

Title: Brother Dear

Author: Xanthe

Fandom: BBC Sherlock

Pairing: Mycroft/Sherlock

Genre: Slash

Rating: R

Category: BDSM, including bondage, whipping, flogging, torture, and interrogation. Voyeurism. Post-episode story for *The Empty Hearse*.

Warning: Dark themes, incestuous hints

Summary: At the heart of the Holmes brothers' complex relationship resides a dark secret that binds them almost as closely as blood.

Wordcount:

Author's Notes: This is my first story in the *Sherlock* fandom. I've always been fascinated by the Sherlock/Mycroft brotherly relationship, and after watching their scenes together in *The Empty Hearse*, that fascination went through the roof, so I thought I'd write my take on it in this story. I would also like to say that I happen to adore *Les Misérables* *g*.

Thanks Yous:

Extract: *"You're a voyeur as well as a sadist," Sherlock accuses.*

"And you, brother dear, are an exhibitionist as well as a masochist." Mycroft grins, and Sherlock grins back, both of them delighted by these particular truths.

Brother Dear **By Xanthe**

Sherlock's white skin is stretched tautly over his firm muscles, which ripple as the Serbian's whip makes contact with his back. Mycroft leans back in his chair, crosses his legs, and settles in to watch: this is going to be good.

Sherlock is barefoot, has been stripped to the waist, and is tethered. He is chained between two posts, and the cuffs around his wrists are made of a thick wrought iron and look painfully tight. In fact, they are - Mycroft knows this because he fastened them around Sherlock's wrists himself. His brother has been denied sleep for a couple of days to soften him up for the interrogation, which was convenient as it gave Mycroft the time he needed to ensure his escape plan was fully in place. There's no rush, though - Mycroft is intrigued as to how Sherlock intends to get out of his current predicament, and he wouldn't like to deny his brother the chance to display his ingenuity. Sherlock isn't as smart as big brother, but he does have flashes of brilliance that can be entertaining.

Another blow from the whip, and Sherlock arches his back and then bends forward, a dark stain of blood now painting his shoulder with a deep, crimson line. From where he is sitting, Mycroft is perfectly placed to admire the sheen of sweat that has broken out on his brother's pale skin and seeped into his hair, making it appear darker as his head sways in the aftermath of the blow.

Sherlock's unruly curls have grown longer and even more unruly in the two years he's been away, but for some reason - vanity presumably - he hasn't grown a full beard. There is merely two days' worth of stubble on his face, dating from his capture. A man who has time to shave his face and yet

no time to cut his hair... Mycroft holds back the 'tut' that springs to his lips, because it's not in character for the role he is currently playing, but he's sorely tempted all the same.

A pained grunt from Sherlock arrests his attention. Sherlock can't stop an involuntary grunt or the flow of tears and sweat while taking a beating, but he never screams or begs for mercy. Mycroft knows this from experience, but he always assumed that it was simply for his benefit: Sherlock would never wish to display such obvious weakness in the face of physical adversity in front of his brother. However, there's no reason for Sherlock to hold back now, alone in a cell with what he believes to be his torturers, unless...

Mycroft gives an imperceptible sigh. He had thought that his presence had gone unnoticed, as Sherlock's wits are undoubtedly dimmed by the lack of sleep and torture, but of course Sherlock knows his brother is in the room. Why else would he be showing off so shamefully, tossing those sweat-dampened curls so artfully, and arching his back so beguilingly to meet the whip? It certainly isn't for the benefit of the Serbian, who is a thug, and completely unschooled in the art of torture. Mycroft is tempted to grab the whip away from him and show him how it should be done, but he's in no mood to indulge his brother's love of theatrics now.

Another line of red is painted across Sherlock's back, and he throws his head back and then allows it to fall forward with painfully obvious grace. Mycroft rolls his eyes, wondering which of them will be the first to end this charade. If only they weren't both enjoying it so much. The presence of the Serbian, an unwitting player in the brothers' own private game, has lent the scenario a certain charged frisson. Mycroft makes a mental note of that.

The Serbian growls some tedious threats, and then casts his whip aside and reverts to his fists. Mycroft suspects he's happier with the crunch of bone on flesh - the whip was always too subtle an instrument for him. Sherlock's exquisitely muscled body is taking a sustained attack now, as the Serb delivers a series of painful body blows. Mycroft wonders idly how Sherlock has found the time to keep up his vigorous Ashtanga yoga workouts during his two year absence, because his brother is in excellent physical condition. At least that means Mycroft doesn't have to worry about telling Mummy that her beloved baby boy is in poor health. That would bring no end of grief down on his head, and it's drama he's happy to do without.

However, the Serbian's fists must be inflicting some damage. Sherlock is used to the whip, but Mycroft has never resorted to anything so thuggish as using his fists on his brother. Mycroft considers whether to intervene, but he decides against it; they're both enjoying the scenario, and it won't hurt to let it play out a little bit longer. He's still intrigued as to how Sherlock intends to get out of his current predicament, and the Serb's body blows are creating some interesting bruising on Sherlock's skin. Mycroft has never seen Sherlock taken this far before, and he wonders how much his brother can stand. Perhaps he needs to push things further in their own private sessions to find out.

The Serb, clearly finding even his own fists too subtle, reaches for a rusty iron pipe, and Mycroft sits up a little. This could be interesting... but Mycroft's familiarity with his brother's vanity easily allows him to predict what will happen next. It's a shame, when they were both having such a good time. A few muttered words from Sherlock cause the Serbian to falter, and then Sherlock starts showing off even more, throwing out deductions about the half-witted Serb left, right and centre, as if they're

going out of style. The Serbian storms from the room, taking the pipe with him, presumably to seek some emotionally charged domestic violence at home, instead of the dreary workplace variety.

Mycroft is disappointed. It's a shame that the pleasure is over, but Sherlock was never going to risk that pipe damaging his perfectly chiselled cheekbones, so it was inevitable.

Mycroft examines his brother for a moment, enjoying one last view of his half naked, beaten body, doubled over, his long hair covering his face.

“So, my friend. Now it’s just you and me,” he says, in flawless Serbian, to let Sherlock know they are alone together now: still not quite safe, but alone. Mycroft uncrosses his legs and gets to his feet. “You have no idea the trouble it took to find you,” he adds. Mycroft is understating that; it really did take a considerable degree of trouble, to say nothing of the time out of his busy schedule. The country doesn’t run itself – it requires Mycroft, sitting in his bombproof bunker in central London, to plan for its safety and continued prosperity. Strings don’t pull themselves, after all.

Mycroft strides slowly towards Sherlock, rather enjoying the sound his heavy boots make on the stone floor. He doesn’t like undercover work, and loathes being in the field, but Sherlock’s interrogation has been an unexpected pleasure, and he’s rather sad it’s coming to an end. He allows himself one last indulgence and takes hold of Sherlock’s sweaty, dark curls and pulls his brother’s head up. This, at least, is familiar territory – they’ve been here before, many times, just the two of them, in a certain room in his apartment in London that has remained locked for the past two years. Mycroft is surprised by the sensory pleasure of being able to grasp such a large handful of Sherlock’s now plentiful hair in his hands; this is different, new, and a most pleasing sensation. He savours it for a moment, before leaning in and speaking directly into Sherlock’s ear – in English, this time.

“Now listen to me, there’s an underground terrorist network active in London and a massive attack is imminent. Sorry, but the holiday is over, brother dear. Back to Baker Street, Sherlock Holmes.”

Sherlock’s mouth twists upwards in a little grin, and Mycroft sighs: it’s time to take his annoying little brother home.

There is some tedious messing around with the escape and transport facilities, but outsmarting the dimwit guarding the cell is easy enough, and before long they are ensconced on a private jet, courtesy of the British government, and flying back to London.

Mycroft uses the on-board facilities to take a shower and ease himself back into his comfortable, impeccably tailored suit. It feels good to wash off all the grime of Serbia – he has really no idea why Sherlock enjoys his disguises and undercover work so much. It’s revolting. He pauses as he reaches for his cufflinks. He was going to wear the St George ones, but maybe the occasion warrants a different pair entirely. It's unorthodox, but Mycroft doesn't mind embellishing his own rules occasionally, and it is fitting. So he reaches instead for the small silver box he insists is always packed with his belongings, and opens it to retrieve the white gold cufflinks, nestled inside on a lining of red velvet. He fingers the inscription on them for a second, pondering the matter, and then puts them on. It is the right decision; he knows the significance of the cuffs will not be lost on his brother.

He emerges into the plane's lounge to find Sherlock sitting on the sofa, freshly washed and smelling clean at least, even if he still has the long hair and two days growth of beard still on his chin.

Sherlock is clad in a black towelling dressing gown, which looks exquisitely dark against his pale skin, and is the perfect counterpoint to the bruising on his body, revealed by the fact the gown is only casually tied and has fallen open at the chest.

Sherlock spots the cufflinks immediately, as Mycroft knew he would, and he gives a little snort, which Mycroft ignores. Mycroft retrieves a black leather case from a drawer, places it on the coffee table, and opens it to reveal the neatly ordered first aid kit he likes to keep at hand. Sherlock eyes him warily, but Mycroft merely raises a challenging eyebrow and clicks his fingers.

Sherlock sighs and removes his dressing gown, then bends his head forward, those long, black curls obscuring his face as he exposes his wounded shoulders to his brother. Mycroft is gentle as he caresses the antiseptic cream into Sherlock's wounds, but Sherlock winces frequently anyway, and shoots his brother an accusing look once it's all over, as if the beating was entirely his fault. There is a conversation to be had on this subject, but not now. These matters follow a familiar routine, and Mycroft happens to like routines.

Mycroft clicks his fingers again, and Sherlock grudgingly lies back to allow his brother to examine his ribs and collar bones, to ensure nothing has been broken. Mycroft takes his time, his long fingers firm but gentle as they stroke his brother's body. He finds a few sore spots where the Serb's fists connected, but it is nothing serious, and he finishes his examination and allows Sherlock to sit up.

Sherlock wraps his dressing gown around his body again, and Mycroft puts away the first aid case and takes a seat beside him. Sherlock presented him with a data stick when they first boarded the plane, which Mycroft handed to his assistant to print out. He has a suspicion as to where Sherlock was hiding it during his interrogation, but doesn't want to think too closely about that. His assistant has left the weighty tome on the table, and Mycroft settles in to read a detailed report of what his brother has been up to for the past two years.

Before long, he feels the familiar weight of Sherlock's head insinuating itself onto his lap. He could object and push it away, but instead he finds himself doing what he always does, and brushing his fingers through Sherlock's soft, dark curls, smoothing them back from his forehead. Sherlock grins up at him, as if he has won some kind of victory over him, which, in a way, he has. Mycroft will make him pay for that another time.

Mycroft refuses to be distracted and continues to read the report, holding it with one hand while he strokes Sherlock's hair with the other, ignoring his tiresome little brother. When he next looks down, Sherlock has fallen fast asleep on his lap. Mycroft gives a grunt of annoyance, and then pulls the blanket from the back of the sofa over his brother's sleeping form, and gently wraps it around him.

It has been two years since they were last alone together, and Mycroft feels his loneliness seep slowly away now that he has his brother back. Sherlock's presence brings other, equally grievous emotions with it, but loneliness is not one of them.

When he was a child, Mycroft never met anyone like himself, and as he grew up, his sense of loneliness became familiar, like a comfortable suit. He reached out many times, but to no avail, and eventually, over the years, that loneliness became ingrained in his personality. With a child's fanciful imagination, he sometimes felt as if he was an alien, transplanted onto a world where he could never hope to belong. He discovered an endless reservoir of resourcefulness in himself, and set

about trying to understand humanity, while knowing he could never properly be part of it. He learned to appropriate their mannerisms, to speak their languages, and to be able to pass, for all intents and purposes, as one of them, while knowing he was not.

Then, just as he had become used to his own loneliness, Sherlock came along – precocious, ridiculous, irritating, rebellious and alarmingly emotional. Mycroft was in his teens before he realised that Sherlock's mind was almost as superior as his own. Prior to that, he had dismissed him merely as an annoying little bother. He still does, occasionally – Sherlock makes that so easy.

Mycroft was twelve years old when he realised he was no longer alone, and that another mind like his existed in the world. At first, instead of being a comfort, it irked him. He might not be lonely anymore, but now he had a rival whose very existence rendered Mycroft less special and no longer unique.

In a secret, bitter part of his heart he is angry that Sherlock has never known what it is like to be the only one of his kind, because he has always had Mycroft. Mycroft resents him for that; hatred and love for his little brother have always clawed at his heart, both demanding his attention in equal measure. When he has Sherlock, he is not alone, and the heavy weight in his heart lessens a little. Yet, when he has Sherlock, he has a competitor always snapping at his heels, a rival for his mother's love, and a constant thorn in his side.

Mycroft's long fingers gently soothe his brother's hair as he reads his report. It has been a long two years.

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Mycroft ensures that clothing in the style Sherlock favours is ready and waiting for him in his office upon their return. He arranges for a barber to shave the minor fuzz from Sherlock's face, and – regretfully – trim those delightful curls.

Sherlock is rested now, and that means his battery has recharged to its usual level of Extremely Irritating.

“How are Mummy and Daddy?” Sherlock asks, as he sits down in the barber's chair, wincing as his sore shoulders make contact with the hard leather.

“They are both fine. I kept them fully apprised of your activities while you were away. Mummy was distressed that the world thought badly of you, and no matter how much I explained that it was our plan, she never quite seemed to fully understand the necessity for it.”

“Well, she is overly emotional,” Sherlock says dismissively.

“A trait you inherited from her, I fear,” Mycroft replies.

Sherlock is annoyed by the insult, as Mycroft intended, and he knows that ‘talk’ is now imminent.

The barber leans over, poised to slice his scissors into Sherlock's long, damp locks. Mycroft remembers how it felt to be able to take such a big handful of that thick, lustrous hair, and interrupts.

“You know, I rather liked it long,” he murmurs. “You could keep it that way.”

Sherlock glances at him for a moment, assessing his meaning precisely, and then he glances back at the barber. “Cut it off,” he instructs the barber spitefully.

There is silence while Sherlock’s hair is trimmed back to its normal length. Sherlock picks up a newspaper and reads it, while Mycroft reads through Sherlock’s report again, committing every small detail to memory.

His hair taken care of, Sherlock lies back to have his stubble shaved, wincing again at the movement. He folds up the newspaper and throws it to one side, clearly bored with it. They discuss Sherlock’s mission to dismantle Moriarty’s criminal network: his little brother has done well, but then Mycroft knew he would. That’s why he sent him to do this task – what Sherlock lacks in brains, he more than makes up for in ingenuity and sheer determination. Of course, Mycroft kept a watchful eye on his brother during his two year absence. He always broadly knew where Sherlock was and what he was doing, even if they didn’t see each other during that time. There would be hell to pay with Mummy if Sherlock had been seriously injured – or worse. So Mycroft was a good big brother, and kept tabs on Sherlock throughout – which, given Sherlock’s love of disguise and intrigue, hadn’t always been easy.

“Anyway, you’re safe now,” Mycroft says, putting the file aside.

Sherlock gives a thoughtful grunt in reply, and Mycroft knows the time is upon them. He isn’t comfortable having their ‘talk’ with the barber in the room, so decides not to indulge Sherlock in whatever absurd theatrics he has in mind.

“A small ‘thank you’ wouldn’t go amiss,” he says urbanely, to head off the approaching tantrum.

“For what?” Sherlock mutters gracelessly.

“For wading in. In case you’ve forgotten, fieldwork is not my natural milieu.”

Sherlock gives his most dramatic wince to date as he levers himself up from the barber’s chair.

“Wading in? You sat there and watched me being beaten to a pulp!”

Theatricals. Mycroft has been expecting it. He feigns puzzlement. “I got you out,” he says.

“I got me out,” Sherlock growls. “Why didn’t you intervene sooner?”

It’s on the tip of Mycroft’s tongue to riposte “and spoil the fun?” but he knows that now is not the right time for such a flippant response. However, Sherlock’s turbulent emotions have caused him to miss the obvious - that Mycroft didn't intervene at all. What Sherlock should be asking himself is why he waited so long and endured so much before making the deductions that sent his torturer fleeing from the room. He could have used his wits to get rid of the oaf before the Serb laid a finger on him. He chose not to, so it really isn’t fair of him to lay the blame squarely at Mycroft’s feet in the aftermath.

Mycroft can forgive him that, because Sherlock is not yet ready to examine the Serbian interrogation calmly. It is, after all, one thing for them both to indulge their unusual tastes in the comfort of the private, locked room in Mycroft’s apartment, but quite another to have a third party present. This is

new territory for them, uncharted, and Sherlock is trying to come to terms with it. Perhaps he is genuinely hurt that Mycroft did nothing to stop the torture, but another part of him wishes to explore the matter further, to hone in on precisely what was so thrilling about the event, and to recapture something of the moment. These are issues to be ruminated upon and unpicked, but that is a job for Mycroft – he runs this particular game, and sharing the discussion with Sherlock will only spoil it for his brother later.

“I couldn’t risk giving myself away, could I?” Mycroft replies - which is a perfectly logical answer that does nothing to address the complexities at hand. “It would have ruined everything.”

“You were enjoying it.” Sherlock has an intrigued, intent look on his face. He doesn’t want to let it drop.

“Nonsense,” Mycroft says dismissively, making it clear he is not going to indulge his brother in this particular conversation.

“Definitely, enjoying it,” Sherlock says, in a decisive tone, but he sits back down again, clearly resigned to not getting the answers he wants. Mycroft understands his fascination with the subject, and files it away for further analysis. However, now is not the time, so he moves the conversation on.

Sherlock is mildly critical of the shirt that Mycroft has selected for him. “What do you think of this shirt?” he asks, surveying himself in the mirror with a smug look on his face. Sherlock’s vanity is familiar and tedious, and makes Mycroft impatient. There are other, more important matters at hand, like the imminent terrorist threat to London. Besides, the shirt clings to Sherlock’s muscled chest perfectly. His brother is beautiful, and he knows it. Mycroft has always thought of him as a highly strung race horse, all flared nostrils, long legs, sleek muscles, and unruly dark mane. He mentioned that to Sherlock once, and his brother laughed, but was clearly flattered by the analogy all the same.

“What does that make you, then?” Sherlock had demanded, with a sly look in his eyes. “My stable boy?”

Mycroft had laughed back – a much more sinister sound. “No, brother dear. Your trainer, of course.”

If looks could kill, Mycroft would have been stone dead in that instant.

Yet here Sherlock is, dancing to Mycroft’s tune: Flush out Moriarty; allow your reputation to be destroyed along the way; deceive your close friends; give up your life in London and spend two years abroad dismantling Moriarty’s criminal network; return to London upon my orders to foil a terrorist plot we’ve uncovered... Sherlock always ends up doing as his brother tells him, which is the way it should be as far as Mycroft is concerned. He is the oldest after all, the one who chose power and responsibility over the flashlights of fame. Unlike Sherlock, he is not seduced by the cheap thrills of being the world’s first consulting detective. He has chosen to devote his life to Queen and Country, and the safety of the land is his first priority.

Sherlock is obsessed with the small detail, whereas Mycroft can see the bigger picture. Sherlock has always been wild and rebellious, wearing his child-like emotions on his sleeve, but Mycroft has

learned to school his own impulses. Mycroft thinks of himself not just as a big brother for Sherlock, but also for the entire country. He is a superior being, and he must do his best to protect the lesser beings under his care, even if they never thank him for it.

“And what about John Watson?” Sherlock asks suddenly, and Mycroft feels a familiar surge of jealousy. Somehow, Sherlock has managed to carve out other interests and a life away from his brother. When he first attempted to do so, it caused considerable tension between the brothers and a rift that lasted many years. Now, Mycroft has accepted that his own company is not enough for Sherlock, and his brother also requires the companionship of those lesser beings.

“John?” Mycroft murmurs distantly.

“Hmm - have you seen him?”

“Yes, we meet up every Friday for fish and chips,” Mycroft replies sarcastically. Sherlock casts him a little look; he guesses something of Mycroft's jealousy, however hard he tries to keep it hidden. Of course Mycroft knows where John is, what John does, who he speaks to and where he goes. It's Mycroft's job to keep tabs on all his brother's acolytes. He gives Sherlock the information he requires, and Sherlock preens at his reflection in the mirror.

“I think I'll surprise John,” he says. “He'll be delighted.”

“You think so?” Mycroft bites back the snort of derision. Sherlock is such a child, imagining the whole world revolves around him. Mycroft blames Mummy for that - she should have been firmer on him when he was young.

“Hmm, drop into Baker Street, who knows – jump out of a cake.”

Sherlock grins happily, delighted by his own fantasy, full of the drama of his big return, and Mycroft takes great pleasure in puncturing that little bubble.

“Baker Street? He isn't there anymore. Why would he be? It's been two years. He's got on with his life.” He chooses the words carefully, hoping to wound, but he's under-estimated Sherlock's massive arrogance and self-absorption - the very flaws that always irk Mycroft so much. Being apart from Sherlock for so long has made him forget just how irksome they are.

“What life? I've been away,” Sherlock replies, looking genuinely puzzled.

Clearly, Sherlock is full of plans for this particular reunion. Mycroft hopes he doesn't actually intend to jump out of a cake, but he wouldn't put it past him. Even so, Mycroft wonders if he should sound a note of caution. Sherlock is a child, approaching the world with a child's sense of self-importance. He is so immersed in his own emotions that he cannot conceive of a scenario in which poor, deceived John Watson would not welcome him.

“I think maybe I'll just drop by,” he says, and Mycroft takes pity on him.

“You know, it is just possible that you won't be welcome,” he points out.

“No, it isn't,” Sherlock says firmly, and Mycroft decides that's all the help he's going to give him, and he must learn a little about human nature the hard way.

Sherlock calls for his coat – Mycroft keeps a store of them, all identical, and Sherlock is delighted to shoulder himself into it.

“Thank you,” he says, and Mycroft knows it isn’t for the coat, but, belatedly, for the perfectly organised and executed rescue from Serbia. “Blud,” Sherlock adds, in an affectionate tone. It is an old English word, literally meaning ‘blood brother’. They have used the word with each other since they were children, and Mycroft can’t deny that it warms him to hear the familiar term of endearment from his brother. Of course, given their recent exploits in Serbia, it’s entirely likely that in this instance Sherlock is also using it mischievously, to refer to the evil deity from Slavic mythology that causes disorientation in his victims. The Slavic root also refers to a desire for illicit sex – a thought that brings just the faintest hint of a blush to Mycroft’s cheeks. Sherlock is aware of all three meanings of the word, of course.

Mycroft watches his brother go, in search of an unsuspecting John Watson who is about to have his life turned upside down.

Sherlock has never studied human nature as Mycroft has done, to enable him to glide smoothly through the world as if he is part of it, without anyone knowing what an outsider he truly is. Sherlock still seems to think he can belong. Mycroft has seen his face crumple at some casual reminder that it is not the case, that the people he cares about do not see him as one of them, and that he is different and occasionally disliked, and he knows how much it hurts his brother. Yet Sherlock’s understanding of human nature remains rudimentary, at best. That is why he thinks he can walk back into John Watson’s life, and they can pick up where they left off.

Mycroft makes a call to his housekeeper. “Please ensure there is a meal for two in my apartment this evening,” he orders. “My brother will be visiting later, and he will be hungry.”

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It is nearly midnight when the knock on the door comes. Mycroft is sitting in his smoking jacket in his study, reading, and he marks his place in his papers, puts them to one side, and gets up to answer the door.

Sherlock is standing there with a cut on his lip and a tissue stuck up his bloodied nostrils.

“Ah, so John took the news of your resurrection well then,” Mycroft says, standing to one side so that Sherlock can push past him into the hallway. Mycroft places a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, taking some small pleasure from how the pressure hurts Sherlock’s wounded back, and ushers his brother into the dining room, where their meal is laid out, ready.

“You knew how he’d react,” Sherlock says accusingly, taking his seat.

“Yes.” Mycroft pours Sherlock a glass of wine and takes his seat opposite him.

Sherlock surveys the food on the table. “And you knew I’d never get around to eating dinner!”

“Yes.” Mycroft pours a glass of wine for himself.

“You could have warned me how he’d be.”

"I did try. You didn't listen."

"Oh, you could have done more than try, if you'd wanted. You knew he'd do this!" Sherlock gestures at his bruised face, his epic vanity clearly shaken. "You wanted this to happen."

Mycroft shrugs. "You do have to admit, brother, that it is amusing how everyone you meet, whether friend, foe, or fraternal..." He smirks. "Has an urge to smack you around your arrogant little head. It's reassuring. Makes me feel as if I'm part of a gang or something." He wave his hand around vaguely, amused by the thought.

Sherlock gives him a wounded stare. "You're a total shit."

Mycroft raises his glass to Sherlock. "Bon appetit."

Mycroft has arranged for Sherlock's favourite food to be served, and as they eat, Sherlock regales him with the story of how the evening went. None of it surprises Mycroft. What does surprise him is Sherlock's apparent resolution that he will one day get John Watson back into his life. Mycroft long ago accepted his own loneliness, but Sherlock, who has never known true loneliness, has always craved friendship. Mycroft can still remember his pathetic attempts to make friends at university. The other students mocked him both behind his back and to his face, and Sherlock hid the wounds away, nursing the hurt, but continued seeking friendship all the same. Mycroft wonders why he bothers. It's not as if it's necessary; Mycroft has done without it his entire life, and it's never done him any harm.

Mycroft has made it his business to experience all forms of human contact in order to learn how to blend in, but so far hasn't found a personal use for any of them. Unlike his brother, he doesn't like to stand out and be different, and he certainly doesn't have a continual need to be admired. His self-esteem requires no such boost, and besides, he can admire himself quite well enough.

Mycroft made a decision at university to try all varieties of sexual congress, so he could learn why the need for sex made people act in such irrational ways. It wasn't an entirely successful experiment. He started off with a female partner, and found the sex a messy and unsatisfactory experience. He could see why, for some, the lure of the physical outweighed the attraction of the cerebral, but that was not his own disposition.

Experimentation with male partners proved more successful, and he suspected that was more his natural milieu, but Mycroft decided he could live without sex quite happily. He tried various other forms of sexual expression just to be sure: a tedious threesome; a quite disastrous attempt at role-play; and even, on one occasion, an ill-advised orgy. There was never any need to try sadomasochism, of course: he was already familiar with that, and with a partner who could not be matched by anyone else.

Sherlock is a virgin, of that Mycroft is quite sure. His brother is scared of sex, maybe concerned that if he gives in to such a primitive urge, his mental capacities will be diminished. Or, perhaps, afraid that his need for acceptance will simply lead to more of the rejection with which he is already familiar. Or maybe he is merely un-titillated by what is on offer.

Mycroft has considered inducting his brother into the world of sexual pleasure, but so far has been unsure if it's a Pandora's box he wants to open. He has no qualms on the matter of incest: even the briefest study of that subject makes it clear that the taboo is about creating defective offspring, and that would not be an issue in their case. Yet he hesitates, aware that it is a Rubicon from which there can be no return once it has been crossed. Maybe, one day, he will chain his little brother to the bed, take a fistful of his glorious hair, and fuck him into the mattress, but that day has not yet come. Mycroft wonders if Sherlock is waiting for it, and if that is why he has remained a virgin all these years. Maybe, in the end, nobody else but Mycroft will do. Not even John Watson, if he was so inclined.

After they have finished eating, Mycroft retires to bed. There is a spare room, if Sherlock wishes to use it, but on this occasion Mycroft doubts he will. John's rejection, and the bloody nose Sherlock received, will have dented his brother's over-inflated sense of self-worth to the point where he will require some brotherly reassurance. It has always been this way.

Sure enough, Mycroft has just turned out the lights and settled down in his king-sized bed, when the door opens.

Sherlock doesn't say a word as he removes his clothes and slips under the covers beside his brother. There is silence. Here, there must always be silence. The bed is their metaphorical neutral zone, no matter where that bed may be. When Sherlock crawls into a bed beside Mycroft, there can be no insults, no taunting, and no sibling rivalry. Here, they are at peace, and the bed can never be used against each other at a later date, even in the heat of the most searing argument. That is their unspoken agreement, and they have always kept to it.

The first time Sherlock sought out the comfort of Mycroft's bed was when he was five years old, when he was struggling with the realisation that their mother and father were not his intellectual equals. Mycroft, seven years older than his little brother, had already had this revelation and come to terms with it, but Sherlock had not. Daddy, an amiable but entirely unremarkable solicitor, was bemused by his intellectually superior children, but Mummy, who had a backbone of steel and a surprising streak of eccentricity that could be deduced from her choice of names for her children, liked to impose her will on them, even when it was absurd.

Five year old Sherlock had been dismayed to win an argument with Mummy over not washing his hands for supper (because exposure to germs in human young built a healthier immune system, and therefore he had no intention of washing them) and even more dismayed when she ordered him to go to bed without said supper for not obeying her on the matter.

"Am I not right, brother?" he had asked Mycroft, who was already sitting at the dining table, with scrupulously clean hands, reading.

"You are right," Mycroft had replied.

"There, see!" Sherlock told their mother. "Mycroft says I'm right, so I shouldn't be sent to bed without any supper!"

"Oh no, you absolutely must be sent to bed without supper." Mycroft smiled smugly.

“But why?” Sherlock demanded hotly, rounding on him with eyes full of betrayal, completely unable to fathom why his argument hadn’t won the day, and why Mycroft wasn’t backing him up on this.

“Because you’re an annoying brat, and the sooner you find out the world doesn’t dance to your tune the better, my stupid little brother,” Mycroft had told him loftily.

Sherlock had lost his temper, run at him and attacked him with his fists. Mycroft had easily held him off, but Mummy had carted him up to his room and left him there to cool down. A few hours later, Sherlock had crept into Mycroft’s room, got into his bed, and snuggled up beside him. Mycroft had been about to mock him, but Sherlock had gazed at him furiously, and the flash of pain in his sad blue eyes defied Mycroft to make fun of him. After all, Mycroft knew what it was like to live in a world where everybody else was stupid, but one still had to listen to them and do what they said. That was one of the reasons why Mycroft sought power when he grew up: at least he got to tell people what to do, rather than allowing lesser minds to have any control over his actions. Mycroft chose not to mock his little brother; he gathered him up in his arms, kissed his curly hair, and held him tight instead.

The habit stuck, and the bed remains the only place of peace and respite for Sherlock, in all his clumsy attempts to reach out to people. Here he can remind himself that he is not truly alone, no matter how much it might feel that way sometimes. There had been no big brother to offer Mycroft such comfort when he was five years old. He had been forced to navigate his way through the world and learn its unfairness alone.

Mycroft lies on his back, and after a few minutes Sherlock snakes his way under the covers and places his head on Mycroft’s chest. Mycroft moves his hand, rests it on Sherlock’s thigh, and gently strokes. Mycroft can’t deny that it’s nice to hold his little brother in his arms, the way he used to do when he was a child, and connect with a living, breathing human being again. Well, they are the only two of their species in the whole world - occasionally they have no choice but to seek comfort from each other.

When Mycroft wakes in the morning, Sherlock has gone - no doubt seeking more reunions with the various lost causes he calls ‘friends’. Mycroft is mildly relieved when his brother moves back into his rooms at 221b Baker Street the next day. He had forgotten, during Sherlock’s two year absence, how very wearying his brother’s turbulent emotional dramas can be.

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Mycroft doesn’t like the limelight. He prefers to walk the corridors of power silently, like a shadow, taking great delight in the fact that none of the people he passes has any idea that he is the person running the country. The politicians and Prime Ministers come and go, but none of them has Mycroft’s intellect, and they all bend to his will, in the end. He sometimes wonders if any of them realise just how easily manipulated they are. He views himself as a benevolent dictator, not ruled by emotional responses, his mental superiority enabling him to move the pieces on the board to best effect, looking at long term goals rather than short term gains. He thinks he does rather a good job.

Mycroft drops in on Sherlock once he is ensconced at Baker Street again. Sherlock gets out the Operation set they used to play years ago, as children. As a game of mainly physical dexterity,

neither of them could use their mental prowess to win, and it therefore had become a safe ground over which they were able to hold a civilised conversation.

When they were children, they had quarrelled incessantly, driving their poor mother to distraction. Mummy came from money, which allowed them to live in an enormous relic of a house that at least allowed them some modicum of escape from one another, but they were always drawn back to each other, in the end. If they wanted any kind of decent mental stimulation, they had no choice.

Mummy had tried her best with them. There had been no point sending Mycroft to school, because he already knew more than most teachers by the time he was five years old. Instead, she had brought in tutors to school him in specialised areas of knowledge. She tried to do the same with Sherlock, but he was so precocious and obnoxious that no tutor stayed for long, so in the end Mycroft had taken over his brother's studies. He was the only one who could keep up with Sherlock's quest for knowledge, in any case. It meant that they had both been isolated from other children, but as Sherlock invariably couldn't play nice when he was with others his own age, and Mycroft despised them, that was probably all for the best.

Sherlock hasn't managed to make it up with John yet, but Mrs Hudson seems as enraptured by him as ever. Mycroft wonders how Sherlock can bear to be surrounded by the good hearted and slow witted, such as Mrs Hudson, John Watson, Greg Lestrade, and that strange little creature, Molly Hooper, whose love for Sherlock is destined to be forever unrequited. Do their good hearts make up for their slow wits, Mycroft wonders? Is that the appeal? It's certainly the case that Sherlock is a good judge of character – surprising for a man with almost no understanding of human nature. All Sherlock's little acolytes are blessed with loyalty and big hearts, but none of them can offer a remotely interesting intellectual challenge for a man like Sherlock – Mycroft is sure of that. He remains assured of his place in his brother's life: no matter what affection Sherlock has for these creatures, he will always have need of his brother.

Mycroft is concerned that Sherlock is enjoying himself far too much with rediscovering his London life, and not paying enough attention to the case at hand - the imminent terrorist attack. That is why Mycroft brought him back home, after all.

"All very interesting, Sherlock, but the terror alert has been raised to critical," Mycroft points out.

Sherlock is disinterested. "Boring. Your move."

"We have solid information – an attack is coming," Mycroft says insistently. Sherlock's lack of urgency on the matter is annoying: Mycroft wishes his brother would learn to focus on important matters, and stop being so self-indulgent. "An agent gave his life to tell us that," he tells his brother sharply, trying to impart the full weight of the situation.

"Hmm, perhaps he shouldn't have done. He was obviously just trying to show off," Sherlock says flippantly.

Mycroft's right hand itches, but he refrains from using it to best effect. He is unable to completely contain his irritation though, and he fails to drop the toy heart into the appropriate slot on the board in front of him, causing red lights to flash and the stupid game to bleep.

Sherlock is delighted. "Can't handle a broken heart. That's very telling," he taunts.

"Don't be smart."

"That takes me back." Sherlock assumes a high-pitched voice that is presumably supposed to be a mocking impression of Mycroft as a child. "*Don't be smart, Sherlock. I'm the smart one.*"

"I AM the smart one," Mycroft reminds him.

"I used to think I was an idiot."

"Both of us thought you were an idiot, Sherlock. We had nothing else to go on until we met other children."

"Oh yes, that was a mistake."

"Ghastly. What were they thinking of?" Mycroft still shudders at the memory; the shock of realising that other children were even more stupid than his own little brother still lingers.

"Probably something about trying to make friends," Sherlock says pointedly. He looks smug, because he's managed to do the one thing that Mycroft never has, and find friendship. The subject remains a mystery to Mycroft, but it seems to be one that Sherlock has solved.

"Oh yes. Friends. Of course you go in for that sort of thing now." Mycroft tries to sound as mocking as possible, because he doesn't see that it's really that great an achievement, and even if he did, he wouldn't give Sherlock the satisfaction.

"And you don't? Ever?"

"If you seem slow to me, Sherlock, can you imagine what real people are like? I'm living in a world of goldfish."

"Yes, but I've been away for two years so... Oh, I don't know, I thought perhaps you might have found yourself a... goldfish."

Mycroft feels profoundly uncomfortable: Sherlock always knows how to hone in on his weaknesses and take advantage of them, and Sherlock is, and always has been, Mycroft's biggest weakness. Does Sherlock know just how lonely these past two years have been for him, without his brother's company? Does he know just what a hold he has over Mycroft's heart?

Mycroft gets to his feet. "Change the subject – now," he commands.

Sherlock, being Sherlock, can't leave it alone for long. He always has to poke and prod - he takes the same pleasure from hurting Mycroft mentally as Mycroft takes from hurting him physically. The subject of Mycroft's isolation and loneliness, of the fact he has nobody in his life he can connect with except his brother, is brought up again, obliquely, until Mycroft explodes.

"I'm not lonely, Sherlock!"

And that reaction, of course, is precisely what his annoying little brother wants. "How would you know?" Sherlock asks, the cold steel of his blade slipping between Mycroft's ribs with deadly precision.

"Yes, back to work, if you don't mind," Mycroft instructs, refusing to continue the discussion. Sherlock knows he has drawn blood - Mycroft will not give him the pleasure of ramming the blade home.

Mycroft exits 221b Baker Street feeling unsettled by the conversation and irritated by his brother, but that is hardly an unusual occurrence around Sherlock. He is also concerned by the terrorist threat against London, but has every faith that Sherlock will solve that particular puzzle. The emotional complexities and inadequacies of the Holmes brothers are irrelevant beside that.

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Mycroft contents himself with running the country for the next few days, averting a minor war in Africa and doing a secret deal to rescue some British citizens being held hostage in Somalia. He will wait three months and then have the hostage-takers killed, after all the fuss has died down and when nobody is looking. He also takes the time to put out some discreet feelers in respect of what happened in Serbia, knowing that it will demand his attention at some point.

It is Mycroft who decides when to leak the news of his brother's miraculous return from the dead. He is tired of his mother asking when she can start boasting about Sherlock to her friends again; she has been badgering Mycroft on the subject for the past two years. Overjoyed, she calls to say they are going to make an immediate trip to London to celebrate, and he promises, somewhat rashly, to take her and his father to see *Les Misérables*. Never mind, he will try to persuade Sherlock to take over on the day – his brother owes him that for not shouldering his share of parental duties for the past two years.

On the plus side, Sherlock prevails against the terrorists, as Mycroft predicted he would. On the minus side, Mycroft has to endure an entire performance of *Les Misérables* when his parents arrive in town. He does try to cajole Sherlock into taking his place at the interval, but the little brat declines. Mycroft suspects its payback for what happened in Serbia, but neither of them mentions that. The subject lingers between them, and will continue to do so until Mycroft resolves it for Sherlock. He has already given it considerable thought and has a plan; he's just waiting for the right time to execute it.

Mummy is in fine form. Her beloved youngest son is back, and when she sees Sherlock she doesn't stop talking about their visit to Baker Street. Mycroft can hardly fathom why, as it sounds as if Sherlock barely had a civil word to say to her, and they were his guests for all of fifteen minutes. Mycroft, on the other hand, has always done his best to be a pleasant and charming son, taking his parents out to nice restaurants and scheduling regular weekly phone chats with them in his diary.

For the first seven years of his life, Mycroft had Mummy all to himself. Even intellectually defective as she was, he loved her dearly. Then Sherlock came along - beautiful, beguiling and bright, even as a baby, with an enchanting shock of dark hair. Mycroft hated him for many years, recognising in him a rival he could not hope to defeat. No matter how brilliant Mycroft was, his mother would always love Sherlock more. It was a matter of survival for Mycroft to lay claim to being 'the smart one' -

Sherlock was always going to be the shiny one, and Mycroft had to carve out some ground for himself or be forever eclipsed by the shadow of his baby brother's burning charisma. It is Mycroft's particular cross to bear that Sherlock is the only person in the world he can truly talk to and connect with. Sherlock is, and always has been, his bitterest rival as well as his closest confidant, and Mycroft has always hated him and loved him in equal measure.

Finally, life returns to normal, and Mycroft decides it is time to reward his little brother for his work on saving London from the terrorist threat. He wonders if Sherlock realises how Mycroft has used both carrot and stick on him, to control and manipulate him all these years. If Sherlock is to be prevailed upon to help out again, then Mycroft will need to ensure his continued co-operation.

He sends Sherlock a note – hand-delivered, eschewing texts, emails and the paraphernalia of modern life. Mycroft believes some things are deserving of old-fashioned traditions, and this is one of them.

“Mycroft Holmes requires the pleasure of Sherlock Holmes’s company at his apartment at 8pm on November 11.”

He thinks the date will please Sherlock – Remembrance Day, a little nod to his recent experiences on Guy Fawkes Night. It isn’t really an invitation, it is a summoning, but Sherlock will know and understand that. Mycroft encloses the cuff link with the note, just to be clear.

After a particularly vicious fight when they were children, their mother had a set of cuff links made for each of them. They are plain white gold, and while Mycroft’s bear the entwined initials S and M, Sherlock’s are inscribed with an M and S.

“It’s a reminder to you both to put each other first,” their mother told them sternly.

“I’m not wearing these,” Sherlock riposted, throwing his cuff links into a drawer. “They look like a homage to Marks and Spencer.”

Mycroft had laughed, enjoying the idea of Sherlock wearing a tribute to the popular store where the middle classes brought their underwear. Sherlock had been true to his word, and Mycroft had never once seen him wearing the cuff links.

Mycroft had been amused for a different reason by the way their initials combined on his own cufflinks, and he could see by the glint in Sherlock’s eyes that his brother shared his amusement. S and M. S&M. It was funny - especially given the turn their relationship had taken during their teenage years.

Mycroft knows that the cufflink invitation will not be declined. It never is. Sherlock likes his rewards, even when, to the less nuanced eye, they resemble punishment.

Mycroft does not arrange a meal for the eleventh. He knows Sherlock will be too jumpy and full of anticipation. He arranges instead for a large breakfast to be delivered the following morning, when his brother will be biddable, sweet natured, and adorable, as he always is the following day.

It never lasts.

~

Sherlock shows up at his door on the dot of 8pm, wearing the white shirt Mycroft bought for him upon his return from Serbia. It's not a gesture that goes unappreciated. Sherlock takes off his coat and scarf and throws them at Mycroft. The deerstalker hat he's taken to wearing at all times, primarily, Mycroft suspects, to annoy his brother, remains on his head, looking ridiculous.

"I was wondering when you'd invite me over to thank me for saving your precious Houses of Parliament," Sherlock says nonchalantly. "I mean, what would my poor brother do without his very own corridors of power to stalk, hmm?" He makes his best smirky face, and Mycroft smiles back at him amiably and hangs up his coat and scarf in a nearby closet.

"I hardly think a 'thank you' is in order. You did wait until the very last minute before finally gathering your wits about you to prevent the bomb exploding," Mycroft says, with just a hint of a taunt in his tone.

"Well, if you thought you could do better, why not solve the case yourself?" Sherlock challenges.

"I had other, more important matters to attend to, and I knew your inferior skills would suffice in this instance."

"Inferior?" Sherlock raises a mocking eyebrow.

"It is not false modesty on my part to know that my intellect is superior to yours." Mycroft smiles sweetly. What he does not say is that he also acknowledges, even if only to himself, that he can never hope to emulate Sherlock's shining charisma. "There is a reason why I run the country while you are famous for being the 'hat detective', after all."

Sherlock sweeps the hat off his head and flings it derisively at Mycroft, who catches it and deposits it in the closet.

"Do you have something for me?" Mycroft asks. There is silence, and Mycroft gazes at his brother keenly, wondering if one day Sherlock will say no.

"Oh, I'm not sure if my inferior mind knows the answer to that," Sherlock says sneeringly, but his eyes are shining a little too brightly, and Mycroft is no John Watson; his little brother has never been able to fool him. He holds out his hand, waiting, and Sherlock rolls his eyes and reaches into his pocket. He takes out the cuff link and drops it into Mycroft's hand.

"Ugly little thing," he mutters, as Mycroft takes it and threads it through the empty shirt sleeve awaiting it. Its partner is already in place, on his other sleeve. "S&M. I have no idea what Mummy was thinking."

"She didn't know." Mycroft smiles forgivingly.

"She still doesn't, I hope." Sherlock winces theatrically.

"Of course not."

"She wouldn't understand."

"Nobody does."

"How can they possibly understand us?" Sherlock says quietly, and he sounds sad.

"They can't," Mycroft agrees.

He takes Sherlock to the room that has been locked for the past two years. Mycroft opened it up for the first time a few days ago, and has ensured it has been thoroughly cleaned, and everything is precisely how he wants it. The room has wood panelling, and there is a warm fire glowing in the grate. The lights are dimmed, but not too low: Mycroft wants to be able to see; that's precisely the point, after all.

"You were right about Serbia, of course," Mycroft says.

"I know." Sherlock shrugs.

"I did enjoy watching. Very much." Mycroft smiles.

"Hah!" Sherlock seems to feel he's won a victory by getting Mycroft to admit it, but it was hardly in doubt.

"But you see, brother mine," Mycroft leans in close and speaks directly into Sherlock's ear. "You seemed to enjoy it, too. In fact, I would go so far as to say that you allowed it to continue for as long as it did because you were enjoying it so much."

Sherlock is still for a long moment, and then exhales deeply. "I was surprised myself," he admits finally. "It was all so unplanned, so violent. I didn't realise it would excite me so much. I think it was the fact that you were there, watching it, that made it so thrilling."

"I would never have allowed our Serbian friend to really harm you - you know that," Mycroft says, because he knows that is at the root of his brother's discomfort on the subject. "If it had come to it, I would have intervened."

Sherlock gazes at him steadily and then nods. "Yes, I know. I was just... confused for a moment. See, I've always thought that although you might enjoy hurting me yourself, you wouldn't just stand idly by and let another do it."

"It's not something I had contemplated before, so it took me by surprise, too." Mycroft smiles. "And I realised that it might enhance our traditional game if we repeat the experience."

"Repeat the experience?" Sherlock queries, his voice now a husky whisper, but Mycroft is far too observant to miss the shiver of glee that passes through his brother's body.

"Yes - with some modifications. I didn't much like the ugly oaf beating you, and I much prefer leather to steel cuffs. However, the watching part was very entertaining."

"You're a voyeur as well as a sadist," Sherlock accuses.

"And you, brother dear, are an exhibitionist as well as a masochist." Mycroft grins, and Sherlock grins back, both of them delighted by these particular truths.

Sherlock glances around the room. Mycroft has changed the usual layout and positioned two whipping posts in the centre of the room, with chains hanging from them, so that Sherlock can be suspended as he was in Serbia. Mycroft wants to recreate that experience for them both as much as possible. However, their environment in London is much more civilised and comfortable – Mycroft has placed a plush red velvet armchair in front of the posts which will be much more comfortable than the hard chair that was all that was on offer in Serbia.

“Best view in the house,” Sherlock says, running his hand over the back of the chair.

“Of course.” Mycroft inclines his head. “At least one of us should be comfortable, and that person will be me, obviously.” He gives a little smirk, which Sherlock mimics back at him, sardonically.

There is a rack of implements beside the posts, and Sherlock goes over to examine them, gazing at each one intently, as he likes to do. Mycroft always allows him to look but not touch – those are the rules with the implements. There are whips, canes, paddles and floggers; Mycroft has given instructions that the whip is to be first, because they both enjoyed that so much in Serbia.

“While that Serbian thug allowed you to keep your trousers on, regrettably, I must insist they are removed this evening,” Mycroft says smoothly. “You’ll be naked, as usual.”

“Of course.” Sherlock removes his clothes, quickly and efficiently, and then stands up straight in front of the fire. His white skin has healed from its previous trauma, and is ready to face a fresh ordeal. He looks happy. He has his John back, and his Mrs Hudson, and Lestrade, and his beloved 221b Baker Street. He has his ridiculous detective consultancy back, and his fame, and his happy London life. And, most of all, he has his relationship with his brother back, however dark, twisted and complex it might be.

Mycroft examines him slowly, his gaze raking over his brother’s naked body, taking in every inch of him. He circles Sherlock like a vulture, enjoying the view, and feels himself start to relax. Sherlock relaxes as well, enjoying the scrutiny like the attention-seeking little whore he is, and he tosses his head back and rolls his shoulders to demonstrate the beauty of his firm muscles rippling under his pale skin.

“Such monumental vanity,” Mycroft murmurs.

“Of all my flaws, it’s the one that you like best,” Sherlock teases, and Mycroft can’t resist the laugh.

Mycroft strokes a finger down his brother’s unblemished back. “I’ll mark this skin. Now I know you can handle it, I’ll take you further tonight than ever before,” he promises. “It’ll hurt very much.” Sherlock’s muscles tense under his hand, and Mycroft soothes his brother’s shoulder, relaxing him and reminding him that no matter how bad the torment, Mycroft will always be there with him, unrelenting, ruthless, and in charge. Sherlock relaxes once more under the caress, and Mycroft knows he is in the right mental space for them to begin.

“Arms,” he orders, and Sherlock raises his arms so that Mycroft can cuff them. He chains the cuffs to the posts, securing Sherlock in place.

“It’s a shame about the hair. I did rather like it long,” Mycroft says sadly. “I’m afraid I’ll have to make you pay for that particular decision, brother.”

"Go ahead. Do your worst," Sherlock challenges, grinning at him.

"Oh, I will, don't worry. Besides, it's still a nice handful." Mycroft takes a handful of Sherlock's dark curls in his hand and pulls his brother's head back, to illustrate the point. Sherlock's gaze meets his, eyes flashing with a hint of delicious defiance, combined with anticipatory pleasure.

Mycroft drops his brother's head and moves away. "Before we begin, I've planned a special introductory torment, as a warm up to the main event," he says. Sherlock looks intrigued, but that look soon turns to one of disgust as Mycroft presses the button on the stereo. The opening overture of *Les Misérables* blares out around the room, in all its glory.

"It was torture, Sherlock. Next time I ask you to do something for our parents, you will obey. Understand?" he says firmly. Sherlock gazes at him mulishly. "I can make you listen to the edited highlights, or force you to endure the full three hours. It's up to you," Mycroft says sweetly.

"You truly are a despicable person, Mycroft," Sherlock says.

"Like I said - it's up to you." Mycroft's hand hovers over the stereo.

Sherlock is bound and going nowhere, and Mycroft can see his brother evaluating all his options. However, Mycroft holds the winning cards in this particular game, and Sherlock's head slumps in defeat. "Yes, Mycroft," he says meekly.

"And you'll call Mummy once a week, and be civil to her for at least ten minutes on the phone," Mycroft instructs.

Sherlock lifts his head again, his eyes blazing mutinously, so Mycroft increases the volume. Sherlock capitulates once more, his head hanging down pathetically. "Yes, Mycroft," he agrees.

"Good boy." Mycroft loves it when he's brought Sherlock to heel, and he caresses his brother's hair for a second, and then leaves the room.

He abandons Sherlock to the mercy of the music for a good half an hour, to fully imprint on his brother the importance of keeping their mother happy, so she bothers Mycroft less.

This game first started when, one tedious rainy afternoon, a thirteen year old Sherlock expressed a wish to act out the beating scene from his favourite novel at the time - *Stalky and Co.* Mycroft had been happy to oblige, but what had started out as a simple experiment in experience, turned into something much more pleasurable than either of them had anticipated. Mycroft found he liked beating his brother, and Sherlock, it appeared, very much liked being beaten. Over the years, the game has become more complex, elaborate and imaginative, but the essence remains the same. Mycroft knows that he could analyse this particular aspect of their complex relationship in more detail, but has chosen not to. He has no idea if Sherlock has made the same choice.

When Mycroft returns to the room, he finds Sherlock swaying in his chains, his eyes tightly closed, and a deep frown creasing his forehead. Clearly, the music has stopped him being able to go to his famous 'mind palace' to escape, which will make the night's suffering all the more acute for him.

Mycroft turns off the music, and Sherlock glances up, relief washing over his face, combined with an excited but appalled apprehension. Mycroft smiles at him and sits in the big red chair; Sherlock is right – it does afford him an excellent view. Mycroft rings a small bell resting on the table beside him, and a few seconds later a man enters the room. He is dressed in plain dark clothing, and is masked. Sherlock moves his head with snake-like interest, drinking in everything about the man's appearance.

“You don't know who he is, so don't try and deduce anything,” Mycroft warns Sherlock. “I deliberately removed any evidence from him. You are not here to second-guess or outwit anyone tonight. You are here to be beaten, and that is all.”

Mycroft suspects that Sherlock gains a certain kind of mental release from being focussed on his own physical discomfort. Maybe that is the only time that Sherlock is able to escape from being so hyper-aware of his everyday surroundings. Unlike Mycroft, he has never learned to school his thoughts and direct them with discipline. He prefers a more free-flowing approach to the burden of his great intellect, and while this gives him his flashes of creative brilliance, it also makes him crave constant mental stimulation. Without it, he crashes into fits of bored depression, where he becomes so enervated he can barely rise from bed. A thorough beating can revive him no end when that happens.

Usually, it is just the two of them in this room, with Mycroft beating Sherlock, which gives Sherlock the mental escape he needs. As Mycroft has introduced this new element to their game tonight, he has taken steps to ensure that Sherlock will still get what he requires from the exercise: Mycroft chose the man and his outfit himself, and has briefed him on what he expects down to the last, most minute, detail.

Sherlock, because he is who he is, clearly cannot stop himself trying to deduce something – anything – about the man, anyway, but Mycroft snaps his fingers.

“Enough, or you won't experience what I have planned for you – and it has taken some planning.”

Sherlock tears his eyes away, and gazes back at Mycroft.

“This man does only what I instruct. It is still me who is doing the torturing, dear brother - he is merely my instrument,” Mycroft says in soft, low purr of a voice. “I've always been good at delegating,” he adds, a trifle smugly. “The whip is first. I want it to sting. You'll be marked with welts that last for several days, as I promised – I've told him to draw blood.”

Sherlock shivers and tests his cuffs theatrically, which makes for a pleasing visual image. Mycroft smiles happily as he leans back in his chair and picks up the glass of whisky from the side table. This really is most civilised. No need to strain his own right arm, and he gets to watch Sherlock perform. Sherlock arches his back as if hearing his brother's thoughts.

The masked man takes up position behind him, raises the whip, and it whistles through the air. The first stripe makes Sherlock gasp, and he throws back his head, to expose his adam's apple. He looks beautiful, such an exotic creature, shown off to best effect by torture. Mycroft smiles and takes a sip of his whisky.

Sherlock seems energised by the knowledge that he has an audience. He fights back, his arm muscles rippling magnificently as he struggles against his bonds. A second blow leaves a line of red over his shoulders, causing him to jump in his chains like a fish caught on a line. Mycroft hums happily in the back of his throat, and Sherlock's gaze meets his, humbled but still defiant.

Mycroft knows just how much Sherlock loves his own humiliation. He loves his helplessness, and the way the whip caresses him as it stings. He loves the adrenaline, the sheer physicality of it, and the experience of being so completely in his own body. Most of all, he loves that his brother is doing this to him, hurting him without mercy in this way, and he tosses his curls again like, the highly strung racehorse he sometimes resembles to Mycroft's mind.

The light from the fire licks shadows up Sherlock's pale body, painting him in streaks of shadow and flame. He looks utterly beautiful, and he suffers so prettily. He puts on a show for Mycroft, revelling in his exhibitionist streak, aware, even in the depths of his pain, of just how good he looks when he's being beaten. Only a man of his bottomless vanity could perform in this way.

"Harder please. He's barely breaking into a sweat," Mycroft instructs the masked man. Sherlock raises an eyebrow, and Mycroft smiles. "We want it to really hurt. He must suffer. If you can make him scream, I'll pay you double," Mycroft offers, knowing that eventuality is unlikely. Maybe, one day, he'll wring a scream from his brother's lips, but he's not sure that Sherlock thinks he's earned that satisfaction yet.

The masked man redoubles his efforts, raining down harder blows on Sherlock's naked, exposed skin. Sherlock's hair is wet through with his sweat now, and there is blood, as Mycroft promised. His breathing is coming more harshly, emerging from his chest in rasping spasms.

Mycroft will know when his brother has had enough, but for now, he sits back, to simply enjoy. For a long time, Sherlock tried to manipulate their game, attempting to force Mycroft into it at his own whim. Mycroft is nothing if not controlling, though, and he has forced Sherlock to accept that he is in charge of how their game is played. He decides when, and where, and how long, and how hard. He invented the rules about Sherlock not touching the implements, and a variety of other little rituals like the cufflinks, to enforce that fact. Sherlock must await his summons, and is not allowed to demand a session in this room or dictate what happens when he is here.

Sometimes, Mycroft calls Sherlock here because his brother is creating havoc with his loud and obnoxious boredom when he is between cases. Sometimes, he brings his brother here to wake him out of a depression. Other times, Mycroft uses it as a reward and to bring his wayward brother to heel. It has worked: Sherlock has been very useful in solving a myriad of crimes that threatened the security of Mycroft's realm over the years. With the right motivation, his little brother can be made to do anything Mycroft wants.

There are also those times, of which they never speak, when Mycroft summons Sherlock because it is something Mycroft himself requires. Those are usually dark times indeed, but Sherlock weathers them without complaint. Maybe they even thrill him a little more than usual.

The strain of the past two years disappears during the course of the evening. The whip gives way to the flat thud of the paddle, and then the cutting bite of the cane, before fading out with the gentle caress of the flogger.

Much later, when Sherlock's entire body is twitching, and the sweat has stained his hair jet black, Mycroft signals the masked man to leave, and then stands up and surveys his panting, suffering brother.

"You did very well, my dear," he says softly, bestowing a gentle kiss on Sherlock's sweaty forehead. Sherlock hangs in his bonds, barely able to stand.

"I was off my game," Sherlock rasps back. "Too long away. You were right - I was distracted. I missed the clues that would have led me to the bomb sooner."

"Yes, but you got there in the end, and next time there will be no mistakes," Mycroft says firmly.

"No. Next time I'll get it right." Sherlock rests his chin on Mycroft's shoulder, breathing heavily.

Mycroft puts a hand on Sherlock's head and strokes his damp hair. "You do suffer very beautifully," he says. "I love watching."

"Can we do it again?" Sherlock asks. "With the Serb substitute, I mean. Not every time. Sometimes, I just want it to be us two. Alone."

"Yes. Of course."

"But I loved watching you watching me," Sherlock adds. "The hatred, the love. I can feel them both in their most purest form."

"I know." Mycroft blinks and, feeling wetness, wipes away a tear that has formed, inexplicably, in the corner of his eye.

Sherlock moves his head at the gesture, and frowns. "I knew you were lonely," he says. "While I was away. You missed me."

"Yes, I was lonely," Mycroft admits at last. "Although, I wouldn't go so far as to say I missed you. You are extremely aggravating."

"You missed me," Sherlock says confidently.

"Maybe. A little." Mycroft takes Sherlock's head gently between his hands, and caresses his brother's tear-stained cheeks with little sweeps of his fingers. He looks into his brother's eyes, gazes at him lovingly, then leans in and presses his lips to Sherlock's, bestowing a tender, loving kiss. "You're the only one who understands, you see, brother dear," he says, drawing back. "I can't keep pets the way you do. It's not in my nature. It's you or nothing for me."

He undoes his brother's bonds and catches Sherlock as he falls into his arms. Then he takes his brother over to the bed and places him on it, and opens up the black leather case he has left beside it. He washes and binds Sherlock's wounds with gentle care, making sure they are all dressed, before getting into the bed beside him. This bed is a neutral zone, as all the beds they share are. Here they are not allowed to analyse, point score or argue. Here, they can just be.

Mycroft, still fully clothed, wraps his arms around his naked brother and holds him against his chest. They will stay here all night, and spend a quiet day together tomorrow. In a few days' time the

endorphins will fade, and the tenderness with it, and normal warfare will, no doubt, be resumed, but for tonight, they have the best of each other.

Mycroft fingers the entwined S and M on the cufflinks, remembering why his mother gave them to him.

Of course he puts his brother before himself. He always has and always will.

Isn't that what big brothers do?

The End

