silver hair and the rich, chocolate brown of his eyes. Male beauty was a matter of taste, as with beauty for anyone or anything, but if anyone could look upon this man and find him anything but intoxicating, they were demonstrably lacking in taste or required the services of a qualified optometrist.

“I shall not fail you, my dear. Rest assured, your ghastly visage shall be given its full and proper due.”

Smiling widely and linking their fingers again, Greg gazed a long moment at Mycroft, almost as if he was hoping to memorize every feature of his companion’s face, then started them walking once more towards whatever adventures they might find. For his part, Mycroft found, to his satisfaction, that he cared not a whit that he was being lead wherever his companion wished to go. When one made all the decisions and crafted all the plans, there was a decided lack of surprise to anything and he was finding it was something he greatly missed.

Especially when those surprises came in a host of large and small forms as their ramble took them hither and yon with much more to see than on his first dream constitutional and which provided far more matters of interest to discuss until, once again, he found himself approaching the inn, with the rich scent of breakfast perfuming the air.

“I take it our stroll is at an end, my dear. Would that it could continue for hours more.”

“Nothing would make me happier. Until later, Mycroft?”
Until later, my Gregory.”

He had never timed a dream so perfectly as to have his final words usher in the opening of his eyes and Mycroft felt just a touch smug at his unconscious mind’s sense of drama. However, his unconscious mind had also never conjured such an elaborate… date… for him, either. Yes, clear signals were being sent and he would be ill-advised to ignore them. Nobody ignored the mental workings of Mycroft Holmes, if they valued their future … not even Mycroft Holmes himself. Change was in the air and, for once… that change might do him a little good…

“Good morning, sir. Lovely weather we’re having, wouldn’t you say?”

Said as a gust of wind shrieked and threatened to blow the inn to Italy.

“Yes, Charles, it is a stellar morning made truly glorious by the bracing breezes.”

And by the pot of tea waiting at his place at the dining room table, which also sported a healthy number of his beloved scones. With clotted cream at the ready.

“Well, there could be some relief coming soon.”

What?

“Oh?”

“Not much, but the airbase is saying there might be enough of a break in the storm tomorrow to get a helicopter out to us.”

Fuckity fuck and fuck it again for good measure. Yet, it had to happen sometime…

“Ah, well… I do hope the base commander is not being too aggressive in pursuing our rescue. There is no need to endanger either a pilot or a valuable craft when we are, by no means, imperiled in our present location.”

“I agree and Mrs. Hudson passed that along with some force. And volume. I think she’s enjoying having two quiet, undemanding guests under her roof. I had an aunt who managed a hotel once and the stories she would tell… put me off completely from ever considering a job in the hospitality industry. That and, well, even I have to admit that the limit of my hospitable nature is a punishingly low one.”

“Yet you chauffer some of the most demanding, irrational and diva-like individuals in existence – politicians and bureaucrats.”

“It’s funny, though, how undemanding they become when they remember I can remotely lock the drinks cubby and ‘forget’ the unlock code.”

“Point taken.”

A point that was punctuated by the arrival of Mrs. Hudson, with a well-filled plate of breakfast to set in front the newest arrival at table.

“Here we are! One hearty breakfast to fortify you for the day. How’d you sleep, dear? Pleasant dreams?”

Charles wasn’t sure whose smile was the brightest, his employer’s or his innkeeper’s, but he wished
they’d share a little of whatever ‘good dream’ homeopathy they were enjoying behind his back.

“It was a most restful experience.”

“I’m certain it was. Well, I’ll leave you to it, then, and I suspect to see that plate cleaned as if we had a dog here to give it a good lick. I’ll get the library ready for you, too, once I’m finished cleaning up from breakfast, dear. Luckily, we’ve got lots of dry wood for the fire, so you’ll be toasty and warm all day.”

Which could be his last if the weather followed course.

“Thank you. I have no doubt that I shall be exceptionally comfortable.”

With a smile, Mrs. Hudson darted off to the kitchen to check on the dough for the day’s bread, since the baker couldn’t deliver, and make some decisions for lunch and dinner. That horrid radio operator, saying today was likely the last day she’d have these particular guests in residence… not that it was his fault they might see some calming of the winds tomorrow, but he could have been a dear and kept that news to himself. Well, if today was the last day with her two gentlemen, she’d make certain it was a very good one. And prepare for the long faces when the goodbyes were said…

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“Oh, that was good; Mrs. Hudson did herself proud once again. I know now where I’ll recommend friends come when they say they want a nice little holiday away from the city. From what I gather, also, the nearby village is one of those quaint ones that sees enough tourist trade to keep itself bustling with good pubs, antique shops, flower shows and the like. The fishing is good, too, in some of the surrounding waterways. Very good place for whatever takes your fancy when you want a change of pace or a bit of a rest. I haven’t peeked in the books, but I suspect Mrs. Hudson sees a healthy income from this little venture.”

Mycroft dabbed his mouth and nodded in agreement with his driver, at the same time mourning that his delectable breakfast had come to an end. Perhaps it was worth considering hiring a cook for his own home. Not that they could likely achieve Mrs. Hudson’s ability to please his palate, but it would do a lot to elevate his average day above his previous standard. That was something he was hoping to do, was it not…

“You’re likely correct and I applaud her efforts at keeping this inn well-maintained and amenable to ensure that continued income. Did you learn… are there other hands for assistance or…”

“Only temporary ones, during peak holiday season. Otherwise, Mrs. Hudson tends to things on her own. Honestly, I think our innkeeper likes to do things with the personal touch. Make certain her eyes are on everything so it’s all done properly.”

A philosophy that had Mycroft’s unconditional approval.

“Well, the quality of service, and meals, certainly make that perspective a sound one. Have you more projects ahead of you today, Charles?”

“I certainly do. Mrs. Hudson keeps an impressive supply of tools and supplies on hand and I shall not rest until I have used them all. The gardening tools are going to be tricky, but I’m nothing if not creative.”

Which meant that Mycroft would surely, and blissfully, be left alone today to huddle in his cave and soak in all its comforts before the door closed on his holiday. Perfect…
“Know now, that if there is not an additional wing added to the inn by dinner, I shall be most disappointed.”

Smirking at this much… happier… version of his employer, Charles doffed an imaginary cap and picked up his plate to return to the kitchen, which would, as a side benefit, allow him to snatch any remaining tasty tidbits before starting on his work for the day. This was the best holiday he’d had in ages! Unlimited time to work on projects that interested him, eat something other than takeaway and sneak glasses of Mrs. Hudson’s excellent whisky when she pretended not to be looking. Getting back to work in London was going to be so utterly tedious… but it did earn him a wage to afford a week here later in the year when the sun was shining and his annual holiday beckoned…

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Finishing the final sips of his tea, Mycroft had the uncharacteristic urge to be helpful and, noticing the serving tray left on the sideboard, loaded it with the remaining breakfast dishes and ported it towards the kitchen, where he found himself pausing as he neared the doorway because… well, it was a very odd conversation Mrs. Hudson was having with, apparently… nobody.

“I don’t know, dear. I can’t… perhaps, but if this goes poorly you know what it might mean… I’m just worried, dear… yes, but it’s such a big step… well, yes, I do think that, but… think on it a bit more, will you… I do remember saying that, but”

“Mrs. Hudson?”

The loud shriek of surprise nearly had Mycroft dropping his tray, but he’d weathered louder shrieking from affronted ambassadors, so the dishes remained merrily intact.

“Oh my heavens! Mr. Holmes, you scared the life out of me!”

“I apologize profusely, but… I heard… is there someone here with you?”

“No! No… who’d be here with me? I was… it’s silly, but I was having a conversation with… this! This stubborn bit of pork who thinks it should be roasted up whole when I think it’s best for chops. Sometimes you just have to talk out a disagreement like that so dinner doesn’t turn out a mess nobody wants to see, let alone eat.”

Bringing the tray into the kitchen and setting it on the small table where Mrs. Hudson enjoyed her own meals, Mycroft couldn’t help but look around for… what, he didn’t know, but it certainly wasn’t pork.

“I see. I do agree, though… at times, it helps to verbalize one’s thoughts, even in the form of debate, to fully comprehend all sides of an issue.”

“My thought exactly. I’ll debate this a bit longer and see which side wins. It’ll be hearty, no matter who’s the victor, so I’ll do something light and lemony for afters, I think. Oh! And I’ve got your clothes ready, at least, the ones that were salvageable. Surprisingly, only a few storm victims to bury, so your bank balance won’t hurt too terribly seeing to their funerals.”

Mycroft smiled a non-committal smile and nodded his thanks before leaving his hostess to get on with her… whatever she had been up to before he arrived. Perhaps it was an earnest conversation with a slab of pork, but… well, in this place, at this time, he was somewhat prepared to believe she kept a vampire in the cupboard who advised her on recipes and the proper method of laundering fine shirts and trousers… perhaps he should take up the handsome edition of Dracula that lurked in the library for today’s reading pleasure. The Count would feel most at home in this inn and wouldn’t
that make for dinner conversation one would surely never forget…
“My dear? You are particularly quiet today. Are you here?”

The lack of response didn’t perplex Mycroft unduly since it was the same no answer he’d gotten the last two times he’d asked his mind to conjure his Gregory to provide some degree of company on this, his last day at the inn. His mind was, seemingly, as unhappy at the thought of leaving as was the rest of him.

But, it would not be forever. That much he promised himself and promises were something in which he placed great importance. He would return and take again a measure of rest to restore his vigor and, further, restore… himself. It was far too vital a thing to leave neglected, though this had been his habit through the years, but it was a habit that was now primed to be retired. He could never swan about London, like Sherlock, with his time heeding no calls but his own, however, even subtle alterations of his routine could make a bountiful difference. Maybe not before this unique experience, but now… he was ready to embark on that path.

Miss me?

And, with the reassurance that only firm, unwavering resole can give, comes roaring back the rewards for his self-reflection.

“Greatly. The room’s comfort lessens terribly when you are not with me.”

Sorry      Thinking

“Yes, in truth, it…”

Wait… that was not a question he’d been asked. That was a statement. Even his imagination credited his mental calculations, it seemed.

“Most intriguing. May I know what were the thoughts that kept you from me?”

Us

How delightful.

“A more worthy train of thought I cannot imagine. Did you arrive at a meaningful conclusion?”

Yes

“Excellent. Shall you reveal it?”

In time

Apparently his mind was in a cryptic mood today. Well, it was ever in a cryptic mood, though generally not with the intention of befuddling him. Regardless… what an entertaining game!

“Of course. It is not wise to hurry such things, especially when there is a wealth of other matters that are far more pressing. Such as the details of my book. I assume you have not read Mr. Stoker’s treatment of the vampire legend.”

No
“Would you like for me to provide for you a synopsis of the plot and a few of my interpretations of his motivations and theme?”

Very much

Then let us begin! This shall be an excellent time for me to ruminate on some of my suspicions about Van Helsing. A character that has received many analyses, yet I believe them to be catastrophically off the proverbial mark…”

With his companion now returned, Mycroft felt a calm restored to his center and congratulated himself on a job well done. Make clear, reasoned, and positive decisions about his life and reap the benefits. And there would be many benefits to reap, he suspected. Though his productivity and acumen was not tied to anything as insubstantial and ephemeral as happiness, a renewed and refreshed outlook would certainly enhance his motivations and, in all likelihood, his creativity, which was critical for successful problem-solving. True, there was none as skilled and proficient with his matters of work as him, none could even be termed close to his level of capability, however, one certainly did not rest on one’s laurels. It was a nod to laziness to do so and he would suffer many slings and arrows before allowing that term to be uttered within a league of where his shoes had him standing.

This small holiday notwithstanding, of course…

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“Knock Knock!”

“Ah, Mrs. Hudson, how kind of you to… oh, is that my lunch?”

Mycroft looked at the tray, heaped with deliciousness and smiled at how quickly time passed when he was absorbed in something he genuinely enjoyed.

“Thought you might like eating in here for a change. Why move when you’re already perfectly comfortable? Your messages are on the tray, too, but I think you can put them off for a bit. Nothing terribly urgent, if you ask me. Especially since… well, you’ll likely be able to tend to them in person soon enough.”

That did not sound gladdening, in the slightest…

“You have further news of the weather?”

“More that I’ve had further news from your colonel. They’re almost certain they can have you out tomorrow afternoon, sometime after 1:00 pm. That does give you, though, another chance for a restful lie in and a filling breakfast and lunch, in case you have to suffer a night at that airbase, where you just know the food won’t be what a gentleman like you wants to find on his plate. That’s some consolation, at least.”

Tomorrow… and not late tomorrow, either. And there would be no stay at the airbase since a rescue would more probably mean the way was clear to see them back to London where… he would be in his office for, at minimum, several hours before he could even shake off the rigors of what would certainly be a turbulent trip. As well as the mental rigors of abandoning this placid mindset and adopting his standard, never-resting one.

“I see. I suppose I should be relieved at the news, however…”

“I know, dear. It’s been a nice little holiday for you, hasn’t it? I suspect you haven’t had one of
those in a long while, too.”

“My responsibilities preclude much in the way of holiday time, I’m afraid.”

“Well, now you know it only takes a few days to make a true and proper difference. Is… maybe it’s too personal of me to ask, but is there anyone waiting for you at home? Or… anyone hoping to be someone waiting for you at home at some point in the future?”

It was eternally the province of females of a certain age to investigate the romantic entanglements of anyone within their line of sight. He was actually surprised their innkeeper had waited this long to pounce!

“No to both, actually. Again, my responsibilities create a situation that… it would be difficult, perhaps, to have someone with that degree of connection in my life.”

“Perhaps doesn’t mean impossible.”

Mrs. Hudson was as persistent as his imaginary Gregory!

“True and, in the interests of full disclosure, I have not made any appreciable attempt to learn the reality of the situation, one way or the other.”

“Hmmm… I can understand that. Busy man like you has a lot on his mind… I know that just from all the silly people waving about trying to get your attention by radio! Do you want someone like that, though? Not a waver-abouter but someone to come home to?”

The question of the day. Or several days…

“It is difficult to say, really. I am not a personable man, not a scintillating or social one… and I have little time to bestow on someone who might wish to share it with me.”

“Listen to you… you’re a fine man with a good head on your shoulders. And you can make a body laugh, which isn’t a skill everyone can claim. The question is want, dear. Do you want someone like that?”

Persistence… this little inn was built on persistence, it appeared. Want… was he even allowed to want? Dream, fantasize, postulate, imagine… but want? A more potent thing in the world than want was scarce to be found and he had avoided, as best he could, framing his thoughts around that rather tricky concept. Did he want the smile which greeted him at the end of a day? Or bolstered him at the start of a new one? Share what might be only minutes between returning home and being again called to service for some matter or another? I would not be fair, could not, in any manner, be equitable, yet… yes. He did want. He wanted passionately…

“I do. It is a profoundly selfish want for I could never offer to that other person the time, attention or priority that they could receive from another candidate, but… if I narrow my scope to my own self and ignore all else… then yes, I want.”

Mycroft’s eyes were slightly downcast and he wasn’t able to see, let alone wonder about, the expressions on Mrs. Hudson’s face, which flowed from sadness through indecision into, finally, determination.

“And it’s right that you do, dear. We all hope for that in one way or another. Family, friends… more than friends… it’s good to want that and it’s good to remember that want and how right it is if… if the opportunity to satisfy it crosses your path.”
Feeling much like a teenager who was having a slightly-uncomfortable chat with his mother, Mycroft smiled weakly and accepted the squeeze to his shoulder as the innkeeper left him alone to have his lunch and… think. And let someone else think, too. Someone who might need to do as much thinking as the man sighing and beginning to unfold his napkin and approach his midday meal. Yes, lots of thinking to be done and there wasn’t a great deal of time to do it, unfortunately. But, life never promised it would be easy… but, since easy was boring, there wasn’t a lot wrong with that, really…

As Dracula gave way to some Oscar Wilde to lighten his mood, Mycroft found his attention wavering now and then as he continued to turn over in his mind his and Mrs. Hudson’s short conversation. And, this time, he did not invoke his imaginary Gregory to help pore over the evidence and pass judgement. Finally, unable to conquer a case of fidgety-ness, he took himself to the shortwave radio, and only partially with the hope that the weather report would have changed so that tomorrow’s escape hatch had been shut… which it had not… and more with the intention of replacing his personal stamp on the comings and goings of governmental business to smooth his transition back to work. Set out a little reminder to those who had likely been dipping their fingers into things that their fingers had no business approaching that he was still alive and soon to land on their doorstep with all the good humor of vengeful angel who had lost his fiery sword and had mites in his wings.

With a flurry of pointedly-pointed messages sent, Mycroft tried once more to descend into his reading, but it wasn’t until a familiar voice sounded in his head that he felt his body begin to settle.

New book

“Ah, Gregory… yes, actually. Oscar Wilde is another favorite of mine and I will be happy to share with you some of my most-beloved passages.”

I’d like that

“It is heartening that you are a man who appreciates books. It speaks volumes about your character and strength of mind.”

Precious

“Moi? Oh! You mean books. You have my utmost agreement for that, but I do recognize, in your day, they were far more precious than now they are. It would be a joy to introduce you to the wealth of authors that arose after your… time. To engage in discussions and debates about tales we have read…”

Sounds wonderful

“It would be, I have no doubt. Something to share together when a measure of quiet time at home presented itself. Even if it was not a large measure of time we had at our disposal…”

Still wonderful

“And breakfast…”

Too late for that

Mycroft’s first laugh since the news of his departure rang out and he wondered if there was any chance he could maintain his mental discourse with imaginary Gregory once he returned home. It
would be a most welcome break during certain tense situations when even a few words of collegial and supportive conversation could boost his flagging energies.

“... Again, I meant as another thing to enjoy as a couple. Not always, for my hours are horrifically unpredictable, but there is some degree of predictability for my mornings. More so than, say, for dinner, though I do see that at home a few days a week. Usually.”

That’s enough time

“... Is it? I find it difficult to believe. I pay some degree of attention to the relationships of others and time seems to be a vital component to maintain them. It is a seed that sprouts profound discord when it is not properly nurtured.”

Worth trying

“... Precisely the issue with which I have been grappling. Whether or not to try. To return to London with eyes open and a willingness to look beyond my work to other areas of my life.”

Smart

“... The smartest in the land.”

This time Mycroft’s laughter mixed with another and he found himself, again, settling into a relaxed state and one which felt like validation for all his foolishness. A new manner of thinking! Create a paramour who is not servile, yet supportive, so that difficult thoughts and shameful worries fear less the harsh light of scrutiny. Good decisions… he was making good decisions. And, for once, they would bring him more satisfaction than the knowledge of a job well done. They would bring him… oh, stop thinking and begin sharing! Gregory simply needed to make the acquaintance of dear Oscar and there was little time as it was for that friendship to blossom … let alone their imaginary friendship which was a flower he was most anxious to see bloom as fully as possible, even if only as a tool to ease his overworked mind…

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Neither Mycroft nor Charles would admit to feeling much like condemned men as they sat at the dinner table for the last time, nor that they took an extra moment to savor the feel of their bed before they drifted off to sleep for their final rest under this special little roof. Sleep, though, for Mycroft failed, in any meaningful fashion, to come. Whereas he tried to convince himself that he was readying himself for the oft sleep-deprived days of his return to work, he knew, in truth, it was an extreme reluctance to slip into a dream and have to pay his Gregory a final goodbye. This bit of cowardice stung sharply, but the sting would be worse if he had to gaze into the eyes he had grown to cherish and bid them farewell.

When morning arrived, with the sun as high in the sky as the first night he had slept in this bed, albeit just as heavily cloaked in storm clouds, Mycroft sighed away his lack of sleep and prepared for the much gentler farewell if his Gregory chose to manifest today as a voice in his mind. His companion uttered few words during those encounters and his imaginary friend’s sadness would not be as scalding to his brain as it would have been in a dream when Gregory’s regrets could be described in detail.

Dressing quickly in his last set of borrowed clothes, Mycroft first spared a thought as to just how many sets of clothes Mrs. Hudson must have accumulated over the years to have easily a set a day for himself and his driver, then made his way downstairs where he could already smell the breakfast that was waiting.
“Oh, thank heavens.”

“Charles?”

“I really did not want to have to go up and wake you, sir. Brace yourself… the helicopter will be here in about an hour.”

“WHAT!”

“I know… the front has changed trajectory slightly and created another escape window that the colonel is going to take advantage of. He’s catching several flavors of shite from London to get you back and the sooner he delivers the easier his life will be. If you want, I can say you’ve caught a tragic case of the plague and are infecting even the house mice, but…”

“Thank you, Charles, but I suppose we must face our fates with dignity and nary a carbuncle between us.”

Though if a plague did hope to visit him in this lifetime, now would be a highly convenient time for it to pay its respects.

“You’re likely right. I’ve already told Mrs. Hudson and she’s readying us something to carry along for a nibble. I think she’s a bit food obsessed, but I honestly can’t find a reason to fault that.”

“No, neither can I. Very well… we shall savor our morning repast, see ourselves packed, I shall tend to any overnight messages that require my attention and… then we say our goodbyes.”

“That won’t be easy.”

“No… no, it will not.”

It should be… he had said goodbye to countless individuals who he had known for far longer, but… to bid farewell to Mrs. Hudson and... dear Gregory… would pain him terribly. Perhaps Gregory had been correct… the volume of time was not the important thing. It was, instead, the quality of the time that mattered. More fuel for thought, he supposed, as if more was, in any manner, required…

One final breakfast, perfectly prepared and plentiful, a few minutes on the shortwave, then it was time for Mycroft to take an unnecessary look around his room to ensure nothing had been left behind as he packed his bag with, astonishingly, most of the clothing with which he had arrived, successfully laundered and pressed. He would miss this place; miss it greatly. But, he would return. A few days here or there… not the quantity of time, but the quality…

“Knock Knock!”

“Yes, Mrs. Hudson?”

Two impish eyes peeked around the door of his room and Mycroft motioned her inside, his own eyes widening at what he saw in her hands.

“I was wondering, Mr. Holmes… I know you admired it, and he doesn’t really gain any admiration here but from me, what poor comfort that is to the dear man… would you take Greg and give him a nice home? I chat with him when I have a moment, but… I think he’d prefer something more man-to-man, if you know what I mean.”
Extending the small portrait towards Mycroft, who stared at it as if he was being handed a live rattlesnake, Mrs. Hudson found she had to waggle it about a bit to break Mycroft’s trance and get him to snap back to a condition where he might have a chance of answering.

“Oh, Mrs. Hudson… I could not. It is a valuable thing…”

“Value is what you make of it and I’d rather see him with someone who appreciates him and might pause now and again to make him feel included in things. I can see you doing that, oddly, more than most would. Just promise me… if the day comes you don’t want it anymore, send him back to me. He’s always got a home here and I’d rather him be somewhere he’s welcome than in some shop where a rich bloke and his wife buy him because he’s the right color to match the paint in their toilet.”

Mycroft reached out with shaky hands to take the portrait and found those shaky hands tightening on the frame as if he’d fight a tiger to keep anyone from stealing his prize.

‘I.. I do not know what to say.”

“You’ve got manners.”

“I mean.. thank you, yes, thank you, however… this is truly a special gift and I have not the words…”

“Just remember that he comes back to me if… well, let’s not think that way, shall we? And isn’t it lucky your bag will fit him perfectly. Just nestle Greg in there between your shirts and he’ll be snug and safe.”

Which is exactly what Mycroft found himself doing, treating the painting as gently as if he was handling a newborn kitten. Gregory… would live with him. In image only, of course, but… if there was an omen that the changes he hoped to see happen would happen… this was surely it. And the one who made it possible would be there to look on proudly… or be the compassionate ear if things went painfully awry…

“Perfect. Well, you’d best be ready, dear, because your helicopter could be here any minute.”

“Yes… yes, I suppose I should.”

“Come along, then. You can wait in the kitchen with Charles and me.”

Nodding slowly, Mycroft turned back to his bag and carefully secured it before hefting it off the bed and following Mrs. Hudson downstairs to the kitchen where tea waited with one last plate of biscuits to help ease the pangs of leaving.

Which he didn’t overly long as it wasn’t ten minutes before the unmistakable sound of a helicopter could be heard over the winds and a quick peek by Charles out of the window confirmed a military helicopter was landing on a suitably flat patch of ground near the inn. As he was joined by Mycroft and Mrs. Hudson, the three watched two men bolt from the chopper and run through the rain towards the inn, with Mrs. Hudson throwing open the door to let them in without knocking.

“Mr. Holmes, sir?”

“That would be me. Are conditions still suitable for departure?”

“Yes, sir. We’ll get you to the airbase and then see you on to London after refueling.”
“Very well.”

Turning and mustering as much of a smile as he could, Mycroft faced Mrs. Hudson and...

“Oh dear lord, I forgot to settle the bill.”

“Anthea already did, dear. You have a safe flight and don’t worry about a thing. I suspect I’ll see you again sometime, so know you’re always welcome for a little holiday… alone or not, as the case may be.”

With a bright twinkle in her eye, Mrs. Hudson gave Mycroft a very unexpected hug, then turned to Charles to give him his own, extending another invitation for a visit whenever he wanted. It was then a quick press of a hefty bag of food into one of the airmen’s arms and ‘get along with you’ motion of her hand to set the four men in motion, a motion which turned to a wave as both Mycroft and Charles looked back once on the way to the helicopter and again when they were inside the craft and lifting off into the air.

Finally, it was a few moments to listen to the sound of quiet in the inn and break it with a large and satisfied sigh as Mrs. Hudson put the kettle on for her own cup of tea, before changing her mind and substituting a few fingers of the sherry she kept in the kitchen cupboard for the more prim and proper beverage choice. Now, what remained to be seen was how this was going to proceed, what with Mycroft in London and back to all that important work he did. Fortunately, she wasn’t entirely without her sources of information so close tabs could be kept on the situation. And, if she needed to step in to get someone’s head sorted, then step in she would. She and Anthea had plans for a nice bit of shopping, in any case, and two birds were easily killed with a single stone. Not that she’d ever kill a dear, sweet bird, but give it a stern talking to… that was another story…

If he never rode in a helicopter again, Mycroft would die a happy, happy man. What a nightmare of a flight! Two flights actually, as they continued on quickly to London after topping off the fuel tank, but the second leg of the journey was nowhere near as fraught with foul winds and turbulence as the initial leg and, after awhile, he could relax a little and begin to enjoy the much-appreciated provisions with which Mrs. Hudson had gifted them. His stomach was especially grateful for the food, not only for the nutritional fortification, but also to settle the unrest both from the flight and the emotional toil of leaving behind the one place in the world he had found true peace. But… it would not be the last time he would achieve that peace and the truth of that assertion, combined with a highly-agreeable sandwich made with leftover roast pork from their dinner, kept his insides demonstrating polite behavior until they finally landed in London and he was whisked away to his office to glare at the dithering hordes anxiously awaiting his appearance.

Fortunately, the items of business actually requiring his personal and immediate attention were few and, in a little over three hours, he was able to be whisked off again, this time to his home with his familiar driver doing the whisking.

“The car should be retrievable in a few days, Mr. Holmes, but this one should do until then.”

“It is gray, Charles. that is a significant demerit.”

“Charcoal gray, though, sir. I did seek the darkest, most demonic appearing of the available fleet.”

“In that case, I suppose it will do. And, if you require a day away from work to manage personal affairs, simply alert Anthea and she will clear it.”
“Thank you, sir. I may do that, actually, simply to ease back into the harsh reality that is my flat and its library of uninspired take-way menus.”

“How dreadful.”

But how familiar.

“Yes, tis a sad, sad thing, but it could be far worse.”

“Say that not, lest ‘worse’ be summoned from the hell from which you secured this car.”

“Lawks! Sewing me lips together now with the lace from me boot!”

Chuckling less at their banter than for the chance to release some of the tension from their returning home, both men let their small laugh fade into a contented smile that lasted until Mycroft was delivered to his doorstep and Charles retrieved Mycroft’s luggage from the car’s boot.

“Here you are, sir. Have… have a good evening.”

Mycroft’s smile turned wistful and he nodded his thanks at Charles before walking to his door, pausing a moment, then vanishing inside.

Where not a thing had changed in his absence. Not that he expected it would, but it seemed that such a momentous event in his experience should carry over somehow to this familiar space where… it didn’t. However, in a flash, Mycroft realized that wasn’t entirely true since what he had failed to do was add the carry-over item to his home and formally usher in this new, paradigm-shifting chapter of his life.

Thinking a moment before making his decision, Mycroft took his bag into his study, where he spent most of his time at home, then took a moment to remove the portrait from its resting place to install it in its new one, which was a sideboard that was directly in his sight whenever he might look up from his desk.

“Perfect. Welcome home, dear Gregory. I hope it is to your liking.”

“Looks very comfortable, actually.”

“Excellent and…”

That was not a voice in his head. That was a voice in his ear and that voice was here.

Turning slowly, Mycroft felt his heart stutter seeing a highly-familiar smile beaming at him from a highly-visible face. A face that was as familiar as the smile. Which came with a familiar body and familiar hair and… he was babbling in his mind!

“Gr… Gregory?”

“It’s me! Or, as much of me as is possible. I’m happy to see you, Mycroft. You can’t imagine how… oh dear.”

Greg raced forward to catch the wobbly Mycroft, whose brain went offline and completely failed to prevent him falling right through Greg’s body to, fortunately, miss anything hard as he landed on the thick rug. Knowing he couldn’t even fan a breeze to help revive his new housemate, Greg sighed softly and smiled in anticipation of the conversation they’d have once Mycroft got over his case of the vapors.
“Well, I suppose this does give me a few moments to look around and take in my new home. You nap a moment, love, and we’ll chat when you wake up. Lots of things to talk about, you and I. But, we’ve got time to do that now, don’t we? All the time we’d like…”
Chapter 8

“What… what hap…”

“Easy, Mycroft. Had a bit of a faint, that’s all. Make sure you’re steady, though, before you try and stand. I’d help, but…”

Mycroft eyes focused just in time to watch Greg’s hand reach right through him, which made the British Government squawk loudly in shock.

“Oh no… oh no no no no no no no no…”

Probably should remember that people, the live ones, didn’t necessarily expect or want a ghost running a hand right through them. It might be considered rude and Greg Lestrade was not one to stand for rudeness, especially from himself.

“I’m not sure what you’re no-ing to, Mycroft, but why don’t you move up to the sofa, at least, so you can be comfortable while you doing it. It looks like a comfortable sofa…”

“No… oh no…”

“Mycroft? Are you alright? I’m starting to worry about you.”

“This is… it is over. My career, my… everything…”

Mycroft held his head in his hands and Greg broke his new rule by reaching out to stroke his hair, pushing a ghostly hand directly through Mycroft’s head instead, though the distraught man muttering into the hands covering his face, fortunately, didn’t notice.

“Officially worried now… look at me, Mycroft. Come on, look me in the eye, ok. Let me know you’re at least understanding what I’m saying.”

“I thought… I thought my little whimsies at the inn were… a lark! An amusement…”

“Mycroft…”

“I should have known! I should have seen…”

“Mycroft!”

Greg tried waving his hand in front of Mycroft’s face, but it had the same effect as if he was trying to tap against Westminster Abbey to make it crumble to the ground.

“Delusions! Something… did I fall during the walk from the car? Was it… no family member, at least none of which I know, had mental illness to produce hallucinations or delusions, but… oh god, my mind is going…”

“MYCROFT!”

“Do not yell at me delusion! I… I am right here.”

“I’m not a delusion, you daft bastard! I’m a ghost.”

“I… I must phone my physician. Maybe… there must be some form of treatment…”
“Ghost, Mycroft… ghost! Not delusion, not hallucination, not you’re seeing things that aren’t really there… which is what a hallucination is, so that was a bit redundant of me… Ghost! Spirit, specter, apparition, haunting… though not one of those evil sorts from the books and such… what you are when you were alive, now aren’t, but… don’t have anyplace to go. Ghost!”

“Gh… ghost?”

“Smartest man in the land can’t understand one simple word?”

“I beg your pardon!”

Now he had this gorgeous man’s full attention…

“Knew that might break into your skull. Sofa, Mycroft… you know a man as elegant and proper as you isn’t happy with his arse on the floor.”

The affronted portion of Mycroft’s fracturing mind jolly well agreed and pushed him off the rug and onto the sofa, while the chaotic and dissolving part of his mind continued on with its chaos and high level of mental solubility.

“There, isn’t that better? And, see? I can sit right here next to you. Well, not sit, actually, more hover at cushion level so it’s just like I’m sitting, which is good enough. Now, try and focus on the fact that I’m here, I’m real, and you’re not losing your mind, alright.”

“Noooooooo…”

“Yessssssssss…. I can even prove it! Oh… well, not today because the phones won’t be working, but Mrs. Hudson will tell you I’m real.”

“MRS. HUDSON!”

“Sure! She knows I’m real and… maybe needing a change of scenery, so… it’s like this, you know my painting over there, looking handsome and dashing? Well, whoever owns it gets me as a very special bonus.”

Mycroft’s eyes cut to the portrait and even more blood drained out of his face, which made Greg ready himself to catch his Holmes if he came over with the faints again, forgetting, as he always did, that catching wasn’t an option for him anymore. Instincts didn’t die, just because you did, damn the buggers…

“No… no, it cannot be…”

“Yes, it can and it is. You can see me now because she gave you the painting. Before… it was all I could do to get a few words out to you, though treading through your dreams was pleasant, I have to say. I… that bit I can’t do anymore, though, and, no, I don’t know why. It’s one or the other and nothing I’ve tried has ever changed that. You either get to see me and talk to me like you are now or you don’t… much… but I can pay visits on occasion when you’re dreaming. It’s not easy, either the talking or the dream visits, and it took everything I had to do as much as I did to… well, to get to know you. I’m glad I did it, though! And I asked Mrs. Hudson to, in case you’re wondering. Give you the painting, I mean. That’s what you heard in the kitchen that time you walked in and looked at Mrs. Hudson like she was going a bit mental… us talking about this. It’s a risk for me, because you can, if you continue to think you’re loony, just toss my portrait in the bins and then it’s fate what happens to poor ol’ Greg, but I don’t think you’ll do that. I think you’d honor Mrs. Hudson’s request to bring me back, if for no other reason than it was the gentlemanly thing to do. I’m hoping, though, that won’t happen.”
Mycroft sat, staring with widened eyes at the figure next to him on the sofa and Greg dug deep for all his strength to make some contact, though he only succeeded in widening Mycroft’s eyes further as he reached out and scarcely caused a hair from Mycroft’s wayward curl to shift a millimeter off position.

“It’ll be a long time before I can do more than that, I’m afraid. I’m sure some scientist would have a reason, but the longer I’m in a place, the more I can do. Move things, for example. That crock for the clotted cream you love so much… that’s been in the inn since the early 1800’s. The decanter your brandy was in is from about the same time. A little later, maybe. The years start to blend together when you’ve got so bloody many of them to your name. Anyway, those I can move about fairly well and how lucky was it that those are things that made your stay more comfortable! But, that’s ok, don’t you think? We can talk, you and I… really talk. And laugh! More than we did at the inn. I can go places with you, too. Take… there’s a, unless it fell out somewhere, a loose sliver of wood at the back of the portrait frame and you can carry that to have me come along. Mrs. Hudson would do that when she did the shopping so I could see the village and the countryside… it’s not a lot, I know, but… it’s good, don’t you think?”

The almost desperate hope in Greg’s eyes was what finally drew enough threads of Mycroft’s mind together for him to begin approaching the vision on his sofa as something more than a sign of mental illness or accident. Gregory… here? It was fantastical, yet…

“Were… were you truly there in the library with me, when I read?”

“Yes! Sat in that chair across from yours or stood behind your chair reading over your shoulder.”

The presence… the sense that he was not alone and had a companion sharing his time…

“When I saw, or believed I saw, a figure… in a mirror or the window…”

“Me, again! Well, probably me. I can’t say for certain since I don’t know all the times you thought you saw someone, but that’s when ghosts sometimes get a chance to be seen. Out of the corner of your eye when your brain isn’t expecting to see anything. Honestly, I don’t know, but it happens now and again. I’ve frightened more than a few inn guests like that and got a proper scolding from the innkeeper, don’t believe I didn’t!”

“Innkeeper…”

“Well, you don’t think I’ve only been there since Mrs. Hudson? The crock!”

Since Mrs. Hudson was not centuries old, Mycroft began to realize the situation in greater color.

“I… I suppose not, then. You would have moved through many hands, given the length of your… condition.”

“I have. I didn’t own a lot when I… died… not many people did, truth be told, and what I had went to my cousin who owned the inn. Or, really, the pub that it was before it was an inn. I… I couldn’t do much at that point, ghostly things and such, even though he owned my painting, but, by the time his daughter took over, I could appear a little and, she was properly scared, too, so don’t worry about your little faint… but got used to having me about. Then, it’s been whoever took over when the last owner died or sold the business. Some… some I didn’t feel comfortable talking to and one bastard I ran off! Horrible person he was. Evil to the two maids he had working and worse to the cook. Saw him racing for the door after six months.”
“I see. That would mean you have you have been there since…”

“Oh, about three years after that painting was done.”

“Since 1741.”

“That sounds about right.”

“Then…”

As Mycroft’s brain slowly regained function and gave itself permission to tentatively believe he was not going mad, details of his companion’s appearance, speech pattern and references began to ask to be noticed.

“…why are you not wearing clothes of that period?”

“Oh! For fun, mostly. I can ‘wear’ what I like…”

“You made air quotes!”

“And?”

“You… you are an antique, yet…”

“Hey! I’m not old! Well, yes, in one sense I am, but in the other, I’m right in that zone of ripeness for mature men who, if I do say so myself, collect a lot of appreciative glances from the younger set.”

The grin! The roguish and brilliant grin… only in his dreams had he seen it, but now…

“Yes, and do pardon my choice of words… I meant, you are not a man of this time, yet you sit there in casual black trousers and a wine-colored pullover that any man of this time might wear!”

“And I look smashing in it, don’t I?”

“That… yes, you do, but that is beside the point.”

“It’s not, actually. Yes, I can look like this…”

Immediately, Greg’s clothes changed to something very similar to what Mycroft saw in his portrait and remembered from countless texts and drawings concerning the early-mid 1700’s. And the ghost looked just as handsome in that garb as he did in the far more recent breed of garment…

“… but, it’s not what you’re used to, so I look like this instead. I’m not out of touch with things, you know. There’s radio and the telly and newspapers. Maybe I can’t change what I’m hearing or seeing, but I do hear and see it, and I’ve been able to visit the village and what not, so I’m not stuck in the 1700’s. I’m a modern man! More or less…”

And back was the very fetching combination that simply screamed modern middle-aged man lounging about on the sofa, missing only a drink in his hand to complete the ‘relaxing at the end of the day’ image.

“And It doesn’t matter to me one way or another how I appear, so if there’s something you prefer, let me know. I… I’d like it if you were happy with how I looked, actually.”

Slamming back into Mycroft’s mind was the actual context of his conversations and interactions at
the inn with his… ghost… and… oh dear.

“You… you are hopeful for… you and I…”

“To get to know each other better! Right now, that’s what I’m hopeful for. We were doing a good job of that before, though I suspect you thought I was a figment of your imagination, but now we can do a much better job of it. That’s all I want, Mycroft. Well, no, I won’t lie. If it’s possible for more than that, then I’d like to explore it, too. I think… I think there could be, I think we’ve taken a few steps along that road to believe, maybe, in time, it’s worth taking a few more. But, I’m not for rushing things! No, not me… that’s a quick and sure way to turn everything into a mess. Just get to know each other for the time being. That’s all. If… if you want to, that is.”

Now the hope in Greg’s eyes was not of the desperate sort, but more of the sort that said this hope was a deep one, and one, perhaps, that had not been allowed to grow until a single moment when its small seed split and the tiniest of shoots appeared. It was a hope that Mycroft hadn’t seen in his own eyes, but felt, most recently, and keenly, in his heart.

“I…”

“Yeah?”

“I suppose there is no harm to be found in pursuing a better acquaintance. To call another ‘friend’ is, alone, a worthy thing.”

“It is! And I’d like to do that, like that a lot. Call you a friend, I mean.”

Friends can become other things, too, can’t they, Mycroft… and I’m hoping those other things don’t remain out of our reach.

“Then… we can make the attempt, though… I shall confess that I have no idea how to go about it.”

“Sure you do! We were already doing that very thing at the inn, so… we just keep on as before. For example, you could pour yourself a nice something to drink and tell me all about what you were doing while I was here waiting for you. Or we could read! Anything on the telly tonight you’d like to watch? That nearly knocked me over when I first saw one and now… I have to admit to having too much of a liking for it. Mrs. Hudson and I would argue like cats and dogs over what to watch sometimes, but I have to give her credit that if I won, she actually put it on what I wanted and didn’t just be spiteful since I couldn’t actually change the channel myself.”

His ghost adored television. Yes, that did explain a great, great deal…

“I… I have multiple examples of that technology, so arguments over programming choices shall not be a concern.”

“Really? Oh, this is going to be great! Especially since I don’t see you as the sort of man who’d enjoy a rousing football match… yeah, that shudder and rolled-eyes bit really says all that needs to be said. We’re going to have fun, Mycroft, football or not; I just know we will. We’ve already started! So, did you go to your work today? Get lots done? I want to know all about your job! It sounded very exciting when I listened to all that business on the radio. I know why that shortwave was there, too, actually. That’s a fun story… I can tell it to you, if you’d like…”

With his heart rate slowly returning to normal and his mind gradually, albeit grudgingly, accepting what was still sitting in his study, smiling at him with all the joy of a someone seeing a new world open up in front of him as a real entity and not a phantasm, Mycroft took a deep breath and made a
‘do go on’ motion as he rose to pour himself a very large whisky. He had chatty, telly-loving ghost as a housemate, it seemed, and that was certainly going to require a slight bit of adjustment on his part. And what went well with adjustment? Alcohol! Lots and lots of delicious alcohol… the more potent, the better…
Well… this was… different. Listening to a deceased man discuss, with great seriousness, why the cartoons of fifty years ago surpassed those presented today was not, in any manner, how he expected this day to end, but expectations were made to be broken, it appeared. Though, to be fair, Gregory’s analysis was admirably thorough and well-reasoned…

“My, you have made nearly a scholar’s study of the topic, Gregory.”

“Thanks! I’m good at noticing things. And thinking about what I notice. Mostly, maybe, to keep myself occupied when… well, you can imagine there isn’t a lot of opportunity for me to talk to people in my condition, so any little diversion is a welcome thing.”

“No, I suppose there is not a wealth of chances for you to share time with others, in an give-and-take fashion, that is. It must… you must become lonely, at times.”

As if the hollow look that began to rise in Greg’s eyes wasn’t a powerful clue in and of itself. It was rare that Mycroft regretted his words or actions, but this was certainly one of those times.

“I do. I can watch them, but I can’t really take part in what they’re doing. Can’t talk to many people in a meaningful way, either. Even you didn’t think I was an actual person to talk to until today, so… we can’t honestly say those conversations were ‘real,’ for lack of a better word. Probably thought you were talking to yourself! So, sometimes, I take in the world around me as best as I can and think about it. Really think and wonder. Then, I’ll make guesses or predictions about things and see if they come true. Say, for example, the guests at the inn. I’ll give them a hard look when they arrive and keep watching to see if what I suspect about them is true. Are they kind, dishonest, arrogant, funny… what sort of job they might do or why they might be there, even if they just say it’s for a little holiday. It helps pass the time.”

For all his own loneliness, Mycroft was having tremendous difficulty imagining a loneliness that spanned… centuries. And, from this small amount of interaction, it was clear that his ghostly companion was the sort who enjoyed the collegial art of conversation and valued associations with people who could provide such a thing. How terribly Gregory must suffer… and have suffered for so, so long…

“I harbor nary a doubt that you have discovered many little ways to fill your time to make it bearable. Clever minds excel at such things.”

“Listen to you with the flattery… which I very much appreciate so feel free to continue at will. But, yeah, I’ve tried, at least, to find ways and means to keep myself occupied and, frankly, sane. Practicing doing things, like moving objects or stepping outside the door of the inn, for example.”

“You could leave the inn?”

“A few yards! Not much, I know, but it let me walk around outside and look at the flowers that are often planted around the edges of the building. Sit and watch the clouds. Mrs. Hudson puts a radio out there with me and I can listen to the music or news or those radio serials. There are a lot of good ones of those! Radio has been a brilliant thing, it really has. Made the last, oh, nearly a century, something easier to bear.”

What would it be like to never be able to leave his home? Not that he was a gregarious person, not in the slightest, but being able to come and go as he pleased was something he had taken very much
for granted. And being confined to one, single location for centuries… it was little wonder that the ghost was eager for someone with whom to grow a true friendship or, if possible, something more. Though, how the latter could be possible was something he had yet to fathom…

“Then you are an excellent candidate for audiobooks.”

“I’ve seen adverts for those! You need something to listen to them with, though, don’t you?”

“Or a device connected to external speakers so the listener might simply sit, or hover, in a comfortable chair and be surrounded by the story.”

“Ooh! I’d like that! I hear them on the radio, too; some bloke will read a story or book, but you’ve only got that choice and it’s take it or not. It’d be nice to listen to something I actually chose, for a change of pace.”

“Then we shall peruse what is available and you may choose at will.”

“Really! Oh, that’s be brilliant, that really would. We could listen together, too, or I could listen to something you’ve already read so we could talk about it.”

He was sitting in his study, sipping whisky and conversing calmly with a ghost. A dead person. Someone who is no more, rather like the bridge that prompted his and Charles’s stay at the inn. The preposterousness of the situation could not be overstated. However, in fairness, neither could the pleasantness, so the scales remained mostly in balance.

It was somewhat difficult, though, to reconcile this Gregory with his imagined one. Or, believed-imagined version. That Gregory was enthralling, warmly-enticing… this one had a sharper, starker brightness. The edges were rougher, there was something less… beckoningly sensual… but how much of that had been due to his own mental creation and how much had been honestly presented could not be disentangled.

The beauty was there, though. The incomparable male beauty that stirred him in highly unfamiliar ways. The humor was there, as well, but with a more irreverent, boisterous and boyish flair. Gregory’s mind was clever, but not academically. His intelligence and perspicuity were grounded in observations and interactions with the everyday world and, though there was value to that, it contrasted sharply with his own abilities of mind. As an imagined paramour, that had not been evident, or important, but now… he needed to come to know Gregory as a whole person, or as whole as could be a dead man, and not as a vision of his imagination. Whether that would be a grand thing or something less than grand remained to be seen…

“Then we shall make that our first order of business tomorrow morning. Now, however…”

“I completely lost track of the time! You must be exhausted! Well, you’ll have a sound night’s sleep tonight since I can’t intrude in your dreams. Not… not the best situation, in some ways, I’ll admit, but every gain comes with a loss, right? It’s a big loss, though, since I’d… I’d like to be able to hold your hand again. That was an amazing thing and… I… well, I’ve never held hands with a man before. It wasn’t done when I was alive, though I wanted to sometimes. See a man that… did something to me, but I knew I couldn’t do anything about it. Saw you and it was just like that. You did something to me and I was so happy that, even in your dreams, I could hold your hand, take your arm… talk to you in a way that would have had me driven out of the village when I was alive. Most handsome man I’d ever seen…”

How you look at me, Gregory… so full of delight. So adoring… I have never experienced such a thing and now I receive it from someone lacking even a single breath of life…
“If it not an imposition to inquire, was that why you spurned the advances of the supposed witch who desired you?”

“Alice? Oh, no… I’ve had my share of women I admired and a few I admired with more than a bit of flirtation, if you catch my meaning. No, Alice was a mean-spirited thing. Covetous, jealous and nasty about getting what she wanted. She’d seduce some poor lad, get him to do whatever she wanted for her, then toss him aside when someone new caught her eye. She’d had her eye on me for a long time and it made her so angry that I’d never be more than polite. Always cordial, never giving any cause for offense, but that didn’t mean she didn’t take offense. A lot of it, too.”

“Gregory… do you know it is said…”

“That she murdered me? Or had me murdered? Yeah, I know. That was all anyone talked about after I died. It was written down, too, in the church records, with the date of my death. Greg Lestrade, villainously murdered by the witch Alice… that sort of thing. Nobody really knew what happened, though. Or… where I was. Am.”

“Your… remains, you mean.”

“Yeah.”

“Gregory, would you tell me what happened? And where you are to be found?”

“I wish I could! I remember up to the point when I came home from the pub. She was furious at me… I may, may, have been boasting a bit about a woman I’d escorted for a stroll and… oh, Alice’s eyes were burning when she heard me. Didn’t help that she’d tried to get me to take her walking that very morning and I’d said no because I had to go and do a bit of snooping around for a poacher who’d been taking rabbits off the squire’s land and… maybe because it wasn’t proper for a man my age to be escorting a young woman without intentions of the marrying kind.”

“An honorable stance.”

“Not entirely honest, though, as she found out that night. Anyway, I came home, a bit tipsy, truth be told, and… I remember tossing my cloak onto a peg and having a seat at my table… then nothing. For memory of what happened, at least. It…”

“Yes?”

“I can’t really put words to it, not in any meaningful way. There was… it was like… a wall. A cold, black wall that seemed a thousand miles thick. I wanted to get to the other side, but couldn’t. Just couldn’t. It was like I was frozen in a block of ice and couldn’t move a muscle to even make a scratch on that horrible wall. Couldn’t see, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t feel… I’d say it lasted an eternity, too, though I know it didn’t, obviously. Felt that way, though. After that, it’s as if I remember a terrible nothingness, one there aren’t even words to describe properly. Like the world was there and then no world existed at all. That lasted for what seemed an eternity, too, until I found myself, suddenly and with no warning, in the pub… the inn… next to my portrait on the mantle. Found out I’d only been dead for three days! Or… lost, gone, vanished, whatever for three days. I’ve tried and tried to remember anything, just one little clue that might be helpful, at least to put The End on my story, but… I can’t. I just can’t. Not even a hint of an idea where my body might be found to put in a real grave with my name above it.”

Reaching out, Mycroft immediately pulled his hand back, remembering that he couldn’t touch the man so obviously in pain, let alone offer a gentle gesture for comfort.
“I am sorry, Gregory. I did not mean to upset you so greatly.”

“It’s alright. Really, it is. I’ve lived with this for a long time and been asked the same questions by other people who I could talk to. I ask them of myself now and again, hoping something, maybe just being a ghost long enough, will let me remember, but… nothing. Someday, I hope, but not now.”

“Then I shall not trouble you again with this. For now… oh dear, once again I am noticing the time and finding it is now even less to my favor.”

“Oops! Hard to think about the time when you’re having a nice chat, right? But, I also forgot that you need to be at your job again and I suspect you’re the type who sees a very early start to the day.”

“That is certainly the case. Often, to my regret, I cannot claim my day has ‘started,’ as it simply continues from its predecessor uninterrupted. More than occasionally, several days pass in that fashion due to the demands of my work, which never cease and pay no attention to minor details such as rest, well-being or good temper.”

“That’s terrible! Well, then, let’s see you to bed, so the rest and good temper bits are satisfied, at the very least.”

Which begged the question… not that he should enter into another conversation and push back further the hands of the clock, but… curiosity never shall be denied…

“Gregory, if it is not impolite to ask… do ghosts sleep?”

“No, we don’t. Or, at least, I don’t. Didn’t even get one last sleep to my name before I died. Wish my murder could have been a morning one, so I could have that one final encounter with my bed to look back upon with fondness. As drunk as I was, it would have been a very fond look, too.”

Again, the horrific reality of Greg’s existence was made very clear to Mycroft, who felt his heart leaden at the thought of living three centuries with virtually nothing to occupy the mountainous quantity of time you had to fill. And not a moment of respite in all those years…

“What… what do you do when everyone else sleeps?”

“Oh… it depends. At the inn, Mrs. Hudson would leave on a radio for me, but not everyone did that. A lot of time, I’d simply look out of a window or think. Sometimes there are people awake at night and I watch them or read over their shoulders. And… when I’ve had an innkeeper who… I hate to say cared, but, at least, was concerned about how I felt, they’d leave little things for me. There was a deck of cards, for instance, very old ones, that I was getting good at moving a bit, so I could play some one-person games. Those got tossed out accidentally, though, when one innkeeper died and their son came in to give the place a clean-out before hiring someone to do the managing for him.”

Mycroft wondered how it was that he, a man who was often said to have no heart, could feel it breaking in his chest. Poor Gregory… there was nothing to romanticize or glorify about the life of a ghost when one gazed at the unvarnished truth of that life…

“But, there’s my pen and it still exists. That helps a lot to pass the time, when I’ve been able to use it.”

“Your pen?”
“About… maybe right at the end, no the century had turned over, so likely around 1910, someone dropped a pen that rolled behind the large cabinet in the sitting room off the entrance at the inn. I saw it and… well, it became another object that I could work on trying to move and, eventually, I got it out into the open and, after another few decades, I was able to actually hold it to write. I’ve been lucky that Mrs. Hudson’s grandfather, who owned the inn before her, was happy to leave out sheets of paper spread wherever was convenient, depending if there were guests present or not, and see my pen filled with ink. Mrs. Hudson’s done the same. As long as I have my pen, I can write! Draw, too, if I’m in a mood for that.”

That, at least, made Mycroft’s heart lighten slightly because a creative pursuit was a highly pleasant way to pass the time. Not that he had time for such a thing, but many a torturous meeting had been made far more pleasant through filling a paper- or electronic-based pad with a variety of sketches. Often, they were decidedly inappropriate and insulting in nature, but that simply added to the enjoyment. However…

“I do not have your pen, I’m afraid. Mrs. Hudson did not include it with your portrait.”

“She probably forgot. It… you weren’t party to it, of course, but it was hard for me to leave and hard for her to see me leave, so it was a rather emotional last day. We’ve been friends for a long time and it wasn’t easy to say goodbye, so I’m sure it slipped her mind, what with everything else going on. She’d surely post it to you, though, if you asked. Which, if it’s not too much of a bother…”

“I shall see it done, rest assured. Or have it collected when our vehicle is extracted from its muddy prison.”

And not only because the thought of that brings the light back into your eyes and a smile onto your lips.

“Thanks! That would be great, since… I like writing, actually. Putting my thoughts on paper or little stories I’ve made up from whatever’s knocking about in my head. Made many a night pass by far quicker than they ever did. They got a typewriter in the inn at one point, and I became a little hopeful that I’d learn to use it, but it got replaced too often for me to do anything with it. My stalwart pen, though… that’s stayed and as long as there’s ink and paper, I can amuse myself.”

Establishing the fastest method of obtaining the ghost his one outlet for non-passive entertainment would be the very first order of business in the morning. Such a tragedy, from every perspective, was Gregory’s life… which was a word that honestly could not be applied to the specter, but the proper one, death, was too dismal to continually contemplate.

“Then, let us see you sorted for whatever might occupy you tonight, while I rest, and I shall do my utmost to see your pen swiftly returned to you.”

“Brilliant! And ink?”

“In abundance.”

It was odd to watch a ghost float upward, dancing to a silent tune of excitement, but what was life without the accumulation of new experiences, be they odd or not.

“When you are finished with your performance, we might set the televisions to channels which suit your tastes and there is a radio in the kitchen, as well as in several other locations that we can also prepare for you. Whatever can be done for your comfort, Gregory, shall be done. I promise you that.”
“This is going to be great! I can go about the house watching and listening to different things… I can’t wait until I have my pen so I can write all about this!”

Suddenly very happy his bedroom walls were well-provided with highly-effective sound-reducing materials, Mycroft smiled and rose from his seat to begin the Great Electronic Awakening. And, to begin the process of giving his mind a touch of peace and quiet to digest this scenario and place it in a context and framework with which he could… oh, he had no idea what to think of all of this and would, instead, concentrate on achieving a few hours of sound sleep to clear his mind and face tomorrow with a refreshed perspective. And breakfast. Which… if there was anything more empty in this world than his refrigerator, it was the head of a politician. Mrs. Hudson… you already are sorely missed…
Chapter 10

Mycroft often wondered how deeply he ever slept since his mind seemed to have a very clear idea of the time and always woke him half an hour before his alarm, which was already set far earlier than was, technically, necessary. But, this allowed him time to fully apprise himself of the events that occurred while he did sleep, before he was tasked to manage them or, when it was a rare, yet cherished, uneventful night, he could linger a bit over his morning tea and simply watch the news. And, in either case, he was blessed with a few minutes to himself to simply lie in bed and… do nothing. Let the only thing in his mind be what he chose to be there and it was nearly the only time in his life that he allowed his imagination to play, even if it was simply to envision the painful, messy and highly-embarrassing assassinations of certain troublesome individuals or the utter glee of watching Sherlock be driven off in a police vehicle because he simply didn’t feel quite like dragging the infant’s nappy-clad arse out of whatever trouble he had caused. What a glorious image it was, too…

This morning, however, his mind went to a very different place. He had expected to have his thoughts turn to his time at the inn and the imaginary friend he had gained, and was fully and eagerly prepared to shamelessly indulge those thoughts during these quiet times alone. Now, though… the situation was wildly upended. Gregory was real… he was a sentient being with independence of thought, opinions of his own, likes and dislikes, a personality not created by the lonely mind of an overworked, middle-aged man who had just begun cautiously to hope that the lonely aspect might have a chance of changing.

The question, now, was could that hope be realized? Gregory was dead. Really, most sincerely, dead. An ex-person. An intangible phantasm who could not so much as turn the page of a book, let alone fully participate in any form of… relationship. He could never publicly acknowledge their association lest he be declared mentally incompetent and what joys of companionship could they experience beyond that of conversation in this house? Dinner in a restaurant? A night at the opera? Well, perhaps the latter, if they used his box and he was extraordinarily careful not to give sign he was speaking to someone who obviously was not at his side, but… how long could such a ruse succeed?

Yet, Gregory was so anticipative of a growing connection between them. In truth, if he revisited his imagination, he had been, also, at least in a purely fantastical manner until, if he was graced with extreme and uncharacteristic good fortune, he found someone to whom to transfer that affection and regard. How to reconcile this, now that he was presented with an individual with whom those emotions could be transferred, yet… they were still, for the purposes of this argument, not real? Though, in truth, he should not be a bit surprised. How typical of the cruel and sneering universe show him his heart’s desire, yet not allow him to reach out and grasp it…

Cracking open his eyes and feeling some surprise that his guest wasn’t hovering over him like an affable, and striking, cloud, Mycroft quickly tended to his grooming and dressing, then made his way down the stairs towards the sound of various television monitors and radios proclaiming their programming at appropriate volumes for a listener to enjoy, but a sleeper to ignore. And, it was a long moment he paused to watch his ghostly visitor stare intensely at the telly where a truly horrid film was playing. Aliens and testosterone-fueled carnage… how joyful.

“Good morning, Gregory. I trust you enjoyed your night.”

Ah, most interesting. Ghosts could be startled. And they giggled when caught out in their startle. In a most delightful fashion.
“You scared me! I was a too caught up in this film and didn’t hear you come downstairs. Have you seen this? It’s fantastic! The inn didn’t get much for different channels on the telly, so this is amazing to me. And it’s so big! Big and colorful and… I’ve had a great night! Films and a bit of music. I can’t wait until I can have audiobooks, too. Really, I’ve not have this abundance of entertainment in my entire death!”

The sheer excitement shining in your eyes, Gregory… it is breathtaking…

“I am very glad you found your options appealing. And we can certainly choose a book for you today, if that is how you would enjoy spending your morning. Though… I suppose I might be able to set some form of timer or command I might trigger remotely to begin your book at the time of your choosing.”

Gregory’s inability to touch anything was certainly posing its share of little dilemmas… well, if there was a thing that lived a short life in the presence of Mycroft Holmes, it was a little dilemma. Though, to be fair, he’d never dealt with a spectral one and that might prove more than a slight challenge.

“Don’t go to any trouble, Mycroft. I’d love to hear a book this morning, actually. Be a break from my music and films. Could I listen to it in your sitting room? It looks to be a lovely day and those large doors to your courtyard promise to let in a lot of light.”

And Gregory could not take a step beyond those doors, no matter how lovely the day. At least, not if he was not present to carry a fragment of portrait frame in his pocket.

“Of course. In fact, we can make your day’s selection while I prepare my morning tea and determine if even a stale crust of bread is available for breakfast.”

“Oh, that’s not good. Have to see you fed properly to do a full day’s work! Not that I can do anything to make that happen, but I’ll give you a stern glare so you do a better job of it than stale bread and tea.”

A glare that was already being given in preemptory fashion, it appeared. Ghosts, apparently, were strong advocates of good nutritional habits.

“Heavens, I had no idea you were such a staunch supporter of a hearty morning meal.”

“Sometimes it’s the only one you get! Once you leave your house for the day, who knows what jumps into your path or if it’ll let you sit with a bit of cheese when your stomach starts to rebel against being empty.”

“Fair point and one with which I have a bounty of unfortunate familiarity. Shall we?”

Mycroft motioned towards the kitchen and Greg merrily followed, though it took a few seconds since he became, yet again, caught up in the blistering action of his film, but reminded himself that it would probably be broadcast another time and he could watch what he missed then. No more days of a program only being shown once! Live television was brilliant, but if you missed it, it was gone forever… recorded programs were much better for that, but did lack something that you only got when something was live. Mycroft seemed too young to really remember live telly programs, but it wouldn’t hurt to ask if he thought the same thing. Smart man like him probably valued hearing about the past and he was a good source for things like that. He’d seen more of the past than most…

Tapping his nose with the capped tip of his very expensive pen, Mycroft studiously ignored his PA’s
glaring, which was equally as ferocious as Gregory’s as they reviewed the lackluster status of his cupboards before crafting his rather creative breakfast of shortbread and few spoons of aged granola in an even more aged carton of plain yogurt. However, it all settled most companionably in his stomach and did make the first meeting of his day a far more agreeable thing than if he snatched one of the overly-sugary pastries from his office’s small break room or, heaven forbid, one of the so-called nutrition bars that were certainly produced by a chemical manufacturer and, most probably, radioactive.

“Mr. Holmes?”

“You have remembered my name. That shall be a shining star added to your performance review.”

Having his pen snatched away made Mycroft pout, because it would surely be held hostage until his PA’s reason for glaring had been satisfied completely, something which did not always occur quickly.

“If you are choosing today to have a mental breakdown, sir, you should have informed me in advance, so I could have rescheduled your meetings and brought a book to read to pass the time.”

Villainous woman.

“I have not chosen today for that particular activity; however, I shall make a note to pencil in the date on your calendar when I have one in mind.”

“We do have several matters to tend to this afternoon, you realize, which would benefit from you actually knowing what they are and why they’re important.”

“I have already briefed myself on these issues.”

“Briefing yourself and actually thinking about them are two different things. That’s not the right thinking face for what needs to be done, so I believe a conversation on the subject is warranted.”

What?

“Pardon?”

“If you don’t believe I know the difference between your ‘thinking about work’ face and thinking about other things faces, then you tragically underestimate the amount of time I have to sit here waiting for you to stop thinking and start speaking. Your ‘thinking about Sherlock’ face is a particular favorite. I can see you mentally throttling your brother while you shove him off a bridge as you’re imagining it.”

Yes, that likely was extremely evident when his mind ventured down that road. It probably the only time Anthea actually saw him smile.

“For the sake of workplace harmony and efficiency, I shall attempt, in the future, to hasten my thought processes so you are not languishing in boredom.”

“Good. Now, let’s talk about what’s bothering you, so you’re in a good temper when you meet with the PM. That always sours your mood and I’d rather not deal with you having a doubly-soured mood if I can possibly help it. There’s not enough vodka in the pub I’m stopping by tonight for something like that and I am not making two pub stops on my way home just to erase the memory of all that sourness.”
“I am not experiencing a whit of bother, thank you very much, so you are assured of only one pub’s worth of vodka being credited to your bank accounts.”

“You’re experiencing a lorry-load of bother and I’m talking with Martha later today, so you know you don’t want me to pass along you’re out-of-sorts.”

“Martha?”

“Mrs. Hudson.”

Oh dear.

“I care not what Mrs. Hudson thinks about my mood.”

“I’ll give her your home phone number and, with the telephone lines possibly back up tomorrow, you’ll begin to care. A lot.”

Anthea had an amazing ability to choose the most powerful weapon from her arsenal for whatever challenge or obstacle had the misfortune to cross her path. Just as any supervillain would hope to do. All she needed was a costume and some form of henchman, human or not, to complete her transformation.

“Joyful. Truly you make my days wondrously pleasant.”

“Talk.”

“I believe I was doing just that.”

“What’s bothering you, sir? You’ve been making your ‘personal reflection’ face and that’s rarely signals anything good.”

Oh dear. Yes, his PA knew his expressions exceedingly well, it appeared…

“It is a minor thing, at best.”

“Perhaps, but those always seem to be the biggest thorns in your side.”

Regrettably true…

“Truly, it is a minor thing. I… I was simply reviewing certain ideas that emerged when I had time, for once, to think about something other than this cursed world and its lunacy.”

For what seemed like the age of the universe she’d tried to get her boss to take a holiday and he’d refused. If a few short days in a small inn could produce this degree of reflection, then she was going to push all the harder to get him away for a week or two somewhere he could truly purge the cobwebs and spiders from his brain.

“Anything that might be helpful for you to share and discuss?”

No. With a lovely aperitif of no. And no for the cheese tray, if you please.

“Simply a reevaluation of certain decisions and behaviors that might benefit from a degree of change.”

“The amount of useful information in that sentence is naught.”
Personal reflection for Mr. Holmes generally centered, though he’d never admit it, on his worry that he was, somehow, failing his brother or rose from old ghosts from times he was certain he had failed Sherlock, but that didn’t feel right today. This was new, something very new, or he wouldn’t be so pitifully obvious about trying to deflect away from it. Financial? No, that was highly unlikely. Health? No… they had an agreement that he would share any concerning health issues with her so she could act as a monitor and provide the necessary warning should symptoms start to become noticeable, something that could send very disturbing ripples through very many governments. Of course, something like erectile dysfunction wouldn’t actually qualify, but the last time Mr. Holmes had a date it was with Charlemagne and they only met up for a quick lunch. However… dating. Might that be the decision and behavior he was starting to question? Well, luck favored the bold…

“Details are now part of the bargain. When did you meet him and please rank his handsomeness on a scale from 1 to… oh, well. You didn’t need that lamp.”

The one that Mycroft’s startled jerk hand sent to the floor to meet an unhappy fate.

“I… I have no idea why… how silly a person you can be, at times.”

“Your dead lamp tells a different story, sir.”

Though why you startled again at the word ‘dead’ is something I’ll file away for later. Could your new interest be a mortician? A pathologist? Not exactly who she would have predicted, but Mr. Holmes did have a substantial unpredictable streak, at times.

“I simply… the question caught me somewhat off guard as it is not one I would have expected to you ask.”

“Well, once you answer it, I’ll have a legion more to add, so let’s begin. What’s his name and what does he do for a living?”

Gregory and engage in benign hauntings.

“There is no… person… in whom I have gained an interest, romantic or otherwise.”

Mostly true, since there was a week’s work of philosophical debate to be had over whether Gregory could properly be termed a person. With Anthea, staying as close to the truth was always wise. Her capacity for sniffing out even the smallest of lies was astounding.

“That degree of aloof fliffle is precisely how I know you’re lying, sir.”

The hound was on the scent!

“Fliffle? You must be fatigued. Please, do take the next several hours for a restorative nap.”

“Fliffleness escalation! Tall or short? Dark or fair? Lean or sturdy? Romantic or pragmatic? These are the things I must know.”

“Then I weep for the depth of your suffering for being denied the knowledge you seek.”

“Fliffleness escalation to Defcon 3! You are a ‘verily’ or ‘whither’ away from Defcon 1, sir. Don’t be that man. Just don’t.”
Damnation!

“There is nothing to disclose! I have nary…”

“Defcon 2!”

“I am not seeing anyone! It is not even possible!”

Oh no…

“Not possible? Oh sir… are you worried about… it’s not as it was before, you know. There are more than a few gay men in government and…”

“Good heavens, Anthea, I am not concerned about revealing my sexual preferences.”

“Then what is it? A class issue? Oh… he’s married, isn’t he?”

“Gregory is most certainly not married.”

NOOOOOOOOO!!!!!

“So, his name is Gregory and he’s got your thoughts turned… I’ve got it. You haven’t told him you’re interested, have you.”

A lifeline!

“Fine! No, no, I have not.”

“What’s stopping you? Ask him out for a drink! Simple, casual, but easy to learn if more than drinks might be on offer if you ask him out again.”

“At present, I have no intention of asking Gregory out for drinks, for drinks or anything.”

“Meaning, you might in the future. Ok… ok, that’s not the best I could hope for, but it’s more than I probably should expect, so I’ll take it. And, I hope you do too, sir. Take the opportunity and don’t let it pass you by. Maybe it comes to nothing and that’s alright. At least you know asking someone out for a drink isn’t lethal and you can try it again with someone else without fear of a being poisoned by social toxicity.”

Escorting Gregory for a drink would be a marvelous way to spend an evening and one they could not share not matter the degree of desire for that very thing. However… sharing a quiet evening while he enjoyed a warming bit of brandy or whisky… of course, now that he knew Gregory could not actually hold a book of his own… maybe they could read the same tome together or the ghost could watch a film while he read. Or they could listen to an audiobook together… there were options, he simply had to attempt them and gauge their success.

“Since I am not, currently, entertaining such thoughts, might we return to our actual work?”

“Do you mean begin our actual work, since all we could return to is me watching you stare into the distance and hit yourself with your pen?”

Mrs. Hudson and Anthea must have a common ancestor. There was really no other explanation for it.

“Begin our work, then, if we are in a mood to nitpick.”
“Oh, we are. But yes, we can. And you can have your pen back, since you need to mark up a few things for the analysts to amend.”

“Very well. And do see something substantial ordered in for lunch. I suspect I shall be at my desk for several hours, at least.”

“Already done.”

“Excellent. And Anthea… place a grocery order to be delivered to my home this evening. I find myself rather like Old Mother Hubbard, in terms of my cupboards.”

“Standard order, sir?”

“Yes. Though… enhance the breakfast choices a touch this time. I am hopeful of achieving a more energized start to my day than I see from my usual toast, fruit and tea.”

Oh yes, her boss was contemplating changes in his life, but, apparently, with small steps at this early stage. That was fine, though. Tiny steps were still steps and, as long as they brought him to a happy destination, she would help in any way she could. Were their aphrodisiacs common to breakfast foods? She could research that while Mr. Holmes read through this round of intelligence reports. And have a little chat with Charles when she could find a free moment. If Mr. Holmes was visiting any location more than usual, his driver would be the one to know. Not that she’d snoop, per se, but… it was always best to be prepared, no matter the situation. Especially a situation as juicy as this…

“Ooh, this looks interesting.”

Mycroft smiled amiably and non-specifically at the delivery driver who was bringing in the grocery order, just in case he’d given any sign that he was listening to the voice of a ghost who was happily peering into the boxes of food that were sitting on the counter and table of his kitchen.

“This is it, sir. If there’s a problem, phone our office and someone will take care of it.”

“Thank you. Do you enjoy your evening.”

Waiting until the deliveryman had left the house, Mycroft then sighed and felt safe to converse aloud with his guest.

“I am happy you approve. I decided a provisioning was in order to avoid a repeat of this morning’s lack of culinary triumph.”

“Lots of good things, here. You must know how to cook.”

“A touch. Survival cooking, mostly, but I have enhanced my repertoire a bit over the years.”

“I was terrible with cooking. Of course, it was harder in my time to make anything, but I was still terrible at it. Luckily, my cousin had the pub! I’d end my days there more often than was proper to see a meal in my stomach and a few, or a lot, of mugs of ale to go along with it. The food I could usually get for free, but the bastard never gave me a free drink in all my days! Family charity only goes so far, I suppose.”

He’d arrived home and Gregory had appeared as if summoned, bright of smile and looking so very, very pleased to see him. It was unexpected, but… nice. As was this casual bit of conversation that
one might expect for any couple at the end of the working day…

“Yes, there is definitely a limit on family charity, with firm lines drawn in the sand. I suspect, though, the food was less expensive to provide, and more critical for health and well-being, than the ale.”

“Well, you’re probably right. I’d help you put all of this away, if I could, but I can talk to you while you do it and cook a little something for your dinner. If you’re hungry now, that is. Maybe a chance to rest first! You hardly came through the door before that bloke arrived, so maybe a chance to relax before you rattle pots and pans about? That sounds more the thing, so we can watch a little telly and you can change it from the film I was watching, because it really doesn’t seem your sort of entertainment, so you can get a bit of rest before thinking about cooking.”

Casual conversation segueing into slightly frantic babbling. Hmmmmmm…

“Gregory… and this is not a criticism… are you typically this garrulous?”

“What?”

“Chatty. You do appear to appreciate a heartily verbose conversation.”

“Oh! Oh…”

“As I said, in no manner a criticism, simply an attempt to better know you and your habits.”

“Yeah, I do tend to go on sometimes. Especially… when I’m a little nervous.”

Nervous? That did not sit sweet upon the tongue. Especially with the slightly furtive look in the ghost’s eyes…

“Why would you be nervous, Gregory? Is there something troubling you?”

“It’s… it’s nothing. Really.”

The ‘it is a minor matter’ strategy is mine alone to use. You would do well to remember that.

“Gregory… if we are to… cohabitate, I would assume there would exist between us some degree of honesty and trust.”

“I trust you! I wouldn’t have… well, placed myself in your hands if I didn’t trust you.”

“Then, while I am shifting certain goods to the refrigerator and freezer, you will expand on your previous ‘nothing, really.’ “

If the ghost could actually move the air in the room, Mycroft was certain Greg’s loud, deep sigh would have felt like a hurricane.

“It’s just… I was thinking today that… well, it’s the trusting you part, actually.”

“That makes little sense.”

“I… well, I assumed, didn’t I… I trusted that you wouldn’t hurl my painting into the rubbish or into a fire, which… I have no idea what would happen if you did that, but… but I also assumed that… you’d want to give having me here a try before taking me back to Mrs. Hudson. She and I argued about that, actually. Mrs. Hudson said it was rushing things. Being presumptuous, too. Said she was certain you’d be back to the inn, sooner than later, and I could spend more time letting you get to
know me, even if it was only in your dreams… that moving so quickly wasn’t a good idea. Not even very polite, which is not at all good if… well, if you’d like that person to view you well.”

“Ah… I see.”

“So, I’ve been a bit nervous since I arrived and it climbed a little today while I had time to do some thinking when my book was finished. It was presumptuous of me and I suppose I’m feeling a bit the fool for acting rashly.”

Gregory was certainly not a man to shy away from his own moment of self-reflection, it seemed.

“That is understandable, from your viewpoint, I mean. But, I cannot say your decision was an entirely inappropriate one, given the nature of our association while I was at the inn. There was little doubt I enjoyed your company, encouraged it, even.”

“I should have said something before you left there, though. Got you to understand what I was so you could make a decision about… what you might want to do.”

“Again, not a criticism, but I did wonder about that. Why reveal yourself in such a surprising manner here when some inroads might have been made at the inn?”

“Fear, I suppose. That I wouldn’t be able to convince you what I was, that I was real, and you’d continue to think I was a figment of your imagination. That if I… spoiled your fantasy, you might not even come back to the inn! Ultimately, I did trust you not to do anything harmful to my portrait, and if you were angered or disappointed, you’d just see me returned, so… I took the chance.”

Which spoke volumes about the amount of hope the ghost was carrying that this would be a satisfying and jubilant experience. There was a whiff of desperation there, to be certain, but the genuineness of Gregory’s pleasure, as well as his own, during his dreams and quiet time in the inn’s library made that desperation seem not entirely without reason. He certainly felt a desperate tug at his own soul when he realized his small holiday was over and that he was leaving such a magical experience behind.

“There is merit to that, I will concede. It was an idyllic time we shared and the revelation of your true existence might have clashed with that in an… unsettling manner. Yes, I begin to understand your conundrum.”

“So, I’ve been nervous that I’m intruding or being a bother and you’re just being polite and gentlemanly while I take advantage of your hospitality.”

Certainly a wealth of self-reflection. Which, of course, was a mark of intellect and good character…

“Again, I begin to see the root of your concern. If I am to be honest…”

“Which we’ve already established is a necessity for our cohabitation.”

“Precisely. I would say that I am, also, nervous as to what… what I am supposed to do. I have no idea how to provide for you any form of contented existence, let alone one that we share in a mutually-rewarding fashion. Truthfully, I would have little idea how to accomplish that with a living man, but one… one who cannot so much as hold a glass of wine or feel the touch of a comforting hand… I find myself utterly at a loss.”

That was far, far, far more honesty than Mycroft expected to disclose, but once the words started flowing, the sensation of relief was so powerful it drew more and more words to follow the first.
“Thank heavens.”

What?

“P… pardon?”

“That’s how I feel, too! I’ve got no idea how to have a true relationship with anyone, but certainly not another man, and one I can’t even kiss hello when he comes home from work or share a table at a restaurant without him looking insane because he’s talking to an empty chair! You’re so intelligent and always perfectly calm and poised… I thought it was just me that was clueless! Whew! Oh, that’s a weight off of my mind. Like a boulder, it was! Sitting right on my shoulders. It’d have to be a boulder’s ghost, though, I suppose, which makes it funny since it wouldn’t weight anything, but even I forget I’m a ghost sometimes and it’s not like I haven’t had enough reminders in three hundred years!”

And, with that confession, Mycroft felt his own shoulder-sitting boulder fall from him and make an appreciable dent in his expensive flooring. Apparently, the struggle to achieve any degree of association would be something else he and Gregory would share.

“That is a gladdening thing to hear, Gregory, about it I shall not lie. And It is a positive thing, wouldn’t you agree, that we both recognize the situation for what it is and are not masking our uncertainties with false confidence? From common ground do good things grow.”

“I absolutely would agree. So… we keep it that way, right? Talk about what we’re thinking so everything is always in the open and we can work on… whatever might need to be worked on? I’ll admit, if it’s not boastful, that this is probably a fairly unique situation that only…”

“MYCROFT!”

The size to which Mycroft’s eyes widened worried Greg greatly, as did the shooing motions Mycroft was frantically making with his hands.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hide!”

“What?”

“Hide!”

“Why would I hide since I am here specifically to confront you about yet another one of your meddlesome attempts to spy on me and John!”

Whirling to face his affronted brother, Mycroft had two facts slam into his head simultaneously. The first was that Greg was not visible to Sherlock and his order to hide now seemed tragically ridiculous. Second, Sherlock had a dog.

“Barooooooo!!!!”

Who was howling in the direction of his ghost.

“What a good boy you are! Giving ol’ Greg a hearty hello. Such a good, good boy!”

A ghost who was speaking to the dog in that very specific tone of voice adopted by all dog lovers when they saw a dog. Any dog. Anywhere. And, how lovely. The dog was wagging its tail.
“Sherlock…Barging into my home for any reason is unacceptable, but bringing this… beast into kitchen.”

“How can you call that sweet doggy a beast!”

Harangued in stereo…. simply marvelous. And the dog was now stealing and eating his loaf of artisan bread from the grocery order. Could this evening get any better? Perhaps a nuclear strike or opened portal to hell? Oh look, the spirits stocks were also delivered. Was there… yes, a fine scotch perfect for sipping in… hang it all, drink from the bottle and hope, when it was drained, that more had vanished from his kitchen than one gorgeous ghost…
Chapter 11

Mycroft slowly counted to three, then another three, and then a third for numerical symmetry.

“Sherlock… I do not appreciate your intrusions at any time, however, this example is a particularly… odiferous… one of the breed.”

“Bread makes Toby flatulent.”

“There has not been sufficient time for him to digest the bread.”

“Toby is regularly flatulent. Bread exacerbates the situation, however.”

“Joyful. Might we move this conversation, then, away from the toxic plumes to somewhere more pleasingly fragrant?”

“No.”

This was going to end poorly. Of that, Mycroft was already aware.

“Sherlock…”

“I have no desire to have my eyes assaulted by your version of home décor. Besides… Toby requires water.”

Looking over to the sight of the dog merrily licking the face of the ghost squatting down in front of him, utterly oblivious to the fact that his tongue was penetrating through the apparition’s face and head. Apparently, all that was required was an eager licking motion and ghostly giggles for the canine to class the maneuver a success.

“Very well. My water I shall share and then my door you will exit.”

“No.”

“This bloke’s a stubborn one!”

“This bloke is my brother.”

“I know I am your brother and you have never used the word ‘bloke’ in your tangle-tongued life! If you are attempting some form of playacting, it shall fail as stupendously as when you performed a flower in your primary school play, where all you had to do was remain motionless! Your wobbly plummet brought down the entire garden of snotty-nosed children and their atrocious costumes!”

There were times in one’s life where glory was not bestowed for one’s actions. That was one of those times.

“You were not even alive then, Sherlock, so you have no actual knowledge of the event.”

“Mummy has a film. I have viewed it. And wept.”

Delightful. And she would undoubtedly guard it fiercely with her maternal claws if he asked to ‘borrow’ it, remembering his oft-made promise that all incriminating evidence of his youth would be ferreted out and destroyed, even if he had to set the entirety of the nation’s intelligence and security
forces to the task.

“I want to see it!”

“Under no circumstances.”

“I assure you, my weeping was genuine! As was my nausea and prayer for death.”

Mycroft’s brain politely reminded him that, though he was conversing with two individuals, only one of those individuals was audible to the other. Must tread carefully…

“I am gladdened, as ever, that you survived your tortuous encounter with anything remotely associated with me. However, given that film is surely locked very tightly away, it is doubtful you will find it creeping back into your existence to further erode your mental fiber. Now, obtain bowl. Add water. Allow this mongrel to drink his fill. Return to whatever ridiculous activity that had your attention before you chose to storm my battlements and disrupt my household.”

“And you are a thirsty one, aren’t you, Toby? Got that thirsty look. Well, don’t worry, Mycroft’s got the best water for you to drink and it will take that look right off your face! Yes! Face! Sweetie sweetie sweet face!”

The dog could see and, clearly, hear his guest, as the hound was wagging, licking and barking with even greater enthusiasm. If this was not hell, the scientific curiosity would more than slightly notable.

“You are our host. It is your duty to provide for us.”

Sherlock… how can you fail to notice that your dog is seemingly having hallucinations and playing with an imaginary, and rather dog-fancying, human? Apparently, your powers of deduction are not as robust as you like to boast or your willingness to consider solutions beyond the natural realm is poorly developed. Regardless… you are an infant.

Taking a large metal bowl from a lower cupboard, Mycroft filled it with water, set it on the floor, then groaned as the dog began to drink, putting equally as much water on the floor as into its mouth.

“See! Your brother shouldn’t let him get that thirsty, though. It’s not right for a poor dog to have to be thirsty like that when it can’t easily find water on its own. In my day, they’d just run to a stream or pond or see if a bucket around had a bit in it. It seems a lot harder now, since people keep dogs on leashes or never let them go outdoors, which is a crying shame, if you ask me.”

“Sherlock, it is likely unadvised to allow your canine to go this long without water.”

“Do not slander me! Toby found a packet of crisps under the seat of the cab after and the salt exacerbated his thirst.”

“Ha! I’d feed the dog crisps, too. Probably not good for the poor thing, but everyone says they’re amazing, so why not let the dog have a little of the amazingness! You want some crisps, Toby? Let’s see if Mycroft has any.”

The benefit of being a ghost is that you can stick your head through cupboard doors and view the contents with great ease.

“Crisps are undoubtedly poor a nutritional choice for a dog, brother, and the individual from whom you… I want to say borrowed, however, I am clearly aware that stole might be a better word choice… obtained this creature will not likely be pleased if they are greeted with some form of
digestive upset when they again are in possession of him…”

“Nope, no crisps. Why don’t you have any crisps, Mycroft? I would’ve thought you’d have the very best lurking around somewhere.”

Holding two, completely independent conversations, was well within Mycroft’s abilities, however, the fact that for one he could not demonstrate participation on his part, lest he appear insane, did make the situation challenging.

“… For instance, I lack any such in my own cupboards, given their high salt and fat content, as well as the exceedingly poor nutritional return for calories consumed.”

There, one sentence and two conversations. When you had it… you had it.

“False. Your cupboards are filled with items that are nutritionally bankrupt and which define the term ‘empty calories.’ What is true is that you are irritated by the sound of crisps being eaten, since, if I remember the quote ‘this is undoubtedly the sound of dried cicada shells being gnashed between the teeth of a Neanderthal.’ Which, specifically, is why I consume them whenever possible in your presence.”

Sherlock smiling smugly and Gregory guffawing appreciatively. This alliance shall not be forgotten, gentlemen, rest assured. Though… neither of you are aware of it in the slightest.

“Be that as it may. Now that your dog has quaffed a volume of water equal to that of the Atlantic Ocean and disgracefully insulted my floor with his lack of quaffing proficiency, will you be so kind as to leave?”

“No.”

“I require more whisky.”

“I require you cease your attempts to spy and meddle in my life!”

“Mycroft! That’s… well, that’s not exactly sporting.”

“Sherlock… I have no idea what new mania has gripped your brain, however, I assure you that I have not set in motion anything that impinges on your life.”

At least, not anything new.

“Untrue! Only today, Dimmock refused to provide information on a case in which I had interest, citing ‘orders from higher up.’ Your fat fingerprints are all over this, Mycroft. I recognize both the girth and the greasy smear they leave in their repugnant aftermath. And will you also deny that you have someone monitoring my flat? That middle-aged, fashion-blind female who has taken up residence at Speedy’s?”

Because there was discrete monitoring of 221B, Mycroft knew the fashion-blind female in question was a recent divorcee hoping to move from her table to the one habitually used by a certain accountant who stopped in each afternoon for his lunch. However, his brother could fathom that out for himself.

“I have no idea what case it is to which you are referring and I give you my word that…”

Gregory was now hovering above the floor while the dog wriggled about on its back, with its tongue hanging out of its mouth. And its wriggling was gleefully encouraged by dog-person voiced peals of
praise and silently clapped together hands of delight. With all earnestness, he would have to ensure that no forays from this house ever crossed paths with a park, lest Gregory spiral into a maelstrom of mongrels who were positively giddy about interacting with a formerly-alive dog enthusiast.

“… that I have not issued any directive that information be kept from you. Further, if there is a woman who has decided your neighbor offers a comfortable place to enjoy her tea, then that is entirely her decision and, certainly, not mine.”

“I am not convinced.”

“I will give you the money you, in truth, arrived to wrest from me.”

“I am becoming convinced.”

“What is it, now, you require for your lunacy, brother mine, and will it necessitate I direct the Treasury to release our annual budget to me in gold to see it funded?”

“It is not lunacy to need ground-penetrating radar!”

“Very well, I will agree that it is not lunacy, however, it is also not mandatory to purchase. If you require one for a valid purpose, I can make one available to you for temporary use.”

“No.”

“He’s a stubborn one, isn’t he? Smart lad. Never give in easily! If you do, you’ll never get what you really want or make a true stand for what you know is right.”

“Marvelous. Is this a philosophy that I can expect you to pursue in perpetuity, my dear?”

“I am not your dear. The mere thought repulses me. As does your flaccid offer.”

Two conversations, brain. Remember that two tracks are running and the trains must not collide…

“Flaccidity aside, it is the only one on offer.”

“Oh yes, I can be a stubborn bastard when I have a need. But, I’m not so thick-skulled that I don’t listen to the other person and see when they have a point.”

Hoping a smile somewhat directed at his guest would compensate for the lack of a verbal answer, Mycroft took note of the fact that his ghost was now playing ‘threaten to grab the water bowl’ so the hound could bravely, proudly and loudly defend its prize. At least someone was enjoying Sherlock’s visit.

“If that is the best I can hope from you, Fatcroft, and, truly, all I ever expect from you is a crushing quantity of everything lackluster and boring, then it will have to do. Have it delivered no later than noon tomorrow.”

“Is your brother short-sighted? You’re lean as a whippet!”

Mustn’t preen for Sherlock would certainly faint and that would only prolong the misery of this torturous visit.

“Gracious, Sherlock, as always. Might I inquire if are you in some form of competition with a time deadline? If so, I shall see one delivered post haste if that hurries your exit from my home.”

“In a sense. If I find the corpse first, Dimmock will dissolve into an unholy stew of
incompetence and defeat, which I shall collect in a jar and use for my experiment tomorrow evening."

“I’ve got to say, Mycroft, this brother of yours is unique. I have no idea what he’s going on about, but it’s interesting. I like that in a person!”

How felicitous. Gregory liked Sherlock. There were, perhaps, some benefits to his ghost’s intangibility, for the last thing in this world that Sherlock needed in their eternal battle was allies. One short, impertinent, pugnacious doctor was more than sufficient, though John’s lack of action in preventing this decent of the foul-tempered cuckoo that posed as his brother into his cozy home would be entered as a very black mark in the doctor’s ledger. Probably sitting on his arse, with a cup of tea and the newspaper for company rather than his chosen partner in life. Cowardly blackguard. Perhaps a small visit by one of her majesty’s tax collectors would help him see the error of his lackadaisical ways.

“I see. This involves a police investigation.”

“One that, as is typical, Dimmock has mangled to the point of disaster.”

“If this will successfully close an open case, then I shall have a suitable model made available to you. With that settled, might I expect you to leave so that I might see the remainder of my evening free from your presence and the dog effluvia that accompanies it?”

“If you provide cab fare.”

“Of course.”

Reaching into his jacket to extract his wallet, Mycroft felt no surprise that the cash he partially withdrew from which he planned to separate a few notes, was snatched wholesale by a long-fingered hand. Fortunately, that brazen theft preceded a whistle for Toby to follow his brother out of the kitchen, though the whistle had to be repeated, since Toby seemed more than content to remain with his new friend who had now turned the dog’s attention to the table where many enticing morsels awaited his attention. A small shove in the direction of the exit, though met with a pained ‘nooooooo…’ by his ghost, finally turned Toby’s attention away from the wealth of food and set him in motion.

“Goodbye, Toby… I’ll miss you.”

“I do apologize, Gregory, however we are not in a position this evening to host a dog for dinner. I shudder at the fate of my china should he find my cuisine especially to his liking. But, Gregory… the dog, very clearly, knew you were present.”

“Isn’t that great! Animals… I don’t know why… but they can see and hear me. I saw a program once on the BBC, they’ve got brilliant nature programs, that insects and the like can see light that humans can’t. It’s my thought that it’s the same for me. Animals have the ability to notice me because their eyes or ears or brains are able to detect… whatever it is a ghost is, which is something I truly don’t have a clue about. Maybe that brother of yours could find out. He seems to be the curious type. Likes puzzles and challenges.”

Was there a thought more terrifying than Sherlock (a) knowing about the existence of ghosts and (b) launching one his flamboyant investigations into their nature? No, no there was not.

“Perhaps, though, for now, I suggest we do not reveal your presence to him. Sherlock, as you observed, is both excitable and chaotic, which does not make good bedfellows with our keeping
quiet the truth of your existence.”

“Oh… alright. I suppose you do have a point. I’ve seen enough telly to know what a problem that would be and I don’t want to be the cause of a riot or something. Someday, though? All I can do is talk to him like I did for you in the inn’s library, but…”

“You would enjoy having more than a single person with whom to converse.”

“You’re not mad about that, are you?”

“Good heavens, no! It is simply… I tend to rejoice when I do not have to converse with people, yourself being one of the very few exceptions to the rule, but I realize that you are of a different mind on the subject. If and when it appears possible, I promise to consider bringing Sherlock into our little fold.”

Which would also bring Doctor Watson, but that was more than he wanted to contemplate at the moment. The very existence of ghosts was not something about which the public required any confirmation. Under no circumstances would that end well and he had to be supremely certain that London’s most besotted detective duo would not divulge even a whisper of what they learned. Likely it would not be intentional, however… yes, something to consider at a point that was not today.

“Really? That would be great! I’m not so naïve that I don’t know I have to be kept a bit of a secret, but I’d appreciate someone else to talk to when you weren’t home. Speaking of you not being home…”

“We are not getting a dog.”

“Why not?”

“Let me think. Dogs require feeding, watering, walking… none of which can be performed without some degree of contact between dog owner and dog. Next, let us consider the state of this house should a dog be allowed free run, without a firm hand to moderate its actions.”

“A little one. One of those fluffy, cheerful ones.”

“I think not.”

“A not-fluffy, playful one?”

“No.”

“You sounded like your brother just then.”

“Thrilling.”

“A cat!”

“Do you honestly view me as an individual who would contentedly clean… a cat box?”

“Uh…”

“That should sufficiently answer your question.”

“Monkey?”
“Gregory!”

“What! I’ve seen them on the telly! Nappies on their bottoms and very smart, so no worry about firm, moderating hands being necessary.”

It was difficult to know if the smile on the ghost’s face was a hopeful one or a teasing one, so Mycroft settled with a noncommitting low-grade glower and raised eyebrow combination that started Greg laughing.

“I’ll wear you down on this, you know, Mycroft.”

“I sincerely doubt that, but if trying brings you amusement, then do carry on while I begin to prepare dinner. Without, to my grief, even a morsel of my favorite hand-crafted bread.”

“It did look delicious, too. Almost like what we used to have when I was alive. Good and hearty. Bit of meat, loaf of bread, and you had a meal! I’ve seen what passes for bread now and… oof. Not exactly something you have to chew, is it?”

“Hence my affection for Mrs. Hudson’s baking skills.”

“If I was alive, I’d live in her kitchen. But, since that’s not happening, I’ll happily putter about yours and watch you work. Film after?”

Mycroft continued putting away the remainder of the groceries and marveled at the degree of companionship the ghost offered, despite his incorporeal form. It was comforting in a way that was difficult to describe, perhaps, but not all pleasant things required empirical description, as he was coming to realize.

“That sounds delightful. May I have the honor of choosing the title?”

“Absolutely! I’d love to know what you fancy for films, actually. I bet you’ve seen lots that I haven’t.”

There was little doubt about that, given the specter’s taste for the somewhat sensational, however, something in him said that Gregory would greatly appreciate a more sophisticated offering. A comedy from the 30’s or 40’s. Some film noir. Yes, there were possibilities there. More than a few, as well.

“We shall certainly see. Hmmm… for what do I have a taste tonight? Perhaps a little fish. That is quick to prepare and…”

“Fish! We could have one of those tanks of fish! Oh, those a gorgeous and I’m sure little fishes could be grand company since I could sit with them in their tank and be part of their day.”

Changing his mind in favor of his newly-delivered fresh ravioli, Mycroft pulled down a very agreeable bottle of wine and hoped it was prepared to give its life in the service of its country. This was shaping up to be a protracted conflict…
Sighing softly, Mycroft doused the light in his bedroom and nestled himself beneath the soft cotton sheet and plush, warm blanket. Exceedingly simple pleasures that he treasured for they were honest and unfailing. His day could be torturous, draining, but he could count on these few, plain things to be waiting patiently when he could finally seek his rest. Perhaps it because his days were relentlessly complex. From the moment he woke until he went to bed, he was presented with a staggering array of diverse challenges, most the result of idiotic, illogical minds for whom even rudimentary principles of strategy were a foreign concept. In truth, it was a great part of why he took satisfaction from his work, frustrating and irritating though it might be. There was no predicting what new lunacy, incompetence or anarchy might greet him and that was, if nothing else, highly invigorating.

Oddly, this was also what was invigorating about Gregory. The times, few and uncommon as they were, where he sought some form of personal companionship, it had been with individuals who were most predictable, indeed. Men of a certain status and background, indistinguishable by education, experience or, frankly, opinion. If he was to be unflinchingly honest, they were chosen for that reason, since there was, ultimately, little in them to stir an interest beyond the casual or physical. There was no challenge to them, nothing to provoke true interest or excitement. Rather like a bowl of plain rice, they were pleasant, served their purpose, but did not… inspire. You did now dwell upon them once they fulfilled their use. And, for a life… and temperament… such as his, that was not something to revile.

Gregory was another thing entirely. He did inspire, offer challenge. He lingered in the mind long after they were separated and that spoke volumes to one whose mind forever inundated with the most critical and complicated of issues. All they did this evening, after Hurricane Sherlock had departed, was share conversation while he prepared and ate dinner, then watched a film and a bit of news. But, as was becoming clear, that conversation was a breed entirely different from that to which he was used to experiencing. Perhaps not on the intricacies of foreign policy or economic analysis, but on a variety of topics that… were fun. As at in the inn, his mind was being allowed to stray far from its normal path and into other areas that had long, very long, lay dormant.

Mycroft Holmes was, for once, Mycroft. Not the mysterious figure that roamed the halls of government with a position too nebulous to define, but too powerful to question. Not the draconian negotiator who brought a snarl to the face of those who sat down for what they believed an easy process until they saw him walk through the door. With Gregory, he was just Mycroft, something that he could not quite claim even when he was alone, since his mind had little distraction to turn it from the roles he played. Never the time, or motivation to make the time to focus on himself and simply… be. What a unique thing that was and it was a delicious feeling. He never yearned to be a ‘normal’ person, but he had often yearned to be something other than the roles he played and duties that he bore. Soft sheets, a cozy blanket, a good film with a dear man… Mycroft had enjoyed a lovely night and, unbelievably, there were many more to come…

And so many lovely mornings, too…

“Mycroft! You’re awake early! Just listening to the news and such. How did you sleep?”

One thing that the British Government found intriguing was that his ghost opted to ‘change’ his clothes every day, as would any living human. Today was a casual combination of khaki trousers and an olive-green jumper that complemented the ghosts warmer eyes most flatteringly. Whether this was the spirit’s normal behavior or something new given their situation was not a topic of
conversation he felt strongly about pursuing. One did not look a gift horse in the mouth…

“I tend to begin my day early as a matter of habit, but I slept quite soundly so what hours of sleep I did gain were productive ones.”

“That’s good. Hate those nights, or I did, where you lay in bed and can’t find sleep for love nor money. But, you also don’t get up and do something useful with the time either, so it’s a completely unsatisfying experience.”

“A keen observation. And you? Did you … oh, do pardon me…”

Having his mobile blare at this time of the morning was not at all unusual for Mycroft, however, it also rarely boded good things, so his frustrated frown was highly warranted.

“Yes? Ah… yes, you are likely correct. No, that will not be necessary at this point, but ready that response should matters change. Very well, I will be waiting.”

“That sounds bad.”

“Hmmmm… oh, not as dire as you might imagine, but there is a small issue that has arisen which would benefit from a quick resolution before it escalates to a large issue. We will be having visitors soon, I am afraid, so I will have to discontinue your media access for the time being. However, there is no reason the radio in the kitchen cannot be left on for your entertainment.”

“Oh, I understand that, and thanks. Actually, though, I think I’ll get enough entertainment watching you work. I bet you’re brilliant when you’re doing whatever it is you’re doing!”

Mycroft’s immediate urge to reject that option outright ran into the reality that their visitors could not actually see or hear the ghost nor could said ghost pass along any information that he learned during the meeting to anyone but dogs or hedgehogs. All in all, there was no actual basis for the objection.

“I can assure you that you will be bored to the point of tears, however, you are welcome to sit in and observe the proceedings.”

“Yes! Oh, this is going to be fun. I promise I won’t do anything to distract you, either. No asking questions or doing flips or any nonsense like that.”

“I do admit that flips would likely negatively impact my focus on matters at hand.”

“I am a fairly accomplished flipper, too, so it does stand to reason. Have time for some breakfast?”

“A bite of toast, perhaps.”

“Nah, big bowl of that oats and nuts and whatnot you bought. Fast, but that all will put the energy into you. Sounds like you might need it.”

Having someone actually care about his well-being was another thing that Mycroft could enjoy, as opposed to Mycroft Holmes. Though, in truth, Anthea was a talented hand-slapper when he reached for something decadent in his desk or in the office break room. To be presented with a carton of yogurt or piece of fruit was only the paltiest of compromises, but it did prevent any subsequent ‘sugar crashes,’ which were never a good thing when one was tasked to keep the empire on even keel.

“An excellent suggestion. Fortification will be of great benefit to my meeting, if only for
enduring the personalities likely to arrive on my doorstep."

"Not the friendliest lot?"

"If there is gain to be had from the friendship, then they are the friendliest imaginable."

"Ugh… I hate that sort. Fake, phony… can’t trust them. Why do you?"

Good question.

"Trust is not what I bestow, so much as tolerance. They have their duties to perform and if they do so properly, then I overlook their insincerity."

"That makes sense, I suppose. You do what you have to to get the job done."

"Precisely. And, now, what I must do is follow your guidance and have a rousing bowl of twigs and leaves to brace myself for that job."

"Tomorrow you can have something greasy, sugary and completely appalling."

"Promise?"

"Double promise."

Rubbing his hands together in glee, Mycroft drank in Greg’s laughter and mentally marked that his ghost went through the motions of walking beside him to the kitchen rather than floating. In so many ways, dear Gregory resembled any breathing person, albeit one far handsomer than most. It was almost too easy to believe he was actually dead…

He could not fault Gregory’s keeping of his promise, for no questions or flips had yet occurred and he also could not chastise the ghost’s rolled eyes and mouthed profanities at the ridiculous antics of their visitors. Competing governmental interests always made for ludicrous posturing, however, it did become difficult to bear when one had already suffered two hours of it. Fortunately, it was past time to declare a break and he was not required to offer anything for the infants’ refreshment since this was a purely business meeting and hostly duties were blessedly nil. If munificence rose in his breast like a reborn phoenix, there were two packets of biscuits that had proved substandard in both flavor and texture that he could toss at the barbarians laying siege to his study. Let them fight over that while he sipped his tea and enjoyed something far more palatable from the cupboard… and, this time, Anthea’s hand-slapping talents would not be in evidence…

"Now, gentlemen, if you would kindly focus back on the topic at hand…"

And if Gregory would keep his promise about not engaging in frolics while this meeting continues…

"… I would hear your analyses of the impact of both potential initiatives, focusing…"

Not on Gregory’s waving and face-making…

"… on long-term gains rather than short-term losses."

Was the ghost mad! Stomping his feet like a toddler and… what? I cannot acknowledge you, Gregory, but I am attempting to indicate you have my attention since… yes, that… bald chap…
slower, Gregory… I am an acceptable lip reader, but cannot decipher your frantic… oh. Ohhhhh… lying, is he? Made a meal… deal!… deal with the skinny young git to… ah, they have their own little scheme they are attempting to enact. Interesting. I am now nodding to indicate understanding so you can relax your performance, spirited though it was, no pun intended.

No mercy intended, either, but that is not something about which you should worry, my dear… not for a moment…

__________

“That was brilliant! I swear I could see blood seeping out of those bastards after you carved them up and tossed them out!”

And wasn’t the carving up simply the perfect thing to put a little spring in his step. Cretins… he would have discovered their duplicity no later than tomorrow evening when the first round of data began to arrive, but it was a refreshing thing to have nipped their petty ruse in the bud and saved himself the work of both fixing the mess and sacking the mess makers. Though, admittedly, the sacking part was immensely fun.

“Thank you, Gregory, though I could not have accomplished the task without your assistance.”

“I don’t like to spy on people, really, but I could see something was up with that lot the moment you stepped out to get your tea. And, they were stupid, too.”

“Oh? Based on what evidence.”

“They’re here! From just watching you today I could tell you do all sorts of that intelligence stuff I see on the telly and you’d be exactly the person I’d expect to have conversations recorded and rooms bugged and things like that. You’d have to be stupid to spell out your evil plan where it’s likely to be overheard. Good thing you sacked them… they’re supposed to be doing government things! Can’t do that when you’re stupid!”

It was probably kinder, for the moment, to allow Gregory to maintain his illusion that intelligence was the foundation of governmental business. The disillusionment would come soon enough on its own…

“That is a most thorough analysis, I must say. In truth, I do have monitoring technology in certain rooms of the house, but generally find it not worth my time to use it for simple matters that will have cross-checks before too much discord might erupt from poor information or deception. Apparently, I should rethink my strategy.”

“Glad I could help! It’s not often I can actually do something helpful, actually, so I’m happy I could step in and see those berks sorted. And… Mycroft…”

“Yes?”

“I’m… I’m fucking amazed, is what I am! What you do… and I wager today wasn’t even anything very important or special or exciting for you, was it?”

“Actually, no. Today was a banal example of what is the pattern of my normal workday. However, banal or exciting, one does what one must for queen and country.”

“I thought so. You… really, Mycroft, you do amaze me. All that genius and cleverness knocking about in your head. If I was alive I’d be relieved to know you were on the job keeping the invaders off the streets and locusts out of the fields!”
Agricultural exaggeration aside, Mycroft quelled the urge to show the smug smile he was feeling and simply smiled what he hoped was something grateful and gracious.

“Again, I thank you, Gregory. To be truthful, it is not often I am acknowledged so openly for my contributions to our little society, let alone thanked for them.”

“Well, you should be. Do you…”

Oh, that shy little-boy look, Gregory. It suits you far too well…

“Yes?”

“Do you think I could come with you one day? To work, I mean. Really see what’s what? I can’t be a bother since nobody can see or hear me, but it’s dbe interesting to get a real feel for what you do.”

Hmmmm… what he did was so far beyond the level of Classified that there was no proper term for it, but… Gregory was not in the position of revealing state secrets to anyone but the aforementioned dogs and hedgehogs and… what an interesting asset Gregory might make for an upcoming meeting with certain ambassadors of supposedly-allied nations. The supposedly becoming more and more questionable by the day…

“I fail to see a professional problem with that request and I certainly have no personal objections. I shall ponder my upcoming calendar and choose a day with a high probability of activity to keep you entertained.”

“Yes! Oh, thank you, Mycroft. That’s going to be a world of fun; I just know it is.”

“I would ask, though… how… I know you said carrying a sliver of your portrait frame could allow you to leave the house with me, but what range does it permit you?”

“Range?”

“How far from my person can you travel?”

“Oh! Oh… not far. Few steps maybe. Mrs. Hudson used to complain that I slowed down her shopping miserably because I’d stop and look at things and if she’d start walking away, I’d get dragged along like there was a rope around my waist.”

“I see… then why are you able to move freely about the house? Though, I suppose I should inquire if you can move freely about the house. You seemed to have freedom of movement at the inn.”

“That’s true. I can’t say I’ve gone to every room here yet, but I’ve wandered a bit and I’ve not had any problem, so far. I don’t know for certain, since my portrait’s not been anywhere but here and the inn, but… maybe it gets attached to the house it’s in? Gives me the run of it, though the outdoors is still out of bounds, at least, for a century or two.”

Mycroft pursed his lips, narrowed his eyes and Greg only hoped that it wasn’t for anything wrong he’d said.

“Let us experiment, shall we?”

“Experiment? Fine with me. I’m always up for something new.”
Stepping over to the portrait, Mycroft felt for the loose sliver, carefully picking it out of the frame and holding it aloft.

“Shall we?”

Greg followed Mycroft out of the study and through the house to the sitting room, where they continued out the large double-doors that led out of the house.

“Oh, this is nice. Good bit of property you have for being in London.”

“I find it pleasant, though I rarely have the time to enjoy it as thoroughly as I would like. Now, would you show me how far from me you can walk?”

Greg shrugged and started walking, making three steps before a fourth simply couldn’t happen, no matter how hard he tried. But, it was enough for an interested party to leave the room, stand on the other side of a wall and allow his representative to observe the resulting conversations in his absence.

“Interesting.”

“Told you. Not very far.”

“But there is some degree of independence. Might I try something else?”

“Go ahead. Don’t you have to go into your office today, though?”

“At some point, perhaps. Though, the matters that await me are as easily handled from home and, likely, more efficiently since there would be none to interrupt my work with this minor issue or that.”

“Good to be king.”

“Very good, actually.”

Mycroft returned Greg’s large grin and made a ‘follow me’ gesture before leading the ghost back into the study where Mycroft picked up the small painting and returned back outside.

“Would you be so kind as to try our little experiment again, Gregory?”

Greg nodded and took his three steps, nearly falling over, figuratively, when the fourth actually made progress forward. In fact, he was able to reach the shrubbery that enclosed the patio area, but could not step through the opening in the shrubbery that lead to the larger expanse of property beyond.

“I… I can walk around!”

“Did you never experiment with moving your portrait before, while at the inn?”

“No. It never occurred to me to do that. I… I never gave it any thought, actually, likely because portraits belong indoors and it didn’t connect that it could be taken outdoors, as well.”

“I would posit that your portrait claims the ‘structure’ surrounding it. Shall we move further outwards? My grounds are not large, but they are larger than this.”

“Yeah, I want to try that.”

Hoisting the portrait, Mycroft walked it beyond the patio and set it down on the ground, looking expectantly at Greg who… didn’t return the look.
“Gregory?”

“I… I don’t feel very well. And I’ve never not felt well since I died!”

“Oh dear…”

“It’s like I’m being rolled about in a barrel that’s being spun around on a rope at the same time. And it’s getting worse…”

The utter panic in Greg’s eyes snapped Mycroft into action. Snatching up the painting, Mycroft ran back to the patio where he quickly set down the portrait and darted towards the unsteady ghost, standing in impatient frustration that he couldn’t even lay a calming hand on the man’s shoulder.

“Gregory… how are you feeling?”

“Better? Yeah, that’s better. I… I’ll admit, that had me scared! Never, not ever felt anything like that. Can’t say I want to again, either.”

“And you shall not. Your painting will never leave the house and…”

“No! Can’t… it worked alright for this courtyard thing of yours!”

Mycroft mulled the situation and had to credit the point.

“True. There seems to be, however, a limit to what you are allowed, at least, in terms of structure. As long as structure exists, the painting appears to permit you movement within it. When we went beyond a formally-structured setting, the specific sense of defined space was lost. A car, a home, even this dedicated patio is fine, but something without set boundaries is not. I am so sorry, Gregory. I would never have tried that if I believed it would bring you pain.”

“I know, Mycroft. Truthfully, I wouldn’t have done it either! I’m glad we did, though. If it’s a nice day, you can bring my painting out here and we can enjoy ourselves without me having to always be within three steps of you. Could we, though… can we try one more thing?”

“I am loath to expose you to more suffering.”

“Me, too! I just want to see…”

Greg took a breath and walked forward, hesitating slightly before trying to step into the sitting room and failing.

“Shite!”

“Your portrait is somewhat dictatorial about its territorial boundaries, I’m afraid. Though…”

Deciding there was nothing wrong with following a flash of whimsy, given the scenario involved a ghost, Mycroft picked up the portrait and set it so that it leaned against the doorframe, half in the house and half out of the house.

“And now, Gregory?”

The ‘ooh’ expression on Greg’s face gave Mycroft hope, which faltered as Greg hit the entry and stopped.

“Well, at least we know…”
“Hold on. It wasn’t the same. Let me…”

Watching a person fight against thin air to the point where they were snarling and looking, frankly, murderous was positively mesmerizing to Mycroft, but that didn’t stop him cheering rather embarrassingly when Greg suddenly exploded into the sitting room and raised his arms in victory.

“That was fucking ridiculous, but I did it!”

“A stellar effort, Gregory, simply stellar. And visibly grueling, so I applaud your perseverance.”

“This means you can leave that there on nice days and I can go in and out as I please.”

Greg’s enormous grin warmed Mycroft’s heart, though it saddened it, also, when he realized how much this miniscule bit of freedom meant to the ghost. So little a thing was so, so very precious…

“I am thrilled for you, my dear, utterly thrilled. But, can you not move your portrait to that yourself, as you could the crock and your pen?”

Greg shook his head ruefully and demonstrated how cleanly his hand swept right through the picture and frame as if it wasn’t there.

“No, and believe me, I’ve done a lot of trying.”

“Well, it is something around which we can work since both of my hands function perfectly well and are highly amenable to the task. However, we must be cautious that a thieving hound does not see your image and, being alerted by the infernal Toby that you are an ally, attempt to steal you away for a game of chase.”

Greg’s throaty laughter greeted Mycroft as he joined the ghost in the sitting room and began to wonder if he enclosed his patio area, would it count towards the house proper, so this bodged-together solution would not be necessary. Of course, an enclosing would negate its value of being outdoors, so… something to think about for another day. Savor the current victory and debate not the future battles…

“Might we, do you think, make good use of our discovery by enjoying the morning newspapers under our weak British sunshine?”

“That sounds perfect! If you spread them out a bit on the table you have out there, we can both read easily enough.”

“Then it shall be done. I will bring a refreshing beverage for myself and my laptop so I might keep an eye on work as we relax, but relax we shall and celebrate your expanded independence.”

“Mix business with pleasure. This is one time I think that’s a smart plan.”

Mycroft grinned at the faux self-satisfied smile on the ghost’s face and wagged a longer finger in Greg’s direction before moving off to collect the newspapers and his laptop. That would also give his ghost some privacy as he fought a second time to push through the barrier that separated him from the outdoors. Such an exhausting thing it seemed, but… could a ghost become exhausted? He could become pained or ill or disturbed, that had been proved, but exhausted? Something he would, in all likelihood learn, at some point, since the spirit did not seem the type to let complacency lull him into an unchallenging life, especially now that he had learned something new…
Poor Mycroft… Man can’t even relax very long without the long arms of the world reaching out and dragging him to his office. Not that it wasn’t important, because those fucking terrorist bastards need their bollocks kicked good and hard and Mycroft had mighty kicking foot, from what he could see, but… drat. And the skies had clouded, so the portrait was back in the study. No telling what would happen if it got damaged and that was not an experiment he was willing to try for any reason, no matter how tempting. Especially since…

He could go outdoors! Not far and not all of the time, but when Mycroft was at home, he had some freedom to go out and… do what he wanted to do. He couldn’t really do very much, of course, but just being able to watch the clouds or simply have new sights to see was an extraordinary thing. Mycroft’s brain was unbelievable! Why hadn’t he ever thought before about asking someone to take his portrait outside at the inn? Do any form of experimentation to test what he could and couldn’t do? Probably because he didn’t have an unbelievable brain. But, also, because… maybe he’d gotten resigned to his situation and more despondent about it than he told Mycroft. Why try anything if you’re convinced nothing can ever change.

But something had changed. Something new in his life that turned it upside down. A gorgeous, brilliant man with a fantastic sense of humor who… well, maybe Mycroft had believed him a dream or something, but he was willing to talk and get to know each other and that was something not everyone would do. Not that he’d tried very hard or very often, after the first century of trying to gain people’s attention and just scaring them or making them think they were loony, but… this time he knew he had to try, really try, and it worked! Now, they had a real chance for… something. Not that the ‘something’ was very well defined at this point but definition wasn’t exactly needed for something to exist. Look at him! Ghosts weren’t very well defined, but he existed. Ok, maybe ghosts were fairly well defined, but since the definition wasn’t much more than dead person larking about, which applied to zombies, too, and vampires, the point still stood. Sort of.

Didn’t matter though… they were making a go of it and whether he was a ghost or… oh hello…

Sherlock barging through the house’s front door and then through Greg was an unexpected feature of the day, but a more interesting one, from Greg’s perspective, was the shorter, blond fellow that followed after, shouting at the detective and… stopping a few steps after he’d barged through the amused apparition and looking back at the empty space with great curiosity.

“Sherlock…”

“I am entirely unwilling to hear another verse of your hysterical opera castigating me for entering my brother’s own home to borrow one… or some… of his ties for an experiment.”

“First, you evil bastard, you broke into the house, which is both rude and illegal, and you plan on stealing his ties to completely destroy with whatever you were brewing in MY favorite cup this morning!”

“None of my beakers were clean.”

“You….”

Watching Short Blond vibrate with angry energy made Greg laugh and decide that if these two weren’t a couple he’d owe himself a ghostly ten quid.

“… if you are going to have a stroke, John, I would appreciate it if you waited until I have completed my mission, so I do not have to waste time phoning for an ambulance.”

“Consider your bed privileges revoked for a fucking week!”
Couple! Ghost money stays in ghost pocket, thank you very much.

“That is utterly unfair. The sofa is riddled with smallpox or some other contagion!”

“You have the mildest of mild allergies to whatever fiber is in the upholstery. Put a sheet over it and you won’t notice a thing, just like… look, when you barged in here like you were hoping to catch Mycroft in a corset dancing to Edith Piaf, did you… notice anything?”

“You have destroyed my brain with that horrifying image and now I can’t think, let alone notice!”

Well, that was rude. Mycroft in a corset was… well, there weren’t many images lovelier than that in this ghost’s mind. He’d seen a few of them, with lovely silk and lace and… alright, not thinking about that anymore or he’d miss the fun of the couple’s fight! But… lots more thinking about that later. With the dancing bit, too.

“Shut it! Seriously, did you… feel anything when you came in here?”

Oh… this was interesting. For reasons other than corsets.

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“No… cold spot right about there.”

Very interesting…

“No.”

“Not even a little?”

“The stroke option has not left the table, John.”

“Fuck you. It’s…”

John peered hard at what would have been Greg, if he could see him, then huffed out a soft, annoyed sigh.

“… nothing, I suppose. Just thought… ok, forget about that and let’s get the ONE tie I agreed you could take and it’s specifically the one your brother mentioned he wasn’t particularly fond of, so he likely won’t retaliate with too much firepower when he finds you’ve nicked it.”

“You are stifling science, John.”

“You are stifling… the world.”

“That is both inane and impossible.”

“Prove it.”

“I… you are hereby warned, John.”

“About what?”
“… The world.”

“I’m shaking. Will you please get your ONE tie and…”

“Two.”

“One.”

“Three.”

“Do you have any idea how to negotiate?”

“That is Mycroft’s job.”

“They’re also his ties!”

“Plural! I win!”

Sherlock ran off at top speed and John raced after him, leaving Greg to laugh, but only for a moment as he fell into a moment of thought. John and Sherlock were a couple and John seemed to have a bit of sensitivity to individuals currently not among the living. That could mean a little fun, for him, that is, and if he’d learned one thing in this long, long death it was that fun wasn’t something you passed by when you found it. Maybe Mycroft needed to invite his brother over for a nice dinner soon. An invitation that included more than Sherlock…
That bastard is going to steal Mycroft’s ties! That’s not a nice thing to do, but I can’t fucking haul him off to the stocks… no stocks and no real hands! Mycroft’s got beautiful ties, too. Definitely some lovely ones in that forest Sherlock’s cutting through like a woodsman…

“Mycroft has a very nice house, I have to admit that.”

Hey! You make a rude noise, you keep the spittle in your mouth and not on Mycroft’s nice ties, you prat! Your brother should give you a good spanking for being an evil little brat, Sherlock.

“Mycroft’s house is as fussy, formal and soul-stripping as is the Mycroft that owns it. You are far too easily pleased, John.”

“Well, I like it. Warm, solid… proper man’s house.”

“How is unfortunate, since Mycroft certainly does not fit that description.”

Mycroft is a very proper man, I’ll have you know, though I admit I haven’t seen his various bits and pieces. You’re just being a colossal…

prise…

“Sherlock… did you hear that?”

Sherlock glared at John, who had interrupted his rummaging through Mycroft’s enormous walk-in closet, and glared all the harder when he realized his glare wasn’t being given its due notice.

“If we have returned to the arena of mental defects, John, I will not be content.”

“Shut it, you. I’m not joking… did you hear anything?”

“All I have heard is you. And not in a manner that I find at all pleasing.”

Oh lad… I’d say you’re losing your nice nighttime cuddle for more than a week now. John here looks about to throttle you.

“Do you… is anything I say, is any one, single thing I say taken seriously? If I fucking said I was dying, would you just sneer at me and say that you had no proof and I was insulting your ears with my groans of pain?”

Two weeks. Your cock is going to be a lonely, lonely thing for two weeks at least, Sherlock. Ha!

“I… that is…”

“Get your blasted tie and let’s get out of here. I didn’t want to do this in the first place and… hurry up.”

Not that tie! It’s gorgeous!

No…. not that one…

“Sherlock! That’s… here.”
John reached up and took the tie they were supposed to steal and quickly put back the others Sherlock had tried to sneak under his coat when he thought John wasn’t looking.

*Good…*

> “Now, Sherlock. We need to leave now.”

> “John! I… what is wrong with you?”

> “Nothing. I’m… I’m hungry and not entirely happy about burglarizing your brother’s house. As it is, he’s probably got us on tape committing our theft and if I, at least, seem a reasonable villain, I may get fewer years in the cells than you when our sentences are pronounced.”

> “Mycroft wouldn’t have me arrested.”

*Untrue…*

> “It *is* the truth, John. Mycroft knows…”

> “Sherlock… I didn’t say anything.”

> “Yes, you did.”

No, he didn’t, so listen to Short Blond, you bloody idiot, and leave your brother’s ties alone.

> “No, *I didn’t.*”

> “First, you deny me the proper sample size for my experiment and now you are playing childish games. You obviously need tea. Come along.”

Grabbing John by the arm, Sherlock began marching him out of the bedroom, accompanied by Greg’s silent laughter and *very* childish skipping to follow the pair down the stairs and to the kitchen.

> “Sherlock! I don’t need tea and I’m not being childish!”

> “I find everything in that statement false except my own name.”

John’s hands thrown up in annoyance made Greg laugh harder, then muster his ghostly energy for another verbal bout.

*Pompous bugger…*

> “Bloody right he is! Wait… Sherlock… leave the tea. We need to go. Go now as in it should have been *before* now, but *this* now will do in a pinch.”

> “Pfft. I have already disgraced myself by touching Mycroft’s kettle, which is slathered with his viscous and putrid skin oils, and I will not allow my sacrifice go to waste because you are having a case of the vapors.”

*Complete bastard…*

> “Did you really not hear that!”

> “Yes, I heard every word you shrieked.”

*Punch him…*
Something John did gladly because the disembodied voice was making a lot of sense at the moment.

“Ow! My arm is now entirely useless!”

“I saved you being further soiled by Mycroft’s oil. You can thank me later when we’re out of here.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes!”

“No. Now, I want tea.”

“I’ll buy tea for you.”

“You can’t buy the tea Mycroft keeps hidden away that he specifically has imported for his personal use.”

“I don’t… really?”

Don’t give in…

“Right. No giving in. Now, Sherlock. Let’s go now.”

“John… I am beginning to worry about you.”

Well, that’s encouraging! Got to learn to listen to your boyfriend or husband or whatever he is, Sherlock. That’s important when you’re a couple. Practice a bit, though, will you? You’re not particularly good at it, at the moment.

“Then unworry yourself by leaving with me.”

“No, I believe tea is still the correct course of action. I will, though, put more biscuits on your plate than I was intending, for I have noticed that the combination of butter, sugar and tea is more effective in tempering your foul moods than tea alone.”

There’s that sciencey brain of yours working, Sherlock. Make John here comfortable while he deals with…

Yum…

… yummy biscuits.

“Exactly, John. It is always to your advantage to agree with me since the correctness of my analyses is never in question. Now, sit.”

John’s fuming genuinely impressed Greg who had seen some very forceful fuming in his years and he gladly awarded John a spot near the top of his list. For his part, John decided that if he couldn’t pry stubborn Sherlock out of the house, then tea and biscuits was likely the best possible way to weather his mental breakdown.

“Fine! But… be quick about it.”
“You become infuriated when I do not brew the tea for as long as you prefer, which is FAR longer than a civilized person finds acceptable, so… no.”

Prat…

“Thank you! Oh no. Fuck me… ok, that’s it.”

“I agree. Your tendency today for name-calling is staggering. And, for your information, I have born far worse insults than ‘prat’ with grace and dignity, so your petty hurling of invectives is as effective as flicking a pea at a prison wall. In the future, I expect… urgh…”

Being dragged out of the kitchen by his collar was not how Sherlock planned his exit from Mycroft’s house, but that’s how it happened and Greg laughed long and hard at how easily John could manhandle the tall, lanky pain in the arse when the situation called for it. Oh, but now those yummy biscuits were sitting out where the ants could get them. Or mice. Probably get stale, too. And he couldn’t do one thing to help. Or eat any. He really missed eating… especially delicious things like biscuits. And there was just no doubt Mycroft had the very best, because he had the best of everything. They looked expensive and tasty and marvelous and he couldn’t have one teeny tiny bite. Being dead wasn’t very much fun sometimes.

Except the times it was. Hopefully, they’d have visitors again soon. Very soon would be preferred… these particular visitors, too. There was a lot of fun to be had with this happy couple and Gregory Lestrade was very much a proponent of fun in any and all forms he could find it…

And, yes, it was an incredible amount of fun to tell his story to Mycroft when he finally came home from work. Mycroft had such a wonderful laugh…

“Oh, dear heavens… that was extremely incautious, Gregory, but I cannot fault you for the japery. John does have a typhoonic temper when his dander is up and Sherlock is incapable of recognizing the escalation of that temper until the typhoon has crashed upon his proverbial shores.”

“He really can’t, can he? Poor lad just keeps winding John up until the explosion occurs. He’s got some awareness, though, I think. It was smart of him to offer your nice tea, to calm the storm, which I notice you do keep hidden away like it’s pirate’s treasure.”

“You have no idea how precious is that tea, Gregory. The number of odious bureaucrats with whom I must deal in order to continue my regular delivery. The crushing multitude of fake smiles I must affect and eons of soul-deadening small-talk I must endure… It is a monstrous, shameful thing I do, but…”

“It’s worth it.”

“Absolutely.”

Greg, again, admired Mycroft’s lilting laughter and the fact that one of the still-sitting-on-the-coutertop biscuits was Mycroft’s self-reward for his bit of humor.

“Every man needs to make certain his needs and his pleasures are satisfied. Well done, Mycroft! Hope the biscuits didn’t suffer, though, from having to sit abandoned like that. I can vouch, though, that no mice or ants had a nibble while they waited for you.”

“They remain in near-pristine condition, but I do appreciate your vigilance in ensuring my small pre-dinner morsel was not defiled by pestiferous creatures.”
“Besides your brother, you mean.”

“Precisely. But you would do well to tread lightly with the good doctor, Gregory. He is a tenacious creature and, now that you have stirred his mental and emotional stewpot…”

“Yeah, I know. It was a bit… more than bit… stupid, but, sometimes, stupid is fun and I don’t see a lot of fun in my day. Well, that’s not really true anymore since I did get more than my usual level of fun with Mrs. Hudson and it’s just ballooned with me being here, but… spooking people is fun no matter where you are.”

If the ghost’s smile was any more luminous, the sun would hide its face in shame. And so would Mycroft if he ever found that part of a ghost’s ability was the reading of minds and the embarrassing thoughts they contained.

“Do I detect a trace of hopefulness on your part that it will spur John or Sherlock to return to investigate further?”

“I… didn’t say that. I thought, actually, you might invite them for drinks or dinner or something of the like and I could get to know them better. Just like we would do if I was still alive.”

“So you might continue with your spooking.”

“Ummmmmm…..”

“You are a scamp, Gregory Lestrade. Positively a scamp.”

“That means it’ll be this week for dinner, right?”

Popping another biscuit into his mouth to stop the next bit of laughter escaping his lips, Mycroft wagged a chastising finger and admired Greg’s naughty-boy grin more than was decent. It did rather scandalous things to his nethers, so decency was officially not an acceptable descriptor.

“We shall see.”

“Yes! Your eyes are twinkling, so we can start planning the menu!”

Grin and shimmy… oh, you do bring to bear your most potent weapons to secure my agreement, do you not… well, if one must find defeat, it should always be this pleasing to the eye.

“Sherlock cares little for the nature of the food with which he is presented and John would gladly live on the cuisine of whatever take-away provider they are frequenting that week, so if I but have delivered a few cartons of something containing sufficient grease, salt and monosodium glutamate, he shall be content.”

“Nope. We’re going to plan something healthy and delicious, and you’ll be the gracious host while I whisper things in John’s ear to make him crazy.”

“Delightful. Not Sherlock, though? Shall he be spared your mischief-making? I admit that it would demonstrate laudable foresight given you have recognized his lunacy is already at an unhealthy level.”

“He is loony, that can’t be denied, but it’s really that he seems to block me out when he has a mind to. I know I was loud enough now and again for him to hear me clearly, though it took a lot of effort to make that happen, so I suspect he just refused to admit he was hearing things and blamed it on John as an excuse.”
“That isn’t at all impossible. Sherlock would rebel sharply at the thought of either his senses betraying him so markedly that he was having hallucinations or his senses being correct and there was a voice, though it was not attached to a person standing with him in the room.”

“Won’t stop me from having my spooky way with him, though.”

That, more than anything, was convincing Mycroft to let his ghost have his fun. Sherlock being discombobulated by a spirit was a fantastically entertaining mental image…

“Well, it is certainly something we can discuss in more depth, if you so choose. Now, I find myself in need of a…”

The sound of the doorbell brought a frown to Mycroft’s face, both for the postponement of his hoped-for shower and the postponement of his evening with his ghost, but there was nothing for it, given a visitor standing squarely on his doorstep. However, there was a high probability the visitor was someone he had hoped might stop by, so…

“If you will excuse me.”

Greg thought about following Mycroft to the door, then decided that, if this was important, his shenanigans wouldn’t be appropriate, so chose to wander into the sitting room, instead, where one of the programmes he liked to watch was getting started on the telly. The fact he stood near the door of the sitting room so he could actually hear the conversation at the door was completely coincidental.

“Excellent. I appreciate the additional effort required for this, Charles.”

“You’re welcome, sir. Mrs. Hudson was very specific about things and… just a moment… hold out for me back… this is for you, too.”

“Oh… I do not remember requesting a trunk.”

That had Greg’s attention fully turned towards the front entrance now and for an extremely hopeful reason

“Very specific about things, sir. It’s only a standard-sized one, if that helps. Not likely to harbor a hungry lion or that fellow you said deliberately gives me the pastry with the meagerest drizzling of chocolate because he knows it’s you I’m getting it for and he has an unreasonable hatred of you, given your unflattering description of his muffins.”

“They are heavy, overly moist and lacking in flavor. No, I take that back, they are well-provided with flavor, which is a culinary prize if one enjoys flavors that are produced in chemical factories and shipped to sub-par bakeries in oil-drum sized vats.”

“Yet, you enjoy his yeasty pastries to the point I have to stop there at least three times a week. Four if you’ve had a meeting with a certain individual who minds the Treasury and you call a blancmange brain behind his back.”

“The man has not the intelligence to match his shoes in the morning, let alone steer the course of our monetary reserves. And, for your information, yeast-dough pastries are not muffins. I believe the offender’s wife, in fact, is the one who prepares the pastry dough and I have seen the look in her eye when he puts out a tray of his accursed baked goods. Her opinion of them is as low as mine, I would wager a year’s salary on the fact.”

The pastry analysis gave Greg time to join the pair and begin to do a little dance at the sight of the large, old trunk on the floor. Realizing his attention could not be divided between an impudent
driver and a gleeful ghost, Mycroft decided one should be dismissed. Since the driver was there for the ghost, Charles was the beneficiary of Mycroft’s run-along flick of the wrist.

“However, since neither muffins nor pastries are on offer, your duty is hereby discharged and you are free to leave for the evening.”

“With tomorrow off, correct?”

“That was our agreement, yes.”

“Then my local says thank you, since it hasn’t seen any of my business in what seems alike a fortnight. Enjoy your evening, sir.”

“You, as well, Charles.”

Mycroft waited until the door was firmly closed to openly admire Greg’s joyful antics as he made ‘gimme’ gestures at the trunk on the floor.

“You seem most anxious, Gregory.”

“You evil, bastard! You know I am… did you… is it…”

Mycroft let the slim case held in his left hand come out into view and relished the ghost’s shout of joy.

“My pen!”

“I asked Charles to collect it when he went today to collect our vehicle, which had been excavated from its muddy tomb. However, the rest is somewhat a surprise for me, though, not, it appears, for you.”

“Bring it into the sitting room or your study, will you?”

Given the girth, heft and dustiness of the trunk, Mycroft rued dismissing his driver, but hoisted the chest aloft with a minimum of audible effort or visible dust-disgust and followed the ghost further into the house, continuing on towards the sitting room where the sofa table would make a good temporary resting place for their new acquisition.

“Open it!”

Greg’s excitement was a joy to behold and Mycroft a moment to behold that joy before unfastening the latches and raising the lid.

“Good heavens… no wonder it was so heavy.”

The chest was filled with paper! Reams and reams of paper, tied with string or ribbon or twine.

“My writing!”

With the light going on in his mind, Mycroft smiled and lifted out a few of the parcels of paper, admiring the charmingly old-fashioned script that covered the pages.

“You saved the various missives you wrote.”

“Some of them. Not all, because a lot were just rubbish or went nowhere, but the ones I took pride in, I did. And, dig a bit to see… yes! The ones with that blue ribbon are… I suppose you
could say were my journals. Wrote about the people at the inn or what I did that week, not that it was every much, but now and again, I’d give someone a scare or a kind word, though they probably thought it was their own voice-in-the-head talking. I thought about asking for all of this, but I didn’t want to be a bother. Mrs. Hudson must have thought I’d want it, though.”

“Apparently so, and right she was. This is a treasure, Gregory. The journals alone are a very interesting chronicle and I hope you continue them now that you are here.”

“I plan to! Write down all sorts of things, especially now that I have more than simple things to write about. No government secrets, though, I promise that. ‘Had visitors today and they were dreadful and boring,’ that sort of thing will do. Oh and the lying and being bastards part. That’ll be in there, with large letters, to show how important it was.”

Not that Mycroft had worried about the ghost writing an expose of classified government discussions, but the fact that Greg had already ruled out that direction of his writing was gratifying.

“The nation thanks you for your discretion.”

“Always good to have the nation’s thanks. Now… is there ink with my pen?”

Mycroft opened the case and found a small vial of ink and dropper to help fill the pen. Staring a moment at the writing instrument, Mycroft had one of his sadly-familiar pangs at how such little things held so great an importance in the ghost’s life. Then pen was a lower quality specimen, nothing much in the way of decoration of embellishment and unlikely to inspire one to literary aspirations if one saw it in a shop window. Probably a specimen purchased by someone of limited means or by a heftier purse who wanted an instrument for travel that they would not mind losing or lending, never to see it returned. It had seen use, too. Bore its fair share of scratches and dings and carried that particular shiny patina that indicated buffing through use rather than the cleansing shine of a cloth. He, himself, possessed a number of pens from this particular era and they were exquisite specimens, both of art and of function. However, he could not say he cherished any as much as Gregory cherished this plain, black specimen with the slightly bend nib.

“You have a small quantity, but I will have more for you tomorrow. Paper, however, I do have in plentiful supply and you are free to make use of whatever quantity you desire.”

“Thanks! Oh, this is going to be great! Listen to the radio or watch the telly and scribble down my thoughts. Might even give me an inspiration for a story or two. You’ll need to spread the paper out for me, since I can’t move it, but I don’t tend to go through more than five or ten pages in a night. Sometimes, if I really get a great idea or if I want to sketch something, but…”

“I can lay out as many sheets as you wish, in whatever configuration you prefer. Is there a room you believe more conducive to your writing process?”

“Ummmm… in here, maybe? I need hard surfaces, and this room has the sofa table and some big sections of wood floor between the rugs. The kitchen’s too bright, I think. I like something a little more warm when I’m writing. It’s silly, I suppose, but…”

“Not at all. Everyone has preferred atmospheres for various tasks. We could… yes, that is a workable idea. It would be an easy thing to establish for you a study, similar to mine, albeit one with a table, in addition to the standard desk, perhaps. It could be a private place to do your work, even if I have visitors or must concentrate on my own matters and require a degree of quiet. A television and radio could easily be added and… hmmm…”

“Really? You’d let me have space of my own like that? It’d be great, actually, since, often, I’d
in the middle of something and my papers would have to be put away because the guests at the inn were waking and the staff was going about their business. What were you thinking about at the end there, though?

Something Mycroft appeared still to be thinking about, so it took him a moment to respond.

“An experiment, actually. Though not one for tonight, I feel. It is not something I would want to try without some… preparation.”

“That sounds unhappy.”

“Not at all, if it goes well. Tomorrow or the next day will easily suffice. For now, it is still somewhat early and I hear the call of my shower growing loud. Do you wish me to fill your pen before I go upstairs or…”

“Later is fine. I’m not quite ready to write yet, though I suspect that’s how I’ll spend most of tonight after you go to bed. I’d like to hear about your day first, though, and then, maybe we can watch a film?”

“I find that an excellent suggestion. I shall make haste so we might begin our activities as soon as possible.”

Something which Mycroft was finding gave him his own sense of glee. It had actually been a balm to his mind to know that he was coming home tonight to someone who would help kick work matters out of his brain and let other, more pleasant matters take their place. A comedy tonight would be just the thing, he felt, to celebrate the events of the day. That it would make his ghost laugh his mesmerizing laugh was simply an ancillary benefit… but one took one’s benefits where one found them…

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“My, but this is a delicate task.”

His own nearly museum-quality pens were more for collecting or viewing purposes and they served those purposes extremely well. He’d never actually had the urge to write with them, however, and… apparently, his instincts were sound if this amount of fuss was required to keep the blasted things working.

“I’d do it myself, but the dropper’s gotten lost or stepped on over the years and had to be replaced.”

“No matter. I simply had to recall the proper technique and provide more attention to the task than I had anticipated.”

Else there would be an ink-stained Mycroft Holmes greeting his PA in the morning. A PA who would certainly find the situation wildly amusing for the entire day. At minimum.

“And… done. Your pen is filled with ink and there is a full fifteen sheets of paper available for your use. You are certain that shall be enough?”

“I am. If it makes you feel better, though, strew more around. Too many certainly isn’t a problem, as long as there’s space for them.”

Mycroft hmmmm’d a moment, then put five more sheets of paper on a clear section of floor near the door to his study.
“There. I would hate to discover in the morning that an inspired night of writing was cut short due to lack of materials. Fortunately…”

“Fortunately what?”

“Oh, nothing. Not at the moment, in any case. Now, though… would it be an imposition…”

“What?”

“Might I watch you write for a little while? I admit it is a rather thrilling thing to consider, you being able to manipulate an object, especially one that will produce something that endures. I do not want to bother you or intrude on your thoughts, however.”

“I’d love you to watch! I was actually going to record some of the things that’s happened since I arrived and you can help me with that. Add in your thoughts, impressions and little details that I might forget.”

Mycroft smiled broadly, then squawked in surprise when Greg floated upward and laid, as if on a cloud, in thin air above a sheet of paper on the sofa table. Failure to admit to the squawking made Mycroft even more determined not to admit to the excited gasp he uttered when Greg picked up the old, battered pen and began to move it across the page.

“If I actually have a desk or table, I tend to… sit rather than hover like this, but whatever works, right?”

“Most assuredly. I, however, shall enjoy the benefits of sitting while we discuss your composition. I must remark upon your handwriting though, Gregory. It is most lovely… a skill sadly lost to many of this day and age.”

“Learned to write properly from my dad. He learned from a member of the clergy who passed through our village on his way somewhere and lingered awhile to make certain everyone was doing their part to read the Bible, pray and all of that.”

“Then my thanks go out to them for passing along the skill to you. Though… Gregory. This cannot stand.”

“What?”

“Your spelling is atrocious. Your eight-word sentence already boasts half of its words misspelled and you cannot claim archaic word forms for the term ‘tellie’ since it did not exist in your living day.”

“It’s spelled with a -y at the end, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“Yeah, I always forget that for some reason. Maybe because I knew a girl named Nellie, with an -ie, when I was younger and once wrote her one of those love letters. I had to read it to her, since she couldn’t actually read herself, but she appreciated it anyway.”

Swallowing down the sour taste of jealousy for a woman now dead for centuries, Mycroft merely nodded and tapped the paper for Greg to scratch through his mistakes, which the ghost had to mentally admit were a few more than usual. It was so exciting, though! His pen, all the paper and ink he could ever want and since the house wasn’t used during the day, he could write whenever he chose! And his own study… that would be the most wonderful thing imaginable. Not only for
avoiding having to set things aside, but, more importantly, just…

… to have a place to call his own. He hadn’t had that since he died. At the inn, there wasn’t space besides the cellar or attic that wasn’t being used, but here… here he could actually claim something as his. Mycroft probably would help make it the way he wanted it, too. Put in little things that would make it nicer to look at and feel right, the way a room feels right when it’s exactly the way you want it, even if everyone else thought it was horrid. They could work on that tomorrow night, maybe, if Mycroft had time and wasn’t too tired or…

“Gregory, is something wrong?”

“What? Oh… woolgathering. I’m just so… happy. Really, I’m simply and happy, more so than I’ve been in a long time.”

Wishing with all that was in him that he could, at the very least, reach over and give Greg’s shoulder a squeeze, Mycroft did the only thing he could, which was smile and suggest that happiness form the theme of this night’s journaling, an idea that Greg quickly decided was the perfect way to proceed. No touches could be shared, but this, time eagerly and intimately spent, was there’s for the sharing and it was more than many had in this lifetime.

Mycroft, though, reluctantly acknowledged that the point might come where this was no longer enough… he was not sufficiently foolish to ignore the fact that he was not the most openly engaging and affable of men… but that was a problem every couple faced. The realization that the bloom and blush of the new and exciting had worn away and that to continue on would require something more than the shallow entertainments that filled the early days of any relationship. Not that they were officially, in any manner, a couple, but one did not ignore the theoretical construct simply because it yet lacked girders and beams to support it. Well, that was bridge to be crossed when they reached it. Tonight was for other things… delightful other things and…

“Gregory! That, most certainly, is not even a word.”

“I think you’re wrong.”

“I most certainly am not.”

“Really? I thought I got that one right.”

“I shall provide proof. The Oxford English Dictionary shall prevail in this, have no doubt.”

“That’s because you wrote it, didn’t you?”

“Balderdash. Though… I may have submitted certain corrections and amendments over the years.”

“Already cheating me out of my spelling victory!”

“The only victory here is for the OED when you are trounced mightily by its weighty authority.”

“That sounds painful.”

“Crimes against language merit harsh punishment.”

“Hence your corrections and amendments. I bet they were sharply worded, weren’t they?”

“They could stab through a tombstone.”
Giggling at themselves for being middle-aged children, Mycroft leaned back on the sofa and Greg rebelliously put an exclamation point after his contested word, even though it was in the middle of a sentence. Somehow, both suspected it would be quite awhile before Mycroft made his way to bed and that was perfectly alright with them. What was an extra hour’s sleep when one had an essay on happiness to script? Especially when your collaborator was positively radiant when they giggled…
Chapter 14

What a night. What a wonderful, amazing night on top of all the other wonderful, amazing nights he’d had since he’d moved himself to Mycroft’s house. This was the sort of thing that... well, he’d never actually dreamed it since he didn’t sleep, but he’d *daydreamed* about it and that was very nearly the same thing. More radio and telly-with-a-y than he’d ever known, his pen, scads of paper and now... his own study. Mycroft had made certain to do an investigation of the house before he’d left for work this morning and it only took a short bit of looking before... this lovely creature became his. A large, solid, proper room, with rich wood, those in-wall shelves with serious, but gorgeous books and knick-knacks, and several of those Oriental rugs... that one with reds, golds and blacks and that one with some green mixed in, too... that made you *want* to be in here. Crystal decanters and glasses that were empty now, but... it was stupid to ask Mycroft to put something in there since he couldn’t drink it, but Mycroft could, and there was something about the rich shades of brown and gold of fine spirits that matched perfectly with a room like this. And the vision of Mycroft sitting on the small, leather-bound sofa sipping something marvelous while they talked, maybe about what he wrote that day! A dream! Really, this was a wonderful, wonderful dream...

And there was a window, too! He’d have to ask Mycroft to open and close the curtains, but it looked out onto Mycroft’s lovely property and it was as pleasant a view as he’d had at the inn. Better, in some ways, because he could actually go outdoors in good weather, if his portrait was placed correctly, and walk about a little to get some inspiration and fresh air. Not that he *needed* fresh air, but there were some things that being dead just didn’t erase. Seeing the sun, being in the fresh air, enjoying the comforts of a cozy room... he didn’t need or even sense some of what made those things joyful, but they still were and now he was reaping them aplenty.

Mycroft had even taken time to shift the rugs around a little to clear floor space and moved the lovely crystal from the sideboard to a cleared spot on one of the shelves so the sideboard would be free for all the sheets of paper he’d then spread about for some writing. That was a LOT of paper, too. And all of it tidily kept in here so it didn’t clutter Mycroft’s nice house and have to be packed away most days where it couldn’t be reached by a ghost with no ability to reach, no matter how hard he tried.

However... ok, Mycroft was supposed to be at work and he’d not said to expect anyone to arrive while he was out, so the noise he just heard had no business being here and disrupting his happy admiration of his new study. That was definitely a person sneaking around noise and one that was screamingly familiar to a ghost who’d spent centuries in an inn where sneaking about was something of a common thing when people paying secret visits to rooms housing people they might fancy but didn’t want other people to know about the fancying...

Smiling that he could move through the door without opening it so as not to alert the intruder, Greg looked through the house and held back the laughter when he found John skulking around the floor above, peeking into each room as if he was worried a werewolf would jump out and eat his head if he stuck it in too far. When each room was checked, John turned and went back to the ground floor and continued the skulking, finding two locked doors thwarting his path, the one to Mycroft’s study and the one to Greg’s, but didn’t stoop to picking the locks, or trying to, to get a look inside. Finally, John stood in the middle of the sitting room, gave his jumper a tug, straightened his shoulders and cleared his throat.

“Alright... I know you’re here and I’m telling you right now that I *know* you’re here, so playing silly buggers isn’t going to work. You’re not going to frighten away Mycroft and you’re certainly not going to frighten away me. Not going to happen, not for any reason, so get that through your head right now. I have no idea why or how you’ve settled here and, honestly, I don’t care, but you
don’t have any power, do you understand. You don’t. You can’t hurt me. You might want to, you might want to hurt everyone, but you can’t. You want to try and scare me, go ahead. It won’t work. One of you lot already gave it a go and failed miserably. Just as miserably as you’ll fail, so don’t waste your time.”

Huffing out a steadying breath, John nodded once and stormed out of the house before Greg had a chance to stop him, though, the ghost desperately wished he would have shaken off his surprise to do just that. John had seen a ghost before! Or heard one or something else ghost-associated! That was great! No, strike that. It wasn’t great, since John had been scared by the ghost and it sounded as if the ghost wanted to scare him. Really scare him, too, not lark about being stupid. That wasn’t great, at all. Mycroft probably didn’t know about John having a fright or he would have said something before or after John and Sherlock went on their burglary spree. That would have been helpful because if he’d known, he wouldn’t have been so cruel as to play games with someone who he’d actually hurt by doing it.

Well, that didn’t matter now. John thought he was trying to be an evil ghost and that couldn’t be allowed to stand. That wasn’t the person he was unless there was a damned good reason for it! There wasn’t a good reason here, so… yeah, that could be allowed to stand. Definitely needed a conversation with Mycroft about what to do to make this right, but, since he couldn’t phone or do that email magic or any fucking thing to make that happen, he’d have to wait until tonight. He could use the time to think, though. Didn’t need arms or email to think, so he could do a lot of it until he had a chance to share that thinking when Mycroft came home.

Poor John, though… that had to be a terrible thing for him to go through. Not that he’d actually seen any ghosts trying to be terrible, but there was enough of that on the telly and in films to make it seem something you’d want to avoid at any cost. Well, Greg Lestrade was going to change that. Show that ghosts could be a little thick, at times, but really were decent souls who just wanted to have a bit of a laugh when they could to break up the monotony. Mycroft would certainly want to help with that., wouldn’t he? Couldn’t let his brother’s whatever live in fear of ghosts! There was one in the family now, so to speak, and, besides, no one should be fearful of anything in their life. It wasn’t right and Greg Lestrade was all about doing what was right… usually… luckily, his exceptions to that rule were few, far between and more idiotic and short-sighted than actually mean-spirited. However, he wasn’t eager to add any exceptions to that list and this one certainly wasn’t going to go on his record…

“You… you want me to what, Gregory?”

Mycroft had endured a very long day, which was not unusual, but had not anticipated he would be greeted at the end of it by a ghost with a prepared speech and accompanying request.

“I want you to bring John here for a chat.”

“With you.”

“Yes.”

“When he is not supposed to know you exist.”

“But he does! In a roundabout way. He knows ghosts exist and realizes one is here in your house, so it’s not much of a revelation to share a few words with the man.”

“Gregory, I cannot emphasize enough how close to vest we must keep your existence.”
“I understand that, but John already knows about ghosts, but not in a good way and I can’t be happy about that, can I? He was visibly upset talking about them and what sort of person would I be if I left that as it is when I could do something about it? Besides, I’m sure he and that brother of yours visit on occasion, our dinner party notwithstanding, and he’d be very uncomfortable, which isn’t something to be proud of if you’re the host, now is it?”

“That is not a terribly pressing concern.”

“Well, it should be. Man has guests in his house, he should do his best to be a proper host. Besides, if John simply refuses to come here again, Sherlock would eventually grab the right end of the stick and shake the truth out of him. Then you’d really have a mess on your hands, because Sherlock seems the type to be a pain in the arse for little things, let alone having his brother hide the fact he’s living with a real ghost from him!”

That point was, unfortunately, *extremely* true.

“I cannot dissuade you from this decision?”

“If you can make a good enough argument, then sure you can. Go ahead. I’ll wait.”

Of all the nerve… but there wasn’t a particularly keen argument he *could* offer so the ghost wins this round. However, gloating would not be met with good grace.

“Very well. I shall do my utmost to broker a meeting.”

“Yes! Thanks, Mycroft. I truly do appreciate that.”

Could you not gloat even a tiny bit so I did not feel quite so vanquished? Would it kill you? Alright, that was a particularly ludicrous statement, but the sting of defeat has curdled my mental faculties.

“You are most welcome, Gregory. Now, might I know what else has colored your day besides a housebreaker?”

Greg’s laugh and elated grin put wind back in Mycroft’s sails and he only affected tremendous difficulty following the ghost to his new study to peruse the pages of writing that littered every hard, horizontal surface.

“This! Had the radio on and with John’s visit… I got a few ideas. Really made progress on a new story, thought it’ll be short one, I think. But, sometimes that’s just perfect for the story you want to tell! Not that anyone will ever read it, but…”

“I am forbidden?”

“What? No! No, I… I just didn’t think you’d be terribly interested beyond my journals. It’s not… nothing I write is very… sophisticated or deep or what one would call professional. Not the sorts of thing you usually read, I imagine.”

True, but there were always exceptions, especially when those exceptions would make your housemate riotously happy.

“Since I have not read your fiction, I cannot pass judgement on your description, however, I suspect that I would find your work interesting, if only for the insight it provided into your thoughts and character. I further suspect, though, that your cleverness and creativity make your stories entertaining, regardless of their literary merit.”
“Really? Well, then, I’d love for you to have a look at them. Just grab something from the pile whenever you’d like. After we fix this thing with John, though.”

The ghost was unSPORTingly singly-minded today.

“Is tomorrow sufficiently soon to satisfy your sensibilities?”

“All those s’s. That’s consonance! I learned that from a program about language once.”

“I applaud your commitment to education.”

“Just because I’m dead, doesn’t mean I should stop learning. Have to keep up with the times and, besides, how many people can boast a wealth of free time just to learn new things! Can’t pass up that little benefit of being a formerly-living person. That’d be daft!”

A respect for knowledge and learning was another leaf to add to Gregory’s laurel crown.

“You said John was a doctor, right. Oh, imagine the stuff I could learn from him!”

I am now deducting two leaves for your unceasing persistence, Gregory. Oh… but you are dancing again. How can I withhold leaves with this seductive scene unfolding before me? Very well, you regain your leaves and I shall pour for myself something potent to enhance my enjoyment of your display. Would that I could hold you in my arms while we moved across the floor, soft music playing in the background, but, then, I could not be an audience for your performance and that would be a tragic thing, indeed…

“You know, you can dance with me.”

No no no… we have fully removed telepathy from the probable range of your abilities!

“P… pardon?”

“I mean, we can’t dance like couples do at a ball, but in a way, we can. Come on, just because you can’t feel me doesn’t mean you can’t dance with me. I’ll even let you lead!”

Mycroft hesitated a moment, then stepped forward near the ghost’s outstretched arms.

“There. Just pretend you’re dancing with an imaginary partner. Or, if you like something a touch more modern…”

Greg launched into his version of The Twist, which drew a snort of laughter out of Mycroft, who actually looked around the room for spies before imitating the motions for a moment until he and the ghost were both giggling like schoolchildren.

“That was not exactly well-described as ‘modern,’ my dear.”

“For me, it is. And, besides, it’s fun! We can waltz or foxtrot or anything we’d like when the mood strikes. So, dance with me? It’s even a slower tune on the radio.”

Mycroft couldn’t have stopped himself from stepping, this time, fully into the ghost’s outstretched arms and mirroring the pose with his own body. Then, since he was leading, he began to waltz his dance partner around the large rug on which he was standing, careful to avoid the papers on the floor. And… it worked. It wasn’t as sensual an experience as one might want with such a man as Gregory in one’s arms, but… it was a pleasure, nonetheless. And one they could enjoy, as his ghost noted, whenever the mood struck. Which might be more often than the rather starched and stiff
Mycroft Holmes would ever have imagined…

In another world, John Watson was merrily walking down the street pausing to look at this or that, nodding at passersby, maybe enjoying a delicious coffee he’d just bought just because he had a craving when a seller happened to be two doors up that boasted an uncharacteristically-short queue. In this world, John Watson was scowling from having to wait in an irritatingly-long queue for lackluster coffee that was failing to put even a bit of spring in his step and feeling that scowl deepen every time he passed any form of public phone that began ringing at him.

Of course. Of bloody course Mycroft Holmes would pick today to play one of his pointless, stupid games. A day when Sherlock had been more off his nut than usual and dragged them both through London until 3:00 am, convinced that information he’d received about an art-theft ring was going to pay dividends. It hadn’t. All it produced was a pouty detective and a dead-on-his-feet doctor who had promised their landlady that he’d go out this morning and replace the small hall table that Sherlock had destroyed during one of his experiments. Actually, destroyed was a kind term, because the splinters, chips and sawdust that was left in the aftermath was a gruesome scene, at best.

And, now, he was being badgered by cheerily ringing phones and, oh yes, a dark sedan idling up the street with a hand waving out the rear window. A hand bearing highly-familiar nail polish… at least he had the protection of this horrible coffee, because every last molecule of caffeine was going to come in handy to ward off the slings and arrows of Mycroft’s smug, though extremely lovely, PA.

“Oh hello. Is it still Anthea or have you moved onto something else for a change of pace?”

“Your sense of humor never fails to fail, Doctor Watson. Please, Mr. Holmes is waiting.”

Wishing he had the feral look and deep-throated growl that a few of the soldiers he served with could muster at a time like this, John settled for the irritated ‘pfft’ he generally reserved for Sherlock’s milder nonsense and got into the car.

“Tell me it isn’t that awful warehouse or whatever it was that he kidnapped me to last time.”

“It isn’t that awful warehouse or whatever it was that he kidnapped you to last time.”

“It’s worse, isn’t it?”

“Yep.”

“Marvelous.”

“Thank you.”

Oh god, she was right…

“A children’s park? Really, Mycroft?”

The eldest Holmes patted the empty space next to him on the bench and smiled what John could only call a self-satisfied smile.

“When one conducts private business, it is best to conduct it in a place that one would never be predicted to visit. It is the habits of the multitudes that betray them, of course. I first considered a
sporting event, but doubted my ability to forestall phoning for an airstrike to rid the world of the hooligans that surrounded me.”

“Those hooligans pay the taxes that pay your salary, you know.”

“Actually…”

“I don’t want to know. I really don’t want to know. It’d probably place me on some dark money hit list and that’s one thing too many today. What do you want, Mycroft? I have a table to buy this morning and, to be honest, I fear Mrs. Turner more than I do you.”

“I find no fault with that reasoning as she has a far greater number of opportunities than me to murder you in any given day, though I maintain that I would use far more creative techniques. In any case… I wish to discuss the visit paid to my home when I was not present.”

Wonderful. Now he had to take the lashes for Sherlock’s lunacy. Well, Sherlock’s bank card was now paying for a new table and a very hearty lunch to help those wounds heal properly.

“Look… you know your brother breaks into your house whenever he’s feeling peevish. Change the locks! Or hide the things you don’t want him to steal. That house of yours has to have a few secret rooms knocking about, so put your real bedroom in one of them and leave that one filled with cheap rubbish that he can steal and destroy to his heart’s content.”

There certainly were a few secret rooms knocking about, and they did harbor a number of items of rather staggering value, however, that would remain Mycroft’s little secret. Sherlock would certainly go on a rampage were he to learn about them and his current level of rampage was more than enough for this or any lifetime.

“An interesting suggestion, however, I am not here to discuss the visit to steal my ties. I am here to discuss the one you made yesterday. Alone.”

John hoped the hot flush he suddenly felt wasn’t readily visible on his cheeks and hoped all the harder that Mycroft only had a surveillance photo and not an actual recording of his snooping and speechmaking.

“I… I found Sherlock had managed to sneak another of your ties into his pocket and was just returning it to you.”

“We both know that is not the case, John. Do try again.”

“I… I just wanted to take a closer look. Always wanting those decorating tips to make the flat more appealing.”

“Humor… not precisely the tactic I would use in this situation.”

Why do you and your PA have such a hatred of humor? Your workday must be dismal as digging graves at midnight in the middle of winter.

“Oh, then what tactic would you use?”

“Given I would have gleaned that my opponent was in possession of information, I would leverage some degree of honesty to extract additional statements on their part to help define the extent of what they did and did not know about the situation.”

“Oh. Should I try that?”
“It requires a deft hand at verbal interrogation and the ability to read so-called body language and micro-expressions.”

“Right. Plan B then. What do you suggest?”

When Mycroft was quiet was when John was most nervous around the man. Quiet meant thinking and no good could ever come from that when Mycroft Holmes was involved.

“Gregory wishes to speak with you. He is… concerned.”

“Who… who is Gregory?”

“Hmmmm? Oh, you spoke with him yesterday. Or, perhaps, I should say you spoke to him. I gather he offered no response, though, I admit, it would have been a scant few words if he had.”

The redness on John’s cheeks quickly drained away, leaving an ashen pallor that Mycroft politely declined to remark upon.

“You… you know there’s a ghost in your house!”

“I believe I made that clear.”

“I… I suppose, but… ghosts!”

John looked around frantically, as if was fearful their conversation would be overheard and Mycroft patiently waited for him to complete his reconnaissance before responding.

“As you say… ghosts. Or ghost, rather, since he is a singular presence.”

“You know he’s real!”

“Should I begin to worry about your mental state, Doctor Watson?”

“What is it with you and Sherlock thinking I’m having mental problems?”

“Do you really want me to answer that.”

“No. No, I don’t. I completely see the error of my question and retract it from the conversation.”

“Excellent. And, yes, I am very aware of Gregory’s existence though, I am sure you understand, it is not something that I advertise. Nor something I would advise you advertise, either. Do you understand?”

“Is that a threat?”

“A caution is, perhaps, a better term. However, I have faith you realize why I would take the step of offering that caution, given the circumstances.”

That was something that John couldn’t argue, even if he wanted to just to spite the pompous git sitting there twirling his umbrella between his palms. He’d never talked about ghosts with anyone because he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life in an institution. If Mycroft knew about his ghost, who was apparently named Gregory, then… yeah, a ‘caution’ wasn’t exactly out of bounds.

“Alright… what does this ghost want to talk about?”

“The content of your words to him yesterday. He is distressed that you are… disturbed… by his
presence and finds that unacceptable. His conscience will not allow that to stand and asked that I convince you to pay another visit so he might reassure you he has no harmful intentions towards you, despite his bit of silliness when you accompanied Sherlock for his theft."

“He… he wants to make me feel better?”

“That is one way to phrase it. Gregory is a good-hearted individual and that he is the root of your upset bothers him terribly. But, the decision is yours. My PA will return with me to my office and the vehicle that brought you here will be yours to direct at will. You may simply continue with your errands or you may add a stop at my home to your intended agenda. Either way, do give my regards to Mrs. Turner.”

Mycroft rose and walked away from the bench without a single backwards glance, leaving John to sit and think. About a ghost. A ghost who wanted to talk to him. And who was feeling bad about playing games and that idiotic outburst he’d sprayed out yesterday when he’d let his emotions run away from him. That… that was rather thoughtful of the ghost, actually. Not like… ok, no thinking about the past and focusing entirely on the present. Which held a ghost hoping he’d stop in for a chat. Well, it would be rude to leave a body waiting for something like that. Even if the body wasn’t precisely a body, in the strictest sense…

Taking one deep breath, John stood, took another deep breath then walked towards his waiting car, which was now minus one sassy PA, but did have a driver who helpfully exited the vehicle to hold open the rear door for him.

“Where can I take you, sir?”

“Mr. Holmes’s house. He… he’s given me permission for that.”

“Of course, sir. I’ve already been advised. Oh, and I am to ask if you would like to stop beforehand for, and I quote, ‘something other than the disgraceful coffee he was drinking which smelled like dishwater and made my hair sad.’ I am very willing to perform that task first, sir.”

Anthea… one day he’d get hers. But, since the subsequent revenge would probably lose him his bollocks, maybe that should stay a happy fantasy.

“Sounds good. One coffee on the way, one quick stop at Mycroft’s house, then…”

“I know several shops that specialize in quality second-hand furnishings, Doctor Watson. I would be happy to suggest a few, if it is helpful.”

“How did you know I… no. Don’t tell me. I already know. So, yes! Yes, that would be very helpful…”

“Charles, sir.”

“Charles. Well, thank you, Charles, for your offer and I will take you up on it once… once I’ve tended to a few things.”

“I am at your disposal for the day, sir, so your wish is my proverbial command.”

“Can I wish for a billion quid in my pocket?”

“Did you bring the ski masks and AK-47’s, sir?”

“Wishes require planning. Got it. I’ll try harder next time.”
“I appreciate your efforts, sir. Shall we?”

John smirked and got into the car, settling himself on the very comfortable seat as they pulled away onto the road. He should feel a large, cold lump in his stomach right now, but… it was hard to have a lump when you knew the ghost’s name was Gregory and that ghost had politely invited you over for a visit. And you were stopping for good coffee on the way. Should he bring one for the ghost? Or would that be ridiculous? Probably ridiculous. He didn’t even know how the ghost might take it and nothing starts a visit off more poorly than getting someone’s coffee order wrong…
John sighed deeply when the large car stopped in front of Mycroft’s house and took a moment to draw together his thoughts before stepping out the driver-opened door to begin his adventure.

“I… I have no idea how long this will take. I have… there’s something I’m supposed to do and…”

“I am well-provided with personal entertainment options, sir, so don’t give a second thought to time. I will be here when your business is concluded.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course, you should probably start your business if you actually want to see it finished.”

Thank you for noticing, Charles, that I’m standing here staring at the door realizing I don’t have a key and Sherlock’s lock-picking skills can’t help me now.

“True, but I just remembered something…”

“If Mr. Holmes has given you permission to enter his home, I suspect you’ll find the door unlocked.”

“Oh.”

“He’s efficient that way.”

“Something I find easy to believe. Alright, then…”

“If you steal anything, though, I also suspect the doors and windows will subsequently fail to open and killer laser beams will reduce you to ash in under a minute.”

“Ha! That’s not true! I know for a fact that… ok, not confessing to stealing or facilitating the theft of anything from Mycroft’s house, so I’ll be walking away now with my dignity intact.”

“Very good, sir. And… it was a dreadful tie, truth be told. But, it was a gift that Mr. Holmes was rather forced to wear when the gift-giver was to be present at a meeting.”

Dignity now wavering between intact and dinged, but the thumbs-up from the chauffer was tipping matters solidly into the intact zone, so just a nod of gratitude in response and a casual stroll to the large and imposing door which rewarded John with the slightest ‘click’ noise as his hand wrapped around knob, signaling that the unlocking process had occurred and the knob-turning would serve to do something other than embarrass him in front of the driver.

Since peeking inside the house before entering would also embarrass him in front of the driver, John strode in confidently, closed the door behind him, then began the peeking. Which was really more, at the moment, of a slightly-hunched, standing in place, looking about for some sign that he was being set up for a foul fate. Seeing nothing that would convince him that his life was now part of a cheaply-made horror film, John walked further into the house and finally decided to stop in the sitting room before speaking.

“Oh… hello? Gregory? Mycroft said you wanted to talk to me.”

Greg
Since Army captains did not leap out of their boots when they heard ghostly voices, John’s shoes stayed on his feet, but his nerves did go on extreme alert, despite the reassurances he’d been given that this would be a friendly visit.

“Oh… sorry. Though, I suppose it’s to be expected that Mycroft wouldn’t leave things simple, when he could add more syllables to make it more formal.”

Posh bastard

Ok… ok ok ok… the ghost had a sense of humor. That… that was good. Humor he could manage, even in ghostly form.

“That he is. Sherlock, too, for some things. For others, he’d make a posh person want to weep in agony.”

Greg breathed an unnecessary sigh of relief that John seemed to be relaxing, which had been a major worry up to this point. This was going to be hard, since talking like this took a lot out of him, and if John couldn’t shake his worry, then it would be a lot of effort for little result, not the outcome he wanted from the conversation.

He’s complex

“Yes, which is why I like him, I suppose. And… alright, I’m very not sure what to do or say here, so I’m going to have a seat and… what can I do for you?”

John dropped onto the sofa and couldn’t see Greg deciding to ‘sit’ next to him, so they could continue on without John looking quite so much like he was poised to run.

Talk

“Yes, got that. Mycroft said… he said you weren’t happy about me thinking… well, that you might be hostile.”

Not hostile… sorry for scare…

Part of John was rebelling wildly at the notion he was sitting here calmly chatting with a ghost, but part of him had to admit that Greg didn’t particular inspire much in the way of terror. He was too… normal… for that. Which was a bizarre way to think, but that’s how it felt. Like he was talking to a normal fellow, albeit one of few words.

“I…um… apology accepted. And I apologize for making that assumption.”

I was an arse

“No. Or… a little. But, if I had to guess, I’d say you were just trying to have a laugh.”

True… not many to have…

“Laughs? Oh, yeah, I never thought of that, actually. Probably not a wealth of chances to have a bit of fun when you’re… is it rude for me to remark on you being dead?”

Not rude

“Good. I’d hate to be inconsiderate since you were nice enough to ask me here to clear the air.”

Which was being cleared quite quickly since the ghost was simply talking and not doing anything…
unnerving. Though, just talking to a ghost was unnerving on its own, but Greg… how could you be afraid of a ghost named Greg! Greg was your neighbor who lent you his tools when you had a sink to fix!

**Is it working**

“I… surprisingly, yes. I wouldn’t have thought there was a chance, but yes… so far, you sound like a fairly regular bloke, for being a ghost.”

**I am**

“Good to know. I notice… you don’t say much, do you?”

**Can’t… too hard…**

“Oh. Oh, ok… well, then I won’t ask you to tell me about yourself or something like that.”

**Ask Mycroft**

“I will. I guess you’ve had more time to talk to him, so he’d know your story.”

**And yours**

“He definitely knows mine. Probably things I’ve long forgotten or never knew in the first place.”

**No… what’s your story**

“Nothing very exciting, I’m afraid. Did my time in the Army, I’m a doctor, in case you didn’t know. When I came back to London, not voluntarily, in a sense… caught a bullet and was discharged because of it… but when I found myself back here, I happened to cross paths with Sherlock and… the rest is history. I help him, when I can. He’s a detective, did you know? A consulting detective. Only one in the world; created the job himself, actually. I still do medical work, though not a great amount, since Sherlock seems to believe I exist to be at his beck and call, but…”

**You like it**

“Ha! I do. It’d be stupid to deny it. Not the beck and call business, because fuck him on that, the bastard, but… the work is amazing. Even if I’m just watching Sherlock work, it’s… there’s nothing like it.”

Now he was gushing like a besotted schoolboy to a ghost! The ghost was a good listener, though.

**Sounds like love**

“What! That’s… look, I have enough of Molly and Mrs. Turner and the Yarders making kissy faces at me behind Sherlock’s back that I don’t need you mucking in.”

**Definitely love**

“Oh, you bastard. It’s… it’s complicated. Whatever we are right now doesn’t need any labels.”

**Pffifffgggggghhhhttttt…**

“How can you make rude noises!”
Talent

John laughed and surprised himself a little by doing it. The ghost certainly wasn’t… wasn’t what he expected. Definitely the fellow you invited over for a beer and to complain about work or Sherlock or whatnot. If he wasn’t dead, that is. Which was still… Greg was dead. Dead and gone and still roaming the earth. In Mycroft’s house! And Mycroft knew about him… didn’t seem to mind the situation, either, because if Mycroft minded something it got sorted out faster than the speed of light. That implied Greg’s friendliness wasn’t put on for his benefit, but just how the ghost was. Which… was not what he’d anticipated. Not based on… ok, no thinking about that… not now…

John… what’s wrong

What gave me away? The clenched fists or clenched teeth?

“Nothing.”

Liar

“Sometimes.”

Now

“No! Yes… look, I am sorry I mistook you for something horrible and thought you… had bad intentions. I am. But… let’s just leave it at that.”

Bad idea

“It’s a wonderful idea, actually. A happy, wonderful idea that…”

Hurting

“You?”

You

“Bollocks.”

Lying again

“So what if I am!”

John bolted off the sofa, hands running through his hair and Greg simply waited for him to wrestle down the emotions that had been cresting, waiting to spill out over the floor.

Go on

“No. No, I don’t talk about that.”

Should

“Wrong. That is not a topic that ‘should’ applies to.”

Wrong… it’ll help

Why was the ghost so bloody… concerned! Kind ghosts were their own brand of terror, apparently. Meddling ghosts. Wasn’t it supposed to be meddling kids? That’s what the Scooby Doo cartoons
always said.

“I disagree.”

Greg’s rude noises took a tremendous amount of effort but John deserved another one so another one he got.

“Hey! Look, a man has a right to… keep his stories to himself.”

*It was a ghost*

“Of course it was a bloody ghost! Terrorized me…”

*Go on, John…*

This lump in John’s stomach wasn’t cold and heavy, it was hot and sour and felt the way bile tasted in your mouth, but… maybe a bit of vomiting was what he needed. He’d never done it, not since… but vomiting was exactly what he felt like doing and words would be gentler on Mycroft’s nice rug than something else.

“It… there was… we’d go on holiday when I was young and there was this house we always rented and stayed at by the sea. Big thing, two stories and lots of rooms. Sometimes we shared it with friends of my parents, sometimes not…”

*Had a ghost*

“There was more than one, I think. Things happened that didn’t seem… the same, as if more than one person… ghost… was doing it.”

*A bad one, though*

Oh yes, a bad one, though… most certainly there was a bad one.

“Yeah. One was… bad. Malevolent is the word for it, I think. I’d have nightmares of a woman… wild-haired, wild eyed screaming… always screaming… sometimes just loud screams and her beating on windows or walls or tearing at her hair… sometimes screaming that she’d kill… whoever. ‘I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you all’… and she’d say how she’d do it, say it with relish as if that very idea of doing those horrible, terrible things was giving her pleasure. Sawing through your throat, gouging out your eyes… it went on and on.”

*More than that, right*

“Oh yes, there was more. That just made me not want to sleep and do everything I could to stay awake at night. Though, I also wanted to stay awake because… sometimes I’d wake up and…”

*Go on*

“There’d be this thin, dusty cloth over my mouth and nose. Being pressed down hard, really hard… I was lucky I was a strong boy and I could wriggle away. I’d snatch that fucking cloth away when I could, burned it when my parents weren’t looking, but… a few nights later it might happen again. I always wondered if it was part of a dress or nightgown or something. Looked and felt like it. Other times, I’d walk and something would be pushed into my path. More than once that nearly sent me down the stairs, probably to break my neck. I started sneaking downstairs after my parents went to bed and slept down there… seemed to be less… fewer things happened on the ground floor, so I felt safer.”
kept going back

“For six years. Two weeks every time and… I tried to tell my parents, but they thought it was my imagination, even when I was nearly in tears… said that meant I was a bright, creative boy. They weren’t dreadful people, don’t think they were, they were just there to have a nice holiday and that’s what was on their mind, I suppose, so they didn’t notice how upset I really was. And, truthfully, I didn’t press the issue much.”

Ashamed

“Yes! I absolutely felt that way, especially when I was older… the last time we went there I was fourteen and certainly not going to say I was being haunted. When you’re eight, it’s imagination and cute, but when you’re over twelve… it’s not so cute anymore. And… you start to wonder what type of person you are that you can’t… you can’t keep yourself safe! You can’t fight back enough to just make it stop. Stop and stay stopped. I was tough, too. Tough, scrappy… not the biggest boy, but I wasn’t one you crossed if you wanted to keep you nose unbloodied. Nothing I could do about this, though. Not one single thing. Finally, when I was fifteen, I said I wasn’t going and my parents decided I was old enough to stay with a friend, instead.”

Only you… bothered

“Only me. Now and again, my parents would wonder why something had been moved, maybe in the kitchen or in their bedroom, but they never experienced what I did. Part of why I think there was more than one ghost. Not everything was evil, some things were just… curious. And, truth be told, after the first few years, I leaned to do things like sleep on my stomach with my arm over my face so she couldn’t reach my nose and mouth easily. Be vigilant when I went to walk down the stairs. Even sit on my arse and scoot forward, so I couldn’t be tripped. The nightmares, though… never got used to those. And I still was careless now and again and had to fight the physical things. Can you… can you do physical things?”

Very little

“Oh. Oddly, I’m feeling bad that you can’t. Seems like it would… limit your options for… anything.”

It does

“That’s a shame. What can you do?”

Follow voice

John’s brow furrowed with confusion, then heard his name being repeated, moving towards the sitting room door and towards another.

Open it

Not wanting to admit to the small bit of worry that rose up in him that this might be a trap of some form, John trusted his instincts that Greg was what he appeared and opened the door to Greg’s study.

Watch papers

Which John now realized were littered on every hard surface, including the floor.

Watch
John looked up and actually laughed that an old-fashioned pen rose from the large desk with what could only be called a flourish.

“You can use a pen.”

This pen

“Yes, only that one?”

Yes

“That’s not a lot of variety, but I suppose it’s better than nothing. Did you… did you actually write all of this on the paper?”

Yes

“That’s… that’s interesting, is what it is. Story of your life?”

Some… not all

“Oh, that’s even more interesting. Political manifestos?”

Arse… stories

“No, arse stories. Well, that will sell well if you find a publisher.”

Now he was sharing a laugh with a ghost! But… the hot, sour bile mass was gone. Whether it was from finally talking about what happened, which had been a lot easier than he ever could have imagined, or because this was further proof that the ghost he’d known was a cunt of the highest order, and not the only example of ghosts out there, he wasn’t sure, but… it was helping.

I’ll tell Mycroft

“You do that! He’d probably be happy with the extra revenue flow. Buy him all the ties he wants and umbrellas, too.”

John watched as the pen quickly moved across a piece of paper and waited until the pen waved him over to read the writing.

He’d be in heaven! It would keep the liquor stocks filled, too. Want some?

“A drink? Actually… that’s not a bad idea.”

This time the pen pointed in the direction of a decanter, which Mycroft had obligingly filled with a respectable whisky, then moved forward to tap on a glass.

“Don’t mind if I do, thanks. And… I do mean thanks, Greg. This… this has helped. For a lot of things.”

Glad

John poured himself a rather decadent amount of whisky because he deserved it, damn it, then took a long sip and sighed happily.

“That is what I needed.”
Anytime

Which… sounded like something John wouldn’t mind doing. Having an anytime, that is. He certainly couldn’t call this anything other than a cordial visit and… he didn’t have the opportunity for lots of those anymore.

“Do you get the chance to talk to a lot of people?”

No

“Mycroft about it?”

Yes

“Ok… that’s a horrid fate for anyone to have to endure, if you ask me, so…”

Should he? There was no reason not to and it wouldn’t be much bother, all things considered…

… well, it wouldn’t be a hardship to stop in now and again to enjoy alcohol of this quality. And quantity.”

I’d like that

Though Greg’s voice didn’t give it away, he was nearly quivering with excitement. Another person to talk to! And John was a good person for that, too. Decent person, interesting job, good sense of humor, liked fine whisky… this definitely had possibilities.

“I think I would, too. Be a break from His Curly Highness, when he’s being a tit.”

Helpful

“I agree. I can’t say it’s a thing I’d ever though I’d do, stop in and chat with a ghost, but life’s about new experiences, I suppose. It’ll give me a chance to learn about you, at the very least. If I have to wait for you to write it all out or moan out a few words at a time, time is going to be necessary.”

Funny man

“Correct. So, tell me, Greg… what did you do when you were alive?”

Policeman

“You? You were a policeman?”

Yes

“That’s impressive. I… I have no idea why, but I think you’d be a good one. Practical mind, I suppose.”

Thanks

“Are you… is it impolite to ask if you’re old?”

Very

“Impolite or old?”
"Oh. My ghost was old. Or, at least, I’m 99% sure she was old."

Why

"Once, after… well, I once had a bad turn after watching a film that was far too much like what happened to me, so thought a little research might help me understand things better. Maybe find out who my ghost was, so… it made them less mysterious, for lack of a better term. I was in Uni at the time and had the library at my disposal… well, I found a book about that area and the house we stayed in… it was a school for a time. There were some unexplained deaths of the kids there. More than a few. The school closed and… they never proved anything, but the headmistress committed suicide a few months after it closed. There were stories… local folk tales that, at night, you could hear her screaming a good mile away in those months before she took her life. If that’s not the ghost that haunted me, I’d be very surprised. It was… this all happened about a hundred years ago."

Young ghost

"What! How old are you?"

Near three hundred

"You win! I’ll drink this next delicious sip of whisky in your honor."

Bastard

"But a bastard with whisky, so fuck you."

Shared laughter was something John valued highly, since he rarely had it with anyone besides Sherlock, so he soaked up the experience and walked over to where Greg had written his first message and tapped the paper.

"Tell me a little about yourself. I’d really like to know how you came to be here. I’ve visited before, not just to steal ties, either, and you’ve never made a peep, so I suspect you’re new to the house."

Weighing how much information he should give John, Greg decided that making a friend on a foundation of lies couldn’t end well, so decided the truth it would be. Maybe… maybe not quite so much truth, though, about what he hoped for with him and Mycroft. That part was still something he’d rather keep private until he had a better idea of how it was all going to work. But, on the other hand, maybe John had some ideas for that… ok, add in a little more detail than he’d originally planned, since any advice on that score would be greatly appreciated.

Dancing with Mycroft last night had been… magical. Not quite what they’d experienced in Mycroft’s dream, but it had its own magic that he treasured deeply. And… there was simply no doubt that other things with Mycroft would be magical, too, so… yeah, the more heads on this problem, the better. John seemed perfectly willing, too, to be a head… that is… a visitor to keep a home-alone ghost company on occasion, so this was an opportunity he’d be foolish to ignore. And, if he was honest, he’d held out some small hope that something like this might happen, though, he’d had enough hopes dashed in this life and death to be a bit cautious with such things. But, nothing good ever came of being cowardly or stupid and he’d be damned before anyone accused him of either of those.

"Greg, what does that say? Elderberry?"
Maybe he *could* be accused of being a poor.speller, but he could get revenge by having Mycroft replace the good whisky in this room with cheap crap they sold to idiots who cared more about being drunk than enjoying the drink that got them there. It was what friends did, actually. Give each other grief and misery, so might as well start this friendship off on the right foot with loads of both…
Chapter 16

It would be his secret that Mycroft kept some small eye on the day’s most important meeting, at least, to the point of monitoring the time elapsed and the physical appearance of the good doctor both going into the visit and leaving from it. The marked change in demeanor and clear signs that John enjoyed the somewhat lengthy stay put to rest a bevy of Mycroft’s own fears as to how the visit would proceed. Apparently, it went well, which made returning home a far more pleasant event that it otherwise might have been.

“Mycroft! Long day for you.”

“Many are and this was not nearly the longest of the breed, I’m afraid. There are times, more than I care to count, where my ‘day’ is really an amalgam of several alloyed together and I fail to see my home from dawn of the first until midnight of the fourth.”

“That’s terrible! I’d make things easier, if I could. Cook dinner or have a drink ready for you when you walked in the door.”

“I know, Gregory, however, the companionship you provide is of tremendous benefit and I cherish it as greatly as I do a glass of my finest spirits.”

Ghosts couldn’t blush, but the shyly-pleased smile on Greg’s face said he’d be doing just that were he still alive.

“That’s… thanks. That’s nice to hear. Oh, but speaking of spirits, we do need more whisky in my study.”

“More? There were several glasses worth in there, at minimum.”

“Uhhh…”

The reason John was smiling so brightly when leaving the house, per security footage, now had an explanation.

“Gregory… did John quaff my lovely whisky like a cheap bottle of beer?”

“Maybe. But it was fun! We were having a great time and there’s nothing wrong with a few good glasses of something pleasant when you’re having a nice time. He read through some of my journals and we talked about what was on the radio and telly… a bit of whisky is a small price to pay for all of that, don’t you think?”

As if that naughty little-boy smile does not reveal your own answer to that question, Gregory.

“No at all! In fact, I am terribly happy to hear that your visit was a successful one.”

“It was, there’s no doubt about that. John… he had a truly terrifying experience with a ghost when he was young and I can see why he was so upset to learn one was here. Now, he knows that I’m not out to harm you or anyone, so he’s feeling a lot better about the situation. And, I think it helps that I did keep myself up to date, as best I could, so he and I could talk about things and find out that we have a lot in common.”

“That does sound encouraging. Might I ask how this communication occurred? You did not overtax yourself with attempts at speech, did you, my dear? I know that is draining for you.”
“It was, truth be told, but I mixed in a lot of writing and that helped a lot. John can even read my spelling! Well, to a large degree, so that made conversation a lot easier. Would it… it’d be alright if John stopped in now and again, wouldn’t it? Just to visit while you’re at work?”

Apparently, the visit went very well, indeed. This was highly interesting but, also, highly useful as it would provide his ghost with another social contact to boost his spirits and one that was controllable. More or less.

“I find that a wonderful idea, Gregory, truly a wonderful one. If you are happy with his company, then I am more than amenable to seeing you enjoying what of it you can. I would ask, though… Sherlock?”

“HA! Oh, we talked about that. For now, John’s going to keep me a secret, mostly to spite your brother for being a bastard to him when they were here to steal your ties. Also, though, he’s not sure how Sherlock would handle if John told him that ghosts were real. Might be intrigued by the idea, might just be more of an arse to John thinking he’s being foolish. He’s going to do a bit of ‘feeling out’ to get a sense of things before he makes any real effort to broach the subject. You have any idea what Sherlock would do?”

“For this, I admit my predictive capabilities will fall short of the mark as I could not have properly predicted my response either to the time I believed you a figment of my imagination or the realization that you were, in fact, a real entity. If I was pressed to make a statement, I believe that if John offered sufficient proof, such as making his disclosure here, where you could give clear evidence of your existence, then Sherlock would be highly intrigued, though that would simply spur his investigative energies and he would, likely, pester you mercilessly with a wealth of experiments and tests so you had not a moment’s peace for a fortnight.”

“That would keep me busy, if nothing else.”

“That it would. Given Sherlock’s tendency to forsake sleep when he has a bone between his teeth, your nights would certainly be enlivened beyond a film or the contemplative musings of your writing.”

“Suits me fine! I’ll look forward to it, then. I hope he brings Toby with him, though. I’ll ask John if he can bring that sweet doggy with him the next time he visits. He’s such a good pup and John can help me play with him, like throw a ball or tug on a rope.”

Joyful.

“Sherlock does not actually own Toby, Gregory, and I am not highly confident that John could borrow the dog, at will.”

“Oh? That’s a shame. Maybe he can borrow him now and again, though. Every dog likes a good walk, so Toby’s owner might like to have someone else do that for a change.”

“When you discuss the matter with John, that should be raised as a persuasion point.”

“I’ll do that! For now, though… why don’t you get comfortable. Relax awhile.”

A glorious suggestion.

“Precisely my plan. And, then… I have somewhat a taste for a lurid and truly overwrought film on some gothic theme. Ghosts, vampires, witches… I find the concept of John’s encounter with a beastly spirit to have raised an urge to indulge my more fantastical side.”
“Perfect! I LOVE those sorts of films, which is odd, since they don’t show ghosts in a good light, but they’re so much fun, I find myself not caring. I always watch one when I can catch it.”

“Then that shall be our evening’s entertainment, and I shall certainly…. hmmm…”

“Mycroft?”

“Pardon… oh, I do apologize. I was struck by a stray thought that requested a touch of chewing before I could lay it to rest.”

“Oh, yeah, I get those, too. Terrible when it happens as I’m writing, because it sometimes makes me question what I’ve written and where I want it to go because I have a new idea that starts waving flags about and doing a provocative dance.”

Gregory dancing provocatively would forever live a happy life in Mycroft’s collection of pleasant mental images.

“Your mind must be an incredibly athletic place, my dear.”

“Oh, it is. Sometimes the athletics are naked, too.”

Mycroft tried to smother a smile, but failed in every possible meaningful way. His collection of pleasant mental images had a rather salacious partner that would gleefully accept this bit of imagination, and give it a comfortable bower of satin cushions, while rich, exotic spices scented the air.

“Oh, you often ponder the history of wrestling and the Olympic games?”

“Such a comedian! Go have a shower and tell yourself some jokes to enrich the experience.”

Mycroft snorted at Greg’s imperiously-pointed finger and slunk off like a schoolboy who’d been shamed by the headmaster. True, no prepared dinner or freshly-poured drink to greet him, but what were those things compared to this? Meager offerings, at best. Besides… he had a taste for take-away tonight and he had nothing in his kitchen to craft the delicious ravioli that he was craving. Or the fresh-baked bread… or cannoli…

“…that was a good one! Haven’t seen it before, but I’ll definitely watch it again whenever you’d like.”

That one of his favorite horror films received such ardent praise further bolstered Mycroft’s confidence that their film adventures would be a blissful experience.

“Very good to hear, for I have a rather secret love for the films produced by Hammer studios and my collection of them is most comprehensive.”

“Yes! Oh, I see some very lights-off, quiet-house film watching our future.”

“But, of course! And I shall huddle under a blanket on the sofa, so I might draw it over my head for the especially-horrifying scenes.”

“I can tell you when they’re over so you don’t miss more of the film than you have to.”

“You are too good to me, Gregory.”
The in-stereo laughing was a suitable accompaniment to Mycroft’s leaning back on the sofa in Greg’s study, a glass of even finer whisky than John enjoyed in his hand, as he cast an eye over the spread-out papers.

“And, it appears that you are being good to yourself, as well. I believe you have seen remarkable progress on your latest tale.”

“noticed that, did you? Got myself a bit of inspiration and went with it. Didn’t put my pen down between John leaving and you coming home.”

“Oh, I am sorry, Gregory. I did not intend to interrupt your creative process.”

“Not at all! I’ll pick it up again when you’re off to bed. That’s actually a good thing about my not sleeping… when I do get an inspiration, I can carry on with it for a long time and get my thoughts on paper.”

“And, I shall ensure your paper supply is refreshed before I retire. Though…”

“Yeah?”

“If I do, I must put away some of the existing pages and that would prevent you from revisiting your work, perhaps to check for flow or pace or something along those lines.”

“Oh, hadn’t thought of that. Probably because I’ve just become used to seeing my work packed away each day and then not seeing it again the next night when I get new paper unless I specifically ask to see something I’ve already written.”

“Yes… certainly an issue worth…”

“There’s that thought-chewing again.”

“Verily, I admit that is the case. Fortunately, the bits are most digestible after proper mastication.”

“I’m using that! I am definitely using that in my story. I’ll dedicate it to you, as payment.”

“Excellent. A more worthy currency I cannot imagine.”

“I’m using that, too! I love those posh phrases of yours.”

“Then I shall not deviate a whit from my normal pattern.”

“Good, because I adore the way you talk. If I’d heard that when I was alive, I’d probably have my hat off my head and be bowing at you while you told me to wipe a glob of mud off your shoe.”

“Why do I find that hard to believe?”

“Because… ok, maybe there wouldn’t have been quite the groveling, but we had a nobleman pass through once and he did ask the blacksmith to wipe some mud off his shoe, which was a fairly stupid thing to ask of a person who can break you in two with only one of his arms. Fortunately, William was a genial fellow… didn’t stop him, though, from being sure to brush against the arrogant bastard’s cloak when he was done and getting some especially-heavy soot on it. Ground it in a bit, too, when making a show of brushing it off.”

“Lesson learned about putting on airs, one would think, but I suspect it was not.”
“Well, never saw that bloke or any of his party again, so I can’t confirm or deny, but I suspect it wasn’t, either. The upper class didn’t exactly hold us common people in high regard.”

“In that sense, little has changed.”

“That’s what the news tells me, but you seem to break that mold a little.”

Just how little, Mycroft would keep to himself, but, to be fair, he held the upper class in just as much contempt as any other class, so the scales were very well-balanced.

“Oh, thank you for that show of support. “

“Always happy to help. This does give me an idea for another story, though. Nobleman who is more accepting of people, regardless if they’ve got a smudge of dirt on their face, and the dashing constable who catches his eye.”

“Really, Gregory? A romance?”

“Why not? Something uplifting about the power of love and that sort of thing.”

Mycroft’s ‘are you serious’ face made Greg giggle and wonder if Mycroft would check through his most recent writings where he’d put a few ideas on paper right along those lines, in point of fact. Something about catching a certain look in Mycroft’s eye, especially when Mycroft didn’t think he noticed, said if one of them wasn’t dead they’d already be doing things that might get them run out of the village in his day. There was passion in Mr. Holmes’s soul and that was powerful inspiration for some wickedly delightful stores, though they might be of the sort that only he or Mycroft would ever get the chance to read.

“Gregory, you are an unrepentant scamp.”

“Guilty. But a handsome one. Can’t forget about that bit!”

“Something I could never do, given your visage graces me each morning and evening. And, how fortuitous that the BBC has decided to grace me further by broadcasting one of my favorite pieces of music tonight.”

Mycroft slightly turned towards the radio that they’d turned on after their film, and hummed along for a few moments before chuckling at his whimsy.

“You should relax and listen, then. We don’t need to chat to share the time. How about I start working on my power of love story and you listen to the radio? Maybe get a book, if you like to read while you listen.”

A better plan could not be offered if Mycroft himself crafted it and he smiled broadly at the thought of a night marked by good book, good music and good company.

“A stellar suggestion. I shall hasten to collect a suitable book.”

Giggling at Mycroft’s exaggerated hastening, Greg picked up his pen and moved to an area of the floor where there were at least six sheets of fresh paper patiently awaiting his ink. Which John had ensured his pen was filled with before he left so Mycroft’s fussy streak wasn’t engaged when he got home after a hard day’s work. Mycroft was so cute when he was fussy, though. Making sure his tie was just so, scrutinizing his shirt cuffs for signs of wear or dirt, nearly having a heart attack when learning that one of his ravioli had opened slightly so a bit of cheese filling flowed a full quarter-inch into the sauce. Fortunately, some sympathetic there-there’s had kept him alive long enough to eat his
meal, cannoli and all…

“Mycroft?”

“Hmmmm?”

“Why are you staring at me?”

“The list of reasons is long and diverse.”

“Let’s narrow it down, then, to why you’re doing it at this specific moment and the past six or seven moments just before the aforementioned specific one.”

Which Greg had noticed when he looked up from his paper for a second and, out of the corner of his eye, caught Mycroft simply watching him, his book set aside on the sofa.

“I am observing how you move.”

“Oh. Ok. Am I good at it?”

“I would award you a passing mark, yes.”

“Well, hurrah for me, then. Is there a prize involved?”

“There… might be.”

“That’s cryptic. Which was probably intentional.”

“Well spotted.”

“You’re planning something.”

“Moi?”

“Yes, you.”

“To be fair, I am always plotting something or other, though, I admit it is usually against an adversarial foreign power or my nefarious PA.”

“Don’t let Mrs. Hudson hear that. She adored Anthea. Speaking of, have you spoken to Mrs. Hudson since you left?”

“No, I cannot say that I have.”

“Oh… alright.”

But the face you are making, my dear, says that ‘alright’ is not how you view the situation.

“Gregory… do you miss Mrs. Hudson?”

“Yeah. But, more than that, I worry about her. Running the inn is hard work and she’s not young anymore. She loves it, being her own boss and doing something she likes, but… I just worry. It’s a bit of a ways to the village and if something happened, when no guests were staying…”
“I understand, Gregory, and… yes…”

“What’s there to be cryptic about now?”

“Hmmmmm… nothing. I simply was ruminating on a cover story to use when I phone, however, I suppose your general concern is sufficient without further embellishment.”

“Brilliant! Thanks, Mycroft. It would make me far less concerned if I knew, now and again, there was someone checking in to see if she was doing well. Given you enjoyed the inn so much, we could visit someday, too. Little holiday, just me and you. I could show you the village and tell you about what the area was like when I was alive. Show you my favorite spots, though, come to think of it, you already know one.”

“I do.”

“Yep. Think.”

“I cannot begin to… wait. The bridge. The one in my dream.”

“Yes! It’s been rebuilt since I was alive, but, even then, it was a nice spot to stop for a moment and think. Hop up on the stones and have a bit of bread or fruit. If you were quiet enough, deer would come up to drink at the stream. It wasn’t too far from where my house stood and I came… I suppose I came to view it as a special place. But there are other special places to show you, so… what do you think?”

That it would be a particularly rewarding experience and finding two or three days to devote to such a thing was not so herculean a task as to make it impossible. Especially since his mind that already turned in that direction before he realized he had someone with whom to share the time and the pleasures it offered.

“One day, we can pay Mrs. Hudson an in-person visit and stay a few days to enjoy the amenities of the inn and the surrounding area. I certainly saw little of it during my stay beyond what few glimpses of terrain made it between the rain-blown raindrops and into my eyes.”

“I was there, you know, when you first arrived. Thought I’d laugh myself silly.”

“Your compassion is your defining character.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t polite, but you and your driver were as drowned-ratty as could be and… somewhere in the trunk, there should what I wrote that night describing you and a brief outline of a story that began with two sad, sodden fellows arriving at a creepy inn. Got a proper finger wagging from Mrs. Hudson from implying the inn was creepy, but I reminded her it was fiction and that made her feel better.”

Taking another sip of his drink, Mycroft shook his head, but continued watching the ghost, who was alternating bits of writing with speaking, and firmed a strategy in his mind that could easily be implemented tomorrow, give the resources available to him. The implications, though… the creation of a monster was never something to be taken lightly… however, Mycroft Holmes was very well-versed in the creation and containment of all sorts and styles of monsters…

Home alone today, but that was ok… lots of things to do to play… and Mycroft was on his way…

Probably. It seemed Mycroft really didn’t have actual work hours, so he could come and go as he
chose, but there hadn’t been any of the dreaded multi-day bouts at the office yet, so, unless something arose, he should be home soon. Of course, if something did arise, there’d be no way of knowing since he couldn’t answer a phone or do email or text or anything like that. And it wasn’t likely Mycroft would send some poor bastard to pop his head in and announce to an empty house that it was going remain empty for another day or two. Maybe he should ask Mycroft if he could pass along the word to John if something like that happened, so John could stop in and carry the message. He’d make it worth John’s trouble, with access to nice spirits or Mycroft’s excellent cheese or something equally delicious.

If the cheese was delicious, that is… it was hard to know for certain when you couldn’t actually taste anything not matter how good it looked…

“Gregory?”

“Speak of the devil! Or think of him, is more the case.”

Mycroft smiled at Greg and didn’t mention that he’d actually had the opportunity to simply watch the ghost for a moment while Greg looked out of the window in the paper-littered study and take his own enjoyment from the sight.

“Yes, though my hellacious ways are something I take great pains to conceal from the public. Did you have a good day, my dear?”

Greg did a mental shimmy because Mycroft’s little ‘my dear’ was slipping more and more frequently into their conversations and there was absolutely nothing bad one could say about that.

“I did, actually. Took a little time to read through some of what I wrote last night, then found the telly in the kitchen was on a channel having a James Bond film spree, so I had my day’s entertainment sorted. Just so you know, I think you would be a fantastic spy. Much smarter than Bond, but just as suave.”

Would be… it was not an eternity since the past tense would be considered inappropriate, however, those days were sufficiently distant that the mere thought of returning to them, at least, in a full-time capacity, was somewhat horrifying. Far too much activity for a man of his temperament, though, the insight into the mind of those who made a career of such things had been extremely useful on many, many occasions.

“How flattering. Unfortunately, the amount of legwork required keeps my interest in such a career handily at bay. But, I am happy to hear you gained a day’s entertainment from my alternate self.”

“They were the older films, too, so they were especially good. Did you get the chance to phone Mrs. Hudson?”

“Ah… now we come to the, shall we say, part of our day that… Gregory, do you feel comfortable with conducting another experiment?”

“I… sure, I suppose.”

“Excellent. Might I inquire, has there ever been any modification of your pen, while it has been in your possession?”

“What do you mean?”

“Say, replacing the nib or cap?”
“Oh… actually, that’s happened twice. Replacing the nib, I mean. I was worried about it, since I had no idea if changing a part could cost me my ability to hold it. It did make it a little harder for about a year or two, but I got used to it quickly and it wasn’t much of a bother in the first place.”

“Very good, then I shall lose the worst of my concern about my small test.”

Setting down his valise on the sofa, Mycroft reached inside and drew out a handsome wooden stand and set it on Greg’s desk.

“Now, if you would kindly insert your nib into the hole… yes, hold it so it flares horizontally, now twist gently clockwise… very good. Lift.”

Greg gave Mycroft a suspicious eye, but obliged and gave him a more suspicious one when he viewed the results.

“You’ve stuck a… what is that?”

“Hopefully, something very useful to you. One moment…”

Returning to his valise, Mycroft withdrew an object that he held behind his back as he returned to the desk.

“How difficult is it for you to wield your pen with its new addition, my dear?”

Greg moved it around, mimicking the motions of writing and shrugged, still unsure what was the purpose of the dark, rubbery mass that was now affixed to the end of his pen.

“It’s fine, actually. It’s definitely a bit harder to move, but not as much as when the nib was replaced.”

“Most encouraging.”

Setting the concealed object on the desk, Mycroft smiled at Greg’s wide eyes as the crux of the experiment began to reveal itself.

“Now, if you would, kindly use your pen to tap on the image of the envelope…”

Greg’s hand slowly moved the pen towards the tablet and pressed on the email icon, gasping loudly when it obediently opened.

“Better and better. Now, kindly tap on the New Message… yes, very good… now tap in the “To” field… yes, note the emergence of the keyboard. Tap the ‘M’ key… ah, there I am! Filled in automatically to save you the effort. Now, type something simple, such as hello, in the Message field… that works well, and ‘Send’… voila! Let us see…”

Mycroft removed his mobile from his pocket, did a quick check, then showed the results to an astonished Greg.

“Your message has been delivered.”

“I… I have email?”

“You do and I have taken the liberty of inputting the email addresses of myself, Doctor Watson and Mrs. Hudson, which Anthea was happy to provide me after I purchased her lunch. You may add as many as you like, but I felt that would be a good start.”
“I… me? I have email?”

“That and, if I am to be somewhat boastful, a great deal more. I have established for you a cloud-storage account and have pre-loaded your tablet with several apps that will allow you to either type with your stylus or use your stylus to write, so you may not only create your stories, but easily store them on your device or upload them for security and, then, the ability to return to view them at any time. If none of these are to your liking, you have an account to purchase what apps you might prefer and I hope you feel free to shop to find the one that best fits your needs. In addition, you have access to various online book vendors and libraries with electronic collections, so you may choose at will and read what you like. Also, note the apps for the streaming music and video services you already enjoy from my media devices as well as several others in which you might have interest. Yes, you may also access the BBC and their television and radio on-demand options.”

Mycroft chuckled as his hand swept right through the ghost’s as he reached out to hold it in an effort to stop the noticeable trembling, and felt only slightly smug that his surprise was having this profound an effect.

“In addition, this particular custom app controls my media devices. They are provided with clear names and you may turn them on and off at will, change station, adjust volume, etc.”

“I can change the channels!”

“That you can. And, since the various streaming media services to which I subscribe connect directly to the devices, you can choose to watch any film or television program that they have on offer, which, since I am rather a glutton for choice, is a scandalously-large number. Simply use your stylus to type in the title in the Search fields and that will take you to them. Finally…”

“Th… there’s more?”

“Much more and you can explore that at your leisure, however, one additional feature is most relevant to your original question.”

Which Greg had forgotten, but it returned quickly to his mind and slammed into his brain with a punishing force.

“Ph… phoning Mrs. Hudson?”

“Yes. Whereas you cannot directly speak into a phone, your tablet can place and receive phone calls. I have had integrated with that a text-to-speech application so you may type your statements and they will be converted to voice. I do apologize for the rather uninspiring tone that is used, but I shall direct a technician to improve that function in the future. So, if you wish to check on Mrs. Hudson or have a conversation with John or myself, you simply… phone. Text messaging is also included, if that is a more appropriate route for whatever message you need to communicate.”

Greg knew he couldn’t tear up, since he didn’t produce any tears, but it still felt as if he was doing that very thing as he stared at the tablet on his desk and the possibilities it offered ran through his brain on a continuous loop. He… he could talk to people. Really talk! And read and watch films… whatever and whenever he wanted. No more paper! No sheets and sheets of paper, since he could write as much as he wanted and never worry about running out of paper or ink or… it was… it was the most incredible thing he could ever have imagined. No… that was wrong. He never could have imagined this. Never. It was overwhelming and amazing and…

“You are most quiet, my dear? Is that a good or bad sign?”
Greg’s rushing forward to give Mycroft a hug left Mycroft with empty arms as Greg passed through him and out the other side, which, surprisingly, startled both men, but had them laughing at the absurdity of it all.

“It’s a fucking wonderful sign! This is unbelievable, Mycroft. Positively unbelievable. I never thought for a moment that I’d ever get to do any of this and, now, I can do all of it!”

“I am overjoyed that you are happy with your surprise, Gregory. And, there are duplicate versions of your tablet in the sitting room and kitchen, so you can enjoy your media indulgences in more than your study. Thus, I would recommend storing your writing in your cloud storage, which syncs with each device, so if you choose to write in the kitchen, which does offer a different view from the windows than does this section of the house, your most current writing shall be available to you to edit or add to at your convenience. And, should you desire to use actual paper for a particular reason, simply repeat the process and the stylus tip will be removed, uncovering the nib of your pen. You can vary between the two writing techniques as you see fit.”

He… he could move around the house, watch telly or listen to the radio where he liked. Write where he liked… do everything as he liked! It wasn’t as much freedom as he’d have being alive, but he wasn’t going to nitpick when… when he had this wealth of potential laid at his feet. And…

“I can go on the Internet!”

The monster was well and truly released.

“That you can. You are free to roam about at will. I recognize that many enjoy the various ‘social media’ venues and they, of course, are yours to establish or avoid as you see fit. I do ask that you not divulge any information about your location or my involvement, due to the sensitive nature of my work. Beyond that, however… perhaps that shall be an outlet for you to connect with other book and film lovers, or even those who write, either professionally or as a pleasant way to pass the time.”

The possibilities in that direction nearly shattered Greg’s mind and he found himself pacing around the study in a daze while Mycroft looked on fondly.

“I…”

“Yes, my dear?”

“I… I can be part of it.”

“It?”

“Life! The living! I may not be alive, but people on the Internet won’t know that. I can do all that I see on the telly and nobody would ever know that I’m dead. I’d just be another berk doing that Twitter thing or having a blog with my ridiculous opinions on the latest films… they’d never know I was a ghost. I’d be just like everyone else. Could do what they do and…”

This time Mycroft walked up to the ghost and wrapped his arms around the intangible form, not missing that Greg stepped closer into the embrace that neither of them could feel.

“I am very happy for you, Gregory. I did debate attempting this for, if the experiment failed, I suspected your disappointment would be crushing. So very delighted the disappointment did not come to pass.”

“You’re too good to me, Mycroft. This is what you’ve been thinking about, isn’t it? That little
planning thing you were doing.”

“I cannot tell a lie; yes, it was. Well, to be candid, the first piece of that statement is a lie for I am an incomparable liar, but this single time, veracity guided my words. Whatever I can do for you, Gregory, to bring you comfort of contentment, I shall do. You have my word on that.”

Greg nestled in further, not caring that he pressed into Mycroft slightly by doing so. He had never felt so… important. Mycroft cared. He cared about him and that was a gift greater than any of the treasures he’d received tonight. He’d been lucky in his death to find kind people who cared about his welfare, but with Mycroft… it was more than that and the depth of this poor ghost’s luck simply couldn’t be measured.

“I don’t know what to say, love, I really don’t. It’s all… thank you. Thank you so very, very much.”

“You are very, very welcome. Shall we celebrate your newfound reach into the world by attempting a phone conversation with Mrs. Hudson? Perhaps you prefer to choose a film to watch? Or would a game of some form be more to your taste?”

“All of it!”

“In which order?”

“Oh… phone first, then film with a game at the same time.”

Mycroft nodded, stepped back, removed his jacket, tossed it over the arm of the desk chair and motioned Greg to have a ‘seat’ on the sofa next to him. It would likely be a long night as his ghost would want to try everything, but that was perfectly fine with him. With his laptop retrieved from his own study, he could make good use of the time and award himself a later-than-normal start to his morning. Even if that did not come to pass, it mattered not a whit. The sheer joy in his Gregory’s eyes was worth far more than anything as trivial as sleep…
Chapter 17

Sherlock had a deep, unspoken affection for John’s unique giggle and hearing it in the flat was generally cause for delight. However, when he was not the inspiration for that giggle, the delight diminished exponentially, especially when the giggle was not singular, but a continuous stream of John-noises that had, to this point, continued for nearly twenty minutes. This required investigation and, perhaps, obstruction.

“John!”

“Hmmmmmm?”

“John!”

“What?”

“JOHN!”

“Fuck me, Sherlock! What do you want?”

“You are not giggling at me.”

“Is that a riddle? You have something wrong in your head if it is.”

“You are giggling and have been for… 21.7 minutes… and I demand to know the reason why since, quite obviously, it is not me.”

Sherlock’s self-centeredness was not one of his most endearing qualities, which made John’s next statement all the more fun to say, since it would make his partner batty.

“I’m texting a ghost.”

“Very funny, John. You know your attempt to hide the true reason will only make me seek it all the harder.”

“How do you know I’m not telling the truth?”

“Oh, let me think. The fact that ghosts are not real and, if they were, they would have no physicality to actually type a text though, frankly, the first reason is more than sufficient. Though, I should add that this situation would require you not only know a ghost but were sufficiently friendly with one that it would text you with messages that made you laugh. Again… what are you trying to hide?”

“I could have met a ghost anytime and just because they’re not… corporeal… like that word, it’s long enough to make you feel tingly… doesn’t mean they have to be technologically behind the curve. Maybe they can meld with the electronics or something. Do that quantum wavey whatever you tried to tell me about once that made even less sense than ghosts being real and then they could text away! You have no clue who’s on the other end of a text or tweet or whatever if you’ve never met them in person to know they’re… not dead. They could all be ghosts! Ha! Think about that for awhile, Mr. Detective.”

Sherlock hissed in annoyance because the last part of John’s ramble had some merit, though not in association with ghosts, but the first part was… well, not entirely ridiculous, because if ghosts
operated on the quantum level or were classed as pure energy, there could be some direct interaction with the various electronic components so as to… Blast! John had bamboozled him and was looking smug about it!

“Drivel.”

“Ha! You have no argument. This is a glorious day in John Watson’s history. In fact, I’ll text that to my ghostly friend right now.”

Sherlock dove forward, but John leapt out of his chair in time, leaving Sherlock with a face full of cushion and no phone-based satisfaction.

“Unfair!”

“Shhhh… typing. ‘And he leapt at me like he was loony! I live with a berk.’ ”

“JOHN!”

‘He’s yelling, too. Hold on a moment.’ ”

John grinned at Sherlock, then tapped a number on his mobile, laughing when the call was answered.

“Oh, it’s a treat to watch. No, not unusual, I’m sad to say. I should, that’s a great idea. Fancy a drink? Great! I’m on my way.”

Terminating the call, John grinned even more smugly at Sherlock who was positively vibrating with annoyance.

“You cannot have a drink with a ghost!”

“You admit he’s a ghost, now, do you?”

“NO! It’s… you cannot have a drink with anyone.”

“I most certainly can. It’s… far enough beyond morning that I won’t disappoint myself tragically by doing it, either.”

“No, you cannot. We… we have a case.”

“Lie.”

“Dimmock texted while you were tittering like a ridiculous schoolgirl.”

“Lie.”

“I can show you the text.”

“Which will be the one he sent yesterday and you told him to sod off because the case wasn’t interesting enough for you. I remember what he said, too, so you can’t fool me with that trick.”

Damn John and his military memory!

“Then… I will accompany you and deride you mercilessly when your foolishness is proven.”

“Nope, because you will just be a chaotic nuisance and I enjoy quiet drinks with the ghostly
gents in my life. Besides… I believe your experiment is boiling over.”

Sherlock’s head whipped around and he swore loudly, diving towards the scientific disaster, while John grabbed his jacket and dashed out of the flat, making certain to keep dashing for awhile to ensure Sherlock wouldn’t be able to follow. His partner would have to meet Greg at some point, that point, however, was not now. This point was to help the ghost celebrate his newfound communication ability and additional independence. Having Sherlock monopolize the time with questions and experiments was not the way he wanted this to go. Greg deserved a proper celebration, even though only one of them could enjoy the liquid spoils of that celebration. And, also, what Mycroft had in the refrigerator for lunch. Couldn’t enjoy too much liquid spoils on an empty stomach…

“...I couldn’t believe it! He did all of this for me!”

The odd tone of the text-to-speech program was a touch jarring, but John was quickly getting used to it, and the fact that Greg seemed to have taken to typing his words with surprising skill meant conversation proceeded a little slowly, but not so much as to be a problem. That is, when the program didn’t fumble on a non-autocorrectable misspelling. But, the ghost didn’t hesitate to use his newfound skills, including texting Mycroft to open the door remotely for him when he, once again, stood there feeling stupid for not stealing Sherlock’s keys before leaving the flat.

“That is fairly amazing, I have to say. Mycroft seems… well, maybe it’s not so surprising, at that. When something is important to him, Mycroft can and will move mountains to see it done. I have to say… this is impressive, too. Maybe you can’t leave the house, but this really does extend your reach into the world.”

“It does. Spent all night seeing what I could do. It was fantastic! Even what I can do here, in the house, just astounds me. I’ve never had this much choice or control or freedom. It’s a bit overwhelming, truth be told, but I’m not letting that stop me.”

“Well, you’ve got plenty of time to get used to things. I’m envious about the film choices, though. Does Mycroft have every streaming service on the planet? I’m not certain some of those are UK-based.”

“No going to look the gift horse in the mouth, no matter where the horse was born. I can pick my films! Watch what I want to watch, when I want to watch it. And I did a lot of those rating surveys so the services learned what I liked. I don’t know a lot of film titles, so this gets me recommendations and I look online for others. The same for music and books… I can read! Read and listen to what I want, not just what’s available.”

The slower conversation gave John time to sip his whisky, take a bite of the sandwich he’d made from some delicious lamb he’d found in Mycroft’s refrigerator, and think more about what this simple modern convenience meant to the ghost. How well would he do if he had three centuries to endure with that level of isolation? Of, frankly, boredom? He’d bloody well go insane… that’s what would happen. Probably become a completely evil ghost who terrorized everyone who crossed his path since it was the only entertainment he had. Not that it excused the evil ghost that terrorized him, since she was a child-murderer and a particularly-vile one at that, but he could understand a little better, other ghosts who might be a bit tetchy and irritable. Of course, since he actually didn’t know any of them… well, Sherlock was tetchy and irritable and he suffered from boredom and, to some degree, isolation, so that model would work well enough to make his point.

“Good for you! Your days and nights will be as interesting as most living people now, because
all we generally do is hang about our flats watching the telly or reading a book. Go out to a pub now and again, but that costs money and I can come here to drink for free, so I can’t protest too loudly the homebound part of your existence.”

“Oddly, I’m beginning to understand that. When I was alive, you looked to other people for entertainment. Friends, family… you had things like the pub or church. They came to you or you went to them, but you did things together. Now, people spend more time alone and there’s a lot to make that less lonely and boring than it would have been in my time.”

“And you can have take-away delivered, so dinner arrives cooked and ready to eat.”

“A huge benefit. Cooking was not fun. Not at all. Though it looks fun now, I have to say. Mycroft can cook and he’s certainly fun to watch while he does it.”

Mycroft cooks? That was a thought that produced a train wreck in John’s brain that took no small time to clear away so the tracks were clear for new thoughts to flow again.

“Mycroft? Cooks?”

“Yes! I can’t say if he’s good at it or not, but what he prepares looks good and he doesn’t make ‘this is horrible’ faces when he eats it. I suspect he would, too, if things weren’t up to his standards.”

“That’s guaranteed. Maybe you should find a cookbook for him. You can find recipes that look interesting, maybe watch some videos about how the dishes are prepared and give him advice in the kitchen when he tries something new.”

“That’s a great idea! I can’t do anything physical, but I could give my input on how to do something and talk about techniques and the like. Oh, I like that. I like that a lot. The more things we can share, do together, the better.”

Which crept up nicely to a question John had been aching to explore.

“Good, then. Really, really good… and, I take it sharing and doing with Mycroft is something that interests you?”

“Of course, it does! I’m living here now and it would be a dreary experience if we just went about our business and pretended the other person didn’t exist.”

Exploration going poorly. However, his question was bollocks, so the poorly bit was his own fault. Trying again.

“True. But… it’s more than that, isn’t it, Greg?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know.”

“Afraid I don’t.”

Stupid text-to-speech voice! Balls for using tone of voice to know what a person’s thinking! This sounded like an attempted cover-up, but… right. Time for the full-frontal assault. And not in a porny way.

“Are you now or are you hoping to be romantically involved with Mycroft?”

“Oh! Oh… caught onto that, did you?”
Apparently, full-frontal was the right way to go. Still in the non-porny sense.

“I suspected during that first conversation we had, but you never said anything outright, so…”

“True, but I suppose I… I’m not sure how or if we can actually make that work. Mycroft can hear me and see me, which is a step above what you can perceive, but he still can’t touch me and vice versa. We can’t even hold hands! But… yeah, we’re trying, doing our best, to make it work. And, I have to say, we’re not doing the worst job of it. Spending time together, real time where we talk and laugh, not just sharing the sofa watching the telly. Even when we are just sharing the space and, say, he’s reading while I write… there’s always bits of conversation and connection going on. Reading something aloud, talking about it and the ideas behind it… that’s important, isn’t it?”

Given the time required to tap out the words, John’s mind settled into pondering the situation and almost missed the final question. Almost…

“It is important. Very much so, in fact. Lots of couples simply go through the motions and are too complacent or lazy or scared to simply end a pointless relationship and try to find something better. Actually being part of someone else’s life, having them take your ideas seriously and show you respect, being their friend and not just their sex partner… that’s all very important. It’s really what a relationship should be built on, in my opinion.”

“That’s good to know. We did have a romantic spark when Mycroft visited the inn where he got my painting. I could go into his dreams, too, and we danced, enjoyed a long walk on a gorgeous day and… there definitely was a spark. The spark’s still there, too, but it’s a matter of fathoming out how to keep it going when I can’t so much as dance with him anymore and feel him in my arms.”

“You’ll find a way. You’ve got the whole Internet at your disposal now to look for ideas.”

Greg used his stylus to bump the volume of the tablet before typing ‘Yes!’ Then lowered it again out of courtesy when he continued on.

“The Internet is a glorious thing. A disgusting, frightening thing, but a glorious thing, too.”

“That it is. How many porn sites have you visited already?”

“Not as many as you probably think! Truthfully, I didn’t even try to find them, but doing a few searches landed me in some very strange areas.”

“You were searching for information about sex with ghosts, weren’t you?”

“No.”

“Try again.”

“Yeah.”

“You got what you deserved, you perverted specter.”

“And no brilliant ideas! Lots of good stories, though. I have a whole folder of those bookmarks dedicated just to stories about ghost sex.”

“You’re going to be one of those people whose device is filled with embarrassing websites dedicated to kinky porn and kittens playing with flowers.”

“What’s wrong with kittens!”
“How many sites, Greg?”
“… a few.”
“Dogs?”
“A few.”
“And you’ve watched how many hours of cute animal videos?”
“More than a few. There’s loads of them!”

Greg was a grandmother! Well, minus the porn. No… if grandmothers had computers, they probably had their share of sexy sites and videos neatly bookmarked in folders labeled ‘Knitting’ or ‘Holiday Snaps.’ As he grew older, he realized just how scandalous the old ladies really were, despite appearances and the Internet just made those scandals all the more juicy…

“Where have you been?”
Hello, Sherlock. Nice to see you, too.

“How are my drink, drinks, with a ghost.”

“I am not at all happy about your suspicious behavior, John.”

“Then you know how I feel when you take off somewhere and won’t tell me where you’re going. Or when you drag me behind you, still not telling me where you’re going or why you’re going there.”

“Irrelevant.”

“Very relevant. It’s hypocritical to be annoyed with me for doing the very thing you do. All the time.”

“Hypocrisy is irrelevant.”

John was very proud of his ability to mimic Sherlock’s imperious flick of his wrist and demonstrated the maneuver with even greater flair than usual since he was in a particularly good mood. Nice long chat with someone he could actually chat with, a firm agreement to stop in two nights from now to watch the match, given Mycroft had already said he had late meeting that night, and a growing sense that he’d made a real friend, which was a rarity in his life. Good day, all things considered.

“I shall have Mycroft obtain your records to discover with whom you were texting.”

“Ha! Good luck with that. He’ll laugh at you and I’ll laugh at him laughing at you, so you’ll go loony twice as fast.”

Watching Sherlock boil with frustration was now, officially, John’s favorite pastime.

“You are taking far too much enjoyment from this, John.”

“Far too much? A smidgen too much, maybe, but it’s certainly not far enough for far. You think on this, though, when you just dart off without a word and I’m left wondering what’s going on.”
Feeling rather proud of himself for not tolerating Sherlock’s nonsense on this, John decided he would enjoy a little Greg-esque freedom and choose a good book to read while he waited for Sherlock to stop sulking. Since that would be very long time, he could look forward to a quiet early evening and maybe a whole quiet night! Today was a blessed one, indeed…

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Bringing his mobile to bed with him… dastardly John Watson. What an untrusting person he was turning out to be. Now, how to steal it without waking him…

____________

“You want me to do what?”

“Give me the name of the person attached to this mobile number.”

There were prices to be paid for having Sherlock’s help for certain cases and Dimmock was never terribly certain if the prices were worth it.

“Um, no.”

“Why not?”

“It’s illegal.”

“Ridiculous.”

“But, still illegal.”

“Fine, I promise not to tattle that you provided me with the information.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It’s illegal.”

“You sound like a parrot.”

“A parrot with the law on his side. Sherlock, I simply can’t give up private information like that.”

“You could for a case.”

“Not necessarily. Is this a case, though?”

“Will I get my information if I say yes?”

“Thank you for letting me know it’s not for a case in such a unique way.”

“I need to know who is this ‘Greg’ texting John!”

Ohhhhh… it was one of those things. And jealous Sherlock was very like the most stubborn and irritating member of the species, which was saying a lot given how stubborn and irritating any other member of the species could be. Especially since John wouldn’t cheat on Sherlock, would he? Admittedly, Sherlock was… Sherlock, but John always seemed happy enough, despite the
murderous desires you clearly could see in his eyes when Sherlock was on a particularly chaotic rampage.

No, John wouldn’t cheat, but… it would be a bit easy to see why he might. Or it could be nothing! Nothing at all. Regardless, Sherlock wasn’t going to let this go…

“Look, I can’t give you his personal information, but I can check if there is anything to worry about, like a criminal record.”

“Why would I care about that?”

“It’s what I can do. More than that is a violation of privacy and I know you, Sherlock. I give you his full name and you’ll track the poor bastard down and make his life a misery, even if he’s only someone John met at the pub and they found they enjoyed each other’s company. People do have friends, you know, and there’s nothing wrong with John meeting someone he might come to call a friend.”

“John doesn’t need friends, John has me.”

“Just so you know, that is a very good reason John needs as many friends as he can get. You’re an arse.”

“Untrue.”

“Very true and having someone he can talk to about your arseishness could be a very welcome thing. But, if the bloke’s just out of prison for embezzlement or something, maybe he should look in a different direction. Hold on a moment…”

Dimmock took the mobile number Sherlock had written down and typed it into his computer, hmmmm-ing softly, before more tapping occurred that produced more tapping and hmmmm-ing, which, fortunately, came to a halt before Sherlock vaulted over the desk and throttled him.

“Ok… not to alarm you…”

“I knew it! A blackguard.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? He is attempting to cuckold me, so he is most certainly well-described as a blackguard.”

“First, you have zero evidence of cuckolding, beyond your hysterical fantasies based on a few harmless texts and afternoon of drinks, just like I might have with any of my mates. Second… I honestly don’t know what he is. Or who.”

That got Sherlock’s attention and he darted behind the desk to glare at the computer monitor and the lack of information it contained.

“I… I don’t understand. There’s nothing there.”

“As if the number doesn’t even exist, meaning it’s some type of blocked information. Not just ex-directory, but inaccessible completely. A warrant could likely see it revealed, but I think even you, loony as you are, realize that’s not going to happen.”

“What reason would exist for something like this?”
“Usually governmental. Security reasons and the like. Bloke has his phone stolen or number intercepted and they don’t want it traced to a specific person. Probably other things, but I just finished a cracking spy novel last night and that’s where my brain is today. Ok, bye.”

Watching Sherlock snarl and speed off gave Dimmock a case of conflicted feelings because (a) Sherlock was leaving, which was cause for rejoicing, but (b) the look on his face said he was on a mission that might end rather bloodily and, just watch, he’d be the one sent out to clean things up. Well, since he had little on his agenda today but writing up a few reports and reading witness statements, that would certainly break up the monotony…”
Chapter 18

The level of security at any government building was high, with certain buildings being especially high, indeed. The sight of a tall, dark-haired man storming through this particular one, coat tails streaming imperiously behind him, should have sparked an armed response with full emergency klaxons blaring at top volume. Instead, it prompted the ground-floor guards to share a sigh while the ranking individual present said a few magic words into his radio that kept the avenging angels at bay and, further, sent an alert to a certain person who said a word that sophisticated women were not supposed to know, let alone hiss through their teeth with more than a little venom.

Tapping a button on her desk, Anthea counted the seconds until Sherlock barged into the outer office and continued at top speed to find his face colliding painfully with Mycroft’s inner-office door since his hand wasn’t strong enough to twist the knob of a door that was tightly locked by the magic button of Mistress Anthea.

“That was barbaric!”

“Do you mean not having any form of appointment or asking about your brother’s availability and trying to burst in because you’re just an arrogant twat? Yes, I agree. That was terribly barbaric.”

Sherlock knew, from experience, that a glaring war with Mycroft’s PA would not necessarily serve him a victory, so he settled for rubbing his very sore nose, squawking loudly at the small dab of blood that clung to his fingers in the aftermath.

“Assault!”

“Yes, you viciously assaulted the door with your face. I am a witness and will testify to it in court.”

“Blood!”

“Can doors bleed? That’s news to me, but science finds new things all the time and I can’t keep up with the progress as well as I would like.”

“Tissue!”

This time, Anthea decided a small amount of compassion was required, given the likely degree of pain involved with the situation, and handed Sherlock a piece of written-on memo paper.

“This isn’t a tissue!”

“It’s paper. Same biological group as the building material your face just defiled, so why are you complaining?”

Sherlock snarled darkly and used the extremely unabsorbant paper on his upper lip, resulting in smearing the thin trickle of blood over his skin as if he’d tried to put on red lipstick and his cat head-butt ked his hand during the application process.

“You are a blight on civilization, which is surely why my brother retains your employment.”

“That, and I have the psychic ability to predict which of his favorite chocolates he wants when he’s finished analyzing a new batch of intelligence reports.”
Observing the exchange from the monitor in his office, which he immediately switched on when the ‘lock down, it’s probably Sherlock’ button was pressed, Mycroft had to admit that chocolate precognition was one of his PA’s more valuable talents. Sherlock-managing was another. Now, though, it was time to learn what had set his brother on another of his ridiculous office invasions…

A quick assessment of the most-recently collected information from his near-constant surveillance on any and all things relating to Sherlock gave Mycroft the knowledge that his brother had gone from 221B to Scotland Yard where... what had the good Inspector Dimmock been doing that might prompt this level of… oh. Ohhhh… now this was very interesting. Seeking information about a certain mobile number, which would certainly not be available to the police. And, a quick check of Gregory’s phone activity… dear, dear brother. The fires of jealousy do you little credit, as your nose is now telling you with some force. However, it will offer me a world of fun…

Pressing his own button, Mycroft unlocked the door and the tiny message that appeared on Anthea’s computer monitor let her know that Sherlock was free to enter.

“… number three – your antagonistic attitude is entirely against the spirit of… good government. I… I shall phone my MP!”

“Who is?”

“I… if you do not know, I shall not step in to fill your gap of knowledge.”

“Lame, Sherlock. I will savor your defeat as you go in to cry at your brother. Door’s open, so try using your hand this time to move it forward.”

Sherlock knew his glare wasn’t particularly potent since his increasingly-throbbing nose was making it hard to properly contort his features for something truly fearsome, but formalities must be met and he gave it his best effort before storming into Mycroft’s office, stamping his foot once seeing his brother smugly smiling at him from behind his very neat desk.

“You were spying on my conversation, weren’t you? Of course you were. Another dishonorable act to add to your bulging, odious portfolio.”

“Dishonorable? Using a mechanism put in place so that unstable or aggressive individuals would be blocked from entering while security was summoned? I believe you should work on your vocabulary, brother dear.”

“Untrue! You took great pleasure from my discomfort and there is no honor in that!”

“A wealth of amusement, though. Would you like a mirror to tidy your cosmetics? I know that, for some, a properly fixed face is essential to successfully navigating their day.”

Flicking his finger towards a decorative mirror on a far wall, Mycroft watched Sherlock waver, then throw himself towards it, smiling widely at Sherlock’s angry snarl at the sight of his reflection.

“Your PA should be fired.”

“My PA deserves a pay rise which, luckily, is already penciled into budget beginning next month. Now, what brings you here today, brother mine? Is Doctor Watson enjoying an afternoon with a friend, perhaps, and you were not content with their company?”

A calculated strike, but a successful one as Sherlock’s snarl turned from the mirror to Mycroft, who gleefully, yet languidly, raised his legs to rest upon the edge of his desk.
“Your duplicity is nauseating. STAY AWAY FROM JOHN!”

Knowing Anthea certainly had her ear to the keyhole, Mycroft smirked slightly knowing she was now holding back peals of laughter to avoid interrupting Sherlock’s hysterical episode.

“Why would I do such a thing? Doctor Watson is an affable man of reasonable intellect for the average person. Admittedly, he no longer maintains his fighting trim, however, I would judge his physique to be more than suitable for… oh, whatever reason.”

If his brother turned any more purple, there would certainly be more than a drip of blood emanating from his nose. This was delightful!

“You… you will NOT steal John from me, you… usurper!”

“Steal? Hmmm… that implies a theft of property. Dear me, John will certainly not be happy to hear that is how you perceive him.”

“Do not attempt your ridiculous word play with me!”

“Alright, I shall reserve my various forms of play for… more enticing targets.”

Knowing that Sherlock’s awareness of how the eternal mockery of his physical attributes overlay a painful series of memories from their youth as to how well his physical attributes could be leveraged to completely trounce a horrid little brother, Mycroft had no particular worry about a punch being thrown, but he undertook a few minimal repositionings to bolster his advantage should his supposition be proved incorrect.

“You… I know you, Mycroft… you are playing with John’s affections simply to enact some petty revenge against me or to satisfy your own ego, neither of which is justifiable by ANY person with integrity and is profoundly disrespectful to John. I shall not permit it.”

Had Sherlock not added the last bit about his doctor, Mycroft might have contented himself to carry on with the charade for a fortnight longer, but his brother’s affection for John was something that did deserve respect, if only for the reason that it had promoted the most astounding growth in the younger man who… who he had despaired would ever find someone with whom an opened heart did not seem such a terrifying thing.

“I have no idea from where came this nonsensical idea, Sherlock, but I can assure you that I have no intention of replacing you in John’s affections.”

“That is a lie!”

“Evidence?”

“You were texting him just yesterday!”

“And how often do I text, Sherlock? Especially when the person in question likely has bountiful time to speak to me through the very same apparatus?”

“Which occurred! John phoned and you met for drinks. This scurrilous behavior shall not continue!”

“Hmmmm… one moment.”

Mycroft buzzed his PA, feeling no surprise that it took a moment for her to enter, given she had to
swallow down her large smile so as to appear the consummate professional.

“Yes, Mr. Holmes?”

“Anthea, did I leave my office yesterday?”

“Twice, sir.”

Sherlock’s loud ‘ah ha!’ was waved off in a very practiced fashion by his older brother.

“For what reasons?”

“You were needed for a meeting with a certain ambassador at his embassy and, later in the afternoon, there was the small matter with the MI-6 official that… required delicate handling.”

“And did you accompany me to those meetings?”

“That I did.”

“Thank you, Anthea. That is all.”

Mycroft pretended not to notice his brother sticking out his tongue behind Anthea’s turned back, but chortled loudly when she made a very accomplished rude gesture, having seen Sherlock’s childishness in the reflection from the highly-polished sconce on the wall adjacent to the door.

“There, brother dear. Confirmation that I did not meet anyone for drinks yesterday, let alone Doctor Watson.”

“Of course your servant would support your lies and infidelity.”

“Shall I again buzz for Anthea so you can inform her personally of her change in employment status?”

“… no.”

“Very well. Whatever is in your head, Sherlock, and, believe me, I truly have no wish to envision a full-color mental picture of that surrealistic depiction of the depths of hell, my image is not to be found in the accursed tableau.”

“Then explain why John was conversing with someone who uses a classified government mobile!”

“Despite your frequent elevating of me to the status of The British Government, I can assure you that I do not alone shoulder the burden of ruling my subjects. You are, as they say, barking up the wrong tree.”

“Then…”

Sherlock’s thunderously-confused face cracked Mycroft’s gleeful amusement and he waved Sherlock over to take the chair on the other side of the desk, which his brother did with surprising speed.

“First, Sherlock… there is no reason to be distressed or suspicious if Doctor Watson has become friendly with another person. It is the normal way, at least, for people who are not you and me.”

“Why would he hide their identity from me? That, alone, warrants suspicion.”
Not when the identity of that other someone was a ghost and, further, the opportunity to whip you into a frothy mass of discord was far too tempting to pass up.

“Were you being rather adamant and tenacious about discovering this identity?”

“I… perhaps.”

“And how do you respond when someone is prying into your business, even when it is utterly innocent and free of any taint, romantic or otherwise?”

“That… is not relevant.”

“It is exceedingly relevant and you are well aware of it.”

So sayeth the guilty expression you are now wearing, which tells me that, in all likelihood, John raised a similar point during your verbal sparring.

“The situation is entirely different.”

“It is not and you, again, are painfully aware of that fact. Most understandably, you annoyed, perhaps even insulted, John with your actions and he chose to enact his own form of vengeance which, I must say, was staggeringly effective. You brought this on yourself, brother, and you alone are to blame for your internal tumult. Had you made a civil inquiry, you may have received the information you desired, however, your abrasive tactics gained you nothing but a surplus of stomach acid.”

Sherlock’s scowl was precisely the one Mycroft remembered from when his brother was a boy and could not squirm away from the fact that he was in the wrong, but was having a monstrously hard time admitting his error. Ah, nostalgia…

“Well? Any response? Or, are you going to continue to haunt my office like a dyspeptic spirit and serenade me with a variety of mournful moans and shakings of your chains?”

Appropriate imagery is appropriate, though his brother need not know that fact.

“I suppose… if one is a nitpicker for social niceties that… I may have adopted too forceful an approach when speaking to John.”

“An astute analysis. I would suggest an apology, as sincere as you can muster, and, perhaps, some small token to demonstrate your contrition.”

“John does need a new wallet.”

“What did you do to his existing one.”

“I… it is not important. Though, the term ‘existing’ is no longer applicable to its condition.”

“Joyful. Then take time to purchase for him a new example and make every effort to see the remainder of his day a peaceful one.”

That Sherlock did not immediately bolt to avoid further conversation on the subject brought a wrinkle of concern to Mycroft’s brow while he waited for the proverbial other shoe to drop.

“I don’t suppose…”

“Yes?”
“You could determine who is this ‘Greg,’ given he is one of your ghoulish brethren.”

“If you are asking me to spy on John’s personal business, the answer is no.”

“You do it constantly!”

“Only for matters connected directly to you.”

“This does connect directly to me!”

“No, it actually does not. John’s friends, pastimes, etc. are not directly relevant to you unless they pose a specific threat to your welfare. Meeting for drinks? That is not life-imperiling, I must say, no matter the quality of the spirits imbibed. Just speak with him, brother. Express your concerns, the foundation for them and be willing to listen to his response. I have full faith that a genuine attempt at communication on your part, and not a dictatorial tantrum, will gain you what you seek.”

Mycroft held Sherlock’s gaze, counted the seconds, and got to four before Sherlock did bolt from his chair and vanished from the office. The lack of an ‘oof’ indicated that his PA had not purposefully left something in the path to the outer door, as she was apt to do when Sherlock had been particularly evil, most likely, feeling some sympathy for the young man who was learning what it meant to be in love and the work that was required to make that love last a lifetime.

“Sir? Shall I cancel your appointments for the remainder of the day so you can monitor this situation?”

“Hmmm… no. I believe, this time, I will let Sherlock deal with whatever fallout that may occur using only his own devices.”

However, he would make a quick call to someone who would certainly, in turn, phone John so everyone was on board with the strategy of assuaging Sherlock’s jealousy and moving him one step forward towards meeting his now-named nemesis. Perhaps that dinner party should occur sooner than later. And without quite as much haunting as his dear Gregory was anticipating. One enormous emotional upheaval this week was certainly all Sherlock could manage without requiring a tranquilizer dart in his arse to bring him back down from raging at the storm clouds…

“John.”

“That I am.”

“Yes… I was simply issuing a greeting.”

When Sherlock was off-kilter and remorseful, it was truly a thing to behold. Not that John particularly enjoyed it, but it definitely had its points of interest.

“One I am more than happy to accept and return. Sherlock.”

“Yes. Thank you. Here.”

Sherlock pulled a small package from his coat pocket and handed it to John, keeping his eyes averted, much like a ten-year old boy handing a flower to his crush.

“Oh… for me? Well, let’s see… ha! Alright, I have to give you credit, this is exactly what I
needed. A new wallet. Nice one, too. Thank you, Sherlock.”

“It is RFID-blocking, not that the theft of your identity would be a particularly wealth-enhancing experience for the perpetrator, but the paperwork to put matters aright would mandate I listen to Mycroft’s crypt-dry prattling for at least an hour, and that is an hour too long for anyone to have to endure without being in a coma.”

Only Sherlock could present a gift and accompany it with an insult, but John appreciated the gesture. Especially since the communication network between him, Greg and Mycroft had already filled him in on certain details of Sherlock’s day. Such as the slightly swollen nose that he would not comment upon, since he wasn’t supposed to know about it, and Sherlock would certainly assume, in any case, that it was beyond his observational prowess, medical degree or not.

“Very helpful feature. I’ll fill it right away and start using it.”

“Good. And, John… I apologize. I… whereas it was perfectly understandable on my part to become concerned that you were enjoying an association with someone, a male someone, that you chose to keep secret from me, I should have approached discussing the matter with you in a more productive fashion.”

AND, only Sherlock could offer an apology prefaced by why it wasn’t actually needed, in the first place. But, when you knew Sherlock… you saw this for what it was – a statement that came straight from his heart, which still needed to put some up shielding against the world because it was a more tender thing than anyone could possibly imagine. The shielding was lessening, though… at least where a few people were concerned…

“I appreciate that, Sherlock. And I’ll apologize, too, for being a bit of a prat about things. It really is nothing to worry about and I shouldn’t have made it seem like it might be. That wasn’t fair to you.”

“No, it wasn’t. But… can you tell me about him?”

Minimally.

“Greg’s a chap I met and found that I had some things in common with. He enjoys a good match and a few pints while watching one. Likes many of the same films I do, especially the ones you say are cultural abominations… just a nice person to chat with.”

“He… what does he do for a living?”

Remembering not to divulge that I know you tried to have the phone traced and found out it was a super-secret government-issued model…

“Does some government work, actually. Or, I should say, has some dealings with the government. We don’t talk about that part, though. What he gets up to with our government is not something I should be privy to, I suspect…”

Especially if he works out that ghost sex with your brother business.

“… but he’s also a writer. Hasn’t published anything yet, but that does occupy a portion of his time and I’ve read a few things he’s written. They’re good! I think he might try that direction as a career, if he’s given the opportunity, but… well, the government thing might be an obstacle to that.”

Mostly because the British Government himself would have to arrange some form of agent to go between Greg and any publishers so that they’d never have to meet his ghostly self in person. And,
then, set him up with a fake identity and a bank account so he could get paid… being dead was really complicated if you actually hoped to work for a living! Not that Greg had said that, specifically, but he very much seemed the type of man who, if he had the chance to be productive and earn his proverbial keep, he’d grasp it with both hands, corporeality notwithstanding.

“Oh. I… I suppose someone like that offers some degree of interest, at least for the purpose of mindless conversation and wilting one’s intellect with deplorable films.”

“And that’s the extent of it. Friends often share parts of your life that other people don’t find interesting or care to spend time doing. And that’s a good thing. They don’t take away from what you have with other people, they just offer new opportunities to do more of the things you like. I will, however, pick a time where we’re not doing something mindless or deplorable and invite you along so you can meet him. And, if it makes you feel better, he’s got someone in his life, too. Maybe we could do dinner or drinks with them as a couples thing. Let you see why I like Greg and, also, that he’s not inclined to make any romantic moves on me or anyone. How does that sound?”

Especially since your brother is inviting us for dinner at the end of the week and our Sherlock-meets-a-ghost team has decided it will be a couples thing, though you won’t realize that at first.

“I… I suppose I could endure the tedium for a brief period.”

“Very gracious of you. In the meantime, how about we enjoy the rest of the day with only ourselves for company? Step out and browse through that second-hand bookshop you like, then treat ourselves with something wonderfully unhealthy for dinner?”

“Will there be egg rolls?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then I agree.”

John made a show of waggling his new wallet in the air before rising and retrieving his various cards from his jacket pocket to tuck into their new home, then grabbed his jacket and beamed widely at the visibly-happier Sherlock.

“Ready?”

Sherlock nodded, then paused a moment as he joined John at the door of the flat to bend and give his partner a small kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you, John.”

Rather than answering, John simply took Sherlock’s hand, gave it a gentle squeeze, grinned up at his shyly-smiling partner and gave a tug to get the tall git walking. Sherlock wasn’t a perfect man, but he couldn’t imagine a more perfect man for him. And unlike another couple he knew, he could reward that perfection in all sorts of blisteringly filthy ways later in the evening. After the egg rolls, of course…
Chapter 19

There was something incongruous about a ghost being startled, but Greg startled every time his tablet ‘rang’ to indicate he had an incoming phone call. Then it was the inevitable giggle at being such a ridiculous person before finally answering.

“Hello?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to being able to actually phone you like this, lad. It’s so wonderfully normal, which isn’t like you one bit, is it?”

“Mrs. Hudson! Well, normal or not, I’m glad you do phone. It’s marvelous, isn’t it? I’m still not used to it myself, truth be told, and I’ve had Mycroft, John and you phone me a number of times. You think it’d sink into my thick skull that I can do this now, but no… skull’s resisting mightily.”

This was, Mrs. Hudson knew very well, a dream come true for Greg. In truth, it was a dream come true for her, too, because she’d worried terribly about the poor dear for so, so long. Unable to do the simplest of things and with only her for conversation… it’d been a worrying gamble to let Mr. Holmes have the painting, but it was a gamble they’d won, that much was certain.

“It’s good not to be complacent, so a thick skull is working to your advantage this time. How are you, Greg? Your Mr. Holmes taking good care of you, dear?”

“I’m well and Mycroft’s amazing, as always. We played chess last night! I haven’t done that since… it must have been a half-century ago! He’s got to move my pieces about, but that’s not important since I have to all the thinking myself. I lost, of course, but I gave him a better battle than he was expecting and I suspect that, with more practice, I might even win one day. Regardless, it was… the only thing to call it is a perfect evening. Mycroft sipped wine, we had a fire burning, soft music playing…”

“So romantic! You found yourself a very romantic one, didn’t you, lucky devil.”

“I did! You wouldn’t think so, meeting him on the street, I suspect, but Mycroft has a romantic streak as wide as the ocean and I think it’s been waiting to come out and be seen. John says Sherlock’s mentioned his brother is a bit of a hermit and I think that’s true. He doesn’t have any friends phoning, that I’ve noticed, and doesn’t talk about old romances. He’s been nearly as alone as me and that’s terrible, since he’s a warm, brilliant man and I… I suppose I should be happy he’s not found someone or I wouldn’t be here!”

Even though the tone of the text-to-speech program wasn’t what one would call expressive, Mrs. Hudson was positive she could hear every bit of Greg’s hope shining through in each of those last words. The poor dear was so smitten, he might as well hang a sign around his neck saying that very thing. Not that a sign could hang around his neck, but… he had a real and deep desire for something special to happen with his Mr. Holmes and she could only cross her fingers and add her hope to the fight, too.

“So good to hear, but, if that changes, you let me know and I’ll box his ears good and proper.”

“I’ll pass that along, because I suspect the threat of it’s enough to keep him on his best behavior. That’ll be needed too, given our little dinner tonight.”

“The one I had to pack surprises for Mr. Holmes to have collected yesterday?”
“The very same!”

“You’re a mischief, Greg Lestrade, an absolute mischief.”

“True, but that’s why I’m so adorable.”

While the person who had been his only living friend giggled at his ridiculousness, Greg thought about the upcoming evening. John had endured sheer torture getting Sherlock to agree to visit his brother for a pleasant meal, but visit they would, and this simple ghost couldn’t wait! Sherlock was an important part of Mycroft’s life and he couldn’t forever hide his existence, even if Sherlock’s visits were rare and, often, larcenous.

And John had come to be someone he could genuinely claim as a friend, so there was that connection to be acknowledged, too. Their evening a few nights ago watching the match was made all the more eventful by Sherlock phoning every ten minutes for this or that ludicrous reason because he was still green-eyed with jealousy, but maybe not quite as emerald-hued as he had been before creating performance art in Mycroft’s office. It wasn’t fair to let that fester too long, though, so a bit more fun tonight, then… well, then they’d see what they’d see…

“You’re not as adorable as you think, you horrid thing.”

“That’s true. I’m more adorable than I think.”

“That new friend of yours, the doctor… is he as insufferable as you, or is he a nice, normal fellow?”

“Very nice, very normal. Sort of.”

“Meaning he’s just as much of a scamp as you. Well, one day you bring him here for a little chat so I can remind him, as well as you, what comes from having an inflated ego.”

“Will Mycroft and Sherlock get that lecture?”

“If they need it. Actually, having met Mr. Holmes… oh, I’d better start writing. Actually, be a dear, Greg, and write my ego-deflating lecture for me. You’re so good with words.”

“I’ll see to it right away. Email you a copy.”

“Email! Oh, it’s a brilliant thing, Greg… I’m just so happy for you being able to do all of this. Sending snaps for me to see where you live, sharing your stories, chatting on the phone… write a thank you letter to your Mycroft from me, too, along with the ego lecture. I wish I could have done all of that for you, but it’s a blessing that someone could. A true blessing…”

Being a real friend to him and treating him like any other person had meant more to him than Mrs. Hudson could ever know, but he’d done the best he could to give her an inkling of how much more vibrant she’d made his life in the time he lived there. And he wouldn’t stop doing it, either. You could send flowers and the like using the Internet, couldn’t you? Maybe Mycroft would set up an account for him with a florist or something so he could brighten her day, now and then, to thank her for all those years brightening his.

“I’ll do that! Make it a fancy, heart-wrenching one, too.”

“What a good lad you are. Now, let’s talk about all the naked people you’ve already found on the Internet. What are some good sites to get quality nudies for free? The inn does a good business, but wherever I can save money, I will, so don’t be shy about letting me know good deals along those
Everyone watched Internet porn! Not that he hadn’t suspected it, but that did explain the times Mrs. Hudson nearly broke the monitor of her old office laptop closing it when he poked his head through the door to ask a question. Well, no reason to lose interest in nudes just because you had a few years on you. He had three hundred and still had a very strong taste for that form of entertainment! Not that he’d been able to **indulge** for most of that time, but he was certainly making up for it now.

“I’ll do that! I’m actually… there so much of everything out there, that I’m a tad all over when I’m exploring. Start by looking for a really good online thesaurus and end up learning about types of hummingbirds! There’s so, so much in the world that I’ve not been able to know about and… sometimes I’m surprised my brain hasn’t exploded by the time Mycroft gets home.”

“Well, you have plenty of time to let it all sink in and be as used to it as the rest of us. Oops, my guests are back.”

“Interesting ones?”

“Two lovely Belgian couples. One of the women, her grandfather was from this area and they’re paying a visit to some of the extended family. Very nice people, very tidy.”

“Which you adore.”

“Tidy and not fussy eaters.”

“You’re already plying them with a savings if they book another stay in the future.”

“You know me so well, dear.”

“I do! But, I’ll leave you to earn your wage and I’ll keep working on his little story I’ve got going. **And** watching this brilliant film about space aliens.”

“Life of luxury… some people have the luck. Goodbye, Greg… don’t work your ghostly self too hard watching that film. Hate to have you tired and tetchy when your Mycroft comes home.”

Snickering as the phone call terminated, Greg did a tiny shimmy at how simple all this had become. Take a call from a friend, email them things, talk about the world with more information than what he could pick up from the news… and all of that was going to be useful tonight once he had one more person to add to his growing social circle. Of course, **getting** that person into the circle was going to be its own bit of fun, but that was what life was all about…

“Gregory? What are you doing?”

“Floating upside down so it’s easier to watch you get everything sorted for dinner.”

“How is that possibly easier?”

And how is it possible that your ‘shirt’ is actually hanging down in precisely the manner one would expect if you were a living person and… exposing a belly that was simply… breathtaking. The smallest amount of padding in which a perfect navel was nested. The gentle sprinkling of hair would be the *piece de résistance* to feel against one’s skin when one used one’s tongue to… and attention turning quickly back to meal preparation. **Without** the erection that was threatening to grow.
“Ummmm… it’s more fun?”

And because you’re noticing the little flash of skin I’m giving you, in my best come-hither fashion. Not that the coming or hithering can go very far, but it’s nice to see your eyes continuing to glance towards that bit of visual enticement and very much liking what they see. Which is actually what I looked like when I was alive, so well done me.

“That is better. Now, I believe I have everything in order for our starters and the wine to accompany them is breathing… the remainder of our courses are patiently awaiting their chance to make an appearance. Yes, I believe we have our first dinner party fully in hand.”

Both men smiled shyly at the ‘our first dinner party’ and Greg floated back upright to stand next to Mycroft and give him a no-contact hug.

“It’s brilliant, love. Really it is. I think Sherlock and John… well, John… will be duly impressed and Sherlock will, at least, have a good meal out of it all.”

“Which he shall pick at as if it was the moldering carcass of a sheep and he was a crow, but that is his norm and utterly expected.”

“Then he’s daft, because even I can tell this is going to be amazing. And you only had half of it delivered!”

Given the time constraints, Mycroft would have preferred to have all of it delivered, but accurately predicted how pleased would be his ghost if there was some actual physical preparation of the meal besides heating and plating a catered feast. Fortunately, the few starters and soup were old favorites that never disappointed and were most simple to ready in a short amount of time.

“When time permits, we shall craft a truly luxurious meal, all from the very basics, but one does what one can.”

“And I’m astounded by it. Do you have our surprises ready?”

“I do and am very much looking forward to, shall we say, springing them.”

“Springing shall certainly occur, though … I really want this to go well for your brother. And for me, too, I suppose.”

Mycroft offered his best reassuring smile and marveled at the depth of his ghost’s concern about making a good impression on Sherlock. It added evidence to the growing file that Gregory hoped to be part of his life for quite some time to come and not as a passive observer.

“I have no doubt your little escapades will only serve to whet Sherlock’s curiosity and appetite to interact more with you to better learn your secrets.”

“They’re pretty shameful. I’m not certain he’s sturdy enough to handle them. Seemed a bit the delicate flower while he was ransacking your ties and yelling at John.”

“Truly he can be the most delicate and fragile of blossoms, but I have faith your deepest, darkest secrets shall but ruffle his petals like a soft, summer wind.”

“Not fair! You’ve got a better way with words than me.”

“Utterly untrue. I have read your writings and find them replete with clever and colorful turns of phrase.”
"Can I steal that one, though?"

"I shall weather the theft with grace."

Feeling a sudden rush of… something… Greg leaned in and gave Mycroft a quick peck on the lips which, though neither could feel it, sparked something very potent in Mycroft’s already ghost-belly heated romantic core. If the doorbell hadn’t sounded… well, Mycroft had no idea what he would have done, but the fire in his eyes told Greg there would have been an attempt at something, nonetheless.

"I… I shall greet our guests."

"And I’ll watch the fun."

Smiling what he hoped was a wickedly-fun grin and not a sexy-fun grin, so as not to stoke particular fires in his Mycroft at a time when they were receiving guests, Greg motioned Mycroft out of the kitchen and didn’t chide himself for inspecting the very pert arse that accompanied Mycroft from said kitchen and how the impeccably-cut trousers emphasized the pertness to a very pleasing degree. Maybe he’d spent a tiny bit of extra time investigating the more naked part of the Internet today, but now he could say, with full confidence, that his Mycroft had a posterior to put all those paid professionals, and eager amateurs, to shame. And, one day soon, he hoped to see it in its fully naked and for-his-eyes-only splendor… somehow, he had a suspicion that the ‘one day soon’ might come sooner than he expected…

I am announcing, formally, that I am here under duress."

"Thank you, brother. Your agony is duly noted. John, I am happy to welcome you this evening. I trust your agony from Sherlock’s hysteria is not overly burdensome."

"Not at all! At least, not so burdensome that good food and good alcohol won’t erase it from my mind."

"Then you are fortunate that I have a healthy supply of both. Come, let us relax awhile in the sitting room while dinner continues to work its magic. I have starters prepared that I believe you will find most appetizing."

Sherlock’s narrowed, suspicious eyes made Mycroft pat his brother’s cheek in response, earning him a loud sputter from Sherlock and a hearty laugh from John.

"That sounds wonderful, actually. Sherlock was convinced we’d arrive and you’d fit us with feed bags filled with grain."

"That is because of his own fondness for such things. Have I ever told you, Doctor Watson, about the encounter toddler Sherlock had with a pony in its stable? Let us say, they shared their own collegial meal and Sherlock learned that oats, grains and the variety of insects that might choose to visit such a stockpile were most palatable to his young taste buds."

Sherlock’s affronted yip, rather than pointed rebuttal, made John laugh more than the news his partner had lunch dates with ponies and wasn’t picky about the menu. Giving Sherlock a quick, high-pitched ‘neigh,’ John followed Mycroft into the sitting room, feeling a little silly that he looked around to see if Greg was present. He felt even sillier when a soft, whispered ‘boo’ slithered into his ear and he jumped like he’d stepped on a tack.
“John! You are not a jack-in-the-box.”

“Muscle twinge. Startled me.”

“I am already broiling under the flames of this agonizing situation, John. Pray you do not make it worse.”

John rolled his eyes and smiled politely at Mycroft who was just returning from a quick trip to the kitchen with a bottle of wine in his hand and a tray of what appeared to be some rather scrumptious-looking crostini and small pastries that surely held mouth-watering surprises if the aroma reaching John’s nose was any indication.

“That looks great, Mycroft! If this is just to start I’m almost scared to ask what’s on the menu for dinner.”

“Oh, after this small nibble to whet our appetites, we have a lovely roasted chicken, with an assortment of vegetables, a most pleasant tomato bisque to precede it and light lemon tarte to end our meal.”

“Ooohhh… sounds delicious. Shame, though, since I probably won’t have room in my stomach for even a bite of broiled Sherlock after that deliciousness. Oh well, cold broiled detective sandwiches will be perfect for lunch tomorrow.”

Mycroft cut eyes towards Greg and smiled a tiny smile that said things were already starting well.

John was in a very proper mood for providing his partner a few amazements, so his allegiance to their mission was still holding firm.

“I suspect there shall be a loaf of bread remaining from our meal and it would be absolutely exquisite married with a marinated and broiled section of my brother.”

“Marinade! Perfect. Sherlock, drink lots of wine tonight. Tenderize yourself for me.”

“Notice my lack of amusement, John.”

“Wine. Wine’s good for amusement and flesh tenderizing. Speaking of, thanks for my own glass of amusement, Mycroft. Yes, this is the stuff. Excellent choice to begin the night.”

John sipped the deep-red wine Mycroft handed to him and wondered what a single bottle of it cost, because it was the sort of wine he always imagined when the wine elite went on about nose this and body that and he had no real understanding of what all the anatomy was about. Probably cost a fortune, but since he hadn’t bought it, a second glass… or third… wouldn’t make him feel the least bit guilty.

*Have a glass, Sherlock* 

“I have no intention of participating in your attempted witticism, John Watson.”

“Ummm… that made no sense, Sherlock, but thanks for sharing.”

“You told me to have a glass of Mycroft’s overpriced vinegar and I responded appropriately. Sense was definitely present.”

“No, because I didn’t say anything. It would have been hard to with a mouthful of wine.”

“You did.”
“No, I didn’t. Mycroft… oh, your mouth is full of… let me have one of those will you? They smell amazing.”

John plucked a savory pastry off the tray extended towards him on its way to the sofa table, and gave it an appraising once-over before taking a bite and pronouncing it exactly as sublime as the wine. The few parties he and Sherlock had hosted certainly hadn’t offered anything along these lines, but maybe Mycroft could share a few tips for their next Christmas soiree to give the occasion a bit more class.

“I distinctly heard you, John!”

“You distinctly heard the voices in your head, maybe, but not me. These are fantastic, Mycroft! More than one type of mushroom for the filling, am I right?”

“JOHN!”

“That you are, Doctor Watson. The contrasting flavors and textures of a variety of species does enhance the appeal, I find. Do try the smaller ones, also. They sport a cheese filling that is positively divine, though, I have a fondness for the crostini, as well. The ones on the right boast a hearty eggplant tapenade and the ones on the left present a delicate roasted garlic spread that supports tender strips of lamb.”

“This is not a cooking program and neither of you is convincing me away from my position. Therefore, I label you both tedious and shall ignore you while I use one of Mycroft’s surely-poisonous offerings to absorb my bile.”

**Fopdoodle**

“And the inanity continues. That is not even a word.”

“To what word are you referring, brother dear?”

Sherlock cut a steely pair of eyes at his brother, who betrayed not a single sign of duplicity, beyond a tiny crumb of pastry at the side of his lip and that was not a definitive indictment by anyone’s standard.

“Fopdoodle.”

“Actually, it is a rather old insult for, I believe, a foolish person, though it may have subtleties about which I am unfamiliar.”

“Ah ha! You know the word, therefore you are the perpetrator.”

“Perpetrator of what, brother? And do try the cheese-filled pastries. I believe a modicum of milk protein might have a calming effect on your humors.”

This set of steely eyes was cut towards John, whose mouth was filled with one of those very pastries while his eyes betrayed the deepest of bliss at the perfectly nuanced flavors.

“I am putting you on alert that any… shenanigans… on either of your parts will be dealt with harshly.”

“Yes… I shall ensure, Sherlock, there is a healthy quantity of whipped cream available for your slice of tarte. Milk protein in abundance is what is called for here, do you agree, John?”
“Might make him phlegmy. At least, that’s what my mum always said and I’ve learned not to question her judgement on medical matters. Toothpaste and splinters… has served me well over the years.”

“Oh dear, phlegm. That is an unforeseen and rather unappealing consequence. Perhaps the eggplant crostini is a more suitable choice.”

Sherlock snatched a cheese-filled pastry from the tray on the sofa table and shoved the whole thing into his mouth, realizing too late that a whole, plump pastry required quite a bit of chewing, which was difficult when the mouth was nearly too full to chew properly in the first place. This, however, did give Mycroft, John and Greg and bracing bit of amateur theatrics to view while the two living guests enjoyed their wine and the non-living one decided this would make a great scene to describe in his journal tonight. Mrs. Hudson would find it hilarious! The theatrics also gave Mycroft and John a moment to savor the silence and share an unnoticed-by-Sherlock glance that had Greg chuckling, since the conspirators were just so happy at the success of their little prank. Along those lines…

_Cute little Piglock_

The unintelligible mishmash of syllables and spraying pastry was a proper vaudevillian touch, in Mycroft and John’s opinion, and they respectfully applauded Sherlock’s energized performance, earning them the additional pantomime of Sherlock strangling them both with his large, strong-fingered hands. And, with Act II waiting in the wings, the fun was just beginning…

_________

“Mycroft, I have to say, whenever you’d like to host a dinner, I will happily be a guest. It’s a treat to eat like this. Don’t you agree, Sherlock?”

John smiled so innocently at his partner that Sherlock’s suspicions went back on alert, but his disagreement with John’s statement would have been issued whether he was suspicious or not, because anything involving Mycroft was subject to immediate and strident disagreement, on principle alone.

“No. If I am not writhing in the grip of botulism by midnight, I will be pleasantly surprised.”

_Arsehole_

“That particular orifice will feature heavily in my torment, yes. Your medical knowledge is inspiring, as always, John.”

“What? Sherlock, I’m beginning to worry about you.”

“Oh, I see. The revelry continues. Very well, enjoy yourself while I use this leaden bread to put a base in my intestine to, hopefully, stem the flow of fluid as it rushes away to speed along my dehydration and death.”

Sherlock snatched a large hunk of the perfectly-baked artisan bread Mycroft had served with the meal, then looked about for a moment, nodding approvingly at the small crock of butter that slid towards him across the table.

“Thank you, John. This gluten-based brick requires lubrication to move through my digestive system.”

“Why am I being thanked and what lubrication are you talking about? I told you, and have not
changed my mind, that even a small amount of motor oil will not be going down your throat, no matter how certain you are that you will only get sick and not dead and you need to document the symptoms for one of your experiments.”

In truth, John was very proud of himself keeping the shock out of his voice since he’d felt a good deal of it seeing the crock move on its own towards his partner. Apparently, Greg and Mycroft had a few tricks of their own planned tonight.

“You passed to me the butter.”

“I passed to you nothing. Look… see the utensils in both my hands. And lo! This one holds a sliver of chicken that this one just cut to the size I prefer.”

John waved his knife and fork at Sherlock who pursed his lips in irritation, especially since Mycroft was seated sufficiently far away that if he had moved the crock he would have had to lean over the table and that was far too much exertion for his brother to bear unless he was moving the butter closer to himself to consume with a spoon.

“I see…”

“Good, that means I don’t have to drag you to an optometrist. Now, Mycroft… you mentioned a book you thought I might enjoy? I’m always happy to get a recommendation.”

Sherlock’s frustrated hiss cut off abruptly when he noticed the crock was not in the same place as it was a moment before and neither John nor Mycroft could have moved it while he was watching them. Could it… maybe he was… oh, the pain was tortuous… could he have been mistaken and the butter actually came to rest near his water glass, rather than near his bread plate? That was not a detail he would have confused, but it was also of little importance, so his mind may have… damnation! This was infuriating!

“The butter is vexing me!”

Mycroft and John politely waited for a follow-up outburst and, when it didn’t arrive, due to Sherlock’s seething, went back to their conversation about historically-correct pieces of war fiction. Sherlock on the other hand, kept to himself that the crock was now back next to his bread plate, obediently awaiting his attention. Perhaps he had imbibed too much wine. Or not enough. Yes… that seemed the plan to pursue. Prolonged contact with Mycroft was sure to disturb any number of connections in his brain and lead to an unpredictable quantity and type of misapprehensions. His perceptions were certainly off the mark tonight and if alcohol could restore his balance, then alcohol he would have.

“Wine!”

“Oh, hoping for a touch of the grape, brother? Do have your fill, but I have waiting the most wonderful brandy for after dinner, so limit your indulgence at table, what say, to enjoy that delight to its fullest.”

Mycroft’s knowing smile made John rub his mental hands together in glee. This was even better than he’d hoped. Sherlock already looked spooked… when he actually met a spook… oh, this was worth the hangover he might have tomorrow from celebrating that reaction…

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“It’s hard to believe you don’t entertain more often, Mycroft, because that was the best meal I’ve had in a long time, please don’t tell Mrs. Turner I said that.”
Mycroft gently stoked the fire and smiled at the figure standing next to him, who was pretending to warm his hands, then his arse, with the heat. Hiding his reactions from Sherlock, given Gregory’s overt and more subtle shenanigans was certainly a challenge, but… the result was so very worth it. Sherlock appeared much like a cat that had already been leapt upon by a rambunctious puppy and was convinced that another attack was imminent.

“Mum’s the word. Sherlock? You seem somewhat… disarrayed. Perhaps a soothing brandy is the thing for you.”

That, at least, got Sherlock’s attention for his strategy of consuming heady amounts of alcohol was still very much a favorable one, though it seemed to be having on a minimal effect, at present. A higher potency ethanol-delivery vehicle was a surprisingly good idea, though credit for it would not be awarded to his brother who was responsible for the disarray, such that it was.

“Yes. Brandy. Lots.”

A small nod at Greg made the ghost dance a very seductive variation of his normal shimmy that brought a particular sort of smile to Mycroft’s face that made John suddenly very happy he could not see the ghost because nothing that made Mycroft smile like that was suitable for public viewing.

“Of course. John, are you also partaking?”

“Partaking with enthusiasm.”

“Excellent.”

Watching Greg skip like a schoolboy to the sideboard, where a very familiar drinks service waited, gave Mycroft a giddy thrill and he coughed to hide his small bark of laughter when Greg handed a drink to Sherlock, who took it with his typical obliviousness to anyone doing anything for him, and to John whose widened eyes at seeing a glass float across the room and into his hand looked decidedly painful.

“Thank you, John.”

Who had now recovered enough to recognize the final surprise in store for his partner and vowed never, no matter how much of a bastard he could be, to ever believe that Mycroft Holmes lacked a sense of humor or whimsy.

“Ummm… thanks for what, Sherlock? Did you not see me not get up from the sofa?”

Sherlock’s head spun towards John as the truth of that statement slammed into his mind, along with the fact that Mycroft was still standing in the same spot in front of the fire that he’d occupied since they moved their affair into the study.

“I… if…”

“Ah, thank you, my dear.”

A third glass of brandy floated its way across from the sideboard towards Mycroft, who accepted it and took an appreciative sip, capped off by a satisfied sigh when he was done.

“Truly an exceptional example, would you not say, Doctor Watson?”

John would happily drink dishwater to have the opportunity to see Sherlock staring, open-mouthed, at Mycroft who was now tittering slightly at a comment obviously pitched to him from near his ear.
“An excellent suggestion. I shall send a bottle home with them this very evening.”

Well, John couldn’t let Mycroft have all the fun, could he?

“Thanks, gents. Sherlock’s not much of a drinker, usually, but I do approve of something fine to sip in the evening.”

If Sherlock’s head pivoted between Mycroft and John any faster, the good doctor was worried he’d have to fit him with a neck brace and treat him for whiplash.

“What… what is… I…”

It wasn’t really necessary for Greg to retrieve the brandy decanter from the sideboard and use it to top off the few sips Mycroft and John had taken from their glasses, but putting a dab of icing on their little cake of fun was just too difficult to resist.

“Thanks, Greg.”

“Thank you, Gregory. Solicitous, as ever.”

And quick as ever, too, which was fortunate since Sherlock’s grip on his brandy glass began to slip and the ghost was able to pluck it from the detective’s hand before he lost one of the very few items in this world that he could actually touch and manipulate.

“What… who…”

“Oh yes, I did forget, brother, that you have yet to formally meet my new… shall we, for now, say housemate? Very remiss of me, I must admit. In any case, Sherlock Holmes, it is my honor to introduce you to the formerly-alive Mr. Gregory Lestrade. I have no doubt you will become the firmest of friends.”

The by-way-of-greeting waggle of his floating brandy glass made Sherlock gape and pale slightly, prompting John to set down his own drink in preparation of catching the fall if Sherlock fainted or apply the time-honored slap-to-the-face if hysterics were the route taken instead.

“For… formerly alive?”

“Pardon? Oh yes. Since… I believe it was in the area of 1741, was it not, Gregory? Oh good, my memory remains flawless.”

“J… John?”

“What? Right. Greg’s a ghost. Not much more to say than that. Wait! Yes, there is. Forgot, sorry. This Greg is the Greg you’ve been aflutter over, so hopefully you see now that you don’t really have any worries on the romantic front. First, he’s got a romantic interest, as I said, though I didn’t say it was your brother, and… he’s a ghost. So, that nonsense is laid to bed and you don’t have to worry about me scampering off for anything sexy. Expect non-sexy scampering though and… Greg, are we still looking to do a testosterone-laden film afternoon soon? I’ve got a few in mind for that.”

Yes… soon as possible

Sherlock leapt off the sofa and would have likely leapt out of his skin if that wasn’t anatomically-impossible.
“That voice!”

“A most manly one, in my humble opinion, but I may be slightly biased.”

Mycroft’s impish smile and small wag of his finger at a point a foot or so above the hovering brandy glass had Sherlock choking back his shock, which was warring mightily with… everything else in the universe, as far as his brain was concerned.

“A ghost! There is a ghost in this room!”

“Yeah, we already established that, so how about we get back to sipping our nice brandy before Mycroft cuts us off because he thinks you’re drunk and doesn’t want the responsibility of seeing you safely home.”

“JOHN!”

“What?”

“You… you knew about this.”

Some of the familiar Sherlock was beginning to slide into the detective’s eyes and John made note that the existence of a ghost was less interesting to his partner than the fact he’d successfully hidden that fact from the world’s only consulting detective and self-proclaimed super-genius. Perfect.

“Yes.”

“And you failed to tell me.”

“Yes. And you failed to notice.”

Sherlock’s eyes immediately narrowed, his lips pursed into a picture-perfect petulant pout that intensified when John giggled slightly, took a large sip of brandy, leaned back on the sofa and slowly, with extreme smugness, crossed his legs.

“We will have words about this, John.”

“We have words about everything, so nothing new there. Now, why don’t you take your brandy from Greg, sit back down, and we can carry on with our visit. Not often we get the chance to enjoy your brother’s hospitality, without him kidnapping us, that is, so I plan to savor every second of it.”

As Sherlock hesitantly reached out to take the hovering glass from its point in mid-air, Greg couldn’t resist a little tug-of-war that set Mycroft chuckling and, strangely, cut through Sherlock’s remaining brain haze.

“The ghost has measurable strength.”

John cut eyes at Mycroft, who returned them with a slight roll that signaled, yes, his brother was fully back on track and already planning to make his dear Gregory’s life a living… dying… hell.

“The ghost’s name is Gregory, brother. Kindly use it.”

“No.”

*Fully* back on track.

“What, then, would you prefer?”
“I… I have not decided.”

“Very well. When you do, ensure it is polite or you will not be welcome here again.”

“Your locks offer no challenge.”

“My locks are easily changed and to forms that are not available to anyone yet, besides the most secret and dangerous of government research laboratories.”

“Pfft.”

Lad’s got gas

“I am not flatulent! Mycroft! Your ghost is maligning me and that completely flies in the face of your ridiculous politeness codicil!”

It smells bad, too

“Incorrect. For your information, the food I consumed at dinner has not had time to reach my large intestine and I have not eaten anything since yesterday to prompt secondary, sulfur-producing reactions.”

Pee-yew…

“Mycroft!”

Downing a large mouthful of his drink, Mycroft let the last vestiges of worry ebb away and embraced the fact that his brother was now wholly accepting of the situation and, most likely, primed to become better acquainted with his dear ghost. And, from John’s crisis-over shaking of his head, the doctor was of the same mind. Now, it would only be a matter of keeping Sherlock from monopolizing Gregory’s time from here until eternity with his interminable experiments.

Which was, now, of somewhat pressing importance. Given certain… developments… tonight, Gregory’s time might have a far better use than enhancing the knowledge base of science. Experiments, though… that was still a very likely thing… though certainly not of the form his brother would dare to attempt…
Chapter 20

Humming happily, Mycroft carried his brandy glass into the kitchen and smiled at the sight of two others being ported by the ghostly hands of his Gregory, who was beaming with noticeable pride at being able to do the porting. And pride for a diversity of other things that had made their evening so wonderfully special. Such an appropriate introduction it had been between his ghost and his brother… a highly-deserved unsettling of the oversized infant Sherlock, to start, then dear Gregory was able to witness, firsthand, Sherlock’s rabid curiosity and eagerness for knowledge when a subject intrigued him.

And Gregory was a most intriguing subject, indeed. With the gameplaying concluded, he had retrieved one of the ghost’s tablets to facilitate communication and Sherlock had quickly taken advantage of the situation, asking so many questions that he was certain he would already need to replace the stylus tip on Gregory’s pen. But, his dear ghost was clearly overjoyed to be able to answer the swarm of questions that flew like agitated bees from Sherlock’s lips. Not with a few, scattered words, but with meaningful detail, all of which was infused with clear indication of the ghost’s intelligence and humor.

And, though Gregory would not realize it now, the continued level of interest, the future plans and schemes, the particular flavor of scorn and derision that was hurled… all were indications that Sherlock had formed the first, fleeting tendrils of a connection. Perhaps it was the extreme uniqueness of the situation, but there was also his ghost’s patience and willingness to take Sherlock’s questions seriously, rather than mocking their somewhat, at times, surly tone or seeming descent into areas that made no logical sense unless one waited sufficiently long for the point to come about from around the next conversational corner. There was not a more positive outcome for the evening than the one they achieved and his Gregory had accomplished it with admirable ease…

“If you turn on the water and hold a cloth, I can swivel these chaps nice and clean. Do my bit for the washing up.”

Their ‘couples’ time was exactly along the lines standard pairs of individuals shared but certainly offered up its own distinct twists.

“I believe I can shoulder the burden this one time, my dear. Your arms must be exhausted after the nearly non-stop flurry of typing to satisfy my brother’s outlandish questions.”

Greg made a great show of being rubbery-armed, which it wasn’t actually possible for him to be, but made certain the glasses made it onto the kitchen counter unscathed.

“He’s a character, isn’t he? Smart lad, though. Curious, too, and I admire that. Well, don’t worry about him being so eager to learn. He’s got questions, I’ve got answers! Or, at least, I’ll give him what answers I can. I think he was a touch disappointed I don’t know more about ghosts and I can’t blame him. I’ve been one for so long you’d expect I’d be quite the expert on the subject.”

“Gregory, let me assure you that if he posed similar questions about the nature of life and the function of living creatures to the overwhelming majority of beings on my side of the life and death coin, they would have a similar level of understanding or lack thereof.”

“I suppose that’s true. Never knew what made me work when I was alive. Can’t say I particularly cared, either, so long as everything that was supposed to work did so properly. I likely could have used a bit of Sherlock’s zeal to investigate things, but that wasn’t as important a thing then, sadly, as it is now. For some people it was, those who had time, resources and ability to learn
about themselves and the world, but for most of us… you learned what you needed to do your job and keep the crops growing so people had enough food to eat come winter. Honestly, I like today better, on that score.”

“Given my personal leanings and talents, I would agree, for I fear I would be of little use in the fields and the local blacksmith would find me somewhat weak of limb to serve as apprentice.”

Greg rolled his eyes and motioned Mycroft to lift an arm and flex the muscles, which Mycroft did with significant hesitation.

“Hmmm… don’t know about that. I see a respectable amount of plumping in that sleeve, so a little practice would likely see you beating life into hearty set of hinges for the church doors in no time.”

The extra enunciation of the p’s in plumping were certainly not intentional. At least not that Greg would admit aloud.

“That… that is very kind of you to say, though I know that, between the two of us, you are far better provided to heft a hammer and dominate even the most rigid and recalcitrant of materials.”

The tiny peek of Greg’s tongue between his lips told Mycroft his message had been received and awarded a sincere touché. Which was, to be frank, a substantial relief since any form in innuendo was as foreign to the elder Holmes as the rules of rugby or who currently sat at the top of the pop music charts.

“I’ll admit to having my fair share of muscle once upon a time. Had to, what with the physical nature of my work. Not so much for managing the criminal element, but helping out where it was needed because people felt upholding the law absolutely included rescuing sheep who’d gotten stuck in the mud, repairing stone walls or pulling loaded vegetable carts when the horse said fuck it and buggered off to do a bit of grazing a mile or so away.”

“They correctly recognized both your immense value to the community and your diversity of skills.”

“And that I had a nice bit of time on my hands since our village was small and the people were mostly law-abiding. Didn’t mind, though. Kept me busy and helped people who needed it, which is what my job was truly supposed to be about. And, yes… gave me the impressive physique you see before you. One good thing about being dead – I don’t have to work to maintain my good looks or sexy body. It’s just the gift that keeps on giving, without me having to replace the ribbon or dust off the shiny paper.”

And I’ll flex my own muscle, such as it is, for your viewing pleasure, Mycroft, my friend. Not nearly as impressive as when I was a lad but… no, strike that… I was a stringy thing when I was young, so I’ll happily showcase this current, more visually impressive, combination of muscle and fat since you can’t actually give it a squeeze to see it’s a touch squishy for someone just boasting about being a vigorous man of the land.

“Gregory… such a display of masculinity.”

“Like that, huh? Well, I like yours, so we’re well matched.”

A fact that was becoming a rather pressing issue since there was a clear sense of something swirling in the air, carried over from before their dinner, and neither man was oblivious enough to miss it.

“I agree. For, lo! See how we have coordinated both a rousingly successful dinner party and the
required washing up. So few could have garnered so many accolades in a single evening, yet our combined skills were easily up to the task.”

Mycroft’s orating-Roman-senator voice and emphatic pose set Greg laughing loudly and clapping at the performance.

“And your brother calls you humorless. He’s an idiot. Brilliant and funny, is what you are. Gorgeous, too. That’s a potent combination…”

Oh, that look in your eye, Gregory… *that* is the definition of potent…

“… and… I’d like to do something, if you promise not to get upset.”

Potency wavering slightly…

“Up… upset? Why would…”

“You’ll see. Can I?”

Mycroft had an overwhelming urge to say no, because something in him said the ‘upset’ in question was going to be *very* upsetting indeed, but decided to have faith in the ghost who was sporting an unmistakable ‘trust me’ expression on his face.

“Very well.”

It wasn’t necessary for Greg to take a deep, preparatory breath, since he didn’t actually breathe in any manner whatsoever, but old habits die hard and he drew in a very large one before closing his eyes, also not required, for a long, quiet moment and reaching up to lay a hand on Mycroft’s cheek. Which Mycroft felt. In a manner of speaking.

“Gregory!”

“Ummm?”

“I… oh dear. What is happening!”

Greg’s rather startling turn towards the translucent shocked Mycroft nearly out of his shoes and filled his insides with icy shards of worry.

“Gregory! Tell me you are alright!”

Removing his hand from Mycroft’s cheek, Greg smiled gently and nodded, though the pattern of the wallpaper was slightly visible through that nod.

“I’m ok. That’s just insanely hard and takes a lot out of me. Literally.”

“Are… how… you shall not remain like this, I assume?”

“Only for a few minutes. Then… the energy or ectoplasm or ether or whatever the fuck it is gets built up again and I’ll be good as new. The important thing, though, is… did you feel anything?”

Mycroft waited until he was certain the opacity of Greg’s being was increasing, albeit slowly, then turned his attention back to the question at hand.

“I did. It was… not as if a solid hand was upon my skin, but there was surely a sensation in the nerves that was provoked by your actions. Not a tingling, per se, but… almost as if it was the sense-
memory of contact that no longer existed. It is difficult to describe, and I have never experienced the like before, however... there is no doubting there was an effect.”

“Yes!”

“And... you did this before. At the inn. I scarcely marked the incident at the time, but... you laid hands on my shoulders.”

“That I did. Probably wasn’t proper, given we hadn’t been introduced, but... you seemed like you could use it.”

“Can you... would you touch me again? So I am prepared and might more closely scrutinize the experience?”

“Uh... sure. Just... don’t get too worried...”

Which had Mycroft’s mouth immediately opening to call a halt to the experiment, but that was exactly what Greg had anticipated so he quickly reached out and let his fingers run across the skin of Mycroft’s cheek, fading even further from view as he did so.

“Th... thank you, my dear. I fully noted four separate areas of sensation, corresponding to the four fingers you used and... it is as if you bypassed the skin proper and your touch stroked the nerves themselves that lay underneath. No pressure or heaviness, simply a slide of stimulus along the nerve fibers. But... oh, Gregory... I can fully see through you, now.”

Greg looked much like a hologram that was being powered by a 10W bulb hooked to a 5W battery and the ghost’s ‘oops’ face didn’t turn Mycroft’s frown upside down.

“Yeah... want me to do it again?”

“WHAT! Are you insane? You... Gregory, you could vanish completely!”

“Well, yes, but...”

“But?”

“I’ll come back.”

“Oh. You say that with certainty.”

“Because I am certain. Done it before. I’ll admit it’s not pleasant... actually, it’s bloody miserable, even worse, in some ways, than when we took my painting out beyond your patio, but not damaging. Or permanent, in any sense.”

“I see. Oh god, whatever you do, do not mention this to Sherlock.”

There was only one possible outcome of that revelation and his Gregory would not see day pass that he did not vanish into thin air to satisfy Sherlock’s investigatory interests.

“HA! Oh, he’d be after me for certain, wouldn’t he? Actually, I’d do it for him, too. Maybe he could learn something! And so could I. I mean... I feel different now, less... here... which is rather obvious, but what is it that’s not here? And were does it go? Where do I go when I fade completely? I’d like to know, since I... I’m not aware when that happens. Not at all. Like I don’t exist and never have. I only know how long I’ve been gone when I get a look at a clock!”

No. No, he did not just hear those words. How... how could Gregory say such a thing so glibly!
No, that could not be allowed to happen. Not a single time, not for any reason.

“That… Gregory, please do not allow Sherlock to ask that of you.”

The pithy response on the tip of Greg’s tongue fell away as he saw the almost-terrified look in Mycroft’s eyes and the tightness in every muscle on Mycroft’s long, lean body.

“It’s alright, Mycroft…”

“No… no, it is not. That… that is a horrifying thing you describe and, though the outcome has been successful in the past, it does not ensure it again shall be in the future. Please, Gregory, that… I cannot stand the thought of something such as that occurring. I simply cannot.”

Gnashing his teeth that he couldn’t even muster a wisp of a real touch to comfort his distraught Mycroft, Greg took a step forward and did his best to let proximity provide reassurance that he wasn’t going anywhere tonight or ever.

“Then it’s settled. I won’t let Sherlock convince me to do that, no matter how hard he might try. I won’t do that to you, Mycroft, I promise.”

Mycroft looked deep into the transparent eyes of his ghost and hoped what he saw there was total honesty because… oh, what a ridiculous display he had given. But, hearing that Gregory was not aware… nothing could have prepared him for the intensely visceral nature of his reaction, but he could certainly not deny it. To fade away to the point where you lost all consciousness and were… nothing… no. No, he could not dwell upon it or his stomach would knot and that was unnecessary. Gregory had given his word and that was the end of it. But he would give a year of his life to simply be able to touch his ghost and reassure himself that Gregory was still there.

“Thank you, my dear. And… I apologize for my rather outrageous reaction.”

“It wasn’t outrageous, not at all. I suppose, it a very strange way, what I described is like dying, though I’m already dead.”

“Yes… yes, that is very much what your description implied, now that I give it thought. And, I shall not be embarrassed to confess that the notion is tremendously jarring to my mind.”

“It would aggrieve anybody with sense and you’re the most sensible person I’ve ever known. I am sorry, Mycroft. I didn’t think about it that way and you can officially consider the subject a closed one. So…”

Should he? It was both a terrible time and a brilliant time, which probably made it the perfect time…

“… why don’t we do something to shove all that death out of your head and put some life into it instead?”

If his Gregory’s shy little boy grin was any more perfect, Mycroft would worry his ghost could not only vanish but could peel back the years to his childhood.

“What… what do you have in mind?”

Not as much as Greg might like, but any steps forward on a certain front were an improvement over the current status quo. Besides, he wouldn’t be happy until he could wipe away every last trace of upset from his Mycroft’s lovely eyes and some tools might be more effective for that than others.

“I believe you were moving in the upstairs direction?”
“I… yes? But only for… Gregory! What… what are you suggesting?”

“That, just maybe, that’s an activity for which you might want a little company. How does that sound?”

Please say it sounds good, Mycroft, because there are a hundred billion reasons that’s the truth and… ok, that was a bit of an exaggeration, but even one good reason is enough and I can think of more than one and thank heavens you can’t hear me babbling in my head because you’d give my head a knock and that wouldn’t help sell my argument, now would it?

“I… I can find no fault with that suggestion?”

Despite the questioning inflection at the sentence’s end, Greg took that as the best ‘yes’ he’d get until his Mycroft was a touch steadier and gave him a bright grin of acknowledgement. Then, wishing he could grab Mycroft’s hand and pull him along, Greg darted towards the kitchen door making ‘hurry up’ motions with his arm and continued to dart towards and up the stairs, only to repeat the motion, laughing at Mycroft’s quick look around for observers, before following suit with the darting.

“You push my physical prowess to the very limit, Gregory.”

“You took the steps two at a time and aren’t even breathing hard.”

“That would indicate a crossing of the limit.”

“Liar. You’ve a long way to go before your physical limits are crossed and I know it.”

“Do you now…”

“Uh huh and… one day, I’ll prove it. Until then… let’s gooooooooo…”

Greg didn’t wait for Mycroft to open his bedroom door, instead, stepping through the wood so he could make a grand show of tapping his foot and checking his imaginary watch when Mycroft finally turned the knob and stepped across the threshold.

“ Took you long enough. Nice room!”

“You say that as if you have not seen my bedroom before.”

“I haven’t.”

“You… you have not?”

“Nope. Man deserves his private places and you’ve not formally asked me up here yet. Not that you did this time, but you agreed with my idea, so that stood in its place. I really do like this space, though… it fits you. You’ve done a truly magnificent job with it.”

Just as warm and masculine as the rest of the rooms in Mycroft’s house, with thick rugs on the floor, antique, heavy furniture and rich, jewel tones coloring the bedding, rugs and curtains that gave the room a sumptuousness that one might not predict for Mycroft unless you knew him beyond the cold, ultra-professional façade he maintained for his work.

“Really? I have changed nothing since I purchased the house.”

“You do love your little lies, don’t you?”

“That likely explains why I excel at them.”
Smirking at Mycroft’s smug grin, Greg crooked a finger and walked backwards to what he dearly hoped was the bath or else Mycroft’s smug grin would intensify from the ghost becoming intimately acquainted with a closet. Luckily, this time, fortune favored the bold.

“Oh… this is perfect.”

Looking around Mycroft’s sizeable bath, Greg admired how such a modern room could feel profoundly old, with the various fixtures, tile on the floor, wallpaper pattern and graceful, framed mirrors radiating age and long lived-in comfort. Maybe… maybe that was one of the reasons he felt so drawn to Mycroft… the man had an old soul. As much as Mycroft embraced today’s world and all its benefits, part of him seemed to come from an earlier time where things moved at a different pace and the little details, even in the flourishes of a towel bar, mattered.

“I am happy you are pleased. It is a handsome room and one whose function is warmed and made more amenable by the timbre of the embellishments.”

“It’s a lovely room, Mycroft. There’s a sense of artistry in here… and don’t try and claim one of those designer people put it together, because I’ll call you a liar, yet again.”

“I will confess to some small measure of input into the décor.”

Since the professional he had hired proved a soulless lout and was tossed onto the street within two days. Which was only slightly longer a tenure of employment than the other three he contracted before realizing that fitting this house to his tastes was only a job he could perform with any manner of competence. Which, in hindsight, was to be expected. But what did it matter given… Gregory was so delighted…

“Your input made the difference. And a separated bathtub and shower… nice. Which one shall it be?”

Given both required a supreme commitment to nudity, Mycroft was suddenly struck by the full import of his ghost’s intentions. Which now seemed very intentional, to say the least.

“I…”

A shower was far quicker, giving Gregory less time to realize the somewhat lackluster nature of his physical form, but did require various bendings and contortions that would surely not present his lacklusterness in even a remotely positive light. A bath was slower, but more dignified, and dignity was a stalwart companion for any number of things, including presenting one’s naked self to one’s spectral partner.

“A… a bath, I believe.”

“Great! Then, let’s get started.”

“L… let’s?”

“Sure! We can share a sofa, we can share a bath! That tub of yours is large enough to host a party, let alone one tall bloke and one ghost, so there’s plenty of room. You can have a nice, hot soak and I’ll get to enjoy you enjoying yourself while you have it. Win-win!”

Share. Which meant… oh dear… oh dear! Gregory was disrobing! Which was not even necessary!

“Gregory!”
“What? Got to lose these clothes if I want to have a bath, don’t I? Ok, don’t answer that because it’s not true, but I’d feel a complete idiot sitting in there dressed, so… get the water running, will you, love?”

Which Mycroft did somewhat hurriedly and with trembling fingers, because… blast! Who could remain calm when a handsome, seductive ghost was performing a striptease! Slowly unbuttoning his generously-cut, royal-blue shirt, beginning with the small ones closing the shirt cuffs, then working each button down the front with an aching slowness, as if the mere act itself was sexually pleasing.

“You know, I may be able to bathe clothed, but you, on the other hand…”

Bathing fully clothed sounded a very good option to Mycroft’s ears but he also knew that if he hadn’t wanted this, he would have demurred when he realized exactly what his ghost had in mind. Onwards, then…

Not taking his eyes off Greg’s fingers, which were still freeing each shirt button at a completely unrushed pace, Mycroft toed off his shoes then, choosing not to sit on the small bench or bend over ungracefully, used the sock-clad toes of his left foot to grip and remove his right sock. His freed right-side toes were then pressed into service drawing off the left sock, which earned him an approving hum from the ghost who had finished his unbuttoning, but had yet to remove his shirt.

“You have talented toes.”

“They… thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

And, let’s hope this shirt sliding off my shoulders presents you with a sight that doesn’t strike you blind or insane. To be safe, I’ll just resorb it right back into me, though out of your sight, because seeing it vanish into thin air when I let it drop onto the ground just might give you a bad turn, which is the polar opposite of what I’m trying to achieve.

“Oh my… Gregory…”

His ghost was half nude! From… oh, there, again, was Gregory’s succulent belly. Even with the toilet slightly visible through it, the sight was enough to make one’s mouth water.

“It is me, if you’re wondering, Mycroft. What I really looked like, I mean. No improvements or covering up the problem areas. Just the real me. What is you see… is what’s all yours.”

Did you just lick your lips, Gregory Lestrade? Your lips that curl perfectly into a seductive smile as you reach over to grasp your bicep lightly and strike the sauciest of poses? You did. Perfect.

“And that gift is not one I shall ever take for granted, my dear.”

“Good. Now stop the water before we’ve got a flood and get your kit off.”

Squawking loudly, Mycroft dove towards the tub and killed the taps, letting some of the water drain so that when he was added to the tub, the flood possibility was again avoided. But, for the rest… slow and steady won the race. However, Gregory did not seem to hold that personal philosophy since… my, he’d made quick work of his trousers… and boxer briefs were a nice touch … Gregory Lestrade, you certainly did not have to turn to check the status of the towels on the bar behind you so I could admire how your undergarments stunningly present your firm, full bottom. But, I’m terribly glad you did.
“Waiting…”

“Oh! Yes… do pardon me, Gregory. I was… distracted for a moment.”

“By my arse.”

“I… yes.”

“Good! It’s a nice one, even I have to admit. Of course, I haven’t seen yours to compare. At least, not really.”

Something in Greg’s tone told Mycroft the issue wasn’t trousers.

“Gregory?”

“I… may have visited you in the bath at the inn. Once. The night you arrived. And when it was already completely full of steam so I couldn’t see anything but a pink shape behind the wavy glass. I made certain of that, too. That I couldn’t see anything, I mean. I’m not a peeper! Would never violate your privacy that way, but… I did want to see if you left anything on the wash basin or the floor that told me a little more about you. Your watch… said you were a man of quality. Valued having things that were meant to last, that were worthwhile no matter their age. I liked that. Said you were someone of character. Made me want to know you better. But not one peek did I take at your naked lusciousness! You can peek at mine, though.”

And, with that, Greg thumbed off his underpants and accepted Mycroft soft gasp as his reward. Middle-aged and showing that age with the expected sags, bulges and whatnot, but… yeah, his Mycroft liked what he saw.

“My dear… you are exquisite…”

And that was as profound a truth as Mycroft had ever spoken. His Gregory’s form was setting his imagination alive as to what it would be like to explore and pleasure said form between the thick mattress and soft sheets of his bed. Strongly built, with tantalizing areas of padding that added their delightful share of visual appeal… a mature man’s showing of dark hair here and there, but with that growing turn to silver that announced the foibles of youth had been blessedly left behind. The thickset, uncircumcised cock that he was trying not to stare directly at, and failing miserably, was perfectly sized for every from of carnal pleasure…

“Like this little fellow, do you?”

Cupping your testicles and using them to nudge your manhood forward for better viewing is unutterably bawdy, Gregory. Nicely done.

“That I do. As with the rest of you, my eyes are filled by its beauty and the vision suffuses my mind with the tawdiest of fantasies.”

One of which is that you pose for me, much as you are now, bold and unashamed of your nudity, so that I might render its glory on paper. It has been so long since I have sketched, but I would uptake that interest again, if only to honor your majesty with my feeble talents.

“Well, then… join me.”

The slow curling of his lips and flash of invitation in his eyes was the resurgence of old instinct from many a night’s flirtation and they served him well as Greg slowly stepped into the tub and nestled himself in the water. Feeling Mycroft’s eyes on him the entire time gave the ghost much-needed
confidence that his companion still found the sight of his creaky old bones a pleasant one. Despite his outward cockiness, Greg was highly aware that, barring having a swim or two with others in his youth, he’d never actually never been fully nude with another man, especially with the intention of doing something with that nudity. And, especially with someone as elegant and sophisticated as Mycroft…

“Of… of course.”

He was not, in any manner, sexually inexperienced, however, Mycroft had not once felt as nervous putting his body on display as he felt at this moment. Gregory was… an exemplar of virility. Robust, roguish, radiating strength and stamina. He had nary an R-word to claim! Besides ridiculous, that is. That he had in abundance…

“Mycroft…”

“What? Oh, again, my apologies. One moment…”

Knowing he had none of Greg’s sensual self-assurance, Mycroft didn’t even attempt to make his undressing a stage-worthy show, but he did ensure it was not done too quickly, for he could not miss the attention his actions were being given by the ghost lounging in the tub. Therefore, a leisurely minute or two to remove the cashmere jumper he’d chosen only partially because Gregory said the particular shade of green flattered his skin and, then, the cream-colored turtleneck beneath, feeling his knees become somewhat weak when Greg’s breathy ‘now, that’s a gorgeous sight’ reached his ears. Hoping that sentiment continued, it was a slightly quicker unfastening of his trousers and, with a very deep breath, the removing of his last vestige of modesty in the form of certainly-not-chosen-to-coordinate-with-my-jumper green underpants.

“Oh my… my my my my my…”

“Gr… Gregory?”

“There’s not a man nor woman alive who’d not fight the devil to get their hands on that body. There’s nothing about you that’s not amazing, is there? Not a single thing that isn’t something the poets would write about or sculptors want to render in the finest marble. My Mycroft is… he’s a vision, is what he is and probably a cold one, at that. Water’s likely still nice and hot, so…”

Reaching out, though he couldn’t actually take Mycroft’s hand, Greg encouraged the most beautiful sight in the world to walk forward and carefully step into the bathtub, smiling widely when Mycroft sighed contentedly from the water’s gentle embrace.

“That’s what I like to see… my Mycroft happy and being treated properly, even if it’s only by his own bath. And see! More than enough room here for the both of us.”

Said with a wide grin that made Mycroft laugh, since his legs and Greg’s were currently defying physics and occupying the same space at the same time. Fortunately, the universe did not implode as a result.

“I shall never doubt your eye for volume estimation, my dear. It is far too keen.”

“Or my suggestions for a little evening’s fun. That is… if it is fun. For you, I mean.”

Leaning back and letting his brain close down certain paths dealing with petty worries and insecurities, Mycroft marveled that this singular situation was… working. Through compromises, uncharacteristic pathways and shared resolve, perhaps, but it was working. Fun didn’t even begin to describe matters… not in the slightest.
“I am incalculably happy, Gregory. This was a remarkable idea, and I am very glad you thought of it.”

“That’s a relief. It’s a different thing, sharing a breakfast table and sharing a bath, what with the associated nakedness. Though, I suppose there’s no particular reason you can’t have naked breakfast. In fact, I wouldn’t mind that, at all. You naked, with mussed hair from sleeping, sipping your tea and reading the newspaper… oh, that’s a grand mental image. Tomorrow?”

Apparently, once his ghost took a step forward, he was ready to begin the march to Pretoria. Ambition was always a thing to admire, was it not?

“I believe I shall break fast while fully garmented, however, I shall continue to perform my cleansing rituals au naturel.”

“And I can watch?”

“If you like.”

“I like very much. I like very, very much, in fact. And, so do you.”

What a smug, saucy tone. This was truly a flawless night…

“Oh. And from where comes your certainty, my dear?”

“The fact that from the moment my eyes landed on your body, that body’s been basking in the attention, rising to attention, actually, to tell me how delighted it is to be on display for my eyes. It’s getting happier by the moment, too, as your ears take in how transfixed I am by the sight of you… those graceful limbs, creamy skin, long, rosy cock and arse I want to take in my teeth and give a good bite because it’s the most delicious thing I can ever imagine. You adore my eyes on you; you revel in knowing I find you gorgeous on the most primal level… and the more I stare, the more I speak, the more aroused you become, which you can’t, not in a million years, hide from these eyes of mine. That’s where my certainty comes from.”

And a particular pleasant plumpness that had grown to a pulsing, rigid erection spoke very plainly about the truth of his ghost’s words. Gregory’s talents were formidable, indeed… and said highly welcome things about what might lie in store for their future in certain areas of their relationship.

“Once again, I bow to the astuteness of your observations and keenness of analyses.”

“Thank you. Now, you enjoy that pleasant hard on for awhile, then you can have a good wash to scrub away the day. Maybe… some reading while propped in that massive bed of yours? It’s a touch early yet, but…”

A languid bath, erection notwithstanding, then a quiet few hours of reading with Gregory in a shared bed? Refusing that was something only a fool would do…

“A splendid idea. I have, in fact, a bed desk that tilts, so I might stand one of your tablets in reading position while you recline next to me.”

“Really? That’s brilliant! Always with the brilliance, is my Mycroft. And the erections that would fill my mouth in all the right ways.”

“Gregory!”

“Don’t worry… that’ll be a story for another night.”
“Promise?”

“Oh yes… I’ll make it a good one, too. One that might give you a few ideas…”

Which already had Mycroft smiling as he, very casually, let his hand sink below the surface to rest high along his inner thigh where his fingers lightly toyed with wisps of hair floating in the warm water. Oh yes, ideas were already forming, very specific ones, at that. And, from his Gregory’s approving glances at that hand, he wasn’t the only one forming them…
Chapter 21

It would be ludicrous to phone his ghost only minutes after leaving the house, but his damnable fingers didn’t seem to have an issue with spurring their owner towards ludicrousness. Fortunately, The British Government was made of immeasurably strong stuff and no dastardly fingers were going to propel him into the catastrophic condition of clinginess. That was not the image he wanted his Gregory to carry today in the aftermath of their indescribable night together. True, the physical events could be described with ease… after his bath, he had seen the house closed for the evening, retrieved one of Gregory’s tablets, then settled in bed, garmented in his most comfortable pyjamas with his ghost by his side, to spend the next two hours lost in good novels and better conversation. But the impact, the penetrating warmth of contentment… that was utterly impossible to describe with something as tangible and concrete as words.

As a youth, he had fantasized, as was normal, about having a lover, someone to satisfy his burgeoning physical desires and, also, a companion to share his time in a collegial manner. Ideally, if there could be a person to stand for both roles, the situation would be optimized… but ideal is a theoretical construct, at best. He had found lovers through the years, physically satisfying for a fleeting bit of time, yet offering no further interest to maintain his attention. He had found individuals who were collegial and provided evenings here or there where the activity or conversation made the time notably pleasant. But they did not inspire any fire inside him that drew him close for more than a night now and again at a restaurant or cultural event.

Gregory was that elusive being who brought together the best of both worlds. The magically-companionable interludes and the fire… the raging carnal fire… that had been well and well and truly proved, had it not? Gregory was not, in any permutation of his imaginings, the individual he predicted would fulfill his ideal, but that perhaps that was what made that person so punishingly elusive. They existed outside the algorithms and came upon you as the proverbial bolt from the blue, one you either accepted despite their unexpectedness or rejected because you feared the challenges to your preconceptions that they brought with them. The coward rejected… and suffered forever the loss.

Mycroft Holmes was no coward.

“Five minutes, give or take, sir.”

“Ah, thank you, Charles. I do not anticipate a very long meeting, however, as we are not approaching the lunch hour, I cannot count on the rumbling of stomachs to bring any contentious conversation to a hasty close.”

“Very good, sir. If you don’t mind, might I run an errand while you are occupied.”

“Errand?”

“Macaroons.”

“I do not remember our agreeing upon code words, Charles.”

“Though I do have a rather substantial collection from the driver’s pool and PA contingent, this one, from your PA, is to be taken literally.”

Joyful.

“Anthea has requested you purchase macaroons while we are out of the office.”
“Yes, sir.”

“Which means my meeting this afternoon with a certain individual would be facilitated by the purchase since said individual’s mood is supremely lifted by a particularly flavorful macaroon.”

“She indicated the situation was critical. Which is to be expected since…”

“Charles?”

“Oh, it’s not for me to say.”

“Oh, it is.”

“Not to gossip…”

“Gossip is for the elderly. This is… tactical conversation.”

“Right. Well, word is The Right Honorable Macaroon’s wife learned he was having an affair.”

“Another one?”

“It seems to be one of his very few talents. Further, she left packed bags at their front door this morning for him to take. Heavy ones, so his driver is fairly certain they weren’t for show.”

“I see. In that case, I shall prepare my patience to be especially powerful and unperturbable. I cannot, however, claim surprise… he is an odious man, on any day, let alone when he properly has been called to account for his dishonorable conduct. There is no justification for such a thing. If you find that your mate is not the other half of your soul, then admit your mistake and seek a divorce! You do not further disgrace yourself by behaving deplorably and committing such insult. It is not their fault you wrongly assessed the situation; that you took vows with one who did not carve into your heart an immutable sigil that forever marked your unbreakable bond. It is not a mortal sin to make an error. To mistake lust or other lesser emotion for love. Yes, there are the marriages founded on profit, opportunity or convenience, but that is a business contract and not even relevant to the conversation. Furthermore…”

Catching Charles’s eyes in the rear-view mirror, Mycroft quickly cleared his throat, because it was evident his driver was worrying he was currently mid-stroke or, more terribly, speaking from the heart. For reasons.

“Ah, it appears we have arrived.”

“Ummmm… yes. Yes, we have. Of course, I can easily circle the block a few times, sir, if…”

“No, no block-circling required. Simply musing, my good man…”

You called him ‘my good man.’ Why not wave a large heart-shaped flag above your head!

“Uh huh… is there anything else I should acquire when I secure the strategic macaroons, Mr. Holmes? Wine, candles…”

“Good heavens.”

“A Barry White album.”

“I do know who that is, you know.”
“I would worry if you didn’t, sir.”

“And, I have no need for one.”

That is a disbelieving stare you are giving me, Charles. It’s a rather good one, so I shall award you a point for effort.

“If that is going to be your position du jour, sir, I will, of course, support it.”

“Thank you.”

“But she won’t.”

ACK!

“You will *not* inform Anthea of your… suppositions!”

“I won’t need to.”

Damnation… he was right. His glow of adoration was likely blinding to someone who made a science of discovering romance wherever, and in whomever, it hid! Was it too late to declare a work-from-home day…

“I am sending a text to… someone… saying you seem a touch under the weather today. That should provide cover, sir. For now.”

The man was a godsend.

“Thank you, Charles. Though, of course, I have no idea why you would do such a curious thing.”

“Of course not, sir.”

Stepping out of the car, Charles opened the rear door and stood his straightest as Mycroft exited.

“Macaroons, shall await, sir.”

“Excellent.”

Strolling regally towards the door of the government building in which sat fretting the individuals awaiting his verdict on their rather haphazardly-constructed bit of foreign policy, Mycroft allowed the memory of his evening and the morning’s non-naked breakfast to play in his mind for a few more moments before packing it away to focus on matters of work. A few candles, however… their supply *was* running a touch low. The soy wax variety were especially pleasing, given their lack of sooting. Ambience was made all the better by a minimum of mess…

“Voila. One sack of macaroons, per your request.”

Oh no. Anthea is glaring. Of course she is, fool! You were genial! The battle is already lost…

“Good. You’ll need them. Now… talk.”

“It was a dark and stormy night…"
“Pfft.”

Anthea intensified her glare and motioned Mycroft into the inner office, making a show of locking the door behind her and snatching away the macaroons to take one for herself.

“I have headache tablets ready if you actually need them, but I suspect you don’t. Confess.”

“I, too, ate a macaroon before presenting the bag, so we are now accomplices in the Great Macaroon Theft of London.”

“Charles said you were under the weather. That’s code.”

Traitorous driver!

“Oh…”

“Women know when one man is trying to cover for another one. You’re all amateurs.”

Non-traitorous driver!

“That is rather… gender-biased of you, Anthea.”

“I’ll make a contribution to Moustaches Monthly in penance. Now… what is being covered up and how deeply is your brother involved?”

“Sherlock?”

“He’s left…”

Anthea popped the macaroon in her mouth, set down the rest of the bag and quickly checked her mobile.

“… sixteen messages for me to pass along since you haven’t responded to his texts.”

Perfect. But, obviously, not sufficiently perfect that his PA knew any form of appreciable detail.

“How would I know what ridiculousness has, today, gripped my brother?”

“Stop avoiding me, Mycroft. I need equipment and you know why. I expect a delivery by afternoon.”

“Well…”

“John refuses to allow me to purchase a dog and you know why. He must be convinced. See to it.”

“That is…”

“Rest assured that your besottedness will not impede science!”

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

“P… pardon?”

Anthea held up the phone for Mycroft to read the message and smiled smugly at her employer’s gritted teeth as he imagined throttling his horrid little brother to a very messy, painful, death.
“I… Sherlock is being hysterical, as usual.”

“No doubt, but the besottedness is new. And interesting. Begin.”

“There is nothing to begin.”

“Besottedness. Sherlock can scarcely utter any word associated with romance, but that soup of letters made it into a text. What’s his name?”

“Sherlock. Is your memory suffering impairment?”

“Funny. Your partner in besottedness. What’s his name?”

“I have no idea to what or whom you are referring. Now, we have a great deal of work to do…”

“Oh, I took care of most of it, typical nonsense that you tell me to handle anyway, so back to the besottedness…”

“There is no besottedness! I… I do not believe that is even a word!”

“How often do you see him? How handsome is he? What does he do? What’s his name?”

“Good heavens, woman!”

“How tall is he? What does he like for films? Can he cook? How’d you meet him? Belt or braces?”

“Now, see here…”

“Facial hair or clean-shaven? Pets? Does he like to dance? Sense of style? Pineapple on pizza?”

Mycroft had a looking-into-the-camera moment and acknowledged that his PA could go on like this all day unless some bone was tossed her way. And only a juicy one would do.

“If I admit that I have become acquainted with a gentleman I find companionable, will that suffice?”

“Name.”

“Mycroft Holmes.”

“Does he have a sense of humor? Rough or smooth voice? Can he drive? How’s his breath?”

“GREGORY!”

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Like extracting a molar.

“I like it, too. Good, strong name. Not something weak and waffly. And one, I do believe, I’ve heard before.”

Waggle not your eyebrows at me, foul fiend. But… perhaps this will prove to you my courage in the area of romance, which you previously, and traitorously, doubted. Not that such courage actually exists, of course, but appearances do count and in all areas of life.
“I am overjoyed. Now, might we return to the purpose of my being here today, which is work?”

“One more question.”

“Is there an end to this agony?”

“That’s not the question, but nice to see you giving mindreading a try. Anyway… is he special?”

Mycroft’s rolled eyes preceded him beginning a pointed retort, but stopped as he noticed the hopeful look in Anthea’s eyes. A hope not for her… but for him. Something pitifully rare in his life… and deserving of honesty.

“Yes, I believe he is.”

Anthea knew giving her boss a hug would lethally embarrass him, so she sublimated the urge and simply smiled at the man who had pooh-pooh’d romantic entanglements for as long as she had known him. This Gregory must be a truly singular person to have gained Mr. Holmes’s attention and if he abused that attention, there would be hell to pay from someone who knew how to deal it hard in high heels and a mid-length skirt.

“Then that’s the end of it. Except when you want to talk about him, that is.”

Mycroft sighed and pointed to the chair in front of his desk, shaking his head when Anthea dropped into it, still smiling at him, then took his own chair and began thumbing through the files on his desk. Want to talk… he wanted to shout from a mountaintop the glory and wonder of his Gregory Lestrade. Of course, as that was in no manner dignified, there would be no shouting, let alone mountaineering to do it, but...

“I do not discuss my private business at work.”

“Of course not, Mr. Holmes.”

“… but… when you have a moment…”

“Sir?”

“I require the highest-quality chess app that is available.”

“App? Not chessboard?”

“Gregory… has certain mobility issues that makes manipulating chess pieces problematic.”

Which also might explain why I never make any mention of activities one would associate with a couple fully able to exploit the various entertainment options one enjoys in London when one is a couple.

“Hmmmm… leave it to me.”

That was a highly worrying hmmmm… but if Anthea was invested, she would leave no stone unturned and Gregory would be delighted to be able to control his own pieces when they played, even if their game was confined to a tablet screen. Little things… seek little things that made a difference, for to Gregory, they meant the world.

“Very well… now, about Venezuela…”

“A gorgeous country.”
“And we will strive to keep it that way…”

“Sherlock…”

“You are interrupting again, John.”

“Interrupting your hour-long, non-stop stream of questions that Greg couldn’t answer completely if you even tried, at all, to give him the time to type the words.”

Keeping Sherlock from invading Mycroft’s house at the crack of dawn had been somewhat of a battle, but John had held firm (and hidden Sherlock’s trousers), until a reasonable hour when it was likely Mycroft had left for the day and Greg would be ready for visitors, whatever that meant for a ghost. Now, though, the dam had broken and there was no holding back the flood.

“It is not my fault the apparition is disgracefully deficient in methods of communication.”

Arse

“My point proved. And Mycroft has not acquired a single tool useful for researching the nature of paranormal creatures. Audio analysis equipment, a spectrophotometer with fiber-optic attachment… what I am supposed to do with sleeve garters and a cake shrine?”

“Your brother doesn’t have a cake shrine. At least… not one I’ve seen. Greg?”

Nope

“There. And Greg would know. He can see through walls.”

“False! He can penetrate walls with his head, but there is no evidence his vision permits him the ability to see through opaque objects.”

“I stand corrected. Well, until you wrap your hands around the science things you want, you’ll have to settle for asking questions and buggering about with your stinky smoke and temperature gun.”

“The smoke does not stink. It… it may have some odor, however, I am attempting to determine if the spirit can promote any form of chemical reaction and beginning with a gas-based system is the most logical choice, given the nebulousness of its existence.”

His not its bastard

“Peck on your tablet, apparition.”

“I’ll peck on your fucking skull, your evil git.”

Fortunately, Mycroft had tweaked the text-to-speech program so it didn’t stumble on profanity, because sometimes you just had to use it. It was a basic law of communication and one that Greg wholeheartedly supported.

“Untrue, for your pecking ability is extremely limited and my skull will, in no manner, be damaged when tapped upon by your bastardized stylus. Speaking of… I require your pen for further study.”

“No.”
“Yes.”

“That’s off limits.”

“I think not.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re not getting my pen.”

“I am, for science demands it. I must understand what is the property it possesses that now makes it accessible to you.”

“No. And that’s a hard, unchanging no.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Sherlock…”

Sherlock knew well that particular tone in John’s voice and it didn’t bode well for him on the domestic front if he chose to ignore it.

“What?”

“Greg’s right. The pen has to stay off limits for your experiments.”

“That is unacceptable. If the factor it has gained can be determined, then it could be imparted on other objects, which could only be viewed as a positive outcome for all parties involved.”

“I’m not saying your intentions are bad or that, in an academic sense, it’s not a good reason, but that’s Greg’s one tool he can use to readily communicate and have contact with the outside world. That has to stay safe.”

“What do you think I will do, John, eat it?”

“No… but once you get started on a research project, you become a bit… tunnel-visioned. I don’t think you’d do anything intentionally, but I can foresee you taking a bit here or there to run a test on, a destructive test, or taking the whole thing apart to the point where it doesn’t go back together quite… right… again. You’ve done it before, Sherlock. Many times. Remember Mrs. Turner’s broach? The one her grandfather brought back from Egypt?”

“I… yes. But, it was made from a true piece of ancient Egyptian jewelry and the various pigments…”

“Which mostly don’t exist anymore because you scraped them off for your tests, as well as broke off little bits of the decorative gold work to test its purity.”

“That… very well, I admit that the broach was not entirely in the same condition I received it when I was done with my tests.”

“Now think what that would mean to Greg if it was his pen, instead of Mrs. Turner’s broach.”

Sherlock’s intense scowl was actually reassuring to John, since it meant his partner was realizing the point being made, though he didn’t like it one bit.

“I suppose, if one has intense anti-science leanings, that your argument has merit.”

Which, even Greg had learned, was Sherlock’s way of saying he admitted his mistake and that
course of action would not be pursued. He really was good boy, if one took him for who he was and set your expectations accordingly. And, were willing to stand your ground even when he was trying to browbeat you into doing things his way, hell and be damned.

“Thanks, lad. I’m a tad paranoid about this, I admit, but… what my pen does for me, I can’t endanger if for a second. Especially now. But…”

Sherlock’s ears pricked up and John groaned accordingly.

“There’s a key at the inn, the lock’s long gone, but it’s the last item, besides one chair, that I can move on my own. I can have Mrs. Hudson send it and you can do experiments on that, if you like. Unlike the crock or drinks service, it’s not terribly useful, so it’d be ok if something accidentally happened, though I’d still appreciate it if accidents didn’t happen, thank you very much.”

Greg smiled as Sherlock cut eyes towards John, who grudgingly gave an approving nod. If Greg was offering, then he’d have to trust that the offer wasn’t over-generous and the ghost could afford to lose that item, if things took a turn for the destructive. However, he’d impress on Sherlock that destructive was not an option here and the key should be returned to Greg in fine condition to scoot around as the ghost pleased.

“Very well. I shall endure even with the shackles you and John see fit to bind me.”

John couldn’t see Greg’s ‘oh, Sherlock’ shake of his head, but he somehow knew it was occurring and that it closely matched his own.

“Good! Then that’s settled and you can go back to asking Greg questions. We’re up to what… number 348 on your list?”

“You are not funny, John. And… it is only number 143.”

“Sorry, I dozed off for a bit and got ahead of myself. Number 143, then. Greg, you ready?”

Ready

“Then we will begin. To what degree is your vision impacted by variations in light intensity?”

As the stylus began to tap out an answer, John leaned back and decided that Sherlock’s next visit could likely be made without him to supervise. All things considered, his partner was being very well-behaved and treating Greg with a degree of respect that spoke to some actual regard for the person he was badgering with questions. That was a very good sign for the future and a lack of experiments that might damage Greg, his few possessions, Mycroft’s house or everyone’s sanity. And, for Sherlock, it might be one more person who welcomed his company or, at least, tolerated it with good grace, which was something his partner needed, though he’d cut out his tongue and feed it to a cat before admitting it.

“It is not lunacy to inquire about ghost activity and the lunar cycle. That is… fine, yes, from an etymological standpoint, you might be able to defend that position, but I am right and you are still wrong. So there.”

Yes, Greg would manage just fine without him…

Now and again, his PA proved herself to be something of a help in matters that extended beyond the confines of the office. And, by now and again, Mycroft meant whenever any issue arose that
benefitted from her particular form of meddling and, after the first meddle was accomplished, it was a joint effort to affect the second so that… well, even he was somewhat proud of what they had accomplished.

“My dear, might you be free for a moment?”

Mycroft had almost left the highly-focused ghost alone when he peeked into Greg’s study, but sometimes one’s own enthusiasm could not be denied.

“Mycroft! I am free, actually. Just doing some proofreading of this story and I could stand a break. It’s a blessing and a curse, this tablet. Before, I would write something and then walk away from it, since changing anything would mean a lot of physical effort to rewrite, scratch out, throw away paper… now, I don’t really have an excuse not to tidy my tales since it’s so bloody easy to accomplish with this pesky technology. How was your day? It’s… well, I was going to say it’s late, but you’re actually fairly on time. I’m the one who lost sight of the clock.”

“The sign of an invigorating day. And, from what I have gathered from my brother’s countless, plaintive messages, invigorating is certainly the word for it.”

“HA! He was amazing! John finally had to drag Sherlock home so they could meet with a client. That’s something I’d love to watch… Sherlock and John on a case. John’s given me a few stories, but it would be brilliant to see them in action. Maybe they could make a video for me to watch, at some point. At the very least, it’d show me what real detectives do, in case I ever want to write a detective story.”

“I can assure you my brother’s methods are not, in any manner, in line with that of a typical member of the detective species, however, I have no doubt they would gladly provide some mechanism to allow you a better look into their trade. For now, though…”

“Oh, that’s a meaningful pause.”

“Perhaps.”

Smiling his most enigmatic smile, Mycroft crooked a finger and bid Greg follow him out of his study into Mycroft’s where…

“A chessboard? Ok… you want to play chess.”

“A game I find most stimulating, especially with you as my opponent.”

“This really doesn’t explain that sneaky twinkle in your eye, Mycroft, but I suspect that bit will come to pass at some point.”

Taking one of the seats Mycroft had placed in front of the fire, with the small chess table in between, Greg began thinking and remembering what he could about Mycroft’s style of play.

“This might be of assistance, my dear.”

Placing one of Greg’s tablets next to the chessboard, Mycroft flipped past the initial screen of apps to the second, and tapped an icon while Greg looked curiously at the image of a chessboard and pieces that appeared.

“Alright… that’s a new one, but you do like to surprise me with little apps you think I’d like, which is positively brilliant and I thank you for it. Want to tell me what it’s for, since we’ve got a perfectly good chessboard sitting right there?”
“You shall see. Now, make your opening move by, oh one moment…”

Mycroft dashed out of his study and quickly retrieved Greg’s pen which he handed to the ghost with some degree of flourish.

“First tap white, for you shall play that color, now the piece you would move… good… and the square onto which you would move the piece.”

“Oh… I’ll put a pawn… right here. SHITE!”

Seeing a white pawn move on the real chessboard exactly to the spot he’d indicated on his tablet gave Greg a fright, then a giggle, both at his overreaction and…

“I can move them myself!”

“That you can. Your tablet is communicating with the circuitry beneath the board which moves the pieces magnetically. If there are other games that attract your attention, the mechanism can be programmed to tailor it to the board in question, though one would have to use pieces that could be moved via the electromagnetic attachment. Not difficult to achieve with a spot of glue and a bit of metal, so do feel free to find other potential amusements, at your leisure.”

Greg grinned so hard he’d worry about sore muscles if he was alive, and moved his pieces all over the board, giggling that they unfailingly obeyed his command.

“This is great! Where did you find it?”

“Actually, it is… it is not entirely correct to say it is a prototype but, rather, a product of one of our R&D labs. The researchers created it somewhat as a lark, however, they were happy to craft another example for me to bring home.”

Once Anthea convinced them they would not be sacked for being caught using government resources to make games to play while at work, of course, but that was neither here nor there.

“Well, thank them for me. And thank you, too! This is… I know it’s a bit stupid, but this will make it feel more like I’m actually playing than when I have to tell you what move to make so you can do it for me.”

“My very thought. And, once this particular item was brought to my attention, I tasked the research team to build one other thing. The time was short, so this first attempt is but a crude prototype, however, a more refined model will be built over the next several days once we have a better idea of exactly how to optimize its function.”

“Something else? Mycroft… you are far, far too good to me.”

“Nonsense. I am exactly as good as you deserve. Now, there should be another new icon… try the next screen, and the next… there.”

Greg’s tapped the new icon and whirled his head sharply at the sound of three soft beeps coming from the corner of Mycroft’s study and, though it was only force of habit, he squinted at the object he saw there that he honestly hadn’t noticed before, even though it wasn’t small.

“Ok… what’s that.”

“What is on your tablet screen?”
Looking down, Greg frowned at the various symbols and images, then turned the frown at Mycroft who smirked at his ghost’s confusion.

“Pretend it is one of the video games you have taken to enjoying.”

“Well, from that perspective… arrows mean direction and whirly could mean turn around…”

At Mycroft’s silent urging, Greg tapped one arrow and jumped when the unknown object moved forward a foot or so, then stopped. Tapping again and holding brought the object another few feet closer and Greg could finally get a good look at the four sturdy wheels that supported a metal column that seemed to have a container of sorts affixed to it at the bottom and a small platform with sides at the top. Tapping again brought the object closer still though it stopped before it hit the chess table, no matter if Greg kept tapping or not.

“It knows there is an object in its path and will not proceed straight ahead. You would have to navigate it around said object for now, though, the next iteration will work to make that an automatic thing.”

“Ok… this is… interesting. Like one of those cars or drones that you control and they move about for you. This could be fun to play with.”

“Potential, Gregory… always look towards potential. For example…”

Mycroft grinned wickedly and walked over to Greg’s portrait, picked it up and deposited it in the container at the bottom of the conveyance, a container that now seemed sized just perfectly to house the painting snugly and safely. He then put the tablet on the top platform.

“Shall we visit our patio, my dear? It is quite a mild evening and an hour’s conversation, or even chess, in the fresh air would do us both a world of good, I have no doubt.”

Knowing he couldn’t reach over and close Greg’s gaping mouth, Mycroft simply took a few steps towards the study door and waited for Greg’s disbelief to ebb, which took wonderfully long time to occur, indicating his ghost was very pleased with this second gift. When he was finally ready, Greg floated up and positioned himself like he was lying face-first on a bed and used his pen to pilot the small robot out of the study, through the sitting room and out into the patio, without any physical help from Mycroft, who did provide a few hints to help the ghost lower the central support to what would be desk height, for a ghost sitting in a chair on a lovely day when writing outdoors seems particularly appropriate.

“I… I can come outdoors. Whenever I want!”

“That you can. We do have to remember to charge your valiant steed, else it will do little, however, this does eliminate the worry of putting outdoors your painting and having inclement weather unexpectedly arrive.”

“I… I can go in and out as I choose. Sit out here and write, whenever I’d like! It’s a little desk, as well as a tiny, portrait lorry!”

“It will be a simple matter, also, to affix another tablet so you may listen to music or watch a film, as well. I realize the entire contraption is a bit cumbersome, but there will be improvements to enhance its efficiency, function and appearance. Does it… do you like it, Gregory?”

Mycroft had seen Greg float, but never shoot upwards and fly around a space, doing flips and cartwheels, which is what Greg did and with an exuberance that made Mycroft laugh freely in a way he’d be mortified to have any living human hear.
“I believe my gift is a success.”

“Success? Oh, Mycroft… this is fantastic! This little bugger is going to be… I can’t believe you thought of this!”

“Again, I did have some inspiration from existing examples, but made the attempt to see this tailored to your specific needs. I shall observe you use it for several days and offer specific suggestions for the next iteration waiting to be constructed. For example, it would be a simple thing to program in the plan of the ground floor so you could simply choose a room and have it…”

“Alfred.”

“Pardon.”

“That’s his name.”

“Is it?”

“Yep.”

“Reason.”

“He’s my butler.”

“Ahh, and, surprisingly, I understand the reference. Very well, Alfred he is christened and long may he, or his descendants, serve you loyally.”

“Hear that Alfred? Me and you are going to get along famously. Toddle about and… Mycroft, do you think my tablet could…”

“Yes?”

“Well, if your lads built Alfred and the chessboard, could they make a drinks machine or door control or something to turn on and off the lights. Things like that?”

“I… I have no doubt, but… why?”

“It’d be nice to save you some electricity or be able to unlock the door myself when John comes to visit or hear you at the door and be able to get a drink ready for you. Ooh! Or draw a bath! Get some hot water ready for a nice soak after a hard day. You know what else, too…”

Mycroft listened to Greg rattle off a half-dozen more ideas of remotely-controlled activities and felt a deep sense of wonder, both at his ghost’s creativity and that most of those ideas centered on making his life a more pleasant one.

“… and they already have those tiny robots that do the hoovering, but we could do something so Alfred could hold do hold a real one and keep your rugs tidy, though I wouldn’t have him wear a maid’s uniform or anything while he worked, because that would be a bit silly. I take it back, it’d be too funny not to, so sorry Alfred, but it’s a frilly apron and cap for you.”

“Lawks! I have created a monster!”

Greg gave Mycroft his winningest smile and floated down from the tops of the tall hedges to lay flat and hover face to face with Mycroft, where he laced his fingers and put them under his chin to escalate the cuteness.
“A cute one, though.”

The quantity of truth in that statement was simply astounding… and wasn’t Mycroft a lucky man for it…

“I propose we first evaluate the success of your butler, then consider expanding the borders of your electronic kingdom.”

“That’s not a no!”

“It is not a no. It is a… we shall see.”

“Yes! Grab the chess set will you, love? I’m feeling lucky tonight!”

Mycroft watched his ghost spin upwards with his hands spread and the light from the moon reflecting off his brilliant smile. His Gregory… an 18th-century man ready to set the 21st century on fire. And, given the structure of this modern world, that was entirely possible without ever leaving the confines of one’s home.

“I’m going to come out here naked tomorrow, just because I can.”

Extending ‘confines’ to include patio areas and thanking the universe that his ghost was visible to only a single pair of eyes... though, capering, bare-bodied Gregory would certainly change his neighbor’s opinion that he was the quiet, eternal-bachelor with the impeccably-groomed lawn. For once, he found he wouldn’t mind that change of opinion in the slightest… it would certainly make the occasional over-the-fence conversation far more entertaining that he’d experienced to date…
Sitting happily in the hazy London sunshine, Greg grinned at Sherlock who looked very much like a vampire being forced to suffer the damaging solar rays and was more than slightly discontent with that fact.

“This is both unnecessary and… bright.”

“It’s great! Good fresh air…”

“You don’t breathe.”

“Warm sun…”

“You feel neither heat nor cold.”

“Birds singing…”

“You… very well, I will concede you are capable of hearing bird vocalizations. It will take me but a moment to find a website where the cacophony plays constantly and you are free to listen to that ad nauseum when we return indoors to continue my research.”

“Nope. I’ve spent three centuries not being able to get more than a step or two out of doors, and that was only after an eternity of not even achieving that little victory, so I’m not going to cut my sun-soaking short just because you’re a vampire.”

“Vampires do not exist.”

“How do you know?”

“Because they are nonsensical concoctions of fiction.”


“That is ridiculous. It is a commonly-known fact that vampires do not exist.”

“It is a commonly-known fact that ghosts do not exist, too, but I disagree.”

“That…”

“Yes?”

“You and Mycroft are well-matched. Neither of you can craft an effective argument.”

“Yes, we are well-matched, but you can get fucked on the effective argument issue. You have no idea if vampires are real or not. Maybe there’s a whole scad of them out and about, they just don’t announce the fact, which is smart, all things considered. Work night shifts or live off investments so they don’t have to work… they could be happy, productive members of society and suck blood when they’re feeling peckish.”

“On to Question #217!”

“Werewolves, witches, faeries, leprechauns… all of those could be real. And you’d never know it. Next time you’re on the tube, you could be surrounded by all sorts of interesting types and never
once suspect they’re a wizard or shapeshifter. I think you’d be able to spot a zombie, though, so I feel somewhat confident they’re not real, or at least very uncommon, because the news isn’t filled with reports about people shambling along dropping limbs on the ground and moaning ‘Brains’

“Are you finished?”

“Not necessarily. I can go on.”

“I will end my life, become a ghost and plague you for eternity if you do.”

“Hmmm… since I’m not certain how I actually became a ghost, I’m not convinced you’d want to chance it. Might end up a zombie instead. But… then you’d prove they were real and that would be a win for science, I’d say.”

Sherlock flicked in Greg’s direction a leaf that had fallen on the small outdoor table and pouted that it simply kept on going without providing any satisfying contact whatsoever.

“Confine your musings on the existence of supernatural creatures to your insipid scribblings and kindly return focus to my questions. This is important scientific research and should be approached with due seriousness.”

“I’m serious! But, serious can be fun, too. Your brother, for example. He’s very serious, but also a tremendous amount of fun.”

“I feel sick.”

“If I tell you about how sexy your brother is, will you vomit? That’d be fun to see and I’m all about fun.”

“Yes, I would, and no, it wouldn’t.”

“Depends on which side of the spew you’re on, I suppose. Luckily, I can’t be splattered so… Mycroft is the sexiest man I’ve ever seen. What his body does to me… so long, lean and perfect. And that arse! Oh, it’s a thing of beauty…”

“NO! NO NO NO NO NO NO NO. I am not listening! Fingers in ears and I will now sing… anything… to drown out your disgusting discourse.”

“It’s not disgusting! Sexiness is the opposite of disgusting. I couldn’t openly admire male sexiness in my time, but now… I’m admiring it every chance I get.”

“Ugh… elderly men behaving like hormone-addled teenagers. It is a horrifying thought. However…”

“Yes?”

“For the purposes of scientific inquiry only… can… you know.”

“No, I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Sherlock, you gave me zero verbal clues. I’m not stupid, but I’m not some form of genius who can guess a person’s meaning from a ‘you know’ and a couple of pauses.”

“If you had any intellect, you would be able to glean my meaning merely from the path of our
conversation.”

“Vomiting?”

“SEX!”

“Oh! Oh… you want to know how your brother and I…”

“Wrong. I do not want to know. I would rather drink an elixir of sulfuric acid, ground glass and stinging nettles, but the horrifying nature of a topic does not bear on its value to science.”

“There’s nothing horrifying about sex. It’s the most natural thing in the world!”

“Not when it involves my brother. Unnatural… the stuff of dystopian fiction…”

“Wrong. Mycroft’s a healthy, very good-looking, sexy man and, while I’ll admit a younger brother doesn’t like to think that way about an older one, there’s nothing unnatural about what we may or may not do.”

“So, you admit to doing something.”

“I admit to… making a start, though it wasn’t along the lines of what you’re imagining, most likely. Mycroft can see me, hear me, but he can’t touch me and vice versa. That’s the way it is, I’m afraid.”

“So… you cannot…”

“If you’re asking can we have sex like any other two men, then no, we can’t. But, that doesn’t mean we can’t have intimate experiences and, for Mycroft at least, there can be some physical pleasure involved. But, you don’t need to have sex to love someone so…”

“LOVE!”

“Oops.”

“This… elaborate.”

“Uh… no.”

“Wrong. You cannot make a confession of love then refuse to provide corroborating details.”

“‘Yes, I can. Watch me.’”

“I cannot see you, so your statement is inane and childish.”

“Yeah, you have a point for that bit. But… the other bit… it just slipped out, the way things do and…”

“That you love my brother is not something that just ‘slips out,’ no matter the casualness of the conversation.”

“I didn’t say I loved him.”

“You are lying.”

“I… lying is a harsh word.”
“But an accurate one, in this case.”

“No… maybe. We can debate the harshness.”

“I’d rather you simply verify your claim, so I can add that to my portfolio of observations.”

“Sherlock…”

“Fine, I shall phone Mycroft and ask him…”

“NO! No, you blackmailing bastard…”

Stupid mouth! Strike that… stupid brain! And fingers doing what the stupid brain told them to do, because they’re just as stupid. Stupider, actually. This was not information that needed to be made public! Especially not to Sherlock who was as tenacious as a dog with a ham in its mouth… He was in the thick of it now and there was likely no way out, but directly through the center…

“…look, it’s too soon for me to say anything about how I feel towards Mycroft. So much is going on; there always is when a relationship is new and for this one… your brother does so much for me, has split my world wide open so I can step out and actually live! There’s a lot of gratitude there and being flattered from him seeing me as that important to go through all the trouble and effort… plus, there’s just the emotional punch from finding someone so wonderful, so caring and funny and handsome and who fits so well with me… lust, too. Can’t forget that bit. Lots and lots of lust…”

“That… that is ridiculously complex.”

Though Sherlock had a grudging understanding of the ghost’s thinking. It had a familiar taste and one he doubted he’d ever forget from first getting to know John.

“Exactly, which is why I won’t throw around what I feel in my heart without making certain what I feel is… not being clouded.”

“So you admit to feeling the emotion of love, but are unconvinced that it is a fabricated feeling.”

“What? I… I honestly don’t know what that means, but if you’re asking if I’m being cautious that I’m not fooling myself, then yes. I… I care for your brother, Sherlock. Maybe, in my own head, I’ve toyed with the ‘l’ word and found I like how it sounds in my mind. I like that it feels right in my heart. But, it’s not fair to Mycroft or me to not be certain before I say anything. We’ve… we’ve just met, for pity’s sake.”

“I knew I loved John very soon after meeting him.”

Which wasn’t something he’d ever admitted, but… the ghost was a surprisingly easy being with whom to converse about… matters of importance.

“Did you tell him?”

“Yes… no. I… was not certain if John shared my feelings or…”

“Or?”

“That I could properly express my own in a meaningful way, let alone continue to do so over time. I also was not fully confident that I could be a sufficiently satisfactory partner to make John happy.”
Another thing Sherlock had never admitted aloud, but once one cat had left the bag, the others seemed happy to follow their compatriot in search of mice or whatever verbal cats preferred for their dining pleasure.

“Guess what? I have those thoughts and worries, too. They’re fairly common, I wager, though nobody likes to talk about it. I’ll tell you, though, from what I see, you’re a brilliant partner for John. As nutty as you can be, you do right by John and make him happy.”

“Oh… thank you.”

“You’re welcome. But, John could easily leave if he was unhappy… I can’t really do that, nor could Mycroft. I mean, we could, but it’s not as easy as packing your socks and saying goodbye. So, for now, I’m doing my best to show Mycroft how much I care, make him happy however I can and just… simply let us both enjoy what we’re building. When the time is right, then he and I can have that conversation. Until then, though… just let it rest, alright?”

Sherlock scowled because (a) he had not anticipated his visit to include any discussion of love or romance centered on his odious brother and (b) his odious brother had the most pathetic record for love and romance in the history of the concepts and… if he could find a mote of real emotional connection with another person, even if that person was a ghost, it wasn’t necessarily a devastating thing for the continued survival of the human species.

“If it helps… Mycroft has demonstrated highly uncharacteristic behavior that indicate… he has invested himself emotionally in your association.”

“In English?”

“He shares your feelings. My brother is… ugh… happy and… ugh to the power of a million… he graces you with… hack hack hack… adoring glances and smiles, which I did not even realize his face could form. And his solicitousness in making your life a more vital one is unprecedented.”

“Oh… well… that’s good to know. Very good, really. That’s data, which is important.”

“Finally, you say something sensical.”

“I have my moments. But… and I don’t want to belabor the point… you really think he’s happy with me? Given… I’m dead?”

“Now that I consider the situation more closely, a corpse is likely the only person who could form an emotional attachment with Mycroft.”

“I’m not a corpse.”

“Semantics.”

“Wrong. Ghost, corpse… two completely different things. I doubt Mycroft would be very happy seeing my naked corpse, but he very much liked seeing my naked ghost.”

Sherlock’s death rattle made Greg laugh and mentally congratulate himself for pestering the serious, logical detective. Mental congratulations were awarded, too, to Sherlock for being a good brother and wanting Mycroft to find someone to love. Not that love was officially on offer yet, but it paid to be prepared.

“Got something in your throat, lad? Maybe you need some water or something.”
“I need an industrial cleaning solution to scrub that terrifying image from my brain.”

“Hey! Naked me isn’t terrifying! I was in… marginally good shape when I died.”

“That is… hmmmm… this implies you have kept your physical features in their entirety.”

“Yeah.”

“Interesting. What about your internal features?”

“What?”

“Brain, organs… I doubt you carry the ghost of your last meal in your digestive system, but I truly cannot rule out the possibility without unequivocal evidence.”

“What?”

“I need to see your insides.”

“You’re loony. You can't even see my outsides!”

“No, I am not. First, I must evaluate whether the invisibility of your exterior extends to your interior. Then, it is a matter of documenting whether the retention of features is both internal and external or simply external, based on your corroboratory testimony.”

“I… I have no idea how you can do that. Or how I'd make that happen.”

“You must know some method to allow me to see your organs and internal orifices.”

“No. You can't see me, Sherlock. That's the long and short of it.”

“That is lazy and inept of you.”

“Sorry. I can… You can look in my mouth if you want and see if you see anything in there.”

“That is undignified.”

“It’s more dignified to want to see my liver? How about I bend over and you can try to look up my…”

“Your mouth will do.”

“Great. Then we can get back to your questions.”

“That will have to do until Mycroft obtains the equipment I require.”

“I’m sure he’s doing his best.”

“I will text his PA again. Agitating Anthea is the surest way to spur my fatuous brother to action.”

“She works hard, Sherlock. You shouldn’t bother her unless it’s important.”

“She lives to serve Mycroft, therefore, by extension, she lives to serve me.”

“I will be passing along that assessment to your brother.”
“Pfft.”

“And he’ll pass it along to his PA. Prepare to be mauled.”

“Mauling would destroy her manicure, therefore, I am perfectly safe.”

“Poor Sherlock… well, I suppose some things just have to be learned the hard way.”

Which, from what Mycroft had told him about his PA, the hard way was about as hard as a body could imagine. Hopefully, he could get a ringside seat for the action…

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“Well, that was tiring!”

“You do not tire.”

“That’s… that’s not entirely true. I can exert myself too much and lose energy, which sort of feels like being tired.”

“Ahh, I shall write that down.”

“Don’t you ever get tired? Four billion questions and yelling at me because I can’t pull my tongue out of my mouth so you can see better down my throat, which you couldn’t see in the first place no matter how much you glared at it… it would exhaust any other person.”

“I am a superior being.”

“Then there we have it. So, what else do you…”

Sherlock snatched up his mobile which had sounded a text alert and scowled slightly.

“Dimmock…”

“That’s your Inspector friend.”

“He is certainly not my friend, but he is a Detective Inspector, though, that anyone would award him a rank higher than sniffer dog is disgraceful.”

“I’ve looked into what it takes to get up to that rank, Sherlock, and it’s impressive. Lot of hard work and skill to earn that position.”

“Then Dimmock certainly does not merit it.”

“Nah, I suspect he does. And you should give him some credit for it, too. Being a policeman’s hard, lad. And it seems it’s a lot harder now than it was when I was alive. Maybe not as much physical work as I had to do, but more dangerous, it seems. And a lot more political! Have to be respectful and polite, not that I wasn’t, but if I told someone to fuck off, I didn’t have to worry about it being in the newspaper the next day. Not that we really had a newspaper, of course, but no one even cared! Figured whoever gave the fucking off to deserved it.”

“Because they were ignorant, illiterate yokels.”

“No! Not… exactly. That doesn’t mean you’re not smart, though. Just don’t have as many facts as others and can’t understand writing. You can still reason and think, which is the more important bit, really.”
“I will concede that reason and thought are paramount.”

“Very gracious of you.”

“I will not concede the unwashed yokels that lived in your time were any more capable of those things than the minimally-washed denizens of modern times.”

“I… ok, I have to agree with you on that. Plenty of the smart and not-so-smart in both eras. But, everyone’s got their talents and uses, no matter whether they’re smart or not.”

“Only if Mycroft finally approves my plan for Soylent Green.”

“I saw that film just the other night! Watching those world’s gone to shit films and that was a brilliant one. But, I can assure you Mycroft won’t approve that because I know he’s very much a supporter of getting lots of vegetables in your diet and that would fly a bit in the face of that position.”

“Mycroft? Vegetables?”

“Yeah! No hunk of meat and bit of potato for him. Nice colorful veg and all the good things in them. Probably why he’s lean and has nice skin. Good clear eyes, too.”

“That sounds like a description of a livestock animal or show dog.”

“They eat lots of vegetables, maybe not the dog though, so it stands to reason.”

“That’s the… damnation.”

“Who this time?”

“Dimmock again. The man is incapable of doing a single thing without my holding his hand and laying it on the clues.”

“Having help with something’s nothing to be ashamed of. Sign of intelligence to know when someone’s got a skill that would be helpful.”

“Ugh… your… people positivity… is nauseating.”

“It’s not that, I’m a fairly cranky bastard, in reality, but I’ve learned a few things in my years, living and dead. Do you… maybe you should see what he wants.”

“Very likely the Stebbins murder. It offers some points of interest for me, which immediately places the case out of his reach and explains why he is fumbling in the dark.”

“Then, I suppose, you should be off and give him some help. A murder is serious and the family deserves answers and justice.”

“You sound like a particularly pedantic policeman.”

“That’s because I am, though without the pedantic part.”

“You were a policeman.”

“It’s not as if I quit. I just… died.”

“I would argue that death successfully terminated your employment.”
“Not by choice, though. I’d have stayed a copper as long as my legs would let me toddle around chasing the chicken thieves.”

“You enjoyed the work, it seems.”

“I did! And I was good at it, if I do say so myself. Kept my little piece of England a peaceful place, treated people fairly, saw justice done properly and not only to benefit the landowners.”

“Your cases were undoubtedly boring.”

“Some were. Some were miseries to solve and were very interesting because of it. Had a murder or two in my time. Thefts, arson… not as big an assortment as you have today, but enough to keep life lively. I wrote down the details of the best ones; you can read them if you like.”

“Boring.”

“Oh well…”

“I would prefer to see you work a case to assess your investigatory methods compared to modern training.”

“Once again, oh well…”

“Hmmmmm…”

“Thinking or is your tummy upset?”

“You are certain you cannot leave the confines of this house or patio?”

“No, I can… my painting doesn’t want to leave, but… now that I think about it, the sliver doesn’t seem to have a problem.”

“Sliver?”

“There’s a small sliver of wood from the frame of my painting that Mrs. Hudson would carry with her and I could go along when she went to the village. When Mycroft and I tried to move my painting out beyond the hedges here, it was not a pleasant experience in the least, but the sliver of wood was never a problem. Didn’t let me more than a step or two away from Mrs. Hudson, though.”

“I see… the painting seems to establish your range of free motion.”

“I’m alright as long as there are discrete boundaries. Lose that and… bad.”

“But the sliver works, albeit to a limited-range degree.”

“It does.”

“Would it work for me?”

“I… I have no idea. I doubt it, since you don’t own my painting.”

“What constitutes owning?”

“I… don’t know.”
“You are a fount of information.”

“My painting hasn’t left the inn once since it arrived! Not since I moved here. The issue never… was an issue.”

“And only the owner of the painting can see you.”

“Yeah, that’s always been true. The person who owned the inn could see me, but nobody else.”

“And, now, Mycroft.”

“So, the issue seems to be possession of the painting and the structure in which it dwells.”

“I… suppose. Again, I’ve never had cause or opportunity to test that.”

“Well, now you shall.”

“What? Sherlock…”

Greg found himself huffing loudly as the detective launched from his chair glared at the patiently-waiting Alfred before gently taking Greg’s painting out of its berth.

“Sherlock, whatever you’re thinking, don’t. As scared as I am for my pen, I’m a thousand times more afraid for my painting. I have no idea what would happen if it was really damaged or destroyed, but I suspect that might be the end for me. The real end.”

“I have no intention of damaging or destroying your unappealing image. I am simply… confiscating it.”

“No.”

“I counter with yes.”

“Sherlock, this isn’t a game.”

“No, it is a case. You are a policeman. I would assume you would feel the urge to add your expertise to the solving of a heinous murder. All that answers and justice business.”

“Good try, but you’re not even that interested. You just want to test some loony theory.”

“That is an ancillary benefit. If it soothes your tiny, overheated mind… my plan is to move your painting to my flat and, then, use the sliver to bring you with me to investigate matters.”

“I… hmmm…”

“Are you thinking or is your tummy upset?”

“Funny. You… do you promise, and I’m being serious here, do you promise to treat my painting with extreme care and do nothing with it but put it safely in your flat?”

“I will place it safely away from Mrs. Turner’s periodic bursts of tidying and ensure it cannot be threatened by fire, water, insect or rodent activity and the action of solvents.”

“Hmmmmm… I suppose…”

“Yes?”
“It would be something important to learn. If I can be transferred like that, I mean. And… I haven’t had the chance to see any of London yet.”

“True.”

“I have to admit, too, that it would be a lark to have a go at a murder case.”

“Also true.”

“And I have your solemn word…”

“Nothing is going to happen to your painting.”

“Then… do you have a case or something?”

“Why?”

“The painting doesn’t like no boundaries, remember?”

“Oh. We can use one of Mycroft’s ghastly valises. He has a bevy of the accursed things and it is time one was put to practical use besides carrying his emergency cake supply.”

“I have never seen your brother eat cake.”

“He likely does it after you believe him asleep. He takes it from the secret cake supply under his bed.”

“You’re not right in the head. But… go get something to carry that and I’ll… let’s get this experiment going.”

“Yes, the quicker we get to Scotland Yard, the less of a disaster can be made of the investigation.”

Both trying to stifle a decidedly immature smirk, Sherlock and Greg dashed off to find a case to transport Greg’s painting and, in his office, Mycroft was considering how quiet and uneventful was his day and wishing that a few more could be this placid. Too often the universe gifted him with the most burdensome and chaotic of surprises and it was a delight to have none of that, today, to intrude on his time. What a joy it would be to return home to his Gregory in something approaching a calm and relaxed mood… something that would surely bolster the chances for a touch of intimacy this evening. Yes, such days came to him rarely and, this one, he would surely enjoy more than most…
“There you are, Sherlock. Dimmock’s texting me now for his case, despite the fact that I very politely said bugger off, I’ve got tea and a book. Very rude of him to ignore that when I made certain to articulate each word loudly and clearly. Speaking of ignore… did you think I’d ignore the fact you’re carrying a valise, very probably one of your brother’s? Please tell me that you didn’t steal the nuclear codes or secret plans for invading Canada or something.”

“You have a suspicious nature, John.”

“And it’s well deserved living with you. Now, can you promise me that whatever nonsense you’re playing at, it won’t interfere with my tea-and-book time?”

“Why is everyone today insistent on extracting promises from me?”

“Because you hate giving them and that makes us happy. But, that does beg the question, who else made you promise something and for what reason?”

Sherlock set down the valise and glared at John, more as a formality than for any real irritation and carefully extracted Greg’s portrait.

“WHAT! ARE YOU INSANE! BRING THAT BACK TO… oh. Hi, Greg.”

John found himself staring wide-eyed at a smiling, waving ghost who looked exactly like his portrait, though wearing jeans, an unfortunate checked shirt and trainers so he more appeared a fashion-disabled dad than an 18th century man of the law.

“It worked! Sherlock can you see me?”

“I can… you are far uglier in person.”

“Thanks. Well… this is something, isn’t it? I’m trying to remember if I’ve ever had two people see me at the same time and I don’t think I have. Something new for me, today! And we’re just starting!”

Rubbing his hands together in glee didn’t do much to erode the embarrassing-dad image, but John found it gave the ghost a slightly more human aspect that was helping him get over the fact that he was staring at a ghost.

“Perhaps it is that both John and my names are on the lease and… however, only I own the painting now, so I do not understand why John can see you.”

“Maybe, you bastard, because you announce every bloody day that everything in the flat, even if it’s my underpants, is ‘ours,’ so you can give yourself permission to destroy it with one of your experiments. Like my underpants.”

John wasn’t sure which was riding higher right now, shock, curiosity or exasperation, but it made a cocktail in his veins that tea likely couldn’t even cure. And it was quality tea, too!

“John may have a point. Something you can think about, lad, while we work on our case.”

“CASE!”
“The ghost may not have hearing to damage, John, but I do and would appreciate it if you would remember that when you shriek like a banshee over trivial things.”

“TRI… trivial? You… stealing Greg and… a case? You want to bring Greg on a case? Oh god…”

“Invoking a deity changes nothing. The ghost…”

“Can you call me something other than ‘the ghost,’ Sherlock. I do have a name.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, which stopped mid-roll when they met Greg’s.

“I fail to remember it.”

“You’re so cute when you lie. It’s a simple name – Greg.”

“Four-letter names are for dogs and convicts.”

“Hey!”

“Except John.”

John still mulled tossing his book at Sherlock, but decided he’d rather not chance the detective grabbing it and deciding to see if it withstood an attack by scabies or other terror, so simply made a gesture that had Sherlock gasping in astonishment and Greg laughing, making thumbs up signs in solidarity.

“Can we turn back to the stealing Greg and taking him on a case bit, thank you very much.”

“Why? The former has already been accomplished and the latter…”

Sherlock picked up the painting and Greg showed him where the loose sliver of wood rested, until it found a new, temporary home in the inner pocket of Sherlock’s coat.

“… can now proceed. If you wish, you may join us…”

“Ahem.”

“… after I ensure the gh… Lestrade’s painting is rendered completely secure from everything up to and including a nuclear strike. If, however, your flaccid fiction is more enticing…”

“This isn’t flaccid! It’s a history of…”

“Boring.”

“I’ll boring you, you git. But, oh yes, I am going with you because someone level-headed has to keep this from becoming a disaster.”

“Ahem.”

“You, Greg, have proven your head is as level as the tip of a knife by agreeing to Sherlock’s lunacy.”

“It’s a murder case! That’s important!”

“Not for you! You’re already dead!”
“I’m a compassionate ghost.”

“You’re a ghost who wants some ridiculous adventure and to relive your living days as a policeman.”

“I… yeah, that’s true. But, the compassionate part is, too, so… there.”

John did throw his book this time, but only to stop Sherlock who was trying to sneak his way out of the flat by walking backwards and harrumphed in satisfaction when the paperback connected with Sherlock’s forehead.

“Assault!”

“Good throw, John!”

“BACK to the lunacy. You two… I cannot believe, not for one single second, that Mycroft agreed to this.”

“We…”

The look between Greg and Sherlock sent John’s blood pressure shooting to the point he hoped his ridiculous partner was prepared to deal with the stroke that was looming on the horizon.

“MYCROFT DOESN’T KNOW?”

“I thought you realized that when you tossed about the term ‘stolen’ for my careful relocating of Lestrade’s portrait.”

“I… yes, yes you’re right. I should have known that neither of you had the sense to actually inform Mycroft that you were behaving like a criminal and experimenting on his partner! You’re toddlers!”

“I’m not a toddler! See this hair? That’s mature, sexy hair and any toddler sporting that is a strange one, indeed.”

“I’m especially angry at you, you stupid ghost. Did you even think about how Mycroft would react if he stopped in at home and found you gone? AND your painting gone. Man would likely mobilize the military looking for it, if he didn’t have a heart attack and die before he could actually use his phone.”

Greg’s ‘oops’ face was, at least, genuine, which put him head and shoulders, in John’s estimation, above Sherlock who simply made a rude noise.

“Lestrade is a free… being. He can go where he likes.”

“No, he can’t! You had to affect a theft to get him out of the house and… yes, alright, I’ll agree he’s got free will and can make his own choices, but those choices should include not sending his partner out of his mind with worry!”

Feeling no surprise that Sherlock waved off his words, John turned his attention to the ghost and fixed him with his best ‘well, what do you have to say for yourself’ stare.

“Maybe… maybe I should… fuck! I don’t have my tablet or pen! I can’t contact Mycroft!”

“I’ll do it, and you… will Mycroft be able to hear you?”
“Uh… no.”

“Then I’ll do your talking for you and you’ll listen to every word of his in return. I hope they sting like a swarm of wasps.”

John grabbed his mobile and hit the contact button that put him directly through to Mycroft’s personal number, which was only to be used when Sherlock was disastrously off his nut and wreaking havoc on the city. It was a testament to Sherlock’s dedication to chaos that John had used the number a frightening number of times in the time they’d been together. This time, though, he set the phone for hands-free use so the criminals could hear every word of what was certain to be Mycroft’s verbal Mt. Vesuvius.

“Ah, Doctor Watson. What fresh hell has Sherlock created for us today?”

“First, let me emphasize that everything’s alright and you don’t actually need to worry.”

“That bad?”

“No… not really, but… are you sitting?”

“Good heavens…”

“Look, Mycroft… you are sitting, aren’t you?”

“John… I am currently preparing to mobilize the military…”

“See there, you two? What did I say?”

“You two? Who has Sherlock dragged into his mania? Please tell me it is one of the police officers with whom he hobnobs and not an innocent bystander.”

“Well, that’s not far off, to be honest. Sherlock… Greg let Sherlock take his painting from your house and bring it here so they can play detectives for the day.”

“What!”

John was certain he saw his mobile shake with the force of the blast and used his free hand to give Greg and Sherlock a ‘that’s on you, you bastards’ wag of his finger.

“Yes, that’s the situation. I’m looking at Greg right now, which is still a bit unsettling, but he’s stopped grinning and, at least, seems to realize the gravity of his poor decision.”

“Gregory… agreed to this insanity?”

“He did and he can hear every word you’re saying, so do feel free to let him have it full in his ridiculous face.”

“GREGORY LESTRADE! Have you gone mad! Why… why would you do such a thing? You, better than anyone, know how vulnerable you are now! Your very survival is at risk and for what? A chance to relive your former policeman days? I… I have no idea what to say to you, Gregory, I simply do not. I am far too… what if I had returned home and found you gone? Did you give that a moment’s consideration? How distraught I would be? How frantic with worry? This is… SHERLOCK! You are not exempt from my wrath so stop trying to slink away and stay where John can trounce you should he have the urge!”

John didn’t want to know how Mycroft new about the slinking, but he had already grabbed the
detective by the ear and dragged him away from the door of the flat.

“Gregory… Gregory, I am utterly undone at this moment. The lack of forethought, the putting yourself in harm’s way… what have you to say for yourself?”

Now, John was having to stop the ghost from slinking away to hide behind Sherlock, holding the mobile in front of him as if he was using a talisman to push back a demon into its summoning circle.

“I was just hoping for a little bit of fun! A touch of excitement. And to help – can’t forget about that.”

“He says he was hoping for fun and excitement and, oh yes, the chance to help. That part was an obvious afterthought.”

“Stop editing my excuses!”

Greg received his own rude gesture and stamped his foot, realizing completely he was now completely a toddler but wanted his playtime too much to protest.

“That is utterly unacceptable and entirely insufficient, Gregory. I… my head is throbbing.”

“To be fair, I suspect it’s for the murder case Dimmock’s been nagging Sherlock to assist with, so it would be for a good cause, but, being dead does have certain drawbacks and not being able to prance about helping catch murderers is one of them, something Greg and Sherlock seem to have forgotten.”

The combined protest at the prancing accusation was loud and vehement, but John didn’t survive mortal wounding in the Army to be cowed by bawling infants.

“Irrelevant. There is an entire legion of individuals whose sole purpose is to investigate crime and you, Gregory Lestrade, are not one of them!”

“I… just for one day?”

“Greg asked if he could do it for one day.”

“How many times has your flat hosted some degree of destructive event, John, including near destruction by various of Sherlock’s experiments?”

“Mycroft does have a point. Sherlock’s got something burbling right now on the table and…”

“My research on the putrefaction-retarding effects of certain household solvents is not explosive! Probably.”

“Ok, we’ve now proven that, as we speak, Sherlock’s got a bomb brewing and a disgusting one, at that.”

“Lie!”

“Sherlock! You told me my painting would be safe! You’ve got a rot bomb in the making… I… I have no idea what to say about that.”

“Your unflattering image is perfectly safe, Lestrade. John is, as ever, wildly exaggerating the danger. If it calms your tiny mind, I will discontinue the experiment and begin fresh tomorrow.”

“Discontinue away, because my painting’s not staying here with some chemical blast gearing up
to take out the walls.”

“At best, the blast would fracture the table and, perhaps one wall would suffer damage, which would certainly not be sufficiently extensive as to weaken the structural integrity of the building. Probably.”

“John…”

“It’s alright, Mycroft. I’ve been here all day, without any warning of explosions, thank you, Sherlock, and nothing’s happened but a few burps and fizzles in his flask. He will now un-experiment things so that nobody has to write Mrs. Turner another large check for repairs to the flat.”

“And he will return Gregory home immediately.”

The threat of painting-death through explosion faded from Greg’s mind as he joined Sherlock’s irate word-flinging at the dictatorial, as they saw it, proclamation.

“The natives aren’t happy about being ordered about, Mycroft.”

“Naturally. However, their lack of good judgement undercuts the gravity of their concerns and weight of their wishes.”

“I’m a free ghost and I can do as I like!”

“Greg says he’s a free ghost and he can do as he likes.”

“Gregory can do whatever he likes when he has properly considered the ramifications of his actions and the dangers to his welfare which, obviously, he has failed to do in this case.”

“Not true! I made Sherlock promise not to harm my portrait.”

“He says he did consider and made Sherlock promise his portrait would be safe.”

“And, does he know the level of credibility of Sherlock’s promises.”

“Obviously, not in the slightest.”

“My promises are extremely credible!”

“Do remind my brother, John, of his promise not to so much as touch the 15th century tapestry I acquired and lovingly hung in my study.”

“He’s got a point, Sherlock. I saw it go up in flames myself and you can’t even claim it was an accident, because the lighter did not accidentally leap into your hand, flick itself on and pull your hand towards the fabric.”

“Sherlock! You destroyed a tapestry older than me? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“For your information, apparition, it was not even a particularly attractive example of the craft and was far more valuable as a vehicle for my documenting the rate of combustion for ancient tapestries, which, you must admit, was vital to solving the Anstruther arson case.”

“John… I am dispatching someone to collect Gregory and…”

Now, the cacophony began again in earnest by the resident simians whose hoots, shrieks and beatings of their chest was certainly entertaining, but not the kindest on John’s ears or helping to
resolve the situation.

“Oh, the monkey cage is really howling now, Mycroft. Might want to watch the strong-arm tactics.”

“I shall not allow Gregory’s welfare to be imperiled, John. I simply shall not and, further, I will not apologize for it. It is both my privilege and my honor to safeguard him and I will not shirk that responsibility, no matter the volume of his disagreement.”

Greg gritted his teeth, but it was hard to stay angry at Mycroft when Mycroft was trying his utmost to take care of him and see him safe. He didn’t have to be such a pompous arse about it, though.

“I appreciate that, love, but you don’t have to be such a prick about it.”

“Greg appreciates your concern, but thinks you’re a prick anyway.”

“That’s not what I said!”

“It’s close enough. Mycroft, I have a suggestion. Do you want to hear it?”

“If I must.”

“Alright… I was going to chaperone those two, but maybe it’s better if I stay here so I can watch over Greg’s portrait and see it doesn’t come to harm, while Sherlock and Greg spend the day bothering NSY, being good little detectives. They will promise to return at a reasonable time and, then, Sherlock and I will see Greg home safely. How does that sound?”

“I am still extremely distressed by this course of action, John.”

“Understandable, but I think it’s fair Greg gets to choose what to do with his time if the safety of his portrait isn’t in question.”

“Your solemn word that all necessary precautions will be taken and Gregory will in no manner be endangered?”

“My solemn word, which is far more credible than Sherlock’s.”

John made a preemptive rude-gesture strike, which stifled Sherlock’s quickly rising outburst.

“I… very well. Gregory, of course, is the final arbiter of his life and the final word for all decisions… and if he chooses this unsound course of action, then I cannot forbid it. However, Gregory Lestrade… we will be having words about this later.”

“You have the most interesting words, love. I adore hearing all of them.”

“He responded, but was only being cheeky, so I won’t bother you with it. Phone anytime if you want to check things are still status quo.”

“Thank you, John, I will do that.”

And station a battalion of operatives around 221B to preclude any outside agent perpetrating chaos on the property.

“Good. I’ll see you tonight.”

“That you will.”
Mycroft terminated the call and scowled from anticipating the deluge of worry he’d endure all day and…

“Mr. Holmes? Is your… is everything alright?”

… that his PA was in his office, hearing every word of that conversation. At least, his side of it.

“Yes, quite alright.”

“Can you unclench your… everything… and try that again?”

Foul woman.

“No need, for the statement is correct, regardless of any imagined clenching.”

“If you say so. Your Greg… it sounds as if he’s an independent sort.”

That was an understatement, which was odd, given Gregory was also one of the most dependent beings in existence.

“He is and, today, that independence spurred him to make an incautious decision. He put his welfare in Sherlock’s hands, for pity’s sake!”

“That is about as foolish a decision as a person can make but I suspect you’ll ensure it doesn’t come around to bite him in the arse.”

“How many persons have you already dispatched to Baker Street?”

“Only a half dozen. Want more?”

His PA would now be awarded an extra hour for lunch.

“Hmmmm… direct four of them to monitor my brother and see nothing impedes whatever inanity he has planned for the day. Have them report directly to me, no intermediaries, and authorize replacements for them to fill out the 221B contingent.”

“Of course.”

The wood sliver must also be protected and four individuals should provide sufficient oversight. Would six be more effective? No… four was enough. Mustn’t seem smothering or overbearing…

“Thank you.”

“And, if I might add…”

“Which you will whether I desire it or not.”

But tread lightly, for the extra lunch time you know not you have been awarded can be retracted very easily.

“True. Anyway, I can’t imagine you being interested in anyone completely ridiculous and immature, so it’s likely not a catastrophe to trust him to do things smartly, despite whatever… issues… he might have. It sounded as if he simply wanted a bit of an adventure… did I understand that he was a police officer?”

“In a former life, yes.”
In a most literal sense.

“Then… it’s understandable he might want the chance to follow along with your brother, despite Sherlock being a loony three-year old with impulse-control issues. Sniff out clues, meet a few of the people Sherlock knows at NSY. Maybe he even knows some of them, himself.”

“Gregory… is from a very rural area.”

“Then, perhaps, he wants to see how things are done in London. I can understand that; interests don’t fade away just because you don’t do the job anymore. But, being a former policeman, he’s not unaware of how to watch out for himself, so a little faith in him is probably a good thing.”

“You believe I am overreacting.”

“No, actually, I don’t, all things considered, but it’s something to keep in mind when you are ‘having words later.’ “

“Ah… a suggestion for productive communication.”

“A tiny one.”

And one he might, *might*, take to heart. Viewed from Gregory’s perspective… the chance to participate in a case, given his enjoyment of his job when he was alive, must have been a profoundly tempting. And… he had yet to escort Gregory to see London or any locale beyond his home…

“I shall give it all due consideration.”

Though said with his most dismissive tone, Anthea was well-versed in reading her boss to know the message had been received.

“Of course, sir. Now, shall we do our best to speed through today’s world-class political absurdity so you have an abundance of time to spy on your Greg and make certain you have a few soothing cocktails before your brother brings him back home?”

Which, now that she said it… home. Which Mr. Holmes had *also* said in conversation. Apparently, her boss was further along with this romance than even she realized. Ooh… this was indescribably juicy. She’d have to be far more vigilant for clues in the future…

“I… I was going to suggest a more motivated day, myself. Though for reasons of efficiency.”

“Naturally. So… the Macedonian situation?”

“A prudent place to start. And, Anthea…”

“Sir?”

“I believe my lunch hour shall require a touch more time than normal, so do take an extra hour yourself.”

Which, for her boss, was as close as he came to blubbing with gratitude.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll make the most of it.”

And so would he. Spying… such a crass word. But, when one had a shoe that fit, one was somewhat obliged to wear it…
“Really, John?”

“Hand up, you miserable ghost. You, too, Sherlock.”

“I refuse.”

“Then I refuse to ever again do what I did last night to make your toes curl.”

Sherlock’s right hand shot up, though he snarled ferociously to balance his obedience with scorn.

“Alright, repeat after me… I… Sherlock and Greg…. do solemnly swear not to do anything ludicrous, dangerous, illegal, publicity-gaining, destructive or embarrassing… to me, I don’t care if you embarrass yourselves… so help me on pain of whatever evil, violent death John can bestow.”

The response to that was precisely what John predicted, but it was entertaining to rile the rabble now and again.

“I’ll take that as agreement. Now… enjoy yourselves, but be careful. Keep Greg’s wood safe.”

Sherlock had no idea why John and Greg began giggling, but took it as a signal to storm out of the flat, with Greg being pulled after him like a water-skier behind a boat. Well, back to tea-and-book day, with the addition of panicked calls from Mycroft every five minutes. The two maniacs had best have a drama-free day or there would be no chance Mycroft would be persuaded to let his happen again. And… that would be a shame. Greg honestly seemed eager for a go at a case and if he could do it safely, that would be a tremendous enhancement to his sheltered life.

That it would give Sherlock someone else to play with when tea-and-book days called was just a delicious side benefit…
“This is even better than the telly!”

If Greg’s smile was any brighter, Sherlock was certain it would blind half the city. If they could see it, of course.

“How can a city be better than a television?”

“What I meant was that what you see in programs and in films doesn’t capture the… energy… of London. It’s amazing! I’ve never come near to seeing something like this, never at all.”

Sherlock snorted loudly, but found himself taking a much slower and circuitous route to NSY than was strictly necessary. The ghost was… mesmerized. Wide-eyed, staring at everything, begging to stop here and there to see something, listen to something, watch the flow of people… this was Mycroft’s fault. If the elephant had simply taken the spirit on a tour of London, he wouldn’t have to waste precious time letting Lestrade ogle the city like a tourist.

“It would be expected, I suppose, that you would never have visited London when you were alive, either.”

“Not a chance. You had to have a very good reason for going to London, since, unless you were wealthy enough to have a horse and didn’t have to work for a living, you’d have to walk there and put your entire life on hold while you did that. Some did, of course. Went to London with no intention of returning, because they hoped to find work and opportunity, or there was a death and/or inheritance involved, but… the rest of us really had no cause for it.”

“And Mycroft has sat upon his enlarged arse and not brought you into the city previously.”

“Your brother’s busy, Sherlock. Leaves early, returns late… besides, I don’t imagine Mycroft as the walking about or take a cab sort of person, so we’d be in one of his cars and… well, you don’t seem to mind people thinking you’re loony and talking to yourself, but I suspect Mycroft would. Especially people who work for him.”

“I always talk to myself. It is often the only way I can be assured of intelligent conversation.”

“HA! You’re likely right, too. You’ve got a good brain, that’s for certain. And people that smart are known to be eccentric… Mycroft’s not that eccentric, though, and he’s wildly intelligent. I’ll have to put some thought into it.”

“A hippopotamus is more intelligent than Mycroft. And lower in bodyweight, also.”

“Wrong on both counts. Ooh… can we take the Tube?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Mycroft definitely won’t take me, so you have to.”

“Wrong. John can take you.”
“That’s an idea. Since this works, transferring ownership of my painting, I mean, we could do this more than this single time. Mycroft would probably be against the idea, though.”

“Tell him he can install a bomb-proof safe in our flat to store your painting.”

“There’s that genius showing through! That’s a great idea!”

“I was making a joke.”

“Well, I’m telling him that anyway and then I can visit and go on cases or toddle around London… I want to do that with Mycroft, too… not the cases part, but certainly going to see what he does for work and where he does it… but nothing says I can’t do it with you and John, also. This is brilliant! I never thought… nearly 300 years at the inn, with only a trip now and again to the village once Mrs. Hudson dropped my painting while dusting it and that sliver came off. Now, I’ve got all of London at my feet and I plan to take advantage of it.”

“Hmmm… I must say I would not expect an innkeeper to have an investigative urge. Most people would not have taken the opportunity to run that experiment.”

“Well, it was more that she didn’t have any glue to fix it, so started towards the village with it in her pocket. I was dragged along as a bonus.”

“And once again, I am disappointed by humanity’s lack of scientific curiosity.”

“Poor dear. Happy accidents do happen, though. But, before you ask, no, you can’t do experiments with my sliver or take another from the frame. I have no idea how much damage it can withstand before something bad happens, so consider all of that off limits.”

“You are as much of a spoilsport as John and Fatcroft.”

“When it’s your survival on the line, watch how much spoilsportery you toss about. Hey, is that where we’re going?”

Sherlock looked ahead at the large sign announcing their destination and quelled the urge to make a condescending remark. The entranced look on the ghost’s face was too much like that of a dog that had seen a juicy bone and he’d disappointed enough dogs today, by pulling away the ghost from romping and playing with the ones they’d met so far on their journey.

“Yes. A greater collection of dunderheads and buffoons you will never find.”

“Pfft. If that was true, we’d be hip-deep in crime.”

“We are.”

“There’s my hips. I see no crime anywhere near them.”

“We will now add one additional dunderheaded buffoon to the collection.”

“You’re a comedian. Despite your funniness, however, I’m planning on enjoying this.”

“Ugh… do what you will, specter, but do not distract me while I work.”

“There’s that comedy again! Just for that, I’m going to strip naked and dance the whole time.”

“First, I would vomit and go blind, which would mandate a rush of my corpse to the morgue, where you would not be able to contribute to the investigation. Second, you will not be able to
contribute to the investigation, at all, if you are concentrating on distracting me and not on the evidence.”

“Now you’ve gone all practical on me. I prefer funny Sherlock to practical Sherlock.”

“I prefer you focus on the case and cease your prattle.”

Greg stuck out his tongue and Sherlock felt a little ridiculous that his reach out to grab it failed due to the fact his fingers had nothing, actually, to grab.

“One point for me! But, yeah, time to get to work. Get your game face on, lad.”

“What does that even mean?”

“More telly for you, just as soon as we’re done here.”

Sherlock shook his head, then made a grand show of ignoring the ghost as he made his way into the NSY building and stalked towards Dimmock’s office, though the ignoring included a few stops so Greg could marvel at the bustle of activity, listen in to conversations at desks (for which Sherlock got glared at for being a snoop) and generally take in the reality of London police work, which was so far removed from his own experience that it couldn’t be measured.

“There you are! Did you just rise from the grave? I’ve been texting you all day!”

Sherlock shared a look with Greg, who was loudly proclaiming there was only one dead person here and it wasn’t Sherlock, though nobody else could hear the revelation.

“Dimmock… as always, you hope to use humor as a tool to camouflage your sub-par intellect and fail catastrophically. If you recall, I do not work for you, therefore, I am not obligated to answer your summons.”

Greg applauded politely which put a proud smile of Sherlock’s face that only served to draw a larger scowl out of the overworked detective inspector.

“But I’m the one who authorizes your access for the cases you want, so have a care, Sherlock.”

“Oh dear, what a terrible threat. Not as terrible, though, as the one about your case clearance rate plummeting to the bottom of the Marianas Trench. Which would happen without my input.”

Dimmock’s frustrated huff and ‘follow me’ gesture had Greg applauding again and Sherlock took a bow before following the DI to his office.

“Nice bit of space… I had a table and chair in our jail, which was a tiny thing, to say the least. And I only had that so there was a place to put my food when I had a spot of lunch. It’s a bit cluttered in here, though. I suppose that’s just the way it is now, but that would have driven me loony when I was alive.”

Greg nosed around Dimmock’s office, with the mountains of paper, the computer seemingly shrieking for attention on his desk, the stack of messages near the phone and wondered if the poor bastard ever made it outdoors to get some air in his lungs. This would not be a part of the job he’d enjoy, that was certain. Paper… you didn’t have to do all the paper business when he was constable. It seemed like everything in modern life was buried in paper, though. Either real paper or digital paper, but it was the same in the end… nose in paper, when it could be doing something far more enjoyable. Modern life wasn’t perfect, there was no doubt about that…
“This disheveled space cries piteously for gasoline and a match.”

“Some of us actually work for a living, Sherlock, and can’t simply swan about, sticking our noses into cases when we please and ignoring them when we don’t.”

Waving dismissively at Dimmock, Sherlock looked through the pile of folders on the desk and found the one for the murder case he was there to oversee and made certain to spread out the various reports and photographs so Greg could have a look.

“I am not, in any manner, to blame for the poor decisions in your life. Now, do you want to tell me what sent you into a hysterical texting fit today or would you like me guess?”

“New witness statements. That gardener finally surfaced, though he didn’t have much to say that was useful, but we did another canvas of the area and up the owner of a bookshop who is willing to testify he saw the wife popping into the boutique one door down from him at the time of the murder, which corroborates her alibi. We finally got the toxicology report, too. Bit surprising there, I have to admit. Plant toxin found.”

“What, precisely.”

“Something from the Acontium group.”

“Monkshood! Bloody hell, but this murderer wasn’t playing about, was he. Or she. They used that nasty stuff in my day, and I saw a gardening program once that talked about plants in the garden that would kill you, despite being lovely. That was one of the stars of the show.”

Sherlock cut eyes towards the ghost who had moved towards Dimmock to get a better look at the paper the DI had pulled towards himself to take another look at the report.

“Monkshood… interesting.”

“Yeah, that’s the common name. Stebbins family has a load of it in their garden.”

“It’s also called wolf’s bane, and you know what that’s for, don’t you, lad?”

Sherlock huffed at the ghost and fixed him with a ‘are you serious’ stare.

“I am well-versed in both the lore, uses, distribution and common names of every poisonous plant in this country and most of the rest of the world!”

“Ok… didn’t say you didn’t, Sherlock.”

While Greg laughed at him, Sherlock scowled at having one conversation partner completely unaware of the other.

“Good for you! That sort of information has to be handy with your detective work. And, from what I’m seeing, it looks like there were quite a few people, including family, living right next to that murderous garden, who didn’t like this Stebbins bloke much. Lots of motive and lots of opportunity…”

Waving off the ghost, who was happily reading through every word that he could see on the papers spread out on the desk, Sherlock had to credit the ghost’s observation and how the new statement from the bookshop owner exonerated the prime suspect, and the one he’d already decided was, by far, the most likely culprit.
“This bookseller… you are confident that his statement is true?”

“As confident as I am with any statement. He didn’t give it up easily, that’s for certain. Like most, didn’t want to get involved, especially with a murder case.”

“That could be shite, too, and the bugger is lying.”

“Yes, lying is certainly a possibility…”

“Who said anything about lying?”

Huffing that Dimmock was too useless to be able to hear the ghost standing next to him, Sherlock thought a moment, then decided it was time to take his inquiries to the source.

“I did. Why would this bookseller even recognize Stebbins’s widow?”

“She reads! It’s the closest bookshop to their home. And this supports my theory that the youngest son is the one to focus on. Getting cut off without a penny by his father after that drugs arrest… lad has a temper, too, from what we’ve learned.”

“Weasel-faced kid, that’s the truth of it, but… ask your DI friend who inherits with this Stebbins fellow dead.”

“He is not my friend.”

“I didn’t think he was, Sherlock, since you likely would have said something if you knew one of the suspects. Are you alright?”

The snarl on Sherlock’s face was a fairly standard one, but Dimmock was alert for any visible sign of mental malfunction to explain Sherlock’s strange behavior. Which was always strange, truth be told, but not quite in this fashion.

“Yes, I… was simply thinking aloud. Did you finally get a copy of the will?”

“Yeah, and it’s fairly standard. Wife gets the house and an allowance to maintain it…”

“Allowance?”

“Second marriage. Bulk of the cash, investments, etc. goes to the sons. Youngest son’s share is in trust until he’s twenty-six, but that’s only four years away, so I don’t see that being much of a reason to not murder his father. It’s a lot of money and not a long wait for it.”

“But it is a long time to work on changing your dad’s mind about cutting off your funds. If it were me, Sherlock, I’d want to know more about the widow. And why a bookseller would recognize her from a quick look as she’s popping into a shop.”

Sharing a nod with Greg that a prior association could mean more than easy recognition, Sherlock snatched up the bookshop owner’s statement and shoved it in his pocket.

“Hey! You can’t take that!”

“It’s not your only copy.”

“No, but… Sherlock, you can’t simply walk off with evide… you’re walking off with evidence.”

With a ghost trailing behind him, waving over his shoulder at the irritated Dimmock, though the DI
couldn’t see a thing, Sherlock left the office and began calculating the quickest route to their next destination.

“We going book shopping?”

“Dimmock and his team of louts could be fooled by a cat.”

“Cats are tricky, that’s true.”

“Pfft. Even you, a member of the undead, were not convinced by the witness statement.”

“Am I undead? Doesn’t that imply I’m not dead, which I most certainly am, so it doesn’t fit very well. We’re not having the vampire conversation again, are we?”

“You are a nonsensical creature, wraith, and Mycroft’s suffering due to your proximity is the only bright spot of my association with you.”

Greg made a rude noise of a quality that impressed even Sherlock, who was storming through the building, conducting an ongoing conversation with ‘thin air’ that failed to surprise or even raise the eyebrow of even one member of law enforcement since they were already convinced Sherlock was solidly on the side of being loony that did not contain them or most people on the planet.

“Har de har har. You’re no trophy yourself, Sherlock. Speaking of trophies, are we taking the Tube to the bookshop?”

“Books, the Underground and trophies share absolutely no conversational relationship.”

“What do you expect? I’m a vampire ghost chasing down a wolfs bane-wielding murderer.”

“You’re going to use that in one of your idiotic stories, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“I hereby disavow all knowledge of your existence.”

“When I’m a famous writer and making lots of money, don’t come to me for a bit of spending cash.”

“Something that would never happen anyway.”

“Not a shilling.”

“I can get all the shillings I desire from Mycroft.”

“And Mycroft can get all the sexiness he wants from me, so your shillings are at my command.”

“That is criminally unfair!”

“Vampire ghosts are the lawless sort, lad. Better get used to it.”

No, he was not being ‘nice’ taking the ghost on the Tube, it was simply the most efficient way to travel, in this case, and expedited their investigation.

“That was great! Oh… what a thing that is.”
“Pestilence confined and transported through the city. Agonizing.”

“Wrong. Well, I can’t argue the pestilence as I noticed a number of people with drippy noses and one with spots that I don’t think were caused by the pimples the kids get, but it was amazing!”

“Amazing if one cannot catch a cold or plague and never have to make contact with the various unwashed and unhygienic examples of the peasantry that use that mode of transport.”

“True, there are some things being a ghost is good for, but the concept of washing and hygiene was a bit different when I was alive, so I’m not too startled by what you probably think is disastrous. But, I do admit, not everyone thinks that way. Couldn’t imagine Mycroft on that marvelous machine if my life depended on it.”

“Mycroft would have the entire system shut down, and all the stations and tunnels filled with concrete before setting foot near the Tube.”

“Yeah… and that’s ok! What’s it? Different strokes for different folks.”

“And Mycroft is as different as they come.”

“You mean that evilly, but it’s actually true. He’s more debonair, intelligent, funny and sexy than most other people.”

“Drat, we are at our destination, so I have no opportunity to adequately expectorate my disgust.”

Greg shook his head at the expected nonsense and followed Sherlock the last few steps to the bookshop, openly eyeing the selection of books that surrounded him and thanking his lucky stars, once again, that Mycroft’s cleverness gained him access to all of these, albeit in digital form.

Soon, however, he wished he could have taken one down to read, because Sherlock was tenacious interrogating the bookseller and didn’t show any signs of slowing down his questioning. Instead, he settled on observing the victim more closely… middle-aged gentleman, not bad looking with a strong chin and clear eyes and, yes, he was making the poor fellow sound like a show dog, which was something he’d need to work on with his writing apparently, because that certainly didn’t sell the chap as a handsome paramour and nobody wanted to read about show dog romances, so it’d all be shite with nobody to blame but himself and his own uncreative brain. But, focusing back on the case, which was the reason he was here and not show dogs… he had only seen a photograph of the widow, but if she was a frequent patron, it wouldn’t be hard to envision something developing between these two. Especially if the husband had a decade or so on her, which he did. And was rich and often away for business. Which he was.

“The evening was overcast! The light level was far too low for you to have seen her clearly enough for a positive identification.”

“There are artificial sources of light, if you were unaware of the fact. Did you just arrive from the 1600’s?”

“Ha! He’d not be too far wrong if he asked that of me, but it’s still condescending, anyway. Think lanterns and get him, lad.”

“Lanterns were commonly used in the 1600’s for lighting, be it streets or houses, so your point is?”

“Yes! Ha… wearing the pout of the very caught out. Tosser.”
“Whatever. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I do have a business to run.”

Pointing imperiously towards the door, the shop owner affected a legs-spread, determined stance, but it failed to make any impression on the consulting detective and his formerly-alive temporary partner.

“One that doesn’t look very profitable. Mention that, Sherlock.”

“I know how to question a suspect.”

“Don’t talk to me, you daft bastard, talk to him!”

Sherlock’s face contorted into the physical expression of a truly scathing curse and rounded on the shopkeeper to make good use of his irritation.

“IN ANY CASE, your business… not a customer to be seen. And I note a wealth of signs demonstrating neglect of general maintenance, which indicates either a lack of care about such things, given the paucity of patrons to view the squalor, or a lack of funds to keep the shop in good condition. What exactly is the financial situation of your business, Mr. Collins?”

“My business and my business alone. Now, leave.”

“Hit a nerve, Sherlock. Keep pushing.”

“I know what to do! Ahem… Mr. Collins, if required, the police can obtain your bank records and…”

“OUT!”

“… the next inquiry made might need to take place with police officials involved.”

“Get out or I will phone the police!”

Sherlock glared at the bookseller, but whirled and marched out the door, deciding to simply let the man stew and return in an hour or so to press further.

“Hold on, lad.”

“Now what, Lestrade.”

“Just stand out here, pretending to use your phone or something. Do NOT look in the shop window.”

“Why?”

“Just do it. And don’t walk away, either.”

Greg motioned Sherlock to take a step further back towards the building, then walked through the brick and glass to stand inside where he could hear what was going on, which was the result of the owner’s quick dart towards the phone that Greg seen reflected in the window glass as they were leaving the shop.

“No, it wasn’t the police, but he was with the police, somehow. A private investigator or something. Of course I stayed with our story! That’s not my fault! I didn’t want to get involved in the first place, but you panicked and… yes, that’s possible. Anne, you need to… no, not tonight. No, it’s not a good idea. We said we’d wait awhile until… fine. Yes… I can be at your house at seven. Sure, I can bring wine. Yes, I remember. I love you, too. Bye.”
Rubbing his hands together, Greg walked backwards through the shop wall and onto the street to stand next to Sherlock.

“That widow, her name was Anne, right?”

“Yes, why?”

“That chap just phoned a woman named Anne about our visit. Very adamant he’ stayed with our story’ and is going to meet her, at her house, tonight at seven. Oh, and the ‘I love you, too,’ might be important.”

Sherlock’s smirk matched well with Greg’s knowing nod and the two began a slow stroll, really a saunter, away from the shop. Time for a little more work, but good things seemed to be looming on the horizon. Though not for the widow Stebbins and her lover…

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“It makes no sense, Sherlock! I’m willing to concede the woman’s having an affair, but why kill the husband? People have affairs all the time. She’s not set to inherit a great deal, in the long run, so it just doesn’t make sense.”

“Did Stebbins have life insurance?”

“Yeah, but not as much as you might imagine and it goes to the sons. There was a second policy taken out by the company, not a personal one, and the wife gets that but it’s only £10,000.”

“Only? People have killed for a bag of crisps, and you are well aware of that, Dimmock.”

“That figure would scarcely fund Mrs. Stebbins’s shoe purchases for the month. It’s the son, Sherlock. Definitely the son.”

Sherlock looked over at Greg who was shaking his head ‘no,’ and was glad one person in the room agreed with him.

“The bookseller. Do you have his financial records?”

“What? No! Why on earth would I have those?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe because he’s the lover of the widow.”

“Which I’m just finding out about this very moment.”

“Then order them now!”

“Was I crowned king and nobody told me? That was very remiss of Parliament.”

“You are supremely incompetent.”

“No, I am a detective inspector who has to follow the law. I admit that the situation merits looking into further, but only for doing due diligence for the case and keeping the defense from tossing the affair into the trial to cloud things.”

“How long will this take?”

“However long it takes.”
“Not acceptable.”

“Sherlock…”

Sherlock’s scowl deepened and he found himself looking towards the ghost to throw his shoulder into the battle.

“He’s got a point, lad. Have to do things legally and work up a tight, solid case to deliver to the prosecution. Admittedly, that wasn’t much of an issue when I was alive, but I’ve watched enough of the news to know that’s the situation now. However…”

“Yes?”

“Those records might not be necessary if your inspector here catches the lovebirds in the act. That might push one of them to talk, knowing they were now in the crosshairs.”

“Hmmm…”

“Sherlock? Want to tell me what you’re thinking about or are you just going to keep standing there humming and agreeing with yourself?”

Sherlock waved off Dimmock’s exasperation and, instead, checked his watch.

“Given we have several hours at our disposal, we… I… will return in time to accompany you to the Stebbins home.”

“And why would I be going there?”

“To ‘discover’ the conspirators together and escort them back here for questioning.”

“I… oh. That’s not the worst possible idea, I suppose. See what shakes loose if they know their affair’s been rumbled. I’m still putting my money on the son, though, it’s certainly possible the stepmother might have a bit of information she’s holding back and this could make her more likely to reveal it.”

“Whatever is your misguided motive, I don’t really care, but be ready to leave when I return and we will see this case closed.”

“I highly doubt that, Sherlock.”

Sherlock shared a final look with Greg, who simply smiled, his policeman’s instincts already telling him to start celebrating, and the two made a satisfied pair as they strutted of the paper-laden office and, finally, onto the street.

“Well, Sherlock… how are we going to pass the time until we drop an anvil on those murdering bastards’ heads?”

“I have several minor matters that require my attention, for other situations of interest, and, also, need to replenish my supply of microscope slides and gentian violet.”

“Alright, a bit of shopping, a bit of snooping… sounds like a fine time to me.”

“It is not as if you have any choice in the matter.”

“That’s what you think.”
Starting to sing in the loudest voice he could muster, Greg mentally rubbed his hands in glee at the look of fright that covered Sherlock’s face and congratulated himself on his newly-gained superpower. Yes, Sherlock, he definitely had some choice in the matter and he wasn’t afraid to use it…
Chapter 25

“Good heavens. Your first day returned to police service and you solve a murder case. Gregory, I am impressed.”

“I am the one who solved the case! Your apparition merely assisted. And marginally, at that.”

Greg and Mycroft shared a smile, Mycroft being able to see this particular one since he’d regained ownership of Greg’s painting over Sherlock’s surprisingly-strenuous protestations. Sherlock’s words were predictable, but lacked the vitriol to make them, in any manner, convincing.

“Of course, brother dear, let me rephrase. Gregory, I am highly impressed that you were able to survive a day in Sherlock’s chaotic presence and still maintain the fortitude and sanity to participate in a successful murder investigation.”

Sherlock’s hiss of annoyance made Greg laugh but, he couldn’t argue the ‘chaotic’ bit. Sherlock was a whirlwind of energy when he was working! But, what a brilliant thing that was to watch. Amazingly smart and made conclusions, correct ones, from only the tiniest of details. Knew that black widow had an accounting background just from the way she held her wineglass! Which made her embezzling a bloody fortune from her husband’s business a very simple thing, so when she and her bookseller lover planned the murder, it wasn’t for a nice house and allowance, but for the millions she’d tucked away. Once Sherlock pushed, led and confused her into admitting the finance-fingagling, it didn’t take a lot of time for the murder twins to start pointing fingers at each other and what portion of blame ultimately landed on this one or that was now the responsibility of the police and the courts. But… they’d done their part and that felt good. Very good, indeed.

“Since all of this bought me a day of rest, I’m more than happy for Greg to take a turn at being Sherlock’s minder now and then. Keeping a watchful eye on an ugly painting is a far happier fate than traipsing about the sewers or getting my eye blackened by an agitated forger.”

“That only happened once, John, and you broke his nose in retribution, so I have no idea why you continue to obsess over your ridiculously minor injury and assaulting my ears with your whinging and cries for pity.”

“My eye was swollen so badly I couldn’t see, you evil detective!”

“You have two eyes, one of which was still perfectly functional, so that statement is further evidence of your hysteria.”

John threw up his hands and Greg laughed harder, but mostly for the proud look on Sherlock’s face for having made his victorious point.

“One day, brother, you may push the good doctor too far and find yourself mourning a return to bachelorhood.”

“Pfft.”

_Solo sex Sherlock_

“Wrong! In fact, John’s sexual urges are substantially increased by the successful completion of a case, so it is guaranteed that we will have a large and prolonged quantity of sex tonight once we escape this mausoleum and return home.”
“AND on that note… Sherlock, time to leave. Mycroft, thanks for not stationing a man in the flat and only a squadron of armed guards outside of it. Greg, feel free to take Sherlock for walkies whenever you’d like, just don’t bring back the evidence in a little bag for me to take to the rubbish.”

Before Sherlock could protest, loudly and with many thesaurus-straining words, John hopped up from the sofa and began pushing the detective towards the door, hating that Sherlock was right about the sexual urges piece. Even though he wasn’t directly involved in this case, listening to Sherlock detail how they solved it gave him some stirrings in highly unmentionable places. Fortunately, his partner very much enjoyed turning those stirrings into something far more delightful and they were only a ride in one of Mycroft’s nice cars away from the bedroom…

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“My dear…”

The look in Mycroft’s eyes was not a jolly or frisky one, so Greg realized, as the walrus said, the time has come.

“Oh oh… is it time for words?”

Which Greg began readying himself for with his best little-boy grin and bedroom eyes, a rather unwholesome-sounding combination, but a potent one, nonetheless.

“A few.”

Mycroft took the seat on the sofa that John had vacated and patted the space next to him, which Greg quickly took, keeping his smile-and-eyes combo shining full force.

“Gregory… would you consider me dictatorial if I asked that you not imperil yourself as you did today, without first discussing the situation with me?”

That was not quite the opening salvo the ghost had expected, but he had to admit it was a lot more agreeable than what he’d anticipated.

“I… no. Not really. I knew it was a terrible risk and let my excitement get the better of me. I probably still would have gone with Sherlock, but maybe after you’d done a bit of wand-waving to make certain my portrait was protected on the way to their flat. And, more importantly, you wouldn’t have been left upset by me being a bit stupid. That’s something I am sorry for, love. I don’t want to upset you like that again and I know that it would have been miserably worse if you’d simply come home and found I wasn’t here.”

“I would have been devastated, Gregory. Terrified for you, worried beyond measure.”

“Which isn’t fair, not for any reason. So, yes, if I get a loony idea and you’re not here to discuss it, I’ll phone or text or wait until I can talk to you about it face-to-face.”

Greg’s expression had changed to one of honest contrition and Mycroft breathed a deep sigh of relief that his ghost was not taking the situation lightly. Even with the clear knowledge that the portrait was secure and would remain that way, he never lost enough of his deep-seated worry to make the day a pleasant one until his ghost was safely back at home.

“Thank you, Gregory. Truly, my mind will now rest easier.”

“That’s good. Because…”
“You are hoping for another outing with my brother.”

“Would you mind that?”

Seeing the pride and happiness radiating off of his Gregory as he and Sherlock recounted their tale of mystery and adventure, Mycroft knew that he could never mind another escapade. As long as their notification pact remained intact.

“No, I would not. In fact, I would be delighted for you to have the chance to again exercise your skills, provided all necessary safety measures were enacted.”

“Yes! Sherlock said you could put a bomb-proof safe in his flat to hold my painting while we were gadding about.”

That was not, at all, the worst idea his brother had ever entertained… apparently, Sherlock was as happy with the idea of another outing with his temporary partner as was the partner himself.

“Then I shall see it done and provide suitable escort to and from your bunker, so the risk is minimized to an acceptable degree.”

Greg did a little dance and Mycroft resigned himself to having a custom-crafted safe delivered to 221B as soon as humanly possible.

“Thanks, love! That’s… oh, I don’t know what to say. It’s all so much!”

“You are somewhat overwhelmed by your independence, I take it.”

“Somewhat? Try insanely overwhelmed. I worked an investigation today, Mycroft. Maybe only for one day and maybe a good deal of the work was already done, but I actually got my hands dirty. Helped question witnesses, gathered evidence…”

“And you performed your duties with efficiency and laudable success. I can assure you, my dear, that if your performance was sub-par, Sherlock would have made that clear to everyone within earshot. Actually, though it might not have been readily apparent, Sherlock was decidedly satisfied with your participation in his investigation. I suspect he entered into things rather unconvinced your skillset would suit a modern criminal case, but that is not his current line of thinking, I can assure you.”

“That’s good to know. I wasn’t terribly convinced, either, but I knew I wanted to try. I would have kicked myself hard if I’d let that chance pass me by untaken.”

“And your efforts have brought justice where, before, there was none. I am very proud of you, Gregory and very happy that you enjoyed your day.”

From the look in Mycroft’s eyes, Greg knew that was the absolute truth and found himself adoring his Holmes all the more for it.

“Thanks, love. Really, I appreciate that a lot. Maybe I can have a day at work with you next.”

“Hmmm… that is not, at all, an unworkable suggestion.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Gregory! Someone has contracted a case of wanderlust, it seems.”

“A small one. In three centuries, I’ve seen the inn, the village and the bit of land in between.
Today, I saw London! A part of it, at least. That does make a person hungry for more.”

Mycroft looked into the large, hopeful eyes of his ghost and quickly reviewed tomorrow’s schedule for any element that might make an office visit less than appropriate.

“I have a few meetings in the morning that shall surely bore you to tears, but the afternoon is relatively light and we can stroll about or take the car should we wish to go farther afield.”

“Really! That would be great! I’m going to write down everything about today’s case once you’ve gone to sleep and ready a few pages for tomorrow’s fun and games.”

“How fortunate you are that you do not require sleep. I quiver with excitement to think what I could do if I was able to forsake sleep for more productive pursuits.”

“Says the man that gets a handful of hours, at best, each night. And, why do I suspect you’ve gone days on end without seeing a wink.”

“Untrue. I require, at minimum, twelve winks to acceptably conduct my duties.”

“What happens if you get eleven and a half?”

“Cataclysmic failure of my mind to function. My PA must step in and handle all matters, up to and including, feeding me my lunch and misting my tongue occasionally so I do not dehydrate.”

“Tragedy! Oh, that’s a thing to avoid, no question about it. Twelve winks you’ll get, at minimum, every single night. I’ll see to it myself.”

“Such a protective man you are, Gregory. I feel most comforted that my well-being is in such attentive hands.”

Greg held up the aforementioned hands and grinned wickedly.

“Oh, these lovelies would happily be attentive for you. Attentive to you, in point of fact.”

Oh…

“Gregory, that sounds salacious.”

“Does that mean sexy?”

“It does.”

“Then, you’re right! Oh, the things I’d be doing now with these hands if they could actually run across your skin…”

An enjoyable tendril of sensation threaded up Mycroft’s spine and he returned Greg’s wicked smile in full.

“I am more than amenable to hearing your thoughts on the subject.”

“Well then, maybe I’ll get a bit more comfortable…”

Greg positioned himself exactly as one would if one were to lean back against the arm of the sofa and prop one’s legs on one’s highly curious partner. Then, his clothes vanished.

“GREGORY!”
“That’s my name and doesn’t it sound lovely on your tongue.”

“I… you are naked.”

“Gloriously.”

“True… but, in the sitting room.”

“Which is a problem why?”

Though he’d expected a reason to leap into his mind, Mycroft found himself with the rather ridiculous ‘because it is’ sitting in his brain looking a bit embarrassed that it might actually be pressed into service.

“I admit the ‘why’ is becoming lesser in urgency now that that I consider the question more fully.”

“That’s my Mycroft. Seeing the truth of a thing when it’s right there in front of him.”

Wriggling in front of him is more like it, and aren’t your eyes getting wide, love, watching the wriggling occur.

“My dear… you are exploiting your nudity in the most licentious of ways.”

“Just getting comfortable.”

“Which, for a ghost, is not necessary.”

“Which is very necessary if I want to see your eyes go dark, love. Which they are. The intoxicating blue that simply mesmerizes me giving way to pure onyx as you let your eyes wander over my body. I love that you like what you see. That it makes you breathe heavier and start to get hard.”

Mycroft felt a bit like a rabbit in the sights of a hawk, but it was certainly not an unpleasant feeling. Neither was the feeling from the growing bulge in his trousers that happily responded to his ghost’s breathtaking nudity and scandalous play with words.

“If I could touch you, I’d take advantage of that and as fully as possible... In fact, why don’t you let me see what I’d be taking advantage of…?”

“H… here?”

“Oh yes. You can stay dressed if you’re shy, but I suspect someone is getting a bit demanding and it’s a gorgeous thing when it wants attention. Come on, love… it’s not fair you leaving him to wait all frustrated like that…”

Mycroft pursed his lips, then let them slide into a smile so scorching Greg almost felt the heat moving through and filling his incorporeal form. And that almost-heat only escalated when Mycroft slowly, and with precise, deliberate motions, drew out his growing cock for the ghost’s viewing pleasure.

“Gorgeous. Really, that’s the word for it. Gorgeous as you, and equally sexy to these old eyes. Your body is perfect, Mycroft. The sort of body I would have had my hands and mouth all over when I was alive. Feel every bit of that milky skin along your back and arse when I held you and slowly ran kisses along your shoulders, pressing my body against yours so you’d know how quickly and profoundly you aroused me. Move myself against you so I could enjoy the sensation of your
skin on mine, your cock rubbing mine, making me moan softly in your ear…

“Yes…”

“You’d feel me, too, wouldn’t you, Mycroft. Feel me move against you and stroke your cock with my flesh. Show me… show me what you’d want to do with that lovely erection to set a fire in your belly and keep stoking it higher and higher…

Mycroft’s hand wrapped around his cock and, for a moment, he simply held it, savoring the strong pulse beneath his fingers before beginning to move his hand along the shaft, using the firm pressure he best enjoyed and bestowed a small moan of his own on the man who was watching every bit of the motion with a large, seductive smile.

“That’s what I want to see. See what you like, what makes you hardest and most desperate to come. Show me, Mycroft. Show me what you do at night when nobody’s watching. Show me what you do when you’re fantasizing about that beautiful cock of yours being sucked by someone who worships your body and adores the feel and taste of your come in their mouth. Someone who will use their tongue exactly as you command, rolling it over the tip, lapping at it like a particularly perfect sweet, stroking your shaft from one end to the other, keeping it flat to pet you like a cat, then sharpening it to trace little messages to you against that hot, tight skin.”

“Gregory…”

“You should see your face, love. Flushed with pleasure, anticipation flashing in your eyes as you feel that delicious tightening between your thighs because you’re getting close. Your hand moving faster because your cock is hard as a diamond and you’ve got a coil of need in your belly that won’t let you do anything but keep stroking yourself, keep watching me spread my legs and let you fantasize where that could lead. You want it, Mycroft… don’t hold back… come for me, love. Let me watch you ignite…”

Which Mycroft did, throwing his head back and groaning loudly as he covered his fingers with a heavy coating of semen and trembled from the strong shocks of his orgasm coursing through him.

“Beautiful… you’re so beautiful, Mycroft. You fill my senses and I can’t imagine, not anymore, a day without drinking in your beauty, hearing your laughter, reveling in your passion…”

Mycroft made a sound deep in his throat that sounded to Greg’s ears like a satisfied, primal growl and he happily took that as a sign that his Mycroft liked what he heard.

“Dear Gregory… what you do to me…”

“Whenever and however I can, love. If I can put fireworks in your mind and body, I’ll do it. Put a smile on your lips… done. Let you know, every day, how precious you are to me… you’re hear it and know I mean every word.”

Content to let the warm glow of satiation envelop him for the moment, Mycroft simply basked in the after-effects of his orgasm and the gentle flow of words entering his ears. Sex was one matter; this was something else entirely and he was perfectly happy to allow this ‘something else’ to bloom like a late-summer rose into something truly wonderful…

“So perfect you are, Mycroft. I’d reward that perfection if I could. Lick you clean, then kiss you deeply, tasting your pleasure and letting you know mine… but, since I can’t, how about a hot shower, then a warm brandy in that cozy bed of yours, with two books and all the comfort we can wrest from this wretched world?”
His Gregory was sent by the universe to bring him immeasurable joy and that it was only for a single person was a touch of selfishness he felt no shame admitting.

“I cannot think of a grander way to spend our evening. But, might I ask a small boon of you?”

“Sure.”

“Could you, henceforth, refer to it as ‘our’ bed?”

Greg’s grin flashed as brightly as the sun’s glare off still water and he reached out, mustered his force and let his fingers put a gentle tingle through Mycroft’s cheek, though not enough of one to upset his… lover… by making himself fade.

“I’d like that. A lot.”

Raw emotion was not unknown to Mycroft, despite what his brother might think, however it was historically confined to that particular brother and never shared with another person. Now, though, he found himself with a harsh, thick pressure in his chest from the adoring look in his dear ghost’s rich, brown eyes and found himself embracing it gladly. Yes, the ‘something else’ was real and its power was astounding. And he was in ecstasy because of it.

“Then we are agreed. Now, might I be assured of a shower that is free from seduction and bawdiness?”

“Uh… no.”

“Excellent. I do prefer my ablutions to be accompanied by an escalation of lust, albeit one my spent loins cannot exploit.”

“Want to put that to the test?”

“I… Gregory, I am a man of a certain age and there are particular truths about biology before which I must kneel.”

“A long drive, at night, through London if I can make you orgasm again tonight.”

A wager? Oh, his exquisite apparition was unerring in pinpointing his libido-stimulating areas.

“I accept.”

“Alright, then. I think I’ll keep my state of undress, since we’re just showering and relaxing in bed, so enjoy watching my cock swing as I walk up the stairs to wait for you.”

Which was exactly what Greg did, with Mycroft’s eyes glued to all relevant parts of the ghost’s anatomy that were libido-stimulating areas for the British Government. Dear heavens, but his Gregory was stunning… and wicked of tongue, to boot. Well, now that he had confirmed he responded powerfully to purringly-spoken eroticism, the doors of intimacy were opened to a very jubilant degree. And how fortunate that his ghost was most comfortable with displaying his assets to best effect during his verbal performance. Spreading his legs… now, if he could only persuade Gregory to do that on his back with his feet on the bed and knees in the air, he might be the delighted loser of a just-made wager…
Chapter 26

“This is great!”

For the tenth time, Mycroft looked over at the excited ghost, ‘dressed’ in a very work-appropriate outfit of charcoal-hued dress trousers, a white button-up shirt and tasteful blue tie with a small charcoal and white pattern that fetchingly gave the ensemble a touch of enlivening that was certainly in line with his ghost’s lively personality.

“Are we there yet?”

Mycroft shook his head, also for the tenth time, and simply smiled gently in response, since he had not closed the divider between himself and his driver, to keep with his normal, morning routine. And, what a morning it had been… waking to find an already groomed and dressed ghost sitting on the bed, quivering with anticipation of another day of adventure, though, the level of adventure watching him sign papers, glower at computer screens and browbeat politicians and bureaucrats was certainly not likely to provide the hum of activity his dear Gregory had enjoyed while working a police case.

Through, a rather restful day might be welcome after the hum of activity of their previous evening. Humming in satisfaction from the highly pleasurable sexual activity, in point of fact. Heavens, but Gregory had a wicked tongue when he so desired, which was a profoundly wonderful thing by any sane and competent perspective. The creativity, the brazenness… it was glorious. Losing a wager had never been so rewarding…

“Mycroooooooooooooooff….. are we even close?”

A small nod sufficed for an answer for the very familiar last leg of the journey had begun, as had the ritual of returning all papers to his valise, check of his tie and absence of sleep in his eyes in the small mirror behind the driver’s seat and the mental run-through of the order of the day and how easily could be fit in the inevitable emergencies that arose with the regularity of stopping activity on his bankcards because Sherlock had, once again, pickpocketed his wallet.

“That’s it! I’m right, aren’t I?”

Another small nod greeted the ghost who was now bouncing up and down like a child finding his favorite sweets in the bag with the rest of the day’s shopping. Fortunately, it was only a moment more before the car was ready to evict its passengers, or Mycroft was certain the ghost would simply attempt to bolt through the metal and glass of the vehicle and run the rest of the way to the building. He, however, would smile at his Gregory's inability to accomplish the bolting and choose, for them both, a more sedate path and wait for his driver to open the door.

“Thank you, Charles. Do keep yourself available as I might require you in the afternoon.”

“Of course, Mr. Holmes. I shall put up my feet, with a book, order in lunch and await your summons.”

“Mrs. Hudson adored your driver, just so you know. Said he had a good head on his shoulders and enough vinegar in his piss to keep your head on yours, too.”

Mycroft’s rolled eyes made Charles smile and Mycroft decided not to correct the misapprehension that there was only a single cheeky individual standing next to their car. Besides, the ghost had already decided to go exploring and it was certainly to his benefit to keep Gregory corralled and not
overtax himself by straining at his proverbial leash. Not that there was any possibility of a security risk, or of the leash snapping, but hunting down a wayward ghost would certainly take him to areas of the building where his presence signaled the downfall of mankind and a rush of people to find the nearest bomb shelter and stockpile of tinned food. Fortunately for the continued, effective function of government, the ghost could only run through the door of the building and wait impatiently on the other side.

“Gregory, now do contain your enthusiasm and restrain yourself from gallivanting about while I am working.”

“Just a little gallivanting.”

“I shall gladly walk you around the various areas when I have a few free moments, so do not worry that my office is the only feature of this structure you shall see.”

“But, walking isn’t gallivanting.”

“Correct.”

“Can’t I have a smidgen of gallivanting? I’ll just galliv for now and leave the vanting for later, if that helps.”

Smile your blinding smile, Gregory, but know I would add my verbal saber to the fight if there was not a frowning PA approaching me at this moment who would happily ask if I was loony and if the looniness gained her a free day while the appropriate medical personnel transported me to a restful location.

“There you are, Mr. Holmes. You have a meeting.”

“In half an hour, yes.”

“That’s another meeting. This is a new one that you know nothing about, though that isn’t stopping the idiots in your office from bothering me about it. You know how much I enjoying being bothered by idiots, Mr. Holmes…”

“It’s Anthea! I’m right, aren’t I? Oh, you’ve got your hands full with her and good on her for it. Important, powerful man like you needs a ferocious PA at his side.”

Thank you, Gregory. Anthea would agree with you wholeheartedly and steal one of my cherished dark chocolate/hazelnut truffles as her prize.

“Mrs. Hudson adores her, too. Thinks she should be running the country, which isn’t a slight to you, don’t think it is. You’ve got the world at your feet, but she thinks England could do with a bit of arse kicking and your Anthea has the shoes for it.”

Another assessment which would gain his PA’s approval. And, another truffle.

“Very well, I shall do my utmost to diminish the influence of idiocy on your morning, but be aware that the Transport Minister is penciled in for 9:00 am and not even I can hold back that particular flood of dimwittedness.”

“That’s when I’ve scheduled my break.”

“Of course it is.”
Mycroft made an ‘after you’ gesture while Greg laughed, but the ghost was actually pleased as he could be that Anthea was exactly as he imagined her from hearing her speak with Mrs. Hudson at the inn and the stories Mycroft told while they relaxed in the evening. Good. His Mycroft needed someone smart and clever to trust and and could count on for a job like his. And, there was no doubt the brilliant man would bristle with a boring, humorless husk working for him every day. Very, very, very good, indeed… if he couldn’t be here to keep an eye on his Mycroft, then it was important someone else could.

“But, I did place a particularly succulent lunch order, sir, as a specific nod to your sure-to-be foul temper.”

“Shall there be gelato?”

“There shall. And you’ll actually see some of it if you don’t kill anyone before the delivery arrives.”

Really, his Mycroft was in the perfect hands. Well… not as perfect as if he had hands, but, if last night proved anything, there were other ways to show this gorgeous man a nice time than using one’s hands. For such a sophisticated, elegant man, Mycroft was as lustful as they come and it was his honor and privilege to fire up those lusts as hot and desperate as he could. There was nobody more intoxicating than his… lover, it should be alright to use that term now, right?... when he was glowing with need, with half-closed eyes and half-parted lips. Well, that was his loveliness to watch now, as often as he could. He had to suspect, too, that ‘as often as he could’ was going to be very often because all that nonsense about not being able to come twice in one night was complete shite. When Mycroft had a day free, they’d go for three, four or more in a day. If there was anything his Mycroft loved it was a challenge and that was one they’d both be happy to take on in earnest…

“And if I do commit wanton murder and cull the political ranks?”

“A stale Hobnob, because I’ll have to handle the paperwork and I will not be happy about having to stay late this evening to do it.”

“I promise to keep my killer instinct securely under control.”

“Smart man.”

Oh, this was going to be a grand day… the show was already worth the price of the ticket!

The show had turned on him! How? How did Mycroft survive this? These people were so stupid! And arrogant. He wouldn’t trust this lot to successfully run a hungry dog towards a sausage vendor, let alone run a country. At least the intelligence division representatives seemed the serious and perceptive sort. Had a healthy contempt for the political buggers, too, if the pained looks on their faces could be believed. Which, that they were very similar to Mycroft’s, made that a certainty, so he wasn’t alone in his brain-rotting misery.

“… without additional resources, there is no possibility we can turn this situation to our advantage. We’ve looked at it from every angle and there simply is no other solution.”

Lying arsehole…

“He’s lying, love. Written all over him like when a toddler says they didn’t eat mud and it’s all over their fingers and faces.”
Mycroft wondered what sort of children his Gregory had known in his life, but credited the observation, which was spot on.

“Not a single other resolution to your little dilemma? Hmmmm… let me bring in a few of our more talented analysts to discuss matters and…”

“No! I mean, that will not be necessary, as we have our own in-house team that fully supports these conclusions.”

Fortunately, Mycroft was watching when Greg leaned very close and said something in the dullard’s ear or said dullard’s leap out of his seat might have caused him concern.

“Oh dear… a cramp? Or, perhaps an insect has vexed you?”

“I… didn’t you hear…”

“Pardon?”

Yes, do look around the room suspiciously and completely miss the ghost making an extremely rude gesture at you while the rest of us send up prayers that this can somehow be leveraged into shoving your useless carcass out of government with hints and whispers of mental instability.

“You… none of you… I…”

“Would tea help?”

“That… maybe?”

“Very well, I suspect we all could do with a cup at this point. I shall have it brought in and I suggest that the time is well used by everyone to prepare for another bracing hour of… honest and diligent toil.”

Making shooing motions with his hands, Mycroft emptied the small conference room of occupants so that he could laugh and wag a finger at the now-dancing ghost.

“Shame on you, Gregory Lestrade, terrorizing that poor man in such a heinous fashion.”

“Just called him a lying bastard, which, as we both know is true. But, I may have used my most menacing growl for added emphasis.”

“Is that akin to your sexual growl?”

“Similar in gruffness, but not going to put a pleasant tingle in places that appreciate that sort of thing.

“Bravo. Truly, my dear…”

“Ahem.”

Mycroft and Greg’s heads whipped around so fact that Mycroft actually worried he’d gotten whiplash, then lost that worry to a far, far larger one.

“Anthea.”

Starting at him with a highly uncertain look on her face which boded not a single positive thing Mycroft could think of.
“I’ve known you a long time, sir, and had far more time for observation than most, so I would know if you had lost your mind. Since I’ve not noticed that, would you care to tell me what’s going on?”

“Ummm… nothing.”

“Incorrect. You were happily conversing with thin air, which happens to be named Gregory.”

“Ahhhh… you are terribly mistaken. I… was on my mobile! Yes, my mobile which… you are now holding up for I asked you to have its memory upgraded by the IT staff while I was otherwise occupied.”

It was somewhat of a toss-up as to whose ‘oh shit’ face was the most damning, but Mycroft was fairly certainly he had beaten his partner by a nose.

“Once again, since I’ve not noticed you losing your mind and that’s not the sort of thing I could easily miss…”

Hi Anthea

Mycroft’s widened, panicked eyes let his PA know that she wasn’t the only one to hear the thin air talking to her and decided that no amount of shock was going to let her employer know she was… shocked to her bones. She’d never have this chance again to outdo him with aplomb!

“Hello, disembodied voice. Or, should I call you… oh my god, you’re Mr. Holmes’s Greg, aren’t you? No, don’t bother to lie about it, you are and I just lost all my goddam aplomb, so thanks for that!”

Sorry

Anthea threw herself into one of the vacated chairs and shimmied with glee. Her Mr. Holmes was smitten with…

“I’ll forgive you when you tell me who, what, when or where you are.”

Ghost

“Brilliant! And funny, because the Eurasian sector says that Mr. Holmes is a member of the undead and remembers when Disraeli was in nappies. So, where’d you meet?”

Inn

“AH! The dark and stormy night of romance. Oh, that evil thing… Martha had to know about this and she didn’t say one word. Well, let see if I send her a tube of that fancy hand cream she saw in the adverts now. Not a single splurt until I get the entire story. I’ll get your bit of it now, though, so let’s start with…”

“Ahem.”

Anthea and Greg turned towards a glowering Mycroft and both unknowingly renewed Anthea’s aplomb agenda, with Greg signing his name at the bottom of the manifesto under hers.

“That’s my line, sir.”

“Be that as it may… now that Gregory has taken the rash step of revealing himself…”
“Oh, did he drop his knickers?”

“Ha! Oh, I do like her…”

“Gregory… please behave.”

“He did, didn’t he? You’re ogling his naughty bits right now, aren’t you? Any way I can have a look, too?”

“I beg your… Gregory! Leave your trousers alone and properly fastened!”

Greg stopped mid unzip and smiled broadly and even more broadly hearing Anthea’s laughter at her boss’s highly-indignant shout.

“Oh, he’s perfect for you. I don’t even have to see him to know that. What does he look like, though? You can see him, I suppose or you wouldn’t know he was fiddling with his trousers. Sherlock! I completely forgot you said he was tortured by a day with Sherlock! Oh, this I have to hear, but you need to hurry before the wankers come back from the loo.”

*Solved a case*

“AHHHHH! Greg, you and I *are* doing lunch.”

“AHEM.”

“Oh dear, Mr. Brolly and Braces wants attention.”

“Thank you, Ms. Dole and Queue. And you can stop laughing this instant, Gregory Lestrade! Your lack of corporeality will not save you a thorough dressing down for this juvenility.”

*Sorry Dad*

“Words, Gregory… you are most familiar with them, so expect a plentiful supply when we return home.”

*Oops*

“Oh, don’t be a spoilsport, Mr. Holmes. How often do you get the chance to show off your Greg to people, tell me that?”

Mycroft opened his mouth to launch a stinging riposte then stopped because… well, he would not admit that his PA had a point, but… she did. A suspiciously calm and composed one, at that.

“As you can see, or fail to, in this case, Gregory is not precisely someone who can be ‘shown off.’ However… how on Earth are you not… how are you taking this so calmly!”

Something Anthea was wondering herself, but she did have some inkling as to why, though she never thought it was anything she’d ever confess to anyone, let alone the pinnacle of logic and reason that was her employer. Well, no time like the present…

“I believe in ghosts.”

“I… what?”

“I. Believe. In. Ghosts. Was that clear enough or should I add a bit of pantomime to my performance?”
If Mycroft’s eyes bugged out any further, they’d shoot out of his head like bullets and Greg despaired that he couldn’t even catch the bloody things to try and shove them back into their sockets.

“Good heavens… no, that is not possible. You are an intelligent, balanced, reasonable woman.”

“True, and one, who, apparently, was right, wouldn’t you say?”

“She’s got you there, Mycroft.”

“Thank you, Gregory, your input is not necessary at this time.”

“He’s got a sexy voice, doesn’t he? I have no idea why I think that, but I really do suspect it’s true.”

“Thank you, Anthea, your input is also not necessary at this time. Except, that is, to explain how it is at all possible that you believe in the supernatural.”

“Fine, don’t confirm your man has a sexy voice so I now officially know it’s incredibly sexy and you’re embarrassed to admit what it does to you when he’s whispering sweet nothings in your ear.”

What happened was his libido began escalating to a hitherto unknown level of passion and desire, but that certainly was none of his PA’s business.

“Ghosts, Anthea…”

“Are, as I’ve always suspected, real. If you must know, my grandmother told me that over and over again, starting when I was a very young girl. She said she’d seen a few in her day, but my parents were more of a mind that what she was saw was gin vapors, since… well, Gran did like a nice tipple in the afternoon. And morning. Evening, too, if I’m honest. Since I’ve never seen any definitive evidence to disprove the reality of ghosts, I’ve not had a reason not to believe, though, maybe, believe is overstating things. I’ve never flatly rule doubt their existence, is more the case and kept an open mind. Of course, that’s settled now, isn’t it and with sexy-voiced proof, too.”

First John, now his PA… was he the only person in existence who had thought ghosts to be a complete flight of fancy? Truly, humanity was even more a stewpot of superstition and nonsense than even he predicted. Though, this particular bit of superstition and nonsense now had to be elevated to the level of scientific reality, at least, for the scant few he could trust with the information.

“I see. So, you absorbed your grandmother’s alcohol-inspired fantasies…”

“Supposed alcohol-inspired fantasies, if you’re going to be snooty and pedantic.”

“I stand corrected.”

“Seems like her gran knew the story, too, love, so you do have to give her credit for having the correct end of the stick.”

“Yes, Gregory, however, I generally give greater credit to objectively-substantiated claims as gin fumes are not likely to sway a sober judge in a court of law or the Nobel prize committee.”

“I wish I could hear what he was saying since it is crystal clear that your Greg doesn’t hold back giving you a piece of his mind. Good for him. You need a man who won’t let you get away with everything, which you try to do. All the time. Ad infinitum. Ad nauseum.”

This was hell. Much cooler than he’d expected, but the demons were just as relentless with their
torture.

“I am definitely bringing my pen for my next visit! Tell her about my pen so I can have her email and we can share information so you’re properly managed at home and at work.”

“I do NOT require managing!”

“Greg said you need managing? I’ll add smart and perceptive to his list of attributes. Honestly, this is close to achieving perfection status and I don’t say that lightly.”

“Tell her about my pen!”

“I…”

Whatever Mycroft was about to say was lost to the winds as the sound of returning meeting participants sounded in the corridor.

“Here.”

Reaching into his pocket, Mycroft took out the splinter of wood that provided Greg his field trips and handed it to Anthea.

“I hereby transfer ownership of this… piece of wood… to you, on the condition it is returned to me when I make the request. Do you agree?”

“Love, I don’t know if that will work.”

“I am waiting, Anthea.”

“Ok… I take ownership of your wood…”

Of course you and Gregory giggle like pubescent children, despite the seriousness of this action. Truly you are peas in an infantile pod.

“… and will cede ownership back to you when you ask for it. Now, would you like to tell me why?”

“Begin walking, preferably to take your leave.”

Anthea frowned, but started towards the door and Mycroft and Greg both gasped when Greg was pulled forward, too.

“A moment, Anthea… can you… no, I suppose you would have said something if you could now see Gregory.”

“Is that what this piece of wood is supposed to do?”

“I truly did not know, but it seems you now have a partner for your gossiping and tale-telling.”

“What?”

Let’s go

“Oh! Oh, you can come with me and not be bored to death by all of the blowing hot air that’s about to arrive?”
“Definitely a better outcome to your morning than sitting through this lot and their eternal moaning. Though… Mr. Holmes, I’ll have your Greg back for the security briefing on North Korea. That’s always entertaining and I wager Greg will enjoy watching the shouting and hand-wringing.”

“Yes I would

“Alright, then, we’re out of here. Toodles.”

Mycroft glared at his PA’s waggling ‘goodbye’ fingers and also at his ghost’s happy dancing out the door but, in truth, was thrilled for this turn of events. Gregory meets another person, one who was supremely trustworthy, and broadens his social circle. His PA gains the factual story of their relationship, which would forestall a great deal of future creative storytelling on his part. A full-circle win, all things considered. Of course, the degree of present-moment storytelling, on Anthea’s and Gregory’s part, would be a significant price to pay for this victory. Sacrifices had to be made, at times, that was true… though some were far more painful than others…
Chapter 27

Smiling indulgently, Mycroft watched Greg type out an email message to Anthea, more to prove he could email than to thank her for the tour and gossip session they’d enjoyed while the British Government sorted out boring matters of state. It also, Mycroft suspect, contained, a clear expression of his ghost’s gratitude for her acceptance of him and willingness to both believe in his existence and embrace that existence warmly. Though only able to speak a few words at a time, his Gregory was most skilled in making the most of those few words, to Anthea’s great gossipy pleasure, and it was his joy that he had no idea what were the topics of their private conversations. His hair would likely catch on fire if he did.

“Are you composing a novel, my dear?”

“Nah, just making certain Anthea has my contact information in case she needs it. We talked about me possibly coming with you again, this time with a tablet and my pen, so we could chat a bit more easily. And she’s going to get your blokes to work on Alfred 2.0 and, this way, she can send me updates or ask questions about what I need or want.”

“Very efficient. But, then, my PA is noted for her rather ruthless efficiency.”

“I’m glad for it. What you did today, love… it was mind-boggling! Ambassadors, MP’s, all those clearly insincere and incompetent people making government decisions… you need a top-notch assistant to keep up with that. Someone to take the load for a bit while you wash all that idiocy and deceit out of your ears and have a chance to breathe air that’s not been polluted by cheap-looking suits and appalling cologne.”

“How did you know appalling cologne is a hallmark of Treasury officials?”

“You gave them both a wide berth during your meeting and steeled your spine when you had no choice but to stand close. Also, Anthea looked like she swallowed a rotten fish for a split second when she walked into the room to hand you that folder. I couldn’t be certain, but they looked like the type I see on the telly that always get associated with lots of cheap, horrid cologne and no sympathy for the poor sods who have to smell it.”

“Very observant of you, Gregory. I am highly impressed.”

“I think my policeman’s blood started flowing again from working the murder case. Or whatever I have that passes for blood, that is. There was flowing; I know that much.”

“Flow is always conducive to productive thoughts.”

“True. And, since my thoughts are properly productive tonight, I suspect I’ll get a good bit of writing accomplished. I may do a bit of rewriting, actually, since the story I’m working on has a character that I was never happy with, but I think she’ll work much better if I use Anthea as a model. Tough, intelligent, capable… that’s something I can work with.”

“She would be honored to serve as your inspiration, though, do prepare for a critical and unflinching analysis of your portrayal if and when she is able to read it.”

“Oh, Anthea would give me a thorough stabbing if she wasn’t pleased, that’s for certain. I’ll send her a copy of it when it’s finished to my satisfaction. Might, also…”

“Yes?”
“I told you I was going to reach out a bit and see what the online writing community was like and… well, it’s a twelve-ring circus! All sorts of groups, posting stories, discussing writing… I’m considering putting a few stories out there to see what people think of them. I’ll probably regret it since… well, I’ve never been subject to what one might call criticism, but I’m… well, I’m thinking about it, that’s all.”

And obviously not entirely confident about the results, but his Gregory was not one to shy away from challenges, even if the outcome might not be in his favor.

“Criticism can sting sharply, that is true, however; if you are hopeful for suggestions from those with similar interest, then one must endure the sting. Be mindful that one need not endure any form of disrespect, so do be vigilant against those who might speak not to help, but to harm, and let me know so I might show them the value of cordiality and respect towards others.”

“You’d deport them, wouldn’t you?”

“If they were within my immediate deportation sphere, else I would enact my chastisement through other means. Very few individuals enjoy a visit from their government’s tax representatives, let alone when their financial records are now sadly rewritten to tell a rousing tale of fiscal chicanery.”

“Ooohhh… I like the sound of that. Very monarchical.”

“My brow would be most flatteringly-enhanced by a crown.”

“It would, at that. One of those that…”

Greg’s thoughts were cut short by his tablet singing for his attention, singing being a literal description of the ringtone, which was belting out ‘Respect’ by Aretha Franklin.

“Mrs. Hudson… a touch late for her to call, but…”

“I shall leave you to your conversation and tend to a few, final matters of work for the day.”

Forgetting his ghost couldn’t feel it, Mycroft patted the non-physical thigh before rising and making his way to his study. All in all, a superlative day… despite his Gregory’s circumstances, it was clear a rewarding life… death… could be had, though one might require certain assistances to make that possible. Fortunately, if there was one person in this world who specialized in providing little assistances, it was the fellow now taking a seat in this comfortable chair and smiling at the sight of a particular portrait cozily settled in its butler’s arms. And this time, as a refreshing change, those assistances were a genuine delight to bestow…

“Love?”

Seeing someone’s head sticking through a closed door was becoming less and less of a shock and Mycroft wasn’t entirely certain if that was a positive or negative thing.

“Gregory? Is there a problem?”

Given your face is etched plentifully with deep lines of worry.

“Ummm… not with me. Are you busy?”
“Eternally, but never so busy as to ignore your concerns. Come in, Gregory, and talk to me about… whatever is vexing you.”

Greg stepped fully though the door and hesitated a moment before having a seat in one of the chairs near Mycroft’s desk.

“Thanks. I’ll say straight off that I know I’m being foolish…”

“Any concern you harbor is not a foolish one if it distresses you to this degree, my dear.”

“Maybe…it’s just… the reason Mrs. Hudson phoned was that there was a break-in at the inn.”

“What! Is she alright? Was anything stolen? What is the extent of the damage?”

“She’s fine, only a bit of cash and few pieces of jewelry seem to be missing and the only damage is a broken window. But… she was out shopping and surprised the two bastards that were robbing the inn when she returned. Got a small knock on the head when they shoved her out of the way to run, but it’s just a bump and nothing worse.”

Though, Mycroft could tell, that did not, in the slightest console his ghost.

“Have the police investigated?”

“They left awhile ago and say they’ll do what they can. There’s been a rash of burglaries in the village, so they’re not terribly surprised the inn was a target. Probably the same men or same group or whatever…”

“But that does not ease your mind.”

“No… not at all. She’s all alone out there, Mycroft. Admittedly, when I was there, I couldn’t have tossed out the buggers, but I could have scared them, at least. Thrown one of the few things I can throw at them! Do whatever I could to put the fear into them to get them out before there was any chance of her being hurt. It never once occurred to me that, when I came here, she’d lose more than companionship and that was hard enough to bear.”

“I admit such did not occur to me, either. However…”

“Oh, you’ve got that look in your eye…”

“Is it fetching?”

“Very.”

“Excellent. In any case, do you feel she would object to our having installed in the inn a security system? Nothing outrageous, but an alarm, better locks on the doors and windows, perhaps, if you like, video recording so, at the very least, the identifies of the perpetrators might be more easily discovered if a future event occurs?”

“Really? You’d do that?”

Seeing the light return to your eyes, I would do that and a world more…

“Without hesitation. I suspect from Mrs. Hudson’s phone call that… I think it is fair to say she looks upon you as family, for that is what one would do when something of this nature happens, is it not? Phone family to notify them and, for yourself, to have the comfort of a loving ear? How could we not respond as would her family to see her well and safe after this frightening experience?”
“You’re absolutely right. Even though she’s very young compared to me, Mrs. Hudson’s always treated me like a son. A roguish one, but a son, nonetheless. I’ve never even considered calling her by her given name, for pity’s sake!”

“Precisely. And what would a roguish son do for his mother, after such a dreadful experience?”

“Everything possible to see it didn’t happen again and catch the fuckers that did it the first time.”

“Precisely, again. Therefore, we shall make short work of the former and, if you like, I can make some inroads towards the latter. I have no information by which to judge the effectiveness of the local police service, however, I have yet to encounter any law enforcement group that could not benefit from some anonymous help to see a case successfully closed.”

“Some strapping lads in dark suits and darker sunglasses?”

“Not all operatives are male, Gregory.”

“Shit! You’re right. Anthea would murder me for saying that, wouldn’t she?”

“You would be thoroughly and painfully murdered, indeed.”

“Alright, starting again. Some strapping people in dark suits and darker sunglasses?”

“Exactly my thinking. Though I shall issue instructions that they should do their best to blend in with the citizenry, so as not to arouse suspicion. I would rather not have their important business interrupted by frequent questions about aliens and when we might expect the larger invasion for the populace would hate to miss their favorite program on the television should it be occurring that day.”

“I told you watching Men in Black would come in handy.”

“As is typical, your wisdom has proven a valuable asset to both my life and my work. I shall, then, make all arrangements and see this set in motion. Shall I leave it to you to notify Mrs. Hudson?”

“I’m on that! Oh, thank you, love. She and I will feel so much better knowing you’ve got people on this and she’ll be very relieved with a security system, I have no doubt. I don’t suppose…”

“Yes?”

“Could we pop in sometime and visit? I know it’s not a short drive, but…”

“I would be most amenable to a day or two under Mrs. Hudson’s roof.”

“Tomorrow?”

Mycroft laughed loudly at the sheer willingness of his specter to snatch opportunities that were not even, yet, on offer.

“Unfortunately, no. However, I can see my schedule adjusted so that a brief visit is possible in, say, a week. I will not guarantee it can happen, but I shall do my utmost to make that possible.”

“That would be great! I know you can’t say for certain, since the world could go loony at any moment and need to you calm it down, but I’d appreciate you trying. I’ll check with Mrs. Hudson about guests, but this isn’t the busy season, so I suspect she’ll have a free room. I think she’d be glad to see friendly faces, especially after today.”
“Undoubtedly. Would you like to make your inquiry now?”

The bright grin and dash though a solid wall made Mycroft shake his head and breathe deeply of the contentment he felt that surrounded him like a soft, warm cloud. Such a… domestic thing they had done. So familial and devoted… and so utterly, utterly natural…

“Oh! I had a great idea! What do you think about asking Sherlock and John to join us? They could stand a nice day or two in the country and Mrs. Hudson would adore them. I’ll ask John about it tomorrow.”

So utterly, utterly horrifying… it was a sad thing to know his dear Gregory was deteriorating mentally, but he would remain a kind and supportive partner, nonetheless. Could he sell a story of a household internet issue for the next year or two that blocked contact with selected phone numbers and email addresses in the London area? Likely not, but it certainly might be worth the effort to try…

“Poor Martha! I’m already on this, sir, don’t worry. I’ll personally see this is taken care of properly. She’ll be as safe as your wallet in Sherlock’s pocket once I’m finished, I promise you that.”

The Ghost-PA communication channel began its broadcasting day early, it seemed, however, one could not disparage the efficiency of the system. No doubt dear Gregory spun a far more impassioned story than would have his rather dreary mind and engaged his PA fully on an emotional level. Which was not the approach he would have considered, but the outcome was commendable as Sherlock held onto his pilfered wallet as if was the last key to the gateways of science.

“Excellent. And, while you tend to that, I am hoping to…”

“I’m already working on clearing your schedule for your holiday.”

Of course she was.

“Then I shall leave the task in your capable hands. Fortunately, for this occasion, I shall not have to rely on antiquated technology to keep open fertile lines of communication, should the need arise.”

“You loved it.”

“I assure you that I did not.”

“You pretended that you were a spy reporting on the details of the secret Nazi plans you’d stolen.”

“Piffle.”

“Don’t piffle me! You were talking to me when you did it!”

“I have no memory of anything of the sort.”

That I shall admit to, though we both remember the event with perfect clarity. Mental note would be made, however, not to, in the future, contact a certain PA when more than three brandies had been consumed in a single sitting and technology that still contained molecules of air from Marconi’s lungs was within reach.
“Sad. But, I expect that of you, so we’re status quo. In any case, I’ve already phoned Martha and told her to expect a visit by a few of ours to assess her inn and plan the most effective security system for the layout. She’s thrilled and I may or may not have mentioned a few of your favorite dishes so she can show her appreciation in a way that won’t make you uncomfortable.”

Now and then, Anthea reminded him why he’d chosen her for this position. Or rather, why he’d agreed when she chose him for an employer, which was closer to the truth.

“Good. Now, on to our Scandinavian issue.”

“Should I have chocolate at the ready?”

“At this point, I would say no, for I anticipate a relatively cordial morning, however…”

“Yes, sir?”

“Have a box in my upper right-hand desk drawer, just in case.”

Once could never fully predict the agents of chaos that bedeviled the world, but a fine chocolate was a formidable weapon against their villainy…

“__________

“A trip to the country? Sherlock would have a tantrum that would shatter the windows of our flat.”

“Which means you’ll be coming.”

“Of course. At much as the prat moans and groans at the thought of grass, trees and sheep, he talks just as much about how rural types are the most murderous and have the darkest secrets.”

Greg grinned and felt his enthusiasm grow for the upcoming trip. As strange as it seemed, he was eager to show his Mycroft the area around the inn, including what remained of the places from where had called home centuries ago. He knew a few things that might interest Sherlock, too, like the tree where they once hung highwaymen, so that should keep the tantrums to a minimum.

“We’re only hoping for a day or two, John, so not too much time to catch the filthy murderers, but one never knows.”

“Regardless, I’m happy for it, no matter how long it lasts. A little fresh air, Dimmock not texting with a case to disturb a fine afternoon… I love the adventure, I really do, but it’s been a bit thick lately and I could do with a break.”

“Then you’ll have a great time, since there’s not much adventure to be found among our lovely grass, trees and sheep. That is, as long as the sheep decide to behave themselves. Some get a touch combative if they don’t like the look of you and I had to rescue more than a one of the local squire’s guests from the tops of walls and fences because the sheep took a dim view of their contempt for the citizens of our good village.”

“The citizens of your good village trained their fucking sheep to chase the gentry, didn’t they?”

“You didn’t hear that from me.”

“Got it. Let me know when you’ve got the dates set?”

“Absolutely. Now, if you don’t mind, I have to get back to my long day of lounging about and
watching films.”

“Take it easy on yourself, Greg. That sort of pace shaves years off your life.”

“Sorry, John. Live fast, die young and leave a beautiful corpse is my new motto.”

“What was the old one?”

“Don’t wear tight shoes.”

“Not as pithy.”

“No, but tight shoes were far more worrying in my day than beautiful corpses.”

“I can see how that would be the case.”

“I am formally voicing my disapproval for everything and anyone associated with this forced eviction from London.”

“Thank you, brother. Your pouting is duly noted.”

“I am not pouting!”

“Then what term do you prefer?”

“I am not a thesaurus.”

“A touch wordy, but if that is the equivalent you support, then thus shall it be. Your ‘I am not a thesaurus’ is duly noted.”

“John! Mycroft is being insufferable.”

“Well, we are traveling a bit fast, Sherlock, but if you want to leave the car and your brother’s insufferableness, do feel free.”

“Your traitorous behavior will not be forgotten, John Hamish Watson.”

“I’ll add that to the list, along with my making you finish your toast this morning and compliment Mrs. Turner’s new dress.”

“It was purple with yellow flowers!”

“That’s why I told you to say it was delightfully colorful.”

“A clown would have found it garish.”

“And that scarlet shirt you bought last week was demur?”

“You said it made me look dashing.”

“Because you reminded me of a pirate king, not because it was the epitome of understated elegance.”

“Mycroft! John is being insufferable.”
Cutting eyes over to the ghost who was merrily enjoying the free entertainment, Mycroft settled into the second half of the trip and smiled gently with anticipation. Sherlock was behaving normally, the weather was surprisingly benign and his Gregory was at his side. Really, what more was necessary in this life to make it joyful?

“Oops… Mycroft, was that your wallet Sherlock just hurled out of the window?”

Alright, perhaps a few additional things were necessary to make life joyful. Something along the lines of shackles, a muzzle and a tranquilizer dart…

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“Oh, look at you, Mr. Holmes. Much tidier than the first time you stepped across my threshold.”

And much warmer and drier, too, thankfully. If he never again felt that degree of sodden clamminess, he would consider himself the most blessed man in history.

“That I am, Mrs. Hudson. And may I present my brother, Sherlock, and his partner, Dr. John Watson? All equally as tidy as myself, so your floors shall remain pristine.”

“I’m so pleased to meet the both of you. I’ve heard so many stories, I feel I know you already!”

“Whatever exaggerations and misrepresentations that accursed ghost has relayed, I state for the record that he is an idiot.”

“Shut it, Lestrade.”

Mycroft offered an arm to their hostess and escorted her towards her registration book to officially begin their stay. From her beaming smile, he suspected Mrs. Hudson was looking forward to this as gleefully as was his Gregory. And, was that something gingery he smelled in the air? A morsel of fresh ginger cake was the perfect way to celebrate the end of their long journey, especially with a suitable cup of tea to accompany it. Well, he certainly could expect a suitable cup of tea, now couldn’t he? Perhaps he should establish a fixed schedule of paying a visit to this small bastion of comfort… even knowing such a thing awaited would make many a soul-shredding meeting far more endurable.

“I am not a stoat!”

Though, next time, it might be best to leave stoats and Sherlock behind in London…

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“Are you certain, my dear?”

Though, at this moment, his Gregory could ask anything and Mycroft would agree wholeheartedly. Such was the overwhelming power of a perfectly-roasted herbed chicken and potatoes, combined with the lure of a soothing glass of excellent brandy and bracing novel had lulled his mind into the most docile state of complacency. And, that Doctor Watson had dragged away his brother to enjoy an hour or two at the village pub where, Mrs. Hudson had assured him, the lager was excellent and the local population was terrible at darts, though they wagered as if they were champions, made the evening perfect for true relaxation.

“I am. I’d like the chance to talk to Mrs. Hudson more easily that I can now. Reassure her that
I’m happy with the choices I made and talk about the robbery and how she’s doing after that fright. That sort of thing is always better done face to face, don’t you think?”

Yes, but I do so hate to lose you, my dear, even for a few hours of time…

“Personal conversations of that nature benefit greatly from, as you say, face-to-face interactions and I certainly endorse that approach here. I admit I was a touch trepidatious bringing your portrait with us, but… it will be good for you to have this opportunity. I, however, shall pounce upon my opportunity to return to my cozy den and descend into the bliss of a good book.”

“Perfect. Don’t wait for me, though. I suspect Mrs. Hudson and I will be chatting until the wee hours.”

Mycroft nodded, then removed the portrait from its protective case, specially designed to keep it safe for travel and repel any attempts at alien abduction or wild dog savaging and carried it down the stairs to its new owner, who was merrily doing the post-dinner washing up. After a few solemn words, which made Mrs. Hudson giggle, ownership was transferred and Mycroft sighed as his ghost vanished from his sight, though the innkeeper’s happy gasp of excitement more than made up for the temporary sense of loss. Now, it was time to begin his quiet evening and his Gregory to begin his livelier one…

Bye love

“Goodbye, my dear. Enjoy your chat.”

Mrs. Hudson politely waited until Mycroft left the kitchen before letting her lips curl into a sly smile and nodded knowingly at Greg.

“He’s got a surprise coming, doesn’t he?”

“You’d think with that enormous brain of his, he’d be leagues ahead of me with his thinking, but this time I’m actually out in front.”

“Because you’re randy and always have been, you naughty thing.”

“True, but now I can actually be naughty and randy and sexy and all the marvelous things that come with being in… adoration.”

“Pitiful man you are. Can’t even say the word.”

“I can, too. Watch… the word.”

“Pitiful! Just start to say ‘dove’ but stick an ‘l’ in the front, instead.”

“How about ligeon, instead?”

“No.”

“Uh…. larrot?”

“Wrong.”

“Would you be happy with leacock?”

“I would not.”
“Can I tempt you, madam with a fine lanyard to sing you sweet songs as you scrub plates?”

“I’m beginning to see why that witch had you murdered.”

“She didn’t laugh at my jokes either.”

“Well, it’s good she didn’t, or you might have fallen in love with her, then where would you be?”

“Dead, by now.”

“Exactly! And never knowing what a lucky man you are to have found your true special someone. He’s mad about you, lad, even I can see that. I’m so happy for you, Greg. Just so very, very happy.”

Years together had given Mrs. Hudson the exact move to ‘hug’ her ghost, yet not have her arms pass through him in an embarrassing way and she made full use of that critical knowledge to give Greg a long, motherly squeeze.

“Thanks, Mrs. Hudson. It’s… it’s strange, actually. I never thought I’d see much beyond these walls and now… I’ve got someone who makes me not care if I ever could or not. If it was just me and Mycroft puttering about this inn for eternity, I’d be happy since we’d be puttering about together.”

“Oh yes, you’re head-over-heels in love and I’m just glad I lived to see it. And in London! With friends and a way to reach out into the world… well, you tell me all about it while I finish up here. Your Mycroft isn’t the early-to-bed sort, so we have plenty of time to share stories before the real fun begins.”

No, his Mycroft wasn’t the early-to-bed sort, but that was alright. Once he did take to bed, it’d be the nicest sleep he’d ever enjoyed. Greg Lestrade was here to make certain that was the case…

“Right you are. And no being a peeper, either, once that fun starts.”

“Why would I waste my time when there’d be nothing for me to see? Maybe a bit of moaning and groaning and Mr. Holmes rolling about rubbing himself against the mattress… oh dear.”

“You need to stay away from the internet.”

“Or spend longer on it.”

“Yeah, maybe you have point.”

“I made certain to put the other two in the Green room, just in case.”

“That’s the one with the especially thick walls… smart.”

“Details in the morning?”

“I don’t kiss and tell!”

“The tell about the other things besides the kissing.”

“Are you making Mycroft the scones he was raving about for breakfast?”

“I am.”
“Then… telling might happen.”

“Such a good boy you are. But, not too good or your Mycroft won’t have the sorts of dreams to make all those details fun to share.”

Greg knew that if Mycroft could hear the evil laughter coming from the kitchen, he might worry that a pair of supervillains had invaded the inn, but his partner would remain happily unaware, for now, of the fiendish plan that had been concocted before they even left London. However, since Mycroft would have supported that plan with unbridled enthusiasm, perhaps the cackling would have been performed by a trio and not the duo currently on stage. That gorgeous man had a sexy voice, too, so the cackling would have been especially pleasing to the ear, which would marry well with the especially pleasing things that were soon to come, once his Mycroft was fast asleep…
Inexpressibly comfortable… truly there was no vector by which the comfort of his evening cold be properly expressed. The warmth of the library, with an Agatha Christie novel and Mrs. Hudson’s quality spirits for company, John removing Sherlock within five minutes of his brother invading his cozy sanctum and dragging him to a place where not even Sherlock’s mandrake-like shrieking was audible, his Gregory raptly listening to Mrs. Hudson’s bits of gossip as he made a small visit to the kitchen to bid his dear ghost goodnight, that particular sensation which a hot shower bestowed that simultaneously enlivened and calmed and, finally, this soft bed with softer duvet cradling him like a babe in arms. Really, if he could reproduce the experience and offer it to the masses, he could enrich his personal coffers to an unlimited degree. However, that would mean the delight was not only his to enjoy and that was a horrifying thought. Nobody else was deserving of such a paradise… true, that was somewhat an arrogant thought, but since no other soul would ever know of it, the paradise remained fully his own to relish…

And paradise was unending! The pastoral expanse of green fields and distant sound of a babbling brook… the familiar line of trees that framed the scene exactly as it had when before he slept in this bed. The air was clean, lightly scented with grasses and wildflowers, and the songs of the birds clearly rose above the quiet of the scenery, as you simply did not hear in London. Never a thing his soul felt it needed but… how could one know one’s needs if one was never exposed to both the presence and absence of those needs? All his life had known their absence, but now, to his great joy, he was reveling in their presence…

“There’s the most gorgeous man in the world.”

“Gregory!”

Looking simply breathtaking in a loose white shirt, with brown trousers and boots. Much as I would expect you to wear when you were alive and walking these fields.

“What a delicious dream I am awarding myself tonight. Though… oh.”

“Something coming to mind, Mr. Holmes?”

Yes, and more so from the smile you are sporting, my dear…

“I… Gregory, are you…”

“Am I what?”

“I shall feel unutterably foolish asking this if the answer is the former, however, are you still conversing with Mrs. Hudson or are you actually visiting me in this lovely place?”

“I’m here. Exactly as here as when I held you in my arms and we danced as if nothing else in the world mattered. In fact, why don’t you step over and let me remind you what being held by these old arms feels like.”

The thrill of the offer sent a pleasurable frisson through Mycroft’s frame and he quickly obliged the man who was holding out those old arms to accept the body stepping into their embrace.

“There… that’s the Mycroft I remember.”
Not that Mycroft heard each word of Greg’s statement, because his mind went offline for a moment, overwhelmed by the sensation of a solid man pressing against him and holding him close.

“Oh, Gregory… I thought I would never again know the feel of you.”

“I suppose, to be honest, you still don’t, but I can’t say it matters much. My beautiful Mycroft…”

Running his hands along Mycroft’s back, Greg smiled widely at the soft purr he heard in his ear as Mycroft nestled deeper into his arms.

“You… you are real, my dear. Here and now, you are real to all of my senses.”

Which Mycroft proved by taking a long sniff of Greg’s neck to breathe in and memorize his scent, lay a kiss on that skin to learn the taste, then move back slightly to fill his eyes with the sight of the person who enchanted him as skillfully as any practitioner of the darkest magic. And, of course, one more thing…

“I have wanted to do this, though I realize it is tragically silly.”

Reaching up, Mycroft ran his hands through Greg’s hair, savoring the texture of the silvery locks between his fingers.

“Not silly at all! Touch whatever and wherever you like. That’s what I plan to do…”

The unrepentantly wicked grin on his ghost’s face sparked a rush of energy straight to Mycroft’s nether region that made the trajectory of tonight’s visit exceedingly clear. And one that had Mycroft’s unconditional approval.

“I see. Then, shall we seal our bargain with the traditional gesture?”

Leaning in, Mycroft gently kissed Greg’s lips, then let the kiss deepen to a level of passion that had both men moaning softly in pleasure.

“When we danced, love, I wanted so desperately to do this. Kiss you as I held you, swaying gently to the music and feeling your body against mine.”

“Yet you did not.”

“Wasn’t proper, especially since you genuinely thought it purely a dream and that wasn’t exactly true. I couldn’t show you that disrespect, I simply couldn’t, no matter how greatly I already knew I wanted you.”

His Gregory… all his life Mycroft had secretly hoped for a man like this. One whose integrity and character were equally matched by his physical appeal and intellectual interest. Needless to say, he was convinced the he would never, in all his days, find such a man… yet here he was. In the most unimaginable situation possible, perhaps, but that did not diminish his bliss at having, this one single time, a personal wish fulfilled by whatever forces shaped this bleak, accursed universe.

“And I adore you for your sense of honor. And for so many other things, as well.”

There was a peculiar electricity that sparked in that precise instant when you locked eyes with the person who owned your heart and everything in your world suddenly became as clear and crisp as a bright spring morning and your way forward lay straight and true into that brightness. Now, Mycroft knew was the time to start on that path and never, once, look back.
“I love you, Gregory. I know it is, perhaps, rash to say so, both for the brevity of our relationship and its unique complexities, however, I have known and never denied that I do love you and desire, in all ways, to see that love grow and be celebrated for all my days.”

Startled as much by the earnestness of his words, as the rise of emotion that propelled him to speak them, Mycroft almost missed the tiny hint of moisture in his ghost’s eyes, something Greg could never achieve outside this dream world, but not even his emotional obliviousness could mistake those little diamonds, each of which was certain to be turned to vapor by the heat of the kiss his ghost quickly laid on his lips.

“Mycrof… how can you… how can you be… you’re the man who… here, come with me.”

Mycrof’s eyes widened as Greg grabbed his hand and began walking, then running, not saying a word during the few minutes it took to reach the bridge Mycroft remembered well from his previous visit.

“Ok… I always said to myself, even though it was really a joke, because I never thought it would happen, that when the time came, I’d bring the person here and tell them that, though, as I said, I never thought it would happen, but… I loved them. Heart, body and mind, I loved them fiercely. Here, in my favorite spot in all of England, I would say that they were the person I wanted to spend my years with. To know the future with. I have no idea how we’ll do it, Mycroft, but I love you, with everything in me and I am committed to keeping that love alive in any way possible.”

Realizing he sounded like a lovesick idiot, Greg decided there was better use of his mouth to be made than blabbing incoherently and leveraged what influence he had in Mycroft’s mind to change the surroundings to something more amenable to his intentions and hoped beyond hope that his Mycroft approved.

“Gregory… I have no idea what to say besides… all of that echoes my own thoughts and feelings.”

“Then, maybe it’s time not to say anything, for either of us.”

Smiling shyly, Greg looked around, knowing Mycroft’s eyes would follow and laughed happily at Mycroft’s excited gasp.

“Gregory Lestrade… our bedroom is certainly not this opulent!”

“Just a few additional flourishes to make it as kingly as the man I want to lay down on that bed and love until your mind can’t stay asleep another second.”

Mycrof knew that even without the flourishes, large candelabras filling the room with a warm, rich light that reflected off the additional heavy mirrors that made the room seem as large as one belonging to a king, he would be happier in this moment than ever he had been before.

“Then, let us begin, shall we?”

Since neither man knew precisely how to do that with the grace and gravitas the moment deserved, neither felt silly simply leaping onto the enormous mattress and taking the other in a kiss that was only interrupted by the flurry and fumbling necessary to throw all caution to the wind and clothing on the floor.

“Perfect… your body is incredible, love. Gorgeous to look at and even nicer to touch.”

Touching which was making Mycroft shiver, though not with the cold as his Gregory’s body was
fiery hot with a warmth that seeped in far past his skin and into his very core.

“As is yours… I have never held an ideal for what is the exemplar of male beauty, but I believe, most seriously, that I have found it.”

“Flatterer. And untrue, since you, sir, are magnificent. Majestic. Mind-boggling. And any other m-words I can think of. I can’t honestly believe how much you arouse me, love. Every nerve on fire…”

With those nerves all intersecting at a certain point that hadn’t seen any activity in centuries and was very eager to make up for lost time. Not that he could ever remember being this hard or this needy, but he’d never found the love of his life before, either… a love who was running kisses over his chest while slowly rubbing an impressive erection along his thigh.

“Hmmmm… that feels amazing…”

“Whatever pleasure you desire, my dear, you shall have. Whatever desire you harbor, I long to satisfy.”

“That’s good since…”

“Yes?”

“I… besides what I’ve seen on the Internet, no matter how filthy my mouth can be, I really don’t have much of an idea about how to physically love a man. You’ll show me?”

Greg was sure he saw a demonic flare spark in Mycroft’s eyes as the face of the man he loved slowly morphed into the wickedest, most seductive expression the ghost had ever seen.

“It would be my honor. And your extreme pleasure…”

As Mycroft’s fingers steadily pushed him back on the bed, Greg wondered if a 300+ year-old ghost could ever claim to be young and innocent, because that’s exactly how he felt at the moment. But, in the next moment, he was feeling an ecstasy that curled his toes, as Mycroft’s lips and tongue traced a languid, meandering path downwards to greet the head of his cock and give it a light, tender suck.

“Yes…”

As the sucking grew deeper and more forceful, Greg found himself gripping the bedsheets to keep his hands, instead, from gripping Mycroft’s hair, and moaned loudly when a long tongue began stroking his hard shaft with an agonizing slowness.

“That’s… oh god…”

Mycroft kept his pace slow and let his fingers trail softly over Greg’s thighs and across the tightening flesh between them until he’d reached a point where a break seemed in order, and he gave Greg’s cock a tiny kiss as he pulled his lips away.

“Nooooooooo…”

“Now, now, Gregory… however shall you have a chance to demonstrate what you have learned if you are too spent to concentrate on your performance?”

After one prolonged kiss while his lover drew his senses together, Mycroft rolled onto his back and ran a hand along his own erection to urge his ghost to take a taste, something Greg rushed to begin
after only a moment’s hesitation. And that hesitation was something quickly forgotten as he wrapped his lips around Mycroft’s rigid cock and began copying his partner’s actions, listening to Mycroft’s sounds and reading his responses as signals to do more of this or be a little slower with that until a hand gently grasped his hair and encouraged him to slow, then cease his lovemaking, which, apparently, was good enough already to have his lover breathing hard, flushed of face and near to orgasm.

“You are far too talented, my dear.”

“I have an incomparable teacher.”

“Oh, I see… and does my incomparable student desire another small lesson?”

“Do you really need to ask?”

Mycroft’s sly smile was all the answer Greg needed and he made to lay back down before Mycroft laid a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Oh no, that is not how I want you.”

Greg’s curiosity was neither eased by Mycroft sliding out from under him nor from his Holmes lightly tapping his flank with his fingers, one hand on each side, but the ghost obeyed until he was on all fours and being getting a few more taps, this time on his arse, to scoot him further towards the head of the bed.

“There. Such an exquisite thing you are to behold, my dear. You deserve a most appropriate reward for pleasuring my eyes as well as my body…”

With another lust-inspiring grin at the man who was watching him with eyes near to black from need, Mycroft moved slightly behind Greg and began kissing the small of his back and running a hand up the inside of Greg’s thigh to gently cup and stroke his scrotum, which hung heavy and full and tightened noticeably at his touch. More kisses followed, over the firmness of Greg’s sculpted arse and down his thigh, until Mycroft moved those kisses slowly in a certain direction that required the help of a hand to spread Greg’s arse cheeks so those kisses could find their target.

“Mycroft!”

“Yes, beloved?”

“D… do that again?”

“That and more… simply relax, Gregory. Relax and feel…”

Returning to his indulgence, Mycroft let his tongue reach out and teasingly flick Greg’s arsehole, which tensed at the contact, though it was exactly the form of tensing, the sort married with a low, desperate moan, that made Mycroft flick his tongue again, this time with a touch more pressure and a few additional up and down motions that because long licks which drew a catlike mewing from Greg and a human-style raising of his tail to beg for more.

“Oh, you are a treasure, my Gregory. Rump raised as high as you can to gain more attention. Let us see how much attention you can bear. Will you permit me my entertainment, my dear?”

“Y…yes. Anything… anything you want.”

“Excellent. Then, I shall continue… and I do hope to amuse myself for no small measure of
Assured he had his lover’s consent to go forward, Mycroft returned his tongue to his prize and lavished it with a dizzying mix of slow, swirling licks and rapid, birdlike flicks, using every bit of creativity his tongue could muster until Greg was trembling and panting harshly to keep himself under control. His control nearly broke, though, when Mycroft returned a hand to Greg’s swollen, bobbing cock and began to stroke it in harmony with the maddening actions of his tongue that had Greg gritting his teeth to hold back his release because it seemed Mycroft’s fingers knew exactly how he liked to be touched, what set his body on fire and were both expert at the task and relentless about keeping the pleasure just at the edge of the cliff but never giving him the final push to begin flying. Finally, no amount of resolve or willpower could forestall the inevitable…

“Oh god… I can’t… I can’t last, love. I just can’t… it’s too good…”

Mycroft paused a moment and only to utter five words… *come for me, my dear…* before returning his tongue to its work while Greg shouted loudly and let his body release its passion in hard, forceful spurts, that Mycroft milked until there was nothing more to give beyond his lover’s quiet gasping and shuddery tremors that took an age to still. Remembering that they were not precisely ‘real’ at this point, Mycroft let another grin stretch across his lips and moved to cover Greg’s recovering body with his own and turned his lover’s head to take a deep, slow kiss from his lips.

“You are indescribable, Gregory.”

“M… me? I’ve… I’ve never felt anything like that. Never come that hard…”

“And it is only the beginning. So many more things I shall show you when next we have the opportunity to be together.”

That thought made Greg’s mental hands rub together in glee and the sensation of his partner’s erection pressed against him made that glee all the livelier.

“I like the sound of that. Your turn now?”

“Most certainly.”

“Anything… anything you prefer?”

There was no earthly way Mycroft could love the man in his embrace any more than he did now, but Greg’s slightly uncertain voice came near to proving him a liar. What a jewel he had found. One he would never let slip through his fingers.

“Turn around.”

Releasing his ghost after a soft kiss on the back of his neck, Mycroft waited while Greg repositioned, then knelt on the bed in front of him so his cock hung at the perfect height for Greg to take into his mouth which, after a small nudge to give him the idea, Greg began with some tentativeness, then growing confidence, hearing the quiet sighs and moans Mycroft made from his efforts.

“Yes… use your tongue, my dear. Very good… oh yes, very, very good, Gregory. Now, do… do not be startled by what I shall do and draw away if this becomes uncomfortable…”

Pressing on Greg’s shoulders for leverage, Mycroft began to thrust shallowly and laughed a breathy laugh as Greg instinctively leaned forward into each thrust to take Mycroft’s cock deeper into his mouth, lavishing it with attention from his tongue and letting his lover set the pace until Mycroft’s body began to shudder, then jerk sharply as he came, mindful to push back with his arms so he didn’t
press too deeply into Greg’s mouth while his seed spilled freely down his ghost’s throat.

Taking only a brief moment to catch his breath, Mycroft drew Greg upwards to share a kiss that held little of their former sexual heat, but burned, instead, with a depth of affection that made each man mourn the moment they had to draw away from each other to show pity on their burdened knees. This time, Mycroft drew Greg down towards the bed and the two fell naturally into an embrace with Greg’s body wrapped lightly around Mycroft’s, while his head rested on Mycroft’s shoulder, which allowed ample opportunity for Mycroft to run a hand leisurely up and down Greg’s broad back.

“I love you, Mycroft. I don’t ever think I’ll grow tired of saying that, either.”

“Neither shall I, Gregory, and I rejoice from that certainty.”

“Think we can make this a regular thing? Not often, I know you can’t set aside work very easily, but every few months find a night to come here so I can show you how powerfully I want you and give you… do for you… everything possible to make you happy?”

“Oh, I believe that can be arranged. As you say, not as often as either of us would like, but I do not see this being a singular experience. I… I would be greatly discontent if that were the case, and for the reason that I also desire the chance to demonstrate how utterly enraptured I am by you and return to you something, even if only a small fraction, of the joy and satisfaction you graciously bestow unto me each and every day.”

“You’re a romantic, Mycroft Holmes.”

“Like beckons like, Gregory Lestrade.”

“That’s true. Think you can sleep awhile? Yes, I know how ridiculous that sounds, given the circumstances, but I’d like to sleep with you, if it’s possible. Something else we can only do here, but I’d love to lie her next to you and hold you while you sleep.”

Turning his head and bending slightly, Mycroft gave his ghost a final, lingering kiss and breathed a sigh of perfect contentment.

“I find that an exceptional suggestion. I know I shall no longer be able to see you, but I do hope you will be here to greet me when I wake.”

“I’ll be here. Never worry about that.”

Nestling closer to the man he loved, Greg settled in to guard the remainder of his Mycroft’s dreams which, from the heavy look of those gorgeous blue eyes, wouldn’t be long in arriving. It was his privilege to keep this man safe and he was proud to be the one Mycroft had chosen for that privilege. Yes, he’d be here when Mycroft woke and every day going forward. There was no place in the world he’d rather be…

When Mycroft opened his eyes, he knew he would see a very different scene from when he had closed them, but it still brought a pang of regret to his heart and he took a moment to stretch away that pang before speaking.

“Good morning, my dear.”

*Good morning gorgeous*
“You are too kind, for I know how… disheveled I must appear at the moment.”

Nope

“Balderdash, though I find myself enjoying the balderdash so do feel free to continue. And, Gregory… thank you for last night. It is something I shall always cherish, though we shall repeat it many, many times in the future.”

You’re welcome  Love you

Mycroft felt a glow erupt from deep within him and he laid in bed a further moment simply to savor the sensation.

“And I love you. Do prepare, however, for a volcanic eruption should Sherlock hear either of us utter those words.”

Worth it

“I agree, though the lava flow does do a mischief on my trousers.”

I’ll buy more

“Problem solved! Now, let me… oh… dear me…”

Greg did not like the sound of pain in his lover’s voice and moved closer to try and help, knowing he could actually do absolutely nothing about it.

What’s wrong

“Just a twinge, my dear. I must have moved oddly in the night. Nothing to worry about.”

Not at all satisfied with the answer, because his Mycroft should never wake with anything on his lips but a smile, Greg peered closely as his partner sat up in the bed and frowned deeply at what he saw.

Mark

“No, it is Mycroft. Have you suffered a memory impairment?”

Funny

“I do try.”

Mark on shoulder

Now it was Mycroft frowning and he rose to stand in front of the mirror on the small dresser, turning so he could see his shoulder in the glass.

“Oh, you are correct. An insect bite, perhaps?”

No

“No? Let me…”

Leaning in closer, Mycroft examined the mark more closely and found himself unsure about what he was seeing. A reddened, slightly embossed-appearing mark was in line with an insect bite or sting, but this was not a single dot or blob as they tended to be. It had a more elaborate shape, almost as if
someone had inscribed a small symbol on his shoulder while he slept. However, since he was in no manner an expert on insects and the aftermath of their villainy, he had no better explanation for it. In any case, at this point, the discomfort had faded away.

“Yes, I see. The sting has vanished, however, so I suspect my entomological encounter shall not be of any further importance. Now, shall you join me in the shower?”

Still not happy about his Mycroft’s morning bliss being marred by any form of discomfort, Greg vowed to inspect the room before they went to bed tonight and make certain that no pesky spiders or whatnot lurked in wait for another bite of tender, creamy flesh. That was his flesh and his alone, damnable creatures, and he’d make certain they understood that or they’d be shown the door.

Oh yes

“Excellent. A hot shower with a glorious man, a delectable breakfast and then… whatever our hearts desire.”

Nap and sex

“Gregory… you are a libidinous creature.”

Guilty

“And I shall provide a proper scolding in due time.”

After lunch

Was love supposed to be this… buoyant? As greatly as he lusted for his ghost’s body, he craved his humor and companionship, regardless of how simply spent was the time they shared.

“We shall see. I am certain Sherlock and John will have some input in our agenda.”

Boo

“Oh dear, I am being visited by another ghost. Speak to me, spirit, and impart your message from beyond the grave.”

Arse

“Is pert and enticing, if I may be so boastful.”

Mycroft felt a familiar tingle on his cheek and imagined that his Gregory had bestowed an exasperated kiss to reward his attempt at a jest.

Shower now you imp

“Oh, very well. Perhaps we can enjoy one tonight, as well, once I have taken my rest.”

Naptime

Rolling his eyes and laughing, Mycroft began to strip off his pyjamas and marveled that even unable to see or hear more than a few words from his Gregory, he was… happy. Happy, in love, and ready to embrace those feelings fully and completely. And, how fortunate that Anthea was already aware of his little secret, for that would make small holidays a far easier thing to schedule. Of course, she would be incessant in her demands for details, but… it was a small price to pay. Besides, if he didn’t have the chance to boast, now and again, about this wonderful man, he’d be a terribly frustrated
employer and that never bode well for either of them in the long run…
Chapter 29

“You’re awake early, Mr. Holmes. Thought you might have a bit of a lie in, all things considered.”

Mycroft narrowed his eyes at the grinning innkeeper as she set down a strong cup of tea next to him on the table, having been alerted to his imminent arrival by one exceedingly-helpful ghost.

“Yes, the quality of your beds is exceptional.”

“Oh yes, the beds. Beds do make for lovely nights, that’s true. What’s in them plays its own part, too.”

Mycroft’s rolled eyes made Mrs. Hudson giggle and give him a small pat on the cheek, which was a hard compromise, because she wanted, really, to give the man a massive hug and congratulate him for getting something few people in history could ever boast - a long, naughty night with a handsome ghost who thought the sun rose and set on his non-dead lover.

“Yes, I do also pass along my compliments on your choice of bed linens.”

“Very kind of you. I’ll have fresh for you tonight so you can have another restful night filled with pleasant dreams.”

“My heart is aflutter.”

“Other things, too, I wager.”

Cheeky woman

“Old ladies are allowed, you horrid ghost. Now, you keep your Mr. Holmes company while I see to his breakfast.”

Winking at Mycroft to put just a touch more pink on his pale cheeks, Mrs. Hudson sashayed out of the dining room and left her breathing guest to sigh and wonder if it would cause too much public outrage if he outlawed nosy elderly women. Deciding the nosy elderly woman public voice was one of the loudest to be found, he shelved the thought. For the present.

“Ugh. You are awake.”

However, outlawing infantile brothers would certainly please more than a few aggrieved elder siblings and, likely, gain him a medal. A large and shiny one, at that.

“Yes, Sherlock. To rise from bed in the morning is a foul habit that I adopted of late.”

John’s quick flick to Sherlock’s ear brought a very satisfying yelp and the good doctor, as an encore, shouldered by the tall detective blocking the door to take a seat at the dining table.

“I have to say, Mycroft… you were right about this inn. I can’t find a bad thing to say about it and neither can Sherlock, though all he’s done is say bad things about it since we arrived. They’re that particular kind of bad thing, though, that’s just hot air he uses to keep everyone reminded of what his breath smells like, rather than supply any relevant opinion or useful information. Nicely done for Mrs. Hudson, I’d say.”

Sherlock’s loud snort as he dropped into his chair shook Mycroft’s teacup and the elder Holmes was
terribly happy not a drop spilled because murdering his brother for waste of exceptional tea was far too much exertion for a body to endure this early in the morning.

“You mock my agony, John, but you cannot deny this is a ghastly gulag of dullwits and syphilitics.”

“Since we’re the only ones here, you prat, that’s a rather self-incriminating statement.”

“I am extending my pronouncement to include that wretched village to which you dragged me last night.”

“How much money did Sherlock lose at darts, Doctor Watson?”

“Twenty quid. But, since he lost it to me, I’m not certain if I’m included in the dull-witted syphilitic demographic or not. I’ll think about it a bit more after I’ve had my… oh, Mrs. Hudson, you are an angel.”

One who was bearing a tray with tea and a large plate of scones to tide her gentlemen over until the rest of the meal was served.

“It’s wonderful to have all of Greg’s friends here to enjoy a bit of a holiday. Well, besides dear Anthea, but I suspect she’s rather happy having all of you away from London, so everyone benefits, all things considered.”

Mycroft was in full agreement with that assessment, but wouldn’t admit it under pain of torturous death. His PA’s whistling and humming as he left his office was positively giddy.

“That harpy would be happiest chasing the vulgar villagers through the fields, clawing at their flesh with her talons, as she made their ears bleed from both the volume and agitated-swine pitch of her interminable shrieking.”

Mrs. Hudson rapped Sherlock’s head with a teaspoon, wiped it on her apron, then set it down in front of him as she put the rest of the tray on the table and began to unload this round of breakfast.

“Silly thing. Doctor Watson, don’t you have a pill or something to manage your Sherlock’s silliness?”

“Not a legal one, necessarily, unless Mycroft wants to loosen the regulations on certain medicinals so they’re cheap and easy to obtain on the open market. Can’t have my medical privileges revoked because I’m trying to write a prescription for tranquilizer-dart filler when that’s typically used for rampaging rhinos and not people.”

“That is both ridiculous and inefficient, John, since I can fabricate any tranquilizer I like with the equipment we have in the flat.”

“Success! My day is already a success without me having to lift one finger. Except, of course, to raise this wonderful tea to my mouth.”

Mycroft watched the exchange and took a large bite of the perfect scone with even more perfect clotted cream that he had prepared for himself while awarding John a basketful of points both for recognizing the quality of the tea and not caring a whit about Sherlock’s typical nonsense.

*Today*

“No, apparition, as not even I cannot prepare the simplest of tranquilizers here with Mrs.
Hudson’s pots, pans and dough whisk.”

**Arse**

“I cannot prepare anything for hemorrhoids either.”

**Today’s plans**

“Are something about which I don’t care since I will certainly not enjoy them.”

John thought about giving the surly Sherlock another rap with a spoon, but that would require reaching over and leave his plate exposed to a theft of the scone he just set on it, since Sherlock was both knowing of how greatly he valued breakfast and a dastardly thief when the mood struck.

“I thought you could give us a tour, Greg. Show us about, tell us what’s different from you were actually putting foot to ground. Mycroft, how about you?”

“Truthfully, John, my mind was moving along similar lines. My previous visit was not, in the least, conducive to taking a step beyond the threshold, let alone taking in a broader view of the environment.”

**Shoes**

“Exactly, my dear.”

“Mycroft has gone insane! Quick, John, sign a testament to that effect so I may be put in charge of his finances.”

“Rather Sherlock, Gregory reminded me before we departed that I might wish to pack shoes appropriate to leisurely rambling, rather than something more suited to… not rambling.”

“Unless he suggested you pack a palanquin and brace of servants to carry it, I cannot imagine you will be able to endure more than three minutes trundling your bulk across grass and dirt.”

The grass and dirt issue had been raised, however, his dear Gregory promised most sincerely to do his utmost to keep their explorations on the… cleaner… side of outdoor promenading.

“Oh, listen to you, Sherlock. Someone’s colon isn’t happy this morning. I should have made a nice pot of porridge for you, dear, instead of all this decidedly non-fibery food. Help get the right things moving and in the right direction, if you catch my meaning.”

Sherlock pouted just as a dissatisfied toddler might and Mrs. Hudson pinched his cheek firmly after setting plates of breakfast in front of her guests.

“But, if you lads are hoping to have a bit of an explore, I’ll pack a lunch for you and I can sneak the fiber in there, instead. Don’t worry about a thing, Sherlock. Your doctor might think a good dose of castor oil is the ticket, but I’ll find a tastier way to get your plumbing back in order.”

Excellent tea, delicious and plentiful meals, plus an innkeeper who was as kind and nimble at handling Sherlock as one could ever hope. John Hamish Watson hereby declared that they’d found their holiday hideaway for those times when he could persuade the great git with the fiber issue to leave London. And, importantly, Sherlock’s lack of explosion said he’d already grown a soft spot for Mrs. Hudson, partially from her readiness to sneak him tiny sweet treats when the two of them didn’t think anyone else was watching. For having only met him yesterday, the innkeeper had already begun building a very laudable portmanteau of Sherlock-related skills and that was a talent to
applaud.

“Greg, you know a pleasant location for an outdoor lunch?”

Yes

John looked over to Mycroft and they reached silent agreement that if an acceptable spot could be found, then a cloth tucked into John’s day pack might make a perfect tablecloth for lunch in the sunshine.

“I’d say a packed lunch would be a blessing, Mrs. Hudson, thank you. And a hearty whole meal loaf, prunes and lots of veg is just the thing to make Sherlock a fit and happy man. I’ll have his portion of whatever cheese, meat and cakes you might feel charitable enough to provide the rest of us.”

Sherlock favored John with his own measure of pout, which quickly turned to a smile after Mrs. Hudson whispered something in his ear that John assumed meant there would be cake aplenty to share when the picnic basket was opened.

“I’ll have just the thing ready when you gentlemen are ready to set out. It’s going to be a good day for it and I suspect the village is going to have itself putting its bosom out for the day visitors, so there’s likely to be something to see there and a few knickknacks to buy. There a bookseller you’d probably like Mr. Holmes. Lots of those leathery old things the collectors enjoy on the upper floor, which he won’t necessarily tell the ordinary people about, but I suspect he’ll know you’ve got the size wallet he likes and will trip himself dragging you up to have a look. And I’ll give Greg back to you for the day, as well, so you two can better enjoy your walk. I’m sure you’ll want to hand him back after dinner though for… brandy and conversation.”

Suffering another of Mrs. Hudson’s winks, Mycroft sighed and consoled himself with the knowledge that his brother had no inkling of how erotically-stimulating brandy and conversation could be with the right person to share the experience. And, now, his commune with nature might be accompanied by book browsing, which was always a joy, especially when leathery old things were involved. Little joys… he had always appreciated them but, now, he recognized more fully how important they were for a person to know true happiness.

Speaking of happiness… Mrs. Hudson remembered exactly how he preferred his bacon. A state-of-the-art security system was a pittance to pay for a treasure such as that…

Yes, the choice of shoes was certainly a prudent one…

“Gregory, are we on safari to Scotland?”

“No, and you know it because we’re not headed in that direction.”

“Point taken. Dover?”

Greg grinned at his lover, who was wearing casual clothes and looking positively radiant under the blue sky and bright yellow sun, and wished he could ruffle Mycroft’s hair and give those luscious lips a much-deserved kiss.

“I promise that if we ever journey to Scotland or Dover, we can take one of your nice cars and spare your delicate feet.”
“Very well, we have achieved an acceptable compromise.”

“Good. And, for your information, there’s our first point of interest.”

Following the ghost’s pointing figure, Mycroft’s eyebrows lifted in curiosity.

“An empty expanse of ground. Are your eyes seeing something that mine do not?”

The knowing grin on Greg’s face was an answer, but not nearly as informative as Mycroft would have preferred, but he had learned, by now, to let his ghost have his fun. Walking the last fifty yards or so, Mycroft came to a halt beside Greg, with Sherlock and John joining them a few moments later.

“John! The ghost has played some form of idiotic prank and I am not happy to be caught in it’s foolish web.”

No pranks

Mycroft led the other members of the living toward where Greg was gleefully pointing and began to wonder if a web was being woven with them as the flies to Greg’s smiling spider.

“My dear… I am still somewhat in the dark. Are you referring to that portion of stone?”

I am

“It’s a nice stone, mate, but I’m not exactly…”

John paused and both he and Mycroft looked at Sherlock who seemed to have a better idea of what was going on than did they, which was certain to make the detective happy, at least. That theory was quickly born out by Sherlock’s dive into investigating mode, walking about and kicking at the dirt now and again with his foot.

“This was your cottage, Lestrade.”

Yes smart lad

Mycroft’s soft gasp preceded him starting his own investigation to see any hint at all of the structure that once stood on the spot.

“Gregory, my dear… your home?”

An unexpected rush of emotion hit Mycroft and the emotion was not exactly a jubilant one.

“You’re standing near where my table would have been! Not a large thing, but a single man doesn’t need anything large, really. Belonged to my uncle, actually, and he left it to my mum when he died. It was a nice little place and I certainly was happy here. Had a little bench outside to sit on and lean against the wall to watch the world go by on a fine summer day…”

Greg wide smile was at odds with Mycroft’s growing sense of melancholy but, he supposed, the ghost had a great deal more time to become accustomed to losing both his physical life and the trappings of that life than did he.

“You had a nice view, Greg, I’ll say that. Probably nicer in your day, too.”

Thanks Nearly the same as before

“Gregory? What… what happened to your house?”
The tone of Mycroft’s voice puzzled the ghost, but he answered honestly, nonetheless.

“A fire. Happened about… maybe 130 years ago? I don’t remember, exactly. The innkeeper at the time told me it had burned and the current owner decided not to rebuild. Can’t blame them, honestly. From what I’d heard, it was a couple and they had a pair of young children. Probably too small for them, in any case.”

“I see.”

Greg cut eyes towards his new lover and marked the lack of light shining in Mycroft’s eyes.

“I don’t miss it, love. If that’s what you’re worried about.”

“What? Oh, do pardon me… I simply… only now am I realizing that what existed of your life no longer exists, in any fashion, and that… it saddens me, I suppose.”

Wishing this was a dream and he could give Mycroft the hug he needed, Greg resigned himself to standing close and smiling as comfortably as he could.

“I understand that. Once in awhile it hits me, too. I’ll be watching a program on the telly and they’ll talk about something from my time and it’s so… I can tell they don’t have any feel for it. They didn’t live then and can’t truly know what it was like. What people felt or believed. What frightened them or what they cared about. Makes me realize that all of that is gone. Gone and can’t return no matter what anyone does or tries.”

His words weren’t having the effect on his partner Greg had hoped, but he couldn’t deny that he understood that, too. He’d feel the same if their places were reversed and feel it sharply.

“But, that’s what memory is for, right? Things and people might not be there anymore, but your memory of them remains. And memories are things you can share so those things and people do continue on, in some ways. Maybe not exactly as before, since memory isn’t always to be fully trusted and letters and the like don’t always paint a vivid picture, but it’s something and something is certainly more than nothing.”

Huffing a slow puff of breath, Mycroft nodded and acknowledged that there was truth to Greg’s words. Given that, he would make it a point to encourage his ghost to speak as much and as often as he wished about his life and times, if only to keep that world alive within the walls of their home.

“I tell you what, love… you’ve shown me you can draw, but I’d love to see a lot more of it, since you really do have strong talent and it’s amazing to watch you render an object or scene as beautifully as you do. How about we work together on a realistic drawing of my house. I’ll tell you what it looked like and what it was made of and we can find some similar photos online of cottages from my time that are still standing… I wager that, between the two of us, we could bring my memory back to life, at least on paper. How does that sound?”

Surprisingly helpful, dear Gregory. As always, I can trust you to lift my spirits when they begin to sag…

“Like a truly stellar idea. I would be delighted to do such a thing.”

“Great! I’ll start looking for reference photos and sketch out the basics and floorplan. When you have a free evening, we can make a start on the actual drawing. This is going to be fun, love… and, if it goes well, we can work on a few other scenes from my life, too.”

With a ray of light beginning to peek through his malaise, Mycroft felt a smile start to move across
his lips and nodded at Greg who was beaming brightly at the thought of quiet nights working on a common project.

“I am already looking forward it.”

“To what? Eating cake?”

“Ah, Sherlock. I take it you have concluded your frantic search for items to steal from the remains of my dear Gregory’s abode?”

“Pfft. As if a pauper, one with appalling taste, I might add, would own anything to spark my interest. I did, however, collect a few specimens of a plant that contains a substance on which I would like to experiment. Mrs. Hudson’s ridiculous treatise on laxatives must have sharpened by alertness for such things for these are exceptional stimulants of the bowel.”

Marvelous.

“Please tell me, brother, that you did not place your infernal plants in with our lunch.”

“I made certain no insects or excessive soil were on the leaves or stem, so I fail to see what is the problem.”

Mycroft cut long-suffering eyes towards Greg who simply shrugged as if to remind Mycroft of the sliding scale needed for grading Sherlock’s actions, then motioned for them to continue on to their next destination.

“How about the cemetery? Might find some other ghosts to chat with and Sherlock can roll about in the graves collecting… whatever he finds interesting.”

“Gregory, kindly don’t put the idea of grave robbing into Sherlock’s head.”

Which, given Sherlock’s rapidly-shouted question to John about a shovel, was a possibility one could not discount. Mycroft made a mental note to remember that Sherlock could not actually hear his ghost during their private conversations and revealing information, himself, was a touch counterproductive.

“No grave robbing, I promise. Maybe a little grave rubbing, though.”

“GREGORY! Oh, dear me…”

“Ummm, you know that’s putting paper on interesting tombstone art and making a rubbing or impression of it, don’t you?”

“I… yes, I do, actually.”

“But that’s what your filthy mind thought of first, was it?”

“I decline to answer.”

‘I love you, Mycroft. Filthy mind and all.”

Now, Mycroft’s smile came more freely and he gave Greg an air-based kiss that had the former-policeman laughing and starting onward to their next adventure. Which would simply be one more in a long chain of them extending forward… who knew how many years.

“I have found more plants! These have exceptional pruritic properties. Fatcroft! Put these
sandwiches in your pockets so there is room in John’s sack for my vegetation.”

And wouldn’t they all be special seen through the lens of memory from being sent into violent fits of itching this very day by a close relative…

As the number of plants grew in John’s day pack and Mycroft ran out of pockets for their lunch, the idea that lunch should likely be moved into stomachs for easier transport was suggested, voted upon and with 2 yes votes, 1 no and 1 abstention due to not being able to eat, a suitable spot was found to lay down a ground cloth and begin eating.

“I was finally enjoying this wretched experience and now we have to stop for you and Mycroft to eat. This stands as a black mark against you, John.”

“You were trying to convince me to climb a tree and steal a bird’s nest.”

“I want to examine the effect on abandonment on the structural integrity of nests through time and that would be a perfect specimen to begin my research.”

“Why in the world would anyone in the world want to know that?”

“Science does not care about want.”

“I’m not shinning up a tree to steal a nest, abandoned or not. If you want it, you can do it.”

“No.”

“Then it’s sandwiches for me and disappointment for you.”

Sherlock’s power-pout went into full force, but John happily ignored it in favor of taking a seat on their picnic cloth and thanking Mycroft for the sandwich and fruit he was handing over.

“This is the life… sun’s shining, quiet, Sherlock’s dead…”

“I am not dead, John Watson!”

“For the purposes of my island of calm, yes, you are. Anyway… Mycroft’s how’s your dead partner doing?”

“Hmm? Oh, Gregory is doing wonderfully. Stretched out his back as if he is attempting to gain a suntan.”

“Nude?”

“Sadly, no, though I suspect he debated a full five minutes on the topic before retaining possession of trousers.”

And two seconds before losing them after John’s question. There were certainly advantages to being invisible to others besides the one you loved.

“Good to know. A proper picnic shouldn’t be sullied by Greg romping about in the buff. Sherlock’s rotting corpse is sulling enough and any more might put me off these remarkable sandwiches. Ooh! And it looks as if there’s a hefty amount of cake hiding amongst dead Sherlock’s evil botanicals. I’m officially of a mind that this won’t be the last visit I make to Mrs. Hudson’s fine establishment.”
Sherlock’s ‘ugh’ was not nearly as loud and disgruntled as it could have been, indicating the detective thought the idea was a good one. Or, at least, one he was willing to consider, as long as Mrs. Hudson’s covertly-passed sweets remained part of the bargain.

“We have harbored such a thought, as well. I cannot often get away from London for personal reasons, however, an occasional jaunt is not impossible. Especially when the various needs of the body are properly tended.”

“Good on you, Greg, keeping up with Mycroft’s various bodily needs.”

_Hurray for me_

“Do not encourage him, my dear.”

_Eat_

“I am! Lo, this delightful slice of fresh pear is dancing happily towards my mouth.”

John smothered a laugh and cut eyes towards Sherlock who was glaring at his brother. Seeing Mycroft that happy was so very unusual but, since he’d found Greg, it was a much more common thing. Of course, it probably didn’t show in the slightest beyond a very select group of people, but…it was… a bizarre thing, is what it was, however, John couldn’t begrudge the man a bit of it. Speaking from experience, what a small piece of happiness meant to someone who had little, was immeasurable.

“And, when your pear pirouettes are done, we can think about the next leg of our expedition. Village?”

“A fine suggestion, Doctor Watson. I do hear the call of books growing louder and louder.”

“And scientific equipment!”

Mycroft simply shook his head and waited for the intelligible member of Sherlock’s household to explain.

“We were talking to a bloke at the pub last night or, to be precise, I was talking to him while Sherlock informed the woman serving our drinks that her perfume could kill an anosmic elephant at fifty paces, and he runs one of the antique shops in the village. Said he has a few old scientific gadgets knocking about that he can’t sell and might part with them cheap if Sherlock is interested. Luckily, your car has a large boot.”

“Ah. Then there shall be a wealth of possibilities to keep us amused.”

_Pub_

“Gregory, dear, you cannot imbibe.”

_Can watch_

“John, you will not drag me into that urine-scented house of pestilence a second time.”

“I’ll let you try and win your money back in darts.”

“I will go.”

“Pub’s on, Greg.”
“Don’t suppose you can do a bit of spooking while I challenge a few of the local lads so their shots miss the mark?”

On it

“Looks like our drinks will be free, which is always a bonus.”

Mycroft smiled gently at how easily, even in his compromised form, his ghost interacted with others and what a gratifying thing it was to be able to offer his love a situation where he could be a part of things. Reaching out to the world was one matter, but building close, comfortable relationships with people who valued you was quite another.

“Sound good, love?”

Oh dear, woolgathering was not advised when one was in a conversation. Or when Sherlock was nearby ready to pick a pocket.

“Absolutely. I am giddy with anticipation.”

“Then finish your lunch and we’ll be off.”

Looking at the half a hefty sandwich he had remaining, Mycroft considered the high probability they’d enjoy a few nibbles in the village, as well as the substantial dinner he’d be presented by Mrs. Hudson, and returned the delicacy to its wrapper.

“I shall save this for an emergency of appetite.”

“What will occur in thirty seconds.”

“Thank you, Sherlock, your opinion is ignored, as always.”

There-there-ing his partner, John forestalled the venomous response and got them moving towards packing the remains of their lunch and starting off again. An afternoon exploring the quaint little village in greater depth, few good pints, then a return to the most hospitable inn in Great Britain. They were back to London tomorrow, so every bit of this hedonism would be savored.

Especially Mrs. Hudson’s excellent beds… there were certain things that benefitted from a luxurious mattress compared to a fairly old and hard one, like the one they had at home. For now, at least. It wouldn’t be too great a hardship to put aside a little each week for some upcoming mattress shopping. Since Sherlock would rather behead himself that come along, he could get exactly what he wanted, too. John Watson, the Sex Mattress King. Had a nice ring to it…

“What a picture that is! Three bedraggled ramblers darkening my door after a long day terrorizing the landscape.”

One especially looking a touch bedraggled, but it was to be expected that the proper, bureaucratic Mr. Holmes would be terribly unused to a long day using his feet for more than showing off his lovely shoes.

“I am suffering physiological failure from enforced proximity to grass and Mycroft.”

“You poor thing. Why don’t you come and tell me all about it while the biscuits I just took from
the oven cool a touch.”

Sherlock nearly knocked John over racing for the kitchen with Mrs. Hudson giggling as she darted after him.

“Well, that’s mine managed. Greg, you set to see yours sorted?”

Yes

“There we have it, then. I’ll see you in a bit for a few biscuits before dinner if Sherlock’s not eaten them all.”

Following his partner towards the cozy kitchen, John took a sniff and very much liked the story that sniff was telling. Mrs. Turner was no slouch at baking, but there was something special about Mrs. Hudson’s touch that really drew him like a moth to a flame. Luckily, she wasn’t their landlady or he’d weigh three tons! Sherlock wouldn’t because he had the metabolism of a demon, but he was damned to hell for oh so many things that this one really didn’t upset his overall scorecard…

“Well, love, one nice shower for you?”

“Yes, I believe that would be advised. It is rare anymore that I am out in the wild for any period of time and I find the perspiration and various natural elements have overstayed their welcome on my skin. And, the invigoration would be a welcome thing.”

“We did nearly make Dover, so it stands to reason you might be a bit tired.”

Mycroft smirked at the ghost and crooked his finger for Greg to follow.

“For that, Gregory, you are condemned to watch me shower and be naked while you do so.”

“That’s fair. Cheeky behavior deserves letting you see my cheeks. Both sets of them, in fact…”

Since he was still invisible to the rest of the house, Greg let his clothes vanish and dashed in front of Mycroft so a head start could be made on the condemnation by letting his living lover ogle his assets before even one foot was placed in the shower. Mycroft might not be able to touch him, but looking was certainly not something to be scoffed at. Especially when he’d do his level best to make that looking something very, very special. Nothing like a good wank in the shower after a long day in the fresh air. Well, maybe there were better things, but they’d have to wait until after Mycroft went to bed to pass enjoy them…

“Mycroft… wait a moment, will you?”

Being asked by your ghostly lover to stop while you are removing your trousers was not part of the expected course of events, but Mycroft complied and waited for Greg to hmmmmmm for a minute or two while gazing at his skin.

“Yes, my dear?”

“Just checking your whatsit from this morning.”

“Ah, I see. I had forgotten about it, actually. Tell me, oh wise one, shall I survive?”

“Well…”
“I shall purchase my tombstone immediately so you may make all suitable rubbings before the elements wear away the artistic flourishes.”

“Funny. But, I wouldn’t buy it quite yet…”

Mycroft turned so he could see his bare shoulder in the mirror and acknowledged Greg’s slight uncertainty as to which direction the winds were blowing. The mark had lost its swollen texture, but had darkened a bit in color. However...

“I see. The expected progression, I believe, for some form of insect bite.”

“True. Just never seen one that looked… patterned.”

“It is not impossible it is from two insects. Perhaps a contented pair of spiders that rested a moment and became aggrieved when slight twitch brought a hair across their bow and disturbed them without a single ‘pardon me’ to soothe the rudeness.”

“Not the most implausible of explanations, I suppose. We could ask John to take a look at it, though.”

“Dear heavens, Gregory, I am not going to bother John for an insect bite.”

“Why not? That’s what family is for, isn’t it? Free advice when you want it?”

“When I am vomiting blood and seeing spots, I will use my Free Advice card and obtain such from John. For now, thought, I shall be content with my shower and your male beauty entertaining my eyes while I wash the remnants of today’s walk down Mrs. Hudson’s drains.”

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Greg shook his head and gave Mycroft a wagged finger of exasperation, but couldn’t actually blame his love. A man didn’t want to make a fuss over something small, but it was hard for a person who loved that man not to make a fuss. He’d let the matter drop, for now, because he had a more pressing and important job to do – making his Mycroft a happy person – but he would keep a weather eye on things, just in case. And, since he had his own communication line to a certain doctor, he could intercede if any odd infection or the like made an appearance. Not going to let those pesky spiders have the last laugh here. Unless his Mycroft turned into Spiderman… that would actually have his very eager endorsement… Spiderman was a nimble sort and what fun could be had in a hammock made of spider’s silk, even if only in a dream, was something he’d be very happy to learn...

“Delicious, Mrs. Hudson. I honestly don’t know how you can make a simple bit of fish so scrumptious, but this is excellent.”

“You are tragically easy to please, John.”

Said while Sherlock scraped the last bit of sauce off his plate with a morsel of bread and reached for another roll to enjoy for its buttery lightness.

“Well, I’m happy for Doctor Watson’s kind words, so you hush, Sherlock, and finish the bread. It’s a joy to cook for someone who’s got a proper appetite and appreciation of a well-prepared meal. Do save room, though, boys… I’ve got a lovely trifle waiting to follow up and it’s one of my special ones.”

Greg laughed at how quickly his Mycroft’s ears pricked up and how closely his excited eyes
matched Sherlock’s, though both brothers only let it last a split-second before sliding back into their formal (Mycroft) and disdainful (Sherlock) resting personas. Mycroft’s resting persona, though, only lasted a moment more as his mobile rang with a ringtone that Greg recognized as specifically work related.

“Do pardon me.”

Rising from the table, Mycroft took himself into the inn’s small library and remained in there until after the dishes had been cleared, replaced with the anticipated trifle and that was reduced to only a fraction that was set aside for Mycroft when decided to emerge from his book-lined bunker. Which was now…

“Everything alright, love?”

“Unfortunately, no. I am needed back in London.”

Greg said a word his mum would have chided him for if she’d known about it in her day, but it was wholly for the fact that his dear Mycroft would lose his last bit of relaxation. If he was needed back in London, it meant something serious, which meant work and intense work, at that.

“World War III, Mycroft?”

“Happily, John, we are not at that point, however, I would rather matters be kept that way. A helicopter is already en route to collect me, but the car shall arrive tomorrow, as planned, to collect you and Sherlock, so you may enjoy your full holiday. My dear… I shall leave it to you to decide…”

“I’m going with you, Mycroft. Even if you simply race straight to your office, I’ll stay there or you can drop me at home, but I’d rather be in London with you.”

Mycroft’s smile told John and Sherlock what was Greg’s answer to Mycroft’s unfinished question and they prepared to be the only guests under Mrs. Hudson’s roof.

“Thank you, Gregory. I shall gather my things and notify Mrs. Hudson about our change of plans, and that I will, of course, pay for our full reservation so she does not lose money due to my early departure.”

“And stick your fat fingers in what is left of the trifle.”

“But, of course! Never pass by an opportunity, brother, to stick one’s fingers in what one finds appealing.”

John’s sharp bark of laughter married well with Mycroft slight wiggle of his eyebrows, neither of which clued Sherlock into the joke, so the memory of his scowl accompanied Mycroft out of the dining room, rather than a scandalized-dowager gasp, which Sherlock did very professionally, in John’s opinion, when especially-filthy things were dancing about. When he’d danced about, stark naked, with a tube of lube clenched between his teeth like a rose, for example, Sherlock nearly fainted dead away. Fortunately, for both of them, that hadn’t lasted too long and scandalized dowagers were randy things when properly inspired…

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This was maddening! His poor Mycroft… he looked positively knackered getting out of the helicopter and the car that collected them had dropped the ‘luggage’ off here, then whisked him off to whatever was occupying him for now… ten hours. And, not one word. It was brutally hard to
know his Mycroft was already tired and wouldn’t be seeing a wink of sleep until whatever this was
got resolved, but he wouldn’t distract his lover by phoning and pulling his thoughts in an
unnecessary direction. He had texted, though, just a simple ‘sending you strong, happy thoughts’
and got back a ‘I love you for it’ as response.

And that was good. It helped, he simply knew it did. This was something he’d have to get used to,
he supposed, because this was Mycroft’s life and there were going to be a lot of times like this and
many that would be much, much harder, but they’d manage. He’d be supportive, do what he could
to help and not be a whinger when Mycroft’s attentions were elsewhere and he had to sit on the
edges waiting his turn. That’s because, when things calmed down, it would be his turn and his love
would make that turn something very special. Which, from the sound of the door being unlocked,
just might be starting soon…

Or not.

“Oh, love. Come here and sit. You look terrible.”

Greg rushed forward and danced a frustrated dance because he couldn’t take Mycroft’s valise and
cloak and had to settle for making little shooing motions to urge Mycroft forward towards any surface,
beside the floor, where he could sit. Though dropping onto the floor for a nap seemed a fair
possibility at this precise moment…

“I am a touch fatigued, I admit. What a deplorable coalition of individuals I had to see sorted
with this situation. Not five functional synapses between them all, though their egos and
pugnaciousness are boundless.”

Dropping onto the sofa in the sitting room, Mycroft let his valise fall from his fingers and took a
deep, steadying breath. Such a draining experience… which was somewhat odd, because this type
of thing usually stimulated him, to some degree, something that unfailingly served him well in his
work. Perhaps it was the incongruity of being one moment in a heavenly cocoon then the next in a
sty filled with nasty-tempered pigs who rejoiced in kicking their feces at any who might try and cross
their paths. Regardless… it was very good to be home.

“Let me pour you a drink, Mycroft. Seems like you could use it.”

“That sounds divine, though I fear it will send me straight to sleep.”

“What’s wrong with that? Your sofa is comfortable-looking, so you’ll surely have a good rest on
the old girl.”

“True. Very well, then, I would welcome a large brandy.”

“Coming up!”

Greg raced over to the drinks service he could actually manipulate and poured Mycroft a hefty
measure of spirits, returning it quickly, before the sofa-sleeping actually became a reality.

“Here you are. A well-deserved reward for your hard, world-saving work.”

“Thank you, from the bottom of my heart. Now, if the world would deign to remain saved for a
day or so, I would be ecstatic.”

“I’ll have a firm word with it, don’t you think I won’t.”

Mycroft’s laugh was real, though threaded with a clear need to rest and Greg pressed the glass up to
his lover’s lips so he could get as much as he could down his throat. Nice high-proof toddy to help his Mycroft get a long night’s… morning’s… sleep and he’d make certain to be especially quiet so as not to do anything to disturb a minute of that sleep. And, get a bit of rest for himself, too. He couldn’t get tired, per se, but worry definitely put a mental strain on his ghostly self and easing that out of his system would be a welcome thing.

“Your protective streak is admirable, my dear. And much appreciated.”

“I’ll protect you with everything in me, don’t ever worry about that. To that end, once you’ve relaxed a moment, I’ll see you upstairs, into your most comfortable pyjamas, and sing you a lullaby any nanny in England would be proud to croon.”

“Such an angel you are, Gregory. I almost believe that if you turn the correct way, I would be able to see your majestic wings.”

“Flatterer.”

A flatterer with large, dark circles under his eyes. Yes, getting you upstairs to bed, dear Mycroft, and keeping you there as long as possible is going to be priority. No doubt the world is going to need you very, very soon, bastard that it is, and you need to be tip top for that…

“Guilty! Oh… I think, though, I have reached my limit for brandy for the evening. Already I am feeling it’s heady effects.”

“No more brandy for you, though your head is a gorgeous thing to behold. A bite to eat?”

“I think not. However, your offer of pyjamas and a lullaby is one I am prepared immediately to accept.”

“Up we go, then. I love you, Mycroft. And I’m so very, very proud of you, never forget that.”

A warm glow rose in Mycroft’s eyes and he was simply staggered by how wholly wonderful it was to have found the love of this incomparable man. He was dedicated, with every fiber of his being, to being worthy of that love and celebrate it fully for all of the long years to come.

“And I love you, Gregory. I love you madly and am happier than ever I could have imagined.”

“As happy as when you’ve got your head on your pillow?”

“Hmmmm… I will need time to evaluate that question.”

Chuckling as he rose from the sofa, Mycroft stretched and slowly made his way up the stairs, with Greg feeling more than a touch silly walking a step behind in case his lover fell asleep on his feet and began to plummet backwards on the path to a broken neck. Once Mycroft was asleep, he’d send a message to Anthea to try and hold non-essential calls, so Mycroft could sleep undisturbed and see if it was feasible to give him an easy day tomorrow. Being supportive included smoothing the way forward, didn’t it? Fuck it if it didn’t. His Mycroft needed him and that was the end of that.

“Oh look, my bedroom door. What a vision of beauty it is to my dull and world-weary eyes.”

And he needed his poetic lover just as desperately. Fortunately, they had a very long time together ahead of them and every moment of that would be grand. Sometimes life actually graced you with a smile, rather than a fist and, finally, he’d gotten a share of that for his very own.

“Lo! My hand upon the knob… to what wonders shall this magic door lead me?”
A big, fat, glorious share that put everyone else’s to shame…
“Yes, Charles?”

“Are you hearing things, sir?”

“No, I am seeing things.”

“That’s just as bad. Changing course to nearest hospital.”

Mycroft sighed and tried glaring at his driver who had been cutting him furtive glances in the rearview mirror since they’d left the house.

“Highly amusing. I am more curious about why you are scrutinizing me much as a boy would a particularly interesting stamp.”

“I never did that as a boy, sir.”

“You are being particularly difficult this morning… evening… Charles.”

Since he had slept through the remainder of the morning and afternoon and would likely have continued through tonight, as well, if there hadn’t been a not-unexpected wrinkle in the situation he had just laid in its own bed that required his personal touch to rectify.

“I’ll try and be more amenable, then, sir.”

“Why are you staring at me?”

“My eyes are firmly fixed on the road, Mr. Holmes. Evidence of this comes from the fact that we have yet to collide with a light post and aren’t dragging behind us a squashed pedestrian who had an unfortunate encounter with the wheels of our car.”

“You are precisely thirty seconds from being assigned to the Foreign Secretary.”

“Not even you are that heartless, sir.”

“There is naught in my chest but a gaping hole through which blows cold, bitter winds.”

“Your PA will be angry if she wore a skirt today.”

“CHARLES!”

“I’m under orders! And from someone higher up than you.”

“Who wears a skirt.”

“Sometimes. Other times it’s a smart pair of trousers and stylish jacket.”

Anthea…

“Am I permitted to know the nature of the orders, you scurrilous spy?”

“Just to give you a look over and make a report.”

Hmmm… implying Anthea believed there was something that required looking over. Which was
not something she would expect without specific information making that a point of interest.
Gregory would not be a happy ghost when he found his new tablet was henceforth only able to
check the status of tidal forces in the Thames and play videos of the elderly complaining about
politics in Great Britain.

“I see. And have you prepared your portfolio?”

“A few sheets have been added to the file, yes.”

This was worse than pulling teeth! Impacted molars, at that.

“Would you be so kind as to share your conclusions.”

“Uhhhh…”

“Foreign Sec, Charles. The axe looming above your fleshy neck is a sharp and powerful one.”

“You’re right. The worst she can do is kill me and that’s a gentler fate by far. You look tired, sir, and that’s odd.”

“Odd? I am often, frequently even, greatly fatigued. I fail to see why that is of particular concern today.”

“Because you look the part, Mr. Holmes. Normally, the only way I know you’re tired is you’re more glowery than usual and sigh in a particular tone when you rub your neck. All of that could mean anything, really, and only I would know it meant you were ready for a hot shower and bed. Today… you look tired. It’s unusual. End of report.”

Which was unusual given he didn’t actually feel tired. Though he believed scarcely one second elapsed between his head hitting his pillow and sleep descending like the aforementioned axe, when he woke he felt rested. Not highly energetic or particularly eager to race into the day, but that was not the case for the overwhelming majority of his days, so nothing was aberrant about that.

“Do you wish to elaborate with clarifying details?”

“No, sir, I do not wish.”

“Change your mind.”

“Are we back to axes?”

“I believe we have traversed the short distance from that to the guillotine.”

“Oh dear. And I just bought a new hat. Fine! It’s… your pallor is a bit ashy. You look drawn, for lack of a better term.”

Mycroft pursed his lips and tried to catch a good look at himself in the window, but the angle was wrong to provide more than a highly-uninformative and rather distorted reflection.

“I see. I had not particularly noticed, however, I will grant that your observations are not fabrications of an overly-imaginative mind.”

Though, dear Gregory had favored him with a concerned expression throughout his grooming process.

“I have very little imagination to speak of, sir, so you absolutely can take my observations at face
value."

“Quite. In any case, it is no matter as I am both hale and hearty and shall navigate my day with my standard level of efficiency.”

“If you say so, sir. Might I suggest, however, that I secure a cup of tea that will strip the enamel off your teeth before Anthea gets a good look at you?”

“I… actually, tea is not a terrible suggestion.”

“On its way, then. And I’ll text Anthea that you’re in fine form besides a little paleness, which can easily be explained by you not yet having a good dinner. That will probably gain you something especially nice brought in from one of your favorite restaurants.”

Oh, that would be nice. Just a tiny taste, though… Gregory had been most draconian tonight about insisting upon a full portion of the lamb pie Mrs. Hudson, over his strident objections, insisted he bring with him to London. Perhaps they had not been as strident as he normally could muster, but it was difficult to raise a voice to stentorian levels when someone was holding a cooling pie in her hands and glaring like the Queen of Hell. Fortunately, Sherlock was not there to hear his rather meek acquiescence when his lackluster stridency utterly failed to penetrate the glare.

“A joyous bit of good fortune, indeed. And I shall hope that luck extends towards seeing this scenario quickly put back in order.”

Because he would like nothing more than to return home and spend time with his ghost. Begin the sketch of Gregory’s home, read, share a film new to the both of them… how unique it was to have a true desire to be at home for something more than relaxing his body and mind, as best he could, to prepare for the next day’s work.

“Fingers crossed, sir. Toes, as well.”

“Hopefully that shall not impede your driving.”

“I was able to spy on you while driving, so crossed toes doesn’t even rate a two on the danger scale.”

“I have never felt safer.”

“I aim to please, sir.”

Of course he lied! That driver of yours… do you and he have some form of pact to try and lie to me?”

The tea had failed!

“I believe it is I who should be affronted as you and Gregory seemed to have formed your own pact.”

“We only use our powers for good.”

“Schemers and conspirators rarely stand on the side of good.”

“The modest ones do.”
“Did you actually just use the term modest?”

“Alright, I admit that was a tragic misstatement on my part, but... look at you...”

“Are you also going to moan and rattle your chains about my imminent demise?”

“How much are you willing to pay to watch that?”

Mycroft finished walking into his office, an action that had been interrupted by the human obstruction that was his PA, set down his valise, then set down himself in his plush chair and sighed loudly.

“We have work to do, Anthea. I suggest you focus on that.”

“I will, but I’ve got a lot of focus and can continue to devote a portion of it to you. Greg expects an update and I’m not going to disappoint him. He worries so much about you. It’s absolutely adorable!”

Feeling utterly betrayed by the warmth that bloomed in his chest, Mycroft held the both the sensation and the mental image of his love, smiling gently at him when he woke, for a small moment before gathering his wits and making an official start to his workday.

“Estonia.”

“Tell me that’s not your private name for Greg, because I’ll tell you this for free, it’s awful.”

“File.”

“My nails are perfect, I’ll have you know.”

“And the financial analysis I ordered yesterday.”

“I... I have nothing good for that one. Ask for something else.”

Savoring his tiny, exceedingly tiny, victory, Mycroft logged onto his computer and began to hum a jaunty tune as he set to work. For her part, Anthea set aside her levity, gave her boss a long look and decided that she’d seen him look worse before, but that was at the tail-end of the occasional three-day crisis that saw him not sleeping more than ten minutes a stretch and subsisting on nothing more than tea and stale biscuits. But, that said, he wasn’t getting any younger and there was a nasty flu going around... she’d keep an eagle eye on her boss, but let the issue drop for now. Besides, between her, Greg and, maybe, Traitor Charles, there would be many eyes keeping watch and those eyes were attached, after a fashion, to some very loud mouths...

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“Look who’s home before the sun is risen! I had a wager with myself that you’d simply stay at your office and move right into today without a break.”

Something Mycroft had contemplated, but decided that the matters at hand could be managed from the comfort of his study with no loss of effectiveness. Besides, the comfort of his study came the comfort of his Gregory, which was always something to covet.

“I weighed the merits of remaining in my office versus returning home and found the thought of seeing again your breathtaking features was a lure I could not resist.”

“My ego is inflating! Oh dear...”
Greg began floating up toward the ceiling, waving his arms and legs about and was rewarded by the hoped-for rolled eyes and laughter of the man he loved.

“I shall find a ghost-tethering cord and walk you through the park much as a child with their balloon.”

“I’d love that! You could be just like the other kiddies, but your balloon could whisper filthy things to you now and then to keep the walk interesting.”

“Then we have an accord should I be so fortunate as to find the proper equipment. Now…”

The sigh that followed had Greg descending back toward the floor and next to Mycroft so he could let his fingers ‘touch’ Mycroft’s skin and bring a smaller, more contented sigh to his lips.

“Back to work for you?”

“Unfortunately, yes. But, I believe, I shall first change into something less… cumbersome.”

“A man deserves to wear his at-home clothes when he’s at home.”

“My thinking exactly. Only a moment…”

Since pre-dawn was not really the proper time to make a lovely drink for his Mycroft, Greg resigned himself to simply providing what companionship he could when a break was needed from the mountain of important work that certainly was lying in wait. But, he did companionship better than any ghost in London, so he was absolutely the man for the job. And, he had his own work to dabble with today, so he wouldn’t be too companion-y and be a bother, instead of a blessing. There was a punishingly stupid comedy film he’d suffered through the first half of while Mycroft was away, but it gave him an idea for an approach to a side character of a story he had going and today would be a good day to put some actual words on the page. Or words to the electronic ether, in his case, but as long as there were words, he’d consider it a victory…

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“Someone needs tea.”

Mycroft looked up from his computer and blinked a time or two before smiling at the head sticking, literally, through the door of his study.

“I believe you may be correct. I have been, rather unexpectedly, free from distraction and became somewhat enmeshed in this little matter.”

“Which you love.”

“Which I love. It is refreshing simply to be able to concentrate fully on one thing and not be required to juggle another four at the same time.”

“Two hands, two feet… at least you’ve got the proper equipment for all that juggling. Come along, then, let’s see you with a heavenly cup of your favorite tea and a bite to nibble.”

“Gregory Lestrade, you would make a truly admirable mother.”

“Fathers can be doting, too.”

“I stand corrected.”
“Though I can’t be either since my swimmers are as ghostly as I am. Come to think of it, I actually wonder if they’re in there, swimming about with little ghostly smiles, happy that they get to stay comfy and warm in my bollocks and not end as a dried splatter on someone’s bed linens.”

“Please tell me that shall not be the theme of your next work of short fiction.”

“You have to admit, it’s got possibilities.”

“I admit nothing besides hearing the call of the kettle.”

Greg giggled and pulled his head back through the wood to wait for his lover to make his way out of the study.

“What took you so long? I nearly died waiting for you out here.”

Mycroft bopped the air in front of Greg’s nose and tutted in his most matronly fashion as he led the ghost to the kitchen.

“I am of a mind, at times, to fund the design and construction of a device that will deliver perfectly-prepared tea with but the touch of a button. No preparation, no waiting, simply place cup beneath the spout and one is presented with an exquisite cup of the most sublime tea.”

“If anyone could, love, you could see it managed. Look at Alfred! He’s a thing to marvel at.”

“Ah, I am supposed to inform you that the next iteration shall arrive at the beginning of next week.”

“Whoo! Oh, I can’t wait. Can I keep Alfred 1.0, though?”

“If you like. Might I ask why?”

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

“I do solemnly swear not to laugh.”

“I like him. We chat while you’re at work. Yes, I know it’s me doing all the chatting, but it’s nice having someone there to toss ideas about with. He’s a mate, I suppose.”

His Gregory was exactly the sort of person to form bonds with inanimate objects and Mycroft would not have it any other way.

“Then we shall retire him with dignity and provide him a lovely, welcoming home in which to enjoy his more restful years with his friend and confidant.”

“Hurray! We old blokes have to stick together. Thanks, love. You’re the best. And you’re kettle’s boiling.”

Which set Mycroft spinning on his heel, with an out flung hand, and both he and Greg watched his ring fly across the kitchen and make a commendable clink when it collided with the window glass.

“Well, that was most unexpected.”

“Very dramatic, though, love. I hadn’t thought it was loose.”

“Nor did I.”
Mycroft retrieved his ring and slipped it back on, noticing how easily it slid onto his finger. And back off again when he gave it the slightest of tugs.

“Curious. Perhaps I am a touch dehydrated.”

“Do the pinch test.”

“Pardon?”

“Pinch the skin on the back of your hand. If it stays tented, you need water.”

“Ah. Pinching and… it appears my hydration level is acceptable.”

“Don’t know, then. But women on the telly sometimes talk about rings being too tight or loose one day and not the next, so maybe it’s not that unusual.”

“Well, it is not worth fretting about given the more important issue.”

“Tea?”

“Precisely. And, if you would be so kind, verify that we have those lovely chocolate biscuits I enjoy in the early afternoon.”

Being able to peek into cupboards without being able to use one’s hands was a skill at which Greg excelled.

“Biscuits are present and ready for duty.”

“Better and better. If my day continues along its current trajectory, I should bid farewell to my current burdens in sufficient time to watch that film that interested you.”

“Brilliant! A spooky horror story with a haunted house and cobwebs and that Vincent Price bloke. Maybe we should do something to make this house spookier. By rights, it is a haunted house now and there’s not one cobweb, creaky board or ominous organ music playing in the background. I feel like I’m letting down the side.”

“Why do I have a suspicion that when the Halloween season is upon us, your decorating urges shall run positively rampant.”

“Because you’re a very smart man.”

“And one who has tea.”

“All is right in the world.”

“Now, that’s a yawn that could swallow an elephant.”

Mycroft chuckled softly and had to admit his ghost had a valid point.

“With a rich sauce, I hope, for I suspect the flesh is not particularly flavorful on its own.”

“I’ll rummage through the internet for some good recipes. Off to bed?”

“Yes, that is a prudent plan. However, we have viewed our film, so I am claiming the evening to
be a successful one.”

“More than successful, I’d say. A good, scary film and relaxing brandy after a hard day, followed by a peaceful night’s sleep… that’s perfection, that is.”

Perfection would be sleeping in the arms of his dearest Gregory, however, it would be some time before he again could enjoy that particular pleasure. Must work towards scheduling more personal time for himself so a visit to Mrs. Hudson’s inn was a regular occurrence. Pleasuring his love was truly one of life’s greatest rewards.

“And what debauchery have you planned for your own night, my dear?”

“Work on a story I’m fiddling about with, then I started a new program on the telly and I’ll watch a few more episodes of that while I fiddle. I’ve been playing with a new game, too, and that will probably fill an hour or so. Plus, Mrs. Hudson asked me to start writing some copy for the website she’s considering having done for the inn. I’ve seen scads of sites that will let you craft a very professional-looking one of your own, though, and you pay them a hosting fee, so I might see if I could put the skeleton of one together and she and I could work to build it ourselves and save her some money. Honestly, I can say, in all my years, I’ve never been so fucking busy!”

“Too busy to accompany me while I prepare for bed, so I might savor these last moments of today in your presence?”

“How could I say no to that! See you off to sleep then get all my nonsense done before those gorgeous blue eyes open again so I can concentrate wholly on your gorgeousness. That’s blissful, positive blissful. Shall we?”

“We shall.”

Detouring only to give his brandy glass a wash, Mycroft made his way upstairs, adoring that even though he did not have physical presence, his Gregory did have presence and it was discernable as they walked together, chatting about silly things while he took care of all the teeth brushing, bed turning-down and choosing of pyjamas.

“You do have the most luxurious nightwear I’ve ever seen, love. It’s so perfect for you, really. Regal, vibrant, silky soft… at best, all I ever slept in was a rather tattered nightshirt that usually had holes in rather embarrassing places. Luckily, running out of my cottage wearing only a nightshirt was a very rare occasion or the vicar might have had to lecture me on modesty and frightening the young lads and lasses with various of my bits waving about in the breeze.”

How one would acquire a nightshirt hole in those particular places was not a question Mycroft felt brave enough to pursue, so simply began undressing, pausing when he noticed the expression on Greg’s face.

“My dear? Is something amiss?”

“Well, no. I think, though, we have an answer to the ring conundrum.”

Pointing at the mirror over the dresser, Greg moved from ‘sitting’ on the bed to stand near Mycroft who was examining his shirtless self’s reflection.

“Yes, I see what you mean.”

“Your luscious belly is still luscious, there’s just a bit less of it. Been dieting?”
“Not… intentionally.”

Thinking back, he had felt a touch less hungry these past few days, but not enough to account for noticeable weight loss. And what he had eaten was frightfully rich and succulent…

“More active? We did take a bracing walk while visiting Mrs. Hudson.”

“I doubt a single day of exercise would compensate for my naturally sedentary lifestyle and work environment.”

“You know what I’m going to say next, don’t you?”

“Gregory Lestrade, an insect bite cannot cause weight loss.”

“Are you a doctor? Or one of those entomologist chaps?”

“I am an intelligent individual who has lived a goodly number of years on this planet, which is more than sufficient basis on which to draw my conclusions.”

“I’ve got more years that you and I’m saying my conclusions aren’t the same. Tomorrow, I’m phoning John and asking him to have a look at you.”

“Doctor Watson is far too busy to be bothered with what is certainly the most minor of matters. Perhaps your theory of dehydration is truer than we believed from one quick pinch of my skin.”

“John is doing nothing tomorrow but sitting on his arse doing the bills and such, since they don’t have a case and Sherlock is all aquiver over a new experiment he wants to start with those plants he gathered. He’ll be happy for the distraction.”

“Gregory…”

“What’s the worst that could happen? I apologize for making a mountain out of a molehill and we make certain you’re drinking more water.”

“This truly is not necessary, my dear…”

“Will you do it for me? If not for you, then to make me feel better about things. I’m worried, Mycroft, and that worry isn’t going to leave me until I have some answers. I love you, you silly thing, and this has me a bit knotted right now, which is not something I’ll apologize for.”

That was the only argument that Mycroft would accept for making an unwarranted fuss over something so ridiculous, and continuing to disagree would have no reason other than stubbornness, something his Gregory did not deserve.

“Very well. If Doctor Watson agrees, perhaps he might join us for dinner…”

“Breakfast.”

Dear heavens…

“… breakfast and he can run his eye over my blemish and confirm it free of infection, contagion or insect larvae.”

“What!”

“There are certain insects that infect a host with their offspring.”
“Why did you tell me that? Now, I’ve got to worry about you being eaten alive from the inside by wriggling insects! Oh, that’s horrible…”

Mycroft made a mental note not to elaborate on the possibilities of a situation when speaking to his ghost lest he suffer watching his Gregory wriggle, dance and hold his stomach as if he was struggling to hold back a rather large bolus of vomit.

“I have little doubt that I could miss the sensation of wriggling insects in my flesh, Gregory, so I am extremely confident the latter is not in play here.”

“Are you sure?”

Mycroft gave his ghost a no-touch hug and tried to smile as reassuringly as he could.

“Alright, then… but you’re not backing out of letting John have a look at you.”

“I shall fully abide by our agreement.”

“Then I’m ok for now. Continue getting naked.”

Laughing out loud, Mycroft was happy he was joined by his ghost and that the laughter was honest. His poor dear… so wonderfully loving and caring. Now, all he had to do was pass his medical exam and that loving and caring man could lose the worry that was paining him so. Worry and distress was not something a man so kind and good should ever have to suffer. It simply wasn’t fair and, though the world was in no manner fair, this one time, he would ensure that it was.

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“John!”

Being met at the door by a portrait- and tablet-toting robot was becoming old hat to John, but it never failed to raise a smile.

“Were you expecting someone else this hour?”

“Milkman?”

“You’re old, Greg. I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

“Yeah… but come on and I’ll see you with some breakfast that will make you forget all about me being old. Mycroft cooked, so it has to be delicious.”

“That’s the only reason I let you drag me out of my flat at fuck o’clock in the morning.”

“That and the enormous cloud of toxic gas Sherlock flooded your flat with.”

“That did factor into my decision. He had to pay Mrs. Turner to have a nice day of shopping and breakfast at her favorite café to make amends for forcing her out into the street in nothing but her pyjamas.”

“Were they sexy?”

“Please don’t use that word in the same thought as Mrs. Turner.”

“Fair enough. Love! Look who’s here with a big appetite and his doctor’s bag.”
Walking into the kitchen, John hummed softly and decided kidding Greg about being a smothery mother was officially over. Mycroft looked wan and strained, which he had seen for the older Holmes before, but not after a night’s sleep and a restful day or so of holiday.

“Doctor Watson, how kind of you to join us. I have prepared something most nutritious in acknowledgement of your commitment to health, but scandalously tasty, as well.”

“I’m solid voter in favor of taste and nutrition, so I’ll say thank you now before my mouth’s too full to do the job properly. At a stopping point?”

Mycroft ran an eye over the various dishes he had in the works and gave John a nod.

“Yes, I believe I am.”

“Alright then, business first, then pleasure. Have a seat? And Greg said the bite was on your shoulder, so if you’d remove your shirt.”

Mycroft wrinkled his nose at the idea, but complied while John retrieved a thermometer and stethoscope from his bag.

“Let’s see… no, must be… is this a joke?”

Greg and Mycroft both cut eyes at John and then each other before Greg took point in answering.

“No, what are you asking?”

“There’s nothing here.”

“Something wrong with your eyes? Right there on his shoulder.”

“Where? There’s nothing on Mycroft’s shoulder but hair.”

“Right there.”

Greg put his pen directly on the mark and felt his heart drop when John just shook his head.

“I don’t see anything, Greg. But, you do?”

“Yeah. So does Mycroft.”

“Oh. Why do I think that’s not good?”

“Love? I think we’ve got a problem.”

Mycroft looked up at his ghost and John and tried to think of a single reason to downplay the situation, but none came to mind, something that was utterly unique in his lifetime.

“Yes… perhaps we do.”
“Well, Sherlock?”

John hoped his voice wasn’t as worried-sounding to his partner’s ears as it was to his own, but doubted that was the case.

“No.”

Worry now escalating. This was the last in a string of tests Sherlock had conducted, with various light sources and sensors, as well as a few hotly-negotiated chemical treatments, to try and make the mark visible and all had failed. It was definitely there, Greg had drawn it for them to see and there was no denying that something was terribly wrong with Mycroft so… this was bad.

“Well, that is not entirely the news I hoped to hear.”

Greg gnashed his teeth that he couldn’t take his lover in a firm embrace and do everything he physically could to provide support, but that amounted to nothing since his fucking death really wasn’t conducive to being useful to his partner in his hour of need.

“John, anything you can do medically?”

Huffing a breath, John wondered what magic tricks the ghost thought he had up his sleeve.

“His vital signs are normal, factoring in the stress of learning you’ve got an invisible mark on your skin, and I’ll continue to monitor those. I’d advise, perhaps, checking him into hospital for tests that I can’t do here. Get some baseline bloodwork, that sort of thing.”

“Love, let’s get you packed and…”

Mycroft held up a hand and shook his head to block his ghost’s growing forward momentum.

“There is no need for that action just yet, I feel. We are still unknowing of the situation and I have no desire to strain our city’s medical resources for… we have no idea if there is a medical route to solution in the first place…”

Which was what they were all dancing around and failing to say plainly, so it was time, Mycroft felt, to simply lay the cards on the table.

“… That the mark cannot be seen by anyone besides Gregory and myself is rather strong evidence that something is at work that is not born of a logical and scientific world, but a wholly different one, altogether. I never would have credited the idea, but meeting Gregory has promoted a substantial change of perspective that does open the door for a myriad of possibilities I… I cannot but help contemplate them.”

“You believe you are subject to what, brother? Black magic? Curses? Demonic possession?”

Sherlock’s tone was contemptuous, on the surface, but Mycroft and John had a wealth of experience reading beneath that surface to what lay underneath. Here, it was a sour miasma of dread, both for Mycroft’s welfare and for the realization that neither science nor medicine might offer a single thing to help.

“I am as in the dark as you, Sherlock, however, my ego shall not stand in the way of
acknowledging that we may have stepped into an area where the rules we know are neither valid nor useful and must... I suppose we may be required to seek some solution that is more supernatural than natural, though it galls me to admit it.”

Hearing Mycroft so easily accept that his fate could be in the hands, not of reason, but magic, disturbed Sherlock, but he was accepting it rather easily as well, truth be told. It was just... Mycroft was Mycroft! Stodgy, unimaginative, pedantic... though he had a bit less of all that lately. Since, specifically, he had met and become stupidly enamored with a verifiable ghost. Fortunately, John looked as disturbed with all of this as he was but, fortunately, just as determined to help.

“It galls me too, Mycroft, but, as someone who has a medical license and not one to practice wizardry, I propose we view this in a medical way, of sorts. Treatment and cure. It’s possible that whatever mechanisms are at work can be treated medically to keep your health up while we work to find some form of... magical... cure, which I have no idea about whatsoever.”

“That sounds smart, love. Will you let John, at least, tend to the medical part so we keep you fit as we can while we look into the other side?”

“As long as it does not involve a hospital stay, I will acquiesce. I cannot shirk my duties, regardless of any personal concerns.”

“If your fat collapsed your organs, you would have to endure confinement to a hospital bed, so I suspect you have a contingency plan in place, brother, for that very eventuality.”

Thank you, Sherlock, for pointing out that which I specifically hoped you would not point out.

“I do have various plans for situations that may arise, health-related and not, however, we are not nearly at a point to implement any of them. A simple draw of blood does not require more than a moment of time and once the results are returned, we can reassess our trajectory. John, I shall provide you access to a medical facility that will run any tests you require and have the results back to you as quickly as possible. You can accompany me to work today and we shall stop en route for you to draw your sample and leave instructions.”

The rather riotous objections over him going in to the office today had Mycroft rising to start the kettle again, though he would much rather have a stiff whisky, instead.

“Mycroft, you... today is not a good day for you to work.”

“Reason, Doctor Watson?”

“You’re... bewitched!”

“Which does not seem to have impacted either my thinking or my ability to communicate, so I am fully prepared to go about my duties. And, we do not, yet, have conclusive proof for your hypothesis.”

“Love, that scares me. Who knows what will happen!”

Mycroft wished that had been typed on the tablet and not spoken aloud, since it pained him terribly to hear the upset in his ghost’s voice. There was fear there, tinges of panic, that broke his heart into small, ragged pieces.

“I shall have the most vigilant and suspicious eyes on me, my dear, so any indication of systems failure will be dealt with immediately.”
“Anthea! Oh, I forgot her. I do feel better knowing she’ll be there with you, but I have to ask… are you going to tell her? She knows about me, so…”

In the spirit of teamwork, Mycroft shared his ghost’s words with Sherlock and John, who mulled the question.

“Anthea will insist you be committed to hospital with any number of witch doctors, tarot readers and Druids, dancing and chanting to free you from whatever hoodoo has overtaken you.”

Sherlock’s typical nonsense, Mycroft had to concede, had a tiny kernel of point this time, which was why he was not inclined to provide his PA with the full-color details of his situation.

“I simply propose to confirm to her that a health issue has risen and steps are being taken to identify the cause and enact proper treatment. More than that will cause her undue worry and, very likely, impact the efficiency of our working environment, which is something I cannot allow. So, I would ask that such be the united front we present when she inevitably attempts to gain more information by going behind my back and contacting any of you directly.”

“I disagree.”

That this came from Sherlock shocked more than Mycroft and John was happy he had the distraction of the kettle boiling to cover his choking on his tongue as he leapt up to take point with tea duty.

“Disagree? Brother dear, about what could you possibly disagree? It was you that invoked Druids, for pity’s sake!”

“If you continue to visit your office, there could be a variety of symptoms, of any form, that she would have opportunity to notice. Given the amount of time you spend in your sty, we could be losing vital information without an informed observer present, lackluster though they may be.”

“He’s got a point, love.”

Thank you, my dear, for typing that so Sherlock’s smugness could leap into the room and dazzle us with its brilliance.

“Gregory…”

“She could also get so worried that she calls for an ambulance and that would put you in hospital where you don’t want to be. At the very least it would cause a lot of fuss because you’d probably be fighting and yelling the whole time they dragged you out on a stretcher.”

Thank you, again, Gregory for adding more fuel to Sherlock’s smugness warhead. Truly you are my most stalwart ally.

“All of which is covered by a simple health-issue excuse, without drawing in the paranormal aspects, if, in truth, that is what they are. As it is my health issue in question, the final word is mine and I would hope it would be respected.”

The growling, scowling, nattering and dithering made a grandly inharmonious symphony and Mycroft accepted his cup of tea from John to sip away the discontent of the moment.

“Greg, Sherlock… I’m sure Mycroft would be willing to compromise and say that if this continues for any length of time, we can take up the question again.”

Mycroft glared a moment at John, but, since it quieted the various hootings and chest beatings of the
monkeys in the room, he forestalled adding a more powerful force to the glare.

“Certainly something to consider, John, thank you.”

“How typical of you, John Watson, to side with the person providing tea.”

“I’m easy. In any case, Sherlock Holmes, why don’t you put your investigative prowess to use and make a start on this case. I’ve got the medical end to uphold, so you’ve got the non-medical bit. Enjoy!”

“What! I… yes, I suppose I am the only one qualified to solve a case of this complexity and bevy of unique features.”

“Ahem.”

“Typing that out, Jacob Marley, rather undercuts your attempted cleverness.”

“Bastard.”

“That is more effective, though rude. In any case…”

Sherlock took a seat at the kitchen table and John recognized the look in his partner’s eye that said he was sliding into his ‘on a case’ mode and felt more than a little relief at the fact. This whole mess bothered him, which was to be expected, but the botheration bordered on fear, which… well, perhaps that was expected, too. There was an underlying fear most people had for things that dealt with ghosts, magic, evil spells and whatnot, wasn’t there? You knew none of it was real, though, so the fear was never more than a general unease. But, when you knew ghosts were real, that meant the other things could be, too, and that made your fear stronger and far more tangible.

“… when did you notice something was amiss, Mycroft?”

“The morning we left the inn. I experienced a twinge in my shoulder when I woke and Gregory observed a raised, reddened area in the shape of the current mark. I never again was troubled by it and it had lost its inflammation, though darkened in color, by the time we returned from our walk.”

“I see. The fatigue and weight loss?”

“I suppose there were inklings of both beginning that day as I was somewhat tired after our walk, though that did not strike me as particularly noteworthy. It did, however, increase through the night which, again, did not seem notable owing to the intensity of the situation with which I was called to manage. Looking back, I would say one unusual feature was that the fatigue was not so much a sleepiness as a general sense of energy loss, which I suppose makes more sense, given the noticeable impact on my body weight.”

“Was there anything you noticed specifically that was out of the ordinary?”

“I can think of nothing.”

“Were there any visitors to the inn while John and I were at the village?”

“I would say no, though I cannot be certain of that as they easily could have been in parts of the inn and I did not mark their presence.

“Any further abnormalities in your health?”

“None I have noticed. No impairment of mental faculties, vision, locomotion or hearing. No
emotional perturbation or variations in the taste of food or perception of odors. Without the events of
today, I likely would not have given matters a second thought, so little changed has been the
remainder of my life.”

“Hmmmmm… and nothing before that morning?”

“If there were signs, I noticed nothing. Gregory?”

“No. I would have told you straight away if I thought something was wrong, but everything
seemed normal.”

“So, we may tentatively conclude that the inn harbored the source of the problem. Did you
consume anything that John or I did not?”

“I had a brandy or two in the library, that neither of you did unless you visited the library after I
went to bed.”

“No. Perhaps we should have that tested.”

“That could argue for a purely medical issue, I suppose.”

“It could indicate a magical one, also, if a potion was involved.”

What struck Mycroft most sharply was how seriously his brother was taking the somewhat ludicrous
notion of magic or paranormal goings-on. Sherlock seemed perfectly willing to approach this line of
inquiry with all due diligence now that they had binned their preconceptions about reality owing to
dear Gregory’s existence and this unsettling turn of events.

“Mrs. Hudson usually drinks a glass of that in the evenings when she doesn’t have guests, love,
so we should phone and ask if she’s noticed anything wrong. I hadn’t thought about it before, but
now I’m worried for her.”

“Ah. Good point. Gregory noted that Mrs. Hudson also partakes of the brandy when guests are
not present and we should likely check her condition.”

Sherlock nodded slowly and looked over at his partner who was finishing his tea and feeling his own
sense of worry about the kindly woman who already felt like a friend.

“Yes, that could be useful evidence. John?”

“I’ll phone and thank her for our enjoyable stay. Ask a few questions and see if I can learn
anything. I assume we don’t want to alarm her with any news about Mycroft’s situation.”

“You would assume incorrectly. If the inn is the source of the problem, then she, better than any
of us, might have an idea as to the vector of said problem. Of course, I have no doubt Mycroft and
his pet ghost will disagree, however…”

“Untrue, brother.”

Greg’s eyes widened at his lover’s calm statement, since he was ready to jump in with a very loud
disagreement with Sherlock’s opinion. There was no need to upset Mrs. Hudson, who would fret
endlessly about what Mycroft was suffering.

“Love, I’m not sure that’s wise. Mrs. Hudson cares about you and this will distress her terribly.”

Smiling that his ghost chose to express his uncertainty aloud rather than share it outright, Mycroft
nodded slightly to acknowledge Greg’s concern, but knew it was one that could not take precedence.

“With that, I do agree, however, only she will know if something new was added to the inn recently or if there was some change, regardless of how small, that might provide insight into the current predicament. I would not upset her, Gregory, if I did not think she might play a role in bringing this to a rapid close.”

“Alright, then… but I’ll do it. She would phone me immediately after she talked to John in any case, so we might as well save a step in the process.”

“An excellent idea. John? Gregory will contact Mrs. Hudson and see what he can learn about this situation.”

Something which pleased John greatly as he truly didn’t want to try and, first, break bad news to the innkeeper and, second, try to extract information based on a lie. He’d probably be bollocks at it and she’d catch him out, anyway, giving him a proper scolding for his efforts.

“Alright, sounds good. Then, you, me and Sherlock can move on with other things. Sherlock? Which things would those be?”

“We should make haste having Mycroft’s blood analyzed and any other tests you deem prudent at this time. I will begin researching likely poisons that could create this situation, as well as lore surrounding using magic to cause direct harm to a person. You are certain, brother, that Lestrade’s sketch of the mark is accurate?”

“It is.”

“Then have him email a copy to me and I will begin researching that.”

“I’ll start on that, lad, when I’m off the phone. Many hands make lighter work.”

Greg had typed that offer as fast as he could because, quite honestly, he was feeling more than slightly useless here and having a job to do, besides breaking troubling news to Mrs. Hudson, would, at least, keep his mind occupied.

“Very well. You begin with the mark and I will focus on the first two research items. I have no doubt more will be added as we progress, but your lack of need for sleep will be beneficial in maximizing research time.”

Now it was Mycroft’s turn to be pleased as he knew well that if his love did not have his own task to perform, he would likely worry himself to death. Proverbially, that is.

“I’m off to phone Mrs. Hudson, then. Love… don’t leave without letting me know, ok?”

Greg didn’t bother to type that last part, simply said it softly while leaning close to his lover and brushing his fingers along Mycroft’s long neck to give the nerves a tiny tingle of comfort. Sherlock was right, too. He didn’t need to sleep and every moment of his time would be devoted to seeing his lover safe and well. Whatever his Mycroft needed, he do his utmost to make happen, even if he had to call in help to see it done. Fortunately, John and Sherlock would likely be easy to conscript, though Sherlock might complain like a champion about it. The boy was worried about this brother, that much was certain and that, alone, would help keep Mycroft’s spirits up. Sherlock liked to hide his feelings, especially about Mycroft, and having them show, even in a not terribly emotional form, was a blessing.

“Well, inappropriate as it might be in some ways, the doctor in me wonders if now is a good time
for a spot of breakfast. I’d like you to do your best to keep your calories up, Mycroft, and a hearty breakfast is a good start. I doubt anything’s salvageable of what you started, so I’ll do a quick fry up and…”

“You are too kind, Doctor Watson, however, I am more than happy to prepare breakfast for myself and my guests.”

“You’re scared of my cooking, aren’t you?”

“Scared is a strong word…”

John huffed loudly and crossed his arms across his chest, while Mycroft simply smiled placidly at his indignation.

“Fine, but remember that when you’re wasting away, gasping for a good meal and I just… oh, I’m sorry, Mycroft. That was not the sort of joke to make today, was it.”

No, it wasn’t and John kindly didn’t remark on the wince he’d seen replace the smile on Mycroft’s face as the words spilled out of his mouth.

“Humor is always a welcome thing, John, think nothing of it.”

But John would and, from cutting his eyes over towards Sherlock, he knew that his partner would, too. He’d have a talk with Sherlock later when they were alone because, despite his overwrought dramas concerning his brother, there was no doubt he cared for Mycroft and this had to eating away at him. It wouldn’t stop munching, either, until they found a solution.

“I won’t then. In fact, I’ll place my breakfast order and make it lavish just to show you how not thinking about it I can be when I put my mind to it.”

Very diplomatic, Doctor Watson, and much appreciated. If there is anything that will make this truly unbearable is any form of tender handling or, heaven forbid, pity.

“I demand bacon!”

And brother dear also deftly sidesteps the tender handling issue. However, if their history was its own evidence, there would come a time where Sherlock would lose his prickly veneer, a time when only the two of them were present, and… the results would be brutally difficult for both of them, but highly important and special to them, as well. When that moment would come, he did not know, but… hopefully it would not come at the point where they had given up hope…

“ Oh no… that’s terrible!”

Greg had dreaded phoning Mrs. Hudson, and it was justified, in his opinion, hearing the utter shock and worry in her voice.

“We’ve got no idea what to do about it, either, but with everyone on the job, I can’t imagine we won’t find some solution to this horrible business.”

“Well, it’s clear what’s happening. She’s reaching for you from beyond the grave!”

No… no, that was not a direction he wanted his thoughts to travel.

“Alice is dead and gone, Mrs. Hudson.”
“That’s shite, that is. I mean, yes, she is dead, but she cursed you, you silly boy! This is part of the curse!”

Thoughts still avoiding that particular direction and doing it spectacularly, thank you very much.

“That’s a story, Mrs. Hudson. There’s no proof she ever did such a thing. There wasn’t even any real proof she was a witch! Most of that talk came from women who’d caught their lovers or husbands giving Alice more attention that was proper or… well, more than a few went further than lustful glances, but that doesn’t make someone a witch.”

“Stories come about for reasons, dear.”

“Ridiculous ones, usually! And witches’ stories, especially. Unfortunate, misunderstood women, though I’d not put Alice group, who caught a community’s need to lash out for whatever reason. I never was called out because she was dancing naked under a full moon or sacrificing babies or whatever it is witches are supposed to do. Frankly, I think she liked being thought of as a witch and helped the story spread.”

“She cast a spell on you, Greg! A lock of your hair, some of your things, one of those magic circle things you see in the films… you can’t say that’s all harmless and just for a lark.”

“I don’t even know if that’s true! That’s what the story says, but… who really knows. Not me, that’s for certain. People were saying a lot of things after I died and… besides, even if all of this was true, whatever ‘curse’ she laid on me, if being a ghost can appropriately be called a curse, would be on me and not Mycroft. And why wait over three hundred years for it to work? It doesn’t make sense.”

Unless…

“Greg… you know why it would act now and not before. You know, lad, even if you’re doing everything you possibly can not to admit it because it hurts too much to think that your Mycroft is being attacked because of a witch’s jealousy. You told him you loved him that night, did something wonderfully naughty to affirm that love and if you don’t think a woman who murdered you because you spurned her attention would reach out to hurt the person you fallen in love with, then you’re being willfully stupid.”

Not willfully stupid… willfully trying to ignore that conclusion which is starting to sound far more feasible and it’s, in its way, more terrifying than what I might have been imagining.

“No, I’m not, I…”

“Don’t want to be the cause of all of this.”

“Yeah.”

Mrs. Hudson wanted to leap through the phone and sit the ghost down for a good long talk, a real talk and not this typing nonsense, but that couldn’t happen. Her poor Greg… just finding love and happiness after a punishingly long time and it gets stabbed in the chest by an evil, evil woman. Well, evil Alice’s ghost might not be wandering about, but if they could learn a way to drag it back up from the hell it was living in, she’d give it a proper piece of her mind! And a kick in the arse, too. With very pointy shoes.

“And you aren’t, Greg. You didn’t do this. You did what anyone would do when they found the person who captured their heart. You didn’t do anything wrong, lad, not at all and I don’t want you blaming yourself any of this. Besides, like you said, you’ve got a wealth of talent working on
things and I can’t imagine any nasty-spirited girl could do something that your lot couldn’t find a way to fix.”

It was nice of Mrs. Hudson to try and boost his spirits, but this was his fault. If he hadn’t pursued Mycroft like a ridiculous, randy teenager, his love wouldn’t be in danger! He could only hope that she was right about them having a stronger, cleverer team. A team that had never dealt with anything like this before, though.

“Thanks.”

“But you don’t believe a word about it not being your fault.”

“Do you blame me?”

“No, no I don’t. But your Mycroft will feel the same way I do, so you remember not to be moany and whingy and just love him all the harder when he tells you that this isn’t on you. Can you do that?”

For Mycroft, he could. Not for himself, but for his Mycroft he could swallow his guilt, put on a brave face and just be a strong, supportive partner for the man he loved with everything in him.

“I can. He means much, much more to me than my wanting to bang my head against a brick wall in penance for putting him in this trouble.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

“Do you…”

“Yes, love?”

“Do you really think it a curse?”

“I don’t want to, but, yes, I do. That’s exactly where my mind went when you told me about your poor Mycroft and my instincts aren’t to be taken lightly, not with all the years I’ve lived. I know you want it to be something else; something easy to explain and remedy, but if Mycroft took his downturn here, there’s nothing in the inn that would do it. I had the same food and drink he did, there’s been no changes to the building or digging up bones in the garden or strange, cloaked figures joining me for tea.”

Which about answered all of Greg’s possible questions in one fell, though lamentable, swoop.

“We had to hope.”

“Nothing wrong with hoping, but sometimes you don’t get what you hope for. You get what you can make for yourself and, now, you have to make your Mycroft safe from that wicked woman.”

“My dear? I do hate to interrupt…”

Greg looked up and knew in the short time he’d been away from his lover, Mycroft hadn’t actually declined any further, but seeing him afresh made it seem so and feel like a punch to the stomach.

“It’s alright, we were about finished anyway. Want to say hello?”

Walking over to lean close to the tablet, Mycroft bid Mrs. Hudson hello and smiled at her girlish giggle in response.
“So good to hear your voice, dear. Let me guess, you’re pulling away my handsome conversation partner for something tawdry and private that these old ears would catch on fire if they heard.”

“You have hit the proverbial bullseye, Mrs. Hudson. Tawdriness is positively scorching the air as we speak.”

“Then, I’ll say goodbye and let you get to it. Greg, phone me later, alright? And any other time you want to. Mycroft, I want to hear from you, too. Don’t leave me in the dark, lad, because I’ll terribly worried.”

“I shall see you are kept fully informed.”

“What a good boy you are. Take care of yourself, Mycroft… I will be thinking about you.”

Very happy the call ended without any of the expected… emotion… from Mrs. Hudson, Mycroft drew a breath and cast expectant eyes towards Greg.

“You leaving now, love?”

The expectant eyes were not satisfied with that statement.

“Gregory, did Mrs. Hudson have any useful information?”

The expectant eyes now turned to concerned ones as Greg’s attempt at a reassuring smile fell very, very short of the mark.

“Gregory?”

“She… may have had useful information. We’ll talk about it tonight when you’re home. I… I think that would be best. Is that ok?”

Not particularly, but if his lover believed now was not the time for a conversation, then Mycroft would honor that belief and set aside his own curiosity. For now.

“Of course, it is. We shall have an abundance of quiet time this evening for any conversation you might desire. For now, then, I shall bid you goodbye and be off with Sherlock and John. If you feel the need, Gregory, do phone or text and I will respond, though there may be some time lag depending on the situation at the moment.”

“I will, and thank you. Be safe today, Mycroft. And, I’m always happy to get a little call or text from you, too, you know.”

Mycroft did know, and it was a small burst of joy in his day to simply be able to share an affectionate word or bit of news, sometimes terribly silly, with the man he adored.

“Then prepare for happiness, for I shall lavish you with attention to the point you are able to do little else with your day but sit chained to your tablet awaiting my next communique.”

“Perfect! I’ll sit very still and keep my foot right in that shackle. Alfred will keep an eye that I’m a good boy and send an alert if I try to escape.”

“Once again earning for himself a comfortable and contented retirement. Until later, my dear.”

“Until later.”
Mycroft bopped the space in front of Greg’s nose and quickly left the room before he simply dropped onto the sofa in his ghost’s study to let the full impact of the morning sink into his bones. There was time for that tonight, though. Whatever his love had to tell him, it wasn’t happy or reassuring, so… crawl onto the sofa, turn down the lights, play some music and… talk. Of the individuals who could have been the one to stand as the other half of his soul, what a joy it was to find someone to whom he could talk without any fear or shame or hesitation. Dear, dear Gregory… how precious you are to me. And, if this marks, ultimately, the final measure of my days, they could not, in any manner, be happier ones…
This did not bode well...

“Anthea… what on earth are you doing?”

Because it cannot be what my eyes are telling me you are doing.

“Making a voodoo doll.”

His vision was verified! His PA was at her desk, which was cluttered with various fabrics, glues, threads and other sundries that made it look like some form of handicrafts shop, merrily building a grotesque figure that would startle any number of ferocious beasts or Sherlock.

“Might I inquire as to why you are doing that particular thing?”

“I would think that would be obvious.”

Oh dear. He had already died and gone to his personal hell where nonsense reigned and his logical mind made him utterly unable to even function in the damned society to which he had been consigned.

“You are thinking incorrectly.”

“Look. With your eyes. What do you see?”

Anthea held up her creation, early-stage though it was, and waggled it around in an impudent manner that made Mycroft snort loudly.

“Is this for a young relative? I dearly hope not unless your goal is to forever be free from gifting obligations at holidays or their eventual marriage.”

“It’s for you!”

“Why would I need a voodoo doll for… is that Tiny Tim?”

“The little boy with crutches?”

“The gentleman who played the ukulele.”

“I had no idea you would know who he is. I’m impressed.”

“Then I am correct in my identification.”

“You’re wronger than wrong, but I’m just shocked you didn’t guess it was Chaucer or Disraeli.”

Hell was supposed to be a tormenting place and thus it was proven.

“In any case, might we simply…”

“It’s a witch!”

“Very well, it is a witch, now might we…”

“Not a witch. The witch.”
“Which witch? Oh dear heavens…”

“The one who’s cursed you!”

Mycroft stared dumbfounded at his PA and wondered what had gotten into her head. Or, rather, who had gotten in…

“Wh… from where would you get the idea that I am cursed?”

“I was told. In detail, too.”

Apparently his lover had gone spectacularly off script and taken matters into his own hands.

“I see. I asked Gregory not to broach this issue with you and I have no idea why he would put forth the specific notion of a curse, however…”

“I haven’t talked to Greg.”

“Oh. Sherlock, then.”

“Nope.”

Well, there was only one further option.

“John phoned, I see. I suppose it is to be expected that, given he shall be overseeing my health…”

“And on you go, careening down a third wrong road. You’re terrible at guessing games.”

“Anthea, there is no one else who has been party to the events of the morning and…”

“Martha told me.”

A rogue piece lands upon the chessboard. Simply marvelous…

“Ah. I had forgotten that you keep in touch with Mrs. Hudson.”

“She phoned me immediately after she finished talking to Greg. Oh! And I forgot…”

Setting down her doll, Anthea hopped up from her chair, smoothed her skirt and punched Mycroft in the arm.

“Gadzooks! Have you gone mad, woman!”

“That’s for not telling me you and Greg officially admitted to being ridiculously in love! And that you had ghost sex.”

“WHAT!”

“I admit the latter can stay private, unless the details are exceedingly steamy, in which case I want all of them, but the former is very much my business as I have to adjust my expectations for you due to you being dopey and heart-eyed for the time being. Though, with the curse working, that might balance the dopey heart-eyes a touch.”

“I… I have no idea what to say.”

“I suspect you do. Words are very much your thing and the more the better.”
The latter being true does not negate that you are positively rotten for mentioning it.

“If pressed, I suppose I would say that my arm is now throbbing, you are addled and I am not, as far as I am explicitly aware, the victim of a curse.”

Though, that is not a terribly large leap of supposition, given the circumstances.

“You are fine, I am not addled and Martha says you are. Done.”

“We are far from done, however…”

*However*, dear Gregory did say they had matters to discuss this evening. Matters, obviously, of a troubling nature.

“… I would be interested in learning how Mrs. Hudson came to that assumption.”

“Well, you’ve got a mysterious mark on you that only you and Greg can see and, oh… I don’t know… Greg was murdered by a jealous witch! Of course the horrid thing would slap a curse on you when Greg fell in love with you.”

Oh. Oh… that was not heartening, though, strangely, well-reasoned.

“The truth of Gregory’s murder has never been established.”

“Even you couldn’t hide how weak you knew that was when you actually heard yourself say it and you are a champion of hiding things. Well, from everyone but me, that is.”

Mycroft sighed loudly and motioned Anthea to follow him into his office, rolling his eyes when she snatched the doll off of her desk, along with needle and thread so she could continue her work, which she did as soon as she was seated in her traditional seat across from his desk, near the monitor that she turned to whatever visually-impressive movie had her attention at the moment when the various dronings of one of her Mr. Holmes’s meeting became too much to bear.

“Now, I would appreciate it if you divulged the details of yours and Mrs. Hudson’s conversation.”

“There isn’t much more to say, really. Greg told her about what happened to you and she’s convinced that it’s evil Alice. I have to say, it fits. More than, say, some purely coincidental, random, freak occurrence involving magic symbols and curses.”

Which seemed to be working fast, in Anthea’s opinion. Her employer was noticeably sadder in appearance than yesterday, which made her regret a bit the force of her previous punch.

“Hmmm… we have not yet entirely ruled out an organic root to his little problem.”

Though, from the tone in Mycroft’s voice, Anthea was well aware *he* had ruled it out and wasn’t particularly happy to find a fleshed-out theory that supported that position.

“Martha said Doctor Watson was going to be running some tests.”

“He is or, rather, one of our laboratories shall run the tests and pass along the results to John. If there is no evidence of a purely medical problem, then he shall work to manage treatment while we seek another route to affect a cure.”

Anthea held up her doll and pointed, which made Mycroft roll his eyes again, but secretly admit it was the best plan they had at the moment.
“Amusing. But, in that vague direction may be where our efforts turn. Truly this is far outside any of our experience and it will require extensive research even to craft a list of potential causes, let alone learn and implement solutions to those causes.”

“Well, it’s not as if you don’t have the best possible researchers and resources at your fingertips.”

“I rather believe the Crown would frown upon my use of those researchers and resources to probe the mysteries of witches, wizards, spells and hobgoblins.”

“It is genetic that your family has to make everything as difficult as possible?”

Yes.

“Of course not.”

“Martha said the mark on your shoulder seemed like a symbol of some form. You could easily have that researched. Anyone asks, you ran across it in someone’s notes or caught a glimpse of it in one of those deplorable terrorist videos.”

That was not, at all, an unworkable suggestion.

“You could say ‘Thank you, Anthea, for being brilliant,’ rather than just sitting there nodding contemplatively.”

“I do apologize. I was trying to throw my voice so your witch puppet could express my gratitude for me, but my skills in vaudeville are, apparently, a touch rusty.”

“You’ll express your gratitude with a bottle of that vodka I like.”

“The vodka priced higher than most people’s cars?”

“The same. Make it, two, actually. One for me and one for Alice here. Though, I can’t say she’ll be able to drink hers very easily with her mouth sewn up tightly, so I’ll have her share.”

Despite the cheekiness, despite the nonsense, despite the doll, despite it all… his PA knew precisely how to handle the situation so things between them were not uncomfortable or, worse, inefficient. Two bottles it would be, along with one of those special cakes she enjoyed from the bakery that did a credit check on customers before they even wasted their time showing them the sugary merchandise.

“Most appropriate, given, also, that she would soon be filled with pins and that would certainly allow your lovely vodka to pour out, which is not a fate suitable for fine spirits.”

“Good point. It’s too bad, though, that Greg can’t drink because I suspect he’s aching for a proper drunk right now to help wash the guilt out of his mind.”

“Guilt? For what would Gregory… oh.”

That would explain no small part of his love’s demeanor when they last spoke. His poor, dear ghost…

“But I know that you’ll reassure him that this isn’t his fault, no matter what he thinks. And, by ‘I know,’ I mean ‘I absolutely expect,’ so don’t take it lightly.”

“I shall… reassure Gregory, that is. Unfortunately, I wager you are correct about his feelings and that is not a burden he should have to bear.”
“All part of that nasty witch’s plan, probably.”

Anthea flicked the face of her doll with one of her perfectly-tended fingernails and gave it a rude gesture for good measure.

“It nicely would complement the overall theme of purposeful devilry, yes.”

“Then here’s what we’ll do. Order you a little nibble, then make a start on the Hungary matter. When that’s done, we can make a research pan for forging ahead on that magical mark of yours.”

“We may begin on the Hungary situation now, for I certainly do not need a nibble this soon after breakfast.”

Anthea let the first hint of her overwhelming concern for her boss show in her eyes, something she knew to keep well-hidden for Mycroft’s dignity and peace of mind, and sighed at the slight hollowness in his cheeks, as well as the extra motion that indicated his waistcoat didn’t quite fit properly anymore.

“Well, I do and I’m not going to eat alone, so we are both having one of those delectable chocolate buns with the hazelnut cream filling you’re always having me steal from the lads in the cryptography section. If it helps, think of it as good mood food and you do prefer to approach Hungary in a good mood than otherwise.”

And a certain PA’s preferred dress size might have to be ignored for a bit, because if it took matching Mr. Holmes bite for bite to try and keep him from wasting away, she’d order a new wardrobe and be glad for it.

“Oh, very well. They are particularly succulent buns.”

And you are a particularly devoted PA. Much to eternal gratitude.

“Not as succulent as Greg’s, I wager.”

“That is none of your business. But… no, they don’t even come close.”

Mycroft took a deep breath and slapped a smile on his face before entering the house, not wanting the energy ebb he was experiencing to be as noticeable as it felt in his bones.

“Mycroft! Oh love, come inside and relax. You look positively dead on your feet!”

The deep breath(smile) combination was unsuccessful.

“Gregory, my dear, what a sight you are for world-weary eyes.”

Smiling gently at the ghost’s frantic ‘come on!’ motions, Mycroft followed his partner into the sitting room and dropped onto the sofa with a notable thud.

“Long day?”

“As are they all.”

Though it was made somewhat less long by having a PA with a reputation an angry tiger would envy keeping minor nuisances at bay so he could focus on important issues. Especially when his focus was wavering a bit today as his brain struggled to absorb the harsh reality that he was now
“How are you feeling, Mycroft?”

Better from seeing your lustrous smile, my beloved Gregory.

“Fatigued, but only slightly more than is typical.”

“Get any news from John about your tests?”

“No, but he indicated that it might be a day or so before all had been completed. I have full faith we will be informed as soon as any information is available.”

“I hope so, because I didn’t have much luck on my end today. I worked to try and find out what that mark on your shoulder meant, but nothing so far. I’ve only scratched the surface, though, so it’s early going yet.”

Was that a useful opening? Regardless, it would do…

“Actually, my dear, I may be able to offer some assistance on that front.”

“Oh? Going to take me to the library? That would be helpful, actually, if it’s one of those enormous ones at a university that have a collection of books on magic or folklore and the like.”

“I shall be happy to do that when I have the time, however, I was more of a mind to use certain resources of my own for researching the symbol I have acquired. It… Anthea had the idea, actually, and it is certainly one worth pursuing.”

“Anthea? You told her? Didn’t we have a row this very morning about that?”

“I cannot claim the honor of informing my PA; that goes fully to our dear Mrs. Hudson.”

How adorable you appear, my Gregory, when you are as chagrined as a proverbial toddler caught with his hand in the biscuit barrel.

“I did not think about that. I’m so sorry, love! It never occurred to me to tell her not to pass the word along, because I forgot about her knowing Anthea. That was idiotic of me… I really am sorry, Mycroft. I know you didn’t want…”

Mycroft reached out and held a finger in front of Greg’s lips, which did as good a job bringing his ghost’s self-flagellation to an end as if he had pressed them closed.

“Ultimately, the revelation was a fortuitous one, as Anthea is exceptionally prepared, it seems, not only to accept Mrs. Hudson’s claims of a curse, but to work to fight it.”

“The curse! She… she told you about that, too?”

“My PA and Mrs. Hudson had a very informative conversation, it seems. And… I suspect that was the thrust of the conversation you wanted to wait and have with me tonight, correct?”

The light dimmed slightly in Greg’s eyes and Mycroft knew, without a single doubt, that no curse-flinging witch would ever be worthy of man such as this. That she believed it for even an instant demonstrated the depth of her delusions.

“Yeah, it was. It didn’t feel like something I could just blurt out when you had one foot out of the door already.”
"And I would agree. Even without corroboration, the theory does have a whiff of plausibility about it, disturbing as that is. What is your opinion on the subject?"

"Honestly, I don’t know. I’d like to say it’s ridiculous, because witches don’t exist, but that would be a bit rich coming from a ghost. I do know Alice was never proven to be a witch, though she didn’t try very hard to deny it, either. And, nobody ever did anything about it, either, like try to run her off or something of the sort. It was just one of those little things you’d hear when, say, she had a new lad on her arm. ‘Oh, Alice bewitched another poor thing away from his wife/girlfriend/fiancé.’ Or, if someone’s wagon wheel broke, there’d be a joke question about whether they’d done anything to make Alice mad at them, but… nothing especially serious. At least, not so I thought."

"I see. And, I suppose, at the time, a bothersome or unusually-spirited woman might be labeled a witch merely as a matter of course."

"Wasn’t unheard of. I can’t confirm the story about there being a magic circle and bits of my things in her cottage, either. That part of the story does go back a way, though. Back to when I first became aware that I was a ghost, but… it’s the sort of thing one might expect to circulate in the village gossip after a thing like that. Me going missing and her riding off, never to be seen again, I mean. I just don’t know."

"Most understandable. What do your instincts tell you?"

"That I can’t ignore it might be true. I mean… here I am! A ghost, chained to a portrait… my body never found, so I certainly didn’t die a normal, natural death. Maybe the truth of it is she did murder me and threw in my fucking miserable life as a ghost as another bit of revenge. It’s not much of a leap to think she’d see anyone who made that miserableness less miserable punished for it. It’s not much of a leap at all."

"Then that shall be our operating theory until another arises. Anthea is rather eager to begin pursuing the research on the mark I am sporting and will coordinate those efforts with yours, so do not believe she is overtaking your chosen line of investigation. She, herself, remarked that your creative flair would be most necessary in considering avenues of investigation and seeing possibilities and pathways that would not occur to her. And, I have no doubt that your endeavors will branch off into other zones associated with this problem, so I am confident your research team will be an active one."

"With Anthea on the job, it’ll be faster going that me tackling things alone and she has access to lots of things I don’t, so I won’t say no to the help, that’s for certain! I’d be stupid to do that and Greg Lestrade may be dead, but he’s not stupid. The more people on this, love, the happier I am, because it means we’ll find an answer quickly and the quicker it happens, the better. I’m so, so sorry this is happening to you. You’ve done nothing to deserve it and it’s not fair. Not in the least."

Mycroft frowned slightly and cocked his head this way and that until Greg had no choice but to meet his eye.

"This is not your fault, my dear."

"It is and there’s no other way to look at it."

"There are many ways to look at this, including the correct one, which is that a dastardly woman has perpetrated a disgraceful act on us both for which she and she alone is to blame."

"I dragged you into that ‘us’ part, remember?"
“Patently untrue since you are physically incapable of dragging so much as a piece of goose down.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do and it remains patently untrue. You did not drag me, Gregory. I dove unabashedly and rather brazenly into your proverbial arms and have never regretted one second of that decision. We have achieved something that few do in this world, laid the foundation for a lifetime of loving companionship and genuine happiness. This current dilemma changes nothing about that and we shall emerge victorious to continue on our contented journey together. Now, will you not give me a smile? Even a whisper of one? Frowning hastens the accumulation of wrinkles, so I have been told, and I do prize your youthful visage.”

Greg’s snort of laughter was like angels singing to Mycroft’s ears and he reveled in the fact his extremely wobbly sense of humor so easily lifted his ghost’s mood.

“I’ll see if I can find a company that sells beauty cream for ghosts and buy a whole vat of it.”

“What a happy day this is for me! My favorite chocolate buns this morning and, now, an eternally-youthful paramour. The riches are simply raining down from the sky.”

Greg laughed again and knew, in his heart, that he would never forgive himself if something happened to the man he loved, but he couldn’t add his own guilt to Mycroft’s struggle. His Mycroft was the most incredible, wonderful, special person that existed and he would do his very, very best to keep a smile on those lovely lips and, when he could, a lustful fire in that extremely sexy belly. Might have to make a dash to the inn a lot sooner than they planned because… lustful Mycroft was an especially contented version of the species and he now had a powerful desire to see those lusts satisfied in any and all nerve-tingling ways…

“Raining riches? Lucky for you, you own a very sturdy brolly.”

“My day gets better and better.”

“Dare we try and take it further up the better ladder with a soothing drink, a phoned-for dinner, a hot bath and a good film we can watch while you’re lying in bed so if you fall asleep from all that contentment, you’re already dressed for it?”

“I do enjoy being daring.”

“The dare we shall! You order the most decadent take-away you can think of while I pour your drink and you can tell me about your day while we wait for it. You’re a bit late tonight, so I suspect you had a busy time at the office.”

“Not so much busy as in the talons and teeth of my PA who insisted on a slower pace of work so that I did not overtire myself and mandated frequent breaks for biscuits and whatnot. Fiendish woman.”

“Villainous, truly villainous.”

And having the whole of Greg’s approval. His poor love… Mycroft’s ring seemed even looser now than it was this morning, but when they got undressed for their bath later, that would tell the tale. He was afraid to suggest pulling out the scale he’d seen hiding in the towel cupboard, but that would be the next step. It was data for John, at minimum, and data was definitely needed to find the way out of this terrible business. While they worked towards that, he would be positive, optimistic and see his love spirits kept as high as possible. Share time, be supportive and forward-thinking, juggl,
dance naked, put on a really filthy show for his lover’s personal pleasure… whatever his Mycroft wanted or needed, his Mycroft would get.

Of course, what was really needed was making all of this go away, but that wasn’t happening this very instant. Or tomorrow, most likely. Something told him, a mean-spirited piece of work like Alice would not allow this to be a simple thing to fix. Well, they’d show her. It was bit cliché to say love conquered all, but he’d prove that cliché true. Love, especially the deep and true sort, could easily conquer a vain, selfish, sadistic, waste of DNA who thought curses were an acceptable way to handle a case of bruised feelings.

The best part, of course, was that conquerors always got the spoils of war and he looked very forward to spoiling a certain unique and special man for a very long time to come…
Chapter 33

If Greg could die from worry, he’d be doing it right now, waiting for John to give his verdict on the test results they’d received from the medical lab. It had taken two days to run all the tests John wanted and, in the meantime, Mycroft had noticeably grown thinner and… lessened. Still mentally sharp as a chef’s finest knife, but nothing was fitting anymore and he’d had to give up on wearing his ring altogether since it wouldn’t stay on his finger for love nor money. It was only through some creative tucking and pinning that his clothes looked presentable for work and an emergency tailoring session was on the schedule for tomorrow afternoon to make those changes a little more sturdy and to start producing a set of basic mix and match clothes to keep Mycroft respectable-looking for those government people who believed that sort of thing was a major part of the measure of a man.

“Alright… I don’t know if this is good or bad news.”

“Do not be offended, Doctor Watson, but that is not reassuring me in the least.”

“It’s not meant to, I suppose.”

Mycroft cast a glance at Greg, who was practically hopping foot to foot with nervousness and was comforted his love was as unhappy with that pronouncement as was he.

“Might we have a degree of clarity? Perhaps a few details to know better your uncertainty?”

“What? Oh… I’m sorry, Mycroft. This just isn’t what I was expecting. Or, maybe it was, but was hoping I wouldn’t see.”

“That was neither clarifying nor detailed.”

“Yeah, I’m balls today, apparently. Ok… you’re fine.”

“Pardon?”

“Not a thing wrong or, at least, beyond standard normal ranges for a man your age and general level of activity.”

Sherlock snatched the test result documents out of John’s hands, which John had already blocked him doing twice, and began reading through the information at a blistering pace.

“This has to be incorrect. Mycroft should have wildly elevated cholesterol or compounds found only in buttercream polluting his blood.”

Greg’s swat to the back of Sherlock’s head went straight through Sherlock’s head but since it made Mycroft snort in laughter, Greg decided it was still a victory.

“So sorry to disappoint you, brother, but it seems I now have demonstrable evidence that I am not becoming a human cake and that particular insult must be laid, finally, to rest.”

“No.”

Of course not. But, as Sherlock’s nonsense was attempting to mask his profound concern, it was not a hardship for Mycroft to simply roll his eyes and motion John to continue on with his report.

“Me again? Ok, then I’ll add in that your vitals are still holding strong and, since you haven’t reported any other symptoms besides… the obvious ones… all I can say is you’re as healthy as any
doctor might hope for his patient. I think we can rule out any discrete medical issue and that’s why I’m not sure if this is good or bad news. There’s nothing for me to treat or manage besides suggesting you pack in as many dietary calories as you can and hope that slows things a bit. There are a variety of weight-boosting drinks that don’t taste completely awful, according to a few patients I’ve seen, and I’ll leave the names here for you, but do your best to increase your overall intake and don’t shy away from all the decadent things you love. If there’s a bright spot to all of this, it’s that you can indulge yourself shamelessly until we find a way to sort out this mess.”

Mycroft shot another look at Greg, glad that the ghost wasn’t frantically typing out a response to that, since shameless indulgence had been their strategic plan since nearly this began. The results were not terribly heartening, as witnessed by looseness of his shirt and trousers.

“I shall take my few bits of luck and guard them zealously, Doctor Watson. So, if a medical solution is not available, then we must take the other fork in our proverbial road. Sherlock?”

“Yes?”

“How goes your end of the investigation?”

Oh, that was a ferocious and rather telling scowl.

“Humans are imbecilic, superstitious, nonsensical creatures.”

“Thank you for you illuminating lecture on the human condition, Professor Holmes, but if you will return to the question at hand…”

“I have not strayed from the topic in the slightest, I was laying the foundation for what I was going to say next.”

“Which was?”

“I… it is rather slow going.”

For his brother to admit that publicly, Mycroft knew the task must be an arduous one, indeed…

“The volume of information is somewhat large, I suppose.”

“And with deplorably little academic cataloging or verification! Ramblings and rantings, the fantastical daydreams of overheated imaginations! Though there is a fairly robust body of… I shall not say respectable, for purposeless pursuits such as sociology and anthropology do not merit the title… but marginally-researched material available, but it clearly is from the point of view that true magical actions are mythical and focus more on how the belief in such things is put to use. Now, though, since we have indication that magical effects are not necessarily a byproduct of weak-minded hysteria, I have no earthly idea what can and cannot be discounted from ramblings, rantings and weepings of the remainder of the reports.”

“Ah, yes, I see your problem.”

“That does not mean, of course, that it shall thwart me.”

“I do not expect that it will, brother dear, I simply recognize the rather unique nature of the task and credit that it will be neither a quick nor straightforward one.”

Which was at the heart of Sherlock’s dilemma. Time… how much his brother had remaining and how long it would take to sift through the chaff to find a few kernels of wheat. Mycroft’s
diminishment was alarmingly rapid and… no, there was no and. They had to find a solution and he would devote all his energies in that direction until they met with success. Mycroft was, without doubt, a dismal troll, but the world was a bit less dismal with that troll in it going about his trollish ways than it would be without him.

“I’m free to help now, Sherlock, since I won’t be researching some bizarre toxin or treatment of infection by a parasite only found in one small lake in the most remote reaches of Peru. Since I’ve got more experience with the rantings, ramblings and weepings of humanity than you do, maybe we can hack through the weeds faster together than you doing it alone.”

Sherlock nodded grudgingly at his partner, but the grudgingly bit was more due to the fact that John was now available to help and not pursuing a realistic, medical solution to their dilemma.

“Given your standard choice of abysmal fiction to rot your mind, this is one occasion I may applaud your lurid and fantastical turn of mind.”

John’s rude gesture served as his answer, but he had to admit Sherlock had a point. Since the experience in his youth, he had taken more than a slight interest in various books and films about the supernatural or paranormal or whatever this might be called. A lot of it was complete crackpot looniness, but he’d read through a few accounts that were eerily close to what he had experienced and he suspected they were as real as was his. That might translate to finding credible information about magic or whatnot amongst the various sources of information Sherlock was prowling though At least, he could hope and hope could be a powerful thing sometimes…

“Excellent. You and Doctor Watson shall make a stellar team, as always…”

Given he had been watching his ghost make certain motions for the past few moments, Mycroft knew that the ghost was eager to share their newest information about the source of his vexation and now was as good a time as any to do that.

“… and, though I do not know if this broadens or narrows the scope of inquiry, we now have a theory to pursue.”

Sherlock’s scowl deepened as he hurled himself into one of the comfortable chairs in Mycroft’s sitting room and nestled in to glare at his brother as punishment for having a theory on the case before he did. But, as Mycroft detailed that theory, Sherlock had to admit it couldn’t be dismissed out of hand, as much as he would desperately like to do so.

“Bollocks, Greg. I forgot about your evil murdering girlfriend, which is odd since I usually remember the ones I’ve had very vividly.”

John cast a grin towards and above Alfred, since that was where Greg’s tablet was positioned and hopefully, so was the ghost. Fortunately, John aimed correctly as the pen began immediately to type on the tablet.

“I forgot, too, actually. Or didn’t make the connection. Luckily, Mrs. Hudson is smarter than all of us and said it straight off. Of course, we don’t know if it’s true, but it’s a solid place to start. Focus on witchcraft and witches and eliminate the rest. And, as far as I know, if she was a witch, Alice wouldn’t have known about any of the practices beyond Great Britain and, maybe, a bit of Europe. Nothing from other parts of the world, so that’s helpful, too.”

Something that seemed to have Sherlock’s agreement, if the detective’s rapid nodding was to be believed.
"Yes, that narrows things considerably. Anything else, Lestrade? Even if it seems minor or insignificant, it could be helpful to my… our… investigation."

And that task had been at the forefront of Greg’s brain since he’d wrapped that brain around the idea of his Mycroft being victim of a witch’s curse. Unfortunately, his traitorous brain seemed fairly empty on the subject.

"No, at least, nothing that, to me, seems important. In truth, I never put much stock in the witch stories and it wasn’t talked about very much in the village. I do know she never really traveled or had family or friends live abroad who might send her a letter now and then. She could read, though, that much I know. Better than me, actually. She did have a few books in her cottage, but I never bothered to see what they were. Good seamstress, though. And handy with decorative needlework. That’s how she earned her living, besides gathering flowers and herbs to sell at market."

"Hmmm… whereas the knowledge of herbs and plants might be important if she were still alive and able to prepare a poison, I cannot see it playing a role now. However, I suppose plants might play a role in whatever ritual she enacted to perpetrate this crime. You are certain you do not know what books she owned?"

"Sorry, Sherlock, but I don’t. It wasn’t very unusual or noteworthy, in truth. People did have books, even in my day, though not many and most were fairly boring. Maybe not the really poor people or those who couldn’t read, but a village our size would be expected to have a fair number of people or families with a book or two to their name."

"My dear, might they still exist? Or any of her possessions? They might provide some information of help to us?"

Disappointing his Mycroft hurt Greg worse than any physical wound ever could, but he had nothing to offer to prevent that disappointment from happening.

"I don’t know, to be honest. My inclination is to say no or, if they do, that they’re scattered about and nobody knows who they belonged to in the first place. I’ve not heard any stories that have her trailing a cart behind them when she rode off the day I disappeared, so she may have left behind what she had. But, I also don’t remember any stories about what happened to those things. My few bits and pieces were given to my cousin, but she didn’t have family in the area anymore, so… people may have simply helped themselves to what they wanted. Her cottage is still there, in a way, but it’s been renovated a few times into a more modern house. There are probably some elements of the original structure remaining, but certainly none of the furnishings or other things."

"I see. And she never again returned to the village, correct?"

"Not that I know of and that would have been the talk of the village for weeks if it’d happened."

"Very well…"

While Mycroft had a moment of thought, Sherlock and John shared a look which confirmed that the other was thinking what they were thinking. They were now on a witch hunt and the fact that the witch was no longer alive didn’t matter in the slightest. At least, this was somewhat familiar to them, as they’d had to track down missing persons or work cases where events of the past were reaching forward to impact the future. The shape of this problem was gaining a few recognizable curves and angles, which put them on stronger footing than they had been to this point.

"… perhaps our first order of business is to see if we can trace the movements of your Alice from the point she left your village. Wherever she settled, she may have boasted of her reputation or
spoken hints concerning your fate. Have you any idea, Gregory, where, perhaps, she went after leaving the area?”

“Ummmm… no. No idea at all. I don’t recall her ever speaking about friends or relatives in other places. She wasn’t an incapable person, so building another life anywhere she chose wouldn’t have been a terrible problem, even if she was entirely on her own.”

“Then the search radius will be a large one, but certainly not limitless. Records for that period are not as complete as one would hope, but they are not non-existent, either and there is a chance that some part of her life was recorded by a church or a tax or property accounting. Unfortunately, much of that has yet to be digitized and would have to be searched manually, however, I have many hands skilled at manual research to dispatch, as required. I shall take point on that aspect of the investigation while you, Sherlock and John continue on with seeking information about the mark on my shoulder and the mechanics of curses and how we might vanquish this one.”

Mycroft’s crisp, matter of fact tone was actually a victory in Greg’s opinion, as there had been a vaguely bleak undercurrent to his words the past day or so, underscoring just how shaken was the man he loved. He didn’t need his former-policeman’s observational powers to know that his Mycroft was feeling powerless in all of this and that was precisely the feeling that would tear at Mycroft’s heart and mind the most savagely. That and defeat. Luckily, they weren’t there yet and, if he had anything to say about it, they never would be.

“If I am forced to, for even one minute, interview any supposed witches, Mycroft, I shall drink a pint of lye in your office and lock the door so you are left to watch me dissolve on your precious, though atrociously ugly, rug.”

John immediately began to wonder where he might find the local London coven and set them on his partner for a course of lectures on witchcraft and its historical practices. It would be brilliant to see! And, oddly, a plausible investigatory tangent to follow, given the circumstances.

“I shall script a thorough set of notes, brother dear, and pass them along to Scotland Yard’s forensics unit as your final assistance towards their crime-solving efforts. I have no doubt the details of the process shall come in handy at some point and won’t your disembodied spirit be delighted to have made such a lasting contribution to their work.”

While Sherlock hissed, Mycroft took a steadying breath and steeled himself for continuing further with their banter. He did not, in the least, enjoy the lack of energy he was experiencing. As he was never the most energetic of men, the loss of what little he had was positively infuriating.

“Love, you alright?”

However, his Gregory’s devotion never failed to inspire a bloom of vigor in his progressively withered frame that made carrying on that much easier to bear. And that the devotion was expressed away from his brother’s infantile ears was a blessing of its own, necessitating only a small smile for a response and to serve as a promise that they would have time for a private discussion once they were alone.

“Maybe we should let Sherlock and John scurry off to enjoy their evening and we’ll work on enjoying ours, what say?”

That earned Greg and even larger smile and he laughed when Mycroft cleared his throat and sat up straighter in his chair as if he was preparing to make a royal proclamation.

“Until the lye drinking performance, however, what say we bring this meeting to a close and
commence tomorrow with refreshed perspectives. I shall ask Anthea to prepare a research strategy concerning Alice… oh, Gregory, what was her surname?”

“Adler.”

“Ad… could you repeat that, my dear?”

Greg looked at the three shocked faces staring at him and wondered what he’d just stepped in and how badly did it smell.

“Adler. Alice Adler.”

It was a race as to whose hand grabbed for their mobile first, but Sherlock’s won by a hair.

“Here. Is this her?”

“What?”

“Is. This. Her?”

Shoving the phone in the vicinity of Alfred and his cargo, Sherlock watched the pen be set down while, he supposed, the ghost moved closer to look at the photo that was on display. When the pen rose again, it was three held breaths awaiting the answer.

“No. Well, in a general way, yes. The eyes are similar, though, I have to say. Why? What’s wrong with you three?”

The quantity of exhaled breath would have blown Greg off his feet if he was alive and he narrowed his eyes to cut towards Mycroft, who was the only one who could see his confusion.

“That, my dear, is Irene Adler, an individual with whom we have had dealings in the recent past. Rather unsavory dealings, at that.”

“John was extremely jealous, which was amusing, however, if there was an individual who could be the reincarnation of a witch, it would certainly be Irene. Or, perhaps, to serve as the host of a purposeful, revenge-seeking ghost, as I suspect Irene would staunchly support the witch’s desire to aggrieve you for your crass spurning of her attentions.”

“I was not jealous!”

“Your shouted objection says otherwise.”

“Sherlock…”

While Sherlock and John battled over John’s non/very existent jealousy, Greg looked harder at the photo and didn’t like that the more he looked, the greater the number of little things he could see that reminded him of the Alice he’d known. The sharpness and intelligence that practically reached out and gave you a slap across the face. The clear, blazing independence and confidence that would make the foolish and weak both fear and envy her. This was a woman who knew her power and how best to use it. And that lovely nose was sparking all sorts of memories from long, long ago…

“Gregory, my love… your thoughts seem to have deepened.”

“What? Yeah, I suppose they have. This isn’t her if you’re thinking she might still be alive and roaming about, but… she could be related. I don’t know much about genetics and all that, but I’m seeing enough to believe it might be possible. It’s odd the name would be Adler, though. That was
Alice’s name and women’s names don’t get passed along family lines that way, normally.”

“I see…”

Though Mycroft certainly wished he didn’t. Putting Irene Adler out of their lives had not been easy, compounded immensely by Sherlock’s unspoken admiration for her cleverness and delight in their game. It was exceedingly unlikely that there was an ancestor-descendent relationship here, but, given the circumstances, nothing could be taken for granted. Apparently, this curse was finding all sorts of ingenious ways to irritate him and it certainly wasn’t hesitant to use, as was said, the big guns when it had the urge.

“… well, it is worth investigating, nonetheless. No stone unturned, I believe, should be our philosophy for this endeavor, though Ms. Adler is a stone I had hoped would stay quietly unremarked in our lives for, say, eternity.”

“Mycroft, you cannot seriously believe that Irene, of all people, is somehow related to... it’s ridiculous!”

“I am a man, John, enduring a witch’s curse and passionately in love with a ghost. You have no idea what I am prepared to believe at this point.”

John opened his mouth to protest, then clamped it shut. Irene was poison. Maybe not evil, maybe with her own, unique set of principles, but poison, nonetheless. Even a phone call, a sodding Christmas card!, exchanged with her was a river through which that poison could flow and they had enough trouble right now to add that to the mix.

But… given the gossamer threads they were grasping at, they really couldn’t let a single one slip through their fingers if it had even the slightest chance of helping Mycroft. The man looked worse every day and… they didn’t have nearly as many days as he would like before what was bad tipped cleanly into what was worse, then it would be something he refused to contemplate. Fine, alright, yes, whatever… it probably wouldn’t lead anywhere, probably would be a waste of time, but if they didn’t reach out to Irene and something happened to Mycroft it would haunt them… him… the rest of his life.

“Right, then. Can you find her?”

Sherlock’s snort prompted John to make a show of wiping essence of Sherlock off of his sleeve, but he kept his eyes on Mycroft, whose reaction was not as theatrical, but equally suffused with ‘did you really ask that of me, John’ as was his younger brother’s. What Mycroft could do with a raised eyebrow and a pair of pursed lips was rightfully the stuff of legends…

“Fine! Sorry I asked. You and Sherlock can handle the details of that while Greg and I carry on with the symbol on your shoulder and finding out what information there might be on real witches and curses. Sound good, Greg?”

Yes

Though, from the concerned look on his face, Mycroft was not at all certain his ghost actually believed that to be the case. More for their private conversation later on…

“Then there we have it. And, with that, I’m in need of a very large drink, something so greasy I’m violating my medical oath by eating it and rubbish with lots of explosions in it on the telly. Since that would make Mycroft strangle himself, Sherlock, shall we?”

“Shall we what?”
John reached over to flick his partner’s ear, rose from his seat and wagged his thumb a few times at Mycroft’s front door.

“Let’s amscray.”

“If you are trying to speak a foreign language, John, I will remind you that (a) you cannot and… that is sufficient.”

“What your remarkably patient Doctor Watson is saying, brother, is that he is ready to leave and expects you to partake of the leaving, as well, a sentiment I heartily support. Do enjoy your evening.”

This snort was as thunderous as the last, but it helped propel Sherlock out of his seat and set him stalking towards the door while John shook his head and waved a quick goodbye to the remaining pair.

“Good heavens… that was rather more drama than I anticipated, but I am not certain why given my brother was to be involved.”

“He’s a good lad, Mycroft. Entertaining, too.”

“That he is.”

“And what you are is tired, aren’t you?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yeah. But, you’ve had a full day of work and then this business tonight. Tell me the truth, though… is this Irene as much trouble as she seems?”

“Oh, more. Much, much more.”

“Marvelous. That can be our ‘we’re all out of plans’ plan, though. No need to stir up something that should remain settled unless we really, really have to.”

“I appreciate that, my dear, however, I am inclined to pursue this line of questioning first and see it over and done with, rather than have it linger at the back of my mind. Ultimately, I suspect it will amount to a brief conversation, by phone, preferably, a reasonable bribe or favor to compensate for her deigning to speak with us and a lack of information that will be useful in any manner whatsoever. If I am wrong about the latter, then… well, we shall cross that bridge if and when we come to it.”

“I’m going to worry, you know. About you and Sherlock both. And, John, I suppose. He really is jealous of her, isn’t he?”

“Endlessly. But, it is has mellowed somewhat into that rather spiteful jealousy one has when one truly has nothing to fear from a rival, but dislikes them intensely, nonetheless.”

“Ooh, that’s a nasty business. I’ll badger him mercilessly about it tomorrow.”

“What a joyful notion. Now…”

“Bath, brandy and bed?”

“Your telepathy is truly impressive, Gregory.”
“One of my many talents. Come on, love… let’s see you comfortable and getting some time to relax away the day so you can sleep well. I suspect you’ll be making your call tomorrow and I’d prefer to have you fully rested for that. Sounds like you may need it.”

Oh, Mycroft had no doubt about that. If he had an ulcer he would already be quaffing antacid as if it were water; however, the sooner it was done the better. One witch in their life was quite enough without adding another, equally venomous, enchantress to the mix. And, if anyone deserved the title of enchantress, it was certainly Ms. Adler, who would wear the crown proudly, even if it was the only thing she wore…
The ‘Incoming’ signal certainly didn’t shock Mycroft, but it did make him say a word he normally reserved for the Prime Minister.

“Your gargoyle is particularly pugnacious this morning.”

“Really, brother dear? The fact that she had delivered a rather sumptuous mid-morning refreshment says otherwise. Perhaps you said or did something to prompt the pugnaciousness?”

“It is not my fault she chose to wear violet today.”

“Is that code for something? If so, do admit me to your little club and bestow the decoder ring or whatever is the ritualistic method for revealing your secrets.”

“Her complexion is not flattered by violet.”

Oh dear…

“You informed her of this, of course.”

“I did.”

“And then?”

“She threatened my private region.”

“I assure you, it was not a threat. You’d best guard your proverbial family jewels, Sherlock, or Doctor Watson shall be a profoundly unsatisfied man for quite some time to come.”

“Pfft. At least my nethers can actually interact with those of my partners, unlike yours. Lestrade should be grateful for his noncorporeal state, for he is not subject to the attempted advances of your boiled-celery erections.”

“Au contraire, brother dear. Gregory is most titillated by the sight of my rather robust response to his masculine beauty and does not hesitate to affirm that fact often and with erotic prose of scorching quality.”

As expected, Sherlock squirmed and scowled like a teenager having his father make mention of his sex life and it was simply a joy to behold. Hurling himself into the chair in front of Mycroft’s desk did nothing to make his discomfort any less visible, or satisfying, either.

“You are hereby forbidden to discuss any manner of intimacy for the middle-age shortened duration of your wretched life.”

Which brought the real reason for Sherlock’s visit flying back into his face and Mycroft watched something he very rarely had ever seen – Sherlock Holmes in a full, florid blush.

“I… I am sorry for that, Mycroft. It was not appropriate, given the circumstances.”

An even rarer thing was an honest apology and Mycroft looked harder at his brother, taking in all the signs that clothes were the only thing about his brother that was fresh today. Poor Sherlock, he had not endured a pleasant night, it appeared…
“Thank you, brother. It is somewhat startling to be reminded of my condition when it has, for a moment, slipped my mind, but I suppose I should become used to the fact as there is no longer any way to camouflage the situation. Fortunately, my braces have kept my trousers secure, else the gentler souls in the building would already have phoned the authorities to come and arrest the man exposing himself in public.”

Was that a sufficient opening, Sherlock, for you to capitalize upon?

“Have you truly lost that much weight?”

As if his brother’s gaunt features were not their own answer to his question. Mycroft had wasted further since last night! At this rate… there was not a moment to lose in this pursuit. Not a single one.

“Yes, I’m afraid. Gregory is highly distressed by the rate, but is valiantly trying to conceal the depth of his concern from me.”

As Mycroft watched Sherlock chew lightly on his lower lip and draw his feet up onto the chair he was reminded of the times in their youth when Sherlock was upset, for whatever reason, and could no longer hide it under his typical thick, affected layers of apathy, scorn or disdain.

“It is worthy of concern; would you not agree?”

“I suppose. However, I am not at a point where any critical functions are being impaired, so I am not inclined to direct too great a quantity of my attention to the situation.”

“I… I suspect it will not be long until you have reached that point, however. The change between yesterday and today is… alarming.”

An opinion that his look in the mirror this morning agreed with wholeheartedly.

“It is and I will not understate the matter by claiming otherwise. However, we have time aplenty, I believe, to find a way to halt the progress and change its course.”

“I would argue the ‘aplenty’ quantity.”

“Aplenty or not, it will be enough.”

There was a flash of something in Sherlock’s eyes that made Mycroft’s heart ache terribly. His brother should never be afraid…

“What if it is not?”

“Then, I suppose, matters will continue to their expected end.”

“Your end, you mean.”

“Yes.”

“J… John is hopeful that an energy-rich diet will prolong the time until that becomes a worry.”

“It is a logical suggestion and one I have taken to heart. Breakfast this morning was positively hedonistic.”

“It does not appear to be making a difference.”
“Perhaps, perhaps not. It is really, I believe, too early to know one way or another.”

“For a standard health situation, I would agree, however, given the circumstances…”

“Circumstances for which we have no guidelines to serve as comparators. We can but do our best.”

“What… is there anything… can I offer assistance in any way?”

Sherlock’s pain and, frankly, grief dripped through every word and Mycroft wished he had the magic words to take every bit of it from his brother. It was the job of the elder brother to shoulder such burdens but when he, himself, was the burden… the job was one that not even he could accomplish with any degree of success. However, he had to try…

“Being here to offer support is assistance I both welcome and find productive. It is easy to slip, when my attention does waver, into darker areas and it is the knowledge that I am not alone in this, that others both want to find a solution to my problem, and are working diligently upon that want, is immeasurably helpful in keeping my mood on even keel. Also…”

It was likely not the best time to discuss such things, but, despite his reassurances to his brother, there was little doubt that time was running short.

“… I have begun reviewing my personal documents and preparing a set of instructions should… should the worst happen. Besides a few bequests, the bulk of my holdings…”

“I do not wish to discuss this.”

“No, I would not expect that you would, I simply… you shall be alright, Sherlock. I have structured my investments and various portfolios to ensure that you shall never want for anything and will be free to continue your work, regardless of what profit it does or does garner for you.”

“I DO NOT CARE ABOUT THAT! I CARE ABOUT YOU!”

Sherlock’s snarl was as vicious as the pain in his voice and Mycroft launched out of his seat to kneel next to his brother’s chair and lay a hand on his knee to reassure him that this moment in time found them both safe and well, no matter what the future might bring.

“And my heart beats strong for it, brother. Knowing you care gives me strength, when I need it most and helps me find meaning and purpose in my life when little else is able to accomplish the task. You are my brother, Sherlock, and I love you desperately for I know that, in your heart, you return that love though, as with me, it is not as easy thing to say aloud between us. I am not giving up, Sherlock, do not believe that I am. I will fight, fight with everything in me against this blasted curse and that fight, in no small part, is because I am not ready to leave you. I am not ready to leave the brother I have loved since first I laid eyes on him. We will join swords against this enemy and come success or failure, we will meet it together and I will know, I will always know that you put your entire heart and soul into the battle.”

Comforting smiles were by no means Mycroft’s forte, but he tried his very best and when Sherlock’s eyes finally rose to meet his, the nearly invisible burst of light that lit in them washed away some of the harsh, gray bleakness they contained.

“Your emoting remains staunchly not stage-worthy.”

Mycroft clutched his heart in grief, rose, quickly steadied by Sherlock’s firm grip, then returned to his chair to wipe a fake tear from his cheek.
“And, thus, my career in the theatre ends before it begins.”

“You only career is in meddling which, unfortunately, best places your plump arse in that particular chair until Doomsday.”

This final shared smile, brief though it was, closed the door on this particular conversation, but the ripples of it would not fade for a very long time. They never did, though neither would ever acknowledge how the gentle lap of those ripples at the backs of their minds was something they never questioned, never doubted and always cherished to a depth that would have shocked any who learned of it.

“Luckily for me, the chair is a most comfortable one.”

“That will certainly be to your benefit when you contact Irene, for nothing about that discussion will be comfortable.”

“Which is why you are here to watch every moment of it.”

“Correct.”

“Lovely.

“She is in Switzerland, at present, I believe.”

“Austria, actually.”

“Really?”

“Oh, did she not send a postcard?”

“If she did, John likely burned it.”

“True. In any case, I have her contact information and… well, I suppose there is no time like the present.”

Though Mycroft would rather stick his leg in meat grinder than make this particular call, especially with Sherlock snatching the phone and setting it so it would broadcast the conversation to his eager ears, also. Perhaps Fortune would favor him and she was otherwise occupied…

“Mr. Holmes the Elder. What a rather distasteful surprise this is.”

Damn. No favor from Fortune today…

“Ms. Adler, always a joy to hear the dulcet tones of your voice.”

“Doubtful, however, I never underestimate the power of any of my talents. Why don’t we get to the point, though, for I strongly suspect you didn’t phone me because you were bored and wanted to debate the need for more women in Parliament. Which you do. Desperately.”

“I shall pass along your thoughts to the PM at my earliest convenience.”

“Don’t bother, I have my own channels for that.”

“I’m certain you do. In any case, what might actually pique your interest is that I am hoping to seek a small favor from you.”
“Ooh… that does interest me. Of course, you and I might have very different views on the idea of small.”

“A morsel of information, nothing more. And nothing that concerns any of your various associates or clients.”

“I did take a prize for geography in school. Do you want to know where to find Scotland? England seems to forget where it is with some regularity.”

“Amusing. Actually… the information concerns you.”

“Me? I would have thought you had all the information you would ever care to have on that subject by now.”

“As did I, so imagine my surprise to find a particular question arising for which I did not have an answer.”

“Should I ask who is inquiring about me or will that remain one of your silly little secrets?”

“It was my own question, in point of fact, based on certain information I received on a particular matter. Really, it is the smallest of things and I will happily compensate you for the scant few minutes we spend in discussion.”

“First, give me some idea what this is about and I’ll decide if those scant few minutes can be successfully compensated. I do have to talk to you, after all.”

If Sherlock grinned any wider his face would split in two and Mycroft took the opportunity to ‘spill’ the cup of water Anthea had delivered with the vitamin tablets his Gregory insisted he begin taking directly onto Sherlock’s lap.

“It is a burden, I know, so I shall make his as brief as humanly possible. Are you, perchance, a descendant of a woman named Alice Adler?”

The silence on the other end of the phone startled Sherlock and Mycroft, but the longer it lasted, the more the answer of ‘yes’ became apparent.

“That is a rather odd question, Mycroft dear. Might I ask why you want to know?”

“Oh, Ms. Adler, you are well aware you have already tipped your hand, so might we skip the introductory parts of our dance and move straight to the more meaningful steps? I simply want to know if you have any information about her, especially the various places she may have lived or if any of her possessions still exist.”

“Again, I would ask why you want to know.”

“A certain issue has arisen that, strangely, has roots in the past. Now, if you would…”

“What issue?”

“That is not for me to divulge, however…”

“Then make it for you to divulge, because if I don’t know that, I don’t know what to charge you for my information.”

Implying she would share her knowledge if her price was met. According, exactly, to what Mycroft had predicted and wasn’t it a good day when things went according to plan.
“The matter is a dreadfully tedious one and I know how little you wish to hear the details of such a thing. Now, shall we say…”

“This truly must be something interesting if you’re phoning me, it involves Alice and you don’t want to give me even a hastily-concocted lie about it all.”

Sherlock took a break from dabbing his lap to make a ‘ha ha!’ face at Mycroft who glared back and made a grand show of refilling his cup from the water pitcher on his desk.

“You are reading far more into the situation than it merits, Ms. Adler.”

“What’s the weather today in London?”

“Pardon?”

“The weather. The variety of environmental factors you experience when you step outside. I realize you avoid doing that as often as possible, but the concept should still be a familiar one, if only in an academic sense.”

“Amusing, yet again. For your edification, it is somewhat mild for this time of year.”

“Good, then I can pack lightly.”

“Pack?”

“If you want my information, part of the cost is a little holiday in London.”

Going according to plan was officially imperiled!

“No.”

“Yes.”

“We agreed, as a condition of your, shall we say, continued freedom that you not return to London.”

“I’m changing that. At least, temporarily.”

“Unacceptable. If necessary, I shall meet with you at your current location and…”

“Have a plane waiting for me and tickets to whatever show is making the critics froth at the mouth. And don’t forget a dinner reservation somewhere appropriate for… oh, I plan on looking very much my best, so don’t disappoint, Mr. Holmes. And, if Sherlock wishes to join me, I certainly won’t complain.”

“Now, see here…”

“Goodbye, Mycroft. I’ll see you… in a few hours.”

Going according to plan was officially deceased.

“Bravo, Mycroft. I will return your memory to the imagery of boiled celery, but, this time, direct you to apply it to your spine.”

“Thank you, Sherlock. As always, your input is greatly appreciated. However, this may, ultimately, work to our advantage.”
“Providing Irene a free holiday where she will surely cause as much mischief as humanly possible?”

“Providing Irene a situation where she cannot as easily evade our questions and where pressure may be more effectively applied. How are your interpersonal skills, brother dear? Up the challenge?”

“If you believe I shall act as your interrogator, you are quite mistaken.”

“I expect you to engage in whatever little fun and games take her fancy for the brief time she will be here to make her more amenable to our goals.”

“Boring.”

“Quite the contrary, and you know it. Already you are eagerly anticipating another contest with Ms. Adler to add another tick mark to whatever scoring system the two of you keep for your nonsense.”

“Balderdash.”

“Highly convincing. Now… I suppose you had best make use of the time until her arrival by preparing John. Perhaps a small, restful trip out of London for a few days would be the best solution.”

“No.”

“Chaining him in Mrs. Turner’s cellar?”

“No. I would have, at some point, to release him, and he would undoubtedly be both loud and persistent in his subsequent haranguing.”

“Very well, but if he commits murder, I will be very cross with the both of you.”

“John’s homicidal tendencies are not my fault.”

“Regardless, so do take steps to manage your partner appropriately.”

“And yours?”

“I have no concerns over Gregory’s conduct in this situation, for he has not the history with Ms. Adler as do you and John. In any case, managing a ghost is both staggeringly simple and miserably complex. Gregory rather defies my ability to manage, I’m both sorry and delighted to say.”

“You are completely useless.”

“Excellent. I do prize being ‘completely’ at anything I attempt. Now, is there anything else?”

Said with a mix of tone and expression that conveyed clearly to Sherlock that ‘anything else’ was a very broad area and Mycroft was prepared, no matter how painful it might be, to take that on if Sherlock needed it.

“Not at this time. Perhaps… later.”

When… if… the situation continued its downward trajectory, there would be a later, that much Mycroft was certain. His brother would need his goodbye, before there wasn’t any further opportunity to say it.
“Of course. Now, I do have an abundance of work to do, so if you will excuse me…”

“There is no excuse for you.”

“Did John teach you that joke?”

“Your pet ghost did.”

“That explains why it was so humorous. Of course, your delivery had a great deal to do with that, as well.”

Something which greatly pleased his baby brother, who tried his best to hide it and failed. Dear Sherlock… you are as simple and difficult to manage as Gregory, but I can’t say I would be happy if ever that changed.

“Someday, perhaps, I will be able to say the same to you. On second thought, you are as humorous as a cabbage, so forget I said anything.”

Maybe if it changed just a little….

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“And we’re doing this here, why?”

Mycroft felt confident the irritation radiating off John could, with the right equipment, be harnessed to power an entire city block and if London experienced an energy shortage he would immediately set a research team on developing the necessary technology.

“Because, Doctor Watson, Ms. Adler is both familiar and comfortable with your flat and that may work to our advantage.”

“I think she’d be just as familiar and comfortable with a 5-star hotel suite and that would work even better to our advantage as I wouldn’t be the one funding her champagne.”

Which was patiently waiting in the refrigerator to welcome Irene and start the process of smoothing the road for her cooperation.

“I believe it was my bank account that funded the champagne. In fact, I even remember handing my driver my card to go into the appropriate shop to collect it.”

“Well… it’s my electricity paying to keep it cold. So there.”

_Peevish_

“Not a word out of you, you stupid ghost. You have no idea how much of a snake Irene Adler is and… just you wait and see. Be happy you can just sit there, be invisible and not have to participate in her ridiculous drama.”

_Peevish and jealous_

“Shut it! You’d be jealous, too, if her naked arse was parading about to fascinate your bloody Holmes.”

_My arse is sexier_

Sherlock and Mycroft had to admit that watching John argue with thin are was an entertaining way
to pass the time while they waited for the car to deliver Irene, but the sound of footsteps on the stairs said the delivery had been completed and the rather avant-garde performance had to come to an end.

“John, I believe you are about to have a welcome visitor.”

John’s rude gesture at Mycroft earned him an unseen grin from Greg, while the gesture’s target rolled his eyes and turned his attention towards the door, which had been left open in a show of collegiality. Unsurprisingly, that collegial opening was fully taken advantage of by Irene, who strolled into the flat as if she not only owned it, but owned everyone in it, as well.

“Ah, Ms. Adler, lovely as always.”

“Mr. Holmes, stodgy as always. Do you own anything other than dreary, dark suits? One day I should take you shopping for a bit of color in your wardrobe. Or… just to buy something that fits.”

Irene considered herself a master of self-control, but she was certain something of the shock she was experiencing showed on her face, no matter how hard she tried to school her expression. Mycroft looked terrible! He might be an arrogant, pedantic, fingers-in-the-pies boy, but even she felt a wisp of pity, for he must be going through something positively dreadful that his expensive private doctors weren’t helping in the slightest.

“Oh, she’s got a mouth on her just like Alice, love, that’s for certain.”

Mycroft nodded at his partner, but that nod froze in place as Irene began speaking.

“And how would you know that since she died several centuries ago? And who are you anyway; I’ve not seen you before. You don’t look like one of Mycroft’s standard drones and Sherlock doesn’t play nicely with anyone besides his devoted doctor… what? Is my hair on fire or something?”

A perfectly valid question since the four men in front of her were staring as if their eyes were about to pop out of their heads.

“Who are you speaking to, Irene?”

“Oh dear, Sherlock… lost your eyesight? What a shame. But, it hasn’t made your eyes any less intriguing. I’m still not quite certain what color they are, but that fits you somehow.”

“Answer the question.”

“Fine. I am speaking to the poorly-dressed man with the silver hair standing next to your brother.”

“I’m not poorly dressed! I saw a jumper just like this on the telly last night and it was posh bloke that was wearing it!”

“You look like someone’s embarrassing father who wears socks with his sandals.”

“What’s wrong with socks?”

“SILENCE!”

Greg and Irene’s mouths snapped shut at John’s bellow, which John enjoyed roaring out more than was probably appropriate, but he found he didn’t care a bit.

“Look, Irene… are you saying you see someone and, I suppose, hear someone standing over
“Is this what’s wrong with Mycroft? You and Sherlock have gone insane and he’s got to tend to you, along with his other incessant busybodying? That would bleed the energy out of anyone, I have to admit.”

“Answer the question.”

“Yes, I see Mr. Sad Dad standing right there, giving me a gesture that would make his woeful children even more embarrassed because sad dad’s shouldn’t try things like that when wearing ugly jumpers.”

Greg folded his fingers back down, cut eyes at Mycroft, then waved his hand so it passed straight through his partner and ended with a tah dah flourish.

“Oh fuck me, not a bloody ghost.”

Three living men dropped into chairs and one non-living one lifted his legs to sit in mid-air.

“Yeah, I’m a bloody ghost. So why don’t you have a seat yourself and we can all have a little chat about it, what say?”

“I say if I cancelled my plans just so Mycroft could show off his new toy, I am going to make this holiday so expensive…”

“Hey! I’m not his toy! I’m his lover!”

“Really? Oh this I do have to hear. Sherlock, there must be something in his house to drink that’s not poisonous. Be a dear and pour me a large one. I believe I might be starting to enjoy myself…”

Something Greg was starting to think, too. Though, by the looks of it, he might be the only male in the room with that particular thought…
Chapter 35

Irene sipped her champagne and remained quiet while Greg took on the job of filling her in with the details of the situation, though Mycroft did interrupt now and again to make it an edited version, something that did not sit well with the ghost. There wasn’t any chance, in his mind, that Irene wasn’t a descendant of their adversary from the past and might be the only one with information to help. Any detail he left out could fail to remind her of some detail that may have proven useful and that was something he could not allow.

“Well, well, well… the most boring man in England is trapped in a horror film, complete with ghosts, witches and a dark and stormy night at a remote inn. I don’t think I could have concocted a more unbelievable story if I tried, but I certainly can’t deny its entertainment value.”

Mycroft gave a small, seated bow and fixed Irene with a pointed glare.

“And does the entertainment value compensate for revealing what information you have on this issue.”

“Hmmm… it’s rather hard to say.”

“Look, Irene… Mycroft is suffering and if you have something to help us change that, it would be decent thing to let us know.”

Sherlock’s and Irene’s snorts of laughter made Greg scowl, but that didn’t diminish his dedication to extracting what they needed by any way possible. Not that he, per se, had any ways, but that didn’t make his commitment any less complete.

“Gregory, my dear… that particular approach is not likely to be successful with Ms. Adler.”

“That’s because unless there’s a perfume called ‘Decency,’ Irene there has never heard the word, let alone shown any of it to anyone in… oh… ever.”

“Still jealous of me, John? I would have thought you’d have gotten over that by now. Not as confident in your grip on Sherlock as you’d like to have us think?”

The perfectly-lipsticked purse of her lips nearly had John vaulting out of his chair to do a bit of smearing, but Mycroft’s ‘not now’ wave of his hand kept the doctor in his seat. For the time being.

“Irene, kindly do not incite Doctor Watson to violence for I suspect he is rather good at it and, besides Sherlock who can scarcely be bothered to find the energy to breathe, there are none here physically capable of prying John off of you should that occur.”

To emphasize Mycroft’s point, Greg passed a hand through John’s back and chest, mournfully shaking his head as he did it. The fact he could do that, yet pick up an odd-looking stylus to tap on a tablet, was something that Irene would love to know more about, but it was very much at the bottom of the list of today’s priorities.

“T’m terrified. In any case, Mr. Holmes, I’m not certain what you hope to learn from me. Alice Adler is very long dead and I’m not one of those dreadful mediums who convince gullible people they have messages to deliver from the Great Beyond.”

“No, I did not expect spirit communication to be within your portfolio of skills, though your ability to interact with Gregory certainly makes me question the boundaries of that assertion. I take
it, also, he is not the only dearly departed individual with whom you been able to converse.”

“They’re not terribly common, I do admit, however, there are a few knocking about if you know where to look. Or are unfortunate enough to be in the middle of something when one decides to pull up a proverbial seat to watch. Which, to be fair, a number of my clients would greatly enjoy, however, when the audience is visible only to me, it really doesn’t work.”

“And you are able to communicate with them. Has this been a lifelong ability or one that came upon you after, perhaps, some experience?”

“That’s not what you want to know, Mr. Holmes. You want to know if that’s the only thing I can do, in case it might help you in some fashion.”

“Both, actually. I am not immune to curiosity for its own sake, however, the possible connection to a greater range of talents is one I would hope, also, to explore.”

“Then, let me put your mind at rest. I don’t have a magic wand to wave, or anything else, for that matter, that will stop or reverse what’s happening to you. Oh, I may have a touch of extra ‘awareness’ of what makes my clients especially satisfied or dissatisfied and I may be a bit luckier than most with little things, but I’m not a witch. My life would be a great deal easier if that was the case, I suspect.”

Something Mycroft would like to debate, but at a time and place that was not now and here.

“But you are descended from one, correct.”

Irene’s ‘should I or shouldn’t I’ expression made John, again, start to rise from his seat, but an exquisitely-manicured hand waved him off the idea.

“You really are easy to rile, aren’t you, John. Pity… must be no fun for Sherlock, who enjoys things a great deal more when he has to work a bit for them.”

John’s rude gesture made Greg and Sherlock laugh and, in truth, it was exactly what Irene had expected. Highly predictable, but, in fairness, Sherlock probably did benefit from having one thing in his life that was both predictable and reliable.

“In any case, yes, great-great-great-and a few more grandmother Alice is quite the celebrity in the family.”

“And her name has carried through the generations, or did you simply adopt it out of… a sense of being kindred spirits?”

“Oh, Mycroft… you do me credit since the stories paint her as a far more formidable woman than I can aspire to be. Actually, it’s more a family tradition. Dear, dear Alice… forced to flee her village, pregnant with her own daughter when her lover disappeared, leaving her at the mercy of the ignorant, narrow-minded peasants. Her girl, Elizabeth, didn’t have it easy, being the illegitimate daughter of an unmarried woman and when she had a child, she had three, if I remember, but only one girl, she insisted the girl carry her name and not her husband’s. Surprisingly, he agreed. Or… she had her own abilities to make his agreement happen. Truly, I don’t know, but it’s carried on through the ages… and, again, you’re all staring at me. This is getting rather tiresome.”

Staring at Irene, then turning to stare at Greg or, at least, in his general direction.

“My dear?”
“It wasn’t me!”

“What is your ghost on about now, Mycroft?”

Tearing his eyes from Greg, Mycroft fixed them on Irene and hesitated a moment before speaking because this was not really a topic he wanted to pursue.

“You say her lover, the father of her child, disappeared. What else do you know of him?”

“Not much. A constable or whatever passed for that at the time. Not the terribly honorable sort, had a reputation for being somewhat of a cad, but…”

“Nope! Wrong! I am not and was not a cad. Not ever. Alice was a jealous thing who would not, not for a moment, accept that I didn’t want anything to do with her. Maybe I had a touch more than my fair share of fun with wiling women who I treated extremely well, thank you very much, and not a one had anything harsh to say about me afterwards. I never even had sex with Alice! Not a single time!”

Now it was Irene staring, and regretting a little the ‘sad dad’ comment, given this deceased person could be her legendary great-great- and so forth and so on grandfather.

“You’re Alice’s lover?”

“NO! I’m sorry, Irene, but that part of the story’s simply not true. She had lovers, rather a lot of them, actually, and, the story right from after I supposedly disappeared was that she was seen riding off with a new one of them, so he’s probably the lad you’re looking for. Not me. Besides, she murdered me, I didn’t disappear, so there’s another nail in that folktale’s coffin.”

Irene’s skeptical cut of her eyes was seconded by Sherlock’s, who was dividing his scrutiny between Irene’s features and his memory of Greg’s, looking for similarities.

“Your upper maxillary shape is not altogether dissimilar to Irene’s, Lestrade.”

“That doesn’t mean anything and you know it, Sherlock. I mean, I don’t even know what that means, but I do know it doesn’t mean anything. Know what I mean?”

“You are flustered. That is a sign of guilt.”

“Wrong! It’s a sign of finding out there’s been a story floating about that I made Alice pregnant, then ran off! That sort of thing doesn’t sit well with me, I have to say!”

“The ghost doth protest too much, methinks.”

“False. You could not knock the dust off a table.”

“Alright, that’s true, but I’ll haunt you, while naked, for the next decade if you don’t stop being a prat.”

“Can we get back on topic! Sherlock, don’t be a prat. Greg… your honor isn’t particularly at stake anymore, so stop typing out nonsense. Irene, we’re here to try and help Mycroft, not trace your family history past one person who seems to be the cause of all this mess, so do you or don’t you have anything that might help?”

Mycroft had to concede John’s practical nature came in handy, at times, this being one of them.
And, it seemed to do its job cutting through Irene’s game-playing if the slightly more ‘normal’ expression on her face was to be believed.

“I don’t know. And that’s the truth. It’s been long time since I looked through any of Alice’s papers…”

That had Mycroft sitting up straight, a posture copied identically by his younger brother.

“… and I didn’t pay that much attention to them, in the first place. Personal musings, recipes… some not for what I would call edibles… I don’t think she began much of that until after she’d had her daughter, though. But, I could be wrong. As I said, it’s been a long time.”

“And where are these papers? Are there any other items of hers in your possession?”

Mycroft was glad Sherlock took point on those questions, since he was feeling a strange draining relief at the thought that, perhaps, there might be some light at the end of his abysmally-dark tunnel.

“I have a secure box at a bank, here in London, actually. That’s where the papers are. As for other things, there are one or two bits of jewelry and a hair comb that’s said to be hers. Nothing else.”

“We need to look through those papers.”

Sherlock was on his feet and reaching for his coat before any answer was given, mostly because he’d read Irene’s eyes and recognized what they contained. Curiosity. She was intrigued by the puzzle and wouldn’t walk away until there was an answer for it.

“Oh no, you’re not going anywhere with her. Not without me.”

“What do you believe will happen, John? Irene and I will race off to Brazil for Carnival?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you!”

Irene rolled her eyes, then rose and walked to stand too close to Sherlock for John’s sense of propriety.

“We’ll be back long before you even run through your very best murder fantasies, Doctor Watson. And, we’ll bring back a little something with us. Lots of delicious calories for Mycroft’s cadaverous frame.”

The flippant tone didn’t fool anyone, nor did Irene’s strut out of the flat, because the look she’d shot Mycroft said in a very loud voice that she wasn’t taking any amusement from his condition. There was nothing funny about this and not even she could take satisfaction from an opponent being hobbed in this terrible way. If she could find a way to help, she would. Any victories over the great Mycroft Holmes would be fair ones and she had full intention of winning quite a few more of them in the future.

“John, we will return soon.”

Sherlock’s reassurance made John scowl slightly, but a huff of frustrated breath closed the issue for now.

“Mycroft? Can I get you a drink? It appears we have a wait on our hands.”

“Yes, thank you. I would appreciate that.”
“Greg, can I get a lack of drink for you?”

“Big glass of air, if you please.”

“Two whiskeys and one air coming up. While you’re drinking it, you can tell us more about this business with Alice. There’s a child involved, now, so you’d better come clean, you horrid Casanova.”

“Not mine!”

“Still sticking to that story, are you? Sad…”

Mycroft settled back to let the other two spar and took a few deep breaths to relax. Not that they helped, but it never hurt to try. Information. Facts, ideas, knowledge… this was his area of comfort, not incantations, potions and soothsaying. Even if it ultimately proved useless, he could say they had an active plan of attack and he was far happier with that situation than the more nebulous one under which they had been laboring. Soon, hopefully, this would all be a dreadful memory and everyone could return to their normal lives. Now that he actually had a life… that particular phrase no longer sounded dismally banal…

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John wouldn’t say he was relieved when Sherlock and Irene returned an hour or so later, but he was, especially since the bag of baked goods they brought was filled with waistline-bursting options. He would swear that, in that short period of time, Mycroft had dropped another few pounds just from the exertion of sitting on a sofa, sipping whiskey.

“Here. This is all I have of her papers.”

Irene set down a small, leather-bound book and a folio of loose pages on the table in front of Mycroft and Sherlock followed with a pastry that could feed a family of six for a week.

“Eat. Then read. In fact, I will begin reading while you chew.”

“I am surprised you haven’t done so already, brother.”

“Sherlock was too busy getting thrown out of the bank. And the bakery. Are there any businesses left in London, John, where you can take him and not have him forcibly evicted?”

That Irene got to deal with Sherlock when he was obviously being his most demanding and abrasive was just the thing to brighten John’s day. The three glasses of whiskey he’d enjoyed while Sherlock was getting hurled onto the pavement, just made the brightening all the brighter.

“One or two, but that’s mostly because we’ve paid them sufficient tolerance money in either purchases or direct bribes to make it so.”

Irene granted John a small ‘well done’ nod and picked up some pages to begin perusing, herself. She truly didn’t remember much of what they contained, having spared a thought for her ancestor only on the occasion her own suite of tiny talents made a notable appearance. However, when she was younger, she had thought about Alice much, much more. A spirited, strong-minded woman who made her own way in life and lived by her own rules. That was what she wanted. Life on her own terms, with her word the final one for anything and everything. And she’d done it. It hadn’t been easy, but if Alice could scratch and claw her way forward under far worse circumstances, she knew she could also. Ooh, this was interesting…
“Grandpapa, your name is Greg, right?”

“I’m not your… fine, yes, my name’s Greg.”

“I’m reading here that Alice was very much looking forward to prying you away from a certain Sally Wheelwright.”

“Sally! Oh, she was a fine one, she was. Soft in all the right places and…”

Greg stopped short and cleared his throat seeing the look his lover was giving him and weathered Irene’s scornful laughter as an additional punishment.

“Reading through this, I do remember your name coming up now and again. Apparently, Alice had a very fond eye for you. You must have dressed better then.”

John and Sherlock had no idea why Mycroft snorted in laughter, but that was only because they couldn’t see Greg change his clothes to what was full off-to-the-opera regalia, complete with gloves, top hat and walking stick.

“Gauche. And that cut doesn’t suit you. In any case, I do concede you held a particular interest for her. Especially if… are you certain you and she never…”

“I never had sex with her! I think I’d remember if I had!”

“Point to consider, my dear… you don’t remember anything after sitting at your table that fateful night. Perhaps she gave you some elixir that clouded your memory while you and she participated in any number of sexual escapades.”

“No! Don’t even… oh, look at your little grin. Trying to be cute and making fun of poor old dead Greg.”

“You are free to haunt me, while naked, for a decade, my dear. I shan’t complain a bit.”

Hearing Mycroft, showing a sense of humor and clear affection for a person was utterly shocking to Irene, but she supposed that there might be some truth in the adage that there was someone for everyone. That Mycroft’s someone was a ghost was, actually, the least surprising thing about it all.

“If you are finished disgusting us with your aged lusts, Mycroft…”

“I believe I might set them aside a moment, brother, if you have something relevant to say.”

“This journal, of sorts, seems to have been started soon after she left the village. There are several mentions of a Nicholas…”

Eyes turned towards Irene who set down the bit of shortbread she was nibbling and nodded her understanding.

“According to family history, he was the one who helped her leave the village when it became clear she wasn’t welcome anymore. Nephew of some toff or another…”

“Gregory, have you any idea?”

Thinking a moment, Greg was about to say no, but a flicker of memory came back to answer Mycroft’s question.

“I might. There was a Nicholas or two in the village over the years, but Alice supposedly rode
off with a young bloke and that wouldn’t be them. But… it seems the squire had a nephew or son of a friend named Nicholas and he would be the right age. Why is that helpful?”

Since Greg typed that part, Sherlock was able to follow along and used the extended wait while Greg tapped his full message to think.

“It appears she was his guest for a time before leaving the area entirely. That opens another avenue of exploration for details about the crime of your murder or any subsequent actions that gave rise to this curse.”

“That would mean she stayed at the manor, which is difficult to believe, but Alice was highly persuasive when she wanted to be. I suppose there could be some stories they have that would shed some light on things. There wasn’t a lot of mixing between them and the common folk, so I may not have heard those from any of the visitors or people who worked at the inn, even when it was a tavern.”

“They might also have some of her possessions which, again, could prove useful.”

“Doubtful. No story I’ve heard through the years make mention of her having anything with her. Just two people going off on a horse. Now that I think about it, though, that does tend to say they weren’t going very far…”

“One thing I know or, at least, what family stories say is that her books contained all sorts of interesting things. Spells, rituals, that sort of thing, and she had a lot of them. None of that survives, though, unless she had one or two with her when she left.”

Mycroft’s brow furrowed and he was happy to see Greg’s was doing the same.

“Gregory indicated to me that she had but few books to her name.”

“That’s not what I’ve always heard. She had a lot of them. Some she wrote herself, others she got by other means. Certainly not a few. In fact…”

Irene flipped through a few papers, then rose to snatch away the book in Sherlock’s hands, to thumb through its pages until she found what she was looking for.

“Here. We never knew who Rose was, but it says here how happy she was that all her books were safely in Rose’s hands and that she could return to them someday if she had the chance.”

“Gregory?”

“I… there wasn’t a Rose that I knew and I would have since I knew everyone, but… no… no, that doesn’t make sense…”

“My dear…”

“Rose was the name of her cottage. Or, rather, it’s what she named it and had a rose carved above the door to make the point.”

John snatched the book back from Irene and took his own look at the writing, feeling a little put out that she’d read it correctly and hadn’t left anything out.

“Why would she say the books were safe there, though? It seems that without her living there, anyone could come along and steal them or they’d be lost to some form of rot, insect or fire.”
John’s point wasn’t lost on Mycroft who also found it odd that an intelligent woman would make such a preposterous statement. Unless…

“Gregory, did the house have any form of cellar?”

“I… I don’t think so. She never mentioned it, nor did anyone else. That being said…”

“Yes?”

“Once, I had to pay a call to ask about a bill one of the farmers said she hadn’t paid and I knocked, then peeked in to give a shout and there wasn’t anyone there. I was about five steps on the way back to the village when I hear her voice calling me and there she was, standing in the doorway. Her cottage was a small thing, so I couldn’t have missed her on the ground level. The bedroom was the entire second level and she easily could have heard me and shouted back for me to wait if she was dressing or the like. I didn’t give it much thought beyond it being curious, but…”

“But, she could have been below the ground floor.”

Greg couldn’t see how, but he hated saying that and dimming the tiny bit of light that had sparked in Mycroft’s eyes.

“It’s possible, I suppose, but… when the cottage was given a going over after she left, someone would have found something. Cellar’s aren’t exactly hidden seeing as you have to get in and out of them.”

“They are if you intend to hide them. And if nobody knows to search. I saw some hiding places in the Army that I would have missed entirely if someone hadn’t shown me where they were.”

Something Mycroft had encountered, too, which gave John’s idea all the more credence.

“Verily, that can be the case. If that is true here, then we have opened up another possibility to explore.”

“Books, love… that would be the place to look for whatever spell she cast to hurt you.”

Nodding at the ghost’s spoken suggestion, Mycroft braced himself for what had to come next.

“Given the possibility of books which might document her various activities and, possibly, spells is something that cannot be ignored, it seems we must make a trip out of London.”

Not a tactic John endorsed with Mycroft’s condition but, sharing a look with Sherlock, he also knew that telling Mycroft to stay here while they went alone would meet with loud and relentless disapproval.

“Oh, and how’s that going to work? Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Homeowner, might we prowl through your house, perhaps tearing up the floors, to look for a three-hundred year old trap door to a secret cellar full of witch books and a cauldron or two?”

“That is not terribly far off my plan, Ms. Adler, though I shall not mention the cauldron lest I appear distastefully dramatic.”

Irene glared at Mycroft, then sighed and stood, grabbing her clutch and another shortbread.

“Then you have to give me a couple of days to get Mr. and Mrs. Homerenter out of there and do NOT think you’re ripping up the floors. I paid a sodding fortune for them.”
Shocked males staring at her was something Irene didn’t mind a bit, except when it was this lot. They looked like gaping cod and none of them wore that look particularly well.

“You own the property!”

“Yes, Great-Grandpapa, I do. My grandparents did the research and found Alice’s cottage, which they were able to buy from the current owner, who had done a deplorable job of remodeling the thing, what remained of it, that is. After a little additional work, it became my grandparents’ holiday home until they passed on, then my father had it remodeled again and use the property for rental income, which is what I do, though through a corporation set up by one of my best clients. That’s why, Mycroft, you didn’t find it in the assets of mine you surely had investigated, because you’re the nosiest man alive.”

Drat. It was exceedingly unsporting of her to have foiled him with such a basic ploy.

“In any case, the tenants have been there forever, but they’ve broached the idea recently with the solicitor who oversees that particular investment, of having the house repainted. So, you pay for the materials and labor to have the work done and you can snoop about inside to your heart’s content. But, if you do try and tear up the floors, be prepared to pay for that, too and with something extremely nice to boost the property value. I’ll let you know what day they’ll be leaving and… I’ll leave them for now, but be careful with those papers… I want them back.”

And, with that, Irene was out the door and moving along to the waiting car for the next part of her Mycroft-funded London holiday. For the rest of the 221B occupants, the silence after her departure lingered a moment, only to be broken by Greg doing a little jig and begin typing on his tablet.

“We’re going back to the inn!”

Something that, only now, was coming into Mycroft’s mind. Along with the implications…

“Yes, my dearest… we are.”

“John, they are becoming lascivious. Evict them now so I can further study these documents.”

“Your hospitality never fails to inspire, brother dear, however, I believe Gregory and I are ready to leave, in any case. I shall inform you as to what we learn and…”

“Mycroft, Sherlock and I are going with you.”

“That is unnecessary, John, though I do appreciate…”

“It’s not only necessary, it’s non-negotiable. I’m not having you out in the country given… given how quickly things are progressing. Sorry, but tell Mrs. Hudson she’ll have all of us, if she’s got rooms available. If not, I’ll pitch a tent behind the inn and relive my military days.”

“I refuse to sleep rough!”

“Fine, Sherlock, then I’ll bring a bedroll for you to take the kitchen floor.”

“Wrong.”

“Mycroft, take yours and run while I hold the line here. Let me know when we’re going to be leaving.”

Not wanting to dishonor John’s sacrifice, Mycroft rose, caught the pastry bag John tossed him and
beat a sedate retreat to his own waiting car.

“This is good, love. I feel it in my lack of bones.”

With the partition up between him and the driver Mycroft pulled out his mobile and pretended to be speaking into it so he didn’t appear to be talking to himself.

“It is certainly a hopeful turn of events, I would agree. The notion of books, perhaps recording the details of her witchcraft… most hopeful, indeed.”

“And we get to have dream sex again!”

“Oh yes… that completely slipped my mind.”

“Funny man. We’re going to have dream sex and more dream sex and a mountain of it when we find your cure and get to celebrate. Get Anthea to arrange things so you can be away for a few days, at least. I plan to celebrate with you for a long, long time when this is over…”

If his Gregory’s expression was any more wicked, Mycroft would believe he was actually a devil, but no devil had a heart as good as his dear ghost’s. And, most likely, no devil could be as joyful in the bedroom, either. Which, soon, they could share again in the most delightful of ways.

Of course… that was still several days away and… well, one could hope that one’s dream self was a bit more fit and vigorous than one’s physical self might portray…
“Oh god, Mycroft. Why didn’t you… Greg! Why didn’t you have me here sooner!”

Greg knew he didn’t need to slink away to hide, since John couldn’t actually see him to focus his anger, or throw a punch, but he felt that’s what he should be doing anyway.

*Under orders*

“Bugger your orders. Mycroft… sit down, let me… just sit down.”

John was in full doctor mode and Sherlock… Sherlock was feeling his lungs clenching so tightly that breathing was difficult. His brother… they hadn’t seen Mycroft in the three days they waited for the signal from Irene that they could access the house and his brother had wasted to the point that he appeared no different than the tragic individuals you saw who were in the final stages of a harrowing, terminal disease. Skeletally thin, with sunken eyes and a papery quality to his skin that created a frightening image when combined with Mycroft’s thinning, brittle hair.

“Thank you for your concern, Doctor Watson, but I am… I do not feel as close to the grave as my appearance might imply.”

“Bollocks. I’ve seen too many people… Greg! You useless ghost! You should have phoned me…”

“I specifically asked Gregory not to do that for I anticipated this very reaction. Given there is nothing you can do to retard or reverse the process, there was no point in creating undue upset in you or Sherlock.”

“I… you should be in hospital!”

“For what purpose?”

“To… to keep an eye on you, at the very least! Get you on an IV for fluids and nutrients to… do something, probably.”

“A rousingly-convincing argument.”

Something John knew all too well, but would rather cut out his tongue than admit. There was nothing he could do for Mycroft. Greg, the bastard, said they’d been packing as many calories into Mycroft as possible, watching he didn’t overexert himself and, in hospital, that’s about all that would happen, in any case. Well, that and a battery of tests that would only serve to irritate, likely infuriate, his patient, which was the polar opposite of what Mycroft needed right now.

“It’s the best I’ve got. Could I, at least, offer a rousingly-convincing argument for you to stay here and rest while we trundle off to the countryside and dig up floors or chase down enchanted badgers with mystical knowledge of countering a witch’s curse?”

“Whyevery would I want to miss that? So few times in one’s life can one claim an adventure worthy of a grand novel of fantasy?”

John had avoided looking at Sherlock beyond a quick glance, preferring not to dwell on Sherlock’s undisguised, shocked-to-the-core expression, but did so now and was happy to see that his partner seemed ready to back his argument that Mycroft do nothing but sit and eat for the next day or two.
Or, maybe, continue researching this particular fantasy novel, finding the key that would unlock whatever magic chest or book of secrets that was needed to see them to The End. He, Sherlock and Greg had used these few days to research everything they could think of and found nothing worthwhile. No information about the symbol on Mycroft’s shoulder, no further details about the life of Alice Adler, no generic spells or witchcraft practices that could be the cause of Mycroft’s problems, let alone their cure… and it was frighteningly clear that they were running out of time…

“Mycroft, I honestly believe, both as a doctor and a friend, that this trip will be too hard on you right now.”

“I see. And you would have me remain here alone and uncared for while the rest of you go off on your adventure?”

“Uh… Greg can stay.”

“Gregory’s memory, knowledge and perceptions could be vital for discovering and deciphering any clues that are found in the search. He needs to be there.”

“I shall remain.”

John made very certain to hide the large, proud smile that wanted to erupt on his face at Sherlock’s offer and noticed that Mycroft was far less successful with his hiding, much to Sherlock’s squirmy discomfort.

“And I appreciate that with all my heart, brother. If we were leaving in another day or two then I would gladly accept, however, I am sufficiently ambulatory and mentally aware for what shall most likely be a very undemanding journey, at least in a physical sense. Besides… I want your mind at the site of the investigation, Sherlock. I feel our chances of success are far greater with you actually present than with John relaying information to you secondhand.”

The scowl that grew on Sherlock’s face was a dark one, but Mycroft knew it was from his brother’s sheer frustration at knowing Mycroft was right, but wishing that wasn’t the case. And, this one time, the frustration wasn’t centered simply on the ‘being right’ piece, but on the harm he feared that rightness would cause if it was ignored.

“Very well. But, I shall be monitoring your activity and you will be returned to the inn for a rest every time I feel you are in need of one.”

“I agree to your terms. Now, the car is waiting, as is Mrs. Hudson. She… she is very excited that we are visiting again and is simply aflutter at the thought of a potential solution to our mystery looming so close on the horizon.”

Besides Anthea, Mrs. Hudson was the only person who had a firm idea of his current health status. His dear Gregory… nearly insane with worry and it would have been nothing other than cruel to allow him no one to whom to talk to express that worry and receive his own comfort and support. Anthea did her share, but Mrs. Hudson was his oldest friend, like a mother to him, and he could not deny his partner that line of communication. Besides, it was not as if Mrs. Hudson could step in and try to force him to remain in London when the root of his problem lay elsewhere.

“She is happy for the chance to feed your gaping maw and that her accounts will be enhanced by our stay. John… carry the bags while I see Mycroft doesn’t topple on the way to the car and embarrass himself to the world at large.”

After making an appropriately-rude gesture, John hoisted the bags and waited a moment while
Sherlock slowly strolled Mycroft down the walk to the car, nodding in thanks when the driver first opened the rear door then darted forward to take the luggage from him to put in the car’s boot. He also took note of how the driver’s eyes continued to cut towards his employer, as if the man was keeping his own watch on Mycroft’s condition. Which had John’s wholehearted approval. The more people in Mycroft’s corner, the better. Really, supporters were about the only firm assets they had right now and they could use all the assets they could get...

Knowing what to expect and having it arrive were two very different things, Mrs. Hudson knew, but she wasn’t prepared for this much of a difference. Poor Mr. Holmes… and poor Greg who had been beside himself, and it was easy to see why.

“Oh, it’s wonderful to see you, my dear, dear boys. Come in! I’ve got lots of tasty nibbles ready and we can catch up a bit while you meet your new friend.”

Up until the last few words, the traveling party was feeling some degree of warm relief to be welcomed fondly. But now…

“I’ll bring the luggage in, sir, while you… well, I won’t spoil the surprise.”

A grinning Charles only boded ill, that was a fact of life. Outlandishly suspicious by this point, Mycroft, with both his living and dead companions, followed after Mrs. Hudson into the inn, where she motioned them to keep following into the kitchen where…

“Anthea! Why on Earth are you…”

“Just because you’ve flitted off on holiday, sir, doesn’t mean the nation is taking a little nap. I’m here to keep it functional by acting as your stand in. The directive is to pass along all requests to me and I’ll liaise between you and whoever is whining loudest at the moment. Besides, if you think I wasn’t going to settle for video of this, you’re loony.”

Mycroft narrowed his eyes in confusion, seeing Anthea nod her head towards one of the kitchen’s windows and, though he would have adored resisting the temptation to look simply to annoy his PA, his curiosity was having none of it and he moved over to take a peek.

“Oh good heavens…”

Sherlock and John crowded to look out the window, though Greg just walked through the wall to have a look and he was the one to start laughing first.

“Look, love! You’ve got wheels!”

Rather substantial wheels, at that. A large, electric wheelchair sat waiting outside the kitchen door and it was clear the chair was designed for moving across natural, difficult terrain rather than standard walkways and groomed paths, given the thick wheels with heavy tread and the slightly wider than standard frame to give it a lower center of gravity to help prevent tipping.

“For what possible purpose…”

“I seem to remember a certain employer speaking fondly of taking a lovely ramble through the countryside the last time he was here and there’s no reason you can’t do that again, with a little help…”

Sherlock’s relationship with Anthea was very similar to that of a cat’s with water, but he did have to
admit her loyalty and commitment to his odious brother was could never be questioned. And… any little boon Mycroft could gain right now was a good thing. A very good thing. If this avenue of investigation did not pay dividends it was doubtful there would be sufficient time to embark upon another, so what little flashes of happiness Mycroft might gain could be his last.

“Oh. I see…”

Anthea quickly turned her attention back to the tea she’d been sipping while gossiping with Mrs. Hudson because her boss certainly wouldn’t appreciate her staring at him while he got misty-eyed over the thought of a long, pastoral stroll with the ghost he loved, especially given the circumstances. Something Mrs. Hudson was happy to build upon to make her guest content and comfortable at this difficult time.

“And, don’t forget, dear… you’ve got a mystery to solve and you can’t do that on your arse, now can you? But do give that nice little handful a rest now, why don’t you, and I’ll put out something for you to eat after your long drive, and some of my special tea that you love.”

Taking Mycroft by the arm like one would an elderly person, which amused Mrs. Hudson to no end given their ages, the innkeeper walked Mycroft back the few steps to the table and patted his hand as he took a seat and stole one of Anthea’s biscuits.

“I was going to eat that, you know, sir.”

“Yes, which makes it all the more satisfying.”

Sherlock and John quickly followed suit, though neither was sufficiently brave to put a hand near Anthea’s plate, while Greg remained silent, watching the scene with his own misty eyes. The past days had been agonizing. Mycroft steadily declining yet growing angrier and angrier at every of his attempts to get him to eat more or rest, as if that was admitting defeat in some way. He felt so useless! Couldn’t even hold his love properly just to give him the simple comfort of touch.

At least they had these last few days to spend together, though. Anthea had braved the lion’s den and asked Mycroft what would make a more efficient situation – him working from home or him working at the office where his condition was sure to prompt enormous speculation, questions, uncertainty… it hadn’t been a pleasant conversation, from what he gathered, but it had been a productive one and his partner had taken her advice to heart, remaining in their home where, at least, this useless ghost could talk to him, make him laugh, convince him to take breaks… it wasn’t much, but it was better than Mycroft simply working himself until he dropped dead at his desk. Which, at this point, wasn’t hyperbole…

But, oh yes, a ramble in the sunshine, with wind and the smell of flowers and grasses in the air was exactly what his Mycroft needed right now. Fill all his senses with the spectacular wonder of the world, when it was being kind, and let that wash away the ugliness that his lover was holding tightly inside. It wasn’t the grandest of gifts for a man as sophisticated and regal as his lover, but Mycroft deserved the world, so the world he would have. At least, one tiny section of the world that would always be theirs, no matter what the future held…

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After a hearty round of what would be considered lunch if Mrs. Hudson hadn’t said that awaited them after their visit to the former Adler cottage, the car was filled with the four original passengers and one extra who got a large wink from Charles that Mycroft kindly failed to comment upon. Fortunately, for all, the drive was a fairly short one, because the tension was escalating at a staggering rate and the amount of fidgeting was quickly too much for even the large, plush passenger
compartment of the car to absorb.

“We’re here, sir. And, it appears the equipment has been delivered.”

Sherlock’s and John’s heads whipped to follow Charles’s pointing finger and what they saw prompted Sherlock to vault out of the car, and race towards it like a child toward their birthday gifts, while John watched with a very fond shake of his head.

“Alright, Sherlock’s happy for the day. Thanks for that, Mycroft. Happy Sherlock is always a treat.”

Now, it was everyone leaving the car, with Charles casually taking a place close his boss and leaving the car with them, something that drivers generally didn’t do.

“Charles? May I help you?”

“Very likely, Mr. Holmes, given you have rather a lot of money and power.”

“A fair point. Let me narrow the focus, then, of my inquiry. May I help you at this specific moment and at this specific location?”

“Ummmm… no. However, it’s more that I can help you.”

The darkening of Mycroft’s eyes hit Charles in the heart, but he was ready for it, nonetheless.

“I do not need assistance, Charles. I am capable of walking without disgracing myself.”

“That’s good to know, Mr. Holmes, however, I was more referring to the fact that I was trained on how to use ground-penetrating radar and I think that might come in handy given there’s one right there your brother seems to be preparing to have sex with.”

Mycroft did not ignore this shared smirk between his PA and his driver, choosing his PA as the one to receive his glare. It had as much as effect as they generally did, much to Mycroft’s annoyance.

“What? I certainly didn’t have time to learn how to use the silly thing, did I, what with having to hold together Whitehall with nothing but my mobile and incredible beauty? That one had nothing to do, so I set him on it.”

“I got a certificate, too, sir, which my Mum is very proud of.”

It was a defining feature of Mycroft’s life that he didn’t think about himself. His decisions, actions and words were to impact matters that had far greater importance than the life of a single person and that person certainly would never be him if that narrow a focus was ever merited. To know that there were people who happily did for him what he could not was something he only recently had come to understand and appreciate. And something he would never, regardless of the number of days he had remaining, take for granted.

“I shall see it framed in something handsome for her to display above the mantle. Now, if you would turn a garden hose on Sherlock to dissuade him from violating the equipment, please do what is required to set it up for use.”

John wished as hard as he could for a garden hose to appear because his partner did seem to have an unseemly affection for the large piece of technology. Of course, given Sherlock had been begging Mycroft to buy one for him for what seemed like eternity, this was not, in any manner, a surprise. Maybe he could rent one for Christmas next year and give his lover another chance to satisfy his
With Charles applying the proverbial hose to Sherlock, who fought valiantly against having someone even touch his new obsession, the other four took a moment to look over the fairly-new construction that was the current Adler cottage and Mycroft remembered what his ghost had once said about there likely being only a few remaining bits of the original structure left in existence. It certainly had been remodeled to modern standards and not even the basic size or shape was reminiscent of an 18th century rural dwelling.

The interior didn’t inspire confidence, either. Everything was new, without even any exposed beams to celebrate the venerable history of the house. If anything was hidden within the original dwelling, it was very long gone, which left the possibility of a belowground space as their only hope. Luckily, they had just the tool to explore that hope.

“I am issuing a formal protest against this denial of my basic rights.”

Sherlock’s happiness was now over, it seemed.

“Given our need for expediency, brother, it is to our benefit to allow the person certified in the use of this device, with actual certificate in hand, to utilize it. However, I feel certain Charles will allow you to assist.”

“I do not assist. John assists.”

Which was more than acceptable to the John in question.

“Fine, then. I’d love a go with that thing. Saw a documentary on BBC Two about using this to find mass graves in war zones and I’ve been curious about it ever since.”

“John does not assist. I assist.”

Of course. However, it was time to move things along and Anthea specialized in efficiency.

“Get to it then, you horrible baby. And if Doctor Watson there doesn’t get a turn at some point, you can forget about having even a bite of what I know Mrs. Hudson is baking this afternoon. I’ll see to it myself.”

The Sherlock-Anthea glare-off was something you could sell tickets to, so everyone paused to watch the exchange of micro expressions until Sherlock snorted loudly and waved off the PA, having understood loud and clear that today’s fruit pie was in grave peril. Though, his desperation to take control of the large device was still highly evident by his twitching fingers and near body check of Charles when the driver moved into position to begin their work. Happily, the driver was battle-hardened from fighting London traffic, for many years, with its legions of vicious cab and bus drivers, and held his ground as Sherlock pressed to stand with him in front of the monitor.

“Alright… this does seem to be working and Mr. Holmes the Second has warmed me nicely with his body heat, so now the fun part. Who wants to help me move the furniture?”

Sherlock immediately pulled out his mobile and focused on it, rather than Charles, as he strutted back outdoors, leaving John and Anthea to sigh and start double-teaming the sofa. While the able-bodied worked, Greg motioned Mycroft to follow him and lead his lover towards the kitchen.

“Yes, my dear?”

“Just wanted to see how you were doing. Can’t really talk much to you what with your driver
here and a little nod or the like isn’t… how are you, love? And, please, be honest.”

His Gregory’s concern dripped heavily from every word and Mycroft sighed softly, though not in frustration. If there was a person more devoted and loving than his ghost, they were already elevated to sainthood and that devotion had not wavered in the slightest even when he, himself, lashed out against it because, frankly, it made him afraid and that was a feeling he despised. The greater the concern, the greater the need for the concern, and the need had become most substantial in a very short period of time. As it did, his confidence that this, someday, would be nothing but a terrible memory lessened and lessened, while his fear and dread grew to replace it. As did anger, something his Gregory did not deserve…

“Fatigued, but well, my dear. I would say no worse than yesterday, though with a bit less energy.”

“Good. And wasn’t that a brilliant idea Anthea had to get a chair for you to take out into the wilds of grassy fields and babbling brooks?”

You tone tells me two things, Gregory… one, the idea was not entirely Anthea’s and, two, you are highly uncertain about my approval of said idea. I will find some way to express to you both my regret that I have made you trepidatious and my gratitude that it never drove you away, even if it is the very last thing I do.

“If you had asked that of me two days ago, I would not have been amenable to the idea, I suspect, however… it would be disingenuous of me to say that an undertaking greater than the number of paces to the loo is tiring and I would so very much enjoy taking a long, pleasant walk with you, Gregory. So, yes, I believe it was a brilliant idea, regardless of the mind from which it sprung.”

Mycroft’s pointed look told Greg the game was up, but he honestly didn’t care. He and Anthea had been in frequent contact about Mycroft’s welfare, continuously brainstorming ways to keep him both in a good frame of mind and in a good state of health. His love’s memories of their walks, either real or in a dream, were some Mycroft treasured, so more of those he would have.

“Great! We’ll make certain you get your fill of fresh air while we’re here. Since we don’t know how long it will be for you to regain your weight, when the curse is lifted, it would likely be a few days, at minimum, before you’d return to your office, so we can stay here for a bit and let Mrs. Hudson take on the job of fattening you up while we enjoy the weather and the great outdoors.”

The ghost’s optimism lit a warmth in Mycroft’s heart as, honestly, did the thought of a small holiday after his ordeal. He’d done what he could to hide the depth of his own worry and doubt from his partner, but it had been difficult, at times, because both were becoming somewhat overwhelming.

“A more joyful thing I cannot imagine.”

The look on Mycroft’s face as he talked to empty space, at least to John’s eyes, was something that gave the good doctor a little more confidence that his patient would do everything he could to stay healthy while they worked towards a solution. Sometimes, for the very sick, fighting the brutal fight and hanging on seemed easier to do for someone else than for themselves alone, and all the time they could buy now would be to their advantage.

“I don’t want to know what you’re joyful about, because I’ll most likely have an image in my head that will keep me awake for weeks, but if you two are ready to start, we’ve got the main room cleared to begin looking. Greg, how much of the current space covers the original cottage?”
Greg thought a moment, dredging up old memories and turned his mental eye towards measuring and comparing.

“Main room, about half of this kitchen and…”

Greg made a quick run through the wall to survey the ground floor and was back in the wink of an eye.

“A third or so, maybe less, of the study they added on. It wasn’t a large cottage, by anyone’s definition.”

Mycroft passed along the message and John gave a quick nod of acknowledgement.

“Makes this easy, then. Let’s get started?”

Mycroft’s villainous cackling and rubbing together of his hands made Greg laugh and quickly float up to curl like a cat for Mycroft to pet. Which Mycroft did very theatrically much to John’s consternation.

“Fuck you and your pampered white supervillain cat. Sherlock’s right, your sense of humor is deplorable.”

“My cat is purring, so I care not about your scorn, John.”

“Get a room. In fact, I have an idea for one right now, so…”

Pointing towards the reason for their presence, John waited for Mycroft to stroll regally out of the kitchen before following, just to have a moment to run a doctor’s eye over his patient without the patient noticing. Cadaverous was the best word for it, but Mycroft was holding on with his mind and, apparently, sense of humor, so that was a good sign. He’d seen his sad share of people like this, though, and he knew they didn’t have but a few days, at most, to see this done. In truth, they could only have one or two days remaining and not a single second could be wasted. Luckily, Mrs. Hudson was highly skilled at making tea that could keep you going for days on end without a wink of sleep to your name…

“_________________”

“You are going too slowly.”

“No, I’m not.”

“And you have the scan parameters set improperly.”

“Wrong.”

“Why are you lingering there when it is obviously a rock?”

“Your brother can have me pardoned if I murder you, Mr. Holmes the Younger.”

Anthea wondered if she should inform Sherlock that Charles was authorized to carry a concealed weapon and had a particularly lethal accuracy with a variety of throwing weapons, then decided it would be far more fun if Sherlock found that out when a dinner fork pinned his hair to the wall.

“Sherlock, do stop pestering Charles and let him do what he is trained to do.”

“Go find a leg of lamb to eat, Mycroft, and leave me to supervise your lackey.”
The room paused a moment to admire how elegantly Charles was able to wrap and tie Sherlock’s scarf around the detective’s mouth in less time than it took light a cigarette.

“Thss grs asult shul nt.”

John moved in to there-there his lover, and snuck Charles a hearty thumbs up behind his back. Sherlock’s anxiety over Mycroft’s condition was extreme, but his manner of expressing it couldn’t get in the way of actual productive measures to remedy that condition. It had been a fight, of late, to keep Sherlock focused on the task at hand, something which profoundly stunned John, but it served to highlight how deeply Sherlock actually cared for the brother he eternally mocked and derided. A genuine, imminent threat to Mycroft must never before have occurred, because Sherlock was not handling the situation well, at all. Luckily, Sherlock not handling something well was still able to do a better job at research and investigation than any other person taking something calmly.

“Alright, back to it. No shillyshallying on my watch.”

Anthea waved her hand imperiously at Charles, then waited a few minutes before urging Mycroft to have a seat in a chair they pushed to the edge of the room, both surprised and happy to see he took it without complaint. This could take a while and her boss needed to conserve his strength, especially if they learned nothing from their efforts. As the time passed and an un-gagged Sherlock returned to monitor the progress, the thought in everyone’s mind was that they did not want to be the one to broach the question about what to do next if this yielded no results. Before any of them had to make the sacrifice, however, both Sherlock and Charles made a ‘hmmmmmm’ noise and stopped, near the wall between the main room and the kitchen.

“Sherlock? Want to share?”

And by share, John meant deliver happy news to break up the gloom that was starting to descend.

“There is a sudden density drop in this region.”

Which put Greg on high alert, more so, perhaps that the others. The splinter in Mycroft’s pocket didn’t let him move more than a few steps from his partner, but that would be enough to take a peek below the floor and see if there was anything interesting, something that would be incredibly disturbing if there wasn’t, given his last experience with moving beyond boundaries, which was why Mycroft had absolutely forbidden it without clear evidence it would be warranted. Now that they had that evidence, though… Mycroft’s cut of eyes towards him and moving to stand next to Sherlock and Charles was all the permission Greg needed to sink through the floor for a quick look.

“Meaning, brother?”

“An open space, most likely. Whether manmade natural cannot be determined.”

“I see. How large?”

Sherlock looked at Charles who immediately got back to their equipment and continued probing, moving into the kitchen and stopping short when they hit the back wall of the house.

“I’d say it’s very large, sir. Or, large enough.”

“Love?”

Mycroft glanced downwards and was glad he was no longer surprised by his ghost’s abilities, because a head sticking up from a floor would give lesser men somewhat of a fright.
“You need to find a way to get down here. It’s… it’s a bloody witch’s shop! Looks like a tunnel with it, too. Keep going.”

Nodding slightly at Greg’s pointing finger, Mycroft used his finger to motion the ghost upwards and thought a moment before addressing the others.

“Shall we continue the exploration outside?”

The equipment was quickly packed out the kitchen door and set up again to press forward, with Greg floating upside down with his head below ground to gauge the actual progress and keep confirming the technology’s readings. After a startlingly long expanse of both terrain and time, he gave Mycroft the head’s up that they should start looking for a way in, because they’d come to the end of the tunnel and there was a distinct door to be found. Which when Greg righted himself, made his eyes roll.

“A massive spooky tree? Really? Admittedly, it probably wasn’t as massive when I was alive, given it’s had three centuries to continue growing, but… really? I have to admit, though, Alice did love to be dramatic.”

Which matched her well with her descendent, in Mycroft’s opinion, but this wasn’t the time for that particular discussion. However, the brief twitch of his lips shouted his agreement to the four winds.

“I believe, given the rather substantial flair…”

Mycroft stopped short realizing Charles was not in the know about their actual mission, then decided that now was the wrong moment to question the ability of one’s allies to keep a confidence.

“… of our target, examining this tree for peculiarities would be a wise idea.”

Picking up on the underlying message in Mycroft’s ‘well, there’s nothing for it smirk’ and Charles’s perplexed expression, Anthea dragged the driver off to the side for a brief explanation, with Greg sighing and following along to provide otherworldly proof, while the others went on about the business of tree scrutinizing. The task was one John proved especially skilled at doing, given he was the only one who noticed the small indentation in the bark, fairly low to the ground, that was the right size for a finger, which he proved by inserting his and learning that the indentation was pressable and rewarded the presser with an audible click.

“Found something.”

Sherlock and Mycroft quickly moved to John’s position, joined in a moment by Anthea, Greg and a remarkably unperturbed Charles. Mycroft quirked an eyebrow at his driver, who returned a ‘What? I’ve done weirder things than dating a ghost and getting cursed by a witch’ shrug, earning him a pay rise if the British Government survived long enough to sign the appropriate paperwork.

“Assessment, Doctor Watson?”

“How…” there’s a door built into the tree that still works after three centuries.”

“A witch’s tree, remember.”

John cut eyes at Charles, then Mycroft, who simply nodded, so John continued on.

“That’s my thought.”

“My dear? Would you care to do a bit of reconnaissance?”
Poking his head through the bark, Greg examined the space which was large enough to fit a person and the ladder than led downward into the tunnel they’d found.

Seems safe  Ladder to tunnel

“Then on we go. Does anyone have a torch?”

Anthea immediate pulled a small, high-powered model from her purse and every male present vowed never again to disparage the size of a woman’s handbag. They contained both secrets and useful surprises.

“Very good. Now, who shall…”

The ‘go first’ part was lost to the wind, as Sherlock snatched the torch, put it between his teeth, pushed the tree-door open and began clambering down the old, but suspiciously intact, ladder.

“Given Sherlock’s lack of shrieking in painful death, I believe it is safe to follow.”

Mycroft’s decent was far slower and Greg floated down next to him to watch for the slightest break in strength to alert Sherlock below, but with his lover’s feet safely on the ground, a ghost-moaned ‘Next’ started the rest of the train moving with Charles first, then Anthea, and John bringing up the rear. Though, once at the bottom, none of them dashed along the darkness, because it was a creepy tunnel, belonging to a witch that led somewhere they suspected, Greg with certainty, was going to be even creepier. It was like a Scooby Doo episode, but without a talking dog and nobody was wearing an ascot.

“Well, then, Sherlock, you have the torch.”

“Meaning, John?”

“That you go first.”

“My brain is the most valuable here.”

“Thanks for sharing, but start walking.”

“If there is a magical boobytrap lying in wait, it should be sprung on someone with less to contribute to humanity.”

“Oh, and which of us gets the honor of beating you to a pulp when you nominate us for that job?”

“I…”

“For heaven’s sake… give that to me.”

Mycroft snatched the torch and began walking, deciding that it was for his neck that the others were being risked and, further that his ghost had already moved forward and indicated that there was no visible, physical trap or snare to be found. A magical one, however, was anyone’s guess. But, if it should be sprung, it should be sprung on him and him alone. He could only hope, though, that it did not transmogrify him into a toad or some form of rodent. Sherlock’s amusement would know no bounds, though, as a blessing, his Gregory was exceedingly fond of animals…
Chapter 37

Everyone present was fully aware they were an adult, and a competent one at that, however, that didn’t stop any of them from huddling together with the others as they crept, slow as tortoises, down the tunnel that was lit only by the glow of the torch in Mycroft’s hand. And absolutely none of them would admit that at the forefront of their mind was the knowledge that this was how countless horror film massacres began…

“You’re almost there, love. Feel along the wall and you’ll know when you hit the room. There are some candles about so if you can get those lit, they should be enough light to see.”

It had never occurred to Mycroft that his ghost could see in the dark but, apparently, being dead did offer some tangible advantages over being alive.

“That we are nearly there and, if we can light them, we may count on candles for illumination.”

“I have matches.”

“No, Sherlock’s become an arsonist. And I’m not being funny.”

“What! Doctor Watson, would you care to explain?”

“John cannot testify against me, Fatcroft, the law precludes it.”

“Doctor Watson is not your husband and I suspect he would willingly assist the prosecution in seeing society safe from you and your pyromaniacal tendencies.”

“Sir, I think this is it.”

Mycroft turned from his bickering at the sound of Charles’s voice and shined the torch in the driver’s direction to illuminate the man’s creeping forward against the tunnel wall with an outstretched arm. The hand of that arm was now waggling in empty space.

“Very good, Charles. And, as your hand is still attached to your arm we may presume that no guillotine-cum-pendulum contraption shall come swinging from the ceiling to slice us in twain as we cross the threshold.”

“Thank you for thinking of that now, sir.”

“My pleasure. Alright, let us find the candles and Sherlock can excite his humours by lighting them.”

“My work on the flammability of various forms of shoe polish will be highly useful in solving any number of cases!”
Anthea gave Sherlock a shove forward and ignored his squawk as she took the torch from Mycroft and made quick work of finding a few candles to light so they could start to work. Of course, once had several burning brightly and the room was well-lit, a part of her wished she hadn’t.

“I’m positive I saw this room in a Hammer film. Several of them, actually. If there was any doubt this Alice was a witch, we’ve hit final nail in the coffin stage.”

Given he was as much a fan of those films as his PA, Mycroft found himself in perfect agreement. There were shelves laden with crocks and baskets of who knew what and large numbers of heavy, leather-bound books that, even without reading word, one simply knew were filled with every type of mystical secret. There were bones, of various species including humans, on the work tables and a great diversity of implements, bowls and knives that were sufficiently unnerving, even without the dark stains on their blades. The large cauldron sitting on a stand over what must once have been an open-pit fire put the ribbon on an already distressing package.

“Our efforts were not entirely in vain, it appears. Now… I suppose we should begin with the books, unless anyone has a more efficient suggestion.”

Sherlock obviously didn’t, as he had already grabbed a stack from a shelf, dropped them on a table and begun thumbing through the one at the top.

“Hmmm… Mycroft, how is your Latin?”

“Excellent, brother. Why?”

“Then this one is yours. As is… this one and… no, this resembles English to some degree, so I shall begin with it.”

Sighing with the memory of many an afternoon watching his brother throw his Latin texts out the window or, in one notable act of rebellion, into the fire, Mycroft drew the two books towards him and began to read as the others chose books to study, all having no idea what they were looking for, but all hopeful they would know it when they found it.

“Love, how can I help?”

A very good question, my dear…

“Perhaps… ah, you might, first, examine the contents of the various vessels and baskets for anything useful, such as smaller books, scrolls or single-page writings. And, I suspect I shall require your assistance with some of the plant names I see mentioned here. They do not ring a proverbial bell, but that might be due to the name falling out of use and the plants is known, currently, by a different name.”

“Sounds good. I’ll start snooping about and you yell out if you need me.”

Since he could only move a few steps from Mycroft, the yelling didn’t need to be very loud and, soon, others were asking Greg questions about plants or places or people, since some of the books were mixed examples of spells and journal entries and, at this point, no information could be considered unimportant and overlooked.

After a few hours and a frantic search for more candles as their original ones began to die out, the group took a break, with John and Charles running back to the car to get water and the basket of food Mrs. Hudson had packed for their mission. It was no surprise that everyone nudged things towards Mycroft because, and they hoped it was a trick of light and shadow, the British Government looked even more withered now than he did when he snatched the torch from Sherlock to begin their
journey into the unknown. That he had the strength to begin speaking surprised more than a few in the room.

“Perhaps we should take this time, while we refresh, to share anything pertinent we might have learned. I, for one, can aver Ms. Adler had a laudable fluency in Latin, as the books I have examined are certainly in her handwriting. And, she had a rather keen academic mind, given the level of documentation and annotation she provided with her various spells and rituals. I have not, though, found any specific writings that seem to bear upon whatever curse was laid upon me or, for that matter, information concerning Gregory and where he might rest.”

“I’ll throw my doctor’s opinion in next and say she was scarily interested in anatomy and the workings of the body. I picked through to find books along my line and there were a properly worrying number of them. The information was accurate and detailed, too. Any… Greg, any bodysnatching happen while you were about?”

Yes  Now and again

“That might explain how she learned about the body’s internals. Dig up a fresh cadaver and have a go at it before you’re discovered. I found one account that, in form, I recognized from my medical training days. When you do a dissection to take notes and sketch what you’re seeing and… well, when someone’s doing that for human body, you rather hope it was dead when it donated itself to science and didn’t suffer a more sinister fate. I’m not sure how all of that helps us, but I can say she certainly had an interest in how humans physically functioned.”

“That fits in with mine.”

Anthea reached over and pulled a book from her pile and gave it a shove towards John.

“Lots of notes on plants and their actions on humans and animals, both good and bad. A fair amount, too, on what we’d today call aromatherapy. That’s on top of the more esoteric uses, such as summoning pixies or bestowing bad luck. Loads of that, too.”

All of which, to Mycroft, pointed to someone who could do a person a great deal of harm if they so desired. But, that harm would be, for lack of a better term, traditional harm. A poisoning he could readily understand, but what he suffered was something far different.

“I suppose if one hoped to lay curses or blessings upon a person, a working knowledge of human anatomy or physiology would be helpful, as would detailed knowledge of the various components of whatever spells one might work. I would applaud her investigatory spirit, if it was not at the heart of my current troubles.”

“The section I grabbed paints a good personal picture of your witch.”

Charles set down the bun he was nibbling and stacked three books on top of each other and slid them towards Sherlock.

“If you want to know how your suspect thought, those are the ones to read. I’d say they were more like diaries than anything else and they paint a disturbing picture, from some angles. Vain woman, arrogant and condescending. Didn’t hold people in high esteem and thought of them more from the point of what she could get from them than what she could give in return. Not precisely cruel, from what I gather, but, certainly, a strong self-serving streak, so if you crossed her, you should expect some form of retribution to come your way. And, since someone’s name is mentioned more than a few times in that top volume…”
Mycroft cut eyes at Greg who wavered between looking sheepish and apologetic.

“I take it she was not happy with Gregory’s behavior.”

“Not at all. Definitely angry and offended that he rebuffed her advances, but happily took up with other women she felt were far beneath her. Made it seem more a deliberate, purposeful slight, as if he was issuing a direct insult as opposed to being, simply, not interested.”

“Would you say, Charles… this might have promoted a murderous intent if she was sufficiently agitated?”

“Unquestionably. I’m not a psychiatrist, but I don’t think you need to be one here to be afraid for the person her anger was turned towards. And…”

Picking up the top book, Charles flipped through the pages until he found the passage he wanted.

“… here she talks about how a slight in life should be punished and that punishment shouldn’t be rewarded by the ‘quiet of death.’ Seems she had full intention to make Greg suffer long after she murdered him. Also… where was it… this bit. It’s a touch rambly, but the upshot is the old chestnut about if she can’t have him nobody can. Typical hypocrisy, since she’s not modest about documenting her own conquests, which were numerous, but being denied what she wanted was a sting that never healed and she had not only to kill but to torture the spider that gave it to her.”

The parallels with Irene were easy to see, but Mycroft had to concede that their Ms. Adler didn’t have quite the level of emotional fire of her ancestor. Which, all things considered, was probably best all around.

“Brother dear, any insights from your perusals?”

“We are missing something.”

There was a small, collective sigh of relief among the Scooby gang, because everyone had been mulling that thought, but didn’t want to be the one to spread gloom by mentioning it.

“I agree, unfortunately. I would know your reasoning, however.”

“This…”

Sherlock waved a hand over the books on the table and snarled his dissatisfaction with them.

“… while there is interest in all of it, none delivers information we do not already know and, though there are spells and the like in the pages, none are of the sort I would expect for someone able to cast such a debilitating curse three centuries after their death. In fact, I see little that would qualify as ‘black magic’ beyond the various physical objects littered about.”

“Yet she indicated this was where her books were safe. I suppose she may have kept the darker things in her memory only, however, the meticulousness of her other notes does make that unlikely.”

John listened to the brothers’ analysis and smiled gently, because when the two of them put aside their barbs and bickering, they made a good team. Fortunately, that team worked, mostly, for good otherwise the world would be a fairly frightening place in short order.

Reaching for another piece of bread to nibble, John accidentally knocked a book onto the floor and, when he reached for it, found himself stopping and staring back at the wall behind him where two things caught his eye, one he’d seen before and one he hadn’t. And then there was one further thing
that made his blood run a bit cold. The one he had seen was a symbol inscribed into the third stone up from the floor that, from a book he’d found, was a protection sigil. The one thing he hadn’t seen was a small depression in that symbol, similar to the one he’d found in the tree trunk, that couldn’t be seen if you looked down at it from above. However, looking up at it, now, it’s location was clearly visible. The further thing was that when he looked at the symbol from this angle, it was the symbol on Mycroft’s shoulder.

“Found something.”

At John’s alert, everyone looked over and followed his pointing finger, grumbling a bit that they had to lean over and turn their heads upside down to see the whole, intended picture. This, to Sherlock, answered the question of what they were missing.

“A protection symbol and what is certainly another mechanism to reveal a door. It is safe to assume whatever is behind that door is important.”

“I saw it before and there are a few others ringing the space that… well I supposed they were meant to protect this room. Maybe be a bit decorative…”

Sherlock’s loud snort gave his opinion of John’s thinking, but now was not the time for recriminations. Moving from his seat, Sherlock went around the room, hunched over so he could examine the symbols John had indicated and hmmm’d loudly at each one.

“Each seems to have the same depression, cleverly hidden by symbol’s pattern from eyes looking downward.”

Pushing his finger into the space, Sherlock’s eyebrows rose at the slight click and the slight motion of a large section of stone out into the room. Pulling it fully open, Sherlock found himself facing another shelf of books hidden behind the wall and a quick thumb through one of the books painted a far different picture than the fairly benign spells and potions in the books he’d previously studied.

“I think we have found the most sensitive writings. If anyone discovered this hideaway, the information they’d find would be damning, but, perhaps, not so much as to inspire the worst of the penalties that were on record for witchcraft. The more incriminating evidence would remain hidden from sight. This is what we need to examine.”

Everyone, but Mycroft, leapt up and opened a hidden panel, pulling out the books they found, until the ‘but Mycroft’ piece was noticed by Greg, who had been paying more attention to his lover than the book discoveries.

John

John look over towards the voice which, since it arose from near Mycroft, brought the elder Holmes to his attention and had him abandoning his books to take a closer look.

“Mycroft, are you alright?”

“I… I am fine, John. Simply a touch fatigued.”

And looking upsettingly pale, even with the warm light from the candles.

“Then, let’s see you back to the inn for a nap.”

“That is entirely unnecessary.”
“Mycroft, I’m concerned you can even make it up the ladder now, let alone in a few hours. Charles? Keys, please? I’m taking Mycroft back to the inn.”

“I can do that, Doctor Watson.”

“I’ll do it, thanks. Give me the chance to do a quick check on a few things with Mrs. Hudson’s laptop. Easier than doing it with my phone.”

Sherlock caught John’s eye and gave his partner silent acknowledgement that his story was utterly pathetic, but it was sufficient to not further injure Mycroft’s pride. A cooperative patient would be far easier to manage, given John’s real intention was to assess how much further Mycroft had declined and take certain steps, if necessary, to treat that decline such as setting up the nutrient IV they’d packed along with their luggage.

“Oh, Mycroft, dear… you look exhausted! Here, have a bit of wat… juice… and a few biscuits while I get a little something heartier together for you.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson, but I am not terribly hungry at the moment.”

“You don’t have to be hungry to eat, dear. Now, you start on this and I wager Doctor Watson there is more than ready to give you a little check over.”

The look Mrs. Hudson gave John said that if he wasn’t before, he was now, because the skeleton she’d said goodbye to a few hours ago was a healthier skeleton than was sitting in her kitchen at the moment, obediently taking a long sip of juice.

“That I am. Just going to grab my bag now.”

“And you’ll let him look over a few things, won’t you, love? Nothing too much, I’ll make certain of that.”

Mycroft smiled and popped a biscuit in his mouth almost laughing that the silly thing actually felt a little heavy in his hand since his muscles were gleefully fleeing his arms in droves.
“I shall allow John to perform whatever tests he deems necessary, my dear, however, I shall expect you to guard my honor most vigorously if he becomes overcome by my masculine beauty.”

“I’ll leap right in and… get Mrs. Hudson to thrash him mightily.”

“I feel utterly safe in your care.”

“No matter what, I’ll always do the best I can for you, Mycroft.”

Greg gave Mycroft’s cheek one of his special caresses and Mycroft kept secret that he felt the gentle tingle in his nerves much less intensely than he once did.

“Look at you smiling… Greg said something sweet, didn’t he?”

“All my Gregory says and does is sweet, Mrs. Hudson. Verily, he is a delicious jam that I am blessed to sample.”

“Someone mention jam?”

Ah, John has returned.

“I’ve got some bread fresh from this morning and you can have a fat slab with jam when you’re done with Mr. Holmes, you lazy thing, and not a moment before.”

“No respect for the medical profession here, apparently. Ok, Mycroft, just want to check your heart and lungs, do a quick grip test and I’ll be done. After that… do you want me to stay here or go back to the house?”

“Please return to the others, John. The more eyes dedicated to the task, the faster this shall be resolved. I shall join you all, if possible, after… well, a small rest does sound delightful.”

“How about this? If it seems we’ll be a great deal longer, we could load what books we haven’t examined into the car and bring them back here to continue on. I assume we’re taking everything with us back to London in any case, right?’

“I feel that is wise, for a number of reasons. They do belong to Irene and she will want to take possession of them, but I would hope to photograph each in their entirety for archival purposes. Perhaps she will even permit them to be loaned to one of our libraries, for I have no doubt they would be of historical interest to many.”

“Not the evil ones, though.”

“Those, perhaps, shall be viewable on a selected basis. But, that is a thought for another time. Tell me, shall I survive?”

Said with a small grin that belied Mycroft’s good humor on the subject of his condition.

“For the moment. I… well, there’s nothing I can say that you haven’t fathomed out already, but… take it easy, alright? Mrs. Hudson will see you fed up properly, then get some rest.”

Taking his slab of bread and jam from Mrs. Hudson, John left the kitchen and decided that bringing books back here was a good idea, if only for the mental state of his patient. Mycroft would feel far worse if he saw himself as useless, so that would have to be avoided at all costs. Right now, ‘worse’ wasn’t something any of them should promote. There wasn’t anything left, really, to be worse… there was only ‘worst’ and that was something terribly final, in this case…
“Here you are, dear, the last bit of the lamb pie I made for lunch yesterday. It’s so rich your stomach will think it’s a member of the royal family. And there’s lovely chocolate custard waiting for you when you’ve finished every bite.”

Mycroft had zero appetite, especially after the biscuits he’d just eaten, but realized that food = fuel and, more importantly, Mrs. Hudson would be most upset if he declined. So, dig in, get it all down, then… oh, who knew. A nap wouldn’t make any difference, they certainly hadn’t yet, so perhaps some reading or other quiet activity. Frankly, if he was counting the last hours he had on Earth, he’d rather they not be wasted with sleeping. What was the expression – I’ll sleep when I’m dead? That seemed very appropriate, given the circumstances…

“Anthea is going to murder you that you didn’t wait for her to get some snaps of this, you know?”

This time, Mycroft’s smile was large and highly amused, something he emphasized by revving his motorized chair even faster as he toodled across the ground.

“I shall offer her an extra quarter-hour added to her lunch break in perpetuity and you will marvel at how quickly the murder is avoided.”

“That’s sorted then. But, I have to say, you look positively dashing on your motorized throne.”

“It is rather throne-like, isn’t it? I believed I would be somewhat distressed taking to this for mobility, however, it has overpowered me with its regal charm.”

“And there’s a holder for the massive cup of wine Mrs. Hudson poured for you.”

“That is a decided benefit.”

Greg grinned at his lover and continued floating in a sitting position next to the large wheelchair that Mycroft was piloting with a small joystick. It probably would have been smarter to stay at the inn so Mycroft could be as quiet as possible, but you’d have to be blind not have seen how nervous and uneasy Mycroft was simply sitting in the library where not even a book could take his mind off of his reality. This was better. His Mycroft was happy, they were together doing something they enjoyed and that cup of wine was very large, which certainly brought its own form of healing to the party.

“So’s this gorgeous day! Oh, this was the sort of day I adored when I was alive. Sort of day you could ramble along forever and never want to go home. Perfect day to sit on my bridge and watch the world go by, even if the world was only represented by a few birds and lots of puffy clouds.”

“And lo, ahead lies your preferred world-watching spot. Shall we linger a moment and revisit your bird and cloud afternoons?”

“Think your chair will make it up that grade?”

“Pshaw.”

Mycroft revved his motor even harder and gave a throaty roar as he puttered forward and inched slowly up the rise of bridge to successfully make it to the apex.

“Victory!”

“WooHoo! And your seat’s high enough to look out to watch for fish while you sip, or gulp,
your wine.”

“Mrs. Hudson’s taste in wine is exceptional, so sipping it shall be.”

“Alright, then. Sip your wine and feel that sunshine on your face. I miss that, actually. Feeling my skin warm with the sun. And shall I describe how golden brown I’d be after a week of actual sunshine? Like a perfectly baked bun and twice as succulent.”

Mycroft snorted into his wine cup and had not a single doubt about that. Somehow he knew his Gregory would be the type to color marvelously from the sun. Unlike him, who became seared a tragic red, then a ghostly-white once he’d slathered on the skin-soothing cream. Which reminded him…

“Gregory… might we speak seriously for a moment?”

“Uh… of course. Are you certain you want to?”

“No, but I feel it is important as it concerns your future.”

“My future?”

“Quite. The disposition of your portrait should… should we not meet with success in our efforts here, that shall be a subject of concern.”

“Ok, no, that’s not a conversation for now.”

“It is, my dear, for we are running short of opportunities for it. I promised Mrs. Hudson, when she gave me your painting, that I would return it to her should ever I not want it. That particular time will never arrive, however…”

“Mycroft…”

“I would know, Gregory, so I may ensure your wishes are respected, what do you want to do if I should… If I should no longer be here to own your portrait? Mrs. Hudson would gladly give you, again, a home, but Sherlock and John would most likely open their lives to you so allow you to stay in London. For that matter, I strongly suspect Anthea would give you a home. Or, perhaps, some sharing arrangement between…”

“Mycroft! Stop trying to barter me away, will you?”

“…”

Mycroft’s eyes darkened and he looked out over the stream, wishing with all his heart that this would not be the last time he would ever see it.

“I simply want you to be happy, Gregory. It is the only thing I can do for you, at this point, I’m afraid.”

“Wrong, we’re not at that point yet, so there’s lots left to do.”

“We both know that is not true. If Sherlock and the others find something useful, then matters will be different, however… I would rather be prepared for the worst for I cannot bear the thought of your fate being something other than you, yourself, have chosen.”

“And I appreciate that, love, but can we not talk about it until we absolutely have to?”
“I fear we are at that time, Gregory.”

“No, we’re not and I don’t want to risk bad luck by talking about things now.”

“Superstitions are not real, my dear.”

“I’m not supposed to be real either, but here I am. I promise, hand on heart, that we will have this conversation if it becomes necessary. Right now, though, you’re still mentally sharp and your chair puts the world or, at least, this little part of it, at your fingertips. So wrap those fingertips around your wine, enjoy things for awhile and relax. John’s going to be angry enough you went off on an adventure rather than napping, so you might as well make his anger worthwhile.”

“Oh very well, I suppose you make a highly credible point. Further John’s irritation will fall upon Sherlock, in some manner, and that is a splendid ancillary benefit.”

Laughing at their silliness, Mycroft lifted his wine in a toast to his ghost and decided Greg was, ultimately, correct. There was still breath in his body, so there was still time for practical matters to be considered. Now was the time to celebrate this day and the man who shared it.

“There! Gregory, did you see? A fish!”

“I certainly did. Good jumper, too. Of course, I’m better.”

Greg launched upward from the bridge and began a highly-acrobatic series of aerial flips and maneuvers that had Mycroft forgetting, for the moment, everything but the two of them and the warmth of their love. A warmth which quickly escalated into a more than pleasant heat.

“Gregory Lestrade! Put your clothes back on!”

“Nope!”

Well, what to say about that? Many things, likely, but it was far more agreeable right now to simply lean back and enjoy the show…

There were many things Mycroft anticipated when they returned to the inn… Mrs. Hudson pressing food upon him, his ghost advocating for another attempt to sleep, peevish Anthea holding her mobile in her hand so that her trouncing of him would be forever captured on the proverbial film… however, a series of disturbed faces clustered around the kitchen table, which held a large book at its center, had not been on the list.

“It appears our intrepid researchers have returned. Longing for Mrs. Hudson’s exemplary cuisine, were you?”

“Mycroft, perhaps you should sit.”

Sherlock rarely spoke plainly to his brother and, even more rarely, with such a flat, indecipherable tone. That particular tone was one Mycroft knew from experience meant his baby brother was putting the thickest, most impenetrable wall between the world and his emotions and that did not bode well.

“Of course. I take it you returned with at least one of the books from the horde. I… I assume it is a title of note.”
Greg found himself wanting to throw the book out the window and push his lover back into his wheelchair so they could escape the long faces and eyes that tried not to meet Mycroft’s head on. Once again, his worthlessness for his Mycroft’s welfare stood tall and proudly waved hello.

“It’s… we looked through a lot of them, sir, and I’ll need to bleach my brain at some point and… it’s like this… well…”

When his PA was at a loss for words, Mycroft’s internal alert system went into the red zone and began pushing to climb beyond that because they surely were facing the Apocalypse.

John and Charles looked between each other and with each of them hesitating to do anything, Mrs. Hudson sighed and moved the book to sit in front of Mycroft, where she opened it to the page they’d marked.

“It’s like this… what this lot doesn’t want to say, and I don’t blame them in the slightest, is they found this and… well, why don’t you read it.”

Giving Mycroft’s hair a quick stroke, Mrs. Hudson moved away to dab her eyes and spare a thought for Greg, who would be savaged by this. But, of course, that was the point of this terrible curse.

“What’s it say, love?”

Mycroft read over the passage, which was headed by a drawing of the symbol on this shoulder, then read it again to ensure he hadn’t missed a word or read a sentence incorrectly.

“Something… not to my benefit.”

Greg contorted so he could read the words and bit off a string of profanities that would have set Mycroft’s hair on fire. They had lost. That fucking witch had won and they had lost and if he ever made it to whatever afterlife existed, he was going to hunt her down and make her pay for however long the universe existed.

*The mark of Destruction placed upon the flesh, shall wrest from them the very life of their body. All that infuses them with existence shall ebb away until nothing remains. No soul, not heart, no breath. That which is most precious, they shall lose it all so nothing remains but tears and loss. As they did not grant this precious gift, they cannot abandon it, so to no avail shall be anything within their power to see their fate reversed.*

“As you see, my dear Gregory, we have come to the veritable end of the line.”

“Look, Mycroft, that doesn’t mean there isn’t some medical solution I haven’t tried…”

“Thank you, John, but I believe that route can now be considered closed. Very well, it appears I must make some calls to see that there is no disruption to… various governmental activities.”

“Let me d… do that, sir.”

Mycroft’s startled at his PA’s shiny eyes and halting voice, but simply nodded in acknowledgement.

“Thank you, Anthea. And do see the books and materials removed from Alice Adler’s lair so that they do not fall into inappropriate hands. I am certain Sherlock will contact Irene and they will negotiate a timetable to turn over the items, once we have properly cataloged and photographed the contents. Now, if you will excuse me… I believe I have a book awaiting my return.”

Mycroft’s watery smile accompanied his shaky rise from his seat and the slow walk out of the
kitchen, with nobody brave enough to reach out and interrupt his exit. What to say to someone like Mycroft Holmes at a time like this? Not even Sherlock had an answer, but all knew they had best carefully prepare their remarks, because the time for goodbyes was upon them and they would have but a single chance to say them…
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Here we are at the end of our tale and I, for one, am sad to see it end. Thank you all, so very much, for following along and providing a wealth of wonderful and much-appreciated motivation and support. I hope you enjoy this final chapter and that you'll leave a comment or kudo to let me know!

Carefully sitting in what he now considered ‘his’ chair in the inn’s library, Mycroft drew a deep breath and found himself feeling oddly content that the start of his life and its end would occur in the same place. He had led a productive life, staggeringly productive, in fact and, though his accomplishments were known only to a few, his work had made a tangible difference to many and the world, he honestly believed, was better for his existence than it would be otherwise.

Perhaps that was boastful, but, if so, so be it. He worked tirelessly, diligently and with only the rarest example of thanks, but he did not regret it. There would be few tears shed because of his passing, far fewer, say, than smug smiles of satisfaction that finally he had met his well-deserved end, but that, also, was not something he regretted. He could not have achieved so much, reached so far and so high, without making hard, sometimes harsh, decisions. Decisions that had earned him few friends, but that was a sacrifice he willingly made to do the job he had to do.

A small, private funeral was already specified in his final instructions. Some may feel an obligation to attend for this reason or that, but it was unnecessary and certainly not something he would know to acknowledge, in any case. He had already braced his solicitor for overseeing the passing of his worldly goods to Sherlock and included a bonus stipend and case of the man’s favorite scotch as a personal apology for having to undertake the task. Sherlock would be provided for and the bequests structured so that they would continue to generate income for his brother, leaving Sherlock to do or do not as he pleased with his life.

And that life would always be with John, so he could leave this world knowing his brother would be looked after, cared for and… alright. Sherlock would be alright without his older brother hovering over his shoulder waiting to catch him when he fell. Someone else was there to do that now and, though he had resources available that John did not, John had resources that he lacked, also and they would be enough. John would see Sherlock remained safe, happy and only in the sort of danger that their work offered, not the old, terrible dangers of his youth that nearly destroyed Sherlock’s beautiful, unique mind.

For years he had been his brother’s watchdog but, here, in this place, he had found his own. Someone who worried. Someone who cared. Someone who put forth every effort to see him happy, safe, supported and accepted. Sitting in this chair he had entertained a fantasy, a glorious fantasy, and found it very much to his liking. Before even he knew Gregory was real, he blissfully settled into that fantasy and found it fit like one of his bespoke suits. No, better than that, more like his coziest jumper for there was a warmth and contentedness to it that even his exquisite suits did not provide. To learn it was real… that his fantasy was something beyond the figment of his imagination and even more beautiful that he could have dreamed… the fact that Gregory was a ghost was supremely inconsequential.
He had found his love. That one, true love that forever colored your life in vibrant hues. Turned it, really, from dreary grey to a palette fit for the most whimsical of artists. Made your existence a life, your house a home… taught you that the overwrought ramblings of the poets about love and devotion was not as far-fetched and insipid as you’d believed. They’d had but a short time together, but the time shared had been indescribable and he would leave this world knowing he had loved and been loved in return. Not everyone could claim that and many who tried later learned they were sadly mistaken. But, not him. Mycroft Holmes had found true love and his greatest regret, now, was that he was out of time to show his beloved Gregory how deeply that love did run…

“Mycroft?”

Speak of the devil…

“Yes, my dear?”

“Just checking. You… you haven’t moved since you sat down.”

“Haven’t I? For no reason, I assure you, other than being lost in thought. How… how are the others?”

“Not good. They care about you and nobody is taking this well. Sherlock’s pulling into himself, doesn’t seem to notice someone’s talking to him unless they really press, so I suspect John will have a lot on his hands. But, he’s up to it. Sherlock will be… John will get him through whatever happens. You don’t have to spare a bit of worry for that.”

And you will be there, too, won’t you, my dear. Already I can see you planning and preparing to see Sherlock through the days ahead, in whatever manner you are able. You will watch over him, be another supportive ear and provide the guidance for which a man of our age is particularly suited. My brother could not be in safer hands…

“There was a time I would have feared greatly for Sherlock, but John has my full confidence and, also, my deepest appreciation for all he has done for my brother. I have ensured, also, they will never suffer financial worry, so… Sherlock will be fine and that is something which gives me great comfort. Now, my dear, as for your portrait…”

“No time for that yet.”

“Gregory… do be realistic.”

“I am! You walked in here, didn’t you? Aren’t gasping your last breath, are you? When it’s time, it’s time, but not a second sooner.”

Mycroft rolled his eyes, which landed, ultimately, on the portrait in question, which sat on the sideboard with a new decanter sporting his familiar brandy, as well as his Gregory’s tablet and pen.

“Well, whosoever comes to own that, they will own an utterly magnificent piece of art. Such a handsome subject, and the artist captured his rugged virility perfectly.”

“Ha! I think I was actually a touch hungover when I sat for that, at least the first day. Surprised I’m not looking a bit green and squinting in pain from the fucking sunshine that berk insisted on letting into the room.”

“Then, the artist was particularly talented, indeed, for not a whit of your discomfort appears in the finished product. Truly, my Gregory, you are a vision to behold. It has been a profound privilege to be able to gaze upon your beauty and know… know that you were willing to allow me to do so.”
Greg moved over to Mycroft’s chair and floated onto Mycroft’s lap, which made the British Government shake his head at how much his ghost still behaved as if he were still alive.

“The privilege was all mine, Mycroft. Not that you got to see this old raggedy body, but that I got to see yours. You are positively gorgeous, love. I’m still not recovered from seeing you the very first time, when you dragged your wet and weary self across Mrs. Hudson’s threshold. There you were, dripping and exhausted, and I said to myself that you were just the thing to make these old eyes feel young again. Even then, you were radiant as a candle. Still are.”

“Balderdash. However, I will allow you your delusion.”

“Very kind of you, sir.”

The shared smile warmed Mycroft’s heart, but faded quickly as the reality he’d pressed on Greg settled back onto his own shoulders.

“I… I wish I could have spent with you more time, Gregory. That is my most profound regret in all of this. Do you think…”

“Do I think what, love?”

“Is it possible I might join you? After I pass, I mean.”

“Become a ghost?”

“It would… it is a fate I would embrace with open arms if it meant continuing to share this world with you and celebrating the love we have found together.”

“I’d want to be able to say yes, but I honestly don’t know. I… it’s hard to believe Alice would let me stay with you, though, no matter what form it would take.”

“True… I shall keep my fingers crossed, however.”

“Toes, too?”

“Most certainly! It shall make walking difficult, but I am not deterred by adversity.”

Greg laughed and ran fingers along Mycroft’s cheek, then drew strength and let his fingers continue his lover’s long, creamy neck to give what little sensation he could.

“No, you’re completely not the sort who would be, no matter how horrid that adversity was. The man I love is a marvel and if he joins me as a ghost, I will be the happiest ghost that ever… well, can’t say lived, now can I? I’ll be the happiest ghost that ever died!”

“And, if that does not occur… you will not forget me, will you, Gregory?”

Greg’s heart would, long ago, have gone the way of all flesh, but he swore he could feel it, now, shattering like a wineglass dropped onto a marble floor.

“Never. I will never forget you and I will never stop loving you. No matter how long I haunt this planet, you will always be the man I love and the one who inspires me every single day. Already, when I’m writing, I think about how you’d laugh or roll your eyes or argue with me about what I’ve written. It’s like you’re there next to me, not letting me get away with being lazy or sloppy or foolish. I find myself wanting you to be proud of what I’ve written. I want you to be proud of the man I am and that pushes me to reach farther than I ever have, now that I can reach, that is. Learn all
that I can, take risks... you inspire me, Mycroft, and have made this time we’ve been together more wonderful that I could ever have imagined. And it’s just going to get better!”

His ghost was not going to lose faith in finding a solution until the bitter end, it seemed. However, since the bitter end was an unraveled and irreparable thing, there was little doubt that is where they, now, had come.

“My time is over, Gregory, and that is something we must accept.”

“No, I won’t. John could still…”

“There is nothing medical science can do that he has not tried, only to see it fail.”

“We still may find something in Alice’s books that could reverse this.”

“I would say the curse is scripted precisely to avoid that particular situation.”

“I’d say it’s scripted to be as dramatic as possible and put exactly that sort of dark thinking into people’s heads so they feel helpless.”

Perhaps. Historically, many of the effects of curses and witchcraft had been attributed to the manipulation of the thoughts, beliefs and emotions of the ones stricken by the act. However, given we had no knowledge of a curse when the mark was laid, that cannot be considered a factor here.”

“Nope.”

“Gregory…”

“Why do you want me to think the worst!”

“Because that is the truth and I would rather you not harbor false hope, but embrace the scant hours we have left to their fullest.”

Now the light was fully gone from his ghost’s eyes and Mycroft wished, despite the sour jealousy that churned in his stomach, that his Gregory would someday find another to fill them again with light. He would be gone, but Gregory would remain and a man so loving and caring did not deserve to continue to on in this world alone.

“You say false hope, I just say hope and I’ll have it until... until I tell you goodbye. I love you, Mycroft, and I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want to say goodbye... I want to watch you wake each day and fall asleep every night. I want us to laugh and talk and love and have every bit of fun we possibly can. I want us. I’m not going to let go of any of that, not one tiny bit, until I’m convinced it’s time to do it. No, that’s wrong. I’ll never let go of any of it. Sorry, Mycroft, but you’re stuck with me to the end and far, far beyond.”

Something Mycroft absolutely knew would be the case if their situations were reversed. He would hold fast, never lose hope and love his Gregory for every second of his own remaining time in the world. He just hated to see his ghost in pain when there was nothing he could do to take away even a mote of it. Though, that did not mean he wouldn’t try.

“And I could not ask for more. I will leave you soon, my dear, but I shall leave knowing that I was loved and by a man whose worth is beyond compare. I never anticipated such a thing, not after all these many years, but since we met, I have enjoyed the most joyful time of my life. Never has my life felt so full, so satisfied and never has my heart been so light and positively brimming with happiness. Ultimately, your witch has failed in her task.”
“What do you mean?”

“Her curse, while suitably dramatic, in the end, missed its mark.”

“Mycroft, I’d say it hit the target square on center!”

“Poppycock. I am losing nothing of what was foretold. I am not losing my soul, my heart nor my breath for you are all of those to me. You are the most precious thing to me, not this meaningless shell of flesh and bone. You are what infuses me with life, not the biochemical machinery granted to me by my parents. You, Gregory… what is dying is my existence, but what lives on is my life. There shall be no tears on my part, no loss, for you are safe and well and shall continue on. The gift given me, by your own loving hands, was you and you shall see years upon years of achievement, friends, adventures. I shall leave this world, but my life shall remain and thrive. Your witch has failed but, perhaps, it is something her hardened, blackened heart could not begin to comprehend and, so, did not anticipate how ineffective, in the end, would be her curse.”

Greg’s look puzzled Mycroft but, in truth, any chance to gaze upon his lover’s face was not one to question. There were so few chances left to him…

“You really believe that don’t you, love?”

“I do. I value my life, Gregory, I value it highly. But… that life has always been devoted to service, and defined by duty and obligation. The value I place on my life is measured by my accomplishments and successes, but… with you, that has changed. None of my work bears, in the slightest, on the love you have for me. You love me, flawed and inadequate as I might be. I am seeing my actual life blossom, beyond the role that I play and… it is a heady thing. My life flows from your love and neither you nor your love shall ever die, so… neither shall my life. You are its steward and will see what we created linger on and, remember your own words… I shall continue to inspire, to remain in your heart and mind. Life, soul, heart, breath… all of that rests with you and you shall remain.”

“Ok. Then this should work.”

Now it was Mycroft’s turn to be puzzled, both by his ghost’s words and by the fact that Greg left his lap and moved towards the sideboard.

“I love you, Mycroft. Never, ever forget that.”

Picking up his pen, Greg smiled at his lover and plunged it through his painting, keeping on slashing at the image even as Mycroft shouted and leapt up to stop him. Instinctively reaching out to grab Greg’s arm, Mycroft reared back when his hand connected with something solid.

And wet.

And clad in rough-hewn fabrics that were not what his Gregory was wearing a moment ago.

“My… Mycroft?”

Mycroft looked up from his shock and suffered seeing not joy, but panic in Greg’s eyes, which flared wide and preceded a silent scream that saw the form vanishing from the library, leaving behind only a small amount of water on the library rug.

Wet… Gregory was wet. And real! His ghost had been real, truly corporeal, and standing here in garments that would not look out of place in Gregory’s actual life. And in his eyes… oh god…
Knowing it would take the last of his whatever was holding him together, Mycroft dashed out of the library and, yelling for the others to follow, kept running at a pace fueled purely by will, panic and dread, ignoring the shouted questions from behind him until, barely able to see, let alone breathe, he saw Greg’s beloved bridge and, uncaring about his own fate, dove into the water beneath it, desperately searching and, finally, finding what he feared.

Pale, with lifeless eyes, Greg floated motionless in the water, hands, arms and legs bound tightly and one foot firmly fixed to a large stone. Swimming as best he could to the figure, Mycroft tried to pull him upward, but not even with his normal strength would he be able to lift the weight of the stone and the body, so turned towards trying to untie the thick rope that affixed his lover to the stone, wanting to rage in frustration that his fingers were utterly insufficient for the task.

So focused on this frantic efforts was Mycroft that he failed to notice the four additional bodies that dove into the water moments after him, but startled at their presence when Sherlock and Charles wrapped hands around the stone, with Anthea and John holding onto Greg’s body as all four struggled to swim upwards, moving slowly, but surely towards the surface, then the bank and dragging Greg far enough out of the water for Sherlock’s violin-strengthened fingers to start on the knot in the rope around Greg’s ankle and John to begin clearing Greg’s mouth and nose to begin CPR. While they did that, Anthea and Charles worked on getting Mycroft to clear out the water he had inhaled and swallowed and checked him for signs of imminent breakdown.

“J… John…”

“Can’t talk now, Mycroft.”

Because this was a situation that demanded all his attention, though his burden was lessened, when Charles left Mycroft in Anthea’s capable hands and took over the chest compressions while John focused on getting air into Greg’s lungs and monitoring for any signs of life, which Sherlock seemed intent on confirming, having freed Greg’s leg from the stone and, now, was scrutinizing the motionless man for the slightest flicker of life, doing things he knew were foolish, such as giving Greg’s legs a shake and slapping the back of Greg’s hands to inspire some form of response.

The last member of the rescue party finally arrived in Mycroft’s car, Mrs. Hudson being the one to think that whatever Mycroft was running after, he wouldn’t even be able to walk back, and she was out of the car and rummaging in the boot, finding a small knife that she ran to Sherlock to begin cutting the rest of the ropes that had kept Greg from having any chance at all of escaping his watery fate.

“Oh my heavens… the poor thing’s been there all this time…”

Mrs. Hudson couldn’t stop the small trickle of tears down her cheeks because the horror of Greg’s death and knowing that he’d been there all along, undiscovered and overlooked by the countless that had walked over the bridge, was nearly too much for her tender heart to bear. And, the longer they worked to put some life back into the now-physical body, the more her heart broke, not only for the man who could die a second time, but for the man who was trembling sharply and looking as if he was poised to breakdown and join his lover in death.

Darting back to the car, Mrs. Hudson grabbed a blanket from the boot and wrapped it snugly around Mycroft’s body, then wrapped her arms around him, as well, speaking softly and soothingly in his ear, because the look in his eyes screamed he was receding from them and it was only minutes until he retreated so far that they might be no coaxing him back.

“There we go…”
John wiped his face of the water Greg coughed up onto him and quickly turned his friend on his side so he could continue to cough, vomit, snort and clear his lungs of as much water as possible, a task made somewhat more difficult by Mycroft throwing off his blanket, and Mrs. Hudson, and crawling over to Greg to hold him tightly, as if he was terrified that some dark force was about to appear to snatch away the man he loved.

“It’s… I’m…”

“You are alive, m... my dear. You are alive.”

Greg continued to cough, but rolled slightly to better fit into Mycroft’s embrace, and used every sense to take in the presence of his Mycroft, savoring most sweetly, by far, the sense of touch.

“Mycroft… oh god, I can feel you, love. I… I’m actually alive!”

Though John was starting to have concerns that word might not describe Mycroft for much longer, because that trembling was getting stronger and he suspected it had nothing to do with emotion. Time to get both patients back to the inn and… do something.

“Before we try to fathom out this… whatever it is… let’s get the two of you into dry clothes and in front of a warm fire. Someone give me a hand?”

Lots of hands volunteered to help the two men to their wobbly, unsteady feet and get them into the car, where Mrs. Hudson waved off Charles and his proper London driving to take the wheel again and speed them over the landscape back to the inn, where she worked on the fire and hot tea part and the others took care of the showers and dry clothes portion of the mission. It wasn’t long before everyone was reunited in the kitchen, since Mrs. Hudson decided the all-encompassing warmth from the oven was a better curative for two near-drowned rats than a single fire.

“Look at you two… can’t even take your hands off each other. Well, spare one, at least, to get some tea in you.”

Something Greg and Mycroft had to be coaxed to do because they seemed to have completely forgotten where they were or that anyone else in the room existed, so lost were they in each other, which had made separating them to get them cleaned and dressed a gentle, but determined struggle.

“Tea… it’s tea!”

Mycroft ran this too-thin fingers through Greg’s hair and smiled at the sheer joy on his no-longer-ghost’s face.

“I have no doubt Mrs. Hudson will make whatever you desire to tantalize your taste buds, my dear. If I must command a fighter jet to bring to us exotic ingredients to make that happen, it shall be my honor to do so. Whatever you desire, Gregory. Oh, my dear… you are here…”

The shine of moisture in his Mycroft’s eyes made them even more beautiful, in Greg’s opinion, something which certainly deserved a kiss as a reward. And, as a bonus, he could finally taste Mycroft’s perfectly-shaped lips, which were exactly as delicious as he’d imagined.

“I am. I’m here and… I’ve been paying attention for anything, any feeling or sensation that it’s going to change, but there’s been none. I don’t want to jinx things by saying it, but I think I’m here to stay.”

This new trembling in Mycroft’s limbs was purely an expression of his inability to contain his glee that a living, breathing man was here with him and that living, breathing man was no different than
the man he’d seen ripped from the library. Though, why that had happened was still a mystery.

“Gregory… do you know what happened?”

A question on everybody’s mind, but nobody had felt it proper to ask, as it seemed wrong to disrupt
the cozy bubble that surrounded the happy couple with any cold reminder of facts and reality.

“I do, actually. It came back to me, my memories, I mean, when I… resurrected.”

Everyone took a quick sip of their tea because they didn’t want anything distracting them from
Greg’s story once it got started.

“Going back to the start, that night in my cottage… I’d sat down at my table and, like I’d said
before, everything went dark. What I remember now is waking up with a massive headache right
there where we found Alice’s books. I was tied up in a chair and she was… well, I suppose she was
working some form of spell. Saying words I didn’t understand and drawing things on a piece of
paper or parchment that she ultimately put in a large bowl that already held a lot of herbs and such,
before lighting the whole thing on fire.”

Greg paused a moment and Mycroft gave his hand a squeeze for strength.

“I kept asking what was going on, but she ignored me, well, besides giving me these smug
fucking smiles, until she finished, and it was about then that this bloke arrived through the tunnel.
Hadn’t seen him before and he didn’t say anything, but I’d wager it’s the one she rode off with after
it was discovered I was gone. She told me that… well, she told me lots about being cruel and
dismissive of her. Flagrantly going about with other
women while ignoring her, that sort of thing.
Said I’d trod on her affections, thrown them away… that I couldn’t love and didn’t deserve it,
besides…”

“The woman was obviously mad.”

“More, I think, love, that she honestly couldn’t fathom that I wouldn’t want her, so what I was
doing had to be deliberate. That I wanted to toss things in her face. Maybe that is a type of madness,
I don’t know. In any case, she said what I’d done was inexcusable and that I had to be punished for
it. And, that punishment would be one, and I remember this explicitly, it would be one that would
last as long as the sun hung in the sky. She wanted me to suffer forever, never have a moment of
love or happiness. That’s when…”

Greg paused again and turned his eyes to Mycroft who returned it with clarity and fortitude,
something which profoundly surprised Greg who was already stunned that his lover was able to sit
up straight in his chair, given the boneless mass they’d had to lift from the car when they
arrived back at the inn.

“… she said that if that ever did happen, if I ever did find love and happiness, that love would
always be hobbled and better yet, for her, I’d get to watch the person I loved wither and die, while
I’d continue on knowing it was me who’d done that to them. But… she said there’d be a way to
save them, but I had to fathom that out myself. And, if I did, and could bring myself to do it, which
she didn’t think I would since I was a selfish, petty bastard, then I’d be the one lost and they’d get to
live with the knowledge that they were the one cause it. No matter the choice, one of us would die
and the other would live with the guilt and pain. And I’d know, too, in the moments of my final
death that I’d condemned them to suffer that guilt and pain. I admit a good bit of that didn’t quite
register because I didn’t know, yet, that she was going murder me, but I know now that she meant
I’d be a ghost, which you have to agree does make properly loving a person a bit tricky. And gave
me the opportunity to die not once, but twice.”
If this woman was still alive, Anthea would happily set some her more secret training into motion and have her vanished from existence in a rather painful and spectacular way. What a horrid person… however, her arrogance and entitlement was no match for her Mr. Holmes. Which reminded her…

“What happened in the library, sir? We heard you shout and then… I never thought I’d ever see you run, let alone run so fast you had us outpaced.”

The ‘especially with being more bone than flesh at the moment’ went unsaid.

“Gregory took the boldest, most extreme gamble and won. Destroying his portrait must have been the mechanism for turning the tide of the curse that Alice intimated and, when it was naught but tatters, he… became real, then vanished.”

“How’d you know where to find me, love? I have no doubt Alice thought that nobody would find me, just as they didn’t when they first tossed me in there. Which is what happened… she started some bound bunch of herbs smoldering and waved the smoke under my nose. I got woozy and felt like my limbs were noodles, which was the point, I suppose, so I couldn’t fight back. They took me to the river and tossed me right in. The bloke with her jumped in after and fastened my leg to the rock. I was starting to come around by the time he finished and… well, realized I was drowning…”

A haunted look shadowed Greg’s face and Mycroft quickly laid a kiss on his cheek to restore what he could of his lover’s calm. What a fiendish thing she had done and to condemn him to it a second time…

“But you did not this time, my love, and that is the important thing.”

“No, I didn’t. Or, rather, I did because I’m fairly certain I was dead again when you lot found me. I have to know, though, Mycroft… how did you know where I was? All I recall was being pulled from the library. I didn’t even know where I was going and I’m sure I didn’t say anything helpful so…”

“I had a few clues. Your clothing, which was indicative of the period in which you died, was wet. When I touched you, you were positively sodden and left water in library. I surmised, and I admit it was somewhat a leap, that you had been transported to the location of your death. If you were to remain alive, whole and happy, there was no reason to relocate you and it was not simply an ephemeral soul being reunited with its Earthly remains, for you were whole and solid. That location, apparently, was somewhere in the water. And, then, there were your eyes.”

“My eyes?”

“In the seconds before you were whisked away, I saw reflected in your eyes what appeared to be ripples or swirls. They were visible against something light, as if you were looking up from a depth to the surface of moving water. And…”

The tiny bite Mycroft gave his lip made Greg smile and he let that smile grow as he caught Mycroft’s eye and urged him to continue.

“It was most certainly a trick of the light, a reflection of part of the bridge, perhaps, however… I had the distinct impression that…”

“Yes, love?”

“I saw a fish.”
Greg’s smile stretched even wider and he laughed before leaning over and carefully taking his partner in his arms.

“Our little fish friends doing their part to save my ridiculous self.”

“Whether true or not, it made me think that if she truly was intent on making you suffer, what better place to make your grave than the place you so greatly adored. Given it was the only idea I had, I pursued it, for failure would lose me nothing further, but success…”

“She stood no chance against your enormous brain, did she? Or, your enormous heart…”

Now, it was Greg’s eyes that were thickly painted with a watery shine and everyone around the table paid studious attention to their cooling tea until they heard a sound that sparked more than one snort of laughter – Mycroft’s stomach rumbling.

“Oh, do pardon me.”

“Not that you asked for it, but my medical opinion is that that’s a good thing. Feeling a bit peckish are you, Mycroft.”

“Now that I stop and notice… yes, John, I am. Which is not something I have been able to claim for quite some time.”

“Then I’ll be the one to formally say that, just maybe, your part of the curse has ended. I had harbored a hope that there’d be some poof! and your weight would have been restored, but if your appetite is back that’s a possible sign that satisfying it will do something more than make your taste buds happy.”

That suggestion had Mrs. Hudson vaulting out of her chair and marching towards the refrigerator, grabbing her apron on the way and tying it on as she began taking out whatever her eyes landed on first.

“Then, why don’t one of you cut a hearty slice of the cherry cake under the dome on the breadboard for our Mycroft and I’ll start a few chops going to put some good, red meat into his blood.”

“And me!”

“I’ll make one for you, too, Sherlock.”

“I demand two. And potatoes.”

Mrs. Hudson huffed and turned, hands on her hips to find not only Sherlock’s hungry eyes starting at her, but a table of them.

“Then cut everyone a slice of cake! John, if you could get the kettle going for more tea and Charles, dear, you’re so good in the kitchen, if you’d give me a bit of help with the vegetables, we’ll have an early dinner, which is probably a good thing because I’m sure our happy couple will want to have an early night. Not that they’ll see much sleep, if they know what’s good for them.”

The filthiest wink a person could make came easy to the innkeeper and she giggled at Mycroft’s matronly gasp in response. Of course, his matronly sensibilities lasted only a moment as the implications of that wink, and an early night, settled comfortably in his brain. He could touch his Gregory. Touch him, kiss him, feel every part of his entrancing body… yes, one filling meal, perhaps a small touch of brandy so they could sit awhile in the library as living men, then they would
take to a shared bed to start their first night together. His Gregory did want to learn how to physically love a man, did he not? Well, lesson number two would commence shortly and it would be a scandalous one, indeed…

Two weeks later

“John’ll be here soon, love, so prepare for a probing.”

Having suffered several bruises from trying to stick his head through Mycroft’s study door, Greg gave himself a mental pat on the back for remembering to open it this time. Unlearning his habits from death weren’t easy, but he was getting there.

“Amusing, Gregory. John has no reason to probe me, though he did say he would likely draw some blood during this visit.”

“And hook you up to that heart machine, so I can’t do any naked dancing or your results will get all fuddled.”

Gregory’s nakedness did marvelous things to his heart; however, a medical mind might misinterpret the results and he certainly had no desire to be whisked off to hospital simply because his libido was enflamed.

“Yes, I, so far, have avoided a hospital stay and am very content to see things continue along that path.”

What made Greg content was the addition of weight to his lover’s frame, slow and gradual as it was. His Mycroft was making his way back to health, eating well, taking gentle exercise, resting a great deal and all of that was working. The cover story he was using for his work was that he’d ‘accidentally’ ingested some fast-acting agent and, given the nature of his work, and the purposeful lack of detail and waving it off as being of minor importance, gave the desired impression that someone had tried to poison his lover and didn’t Mycroft and Anthea adore the added layer of legend to Mycroft’s already legendary status.

“So, you’ll happily eat every bite of the pasta I asked Mrs. Hudson to make for your lunch?”

“Sauce?”

“That creamy Alfredo that you adore.”

“All bites shall be eaten and, further, shall be savored. I must admit, I am dreading her return to the inn, for I cannot remember a time I have enjoyed my meals to such a degree and she is far more diligent about keeping the house clean than the service I normally employ.”

The fight between Mrs. Hudson and Mycroft when she announced he needed someone to take care of him while he recuperated, since Greg would have his hands full learning to be alive again, had been a half-hearted one on Mycroft’s part since the last thing he wanted was for his lover’s first days as an again-alive person to be consumed by caring for an almost-invalid. Given it was the slow season for her, it hadn’t been difficult for Mrs. Hudson to close the inn for a time and move in to act as housekeeper and cook for the Holmes-Lestrade household.

“Uh… about that…”

“Yes?”
“Mrs. Hudson’s taken a liking to London.”

“Oh? Well, I am more than happy to host her for visits in the future so she may enjoy the city at her leisure.”

“Uh… about that…”

“Gregory!”

“How would you feel about a more… permanent arrangement?”

“Meaning?”

“Well… you’re going back to work for full days soon and I’m… well, I’ve got a couple of publisher meetings on the horizon, don’t I, so if that leads to something good… your service does a great job, it really does, but a live-in housekeeper would be a handy situation for us, especially when it’s a housekeeper who can cook.”

“You’re proposing Mrs. Hudson become our live-in help?”

“Not exactly.”

“How not exactly?”

“She’s the one proposing it. She had an estate agent put feelers out about the inn and already has buyer who’s made inquiries about it. And, she likes the rooms she’s got in that part of the house you don’t even really use since it’s actually there for a cook or housekeeper or butler or whatever and you don’t have one. We get a clean house, laundry done, delicious meals and she only has to worry about two guests and not a changing roster of them, many of whom are actually more demanding than you!”

“Really, Gregory…”

“It’s true! Some of them are miserable bastards and… well, don’t tell her I said this, but I think she’s getting tired of running things alone. It’s a lot of work, especially when the tourists are swarming and I know how hard it is for her, even with seasonal help. I’d say it’s a win-win, especially since she already knows a lot about what you do and who I am, so there’s no worry about keeping secrets and the like.”

Mycroft narrowed his eyes at the grinning ex-ghost and marveled, privately, how much he loved this man. Gregory as a ghost had been a treasure and Gregory as a living man was just as much of one, though a treasure with a staggering appetite for sex and overwhelming desire to do and see everything this world had to offer. Being a tourist in London was something he’d never done, but Mycroft had gladly turned tourist to accompany his partner to the various attractions and experiences London had to offer. When he was stronger, that tourism would extend to other cities, as well as the cultural events this city had to offer in abundance.

And, now, his love was dipping a toe into the working world and only with the teensiest amount of help from him. Even when still dead, Gregory had sent some writing samples to various print and online publishers and was beginning to receive responses. Many rejections, as was to be expected, but some indications of true interest and a few meetings were in the works to discuss matters more fully. For his part, he had only provided some help scripting letters of introduction and passing along some private email addresses and phone numbers so his love could bypass intermediaries and contact relevant individuals directly. Gregory had insisted that this would be something at which he would succeed or fail purely on his own and it was no small matter of pride on both their parts that he was
making progress on forging a career that offered him the creative opportunities and sense of accomplishment he desperately desired.

“There is some merit to your argument, I suppose. I shall consider it and speak to Mrs. Hudson more fully on the issue.”

“Yes! Then we can talk about our dog.”

“Pardon?”

“We need a dog.”

“I assure you we do not.”

“I’m thinking one of those big, rascally fellows that love to play and will chase a ball all day without ever wanting you to stop throwing. I’ve got a folder on the computer you can look at with lots of photographs of candidates.”

He had created a monster.

“Gregory, dogs require a great deal of attention. Exercise, walks for… various purposes… and neither of us have the time for such things, especially given your burgeoning writing career.”

“I think you might be wrong about that, but I could be convinced into getting a cat, instead.”

“Dear heavens…”

“I’m thinking a nice fat, lazy one who sleeps most of the day and will snuggle on our lap when we watch a film in the evening. But, a thin, active one would be alright, too. I can toss it a toy to play with now and again while I’m writing to keep it occupied. Or give it catnip, so it gets loopy and keeps itself happy with whatever it’s loopy head says is hilarious at the time.”

“Might we table this discussion for a later time? I would hate to have it interrupted by John’s arrival.”

“I won’t forget you know.”

“You shall also have to convince Mrs. Hudson, since she would be the one cleaning the various messes an animal would create.”

“So, to sum up, we’ve officially hired Mrs. Hudson and you’ll agree to a pet as long as she does. She already has, just so you know, either a cat or dog as long as she has a say in naming it because she won’t stand for a pony-named pet when it should have something normal like Mrs. Tiddles or Rodney, instead. Thanks, love! You really are the very, very best.”

Running forward, Greg gave Mycroft a scorching kiss then ran out giggling at his wholesale victory on all household-related issues. For his part, Mycroft lingered in the fading sensation of his lover’s lips upon his own, then smiled wickedly at the now-closed study door. Of course Mrs. Hudson had a buyer in mind for the inn. One who would work behind the scenes through a solicitor and not quibble a bit on whatever asking price she might set. There was always room in his portfolio for another investment and the inn showed a steady history of turning a profit. Naturally, there were measures to be implemented to improve upon that, but that was ever the case with investment properties.

Mrs. Tiddles and Rodney was an entirely different matter. His beloved had quite the challenge
ahead of him to make a pet a member of their home. This would take a tremendous effort on
Gregory’s part, as he was not an easy one to convince on such matters. It would take… oh, the most
debauched and unbridled of techniques to even begin to turn his mind in that direction. Given his
beloved had a strong taste and even stronger talent for the debauched and unbridled, perhaps the
purchase of a lint brush was very much in order. Fat, lazy cats were villainous shedders and his suits
would never forgive him the insult if he allowed the insult of cat hair to darken their day…

End Notes

My tumblr and twitter are good places to haunt for update notifications or to get tidbits about
this or any of my scribblings. I'm eventhorizon451 for both of those...

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