

nothing to declare

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/10458231) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/10458231>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Fandom:	Sherlock (TV)
Characters:	Mycroft Holmes , Sherlock Holmes , Anthea (Sherlock) , Lady Smallwood
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2017-03-26 Words: 8,875 Chapters: 1/1

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Summary

In New York, you can be a new man.

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In New York, you can be a new man...

Notes

Thanks to D for reading, to L for technical advice, and to Spike for insisting upon persistence for several long weeks.

Mycroft swung the door of the suite shut with relief. The transatlantic flight had been the longest sustained period he'd spent in public since the incident, and the strain of remembering how to act in a manner that would draw no awkward attention was ghastly. As he sank down into a nearby armchair, he felt his control over his features lapse. He didn't bother to glance into the mirror across the room to see what it looked like. He had seen it reflected in the faces of his colleagues at odd moments for weeks now.

Someone had told them about the 18-year Suntory Yamazaki; there was a bottle standing next to the welcome basket of fruits and chocolates. He leaned forward to pour himself a generous two fingers, no ice, and took it and the bottle with him to the bed, only just remembering to slip his shoes off before lying back against the high-stacked pillows and sighing. Despite the homely touches that ambitious hotels now tried to give to their accommodations, they could not obscure the fundamental blankness of a new hotel room, the way that all history within its four walls had been tidied away, replaced by fresh linens and toiletries and glassware. A little world made anew. He had always found it restful, and never more so than now.

His phone buzzed, disturbing his reverie. He sighed again and fished it out of his pocket.

Need records on Sowellton Trust —SH.

It was four in the morning in London.

Travelling for work, he typed with one thumb, and put the phone down.

It buzzed again.

Mycroft knew what it said without looking: *And Peter Royston.*

He didn't pick it up.

He woke with the bottle a quarter-empty and no idea what time it was. There were 47 voicemails on his phone, all but three to do with pending matters back home. He rubbed his face, resisting the urge to delete them all. It had taken him less than five minutes to determine to accept the Americans' offer, but he'd known that leaving England behind, even for a few months, would never be as simple as getting on a plane.

The living room was decorated in a sober green and grey, though the wallpaper was shot through at intervals with disturbing apricot paisleys and the surfaces were scattered with regrettable brightly-colored animal knick-knacks. The price one must pay, he supposed. He extracted his laptop from the room safe and opened it, watching the email count crawl higher with dismay. As they downloaded, he went back to the bedroom for the Scotch.

A few hours of attending to home affairs, and the bottle was emptier. He stretched, and his sleeve slid through his peripheral vision. He frowned: something was wrong with it. No, something was wrong with *him*. He was still in yesterday's suit. His trousers were a river of creases and his sleeve was crumpled where he'd slept on it. There was even a spot on his tie.

Disturbing. Since Sherrinford, he'd been experiencing what he could only characterize as a sporadic mental migraine: trembling spots like dissolving patches of reality through which he couldn't see, dazzling glare, jagged colorful lines of noise that confounded his calculations. He hastily gathered up fresh clothing from the armoire and went into the soothing grey marble bathroom. He looked at the shining digits inset in the bathroom mirror. Five p.m. The more traditional information the mirror also provided almost persuaded him to go back to bed, but he knew he had to adjust to Eastern time as quickly as he could.

Twenty minutes later, showered and shaved and, hopefully, looking slightly less like a refugee from a horror movie, he emerged from the hotel lobby into the narrow cobblestoned street. The hotel was located in one of the districts which, fifteen years or so earlier, hopeful estate agents had chipped away from a less desirable neighborhood by bestowing a new name upon it. It was now a mix of older brick tenements whose expensive boutique storefronts still sported graffitied roll-down metal gates and newer limestone-clad condos. He spent so much time in the more immutable precincts of London that he sometimes lost the sense of how quickly, and how ruthlessly, cities could change. New York City was perpetually forgetting itself.

He found an odd bistro in somber tones of black and charcoal where the music was too loud but the hanger steak, with an old-fashioned *beurre maître d'hôtel*, delicious. Later, as he strolled back east, his eye was caught by an unmarked steel door in one of the tenement fronts, next to a grated ground-floor window, marked in peeling letters, TAILORS M&H ALTERATIONS. Obvious. He went up to it and pressed the buzzer. After a minute, the door opened, admitting him into an industrial-looking space dominated by a long old-fashioned backlit bar of grey marble, beyond which were wooden booths, already half-occupied.

There was no menu. The bartender asked him what he was in the mood for. "Something unpleasant," he told him. To his credit, the man only nodded and presented him five minutes later with a faintly green-hued drink which proved to be marvelously, complicatedly bitter. He took it to a booth to nurse and watch the crowd circulate. His mind wandered, and soon he saw them moving jerkily, as in speeded-up time lapse film, the Edison bulbs turning into long glowing trails of light.

The third drink was just beginning to make the edges of everything blurrier when his phone rang. Andrea's ringtone.

"You're working late."

"Oh, I'm already home, sir." If he concentrated, he could, in fact, hear the faint sounds of her Elephant & Castle street in the background, quite different from those of the Mall. She had waited til evening in New York, when he was most likely to be at loose ends. He supposed he should be touched. "I'm just checking you don't need anything."

"Everything is fine."

"Is the hotel suitable?"

“Yes. Thank you for the Scotch.”

“I’m responsible for keeping you safe. I didn’t want you wandering into disreputable New York bars at all hours.”

“Too late,” he murmured, noting from a distance his own melancholy tone.

There was a long pause. “Sir, I can be there in fourteen hours.”

He shook himself. “I appreciate the sentiment, Andrea, but we’ve discussed this. Your presence here is not necessary. You’re more useful to me in London.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, sounding stubbornly dubious.

Mycroft signaled the bartender for another. “I’m in deadly earnest. Who else is capable of throwing my brother out of the office when he comes round?”

“No one, sir.”

“When it happens, be sure to send me the footage. Good night.”

He hung up and went back to the bar.

Spreadsheet attached. Take a sample of the loans and extrapolate default rates as a function of the increase in temperature in Buenos Aires. Need by the morning.

The next morning, he climbed into a black car which took him across town to an extraordinary structure: a tall Brutalist building with a facade of six vertical slabs of concrete terminating in hollow boxlike shapes, echoed by a shorter group of four slabs set in front. The box-shapes were fascinatingly arbitrary, suggesting, yet utterly refusing, the possibility of windows. As he stood looking up at it, the name of the architect came to his mind, the types of materials, their cost, the bandwidth capacity of the giant satellite dish and its auxiliaries mounted on the roof, all the likely uses for that bandwidth, yet he had to admit the building did better than most at shutting his mind out.

The inside was actually something of a disappointment: like every intelligence office everywhere, lined with shabby cubicles under flickering fluorescent lights, occasionally interrupted by banks of grimy machinery. They’d given him what would have been a corner office, with bland but new carpeting, a surprisingly modern desk and chair, a new laptop and three-monitor setup, and a leather couch. “Official visitors’ office,” Tom, his contact, said. “You gave us a much-needed excuse to upgrade.”

The measuring of government resources out in teaspoons was the same everywhere. “My pleasure,” Mycroft said.

“Anything to get some actual work done.” He grimaced fatalistically, with, Mycroft thought, a genuine touch of embarrassment. “You have no idea what it’s been like.”

“The PM is several beams of sunshine short of a delight, but we needn’t dispute our relative degrees of suffering.” He sat down at the desk and turned the laptop on to start authentication, then pulled a pad of paper from a desk drawer.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it. Call if you need anything.”

It took him a while to orient himself. Everything about the setting was different, and his attention kept catching on those little details rather than on the subject matter before him. And then, what he had really feared: the glare and the shimmer, leaving him leaning back in his chair, covering his eyes with his hand as if that could damp down the colorful electric graffiti writing itself on his inner vision. But he waited it out, hours in the darkened room, and eventually the blankness and the brilliance retreated again to the periphery. An odd set of figures on one monitor caught his attention, dropping a pin in his mind, which then immediately threw out connections to a broader context which he could not yet see, but knew he would be able to find in the documents he’d been given. He began typing. For a painful period, it still took some effort, some conscious direction of his choices, and then it took none at all. Everything fell away except the endlessly ramifying series of analyses his mind flowed through, dividing and reconstituting itself like quicksilver. He hadn’t been able to work at this level in weeks, had found himself constantly dropping out of focus into the prison of analog time. What he’d needed, apparently: problems for which he bore no responsibility whatsoever, solutions that implicated the welfare of people who mattered nothing to him...

“Taking calls from the real world yet?” Tom was standing in the doorway at the end of the day, looking Mycroft up and down. “I’m thinking it was a good idea we kept you up here, away from the administration. If anyone got a look at you...”

He smiled tightly. “I’m sure the feeling would be mutual.”

Back at the hotel, he ordered room service and dealt, much more awkwardly, with recalcitrant problems at home. Then, despite the late hour, he went to the unmarked bar again. He had been unfair, he thought, in previously refusing to recognize the four a.m. last call as a contribution by America to civilization. When he finally slipped between the sheets, he tumbled into unconsciousness almost at once.

The next day, he spent an hour patiently walking a startled review committee through his analyses, then retreated to his office and locked his door. He’d been concerned about the disruptions of working in an ordinary office setting, especially among Americans, but it seemed Tom had already put word round about him—no one who sat near him attempted to introduce themselves, and, when he had to venture once into the hallways, the cubicle-dwellers all seemed to have immensely absorbing work on their screens. He was left entirely, blissfully alone to his contemplations. At the end of the day, he emailed the results to Tom and walked out of the building without making eye contact with anyone.

He *was* a creature of habit, when he was permitted to be, and he fell into a routine quickly. The day's work for the Americans, the evening's clean-up for his own country. Solitary drinking in an establishment where no one noticed him except the bartender, who'd learned to have his cocktail ready almost the moment he came in the door. A return to a suite as pristine as when he'd arrived, and silent and dreamless sleep.

A few weeks in, he had lunch with a man who he'd met years earlier in a newsgroup devoted to geometry and who had just recently retired as one of the leading figures of American finance. Mycroft had always admired the way Pisanello had maintained a twinkly-eyed, gently abstracted persona despite his ruthless devotion to exploiting the last penny out of inefficiencies in the market. Bearded and sly, like a hedge fund Gandalf or Dumbledore. They ate sushi in a converted townhouse on a narrow residential street in the West Village, the extraordinary morsels—glowing like jewels, but sculptured and textured to make them undeniably flesh—beginning to arrive as soon as they sat down. New York, he reflected, had a remarkable way of anticipating one's desires, as if even having to formulate them was work the knowing left to the professionals.

As ever, as lunch concluded, Pisanello said, "Well, Mycroft, if you'd ever like a change of pace, I still think you could do extraordinarily well with us."

"You know I prefer my somewhat *weightier* work in the public sector," Mycroft said. But then added, to his own surprise, "However..."

A crafty look instantly flickered over his friend's face. "You know the possibilities open to someone who does well enough here."

"Yes," he acknowledged, though it wasn't *power* that kept him at his work.

Pisanello cocked his head. "You would have to move here. We would need you closer to the servers. And it would have to be soon. I anticipate another succession crisis at the fund in six to seven years, and you'd need time to establish yourself."

Mycroft looked down at the tiny perfect triangles of egg custard wrapped around a matching triangle of rice on his tray. The cleanliness and purity of it: identifying signals out of the noise, the unexpected correlations between series of data, then converting them into wealth through the immediate and unanswerable judgment of the market. There was an appeal. "It's worth considering," he found himself saying.

"Goodness." Pisanello raised his hand to call for the check. "If you really are interested, you should have dinner with some of us soon."

"I'll let you know."

A faint smile. "I never thought we would have a chance with you, Mycroft."

"Neither did I," he said, and it was the absolute truth.

Fourteen sheep were found dead by violence in Iceland last week. Compare against all ritual animal killings in Scandinavian literature. There must be a pattern.

“I’ve seen you here before.”

Mycroft stirred from his near-trance, glanced up. A young man was standing in front of his table. Dusky skin, short black hair, strong high cheekbones, dark, soulful eyes. Yes, a recurring image, if he stopped to sift through the stream of faces that had marked his evenings. “It’s possible.”

“I’ve been wanting to tell you, I love your look.” In London, the way he dressed was considered distinctive, even affected, but still recognized as a move against the background of a long tradition. In New York, he’d noticed, his style was taken as simple personal idiosyncrasy, a matter of self-willed choices. “May I?” He glanced at an empty chair.

“If you like.”

He was wearing a sweater with wells of jewel tones outlined by contradictorily rough-looking purl stitches and a handsome leather jacket. Late twenties. An artist, in paints and mixed media. Mycroft considered the possibility that he was a plant, but then rejected it as unlikely. He hadn’t broadcast such tastes. “What *is* that drink? It looks terrifying.”

Mycroft glanced at its green depths. “I’ve no idea,” he confessed, and smiled.

As Kashif talked, Mycroft listened and analyzed. He’d just finished a piece, and was still riding the thrill. He’d thought about one of the apps, but had decided it might be fun to “go analog.” He often went with older men, expecting to be spoiled, and that was the possibility he’d seen in the man in the elaborately formal clothing sitting in a bar whose clientele was a little too young for him. Mycroft caught the eye of the bartender, who verged on the clairvoyant, and nodded slightly: the tab would be his.

Later, lying in bed, Kashif was still talking about his work. “I’ve had to go to lunch with him *three times* and I’m still waiting to hear if he’ll take it. It’s exhausting. But one sale like that brings about a gallery show, a gallery show makes an exhibit somewhere, an exhibit somewhere makes a *lot* more sales like that...”

“...And eventually enough people have bought into your work that there’s a positive interest in keeping values high,” Mycroft murmured, following along. He’d never given the matter much thought before. “Dealers will discreetly encourage further exhibits, auctions will be supported, and so on. The actual merit of the work becomes irrelevant.”

There was a frown in Kashif’s voice. “It’s not the money I’m interested in, Mycroft.”

“I see it, though,” he said. “Contemporary art has no inherent beauty, no history; its worth is entirely artificial and manipulable. Perfect if one is playing the game of expected values.”

Kashif sat up. “But I’m not.”

“Your patrons are,” Mycroft said, but managed not to add, *and so you must be, too.*

“Let’s not talk about it anymore.”

“All right,” he said, but the other man was now radiating frustration. After a minute, he sighed and went on, “You don’t have to stay the night. I know it’s...not customary.”

Kashif moved to the edge of the bed. “Yes, I’ve got Crossfit early. I should...”

“Good luck with your sale.”

“Thanks.” He was pulling on his clothes, but he hesitated just as he brought the sweater down over his head. Even in the darkness, Mycroft could read the calculation right off him. “I’ll send you an invitation to the show when it happens.”

“I would be fascinated to see it,” he said, and hoped his irony was as unreadable to him as to every other American.

Two nights later, just as he was falling asleep, his phone rang, a short Strauss trill. He put his hand out and brought the phone to his ear. “Yes?”

Lady Smallwood. It would be 8 am in London. “Good morning, Mycroft.”

“Elizabeth.” He rolled over onto his back, feeling the slight internal pitch of intoxication, and rested his free hand on his chest. “Good morning.”

They hadn’t spoken directly since he’d left London, and there were several matters to discuss. Despite his drowsiness, they managed to dispatch them with reasonable efficiency. Lady Smallwood had always been brisk and no-nonsense; it was oddly pleasant speaking with her about even tedious matters. Perhaps it was the alcohol. That drink they’d never had.

“Your brother is now on his third case officer since you left,” she said when they’d finished, a low roll of amusement in her voice. “He dumped a plate of pasta on the head of the second one.”

He sighed, but not with real feeling. It had been quite obvious that he could no longer serve as handler for any of his relatives. The transition was bound to be stormy, but it was also emphatically no longer his problem. There would hardly have been any point in crossing the Atlantic if it were otherwise. “Occupational hazard, I’m afraid.”

A long pause. “Mycroft,” she said finally, lightly, “are we losing you?”

Time for a pause of his own. Of course, he’d made no effort to hide his meeting, and there was bound to be a certain degree of interest taken in his actions whilst abroad. He wasn’t aware of any direct British access to the affairs of the Fund, but that didn’t mean information couldn’t be acquired indirectly. Well, there was little point in a crude attempt at deception.

“It’s an open question.”

Her tone grew careful. “I hope you understand just how much Her Majesty values your services.”

He ran his hand over his eyes. “Please don’t bring her into this.”

“If it’s a question of compensation—“

“It’s not.”

“The report comes out next month and it will clear you entirely. No one considers you responsible for what happened at Sherrinford. Even unofficially.”

He had to suppress a small laugh. No one whose last name wasn’t Holmes. “I know.”

“It’s not like you to run off to lick your wounds, Mycroft.”

He wondered, briefly, what she thought his wounds to be.

“I’m told people can change,” he said. “Even at my advanced age.”

“And this is your idea of a change?”

“The best one I’ve had.”

“I could have made other suggestions. If you’d consulted me.”

He suddenly felt all the miles between New York and London. The illusion of easy, fluent contact was just that—an illusion.

“I wouldn’t have dreamed of troubling you with my personal concerns, Elizabeth.”

She sighed. “Of course not.” Her tone shifted again. “Well, I have an 8:45. If you make any decisions, Mycroft, we would appreciate the earliest possible notice.”

“Of course. You’d need to begin looking for my replacement.”

“You can’t be replaced,” she said. “As you should know.”

A flicker of warmth, but it died away at once. “Others have managed,” he said. “Have a pleasant day, Elizabeth.”

“Good night, Mycroft.”

He hung up and set the phone down. After lying in bed for a minute longer, he got up to find the latest bottle of Scotch. He sat on the edge of the bed with the glass untouched in his hand for a long time.

That Friday evening, he broke up his routine by going to the Metropolitan Museum. The crowds of tourists thinned as the evening wore on. In the great court of Greek and Roman art,

he tossed a coin into Mercury's fountain, but found he was unable to formulate a wish. *Such vagueness has doomed more than one man*, he chided himself gently.

Eventually, he found himself in some back corridors in which the style of the home of one of the major donors had been preserved: heavy curtains and damasked wallpaper, all in burgundies and yellows, quite different from the relatively antiseptic and spare exhibition rooms elsewhere in the place. He wandered about the largely deserted space, peering at the odd, if exalted, mix of art the rooms were filled with. Finely inscribed Marys folding their hands in sorrow over the dead Jesus. Solid merchants and their wives, proudly displaying the tools of their professions in their workshops. Gilt angels rolling wheels of fire three times their size to drive away Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

At last he came to an empty room with an incongruous plump maroon couch set in front of a fireplace. He was glad for the chance to sit somewhere comfortable, and did. He looked up: facing him was an El Greco of the wounded Christ bearing the cross, a sly-looking Rembrandt citizen, and a fierce St. Jerome in a violent pink gown, also El Greco. He felt like an emperor with a sackful of treasures dumped out in front of him. For a moment, he was actually glad of the American ignorance of the concept of restraint.

"Fancy meeting you here," Sherlock said, dropping down next to him on the couch. "New York's not exactly your natural milieu, but back you to seek out the most pompous corner."

He started, and then restrained himself, knowing Sherlock would catch both. "I believe I mentioned I'm working."

"For *six weeks*. Do they miss you at the Mall?"

Mycroft looked at him. He seemed to be flourishing—normal weight, clean-shaven, dressed in decent clothes, well-rested allowing for recent jet lag, no visible signs of intoxication. In fact, he looked pleased with himself.

"They're getting by, I imagine," Mycroft said. "What are *you* doing here, Sherlock? Trolling for a new landlady?"

"A case." He waved his hand. "Didn't my new handler tell you I was coming?"

"I don't get those reports anymore."

"No? I think I'm hurt, Mycroft."

He smiled thinly. "I doubt I've missed anything of real importance."

"Definitely hurt." He cocked his head. "You know, you should answer your phone from time to time. I need a favor."

Ah, of course. "I'm busy, Sherlock."

Sherlock looked up at the fox-faced Rembrandt. "Clearly."

"What is it?"

“I need access to some CIA databases.”

“No. You’re not popular with the CIA, and I’m not inclined to trade away favors at the moment.”

Sherlock dropped his head back and scowled up at the ceiling. “Come *on*, Mycroft.”

Mycroft lifted his eyes as if he were resuming his contemplations.

“You’re being a rubbish big brother.”

“Yes,” he agreed, coolly. “Yes, I am.”

Sherlock frowned. “What?”

“You’ve been telling me that your whole life. I’ve come to agree. How do you like it?”

He knew he wasn’t keeping the bitterness out of his tone, but he couldn’t think of a reason to try. He wasn’t sure if he was speaking the truth. He was, however, confident that he no longer had the will to protest the conclusions that everyone else had drawn. He found himself growing irrationally angry, in a way he couldn’t remember Sherlock evoking from him before. *How many miles would be enough?*

Sherlock seemed to sense this without understanding it. He rose warily. “Well, *you’re* in a strop for some reason.”

The anger passed as quickly as it had come. “I just want to look at the paintings.”

“This isn’t finished, Mycroft.”

“Yes, Sherlock,” he said, studying Jerome glowering down in his satin, “it is.”

Sherlock was sufficiently confounded that he twirled and went without trying to get the last word.

Eleven texts: deleted without reading.

Even though it was the middle of the night, that evening Andrea picked up after only two rings. “I’m sorry, sir,” she said immediately, “but you *did* instruct me not to pass on any information on the subject short of true emergency.”

“No need to apologize,” Mycroft said. “You did just as I asked.”

There was an insistent buzzing arc, like a malfunctioning fluorescent light, in his mind’s peripheral vision again. He stood for a moment in the suite’s living room, at a loss as to what he had been intending to do.

“I hope the building’s still standing.”

“There was almost no collateral damage at all, in fact.” Ah, yes. He went into the bedroom and pulled his pajamas from the dresser. “Does he really have a case?”

“Yes, sir. Do you want the details?”

He ignored the slight pang in his chest. “No, thank you.”

He managed to get himself changed and into bed, though the lighting system—a complex set of controls above the nightstand that they had actually given him a formal lecture on when he’d checked in—defeated him, leaving him stuck somewhere in “Twilight Dim” for the evening. Close enough.

When, the next morning, the staff brought in a new bottle of Yamazaki with the breakfast table, he still had to stifle a smile.

A couple of days later, Tom pulled him aside when he came in to work, looking a little awkward.

“We identified a breach last night. Among other things, the intruder may have accessed your personnel file.”

Internally, Mycroft winced. But while he wasn’t about to provide Sherlock with a cover-up, neither did he intend to get him arrested in a foreign country. “Well, that’s unpleasant news. Will wounding performance reviews begin ‘surfacing’ on Wikileaks, I wonder?”

Tom chuckled. “Seriously, though, Mycroft, your current address was in there. It’s not as if we’ve been keeping you in a safehouse, but I’d consider moving.”

“If anyone were interested in my hotel, there were much easier ways of finding it out.”

“All right,” Tom said. “But we’d feel better if we kept someone on you for the next few days.”

Mycroft shrugged. “As long as they don’t interfere.” And as long as Andrea didn’t find out. She’d never forgive him if she knew he’d allowed himself to be guarded by personnel she hadn’t selected personally.

On his return to the hotel that evening, he opened the door to his suite cautiously. Sherlock’s lurid taste in pranks was bad enough exercised in his own home; in a hotel, it would be mortifying to have to explain. But the rooms were dark and empty. Trailed by Aviv, his guard, he checked the closets and the curtains—nothing. Perhaps he was going to be spared the visitation after all. Perhaps the hack had been merely a little light psychological warfare to keep his hand in.

He didn’t believe it, of course.

“Do you need anything?” he asked Aviv, who shook his head. “Then you’ll excuse me.”

Aviv left to take up his station in the hall. Mycroft went straight to his bed, lay down, and folded his hands on his chest. Time to work out some scenarios.

The next day, while ensconced at his table, drifting comfortably, he got a call from the head of IT at the Fund. “I was asked to get in touch,” he said, “because two hours ago we caught your brother attempting to hack into one of our systems.”

Mycroft reflected dryly on the discrepancy in capabilities between the NSA and the Fund that this seemed to indicate, then sobered. This didn’t exactly bode well for a future there. “You should understand,” he said, “my brother is—“

“We know it wasn’t on your behalf. You’d have done it under official auspices, whether British or otherwise.”

“I also like to think I wouldn’t have gotten caught.”

A slight pause. “Well, that’s a hypothetical. But we take our security extremely seriously, Mr. Holmes. We can’t afford not to. This is not the kind of thing we can keep overlooking.”

Mycroft took another drink. “Feel free to tell him that, as forcefully as you like. I’m not his keeper.”

“You’re sure about that.”

“Very.”

“All right, then. Thanks for your time, Mr. Holmes.”

Mycroft glanced over at the next table, where Aviv was sitting, patient, blank-faced, drawing more than one admiring glance. “Apparently I should’ve sent you to Long Island,” he muttered.

On the way back to the hotel, Aviv suddenly closed the gap he normally left between them. “You’ve got an admirer,” he said softly.

Mycroft managed to suppress the glance over his shoulder. “Do you recognize him?”

“No. Man. Tall. Blond. Heavy glasses and a Van Dyke. Hands deep in his pockets. I think I should call for backup.”

“Wait.” He touched his arm. “Does he *stalk* from shadow to shadow?”

Aviv laughed shortly. “If you’re being colorful about it.”

Mycroft suppressed the extremely wayward urge to slip his arm into his, possibly even draw him in for a kiss. “It’s all right. It’s no one worth worrying about.”

Later, when they’d arrived safely, Aviv handing him off to the even-taller Angela, Mycroft turned off his lights and twitched the curtains of his living room aside for just a second. Shortly before five in the morning was perhaps the only time his street could be expected to be empty, but at the moment it had a curiously just-vacated look. Even though he was confident of his tail’s identity, the sight still evoked the paranoia of certain posts abroad, before he had been able to disentangle himself from legwork.

He almost wished he could have seen Sherlock standing there, watching.

The next morning, a Saturday, he set forth from the hotel for a long amble through the streets. Spring was just making itself felt, fitfully, in the city: a clutch of overoptimistic blooms in a courtyard, a startling flash of blue between trees accompanied by the rapid-fire beating of wings, a certain damp, freshening smell in the air. He crossed through a district of buildings with remarkable arched cast-iron facades and another of charming brick tenements before emerging into a park. He settled himself on one of the benches ringing the central fountain. Not so very different from Russell Square, if you didn’t look too closely at the people.

Deliberately, he didn’t.

After a few minutes, a strangled squawk proved the validity of his strategy. He glanced to his left. Aviv had Sherlock in a painful-looking armlock. A few people nearby were watching, but the tussle hadn’t made much of a stir. The blessed indifference of the New Yorker.

“This.” Sherlock said through his teeth. “Is childish.”

“You alarmed some of my colleagues, Sherlock. They insisted I accept better security. Such a pity that *krav maga* should happen to be so effective against your style. You can let him go, Aviv.”

He complied, and Sherlock straightened, visibly resisting the urge to rub his elbow. He took a moment to scowl at Aviv. Then he started moving in a restless arc back and forth in front of Mycroft, cocking his head and taking different angles.

Mycroft watched the skateboarders attempting to grind along the fountain rim. An unpleasant noise. He began picturing injuries, knees scraped raw from the concrete. A policeman appeared, and they scattered.

“Your contract with the NSA is only for three months,” Sherlock finally said.

“Yes.”

“But you haven’t bought a return ticket, your solicitor is fast-tracking a green card application, and your real estate agent is having discreet discussions with certain individuals about the possibility of letting your house in the fall.”

“Yes,” he said again. Neutral facts. Sherlock was welcome to them.

Abruptly, he hopped onto the bench, then stooped into a crouch, interlacing his fingers and pressing his knuckles against his mouth. His eyes bored into Mycroft’s face, the gaze of a man studying a specimen.

“You’re not planning on coming back, are you?” he finally demanded.

Mycroft considered it for a moment more in the weak sunshine. “Probably not.”

“But you’re the British government.”

That old fairytale, said in all seriousness. It made him wonder how little Sherlock actually knew him. He had always thought that most of his inaccuracies were deliberately chosen for maximum obnoxiousness, but perhaps...

“I know history is not your forte, Sherlock, but if you consult your memory I’m sure you’ll find evidence that it’s existed without me before.”

“They’re just going to let you go?”

“I’m sure there will be difficulties to be sorted out with the lawyers, but I *am* a free man.”

“What about our parents?”

It came easier than expected. “As you’re the officially designated adult of the family, Sherlock, I have every confidence you’ll be able to see to their needs.”

Sherlock chewed his lip and dropped down into a normal sitting posture, facing away, arms crossed.

“Why are you doing this?”

He shrugged. “The better question would be: why *not*? But”—he raised his hand to forestall him—“either way, I don’t see that you’re entitled to an answer.”

“Is it because you *lost*? That’s beneath you.”

Whatever used to absorb Sherlock’s vitriol, there was no more left. It was like bone scraping on bone.

“Well, I’m glad you think *something* is, Sherlock. But it wasn’t a competition and I didn’t lose.” *And I hope all of you will be very happy together*, he managed not to say, because he knew it wouldn’t come true.

“Euros wonders where you are,” Sherlock said, in an accusing tone.

The thought of the two of them discussing him in their little musical sessions made him gladder to be in New York than he had yet been.

“Of course she does. I’m sure it’s not half as much fun without my being compelled to watch.”

Sherlock slammed the heel of his hand down on the concrete. “Why is it so hard for you to accept?”

He felt himself stiffening. “What she did is still largely theoretical to you, Sherlock,” he snapped. “Even now, you barely remember Victor Trevor. Or the fire at Musgrave. The people who died at Sherrinford—you didn’t know them. But I’ve lived with her crimes since she was old enough to walk. Every day of my life. For God’s sake, *she killed Uncle Rudy*.”

That brought Sherlock’s head around. “Uncle Rudy committed suicide.”

Mycroft stared, letting his lip twitch with disdain at his slowness.

Sherlock actually rolled his eyes at him. “You don’t know that.”

“I most certainly do. It took years, and he did his best to hide it from me, but at the end...I didn’t know how to help him, and then it was too late. And then, when I took over—“

He stopped.

“What?”

He closed his eyes. He’d never discussed this with anyone. Not even the oversight committee. He’d been terrified they’d take him off the case, that she’d be left with a free hand. He’d simply had to endure it, as best he could. He waited until he could resolve the memories into a few bland words. “She tried it with me.”

Opening his eyes again, he could see the remarks, the counterarguments, gathering behind Sherlock’s brow. He knew he wouldn’t have the strength to have this conversation again, and so he pushed ahead once and for all.

“You may do what you please, Sherlock,” he said. “You may save your sister’s soul, if you can. But there is no defect in *mine* because I won’t embrace the monstrosity that has haunted this family for almost as long as I can remember. Tell me, brother mine, in your little communions, has she ever once expressed remorse? For *anything*?”

Sherlock’s mouth dropped slightly open. The sight was infuriating.

“Of course not. Because she doesn’t feel it. But, please, do exercise your empathy on that. Just leave me out of it. I’ve removed myself from the situation. *Leave me out of it*.”

He had to stop; he was breathing too hard to continue. He didn’t even feel capable of looking around to make sure that their conversation hadn’t attracted unwanted attention. He kept his eyes fixed on Sherlock’s.

Sherlock’s brow was furrowed, as if he was confronted with some genuinely unexpected puzzle. Finally, he shook his head.

“All right, Mycroft,” he said, low, rising and putting out a hand. “All right. Just...just don’t do anything drastic yet. Please?”

Mycroft wondered, distantly, when the last time was he’d heard Sherlock use the word “please.” But he was well past the point of considering it a success to have extracted some consideration from him. He shook his head sharply and looked away, wishing he had a cigarette. “Go home, Sherlock.”

He heard him swallow. He waited, counting out the seconds. When enough of them had gone by, he looked up again.

Sherlock was gone.

By the time he got back to the hotel, the mental migraine had given way to a real one, and he nearly staggered into the wall of the suite’s foyer when he closed the door. Thank goodness housekeeping had drawn the curtains, granting him the reprieve of the dark. He went as directly as he could to the wardrobe and located by feel the unlabeled bottle, gift of a friendly MI-5 chemist whose research ran to interrogation drugs. He swallowed two of the plain white tablets and fumbled his way to the bed.

The pills kicked in quickly. He hadn’t taken opiates in some time, and the rush of warmth carried him away. He pulled a sheet over himself with a feeble flop of his arm and closed his eyes. *Lethe. Ameles potamos*. Not the denial of pain, its inversion. Stephen was very good at his work.

But even as he floated and spun, he became aware of someone else in the room. Uncle Rudy. He’d been there for some time. Padding about, as the dead did. Holding up one of his ties to a faint beam of light across the room, judging the quality of the silk. Arguing interminably with someone, his voice fading in and out like a radio transmission. He wasn’t sure Rudy even knew he was there. He couldn’t remember how to speak, so he didn’t try.

He lay like that for two days, Rudy coming and going with the tides of pain relief, til the bottle was empty.

After the migraine had passed, he felt hollow, clean. He hadn’t eaten the entire time; it was a liberating sensation, one he half-wanted to prolong. He picked up the pieces at work and then went to dinner with some of the principals of the Fund, when, in the name of precise calibration of his visible eccentricities, he finally gave in and picked at the food. The artfully composed twigs, puffs, and ash sat lightly on his stomach. He left the blood truffle behind on the plate.

Sherlock would be back in London by now, he thought with something approaching relief. His phone was blessedly free of calls or texts from his number.

He decided to eschew the bar in favor of an early bed. Housekeeping had worked wonders with its first access to the suite in days. You would never know he had been suffering there. The fresh pillowcases were cool against his face.

Three days later, the front desk caught him on the way out with a package. He frowned at it. An oversized brown kraft envelope, awkwardly taped closed, that felt like it contained a stack of paper. His address on it in block lettering, permanent marker. Domestic postage. No return address. He considered taking it with him to work to be checked for threats, but decided he'd rather not run the risk of exposing something private. He took it back up to the suite and put it in the safe before heading to work, hoping he would not return to find the hotel blown up or quarantined.

In the evening, he made himself handle London business before opening the envelope.

The Sherrinford report. Two days early. Interesting. He flipped through it quickly, trying to analyze the discourse without actually considering the events upon which it was built. Roughly what he'd expected. He recognized the friendly hand of Lady Smallwood in some of the descriptions of his conduct in particular. He really would have to think of some reciprocating gesture. She was right: the only blame he took was for arranging inadequate support for his emergency inspection, which was largely excused by the uncertainty as to which personnel had been compromised.

He was surprised to discover that he enjoyed the vindication. Even though he knew how much of it was driven by politics, even as *he* could see the mistakes in his judgment and the flaws in his decisions...that a version in black and white on official stationery that didn't make *excessive* omissions could make his conduct seem reasonable gave him some comfort.

Who, he wondered, would be so interested in his comfort?

Behind the larger report was a smaller, much slimmer volume marked SPECIAL ANNEX. He started to flip past the first page, but something caught his eye. He wasn't on the distribution list. Remarkable. He was on every distribution list that he wanted to be. He could read about Her Majesty's blood sugar if he decided to be interested in it. Yet here was a report on a topic that concerned him intimately, and he was pointedly excluded.

First: a review of the new upgrades to security measures at Sherrinford. Then: an extremely dry discussion of the family visitation issue. "Given the incredible level of violence carried out by Patient EH at every opportunity during her confinement (see: Review of 2016 Security Breach and Associated Fatalities, Appendix A), ongoing visitation by EH's family poses major security risks to all involved, as well as to the entire facility. It was suggested by multiple members of the review committee that no further visits be permitted, regardless of the possible response of EH's parents. It was ultimately resolved that future visits be authorized solely on the grounds that, should they be denied, the steps necessary to deter EH's parents from breaching security would jeopardize the services' relationship with one of the nation's most valuable assets. The matter has thus been tabled, to be reconsidered at Patient EH's next welfare review."

Mycroft closed the report. Well. He supposed he ought to be flattered.

But he was intensely curious instead. Lady Smallwood knew he would be receiving the main report himself in a few days, and hardly needed to arrange to leak it to him. As for the annex, he wasn't entirely certain she *would* pass it to him, even as a reminder that he had influence and allies. Sir Edwin resented him far too much. He ran through his circles and networks with

great speed, identifying and rejecting candidates in the blink of an eye: too junior, too hostile, too cautious...

He needed more data. The envelope was of completely ordinary stock that could be purchased in any store in the state. It bore a city postmark, but that might mean only that someone local was acting as relay. Presumably fingerprinting would gain him nothing. The particular version of the report he'd gotten might give him a clue, but he would have to compare it against all other drafts, something he wasn't presently in a position to do. He idly paged through the main report again, more slowly this time, and a receipt fell out. A cafe in Fort Tryon Park.

The last four digits of the card—recognizable as belonging to one of his own.

He took a deep breath and chose to suspend judgment.

The next day, he left work early without a guard and took a car uptown. That far north, the city took on a geological scale: looking down on the cliffs of fall as it narrowed, you began to understand that you were actually on a land mass twisting violently upwards out of the earth. The great works of infrastructure—the highways and bridges arching massively over the river—had an ancient aspect, as if they were monuments from the Stone Age, or at least relics of the Romans who had never actually set foot on Manhattan. Mycroft carefully settled himself on one of the walls protecting the footpaths along the edges of the park, looking down at the foliage clinging to the worn sheets of rock and then across to the great river and the mirroring outcroppings beyond. The report lay half-exposed beneath a newspaper next to him.

A policeman would be along to scold him for his daredevilry within a few minutes. He would give it that long.

When Sherlock joined him, springing fluidly onto their dangerous perch, he decided to maintain his suspension.

"Doing a little light reading?"

"There was an interesting twist at the end," he said. It was all too uncertain. He wasn't going to give him anything.

A small cruise boat made its way up the river. The Hudson was not like the Thames, freighted down with more than a millennium of history, Roman traders bearing fine pottery and wine from the heart of civilization, traitors headed to the Tower, *Elizabeth and Leicester, beating oars, The stern was formed, a gilded shell, red and gold...*

But, in the end, he thought, all travelers pass and all rivers regain their same smooth surfaces.

"Extensive and gruesome as it is, Uncle Rudy's not in Appendix A," Sherlock ventured after a few minutes, watching Mycroft out of the corner of his eye.

Mycroft bristled automatically for a second or two before realizing that there was no challenge in Sherlock's tone. "He wouldn't be. He never told anyone. Nor did I."

Sherlock nodded. There was another long silence.

"I've been thinking about that Christmas. Very unpleasant."

"Yes."

"Mummy, as I recall, was mortified. Rudy had finally had the *queer outbreak* that would expose the family."

Mycroft remembered each remark, each suggestive expression, which he'd cataloged across the suddenly yawning gulf between him and the rest of humanity.

"Meanwhile, Father couldn't have been more awkward. And you..." Sherlock hesitated, giving him another sidelong look. Mycroft realized that he carried the signs of a second round of jet lag. So he had gone home. And come back. He wasn't sure what that meant. "You were so..." He passed his hand straight down over his face. "So utterly closed-off, I thought you *must* have been high."

"I wasn't. Unlike you."

"You *hit* me."

He remembered that, too, the thud, the red blooming across Sherlock's face, the realization that he had no sensation in his hand.

"You were snorting coke in the bathroom during Rudy's memorial."

"I didn't even know you knew how to throw a punch."

"Sherlock, I had already been posted for three years in progressively more dangerous foreign countries. How could you think I wouldn't?"

"There was a lot I didn't know about you," Sherlock said simply. "Maybe things I could've helped with, even."

Sherlock, who had taken adolescent self-absorption, like every other one of his pursuits, to its absolute pinnacle. "I doubt it."

"I might've liked the chance."

It *was* melancholy to contemplate: Sherlock fighting blind through so much of his life, unable to see more than the surface of so many of the events that shaped his existence.

"That started your most annoying period," Sherlock recalled. "You used to go in after me and straighten the silverware in its drawer. You wouldn't let me put books back on the shelf because I 'wouldn't get it right.' You replanted half the flowers edging the walk at the cottage to even up the line. Mummy thought you were grieving."

“No.” Or...he supposed he had been, must have been, but far more than that, he’d needed reality to be absolutely predictable. Defined with complete clarity, so he could have something to take hold of. Later, fortunately, Rudy’s pocket-watch had come to suffice, a heavy weight always in his pocket, always smooth to his touch. He could feel it now, nestled into his side.

“At any rate.” Sherlock tapped the report. “You can stop the family visits now, if you want. You know how.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“Come on. Mummy and Father signed the Official Secrets Act. No matter how angry they get, they’re not going to do anything. The only thing keeping them going is that MI-5 doesn’t want to upset you.”

“Perhaps.” Given the blow that Sherrinford might have been to his reputation, it was oddly charming to imagine his colleagues worrying over his relationship with his family.

“So are you going to?”

Mycroft actually turned and looked at Sherlock, who was kicking his dangling feet and staring straight down, looking very young. Sherlock had gone to some lengths—some considerable lengths—to put it into his power to stop the visits Sherlock himself had asked for. It was possibly the most selfless act Sherlock had ever carried out, for Mycroft, at least.

“I may be able to stop the visits, but I can’t stop you wanting to go.” He took a deep breath. “Do you still want to go?”

Sherlock kicked the wall, harder.

“I thought...in the moment, it seemed a very dramatic, heroic thing to do. *Rescuing* my sister. And a way to be better than *you*. Now that I’ve had more visits...” He stopped. “Now that I know certain things. I was there again this weekend. I don’t think she’s trying to do anything to me, but...When we play, she’s mirroring my ego back at me. Our *special* intellects. Both of us, *victims* of your high-handed meddling. Maybe she’s sincere, maybe that’s the closest she can come to communicating with me. But what are we really communicating? Who am I trying to love? And what is she *not* showing me?”

Mycroft thought of the answers to that last question, one by one. But he had already laid out that case. So he waited.

“Meanwhile...” he sighed, and gestured to take in all of New York. “So, no. It’s not worth admiring myself in the mirror. And by ‘it’, I mean. This.” Again, the city. “You’re the most incurable Englishman I know, Mycroft. You can’t think you’ll be happy here.”

“I’m only trying not to be miserable,” he said, more honestly than he’d intended.

“Is it working?”

Drinks that tasted of existential discontent, beautifully clean problems, the promise of enough wealth to lift him beyond the reach of all friction, forever.

“It is. At a cost, of course.”

“But if it could be better in London...?”

His work for England still had value, it seemed, even if he came a degree or so short of infallibility. *One of the nation's most valuable assets. You can't be replaced.*

Mummy and Father were a lost cause. But one didn't have to devote anything to a lost cause, at least once one was willing to admit that it *was* lost. Perhaps it was fortunate, that now he had no choice. That pain could fade, would fade. Let them stand in front of the glass and look at Euros's back for the rest of their lives.

It had always been Sherlock's choice which he truly couldn't bear, which demanded an entire ocean to cushion the pain of.

“Hey! You two! Get down from there! It's not safe!”

The inevitable policeman, interrupting his reverie.

“Come on now, move along.”

Sherlock was still looking at him, not willing to let go til he got an answer.

“All right,” he said, and turned to drop down to the pavement. “I will.”

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