### Excultus

**by** Mottlemoth

**Summary**

[Mystrade Supernatural/Sci-fi AU]

23rd-century London is a divided city. Two hundred years of genetic tampering has fractured humanity into subspecies, not all of whom are willing to get along. The capital's crime-ridden streets are now home to some fairly fantastic variants of human—some of them more dangerous than others. For DI Greg Lestrade, Cross-Human Relations at Scotland Yard, it's all just part of the day job.

But when a horrifying discovery forces him to seek the help of Mycroft Holmes, Head of Criminal Psychology, Greg might just be tested past his limits. Mycroft is unpleasant, unforgiving, and famously impossible to please—but if Greg needs anyone right now, it's a vampire expert.

With dangerous forces fast on their tail, Greg and Mycroft must work together to avert the vampire threat before it's too late.

### Notes

Excultus is dedicated—with my unending love and gratitude—to Liz and Bourbon, to Avid and to Greenie.
It had been a quiet night so far in Comms 4.

For TJ, a midweek eleven-until-seven was a shift you could expect to crumple up and toss away at dawn - another night on the clock, another eight hours in the pay packet. Tuesday had now ticked into Wednesday, and Wednesdays were good. Nothing much ever happened on a Wednesday. Calls were always few and far between: a spot of arson here, the odd mugging there.

Nice and easy.

It meant he could have Maisie to himself for a while.

When she'd first started working in Comms, he'd found his new podmate a little standoffish. She was quick to scowl at his soda cans, his slanted humour and his non-standard additions to the uniform. Two months in, and she was still scowling - but with half a hint of a smile now.

And the pointy ears were sort of starting to work for him.

"Can you hear better out of your ears?" he asked, revolving in his chair as he opened a party-sized bag of salt and vinegar crisps, not long after one AM. "I mean… do they pick up more sound?"

Maisie cast him a fond frown over their central console, adjusting her headset. "How would I know?"

TJ hummed. He tossed a crisp into his mouth.

"I suppose you wouldn't, would you? You've always had them, so you wouldn't know any different... interesting."

Maisie bit her cheek as a traffic violation flashed up on Lansdowne Terrace. She read it at speed and dismissed it from the hard-light screen with a slash of her finger, her lips pursed.

TJ crunched up another handful of crisps.

"You must struggle getting hats to fit, though. That, we can say for a fact."

"Can you shush about my ears? You're meant to be a police officer, TJ. Equality and diversity is
"I know, I know... I just never had a friend who's an elf before. I'm curious."

"We're not friends," she told him, with a flash of her elongated eyes. Her features were stark and smooth in the blue-tinged light of the screens surrounding them. "We're colleagues. And I'm part-elf. And you've knocked the transmitter on your headset again."

TJ reached for the back of his neck, tutting as he found the transmitter cocked at an angle. He began to twist it back into place.

"Don't know why I ordered these things," he muttered. "The audio's not even that great. Might go back to the TX121 again."

"You spent two months harassing Officer Yardley for these," she reminded him. "'Life changing', you said. You promised him you'd lower our response times by five percent."

"Yeah, well... Yardley's a stubborn old arse." TJ shoved his chair back into place, glancing up at their projected light map of the city. Nothing new. "And I'm a stubborn young arse who likes draining the department budget on new toys. We're a match made in heaven. Besides... only the best for my team of two."

Maisie smiled at him through her hard-light screen.

The truth was that TJ was the fastest responder on their books - Maisie knew it. Everyone did. Their outdated system, as highly-strung and fickle as a wild horse, obeyed him when it mattered. He knew London like the back of his hand, and he could get the street teams what they needed before they'd even asked for it. If he'd wanted to lower response times by five percent, he would have done.

TJ reached across the bank of computers that divided them, rustling the open bag of crisps in her direction.

She looked at him, one sandy eyebrow raised.

"Go on," he soothed. "The night is young. It's not even two. Besides, it's Wednesday. You know nothing happens on a Wednesday."

Maisie resisted for a moment more, eyeing the crisps with her tongue poked into her cheek.

She took one neatly. "Thank you."

"Get a handful," TJ offered. "I've got another bag in my desk."

"How is your keyboard not full of crumbs?" she asked, scooping a tentative handful of crisps from the packet.

"It is," he said. "That's the secret. Stops anything worse getting in there. I could pour cola over this thing all night long, and the crisp shards'll soak it right up. Magic."

Maisie shook her head. "You're a walking health and safety hazard... you know that?"

"Correction," TJ said. "I'm a sitting health and safety hazard. That makes all the difference."

The panel to his right flared a sudden violent orange.
"Here we go." TJ flashed his hand across the panel; the LED on his headset blinked from green to red. "Comms 4. You're through to TJ. Let's go."

Maisie watched through her screen as he dispatched a street team, an ambulance and a request for an incident report through to a suspected mugging on Osborn Street. It was all over in less than a minute. TJ logged the call without looking, slurped the last two inches of his soda and tossed the cup over his back towards the bin. It hit the filing cabinet they never used, and joined the others in the pile on the floor.

The response panel faded from orange back to green.

"So your ears," TJ said. Maisie rolled her eyes. "Can you feel stuff in the tips?"

"Yes! Of course I can."

"They're normal ears, just... pointy? And you live a bit longer."

"Not much... I'm more prone to sunburn. Not as badly as my gran."

"Is your gran the one who's a proper elf?"

Maisie sighed. "She's a 'proper elf', yes... they made her that way as a baby. Cost her parents thousands." She reached absently for this week's call times on a clipboard, scanning through the printed list for her name. "I'm a... mongrel elf, apparently..."

"Don't say that... didn't mean it like that."

Maisie didn't reply, comparing her call times to the rest of the Comms team. She was the sort of person glad to come somewhere in the middle, so long as she beat her best for last week.

TJ's name was highlighted with his usual star, pride of place.

"I'm just curious," he said, his round hazel eyes watching her across the computer bank. "I'm not getting at you."

Maisie put the clipboard away.

"You're too curious for your own good," she told him. "It'll get you into trouble some day."

"Yeah... so I hear. Still waiting."

Maisie began to organise her pot of pens. TJ drummed his fingers on the desk for a while, thinking. Their various banks of hardware hummed and pulsed around them in the darkness, brightening the confined space of their pod with a blue glow.

"Neither of you are really... 'proper elves' though, are you?" he said.

Maisie frowned, busy turning all her pen lids to point upwards. "What do you mean?"

"You're not actually real elves," he said. "Stardust and forests and poetry. You're just... people. Modified to look like an old idea. All of us are."

Maisie's startled response was interrupted by the scarlet flash of her screen. It washed her features red.

She swiped her hand across the screen.
"Greater London Police. You're speaking to Maisie. What's your location, please?"

The voice in her ear crackled with panic.

"Hi - I'm in Hackney - at The Clockwork Lion. Pembury Road." There came the sound of smashing glass. "Oh, shit - "

"What's happening, sir?"

"There's a fight - shit, they're kicking him apart - three guys, big guys - they're stoneskins - I'm the landlord. Please, please do something."

There came another crash. Maisie began to whirl through her screen, selecting and dragging and flashing through windows.

"Sir, did you say 'stoneskins'?"

"Oh - sorry, I just - "

"It's fine, sir. Just for my info." She flashed the details into place. "And there's an assault taking place?"

"Yeah - yeah, they've got him in the bar room - it's one of our regulars. Screaming about money. They're caving his head in - now, right now - "

"And where are you?"

"I've got everyone locked in the kitchen - God, please hurry - "

"Okay." Maisie's fingers flew across the screen. "Two seconds..." As she entered the final pieces of data, all six windows converged with a flicker into a single blazing blue square. 'SUBMIT'. Maisie slapped it with her palm. "We're sorting you a street team now. Stay on the line with me."

As the data flashed from her screen onto his, TJ was ready. He streamed through buttons at lightning speed.

Gang assault - Hackney - high risk to other citizens - cross-human perpetrators, GAR01. Three. He didn't need the auto-suggestion of Armed Response that expanded across his screen. He flashed it to one side, hit 'Cross-Human Relations', spun through the night's list of street teams and snagged his finger on the name he knew would sort this out just gorgeously.

As his left hand hit call, his right was already dispatching the armed back-up team and the ambulance.

His headset trilled with the call connecting tone - four times - five.

"C'mon, Lestrade..." he muttered, flashing open a map and scanning for secondary teams in the area. There was no-one anywhere close to Pembury Road. The tone chirped on in his ear. "Don't screw up my high score..."

At last there came a click, and an intake of breath.

"DS Darling," said a pinched female voice.

"Hello Darling, it's me." She didn't laugh; she never did. "Got a gang assault on Pembury Road, pub called The Clockwork Lion. Three stoneskins are turning someone inside out. Where's the
King of Hearts?"

DS Darling didn't bother concealing her sigh.

"Detective Inspector Lestrade," she said, tartly, "has just gone to - ... oh! He's here now. He's just coming across the street. Shall I put him on?"

"No, just tell him. Pembury Road. Clockwork Lion. Got Armed Response on the way for you and an ambulance too. Alright?"

"Ah - yes, right... I'll make sure he's aware of the situ- "

"Cool," TJ said. "Bye, Darling."

He hung up before she could endanger his call time record any further, dispatched a request for an incident report to Lestrade's wrist-set, and tugged open his drawer for a caramel bar.

*Hectic for a Wednesday,* he thought.

Probably dead now 'til dawn.

As Greg made his way back towards the car, two coffees cradled in the crook of his arm, he could see his sergeant speaking to Comms. She looked faintly concerned by the call.

Then again, he thought, Lindsey Darling seemed faintly concerned by everything.

She'd been with him three weeks now. He hadn't seen her smile once. Most of the time, she was reluctant enough just to get out of the car. If it weren't for his bad record with sergeants, he'd maybe have requested a reassignment for her - but they were stuck together now, and that was that. As with most things in his life, Greg was doing his best to make the most of it. Maybe she'd learn from him; maybe she'd drive him insane. The odds were pretty even so far.

"Everything alright?" he asked as he got back into the car, handing her a coffee. She took it without comment.

"That boy," she declared, "is very rude."

Greg pulled his coat out of the way of the door, closing it behind him with a slam. "Which boy?"

"The boy in Comms 4," she said. "He's far too familiar."

Greg's face twisted with a smile. "What, TJ?" He popped the lid from his coffee - two extra shots. It would get him through until dawn. "Well, he's a scamp sometimes... hardly a 'boy'... late twenties. And he's good at what he does. You can't deny that."

Darling looked as if she really could. She pressed her lips together, saying nothing.

"What did TJ want?" Greg asked, as he buckled himself in.

"Oh... there's an assault on Pembury Road. And while we're on the subject, I really don't think he
should be using the term 'stoneskins' to refer to - "

Greg nearly dropped his coffee.

"An assault?" he said. "Now?"

"Well... yes," she said, staring at him as if it were obvious. "Apparently there are three of them."

Greg scrabbled for his coffee lid.

"Christ, Darling, tell me that bit first! Here - " He bundled the coffee into her hands, started the car and slammed the control for the siren. "Where on Pembury Road?"

"Oh! A pub, he said."

"Which pub? There's nine of them!"

"Oh, the - clockwork dragon...?"

"Clockwork Lion. Right." Greg peeled the car away from the curb. "Who the hell are they assaulting?"

"Comms neglected to say."

You neglected to ask. "Back-up on their way, right?"

"I... think so, yes."

Greg briefly thought to snap at her that thinking back-up would be there, and back-up actually being there, were very different concepts - one of which would lead to a happy outcome, and one of which would get them pulverised. There wasn't time to get her to understand that now. If she didn't know it already, he couldn't teach her it while driving at full-siren through Hackney.

He wasn't sure why Lindsey Darling had become a police officer. He just wished the commander could have assigned her to someone else.

The Clockwork Lion was a few streets away: an old-fashioned little pub, softly-lit, with smoked panels of glass in the front window. They screeched to a halt outside and Greg wrenched off his seatbelt, hurrying from the car.

The chequerboard of fogged glass was an attractive sight in the London darkness, but made it difficult to see what the hell was going on inside. From the sounds of shattering glass and shouting, the guy wasn't dead yet at least. The assault was still in progress; there was no sign of back-up.

"Did Comms say three?" Greg demanded, as DS Darling came to hover reluctantly at his side. Her arms were folded, her shoulders hunched. She gave him an uneasy nod.

Greg set his jaw, staring at the closed door of the pub.

TJ would have handled it. Armed Response would be on the way.

Besides - if he didn't get in there now, there might be no-one left for Armed Response to save.

Greg steeled himself, took a breath and shoved open the door, ignoring Darling's gasped protest.

The place was a wreck - chairs smashed, tables upturned, and everywhere strewn with the
glittering crunch of broken glass. Greg proceeded with care, shards cracking under his boots. His quiet approach was lost in the frenzied shouting from behind the bar.

They were big fuckers, even for gargoyles.

Greg felt his stomach twist as he laid eyes on them - bulging necks, crumbling grey skin, faces warped back from sharpened teeth. Their fists were the size of a normal human's head. Dark grey veins stood out on their forearms like taut string. They were doing their utmost to reach the top of a massive wooden shelf behind the bar.

Crouched on top of it, crammed between the frescoed ceiling and the shelf, was a jaguar.

The thing was raging, slashing the stoneskins to shit as they lunged at it. Every time a grey hand reached up to grab hold, the jaguar caterwauled like a stray tom and tore at them until the hand went down. The gargoyles, also raging, weren't letting this dampen their enthusiasm. They were swearing and shouting as they tore shelves and bottles from the wall.

Greg stared wide-eyed at the scene, trying to reconcile this development with what he knew of the world.

Then the obvious occurred - and he sighed.

This was going to involve paperwork.

Lots of paperwork.

His hand strayed to the lump of the gun beneath his coat, fingertips flexing on it. Try without, he thought. Stoneskins would take at least four shots each, even if he wanted to take them out. Every bullet meant another six pages of forms. Best to fix these things without bloodshed. And Armed Response were on their way - so Darling thought.

Steadying himself, with a suspicion he might regret this, Greg barked,

"Right! Enough!"

His voice carried clear across the bar.

The stoneskins stopped at once. Slowly they turned.

Three pairs of deep-set, blood-red eyes flashed over Greg's professional black coat, visible wrist-set, authoritative stance, and the petrified sergeant now hovering ten feet behind him.

Three identical smiles spread into place.

"Police," the biggest growled. His voice rasped low in his throat, thick with gravel and dislike.

Greg reached for the hardware fitted around his right wrist, impressing the control for ID. A square of flickering hard-light appeared in the air, scrolling his likeness, name and credentials for inspection.
The gargoyle snorted. His humourless eyes cracked at the corners.

"Cross-Human Relations... huh." He cast a theatrical look of bewilderment around the wreckage of the pub. The edges of his mouth twitched. "Funny. I don't see no humans here, Detective Inspector. So I dunno what 'relations' you've arrived to sort out."

Greg held the guy's stare. He'd been doing this long enough to know not to break eye contact with a gargoyle.

"Sorry, fellas. It's a legal term, and I'm the law. How about we let Felix down from there?"

"You wanna get him down for us, inspector? I'd be appreciatin' that. The slink owes me quite a few quid, see. Not sure where the pockets are on a puma. We'll find 'em."

"Yeah..." said Greg, pulling his lip between his teeth. "Problem is, guys, I'm wanting him down safe. As in, not pummeled to a pulp by you lot." He raised an eyebrow. "How d'we go about arranging that?"

The gargoyle gave him a look of poignant regret.

"Looks like we have a disagreement then, inspector. This ain't gonna be pretty. I suggests you look away."

"You used to police just looking away?" Greg asked, with a frown.

"Some of 'em," the gargoyle husked. "Smart ones."

"Shame you got me, then. And I don't have a lot of sense." Greg glanced at the top of the shelf, where the jaguar was beginning a discreet escape sideways. "If you wanna join this discussion at any point, sir, feel free."

The jaguar stiffened, shooting him a wide-eyed stare.

"That's a registered form, right?" Greg asked it, annoyed. "Seeing as the current penalty for unregistered forms is six months, minimum. More for a dangerous form in a dense population area. Such as, y'know... a jaguar. In London."

The jaguar sneered at him.

One of the gargoyles risked an unwise grab.

Over the sound of spitting, mauling, and the pained cries of the gargoyle, Greg caught the screech of wheels outside the pub.

Armed Response were here.

"Right," he sighed, and squared his jaw. "Enough, guys! No more!"

He strode forwards, pulling cuffs from inside his coat.

It was a mistake.
Over the course of the next few seconds, several things happened in quick succession.

First, the largest of the gargoyles lunged for Greg. Before he could brace, fists like granite seized the lapels of his coat and hurled him back against the nearest wall. There came a hideous crack. Greg wasn't certain if it was the wall, a rib or the back of his skull. Pain whitened his senses, bleaching all his thought. As he choked, gasped and scrabbled for the fist now bulked at his throat. Sergeant Darling let out a shriek.

The door of the pub came crashing in - armed officers charged into the room.

Panic seared through Greg's heart. Guns were drawn. Shots were about to be fired. He struggled, heaved his chin up from the gargoyle's fist, and gasped out,

"WAIT!!"

The helmeted response squad froze. Every gun was levelled at the gargoyle - the base of the skull, where a bullet had the most chance of getting through.

Greg swallowed, hard. He dug his fingers into the fist still crushing at his throat.

The gargoyle, red eyes filling with furious panic, watched him struggle without reaction.

"This..." Greg gasped, his eyes shuttering. The fist loosened just enough for him to speak. "... s'not necessary..."

The gargoyle's face convulsed.

"How long do I get for assaultin' a police officer these days?" he snarled. "Maybe it's worth just bumpin' it straight up to murder."

Greg fought to quell the rising panic, knowing it would only burn through his supply of oxygen faster.

"F'you do that..." he warned, staring into the gargoyle's eyes - he choked, hauled himself up and dragged in a sharp breath. His pulse fluttered against the fist squeezing his neck. "... you definitely won't get your money back, mate..."

The gargoyle stared, scarlet eyes hard.

His cracked grey mouth then twisted.

"I won't, huh? Well, that won't suit either of us."

"... prob'ly best let me go then..." Greg managed, voice tight, as nonchalant as he could whilst pinned to a wall.

The gargoyle huffed. Reluctant humour glinted in his eyes.

"You ain't afraid," he remarked. It seemed to fascinate him. "Tell 'em to put the guns down."

Greg flashed his eyes to the Armed Response Squad, still ready to fire.

"... guys...?" he croaked.

Glances were shared beneath the mirrored visors. Most of them were directed towards the tall, athletic figure who stood at their centre - an officer Greg recognised by stance alone.
After a moment, with his unseen stare fixed resolutely on Greg, the squad leader gave a short nod.

The guns were lowered.

So was Greg. The heavy hand uncoiled at last from round his throat. He drew a long breath through his crushed windpipe, unsurprised to hear himself wheezing. His heart thudded in the sudden calm.

"Come quietly," he told the gargoyle, his voice hoarse, "and we'll talk about this. Misunderstandings happen. Nobody's hurt. We can clear it all up."

The gargoyle studied him, quietly amazed.

"I ain't wearing handcuffs," he warned.

"Fine." Greg coughed, breath dragging in his throat. "You behave yourself nicely in the car, though. And you're not going in the same one as the shapeshifter."

A smile spread across the gargoyle's cracked grey face. An agreement seemed to have been reached.

Greg turned his attention to the Armed Response squad leader, who was pushing up the visor of his helmet. The boyish, blue-eyed face beneath it crumpled with amusement.

"Can you play chauffeur?" Greg said.

Luke gave him a sloped smile. "Eight years of firearms training," he said, "and now I'm a taxi driver?"

"Great," said Greg. "That's sorted. I'll see you back at Scotland Yard in an hour for all the paperwork."

"You're not coming now?"

"Not right away." Greg reached up to massage his throat. "I've got to shout at a few people first."

* *

Top of the list was the landlord hiding in the kitchen.

"Next time you have a situation," Greg said, as Sergeant Darling took the other patrons' contact details for statements, "you give my Comms team full details - alright? I don't care if the guy's your mate. I could have had my eyes slashed out. That'd make apprehending suspects more of a challenge than I really want."

"They were beating him to a paste!" the landlord protested. "And there were three of them!"

"I came bolting in here expecting some poor bastard having his head kicked in!" Greg said. "I discovered a weird reboot of The Jungle Book. I hope you had no prior knowledge of that, by the way. Concealment of unregistered shapeshifter forms is an offence."

The landlord bit his tongue, saying nothing.
Next came the shapeshifter.

"Change," Greg barked through the grill on the back of the van. "Now."

The jaguar raged at him, clawing at the grill.

Greg folded his arms.

"You can hiss and spit all you like, mate," he said, unmoved. "Only one of us is about to find himself pantless in a police cell. What're you doing borrowing money off gargoyles, anyway? Everyone else has learned their lesson with you, is that it?"

The jaguar's eyes narrowed.

With a disconcerting ripple of flesh, fur and skin, the big cat melted away. In its place was left a scrawny, crouched and naked man. He was panting, his teeth still beared.

"Why didn't you shoot them?" he spat. "They could have killed me, human!"

Greg bit his tongue.

"Because that's how we solve our problems in the twenty-third century?" he said. "By shooting them? Explains the state of this damn city."

He banged on the back of the van.

"Get him out of here."

Last, but certainly not least, was Sergeant Darling.

"Listen," he said, as they left the pub. It was now creeping towards three AM. Greg needed caffeine, nicotine and aspirin - badly, and not necessarily in that order. "That wasn't good, what happened in there."

Sergeant Darling hummed in the back of her throat, fiddling with her wrist-set.

"Don't worry, inspector. I realise you didn't stick to protocol. I suppose it's easy to forget in the heat of the moment."

Greg stopped. "I'm not meaning me, Darling."

"Oh?" she inquired, cool. "Then what were you meaning?"

"You weren't a lot of help, if I'm honest. You might as well not have been there."

"Neither of us should have been there," she informed him, point blank, as she gave him an imperious glare. "Protocol clearly states to wait for back-up before entering a hostile situation - which that very much was. I'm sorry, inspector. You might rush in where angels fear to tread, but it's definitely not the correct procedure."

Greg gathered together what little remained of his patience.

"Darling, when you're in a scenario where 'correct procedure' will end up with somebody being dead - "

"I'm fairly certain that procedure is made to avert such an eventuality, inspector."
"And I'm telling you that it'll let you down," Greg said. "Procedure's fine until something unprocedural happens - then you need to use your discretion. Human life comes first. That's the golden rule. It trumps all the other rules. Alright?"

Sergeant Darling sniffed.

"I'm not sure you should be using the term 'human life'," she said. "Not everyone we work with identifies as such. It's actually rather offensive."

Greg pinched the bridge of his nose. *God give me strength.*

"Get in the car," he told her, too exhausted to argue. Maybe he'd have a word with the commander in the morning. Some kind of training course. *How to cope when Lindsey Darling is your sergeant*. There would be a support group somewhere. A circle of small plastic chairs and broken ex-DIs, sobbing into their hands. "I'm going to smoke."

As Darling got into the passenger seat, she called,

"Would you do that away from the car, please, inspector? I'd rather not get all your secondary smoke."

She slammed the door before Greg could reply.

Greg took himself and his cigarettes to the nearest alley to calm down.

As he leant back against the brick wall, wreathing himself in smoke to try and blot out the stench of piss, Greg reflected that all this had seemed like a great idea at one point. It didn't make him feel much better. Eighteen months ago, his world had been an enjoyable place. That was before his return to London - before he'd moved back down here.

Things were different now.

_Forty-one._

Forty-two, in summer - if winter ever ended - forty-two with a messy flat, no friends outside of work, no hobbies except the TV, twenty cigarettes a day, and fifty hours a week with Lindsey Darling. It was a sorry state of affairs, however you tried to package it.

Greg turned his eyes skyward to the thin strip of stars above. They twinkled, even through the haze of his smoke. He watched them for a moment, thinking.

He knew exactly where it'd all started to go wrong. He could pinpoint it to a handful of conversations. There was little point in regret. It wouldn't change things back. All the same, it wasn't easy.

It wasn't getting any easier with time.

Greg tried to cheer himself with the recollection that, because of him, a. ungrateful shapeshifter would now live another day to unwisely borrow money.

He stubbed out his cigarette on the wall.

He couldn't leave Darling sitting in his car all night - as much as he wanted to. Luke would be waiting back at Scotland Yard to begin their assault on Mount Paperwork. Slinks - shapeshifters - were always a bloody nightmare. The sooner paperwork got started, the sooner he could go home.
There was half a bottle of white wine waiting in his fridge. He'd put a box set on, drag his duvet to the sofa and smoke until the windows went opaque.

It was as bright a prospect as he could hope for these days.

As he turned to leave, Greg's wrist-set emitted a strange noise.

He stopped, lifting it up from his side to listen. Information - maps, times and weather conditions - scrolled lazily across the bright blue screen.

It had almost sounded like a gasp.

Greg tapped the set, frowning.

Then the sound came again - and he realised it wasn't from the wrist-set at all. It was from somewhere nearby.

It was the sound of something trying to breathe.

The hair rose at once on the back of Greg's neck.

He looked quickly along the alley - bin bags, ragged open by foxes; old flyers; flattened boxes. At the end, on the right, there was a metal gate.

Greg waited, listening, feeling his bruised throat tighten in the silence.

A third gasp came from the direction of the gate. It cut off this time, cracking.

Greg reached for his gun.

He flicked the safety catch without taking his eyes off the gate. In total silence, laying each footstep after the other with care, he proceeded down the alley.

There was graffiti painted across the gate - a gang sign, daubed in white to stand out in the darkness. It was like a trident. Forked, sharp. Greg didn't recognise it. This in itself was strange. He'd picked up most of the others within weeks of coming back to London.

A new gang, his brain suggested - and as he reached a steady hand to open the gate, he realised it was a new symbol. The paint was wet. It gleamed as the shadow of his arm fell across it.

As Greg eased open the gate, it let out a perishing creak.

Beyond was a small concrete yard. It was no bigger than Greg's bedroom - a cramped, grubby and cold little space. There was a door into one of the buildings bordering the yard, and a few brick steps, and an old bike.

There was something else, too.

The scene laid out before Greg, carefully arranged for him to find, changed everything forever.
Blood and Concrete

I felt the blackness come and go,
And strove to wake; but would not make
My senses climb up from below.

- Lord Byron
'Mazeppa', Stanza XIII (1819)

Fourteen years with the police - Greg had seen his fair share of bodies. Some weeks, he saw more of them than he saw hot meals. He'd seen blood, too - more of it than anyone should see.

Usually, the experience began with protective clothing and a briefing from a sergeant. It took place amongst the busy presence of forensics, who wandered like friendly ghosts in their crinkling white suits, laying the reassurance of science across the dirty chaos of what people did to each other when given half a chance.

It wasn't often you saw a sight like this, just from pushing open a gate.

"Holy shit." Greg's throat closed. He swallowed, forcing it back open; the words gasped out again. "Holy shit."

There was a woman lying on the ground. At first, he hadn't been sure she was a woman - too pulled apart to tell. Her clothes were torn; her skin was torn. She was everywhere.

Procedure began to kick in.

Greg fumbled his gun into his back pocket, pale, reaching for his wrist-set.

Take a scan. It was the first thing they told you, day one of training. Crime scene? Take a scan. It was rule one. It was inviolate. The scan would remember things you wouldn't. It would catch the details forever, before they could vanish out of your stupid head like smoke.

Then Greg heard her gasp again - and he realised she was still fucking alive.

It didn't seem possible - not wrenched open like that, pouring out over the concrete - but somehow it was. She was still here, gasping out her last to him. Frightened to die.

Greg stepped into the yard, into the blood. It was everywhere. How could there be so much blood? How could she still be alive? His heart was pounding as he knelt down at her side. Blood seeped through the knees of his trousers, into the hem of his coat where it brushed the ground.

He gathered her hand from the concrete, wrapping it in both his own.

She was icy cold.

She was a mess - blue eyes staring up at him, wide and frightened, choking around the weeping
black wound in her throat. She couldn't believe this was happening. They never did.

Greg's brain, clutching feebly at procedure, categorised her for him: female, human, thirty to thirty-five. He squeezed her hand, staring into her face. He couldn't bring himself to look any lower.

He heard his own voice make words for her.

"It's alright," he heard himself say, perfectly calm. "I've got you... it's all alright."

She was going to die. She knew it. An ambulance wouldn't get here in time. These were her final seconds. Her breaths were shortening, more blood now than air, and her eyes lulled shut in an unsynchronised blink.

She gripped Greg's hand, trying to speak.

He gripped her back.

"I'm here," he said. "You're okay. We'll get you sorted."

She stared into his eyes, pulling her throat together one last time to speak.

"E-Emma," she managed.

Greg gave her a quiet smile, like they were sitting in an interview room - like she was about to give him a statement and she was nervous.

"Greg," he told her, gently.

She breathed it out; her tired blue eyes fell shut.

Quietly, he watched her die.

After a minute of desolate silence, with his heart now half its size, Greg reached out to check her pulse. Her neck was wet with blood. He had to brush her hair aside - shiny, wavy black hair.

He closed his eyes to listen better, searching for any sign of her heart.

Nothing.

She was gone.

Numb, Greg laid her hand upon the ground. Her fingers rested there, open and still like the folds of a fallen flower.

Blood smeared across his wrist-set as he pressed the channel through to Comms.

A crackle broke the silence; it echoed in the concrete space.

"... hang on..." TJ's voice came muffled. "... it's the King of Hearts. Must be that thing on Pembury Road... oh God, these freaking headsets - why did I even buy the damn - "

A crunch, a fizzle of static, and TJ's voice cleared.

"Comms 4," he declared, with a sigh. "You're through to TJ. Let's go."

Greg's heart thudded in the quiet.

TJ's breath caught.

TYST was comms code. It stood for 'Take Your Sweet Time'.

"Dead on arrival?" he checked.

Greg's heart ached. "No," he murmured. "She is now."

He listened as TJ whirled through screens and checks, searching, dispatching.

"Scan?" TJ prompted.

Greg shut his eyes. "Christ. Hang on..."

"Greg, you - you didn't do an ISOC scan?"

"She was dying - she couldn't breathe... no, I didn't do the scan - just - hang on..." Greg got to his feet, grimacing as his shoes skidded in her blood. "Christ - "

He backed into a corner, tracking his own footprints with him across the concrete.

As he booted up the software on his wrist-set, he became aware that he was breathing shallowly. It took effort to deepen it into his lungs. He set the wrist-set to scan and closed his eyes against the sudden blaze of white-blue light that beamed from the device, tracking and whirling over everything in sight, recording every detail.

He hated the cheerful 'bloop' the thing made when it was finished. It was a smug, satisfied little sound - as if the software was pleased it had done its job.

"Sending," he said, as he patched it through. He hesitated. "TJ, it's... I've never seen anything like -"

TJ gave a soft snort.

"I've been doing this for years," he said. "I've seen my share of -"

There came a quiet bleep over the line.

TJ stopped talking.

For a few seconds they simply breathed together, looking at the same thing - Greg, laid out before his eyes; TJ, in crisp digital precision on a screen halfway across London.

"Holy fuck," TJ whispered at last.

Greg swallowed. "Patch it through, TJ. Stick to procedure. Don't fuck up your record, fuzzball."

TJ inhaled. There came the sound of his flurrying fingers. His voice - when he spoke - was stiff and quick.

"Right. Ambulance en route. Calling street teams - CID - high alert, through to seniors..." He hesitated. "Greg, those - wounds -"
Greg's throat thickened. "I don't know," he said. His chest rose and fell as he stared at them across the yard, his back still flat against the bricks. He tried to force his eyes to see; they were desperate to look away. "I've never... is that werewolf?"

"Werewolves don't do that," TJ managed, tight.

"No," Greg said, his heart pounding. "No, I know they don't. Those are... bite marks. At the throat. The ring of punctures below her ear. There's a - blade at the abdomen, I think - that depth into her internal organs, but..."

"It's cross-human," TJ said. That, they could agree on. "M'calling your commander. Get her out of bed. Vickery needs to see this."

Greg realised he was breaking into sweat. He pushed a hand across his forehead, panting as TJ rang through to the emergency lines. Greg's fingers came away smeared in blood and sweat. He swore under his breath.

"You just found her like that?" TJ asked, as he waited for Commander Vickery to pick up.

"Heard her gasping," Greg said. He shut his eyes. "Her name was Emma."

"Jesus - did you know her?"

"No." Greg almost, almost laughed. "Not for long."

* *

Luke Elwood's nippy little sports car got there first, screeching to a halt across the road fifteen minutes later. Greg had come to the end of the alley to wait. He couldn't stay in that yard. He felt guilty leaving Emma alone - as if she'd care - but he couldn't have spent another second looking at what someone did to her.

While he waited, he stood in the silence and tried not to think.

"Bloody hell, Greg..." Luke slammed the car door. He was still in his leather combat gear, missing the guns and the visored helmet. He stared at the blood soaked into Greg's shins and his coat, daubed up his hands and across his jaw. His fresh-faced features turned grey. "What - what even..."

"She's in the yard at the end," Greg managed, numb. He pointed. "Went for a smoke, and... there she was. Watched her die."

"Where the hell's your sergeant?"

Greg rolled his eyes.

"Insisted she had to take a look," he muttered. "I warned her. Don't think she believed me... took one look and went screaming off in the car in tears. God knows now."

"Sorry - she drove off?"

Greg frowned. "Have you met Lindsey Darling?"
"Right… well, look - Vickery wants to see you. She's been shown the ISOC scan. Are you fit to drive?"

"I'm fine," Greg said, exhausted. "It's the poor cow down there you should be worrying about."

"Dunno how much good worry will do her now, mate… here."

Luke tossed him his car keys. Greg considered it a small miracle that he caught them.

"Take Serena," Luke said, with a nod at the four-wheeled and gleaming Mrs Elwood. "Get back to Scotland Yard and I'll take over here. I've got people on the way."

"Are you serious? You're Armed Response, Luke. I'm CID. S'why my badge says 'Detective' and yours doesn't. This isn't your gig."


"Oh, good," Greg muttered. "That makes me retired… off to the beach."

"Fine - but go see Vickery first. She's pulled TJ out of Comms for the night too."

Greg's heart sunk. "Really?" TJ was a tough cookie - the kid lived for his job. The scan must have gotten inside his skull, if he'd been taken offline for the night.

If Greg needed any more proof that this situation was a whole new level of scary, there it was.

"Right," he said, weary. "Well… thanks, Luke. What about the paperwork for the slink?"


"A woman ripped apart in an alley, and you think Vickery's going to care about an unregistered slink? It's history, Greg. It's done. We've got more to worry about. Now don't crash my car."

Greg remembered little of the drive back to Scotland Yard - street-lights and big shops, glass fronts bright in the darkness. Luke's car smelt too clean; the seat was too far back. He kept three kinds of aftershave in the glove compartment.

This day didn't seem real anymore.

Greg kept seeing that horrible gate opening in his mind. He couldn't keep it shut.

He left Serena in her designated spot in the underground car park, let himself in through the security door, and tried to ignore the alarmed looks he got while crossing Reception. London was as much of a human cockpit as it ever had been, but it was rare for someone coated in actual blood to be wandering about Scotland Yard.

The department lights were all out. Greg switched a few on, left his coat across his desk, and went to the bathroom to wash what he could off his face and hands. There was nothing to be done about his trousers. He wasn't sure he could even just wash them. There was only so much you could
expect of laundry powder.

As he watched the red-tinged water swirling away down the steel drain, Greg became aware that he was washing away the last of someone - her last living blood.

The thought made his stomach clench.

She was still there, spread out across the yard. He was here trying to scrub her out from under his nails. *Holy shit.* He'd seen some things he'd rather not have seen - plenty of them by now.

But that...

He didn't know what he thought.

He didn't know what there *was* to think.

Vickery's fogged glass door was shut when he approached. Greg leant near to it - he could hear voices from inside. A quiet knock prompted no response.

It looked like he had a few minutes for coffee. He was close to exhaustion, and Vickery would have questions he needed to answer.

The staff canteen was almost deserted at this hour, manned by a single surly staff member. Greg inconvenienced her for a coffee, which was handed to him with a sigh.

He took it across the canteen, where a familiar figure sat hunched and not eating, rolling a salt cellar back and forth across the table-top.

"Thought you were in with Vickery," Greg said, as he sat down.

TJ looked up with a start. His freckled face relaxed as he saw who it was.

"I thought *you* were in with Vickery." His hazel eyes were round as they regarded Greg. "Yardley pulled me out of Comms," he said, pained. "Said I've been exposed to 'traumatic material', and I'm compromised... Maisie can't handle the pod on her own. What if it kicks off and she needs me?"

Greg smiled without warmth, stirring his coffee. "Think it already *has* kicked off, mate..."

TJ's eyes sank to the salt cellar. "This isn't meant to happen on a Wednesday."

"M'sorry you had to see that, TJ. Genuinely. I mean... that was..."

Greg couldn't find the right word. None of them properly covered the horror of that scene - the yard, the blood, the cavity excavated in her stomach.

TJ exhaled, watching his face.

"I'm - sorry I saw it too," he said. He hesitated, fidgeting with the curve of the salt cellar. "But... Maisie."

For all that TJ was an idiot sometimes, Greg thought, his heart was right where it should be. He blew across the surface of his coffee, giving the comms officer a faint smile.

"She'll be alright," he promised. "Yardley'll watch her. Besides, if it gets busy, the other pods will pick up the traffic. It'll be fine."
TJ pulled a face, not ready to believe him.

"I'm not even traumatised," he muttered. "That's the stupid thing. What have I got to see Vickery for? Is she going to pat my hand and give me tissues?"

He sighed, rolling the salt cellar miserably along the edge of the table.

"It's stupid," he said.

"She probably just wants to check you're alright, TJ. You saw something horrific. Vickery'll be worried about you."

TJ had no argument to make. He stuck his tongue in his cheek, revolving the salt cellar on its end between his palm and the table.

"What... happened to...?" he asked.

Greg took a mouthful of coffee. It had the canteen's characteristic shoe-leather-in-summer aftertaste - but right now, it might as well have been liquid gold. It scalded the back of his mouth as he swallowed it. He winced, and drank some more.

"I don't know," he said at last. "I wish I could tell you. I've seen a lot of injuries before, but... well, forensics'll be on it even now. We'll get their first findings by noon maybe. Then Darling and I will do what we can."

"How d'you know you'll be assigned it?" TJ asked.

Greg returned to his coffee mug. "'Cause I'm not having anyone else take it. That's why."

TJ watched him drink for a moment, quiet and no longer fiddling. Greg wondered if he understood. He'd heard Greg in those first moments - the first seconds of a new world where Emma was dead. Minutes before, she hadn't even existed. Then she'd died holding onto Greg's hand.

"How d'you lot cope?" TJ asked, after a while. "Stuff like that."

Greg put down his mug. He took a moment to collect together a proper answer.

"It's worth it on the other side. When you help someone - make them safe - get some justice for the people they left behind."

TJ contemplated this, pensive and unhappy. Greg had never seen him so quiet.

"When did you last eat?" Greg asked.

TJ scratched at his chin, his eyes downcast. "Bit before your call, maybe? Cheese footballs."

"D'you want some toast or something?"

"No, I'm - alright. Don't feel like eating."

"You know that's not good for you. Here, have some coffee. It's got four sugars in."

TJ eyed the black surface of the coffee, resisting. He then took the mug in both hands. He grimaced as he drank it; his expression contorted.

"Gah," he said, nose wrinkled. He handed it back to Greg. "How do you drink it that strong?"
Greg gave him a small smile. "I'm a DI," he said. "It's the only way we stay on our feet. Most of us are actually dead now. The coffee twitches make it look like we're still going."

TJ smiled reluctantly. "Makes sense."

Something reoccurred to Greg - some small, half-lost detail. It had been wiped from his mind by blood and blue eyes.

"TJ..." he said, curiously.

"Mm?"

"... the King of Hearts?"

TJ shot him a guilty grin across the table.

"It's just a nickname," he said, wiggling in his chair. "Everybody ends up with one. You don't wanna know what they call DS Darling."

Greg really rather did.

"Right," he said, raising his mug to his mouth. "But - why...?"

"Come on, Greg..." TJ's eyes brightened with puppyish mischief. "'The jaw that broke a thousand hearts'?"

"Christ almighty. Greg swallowed his coffee, choking a little. "Bugger off, TJ!"

"Hey, I'm the messenger! Not my fault you're considered hot property around here. For what it's worth, I understand the main pulls are your boyish charm and your heroic lack of absolutely any sense. Between you and Commander Elwood, there's a lot of knickers being put through a hot wash once a week."

"TJ, you can piss right off. Immediately. And when you've pissed off, you can piss off some more."

TJ held up his hands, his eyes sparkling.

"I don't come up with these things," he said. "Who am I to suppress workplace creativity?"

"Right." Greg hid his smile behind his mug, drinking. "And what does Luke Elwood get called behind the Comms 4 door?"

"Who, Commander Arse?"

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a reply."

"The man heads the Armed Response Squad, Greg. What did he think he'd end up known as? Those initials are a gift. A gift from the higher-ups for us lesser mortals to enjoy here on Earth. I'm not turning down a piece of perfection like that."

"You're a rascal," Greg told him, and drained the last of his coffee. "We should get you fixed."

"Haha, very funny. Don't get sassy, Greg. That's the difference between you and Commander Arse. He knows he's a dish. You don't."
"I'm not hearing this," Greg said. He shoved back his chair. "Come on. Put the salt pot down, and we'd better see Vickery. D'you want to go first or second?"

TJ winced. "Uh... you go first. You're the proper professional here. I'm an idiot who answers the phone."

As they approached Commander Vickery's glass door, it opened with a creak and DS Darling emerged. Her face was pouchy and pale, red around the eyes with angry tears. She didn't say a word as she appeared. She flounced past them without so much as a glance, her chin held high, and headed off down the stairs with her handbag clasped beneath her arm.

Greg suspected he was being punished for making her look at a murder.

Darling probably thought he'd killed the woman himself, just to distress her.

"Looks like you're in the dog house," TJ muttered, with a sideways flash of his eyes. They heard Darling storming off down the stairs. "Another one bites the dust?"

"Shut up," Greg said quietly. "She's only the fourth, if she does."

"The fourth in a year. What do you keep doing to your sergeants, out of interest? You change sergeants more often than I do bedsheets."

"I don't do anything to them. They just... leave."

"You still wanna go first?"

"Mhm. Best get this over with."

As TJ took a seat, crinkling a small bag of sweets from his pocket, Greg knocked on the frosted glass door. He realised there was still dried blood in his finger joints. He curled his hand away from his sight.

"Enter," called the voice from within.

With a last wide-eyed look from TJ, Greg let himself into the office.

Commander Vickery was making herself a coffee at her desk. Nothing about her suggested it was [four] in the morning. She was, as always, dressed to perfection - a crisp black suit, a silver satin blouse, and patent leather spike heels. The commander couldn't possibly have ended up in any other profession - and she would never leave it, either. Greg knew beyond all doubt that Vickery would be a police officer until her dying breath, and probably hounding them for expense reports months later.

"Coffee," she said, placing a cup in front of Greg as he sat down. The substance within the mug was almost as black as her heels.

"Oh, I... just had one in the canteen, commander. Thanks, though."

"Have a second," she advised, sitting down into her chair. She crossed one leg over the other. "I'll
make you a third, if you need it."

Commander Vickery was being kind, Greg realised with a jolt to the heart. If the situation hadn't been damning enough, it bloody was now.

"How are you?" she asked, with the briskness she'd ask if he'd filed all his invoices yet.

"M'fine, commander."

"You're not," she said. She raised an eyebrow. "I've seen the ISOC scan, Lestrade. I'll be seeing it for some time yet. What in hell's name happened out there?"

"Honestly, ma'am, there's not much to tell." Greg took in a breath, trying to piece together the chaotic scraps of memory which made up the last few hours. "I - heard a funny noise in the yard off the alley. Went to investigate… there she was. She was alive for maybe a minute after I got there. I mean, those injuries… there wasn't much I could do. Just sit with her."

"You must have just missed her attacker," Vickery noted, watching him closely across the desk.

"Yeah," Greg said, realising it for the first time. "Yeah, I - guess so. Don't ask me if I saw anyone. I was kinda preoccupied with the incident we were already sorting. Didn't think we'd be dealing with anything worse."

"Understandable," Vickery remarked, lifting her chin. "What was your initial impression?"

Greg took a moment to try and be there again - the gate, the yard.

"Blood," he said. "Didn't realise we had that much in us."

"Any first instincts as to what hit her?"

"I… didn't really snap into 'deduction' mode if I'm honest, commander."

"I'm not asking about your deductions," Vickery said, sitting back in her chair. "I'm asking about your instincts, Lestrade. They're very different. As you walked into that yard, your brain told you everything it possibly needed to know. The trick is in recovering that first data. So, tell me… as you realised what you were looking at - what came into your head? What rushed forwards?"

Greg shut his eyes, returning himself to that awful first split-second. It made his throat thicken.

"Don't think I did realise what I was looking at," he said. "Not at first." He pushed his hands together under the desk, gripping his own fingers. "It didn't look like a person. Just a mess. Then I -saw legs, and her belt - and I realised she was real."

"Were you afraid?"

Greg frowned. "I - don't know."

Vickery's eyes were raptor-like and cool, drawing from him what she needed. "Did you keep your weapon to hand?"

"I… no," Greg said, remembering. "Put it in my back pocket."

Vickery processed this. "You didn't think the attacker was still there, then."

Greg looked down at his gathered hands. "I guess not." Something pulled his eyebrows together; it
made him feel uneasy. "I - didn't feel like…"

"Didn't feel like…?"

"I don't know, commander, it was... she was just everywhere, and it didn't look like... like anything an attacker could have done. I'm not saying I thought she'd had an accident or exploded or something, I just…"

He drew in a breath, shaking his head to try and make sense of it. Everything was pounding. Everything was dark.

"I saw her," he said. "Saw her there, across the ground - and I realised she was a 'her' - and it didn't look like anything a human had done. Any kind of human," he added, glancing into Vickery's piercing eyes. "I don't mean an animal either. A machine, maybe. Something - more efficient than us. Something that shredded her up and left."

He paused, reading her face.

"Those were... teeth marks," he said. "On the throat."

"Mm. My initial impression, too."

"But... gargoyles crush. She wasn't crushed. She didn't have any bruising. Werewolves scratch and slash, but I didn't see slash marks. Besides, they're usually too busy fighting each other to prey on humans..." Greg rubbed his tired hands across his face. "I don't know, ma'am. It's cross-human, whatever it is. I just don't know if this is something I've encountered before."

He paused, his heart thudding with a sudden recollection.

"There was a sign," he said. "A gang sign. Painted on the gate."

"Mm. I've had digitals through from Commander Elwood."

"I didn't recognise it. Didn't mean anything to me." He hesitated. "Did DS Darling recognise it?"

Vickery gave him a very serious look, one eyebrow arching just a fraction.

"No," she said. "No, she did not."

As Greg picked up his coffee, the commander added,

"DS Darling has requested that she be relieved of her duties immediately... trauma. Stress. Unreasonable treatment."

Greg's heart fell. And there goes number four, he thought, despairing into his coffee cup.

"Right," he mumbled.

"She made a number of accusations about your professional conduct."

"... right."

"Suffice to say, Lestrade, if I took these accusations seriously, you might have an investigation on your hands."

Greg shut his eyes for a second. "Ma'am... if I could start with my counter-accusations. DS Darling
is - "
" - relieved from her duties," Vickery said. "She asked for a month, which I've granted… but she shan't return. I'll eat my desk if she does." The commander rearranged herself in her chair, tossing one leg across the other. "You are 'between sergeants' once again."

Greg took a quiet sip of his coffee. He suspected he was going to need it.

"I'd hoped your previous 'between sergeants' was the last time," Vickery added, wryly.

"Yeah, ma'am. Me too."

"Is there something I should know?"

Greg winced. "I have terrible luck?"

"I'm sure you can admit it seems astonishing," she said, surveying him along her nose. "Four sergeants inside of a year… and from a new DI."

"I'm new to London, commander," he said. "Not new to detection. I mean... back in Manchester, I didn't have this problem. Honestly. I don't know why they keep quitting."

"DS Darling believes that you rush in 'where angels fear to tread'," Vickery remarked, and awaited his response.

Greg pulled a face. "I'd say that's what police are meant to do, ma'am. If we don't rush in, who will?"

She smiled. It was a thin smile, but a smile nonetheless.

"I'll try to find you someone more durable," she said. "Frankly, Greg, I'm not sure what you're doing to them. But let's see if we can get you someone more prepared to go the distance."

Greg bit the side of his tongue.

"Thanks, commander." He hesitated, holding the coffee cup to his chest. "I promise it won't affect the case. I'll manage the slack myself, ma'am, 'til you find someone."

Vickery eyed him with surprise. "You're expecting to investigate it yourself?" she said, intrigued.

Greg braced himself. "I'd like to. Very strongly."

"Interesting. Why?"

Greg watched her for a moment, trying to work out how much honesty she'd appreciate and how much was a mistake. "I feel personally invested," he said last.

Vickery's steely eyebrows lifted. "Some might say that makes you supremely unsuitable to investigate it."

"I'd say it makes me dedicated, commander. It'll push me to go the extra mile."

"Without a sergeant, Lestrade, you'll need to push more than one extra mile."

"I'll improvise," he said. "Until one comes along. At least let me do the initial inquiries, ma'am... help me get it off the ground. When it's in the air, you'll see I can handle it. I promise."
Vickery was impressed. She sat back in her chest, considering his fervour as if it were a fine wine. Greg hid his nerves within the coffee cup, drinking.

"Well," she said. "We do have a number of avenues of inquiry to pursue… and there'll be legwork required…"

"Do we have a theory to test?" Greg asked.

Vickery didn't reply at once. She traced a fingertip in a circle on her desk, watching it, thinking.

"I'm afraid I do have a theory," she said. "Quite frankly, I'd like it to be disproven as soon as possible… the sooner the better."

"What theory?"

Vickery sat forwards. She inhaled, stiffly.

"There's someone I'd recommend you speak to," she said. "Seeing as you're so eager to lead the way with this, I'll get you written into his diary for this afternoon. Take along your ISOC scans, show him what you have - I'll forward you the scan of this gang sign - and see if you can glean some impressions from him."

"Is this an... external consultant?" Greg asked. "Third party?"

"No, Scotland Yard. Just outside of our division."

Greg's brow contracted.

"Commander, if this is a cross-human attack… what's someone from another division going to know? We need cross-human experts. Maybe if I send the scans to my old team in Manchester, they could take a look for - "

"Mycroft is a cross-human expert," Vickery said, raising an eyebrow. "He was in Cross-Human Relations long before they moved him up to Criminal Psychology. I assure you his skills remain as sharp as ever."

Greg hesitated, skidding across that name. His heart clenched, praying he'd misheard. 'Michael', he thought. Any name. Any name but that one.

"Sorry, ma'am - did you say…?"


Greg said nothing for a second, wondering if this day could get any worse.

"We've met," he said at last.

"I see." Vickery regarded him with a frown, clearly suspecting there was more to his answer. Greg only hoped she couldn't tell exactly how much more. "Well, I'll tell Mycroft to expect you later this afternoon. His office is up in Criminal Psychology, along with the rest of his team. I suggest that
for now you go home, get some sleep, and return bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this afternoon. You'll need all your wits about you if you're doing this without a sergeant. Is Timothy Tierney out there?"

Greg wondered briefly who the hell Timothy Tierney was.

"Oh - yeah, TJ's just waiting outside. Ma'am, can I ask... is there - anyone else who might be able to - "

"Send Tierney in, will you?" Vickery said, sitting back in her chair, and reaching for a data-pad that had just illuminated for her attention. The conversation was over. It was done. Greg's fate was sealed. "Let me know how you get on with Mycroft. And do give him my regards."
I feel a cold northern breeze play upon my cheeks, which braces my nerves and fills me with delight. Do you understand this feeling?

- Mary Shelley

'*Frankenstein'* (1818)

Greg had grown up in London - outskirts of Lambeth. He'd hit the road as soon as he could. As a young man he'd lived all over, including a few years out in New Zealand, then in his late twenties ended up in Manchester - and it was there that he joined the police.

He spent a year or two in uniform, laughing when people told him he'd do well in Criminal Investigation.

It didn't seem like it could be true. A detective? Like the old shows on TV? Detectives were heroes. They went charging in while others stood and watched. Greg was just an idiot, trying to make the streets a bit safer.

The day he sat the Investigation Exam was the proudest day of his life. He didn't care if he failed; he was just pleased they let him have a go. He sat at the console and almost enjoyed the gruelling three-hour exam, revolving the 3D hard-light projections of crime scenes and tapping in procedures to follow, factors to consider, lines of inquiry he'd be making. He fizzled through it while the other entrants turned greyer and greyer around him.

He thought Commander Parson was joking that afternoon, when he called Greg into his office.

An exemplary approach, they said. High nineties. Uniform to be taken off and thrown in the incinerator at once.

Shocked, all Greg could ask was which fictional suspect had committed the crime.

A few years on, and his steady patience and easy nature had led him into Cross-Human Relations. It wasn't an easy gig by any standards. Politics made things murky - and holy shit, there were a lot of politics around. Nobody could agree on what a human was anymore, let alone how the relations should be running. But it suited Greg, and he didn't feel bad saying he was good at it.

He'd always been able to talk to people. Even as a teenager, he found himself drawn to those fragments of humanity that most people crossed the street to avoid - people in doorways, people slumped over at bus shelters, people who stared in amazement when they realised he was striking up a conversation.

Greg didn't know what it was. He just liked them. He felt for the poor bastards all the rest had given up on, usually for no good reason. His friends warned him it would get him into trouble one day.
It got him his DI's wrist-set, his gun and his desk, with his name on the electronic panel across the front. Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade (Cross-Human Relations: CID).

Some mornings Greg just sat with his coffee, and watched his name scrolling by.

He had Manchester running like a dream before long. They all knew his face, and they knew he played fair and straight - the gangs, the hard bastards, the career criminals. When he rounded up the Artillery Street Claws, there wasn't a single shot fired or officer mauled. "Fair enough, Greg," the Alpha had shrugged, as Greg handcuffed him on the doorstep, trying not to catch his wrist fur in the mechanism. "Yerr only doin' your job. Tell your boys don't be wakin' my cubs while they search the place. Need their sleep. School sports day in the mornin'."  

Then a year ago, just before Christmas, Commander Goulding had invited Greg into her office.  
"I've had a request," she said, easing a plate of digestives across the desk to him. "More like a plea... part of me wanted to delete it without a second reading. But that wouldn't be fair to you."

Greg eyed the digestives with concern.

"You're sweetening the deal already, are you?" His proclivity for chocolate biscuits was legendary throughout the force. He took one, broke it in half and dipped it in his tea, sitting back in his chair. "What's happened, ma'am?"

"I've been contacted by Commander Vickery... Amelia. An old friend of mine. She's Head of Cross-Human Relations at Scotland Yard."

"Scotland Yard?" Greg raised his eyebrows, placing the digestive in his mouth and removing the chocolate with a flash of his tongue. It was the only way to eat them. "Out of their depth, are they?" he asked, grinning, as he licked his lower lip. "As usual."

Commander Goulding smiled a little; she looked almost apologetic.

"Chronically," she said. "And now rather desperate. They've got some worrying morale issues, workload problems... organisational trouble... Amelia's approaching despair."

Greg gave a huff. "London." For him, it explained everything. "Glad I got out when I did."

The commander lowered her eyes into her tea. "Ah."

Greg felt a prickle pass through his chest.

"Tell me," he said. Part of him knew already.

"Scotland Yard need an urgent blood transfusion... all forces in other major cities have been approached. They want the best of the best." Commander Goulding regarded him across the digestive plate. "That's you, Greg."

Greg looked down into his tea. He'd forgotten the biscuit in his hand.

"It's a hell of a pay rise," the commander said, taking from her desk drawer an electronic pad and sliding it towards him. "New car..."

Greg gave her a hollow smile, glancing with reluctance at the details.

"You know the way to my heart, commander... I'll give you that. Chocolate biscuits and a new car."
As he spotted the yearly salary, he had to look twice.

"Holy shit," he breathed. His eyes flashed to her in panic. "Sorry, ma'am."

"Swear, Greg," she urged. "Please do. I said much the same thing."

"That's a typo, right? Accidental extra zero?"

"That... would be your first year's salary," she said, gingerly. "Rising after twelve months. It doesn't include your rent assistance or medical insurance."

"Christ..." Greg wished he could knock a digit off that figure. It turned 'no' from the easiest decision of his life into the hardest. A few years on that sort of money, and he could retire at fifty. Next stop, New Zealand. Comfortably too. "Commander, I... this is home, you know? Been here years now... never thought I'd leave."

"I know, Greg. If the pay weren't so high..." Goulding sighed, resting her chin on one hand. "I'd have been selfish, I'm afraid. Pretended I never saw it. But I can't keep that sort of opportunity from you - and Scotland Yard would open up new paths for your career, if you wanted... there's a lot of upward movement there..."

"S'why they can't solve any crimes," Greg said with a frown. He scrolled through the pad in his hand. "They promote anyone with a brain cell straight up the ladder, where they can't do any good... they should throw this money at the lower ranks, keep people happy... tell them they're appreciated... do all the stuff that you do. You thought of transferring?"

Her eyes softened with a smile. "I'm not sure Amelia would appreciate me shoving her out of her chair."

"No," Greg said, weakly. "Guess not."

He sighed, gazing again at the salary. He couldn't believe that number.

"I don't know, ma'am," he murmured. "London." He hadn't been back in two decades - last damn century. He'd been eighteen when he left, carrying everything he owned in a hold-all, and he'd never wanted to lay eyes on the place again. "Maybe it's changed," he told himself, listlessly.

Or maybe the place would be in the same mess he'd left - the mess it had been in for centuries, and would remain in long after he'd tried to fix it.

"This is - maybe a bigger task than I can handle, commander. I know I do okay up here, but it's a different kettle of fish down there... big city. Big problems. This feels like it's above me."

Commander Goulding gave him a sad smile.

"They asked for the best, Greg. I called you in. If you say no, then I'll put together a list of other potentials. You don't have to go, if you don't want to... and I for one would selfishly be rather glad... but please don't dress it up as a lack of qualification on your part."

She was good, Greg thought.

He'd miss her.

As he thought it, he realised some stupid part of his brain had made a decision.
That money didn't come along twice in a lifetime. He could be on the beach in Karekare fifteen years earlier than he'd ever hoped, and with a better life around him. Besides... Scotland Yard. A new car. Rent assistance. He could get a half-decent place, especially on that salary. It wasn't like he'd be going back to Lambeth.

He'd left London as a kid. He'd be going back as a man. The city might be the same, but he wasn't - and that was something to hold onto.

He sighed, gazing at Commander Goulding across her placatory digestives.

"If I screw it up," he said, "will you have me back?"

Her eyes shone. "Of course we will, Greg."

"Will you manage without me?"

"Of course we won't. But that's for me to worry about, not you." She took the pad from him, scrolling through it with a smile. "Amelia was looking for people to move and start as soon as possible… ideally just after Christmas."


"Think about it overnight, maybe. You can give me your final yes or no in the morning."

"Sure," Greg said. His legs felt rather weak all of a sudden. Was this a mistake? He supposed he'd done stupider things and lived to tell the tale. "What about Meg? Only had her three months..."

"Don't worry about your sergeant. I'll find someone to continue your good work."

Greg's mouth pulled. "Barely _started_ the good work."

"Perhaps that makes it a good time to go, then." Commander Goulding sat back at her desk, sipping her glass of green tea. "If you'd still had DS Symmonds with you, I imagine this would have been a difficult choice."

Quiet settled over Greg's chest.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, it would." He reached for his mug. "Probably a good job he's gone."

"Have you heard from him at all?"

"Couple of emails," Greg said. He drank his tea, feeling the need for detail to fill his own quiet. "Wales suits them. Nearer Amy's family, for the kids… quieter. And he doesn't have to make me ten cups of coffee a day."

Commander Goulding smiled. "You must miss him."

Greg said nothing for a moment. He put down his mug.

"Five years is a long time to put up with me," he said at last. "Don't know how Jason managed. He was a trooper." He paused, adding, "Maybe a new start'll be good for me, you know. Freshen up my old bones."

"It won't be the same place without you, Greg. Genuinely."

"Thanks. I'll - miss you too, commander. I hope Vickery's half the boss you are."
Greg moved the day after Boxing Day.

The van cost a fortune; Scotland Yard agreed to pay for it without blinking. They didn't even ask for several quotes - just signed it off, and that was that.

Not for the first time, Greg found himself packing up his life to hit the road.

With rent assistance on top of his salary, he could have taken his pick of cushy places. He kept his eyes on the end goal, though. This wasn't about upgrading to a swanky central London pad with a view, foping about the place in luxury. This was a savings game. The more he put aside now, the better things would be in New Zealand - and the faster he could get out there.

In the end, he signed the lease on a small place in Pimlico. It wasn't far from work - he could walk it, if he wanted - just one bedroom, which was all he needed. The estate agent sent him scans of the place. He was amused to boot them up on his wrist-set to discover a very low-grade version of the ISOC technology they used at work, except without a body slumped in one corner.

It looked like a nice enough space. Bedroom, combo lounge and kitchen. It had a bath, which was good. Fifth floor, so nobody would be breaking in through his window. He checked the crime stats for the area. They were high - it was, after all, in London - but not ludicrously high. The latest demographics showed a 4:1 ratio towards what the report termed 'standard humans', which Greg couldn't help but imagine as being like 'standard poodles'. The next biggest group in the area were elves, who were rarely any trouble. That was fine.

By the time Greg actually moved, he'd almost convinced himself he could do this.

He had four separate leaving parties, woven in with the festivities around Christmas. His team clubbed together to get him a bloody watch, engraved and everything. They handed it over with a bottle of supremely well-aged whiskey, and a fistful of cards, and told their boss beyond doubt that he'd be back within the month.

Scotland Yard wasn't good enough for him, they said. He'd hate every second of it.

And they'd miss him like mad.

It rained on moving day. It started as soon as they hit the outskirts of Manchester, followed them
for three hours down the motorway, and continued long after the van had driven off, leaving Greg
to hulk wet cardboard boxes up five flights of stairs.

(The lift was broken. According to the sign, management were looking into it. The lady in the flat
next to Greg's told him they'd been looking into it for three years now. Startlingly, just looking
hadn't fixed it.)

The space seemed oddly smaller than the scans had suggested. Greg made a note to look into it in
the morning, when he wasn't knackered, soaked and starving. He ordered Chinese food - which
turned out to be crap - and ate it sitting cross-legged on the floor of his new bedroom, gazing up at
the curtainless window.

London lay beyond the glass: black, sparkling, shrouded in its own light pollution and fog;
buildings bolted on top of buildings, buildings blocked off into infinity. The city filled every
window that ever faced it. When he was a kid, this side of London had thrilled him. Moneyed
London - lights and cars and apartment blocks, the London that never closed its eyes, London with
its arms open wide to the world.

He'd come to know the place a little better than that.

Not that you ever really knew it. London always kept something back - something it could pull on
you at any time and ruin you.

As Greg licked spare rib sauce off his fingers, his wrist-set flashed. He twisted his arm with a
frown, and carefully pressed the button with his clean little finger. An e-mail expanded to fill the
screen.

NEW MESSAGE

From: Jas on Symmonds
To: Greg Lestrade

Hey… how did the move go? Hope you got that massive sofa of yours through the door. Still don't
know why you bought such a big one.

GL at Scotland Yard… you start Monday 6th right? New challenge for you. Bet you're going to love
it there.

Now that you're closer, have I lost my excuse not to visit? Let me know when you're settled and we
could maybe meet up in London… they have pubs right? Or is it just fancy wine bars? Suppose we
can still reminisce about the old days in a wine bar.

Anyway. Hope you're okay. Hope life's treating you good.

Jason.

Greg considered that final, forthright, diplomatic full-stop for a while.

He then considered the rest of the message, too.

He'd left the monstrous sofa in Manchester - and yes, it was Monday 6th that he started - and yes,
they did have pubs here.

And did he want to meet up?

Greg closed the message without a reply.

He started his new kitchen bin with the scraps from his takeaway, and set about unpacking his stupid life.

The estate agents had doctored the scan. Greg found what he was looking for after fifteen minutes' careful examination of the skirting boards - there, on the scan, a hairline crack that shifted the corner by several inches. When he knew what he was looking for, he found it in a couple of other corners too. They were stains erased from the carpet, a peephole suggested on the door that wasn't actually there, and in the bathroom, the window had been enlarged by nearly 12%.

He was on the point of calling up to complain when he realised this would mean house-hunting in London whilst homeless in London - all for the sake of a few inches of space.

He told himself that life was too short, and concentrated on making his peace with his new home.

He'd given himself just over a week to get settled before work.

By New Year's Eve, with everything unpacked and his days dull and empty, he was rather regretting the decision. He spent the last night of the year in front of the television, smoking alone with an oven pizza and a few cans of cider for company.

His new neighbours, he found, all slotted neatly into one of two categories: antisocial or deranged. A few were both. The only exception was Tina next door, who was already a bit too glad to catch him on the stairs. Greg started discreetly avoiding her and dialling down his smiles.

By January 2nd, he'd taken to wandering the neighbourhood for stimulation. There was only so much TV you could watch before your brain started to slacken and turn to mulch. Sadly, Pimlico had little to offer him either - grey faces that didn't want to talk, expensive shops, coffee places full of business people working through their lunches, roads choked with traffic and fumes.

That was the problem with London, though.

There was nowhere worse to be alone if you were lonely.

He couldn't keep messaging the Manchester crowd, replying to every text within seconds. It was pathetic. He didn't want them to remember him that way. On Friday he got another e-mail from Jason, checking whether he'd received the first e-mail.

By the Saturday before he was due to start, Greg was ready to resort to desperate measures.

He didn't want to think the things he was now thinking - he didn't want to start dealing with words like 'mistake'. He just needed to meet some people. That was all. He'd not had a conversation in days, and his flat was gleaming. It wasn't right.

He decided he was ready to take a risk.
In a spirit of adventure, he put on his going-out shirt (black, with pewter pinstripe) and the cologne Jason had given him for Christmas three years ago.

He caught the tube to Soho, and made himself at home in the first bar he found.

In Manchester, this was a foolproof route to company. He'd have been playing pool with someone within an hour.

It turned out that in London, it was the fastest route to spending a long evening bored in a bar on your phone.

Nobody seemed happy to be here. Nobody. Everyone was tired or stressed, ignoring each other viciously or blatantly on the letch. Greg entertained a few of the letches, just to trade words with another person for a while. By ten, he'd started to drink to persuade himself this was going better than he thought.

Not long before one AM, a gnarled old werewolf invited him round the back of the pub for 'a quick gruff', whatever that was - and Greg finally admitted defeat. He declined the werewolf's kind offer, threw back his last half-pint and headed for the Tube, pulling his coat around himself to stave off the cold.

His head was fuzzy as he walked - not the happy, absent-minded fuzzy of a good night, but the dull and quiet fuzzy of a bad one. Buses passing by were too loud. The pavement beneath his feet was too hard.

He started to think about his flat, waiting dark and empty for him back home. He'd had a great place in Manchester. It had been just right for him - all the furniture just where he liked it.

Someone else would be living there now.

A new DI would be sitting at his desk.

Stupid idea, he thought, as he entered the almost deserted tube station. Stupid, stupid idea.

Not even just tonight.

It took him a minute to figure out his platform - too tired, too downhearted to focus. Only as he realised the final tube was coming up did he put some urgency into the matter. He was too tired to grapple with bus routes, and a taxi would cost an utter flaming fortune on a Saturday night.

Greg made his way along the echoing grey tunnel towards the platforms, wishing he hadn't drunk so much. He couldn't tell if he was pissed or just miserable. They felt much the same, in his experience.

Not a soul here either, he thought, as he descended the escalator into the earth. Just past one AM in early January, and everybody was safe at home with their somebody.

His heart ached as he thought about it.

Maybe he could just say hi to Jason.

Just a quick e-mail - ask him how the family was, tell him how the move went. Small, friendly things. That would be okay. They'd been through a lot together, after all.

You couldn't just throw that away.
He reached the platform, checked the electronic board and discovered there were four minutes to go before the final tube. *Thank Christ,* he thought. At least something was going his way.

He started looking for his cigarettes, then realised he should probably check for no smoking signs first.

As he glanced left and right along the platform, Greg realised with a thrill that he wasn't actually alone.

There was a man sitting on a bench beside the vending machines.

He wasn't the sort of man Greg expected to see in a tube station at one AM. He was startlingly well-dressed, smartly-cut grey trousers and a tailored black coat to the knee, black leather gloves, an umbrella propped at his side, and a narrow scarf in blue-grey wrapped around his throat. He was around Greg's age - a couple of years older, maybe, but no more - with auburn red hair and a neatly kept short beard, both of a hue that suggested it had faded from a younger, flaming red. The man was pale, and he looked tired - *then,* Greg thought, *who in this damn city doesn't?* He was reading, quite unaware of the world around him.

And he was reading a book: an actual old-fashioned book, made out of paper, with a cover that had a picture printed on it.

Greg hadn't seen a book in years.

Whatever this one was about, the guy was enjoying it. There was a deep peace about his tired eyes, and a small smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. As he read, he stroked the edge of the page with his thumb.

He seemed to be in a world of his own.

Greg found himself fascinated.

He'd never seen someone look like that at words on a page - like they made everything alright.

At once, he wanted to know what the guy was reading. He wanted to know why he was here at one in the morning - he wasn't out on the lash, clearly. If anything, it looked like he was just headed home from work. There was a briefcase under his seat.

Greg wondered what he worked as.

As the man shifted, turning his page, he seemed to sense the weight of Greg's eyes - and looked up.

In the second their eyes met, Greg realised just how intently he'd been staring.

He looked away far too fast, heart jumping from the blue-grey gaze that had flashed into his own. Mortified, he began a thorough and focused search for his cigarettes, only daring to lift his eyes when he'd found them.

The stranger had returned to his book.

He was resting back in the hard metal seat, one long leg crossed over the other. Those shoes were handmade. They were proper leather, and they were properly looked after.

The umbrella probably cost more than Greg's suit.

The minutes idled by. Greg smoked, trying to keep his eyes to himself. It was hard. He finished his
cigarette, glancing at the board just as it updated with a flicker. The tube was delayed - three minutes.

Greg lit another cigarette.

He found himself trying to think of conversation starters - something clever. Something elegant and witty. The sort of thing one said to a well-dressed man reading a book. Greg didn't know a thing about books. He didn't know much at all, he found, raking his brain for any scrap of humour or profundity, and finding absolutely fucking nothing.

Three minutes passed by.

The board updated again - delayed by another two minutes.

Greg suddenly didn't feel quite so fuzzy anymore.

He watched, his tongue bitten, as the man with his book gave a slight stretch in his seat, tearing his eyes reluctantly from the page to check the board. The man sighed as he registered the delay, his eyes flickering. He eased back his cuff - *proper cufflinks,* Greg thought - *actual French cuffs* - and checked an artistic masterpiece of a watch.

Greg steeled himself.

It was one AM, and he was lonely. He'd already wasted two miraculous delays.

He slipped his hands into his pockets, well aware he was about to embarrass himself.
On all her breezes borne
Earth yields no scents like those;
But he that dares not grasp the thorn
Should never crave the rose.

- Anne Brontë
'The Narrow Way' (1848)

As Greg took a first step, there came the sudden boom of an announcing tone.

A flat voice rippled along the platform.

"Attention all commuters on Platform 6… your attention, please… we are sorry to announce that the 01:09 service to Victoria has been cancelled… repeat, that is the 01:09 service to Victoria… cancelled… Greater London Transport apologise for any inconvenience caused."

There came another tone - and that was that.

Greg's heart flopped from his chest onto the floor.

"You're not serious..." He turned to check the sign. Platform 6. The electronic board updated with a shiver of black and orange. 01:09 CANCELLED. "No, come on… really?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake..." said another voice - a crisp, erudite voice - one that made the hair stand immediately on the back of Greg's neck.

He turned around, his stomach squeezing.

The man looked back at him along the platform - two strangers, united in despair at this horse-shit.

"I thought they couldn't cancel last tubes," Greg heard himself say, startled at his own sudden ability to produce a sentence.

"They're not meant to," the stranger said. He sighed as he closed his book, reached for his briefcase and snapped it open. "Then, Greater London Transport has never been averse to inconveniencing people… hardly a surprise."

"Are you - gonna be alright?" Greg asked. "I mean... can you get home some other way?"

The man shut his briefcase with a frown, his mouth thinning. "I'll have to resort to a taxi. Damn. I hardly ever take the tube - precisely for this reason."

"Me neither." Greg hesitated, feeling his heart thump against the front wall of his chest so hard he was sure its outline could be seen. "Whereabouts are you going?"
"Belgravia," said the man.

Greg's pulse spiked. "I'm going that way," he said. "Sort of, anyway… Pimlico." Before he could stop himself, he said, "D'you - want to split the fare?"

The stranger gave him a startled look.

"I mean - if we're going in the same direction," Greg managed, flushing, "it makes sense... save some money."

The man looked as if he'd never been so caught off-guard in his life. He took a moment to respond, thinking quickly as he studied Greg.

"I… suppose you're right," he said at last. Greg's heart leapt. "You're - quite certain it wouldn't be a problem?"

"What? No," Greg said. "No, of course not. I mean… we were gonna share a tube. Might as well share a taxi."

The man regarded him for a moment, torn between unease and surprise. He then got to his feet, as he reached for his umbrella. He was tall, Greg noted - and he wore it well - graceful and upright, perfect posture, masculine elegance wrapped up in a coat.

"Well… that would be convenient," the man concluded, with care. "Thank you."

"'S'alright," said Greg. He found himself amazed at what he'd somehow just orchestrated. "Right. Let's go, then."

They ascended to the surface together in silence.

The entire length of the escalator, Greg and his brain panicked together for something to say.

*Good book?* he thought - no. Corny. And he knew nothing about books. *What brings you out at this time?* Weird, and transparent. *Fucking tubes, eh?* Cliched. *God, why did I have to drink so much? Come on, brain... we know how to do conversation. We've done it before. Something. Anything.*

In the end, awkward silence dogged them all the way to the taxi rank.

Greg found himself distracted just by the way the stranger moved - the way he walked - smooth, controlled. Greg didn't meet many posh people. Something about this one reminded him of unmarked snow. It made him feel desperately working-class - a little scruffy, a little thick, a little uncultured.

But he couldn't stop looking at the guy.

There was a short queue for taxis - party-goers, Saturday night revellers.

They stood side-by-side, an uneasy metre apart.

"Whereabouts in Belgravia?" Greg asked. *Seriously, brain? You've had five bloody minutes, and that's the best you've got for me?*

"Ebury Street," the man said, with a sideways flash of his eyes.

Greg couldn't picture it - but he had a feeling the property prices had a whole lot of zeroes.
"Nice," he said.

There was more silence. Greg died a little inside, pushing his hands into his pockets. The queue shuffled on a place.

"How d'you normally get around?" Greg asked. "If you - don't take the tube, I mean."

"Oh, I - usually walk. I live fairly close to my workplace."

"So you've - not been at work tonight, then?" Greg asked.

The man glanced down at him, studying his expression for a moment - reading him like a page, Greg thought, trying to find his way between the lines.

A faint smile lifted the corners of the stranger's mouth.

"I'm called upon to leave the office sometimes," he explained. "And to work unusual hours."

"Right." Greg gave a small smile. "Same."

The man lifted an eyebrow. Greg knew exactly what he was thinking.

"I've not been at work tonight," he added, and the queue moved along.

"Thank heavens."

Greg grinned. "I'm not that drunk, as it happens. Just... cheerful." He faded out. God, what am I saying? "I just moved here," he explained. "Moved back here. Trying to meet people - unsuccessfully, so far."

"Meeting people?" the stranger remarked. "In London? Brave man."

"Yeah, well... always had more courage than sense..."

They were nearing the front of the queue.

"Moved 'back' here?" the stranger said, with mild interest. Greg's heart jumped. "Are you a native?"

"Yeah... south. Down in Lambeth. Left years ago... to be honest, I didn't think I'd ever find myself in London again. I guess you never really get away."

Quiet curiosity touched the stranger's eyes. "What brought you back?"

"Work." Greg looked down at his shoes, swishing the words around his mouth. "Not sure I made the right decision."

It was the first time he'd admitted it aloud.

"No?" the stranger said, watching him with interest. "Why?"

"It's - complicated."

"I see." The stranger drew himself up a little, looking away. "Forgive me. I don't mean to pry."

"Oh - God, no, it's not - … wow. Sorry. I've not spoken to someone properly in days, is that tragic? I didn't mean to start spilling my soul over you."
"It's quite alright," the stranger said. They were at the head of the queue now, and a car was pulling around the corner. "Pimlico, you said? We - might as well drop you off first."

Greg held the car door for the stranger, receiving a murmur of thanks in reply. He folded himself graciously into the back seat. Greg got in beside him, and the taxi set off into the darkness.

Alone together, Greg found himself nervous yet again. He couldn't tell if the man was affected by it or not. If anything, he seemed rather used to the company of nervous people. Greg wondered if he was a lawyer, maybe - a barrister - something like that. He certainly had the demeanour for it.

"What's your name?" he heard his own voice ask, out of the blue.

The stranger regarded him for a moment, considering him, as the taxi swayed around them and the pine tree air freshener swung and danced.

"Mycroft," he replied at last, turning to look out of the window.

Greg knew immediately that it was not a false name.

Nobody came up with that as their cover name.

"Wow... unusual." He smiled a little. "I'm - just plain old Greg."

The other man smiled in response, amused. "'Gregory' is a perfectly honourable name," he said. "From the Latin, 'gregorius'... meaning 'watchful'."

Greg had never known that. Not in forty-one years had he ever checked what his name meant.

"Where's 'Mycroft' from?" he asked, as they passed The National Gallery lit up in the night.

"Old English," Mycroft murmured. "'Field at the source of a stream'... not quite so evocative, sadly."

"Seems evocative to me." Greg smiled, watching Mycroft's eyes crinkle at the edges as light from a passing hotel fluttered across his features. "It's unique... never met a 'Mycroft' before. I like it."

"Thank you," Mycroft said.

Greg felt his heart give a little squeeze. "You're welcome."

It seemed like only moments before the taxi was turning onto Greg's street.

He found himself desperate not to reach his flat, panicking in silence as the angular red-bricked buildings passed by. If only he'd given the driver a wrong address, he thought - pretended he was lost. In fifteen minutes, he'd had a more genuine conversation than he'd had all week. He didn't want it to end.

"How much is my half?" he asked, reaching for his wallet.

Mycroft gave a strange smile. "Don't - trouble yourself. I'd have been paying this anyway."

"Seriously, let me pay my share. It's only right."

"There's really no need."

"Well, then... I'm just going to leave twenty quid here on the seat, and whatever happens to it,
happens." Greg put the money down, folded away his wallet, and with a sinking feeling realised they were approaching his block. "Um - anywhere here please, mate?"

The taxi driver slowed to a stop. The doors unlocked with a clunk.

Greg found his throat suddenly tight.

"Thanks, for..." he said.

"It's no problem," replied Mycroft.

"No, really... I appreciate it. And it was nice to..."

"Mm... yes."

Greg sought in desperation for something else to say.

But there was nothing. His brain mouthed at him, empty-handed. He was out of excuses. Time was up.

Reluctantly he opened the door, stepped out onto the pavement, and gazed up at the soulless front of his building. It didn't look like his home. It didn't look like anything that meant a damn thing - just some building. Just somewhere to sleep. He shouldn't have moved. He shouldn't have done it.

He hesitated for a second, his hand still on the door.

He'd embarrassed himself enough tonight to have just one more go. And if it backfired hideously, he thought, what did it matter? The guy was about to drive off anyway.

At least Greg could tell himself he'd tried.

He turned back, took a deep breath, and leant down into the taxi.

"Hey," he said. Mycroft looked up from a wrist-set, pulling his sleeve quickly back across it. "I'm about to horrify us both. And I'm really sorry. But I have to ask."

Mycroft watched him, saying nothing - his expression grew distinctly guarded. Greg's heart began to lurch instead of beating.

"God, I... don't even know if you're... yikes. Okay, here goes." He forced himself to breathe. "D'you want to come in?" he asked. "For a drink?"

Mycroft stared at him as if quite certain he must have misheard. "Do I...?"

"Want to come inside?" Greg said, darkening. "For a drink - with me. Now. Alcoholic or otherwise."

The blue-grey eyes widened with amazement. "I - I'm afraid I..."

_Yowch. Here it comes._

Greg decided to cut it off before it could hurt - before this day could include a flat-out rejection, as well as everything else. He smiled, tightly, and said,

"Sorry. I'm - bloody lonely. I screwed up my life, and I've not had sex in months. I thought I'd ask." He saw Mycroft's jaw slacken with shock, as his own stupid mouth kept on talking. "Take it as a
compliment, if you want... you're really interesting. Or just forget about it. Thanks for the taxi share. G'night."

He shut the taxi door, turned away, and walked along the pavement towards his building.

As he did, he felt his brain cave in upon itself with embarrassment.

*I am a knobhead*, he thought. *A five-star, gold-plated, triple-action knobhead.*

At least he'd asked.

He could hold onto that in an hour, when he was lying in bed unable to sleep.

As he fumbled for his keys in his coat pocket, Greg heard the taxi drive away into the night - and that was that.

The stranger, and all his fascinations, were gone.

Alone, yet again, a grey and lonely honesty rushed to fill the silence.

He wished he'd not taken up Commander Goulding's offer.

He hadn't even started the bloody job yet, and his life was already falling apart. This had been a colossal mistake - and now he had a twelve-month lease on a flat he hated, in a city he hated, and nobody wanted anything to do with him.

As he fitted the key into the lock, he wondered if he felt bad enough to e-mail Jason. Tomorrow morning, he could well be reading through his sent messages in despair. He didn't have a lot of dignity left.

He didn't have a lot of anything left.

And then someone appeared at his side on the doorstep - and Greg glanced up in surprise.

It was Mycroft. Briefcase, leather gloves, neutral expression.

He said nothing at all as he waited to be let in, not meeting Greg's eyes.

Greg realised his mouth was open.

He shut it at once, and twisted the key in the lock. Hardly daring to believe this was happening, he stepped back to let Mycroft inside.

"I'm - on the fifth floor," he said. His own voice sounded far too loud in the stairwell. "Sorry about the lift."

"It's quite alright," Mycroft said.

They walked up the stairs together.

*Oh, Christ... oh, God.* Greg’s heart and brain seemed to be trying to drown each other out - one intoning a panicked stream of blasphemy, the other beating so hard it was about to crack one of his ribs. He did his best to keep the inner battle off his face as he showed Mycroft to his door, unlocked it, and again stepped back.

Then Mycroft was in his flat - putting down his briefcase and umbrella, looking around in the
"You just moved in," Mycroft noted, surprised.

"Jesus, how can you - ? … how can you even see in this dark? Let me get the light..."

Greg snapped it on. His flat appeared in a flicker - all unpacked, all assigned its place.

"How did you know?" he asked, as Mycroft unbuttoned his coat. *He's staying,* Greg thought, with a thrill. *Getting comfortable. Holy shit. This is happening.*

"There aren't any dust marks anywhere... unusual for a single man of our age. You also have cardboard boxes flattened on the floor in your kitchen."

"Christ, you - saw that with a single glance? That's amazing."

"My profession requires a certain level of observation." Mycroft smiled a little, sliding off his coat. Beneath, his tailored grey trousers matched the other two pieces of his suit - waistcoat and jacket, perfectly fitted, a white shirt and a ruby-coloured tie. He even had a fucking pocket-watch, Greg realised. *Holy shit.* "Might I give you this?"

He handed Greg the magnificent black coat; Greg carefully hung it up. He unzipped his own leather jacket with a quick shrug and put it beside Mycroft's, experiencing a strange thrill to see them on the back of the door together.

"Erm..." he said, turning back to his guest. "Confession time. When I said 'drink'..."

Mycroft's expression flickered. He looked concerned.

"I probably should have mentioned," Greg said, "I don't - actually have any booze in the house. I've got coffee. But... you look more like a tea drinker, maybe..."

The other man's face relaxed into a smile - disarmed. "Do I?"

"Maybe champagne. But I don't have any of that, either... sorry. *I may* have brought you here under false pretences."

Mycroft regarded him for a moment, still quietly amused.

"Perhaps," he said, with care, "you'd be reassured by my counter-confession."

Greg felt his stomach tighten. "Which is?"

Mycroft cast his gaze down towards the carpet, poking his tongue into his cheek. He folded his arms across his chest. "I... didn't come up here for a drink."

*Oh God!* Greg's brain flew into panic. *Oh God, oh God, oh God...*

"I don't usually do this," he said. It seemed important to say it. "By *this*, I mean... propositioning interesting men in taxis..."

Mycroft smiled again; it took years off his face. "You think I'm interesting."

Greg's heart heaved.

"Jesus," he breathed. "This... fucking *city.* How can a guy like you not know you're interesting?"
Nobody ever talks here, do they? Nobody ever says a thing to each other…. everyone just… blunders on. Like nobody else exists."

Mycroft looked oddly moved. "Why did you come back?"

Greg was vulnerable enough - and nervous enough - to tell the truth.

"Bit of a break-up," he mumbled, after a moment. "Bit worried I'm getting old. Money, too. And I... got persuaded with chocolate biscuits."

Mycroft snorted, putting a curled hand to his mouth. Greg found himself laughing a little too - laughing at the stupidity of this - standing in his lounge six feet apart, trying to negotiate around each other - two strangers, in a city full of strangers.

"For what it's worth," Mycroft said, with a flash of his gorgeous grey eyes, "I'm not - usually amenable to the charms of a handsome unknown... this is atypical for me, too." A touch of restrained bewilderment crossed his face. "Highly atypical."

Greg was grinning. "You think I'm handsome."

Mycroft's eyes glittered. He gave a slow, confessional nod, saying nothing.

Greg gathered the last of his nerves together.

He extended his hands.

"You'd... better come here then," he said.

He sat Mycroft down on the end of the bed to undress him - jacket, tie and cufflinks, pocket-watch removed to the safety of the nightstand. Greg's heart was hammering already. As he cupped Mycroft's jaw in his hands, leaning close, Mycroft stiffened up. He reached out and put his fingertips on Greg's lips.

"I - I don't..." His eyes filled with urgent apology. "It's not - … I don't mean to - …"

Greg's heart pounded. He kissed the fingertips instead, gently. "S'okay," he said. Some people didn't. He liked kissing - loved it, in fact - but he hadn't invited Mycroft up here to make him feel uncomfortable. It was alright. "Just... on your mouth, or - ?"

Mycroft's pupils grew in the darkness. "Elsewhere is... fine."

"Any other ground rules?"

"Don't call me 'Myke'... I can't bear it."

Greg smiled against the fingertips. He caught them with his hand, holding them to his lips as he kissed them. "Anything else you don't like?"

"What are you - suggesting?" Mycroft murmured, cautious.

As Greg drew the fingers gently inside his mouth, Mycroft took a long and very slow breath. The muscles in his throat worked as he swallowed.

"That's - fine," he said, his voice tight.

Greg curled his tongue around the other man's fingers, briefly - enjoying their faint twitch - then
eased them back out of his mouth.

"Do you take?" he asked.

He knew it was blunt - but they didn't seem to be toying with each other.

"Holy God," Mycroft breathed, his eyes fluttering shut. That was a 'yes', if ever Greg saw one. He began to undo the buttons of Mycroft's waistcoat, feeling his pulse rate creep up as each one came apart. Mycroft's hands - almost tentative - rested at his waist. After a few more buttons they slid to Greg's thighs, then carefully eased their way back upwards, grazing with longing across his lower back. Greg smiled into the still-astonished grey eyes, working his way onwards - button-by-button.

It was strange to do this without kissing, he thought.

But it wasn't bad. It meant he could see Mycroft's face - watch every flicker of every thought that crossed his expression.

Right now, it was mostly restless disbelief.

"Relax," Greg said to him, softly. He eased the waistcoat back from Mycroft's shoulders. "You can touch me. It's just me and you here."

"How - strangely comforting," Mycroft said, a little bewildered by his own reaction. His eyes shut once more as Greg took the opportunity to lean close to him, nuzzling at his neck. The waistcoat was dropped from the bed. "I should tell you I haven't - ... in quite some time..."

Greg nudged him gently to lie back, leaning over him. "D'you remember the basics at least?"

Mycroft gave a faint laugh, startled. His hands flexed on Greg's back at the first brush of mouth at his throat - shivering a little, tipping his head back as he breathed.

"I... may need a few pointers," he managed.

"S'alright. I'm a patient man." Greg gently untucked his shirt for him - stroking kisses over his neck, relishing with a leaping heart the deep rise and fall of Mycroft's chest beneath his own. "Is this okay?"

"Yes," Mycroft breathed. He swallowed as Greg's hands eased gently beneath the loosed hem of his shirt.

"Still okay?"

"Yes..." Mycroft shivered, stifling a moan as Greg's hands coaxed over his stomach, over his chest. Greg saw him bite down on it, embarrassed.

"Don't," he whispered. "Don't hold it. I... like sounds." He hesitated, catching one of Mycroft's hands from his back. Without preamble, he guided it down below his belt.

As he cupped Mycroft's hand at his hardening cock, the sharp intake of breath it earned him made his heart thump hard.

"That's before we've done anything," he murmured. "That's - ... Jesus, you're gorgeous. So don't hold it in. Please." He laved his tongue slowly across Mycroft's neck, rocking his hips into the hand that now had hold of him, his stomach tightening as Mycroft let out a little moan. "S'just you and me," he soothed.
"Oh, God." Mycroft shuddered suddenly, grabbing for his shirt buttons. "Oh, God - get this off -"

Greg lost a button in the rush. They ripped at each other's clothes like horny fucking teenagers, gasping as more and more fabric gave way to bare skin - pushing against each other, panting - Mycroft was as pale and perfect below the neck as above, white skin that was endlessly satisfying to stroke. Greg discovered, to his delight, that the gorgeous auburn red of Mycroft's hair had not faded quite everywhere. Mycroft found the scar on Greg's side where a half-orc had knifed him in Cheetam Hill - the bear paw tattoo he'd had done on his chest in Tauranga.

At last, naked, they collapsed back onto the bed with a wild creak of springs. Greg pushed him over onto his back, dipping eagerly for that snowy-white neck once more as he negotiated himself between Mycroft's legs.

"Ohh..." Mycroft's hands gripped at his shoulder blades, tightening as Greg bit a little at his neck and thrust against him - grinding their erections slowly together. "Oh, holy God - ... oh, fuck..."

Greg had never heard that word pronounced so perfectly, so desperately. It was the single most erotic sound he'd ever heard. He decided he wanted to hear it again, right now.

He kissed his way roughly, restlessly, down Mycroft's chest, pausing only to flick his tongue across his nipples.

Mycroft realised at about navel-height what was about to happen.

"Greg," he gasped, as Greg's nose nuzzled just above the line of his hair - adoring the softness of his skin there, his scent, that secret ember-bright red. "Oh, hell..."

Greg realised after a minute how much he'd missed doing this - especially with someone who made noises like those. The first tentative brush of fingertips over the back of his head made him shudder. He caught the hand, gripping it, encouraging the fingers to scrunch tight into his hair. Mycroft let out a whimper - his hips jerked up, desperate, and Greg redoubled his efforts. He buried his nose into the thatch of dark red hair, his heart burning as Mycroft shakily stroked at the back of his neck.

"Get me something?" Greg breathed, his voice thick, halfway through.

"W-What?" Mycroft managed, gazing down the bed at him - face flushed, eyes glittering, hair tousled where he'd ground his head back against the pillow.

Greg struggled not to come on the spot. He laved a lick across the head of Mycroft's cock, earning himself a fitful moan.

"Top drawer," he said. "Right-hand side."

"Fuck," Mycroft breathed again. He stretched, twisting slightly to one side as he opened the drawer and sought through it - charging cables for old electronics, painkillers, dead batteries. At last, he found and passed down to Greg a bottle of perfectly clear gel.

Their fingers tangled as he handed it over.

"Quite some time," he reminded Greg, one eyebrow lifting.

"Let's pretend it's the first time," Greg said. He snapped open the bottle with his thumb. "Now get your hands back in my hair... m'not done with this gorgeous cock of yours yet."
As he swallowed Mycroft back into the top of his throat he earned himself a gasped rush of blasphemy, streaked through with his name. He squeezed way too much lube across his fingers - more was more - and reached between Mycroft's thighs, rubbing for a while at his perineum, sucking on him too slowly, breaking rhythm whenever those beautiful low groans became too tight or the fingers twitched too hard on his head.

"Damn it," Mycroft gasped at last, arching, pushing his thighs apart. "I'm not a virgin. Please."

Greg eased his fingers to Mycroft's entrance, slowly stroking lube across the tight ring of muscle there. Mycroft shuddered and gripped at his hair.

"Yes..." he breathed. At the first finger he tightened a little, relaxing as Greg began to lick slow stripes from the root to the tip of his cock. "Oh, God. That's - … mnh - …"

Greg continued the licking through two fingers, then three. He took his time. The urge to grind himself against the mattress for relief was enormous but he fought it - there was something he wanted more. He couldn't believe this was happening. He couldn't bear to waste it. He ignored Mycroft's first two pleas for things to progress, waiting until the request was made at such a pitch that it was starting to sound almost distressed.

He then drew back his mouth, quickly, and eased free his fingers.

"Yes - " Mycroft whimpered. "Yes, yes - …"

Greg crawled up the bed to him, pushing their foreheads together hard. They panted, staring into each other's eyes across a single inch of space as Greg fumbled through the bedside drawer for the box, shook it open and retrieved one of the sleek square packets from inside.

Mycroft took the condom from him, tore it open, and unrolled it slowly over his cock. Greg realised he was sweating. He'd never felt so sensitive to the touch, so desperate.

"Up, gorgeous," he managed, his voice tight. "On your knees for me. Here… like this."

He guided Mycroft to kneel, hands on the headboard and facing the window above Greg's bed. The curtains were open. Neither of them cared. Let someone watch, Greg thought. Mycroft's back was white-pale and perfect and smooth under his hands, slightly curved, and as Greg leant over him gently, attaching his mouth to the side of Mycroft's neck, the other man let out a cry.

"Is this okay?" Greg asked him in a growl, shaking, even as he guided his cock to Mycroft's entrance - even as Mycroft groaned like he was about to pass out and arched back against him in desperation.

"Damn it - do it - don't tease me. Do it..."

Greg bit softly at his neck as he pushed his way inside. He felt Mycroft bear down against him, panting hard, his thighs shaking with each slowly encroaching inch inside him.

"You okay?" Greg gasped.

"Stop being such a gentleman," Mycroft begged in desperation, startling a breathless laugh from Greg.

"Alright..." Greg whispered. He laved his tongue over Mycroft's ear. "If you insist…"

At the first slick thrust, Mycroft's neck arched with pleasure. He hissed, devolving into heartfelt
and almost feral groans as they worked out a rhythm together, shaking, sharing their sounds. Mycroft gripped at Greg's headboard and panted, his cheeks flaring with colour. He was beautiful, Greg thought. He didn't even seem to know.

For a while, they just fucked slowly - Greg desperate not to let this end; Mycroft's whimpering moans providing all the encouragement he needed. At last he reached around Mycroft, gripped his cock and began to fist him gently in rhythm, prompting an ardent call of pleasure. A desperate hand was thrown out, planting hard against the window pane.

Greg's heart contracted. His stomach twisted with the sheer sensation of it. He couldn't hold back. He couldn't keep control any longer. He began to push harder, deeper, just a little rougher - the noises it caused lit his soul alight.

"Fuck...!" Mycroft gasped for him, as the flexing of his back caused a vital shift in angle. His face twisted with pleasure. "Fuck, fuck - there - ..."

Greg gritted his teeth and began to slam, there.

Mycroft's cries ripped up the quiet darkness of the flat.

As Mycroft came, as wet heat gushed over Greg's fingers and his body contracted desperately around Greg's cock, the sounds he was making and the ardent arching of his back grabbed Greg by the throat and dragged him over the edge with Mycroft into oblivion. He buried himself deep into the other man as climax burned him open, gasping out his choked relief between Mycroft's heaving shoulder blades. It was only seconds, but it felt like minutes. Everything rang with light.

In the thundering quiet that followed, they slumped bonelessly to the pillows.

Greg pulled Mycroft into his arms. He dragged the covers over him, panting. Mycroft nuzzled into his neck, letting out a soft stream of profanity. He mouthed at Greg's pulse gently for a moment, then carefully removed the condom for him, wrenching a small moan from Greg.

"E-Easy..." Greg breathed. "Fuck..."

From the flat below, there came a distinct muffled rapping against the floor.

"Oh, piss off," Greg muttered to his disgruntled neighbour. Mycroft laughed into his neck, drawing in his scent with a slow breath.

"I may have just made you unpopular," he murmured.

"I don't care," said Greg. He wrapped his arms around Mycroft, tightly. "That was - ..."

"I know," Mycroft whispered. He understood, Greg thought. He felt it too. Mycroft was nosing at his earlobe now, breathing him deeply. "I... haven't come like that in - ... oh, hell..."

Greg pushed his fingers gently through Mycroft's hair, tussling the sweat-damp red.

"Stay the night, will you?" he said. "Don't go rushing off... I - kinda want to hold you."

Mycroft was quiet for a moment, burrowed tight into Greg's chest. He then stirred, and lifted his head.

He placed a kiss - fervent, desperate - between Greg's eyes. He cradled Greg's face as he did it, his fingertips shaking a little. No breath escaped his nose.
Greg had the strangest sensation he was being told far more than he understood.

He gazed at Mycroft's lips as the other man drew back, regarding Greg across a few inches of pillow. His grey eyes had turned languid and soft. He looked deeply, soulfully content.

"I'd like to stay," he said at last. "Thank you."

"Are you tired?"

"Ah… a little."

"S'okay. Me too." Greg tucked Mycroft gently back under his chin, stroking his hair once more.

"Well… I guess we're in the best place for it… m'sorry if we tore any of your buttons."

"Yes, I… think you may have lost one or two as well."

"Can't say I regret it."

"No," said Mycroft. "Nor can I."

Greg's heart gave a funny little thump. "What were you reading in the station?" he asked, suddenly desperate to know. "You... looked like it was wonderful. Like it was everything. I've never seen anyone look at a book like that."

He felt Mycroft's smile curve against his neck.

"An old novel," he replied. "You... might not know of it. I shan't think ill of you, if you don't."

"Try me," said Greg.

"It's - called 'Wuthering Heights'. Emily Brontë. My favourite."

"That's a love story, isn't it? From Victorian times."

"Yes… not a happy story. But a love story, all the same."

Greg reflected, quietly, that he'd never known a love story that turned out to be a happy one.

He thought for half a second of Jason's e-mail - and he realised he didn't want to reply. In this moment, he knew with a clear and peaceful calm that he deserved better - that Jason had made a choice, and it had been a cruel one - that the whole thing had never been about the two of them building something. It was all about what Jason took from Greg. All about what he needed. All of it. It wasn't healthy, and it wasn't okay - it wasn't what Greg wanted. It was good that it had ended.

Then Mycroft stirred gently in his arms, and Greg smiled. He tilted his head to kiss the man's forehead, tasting the touch of salt from his sweat.

"Maybe I'll try to find a copy," Greg said, "and give it a read… it seemed to be working for you, anyway."

"Perhaps I'll lend you one," Mycroft mused.

Greg's heart gave a hopeful little hop in his chest. A loan of a book, he thought - that would require another meeting. And then another one to give the book back.

"Thank you," Mycroft murmured, as Greg marvelled for a moment at his own luck. "For…"
"S'okay," said Greg. "Thank you, too." He lifted an eyebrow, gazing into Mycroft's face. "When you say 'quite some time'..."

Mycroft gave him a look of half-amused despair. "Let's not go into that," he said, discreetly.

Greg smiled. "Alright."

They settled to sleep not long afterwards.

Greg woke at half three to find gentle hands sneaking across his stomach, wrapping around his prick, which hardened eagerly for their touch. Mycroft nudged him onto his back, took lube and another condom from the nightstand, and rode Greg sleepily for twenty minutes of utter bliss - moaning Greg's name softly to the darkness, shivering as Greg's fingers came up to toy with his nipples. He seemed to enjoy just being touched - anywhere, everywhere, biting his lip as Greg's hands skated across his skin. He seemed to like the sounds that Greg made.

When they came, it was in sync once more - heaving together, gasping, quiet cries.

Greg slept more deeply than he had in months.

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*Thank you so much to my friend [smmr0829](https://smmr0829.tumblr.com) on Tumblr, who drew the following beautiful illustration for this chapter...*

*Thank you, Summer. My first ever fan-art. It means the world to me. <3 I'm so grateful.*
Dr. Holmes

Rough as a saw-edge, and hard as whinstone! The less you meddle with him the better.

- Emily Brontë
  'Wuthering Heights' (1847)

Greg woke the next morning to find Mycroft was gone. His clothes were missing from the floor; the pocket-watch had been retrieved from the nightstand.

Greg's heart sank. For a second, he wondered if it had all been a dream - a crazy, perfect dream - until he spotted the sheet of white paper waiting for him on the other pillow.

Good morning.

Greg drank in the sight of the handwriting - neat, gorgeous writing, in proper navy ink.

I'm afraid my working days start early... I didn't want to wake you. I suspect you needed the sleep.

Thank you for a wonderful night.

As you've probably guessed, my job makes rather a lot of demands on my time... but, if you're ever roaming tube stations at one in the morning again... perhaps you'd like to roam them with me.

Mycroft x

Beneath the signature - and the kiss - was a string of numbers and letters.

It was a wrist-set code, unique to its user.

Greg's heart pounded as he read it. He scrabbled out of bed and hurried to the dresser, where his wrist-set and other things for work were lying ready for Monday. He switched the wrist-set on, attached it to his arm to let it get his bio-rhythmics, and sat down at the end of the bed to carefully key in the code.

As he hit search, the wrist-set pondered the matter for a few seconds - then streamed out a flickering square of hard-light, offering him a revolving contact card of credentials.
The image scan must have been recorded some time ago, Greg thought - a seemingly younger Mycroft, prouder and sharper, facing the scanner's gaze with an air of almost luxurious defiance. It made Greg's stomach curl in delight. He checked the birth date, discovering that Mycroft was in fact three years older than him - and born on Christmas Day.

His finger hovered towards the large rectangular button that spun slowly before him in the air.

ADD CONTACT

Just before he pressed it, Greg glanced at his bedside alarm clock.

Quarter past seven in the morning.

*Probably a little too keen*, he thought. He then wondered how early Dr. Mycroft Holmes's working days could possibly start, if he was out of the door by quarter past seven - and on a Sunday, too.

Not that it was a problem, Greg thought.

He could cope with a workaholic.

A brand new job at Scotland Yard wasn't going to leave a lot of spare time. Maybe an understanding someone was just what he needed.

A strange, sugary sort of tingle passed through his chest, as he watched Mycroft's projected image turn before him in the air.

This felt like the beginning of something.

He closed the contact card for now, telling himself he should wait at least until Monday. *Hold a little back*, he thought - encourage a little chasing. He didn't want to blow this. He unstrapped his wrist-set, smiling to himself, and headed for the shower.

It was a good day that followed. Greg hit the supermarket, filled his cupboards for the week, and made a spaghetti bolognese he could heat up tomorrow in case of a long first day. He went for a jog, put out all his recycling, laid his suit out ready for the morning and got to bed at a sensible time, remembering as he did the night before - the man who'd knelt astride him, gently groaning - the gorgeous grey flashes of his eyes.

It was true, Greg thought. So long as you were getting laid, the rest never looked so bad.

He wondered what about humanity made that happen. It was almost cute. Politics, war, uncertainty and fear - all pushed aside, for the feeling of someone's hands upon your skin. Humans were simple
creatures.

He hoped it wasn't long before he saw Mycroft again.

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Greg arrived for his first day at Scotland Yard at nine AM prompt. After an excellent weekend, he'd remained in an excellent mood. He got up early to shave and iron his shirt, had a decent breakfast, and called himself a taxi with plenty of time.

He was greeted at the front desk by the incomparable force of nature that was Commander Amelia Vickery, Head of Cross-Human Relations. She provided Greg with the firmest handshake he'd ever received, armed him with a lanyard and copious security codes, then immediately started the tour.

"Reception," the commander said, gesturing around the expansive lobby, with its gleaming glass walls and rolling news channels on numerous vast electronic screens. "The lift is this way. Floor Five is home. When we had the building redone, they wanted to bump us up to Floor Twelve... twelve. I told them that under no circumstances are my team going to be wasting valuable hours of their lives, chunking up and down in some bloody lift."

Greg couldn't help but smile as he followed Commander Vickery across the lobby. She had a ferocity he suspected he would grow to like.

They stepped into the lift and Vickery hit the button for Floor Five. A tag beside it read: CROSS-HUMAN RELATIONS. A little bubble of pride fizzed up in Greg's chest as he looked at it. Maybe this hadn't been a stupid mistake after all.

"We'll get you introduced to everyone," Vickery said, as the doors rumbled shut, "then start matching you up with a sergeant... quite a few kicking their heels at the moment, waiting for a good DI... I'm sure we'll find you someone suitable."

At the last moment, a hand shot out between the doors. They juddered to an apologetic stop, and then reopened.

Greg glanced at the newcomer appearing between them - and almost choked on his own tongue. It was Mycroft.

In the same second that he recognised Mycroft, Mycroft recognised him.

A more horrified expression had never crossed a human face - the wintry eyes widening, mouth slackening, a small step taken quickly backwards.

"Ah - Mycroft," said Commander Vickery, oblivious to the two men now staring at each other in panic. "This is my new blood from the north, Greg Lestrade... he's joining us as a DI from Manchester. He comes very highly commended by Lynda Goulding."

Greg was pretty certain his heart had stopped beating.

Mortified, unsure what else to do, he offered Mycroft a hand.

Mycroft took it, still staring into Greg's eyes.
"Charmed," he said as they shook, his voice stiff.

He was not smiling.

"Dr. Holmes is Head of Criminal Psychology," Commander Vickery explained. "Floor Fifteen."

Mycroft quickly released Greg's hand, and stepped with them into the lift. He was wearing the same tie he'd worn two days ago, Greg realised - ruby red. His cheeks were now appointing themselves a similar colour.

"You'll mostly be working with Mycroft's staff," Vickery went on. "But he's not averse to getting hands-on when needed."

_Christ_, Greg thought. He struggled to keep his face under control, determinedly not looking at Mycroft.

"Good weekend?" Commander Vickery enquired of her fellow Head of Department, who was determinedly occupying himself with his pocket-watch.

"Ah... working, as it happens," he said. Greg found himself gazing at the side of his head, unable to tear his eyes away. "McGovern case."

"Heaven help us. Is that still rumbling along?"

"Not any more." Mycroft glanced at Greg, found him gazing, and his expression set in unease. It took him a moment to recover his train of thought. "We had a development very late on Saturday. He then folded under interview on Sunday... Richard is very pleased."

"I imagine so," said Vickery, as they reached Floor Five with a cheerful bing. "The fool should have put you on it weeks ago. He knows the place doesn't function without you. Right - this is us, Lestrade. Brace for impact."

The doors opened.

Greg's knees had somehow forgotten the normal mechanism for walking. He followed his new boss out of the lift, feeling like he'd been doused with ice water from a great height.

As the lift doors closed, he risked a glance back between them.

Mycroft - looking pale and ill - stared back at him through the shrinking gap.

It was not a happy expression.

The doors shut with a clunk, and he was gone.

Greg had the keenest sensation that Mycroft had not been pleased to see him. He tried not to think about it. It was his first day - he needed to keep his head together.

This was the last thing he bloody needed.

As Vickery marched a shell-shocked Greg towards the front desk of his new division, she inclined her head towards him.

"People will tell you that Mycroft's a tyrant," she told him, confidentially. "They're absolutely correct. But the man gets the job done, and he's the best we've had. Exactly the kind of person this place relies on. Dawn, this is Greg Lestrade - new DI from Manchester - coffee in my office in five
minutes, please."

It was an unsettling start to an unsettling first day.

Cross-Human Relations seemed a good enough bunch, Greg found - a blur of names and faces, inspectors and specialists and admin staff, none of whom really made much impression on him in the wake of Mycroft. He did his best to remember what he could, knowing most of it would trickle out of his head overnight.

But it was fine, he told himself - he would learn. These things took time.

Vickery got him sorted with a desk, standard issue weapons and an upgrade to his wrist-set, all the while sandblasting him with information and advice. By the end of the day, Greg felt like he'd spent several hours in a spin-dryer on the high setting.

"You'll find the team here are a mixed bag," Vickery told him, as they sat at her desk for the concluding chat of the day, just a few minutes before six. "We've got everything from dedication incarnate to lily-faced lumps who aren't worth their uniform budget... the problem is that recruitment is low. If I cut out all the dead weight, we'd go floating off into space. Nobody wants to get into Cross-Human Relations because they think it's messy. Complicated. Sensitive. I need people who'll put that aside and get the job done."

Greg gave her a weak smile, supposing he'd been good at just going for things lately.

"I'll do my best," he promised.

"Good. Truth be told, Lestrade, I want all the DIs leading from the front. If people tell me they're drowning, I expect to see them swimming hard first."

"Right."

"If you want to make a difference, you've come to the right place."

"Good," he said. "That's what I'm in it for."

"Excellent." Vickery turned her head to the flashing of her wrist-set as a call began to come through. "Well," she said. "That's you done for the day, I think. I'll see you back here tomorrow, Lestrade, when the real work begins."

Greg got to his feet, a little weak.

"Great," he said. "Thanks, commander."

She gave him a small, steely smile, though the warmth in her sharp eyes was genuine. "Shut the door as you go, will you?"

As he did, he heard her answer the incoming call with a bark. "Vickery."

Wine, Greg thought, as he gathered his coat and his briefcase from his desk. He was suddenly glad of the pre-made spaghetti bolognese waiting for him at home. An off-licence somewhere would supply him with a bottle of red to go with it.
As he waited for the lift, he took a few moments to reassure himself.

This was just first day fatigue. It wouldn't always feel this way. A good night's sleep, a proper meal, and he'd been ready for round two in the morning.

The lift doors slid open with a ping.

Mycroft's face opened with equal measures of surprise and despair as Greg appeared.

Greg hesitated. If there'd been any doubt left over after this morning, he now knew it for sure. Mycroft was not glad to see him. He didn't know why - but he knew what that expression meant.

As he looked nervously into the lift, he wondered what would seem more rude - to get into the lift, or just stand here like an idiot and let it go. In the end, he told himself they were professionals, and got inside.

The doors shut.

The lift set off.

As the floors blinked by in damning silence, Greg and his brain quickly tried to think. He couldn't not say anything.

"Erm... hey," he tried, as they passed Floor Three.

Mycroft paused.

His hand reached out to the elevator controls. He jammed the top two rows down, holding all four buttons for a second. The lift juddered to a halt. Emergency strip-lights flashed on in every corner. A faint alarm tone began to sound somewhere, a very soft and steady beep.

Greg's heart gave a hopeful lurch as he realised they'd been trapped between floors.

Then he caught sight of Mycroft's expression - and every drop of blood ran from his face.

"You are now going to listen to me," Mycroft said. He advanced on Greg, bearing down at him from his several inches of height advantage, his eyes as hard and cold as stone. "And you are going to listen very closely."

Greg said nothing, staring with alarm at this sudden, breathless anger.

"I have been here for twenty years," Mycroft snarled. "My career is my existence. I have nothing else. And I'm not about to let some puppy-eyed prick come striding in here and jeopardise it. Do you understand?"

Greg's mouth fell open. "What - what are you - "

"I have a reputation here. A reputation I will fight tooth-and-claw to preserve. If you breathe a word to anyone, to any soul in this building, about what may or may not have happened between us, I will eviscerate your career so thoroughly they'll need dental records to identify it. Is that clear? I will ruin you."

Greg realised his back was pressed against the wall. For a few seconds he could only cower, shocked to the core by a viciousness he'd never expected to see from that face - the face that, just two nights ago, he'd watched tightening with quiet pleasure and breathing to him that it felt good.
With a sudden jolt, Greg's distress crackled into anger. He'd said a single word, and suddenly he was being threatened with evisceration of his career. He gritted his teeth.

"What the fuck?" he managed, short of breath. Mycroft's eyes flashed. Greg dragged his thoughts together, furious, pulling himself back to his full and proper height. "Are you for real? I say 'hello', and suddenly you're going to ruin me? What's - wrong with you? I wasn't grabbing you by the arse in the lobby. I was saying 'hi'. Two nights ago we were fucking like we're in love, and I'm not allowed to greet you in an empty lift?"

"I don't want you to greet me," Mycroft breathed, white in the face. "I don't want you to so much as look at me. Have I now made that perfectly clear? I want nothing to do with you. This place is my wretched excuse of a life, and I'm not going to allow you to cripple that. Do you understand?"

His eyes blazed, wild with anger and fear.

"And we never fucked, Inspector Lestrade," he bit out. "Not once. Not like we were anything. You are mistaken."

Greg could barely speak.

"Holy shit," he whispered, at last. He searched Mycroft's eyes as he fought to swallow, now as pale as the white elevator wall behind him. "I've... had some crazy before, but - ... Christ almighty. You're on a whole other level."

Mycroft's face twisted.

Pain, Greg thought. He saw it clear as day. Sharp, visceral pain.

"I expect you to remember it," Mycroft breathed.

He reached over Greg's shoulder without breaking his gaze, reset the emergency lock, and the lift lurched back into motion.

As they hit the next floor, Mycroft snarled, "Stay away from me."

The doors hulked open. He took hold of his briefcase and umbrella, and left the lift at speed.

The doors scraped shut behind him. Yet again, he was gone.

Greg stood in the silence for a while, staring at the unlit buttons of the lift, trying to figure out what the hell had just happened.

He was still trying to figure it out when he arrived home, and discovered Mycroft's note still resting on the bedside cabinet - that wrist-set number carefully inked, to ensure every digit was legible.

Some puppy-eyed prick.

I will ruin you.

Not a happy story. But a love story, all the same.

Just after one AM, on his fourth glass of wine, Greg tore the note apart. He tore the scraps into smaller pieces and consigned them to the kitchen bin, where coffee grains and uneaten bolognese sauce soon bled the numbers into nothing.

He e-mailed Jason.
He received no reply.

After that, Greg took steps to avoid Criminal Psychology at all possible cost. He sent his sergeants whenever he could, or he emailed - or, as an absolute last resort, he called them on the internal comms system, and never spoke directly to Mycroft. He'd not yet set foot on Floor Fifteen. He hoped he never would.

If he saw Mycroft coming along a corridor, Greg dodged into whatever doorway happened to be available. He started taking the stairs everyday, purely to avoid the possible horror of another shared lift ride. Mycroft never seemed to appear in the canteen, which was a blessing - though, as Greg quickly learned, the man was rarely seen outside his department.

The weeks and the months began to go by, and that single wonderful night became no more than a shade in Greg's memory - something half-real, not quite possible. Sometimes, he almost wondered if he'd invented it all. The details began to blur.

Soon, it didn't feel like it had happened at all.

To his relief, he soon found out that he was not the only person to fall afoul of Mycroft Holmes. No one had committed the same offence as him, perhaps - but the man was spoken of throughout Scotland Yard in dark and guarded tones.

"Last July," Dawn told Greg at the photocopier one morning, lowering her voice and checking around for Commander Vickery, "he made the Head of Human Resources cry so hard she threw up. Nobody stays in Criminal Psychology longer than a year. He knows what he's on about, apparently... but he's a cock. Total and utter. Have you spoken to him?"

"Not really," Greg told her, masking his expression. "Quick hello on the first day... you know."

"Commander Vickery seems to like him," Dawn muttered. Her rose-pink eyes rounded a little. "God knows why. They used to work together, I think... years ago. I just hope they haven't slept with each other."

Greg doubted it very much. Commander Vickery wasn't the sort to take lovers from her staff - and even if she was, she was not Mycroft Holmes's type.

Not that anyone had a clue about that.

Before long, the dust and grime of London had fallen thickly over Greg. The daily grind began to wear him down within its teeth. Month followed month, London never changed, and the in-tray never emptied. He lost DS Bryson in April, just as her training had finished, then DS Springwell went back to being a school-teacher in July. He managed right through until November with DS Duff, until the man suddenly announced he was off to India to find himself. The contract on Greg's flat came up for renewal in December. He signed it in a trance, too busy to think about whether he should or not.

But by then, he'd learnt the awful truth.

There was no 'try it and see' with Scotland Yard. There was no 'just for one year' with London.
The place grabbed you, and got into you, and the weeks marched ahead as you ran before them like a field mouse before the harvester, as all of your personality traits and hobbies were replaced by that one word, 'tired'.

Soon January had rolled round again.

Then in a filthy courtyard off Pembury Road, Greg watched a woman called Emma bleed to death. He held her hand as her life poured away between the concrete slabs. He watched her die again in his dreams, and woke up just after one PM, determined that if he could change one thing in this rotten and awful city, it would be to catch her killer, who was still calmly walking its streets.

Greg's life might be a dull and colourless mess - but Emma's was gone. It had been taken from her. He couldn't let that go unpunished.

And somehow, Mycroft Holmes was going to help him.

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Thank you to my magnificent friend Imirandas, who commissioned the following illustration for this chapter from camillo1978... you are both amazing and I don't deserve you. <3
Specialist

(More art! Thank you to raggedyarchangel on Tumblr, who drew the gorgeous illustration for this chapter below...)

Now hatred is by far the longest pleasure;
Men love in haste, but they detest at leisure.

- Lord Byron

'Don Juan', Canto XIII, Stanza 6 (1823)

As Greg ascended to the heights of Scotland Yard in the lift, just before four PM, he came to the unexpected realisation that he missed Sergeant Darling.

He'd have loved nothing more in the world than to send her upstairs for a Mycrofting. He might even have persuaded TJ to crack into the CCTV for him, and transfer a copy to his wrist-set. What a memory to treasure that would have been.
Fidgeting with his keys in his pocket, watching the lights blink by, Greg wondered vaguely who would have broken first - Darling or Mycroft. Probably Darling.

Still, he thought... he'd have liked to see her try sneering at Mycroft. Just once.

As the lift gave a ding, alerting Greg that he'd reached the dreaded Floor Fifteen, it seemed to sound a little sorry for him. The doors slid open, and he took a moment to prepare himself for whatever was about to happen. This was a professional issue, he reminded himself. He'd also been given a direct order by a superior - what could he have said? "Sorry, commander. I fucked him once and now he hates me."

And, of course, there was Emma.

Greg didn't know a damn thing about her - but he'd been the last person she ever saw in this world.

If he couldn't put up with one spiteful arsehole for an hour to bring her killer to justice, then he didn't deserve to call himself a DI.

He walked quietly along the corridor to Criminal Psychology, pushed open the frosted glass door, and reassured himself there was only so much Mycroft could do to him within the confines of the law. It was going to be fine.

As he entered the department, he came across an empty reception desk - and an apparently deserted office.

As Greg took a startled second look around, he realised there were people here - huddled at their consoles in utter silence, hidden away amongst the machines. They were working with a fervent focus, in an atmosphere that was usually reserved for examinations or courts of law. There was no chat - no sound. Charts, procedural lists and demographic studies were plastered across every available space, with little decoration or colour to cheer the blank grey walls.

Nobody looked up as Greg entered. Nobody lifted their gaze for even a second.

Unnerved, Greg cleared his throat.

A few frightened eyes flicked his way over the top of screens. They gazed at him like nervous little rabbits hiding in the undergrowth.

"Erm... Mycroft Holmes?" he tried, gingerly looking around.

As one, their eyes slid along the length of the office - to the forbidding glass door at the furthest end.

It was a standard issue Scotland Yard glass door. There was, however, a radius of several metres of empty space around it, where no sentient life dared to be. Even the furniture seemed to be cowering away from that door. In engraved letters upon it glinted the stark warning, Head of Criminal Psychology - then, rather optimistically beneath, Please knock and enter.

Greg suspected the genial invitation predated Mycroft's claiming of the territory. It was a wonder it hadn't been carved out from the glass in chunks.

It was as he eyed the door that Greg finally picked up on the shouting.

It was only faint - as if it were coming from out on the street far below - but as he focused in on the sound, he realised it was Mycroft's muffled voice. He sounded angry. Shadows moved beyond the
"Right," Greg said, awkwardly. "Who's he - …?"

Their eyes moved, without a word, to the empty Reception desk.

"Ah," Greg said. "Thanks. I'll… see myself in."

They watched him, horror-struck and silent, as he made his way between their desks towards the door.

The voices grew more audible as Greg approached - Mycroft, clearly raging, and a tear-stricken second voice that seemed to be trying to explain itself. It wasn't having a lot of success.

Greg hovered outside the door for a minute, feeling guilty. He didn't want to let the shouting continue - so far as he understood, she'd sent a taxi to the wrong tube station - but intruding might only get her shouted at more later. He waited, his stomach twisting, until a bleep from his wrist-set informed him that he was now late for his appointment. Bracing himself, with a small wince, Greg knocked on the glass.

The shouting stopped at once. There was half a minute's quiet, in which Greg picked up the low undertones of final words being had, before the door then cracked open. A tearful half-elf in a pencil skirt and heels hurried out, blinking furiously as she slipped past him and returned to her desk.

"Come in!" barked the voice from within the office.

*God help me.* Greg thought of Emma, and pushed open the door.

Mycroft had his back turned as Greg entered into the office. He was jacketless, sorting furiously through three stacks of paper on his desk. It was a sparse office - coldly elegant in whites and pale grey, with a striking black desk and no chair in which a visitor could sit. The shelves were lined with textbooks, box folders and spiral-bound case studies, all immaculately neat and kept in geometric precision. The only attempt at a personal touch was a little ivy plant, sitting in a glass pot on Mycroft's desk. How it managed to stay alive in here, Greg didn't know. He then realised it was artificial.

"Yes?" Mycroft said, sharply, not looking up from his papers. "What is it?"

Greg prepared himself for the worst.

"Commander Vickery sent me," he said. "I'm... here about Pembury Road."

Mycroft froze; he turned around.

As he spotted Greg by his door, unconcealed despair crossed his face. It sharpened quickly into annoyance.

"Heaven help us," he sighed. "Amelia didn't say it would be - …" He dropped the papers onto his desk with a flump, pushing his hands wearily beneath his reading glasses. "What about Pembury Road?" he asked. "I'm currently occupied."

"We were - hoping you could take a look. Commander Vickery thinks you might have some insights for us."
"Your division has a profiler," Mycroft told him, flatly. "Speak to them. I no longer handle this sort of menial casework. Why the hell has Amelia sent you to me?"

"I don't know why," Greg admitted. If they were going to be blunt with each other, he thought, maybe they should just be blunt. "She seemed to think you had some specialist knowledge. I've not seen wounds like these before, and the commander thought you could save us some time by taking a look. But if it's too much to ask you to do your job, fine. I'll let her know you were helpful."

He reached for the door.

"Are you attempting to threaten me?" Mycroft asked him, outraged.

Greg resisted the urge to press his forehead against the glass in despair.

"No," he said, tired. He turned back, regarding Mycroft with a dull expression. "I'm attempting to put something right. It's twelve hours since I found someone pulled to pieces in an alley. She died holding my hand, and I don't have a clue why she's dead. Vickery thought that you might. But you're busy, so... sorry to bother you. Go back to shouting at your paperwork."

"What - do you mean, 'pulled to pieces'?" Mycroft asked him, eyes guarded.

Greg gave him a shrug. "What does it sound like?" he said. "She was everywhere. Just... torn open. I found her." He indicated his right forearm. "I've got ISOC scans to show you, if you care."

"I'm a psychologist," Mycroft said, slowly. "You have forensics experts to identify wounds. I don't see why you've been sent to me."

"Neither do I," said Greg. "The commander said something about discounting a theory."

Mycroft paused, regarding him very carefully.

"What theory?" he asked.

"If I knew," said Greg, "believe me... I would be anywhere else right now, following that theory in any way I can. Just to save us both from having this conversation."

Mycroft took a moment to reply, surveying Greg over his reading glasses.

"Show me this scan," he said at last, stepping back.

* Miracles never cease, thought Greg. *

"In full?" he said, booting up the software on his wrist-set.

"Yes," Mycroft sighed. "In full, please... if Amelia has asked me to see this, I shall see it..."

"It's... not nice to look at."

"Spare me, inspector," Mycroft growled. "Load the damn scan."

Greg opened the relevant files, detached the wrist-set from his arm, and laid it on top of a nearby bookshelf. As he stepped back, a ray of blue beamed from the device, hit the opposite wall and spread quickly in an arc from ceiling to floor, filling the space with flickering strands of light. They weaved back and forth, etching, layering, building up around them that space - that awful, concrete space in which Greg had been standing only hours ago. It built the bricks in the walls, built the chain-link fence, built Emma's body lying open on her back, sketching in every tiny detail of her
ruptured organs and her torn throat, casting her in shimmering blue hard-light. There was no colour - only shape. The lack of red made it easier for Greg to look at.

At last, the scan had taken shape all around them. Greg folded his arms, studying Mycroft closely as the psychologist took in the projected scene - the gate - the doorway into the yard - Emma.

Mycroft looked at her without moving for some time. When he finally drew nearer, it was with quiet and uneasy steps. He bent down, considering her wounds in silence - reaching in to magnify some parts of the projection, manipulating it carefully with his hands to grow larger or rotate as needed. He took a long time over the wounds on her throat; he barely glanced at her abdomen. He studied her hands. He studied the dark blue blood spread across the concrete flags. Greg said nothing, watching him work.

It was several minutes before Mycroft spoke.

"This is not an ISOC scan," he said at last.

Greg didn't know what to say. "It - looks like one to me."

"It's a SOC scan," Mycroft said, biting his tongue. "That, I will give you. But this is not an Initial Scene of the Crime scan. Where is the initial scan?"

"This is the initial scan," Greg said, avoiding his eyes.

Mycroft looked up at him, brow contracted, still kneeling by the hard-light shell of Emma's body. "In which you had magically teleported from the gateway to the corner?" he said, fascinated. "And somehow trampled your footprints all around in her blood."

"She wasn't dead when I got there. I had to see to her first."

"Yes... you knelt at her side. You held her hand. That much is obvious..." Mycroft leant down, wincing as he re-examined those wounds at her throat. "You moved her hair. Why?"

"Jesus - how can you tell that?"

"The way it falls. Clearly rearranged by a steady hand."

"I checked her pulse," Greg explained, "when she was gone..."

"Then these are your fingermarks, here... and what did you find with her pulse?"

Greg stared at him, baffled. "She didn't have one. Most dead people don't."

"How certain were you?" Mycroft asked, frowning over one shoulder. "A weak pulse can be notoriously hard to locate, especially in a stressful situation. Most people without the proper training routinely miss vital signs of life."

"Yeah, people without the training," Greg said, annoyed. "I am trained. I'm a damn DI. I know how to check a pulse."

"Mm." Mycroft seemed unconvinced. He got to his feet. Greg was startled to see him instinctively wipe off his hands, though there was no blood upon them - only light projection of blood. It was a strange gesture, one that spoke of habit. "You should have taken an initial scan. You might have obliterated evidence - we have no way of knowing."

"She was dying," Greg said, flatly. His hands curl quietly into fists in his pockets. "She was dying,
and she was frightened. I made my choice."

"Let's hope it was the right one," Mycroft said. He surveyed the wreckage of Emma's body on the ground, uneasy. "Would you like to know about her, first? Or him?"

**Him.** Greg's stomach contracted, hard. "Do you - know who - ?"

"No," Mycroft murmured, "obviously… I can't show you his face, or give you his name. But I can show you a little of his mind. We can read *him* through what he did to *her.*"

"Are you certain it's a him?"

Mycroft gave him a look of faint scorn.

"Sadistic killers are overwhelmingly heterosexual males, inspector. You know this. Criminal profiling has known this since 1888. And who else would be in a yard with a prostitute in the middle of the night?"

"With a - … wait, you're saying she's a - "

"Yes," Mycroft said, as if it were obvious. "Of course she was."

"How do you know?"

"Foremost," Mycroft said, "who else would be alone in a yard with a sadistic heterosexual male in the middle of the night? In addition, if you'd like some more detailed psychological suggestion..."

He lifted his chin, and began.

"Single mother of three," he said, "judging by the tattoo on her shoulder - three butterflies, the latter two added several years apart, based on the ink fade and the slight stylistic change from one to the next... the last still awaiting its colour. Quite possibly three girls, the youngest around four. Inside of the left wrist, the name *Dan* once tattooed there - added ten years ago, at least - cheap laser removal, then recently augmented with a covering design of a heart. In possession of her own now, it seems. Thematic. Quite understandable. The man beat her and once broke her nose."

Greg's mouth had opened. He started to express incredulity - but Mycroft wasn't finished.

"The ex-partner pays no maintenance for his daughters or their mother," he said, cutting across Greg and casting his eyes across Emma's flickering body, "given that her clothing is all at least three years old. Typical signs of wear. Thinning fabric, faded colours. The only new items are the leather boots. She stands as her profession, then - a lot - she walks for hours at a time, and needs to have dry feet or she cannot continue to walk. Knee-high, buckled black leather? These were chosen for aesthetics, and yet she wears them almost nightly. The wear on the soles is characteristic of continuous, low-impact use. These are work boots, for a woman whose attractiveness is her livelihood."

He frowned, running his tongue behind his teeth, wholly unaware of Greg's gaping expression.

"She's likely to have sought gainful employment," he ventured, "in admin, retail or clerical work... but will have encountered difficulties in scheduling, with school-age children to look after... her rising frustration with attempting to live an honest life is likely to have driven her towards alternatives. She's attractive, under forty, and probably learnt from her father - who almost certainly drank - that a female's true worth is her amenability to men. Only a matter of time before someone made the natural suggestion to her. She now carries no handbag, no cosmetics, no personal items,
and keeps only her mobile phone and her cigarettes to hand when she's working. The loose skirt
with no underwear in January is also fairly indicative. Check if you wish, but the drape of her
clothing across her body should do. Extrapolating somewhat, she probably drank or used
recreational drugs before the children came along. Now, she is devoted only to them. Excuse me -
was devoted."

Greg's mouth hung from his jaw. Mycroft streamed towards his conclusion, almost finished, his
eyes darkening as he gazed down at the hard-light chasm of Emma's abdomen.

"She didn't know her killer," he said. "No facial mutilation. Frighteningly common, in cases where
they do. She met him only minutes before she died. She was clever enough not to let clients take
her off the street into buildings where she could be trapped and abused - and she'll have used this
yard before. She'll have led him here, knowing it was safe. Quiet. He'll have considered it a gift
from the universe. And she had no idea what he was. Otherwise, she would never have agreed to
accompany him."

It took Greg several seconds to regain the power of speech.

"Wh-... what he was?" he said.

He could barely breathe. His heart was breaking open for her, for a woman he'd never known - and
there were kids somewhere. Little girls. Their mum was dead. They didn't even know.

"What - what do you mean, 'what he was'...?"

"Inspector Lestrade," Mycroft Holmes said, very seriously - and took off his reading glasses.

He folded them away into the pocket of his waistcoat.

"How much do you know about vampires?"
Unhallowed Arts

Beware, for I am fearless and therefore powerful. I will watch with the wiliness of a snake, that I may sting with its venom. Man, you shall repent of the injuries you inflict.

- Mary Shelley
'Frankenstein' (1818)

"Vampires?"

Greg searched Mycroft's face, his chest oddly tight.

"Only that I've been in Cross-Human Relations for years," he said, "and never laid eyes on one."

"They're rare," Mycroft admitted, "in the manner of most apex predators. Non-existent, according to some sources… sadly, mistaken sources. One moment."

He crossed to his office door, opened it with a jerk, and barked,

"Stephanie?"

His PA leapt to her feet as if she'd had several hundred volts put through her. "Yes, Mr Holmes?"

"Coffee," he said, "black. Two sugars."

He shut the door before she could reply.

"I thought you drank tea," Greg said, before he could stop himself. He immediately wanted to cram his fist in his mouth.

Luckily, Mycroft's response was a mere contraction of his brow. "The coffee is for you," he clarified. "You will need it." He pulled his own chair from around his desk, and placed it on the carpet before Greg. "Sit."

Greg sat.

Mycroft leant against the front edge of his desk, drawing his thoughts together.

"What specific insights did Amelia hope I can give you?" he asked.

Greg hesitated, unsure what was really being sought here. "I... think she hoped you could identify the wounds," he said. "So they're - vampire bites? But - her abdomen - "

"Forget the abdomen," said Mycroft.

"Forget the - … are you having a laugh?" Greg demanded, his eyes widening. "She was ripped open like a fucking cushion, Mycroft! How am I supposed to forget that?"
Mycroft's eyes narrowed at the use of his name, the corners of his mouth twitching.

"They're knife wounds," he said. "He's young. Probably newly changed, crippled with insecurity. He doubted the capacity of his teeth and brought the knife as back-up. Rightly, in the end. He barely managed to drink from her. You saw how much he spilled."

"Jesus Christ..." Greg covered his face, feeling like he'd been punched. "Stop," he said. "Stop, and start from the beginning. *Vampires*?"

"Vampires."

"How long have vampires been going on? I've never come across this before. Not once."

"In fact," Mycroft said, "they were one of the first cross-human projects to be attempted. This was in the earlier years of the genetics disaster - late twenty-first century."

Greg frowned, trying to piece this together with what he knew.

"I thought the genetics crap kicked off with trying to blitz diseases," he said. "Then snazzy hair colours and pointy ears - elves and so on - easy stuff."

"Mm, at first. Then human ambition reared its ugly head." Mycroft folded his arms, lifting an eyebrow as he spoke. "Vampirism seems to have drawn a lot of early interest. Foolhardy pioneers with money to burn, investigating what exactly could be changed in the human blueprint before it shatters. The vampire is an enduring cultural legend... the ultimate human predator. It was only a matter of time."

He adjusted a slight crease in his sleeve, and went on.

"There were a few horrifying attempts very early, with unfortunate outcomes for the initial subjects... most didn't survive more than a week. Their physiology couldn't handle the affected change."

Greg's stomach lurched as he realised what was being discussed here.

"You're - talking about newborns," he said. "Babies they engineered. Their - 'physiology' - ?"

"They were laboratory-designed for their digestive systems to process human blood," Mycroft explained, "and only human blood. But their other systems couldn't function with the adjustment. They were too fragile. They couldn't cope. They shut down. The idea was abandoned for a few decades, until a more unfortunate one was stumbled across."

There came a hollow knock on the office door. Greg jumped. He immediately felt stupid, and the colour rose in his face.

Mycroft did not comment. He moved to the door, took the requested coffee from Stephanie without a word, and shut the door in her face.

He handed the coffee to Greg.

"As you're aware," he went on, "most of the first engineered humans - *cross-humans* - were infants. Doctored within a petri dish, implanted within a willing mother, and born. Grotesque sums of money were handed over by the rich and powerful for genetically-enhanced children. For some of them, it was done with an emphasis on physical health and longevity. More often, the desired enhancements were a grubby mixture of physical attractiveness or creative new features. When
these children came to maturity, most proved capable of reproduction… some of the genetic modifications transpired to be fairly stable, such as the simpler elven genes. Others made a rather disastrous cocktail when mixed with the virgin human genome. Werewolves in particular face a number of health issues when breeding, and their genetic code is often very varied and idiosyncratic. Nonetheless - the process always involved sex cells, and the changes were either made or already present before a foetus could even develop."

Greg realised his coffee was burning his hands. He shifted, taking a first drink - it was strong as hell and sickly-sweet. He drank it down all the same.

"Then genetics turned its gaze to adults," Mycroft said, sleekly. "Grown, fully-functioning adults… for vampirism, the major innovation was the idea to enact the required changes by using a virus."

"A virus?"

"Mm. It could modify the subject's existing cells, and even amend their DNA, to produce any desired change. A lot of money was driven into the research - money from questionable sources - then at last, the virus was created by a team in London, with the hope of inducing a transformation in an adult subject."

Greg brought his coffee uncomfortably to his mouth. A transformation, he thought. It made his skin prickle.

"A number of features had been agreed upon," Mycroft said. "Enhanced strength and speed - sharpened senses - a toughened constitution - rapid rate of healing - a cocktail of helpful chemicals in the saliva - local anaesthetic, vasodilator and anticoagulant enzyme, among other things - and, of course, nourishment derived from human blood. The virus was trialled. It was a success. The genetic changes proved not only successful, but stable and irreversible - and also perfectly viable to pass onto offspring."

"All just through a virus," Greg said, suddenly feeling rather weak.

"A single injection."

"Jesus…” Greg whispered. He took a large mouthful of coffee. "If it's that easy," he said, "then why aren't we all...?"

"The transformation is supposedly very painful," Mycroft said, "and drawn out. It's also very taxing upon the subject's physiology. Some do not survive. Producing the virus was a breathtakingly costly endeavour, and required a great deal of scientific expertise."

"So it - it never spread that far."

"No. Within months of vampires beginning to surface, legislation at first regulated and then forbade the endeavour outright… it was realised a mistake had been made. A grievous one."

"A mistake?"

"Mm. Humanity had done a sterling job of creating itself an apex predator."

"So - you mean, the vampires started - ..."

"They started doing what we had designed them to do," Mycroft said, raising an eyebrow, "which was to prey on us. Human governments have been fighting to subdue vampirism ever since."
"Is this virus still used? Still out there?"

"The only samples are stored in a very small number of secure vaults, lest they ever be needed - but unfortunately, vampires were created with the ability to produce more of their own... not by attacking other humans, as in legends, but simply by breeding. Born vampires tend to be stronger, more dangerous, and more invested in vampiric interests than virus-transformed ones. There are likely far more of them around than we can imagine."

"Vampiric interests?" Greg said, suspecting he didn't want to know.

"It's common for vampires to form groups," Mycroft elaborated, smoothly. "They believe themselves a persecuted people. They can pass entirely undetected in society, but often choose to live with their peers."

"Persecuted..." Greg breathed. His heart pounded against his ribs, angry and sickened. "What about Emma?"

Mycroft's brow crumpled. "Who?"

Greg pointed at the hard-light wreckage of a person still flickering on Mycroft's office floor.

"Ah," said Mycroft. "Yes... well, those are vampiric wounds at the throat. The teeth marks are quite characteristic."

He reached for his reading glasses, unfolding them carefully as he spoke.

"I can also tell you that your perpetrator has been transformed by virus, rather than a born vampire. He's unlikely to be much older than thirty... below average intelligence, an unimpressive CV... few friends. Few sexual encounters other than with prostitutes, and none of them particularly satisfactory."

"Piss off," said Greg. "Are you making this up?"

Mycroft scowled at him deeply.

"I am Head of Criminal Psychology at Scotland Yard," he murmured. "I have no need to make things up." He visibly bit his tongue. "I believe that's the job of CID."

"Not this bit of CID," Greg growled. He took a moment to calm himself, struggling to fit all this in his head. "Fine," he said. "How d'you know all this?"

"The mess he's made of her throat," Mycroft said, as if it were bloody obvious. "He's not mastered his own abilities. Clearly he intended to kill her one way or another - we know this because he brought a knife - but a vampire of any experience could make two small incisions and drain her to unconsciousness while she was unresisting. This is hideous overkill, inspector. And in the end, he resorted to the ways he used to imagine punishing women back when he was human. This entire attack reeks of poor self-esteem, sexual inadequacy and misogyny - exactly the type of person who would opt to become a vampire in the first place."

"Wait," Greg said. "You said the virus is kept in vaults. Why the hell am I now dealing with a vampire attack?"

"The virus is kept in vaults, inspector. Not the vampires affected by it. Estimates range from extinct to several thousand worldwide... though I think you can now confidently discount 'extinct'."
"God…" Greg suddenly remembered he was holding a cup of coffee. He drained it, wrinkling his nose as he swallowed the lot in one go. He then handed the cup to Mycroft. "So… what am I looking for?"

Mycroft looked faintly displeased to find himself holding a cup. He put it to one side, and turned the handle to line up with the edge of his desk.

"He's likely to live locally," he said. "Check for similar, non-fatal attacks in the immediate area within the last six months. He's probably worked his way up to this. Speak to prostitutes - find out if any of them have been bitten. They'll be reluctant to tell you. Mixed feelings. Handle with care."

"Sorry - 'mixed feelings'?"

"I shall transfer you some medical literature," Mycroft said, simply.

Greg had the distinct impression that particular question was now closed.

"Right…" he said, uneasily. "Okay. Next question. Are people in danger?"

Mycroft raised both eyebrows slowly.

"Yes..." he said. Greg's stomach hardened. Mycroft cast a wry glance at the courtyard projected behind them. "Did you truly need my expert analysis to tell you that? Now the perpetrator has started, he's unlikely to stop."

"Sweet Jesus..."

"Sex and violence is a potent combination, inspector. And this man has a weak mind."

"Did you say they tend to form groups?" said Greg. "What are the chances I've got a vampire nest somewhere?"

Mycroft's mouth shrugged as he thought. "I shan't speculate," he decided at last. "This looks like a chaotic, self-serving attack to me, probably borne from frustration and loneliness. He knew he wanted someone to die, but he doesn't seem to have cared who. Afterwards, he left her in a degrading position to mark his territory… to shock whoever found her. Rather suggests a lone individual, if anything."

That phrase, 'mark his territory', sent a jolt through Greg's frazzled head.

"There was something else," he said quickly, getting out of the chair.

He took his wrist-set from the bookshelf and the whole scene lurched, then retracted with a shiver back into the device. The real world - Mycroft's shelves, his books, his window, reappeared around them.

Greg scrolled quickly through his files. "This was on the gate," he said, and hit project.

The wrist-set flashed, and another beam of light arced out. It began at the top, grinding its way slowly down through each forked prong - knitting, building, flickering - until the white symbol hovered a metre high in the air between them.

"I've not seen this before," Greg said. "I know all the gang signs in London. I'm pretty sure it's new. Have you - "

He glanced through the hard-light projection at Mycroft - and stopped talking at once.
Mycroft looked as if the world had gone up in flames around him.

He was gazing at the symbol, pale, his mouth slightly open.

Greg had never seen horror like that - silent, breathless fear. It wrenched at a handful of his soul.

"Christ," he said, alarmed. Mycroft's expression shuttered with sudden awareness - closing, concealing. "What was - ?"

"Close that," Mycroft told him, drip-white.

"What is it?" said Greg.

"I said CLOSE it!"

Greg closed the projection quickly. "And I said, what is it?" he demanded.

Mycroft ignored him. He moved around his desk, grabbed his own wrist-set from its charging pad and lashed it in place, flashing quickly through contacts. His jaw set as he selected one. A connecting tone filled the office.

It was a few seconds before the call was answered.

"Vickery," came a familiar bark.

"It's me," Mycroft said. His voice was stiff, his back turned to Greg and his shoulders now as hard as the edge of his desk. "I have - your inspector here."

"Has he shown you the ISOC scan?"

"Yes."

"And?"

There was a long, awful pause. "Amelia," Mycroft said at last, and nothing else.

Greg felt his heart twinge strangely.

Commander Vickery's sigh filled the silence. "What's the chance of a copycat?" she enquired, in a tone that expected to be disappointed.

"It's... not impossible," Mycroft said. "Those are bite marks. That is the sigil."

"Is someone just using it to spread fear?"

"I don't know." Mycroft was rubbing his elbow, quietly. "You can't send me one ISOC scan, and that sigil, and expect me to be able to tell you it's alright."

"But is this attack something one nutcase has decided to fill his quiet Saturday night with," Vickery asked, "or was he sent, Mycroft? Are we looking at a message here?"

Mycroft covered his face briefly with his hands.

"A disorganised, frightened attacker," he said. "So nervous he couldn't take enough blood to knock her out. Yet somehow in control of his senses enough to paint - that."

"Because he'd been ordered to?" Vickery asked.
Mycroft said absolutely nothing, still facing the wall. A distinct tremor had begun in his shoulders. Greg found himself distressed just watching it - helpless, not knowing what to say or to do or even to think.

Amelia Vickery gave a sigh.

"Is Lestrade still there?" she asked.

Greg almost didn't want to trouble the silence with his voice. "I'm here, commander."

"Can you step out of the room for a minute, Lestrade? I need to speak to Mycroft privately."

Mycroft stiffened up at once.

"No, commander," he said. His expression paled. "Do not ask. My answer is no."

"Greg," Vickery's voice cut across him, firmly. "If you don't mind."

As Greg shut the door, he heard the first dreadful moments of Mycroft Holmes beginning to plead.

"Commander… please - you can't possibly expect me to - "

The door closed with a snap.

Greg stepped away, feeling a strange cold creep its way inside his chest. He glanced around Mycroft's frightened staff, all of them busily absorbed in their work.

"Erm… guys?" he said, gently.

They look around in alarm.

Greg quickly brought up the sigil, letting it beam above the banks of their consoles. They gazed up at it, confused, their brows wrinkling.

He asked. They thought about it for a moment, then told him none of them had ever seen it before.

Greg thanked them, closed the projection, and waited.

Ten minutes later, he was alarmed to see Commander Vickery come striding through the doors to the division.

She said not a word as she passed Stephanie at Reception, strode between the banks of hardware and then past Greg, letting herself into Mycroft's office without so much as a glance at anyone.

"Now you listen to me," he heard her say, furiously, as soon as she entered. "You promised me, on your knees, that if this ever - "

The door banged shut.

Greg sank down at an unoccupied desk.

He didn't know whether he should leave or not.

He didn't know what to think at all. Something wasn't right. His head whirled from one thing to the next - Emma's kids, out there somewhere, wondering why their mum hadn't come home last night - that forked white sigil - vampires, predators, stalking the streets. He didn't know what to do with it
Five minutes later, Vickery emerged.

"This is going to take a while," she told him, before he could ask. Greg risked a glance through the open office door behind her. He caught a brief glimpse of Mycroft smoking at the window, shaking as he stared out across the city, and then the door swung into place. Greg's heart thumped. "You can head off now, Lestrade," the commander said. "Get some rest, then be in my office at nine tomorrow morning."

"Is he - okay?" Greg asked, before he could stop himself.

Her tawny eyes narrowed. "Yes, why shouldn't he be?"

Greg took it as a strong suggestion not to pry.

"Commander," he said, lowering his voice. The hair on the back of his neck had stood on end. "What the hell's that symbol? What's going on? This is - bad, isn't it?"

Commander Vickery regarded him carefully for a moment.

"Nine tomorrow morning," she said, quietly. "Now off you go."

Greg had no choice.

He turned, and left.
Angels

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

- Christina Rossetti
'Song' (1862)

They met that night in the yard.

Greg was searching his coat for a lighter, cigarette held between his teeth, when he heard the soft scrape of a catch in the darkness - and there she was, in her boots, with her black leather jacket and her shiny brown hair.

Emma held the lighter out to him, her blue eyes bright and amused.

Greg leant forwards. He placed the tip of his cigarette within the tiny flame.

"Thanks," he murmured.

"Don't mention it," she said. Her voice was Hackney, born and raised - she sounded like his mum, friendly and fond and unafraid. She settled beside him with their backs to the wall, pulling her cigarettes out from her pocket. "How are you feelin', sweetheart? Must have been a shock for you."

Greg laughed around his cigarette. He shook his head.

"A shock for me? You're fucking dead."

"I'm the lucky one then, ain't I?" Emma lit her cigarette, the lines deepening around her eyes as she concentrated. "S'you that's left behind, darlin'... s'you that's gotta sort it all out."

"M'sorry," Greg said. "I mean it. I'm sorry someone went and did that to you. I'm sorry that it hurt."

She took a first drag on her cigarette, thinking. She blew out a slender stream of smoke.

"Life's a shithouse," she told him, at last.

"Where are your kids?" he asked.

She crossed one ankle across the other, glancing down at her boots.
"They tell you you're a bad mum," she murmured. "Leavin' 'em to go out to work... they don't tell you otherwise how you're meant to put food on the table. School always sendin' letters home. Money for this, money for that. You know what my mum told me once, when I was little?"

"What?" he asked her, quietly.

"She told me... *sweetheart... every woman in this world is only one man away from utter fucking disaster* ... I didn't listen. I thought that Dan was diff'rent. Thought maybe so was I."

Greg's heart ached as he stared at her.

"Tell me where to look," he begged her. "Tell me where to find whoever killed you. Tell me where to find your little girls."

She smiled a little, no humour in her eyes. She rolled the cigarette between her fingers.

"S'not that simple," she told him. She raised the cigarette to her mouth. "You should get out now, y'know... before it's too late. Get yourself back to those friends you miss - that place you left - there's nothin' for you here, darlin'. Get yourself somewhere good, and stay there."

"There's you here," he said, staring into her face. Her expression shifted. "And it might happen to someone else... I can't walk away from that."

Emma smiled at him around the cigarette, her blue eyes bright and sad.

"You gonna be my hero?" she asked, teasing. She didn't believe in such things, he thought - like his mum. She knew it was all a fairytale.

"No," he told her, sadly. "It's... too late for that. It was too late the second you led the guy into this yard. But I'm still not walking away."

"That's nice," she said. She wrapped her arms across her chest. She dragged on her cigarette, slowly, as her guarded stare slid sideways across the ground - to where her body lay ripped open, her blood poured out across the flags.

"Didn't even think they existed," she muttered. "Heard they were a story... y'know... somethin' to frighten your kids with. Get them home safe by ten."

"Can't you tell me where your girls are?" Greg said. "I can find them for you, make sure they're alright... get social services out. Someone'll look after them."

For the first time, a few tears came to her eyes. They were gone almost at once, forced back beneath a twisted smile.

"There's nobody can look after my girls," she said, her voice hollow. She twitched the ash off her cigarette. "Not now. Nobody can look after anyone, darlin'. We're all just kids. Frightened in the dark."

Greg didn't know how to convince her - how to make it alright.

Emma looked up at him, thinking, the cigarette still held between her fingers. Its glow was the only light now - that tiny red spot in the blackness.

"Thank you for sittin' with me," she said. "Got that handsome coat of yours all bloody."

Greg's throat tightened. "I didn't want you to be alone. Didn't want you to be afraid."
Her crystal blue eyes shone in the darkness.

"I've always been afraid," she said. "Trick is you just keep goin'. Then eventually you forget what it's like to feel okay."

She flicked her cigarette one last time, dropped it to the ground, and twisted it into ash beneath her heel.

"You look after yourself, darlin'," she said, as she walked away from him across the yard. The blood gleamed beneath her footsteps; the starlight shone on her hair. "S'a cold night... don't stay out long. You'll catch your death."

Greg awoke to the darkness with a gasp.

He found that he was sweating.

He switched on the bedside lamp and sat up in bed for a while, his head pounding, heart racing. He could smell her perfume. He could hear the click of her heels on the concrete. He could see the tears she'd forced back in her eyes. Greg put his hands over his face, swore softly under his breath, and willed his heartbeat to settle.

When he finally checked the clock, he found that it was almost three AM - twenty-four hours since he'd found her.

This time yesterday, she might even have still been alive.

It didn't seem real.

As he thought it, he knew at once he would not get back to sleep.

Wearily he pushed back his winter duvet, transferred his feet to the cold grey carpet and padded through to the kitchen, rubbing hard at his eyes.

He made tea - he couldn't bear the thought of coffee. Not at this time. The quiet ritual of boiling up the kettle, pouring water over the teabag, adding milk and stirring it helped to calm him down somewhat. He found the gentle clink of the spoon oddly soothing. It kept thoughts out of his head for a few minutes. He took the mug back to bed, sat himself within the crumpled pile of the duvet and pushed open his curtains a little, so he could look out over London.

_Vampires_, he thought, watching the buildings glitter. Out there, right now.

Surely she'd have known.

'Predators', Mycroft had called them - humanity's _apex_ predator; designed to hunt; designed to dominate. Emma had met one, talked to him, struck an arrangement with him. She'd decided she was safe taking him off to a quiet yard. How could she not have known?

But then, Greg supposed… in nature, a species evolved alongside its predators - every successive generation came up with new ways to detect them, avoid them, outsmart them, and every successful escapee went on to breed and pass on those instincts.

But humanity had literally custom-built their own worst nightmare.

How could they be expected to have warning systems against something no ancestor had faced? Something they weren't even certain existed?
Emma hadn't been stupid, he thought - and she hadn't been naive.

She'd just been unlucky.

He realised with a jolt he was thinking like he knew her at all. *It was a dream, dickhead,* he told himself. He covered his forehead and rubbed between his eyes, the untouched mug of tea still held to his chest. *All just a bloody dream.*

It had felt so damn real - more real than this moment felt. More real than Greg had felt in a year.

He couldn't stop seeing Mycroft's face through the hard-light projection - that forked white symbol; what it had done to him.

Nothing scared Mycroft Holmes. The man was a tyrant. He was a machine, not a human - he was a force, like gravity or friction or tectonic shift. He could take one look at an eviscerated corpse and tell Greg she was on the game with three kids and an ex who'd broken her nose.

But something about that symbol had ripped the heart out of him.

Greg glanced up at the window pane above his bed, lifting the mug at last to his mouth.

A ghost of a handprint was smudged there upon the glass - thrown out in desperation a year ago now, by the gorgeous red-haired stranger who'd gasped Greg's name as he came.

Greg could only ever see the handprint at night, when all the lights were out. London then silvered it for him - frosted it with the city's glow - reminding him it wasn't just some dream. They'd been here together, the two of them. They'd found something together. They'd shared it, softly, in the dark.

Sometimes, he almost wished he hadn't turned up to Scotland Yard that Monday.

His whole London career, he thought - all the good that he'd done - all the people whose lives he'd now changed, however small - wished away, for the thought that Mycroft Holmes might have leant him *Wuthering Heights.*

Greg sighed a little, glancing down into his tea.

He supposed he could understand having a reputation to protect. Jason had - … well, he'd had good reason to keep things quiet. Nobody wanted their business spreading everywhere. It was only normal.

Still.

Someday, Greg thought, he'd fall for someone who wasn't mortified to love him back.

He thought of Mycroft, smoking at his office window, staring out across London like it was burning all around them. He thought of Emma's kids, waiting by a window too - wondering why she'd not come home.

He took a long drink of tea.

He wondered if other people ever felt like this. Bewildered, weary, at the shape that life seemed to be taking around them.

At least he still had a life, he thought.
Traffic on Great George Street was horrendous. Greg only got to work at two minutes to nine.

As he crossed Reception, he felt strangely apprehensive. He didn't know what he was expecting to happen. A strange and gentle dread had followed him ever since the dream, and the dawn had not dispelled it. He took the lift up to Cross-Human Relations, rubbing the back of his neck and hoping someone at least had some answers for him today. He needed to speak to Luke Elwood - find out if anyone had tracked down the kids yet.

As he stepped through the glass door, he discovered Mycroft sitting outside Commander Vickery's office.

The other man looked dreadful - pale, unhappy and dishevelled, as if dressing this morning had been the least of his concerns. Mycroft raised his eyes as Greg entered the department, then looked sharply away, paling even further. It seemed he, too, had had a bad night.

"You about to get suspended?" Greg asked, biting the inside of his cheek.

Mycroft's brow creased. "I beg your pardon?" he said.

"Yeah… figures you behaved yourself at school..." Greg pushed his hands into his coat pockets, wondering how to phrase this without getting his head bitten off. "Yesterday was... rough. M'sorry."

"Don't patronise me," Mycroft warned, his eyes darkening. "You haven't the faintest idea."

"I'm not patronising you," Greg said, wearily. "I'm trying to - … God, I don't even know what I'm trying to do… whatever. Forget it. Is the commander in?"

As if in response to his question, the door of the commander's office suddenly opened.

Vickery looked out at them both, one eyebrow lifted.

"Good," she said. "Inside, please. Both of you."

Avoiding Mycroft's sideways glance, Greg steeled himself and stepped into the office.

Two chairs had been placed before Vickery's desk side-by-side. Greg sat down in the left-hand one, brushing his coat out beneath him. Mycroft took hold of the other chair, moved it an unnecessary six inches to the right and sat down, ignoring Greg's sigh.

Vickery placed herself behind her desk, gated her fingers, and surveyed the pair of them rather seriously.

"As you both know," she said, "we have a situation on our hands. Naturally, we need it to be investigated as swiftly as possible."

Greg risked a brief look at Mycroft, whose expression was set in a strange resignation. He wondered what that was about.

"It is a fact," Vickery said, "that at least one vampire in London has attacked at least one human. This is already a cross-human relations nightmare. Questions remain - the most pressing being,
"Will this happen again?" I need those questions answered."

She turned her eyes onto Mycroft, fixing him very closely with her stare.

"I spoke to the commissioner," she said.

Mycroft visibly bit his tongue. "And?"

"He agrees with me," she said. "He's contacted Oxford already. They're sending Lucilla McCarthy to act as your stand-in."

"Lucilla McCarthy," Mycroft burst out, aghast, "is not worth the paper her degree is printed upon. Are you genuinely suggesting that I can be replaced by - "

"Whoa - wait," Greg said, sitting forwards. He was done with being left out of discussions. This had gone on long enough. "What d'you mean, 'replaced'?" He turned to Mycroft. "Are you resigning?"

Mycroft shut up at once, retracting back into himself like a sea urchin.

"No," Commander Vickery answered, watching Mycroft with her mouth rather thin. "Mycroft is being re-assigned… as, he will remember, was always agreed upon as a possible eventuality."

"An eventuality of what?" Greg demanded - adding, after a sharp flash of her eyes, "...commander?"

"A recurrence of a problem we tackled nearly ten years ago," Vickery said, her voice low. "Mycroft was pivotal in that operation. He was a DI in my division at the time."

Greg turned in amazement. "A … you were a DI? Here, in Cross-Human Relations?"

"A long time ago," Mycroft replied, his voice hollow. He was gazing at Commander Vickery in a mixture of defiance and despair.

"Please don't give me that look, Mycroft," she said, unmoved. "I'm sure you remember which end of the gun to point at people. That's enough for me. I'll warrant you've had a cushy few years upstairs, with your case studies and your textbooks, but you were my star DI before Excultus… and you're sitting next to my star DI now."

Mycroft and Greg's eyebrows rose in unison. They looked at each other in surprise - then swiftly looked away, dropping into frowns at once.

"I want you to make the initial inquiries together," Vickery said - and the bottom dropped from Greg's stomach. "Find out if this is a genuine reappearance, Mycroft, or a copycat working alone. And find out what danger is posed to the public."

"Commander," Greg interrupted, desperately. Her eyes snapped to him at once. He mouthed at her, scrabbling in his brain for some excuse, any excuse - any damn excuse. "It seems - … I mean - Dr. Holmes is probably needed in Criminal Psychology. And I don't need a - "

"Were we not only recently discussing your vacancy for a sergeant?" Vickery enquired.

Mycroft bristled at once.

"I will not be his sergeant," he said. "No. On my life, Amelia, no. I will make the wretched inquiries but I will not deign to - "
Commander Vickery's eyebrows arched towards her hairline.

"I must have just misheard you, Mycroft," she said, drowning him out. "I almost thought you'd addressed your division commander by her Christian name."

Mycroft's expression wracked with despair.

"Don't do this," he begged her. "Not him. Please, reconsider."

"And what is wrong with him?" Vickery asked, affronted.

For one wild second, Greg almost hoped Mycroft would tell her. What a marvellous final memory that would be, before he had to drag all three of them out of the window to their deaths, so they wouldn't have to recall that moment ever again.

In the end, Mycroft could only stare at her. He'd become so pale he was in danger of fading into translucency.

"I won't be a sergeant," he breathed. "You can't take me from Department Head to a damn sergeant, not in one day. With God as my witness, Amelia, I will not stand for it. This is more than I can bear."

"Then Lestrade will act as your - " Commander Vickery began.


Vickery held up a finger for silence, momentarily covering her eyes.

"Decide this between yourselves," she said. "For now, please get out there - both of you - and bring me back some answers. I don't expect to lay eyes on either of you again until you're in here telling me exactly what we're dealing with. Have I made myself clear?"

Neither of them spoke - shocked, pale and angry.

"This is a serious situation," she warned them, unimpressed. "You're our vampire expert, Mycroft. You had dealings with Excultus. And you, Lestrade, supposedly have the greatest possible interest in seeing this case to its end. I have now given you four good reasons to get out of my office and do your jobs. And here comes a fifth: because I told you to. Now out, the pair of you. Close the door as you go."

They got up, slowly, each as shocked and unhappy as the other. They moved without a word towards the door. Greg opened it; Mycroft stepped through.

Greg shut the door, saying nothing, and took Mycroft's coat down from the rack by Reception.

"What are you doing?" Mycroft asked, stiffly.

Greg handed him his coat. "Put this on," he said.

It was a mark of the situation, Greg thought, that Mycroft Holmes was willing to take orders. He put the coat on, then shortly afterwards obeyed two further commands - "Get in the car," and, "Put your bloody seatbelt on, we're law enforcement..."

It was a half hour drive to Hackney
Every minute of it was spent in damning silence.

"Where are we going?" Mycroft finally asked, as Greg parked the car and switched off the engine.

"You know exactly where we're going." Greg locked the doors with a clunk, then pulled his cigarettes and his lighter from his pocket. "In a minute. First, you're going to tell me what the hell 'Excultus' is, and why the sight of that symbol tore the soul out of you."

Mycroft froze. "Open the doors."

"No," Greg said, calmly. He shook a cigarette from the packet. "D'you want a smoke?"

Mycroft's mouth twitched a little. "I don't smoke."

"Funny. You smoked yesterday. Only when you're stressed, is it?" Greg handed over the unlit cigarette, then started one for himself. He sighed as the first deep pull of nicotine crept its way into his capillaries, soothing their rough edges, quietening that familiar scream. "Changed your mind if you smoke yet?"

Mycroft's expression creased.

"Oh, hell," he muttered, jammed the unlit cigarette in his mouth and leant towards Greg's lighter.

Greg found himself reminded of Emma. He clicked the lighter and held it steady, as Mycroft lit the cigarette.

"Now," Greg said, dropping his head back against the headrest. He shut his eyes, breathing smoke in a slow stream from his nose. "Talk."

Mycroft took a moment, gathering together the words.

"Excultus," he said, at last, "were a vampire organisation operating in London in the very first days of this century. They believed they were a political sect. They were a terror cell. They had a particular set of opinions that made them especially dangerous to humans."

"What opinions were these?" said Greg.

Mycroft took another moment.

"It's - Latin," he said, at last. "Excultus... from 'homo excultus'."

"Homo exc-... like homo sapiens?"

"Yes," said Mycroft. "'Homo sapiens' is the wise or thinking man... the widely accepted species name for humanity."

"Right. Then what the hell is 'homo excultus'?"

"The meaning is quite broad," Mycroft said, "but it indicates the refined or improved man - perhaps even the honoured man."

"The 'improved man'... and who is that supposed to be?"

"A number of vampires use the term," Mycroft said. He dragged on his cigarette for a moment, rather hard. "Excultus, and their followers, took to the idea with some conviction. They believed they were no longer a subset of humanity - much less a sub-species - and that direct action should
be taken to promote that. They were of the opinion that the vampire is the next step in the evolutionary line, outstripping homo sapiens as the rightful pinnacle of development. Homo sapiens were expendable… prey. An evolutionary stage that had now been superseded. Excultus were prepared to act as if this were quite true and proper."

"Christ…"

"Mm. With all the horror that accompanied it."

"And you took them down? You and Vickery dealt with all this?"

"Yes," Mycroft said. They had not looked at each other once during the entire conversation. He dragged on his cigarette, then tapped the ash shakily into an empty coffee cup that Greg held out. "It's a miracle that I retained my life. I had to leave the department afterwards. I could no longer discharge my duties. I was compromised on every conceivable level."

Greg smoked for a few moments, thinking hard.

"I remember ten years ago," he said at last, with a frown. "I remember it pretty well. And I didn't hear a thing about this."

"Of course you didn't," Mycroft muttered. "We managed to keep it from the public - all of it. Amelia covered everything up."

"Sorry, wait - there was a vampire terror cell operating in London, and that was kept from the public? People could have been killed."

"They were killed. Scores of them."

Greg nearly swallowed his cigarette. "Scores?" he said, rounding on Mycroft suddenly. "What the fuck? No wonder they were, if you kept it fucking covered up! Why the hell were people not told? They could have taken steps to keep themselves safe!"

Mycroft stared at him, wild-eyed.

"You truly don't have the measure of what you're dealing with yet, do you?" he said. Greg's teeth gritted. "I seem to have it better than anyone else!"

"They were Excultus!" Mycroft half-shouted at him. "Not some rambunctious orc street gang! Within months of their emergence we were turning up literature that described humans as cattle. There was no way to keep people safe. The only option was to take down Excultus, which I did. Almost entirely single-handedly. It cost me my career in Criminal Investigation. It cost me years of my life. It cost me a great deal more than that. You can't begin to imagine what I sacrificed. And I do not regret to inform you that I have no wish to return to those days."

"Right." Greg unlocked the car doors. "C'mon."

"Where are we going?" Mycroft demanded, as Greg shunted open the door and got out, still smoking.

"Emma," he said. "You're going to see where she died."

"Oh, for - ..." He cut Mycroft off as he slammed the car door.

It was a minute or two before Mycroft got out.
"I've already viewed the ISOC scans," he muttered to Greg, crushing his spent cigarette under his handmade leather shoe.

"I didn't say, 'scene of the crime'," Greg said to him, cold. "I said, 'where she died'."

"And what exactly is this meant to prove?"

Greg didn't reply. He tossed his cigarette to the pavement, ground it out, and pushed his hands in the pockets of his coat as he set off along the road.

With a despairing sigh, Mycroft followed.

"Vickery mentioned a possible copycat," Greg said to him, as they passed The Clockwork Lion. The events of that night felt like months ago now. It had literally been yesterday. "Someone using the symbol to scare people. What are the chances?"

"It would be a blessed relief to us all," Mycroft replied.

"The symbol's not widely known though, is it?"

"No. Not at all."

"I showed it to your whole team yesterday, and it didn't scare a single one of them. Just confused them. Seems pointless to use a secret symbol to scare people who are clueless, especially when you've left a ripped-open body. That's scary enough."

"It might be an admirer of Excultus," Mycroft said, as they turned into the alley. "Someone who identifies with some aspect of their history or their beliefs... adopting their symbol as a personal signature..."

Greg lapsed into silence, leading him along to the gate at the end. The entire place had been scrubbed. Forensics were done here. It was a crime scene no longer.

As Greg reached the gate, he noted that the symbol had been removed without a trace. The gate looked cleaner than it probably had ever been. He just hoped Luke had taken all the details down for him - they were going to need them. Not many murders in the twenty-third century could be solved by finding a tin of white paint in somebody's shed, but Greg was willing to take every blessing.

He pushed open the gate, and waited for Mycroft to step through.

The other man rolled his eyes slightly in the gloom. Even on a bright morning, this alley was dark. "Are you attempting to manipulate me with sentiment?" he asked. "If you are, it shan't work."

"Get in the yard," Greg muttered. "I just need to see you stand there."

Mycroft breathed something that finished with "... give me strength...", then strode into the yard.

Greg followed him, closing the gate behind.

There was only so much blood you could get out of concrete. Those stains would be there for weeks, Greg thought - maybe even months - the very last reminder of her.

For a while Greg said nothing, just letting Mycroft look at them.

Then he said,
"You told me in that lift your career is your existence. You said it was all you've got."

Mycroft looked up across the yard at him, hollow-eyed.

"Well, this is all I've got," Greg went on. "Trying to make things right. Trying to stop shit like this happening to people that don't deserve it. If you want, then go ahead and quit. Make yourself the seventh partner I've lost in two years, shoot your career in the head, and I'll fix all this myself."

He folded his arms.

"Because I'm going to find who did this," he told Mycroft's silent expression. "I'm going to stamp them out, however many of them there are - one, ten, a hundred - I don't care. I care that she died. I care that somebody was ripping her throat out while I was metres away in a pub, taking statements about some petty squabble that didn't matter. I get that you're scared. And no, I probably don't know what I'm letting myself in for... but that's the job. 'Where angels fear to tread'. Again, and again, and again."

He breathed in slowly, watching Mycroft's face shift with unease.

"And if you tell Vickery where to shove her inquiries," he added, "she's not going to let you skulk back upstairs to your books and your frightened staff. She'll have you hanging from the roof by lunchtime as a warning to the others. And you know it."

Mycroft looked as if he were ready to crumple with exhaustion. His eyes went quiet; he gazed back down at the bloodstains, lost.

"You don't understand what you're asking me to return to," he said at last. For the first time in a year, Greg saw a glimpse of that man he'd met in a train station, what felt like a lifetime ago: a man who petted pages as he read them; a man who didn't kiss. "You can't possibly understand," Mycroft breathed. "You can't even begin to."

"So if we do nothing," Greg said, raising an eyebrow, "this'll all go away?"

Mycroft's expression folded.

"I did everything," he breathed. "I did it all. I can't do it again."

Greg looked into his eyes, feeling his chest heave.

"Then just make the first inquiries with me," he said. "I know nothing about vampires. Seems like you know everything. We'll ask around, we'll get proof this is just one loser aping his old heroes, we'll report back to Vickery, then you can go running back to Criminal Psychology and we never have to see each other again."

Mycroft looked as if nothing would be sweeter in this world.

"I will not be your sergeant," he warned.

Greg paused. "Well, we'll talk about that..."

"We have talked," Mycroft growled, "and come to the conclusion that I will not be your sergeant."

"Is our hierarchy of two really what matters right now?"

Mycroft put the heels of his hands to his eyes. "I am too old for this," he told himself. "God almighty, with you - of all people..."
Greg braced himself. They were going to have to talk about this at some point, he thought. Perhaps it was best to get this out of the way now.

"Look," he said. "About - the thing we had - "

Mycroft finally broke.

"I am returning to the car," he said, before Greg could come out with another word. "You will then drive me back to Scotland Yard, where I will return to my office to prepare for the imminent flaming ruination of my department. I don't expect to see you for the rest of the day."

"Right. And what then?"

"Then - …" Mycroft sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Then, we... attempt to solve this hideous mess. Together."

He shut his eyes.

"God help us."
The best thing about Luke Elwood, Greg thought, was how completely bloody normal he was.

He met Greg in a coffee shop near Scotland Yard that afternoon, ordered a normal coffee and chatted for a short while about normal things - the weather and TV and sport. He did all the normal embellishments of social engagement - smiling; laughing; asking interested questions. After two days of speaking only to Commander Vickery, Mycroft Arsehole Holmes and a dead prostitute in his dreams, Greg was glad to remember what normal conversation actually felt like.

Finally, Luke placed down two fresh cappuccinos between them, and they got onto shop talk.

"I'm warning you now," he said. "It turns out I didn't miss my calling to CID. Hardly got anywhere at all."

"That's fine," Greg said. "It's why I'm taking over. Just tell me what you got, and you can go back to shooting people."


"Right… well, I'll transfer you what there is. If you've got questions now, expect a lot of 'I don't know' as your answers, but fire away…"

"The kids," Greg said, for starters. "Have you managed to find her kids?"

Luke blinked at him, startled. "How did you know she had kids?"

Luke blinked at him, startled. "Have you managed to find her kids?"

"I've been - working with a consultant. He said it was likely. Are they alright?"

"I... don't know," Luke admitted, his mouth flattening. "I knew about them - there's a picture of them set as the lockscreen of her phone, but we couldn't get into the damn thing - it's passcoded. And before you ask, no... it's not '1234'. Checked it myself. Tech are working on it..."

"Yeah, she was smarter than '1234'..." Greg glanced down into the smiley face dusted atop his cappuccino foam, thinking. Tech would take forever with the damn thing. Maybe that part of the process could be fast-tracked, he thought. "So... have we identified her yet? Got a surname?"

"No, but I've got onto Missing Persons - they've sent details of a few recent 'Emmas', and a couple of others matching the description. That might be somewhere for you to pick up… sorry. I haven't made a lot of headway."
"Don't worry about it, Luke. She died yesterday and you aren't a detective. How are forensics coming along?"

"Well, the yard had more forensics than you could ever dream of," Luke said, with a pained look. "It seems to be in pretty common use for all sorts. Forensics say the problem is figuring out what's relevant. I mean… eighteen different samples of semen. Eighteen."

Greg drummed his fingers on the side of his mug, thinking.

"So she's not the only prostitute using that yard," he said.

"She's - … what, sorry? She was on the game? How do you know?"

"Oh - well," said Greg, looking down into his coffee. "The boots… the things she was carrying. Phone, but no make-up. No knickers in January. Makes sense, when you add it all together."

Luke shook his head slowly. "I definitely picked right with firearms," he said. "You CID lot are so switched on. I don't know how you do it."

Greg lifted the cappuccino to his mouth, covering his expression.

"Have forensics got anything from Emma's body? he asked, and took a drink. "Saliva sample from the bite wounds, maybe?"

"Still waiting," Luke said, with regret. "Told me they'd have something for us by noon, but then they said they were checking something again... some weird result. Contacting a lab in Edinburgh to confirm. Better safe than sorry, I suppose."

Vampire DNA, Greg thought. He made a mental note to ask Mycroft for the medical literature he'd promised. He suspected he was going to need it.

"And have you sorted out any door-knocking?" he asked.

Luke brightened at once, putting down his cappuccino.

"Ah - yeah, now that I have sorted. I got uniform to make you a map of all the buildings nearby and what's in them. The yard itself belongs to a restaurant, who say they keep that door locked all the time - never use the yard - couldn't put anything out there or it got nicked. Tried locking the gate. Someone nicked the lock. That kind of street."

"By any miracle," Greg asked, with a slight smile, "did anyone see or hear anything?"

"Well, most people told uniform all about the gargoyle fight in The Clockwork Lion. They all heard that. And most of them know that particular yard is nowhere good - say they've heard people in it before..."

Luke pulled his wrist-set round, flashing through screens with his fingertip.

"Got a couple of names for you," he said. "People that might have something more to tell a charming Detective Inspector over a cup of tea... nosy neighbour types, you know... I'll wire it over now."

Greg's mouth twisted. "You mean you weren't charming enough at them?"

"I did my best," Luke said, eyes glinting. "Sadly this isn't my area. Leave guns and cars to me, Greg. I'll leave the black-eyed boy charm to you."

"Thanks," he said. "That's my weekend eaten up nicely."

"Nah, just get your sergeant to do it," said Luke, his face full of mischief. He pantomimed sudden horror. "Oops - sorry! Sore subject? I heard all about it this morning in the canteen."

Greg shook his head, raising the coffee cup to his mouth.

"Four," he said. "Four, since I came back to bloody London."

"What exactly have you been doing to them, Greg? Do you make them do your laundry? Clean your car and stuff?"

"No! I just - … God, I don't even know. Apparently I'm just an unbearable DI."

"You should be careful," Luke warned. "Looks like Vickery's scraping an increasingly shallow barrel for you. God knows what sort of maniac you'll be saddled with next."

Greg stared at him for a moment over his half-empty coffee cup. *If only you knew, mate. He didn't think Luke would believe him, even if he told him.*

*Shit,* he thought - what would people be saying in the canteen soon? The King of Hearts versus the dragon from the top of the tower… people would be placing bets. He'd be getting sympathy cards left in his pigeon-hole.

"Are your team usually put to laundry and car-washing, then?" Greg asked, sitting back in his chair. "When they're not ARSing around?"

Luke looked affronted, draining the rest of his coffee with a snort.

"If you think I'd let any of *that* lot near the lovely Mrs Elwood," he said, "brandishing a bucket and sponge, you're having a laugh. *My* tender hands only, thank you."

"How is the Mrs?"

"Having her oil changed tomorrow. She's a high-maintenance lady, but… she's worth it."

Greg couldn't help but smile. "You ever thought about trying an actual relationship, Luke?"

"Done my time with them," Luke said, with a shrug. "More trouble than it's worth, if I remember rightly. It's just me and Serena now. She never lets me down."

As they pulled on their coats and a waitress took away their empty cups, Luke asked,

"What about you, Greg? Ever tested out this rumour that there's more to life?"

Greg huffed; his thoughts strayed to Jason. He pushed them away.

"More trouble than it's worth," he agreed. "I've been there a few times… given it a chance. Never plays out."

And he found his thoughts straying now to Mycroft - the wrist-set number, the pocket-watch on the bedside table - lighting a cigarette from Greg's lighter. *I will ruin you.*
"People are never easy," Greg concluded. "I can't work them out."


That evening, with the leftovers of a lamb casserole boxed up for lunch, Greg took to his sofa with a tablet screen, his wrist-set and half a pack of caramel squares. Luke had wired him a huge amount of data - the first step was sifting through it for actual information.

He surrounded himself with hard-light screens and windows, names and statements and Missing Persons reports, forensics SOC findings and maps, dragging them through the air as he sorted through the virtual pile. Within an hour, the caramel squares had been dealt with and the first lines of inquiry were clear - speak to the neighbours and see what they'd heard; find the other girls who worked this part of town, and see if they'd met anyone interesting lately; chase up Missing Persons; get the phone cracked.

And that last one, he could sort straightaway.

As his wrist-set bleeped a quiet eleven PM, Greg opened up his contacts book. He flipped through it for 'C', found the entry, and hit call.

"Comms 4," came a voice that made him smile. "You're through to TJ. Let's hear it."

"Alright, fuzzball?" he said. "It's me. Just checking how you are."

"Your Majesty!" said TJ. "What an honour. Two secs, I'll call you back. Don't want to screw up my incoming call times."

The line cut out. Greg brushed the crumbs off his jumper, removed a small smudge of chocolate from his thumb, and set about dragging hard-light windows into the correct new folders on his tablet screen as he waited. Each vanished into the device with a swish and a small flash.

His wrist-set began to shiver on the coffee table.

"Answer," he told it, in his wrist-set voice. It took a lot of practice to master. Two hundred years, and Voice Recognition Technology was still crap. There came a small crackle over the line. "So," he said, "how're you feeling?"

"I'm fine, thanks," said TJ's voice. "Vickery said she'd get me a week off if I wanted, but… well, I've got things to do here. I'm kinda touched you're checking on me, to be honest."

"It's not everyday you have to look at something like that… I knew you'd be alright, TJ. Just wanted to make sure. Did Maisie manage fine on her own?"

"Yeah, like a star… bad news for me. She knows I'm expendable now."

"That's not true," Greg said, with a grin, as he scattered a window he didn't need. It vanished into blue dust in the air, each speck of light winking away into darkness. "I bet she's glad to have you back. We all are."

"Shucks, Lestrade… I've come over all bashful. Only out of the game one night. Did Vickery let you on the case?"
"Yeah, she did. Just getting my facts together now. Listen… about that… I've got a favour to ask."

"Oh, boy. This sounds good."

"You still do phones, right?" Greg said. "Hardware? Hobby of yours, if I'm right. Lucrative, too."

"I do." He heard TJ shift in his chair with a squeak. "Why?"

"I might have something for you to get your teeth into. I need a phone cracking."

TJ paused. "I do believe, Inspector Lestrade," he said, with theatrical discretion, "that we have a dedicated Tech department here at Scotland Yard, who can assist you with all your case requirements within the confines of our current UK legal system."

"I need it done fast," Greg said, settling back into the sofa with a raised eyebrow.

"Hrrmm… I bet." TJ thought for a moment; Greg heard him unwrapping something with a crinkle. "Can lead to problems later in court. Gets grubby."

"If I happened just to guess her passcode, it wouldn't. That'd be a happy stroke of luck. Besides, she's not exactly going to sue me for breach of privacy, is she? I saw her internal organs, TJ. She won't care if I see her address book, 'specially if it means I can find her kids."

"What kind of phone is it?" TJ asked.

Greg hesitated, reached for a forensics report he'd consigned to the end of the sofa. He dragged the hard-light square over, pulled it larger and scanned quickly through the text.

"It's a… Kimura X Series," he read. "212."

"Ooh, a 212? Vintage. Those are like six years old."

"Can you do it?" Greg asked, biting his bottom lip.

"Ah… get it to me, and I'll take a look…. no promises. Some of those old Kimuras burn their contents if you're heavy-handed with them on the wrong settings."

"You're a legend, TJ. Thanks."

"No promises," TJ said again. "But I'll have a look - for you. Royal decree and all that."

"How much are we talking?"

"Ah… let me quote you something when I've got the thing in my hands. Mates' rates."

"You star. Right, TJ… I'll let you get on. Hope it's a quiet night for you."

"Yeah, should be. Quieter than the last shift at least. You out on patrol?"

"Not tonight," said Greg. He moved the tablet screen away to the coffee table, stretching out the crick that was forming in his shoulder blades. "Good night's sleep for once, I think."

"Nights? Sleep?"

"Ha. Sorry, I forgot."

"I suppose without a sergeant, you'll be excused from patrols now, won't you?" TJ said. "Who
knew some good could come of the loss of your beloved Darling? Now get off the line, Lestrade. You're blocking my calls. Thanks for checking on me."


The line cut out. Greg rubbed the back of his neck, tired, as quiet settled over the flat around him. He closed the last few light screens, took his wrist-set from the coffee table, and padded off for a shower before bed.

He was just settling under the covers as his wrist-set lit up on the bedside cabinet.

He reached for the wrist-set, flipped it to face him and squinted at the notification he'd just received.

NEW CONTACT REQUEST FROM:
MYCROFT HOLMES

Greg lifted his eyebrows. He glanced at the top of the screen - nearly midnight.

He wondered where Mycroft was - what he was doing. Thinking about Greg, it seemed; at least in part.

Greg pressed 'ACCEPT', laying his head back down to the pillow.

He spent five minutes trying to sleep before he admitted defeat and let curiosity overcome him. He reached for the wrist-set, rolled into his back with a sigh, and loaded up Mycroft's social profile.

Hundreds of contacts - which initially startled Greg, until he realised almost of them belonged to the Group tagged 'Professional'.

'Family' was followed by a blunt, bleak '0'.

With the very tip of his tongue poking from his lips, Greg scrolled through Mycroft's newsfeed.

There were no personal updates - no photos - no news - very little, in fact, until Greg hit 30th November last year.

I will not be available today. Please direct any urgent matters to my team.

Sick day? Greg thought. Flu had burned its way through Scotland Yard in the run-up to Christmas. He had a brief vision of Mycroft miserably bundled up in bed, surrounded by crumpled tissues and watching daytime TV with a scowl. It made the corners of Greg's mouth lift irresistibly upwards.

He continued scrolling, flashing past automatic notifications of new contacts, a few professional queries, and no more - until another November flashed up, and another status update.
Please note that I will be not be in the office today, and unable to answer any messages.
My team will deal with any urgent matters.

Greg checked the date.

It was posted on the 30th November.

Greg's brow furrowed in the dark. Weird, he thought. He hadn't spent this long as a detective to miss the sensation that he'd hit upon something. He pushed the thought aside, and out of interest switched to Mycroft's professional history.

There it was - Greater London Police: Head of Criminal Psychology. He'd been doing it nine years. Before then, the entry read, Greater London Police: Cross-Human Relations: Detective Inspector. Curious, Greg tapped on it.

A social update from that year popped up in one corner - a photograph.

Greg's smile split immediately into a grin.

The photo showed Mycroft, probably no more than thirty, topped with a party hat and seated before a sizeable cake. He was surrounded by what must have been his old CID team, his face crumpled in reluctant amusement. The cake was iced with wobbly writing: CONGRATULATIONS DI HOLMES!!! The missing R had been squeezed in above.

Greg wondered how the hell Mycroft had made it to DI at such a startlingly young age - then reminded himself of everything he knew about Mycroft Holmes, and realised it wasn't all that much of a surprise.

Mycroft wasn't tagged in the photo - but he'd commented below it, locking it unknowingly to his profile.

Thank you all for celebrating my professional achievement by making me look like an idiot. Untag me this instant. I'm a big deal now. :P

For some reason, the tongue emoticon made Greg's stomach swoop. He found himself grinning, his heart thumping a little. His thumb tapped 'Like' before his brain could stop him.

He then noticed the date on the photo - and nearly threw up.

"Oh - bollocks...!" he gasped. He smashed 'Unlike' - but the damage was done. "Oh, God - you bloody idiot, Lestrade..."

He clasped the wrist-set to his face in despair.

He'd just liked a photograph fifteen years deep into Mycroft's profile.
The facial scan that grinned from the contact card had been taken in happier times. There was a brightness to Lestrade's dark eyes and an ease to his smile - gently-sloped - that didn't seem in much evidence these days. It quietened Mycroft's heart as he surveyed the image, his impassive grey eyes trailing the features of the man who was now to be his CID partner.

That jaw.

He breathed in, slowly.

That bloody jaw.

If the gods themselves had put together a human male for the sole purpose of tormenting him, they would not have exceeded Mother Nature's attempt - Detective Inspector Gregory James Lestrade.

The man was a masterpiece. Worse, he hadn't the faintest clue. Those eyes - dark as pitch, flashing with fire, full of every single thing that ever crossed the man's heart - every spark of anger, every swoop of joy - those ardent, honest eyes. Greg didn't have a breath of the arrogance that usually came with good looks. He was just getting on with his life - easy and open-hearted, and as handsome as hell. His nose, his mouth... his wretched jaw. Even clean-shaven for his facial scan, the man had the faintest shadow of stubble - and it was going to destroy Mycroft's life. It evoked in him a longing that he hated more than he cared to contemplate.

That grin.

That easy, puppyish grin.

Gregory Lestrade was the sort of man who'd pull you out of bed to bake in your underwear. He looked like he'd lie with you in long grass somewhere all summer, and he'd have brought a frisbee - and he'd be good at it. He looked like he'd consider it a matter of personal honour that you never fell to sleep without the tender ministrations of his hands.

'King of Hearts', they called him.

Most of Administration no longer spoke to each other because of Greg Lestrade. He hadn't a clue. Heads turned when he passed through Reception in that coat - in that clean white shirt - the black leather gloves he wore in winter. There were people at Scotland Yard who were openly willing to commit murder if it secured them the attentions of Lestrade.

Attentions that Mycroft had once secured for himself - that one impossible night.

Heaven help me, Mycroft thought, watching Greg's contact details revolve in the air.

It still startled him that he'd said yes.

Unthinkable - to take up an offer of sex from a handsome stranger he'd just encountered in a train station. It still sounded like madness a long year later.

But it had been nice to feel wanted.

To feel normal for a while.

For years, all he'd had was Scotland Yard. Scotland Yard, and his books, and his fish. They were enough for him. They always had been, and they always would be - his life was quiet, but it was safe - it was what he'd chosen.
It was what he deserved.

Then along came Lestrade.

Sex - with a man he liked. Hands on his skin. A voice, husked, breathing small softnesses to him in the dark. He'd thought those things were gone - long gone.

It had been nice to feel like everyone else for a while. Happy, and normal, and human.

The young ladies in Administration would claw Mycroft's eyes from his skull if they knew. He thought about that rather often.

He'd nearly died that morning as the lift opened.

His fragile indiscretion, suddenly standing there in Scotland Yard - next to Amelia, of all people. The living, walking proof that he'd been lonely - that he still wanted things like that - that his books weren't enough, and his fish weren't enough, and his career kept him occupied but not warm at night.

And now they were going to work together.

It was not going to end well.

That, Mycroft knew beyond doubt. Lestrade was going to be his downfall, and losing Head of Department was only the start of it. He could feel it. He didn't know the details yet - only Heaven knew those - but it was all about to begin.

And if it were true - if Excultus were poised to return...

It didn't bear thinking about. It made him feel sick to the soul.

It was why he was here tonight - to stop thinking, and to stop feeling sick.

He hit 'Request' before he could think another thing, closed his contacts and concealed his wrist-set back beneath his sleeve.

As he did, the door into the room opened. A young man of nearly half Mycroft's age let himself into the dingy space.

He gave Mycroft a shy smile, shut the door with a nudge of his hips, and said,

"So... Mandy says you're new?"

He was a half-elf; the midnight-blue hair was genetic. In a glance Mycroft registered the undergraduate studies, the nail-biting habit - and the long-healed self-harm scars at his wrists. No obvious signs of drug use.

"I am new." Mycroft taken a seat in a chair to wait, pointedly not on the rather worn-down bed. "Might I ask how old you are?"

The half-elf smiled, glancing down beneath his long eyelashes. "Twenty-four. I know I look young."

It was the truth - and at least it started with a 'two', Mycroft thought.

"Mandy - said you asked for 'human or very close'," the young man broached, gently. "Will I do?
I'm half and half, but... everyone else is busy right now. You can wait, if you'd rather...

Like he was a commodity, Mycroft thought - hating himself for a moment to the point of not breathing - as if the young man were a product to be deemed acceptable or not, then made use of or discarded as appropriate. His chest heaved with the misery of it.

Part of him dearly longed to leave - but more of him knew he'd only be back the next night. The thought wouldn't go, now that he'd entertained it. This had to happen, no matter how much he hated it.

He felt his wrist-set vibrate as a non-urgent notification arrived. He ignored it.

"May I ask your name?" he said to the young man.

The half-elf paused just a fraction too long. "Robin."

It was a lie - but in no circumstances would Mycroft be taking that shield away from him.

"Robin," he said. "I'm going to estimate your month's rent as eight hundred pounds... am I correct?"

The young man's eyes flickered with unease. He said nothing, his body tightening slightly in the instinctive response that said he'd sensed a predator. Mycroft wondered how many horrifying incidents it had taken before that particular response had been learned. Probably just the one.

"I don't wish you to remove a single stitch of clothing," Mycroft said, at once. "Nor do I wish you to remove any of mine."

The unease deepened to serious concern.

"I don't do - specialist stuff," the young man said, stiffly.

"Five minutes," Mycroft said, "for eight hundred pounds." He watched the young man's eyes widen in distress and desperation, his mouth opening a little. "You'll leave this room happy, healthy and calm - I promise. I'm willing to pay you in full in advance."

The boy wrestled with it for a moment, his slim chest rising and falling deeply.

"What - do you want?" he said.

Mycroft was aware, halfway through, of his damn wrist-set vibrating again - three times in fairly short succession. Whoever was so ardently trying to contact him at midnight, he hoped they were in serious and urgent distress. It was difficult enough to concentrate as it was.

Robin didn't notice the wrist-set.

He didn't notice much.

"I won't charge," he begged in Mycroft's ear, twisting against his hold, panting so hard he was shaking. "Please - please, please - we'll d-do whatever - h- holy s-s-shit, please - ..."

Sometimes, when his black humour exceeded his vicious self-loathing, Mycroft told himself he was doing a kindness for the next man to be told to wait in this room. Whoever it was, he would find himself in possession of the most enthusiastic rent-boy in London.

The young man took some coaxing to calm down. He wasn't one of the worst, not by a long shot - and the sight of the eight-hundred-pound bank transfer shocked him enough to clear his thoughts.
Mycroft took the chance to impart to him some basic medical care, thanked him for his time, and swiftly left.

As he walked home, the night air grew colder, cleaner and sharper around him. Every breath drew the coldness deeper into his lungs. Lights soon blazed and streamed with every step; the whole world seemed to slow. Every establishment serving food that he passed, he tasted their speciality in the air - onions, fried chicken, garlic - it made his stomach turn, made his mouth prickle. Perfumes, shower gels and laundry detergents wafted past him in abundance, fragrant clouds trailing after their people. He soon caught gasps of music from passing earphones. Bricks in the walls had roughened; people's coats had softened, thickened. The underground, miles below, thrummed gently to him from the city's depths.

He never hated himself more than in these moments.

He never felt lonelier.

As the porter let him into the building, it reoccurred to Mycroft that someone had been trying to contact him.

He checked his wrist-set as he walked up the stairs to his apartment, wondering if the Kuslanovs in Apartment 2 were aware that one of their staff had taken to marijuana. The entire floor reeked of it.

11:57 Notification:
GREG LESTRADE has accepted your contact request.

12:19 Notification:
GREG LESTRADE has Liked a photo of you from 1st August 2202.

Mycroft's eyebrows nearly reached his hairline.

You have three new messages from GREG LESTRADE.

"Open," he told the device, startled. The first message popped into place.

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE

Hello. Bit awkward. I was looking for your work number to put in my quick contacts and I might have accidentally "liked" an old photo of yours. Damn wristset screen needs a service. Please don't think I'm researching you. Lestrade.

"Next message," Mycroft said, bewildered, stopping in his tracks halfway along the landing.
NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE

God help me Meggers. I was just nosing through a guy at work's profile and liked a photo of him from fifteen fucking years ago. Should be noon there for you (one AM here) so just thought I'd update you that I am still an IDIOT whose life is a HOT MESS :D

How's NZ? Miss you all like crazy. Saw the pics from Christmas. Did your sister and Andrzej actually cop off in the end or did they just stick to eyeshagging? They need to get back together.

I should have just taken the time off and flown out for the month. I'm sorry I turned you down. Case fell through in the end anyway. My pointless sergeant lost the evidence.

Oh by the way she also quit yesterday. So now I am onto SERGEANT NUMBER FIVE since I moved… that is BAD… and YES the new one is the guy I was creeping at and also there is history that I'm not even going into because as we've established MY LIFE IS A HOT MESS.

Write back before I throw myself off the roof.

Greggers. PS not emailed J in three months. Proud of me?

Mycroft took a moment to close his mouth.

He almost wanted to laugh.

"Next message," he said, with a touch of trepidation.

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE

OH HOLY JESUS. That wasn't meant for you!!!

Oh Christ!!!

I'm really REALLY SORRY. That was meant for an old friend out in NZ. Her name is next to yours in my contacts. Oh God I am mortified right now.

Genuinely I am so sorry.

And I am NOT creeping on you. That was a joke.

Jesus jumped up, I am a moron…

Mycroft read the message several times, leaning on the balustrade of the landing.

After the fifth reading, the smallest of smiles lifted the corners of his mouth.

He considered the matter for a moment, then stroked his thumb across 'reply'.
Half an hour into pacing his flat and smoking in despair, Greg's wrist-set lit up on the coffee table. He lunged for it and opened the message without breathing.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

I am not your sergeant.

And just to clarify the matter, yes... your life IS a hot mess.

We will not be discussing this at work tomorrow.

Sincerely, 'Meggers'.

"Bollocks," Greg decided.

He threw his wrist-set onto the sofa, scrubbed a hand through his hair, and ripped open a new pack of cigarettes.
Greg entered the division the next morning to find Dawn gazing boredly at her screen, winding an elastic band around her fingers. She glanced up as he stepped through the door.

Her face opened, her pink eyes flashing wide. She leapt up from Reception at once, hurried round to Greg and hooked her arm through his.

"Morning," he said, confused, as she bundled him quickly into the photocopier room.

She shut the door with a snap.

"Is it true?" she asked, gazing up at him in astonishment.

Greg looked down at her with rising concern.

"Is... what true?" he said, carefully.

"Oh my God!" she gasped. "It's true."

She crossed her hands over her mouth, her expression filling with pity.

"He arrived about an hour ago," she told Greg with a small shiver, as he searched her face in bewilderment. "He started setting up in DCI Stratmann's old office, so I asked him, and he told us... and we just didn't believe it. Nobody's dared to ask Commander Vickery."

The pieces fell into place in Greg's mind. He suppressed a sigh.

"Got here early, did he?" he said. "Did you say Stratmann's old office?"

"He said you're working on something high-level... told us Vickery's allocated you a private workspace. God, Greg. I can't believe it." Her eyes grew huge. "You're Mycroft Holmes's sergeant..."

Greg stared at her for a second.

Maybe he'd misheard.

As he arrived at DCI Stratmann's old corner office, he discovered he had not.

The electronic panel on the door - last night reading 'VACANT' - had now been updated.
"Oi!" he said, jerking open the door. "What's this?"

Mycroft looked around from the bookshelf, startled, holding a thick stack of psychology textbooks in one arm. Today's suit of choice was pale grey with a turquoise tie. He looked astonishingly well-rested, poised and upright - there was colour in his face, and the touch of turquoise made his hair seem redder. It even made it look thicker. In this light, he appeared to have lost five years from his face.

He looked - good.

He looked really good.

Wow, Greg thought, shocked from his annoyance in the space of a second.

Only as Mycroft's face opened with alarm did Greg realise he'd spoken aloud.

"Oh - Jesus!" he said - making things endlessly worse. Mycroft's eyes widened to twice their size. "I meant the office," Greg added, wildly. "It - seems bigger in here than when Stratmann had it. And you've tidied it. Thanks. It looks great. Really great."

He would never quite forget the expression on Mycroft's face.

"You're welcome," Mycroft said, slowly.

Greg took a second to gather his thoughts back together. This was not entirely what he needed right now. Sharing a space with Mycroft was going to be difficult. Sharing a space with him looking like that was going to be even worse.

The business with the door then returned to Greg with a lurch. He did his best to restore his derailed annoyance.

"Right," he said, setting his jaw. "This - on the door. Did you do this?"

"Do what?" Mycroft asked, with a frown, as he returned to placing books upon the shelf.

"The names, Mycroft. The names on the door."

"I had Technical put them there, yes… as it is now our office, and people may need to speak with us… why? What precisely is the matter?"
"This bit," said Greg. "Right here, where you've put your name under 'Inspector' - which you are not - and me down here, under 'Sergeant'. That's the matter."

"The door's programming only permits one inspector's name," Mycroft said, his brow creasing further as he eyed Greg over his armful of books. "And, as I think we established last night, I am not your sergeant..."

Greg flushed darkly. "That doesn't mean I'm yours though, does it?"

Mycroft took a moment to tend to his patience, visibly biting the end of his tongue.

"Lestrade," he said, very seriously. Greg tried hard not to hear it as a purr. "I regret to inform you that I am the senior inspector in this investigation. Therefore, my name takes precedence over yours. I'm sorry if that sits uncomfortably with you."

"Wait... hang on." Greg held up a hand. "I'm the senior DI - because I already work here, Mycroft. You've just transferred. You're new. That means you're reporting to me."

Mycroft's eyes flashed.

"I've been a detective inspector for fifteen years," he said. "And that means -"

"It doesn't count," Greg cut across him, "if most of those years were spent upstairs in Criminal Psychology, writing profiles and drinking tea."

Mycroft bit the side of his tongue, hard. Greg watched the muscles in his cheek work. There was silence for a few moments, in which neither of them moved and neither spoke.

Mycroft then put down the stack of books. He crossed to the office door and closed it, gently. As he turned to stare into Greg's eyes - glacial grey on the darkest brown - barely a foot of space stood between them.

"It is now three minutes past nine," he intoned. "You and I have been partners for one-hundred-and-eighty seconds. Please stop making this so difficult."

Greg bit back a number of immediate responses. He swished his tongue around his mouth.

"I'm a lot of things," he said, at last. "I'm the first to admit to that. But I'm not your damn sergeant."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow, slowly.

"It's a door, Lestrade," he said, his voice as sleek as silk. His expression was almost mocking in its patience. "I suggest you learn to pick your battles... or this will be a long war for you."

For a few moments Greg simply looked into his eyes. As he did, he drew up from the depths of his mind a memory. He ran it lazily through his head, like a video, recalling every perfect detail in all its glory, and he watched Mycroft's pupils slowly dilate as he did so.

"What?" Mycroft said, his coolness cracking a little.

Greg said nothing - just looked at him, remembering. The arch of his neck; the flushed patches across his chest.

"Stop it," Mycroft snarled. He knew exactly what Greg was thinking.
Greg stepped away, the battle won.

"We need to get on," he said. "We've got a murder to solve, and three kids to find. There's no time to be dancing the hokey-cokey with your ego."

He pulled off his coat, tossed it over a chair, and dragged Stratmann's old incident board out from behind the door.

"We'll get this set up first," he said. "Then there's an initial list of Missing Persons from Luke for us to work through, and this afternoon we hit the streets on inquiries. I hope you're wearing comfortable shoes. While I'm doing this, can you get onto Forensics and scare a report on Emma's body out of them, please? Should be right up your street."

As he searched for the incident board's on button, blowing dust out of the vents, he heard Mycroft behind him start speaking into a wrist-set.

"Doctor Harper... it's Mycroft Holmes. Just querying the tardiness of our report for Pembury Road. You've had her for approximately fifty-four hours now. I'd be fascinated to hear what's taking so long."

Doctor Harper, stuttering, explained that she hadn't realised Criminal Psychology were already involved.

"They're not," Mycroft said to her, shortly. "This is Cross-Human Relations CID, and it's my case. I'm now working with Gregory Lestrade. What precisely is the hold-up?"

They'd had an unusual result in the saliva, Doctor Harper explained after a moment's amazement, as Greg set the brightness on the screen. Unusual cross-human DNA. They'd wanted to check it to be sure. She was sorry there'd been a delay in transferring the sample to - ..."It's vampire," Mycroft interrupted her, bluntly, "isn't it?"

She gave a tremulous - but definitive - yes.

"At last," Mycroft said. "Thank you for that. If I could have the rest of your report in slightly meatier chunks, Doctor Harper, and fairly soon, that would be sublime."

He hung up.

Greg found himself uncomfortably impressed. As he booted up the incident board's applications, decisively setting the name of the investigating DI as Greg Lestrade, a second phone call started behind him.

"Stefanie, it's Mycroft... I need the vampire research from the 2204 archive transferred to my wrist-set. All of it, please. Without delay."

"This is what I think," Greg said, an hour later, when all the major details had been dragged into place on the incident board. They'd added the forensic photographs of Emma that had miraculously appeared within five minutes of Mycroft's phone call, and were now standing side-by-side as they looked over the web of information at their disposal. "You said she'd probably used that yard
before... right?"

Mycroft - in his shirt sleeves, biting his thumbnail - gave a short nod.

"She must meet people nearby," Greg said. "Nobody's gonna want to walk halfway across London in the cold for a shag." He tapped at the map in the top-right corner of the screen; it expanded to show them the tight tangle of streets and alleys and courts. "This is her territory, right here. And you said her killer was likely to live locally."

Mycroft pulled a slight face.

"If he's supported by the safety of a group, that radius will expand considerably," he said. "But then, he left the scene with a considerable amount of blood upon his clothing and his face... I doubt he could make use of public transport..."

"Let's go with your gut instinct," Greg said. "Gut instincts are usually right. So - she's working here. He's living here. They won't be strangers in the area. Someone will have seen them both before."

He rested back against the edge of the desk, his eyes roaming the map.

"Nine pubs," he said. "That's on Pembury Road alone... smart place for a prostitute to work."

"It might be fruitful to take her photograph around the bars," said Mycroft.

"Yeah," said Greg. "That's top of the list. And the killer... what sort of person should we be keeping our eyes open for? This is profiling - this is your gig. So go ahead and dazzle me."

Mycroft collated his thoughts for a moment, folding his arms across his chest.

"Young," he said at last. "Not particularly bright, likeable or emotionally secure, but not a frightening person. She agreed to take him somewhere secluded, after all. Likely bullied at school. Not brand new to the business of prostitutes. She probably resembled his mother far more than he'd appreciate having pointed out to him. General attitude that women owe a nice boy like him their attention."

"Seriously? A 'nice boy'?"

"As he sees it. He's been pushed to this, so he believes. He has been cruelly ignored. Now nobody can ignore him."

Mycroft pushed his tongue into his cheek, thinking.

"Issues of sexual self-esteem aren't uncommon in vampires... but in this case I believe they predate his transformation by some years. Probably started with puberty."

Greg wondered why issues of sexual self-esteem would be common in vampires - he didn't dare ask.

"When did this transformation happen?" he asked. "You're talking like it was recently."

"I'd guess six months, no more. Perhaps much less. Those wounds were... juvenile, even accounting for his nervousness."

Greg's stomach gripped slightly. "Okay," he said. "Next big question - how? You said that virus is kept under lock and key."
"So it should be," Mycroft murmured. "Apparently this is no longer the case... I imagine the virus vaults need to make a very swift evaluation of their security systems..."

"Because - and listen, don't freak out - but unless you're suggesting a loser who couldn't get himself a girlfriend somehow infiltrated a top security government vault, stole a virus that the world has been keeping on lockdown for a decade, managed to infect himself without dying, and is now stalking the streets looking for prostitutes to punish, there's at least one other person involved in this. Someone with the power to do all that."

Mycroft bit at his thumbnail again.

"How this has happened is important," he decided, after a moment. "But perhaps you and I should be dealing with the more immediate consequences, rather than speculating on their origins. Amelia will be well placed to rattle cages at the virus vaults. We know there is a single violent vampire at large. That is quite enough for us to be getting on with."

"Right," said Greg. "Agreed. I'll ask the commander to hammer the vaults. Meanwhile, you and I will take a picture of Emma around Pembury Road - and the sigil as well, see if anyone recognises it. We'll check for CCTV. See what we can root out."

"Mm, agreed."

There was a pause, as they realised an important milestone had just been reached. They risked a sideways glance at each other.

*God,* Greg thought. *What had happened* to Mycroft last night? The man looked as if he'd spent two weeks staying somewhere five-star. His eyes were like grey silk. Greg wondered, with an unhappy flutter in his stomach, if maybe he'd gotten laid.

Mycroft frowned at him, reading his expression with unease.

"Have I something on my face?" he enquired. "Stop staring at me."

"I'm not *staring* at you," Greg muttered. "I'm looking at you. And you looked at me first, so..."

Mycroft was unconvinced. "Well, don't," he said.

"Don't what?"

"Don't look at me."

"What," said Greg, "ever?"

"As little as possible," Mycroft muttered, his brow crumpling.

Greg found a strange smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. He didn't know what it was. He couldn't help it, either.

"What now?" Mycroft asked him, exasperated.

Greg shook his head, still smiling. He didn't think he could explain it, even if he knew.

"C'mon," he said. "That's the board done… d'you want to chew through the forensics report, or start on Missing Persons?"

Mycroft opted for Forensics. Greg pulled a second chair into the office, booted up an external
comms screen and sat at the opposite end of the desk to Mycroft. They worked without speaking for another hour.

Greg tried not to notice that Mycroft chewed pens when he was reading.

Mycroft tried not to notice him noticing.

"Did you get some lunch?" Greg asked, finishing a cigarette as they met in the underground staff car park not long after one.

"Yes, thank you…" Mycroft said. He let himself in through the passenger door and sat down, pulling off his gloves. "I hope you realise I shan't be taking notes in a little book beside you."

Greg smiled, peering in at him through the open driver's side door, the cigarette still smoking between his fingers. "You're asking the questions then, are you?"

Mycroft treated him to a small frown.

"If there are things I wish to know," he said, "yes. As is my prerogative as a DI."

Greg smiled around the final drag of his cigarette, crushed it underfoot, and got in.

Mycroft had taken a revolver from the pocket of his coat. He was loading it in his lap, sliding bullets into the cylinder with the casual deftness that was a hallmark of professional training. Greg had seen Luke Elwood load the magazine of a SIG Sauer P819 without putting down his bacon sandwich. It was a marvel to behold.

"Is there something I should know?" he asked Mycroft, amused, as he slammed the door and started up the engine.

"No," Mycroft replied, absently. "Except that one should always be prepared."

"Are you planning a violent shoot-out for our initial inquiries? Because that sounds fun, but... it's Friday. I kinda hoped I'd live to see the weekend."

"You assume I was going to shoot you?" Mycroft remarked, with interest, as Greg pulled across the car park towards the security barriers.

"C'mon, Mycroft. We both know that the second things kicked off, you'd drop me before anyone had a chance to blink... you wouldn't even bother shooting anyone else. I'd have a bullet between the eyes before I could even cry 'foul', and you'd tell Vickery that I leapt in front of the gun like a madman. So ends the heroic career of DI Greg Lestrade."

He leant out of the car to press his wrist-set to the scanner, wincing as he stretched.

"Frankly," he added, as the scanner bleeped to allow their exit, "the fact that you've now loaded the thing is the clearest sign of premeditated murder I've ever seen. And I'm in CID."

"Would you care to check my safety catch?" Mycroft offered, presenting the revolver to him, hooked by its trigger around one finger.
Boy, would I? Greg bit the tip of his tongue, told himself to behave, and drove out beneath the rising barrier.

"It's alright," he told Mycroft, idly. "Just hit me between the shoulder blades when I'm least expecting it. S'easier that way. Gives me something to look forward to."

"Have it your way," Mycroft said, easing the gun away inside his coat. He then frowned, reached beneath the seat, and slid it a considerable distance backwards to accommodate the graceful stretch of his legs.

"What manner of short-legged creature was in this car before me?" he asked Greg, bewildered. "Oh, God," Greg muttered, remembering. "Darling was."

Mycroft gave him a startled look.

"Sergeant Darling," Greg said, with a sideways flash of his eyes, as they headed along Victoria Embankment. The lunchtime rush was over now - it would be plain sailing all the way to Hackney. He reached for the radio. "Lindsey Darling… number four. Only lasted three weeks before I broke her brain. New bloody record."

A cheerful piece of the latest pop broke out from the radio. Greg turned it down a little, suspecting Mycroft wasn't a pop music person.

"Barely worth her adjusting the seat," he said, almost to himself.

"Mm… I'd heard that you're cursed," Mycroft remarked. "It's rather brave of me to sit beside you, if the stories are true."

"Cursed?" Greg shook his head in despair, staring at the road over the wheel. "Jesus. It's not my fault they all just up and left. And nobody will believe me. I'm a perfectly good DI."

"Didn't one of them have to go to India to find himself?"

"You say that like I did something to him. Sergeant Duff just wanted to go to India - and he… Christ, stop laughing, will you? That's the last thing I need. A psychologist, laughing at me."

"Surely I'm not the first."

"Oh, thanks! Thanks for that. Next set of traffic lights - just so you know? - I'm shoving you out. So just brace yourself."

"How courteous of you to warn me," Mycroft remarked, pleased, crossing one leg over the other.

"Do people not normally warn you when they shove you from a moving vehicle?" Greg asked, glancing up at him in the rear view mirror. Mycroft had his face turned towards the window, watching the buildings that passed by.

There was a smile toying about his mouth.

"No," he replied, amused. "It seems you're a modern gentleman, Lestrade."

"Maybe that's the secret," Greg said. He could feel something fluttering eagerly in his chest - something small and bright. "The four of them couldn't cope with my chivalry. Opening doors,
fetching them coffee. Warning them before I turf them out of the car for their cheek. They didn't know how to handle it.

"Well, it's been…" Mycroft checked his pocket-watch, surprised. "... four hours, including lunch, and I'm already contemplating a lengthy pilgrimage to Tibet."

"Or murdering me."

"Or murdering you, which goes without saying… though, of course, it won't be murder if you're caught in a hail of accidental gunfire while we attend a speeding incident, Lestrade. That will simply be unfortunate."

They were approaching traffic lights. As they joined the end of the queue, Greg took a sly glance sideways.

He found Mycroft smirking at him with visible apprehension.

Greg raised both eyebrows.

"Stop looking at me," he warned, mock-serious. "We've talked about this."

The blue-grey eyes lit up from within. Mycroft looked away, visibly biting down on his tongue, and the traffic set off.

Whatever had happened to Mycroft last night, Greg thought, he hoped it happened to him again soon.

They arrived at Pembury Road thirty minutes later.

"Right," Greg said, as he parked the car. "Let's do this. I've got a list of people that Luke reckoned might have something for us. We'll start at the top and work down. You'll be back up to Floor Fifteen by Monday."
The first name on Luke's list was a Mrs Sanders, whose first floor flat overlooked the alleyway into the yard. Luke had noted beside her name: Professional curtain twitcher. Was up because of brawl at clockwork lion. Makes crap tea. Her door was squeezed between the drop-in centre for alcoholics and an off-licence, and it had the only step on the street that had recently been scrubbed.

As they approached, Greg couldn't help but enjoy the presence of Mycroft Holmes at his back. The man looked the part, if nothing else - gloves, a proper coat and a frown. Sergeant Darling had always looked like inquiries were keeping her from something that actually mattered, like sitting down - or sighing - or telling Greg in her pained voice that his shoes were in need of a polish.

Greg knocked smartly on Mrs Sanders' door, stood back, and waited.

There was no answer.

He glanced at Mycroft, tried a good ring of the bell, and waited a little longer.

At last, just as he was about to call this a poor start to the investigation, the letterbox opened with a snap and he jumped.

"Yes?" came the sharp enquiry through the gap.

"Mrs Sanders?" Greg checked.

"I don't want any," she barked, and the letter box shut.

Mycroft quickly smothered a smirk. Greg pushed his tongue into his cheek, and knocked again.

The flap reopened.

"What?" came the voice. "What in pity's name is it? I'm dusting."

"Mrs Sanders, my name's Detective Inspector Lestrade," he told the letter box. "I'm here with my sergeant, DS Holmes."

Greg felt the temperature around him suddenly drop ten degrees. He bit down on his smile, keeping it out of his voice.

"I hoped we could ask you about the early morning of Wednesday 14th," he said. "I understand
you might have something to tell me."

The flap clicked shut.

As there came the sound of many bolts being drawn, and many rattling security chains, Mycroft slid a discreet step closer to Greg.

"What exactly do you think you're doing?" he asked, his voice dangerously low. His breath ghosted over Greg's neck as he spoke. "I am not your sergeant."

Greg inclined his head back over his shoulder, treating Mycroft to a look of bemused patience.

"It's a door, Mycroft," he murmured. His eyes gleamed. "Pick your battles."

Before Mycroft's livid expression could form a response, the door creaked open.

Mrs Sanders appeared in the gap - suspicious, beady-eyed, and nearly half Greg's height. There was a lot of bristly hair sprouting from her chin and her nose. Greg wondered why Luke had neglected to mention she was a halfling.

"Police?" she said.

Greg activated the credentials module on his wrist-set. She grabbed the square of hard-light in her small, claw-like hands, dragged it closer and peered at it for quite some time, examining every detail.

"Fine," she said at last, begrudgingly. "You can come in."

The credentials of Greg's sergeant apparently needed no such check. Greg was - after all - the boss.

He stepped graciously into the narrow hallway and followed Mrs Sanders up the stairs, keenly aware of Mycroft seething behind him.

He suspected he was going to pay for that later. It would be entirely worth it.

Mrs Sanders made them a crap cup of tea, which Greg politely drank and Mycroft merely held as they sat in comically tiny chairs in her lounge.

She told them that the area had been going to pot for years - she'd known it was the beginning of the end when a half-orc family moved in two doors down. Where half-orcs appeared, she told Greg ominously, *Trouble* - with a capital T - swiftly followed. It had only been a matter of time before they found someone dead in that yard... and had Greg ascertained where all the half-orc family were that night? Greg promised her he'd check, while making a mental note that he'd do no such thing.

"I've been told you were up that night, Mrs Sanders," he said. "Did you happen to hear anything down in the yard?"

"Oh, I heard plenty," the little woman said, disgruntled. "Far too much, inspector. As always. Even if I'd not been woken by all the shouting and yelling earlier from that dreadful pub, I'd still have been disturbed."

"Oh yeah?"

"I've told the police several times now... and nothing's been done about it. Women. Using that yard for filth."
"Filth?" Greg said. He raised an eyebrow. "Are we talking about... professional filth, by any chance?"

Her eyes narrowed with distaste, holding the teapot in both hands as she poured herself another cup of tea.

"This was a nice area, once..." she muttered. She glanced at Greg's empty cup. "Here, inspector. Pass me that."

Greg winced inwardly as she poured him out some more tea. It came from the spout an insipid grey. Greg wasn't sure how you could even make tea turn grey. Mrs Sanders handed him the tiny cup, then shot a little frown at Mycroft.

"Not even touched yours," she remarked, affronted.

Mycroft gave Greg a helpless look across the lounge. Greg lifted his second cup to his mouth, holding Mycroft's eyes.

"Drink your tea, sergeant," he murmured.

Mycroft's expression worked. Mrs Sanders didn't notice, busy negotiating her sizeable feet into slippers.

"So you heard...?" Greg prompted her, discreetly, and Mrs Sanders gave a snort.

"Oh, I heard," she said. "And not the first time. Carrying on out there like animals."

"What time was this?" Greg asked.

"Just before three," she said. She started looking around her chair for something, muttering. "Where the devil have I put - ...? Oh, for pity's sake... I only had them on a second ago..."

From the corner of his eye, Greg noticed Mycroft quietly leaning back in his chair. He was extending a hand to the window behind him, silently opening the clasp.

"Just before three, Mrs Sanders?" Greg said, eyeing Mycroft with restrained concern. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes..." she muttered, distracted. "I looked at my clock... my mantelpiece clock..."

"How long before three, can I ask?"

"Just a few minutes before," she said, impatiently. "Give me a moment, please inspector... I can't find my blessed glasses..."

They were on her head. As she bent down to search in the magazine rack, Mycroft nudged open the window and deftly emptied his cup of tea through the gap.

Greg pushed a hand across his mouth, frowning hard to smother his expression.

"Oh!" Mrs Sanders cried, annoyed, as the glasses slipped free of her hair and butted her on the nose. "Why didn't you say something, inspector? I'd have been searching for hours!"

"Sorry, Mrs Sanders. I thought you were looking for different glasses."

"I've only got one pair!" she told Greg, as if he should be well aware.
"Right," he said. "Well, the morning of the 14th… you said at three o'clock - "

"Yes, inspector. At three o'clock, I heard one of those dreadful women down in the yard below with one of their dreadful men. She was making a good fuss of it, too."

"A... good fuss…?"

Mrs Sanders bit her tongue. "She was loud."

"Right…” Greg wasn't quite sure how to phrase this to an old lady. "Mrs Sanders, did she... in fact sound like she was being murdered?"

Mrs Sanders eyed him, unsettled. "No," was her decisive answer.

"Did she sound - in pain, or - "...

"Detective Inspector," said Mrs Sanders. "I have six children. They might never visit, but I produced all six of them. I know what a woman having an orgasm sounds like."

"Right…” said Greg, resisting the urge to cover his face. "Thanks for that." He was quickly starting to discount the testimony of Mrs Sanders. She'd mistaken the time - it was the only possible explanation. At three AM, Emma was being murdered in that yard. Whatever Mrs Sanders had heard, it wasn't that. "Did you notice anything else we should know about, before we go?"

"No… it all went quiet, once they'd had their fun. Until of course the police arrived."

"Did you happen to look out of the window?"

Mrs Sanders gave him an appalled expression. "I have to put up with hearing it several nights a week, inspector. I don't want to see it as well."

"Okay." Greg reached for his wrist-set, loading up the image files he'd prepared. "One last thing, then we'll let you get on with your dusting... do you recognise this woman?"

Mrs Sanders squinted at Emma's flickering portrait, hovering in the air above her coffee table.

"No," she decided, firmly. "Is that the one who was killed?"

Greg felt his chest twinge. "Yes. That's her."

"Hmm…” droned Mrs Sanders. "She looks the type."

Greg loaded up the next image file, carefully masking his expression. "Have you seen this symbol anywhere?"

Mrs Sanders squinted at the Excultus sigil with vague displeasure.

"Looks like a sort of pitchfork," she said.

"Yeah, it does… but have you seen it anywhere?"

"No," she said, with narrowed eyes. Her nose twitched.

"Right," Greg said, despairing inwardly. "Thanks for your help, Mrs Sanders... we'll be on our way now."
"Well, that was a bloody waste of time..." he muttered, once Mrs Sanders had ejected them onto the street and slammed the door behind them. "So much for Inspector Arse. Didn't even check the old girl was awake at the right time."

"I'm... sorry to say that she was," Mycroft remarked, coolly.

Greg stopped, turning to look back at him. He searched Mycroft's face.

"She can't have been," he said with a frown, as the traffic rumbled by. "She didn't hear Emma being killed. She heard someone else, earlier in the night. The timings don't add up."

Mycroft said nothing for a moment, his expression oddly closed.

"Have you read the medical literature I sent you yet?" he asked.

Greg raised an eyebrow. "Not yet. S'waiting for me on my wrist-set. Why?"

"Read it," Mycroft advised, "when you've time."

Greg paused. A strange, tight prickle crept its way up through his chest. "What are you telling me?" he asked. "She - ... d'you mean - that was what the old lady heard? She heard the murder? Then why did it sound like - "

Mycroft moved the words around his mouth for a moment.

"What Mrs Sanders heard doesn't actually augment the picture," he said in the end. "We knew all of it already. If she'd brought herself to look outside, she might have - "

"Whoa," said Greg. "Stop. I'm not being led away from this." He braced himself to hear something he suspected he didn't want to. "Why did - Emma sound - ...?"

Mycroft, too, visibly braced himself.

"It's... called PT-309," he said, at last. "One of the chemical components of vampiric saliva."

"PT-309," Greg said. He could feel cold spreading across the back of his neck. "And what does that do?"

Mycroft raised an eyebrow, saying nothing.

Greg breathed out slowly.

"Right," he said. "So you're telling me there's - an aphrodisiac? In the saliva."

"A potent one."

"A potent one?"

"Incredibly. Lab-created to stimulate sexual response."

"And it gets into the bloodstream via - ..." Nausea roiled up in Greg's stomach, cold and awful. "So - as he killed her, she - ..."
"Christ."

He took a moment to steady himself, pushing his hands deep into his pockets.

"Fine," he said, breathing it out. "Okay. The old girl heard the murder, then. But it - doesn't tell us anything new - like you say. So… let's just get on with the list...."

"Are you alright?" Mycroft asked, regarding him closely.

Greg avoided his eyes.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he muttered. It wasn't an answer, and he knew it. He just didn't want to think about it. Not only had the bastard killed her, he'd forced her to like it. Jesus.

And someone had designed it all to be this way - some team in a lab, decades ago, had combed through a list of chemicals, circled that one and said, "Yeah, the aphrodisiac. Put that in. Why not?"

"I hate our species sometimes," Greg decided at last, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck.

Mycroft took a long breath, watching him with a heavy gaze.

"Perhaps we should get on," he suggested.

"Sure," said Greg. He pushed the thoughts out of his head, reaching for his wrist-set. They didn't have time to feel sorry for her now. Pity wouldn't bring her back to her kids. "Let's... keep going with this bloody list."

They spoke to six other nearby residents, all of whom had a broadly similar song to sing. It was a rough area, they all said - it was no wonder to them that a body had finally turned up. Prostitutes were a common sight after dark, especially near that yard. Two of the neighbours thought they maybe recognised Emma - maybe - but it was by no means the definitive 'yes' Greg was looking for.

They'd all heard the brawl in the bar. Most admitted they'd had a cheeky goggle through their curtains as Luke Elwood and his squad arrived in all their leathers with the guns, but had swiftly lost interest once the gargoyles were driven away.

Not one of them had seen the symbol before.

"Perhaps," Mycroft suggested wearily, as they found themselves outside the seventh residence, "we can't rely on the vigilance of the general public to help us with this investigation..."

They stopped for a minute by the mouth of the alley; Greg started looking for cigarettes.

"Yeah... I'm thinking that too," he said, patting down his coat. Seven interviews, he thought, and nothing to show for it. "Unless one of them was specifically keeping watch on the alley, they're not going to know much more than Mrs Sanders... and by that point, all of the fun with the gargoyles was over. Jesus, even I wasn't paying attention anymore..."

"Perhaps bar staff are the better people to show the picture," Mycroft suggested. He declined a
cigarette with a faint frown. "No, thank you. Residents would more likely be tucked up with cocoa and a book by the time that a prostitute was plying her trade..."

For the first time in several hours, a little humour stirred in Greg's chest. He looked up at Mycroft as he placed a cigarette in his mouth.

"It's cocoa then, is it?" he said, snapping his lighter.

Mycroft eyed him. "Excuse me?"

"Well, it's not coffee you drink," Greg said. "And clearly you don't think much of tea either... pitching it out of Mrs Sanders' window. So it's cocoa. Cocoa, a book and lights out at eight."

Mycroft gave him a pained expression.

"You've mistaken me for someone's maiden aunt, Lestrade... I care not for cocoa."

Greg rumbled with amusement around his cigarette, finally getting it to light.

"Fine," he said. "Bars, next. We'll catch them before five o'clock when they get busy."

Mycroft had paused. He was looking at the shop beside them - an electronics dealer. The devices that had top billing in the window were dusty, fairly old, and haphazardly slapped with lurid neon star-shaped price labels, along with a banner proclaiming all items to be 'expertly referbished'.

"What?" Greg asked, blowing smoke.

Mycroft nodded upwards.

There was a CCTV camera skulking on the corner of the building, angled down towards the shop door.

Its line of sight would take in the entrance to the alley.

Greg's eyebrows rose.

"D'you reckon?" he said, blowing smoke.

Mycroft made a quick scan of the surrounding area, squinting at the tops of buildings.

"The best chance, by a long shot," he said. "Their spelling might not be much, but their security might be our much-needed miracle."

"Wouldn't that be a nice easy solution?" said Greg. "Right... let me finish this, and I think we'll go say hi."

The bell tinkled lightly as they entered the shop. Everywhere was crammed with gadgets, keyboards, old consoles and screens, piled up to a precarious height. The distinctive grungy smell of a soldering iron was wafting from the back of the shop.

A moment of silence passed before a man appeared behind the counter - an older gent with a pudgy, soft sort of face, a genial expression and a pair of spectacles wedged at the end of his nose.

"Good day," he said, blinking at them.

Mycroft extended a hand, displaying his credentials with a deft flash of his wrist.
"DI Holmes," he said, as they shook. "My sergeant, Greg Lestrade. Are you the owner of the business?"

Greg looked down at his shoes, half-smiling. He'd deserved that, he thought. 2-1 to Holmes.

"I am," the shopkeeper said, with the round-eyed anxiety that many of his class fell into by instinct when confronted with an officer of the law. "How may I help you, inspector?"

"I was hoping to ask about the camera on the front of your building," Mycroft said. "My colleague and I are investigating the incident of Wednesday morning."

"In the alley," the man said, uneasily.

"Mm. Is this something you're aware of?"

"Oh, well, I… heard something dreadful had happened, of course… and there was a young policeman around that afternoon, asking if I knew anything… I'm afraid I didn't then, and still don't now..." The shopkeeper hesitated, glancing at Greg. "I - heard it was murder, was it?"

"I'm afraid so," said Mycroft, coolly.

The man looked down, rubbing his hands together. "Dreadful," he said. "What people will do to each other. I've had break-ins, of course… hence the camera… in a way I can understand all the thefts. Times are hard, and we all need money to get by... but murder…"

He shivered a little.

"It doesn't seem credible," he finished.

"Is your camera constantly recording?" Mycroft asked.

"Oh - oh, well… I don't know, I'm afraid. It's been a while since I had to use the footage. The storage could have been filled up some time ago… I kept meaning to drag out the ladder and have a look, but you know how it is… the weeks become months..."

Greg's heart sank. It had been worth a try, he thought.

"I don't suppose you'd be so good as to check it for us, would you?" Mycroft asked, undeterred. "If you did happen to have footage of Wednesday morning, it could be vital to our investigation."

"Oh - yes, of course, inspector."

"Excellent." Mycroft reached inside his coat, extracting a white business card and a pen. He leant on the counter, crossed out his Criminal Psychology details with a neat stroke, and jotted in the new number. "If you remember anything else of interest, we'd appreciate you letting us know."

"Yes - yes, I will."

Greg eased forwards, loading the images up on his wrist-set.

"Before we go, sir," he said. "By any chance, do you recognise - "

Emma's photograph - cropped from the chin down - blinked into being as a hard-light square.

The man glanced at it, his expression mild. As his eyes took in what he was seeing, he stiffened from head to foot.
His mouth opened.

"Oh…” he breathed.

Greg's eyebrows lifted slowly. "Do you - know this woman?" he asked.

The shopkeeper swallowed, still staring at Emma's closed eyes. Colour suddenly flooded his face.

Greg didn't need to be a psychologist to know what that expression meant.

"Was it... her?" the shopkeeper asked, his voice a little strangled. "I-In the alley?"

"I'm... getting the feeling you knew her, sir," Greg said.

The man glanced into his eyes, embarrassed, then quickly away. "I'd... met her before, yes."

Greg glanced briefly at Mycroft, who encouraged him silently to continue. Greg chose his words with care. "We've - got good reason to believe she was a prostitute, sir… and with all the discretion that Scotland Yard can promise you… would I be right in saying you have good reason to believe it, too?"

The man said nothing, petrified for a moment.

He then gave the tiniest of nods.

"Did you know her name?" Greg asked, ignoring the quickened thudding of his heart.

"I… knew her as 'Emma'." The man flushed, desperately embarrassed. "I'm afraid I - never knew that much about her. She was, um… outside my shop late one night. I'd forgotten to put the bins out. We got chatting, and… well, I… live alone…"

He looked down at his feet, giving a short dry cough.

"She was very kind," he said. "Very - friendly, and funny."

He glanced up at them. His watery eyes were full of fear.

"Times are hard," he managed, as he swallowed.

"Did Emma tell you anything about herself?" Greg asked, gently. "We're trying to find her family. Any information you can give us will help - anything at all."

"I'm - sorry," the shopkeeper said. He looked it. "I didn't think she'd want me asking about - … well, it didn't seem right."

"It's… okay, sir. We understand."

"God, I - I can't believe that - ... how could someone possibly - …"

The shopkeeper looked down, knotting his shaking hands together.

"Gastrell's," he said, suddenly. His eyes widened. "Gastrell's Bar. She liked to drink there. She - she said the prices are far too high. I know it's not much, but..."

Greg's heart thumped. Gastrell's was just down the street - a bit of a dive, from the outside.

"That's great," he said. "Thanks. That's just what we needed. And you'll get that CCTV looked at
"You have a very good way with people," Mycroft noted, as they left the shop with another vigorous jingling of the bell. "You seem to… bypass their boundaries. They let you in."

Greg smiled a little, deciding not to point out that the crowning glory of this ability had been Mycroft himself.

"Cross-Human Relations," he said, by way of explanation. "You have to span the divide… y'know? Most people are just waiting for a hand to reach out, and they'll reach right back… when you realise that, it's easy."

Mycroft said nothing; he seemed moved by it, though. They walked in silence down the road together towards Gastrell's Bar. In the pit of January, it was already starting to go dark. Greg checked his wrist-set - just past four, and night was already gathering at the edges of the world.

"Have Missing Persons gotten back to you?" Mycroft asked him.

"Yeah, they've sent the latest batch… had a quick scan. No 'Emma' - maybe a few possibles - but honestly, when you're scrolling through a tide of missing women, all described as average height, average build, average features… it's just… London, you know? It - swallows people up. It's depressing."

"Transfer details of possible matches to me, will you?" Mycroft said. "I can make the calls over the weekend."

Greg looked at him sideways. "Right," he said. "And what will I be doing?"

"Reading medical literature," said Mycroft. "You need to learn your quarry."

He pushed open the dingy black door to Gastrell's Bar, and they stepped inside.

The low, sluggish pulse of grungy music already throbbed from the ceiling. Staff were around in jeans and scruffy t-shirts, cleaning tables with dirty cloths and setting up the stage for a band. Greg led the way towards the bar, aware of his shoes peeling stickily off the floor with every step.

Mycroft passed a hand quietly beneath his nose.

"You alright?" Greg said.

"Quite a place," Mycroft remarked, a little choked.

Greg's face twisted with a smile. "Not your sort of haunt?"

"I tend not to frequent anywhere on the verge of being condemned by the health authorities."

"God, you must have been a boring teenager," Greg said, leaning on the bar. He glanced along it, spotted a brass bell and gave it a quick ding, preparing his digital ID as they waited. "Cocoa and a book, was it...?"

"I stand by my choices," Mycroft muttered, as a man appeared from the back.
He was dark-skinned, black-eyed and shaven-headed, in a surprisingly dashing white shirt. A
trendy slash had been shaved through his right eyebrow. Though young, his features held a certain
weight that marked out a member of management; diamonds glinted at each earlobe.

"Hello," he said, uncertainly. "Can I help?"

Greg offered a hand. "DI Lestrade," he said. "And this is my sergeant, DS Holmes. We're looking
into an incident that took place down the road from you, earlier this week."

"Ah," said the manager, with an uneasy smile. "Yes… I don't think anyone's been talking about
anything else, to be honest. I'm Kieran - Kieran Matthews. Duty Manager."

"Were you on duty that night?"

"Afraid not, inspector. I've heard it all kicked off at The Clockwork Lion again, though."

"Happens often, does it?"

The manager smiled a little, holding back more than he gave. "Landlord lets all sorts go on," he
said. "Should pick his friends better, if I'm honest. Was that - what happened? Gargoyles got
someone?"

"No," Greg said, with regret. "Separate incident… looks like she was a prostitute attacked by a
client."

"Jesus," the manager breathed. "Another one."

Greg and Mycroft immediately froze.

"What - do you mean, 'another one'?" Mycroft asked.

"Oh - there was a thing," the manager said, uneasily. "'Bout a month ago now. A woman came
running in here as we were closing up, saying she'd been attacked by someone - she was covered in
blood…"

As he indicated vaguely about his neck and shoulders, Greg's heart clenched.

"I mean, she was pretty hysterical," the manager said. "We called the police, but when they got
here, she freaked out… pretty much fled the building. I don't know for sure she was, ah - in that
line of work," he added, quickly. "It's just she - … well, we get a few in here. Fishing for clients.
You get to know the look."

"Did you get her name?" Greg asked. "Address? Anything about who she was?"

"Sorry - she wasn't making a lot of sense. Haven't seen her since. I've got details of the officers who
turned up, if you want?"

"God, yes. That'll save us a search. Thanks, mate."

The manager smiled. "No problem. Think the card's in my office."

When he returned, Greg glanced across the name on the card - it was nobody he recognised.
Mycroft took the card, sliding it away inside his waistcoat.

"I'll handle that," he told Greg, discreetly.
"Thanks," Greg said. He reached for his wrist-set. "Can I show you a couple of photos?" he asked the manager. "Just in case you recognise the victim... we've heard she used to drink here sometimes. And there's a symbol you might know."

"Sure," the guy said. "Go ahead."

The sigil meant nothing to him.

"Looks like some sort of... I don't know, astrology," Kieran said, wrinkling his nose. "Bit medieval. Like you'd find drawn on a magic potion... what is it?"


He loaded up Emma's photograph. It flashed into the air.

The manager sighed, looking up at it.

"Yeah," he said, quietly. "I've seen her here before... blue eyes? Laughs a lot?"

Greg's heart twisted. "Did you know her?"

"God, not really. Only by sight. I, uh... had to ask her to conduct her business elsewhere, once... credit to her, she went without a fuss. I don't really mind if they're around on my watch, so long as they're discreet. But she was turning up a bit too often - advertising herself a bit too prominently, you know? I don't want trouble. We might be a bit rough round the edges, but we're not a knocking shop. I don't want us prosecuted as such, neither."

"Did you happen to catch her name?" Greg said, already expecting the answer. "Or - any idea where she was living?"

The manager's expression crumpled with regret. "Sorry," he said. "I - got a good job here. You've got to watch who you linger with."

"Fair enough, mate. Thank for your time - and thanks for those details. We'll look into it."

"No worries," said the manager. "D'you have a card?"

"Oh... sugar," said Greg. "Not on me. Uh -"

Mycroft reached into his coat. "Here," he said, withdrawing one. "Give me one moment... some of those details need amending."

He slid the pen from inside his coat, clicking it. When he was done, he handed it to Greg, who added his own name to the back of the card - trying to keep his handwriting neat. It wasn't often he wrote things out by hand these days. It felt like being back at school the first day after the holidays.

"Thanks," he said again to Kieran, who smiled, taking the card between his fingers.

"Any time."

The darkness was thickening as they stepped back out onto the street. Streetlights had winked on in the gathering gloom. Cars, their headlights bright, were hushing by as the first grumbles of Friday rush hour commenced out on the main road.

"We've done this all wrong," Greg said, as the door groaned shut after them.
Mycroft looked round at him. "Mm?"

"Yep. We're in the right place... just at the wrong time."

"I'm - not sure I follow you."

"We need to be here at night," Greg said. "Actual night. All these people maybe glimpsed Emma, maybe knew her by sight... but they're not the people who actually knew her. We need to speak to her own kind. How well did you sleep yesterday?"

Mycroft shot him a startled expression. "Ah - very well, thank you," he said. "Why?"

The unwelcome possibility of a sleeping companion re-occurred to Greg. His stomach contorted a little - he wished the thought didn't bother him as much as it did.

"Good," he said. "Well... I reckon with a nap and a coffee, I'll be good to go as well. How about I pick you up at midnight, and we'll get back here? It's Friday night. That'll be peak time."

"Peak time for - prostitutes, you mean?"

"Yeah. All the ordinary folk don't know anything. But it's no wonder - this isn't about them."

"Fine," Mycroft said, a little unnerved. "Midnight, then. Are we returning to Scotland Yard now?"

"I - probably need to sleep a bit, if I'm honest. Not all of us have got that 'ten hour' glow like you. D'you want me to drop you off at home?"

"No... leave me at work," Mycroft said, as they made their way back towards the car. "I'll - make some progress with Missing Persons. You can collect me from there later."

"You're... going to work until midnight? Seriously?"

"Yes... why?"

"Aren't you - going home for food and stuff?"

"Oh, I'll... improvise," Mycroft said.

"Right..." said Greg. He fished his car keys out of his pocket. "I suppose I'm not your mum. Get some rest though, okay? I don't know how long it'll take us to find the people we need tonight... prostitutes are fairly good at hiding from the Bill. And I don't intend going home until we've found at least one person in this bloody city who knows who the hell Emma was."
"Young Lady"

The night is darkening round me,
    The wild winds coldly blow;
But a tyrant spell has bound me
    And I cannot, cannot go.

- Emily Brontë
'The Night is Darkening Round Me' (1837)

Five minutes after midnight, Mycroft was waiting on the pavement outside Scotland Yard - coat, heavy black scarf and gloves. Greg slowed to a stop, unlocked the door and turned down the radio.

"Did you sleep?" Mycroft asked him, as he got into the car.

"Yeah," Greg lied. "Did you eat?"

"Yes," Mycroft also lied, pulled shut the door, and loosened his scarf. "Let's go."

They set off on the familiar route to Hackney, the lights of London flashing across their faces in the dark. Greg couldn't help but remember the first night-time drive they'd taken together. He had the strangest feeling Mycroft was remembering it, too.

"How's Missing Persons going?" he asked, to break the silence.

Mycroft gave a slight sigh. "Not well," he confessed. "Plenty of people simply aren't answering the phone… some have already had their missing person returned, but neglected to update the agency… I've eliminated a number of the 'Emmas' already, but it's going to take time. More appear every hour..."

"I just hope - …" Greg said - then shook his head.

"What?" said Mycroft, looking across at him from the passenger seat.

"I just hope that if they're on their own, they'd know to call the police. S'been two days now. Surely they'd have… told someone, tried to… tell a grown-up…” He sighed, gripping a little at the wheel. "I just hope someone's got them. That's all."

"They have a father somewhere, don't they?"

Greg pulled a slight face. "Broke their mum's nose, walked out on them all… how attentive can the guy be? Probably got himself another family somewhere already."

"It's better than no father at all," Mycroft remarked.
Greg said nothing for a moment. He then realised that his silence was telling.

"Don't be so sure," he said, simply, and reached for the radio.

They drove for ten minutes of wordless quiet, listening to easy jazz. Friday night London was in full swing beyond the car window - bars, pubs and clubs, blazing with brightly-coloured lights, people eagerly queuing outside in all their skimpy finery. Greg wondered when the sight of pretty young people in thin shirts and tiny dresses had started making him feel old, rather than interested. There must have been a point when that changed.

Then again, he could call to mind a few points when nearly everything had changed.

"How old were you?" Mycroft asked, at last.

Greg gave a soft snort.

"I don't think so," he muttered. "You're not cracking me open like a walnut."

"I meant when you left London."

Greg frowned a little, surprised enough to answer. "Eighteen," he said. "Twenty-three years ago now... Christ."

Mycroft lapsed into quiet for a while, thinking.

"Why did you leave?" he asked, as they pulled up at the next set of traffic lights.

"I hated it here," Greg muttered. He gazed up at the lights, the red glow streaming a little at the edges of his eyes. "Nothing left for me. Thought I'd go see some of the world."

Mycroft waited a moment to speak. "Your mother was gone," he deduced.

"Piss off, Mycroft," Greg murmured. There was no humour in his voice. He stared at the light, wondering if they always stayed red this long. "Or I really will shove you out."

"What happened to her?"

"Was I not clear enough with 'piss off'...?"

"She'd have been... early forties?"

Greg's jaw worked. He consciously eased his grip on the wheel, taking a while to speak. "Thirty-three."

He heard the distinctive sound of maths being done.

"She didn't have to keep me," Greg said, before he could hear the next sound that always came - the sound of a judgement being formed. He couldn't bear that fucking sound. He couldn't stand seeing it, either - the slight shock in the eyes, or the pursing of lips, or worst of all, the fucking pity. He didn't want to see it in Mycroft's face. He didn't want to hear it in his voice. Not tonight. "She kept me anyway," he said. "It was just me and her, and we were fine. Then I let her down. I left London. I travelled. I joined the police. I made DI. Commander Goulding gave me biscuits, so I came back to bloody London. Darling pissed me off, I went for a smoke, Emma bled to death holding my hand, and here we are. Any more questions?"

Mycroft didn't speak for several seconds.
"What - did your mother do for a living?" he asked, his voice quiet.

The lights changed. Greg released the hand-brake, his eyes fixed on the road.

"She was my mum," he said, and nothing else.

There were almost in Hackney by the time Greg found his voice again.

"What did your mum do?" he asked Mycroft.

He wished they hadn't done this to the sound of easy-listening jazz. It didn't seem right.

Mycroft shifted a little in his seat. "She - bred Samoyeds," he replied, at length.

Greg's forehead crinkled.

"The… big white fluffy ones," he said.

"Yes." Mycroft glanced across at him, regretfully. "I'm - not sure if it counted as 'making a living', but it kept her on the milder anti-depressants..."

Greg reflected for a moment on the vast range of circumstance occupied by humanity. Of course your mum bred samoyeds, he thought. He didn't know why he'd had to ask.

"M'more of a huntaway kinda guy," he said at last, vaguely, switching off the satellite navigation as they reached Pembury Road.

"Huntaway?"

"Sheep-herding breed out in New Zealand," Greg said, looking around for a parking space where they wouldn't be observed. "They're sort of... black and tan. Couldn't have them in London. They need miles and miles of hills to run... and they're noisy. 'Specially when they're working. They bark like they want you to bark too."

He bit the inside of his cheek, spinning the wheel towards a handy side-street.

"Some day," he said - telling himself far more than Mycroft. "Right. Get out of my head now. We've got a job to do."

"I - didn't mean to pry."

"Of course you did," said Greg. "S'fine. We'll just do your unhappy secrets on the way home."

As he reversed into the space, glancing out of the back window between their headrests, he said,

"You can tell me why you don't like to kiss while you're fucking... how's that? M'looking forward to that story."

He jerked on the handbrake, pulled a cold smile at Mycroft's horrified expression, and clunked open the car door.

"Get your gun loaded," he said, "then get yourself out here. You've got five minutes while I have a cig. Don't ever mention my mum again."

He shut the car door with a slam, leant against it, and smoked until the shaking in his hand had stopped.
Mycroft emerged just as he ground the cigarette underfoot.

"Here's how we're doing this," Greg said. He was glad to see no protest in the regretful grey eyes. "You stick out like a sore thumb here. Take it as a compliment that I don't think you've ever spoken to a prostitute in your life. We're never going to be approached if we're hanging about as a pair - so I'll go track one down, and bring her or him back here to talk."

"What shall I do?"

"Just keep watch," said Greg. "I won't be long. I'll buzz if I need you."

He tossed Mycroft his car keys, turned up his coat collar, and walked away.

As he turned out of sight onto Pembury Road, an old joke came to Greg's mind - he couldn't quite remember who he'd heard it from - the one about the psychiatrist and the prostitute who'd spent the night together, then in the morning turn to each other and say, *That'll be two hundred quid, please.*

As he ran the punchline back through his head, Greg realised whose voice he was hearing it in.

Jason had always liked jokes. He'd saved the best 'til last, though.

*What a night,* Greg thought. The world wasn't pulling its punches today. He just hoped he'd had the last of them.

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As Mycroft watched Greg go, he found an uncomfortable and distinctive lump had lodged itself in his throat.

Part of him wanted to call out - to speak, to apologise to Greg - to say something -*anything* - but he had no idea what he could say.

Of all the beginnings to have in life… a fifteen-year-old mother.

*It was just me and her, and we were fine. Then I let her down.*

Mycroft paced beside the car for some time, wishing he had cigarettes to smoke. They would have kept his mind - and his idle fingers - busy. Without them, it was only ten minutes before he worked back the sleeve of his coat, reluctantly loaded a London crime database on his wrist-set, and brought up a search window.

This resource was to be used strictly for academic purposes. Its contents were classified beyond measure.

*LESTRADe,* he entered, as he leant against the car. *Human. Female.*

He tapped through the filters - birth year: 2161, as a first estimate. She'd have been around eleven when Mycroft was born. Greg's mother. It made his stomach coil. Death, after a quick calculation and another good guess: 2194. *Lambeth.*

*RESULTS: 1.*
With more than a flicker of guilt - suspecting this was a discovery he would regret - Mycroft tapped on the link.

By the time he'd finished reading, he'd never wanted a cigarette so badly in his life.

The sound of a gentle cough jogged him from his silent despair. He glanced up from the hard-light screen, his heart heaving, to find a doe-eyed face gazing his way from beside the car.

She'd appeared quite silently, as if she'd been formed from the shadows: a young woman in the latter end of her twenties, with leonine corkscrew curls and soft, intelligent eyes. They were as big and dark as Greg's. Her powder blue jacket had a high collar and a deep V-neck, inviting the viewer's gaze to settle in its valley. The skin beneath seemed as soft as the suede of her jacket - though raised now to goosebumps by the January cold.

Even after all this time, Mycroft found himself surprised by the sight of a prostitute in powder blue.

"Hello," she soothed at him, and his heart spider-cracked like brittle glass.

He couldn't stop picturing Greg's mother.

He wanted immediately to seize this young woman, throw her in Greg's car, and drive her to safety - to anywhere other than this cold and dirty street at one o'clock in the morning. He didn't know what in God's name he or anyone else could do for her - what she needed in order to escape, or how to get it to her before it was too late. It was just me and her. Then I let her down. Oh God, it was too awful. He couldn't bear it.

"Hey," the young woman murmured as his expression broke. She moved forwards to him, compassion softening her gaze. "S'okay… don't be nervous… how about we sit in your car? We can talk a while, if you like."

Mycroft caught her hand before it could reach his face. He held it at a safe distance, letting out a deep breath, and studied her gentle features.

"I - would like to talk to you," he said, unsurprised to hear his voice come out hoarse. "Very much. But not at all as a precursor to sex."

He released her hand, feeling faintly nauseous as he did. She gave him a smile of equal wariness and interest.

"Okay," she said, softly. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I'm trying to identify someone," he said. "Someone who was here quite recently."

Some of the softness ebbed from her expression. "You're police," she said.

"And not a part of Street Crime, I assure you. Please do not go. I'm CID. My name is Mycroft Holmes."

"Show me," she said, stiffly - with a pointed glance at his wrist-set.

Mycroft immediately beamed his credentials into the darkness for her. She read them quickly, raised an eyebrow, then folded her arms across her chest.
"Who're you trying to identify?" she asked, as she rocked back on one heel.

"Two people, in fact... one who was attacked, one who was killed, both within the last month or so. Both were women of your profession."

She visibly flashed her tongue around her teeth.

"We're not in some sort of union, you know," she said. "Staff cards. Monthly socials. General meetings every Monday."

"I'm aware," he said. "But a woman like you lost her life here in deplorable conditions, only three days ago. We believe she has children. We don't know where they are. If you were able to recognise her, you'd help me find some justice for the poor woman and her family. I'm not suggesting you're all telepathically linked. I'm suggesting that if you work in this area, you may know her face. That's all."

She looked down at her shoes, uncomfortable.

"Fine," she sighed, at last. "Show me."

He noted that a slight tremor had picked up in her shoulders. Mycroft loaded up the image on his wrist-set, watching her face for every tiny flicker of movement.

As she gazed up at Emma's image in the air, nothing moved in her expression at all. Nothing showed in her eyes. Nothing in her soul felt a single tiny thing.

"Who is this woman?" Mycroft asked, his voice hollow.

She looked away, raising one eyebrow. "I've not met her. I'm sorry."

"You're an excellent liar," Mycroft said; she did not react at all. His pulse rate quickened. "I'm impressed. Deeply. But I'm afraid you've come up against an excellent psychologist, and a desperate detective - and though I'm impressed, I'm not fooled. We know she has children. Three of them - three girls - "

And there it was - the flicker he'd been watching for, just across her eyes. Mycroft's heart ignited.

" - and if you know her," he said, "I will now beg you to tell me her name. Please. Those children have just lost their mother. They need to be found."

The young woman said nothing for a moment, flicking her tongue across her lip ring.

"She's the one who was killed?" she said. "In the alley, by the pub?"

Mycroft's chest ached. "Tell me her name."

"I don't know it. I only recognise her by sight - passed her in the street a few times, that's all. What happened to her?"

"Something unbearable. Something that for all we know could happen again, on any night, anywhere in this city, to anyone, unless we're given help to stop it."

She huffed, unmoved.

"Imagine," she mused. "Violence, perpetrated against a sex worker. Unthinkable."
"Your flippancy might mask your fear to most," he said. "Not to me. Whatever grudge you hold against the authorities -"

Her expression contorted with anger and a smirk at once. She threw back her head as she quashed both emotions down beneath her pretty features, exposing the long column of her neck to him, squaring her arms across her chest.

"I don't know her," she said, her voice a solid wall. "I've never met her. I'm sorry I can't be of more assistance to you, inspector."

"The other victim, then," he said. "The attack a month ago. A woman was badly bitten on her throat and sought help at Gastrell's Bar. She fled when the police were called. Who was that?"

"Search me," she sighed, feigning exasperation as she looked away along the street.

Mycroft's jaw set. "You know her, too."

She huffed at him once more. "Mm, we were introduced at the Hackney Whores AGM last year," she said. "I only go along for the networking and the biscuits."

"What is your name?" Mycroft asked, drawing on the very last of his limited reserves of patience.

"Anna," she said, dull.

"What is your real name?"

"Samantha."

"Young lady," Mycroft said, sharpening, "I'm trying to prevent another -" 

"Don't you dare 'young lady' me," she breathed, suddenly. Her eyes flared in the darkness; they burned with anger and shattered pride. "In your fancy suit. With your fancy car. Don't stand there and claim to me that you care about someone's kids. You're police. You're paid to fill in the forms, cover it up and dance off home to your wife and a hot dinner and a beer. Don't you dare patronise me."

Mycroft breathed in, trying to steady himself.

"I have had neither long-term partner, hot dinner, nor beer, in some time," he assured her. "Nor have I deserved them. My only focus in this world is stopping this before it gets worse - vastly, vastly worse. Worse than you can possibly comprehend. Have you heard the name 'Excultus'?"

Genuine lack of recognition tightened her forehead. "No," she said.

"Then have others been going missing? People other than Emma?"

She didn't skip at the name. She knew it. Mycroft would be prepared to swear.

"What would you care if they had?" she sneered. "Nothing's ever done about it. Missing Persons might as well just tell you to piss off whenever you call. And I don't know who 'Emma' is."

"Have you heard of clients biting or taking blood from -"

Her expression shuttered. "No."

"I'm revising my estimate of 'excellent liar',' Mycroft told her, fiercely. "There have been other
attacks. People are going missing. Tell me - for the love of everything sacred - how widespread is this? What is happening?"

She held up a hand, suddenly - as if a sharp noise nearby had come to her attention. Mycroft stiffened.

Her eyes then flashed.

"Sorry," she murmured. "I just remembered... you've not paid me."

She turned on her heel.

Mycroft rushed after her, pulling a business card from the inside of his coat as he did. He pushed in front of her, blocking her progress down the street, and forced the damn card into her hands. He clamped her grip around it, hard.

"Take this," he urged her. "Take it. You will need it."

"Get off me!" she spat, breaking out of his grip. She cast the card back at him in disgust. Mycroft grabbed the card from the air. "Don't follow me," she snarled, pushed past him, and stormed away along the street. Her heeled boots echoed into the darkness.

Mycroft hurried back to the car, tugged the door open and started rooting through Greg's glove-box, digging amidst the half-finished tubes of sweets, old papers, packs of tissues and spent cartridges.

"Damn it," he breathed. He barked at his wrist-set, holding it and the business card safely aloft in one gloved hand. "Outgoing call! Greg Lestrade!"

The wrist-set gave a soft bleep. The connecting tone trilled to itself in the quiet as Mycroft continued to hunt with one hand. The call finally picked up with a rush of breath.

"What is it?" came Greg's voice. "You're blowing my cover. One of them was just on her way over."

"Where do you keep evidence bags?" Mycroft demanded. "You must have some somewhere. Damn it, Lestrade. This car is more of a hot mess than you are."

"Evidence bags? There's - some in a case under the driver's seat… sorry, what the hell are you doing?"

Mycroft scrabbled to look. There was a hard black case stashed under the seat. He tugged at the clasp one-handed and cracked the case open, reaching inside to grab a familiar flutter of clear plastic.

"She's had a poor experience with the police," he told Greg, carefully prizing open the bag. He slid the card inside, safe. His heart thudded, hard. "Her fingerprints will be on file. It's not Anna or Samantha. Telling, though - focus on 'A' vowel sounds, and 'N' - possibly concealing an 'O' or 'I'-heavy name - something like 'Olivia'? Would fit that final 'A' she's clearly attached to."

"What in fourteen shades of fuck are you talking about?"

"She knew them!" Mycroft blasted. "She knew them both! She knows the children and she knows there are vampires - she knows that others are going missing. She wouldn't tell a toffee-nosed prick like me, but she'll tell you. We'll find her with the prints. You'll reach a hand out for her, and she'll
"Can you slow down, please?" Greg's voice crackled from his wrist-set, exasperated. "You're giving me a headache. What the hell's happened? Start at the top."

"Get back here," Mycroft told him. He gazed at the business card now safely sealed in plastic. "We have everything we need. Now we simply need to run the fingerprints."

"Right..." Greg muttered. "M'on my way... then when I get there, you can maybe explain what you're on about - yeah? Or is that a lot to ask?"

Sergeant Number Five was losing his mind, Greg thought. A single shift, and it was kicking in. What would people say when they found out he'd broken even the tyrannical Mycroft Holmes? He'd never be trusted with another sergeant again.

He hung up, muttering, and abandoned his casual loitering position at the mouth of the alley. This had been a weird day. He didn't even have any booze in the house to make it better, he thought. He'd have to go out and get some.

As he turned in the direction of the car, there came a distinct and cheerful jingle from nearby.

"Sergeant?" said a tentative voice.

Greg looked around.

The owner of the electronics store was peering at him from the door of his shop, his face shining.

"Oh!" said Greg, in surprise. "Mr...?"

"Ah - 'Eccles', sergeant. I hope I didn't startle you."

"No," said Greg. "No, not at all... you're up late, Mr Eccles. Insomniac, are you?"

Mr Eccles flushed. "Chronic, I'm afraid, since - Mary died... but I've been taking a look at my CCTV for you," he added, brightening. "And I do believe I've got you something!"

Greg's heart nearly leapt out of his throat.

"No," he breathed. "Are you serious?"

"Yes!" said Mr Eccles. "Wednesday morning! I've got it - and I've already found Emma - please, please! Come inside! I must have wiped the storage completely last time I checked it, so it's kept recording for much longer than I thought. I have everything."

"Hang on," Greg said, his chest tightening. "Let me call my colleague. Two minutes."

He grabbed for his wrist-set.

"Oi," he said, as soon as Mycroft picked up. "Can you get to the electronics shop? You won't believe this. We've got CCTV. Mr Eccles is here with me. He's up late and he's found Emma for us."
"Dear God," Mycroft said. "It's definitely her, is it?"

"I don't know yet. I'm standing in the door waiting for you to get here."

"I'm on my way," Mycroft said, and hung up.

He appeared a few minutes later, striding down the street with an evidence bag in his hand.

"This," he said, showing Greg the business card inside, "carries the fingerprints of a prostitute who knows far more than she claims. She and I met. She reacted poorly to my interview technique. You will fare better. Here ends my explanation."

"You utter star," Greg said with a grin, grabbing the bag from him. "Right. We'll get onto that in the morning. For now, let's have a look at this CCTV. He's here, Mr Eccles!" he called - and held the door open for Mycroft. "Past the counter and up the stairs," he said.

Mr Eccles' rooms were cluttered, musty and cramped. Greg didn't care. The shopkeeper sat them both before a fairly aged and grubby computer, offered them tea - which was declined - and then excitedly turned to the business of the CCTV.

"As you can see," he said, indicating the time-stamp in one corner of the blurry black-and-white screen, "this is the footage from 2:43 AM… and the two of them come from behind the camera - "

Greg watched the screen, his heart banging, as the shivering outline of Emma - her wavy brown hair, her skirt and her boots - strode into view.

She was closely followed by a figure whose heavy coat and low-pulled cap hid a thousand things - but there he was, Greg thought - the man they were hunting. He was stocky, heavy in his tread, and seemed to be hanging back a little. He didn't look like a killer - but then, Greg thought, they rarely did. This one just looked like an awkward loser heading for a shag with a prostitute.

Emma stopped at the mouth of the alley, waiting for him. She turned towards the camera to watch his nervous approach. She then reached reassuringly for his hand.

"God," Greg whispered, as the man took hold of it. He let her pull him out of sight. "God, if only she'd not - …"

They disappeared together.

"TJ can enlarge this," he said to Mycroft, his breath tight. "He can clarify it - sort it out - he'll get us a better look."

"We'll already have a better view of him as he leaves," Mycroft said. He lifted his head to Mr Eccles, who was hovering beside them in a state of high anticipation. "Could you kindly skip ahead, Mr Eccles? I believe Greg found the body at three minutes to three."

Greg's stomach jolted strangely at the sound of his first name in Mycroft's mouth - but there wasn't time to think about it now. Mr Eccles tapped eagerly at the controls.

"Righto," he said. "Here we go..."

The tape skipped forwards. The scene shimmered, outlines fluttering, though no figures came or went until a sudden blur began at the distant door of The Clockwork Lion.

"Stop!" said Greg - Mr Eccles hit the button. Greg peered at the screen. "That's me and Darling.
That's us. Can you sneak it forwards a bit?"

Mr Eccles did so; each man held his breath. Greg watched as he and Darling argued outside the pub for a minute, two blurry shapes standing several feet apart. She then got into the car. His blurry self fumbled for a moment in his pocket - cigarettes, Greg thought - and crossed with hunched shoulders to the mouth of the alley.

"Wait," Greg said, slowly.

He watched himself disappear into the alley to smoke.

He turned to look at Mycroft, who seemed to be undergoing the same impossibility of thought that he was - staring at the screen with a furrowed brow, mouth a little open.

"But where's - …?" Greg said.

Mycroft looked up at Mr Eccles, baffled. "Would you run the tape backwards, please, Mr Eccles? On a fairly slow speed - until we get back to their first appearance."

Mr Eccles hurried to comply.

It took several minutes, but they watched in silence as the time fluttered backwards. Emma and her final client reversed awkwardly out of the alley. She let go of his hand, and they shuffled backwards together out of sight of the camera.

"But…” Greg managed, lost.

"Forwards again," Mycroft said to Mr Eccles. His voice was strangely thick.

Mr Eccles pressed the control to restart - a little nervously now. He'd sensed that something was wrong.

They watched, again, the slightly quickened stretch of time between Emma and her client entering the alley, and the emergence of Greg and Darling from the pub. They stared in silence as Darling bustled into the car, and as a sped-up Greg tugged cigarettes from within his coat, and vanished at double-speed into the alley.

Nobody had emerged.

"This makes no sense," Greg said, turning to Mycroft with concern. "Did he... go into the restaurant after all? Did they lie about that door being locked? Or - … Jesus, did he climb a wall? Can they climb? I don't understand. There's only one exit to that yard - and it's through that alley. You've seen it. You know it's true."

Mycroft had steepled his fingers in front of his face. He was watching the screen in total silence, his expression fixed, his eyes hard.

"Mycroft," Greg said, his heart thudding. "Mycroft, what - "

Mycroft suddenly froze.

Greg looked at the screen.

He watched, his pulse spiking, as a heavy-coated figure slid suddenly out of the yard. The killer turned and walked very quickly past The Clockwork Lion, right past Darling sitting in the car, and vanished out of range of the camera.
Greg's mouth fell open.

"But..." he croaked. His brain reeled. "But... how - ...?"


"What?" Greg demanded. "What is it? What the hell are you seeing that I can't? This - this isn't possible. He can't have gotten past me. That alley's five foot wide. There was nobody there."

Mycroft's hands spread to cover his entire face, breathing hard.

"The scan," he groaned into his palms. "The scan, Greg - if you'd only - ... oh, dear sweet God - ..."

They'd forgotten Mr Eccles was there.

"What d'you mean, 'the scan'?" Greg said. "How the hell is any of this possible?"

Mycroft dropped his hands suddenly, deathly-white in the glare of the screen. He stared at Greg in abject horror.

"Here is the timing of the events," he bit out, shaking, "as you yourself have laid out to me. You heard her gasping. You entered the yard. You crossed over to her, you knelt with her as she died, and then you took an ISOC scan. Your Initial Scene of the Crime scan. You left her corpse, you backed into a corner and you took the scan."

Realisation - cold, and screaming red - began to dawn in Greg's mind.

"What... what are you telling me?" he breathed, his mouth open.

Mycroft stared into his eyes.

"He was in the yard with you," Mycroft breathed. "He was behind you. When you entered that yard, he was standing in the corner where you eventually took the scan. He made his escape as you knelt down to tend to her. He passed within feet of you. You even left the wretched gate wide open for him. He was still there, Greg."

Greg's stomach lurched. He wretched, grappling to cover his mouth as horror seized him and crushed him in its claws - a white, strangling terror that ripped through him in convulsions.

"If you'd made the scan," Mycroft snarled, even as Greg forced his own head between his knees to breathe, "when you were supposed to, we would now have an ISOC scan that features the actual killer, hiding in a corner, in perfect high-definition detail."

"Oh - ..." Greg whimpered, fighting for air. "Oh - fuck - ..."

Mycroft stood up suddenly.

"Thank you for your assistance Mr Eccles," he barked, making the terrified shopkeeper beside them jump nearly a metre. "I'm afraid Scotland Yard will now be seizing your footage as evidence. And may I congratulate you on being a far better Detective Inspector than Lestrade here will ever be."

Mr Eccles made an indistinct bundle of words, somewhere outside Greg's rapidly collapsing universe - which now comprised only his shaking hands, the throat that was about to close in on itself, and the stomach that was about to hurl its contents across Mr Eccles's electronica.
Mycroft's voice sharpened with sudden anger.
"Get up, Lestrade!" he shouted. "We have work to do! And your damn incompetency to fix - …"

"I'll… get him a glass of water," Mr Eccles managed, faint.

As his footsteps thumped quickly away, a hand seized Greg by the back of the collar.

"Get up," Mycroft snarled. His breath came hot and sharp in Greg’s ear. "You want to curl up, do you? You want to vomit? This is what you and I are now dealing with. This is Excultus. 'Where angels fear to tread', you said - so get yourself up, Lestrade. And if you are frightened, then good. It means you have more sense than the rest of your actions so far suggest."
You think to baffle me, you with your pale faces all in a row, like sheep in a butcher's. You shall be sorry yet, each one of you!

- Bram Stoker
'Dracula' (1897)

She could still hear his voice - every well-spoken vowel, every crisp little consonant, every clever intonation.

*Your flippancy might mask your fear to most. Not to me. Whatever grudge you hold against the authorities…*

Bastard.

Utter, utter bastard.

The walk home - usually fifteen minutes - took Olivia only ten. She marched up the steps to the house, shunted her key into the lock, twisted it with a jerk - and felt it stick. Furious, she wrenched it the other way, then tried again. Nothing. It had jammed.

She laid her forehead on the peeling red paint, breathed, and warned herself not to cry.

They couldn't afford a locksmith - not in January. Not with the winter heating bill to come. She'd already had to ask them all this month to put in for a new washing machine, and the grocery bills were only getting higher. Life had never been cheap. Things had been alright at first, with the house - but now there were more of them by the year, and the place was falling apart.

Olivia worked the key stiffly within the lock until her fingertips were red and sore, and the smell of the crumbling paint was making her feel ill.

"Please," she begged it. "Please."
The lock had no pity for her. It held fast.

She could still see the bastard's face before her in the dark.

Clever. Sneering - calling her 'young lady'.

He'd looked at first like the quiet and well-paid type - and while there were never good men, those were the easiest. High-flying, respectful, with a clean hotel room somewhere and an inclination to privacy. They were more likely to pay you to stay all night; more likely to ask for your number in the morning. They preferred having one girl to see regularly. To them, it was a professional relationship - like having someone to do their laundry. In time, they'd often pay you just to have dinner - to sit and watch a film with them - ask about their day.

He'd looked like that type: lonely; gentle.

But he wasn't.

Damn police - and now Emma.

Oh God, Emma.

Something unbearable, the stuck-up bastard had said. Olivia's short life had featured plenty of things that most would consider unbearable. A CID Detective would know in great detail what people did to each other if given half a chance - and yet he'd used that word, 'unbearable', and Olivia already knew she couldn't cope with that word. She'd learned long ago that life was not to be enjoyed. Just endured. Now it seemed they weren't even permitted that.

As the heat threatened to break its way across her eyes, there came a clatter from the other side of the door - then a harsh clunk as the lock was released from within.

Olivia jerked out her key, drew her head up and took a sharp breath. The tears were gone by the time the door swung open.

Sam appeared in the gap, wide-eyed behind his reading glasses. He'd been studying. He was dressed in an old grey t-shirt and Christmas-themed pajama bottoms, printed with gingerbread men. His midnight-blue hair was stuck on end where he'd been scraping his fingers through it.

"Hey!" he said, startled by her stormy expression. "You're - back early, aren't you? Is the door sticking again?"

Olivia felt her heart thump with despair as she looked at him. She'd just have to be strong, she thought - if not for herself, then for them. All of them. It was the only thing she could do.

"I - think it's my key," she managed, after a moment. "Who's still awake?"

"Oh... most of us," Sam said. He fiddled with the piercings in one of his pointed ears. "We're watching TV in the lounge. Are you... okay, Livs? You don't look right..."

As she stepped wearily into the entrance hall, her heels echoing off the cold Victorian tiles, Sam looped his arms around her in a fragile hug.

"Livs, did... someone hurt you?" he asked into her hair.

"No," she mumbled, as she hugged him back. He'd been here the longest now - it had always been the two of them. She loved all the others, but it was Sam who could tell. It was Sam who baked her
biscuits and left them in her room when things were shit. "I've got bad news," she told him, numbly. "We should probably get it over with."

"Bad news?"

"Mmh. We'll be fine - we'll always be fine. It's just… something I need to tell you all."

"Okay," he said, his voice small. "Well… so long as nobody hurt you."

"No," Olivia promised him. "Not this time."

As the lounge door opened, heads looked up by the light of the small TV. The others were gathered around on the horseshoe of old battered sofas, tucked up together under blankets, napping in each other's laps, watching a baking competition quietly in the dark. A few tealights fluttered feebly on the central coffee table, surrounded by half-drunk mugs of tea and cheap glasses filled with cheap wine. The heavy curtains were drawn tight across the floor-to-ceiling windows, in the hope of retaining what little warmth had been collected.

"Not much around tonight, chick?" someone asked.

Olivia's heart ached behind her ribs as she looked at them all. It did not show on her face.

"I - met a policeman," she said.

"Oh Jesus, Olivia... you didn't get dragged in?"

"No," she said, with a faint smile. It wouldn't be the first occasion, if she had. "He told me something. I - think you all need to hear it. Can we turn the TV down?"

The remote was sought under blankets and cushions; it was found. As Olivia lowered herself uneasily into an armchair, and the volume shrank down low, their faces turned towards her in the half-dark - young women; old women; human, cross-human - fourteen of them in total right now.

_Thirteen_, Olivia corrected herself - thirteen, now.

She drew her legs up beneath her, took a silent breath, and said,

"The body found in the alley on Pembury Road. It… was Emma."

Sharp breaths - hands lifting - a single, desperate cry. Beside Olivia's chair, Sam covered his mouth.

"The police are looking into it," Olivia said, hating the words it was now her duty to say - hating what she had to do to them all. "They've started an investigation. They haven't discovered much so far, from the sound of things - but they're trying to find Emma's girls. And they're trying to figure out what's going on."

Pale, silent looks were shared; nothing was said.

"What happened to Emma?" Kitty asked at last from the opposite sofa, her eyes shining with tears. Her whiskers quivered as she spoke.

"I don't know," Olivia murmured. "He was keeping it quiet… which isn't ever good from the police. He - said it was - 'unbearable'. That's the word he used. He asked if people had been going missing."
The horror on their faces was made all the worse by the cold flicker of the television, papering their expressions in flashes of unnatural colour. Olivia braced herself.

"He asked me if anyone's been bitten," she added. Her voice rang hollow.

There was a long silence.

"Olivia..." Marian sat forwards, gathering her cardigan around her. She was the oldest among them; she had seven grandchildren. Her face was pale and serious as she gazed across the room. "We should tell them. We should get in touch."

Olivia bit the side of her tongue. "We really shouldn't," she said.

"Olivia, this is - … if the police want to know - "

"How many criminal records are in this room?" Olivia checked. Silence fell. "Besides, what good do the police ever do? Tell me honestly - any of you - that you've met a good and decent policeman, and I'll ring him right this second. We told them about Susie back in September, and they did nothing. Trish in November - nothing. They're only looking into Emma because they have to - because it's murder now. If she'd vanished into nothing like the others did, they wouldn't care. They'd be telling me on the phone again that 'people do just leave sometimes'... 'maybe she just forgot to say'..."

"But - if it's murder," Kitty breathed, "if we know for sure that something scary's going on… maybe they'll listen now. Maybe they'll take us seriously."

Olivia held up her hands.

"Look," she said. "There's - something else to think about."

They fell silent, fearful and gazing at her.

"If we tell them what we know," she said, "and we tell them we knew Emma... they'll be straight round here, looking for evidence. And they'll find..."

Nobody spoke for a moment. Olivia regarded them all with seriousness.

"They'll take them away," she said. "They'll give them to Dan - or they'll be shipped off into care. That's not what Emma would have wanted."

"I bet it was Dan killed her," Kitty said, dabbing furiously at her eyes. "He found her. Tracked her down. Bastard."

It had crossed Olivia's mind. "If it's Dan," she said, "they'd have found him drunk in a gutter nearby... or he'd have videoed it and put it online. This is… to do with the biting. That's why the police are asking."

Sam had gone very quiet beside her. She could sense him there, distressed, fiddling with his fingertips.

"How do we tell Emma's girls?" Marian asked the room at large.

Olivia had thought about that, too, as she'd stormed from Pembury Road - how to look into three pairs of eyes, and tell them that their mum would not come home. She didn't think she would ever find the right words to say that to a child. Somehow, she'd have to say it all the same.
"We'll... tell them in the morning," she murmured. "If we all just sit them down - and tell them it's okay - tell them we'll look after them now. They've lost their mum, but not their family."

Sam's voice broke the silence.

"Livs," he said, weakly.

She turned to look up at him; he was as pale as fresh snow.

"We should go to the police," he said, frightened. "This is bad. This is - really bad. I mean, if... something scary's going on - we have to tell them."

Olivia's stomach tightened. She reached out for his hand.

She caught his fingers, stopped them fiddling, and quietly rubbed her thumb across his palm.

"It's fine," she told him. His eyes remained fixed on the ugly patterned carpet. "We're all fine, Sam. We'll just look after ourselves."

"But - the biting, Livs..."

"It's not a problem," she murmured. "We just need to be more careful. Maybe we work in pairs from now on. Maybe we bring people back here. I know we said we wouldn't, but... we'll be safer that way. It'll be alright."

"But - but biting," Kitty said, distraught. "What is that? What's preying on us, Olivia?"

"Nothing's preying on us," Olivia told them, quietly. Her heart ached. "Nothing more than there ever was."

Sam came to her room within an hour.

"I'm just worried," he said, sitting cross-legged on the end of her bed. "That's three people we know have gone missing - and you know that other people are talking about this too - and Emma's been killed - it's just... I don't understand why you won't go to the police..."

Olivia pulled her camisole over her head, casting it into the laundry. She said nothing as she wriggled into an oversized t-shirt, then came to sit beside him on the bed.

"Look," she said, softly. "I know you're scared. But you've not been bitten, have you? Hardly anybody has. We don't even know if Emma was. So just... don't worry. It's not actually happening."

Sam said nothing, gazing at her with wary eyes.

She tried to give him a smile. "Besides... you've got that nice safe office of yours. You'll be fine."

Sam looked down with reluctant humour. "It's - not an office, Livs. It's a room, and I only borrow it... I dunno if most offices are rentable by the hour or come stocked with anal lube."

"Still," she said. "It means you're always within shouting distance of help."
"The rest of you aren't," he replied.

Olivia rested her head on his shoulder.

"I don't know if they'll want me on the books at Princes," she murmured, sadly. "I'm - not a prince, Sam. Missing a vital part."

"Most of them aren't bothered about that part," he muttered.

"Yeah, well… my tits will still be an issue, won't they? Look, it's - ... I'm just trying to cheer you up. Everything's fine. We've been okay so far, and we'll manage. I promise."

"Three of us are gone," he reminded her, pale. "And one of us is definitely dead."

Olivia said nothing. She gazed down at her bare legs for a moment, lost. What was there to say to that? Sam was right, and she knew it. They hadn't heard the last of this. There was only so much that bravery could cover up.

But the kids...

They couldn't go to Dan. Not after what he'd done to Emma.

They couldn't go into care, either - not after what it had done to Olivia.

Once again, she saw that clever bastard and his face before her in the air - calling her 'young lady' - telling her things would get worse, worse than she could possibly comprehend. She'd wanted to spit at him - rage at him - scream at him that he couldn't comprehend the things she'd experienced, day in, day out, for years. He didn't know horror. He didn't know pain. He didn't know a thing.

Then Sam started to cry, and Olivia felt her stomach lurch.

"Oh - hey…" She put her arms around him, rumpling her fingers through his deep blue hair. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"I - I don't… don't understand - …"

"What don't you understand?"

"A thing happened to me," he said into her shoulder. "A - good thing, I thought - but - it was actually maybe a bad thing… and now I don't understand. And I'm scared."

Olivia stroked his hair, slowly, closing her eyes. "What happened?" she asked. "Tell me. I'm here."

Sam hesitated, struggling to speak.

"I thought there'd be a scar, but - …" He bit his lip, pulling nervously at the neck of his t-shirt. "It healed so quickly…"

He brushed his thumb at the crook of his neck - tucked just down where it met his shoulder. Hardly breathing, Olivia looked closely at his skin.

Two small silver circles of scar tissue, a couple of inches apart, shimmered beside his thumb.

"I feel like I should tell the police," he managed after a moment, tears darkening his eyes. "If they're looking for someone who's been biting people like us - … but he was nice. He was really nice. He can't have killed anyone. I know it."
For the longest time, Olivia couldn't speak.

She drew Sam back into her arms, and petted his hair until he'd stopped shaking - until she could bring herself to form words.

'Something unbearable'.

"Don't tell the police," she murmured to Sam. She was surprised to hear her own voice so calm and quiet, even as her heart thudded in terror. "It doesn't matter, alright? If you're okay - and if you thought that he was okay, then… it's okay."

"He wouldn't even fuck me," Sam told her, lost. He rubbed at his neck. "I actually wanted to. It's been years since I - … but he - … I don't know."

"When was this?"

"Literally two nights ago."

"And those have - healed already?"

"They were pretty much healed yesterday morning. He cleaned them for me after. Told me to leave them alone and use saline if they itched. Like it was an ear piercing. Then he paid me, and he left…"

Olivia almost didn't want to ask. "How much did he - …?"

Sam hesitated. "He - gave me eight-hundred pounds."

"Eight-hundred?"

"It's still there in my account. I don't know what to do with it. Why would he be paying some people eight-hundred quid and being nice to them, then killing others? It just doesn't - … I'm sure it's not him. But oh God, if people are in danger…"

"Put it out of your head," Olivia advised, uneasily. "Let's just - stop talking about this whole thing. You've got exams and I've got a cafe shift tomorrow. D'you want to sleep in my room tonight?"

"Yes please," he managed, his voice small. "Do you - want some of the money for a locksmith, Livs?"

Olivia's heart sank. She couldn't take it off him.

"We'll try the door again in the morning," she said. "It's… probably just my key. It's your money, Sammie. You earned it. Come on, let's… just sleep."

They wriggled under the blankets together, and Olivia switched out the light.

They hugged, wrapping their bare legs; she petted his deep blue hair until she felt him fall to sleep. She knew people would think it weird that they did this. Sam was as gay as they came, and both of them were whores - bodies for sale - but Olivia didn't care.

She didn't care if nobody understood. It was just nice to hold a human she felt safe with. She didn't expect a person in the world to understand what it felt like to be used for relief - what it felt like never to choose the bodies that came near yours.

It reminded her of the care home when she and Sam did this - sleeping in a warm pile of innocent
limbs and backs, those children she'd grown up with, children the world had later broken into pieces one by one. They hadn't known, then. They were young, and they'd thought they'd find a home someday, and things would be alright in the end. They just had to behave, and be good, and good things would happen.

As she held Sam in her arms, Olivia thought about Emma - warm, mumsy and friendly - her bright blue eyes - her smile. She'd never been afraid.

Now she was dead.

Lottie was only three. They'd have to tell her in the morning. Three years - three tiny years - before she got to learn that life would take away the things you loved; that the world wouldn't care for your tears; that all you could do was keep going, until it was done with you, and hope that whatever it did to you didn't hurt for long.

Alone at last, the tears coursed silently down Olivia's face. They settled into Sam's hair as she stroked him.

In the silence, she pressed a little kiss to his head, and promised him in a whisper that he'd be alright. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

---

Friends,

A visit from Scotland Yard. Their main interest is the human woman - who she was. The sigil, too. The investigating officer is a DI Lestrade, accompanied by a sergeant named Holmes. They're asking all the wrong questions.

No concerns.

- Pembury Road.

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Pembury Road:

Please supply immediate written description of the sergeant.

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Friends,

Human male of approximately 45. Roughly 1.9m tall, though upright stance gives impression of greater height. Auburn hair, fading. Light eyes (blue/grey). Slightly weary in features. Distinctive point to the nose.
How would you put the relationship between the two of them?

Please also supply description of the human inspector.

Error in communication, friends? Both officers human.

Lestrade is of similar age. Shorter by around 5cm, a little broader in shoulder. Salt & pepper hair. Touch of stubble. Dark brown eyes (nearly black) and honest features. Gullible. Far too quick to trust. Smokes.

They seemed familiar. Comfortable.

Very aware of each other.

Await further instructions, Pembury Road. We have a task for you.

We suggest you send someone who knows what they're doing this time.
Greg could hear her looking for keys in the hall - sifting through papers, emptying bags out and tutting, the smart click of her heels on the laminate floor.

As she appeared in the lounge, she brought with her a waft of jasmine and violets. She was wearing perfume, and her long coat - the raspberry-coloured one. She'd painted her nails bright gold.

"You seen my keys, darlin'?" she asked him, as Greg looked up curiously from the sofa, surrounded on all sides by Physics revision notes.

He smiled, mischievous and fond. "Have you left them in the fridge again?"

She bent down to kiss his head as she passed.

"Cheek," she said. He scrubbed off her lipstick smudge with a grin. "That was one time."

"Top of the TV, maybe?" he suggested. She looked across the room.

"Oh! Greg, you star... what would I do without you?"

She strode over to the TV, scooped up her keys and tipped them into the tiny purse that hung from her arm.

Greg watched her, biting the very end of his tongue.

"Are you... going out, Mum?" he asked.

"Just off to see some friends," she said, breezily. "You'll be alright by yourself, won't you? There's that leftover shepherd's pie if you get hungry... don't eat up all the crisps, darlin'. M'onely going to the supermarket on Wednesday."

As she headed for the door, something made him call her back - something about the hug of her dress, the chirpy tone against the flatness of her eyes, the way she was striding in those heels.

"Mum?" he said.

She glanced around from the door. "Mm, sweetie?"
Greg hesitated, trying to work out how to ask. His chest ached as he looked at her.

"Mum, are you - ...?"

Her expression was all the answer he needed. She hitched up a smile to cover it.

"You get on with your revision, darlin'," she soothed. "Got your exam next week. Physics, is it?"

"Mum," he managed, his voice breaking. "I've - got my job now. You don't have to go out."

"There's... bills to pay, sweetie. Don't worry about it. You handle Physics. I'll handle bills."

"I'll do more hours," Greg said, desperately. "Mr Baker's always offering me more shifts, Mum. You know he is. You - you don't have to - "

"You'll do no more shifts, Greg Lestrade," his mother said, dropped her tiny bag by the door and crossed the lounge to the sofa - leaning over him, kissing him on the head. Her bare arms wrapped around him; her perfume encircled him, too. Greg burrowed into the safety of his mother's closeness. His throat had become too thick to speak.

"You work too many blessed shifts as it is," she murmured into the soft, puppyish tufts of his hair, dark like hers - her Greg - her number one. "You've got those exams to concentrate on. University. M'so proud of you... so don't you go putting a single thing in your head that doesn't need to be there, sweetheart. Not one thing."

"Mum, I'll - ... I don't have to go to uni - I could go full-time at the shop instead. Mr Baker'd let me. I'd be making proper money. I mean it, Mum. I could pay all the - "

"Greg..." she breathed, holding his face. He stopped talking - and that was the moment, there.

That was the moment he'd killed her.

He should have kept on - told her he was serious. Told her he wasn't letting her do this anymore. Told her he was a man now - eighteen-years-old, a grown man - and he didn't want to go to university if it meant she was doing this. He should have told her that he'd look after her now. It was his turn now. He'd keep her safe and he'd pay the bills, and they'd go to the supermarket on Wednesday, and he'd get out his wallet at the till. He'd hand the money over, proud.

Instead, he let her take his face into her hands - her painted nails - her eyes, big and dark like his.

"I'll be home by morning," she promised him, and gazed at him like he was the whole world - and he should have stopped her. He should have told her she was the whole world too. "Don't eat all the crisps," his mother warned him. She kissed him on the forehead, and she left.

For a long time Greg gazed at the door she'd closed behind her.

He slid his hands into his pockets, feeling a cold breeze pass through the yard around him. It shivered through the hair on the back of his neck. The gate through which his mother had left was still closed; it would not open again.

Those times were gone, and so was she.

Her son, though broken, brokenly lived on.

"You ain't alright," said a voice to him, softly. "Are you?"
He glanced down to find Emma at his side. She was gazing up at him, a mother to another mother's frightened child.

He tried to smile for her. There were only tears. He felt his stupid face starting to crumple, his heart breaking open all over again.

"Should've told her I loved her," he bit out, forcing himself to look down at his shoes. His shoulders began to shake. "One last time. She - … *fuck*, I should've stopped her... she always looked after me. I let her go. It was all my fault. Where the *fuck* are your kids? Please. *Please* just fucking tell me."

"Would you believe me if I told you they're fine?"

"No," he said, flatly. "Because *I'm* not fine. And I'm forty-one."

She hesitated, awkwardly looking away from him. Her face was full of shadows.

"Problem is, sweetheart… you got more to worry about now."

She inclined her head uneasily over his shoulder.

Greg frowned, glancing back.

He lurched as he realised there was a figure right behind him - looming and dark and only inches away, standing stock still in the corner of the yard. Greg reeled round and staggered back from it, gasping, dragging Emma with him.

The figure did not move. It simply stared. It had no features, no shape - just the coat, and the hat pulled low - and somewhere in those shadows, eyes he couldn't see - eyes that were staring, staring into the yard.

"*Jesus Christ* - ..." he managed. He pushed Emma behind him, shaking. "Just - stay there. Don't go near it. We'll be fine."

She laid her hands gently on his back.

"Still my hero, huh?" she murmured.

Greg didn't dare take his eyes from the figure in the corner - frozen still, but it could move at any second. Those eyes were staring at him too. He could feel them on him like an iron weight, fixed, waiting.

"Don't move," he warned Emma, shielding her with his body. "If we just - maybe it'll - "

The figure lunged.

With horrifying speed it crossed the yard in a rush, struck Greg and threw him backwards. He hit the stone wall behind with a crack of his skull.

Before he could even breathe, the teeth tore the first chunk of his throat out.

Greg woke with a strangled shout. He lurched out of bed, scrabbling in panic for his neck.

He staggered, slumped against the nearest wall and sank to the floor, panting hard, clutching at his throat.
"Fuck," he breathed, wrapping his hands tight. He shut his eyes. "Dream," he gasped to himself, desperately feeling the skin of his throat - intact, hot with sweat, his heart attempting to batter its way free to safety. "Fucking dream. Just a dream. Just a fucking dream."

It was morning. Sun was glinting through the gap between the curtains.

Saturday, he thought. Just a fucking dream.

He realised his wrist-set was juddering with an incoming call. He'd fallen asleep with it on last night, too exhausted and drained to unstrap the thing. He pushed his hand back over his sweaty forehead, his chest rising and falling deeply as he breathed.

"Answer," he told the wrist-set.

There was a click as the call began.

"Lestrade," he managed, tight-chested.

"What are you doing?" Mycroft asked at once, his voice full of suspicion and concern.

"I'm - ... Sat on the floor in my boxers, clutching my own throat. "... I - just woke up - what's wrong? What's happened?"

"Your biometrics suddenly screamed off the chart," Mycroft said, tersely. "I had an urgent alert come through on my wrist-set. Are you quite alright?"

"You - ..." Greg realised with a flush. "Oh. God, have they connected us up already? That was quick…"

He closed his eyes, rubbing slowly at the place the vampire had ripped with its teeth. The completeness of his own skin was a comfort.

"Turn biometric alerts off for me, will you?" he asked Mycroft. He wished he wasn't still audibly panting a little. "They're never useful. And you'll be getting red-level warnings every time I have a lamb madras. M'fine."

"You do not sound fine," Mycroft noted. Somehow his voice had raised its eyebrows.

"Yeah, well," Greg said, with a frown, "I'm telling you that I am."

"Are you aware that your heart rate hit 180 beats per minute? That's frankly astonishing." There was a faint series of blips. "It's still obscenely high now."

Greg breathed in hard, silently ordering his pulse to settle. He laid his head back against the wall.

"Can you not monitor my heart rate while we're on the phone, please?" he said. "It's - frankly creepy. And unnecessary."

"Well, if you're certain you're safe..." Mycroft said - though he sounded entirely unconvinced. "How - are you today?"

What the hell new game is this? Greg wondered.

"I'm - fine," he told Mycroft. "Why?"

"There's that word again..."
"Why would I not be fine?" Greg asked, pressing two fingers to his pulse. It thudded fretfully back at him.

"We had an emotionally charged night." Mycroft paused. "And I was... perhaps a little harsh with you towards the end."

Greg had a feeling this counted as an apology in Mycroft Holmes's world.

He didn't deserve it, either way. That much he knew for sure.

"Yeah... well... you should be harsh with people who've fucked up on a colossal scale."

"After reflection," Mycroft said, a little awkwardly, "your decision to go to Emma quite probably saved your life."

Greg saw again that figure - the staring, shadowed figure in the corner of the yard - and relived the speed with which it lunged for him. His heart jolted at the rawness of the memory.

He heard Mycroft's wrist-set beep.

"Turn those alerts off, will you?" Greg said. "I'm not kidding. And you say that now, but if he'd come at me, I could have grabbed him. Stopped him. Case closed."

"Or... he could have gutted you, and left you to die."

Greg's heart fluttered uneasily. "Can we talk about something else please?" he said, pained. "This is making me nauseous."

"Well... if you insist... I'm about to have the business card sent for fingerprint analysis. Whether it will be processed until Monday is another matter. I'll push ahead with Missing Persons today, even if it seems a forlorn hope. I'm sending uniform out with Emma's picture to other bars in the area. And I'll have Technical start on the CCTV - I don't know to what degree such a low-quality image can be enhanced, but we can at least glean a better idea of height and build."

"Right," said Greg. His heart rate was slowing gently with all the practical talk. It made him feel somehow safe. "What can I be doing?"

"I - think you would be well-placed to rest, Lestrade."

"I'm not doing that," said Greg. "Not while you're working. Not while those kids are watching the front window for their mum. Shall I head out with uniform?"

"No," Mycroft decided. "Uniform should be capable of carrying a picture around without supervision. And I believe you have some medical literature to be reading, inspector."

"Right..." Greg said, rubbing between his eyes. "Yeah, I do need to wade through all that... maybe if I just get my head down today, and chew through it..."

"Contact me if you have queries. There's a lot of jargon involved."

"Oh... good, my favourite. I will, thanks."

"And you're certain you're alright?"

Greg was trying not to enjoy, on some twisted level, that he'd worried Mycroft. The memory of the nightmare soured the sugary sensation at once. "I'm fine," he said, stiffly. "I just had a long night."
That's all."

"Mm," Mycroft said. "Well… happy reading."

He hung up.

Greg unstrapped his wrist-set, threw it into the tangled mess of sheets on the bed, and headed for a very hot shower.

He felt a little more human by the time that he emerged. He dressed himself in jeans and an old jumper, got coffee and cereal from the kitchen, and set himself up at the desk in the lounge.

"Right," he told himself, laying his wrist-set flat. "Research. Here we go."

He tapped on the research archive that Mycroft had transferred to him. A vast array of sub-folders leapt at once from the wrist-set, scattering themselves wide into the air before Greg's startled gaze. More and more popped into being as the archive continue to load. Anatomy, Physiology, DNA, Epidemiology, Chemical Biology, Virophysics...

By the time it finished, Greg found himself facing thirty or so separate folders.

Despairing, he tapped for details of the archive. Total Files: 612.

"Christ," Greg decided.

He got up and made himself a stronger coffee.

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NEW MESSAGE

From: Greg Lestrade
To: Mycroft Holmes

Hey. Day going okay so far? Let's hope the outcome of this case doesn't rest on my ability to master vampiric epidemiology.

Been reading for an hour and I still haven't found out what epidemiology is.

Greg.

---

NEW MESSAGE
From: Mycroft Holmes  
To: Greg Lestrade

_Epidemiology is the study of the distribution and determinants of disease, and the application of this study towards decisions regarding public health._

_As a small crumb of advice, you might fare a little better in the 'Introductory Notes For Lestrade' folder…_

_I do admire your dedication though. Top marks._

"Christ," Greg decided, again. He made himself another coffee.

When he returned to his desk, he opened up the folder and found a handful of files only, with far more digestible titles. This was going better, he thought - and it would go better than his A Levels, at least.

He worked his way through _01 Demographics, 02 Social Risk Management and 03 Major Genetic Adaptations_ without encountering particular surprises.

By the end of _04 Excultus_, he was in serious need of more coffee.

The police had first noticed a problem back in 2202 - sixteen years ago now, before Greg had even earned his bright-yellow jacket and his pushbike. People had been going missing in South London and the East End, from those classes of people most inclined to go missing. By the time a pattern had been spotted, it was too late.

A raid on a suspicious property on Shoreditch led police to discover people kept in cages like cattle - riddled with half-healed bites, their heads so screwed up that every single one of them went into permanent psychiatric residency. Electronics at the property were cracked, which led to another alarming discovery. This was just one cell - one piece of a wider network.

Excultus's top-level management turned out to be a twisted sort of aristocracy - people who could trace their bloodlines back to a figure called The First. He was the original adult subject: an online currency billionaire whose political views on women and liberals were the stuff of nightmares. He'd supplied the bulk of the funding. He'd been the first to receive the virus.

Excultus literature called it 'exaltation' - the transformation - the virus ripping its way through genetic code, burning out the weak, augmenting the strong. The First had surrounded himself with a hallowed inner circle, who in time were all blessed with the same. He'd then taken a consort ("A fucking consort?" Greg read aloud into his coffee mug) who a year later had given birth to a child - The First Child.

Over a hundred years had passed.

And now people were going missing in the East End once more.
Only Mycroft's academic, clinical tone brought Greg to believe that any of this could be real - that, and the memory of Emma's body.

Greg took a break. He went for a short run to clear his head, spoiled it with three cigarettes, got himself another coffee and returned to his invisible chains at the desk.

He then turned, bracing himself, to 05 Pair Bonds.

As noted in 03, optimal health for a vampiric individual can be maintained with consumption of 100-150ml of blood from a living donor roughly once per week.

This can be supplemented or substituted with preserved blood (as from a blood bank) consumed daily at greater volume, though this is not physiologically recommended. The health benefits of a living donor's blood are numerous; preserved blood consumption (especially long-term) leads to health symptoms for the individual such as lethargy and fatigue, mood swings, insomnia, dramatic weight loss/gain and poor immune response.

The presence of PT-309 in vampiric saliva (in combination with a local anesthetic) means that living donors are chemically primed to find the experience both physically and emotionally stimulating.

Greg stopped, reading those words a few times. 'Physically and emotionally stimulating'. He thought of Mrs Sanders, and her insistence that Emma was making a 'good fuss' down in the yard as she died. It made him feel deeply uncomfortable.

He read on, frowning darkly.

A powerful sexual response to feeding is extremely common for the donor. In the right conditions, the act of feeding for the vampiric individual can also be an intensely intimate one.

As a result, it is not uncommon for vampiric individuals to form what are termed 'pair bonds' with living donors.

These bonds are usually intensely monogamous, based around the sexual response from both partners towards feeding. The arrangement is a form of the symbiotic mutualism often found in nature. The human donor provides nourishment to the vampiric individual, and is in turn better protected by a much stronger, healthier and fitter mate.

The closeness of the pair bond is also of psychological benefit to both partners.

Greg found his insides tightening strangely as he mulled that over in his head. 'A stronger, healthier and fitter mate.' Like werewolves, he thought. They formed strong bonds, too. It was a family thing - usually based on the fact that their human neighbours despised them and thought they were ruining the neighbourhood.

But all this didn't sound like the practice of people who also kept humans in cages. He didn't understand how this fit in.
A healthy human donor can very safely lose around 500ml (roughly 10% of overall blood levels) in a four-week period without undue effects.

A pair bond greatly decreases the risk of 'feeding frenzy' in a vampiric individual - a psychological state where violence and aggression are brought on by increasing hunger. A vampire unable to feed undergoes an often rapid descent into increasing desperation. The consequences are usually violent in nature, resulting from a loss of control by the vampiric individual. A human fed upon by a vampire in 'feeding frenzy' is at enormous risk of hypovolemic shock (blood-loss from overfeeding - loss of anything over 40% total blood volume usually leads to death).

The quiet, frequent feedings of a bonded pair dramatically lower the chances of this occurrence.

It is noted that juvenile or inexperienced vampires (i.e., those only recently exposed to the genetic virus) are often yet to master the control needed to regulate the amount of blood they take from a living donor. Experienced vampires are more likely to produce a smaller wound, take less blood over the course of a feeding (at more consistent amounts, and at a steadier rate) and pick up on the early warning signs of hypovolemic shock in a partner.

It is also noted that members of vampire-supremacist organisations (such as Excultus) are likely to frown on the practice of pair bonds. Living donors are considered sustainable items of prey, rather than viable partners.

As he finished, Greg found himself thinking a number of things. They were like discordant songs in his head, all playing at once. His coffee had finally reached a temperature where he could drink it, but he wasn't sure he wanted it any more.

'Quiet, frequent feedings' - as opposed to a violent frenzy. An experienced vampire, watching their mate carefully for signs of blood loss - taking less - taking it slowly - and on the other hand, the juvenile or desperate ones, who presumably hit the next human they encountered like a wrecking ball. 'Sustainable items of prey'. Cages in a basement in Shoreditch. It made Greg feel sick.

He read through the notes again, wondering uneasily where all this information was coming from. Mycroft had been hunting vampires ten years ago - stamping them out, so Greg thought - not cosily interviewing vampire-human couples on a couch somewhere.

Greg reached for his tablet, opening up the internet with a frown.

He typed in 'vampire pair bond'.

He found a lot of questionable online fiction. He took a drink of coffee, wrinkling his nose at its now lukewarm temperature, then typed in: 'vampire pair bond PT 309'.

More fiction - most of it bluntly ignoring his addition to the search string - then, halfway down the second page, a forum hosted by one of the big providers. 309ers: help, chat and support.

Greg clicked on it carefully.

309ers is an online community for couples/individuals involved in a pt309 r/ship. FM, MM, FF, XX all welcome. No need to register. NSFW content (no seriously, nsfw). Please respect forum rules
(mainly BE NICE) and no dating/sex ads.

Greg scrolled through the list of available sub-forums, his eyebrows inching higher and higher on his forehead as he read.

- new to pt309 (IE, are you reading this and FREAKING OUT? come HERE FIRST)
- 309-carriers support network
- partners support network
- 30999: let's get medical
- general chat board
- 309sexsection (NSFW - over 18s ONLY)
- elf & safety/blade ear 309ers
- MM pt309 lounge
- FF pt309 lounge
- XX pt309 lounge
- 309er parents/family help

Bewildered, Greg strayed through instinct into the board at the top.

- STICKIE: read THIS and stop panicking. then introduce yourself.
- omg i thought he was joking......
- My new gf is PT309. Not sure what i think but kinda afraid.
- So I didn't know what PT-309 was last week... and noooow...
- hello, new to all this
- 309 one night stand. yikes. can someone help? I can't sleep
- is it normal to feel like this?????
He told me last night. Didn't believe him until he showed me this site...

newbie to 309, honestly a bit scared YES I READ THE STICKIE IT DIDNT HELP

She wants to "pair bond"? (I am 28F if it matters)

"Oh my God," Greg mumbled, not daring to click any further. He backed out of the newbies sub-forum and scrolled numbly through the others, finding himself in the 309 Carriers Support Network. His breath caught in his chest as he read. It was even worse.

Nightmares about losing control/killing her. Help.

what are very symptoms of frenzy? worried I have them, no L/D 6mths

Weight gain on blood bags :((

struggling to keep focus at work, been off sick too much... help?

non 309 medical condition... no safe doctors in my area... WHAT DO I DO

Pretty sure I'll never form a pair bond. Not feeling great.

survey: have you ever paid someone to feed? how much ££

Greg wondered when his heart had started pounding. He went back to the home page, pale, and before he even knew what he was doing he'd hit 309sexsection with his fingertip. It unfolded before him.

STICKIE: blood sex faqs

STICKIE: hypovole symptoms. READ THIS NOW FOR WHEN IT COUNTS

STICKIE: reminder... please no sex ads... please. no seriously stop now guys.

Oh my god.

He is hyper sensitive after feeding...

TIPS for partners - MASTER LIST - add yours!

so apparently non 309ers have sex on average ONCE a WEEK??? really?
Blood Sex <3 <3 <3 Stories <3 <3 <3 Share <3 <3 <3 <3 <3

First time she's come while I'm drinking. I am so fucking in love rn.

!discussion! is your 309 partner crazy good at oral? Cos I'm pretty sure I'm spotting a pattern here

Teasing…. is it dangerous?

TIPS for carriers - MASTER LIST - add yours!

blood sex w/ partner last night first time (now I can't concentrate at work)

Lets talk PAIR BOND POSITIONS :) come share faves x

Greg's wrist-set buzzed suddenly. He jumped, reached for it and numbly opened the message that had just appeared, his eyes staring and his throat oddly dry.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES -
Might I say something to you?

Greg's coffee was now completely cold. He pushed his chair back from the desk, made his way in silence to the kitchen and typed out a response as he waited for the kettle to boil, his heart continuing to drum in his chest.

Sure. What's up?
SENT: 10:57am

Mycroft's response came as he stirred his new coffee, comforting himself with the quiet rattle of the spoon.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
I regret that I delved into your past last night. It was ungracious of me. I wanted to say I'm sorry.

"Holy shit..." Greg mumbled. Now those were rare words indeed. He wondered if he could get them printed out and framed for their office wall.

He hesitated as he typed in his reply.
Don't worry… it's fine. Really. What's past is past. Just promise me something, will you?

SENT: 11:02am

As he sat back down in his chair with a squeak, Greg took a moment just to breathe in the smell of his coffee. A response arrived as he took a first sip.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
What is it?

Within a few minutes, Greg found he was no longer so interested in the forum - just drinking his coffee, replying to Mycroft, and waiting for the next message to come through.

Don't go looking for what happened to my mum. I know you're probably itching to plug her name into the crime database and find out. And I'm probably making it worse by asking but just… don't? For my sake. I don't want that in your head when you look at me.

SENT 11:12am

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
I won't invade your privacy again. I am sorry that I did - genuinely. It was not professional of me. And very unkind.

It's fine. Just dish me some dirt on you and we'll be even. Then again I don't think you're the sort of man who HAS much dirt. Not even a speeding ticket right?

SENT 11:21am

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
"Dirt"?

Secrets. Skeletons in the closet. Interesting tit bits.

SENT 11:24am.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
Oh. I suppose we all have secrets.
I don't know what counts as dirt and what is merely titbit.

Tit bits are fine. Go on. Let's hear it.
SENT 11:31am.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
I... keep tropical fish.

Now lying upside down on the sofa, the desk and his reading material abandoned, Greg took a moment to make sure he'd read that right. He found himself smiling a little as he typed out a reply.

You mean like... fancy goldfish? With the fluffy tails?
What are their names?
SENT 11:40am.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
They're... fish, Lestrade. They don't have names.

Send me a pic. I don't believe you.
SENT 11:47am.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
I am at the office now. I might send you one later.

What are you doing at the office? Also bad news but fish don't count as dirt. That's not nearly salacious enough.
SENT 11:55am.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
I have Missing Persons to work through. People answer the phone quicker to a Scotland Yard call. And you wanted SALACIOUS titbits? Why didn't you say?

Come on Holmes, stop stalling and cough up. And this has better be good. Last night you found out I am literally a son of a whore. I am expecting grade A dirt here or we are not even.
SENT 12:01pm.
NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
Very well. If it leads you to forgive me...

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
I lost my virginity to Gregorian chant.

Back at his desk with fresh coffee and a ham sandwich, Greg's mouth opened slightly as he read the message that awaited him. He typed his reply in amazement.

Jesus is that a cult or something? You lost your virginity to all of them?
This has escalated quickly.
SENT 12:10pm.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
No, it's a music style... monks in hoods. Medieval monasteries and so on.
Look it up.

Greg did so, typing the search string with a furrowed brow into the window beside the vampire sex forum. It had been a strange day, he thought.

As the sound file began to play, he burst out laughing.

Sorry you've actually had SEX to this? How did you even MANAGE that?
SENT 12:21pm.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
Oh God. It was when I was in college... a boy I liked invited me to his room to study. He had it playing when I arrived. Afterwards he made me Earl Grey tea.

He "made you earl grey tea"? Is this some slang I've never heard before?
SENT 12:26 PM

Mycroft I can't believe anyone in the world has ever managed to shag anyone while listening to this.
I have never been less turned on in my life.
SENT 12:27pm.
NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
You said "Grade A Dirt". I hope that fits the bill. Am I forgiven?

Holy shit yeah. Sorry, this is amazing. I can't stop laughing.
Wow, now I know where I went wrong...
SENT 12:32pm.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
To use a favourite phrase of yours: piss off, Lestrade.

So I'll order us a cd of this, yeah? Give us something to listen to in the car?
SENT 12:34pm.

A few moments later, Greg's wrist-set began to buzz agitatedly on the desk beside him. He smirked, picking up his coffee mug in both hands and sitting back in his chair.

"Answer," he told it - there came a click. "I'm joking," he said. "You know that, right? I'm not going to torment you with Gregorian chant. I can probably come up with much better ways."

"What... on earth are you talking about?" came a voice - not the one he was expecting.

Greg felt the bottom drop from his soul. His mouth opened. For several seconds, he couldn't speak. He could only look at the wrist-set, hoping against hope that he'd misheard - that it was Mycroft - or someone else - anyone else.

"Greg?" came the voice from his wrist-set at last.

"Hey," Greg managed. He'd entirely forgotten he was holding a coffee mug. "Um... you alright? Long time no speak."

"Yeah... yeah, long time... what was that about Gregorian chant?"

"Oh - no, I was just chatting to someone else," said Greg. His heart thudded painfully, his whole body frozen into place in his chair. He wasn't ready for this today. Not by a long shot. "I thought you were him. Sorry."

"Oh?" said Jason, with interest.

In the single sound, Greg heard it all.

"No, he's not - ..." Greg took a breath. What does it matter to you if he is? he thought savagely. It's not your business anymore. "Just a work colleague. We're mid-case. So, uh... what's up?"

"Nothing, just... wondered how you are," Jason murmured. He hesitated. "You've not answered any of my messages."
"Sorry. You remember how it is. Round the clock most days."

"Right. How's Scotland Yard?"

"Oh… fine. Still standing, last time I checked." Greg paused, glancing down into his coffee. "How're the wife and kids?"

"You... don't have to say it like that."

Greg bit the end of his tongue. "Say it like what?"

"Like - …" Jason sighed. "They're - fine. Thanks for asking."

"How old's the littlest now? Coming up to two?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

Greg bit his tongue a little harder. "You're his dad, Jason. Aren't you supposed to know?"

"God, I knew you'd be like this…" Jason sighed, audibly shifting his head into his hands. "Look, do you... have to be weird about it? You said we'd be friends, Greg. You said you'd keep in touch. I didn't want you just to cut me off like I'm nothing to you."

Greg's heart thumped with distress.

"I thought that was exactly the plan," he said, his breath shallowing. "Fresh start. No more - this. No more temptation. You moved to Wales, Jason. That's a pretty clear message to hit me with."

"Because of my marriage, Greg - my kids - I'm not - … look, you wouldn't understand. But you don't need to act like I just vanished into the air."

"You seriously thought we'd be meeting up every few months for a beer, did you?" Greg said. "Sending chummy emails?"

"Why not?" Jason said, hurt. "You were my DI. We had five years together. And you said we could be friends."

Greg covered his forehead with a hand, exhausted. For a while he didn't speak - his throat was too thick with all the shit he'd never said, and all the shit he'd said a hundred times. None of it had made any difference in the end.

"What are you thinking?" Jason asked him, in the quiet.

Greg pinched the bridge of his nose. Jason had often asked him that - usually right after sex, lying in silence in Greg's bed when they were supposedly working a late night. Empty wine glasses on the bedside cabinet. The question was normally just a precursor for Jason to explain what he was thinking - which was inevitably how guilty he felt, how hurt Amy would be if she knew, how they couldn't do this anymore.

Greg drew in a hard breath, breaking. He'd waited long enough to ask.

"Why didn't you... why didn't you tell me you were engaged, Jason? If you'd just told me that first day - not kept it from me... I mean, Jesus - by the time I found out, we'd…"

"I didn't know if we'd actually go through with it," Jason said, his voice wracked with misery. "I - I didn't expect I'd actually - …"
"- marry Amy," Greg finished, dully. "Having spent the night before the wedding fucking me."

"You don't understand," Jason bit out, "what it's like to be gay, and not be able to tell - "

"It's easy to be gay, Jason. You just grow yourself some balls and say it, man - then you just deal with the shit like the rest of us do. At least don't string along a bloody wife and kids to cover your tracks while screwing some poor bastard on the side, how's that?"


"I understood perfectly," Greg said, bluntly. "You wanted a wife to make your parents proud, and get your tea on the table for five, and you wanted a boyfriend on the side to fuck and cry with about how nobody understands."

"You weren't - ever my boyfriend," Jason said, his voice hollow.

Greg took the blow like a hammer to the chest. He pushed his hands over his face, breathing in to numb the pain. This was a new low, even for Jason. It hurt. It was going to hurt even more at three AM. He knew it already.

"Five years," he managed, at last. "Five fucking years."

"Greg..." Jason's voice stiffened. "Greg, don't - I didn't mean it - "

Greg reached for the wrist-set, flipped it over and slashed his finger across the switch. The call cut. He sat back in his chair with a squeak of the lumbar support, breathing hard and rubbing at his eyes.

The wrist-set began to vibrate again almost immediately.

"Piss off," he told Jason, exhausted.

Of all the things to deal with today, he thought... of all the things he needed in his head right now.

He pushed back his chair, went to the kitchen and made himself yet another coffee. He didn't bother with a spoon for the sugars - just a general pouring from the bag. He still had the rest of Mycroft's notes and an entire support forum to read. Suddenly, the last thing he wanted to do in the world was wade his way through vampire sex tips - not that he'd wanted to read them before.

As he returned to his desk, the wrist-set was still shuddering.

"Could you just... not?" he begged Jason under his breath, turning the stupid thing over. "Could you just stop doing this to me, before I - "

INCOMING CALL FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

"Answer!" Greg yelped. There came a click.

"Hey," he said in a rush as he sat down, his heart bumping against his ribs. "What's - what's up?"

"Have I now managed to offend you twice," Mycroft asked, "in the space of twenty-four hours? I
"What? No, I... I don't know what you're on about," Greg said. "I've just not read my messages for
a while. I was doing my homework. Are you okay?"

Mycroft audibly breathed out. "I thought I'd - … never mind."

"You thought I was ignoring you," Greg said, his chest twinging.

"Sorry. I'll let you get back to work."

"No, I'm… needing a bit of a break, to be honest..." Greg picked up his coffee, holding the heat of
the mug to his heart. He was still shaking a little. "You - alright? Still at the office?"

"No. Just home." Greg caught the distinct sound of keys being dropped into a wooden bowl. "I've -
abandoned Missing Persons, I'm afraid. Emma clearly isn't there. Whoever knows her, and for
whatever reason, they've chosen not to report her disappearance... we'll just have to hope my
business card subterfuge pays off. Forensics are taking the fingerprints off it now."

Greg smiled a little, glancing down into his coffee. "This clearly wasn't going to be solved by a few
phone calls," he said. "You checked, at least. Now we can concentrate on the other options."

He pulled his feet into the chair with him.

"So... where is it?" he asked.

"Where is... what?" Mycroft said, warily.

"My fish photo," Greg said. "You promised."

Mycroft let out a startled, soft laugh. It crackled a little over the line. "I'll - acquire you one," he
muttered, embarrassed. "Though I don't recall a 'promise'..."

"Label it with their names," Greg said. "So I know which one is which."

"I told you. They don't have names, Lestrade. They're fish. They don't have a concept of self."

"Neither do one-year-olds. People still give them names." Greg sipped his coffee. "How many fish
have you got?"

"Around - twenty-five, now. Not including the cherry shrimp."

"Twenty-five?"

"They have a large tank," Mycroft said, injured.

Greg found himself suddenly smiling. "Have they got little castles and stuff?" he asked. "Bridges to
swim under? Bits of plant."

"Why are you so amused by my fish?"

"I don't know," Greg admitted. "I just... think it's nice. Why fish?"

He could hear Mycroft moving around the room, interacting with things - the clang of a bin lid, the
rustle of a bag, the clunk of a fridge door seal. "What do you mean, 'why fish'?" he asked Greg,
suspicious.
"What is it you like about them? Can't imagine you with a hamster, I suppose..."

"They're... peaceful," Mycroft decided, at length. "They're calming to watch."

"D'you sit on the floor next to their tank? Like a cat?"

"No, I... sit in my armchair..." Mycroft said, bewildered.

"With a book," Greg added. "And cocoa. Watching your fish." He couldn't stop smiling; he'd forgotten Jason. He'd forgotten the forum, the notes, the nightmare - all of it. There was just Mycroft's voice and the thought of him at home somewhere, searching through his fridge. "Sorry, did you say 'cherry shrimp'? How are they different from normal shrimp?"

"Why do I get the impression you're being facetious at me?" Mycroft asked, with an audible frown. There came the sound of a plastic straw being squeaked through a disposable cup lid.

"Remind me what 'facetious' means," said Greg, "and we'll find out."

"Jocular," Mycroft said around a straw. "Glib."

"I'm not taking the piss," Greg said, "if that's what you mean." He lifted his coffee to his mouth, smiling to himself. "I'm just... I dunno, I like it. You and your fish."

A strange, sudden urge welled up.

"Hey," he said. "D'you wanna maybe - "

"- is your reading going?" Mycroft asked in the clash of new topics.

Greg retreated, embarrassed.

"Sorry," he said. "Go on."

"No, I spoke over you," Mycroft said. There came a quiet creak as he sat down somewhere. "Continue. I'm listening."

Greg found he couldn't. He shifted topic, telling himself he was a fucking coward and he would grow old alone.

"You were... asking about reading, right? Uh, it's going well I think. I've found a forum on the internet which has been - illuminating, if nothing else."

He took a drink from his coffee, swirling a thought around his head. He supposed there was no better person to ask.

"Listen," he said. "There are different - kinds of vampire, aren't there? Different - ... I don't know, sub-cultures. Excultus sound like they'd drop humanity into a big blender and just have done with it, if they could. But that doesn't seem to be a universal attitude."

"What precisely have you found?" Mycroft asked, slowly, still audibly chewing his straw.

"I... think they call themselves '309ers'."

"God help us. You've descended to the murky depths of the internet already." Mycroft sighed, shifting a little in his seat. "Attitudes to humanity vary wildly from one vampire to the next," he said. "Not all of them subscribe to Excultus's views. Excultus tend to view errant individuals as
blood traitors’... human-sympathisers."

"But they're out there," Greg said. "Couples. People living with this in secret."

"Ah. You've reached Pair-Bonds’. Yes, there's quite a number of them. Prejudice against those living with vampirism is understandably enormous."

"Yeah, I bet."

"Most of the vampires living out in the community are moroi... given that the virus has supposedly been under armed guard for years - which Amelia has told me she is looking into, by the way."

"They'll be - … what, sorry? Moroi?"

"Born vampires," Mycroft said, around his straw. "Not transformed by virus."

"Right," Greg said.

His voice drifted out into the quiet.

He knew his focus should be on the vampire who'd just robbed three children of their mother, and left her to die in a dirty concrete yard - but part of him couldn't stop imagining those couples. Pair bonds.

'Physically and emotionally stimulating'.

It made his insides coil.

"What did I interrupt you in asking?" Mycroft said, over the line.

Greg's thoughts defogged. He tightened his grip on his mug.

"I was thinking," he said, his voice as casual as possible. Be brave, Greg. "D'you want to - meet up somewhere? For a drink? You can talk me through the rest of this research. I'm going to pick it up ten times faster if I hear it, rather than read it… and I won't have to bug you with questions by text every five minutes."

"I - …" Mycroft took a moment to respond. "I'd - be happy to."

Greg's heart skipped into the air.

"But I'm afraid I... have a prior engagement tonight," Mycroft finished, sending Greg's heart into an ungainly flop and a skid across the floor. Bollocks, Greg thought. Bollocks, bollocks. "Thank you, though… I - I'd have liked to - "

"No, it's fine," Greg heard himself say - and there was that word again. "We'll talk shop on Monday." He smiled a little, trying to keep the sensation of being punched in the gut out of his voice. "Might as well do it while we're being paid for it, anyway..."

"Unless you'd - …"

"Unless I'd...?" Greg said, quickly. He waited.

Mycroft seemed to grapple with something for a moment. "Nothing," he said at last. Greg breathed out. "Never mind."
Greg looked down into his coffee.

"Right," he said. "Well… on with my reading, then."

"Do - message me," Mycroft said, oddly tense. "If I can illuminate anything."

"Alright," Greg said. "I will."

There was a pause.

"Bye," Greg said, and then to the wrist-set: "Close call."

"Greg, if - " he heard Mycroft say, before the connection cut.

Greg sat for some time in the quiet, holding the coffee to his chest as it, too, went slowly cold.

He realised after a while that it was Jason to whom his thoughts were straying.

He couldn't do this, he thought.

He couldn't go back to this.

It was months since he'd been back to feeling like this, and if he didn't do something about it, he'd be calling Jason at three AM - and Jason would be telling him to get on a train - saying things at him like 'only you,' and 'one last time'. (How many 'one last times' had they had now? Countless. No more, Greg thought. Not once more.)

He reached numbly for his wrist-set, loaded up his contacts, scrolled through and found the number.

"Hey," he said straightaway, as the new call was picked up. "Where're you drinking tonight? I'm going out of my head. I need to get unwisely pissed."

"You assume I'm going to be out drinking?" said the voice of Luke Elwood, wry. Greg could hear his face twisting with that roguish smile.

"You assume I'm going to be out drinking?" said the voice of Luke Elwood, wry. Greg could hear his face twisting with that roguish smile.

"It's your Saturday off. Of course you're going out drinking. So where am I meeting you?"

"We were thinking Four Thieves to start," Luke said. "About eight - they serve food, if people want it - then wind our way along the road, hit Meltdown in the small hours? Then weep and throw up all Sunday… usual Armed Response night-out. Some of the other Scotland Yard lot are coming along to The Four Thieves, but they'll drop off soon. They always do. I'll be amazed if they even make it to The Roebuck, to be honest. You're coming along to the bitter end though, Greg, yeah? Honorary ARS for the night?"

Greg smiled, feeling better already.

"Yeah," he said. "Fine. Honorary ARS."

"Right. See you at the Thieves at eight. I'll get the first round in."

"Okay. Great." Just before Greg hung up, he winced a little and added, "Luke?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't - try and get me laid tonight. Seriously. Not a good idea right now."
"Why would I do that?" Luke said, and hung up.

Greg tried not to think too deeply into that final question. He was about to get back on with his reading when his wrist-set gave a feeble flash of a long unread message - and he remembered the whole reason that Mycroft had called him in the first place.

He reached for the wrist-set, his expression dull.

It had been a long and stupid day, he thought, in a long and stupid week - and nothing showed any signs of stopping. At least he could blow off some stream tonight.

He opened up and read the message.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES:
You can buy as many Gregorian chant CDs as you wish, Lestrade.
So long as there isn't one playing the next time we have sex, I don't mind.
His heart was like a sensitive plant, that opens for a moment in the sunshine, but curls up and
shrinks into itself at the slightest touch of the finger, or the lightest breath of wind.

- Anne Brontë
'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall' (1848)

It was quarter past eight when Greg reached The Four Thieves. He hadn't wanted to get there early
and sit alone somewhere, looking desperate for company - which he absolutely was. In the end, he
needn't have worried.

As he entered the bar, he found it a genial riot of chatter, laughter and clinking glasses, with music
thumping low across the crowd and the air spiced with perfume and smoke. As much as Greg
hated London - when it did nightlife right, it did it right: sharp-looking people, music and laughter
and lights. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket, feeling a little better already.

He'd spent the afternoon slogging through Mycroft's final notes - though in truth, he'd processed
very little of them. He'd had more on his mind.

He'd been holding onto this - distraction and escape, if only for a while.

As he spotted Luke Elwood through the crowd, Luke spotted Greg too. He waved Greg over,
grinning the full width of his handsome face, and as Greg reached him they dragged each other
into a happy hug.

"Worried you'd bailed!" Luke said, delighted, slapping him between the shoulders. "You look
knackered, mate. You look bloody awful."

Greg smiled awkwardly. "Thanks for that. S'just what I need to hear."

Or... fuck it. Tequila now?"

"Jesus," Greg laughed, a little scared. "Be gentle with me, will you? I've not been out on the lash in
a while. I want to get home in mostly one piece."

"It's like falling off a bike," Luke promised, clapping him on the arm. "Don't worry. I'll look after
you. Besides..."

He worked his lower lip between his teeth; his eyebrows scrunched a little.

"I hear you've got good reason to drink," he finished.

Greg pulled a face.
"Could be going better," he admitted. "We've got CCTV though, and fingerprints on a potential witness… problem with sex workers is they live and work off the radar. Haven't even got a surname for her yet. But I suppose it's still the first week. We'll get there."


"What?" Greg asked him after a moment.


Greg realised in a rush.


Luke's eyes filled with an understanding he didn't actually have.

"Stay here," he told Greg, bracingly. "You need a drink."

He disappeared off towards the bar, snaring appreciative glances as he went like a magnet scraped slowly through a box of iron filings.

In his absence Greg turned to the rest of the group gathered at the table - a collection of assorted Scotland Yard people, some of whom he knew and some of whom he didn't. One face in particular caught his eye across the table. He grinned, waving.

TJ returned him a jaunty little salute. He was tucked into the booth beside his podmate Maisie, who was currently chatting to one of the Admin girls on her opposite side.

Greg raised his eyebrows at TJ, biting his tongue.

TJ shot him a bright-eyed look of warning, and scooped some peanuts from a bowl without a word.

Luke returned a minute later with three of the Armed Response boys he'd found at the bar, along with a pot of salt, a sliced lime, and several shots of the cheapest and nastiest tequila to be found in Camden.

"Christ," Greg breathed, as Luke laid the supplies down on the table with a grin.

"The night is young. And you've got a lot to blot out."

"More by the day." Greg licked his hand, reaching with a pre-emptive wince for a pinch of salt. "This is gonna hurt."

"Yep," said Luke, and handed him a shot and a slice of lime. "Then we keep doing it until it no longer hurts."

_Fine by me_, Greg thought.

He thought of Jason - Jason's wife, who'd always been nothing but lovely to him - and he thought of those gorgeous kids who knew him as Daddy's Boss, for five _fucking_ years - he thought of Mycroft ringing up to check on him this morning - the texts - _tropical fish_ - his bloody _Gregorian chant_ - a "prior engagement", what the _fuck_? - and finally, Greg thought of his mum.

The tequila hit the back of his throat like burning oil.

He choked, trying not to double over as Luke thumped the table beside him and laughter went up
from their audience. It had started, Greg thought. This was happening now. It would end wherever it ended.

He gritted his teeth into the lime and sucked with a hiss, suspecting the metallic taste in his mouth was probably his throat-lining.

This was a bad idea, he thought.

This was a really bad idea.

It was the best bad idea he'd had in months.

Mycroft nudged open the fridge, removed the two-litre bottle from the door and joylessly refilled his cup, watching the level rise without particular appetite.

_D'you want to meet up somewhere? For a drink?_

As the words played back through his mind, he felt his shoulders - for the tenth time that afternoon - slacken in a silent sigh.

He'd panicked, and leapt to 'no' as the only possible answer. Only afterwards had he realised there were a whole host of answers he could have given, 'why not come here?' being the obvious one. Some witticism about the fish, he thought, dully. Easy enough to get Greg onto red wine. Sit together in the living room with the floor lamps lit, discuss the research notes, while away the hours together... those decadent brown eyes upon him.

With, of course, the advantage that Greg would not have had to leave come closing time. He could have stayed a little longer.

Perhaps until morning.

"Stop it," Mycroft warned himself in a breath, affixing the lid with a snap. His jaw tightened.
"Accept your fate."

He returned to the sofa in the living room, and resumed his position amongst fifty-three separate hard-light screens detailing violence to the neck or throat, perpetrated by a stranger. The attacks had all been within the last six months and were spread city-wide. Mycroft was compiling them onto a map, hoping for a pattern to leap out. So far, the pattern suggested that a depressingly high number of ordinary Londoners went for the jugular just as the opening bid to a fight.

As he drew on the straw, grimacing, Mycroft casually checked his wrist-set on the arm of the sofa. As he did, he performed a fairly good impression of a man who wouldn't care what it said.

His impression of a man not disappointed by 'No New Messages' was less convincing.

He hadn't heard a thing from Lestrade since the phone-call.

Mycroft's last message sat with a 'Seen' mark beneath it, right at the bottom of the thread - echoing miserably to itself in the space.

Mycroft hesitated as he gazed at the wrist-set. His thumb hovered over the on-screen keyboard. He
wanted to - and that feeling, the simple sensation of 'want', was so tiny and so overpowering that it physically hurt. It was as thick in his chest as heat, as sharp as salt. He couldn't ignore it. He couldn't make it go quiet. This was getting out of hand, and he knew it.

*But what is there to say?* he asked himself. *What do you possibly have to say?*

Nothing that was bearable.

Nothing that would change a damn thing.

It was the bitter truth, and he was going to have to make his peace with it. Mycroft closed the keyboard with a slash of a trembling finger, his mood sliding further into desolation.

Numb, he returned to his map.

"So what's the story?" Luke asked, as Greg set down two more pints and sat beside him in the booth. Maisie and the Admin girls were shuffling out at the other end to go to the quiz machine.

"The story?"

"You and Dr. Holmes," said Luke, as he lifted his pint to his mouth.

Greg wondered for one wild second exactly what Luke was asking, then spotted the bemused grimace he was being given.

"Did you massively annoy the commander or something?" Luke asked. "Seems like a hell of a punishment to exact on someone. Couldn't believe it when I heard. Nobody could."

"He's... got specialist knowledge," Greg said. Talking about Mycroft felt strange - both good and bad at once. It made his chest feel warm and the back of his neck feel cold. "He was a DI, back in the day. He worked with Vickery. So now he's been recommissioned... back by popular demand."

"Just for you, huh?"

Greg's heart twitched a little. The warmth deepened in his chest. "Just for me," he said, drinking.

"Crazy," said Luke, and shook his head, leaning back in his seat with a sigh. "Surely there was one proper sergeant left you hadn't broken."

"You're funny," Greg said, deadpan. "Really. And no, turns out not." Tequila was fuzzing the edges of his thoughts, blurring them together a little - he could feel it. It was making him feel honest and unhappy and slow. "Mycrof - ..." he began, and there was that name in his mouth - why did it feel *good* there? Why did it make his heart beat a little faster? "... he's not a sergeant, really. We're... dual DIs, I guess."

He bit the inside of his cheek and drank.

"We had a fight about the door," he admitted. "We've - had a fight about a few things."

Luke gave him a sympathetic smile. "Can't be helping with the case."
Greg hesitated, looking down into his pint. He frowned a little.

"You know what? That's the worst bit," he said, startled by his own realisation. "He's really good at it. He's quick, and he's observant, and he just gets on with things. Doesn't wait for me to ask. It's - just a shame he's…"

Greg couldn't find the words. They were gone, kept in storage in those parts of his brain the tequila had already claimed.

"... yeah," he finished, lamely.


Greg huffed. "You think?" he said, with a flash of his eyebrows. "Didn't consider that. Thanks, man. Maybe I should ask Vickery for you as a sergeant next."

"Don't think so." Luke smirked into his pint glass and drank, putting it back down with a clunk. "You're not getting me with your curse. I've got things to live for. Who'd wax Serena?"

Greg grinned a little, shaking his head.

On the other side of the table, TJ was now sitting alone with a lemonade. He was watching the goings-on at the quiz machine with some yearning, as he bent a beermat quietly into eighths.

Greg watched him for a moment, his humour fading.

"Give me a minute," he murmured to Luke, who gave him a thumbs-up mid-drink. Greg picked up his pint and slid around the booth.

As Greg settled in beside him, TJ glanced up.

"Hey," he said to Greg, with a rather tired smile. "I've not done the phone for you yet, so don't ask."

"I haven't even paid you," said Greg. "Besides, I only got it to you yesterday. I didn't expect you to have even started, TJ. It's fine. Any idea of a price?"

TJ wrinkled his nose.

"Give me another look at it tomorrow," he said. "I'll hit you up on Monday."

"No worries. You on duty later?"

"Yeah…” TJ checked his wrist-set, squinting. It was covered in stickers, scuff-marks and scrapes. "I've got a little while before eleven, though… nice to come out sometimes… see people… congrats on the new sergeant, by the way. Or are you his? I don't know how it works."

"Ah, thanks… we're - sort of equal. That's the idea, anyway."

"How's that going?" TJ asked, looking up at him sideways.

"I've had worse. I think," Greg looked back at him. Usually clean-shaven and fresh-faced, there was a distinct hint of stubble and a greyness about TJ today. It didn't suit him. "You okay? You seem down."

TJ continued folding the beermat, his eyes downcast. "I'm okay," he said.
"You're gonna sit there and lie to a detective, huh?"

TJ smiled wryly. In answer, without looking at Greg, he reached up and scratched at the stubble on his jaw.

"Ah..." said Greg, cottoning on. "You reckon?"

TJ seemed to brace himself, then turned to look Greg in the eye.

"I had *seven* packets of crisps for breakfast," he said, "and a pint of raspberry ice cream."

Greg found his mouth forming into a smile against his wishes. "Right," he said. "Don't do that. That's not going to be good for you."

"I can't help it. No seriously, Lestrade. Stop. You have no idea."

"You need to eat protein. Not just sugar. You *know* this, TJ. Don't make me leave pamphlets in your pigeon-hole."

TJ sighed a little, tapping his nails against the side of his lemonade.

"Protein has to be cooked," he lamented after a moment. "Sugar... comes in packets."

"I know, mate. But you're gonna make yourself ill. We need you on top form."

TJ's eyebrows shifted into a quirked horizontal S across his forehead.

"You've done *three* shots of tequila and drunk *two* pints," he said. "And it's only just turned ten. Out of you and me, who are we thinking will feel better in the morning?"

Greg smiled a little. "Message me when you finish your shift," he said. "We'll find out."

TJ smiled wearily, said nothing, and drained a third of his lemonade in one go.

As he did, Greg quietly checked his wrist-set.

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NO NEW MESSAGES
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He didn't know what he'd been hoping to see. He was sad not to see it, nonetheless.

As he lifted his head, he caught TJ casting his pining gaze across the bar once more. Maisie stood out amongst the Admin girls. She was fresh, pretty and wholesome as a peony, laughing as they all attempted to bluff their way through pop hits of the 2180s.

"You asked her?" Greg said, discreetly.

"Asked her what?" came the guarded reply from beside him.

"If she likes you back, fuzzball."

TJ snorted - a gruff, rasping sound that seemed to come from a throat slightly deeper than his own. He winced at his own noise, and drank.
"It's not that easy," he muttered, as he came up from his lemonade for air.

"It might be," Greg said. "If you tried."

"Says the man shooting cheap tequila before nine? Get out of London, Lestrade. You've come out to get so pissed you can't think. There's only one thing causes that. Don't tell me it's easy."

For a few moments, Greg was lost in a cluttered storm of self-pity, affection for TJ, and amazement at this level of hormonal insight.

"You'd do well in CID," he said, at last. "You know that? You're resilient. You're fast. And you're much better with people than you think."

TJ gazed across the bar. Maisie and the Admin girls had just won five pounds. They were hugging each other, shouting and laughing.

"I'm really not," TJ managed, and finished his lemonade in one swig.

"D'you want some more peanuts?" Greg asked.

TJ grappled with it for a moment. "Yeah," he said, in a small voice. "Please."

By twelve, Mycroft had finished and then deleted his map. There was no pattern - or, if there was, they had no way of isolating it from the dull, constant thunder of London's daily violence. It was a depressing conclusion to reach - but if random attacks were happening, they were not yet any more horrific than the usual carnage.

Mycroft closed the hard-light windows one by one, returned the extra devices to his office, and found himself drifting dully back into the sitting room.

It had been a rather wasted evening.

Mycroft stood for a while, grappling with the reality of that as he gazed into his aquarium and felt the apartment heave around him in silence.

Usually, silence was Mycroft's sanctuary. It was his armour.

It stood around him like castle walls, impenetrable. In its reassuring nothingness he could hear the quiet conversations of his own heart reflected back at him. Tonight, he didn't like the things being said. There was nothing he could say back - no comfort he could give himself. He could only listen, barraged by the silence and the echo of all that he'd lost, all that had been taken from it, all that he'd never even had in order to be able to lose it.

The psychology of it was desperately simple - which made things so much worse.

Within the complex, space could be sought - space to breathe, space to stretch. One could push open a small cavern in which to hide and to grow, or even just to take shelter from the rest of it for a while.

But when these things were simple, they had you by the throat. All you could do was claw at them, and watch them not move an inch.
Mycroft lifted his wrist, thick-throated, and brought up his messages.

He wanted to hurt himself. This was by far the fastest way to do it.

He typed in the message, feeling every letter lacerate the inside of his wrists and his ribs and his throat. Stop, he begged himself. This is unhelpful. Stop, for the sake of our sanity. He hit send before he could stop himself, ignoring the silent groan of despair that went up inside him - longing, mortified and lonely.

"Damn," Mycroft breathed. He covered his face with a hand. "Damn, damn ..."

How did your reading go? I hope my notes weren't too involved. Apologies for the late text. Just by chance that you're awake.
Sent 00:02

Midnight at The Roebuck, and the whole room was pounding.

The drink was kicking in now. Whiskey and kahlua, vodka shots with their arms linked, shouts of rough laughter, smoke and music and the relentless banging of the bass. The place was packed.

Greg felt fucking alive.

As Luke slung an arm around his neck, the whole room reeled. Greg lurched with it, nearly spilling the pint out of his hand - definitely kicking in now, he thought. Luke dragged him close, pulling him in tight beneath the noise.

His voice rasped in Greg's ear. He smelt like propellant and car wax.

"Gemma," he declared, "from Admin... wants a word with you. Outside."

Greg didn't know who the fuck that was. He gazed at Luke, his face breaking open into a wolfish grin. "What about?" he asked.

Luke's laughter rang to the roof.

"About how bad she wants to screw you, probably! I don't fucking know, do I? Go and ask her."

"Wait, stop," Greg managed. His head was spinning. "Who is this we're talking about?"

"Gemma," Luke reeled at him, wild. He was still gripping Greg by the jacket, his hands bunched in the black leather. "Gemma - with the - the red hair - and those stockings she wears..."

"You know I don't go for women," Greg said, bewildered. "You know this. I've told you."

"Not at all? Not even now and then? She's Gemma! From Admin? Did I say it was her? She's just -... look, just go shag her, Greg." Luke's blue eyes blazed with bad decisions, his grin a mile wide. "Come get me if you need a hand, alright?"

"Piss off," Greg told him. "Piss right off. I'm not double-teaming an Admin girl behind The
Roebuck with you. You're fucking unbelievable."

"You want a guy, then? I'll find you a guy. Gimme five minutes. D'you give or take? I bet you give."

"No - no, Luke. Nobody. I'm a fucking mess. Leave me alone. You've already made me drunk as hell. This isn't helping anything."

He felt his wrist suddenly start to vibrate.

"Fuck," Greg managed. "Hang on - ..." He hauled up his sleeve - it took a few tries - then discovered he couldn't see the screen in here. *Forget it*, he thought. "Bollocks. Read it later."

"Who the fuck is messaging you at this hour?" Luke demanded.

Greg's head glugged with misery. "Prob'ly my ex..." he said. He didn't want to think about it.

And then an idea occurred.

"Oh - *fuck!* - come here," he gasped. "Come here now."

He pulled Luke in around the neck, drunkenly manipulating his wrist-set round to face inwards. This thing had an automatic picture button. He hit it and held it - five second timer. He then extended his wrist high above their heads.

"What are you doing?" Luke laughed in his ear, his breath hot and rough, tinged with stubble and whiskey.

Greg stared up at the camera. His eyes blazed with all the defiance and hurt he'd ever felt - every lonely night. Every 'we can't do this anymore'. Every 'prior engagement'. He'd show the pair of them.

He'd show them who was making the bad decisions now.

"Just try to look like I'm gonna fuck you tonight," he told Luke, lifting his chin.

Languid, feline, Luke smirked against his jaw. He reached around with one hand, cupped Greg's arse and squeezed hard through the denim.

The flash fired.

The faint chime of Mycroft's wrist-set carried through to the bathroom. He hastily finished brushing his teeth, rinsed his mouth and returned to the bedroom, the hem of his dressing gown ghosting around his legs as he grasped for the wrist-set, and sat down on the bedside.

*Social Update - 18th Jan 2218 - your contacts have uploaded new photos.*
Mycroft rolled his eyes. *Heaven help me, am I expected to care about this?* He was about to put the thing aside when he noted the first name tagged beneath the update, and paused.

*Greg Lestrade (1)*

Mycroft's breath stalled.

His finger twitched.

As the photographed rendered in the air before him, spun out in full detail by hard-light, Mycroft only needed to catch the sight of *two* figures before he realised this was going to keep him awake.

Finally, the photograph was completed. Mycroft stared at it, his mouth slightly open.

He found himself paralysed into place. Prickles, at once both hot and cold, began in his chest and spread slowly throughout him, creeping, agonising, curling into his shoulders and his spine and across the back of his wrists.


That was Greg's jaw he was nuzzling, drunken and boyish and gorgeous. That was a bar they were in.

And that was Greg, laughing fit to burst, in a black leather jacket and a grey-striped shirt - *the* grey-striped shirt - the one Mycroft had almost torn from his chest a year ago, desperate to feel the skin of this handsome stranger whose eyes were dark as death and his grin as bright and beautiful as hard-light - the bear-paw tattoo Mycroft knew was beneath that shirt - the way Greg had felt inside him - the man's hands soothing over his skin at three AM as Mycroft had rocked on him, died on him, shattered into pieces for him - and that was Luke Elwood - and the two of them were in a bar somewhere, nuzzling, intoxicated with each other - and Mycroft realised it was *over* - it was gone, before it had even been.

The whole world reeled.

A smash, sharp.

Mycroft sank into himself. He clawed his hands into his hair. He wracked with it, shuddering, too strangled by jealousy to think, until after an eternity of time he realised the sheer force of his anger was now sharpening his teeth into points. The shock of it was enough to make him breath again.

He gasped, heaving. He raised his head from his shaking hands.

The wrist-set he'd thrown had hit the wardrobe door. The mirror there had cracked from the centre to its very edges.

Mycroft's shocked reflection stared back at him, shattered into shards - tear-stricken, breathing hard, his hair on end.

Pale. Ageing.

Scrawny and lanky and grey-faced.
The nose he'd hated all his life. The insipid scatter of freckles across his chest. The cream-and-fawn-coloured Belgravia bedroom around him that he didn't deserve, and the monster who sat alone in it while the world and all its ordinary people were out - happy in a bar somewhere, in love for just the night, laughing like they'd never shed a tear in their lives.

Mycroft laid his face in his hands. He couldn't bear to look at it anymore - what he was.

"Sweet God," he whispered into his palms, as he shook. "No more... please. I beg you. No more."

Quiet tears flowed between his fingers.

"No more," he breathed.

A while ago, it had been two AM and Greg had been quite definitely wrecked. They were in Meltdown on York Way. People had dropped off the herd in droves, and those who'd stayed the course were now definitely on their way to the bitter end.

Whether he was still merely 'wrecked' - or indeed, even what time it was - Greg didn't know, but one of Luke's boys had bought them all gin, and he didn't do well with gin. He wasn't even really feeling the alcohol any more. It was water under the bridge. He'd reached the stage of drunkenness where he just wanted to keep drinking, at any cost, and that was fine.

Ten minutes after gin, Luke found Greg on the corner sofas, where he'd retreated for a while just to stop his head pulsating.


Luke did not argue. "Not had a bloke in a while though. Kinda miss it."

"This is all your fault," Greg decided. His tongue felt too big for his mouth. "I'm fucking ruined, you know that? I never should've rung you."

"Whatever," said Luke. "You're having a good time and you know you are."

Greg gave a non-committal grunt. He was going to have to go and smoke soon, he thought - get some cold air - try to sober up enough to climb into a taxi without braining himself on the fucking roof.

I'm too old for this, he thought, bleakly, as the lights all flashed in his eyes. Maybe we should go and get Japanese food.

Or tattoos.

"Greg?" Luke mumbled into his shoulder, somewhere far away.

"Mm?"

"Why haven't we shagged? You and me."
Greg snorted. "'Cause you're my friend," he replied. "And you're a slut, and I don't go in for that."

"It might be good, though. Just… blow off some steam."

"It really wouldn't. My life is enough of a hot mess without you getting involved."

"What d'you mean?" Luke asked, head rolling back onto Greg's shoulder to gaze up at him.

Greg wrestled with himself for a second.

"I... had sex with Mycroft," he then heard his mouth say - and there it was, he thought. Spoken, at last. "A year ago. Just once. Well… twice."

Luke gaped at him like a carp.

"You - … what?"

"Didn't know who he was then," Greg mumbled, shaking his head. He gazed at the straggle of drunken people on the dancefloor, still valiantly trying to dance. Most of them were having trouble just standing up. "I… think I - did more than have sex with him though. I messed up, Luke."

"... you - did more than - ?"

"Think I fell in love with him a bit. Not loads. Just… a little bit." Greg closed his eyes. The air was hot; it had taken on its own heartbeat. "Just for a little while."


"Yeah. I know."

"Wait… are you still shagging him? Is he gonna kill me?"

Greg didn't have the energy to laugh. He also suspected he might vomit if he opened his mouth too wide. "No," he said, dully. "He hates me now."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Asked him for a drink earlier and he said no. Always giving me mixed messages… sometimes I think he maybe likes me, then… I dunno. S'just people, isn't it? They make no sense. Everyone should just be a slut like you… s'easier. No feelings. No mess."

Luke hummed. Then, after a moment's quiet contemplation, he started to laugh.

"What?" Greg said, frowning at him.

"You're a detective," Luke reeled. "And he's a psychologist. And even you two don't understand each other. Fuck falling in love. It never works."

Greg didn't laugh. He didn't really get it. He sat for a while and listened to Luke laugh instead, feeling vaguely and drunkenly better.

"M'going for a smoke," he sighed at last, patting his pockets for his cigarettes.

"D'you want me to come with?" said Luke.

Greg got up. "No," he said. "You stay there. Try to sober up so we can get a taxi."
Luke lay his head against the back of the couch. "Fine," he said. After a second, he added, "You're a good mate, Greg."

"I know, dickhead," Greg said. "And s'fine you tried to fuck me. No hard feelings."

"Had to ask." Luke smiled a little, amusing himself. "Had to make a play for you. King of Hearts."

"If people had one clue what a fucking mess I am," Greg muttered, "nobody'd be calling me that any more."

"Mhh. We're all a fucking mess." Luke gazed vaguely across the crowd. "You should ask him."

Greg wondered drunkenly what he meant.

"Ask him why you're a mess," Luke clarified, squinting fuzzily at him from the couch. "He'll know, if anybody does... he's meant to be a psychologist."

Greg considered this suggestion, piecing it together in his mind.

It was three AM. He was wasted. And after a year of lonely celibacy, he'd just turned down Luke Elwood.

He supposed he'd heard worse ideas.

The quiet shivers from the bedside cabinet were enough to unsettle Mycroft from a pitiful attempt at sleep. He pushed his hands over his face in the darkness, weak, his eyes still burning from earlier. He prayed this wasn't some urgent work call.

"Answer," he croaked to the ceiling.

There was a click.

"Hey," came a burst of voice, as soon as the line connected. "Good. You're up. I - need to talk to you."

Mycroft gazed up at the shadows that lingered about his bedroom ceiling, wondering what fresh hell was about to unfold before him.

"Lestrade..." he said, weakly. "You're inebriated."

"No," said Greg. "M'in Camden."

Mycroft closed his eyes. Christ Almighty. "I see."

"I'm with Luke Elwood," Greg explained. "Him and the boys. They've - got me a bit drunk, if I'm honest. Been drinking for a while now. About seven hours. I'm... round the back of a nightclub."

"Lestrade," Mycroft managed, not wanting to hear this. He'd only just reached a place of calm after his mortifying midnight breakdown. He couldn't afford any more smashed wardrobe doors. "Your window for this prank call has now expired," he said, exhausted. "I am hanging up. Try harder next time."
"Wait!" Greg lurched. "No! Stop. Don't hang up on me. Please - don't hang up."

Mycroft bit the side of his lip.

"I need to talk to you," Greg said again from the wrist-set.

"About... what?" Mycroft asked, carefully.

Greg took a deep breath, audibly settling his nerves. "Y'rasychologiss," he said in a rush.

Mycroft took a moment to mentally untangle this sound, reaching up to massage the bridge of his nose.

"I am a psychologist," he said. "Yes..."

"Then - psychologise me," Greg said. "Do your thing. Do your - clever thing - and tell me what it is it. Give it to me straight. Why're they always ashamed of me?"

Mycroft had been back on the verge of hanging up. The question alarmed him enough to reply.

"Why is who always - ?"

"People," Greg said. After a sad, quiet second, he added, "People I like. People I wanna fall in love with. I'm always somebody's mistake. Always an ugly secret. Nobody wants to just... just be with me, just... be my stupid boyfriend... fall in love with me like normal people do. Why don't I get that? Why won't anybody give me that? What m'I doing wrong?"

The silence that followed was one of the most awful that Mycroft had ever experienced - but he found he couldn't break it. He stared at the ceiling with his mouth a little open, his heart beating a sluggish and desperate despair into the quiet.

"M'croft?" Greg checked. "You hung up?"

"No, I'm - I'm here." Mycroft tried to gather together the professional thing to say, the right thing to say. "I'm in - Criminal Psychology, Lestrade. Not counselling. If you wanted to know why you're currently vandalising a bus shelter, I might be able to enlighten you, but I... can't tell you why people seem to - ..."

"I'm not vandalising anything," Greg said, hurt. In this drunken state he'd taken it as an accusation. "I'm just... standing here, smoking. It's raining a bit and I'm - I'm kinda sad - and I thought... thought maybe you'd know why."

Mycroft could barely breathe.

"Greg," he managed, lost.

"You... don't ever call me 'Greg'..." The voice over the wrist-set paused; pain softened its tones. "You did, once. You called me that a year ago. When we were - ... but you don't now. Not anymore."

He breathed in suddenly.

"Why'd you turn on me, M'croft?" he begged. "My first day - I - I wasn't going to embarrass you... I wasn't going to tell everyone your business. I just wanted - ... just thought you'd maybe... with me..."
Mycroft couldn't speak, gazing wide-eyed at the ceiling. This was surely a dream. The sound of a shudder wrenched at his heart, dragging his eyes across to the gentle illumination of the wrist-set.

"You left me your number," Greg was saying, distressed. It sounded like a plea. "As if - as if you wanted me to - … like I wasn't a mistake. So why'd you shout at me?"

"Greg... I…"

Mycroft swallowed. His heart screamed at him to stop.

"When I - saw you at Scotland Yard…"

They shouldn't be discussing this, he thought. It was three AM, and this shouldn't be happening. They shouldn't open that box - that safe, sealed box. This was a mistake and Mycroft knew it, one more damn mistake in a long and miserable line of them.

But then he heard himself making it all the same - unable to stop, unable to claw the words back into his wretched mouth as they spoke themselves, as they broke their way out of his helpless throat from that place in him he'd kept quiet for too long.

"I saw you," he managed, "and suddenly you… you weren't just my handsome stranger. You were there. You were real, and you were standing there next to Amelia - and I realised how much I'd lied to you - and I realised you were about to find out."

He put his hands across his face; a tremor had begun in his wrists. He breathed for a second, his heart pounding, trying to form all of this into some sense.

"I'd made you think I was someone interesting," he told the darkness at last. "Someone charming. Someone romantic. And I'm - not, Greg. I'm... damn Dr. Holmes, loathed from the roof downwards. I saw your face appear and I realised that by the end of the day, you'd have heard it all. They would have told you. I was not the man you'd gently touched. I was not the man you'd called 'gorgeous'. I was not a quiet romantic who'd spent the night with you simply because I liked you, because you were handsome and you were kind to me - ... I'm an - arsehole, Greg - certified. Signed and sealed. I'm the wretch who stalks Floor Fifteen. I'm a bitter old bastard who was broken by Excultus and left in shards, and I'd lied to you, and the whole world was about to rush in as quickly as they could to show you that. To crush that one good thing I'd found in ten damn years..."

Mycroft closed his eyes - misery welled up in his throat like acid.

"I thought that if perhaps I showed you first… it was a - goodbye of sorts. And you'd find it easier. Easier to turn away from me."

There was a moment of silence.

Greg's reply was strained with tired, intoxicated tears.

"You are a bastard," he managed. Mycroft's heart slowed, clenching with distress - with everything he damn well deserved - until Greg said, "You... could've been my gorgeous, too. I could've handled that."

Mycroft's heart heaved.

"Greg, I'm not that man you spent the night with," he begged. "Please tell me you realise that now. I'm not anything like that man. I am empty, Greg. I am broken. I'm inhuman. He - he wasn't real - the man you met that night. He was only a dream."
"He was real," Greg almost whispered. "And he's you. I know it 'cause I've seen it. You're broken and you're perfect, too. Just like the rest of us."

Mycroft pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, swearing softly under his breath.

Greg's voice shook. "I wouldn't've told anyone. You know that? Not a soul. I would've kept your ugly secret. You didn't - you didn't fucking need to treat me like - "

"I never wanted you to be an ugly secret," Mycroft said, desperate. "Never. Greg, I wanted you to be - … oh God. When I left you my number, I thought - … God help me - the first brave thing I'd done in a decade. The first thing I'd wanted enough to risk being brave."

"And you… you worried I'd think you'd lied? About what you're really like?"

Mycroft shut his eyes. "And what I am," he managed, through a throat almost too tight to speak.

"But... you're wonderful," Greg said, confused. "I get that. Why don't you?"

There was a long, painful pause. Mycroft rubbed at his hairline in the silence, gazing at his palms with a heart full to breaking of absolutely everything. Perhaps he was dreaming, he thought. He'd wake up in the morning and discover this was all just yet another nothing.

Then Greg said, nervously,

"Okay, that's… you done. Now do me." He took a courageous breath. "Why're people ashamed to be with me?"

Mycroft listened to his heart thump for a moment.

"You had the misfortune to run into a withered wreck called Mycroft Holmes," he told Greg, tired. "You've - been unlucky. That's all. Anyone else in this world would tear the stars from the sky to have you." He ran a hand across his forehead in the darkness. "To claim the King of Hearts."

"What... what about Jason?"

"Who is - ?"

"My sergeant. Back in Manchester. He - … we, um - …"

Mycroft hesitated. "You - …?"

"We - … oh, shit... he was - engaged when we met. He didn't tell me. He didn't tell me until it was way too late. Then they got married, but he just kept coming back to me - telling me he'd made a mistake - telling me he was gay, and only I understood. They had kids, Mycroft. I fucked up. I really fucked up. But I - sorta loved him... and we spent every day together - and I wanted him to be alright. So I just… tried to be there for him. I tried to be what he needed. Then he just came in one Monday and hit me with his resignation. We were mid-case. Said he couldn't cope with me anymore."

Mycroft listened, his chest aching. He had reached a professional conclusion long before Greg finished.

"I have a diagnosis to offer," he said, when Greg lapsed into pained silence. "If you would like it."

"Tell me," Greg said, desperate. "Please. I can't handle this anymore. M'loney. I want someone who come homes to me after work. I - I don't wanna be an embarrassment any longer."
"This... 'Jason' of yours was a prick," Mycroft said, flatly. "That is my diagnosis."

Greg spluttered with shocked laughter.

"You don't swear," he said in delight, once he'd recovered himself. "You never swear. I've only heard you swear out loud when we - … um..."

Mycroft found himself smiling, his eyes lost somewhere in the shadows beyond the bed. More honesty came forth. It was three in the morning. It felt good for once not to lie.

"Because you were magnificent," he said. "You were... quite simply the most handsome man I'd ever laid eyes on - and you were inside me. I'd challenge anyone in this world not to swear."

"Jesus - Christ…"

"And this 'Jason' who mistreated you," Mycroft went on, "and exploited your great capacity to care in order to nourish his own self-destructive misery, is so stupid I can barely fathom it... the man classes as a fungus, Greg, if he had the privilege of going to bed with you for five years, and didn't appreciate his own luck."

Greg was laughing - the choked, softened laughs of relief that came after pain.

"You're... being kind," he mumbled. "Trying to make me feel better."

"I am," Mycroft managed. "By - giving you honesty. You told me once... it is this city. London. Nobody speaks to each other. Nobody acts like anyone else exists."

He hesitated, shifting gently to sit up in the bed.

"I - am a fungus too," he admitted. "I hurt you, Greg. Because I was afraid. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry I drunk-called you," Greg managed. Mycroft heard him sigh, rubbing his face. "I'm outside some awful nightclub somewhere in Camden. I'm so fucking drunk. God, did I wake you up?"

"No," Mycroft said, with a faint smile. "I was awake anyway."

Greg hesitated. "Have you - got company?"

Mycroft huffed, running his hands tiredly through his dishevelled hair.

"No... I haven't." He hesitated. "I've not... 'had company' since you."

There was a pause. "Me neither," Greg said.

Strange, Mycroft thought, to realise they'd been in a sexually monogamous relationship all this time. A sparse one, but an exclusive one nonetheless.

The memory of the photograph returned to him with a fretful twinge.

"You - …" He didn't know how to put this. There was only one way, he thought - and he had to say it. He couldn't sleep if he didn't know. "Luke Elwood."

Greg hesitated. "What about…?"

"You - uploaded a photograph from your wrist-set. The two of you seem to be - …" Close. "... - ah.
"I don't remember that," Greg managed, suddenly scared. "When was this?"

"Three hours ago."

"Three - ? Oh - wait... in The Roebuck... oh, God - …"

"Ah, alcoholic amnesia. You're partly sobering up."

"It's - fucking cold out here," Greg managed in a rush.

"Yes," Mycroft murmured, fighting a smile. "That should do it."

"Oh Jesus, Mycroft. I've - drunk half of London… Christ, this is going to hurt in the morning..."

Mycroft bit his tongue, stroking the side of his own neck. "I'm rather glad I turned you down now," he admitted, with a half-smile. "I'm not sure drunken carnage with Armed Response would have suited me."

"I wouldn't be here, if you'd - …" Greg stopped suddenly, realising. Awkwardness filled his voice. "Sorry, I just - … shit."

"Luke Elwood was merely the back-up choice, was he?" Mycroft said. He tried to ignore the flighty leaping of his heart.

"God, I… need to stop talking," Greg muttered. Mycroft could hear him lighting an urgent cigarette. "Did you - enjoy whatever it was you were busy doing?"

"Not particularly," Mycroft said, wholly truthful. "I - should have met you instead."

Greg went quiet. "Really?"

"Mm. Talked you through those notes."

"What're you doing tomorrow?" Greg asked, quickly.

"Later, you mean? It is 'tomorrow'. And I will be allowing you to sleep off a rather breathtaking hangover," Mycroft said, amused. He began to rub at a small knot of tension in the back of his neck, letting his eyes fall shut.

Part of him wanted just to say it. Get your damn drunken hide over here now... let me screw you sober. Make me swear.

It had been a long year, Mycroft thought. He breathed away the heat that rose up in his face.

"Other than that," he said, collecting himself, "I have some new threads of inquiry to commence… I won't burden your overtaxed brain with them now. It can wait for Monday."

"'kay," Greg said, softly.

There was a gentle pause.

"Have I made things weird?" Greg asked.

Mycroft smiled to himself in the darkness. "No," he said. "Have I?"
"No," said Greg, quietly certain. "It's fine."

"Mm. There's that word."

"Yeah, well... I actually mean it this time. It is fine. It's - really fine." Greg shivered a little. "Mycroft, I'm... possibly going into hypothermia. I have to go. And I've got to get Luke into a taxi without him trying to undress me."

Mycroft's eyebrows lifted. "Is that likely?" he enquired.

"Eh, he's... asked. He's a tart when he's drunk. I said no."

"Indeed," Mycroft murmured. And yet you said yes to me. "Well... a good headlock should do it... failing that, a precise kick to the groin always makes a reliable failsafe."

Greg's voice brimmed with a grin. "Alright. I'll try that. Talk later?" he said.

"Yes - talk later..." Mycroft smiled slightly. "A pint of water before you sleep, please. Eggs in the morning will break down the acetaldehyde. No citric fruits - the acidity shan't help. And don't believe that old rubbish about having a banana and a cheese sandwich. It does nothing."

"Really?" said Greg. "Does that not work?"

"No," said Mycroft. "Utter nonsense, apparently. No basis in fact whatsoever."

"Right," said Greg, startled. "Well... good to know." He hesitated. "G'night, Mycroft. And - thanks."

Mycroft gazed down at the dishevelled sheets around him.

"Goodnight, Greg," he murmured.

He heard Greg breath in, deeply.

The line then cut.

After thirty seconds, the blue illumination of Mycroft's wrist-set faded into darkness.

He laced his fingers at the back of his neck, turned his face to the ceiling, and breathed.
(Thank you so much to my amazing friend Ngaijuuyan on Tumblr for this drawing of Luke... you are brilliant, Yan! I love it! Thank you so, so much!)

The more I saw of them, the greater became my desire to claim their protection and kindness; my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures; to see their sweet looks directed towards me with affection was the utmost limit of my ambition.

I dared not think that they would turn them from me with disdain and horror.
Greg woke up on Sunday afternoon to four new messages, and the sensation that someone had caved in his skull with a brick.

The earliest message was time-stamped at precisely seven AM.

> you have ten minutes to reply, or crisps & ice cream are proven better for you than tequila. tj.

The next had arrived ten minutes later.

> i win. crisps and ice cream it is.

It took Greg a few moments to remember. When he did, he couldn't fight a smile. He made a mental note to text TJ later, and see how he was.

The third, in a jokey tone that fooled no-one, was from Luke Elwood. It had been sent just before noon.

> Mad night, right! you ok? Hope hangover not too bad. No regrets?? :D

"Tart," Greg murmured. "I'm never drinking with you again."

He closed the message without replying - and turned at last to the one he'd wanted to open first.

> NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
> Good morning…
> How are you?

Even Greg's thumbs hurt. He typed nonetheless, lying on his back in bed with his heart jumping, as he concentrated on keeping the keyboard in focus.
Hi... I'm alright thanks.
Okay that's a lie... I feel like the bottom of a bin. Fuck me up. What was I thinking.
Are you okay?
Sent 15:12

He'd barely put the wrist-set back on the bedside table when a reply buzzed through.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
How is the alcoholic amnesia?

Greg bit his lip. He replied with care, his head pounding with all the mess and the carnage of last night - and pounding, too, with the best bit by far - the nightclub's yard, the cigarette that had burned down untouched in his hand; the voice from his wrist-set; the things it had said.

I remember drenching you with my soul at 3am… I'm sorry if that got way too much. Shall I send you a check for the therapy?
Sent 15:15

He didn't put the wrist-set back - just held it quietly across his eyes, letting it block out some of the glare from the curtains. He felt as fragile as a newborn lamb and filthy as an oil-rig.

The buzz a minute later thrummed through his skull, making him groan quietly. Greg flashed open up the message.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
A mutual drenching, I think. No apology nor cheque needed. First session free.
Not sure if you recall quite everything that I said. For the record, whatever you can recall... I meant it.

"Fuck," Greg whispered, his heart drumming urgently to itself.

Think I remember the important bits...
You've really not been with anyone?
Sent 15:19

He was going to have to attempt standing up soon. He needed to start decontaminating himself, and it felt like it would be a head-to-toe job. He needed food, too. Eggs, Mycroft had said - which meant a walk to the shop.
Just a few minutes more.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Rather suggests you're a hard act to follow, doesn't it?

"Fuck," Greg breathed again.

Another message arrived before he could even begin to formulate a reply.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Promise me.

Greg replied in seconds, biting hard into his lip.

Promise. Nothing. Just a friend. Not my type and he's a tart.
Sent 15:21

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
I fear this might be veering into the unprofessional... if that ship has not already sailed.
We have to work together Greg.
Danger lies this way.

Professional on monday morning. Promise. Back on with the case. Back to making a difference.
Sent 15:24

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Are you intending to be unprofessional at me until then? Just so I can prepare myself.

Greg squirmed a little beneath the covers.

"Get over here," he groaned under his breath, as he typed in his reply. He could feel himself growing hard - a comfortable, lazy ache inside his boxers.

Maybe. Learned a lot about you yesterday. Kinda want to know a bit more.
Kinda need you to know you're not a monster too... not to anyone. Definitely not to me.
If he asked, Greg thought…

God, maybe Mycroft would.

Sunday afternoon, curtains closed. Push those gorgeous pale thighs apart and see how long Mycroft coped on his tongue before begging for something more substantial. Sex, slow and sleepy - no rush - nowhere to go. Get food delivered. Lie on the sofa together and watch something old.

Bedtime; go down on Mycroft. Those pale hands trembling as they petted his hair.

Drive to work together in the morning.

Christ.

**NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES**

You will hate me one day.

_In advance, please know. On that day I will hate myself more than you ever could._

Greg blinked, reading the message a few times. He'd been on the verge of kicking out of his boxers and making himself a little filthier before his shower.

This was new, though. This wasn't good.

_What the fuck? I'm not gonna hate you.  
Don't know if I hate anyone in this world to be honest. Hate's a big word. Life's too short.  
Everybody's got a past, you know that? It's fine.  
We're only human._

_Sent 15:30_

_Seriously, you are too hard on yourself. There's no need for it._

_Sent 15:41_

_And for what it's worth, I'm not the hating type._

_Sent 15:47_

Mycroft?

_Sent 15:55_
"Christ, you're… a fucking oyster, man…"

Greg returned his wrist-set to the bathroom windowsill with a sigh, scrubbing the towel through his hair.

"M'not backing off," he warned the wrist-set. "I'll drag you out of that shell kicking and screaming if I have to. You'll see."

Cool. Hope it all goes well :)  
Just so you know? Here if you need me.  
See you tomorrow.

Sent 16:51

Greg arrived the next morning to find the office door locked. Mycroft was not yet here. He opened up, made coffee and checked their internal messages, discovering a few worrying messages about the press - which he rather hoped Mycroft knew more about.

There was also a message from Comms.

FROM: TIMOTHY TIERNEY [COMMS4]  
TO: D.I. GREGORY LESTRADE [CROSS-HUM]  

howdy lestrade.

spotted a non-emergency call filtering through the system last night. the guy refused to give his real name but said he wants to talk to a police officer about sex workers being bitten on the neck by clients? he's been told we're wanting to hear from people.

this is your thing, right? pembury road?

she looked bitten to me.

guy says you can ring a "bar" called "princes" (...) near pembury road after 8pm most nights and ask for robin. he'll get back to you. attached the contact details below.

Greg set an alarm on his wrist-set for ten past eight tonight, keyed in the contact details and the name 'Robin', then sent a thank you back to TJ. He finished it just as the door opened.
Mycroft entered the office, tired though immaculately dressed, and looking guarded. Today's suit was navy; there was a red patterned handkerchief folded into his top pocket.

"Morning," said Greg, smiling through the hard-light message inbox. "I get the feeling you've had a productive weekend. I'm lagging behind. Made you tea already - come and update me."

Mycroft seemed somewhat reassured by the professional tone. He placed his umbrella beside the door, removed his coat and then joined Greg at the desk, quietly taking a seat. He began drawing screens of notes from his wrist-set, ignoring the tea.

"I've been in contact with a hundred and eight brothels across London," he said, to begin with. "Establishments of longevity with higher prices, a reputation for hygiene, no major drug incidents and no statistically significant virulence of STDs nearby. Places where a proprietor is more likely to work with us. I've requested details of any and all missing staff within the past year."

"And biting?"

"Yes. And biting."

"Fantastic. Listen, I think it's paid off already. TJ fished a message out of the system for us last night - would have gotten lost in wider CID, but he spotted it. Someone from a brothel near Pembury Road, talking about clients being bitten. I've got the details. I'll get in touch tonight."

"Excellent. Pembury Road seems to be our epicentre, so that's heartening."

"Can I ask about some of the other messages? I spotted a mention of the press..."

Mycroft's expression tightened. "Mm. We may have a problem."

Greg braced himself, picking up his coffee. "Hit me with it."

"I was contacted by three separate journalists yesterday. All were wanting to speak to the investigating officer of the Pembury Road case. They had questions about the bite wounds' victim found there on Wednesday."

"Right… what questions?"

"You're rather missing my point," Mycroft said, raising an eyebrow. "The details of Emma's death have not been released, and certainly not in any official capacity. You and I have been careful in our inquiries. That a body was found will be common knowledge - but that she died of bite wounds should not be known to anyone outside of Scotland Yard."

"Christ. So we've got a leak?"

"This is far more serious than a legal indiscretion," Mycroft said. "If the population becomes aware of a vampire threat, we will face mass panic, copycat attacks and a flood of false information. It will cripple us before we've begun. This cannot happen, Greg."

"Right. What did you tell the journalists?"

"To print not a word," Mycroft murmured, "or face the full unbridled fury of Scotland Yard's legal team."

"And us," added Greg, his jaw setting.

"Quite. I've briefed Yardley in Comms to circulate throughout his team that any curious journalists
are to be directed immediately to myself or to Commander Vickery, and otherwise not engaged
with in any capacity."

"Okay. I'll get a memo round the ground troops," Greg said. "Make sure they're all completely
clear on what 'sackable offence' means..."

Mycroft folded one leg across the other. "Already done."

"Oh? Right. That was quick." Greg paused. "You - phrased it nicely, right?"

Mycroft frowned, gating his hands on his knee. "No," he said, confused.

Greg's heart sank. "Did you sign it from both of us?"

"Of course."

"Right, well… that's fine. I didn't need a social life anyway."

"There is a more concerning possibility than a leak," Mycroft said. Greg's skin chilled slightly. "If
this \textit{is} Excultus, operating under their previous methods, then alerting the press might be of their
own doing."

"You mean they've - tipped off journalists about their \textit{own} murder?"

"They're a terrorist network, Lestrade. Awareness is everything."

"Jesus," Greg muttered. Maybe Vickery would transfer him to Arts and Antiques, he thought, if he
asked nicely enough. "But... that's only if this \textit{is} Excultus - not just one nutcase."

Mycroft's mouth thinned a little, his gaze closing off.

Greg took a deep breath. He prepared himself to hear the worst.

"You think it is," he said, quietly. "You think it's Excultus. You think they're back."

"I have good reason to fear that eventuality," Mycroft said, a little clipped. "My - heightened
emotional response jeopardises my ability to judge the likelihood. I am a poor indicator. Aside
from the sigil, we have had \textit{no} clear evidence... not even any vague suggestions."

"But ringing the press is the kind of thing they used to do?"

"Mm."

"Right... so we have to keep it in mind..." Greg sat back in his chair, thinking fast and hard. "The
business card with the fingerprints?"

"By Wednesday lunchtime," Mycroft said. "I have been promised on the lives of everyone that the
Forensics team hold dear."

"And the CCTV?"

"Quite probably Wednesday too. I can't imagine it will be enough on its own. We need to combine
it with a witness description of either Emma's killer or the man who attacked the young woman a
month ago near Gastrell's Bar. Together, they're more likely to reap some results."

"Well, let's hope the brothels bring us some gold. I'll ring our contact tonight, and we'll get an ID of
"Excellent. Ah, one thing... I've been told by the Technical department that you removed some evidence from them and halted its processing. Might I ask what you've done with Emma's mobile phone?"

"It's gone to a third-party specialist," said Greg. "He's quicker than our guys, he's better, and he's not got the rest of London's technical crimes to deal with."

"I see. Will he be able to bypass the lock?"

"If it's physically possible, he'll do it. Don't worry, I've used him before. He's the best."

"This is a specialist working within the bounds of the law, I trust," Mycroft said, one eyebrow lifting but a fraction.

"Mycroft, I'm a DI... give me some credit." Greg took a drink from his coffee. "And this is the fastest, most direct route to get to Emma's kids," he added. "The second we get that passcode, we start ringing through her address book. They'll be safe with social services within the hour, and I can get some proper sleep."

Mycroft hesitated, reading his face.

"Are you sleeping?" he checked.

"It's fine, Mycroft. I'll just go on a drunken rampage every Saturday night and have a week's worth of sleep every Sunday."

Mycroft's mouth twisted with reluctance. "How are you, out of interest?"

"Fine," said Greg, giving him a small smile. "Ready to get going. You've worked your arse off this weekend while I've been throwing my bad decisions far and wide across Camden. I'm sorry. I mean it. We've got more to worry about."

"Escapism is - a psychological mechanism for mental health. Perhaps not to be indulged in frequently... but nonetheless..."

Mycroft smiled a little.

"'All's well that ends well'," he proposed.

Greg's heart lifted a little. "That'll do," he said.

He downed the last of his coffee.

"Let's get this incident board up to date," he said, getting out of his chair. "And we should chase up the details that the manager of Gastrell's Bar gave us - the patrol team who attended the attack a month ago. They might have something to add to it."

"Indeed they might," said Mycroft, "but I'm afraid we shan't be hearing their testimony this week."

"What?" Greg said, turning from the board in despair. "Why?"

"I've already chased it up. The inspector is in Marbella with his mistress, and the sergeant is in intensive care after a serious motorcycle accident."
"Bloody hell. That's just our luck."

Mycroft's eyebrow quirked. "Quite."

"When's he back from Marbella? This week?"

"Late this week, yes. I've made sure he'll be sent upstairs to us on Monday before he's so much as removed his coat."

"Right. Good." Greg logged into the incident board with a quick press of his palm, and opened up the interactive tree of lines of inquiry. It was growing wilder and wilder by the day. "D'you want a drink, before we get going?"

"No," said Mycroft, removing his jacket. Shirt sleeves, Greg thought. Time to get to work. "Thank you for the offer, though."

"How do you even function without coffee?" Greg asked, as he moved to the door with his empty mug. "Do you just dust a huge amount of cocaine across your weetabix every morning?"

"Yes," Mycroft said, taking his place at the board. He started to prune the inquiry tree, flashing away completed tasks. "I find it adds a certain 'zing'."

Greg smiled, pausing with a hand on the door. They were going to get somewhere this week, he thought. Something was going to break. He knew it.

"Oh," he said. "By the way... one last update."

Mycroft looked round from the board. His features were tired, but his eyes were sharp and keen. He didn't know that his resolve made him gorgeous. He didn't know it at all.

"Mm?" he said.

Greg held his gaze.

"You're not a monster," he said. He watched Mycroft's expression fold, but did not look away. "And if I was gonna hate you, Mycroft... I'd do it already. Believe me, I've tried."

Mycroft said nothing, greying.

"Open up to me," Greg said, and gave a gentle shrug. "You've seen my skeletons now... most of them. Show me yours sometime. You never know - I might even understand."

He let himself out of the office, headed to the kitchen, and returned with coffee to find Mycroft arguing with his wrist-set - explaining to the editor of The City Post, in some detail, exactly how dedicated Scotland Yard's legal team were.

It was a productive day. They called it quits at six PM on the dot, on Mycroft's insistence.

"You have biological needs," he remarked, sweeping Greg's coat from the back of the door and almost wrestling him into it, smoothing it across his shoulders, and steering him on the spot.
towards the door. "You spent most of the weekend torturing your liver for crimes it did not commit. Self-care, please. Go to your flat, cook something containing a vegetable and eat it. Have a hot milky drink at nine and put your head on a pillow at ten."

"Hang on a second, Holmes. You're leaving too, you know that?"

"I only have a few things to finish," Mycroft said, dismissively, even as he negotiated Greg towards the door. "The lights will be out and the office locked by eight. I promise."

"Oh no," said Greg. "No, I don't think so." He reached for Mycroft's coat. "We're not competing over which DI can work themselves fastest into an early grave. C'mon. The rest will wait until morning. Nobody will be answering your phone calls now, anyway."

"That's - … be that as it may, there are things I can do while we're - "

"Yeah, you can. In the morning." Greg held out the coat. "In, please," he said. "Now."

Mycroft met his eyes, unmoved.

"I wasn't mainlining tequila with Luke Elwood all weekend," he remarked, with an arch of his eyebrow. "I'm fine."

Greg had never heard the name 'Luke Elwood' imbued with such contempt. It was usually rather breathed. He tried not to linger on the fascinated twisting of his heart as he realised that Mycroft was viciously, patently jealous.

"You were working though, weren't you?" he said, rescuing his thoughts. "Contacting a hundred and eight separate brothels. Terrorising Forensics. No - no more of this. Come here, get in the coat, and go spend some quality time with your fish. The little bastards will miss you."

It was the first time that the fish had been voiced. Mycroft's expression twisted - humour, annoyance and resistance all at once.

"Do not be flippant about my fish," he said. He eyed Greg with a glint in his gaze. "Some of them are nearly as clever as you are."

Greg held up the coat, raising his eyebrows without a word.

"I will be one hour," Mycroft protested, biting his tongue. It was looking dangerously like a smile. "And not a minute more. You have my word."

Greg waited.

"Oh, for…” Mycroft breathed, turned, and with reluctance allowed himself to be guided into his coat. Greg pulled it over his shoulders, easing the heavy fabric into place and trying not to smirk. "This is unnecessary..."

"Your DI's orders are always necessary," Greg murmured, fixing his collar.

"You are not my DI," Mycroft muttered. "I am not your sergeant."

"If I'm not your DI, Mycroft, how come you're obeying me?"

Mycroft put a hand over his face. "God preserve my sanity, Greg Lestrade."

"He's leaving that to me these days," Greg said, with a smile. He'd fixed Mycroft's collar some time
ago. He kept fixing it anyway. "If you're going to preserve mine, I've got to preserve yours too. So go home - cook something with a vegetable - eat it - milky drink at nine. Pillow by ten. Alright? This works both ways."

Mycroft huffed with amusement, directed his curled smile down towards his handmade leather brogues.

"Perhaps we might yet be a good influence on each other," he remarked.

Greg smiled. "Miracles never cease, huh?" he murmured. He'd never wanted to circle his arms around someone's waist so badly in his life. The side of Mycroft's neck was begging him - *pleading* with him - to grace it with his mouth, rasp it raw with his six o'clock stubble.

*Pillow by ten,* he thought. He bit the tip of his tongue.

"Are you quite finished pawing at my collar yet?" Mycroft asked him, quietly - with a note of something deeper.

Greg primed his reply in his mouth for a moment.

"Not quite yet," he said. *Biological needs,* he thought. *One in particular.* "Hey," he murmured, letting his voice grow low and soft - a rumble that made Mycroft's shoulders rise gently under his hands. "Listen… you and me… we -"

The office door opened.

Mycroft jumped like he'd been shot. Before Greg could even blink he was halfway across the room, and they turned to find Commander Vickery standing in the doorway.

"Ah," she said, pleased by the sight of coats. "Clocking off for a good night's sleep, are you? Good. And to think I thought I'd have to remind you."

There was a brief, strangled silence.

"Of course not," said Greg, with a valiant smile. "You know me, commander… always on the ball."

Vickery despaired for a moment.


Greg's eyes widened. "What, the graveyard shift?" he said. "Really?"

"Yes," Vickery said, treating him to a pursed frown. "Unless we've suddenly *gained* a DI that nobody thought to bring to my attention - other than Mycroft, who will of course be accompanying you anyway."

"No commander, that's - that's fine." *Bollocks,* Greg thought. *This is not fine.* "Have we hit district rotation week yet?"

"No, you're still assigned to Hackney. Is that a problem?"

"No. Not at all."

"Excellent," the commander said, crisply. "Mycroft, I'm pushing all three major virus vaults for a comprehensive inventory check and security audit - every lock, every access panel, every glass
vial from the top of the roof to the basement floor. They're pushing back. 'Time'. 'Resources'. They'll break. Give me another day or two."  

"Of course they will," Mycroft said, with a weak smile. "Thank you, Amelia."

Her brows knitted - stern, steely and fond. "Thank you 'commander'..." she murmured.

Mycroft inclined his head. "Thank you, commander."

She let herself out, with a last look of weary bemusement at them both. The door snapped shut in her wake, and they heard her heels striding away.

"What is this about a graveyard shift?" Mycroft asked, pained.

"God, it completely slipped my mind... bloody night patrol. We're just so understaffed these days, and Comms need someone from Cross-Human Relations available for emergency response at night. All the cross-human insanity tends to kick off then. Vickery's had to branch patrols into CID staff as well... damn, thought I'd gotten out of it."

"What time will this be?"

"Eleven until seven. Damn."

"I see... are these shifts usually eventful?"

"Well, last time, I got strangled against a wall by a gargoyle - then I found someone torn apart by a vampire."

Mycroft put two fingers to the bridge of his nose. "Lord God. It hasn't even been a week... well... if this can't be helped, it can't be helped."

He retrieved his umbrella from by the door, weary.

"I... should tell you it's been some time since I was involved in frontline response."

"It's fine," Greg said. "Darling managed to survive three shifts. I'll look after you too. Leave the 'strangled against a wall' bits to me, they're my specialty... I trained in Manchester. Strangled against a wall twice a night."

Mycroft smiled a little, but did not laugh.

"Your scar?" he said, after a moment.

Greg took a second to cotton on. Most people didn't know he'd got it - wrapped around his side. He'd nearly lost a kidney. Only a lover's hands ever found the mark.

"Half-orc," he said. "Off his head in Cheetham Hill. Should have known better - thought I could calm him down."

Mycroft said nothing, thinking, slowly revolving his umbrella against a point on the floor. Whatever he was thinking, it didn't look like anything good.

"You alright?" Greg asked.

"Mm. Not my forte, that's all. Not anymore."
"What, frontline stuff?" Greg couldn't help but wonder. "Was it, once?"

Mycroft took a moment to respond. At last, he said,

"Where angels fear to tread' is rarely a safe and peaceful place." He smiled thinly, reaching for the door handle. "It seems we have even more reason to get a decent night's sleep. Good evening, Lestrade."

Greg didn't know what to say. He watched Mycroft open the door, feeling his heart tighten, unsure why.

"Mycroft," he said, as his partner stepped through.

Mycroft glanced back at him.

"I've got this," Greg said. "Honestly. I'll be the frontline. You can be the 'over Greg Lestrade's dead body' line."

Mycroft processed this for a moment, almost smiling.

"I'm touched," he said. "Truly, I am. But I'm afraid there are individuals in this world for whom such a thing would be desperately easy to arrange."

Greg smiled, pushing his hands into his pockets.

"Sure," he said. "Loads of them. But we're not going to come up against them tomorrow night."

He switched off the incident board with a snap; the illuminated windows flickered away into empty glass.

"A mugging or two... drunk minotaurs getting their heads wedged in railings... that's it. I promise. C'mon, let's head down together. We're going the same way."

Mycroft said nothing, but did not protest. Greg picked up his keys, turned off the office light and locked the door behind them. They headed through the department together, side-by-side in comfortable quiet.

Greg was aware of heads lifting from screens as they passed. People watched their progress with a discreet but fearful fascination. DI Lestrade and Dr. Holmes, he thought: the unthinkable pair. His chest twinged a little as he realised it. Everyone believed that Mycroft was some tragic set of shackles he'd been fitted with - a weird punishment by Commander Vickery, for crimes of an unspecified nature.

They didn't see Mycroft poring diligently over forensics reports so thick with jargon that they made Greg's skull shrink. They didn't see him quietly chewing on a pen as he compiled a database from recent lists of Missing Persons, hunting for a bias towards humans and half-elves. They didn't know what he sounded like at three o'clock in the morning.

Greg hadn't even seen anyone else speak to Mycroft yet. It hurt to realise it. The rest of the department seemed to be keeping their eyes down and avoiding him, like a ghost that nobody dared to disturb, lest it suddenly turn on them.

People were even avoiding Greg now. Nobody called goodnight as they passed; nobody smiled and waved. He'd been touched, Greg thought - darkened with Mycroft's aura.
As they passed the banks of screens and desks, he wondered if it worked the other way too.

He slowed his pace a little, and leant close to Mycroft's ear.

"Can I ask something?" he murmured, in wholly serious tones.

Mycroft shot him a briefly concerned look. "Yes," he muttered, as they walked.

"These fish of yours… the ones as clever as I am. D'you think they'd be game for a job share? Because I'm up for it, if they are."

Mycroft's face opened with the first tiny crack of amusement.

"I shall ask," he intoned, guarding his expression.

Greg grinned, adoring that little chink of light. Gently he began to widen it.

"'Cause I'd do weekends, if they've got things on… classes. Family commitments. S'fine, I don't mind."

"Stop being jocular about my fish," Mycroft muttered at him, fighting a smile tooth and nail.

"Have you told them about me yet?" Greg asked, still in undertones. People were watching with fascination now. "Shown them a photo… pressed one up against the glass. 'This is Daddy's new sergeant. He's called Greg. He's horrendous. Daddy's going to shoot him at the first opportunity'."

"Stop it..." Mycroft managed, biting his lip. He was starting to shake.

"M'just curious," Greg murmured, mildly. "That's all. What do your fish think of Gregorian chant? Probably doesn't have the same effect it has on you."

"You - …" Mycroft's grin flashed away as quickly as it had appeared, smothered into a look of wild-eyed, glittering severity. "Be quiet. And stop looking at me."

"Oh God..." Greg said, with a roll of his eyes. "Are we back to this again?"

Dawn at Reception was openly gaping. Greg cast her a grin as they passed, and dashed off a genial wave.

"Night, Dawn. Ignore him. He's had a long day - too much herbal tea."

Mycroft swept him out of the department before he could say anything else.

"What on earth are you doing?" Mycroft asked, as soon as the door closed. In the privacy of just Greg's company, his smirk finally opened across his face in amazement. Greg gazed at it, glorying. "Must I ask you to behave? I do still nurture some hopes for the quivering wreckage of my career, thank you."

"I'm just giddy for home time, I think," Greg said, as they wandered towards the lift. "Looking forward to my 'something with a vegetable'. It's my favourite."

"You are horrendous," Mycroft told him, his eyes still dancing. He hit the button for the lift. "I should have shot you days ago."

Greg smirked down at his shoes.
"It feels good, doesn't it?" he said, after a moment.

"What feels good?"

"Laughing. Smiling." Greg looked at him sideways. "You could feel like this all the time, you know."

"Could I?" Mycroft intoned, watching the lift doors. "Pray tell how."

"You just need to open up - just a little, now and then, to someone who likes you."

The doors opened before them with a quiet ping.

Mycroft seemed to remember. He glanced at Greg; a flicker of uncertainty passed across his face.

Greg grinned.

"Get in," he said, shaking his head. "It's fine. It was a year ago."

They got into the lift together. The doors slid slowly shut.

The lift rumbled as they descended, side-by-side in poignant silence. Greg found himself smiling in spite of the quiet, his hands in his pockets. He knew exactly what was going through Mycroft's mind. Mycroft knew what was going through his.

It was a mark of how far they'd come, Greg thought, that he could smile about it now. He could even stand to be with Mycroft, here, where it had all gone so wrong. It had only taken the threat of a murderous vampire terrorist cell to bring them to this place.

He wondered briefly where they'd be a year from now.

He hoped it was somewhere good.

As they passed floor three, Mycroft reached out a hand for the controls.

Without a word he depressed the top four buttons, and held them down.

The main light cut. Greg felt the lift, and his heart, both judder to a halt. The emergency strip-lights winked on. The alarm tone, faint, began to sound in the silence.

Mycroft turned to him slowly.

"I am sorry," he said. "For what I said to you here. Utterly, utterly sorry."

Greg realised his mouth was slightly open.

He closed it, attempting nonchalance.

"It's fine," he managed. "Forget about it."

Mycroft's eyes narrowed gently. "Yet again, that word."

"Honestly," Greg said, feeling his pulse start to pick up. "Don't... lose any sleep over it. I mean it. We - all do stupid things when we're scared."

Mycroft watched him for a second in the silence, his expression wracked with something Greg couldn't even begin to understand. It looked like it hurt too much to bear.
"Where were you thirteen years ago?" Mycroft asked, at last.


Mycroft quietly passed his tongue across his lips. "September."

"Y-Yeah. Why? What... what happened thirteen years ago?"

Mycroft said absolutely nothing. He was still watching Greg with that unbearable expression.

Then he stepped quietly forwards.

Greg's back bumped against the wall of the lift. As his feet fell upon the strip-light beneath them, their shadows loomed and leapt around the tiny space, thrown into enormousness against the roof and walls.

Mycroft's body pressed slowly against his own - pinning him into place. He laid a hand to the wall either side of Greg's head, and for one wild, leaping second, Greg thought they were about to kiss. Mycroft's forehead rested against his own.

Greg, unbreathing, closed his eyes.

"You," he heard Mycroft say in the silence. Their mouths were a breath apart; Greg felt every spoken sound like a brush of lips. "If only, it… would be you. Know that."

"I-If only… what?" Greg managed.

Mycroft shook in silence for a moment.

"Just know it," he whispered. "Just - carry it with you."

"Can it... not - be me?" Greg asked, barely able to speak. He didn't understand what they were talking about. It felt like he was on the verge of cardiac arrest.

He felt Mycroft shake his head.

"Why?" Greg begged. He was breaking apart. "Just… why?"

The soft alarm tone filled the silence for some time, too slow, too tiny in the quiet.

"If only' is all I can give you," Mycroft said, at last. "All I have to give. Perhaps a year ago, there was a chance… but now, with events as they are… with the danger so great..."

He swallowed.

"I should have stopped this days ago," he whispered. "I should have saved you the pain. I have nothing left but 'if only', Greg - but it's yours. Wholly... every regret. Every conceivable regret. Just - know that."

He drew away.

"May it comfort you."

He stepped backwards; Greg felt the soul ripped from him in a single quiet step. Mycroft released the lift buttons.

The lift rumbled back into motion.

"Mycroft," Greg begged, his chest heaving, his soul cracking into shards. "Mycroft, don't - don't walk away from me now. You can't. Please."

The lift hit the next floor with a ping - any floor - any route of escape - some meaningless number that Greg couldn't process. The doors opened.

"Mycroft," he pleaded.

Mycroft stepped out, his head hung. He walked away along the corridor, his coat stirring quietly behind him. Greg watched him leave in despair, panting with it, and the doors slowly slid into place. He was gone.

Greg's head fell back against the wall of the lift.

"Shit," he whispered to the silence, closing his eyes. "Shit, shit… oh, shit…"

At ten past eight that night, the sound of a wrist-set alarm broke through the haze. Greg lifted his head from the pillow, exhausted. The room around him was a swamp of smoke and vodka. It had been the most appealing thing on the shelf at the shop. He'd eaten nothing - he couldn't bring himself to.

He pulled himself weakly out of bed in the darkness, and followed the cheerful beeping to its source in the lounge. His wrist-set was buried in the pile by the door, a pile that contained his coat, his bag, car keys, today's junk mail and a vague attempt at groceries, now spilled from their carrier bag across the carpet.

As he squinted at the light screen in the darkness, reading the reminder he'd set for himself, he groaned softly. He scrubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand. *Princes.* Ten past eight. Robin who knew something - Robin, who wanted to speak to a police officer.

For a few moments, Greg was about to drop the wrist-set back into the pile.

He wanted to go back to bed, light up again, curl under the covers and smoke himself back to sleep - back into numbness.

Then he thought about them - those girls. Those three little girls.

He didn't even know their names.

It had been nearly a week, and she still hadn't come home. What would they be thinking? How much had they cried? Were they old enough to realise what it meant that she was gone? Meanwhile Greg had been drinking tequila with Luke Elwood, flirting with Mycroft - racing giddily back down this stupid, stupid path he'd walked before. He'd learnt nothing from Jason. He'd learnt nothing from anything.

His mum would have cried, he thought suddenly - cried to see him now. Smoking in the dark, drinking vodka. Not making his work calls, instead just curling up in bed. Jason. Mycroft. Those
little girls somewhere, motherless little girls, and a monster who'd taken her away, and all Greg could think to do was lie in bed and smoke and grieve losing someone he'd never even kissed.

His mum would have been ashamed of him.

He was letting her down, even now. Even after all this time.

Greg pushed the heat from his eyes, shaking, and took himself over to the sofa. He sat down in the darkness.

By the time he'd keyed in the number, he was calm enough to speak. He listened to his wrist-set trill as it rang.

"Princes," came a woman's brusque voice, at last.

"Hi," said Greg, sounding hollow to himself - hollow, but calm. "Can I speak to Robin, please? I think he starts at eight."

"Yeah, he's just arrived. Are you a client?"

She might not put him through as police, Greg thought - nor as a friend. Robin might not be allowed personal calls. "Yeah," he said. "M'a regular. Just wanted to arrange with him."

"Alright. Just a minute. What name is it?"


Greg waited. He could hear small scrapes of a conversation in the background, including a young male voice asking, "*Which John?*" - and a gruff, displeased response from the woman.

At last, the phone was picked up.

"John?" said a tentative male voice.

"Hi, Robin. Sorry. I'm not John. My name's Greg Lestrade, and I'm ringing from Scotland Yard. I didn't want you to get in trouble for it. Can you talk to me now, or is it a bad time?"

The voice at the other end of the phone took a moment to speak, shocked. When it did, it had a forcefully breezy tone to it that Greg deciphered at once. The woman was still listening. It was a communal phone.

"John!" the young man said, delighted. "Sure, hi - what can I do for you? Go ahead, I'm listening."

Greg played along. "Thanks. I'm interested in hearing whatever you've got to say. Is there a good day I can meet you?"

"Ah - well, there's tomorrow? I'm working from eight PM. As usual."

Greg felt his wrist-set buzz suddenly in his hands. The screen lit up, bright blue in the blackness. *NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES.* He ignored the desperate, sickening swoop that overcame his stomach and shut his eyes, concentrating on the call, thinking of Emma, thinking of her kids.

"As a suggestion," he said, "I think you're near Gastrell's Bar, right? Pembury Road? We could maybe meet there at four PM, before your shift. Should be quiet, and we can chat."
"That sounds great, John. I'll put you down. See you tomorrow, okay? Can't wait."

"Thanks," said Greg. "See you at four."

The call cut.

It took Greg a minute to find the strength to open the message. His chest had formed itself into a solid wall of granite. Whatever this said, he thought, he needed to see it. He needed to let it hurt him - then they could end this, and get on with the case. His life was a car wreck.

Losing Mycroft couldn't make it any worse.

He'd never even had him, after all.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

I will be out on inquiries during the day tomorrow.

I need you to understand that this is now ended. Whatever this was.

There can be only professionalism between us from now on. I cannot cope with anything else. I will remain with you long enough to satisfy my own mind that Excultus have not returned, then I will return to my department.

You must not speak to me about what was almost between us.

If you do, I will give Amelia my resignation. I will leave. Excultus took my life. I do not care if you shatter the one fragment of pride I have left. My career is crippled enough. Let it die. All the nights I begged God to take these thirteen years away. I didn't realise he would understand I was asking to be made a Detective Sergeant again.

I will attempt to have one of us excused from the night patrol. Amelia will say no.

I don't know how we will bear it but somehow we will have to.

I know it hurts.

I cannot make you understand that it is a lesser pain you feel - that I am protecting you from greater. That this is my one act of love to you. My last act of love. An act of love whose magnitude you cannot imagine.

You cannot understand. I never want you to understand. I would not wish that upon you for anything in the world.

Do not reply.

I will not read it.
As Greg opened his eyes to the bedroom ceiling on Tuesday morning, he found a strange calm had settled over him in the night. It had come rolling across his heart like fog, blanketing his grief. In its safe and quiet thickness, his thoughts came clear and slow.

He'd dreamt about Emma again.

He'd been there in the yard beneath the moon with her. The details were already running through his hands like water, her face growing fainter with every passing moment of the day. He couldn't even remember if she'd spoken to him - what she'd said - if her blood was even there on the cobbles anymore. He could see her eyes, blue and full of pain - and he could remember her last moments, choking out her name to him - begging him to know her, just for a moment. Begging him not to forget her. The dream was fading, but the truth was not.

Greg breathed it in, closing his eyes for just a moment more.

Today would be difficult.

The day after Jason had resigned had been difficult - he'd lurched brokenly through it like a walking wreck, Jason's anguished texts ripping his heart open afresh every half an hour. I'm sorry. I have to do this. You deserve better than me. I will miss you. Just stop loving me, then - stop thinking about me like that. He'd barely made it until five.

The day they'd found his mum had been difficult, too.

A man with a gentle smile and a social services lanyard had called up his university for him - told him it was okay, because he could delay his A Levels. Like that was the priority. Nobody had left him alone all day. Every room he'd tried to go to, someone in uniform had quietly shuffled after him and just stood somewhere in a corner, hovering, reminding him every time he lifted his head from his hands that his mum was dead.

He'd only realised years later why they were keeping watch on him.

They were the only thing that had stood between him and his mum that day - a string of heartbroken Police Constables, one after the other, ordered to watch every move that the Lestrad...
kid made. He'd had no reason to keep going - no reason not to sink into his grief and let it swallow him alive.

Today, he had four reasons.

One of them had died holding his hand; the other three would never hold her hand again.

Greg pushed the covers back from his bed, and headed for the bathroom.

He showered, shaved and dressed in clean clothes, made himself a proper breakfast and loaded the dishwasher. He put away the groceries he'd abandoned by the door last night. He found himself holding a spare five minutes, and used it to polish his shoes. He got to work without hitting traffic, made himself a coffee, sat down at his desk and loaded up a database of London primary schools.

The idea had come to him as he'd passed Dawn's desk - the photo-frame they'd given her for her birthday in November, pride of place beside her screen, and within it was the proudest of photographs.

Dawn's son had his mother's genetic pink eyes. They clashed wildly with his scarlet school jumper.

Greg set the database results to filter by proximity to location, input Pembury Road, booted up his wrist-set, and began.

"Hi, Bodney Road Primary School? My name's DI Lestrade. I'm calling from Scotland Yard, I wonder if you can help me… yeah - I'm trying to track down three little girls."

Each call took at least ten minutes, lengthening wildly with the size of the school.

Some of the smaller ones could tell Greg immediately they had no sets of three sisters, nor two sisters with a third yet to start. Others could not be sure at all. Headteachers knew far more than Receptionists; he started asking to be put through to them directly. Most of them promised to make inquiries and get back to him.

Greg kept a list beside him as he worked, striking some out, flagging up others, phoning school after school, his hair scuffed more and more on end by his exhausted fingers as the day wore on. He didn't have lunch; he couldn't bring himself to leave his desk. He didn't want to see people in the canteen. He didn't want to run into Luke, and have to smile and joke with him and tell him everything was fine. He didn't want to be chatted up in the queue by Admin girls. He just wanted to find Emma's kids. He wanted to do something good. He needed to.

"Hi, is that St Mark's Primary School? Yeah - DI Lestrade, Scotland Yard. Can I have a quick word with your headteacher please?"

"Oh! I'm so sorry," said the latest in a long line of polite young ladies. "She's not available at the moment. We're just coming up to home time and she'll be busy overseeing. Can I ask what it's about?"

Home time? Greg glanced in alarm at his wrist-set.

It was twenty past three.
"Fuck!" he gasped, then realised with a lurch. "Shit - oh God! Sorry, I have to go. I'll ring her back. Thanks for your help."

He hung up, cringing. Christ. There was no time to be mortified now. He strapped his wrist-set into place, hurried from the desk and grabbed his coat as he flew out of the door, clumsily locking the office behind him.

He couldn't bring himself to use the lift. He couldn't be in there again - not today. Not today, of all days. He jogged down the stairs instead, scrambled into his car and set off for Hackney at speed, drumming his fingers on the wheel as four o'clock edged closer and closer. Please let this be worthwhile, he thought, stuck in traffic halfway. He hadn't heard a thing from Mycroft since last night. In seven hours' time, they were going to be sealed in a patrol car together until dawn. Christ, Christ, Christ...

Greg arrived at Pembury Road just in time, parked up, and took a few minutes by the car to smoke himself calm. As with most investigations that were going dreadfully, every new witness could knowing nothing or everything. You never knew until you spoke to them. There was no room to do a half-arsed job.

Halfway through his cigarette, he felt his wrist-set buzz. Greg braced himself, tugging up his sleeve.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

"Oh, Jesus..." he moaned, adding with great reluctance: "Open…"

Amelia not open to relieving me of patrol. Tried to push the matter. I have just had a twenty minute lecture on 'duty'.

Shall I meet you at Scotland Yard tonight?

Fuck. Mycroft had been there - there at work, in the department, inside Vickery's office getting his ear chewed off as Greg had gone rushing past. It made Greg's heart heave like it wanted to throw up. He dragged on his cigarette as he typed a response, hating every blunt little letter.

No, will just pick you up direct. Send me your address.

Sent 16:01

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

133 Ebury Street. Good idea with primary schools. Any progress?

"Don't," Greg breathed. "Don't you dare try and be nice to me." He missed Lindsey Darling, he
realised. Christ, she'd been a horsey-faced *waste*, but she'd never fucked him and broken his heart. That was the standard now, Greg thought miserably. Sergeants who at least didn't screw him then take a sledgehammer to his soul were considered pretty decent.

As he stubbed out his cigarette on the wall, he caught a strange flicker in his peripheral vision. He glanced across the road just in time to see a lace net curtain drawn swiftly across a bristly, disapproving little face - Mrs Sanders the halfling, out of whose window Mycroft had pitched a crap cup of tea. It felt like months ago.

The curtain fell into place; Mrs Sanders was gone.

Greg watched, wondering.

Half a minute later, he saw the nets twitch ever so slightly. She was still there.

It was almost five past four.

Greg let himself into Gastrell's Bar with a squeak of the grubby door. He ordered a lemonade at the bar, and lingered for a minute as he looked around the room for a prostitute.

Of all people, Greg knew there was no one 'type'. He had little experience of male prostitutes, though he knew that they came in an even broader range than the female.

There were few people around in the bar at four PM. None of them seemed to be expecting company. They were all engrossed in either drinking, talking or watching the darts, with the leaden expressions that didn't usually mark out a person whose charms were for hire.

There was only one person he recognised - Mr Eccles, who owned the electronics shop. He had his back towards the bar, and had not seen Greg. He was sitting rather hunched and nervous at a table for two, drinking creme de menthe as he made conversation at a bored-looking woman in a boob tube and heavy eyeliner. She was humouring him with tight smiles, taking frequent glances at her crystal-studded phone.

Greg bit the inside of his cheek.

"Inspector Lestrade," said a pleased voice from behind the bar. "Good to see you."

Greg looked around. The duty manager, with his crisp white shirt and shaved eyebrow, had appeared with a basket of clean bar towels.

"Oh - hi," said Greg, with a small smile. "How are you?"

"Kieran," the duty manager said, his eyes bright. "Kieran Matthews."

"Sure. Of course - sorry."

"No, no. Not a problem. I'm sure you have more than enough names to remember, in your line of work. Has he found you?"

"Has… who found me, sorry?"

"There was a young man asking for you, about five minutes ago… said he was meeting you here. I think he's over in the corner."

Greg glanced the way Kieran was pointing - off around the pool tables.
"Right," said Greg, with a grin. "Thanks. I'd've been standing here like an idiot all night."

Kieran smiled, looking him up and down slightly. "Not a problem," he said, and started to fold towels.

Greg tried not to notice the look. The last thing he needed today was the look. He picked up his lemonade, gave Kieran an unsmiling nod and headed off towards the pool tables. As he got nearer, he spotted a small alcove tucked away in the very corner.

His stomach gave a guilty twist as he recognised, beyond doubt, a prostitute: a young man with blue hair, slim hips and ripped jeans, his gracefully-pointed ears adorned with a number of piercings. He was sitting awkwardly on his own, taking nervous comfort in the mobile phone he had out on the table. He had the distinct look of someone who was not sure why they'd come.

As Greg approached, Robin glanced up from his phone. His eyes widened a little and he sat up, on edge at once, reaching for the glass of orangeade before him on the table. Greg would never understand the number of people whose first instinct towards an officer of the law was to stand or sit up straight - as if slouching were a sure-fire indicator of heinous criminal intent.

"Robin?" he said, offering a quiet smile and a hand.

The young man's face relaxed a little. He took Greg's hand and shook, unsettled by the formal contact of palm-to-palm. Greg sat himself down at the table, pulled in his chair and said,

"Thanks for meeting me. I appreciate it."

"Oh - it's okay," Robin said. He glanced down uncomfortably at his hands, fiddling a little with the sleeve of his hooded top. "Honestly, I started thinking on the way here, and... you know what, I probably have nothing to tell you. I'm - really sorry if I'm wasting police time. I just... I couldn't get it out of my head."

"It's alright. Am I assuming Robin's not your real name?"

The boy blushed a little. "Is that okay? I - don't know if you're allowed to... hear all this off the record, but..."

As Robin spoke, Greg removed a small notebook and an old-fashioned pencil from inside his coat. He laid them casually on the table and took a drink. He hated writing by hand, but when you were talking like this, nothing clammed up a witness like the sight of a wrist-set and a hard-light screen. Something about the quietness of actual notepaper tended to relax people. It softened them with a strange reassurance of anonymity, as if their words were only scribbles - not documents in a criminal investigation.

"You've done the right thing," Greg assured him. "Don't worry whether things are relevant or not. That's my job to figure out. Just tell me whatever you can, in as much detail as you can - and I'll do the rest."

He could see Robin relaxing with every word. His shoulders were unwinding a little, his grip on the orangeade gently loosening.

"Okay," he said. He found a nervous smile for Greg. "There's... not a lot to tell."

"That's fine," said Greg. "Start wherever it makes sense for you."

"God, I... don't know if it'll ever make sense..." Robin reached up to fiddle with one of the
piercings in his pointed ears, remembering something that made the colour rise in his cheeks. "It wasn't bad. It's - ... I don't know how else to start. I literally don't know what I'm doing here. It wasn't bad, and he wasn't violent, and I just... you're - looking into Pembury Road, right? They found a body in the alley. Was it... bites?"

Greg gave him an apologetic look. "I'm not at liberty," he said. "All I can tell you is that if a client's bitten you, I want to know about it."

Robin took a moment to process this, gazing at Greg with a torn expression.

"But you're looking for a killer," he said, at last. He flushed. "I didn't meet a killer."

"Who did you meet?" Greg asked, picking up the pencil.

Robin hesitated a little, glancing at the empty notepaper.

"I didn't know his name," he said, after a moment. "I, um... Mandy - my boss - told me there was somebody new. This was early hours of last Friday. Mandy said he looked like he had money, and he was polite, and... he'd asked for 'human or close'. That was it. He didn't have any other asks."

Greg hesitated, raising an eyebrow.

"We cater to all sorts," Robin explained. "There's - half-orcs, gargoyles. For people who want that. We had a merman until a year ago, but Mandy couldn't handle the water bill."

Greg couldn't fight a smile. "But this guy wanted human?"

"Yeah. I'm..." Robin waved a hand vaguely at his ears - an apologetic dismissal of their elongated tips. "And I was the closest available, so I... I went to the room." He breathed out a little, lost in something - remembering. "He was sitting in the chair. Asked how old I was. He said he didn't want sex, or - or even any clothes off - he said it would be five minutes, and I'd walk out happy, and healthy, and he'd give me eight-hundred quid."

Greg raised his eyebrows. He didn't keep too close an eye on the going rate these days, but eight-hundred quid for five minutes sounded pretty generous.

Robin was following his thoughts. He swallowed, uneasy.

"In advance," he added. "I - don't make that much in a week."

"Did he tell you what he wanted?" Greg asked, jotting quietly.

Robin shifted a little. "Sort of. He didn't - ... he didn't say like, 'I am a...’ - or even 'I am going to...’ - he - said he wanted me to sit on his lap. Clothed. Then - ..."

The boy blew out a rush of air, shivering, and lifted his orangeade to his lips with a tremor. Greg watched him drink for a moment, the ice cubes chattering together as they bobbed on the bright orange surface.

"He said he was going to kiss my neck for a while," Robin finished. "But that was it - and otherwise, I... just had to sit. And I'd be alright."

Greg felt his pulse rate kick a little. He ignored it. "Did you know he was going to bite you?"

Robin shivered again. "No. Literally I just thought about how much we needed eight hundred quid, and he - he seemed nice, and he was gentle when he spoke, and... so I... got on his lap. And he
kissed me for a while. Rubbed my back."

The colour rose in his face.

"He was - licking me."

Greg was finding it rather hard to keep his handwriting neat. He realised he was impossibly glad Mycroft was not here. "Licking you?" he checked, lifting his eyes from the pad. He hadn't touched his lemonade.

"Erm, yeah," said Robin. "Just - my skin."

"On your neck?"

Robin showed him - quietly tapping the crook of his neck, between his throat and his shoulder. "Here."

"Okay," Greg said, calmly. "What happened then?"

Robin took a long breath, rubbing his thumb in a circle on the side of his glass. "It - was kinda working for me."

Greg waited.

"You don't understand," Robin said. His voice tightened. He stared into Greg's face. "I… since I've - … nothing works for me. Nothing. Not anymore. It happens to most of us. You just get used to - … it's just work. You hear yourself put it on so often that eventually you can't tell anymore if it's real or not. Then eventually none of it feels real. But…"

He looked down into his glass. He lifted it, shaking, to his mouth.

"It was working for me," he managed, after he'd swallowed. "I - liked him. It felt nice. I started rubbing against him a bit, just to - … for him - and honestly I knew he'd bitten me gently, like - like people do bite, when they're - … then when I realised he'd broken the skin, I didn't care. I didn't care at all. It worked for me even more. I realised he was drinking my blood while he held me and I just wanted to screw him until I cried. You don't understand. Nothing works for me. Nothing. I'm just - dead. I am dead now. And he made me feel alive."

He'd begun to cry. Greg's heart lurched into his throat, his chest tightening.

"He's not a killer," Robin managed, gasping a little. He reached for his drink to cover his mouth. "He was a nice guy. I don't know why I even called you. He - cleaned it for me after. He - …"

He drank for a while, deep and noiseless gulps. The glass was nearly empty by the time he put it down. He breathed, drawing back into himself and closing it all away - calming down too fast and too hard for it to be natural.

Greg had witnessed that professional skill in prostitutes before. They could crush it all down in seconds, like it just didn't exist. He'd seen his mum do it. It made his soul shrivel to witness it again.

"He was a nice guy," Robin said, when he was calm. He avoided Greg's eyes. "He wouldn't get in bed with me. I wanted him to. I basically begged him to and he wouldn't. He talked with me for a while to calm me down, and he paid me - all of it - all eight-hundred. He told me to soak the wounds in warm saltwater if they itched and it'd soothe them. Then he left. And I just cried in the
chair for about an hour. Mandy was furious. I could have gotten through three clients in that time."

He lifted a hand to rub the side of his neck, his features taut. His eyes were lost somewhere in the surface of the table.

"I didn't tell her what he paid me," he mumbled. "I told her he gave me fifty to suck him off. She'd have taken half of it for herself. I've - not seen him since. I hoped he'd come back but he hasn't. And he didn't give a name at the desk. I checked."

Greg found himself holding a hovering pencil over an almost empty sheet of paper. He gazed at Robin for a few seconds, saying nothing, trying to figure out why the hell this had seized his soul by the throat.

"I didn't know they even existed," Robin said, staring at him - two utter strangers locked together over a pub table by this desperate madness, both as pale and shocked as the other. "But I guess - there's all sorts out there. If someone can imagine it, science made it."

His expression cracked.

"Why are you wanting to know all this?" he begged. "Did - did Pembury Road - "

"I can't tell you," Greg managed. He reached for his lemonade, sitting up, taking a long drink as he settled himself. "Look, this - … whatever happened to you - I don't think you were in danger."

"Me neither," Robin mumbled.

"But - genuinely, thank you for telling me. Telling us." Greg realised he felt faintly shaky - like he hadn't eaten in way too long. This was affecting him more than it should. He shouldn't have skipped lunch. "Have you heard of this happening to anyone else?"

Robin hesitated. "Not like - …"

"D'you mean… not like happened to you?"

"No."

"But you've heard of people getting bitten?"

Robin said nothing for a moment, considering the empty glass now sitting before him on the table. "My friend was - attacked. A client. It doesn't sound like the same thing at all though."

"What happened?" Greg asked, his heart contracting slowly into itself.

Robin hesitated. "It's… not really my story to tell."

"I know," Greg said, gently. "But if you tell me, I can stop it becoming someone else's story too."

Robin flushed with discomfort, fiddling with his ear again.

"It was… awful," he mumbled. "She, um - picked up a man near here. A young man - a little younger than me and her. Bit quiet and shifty but… well, the girls get a lot of that… they'd only just started when he suddenly attacked her. Just out of nowhere he lunged for her. She fought him off and ran away. She doesn't like talking about it. She's… a little messed up."

"How long ago was this?"
"About a month ago."

Greg steadied himself. "What did she do after she ran away?"

Robin's expression shifted a little, saying nothing.

"Did she try to get help?" Greg prompted, gently. "In here?"

The young man gave an almost invisible nod.

"What's your friend's name?" Greg said, the notepad and pencil now long forgotten.

Robin let out a little rush of air. "You don't even know my name," he reminded Greg, shakily. "I'm not telling you hers. She'll kill me. She told me not to come and speak to you. She's the only friend I've got in the world."

"Would she speak to me like this, if you asked her?"

"No," Robin said, firmly. Of this, he was sure. Greg's heart sank. "She - doesn't speak about it. Ever. She, um… she had a wound - all on her neck - but it didn't heal like mine. She hides it with her hair now."

"Did she tell you anything else about the guy?"

Robin thought about it. "I can't really remember what she said, and what I've just imagined... I know she said he was quiet. Could barely speak. Hinting at her. It's - pathetic. They want you to literally open up your body for them, and they don't even have the guts to say it."

Greg's throat tightened a little. He took a drink, and it loosened. "Any kind of height, build? Eye colour? Distinguishing marks?"

"Just 'young', she said…" Robin looked deeply, desperately sorry. "Genuinely, she only spoke about it that night. Since then, none of us can say anything or she just goes off for hours. She won't talk about it. I think she's told herself he was just some kid, watched too much violent porn and thinks you can do whatever you want to a prostitute you've paid."

Greg's stomach turned over with a cold, sickening lurch. He pushed the thoughts away, reached for his lemonade again, and drank until his pulse-rate had settled.

"And you don't think this guy who attacked her was human?" he said, as he put the glass down.

"No," said Robin. "No, the - bites were - … humans can't do that. And I've seen most things that humans can do."

Greg steadied himself for a second

"Okay," he said at last. "It's my job to ask you, and so I have to. Just one last time. Is there no way your friend'll speak to me? Or can you speak to her about the attack, and maybe pass onto me what she says?"

Robin hesitated, crossing one slim leg quietly over the other. He fiddled with the artfully torn holes over his knee.

"She won't speak to you," he said at last. "And she'll be really hurt if she knows I spoke to you. But I - … I don't know. I can try and get you a description of the man who attacked her. Maybe."
Greg's heart boomed. "If you can do that," he said, "you could help me end this. All of this."

He tore a page from his notebook, scrawled down his wrist-set ID, phone number and name for Robin, and slid it across the table.

"Can I get a number for you?" he asked.

Robin blushed a little. "Sure. But, um… I've told you everything I know. Honestly, there's nothing else."

"It's in case something else comes to light," Greg said. "So far, you've told me more than anybody else has. I know you're scared, and I know you want to stay off-the-record - but believe me, right now I'll take anything you've got."

The young man stirred slightly in his seat. He took the piece of paper that Greg offered, and the pen, and nervously looped down a phone number.

"Can you... text rather than call, please? If - …" He stopped with a lurch, swallowed back the name he'd been about to say, and finished, " - … my friend hears me talking to you - "

"I'll text," Greg promised.

"I… have to go to work soonish. I need to find some food first."

"That's fine. You've been more than helpful. Is there anything else you can think of that I should know?"

Robin took his phone from inside his jacket, keying in Greg's number with a somewhat guarded expression.

"Anything," Greg prompted, gently.

Robin took a moment to reply. "I heard you're - asking about people going missing."

Oh… oh Christ, no. "We are," said Greg, his voice measured, his face a wall of calm. "Do you know someone who's now missing?"

Robin laughed, still typing into his phone. There was no humour in it whatsoever.

"Who's gone missing?" said Greg. "This is a long shot, but… is it a woman called Emma?"

Robin closed his phone with a snap. "I don't know anyone called Emma. But I know three people who are missing."

The contents of Greg's chest evaporated instantly. "Three - "

"Three in - …" Robin counted, his eyes cast sideways to the pool table. "Five months?"

"Jesus," Greg said, and took a moment to calm himself. He placed a hand flat on the table. "Are you sure these people have disappeared? They've not just - "

Robin sighed a little, biting his lip.

"Listen," he said to Greg. "This is exactly why people don't - …" He shook his head, retreating back into politeness. "We tried contacting the police. And honestly? They didn't really care. The woman on the phone seemed to think that people like us just 'wander off', or get lost somehow. The
second she heard they were prostitutes, she couldn't get us off the line quick enough. Told us she'd log it and that was that. She acted as if people like us do just fall through the net, and it's our fault for being at the bottom of the bag where all the holes are."

Greg's chest twisted with despair. No wonder Mycroft hadn't found a thing through Missing Persons.

"The people who're missing," he said. "The three of them. Were these people the type to - "

"Nobody is the type just to vanish," Robin said, a little fiercely. "Nobody does that."

"Okay. Listen, if you give me their names, I swear to you I will do everything I can to find out what - "

"I'm not giving you any names," Robin said, his voice tight. He was backing away into his chair now, nervous, clamming up. "Because then you'll have my name, and my friend's. And she'll never forgive me."

Greg breathed in, knowing he was on dangerous ground here - but he had to push. He couldn't stop. This was the single biggest breakthrough they'd had in days.

"This isn't a small thing," he said, staring into Robin's frightened blue eyes. "And you know it's not. It's why you called us. It's why you're scared. There's something going on that isn't going to just stop, not until somebody stops it. If you have information and you keep it to yourself, it could well be your fault if someone else gets hurt. I don't want that on your head. You don't want it either. I know you don't."

Robin's eyes shuttered.

"I don't know anything else," he said, after a moment.

Greg wished he knew why people thought they could lie to detectives. "Those three people could need help," he said. "I'm not going to push you - but you could finish this right now before it gets any worse. Before anybody else gets hurt. Will you think about that for me?"

Robin nodded, uneasily.

Greg let out a breath. "Thank you," he said. "There's one last thing."

Robin waited, biting his lip, as Greg pulled back his sleeve and flashed through screens on his wrist-set.

"What is it?" the young man said, suspiciously.

Greg hit 'project'.

The white Excultus sigil wove itself into being above the table, flickering brightly in the comfortable gloom of the bar.

"What - what is that?" Robin asked, his eyes flying across it with concern.

"Have you seen it before?" said Greg.

"No, I - I don't like it though." Robin's eyes were round, the sigil illuminating his face from above. It made him look smaller, younger. "It - looks a bit satanic."
Greg closed the image, wrote something in capitals on his notebook, then turned it around to show Robin.

"Does this mean anything to you?" he asked.

Robin eyed the eight letters with deep discomfort.

"No," he said, at last. "What's - 'Excultus'? What is that?"

"Keep hiding what you know from me," Greg said, quietly. "And everyone in this city will find out."

Robin's face opened with shock. He gazed at Greg across the table, white-faced, his lips a little open.

"You've got my number," Greg said, scooped his notebook off the table, and stood up. The chair emitted a quiet creak as it lost his weight. Robin gaped up at him, lost and panicking quietly. "Let me know when you've had a think, alright? Can I offer you a lift to work?"

"No," Robin managed. "I - just round the corner..."

"Okay." Greg tapped the table. "Thanks for your time."

He turned and left the bar, without looking back.

He waited until he was some way down the street to stop beside a parking meter and spark up. As he smoked, he thought. It was a working cigarette, not a recreational one. He got out his notebook and pinned it against the parking meter, jotting as he worked through the cigarette, pulling some ideas into place, retreating others to the back of his mind. He scrawled a name in capital letters, and circled it, and beneath it he added, 'I AM A FUCKING IDIOT', then continued to write.

Things were opening up. Things were moving.

He could feel it.

It was coming up to five by the time Greg got back into his car. He was going to run straight into rush hour, but he needed food, a change of clothes and a few hours' sleep on the sofa before tonight. This day wasn't even half done yet, and by far the hardest part was approaching.

He put music on, loud, as he drove back to Pimlico, letting it fill up any room for thoughts. There'd be enough time for thinking tonight.

Greg's alarm woke him up at ten PM. It wouldn't be far to Mycroft's flat in Belgravia, but they needed to be in Hackney and ready to respond to Comms by eleven on the dot.

With a distinct sense of dread, Greg filled a flask with coffee and packed a bag with supplies for the night ahead - a thick jumper, caffeine tablets, caramel digestives. He and Sergeant Duff used to play card games into the small hours, betting with fruit gummies. Something told him Mycroft wouldn't care for Backhand Ratscrew.

"Christ," Greg murmured to himself at the thought, standing in his kitchen as he forced down a
bowl of cereal.

Maybe Mycroft really would shoot him, he thought. He could only fucking hope. It would solve a lot of problems. Then Luke would shoot Mycroft in a rage, and Jason would throw himself in the sea, and so would end the whole miserable mess. At least he'd get a plaque on the Line of Duty wall.

To The Memory of Greg Lestrade, who once fucked Mycroft Holmes. He should never have left Manchester.

Greg was in the car by quarter past, and on his way to Ebury Street not long after.

It was a bitterly cold night - black as the abyss, and without a star in sight. He put the radio on, unnerved by the quiet of the car around him. He skipped through channels as he drove - every song was too slow or too fast, too miserable or too cheerful. In the end, he settled on sport and let it quieten his panic as he crawled along Ebury Street, checking the number on each door.

As he laid eyes at last on the green door of number 133, it opened.

Mycroft emerged into the night, swathed in a long black coat and a thick woollen scarf. He was wearing leather gloves, and holding a flask in one hand.

Greg's heart contracted tightly. He kept his expression neutral as he slowed the car to a stop, unlocked the doors, then reached to take the bag off Mycroft's seat.

The bag wasn't there. Greg frowned, turning to check the back as the passenger door clunked open.

"Bollocks," Greg muttered to himself, as Mycroft got in and shut the door.

"Problem?" Mycroft said, adjusting his seatbelt. Greg's heart hammered in response to Mycroft's voice - his presence, his scent, sitting right there in Greg's car like everything was all fine. Shit, Greg thought to himself, breaking a little already. Shit, shit. I can't do this.

"I've left my bag," he managed, checking his wrist-set. He was going to struggle to survive this night as it was, let alone without coffee. "It's - got my gun and everything in it. We're going back that way though. I'll be two minutes. Sorry."

"It's fine," Mycroft remarked, his gaze fixed straight ahead on the window. As they pulled away from the kerb, he began to unscrew the metal flask he'd brought with him. "We have time."

They set off back towards Pimlico, listening in strained silence to the outcome of sports matches neither of them cared about.

"How were your inquiries?" Greg asked, when he couldn't bear the quiet any longer.

"Fruitful. Yours?"

Greg thought back to Robin, his desperate tears as he'd talked about a kind man who'd rubbed his back, cleaned his wounds for him and didn't want sex. His stomach curled uneasily.

"I met the guy from the brothel - the guy who got in touch at the weekend."

"Oh?" said Mycroft, with restrained interest. "You didn't mention it was a man."
"Barely a boy, to be honest... works at a place called Princes. Really near to Pembury Road."

"Princes?" Mycroft said.

Greg held his nerve. "Yeah. Kid was a half-elf, but said they've got gargoyles and all sorts on the books - all tastes catered for. Calling himself 'Robin', but it's a stage name. Wouldn't give me his real name."

Mycroft said nothing for a moment. "I see," he said. "And what did this person have to say?"

"Had a client early hours of last Friday," said Greg, concentrating on the road. "Gave him eight-hundred quid upfront, then drank from him. The guy seems to have treated him kindly. Robin's okay - a bit screwed up from... PT-309, right? The chemical? But he's fine."

Mycroft listened in silence, taking a slow sip from the flask he'd brought. He made no comment.

"There's more," Greg went on. "Robin also knows the girl. The girl who got attacked near Gastrell's Bar. She's a mate of his, and from the sound of things she only just got away with her life."

"Really?" Mycroft said, briefly meeting his eyes in the mirror.

"Yeah. He wouldn't give me her name, but I've got his number. I spooked him a bit - gave him some bad cop. I think that if we give him a few days, he'll crack. All his mate told him was that the guy was young, and he was quiet, but we can get more information. I know it. You were right. It's some loser. A kid that spends his nights watching violent porn, and now someone's transformed him into a living horror movie."

Mycroft was thinking, hard.

"This opens up a number of possibilities," he said. He reached for his wrist-set, flashing through blue light screens in the darkness. "Combined with the primary schools, this is excellent. Things are unfolding."

"Don't get excited. I'm barely a quarter of the way through the list. We're relying on the schools to be observant too, and I remember school. We could probably have held a dinner lady hostage for weeks before anyone noticed."

"Progress is progress," Mycroft said. "And it is a very good idea. Can your third-party specialist send us a copy of the lockscreen of her phone? We can distribute the picture throughout the schools."

"Jesus, why didn't I think of that? And he's on tonight. Right. I'll ring him at eleven, and he'll have it to us by morning."

"He's - 'on', tonight?" Mycroft said.

Greg hesitated, realising. He squeezed the wheel.

"Is this Timothy Tierney?" Mycroft asked, sharply. "The scruffy one in Comms 4?"

"He's good at what he does," Greg protested. "It's not his fault he's scruffy - and he's faster than all of the actual technical department combined. And we need to find those kids."

Mycroft looked for a moment as if he was going to argue - then gave in. "We do," he sighed. "Very
well. I hope Legal don't get wind of this."

"I'm not going to tell them. Are you?"

"No," Mycroft muttered. His expression darkened, drinking from his flask. "I would not thrive in a prison environment."

They pulled up outside Greg's flat; the car's front window was washed in eerie yellow-orange by a streetlight overhead. Greg put on the handbrake, fished his keys from his coat pocket and said,

"Okay - two minutes, then we'll get to Hackney. Sorry about this."

Mycroft was engrossed in his wrist-set, scrolling through the latest Missing Persons updates.

"Not a problem," he muttered, distracted. "Take your time."

Greg slammed the car door, let himself into the building, and hurried up the stairs to his flat. He was panting a little by the time he reached his floor. Just being away from Mycroft for a few minutes was a blessing, though. It gave him room to breathe.

Greg rested against his door as he fitted the key into the lock, quickly clunking it round. He twisted the handle, expecting it to give with the familiar squeak - instead, it held solid.

Greg paused.

He tested the handle again - locked.

*Jesus, did I not even lock my door?* It was a good job he lived so high up in the building, Greg thought, or someone would have been in and stolen half his stuff by now. He unlocked the door, muttered to himself that he was an idiot, and let himself into the darkened quiet of his flat.

His bag was where he'd left it by the door. Greg scooped it up, grabbed the flask, and was about to back out onto the landing, when he caught a strange noise.

It was the distinct, quiet clunk of a door being closed - somewhere within his flat.
Greg froze on the spot.

Nothing moved; nothing stirred.

"Hello?" he tried.

There was no reply from the darkness - only silence. His flat seemed to be holding its breath.

Warily, Greg stepped a little further into the lounge.

It had sounded like his bathroom door. Who the hell would be in here, shutting his bathroom door, he didn't know. His hand strayed instinctively to his coat pocket, finding it empty.

His Magnum was not there - it was zipped into the bag with the caramel digestives. Greg felt immediately stupid, reaching for a high-powered firearm in response to what was probably Mrs Downstairs slamming a window too hard.

All the same, he thought - he couldn't go without checking the place. This was strange.

He moved quietly through the lounge, pausing to glance into his kitchen as he did - nothing. The door to his bedroom was ajar. Greg stepped through it, tentatively - and found himself looking at a firmly closed bathroom door.
He always left it open.

"Jesus," Greg managed under his breath.

Someone was in there.

The strangest, coldest prickle rose on the back of his neck.

*Call the police,* his instincts hissed - before realising he *was* the bloody police. *Get out of here.* *Now. Not right. Something not right. Right now.*

Greg decided an instinct like that should be obeyed.

If he'd now cornered a burglar in his bathroom, he could wait for back-up on the landing. This was weird.

He turned to leave - and found someone standing in the door of his bedroom.

"**CHRIST - !**"

It was a man. Greg staggered backwards a step, faltering at the sight of him - tall, hollow-cheeked and smirking, barely visible in the gloom. He had his hands in his pockets.

"Jesus - fucking - ..." Greg scrabbled to think. "*Who the fuck are you?*

"Are you Lestrade?" the man enquired. His voice curled with the question - delighted to be asking it.

Greg said nothing, panting.

"They didn't say you were handsome," the man murmured, and ran his eyes down the length of Greg's coat.

*Oh. Oh, holy Christ.* Greg felt every muscle in his body tense and turn to rock at once.

"Who the hell are you?" he managed. His throat closed over in panic as he swallowed.

The man idled forwards into the room. Greg rapidly backed away.

"Where are you going?" the man asked him, soft and mocking. His eyes darkened. "Are you frightened?"

*Defend yourself. Get a weapon. Get a fucking weapon.* There was nothing in here. Greg's back hit the wardrobe - the man was continuing to approach. Greg dodged sideways, grabbed for the bedside lamp and wrenched it from the wall hard enough to snap the cable. He hurled it at the advancing figure - a rough direct blow to the face. The man jerked backwards as it collided with him. Greg took his chance. He vaulted over the bed and lunged through the door.

He made it halfway across the lounge.

An entire building below, bathed in the yellow glow of the streetlight, Mycroft sat with his open
flask and tried not to panic. Every now and then, he lifted the flask with a tremor to his mouth, and took a quiet sip. It wasn't helping yet.

He now had a fairly major problem on his hands. That much was obvious.

His first thought was to get to Princes, quickly - but what to say? What to do? Greg was now a single question away from discovering that the term 'vampire expert' could be interpreted in a number of ways. It would spell the end of everything.

They needed the name of the assaulted girl - but if Greg pulled the boy into Scotland Yard for interview, and he laid eyes on Mycroft...

It didn't bear thinking about.

Mycroft wasn't sure how subtly he could pull that thread of the investigation out of Greg's hands. In many ways, it was their *only* thread. There was no discreet way to take it over - nor was it wise for him to spend any more time with Robin, who'd clearly been compromised enough by the time they already had shared.

But what in God's name was the answer?

*Tell* Greg?

Unthinkable.

The man would lose his mind. To discover that after all this time - sharing an office, sharing the investigation... to say nothing of sharing a bed. *Oh, holy God*...

Mycroft brought the flask back to his mouth, shaking a little. He didn't know what to think. He didn't know how to begin resolving this.

As he drank, trying to calm himself back to clarity, he became aware of a sudden muffled beeping.

He paused, glancing around Greg's car. Nothing seemed to be in need of attention.

He put the flask aside with a frown, twisted up his sleeve and studied the alert now coming through on his wrist-set.

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BIOMETRIC ALERT LEVEL 3
CID PARTNER
DI GREGORY MARK LESTRADE
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Beneath, a real-time chart was scrawling out the rapid incline of Greg's heart-rate. As Mycroft stared, the alert blinked suddenly from yellow to orange and hit *ALERT LEVEL 2*. The beeping ratcheted up in volume and became faster and more frantic.

Mycroft hesitated, glancing out of the front window at Greg's building. His breathing shallowed.

In only seconds, the beeping intensified again. It became a shrieking, chattering stream.
The screen flashed from orange to scarlet. Greg's heart-rate was entering the stratosphere; his blood sugar levels had lurched. Stress hormones were screaming upwards. Blood was rushing to his limbs. He was kicking into fight or flight.

Mycroft's mouth fell open.

He grabbed for the handle of the door.

The vampire came out of nowhere. It hit Greg hard. The force of its body was far stronger than a human but too fast to be a gargoyle, and the arms that grappled round him as he staggered were more dextrous than a half-orc. Greg's every nerve screamed with panic; thirteen years of combat training kicked into action. He wrenched himself over double, heaving his attacker off its feet. The combined momentum of their weight sent them lurching to the floor. As he hit the ground, Greg kicked out. His foot connected with something that jerked. Greg kicked it again, seized a nearby dining chair by the legs and flung it as hard as he could at the carnivore now scrabbling forwards to grab him once more. The vampire reeled with a cry of pain. It bought Greg a second's grace. He struggled to try and get to his feet.

Just at the point of standing, the vampire lunged for him again. Greg bowled over backwards and the whole room reeled. There came a slam and a crack as the back of Greg's head hit the coffee table. Pain wrenched its way out of his throat; his shout was met by a hiss from the darkness.

"Oh, stop it," the vampire snarled, and seized Greg by the wrists.

It wrenched his arms apart from his chest, prying him open like a hedgehog. Greg heaved, twisting, fighting it with his every scrap of strength. The grip didn't break. It didn't shift an inch. The vampire pinned him open and flat to the floor, then grinned down at him, flushed. Vicious delight crossed its hollow-cheeked face.

Wrenching together his last remaining power, Greg drove every last iota of it into his forearms. He heaved, using the grip to pull up his legs and lash out a kick hard enough to shatter bones.

The vampire smoothly dodged the strike.

He then leant his weight sideways onto Greg, pinning him down in one idle motion - immobilising him into place.

"Well," the vampire sighed, panting. "This has been fun… but let's stop messing around now, shall we? That's enough foreplay."

Greg's brain bleached itself into immediate, shrieking terror. He gritted his teeth, hauling his shoulders up around his neck as he curled into himself in panic.

"Cute," the vampire remarked. "Wow, Mycroft's going to be angry when he finds what's left of
The vampire leant down.

Greg screwed his eyes as tightly shut as he could. *Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.* He felt the brush of an idle nose and warm breath across his chest, ghosting up a little to the neck of his shirt, where the vampire gathered a mouthful of the white cotton within its teeth and ripped it aside, exposing a large triangular section of his chest. Greg kicked and heaved; it made no difference. This was happening. He was about to die.

And he was going to die like Emma - making a fuss.

"Is that a pawprint tattoo?" he heard the vampire breathe. Delight sharpened its mocking voice. "Oh God, I love it… shall we start there, then? You're going to open up that neck for me soon, anyway… so it doesn't matter…" The creature sighed. "Okay, pretty. Here we go."

The first lick sent revulsion skittering through Greg's entire body.

*No,* he gasped to himself, somewhere in the petrified echo of his heart. *No, no, no.* He would say it until he could think no more. His last free word would be *no.*

Then there came the bang of the door - and a shout - and the vampire raised its head.


Greg stayed exactly as he was, white in the face and no longer breathing. Everything rang. Everything screamed.

The vampire wasn't moving. Its face had slumped against his chest.

He could feel it bleeding.

Greg didn't move. He couldn't.

Footsteps rushed across the room.
Breathe

Chapter Notes

For anyone who skipped: Greg is attacked by a vampiric intruder in his flat, who knows him by name - and has been sent to kill him. Biometric alerts from Greg's wrist-set warn Mycroft of the danger. He arrives to find Greg pinned to the floor by his attacker; Mycroft shoots the intruder dead.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal dared to dream before.

- Edgar Allen Poe
'The Raven', Stanza V (1844)

Mycroft dropped the revolver beside the door.

"Greg - " He fell to his knees, seized the vicious creature by the back of its clothes and heaved its lifeless body aside. Greg stared up from beneath it in utter, white-faced horror. He was covered in blood. His shirt was torn.

Mycroft grappled for his throat.

"Greg - ..." He searched the skin in desperation - searched and searched, panting, shaking so hard that he could now hear Greg's wrist-set alerting his own biometrics. No wounds. There were no wounds. No wounds on his neck. Mycroft tugged the shredded fabric of his shirt apart. Nothing - nothing there. He wasn't bitten. "Oh God, Greg..."

Greg jerked suddenly. He grabbed for Mycroft.

Mycroft hauled Greg into his arms, grappling him into the tightest of embraces. He gasped his dry sobs of relief into the man's hair. Greg clung to him.

"You're alright," Mycroft almost wept, as with a sudden heart-wrenching blast of air Greg began to pant, heaving with it, struggling to get the oxygen he needed into his lungs. His hands dug into Mycroft's back; his fingers felt like claws. "You're alright. You're alright. Breathe - "

Greg was starting to shake uncontrollably.

"Breathe," Mycroft begged him, burying a hand into the back of Greg's hair. "Breathe - s-slow -
breathe."

Greg gulped down air, forcing himself to swallow it.

Mycroft listened to him take six or seven deep, shaking breaths. He found himself breathing with Greg, stroking at the back of his head, his heart pounding so hard he could barely hear a thing.

"Outgoing call," he managed to his wrist-set. "Comms."

The click was almost lost in Greg's ragged breaths.

"Comms 4," came a voice. "You're through to TJ. Let's go."


"Okay - dispatching. Stay on the line, Dr. Holmes. What's happened?"

"He's been attacked - shock - head injury - no bite wounds - "

Tierney stayed as calm as standing water. "Are you in danger right now, Dr. Holmes?"

Mycroft locked his arms tight around Greg, feeling him breathe, holding him more desperately than he'd ever held another being in his life. "No," he managed. "No danger."

"Attacker fled?"

"Neutralised. Shot."

"Okay. Is Lestrade breathing?"

"Yes, he's breathing."

"Blood loss?"

"No."

"Would you say he's stable?"

"Yes - yes, he's stable - "

"The attacker, Dr. Holmes. Describe him to me as fully as you can."

"Vampire," Mycroft managed. He buried his fingers tightly into the back of Greg's coat. He nuzzled into the man, shaking and holding him, drawing in Greg's scent on every single breath. Greg was fighting just to breathe. "Male. Dead."

"Definitely dead?"

Mycroft cast his eyes to the thing now slumped on the floor beside them. Its glassy eyes were gazing stupidly towards the door.

All six shots had found their mark.

The first clinical shot to the temple had killed it. The next two had been to make sure. The final three were purely out of anger.
The psychology of shots and weapon strikes to the face was very simple, well-documented, and unvarying. It denoted utter hatred.

"It's dead," Mycroft breathed. He stroked his face against the side of Greg's, rubbing slowly at the back of his hair, rumpling it with his fingers. He forgot at once that he was talking to Comms. He murmured it to Greg, ringing with it, breathing with him still. "It's dead. It's dead and you are alive. And you are safe. Because I am here."

Somewhere from his wrist, there came the sound of TJ opening up a second Comms line.

"Commander Vickery? It's Comms 4. DI Lestrade's been attacked at his flat. Vampire. Dr. Holmes is with him - medics and back-up on the way."

Within fifteen minutes, the quiet Pimlico street had become a hive of police activity. Vehicles, specialists and lights arrived in force to start driving back the darkness. The street was soon cordoned off at either end, and the sight of police vans and tape alone was enough to draw a crowd of curious onlookers. The residents of Greg's building, disturbed by gunshots, were being persuaded back into their flats by uniformed officers. An early CID team arrived; they began to take light scans of every square inch of the apartment.

In the midst of all the chaos, Mycroft retreated with Greg into the kitchen.

He turned on every light and sat Greg in a chair in the furthest corner, where he would be able to see the door and the room in its entirety. He knelt in front of Greg, taking gentle hold of his gaze. Greg stared back at him in mute terror. He hadn't uttered a sound since the attack.

Mycroft's heart heaved. He reached up, unwinding the scarf from around his own neck. He'd seen it done with victims of botched attacks - soft wool was plate armour to a frightened mind. Carefully he wrapped the scarf around Greg's throat, looping it, securing it.

Greg let him, sitting in silence. He started to shake.

"A medic is coming," Mycroft said, as he tucked the last of the scarf into place. "They will take this off to look at you. I will make them put it back."

Greg said nothing. He was staring at Mycroft with an almost fearsome look of panic.

Mycroft reached up to cup his jaw; the tremors eased.

"Commander Vickery will wish to speak to you too," Mycroft murmured, watching his eyes. Greg visibly swallowed. "She will be gentle. If you cannot speak back, she will understand. This will all be a memory soon."

There came movement from outside the kitchen. Mycroft released Greg's jaw gently, stood up and turned to find an emergency response medic being ushered in.

"Dr. Holmes?" the medic said. She'd been warned about him. "Dr. Armitage..." She offered a hand - fifties, gentle-voiced, bespectacled and calm as an April dawn. "I understand somebody's been
attacked."

As she examined Greg, Mycroft stood guard at the door.

He found himself experiencing the same emotions that, in a house-cat, would have produced a flicking tail.

CID were light-scanning his own revolver where he'd abandoned it by the door. Forensics had arrived for the body. He watched them measuring the distance between the bullet-wounds, photographing the blood-spatter across the carpet. The silence in the flat was now broken up by radio chatter, every shadow chased back by light, but the feeling remained. Death had happened here. Worse had been intended.

It was hard not to imagine the scene currently taking place in another universe, parallel to this one - the same darkened flat; a body on the floor.

Mycroft listened numbly to the medic's quiet questions, and Greg's broken attempts to answer her. He wanted to stop thinking. He'd never wanted it so much in his life.

"Sir?"

A uniformed officer had appeared in the open front door. Mycroft lifted his eyes to the man, saying not a word.

"Commander Vickery's here, Dr. Holmes... she's just on her way up."

Mycroft nodded shortly. The constable left.

Dr. Armitage had finished with Greg. She rewound Mycroft's scarf into place, speaking with the gentleness that belied an excellent physician. As she stepped from the kitchen, Mycroft detained her for a moment to check the current medical advice on emotional shock. He found that in a decade it hadn't changed. A warm, quiet environment - sleep - small amounts of food, if Greg could manage it.

Mycroft thanked her, and she left.

The commander's approach was marked by a distinct shift in the air. There was an upswing in noise, motion and radio chatter, as if her very presence were kicking the machine and all its components into life. As she stepped through the door of the flat, and Mycroft laid eyes on her, his heart nearly pounded itself apart. He'd never been so glad to see her in his life.

"What happened?" she asked, striding straight over to him.

"He came upstairs to retrieve a bag," Mycroft managed. His voice came out low and stiff. "I was waiting for him outside. His biometrics alerted my wrist-set. By the time I got up the stairs, the bastard had him pinned to the floor."

Vickery glanced over Mycroft's shoulder, into the brightly-lit kitchen he was guarding. Greg, numb, was still curled up in the corner chair, staring into space. He'd drawn the scarf up over his nose to smell it.

"Was he bitten?" she asked Mycroft.

Mycroft shook his head, eyes lowered.
"Not at all?" she said.

"No. No signs of PT-309 in his behaviour. No wounds that I could find."

"What happened to his assailant?"

"I happened to his assailant," Mycroft snarled, feeling his upper lip draw back a little. The tail he didn't have began to twitch once more.

"Steady," Amelia said to him, simply. She laid a hand on his arm.

Mycrof swallowed, working to relax the muscles in his mouth.

"I'm assuming this happened at range?" she checked, eyeing the minimal amount of blood on Mycroft's face and clothing. A little had transferred from Greg as he'd held him.

"From the door," Mycroft said.

"Good." Amelia cast her gaze across the developing crime scene, lingering on the figure slumped beside Greg's coffee table. "Excellent shot, Mycroft... knew you hadn't lost your nerve."

"Thank you," Mycroft said, entirely unmoved.

"Come to me tomorrow," she said. "We will talk. Don't bother with an appointment. Whenever suits."

"I - need to see to him first."

"Naturally," Amelia said. "I expect nothing less. But you know where I am."

Mycroft did not react; he couldn't. He feared what he'd say, if he did.

"I'm going to take him to my home for the night," he said, after a moment's uneasy silence. "He will be safe there."

"Wholly sensible. If anyone can calm him down, it's you. Has a medic seen to him?"

"Yes. Shock, she said. He needs sleep, quiet, and time."

"Very well. Give me ten minutes alone with him, Mycroft, and he's yours."

Mycroft's throat closed over briefly. "Thank you," he said. He stepped aside, watching in silence as Amelia strode into the kitchen.

Greg looked up. At the sight of his commander, his face opened in the same rush of relief and reassurance that Mycroft had felt at her approach. Amelia took a chair and pulled it across to him - her voice was bracing, her manner calm.

"Now, Lestrade," she said. "I understand you've earned your stripes. Let me have a look at you."

Mycroft looked away; he pulled his coat around himself.

He realised he was letting go of something he'd been holding onto since first he'd opened the door of the flat. He breathed it out, closing his eyes for a moment.

Greg would be safe with Amelia. The worst was driven back.
The danger, for now, had passed over them all.

Mycroft left them to speak. He took the five flights of stairs in silence down to the road, wrapped tight in his own thoughts. He needed night air. He needed it to fortify him for the long and difficult hours ahead.

Out on the street, he found himself unconsciously guarding the entrance to the building - pacing, watching, thinking, as specialists and technicians and officers came and went.

He had no desire to smoke; this was not stress. It was something else entirely. In the midst of his thoughts, it occurred to Mycroft vaguely that he'd taken a life tonight.

He would take it several more times, if he could.

Some fragment of his soul would remain here in this building forever more, unloading bullet after bullet into a creature that was no longer there. A creature who had almost - Greg - … he couldn't think about it. He couldn't permit the notion even to enter his head. It was gone. It was dead. It was over.

He'd broken it, and it would breathe no more.

He hadn't even taken a damn ISOC scan. He hadn't taken a scan at all.

As he paced, trying to settle himself, Mycroft realised he was experiencing physical pain being out here.

Each minute was conducting itself with the leisurely idleness of an hour. He loathed every single passing one. He would bow to a gentle-handed medic, he thought - bow to Amelia - but to no other. After these necessary minutes, Greg was his. He would be wholly within Mycroft's care. No more delays. No more conversations. Twenty-four hours ago, he'd been warning about danger and regret - about loss - about 'if only'.

He'd had no idea.

In one masterstroke, the universe and all its powers had shown him how bitterly little he knew of regret, and offered to teach it to him in its entirety. His wretched self-pity - that sugar-sweet narcotic, that toxin whose addiction often seemed like his only joy in the world - had nearly been paid for in blood.

Greg's blood.

No more, he thought. Not once more. Not while I breathe.

A new vehicle had arrived on the scene.

It was a small blue sports car, whose appearance was familiar enough for it to be permitted beneath the barrier without an ID check. Mycroft watched, his brow furrowed, as the car swerved to a halt directly beside Greg's own. The driver's door clunked open, and a panic-stricken man stepped out.

It was Luke Elwood.

He threw shut the car door and came hurrying towards Mycroft. He'd been on duty. Combat leathers - knee-high boots - a SIG Sauer slung at his hip.

"I heard about Greg," he said, his expression grey and taut with panic. "I heard on Comms - is he
alright? Is he just upst-"

He made to step through the doorway.

A hand flew up.

It struck Luke firmly in the centre of the chest, stopping him dead in his tracks.

As Luke shot a look of panic into Mycroft's eyes, the hand at his chest pushed him firmly back from the threshold. Luke stepped back, alarmed. His boyish features flashed with uncertainty.

Mycroft took a moment to swallow the acrid, slightly sweet taste that had arisen in the back of his throat. He slid his tongue across his front teeth.

Two sharpened points awaited him.

"Greg," he murmured, holding the name in his mouth for a moment, "is with Amelia Vickery."

The muscles in Mycroft's throat had thickened, by the same biological mechanism that had sharpened his teeth and turned his pupils to pin-pricks. It had shifted the pitch of his voice a little lower into his throat - not enough to be described or even remarked upon by the average person, but enough to raise every single hair on the back of Luke Elwood's neck.

"He is not to be disturbed," Mycroft added, in a voice of iron, and he watched Elwood lick his dry lips. A flush rose up amidst his pallor.

"Is he - alright?" Elwood managed.

Mycroft's gaze did not waver. "Physically," he said.

"Oh - Jesus…" Elwood hesitated, looking as if he didn't know whether he wanted to cower, push past Mycroft or back away. "Who attacked him? Do we know what happened yet?"

"He was attacked by someone who is now dead. I'm sure the full story will reach you in time. Suffice to say that you're rather late to be of much assistance."

Elwood swallowed; Mycroft watched him decide to take a risk.

"Listen," he said. "We've - not been introduced."

He offered a hand.

"I'm Luke," he said. "ARS Squad Leader. Greg's a good mate of mine, and I just want to know he's alright. That's all. I'm - sure you understand."

Mycroft could not remember the last time he'd loathed someone quite so keenly. He glanced down at the hand, and thought about Elwood nuzzling at Greg in a bar somewhere, slung drunkenly around those beautiful shoulders - those shoulders that Mycroft himself had once gently gripped as Greg rocked up inside him. Something it seemed that Elwood would rather care to sample, too.

The loathing seethed its way ever higher in Mycroft's throat. If he could spit it, it would dissolve its way through cast iron.

He ignored the offered hand. Instead he leant a little closer to the man, and lowered his voice.

"Mr Elwood," he said. "I'm… entirely aware of who you are - and your concern for the welfare of
others is deeply touching. But rest assured. Greg Lestrade is about to be transferred into the best of hands. He has no need whatsoever for yours."

As Luke stared into his eyes, unnerved, the door to the building opened behind Mycroft.

"Alright, Mycroft..." came Commander Vickery's weary voice. "You can get the poor devil out of here now. Make sure he sleeps, will you? He's had a hell of a shock."

Mycroft's eyes gleamed as he took in Elwood's astonished expression - drank it in - committed every pretty little facet of it to memory forever.

"I shall, commander," he said, still staring into Elwood's eyes. "Thank you."

He turned, slid his gaze from the man with unconcealed contempt, and stepped without a word back into the building.

He ascended all five sets of stairs in silence, and passed the constables stationed at the door without prompting a request for ID.

He found Greg in the bedroom.

Grey-faced and silent, still wrapped in Mycroft's scarf, he was staring into an empty hold-all on the bed. He looked as if he couldn't even imagine where to begin.

Mycroft moved quietly to the chest of drawers beside the bed.

"Enough for tonight," he murmured to Greg, as he added boxer shorts, socks, a few clean t-shirts and loose grey cotton bottoms to the hold-all. Greg watched him numbly. "All else can be brought later. You need quiet, calm and safety. I will secure them for you."

He took one of Greg's pillows from the head of the bed, resting it beside the hold-all. The familiar scent would help him sleep.

"Stay here," he instructed, and moved briefly into the bathroom. He returned with the toiletries that were kept closest to the shower controls and the mirror, and therefore most frequently used. Greg was still standing in silence beside the hold-all. Mycroft added the items quietly to the bag.

"What foods do you like to eat?" he asked. As Greg stared at him, bewildered, he answered his own question. "You always opt for sweet things… pastries - biscuits. Come with me."

Greg followed him, as quiet as a cat, back through to the kitchen. Mycroft stationed him safely in the corner once more, then set about searching cupboards for favourite foods. Sugar, comfort and staples would do for now. He would need to find Greg actual nutrients tomorrow. For tonight, he added bread, milk and a box of eggs to the bag, along with tea and sugar, a packet of caramel digestives and butter from the fridge. He could barely remember how much food counted as a meal anymore. He added a box of cereal, then became aware of Greg silently opening a cupboard above the sink, reaching up onto his toes for something.

Without a word, still as pale as a hospital wall, Greg passed him a rounded glass jar. Mycroft glanced over the paper label.

Hazelnut spread.

He added it silently to the bag.
"What else?" he said, looking Greg calmly in the eye. "Will this be enough?"

Greg breathed in, glancing fearfully over his shoulder into the lounge.

Mycroft understood.

"I know," he murmured. "You don't have to stay here a moment longer. We shall leave now. I'm going to need your car keys. Where are they?"

Greg hesitated, reaching tentatively for his pocket. He handed the keys over without a sound.

"Thank you," Mycroft said. The shock was crippling Greg to a halt - he needed quiet commands and clean instructions. It could be hours before he spoke again. He needed to be guided there, step-by-step. "I'm going to take you to my home for the night. You'll be safe there, and able to sleep. Just stay beside me."

As they entered the lounge, Mycroft kept a close watch on Greg. He spotted the first halting step and intervened at once, placing a hand firmly between Greg's shoulder blades and steering him from the room.

Down the stairs, Greg stayed tightly at his side. Mycroft left his hand in place between Greg's shoulders - a thread for Greg to follow to safety, a stable touch amongst the screaming chaos of shock. In silence they made their way down through the building together, all five flights of stairs, step-by-step, until Mycroft was finally pushing open the front door and guiding him out onto the street.

Greg's exit from the building was noticed almost immediately. Heads turned; faces opened. A few fools began to approach.

With one lethal glance to each, Mycroft speared them all into place exactly where they were.

The last thing Greg needed in this moment was well-meaning idiots, forcing him to reassure them he was alright. Mycroft would not permit it. He would not have it. The whole damn lot of them cowered from his glare. Without a single unwise approach, he got Greg safely into the passenger seat of the car.

"Put your seatbelt on," he murmured to Greg. *How times change*, he thought, as he added, "We are law enforcement."

Greg put the seatbelt on, as meek as a mouse. Mycroft gently passed him the bag.

"These are yours," he said. "We have everything you need. Can you hold it for me?"

Greg took the hold-all onto his lap, breathing in very deeply.

Mycroft closed the door with a soft snap. His heart felt like it was burning. Protective despair strained in him so potently it hurt. It was going to be a long night, he thought - they were still hours from dawn.

Scotland Yard had selected an emissary. As Mycroft walked around the car, turning up the collar of his coat, she was nudged forward by the gathered crowd - one of the detective constables, round-faced and respectful, and apparently much braver than she looked.

"Inspector Holmes," she said. "Will DI Lestrade be alright?"
Mycroft almost congratulated the girl on her guile. *Inspector Holmes* was a good start; *will he be* was much better than *is*.

He spotted Luke Elwood among the waiting crowd as he turned to answer her - grey, silent, his boyish face set in something that Mycroft couldn't quite identify.

Mycroft ignored him ferociously.

"DI Lestrade," he informed the constable, "has suffered a shock, but is unharmed and will be fine after a night's rest."

"Thank you, sir. Can you give him our best?"

Sir. Clever girl.

"I shall," Mycroft said. "I suggest you all return to your duties." He opened the driver's side door, stepped into the car, and closed it with a slam.

An enclosed silence settled safely around them.

He took a moment to familiarise himself with the controls, trying to forget how long it was since last he drove.

He caught the distinct sound of Greg breathing out.

"Mycroft?" came the small voice.

Mycroft masked his surprise, laying a hand on the wheel. "Mm?"

"Get me out of here," Greg whispered. "Please."

Mycroft started up the engine. "With pleasure," he intoned, and drove away.
The Best of Hands

There are darknesses in life and there are lights, and you are one of the lights, the light of all lights.

- Bram Stoker
  'Dracula' (1897)

Greg stayed silent throughout the short drive. Mycroft kept an eye on him in the rear view mirror.

Greg was watching the streets of London go by as if he'd never seen them before - as if the city was not at all the place he'd thought it was.

_I never want you to understand. I would not wish that upon you for the world._

Mycroft's soul ached. He'd typed those words just over twenty-four hours ago - sent them from the heart of a hurricane of misery and despair. He'd known nothing. He'd let Greg down.

He parked the car directly outside his home. He'd be hit with a fine - an astronomical one - but he didn't care. It would be worth it for each unsafe step that Greg no longer had to take to the door. He opened the passenger side door for Greg, took the hold-all from him, and helped him quietly from the car. Greg said nothing as Mycroft put an arm around his shoulders, guided him across the pavement and keyed them into the building.

Inside the expansive black-and-white tiled lobby, the night porter looked up from his desk.

"Dr. Holmes, sir… is everything alright?"

"Thank you, Archie. My colleague has had a shock, but he will be fine. He'll be staying here for the night."

"Right, sir. I'll make a note."

Greg's rounded eyes were taking in the entrance hall's more modern additions. The building boasted a complement of security features that would make a bank proud; cameras, fingerprint pads and an advanced alarm system were all in reassuringly obvious evidence. It was why Mycroft had chosen the place nine years ago. He'd never been more glad of his selection than he was now.

He guided Greg between it all, and quietly up the stairs.

"This is posh," Greg voiced at last, as Mycroft got him to the door of the flat.

On any other night, Mycroft might have smiled. He couldn't - not tonight. He drew back his sleeve to access his wrist-set.

"It's safe," he murmured. "Private. That's all I can ask of it… and it's all you will need."
He fitted his wrist-set into the security pad beside the door. A fast triple bleep was emitted and a light blinked on overhead, illuminating their faces for the camera.

"Access," the door requested, politely.


"Holmes," the door mused to itself, checking his voice patterns. "Mycroft. With guest. Logged."

Another triple bleep, and there came a quiet click. Mycroft's wrist-set disengaged from the lock.

He gently pushed open the door, and stood back for Greg to enter.

"Lights, Anthea," Mycroft said, as the door closed behind them. The apartment flooded with immediate light, every shadow dispelled, every corner illuminated. Greg dragged a breath through Mycroft's scarf. "Thermal signatures present?"

"Two," replied the apartment's AI, her tones emanating promptly and efficiently from discreet speakers built into the walls. "Living room area. Confirm OK?"

"Confirm," Mycroft murmured. He turned to Greg. "Come here," he said. "Let me help you off with this coat, then I will show you each room."

It was a marvel of the human face, Mycroft thought, that it could show both deep shock and mild surprise at once - and that they were very separate emotions. He helped Greg with the buttons of his coat, took it from him and hung it on the coat-rack, allowing the scarf to remain.

"Living room," Mycroft then said, by way of introduction. Greg gazed at the long sofas, the entire wall of bookshelves, the elegant cream decor ribboned with black - and the large, softly-bubbling fish tank in the centre. "Through here," Mycroft said, leading him to a door. "My office." He opened it wide to show Greg the immaculately neat space, allowing him to take in each corner. "And through the door over here, the kitchen."

As Mycroft lifted the hold-all onto the counter top, unzipped it and removed all the food, Greg stayed at his side. He gazed around at the brushed steel in quiet interest.

"Clean," he remarked.

Mycroft placed the jar of hazelnut spread carefully on the counter. In truth, this room was hardly used. He'd thought once of having it stripped out, then realised the apartment would become impossible to sell.

"Come with me," he said. Greg quietly followed him again, safe within Mycroft's aura.

He showed Greg the small bathroom ("Shower if you wish, you don't need to ask...") and then the spare room - also barely used.

"This is where you will sleep," Mycroft said, placing the hold-all down on the bed. "The door locks, if you would like. The code is E2503. Let me know if you change it, or my assistant will be upset with me. She hates change."

"Your... assistant?" Greg managed.

"Anthea?" Mycroft said. "Say hello to Inspector Lestrade."

The apartment played a gentle, bright chime. "Hello, Inspector Lestrade."
Greg's mouth fell open. Mycroft almost smiled.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

Greg was surprised enough by the question to answer. "Fucked up," he said, gasping it out. His eyes widened. "That was - … Jesus, I - …"

"I know it was," Mycroft said. "But you are safe here. Utterly safe."

"I mean, I - … and I thought - and that would be the last - "

"I know." Mycroft wanted to hold him - step forwards, wrap him up and hold him, hold him until weeks and months and years had gone by and somehow the world had grown alright again outside these walls. "It was horrific - and you will need time - but that is time still available to you. You are safe. You are now behind the most advanced security features that are commercially available, in the home of a Fellow of the British Psychological Society. Yes, it was fucked up. And you are going to be alright."

Something in Greg's expression cracked softly. He wrestled with it for a moment. The words wouldn't come.

"Where do you sleep?" he asked at last.

"My room is upstairs." Mycroft held the door. "Let me show you. If you know the layout of the apartment, you'll feel more secure."

Of all the nights he'd imagined leading Greg Lestrade into his bedroom, Mycroft thought, he'd never envisaged it would be like this.

He'd dreamed about it since that very first morning after - the happy Sunday he'd spent a year ago, thinking softly of the man who'd pretended for him it was the first time. He'd almost called Greg and asked him for his company - the theatre, perhaps. A long walk. Less than twenty-four hours. It had seemed too keen, too fragile, and so he hadn't.

What a different path they might have taken, if he had - if it had all come out on a walk around Hyde Park in the sun, not a cramped lift in front of Amelia. No way, at Scotland Yard? Oh shit, I start there tomorrow. I'm Cross-Human Relations.

Perhaps they'd have made it. I have a… rather fearsome reputation at work. Please don't believe all you hear. Greg taking his hand, smiling. Don't worry. I won't. Home, to Mycroft's bedroom - leading Greg in by the hand and laying him down - slowly pulling away all his clothes, creating something wonderful together.

Instead, after a year of avoiding each other in corridors, Mycroft led up the stairs a broken man who'd just discovered he was a prey species. It wasn't right - but it was all they had now.

He watched Greg look around: the dresser; the cream armchair that matched the lamps; the bed thick with cushions, and the shelf of favourite books above it; the mirrored wardrobe doors.

"What happened?" Greg asked, eyeing the smashed middle panel.

That had been three nights ago. It seemed much longer. I punished it in a jealous rage. He was nuzzling you, and you are mine. The door was perhaps not to blame.
"They're fragile," Mycroft explained. "One thoughtless slam. I should never have had them installed."

Greg's eyes trailed along the shelf above the bed. He smiled a little as he read their titles.

"'Wuthering Heights'," he noted. He glanced round at Mycroft, shy.

Mycroft realised, suddenly, that he could have found Greg dead tonight.

He'd have waited in the car until concern about being late prompted him to investigate - and Mycroft would have found him there, opened up across the floor. Too late even to hold his hand.

Mycroft swallowed a little, forcing it down. Words of comfort rose up from amidst the despair.

"'Whatever souls are made of',' he said, "'his and mine are the same.'"

Greg paused; his eyes softened. "Is... that a quote?"

"Cathy. Of Heathcliff."

Greg smiled a little.

"Not a happy story," he remarked. "But a love story, all the same."

Mycroft's chest tightened.

"All love stories are happy stories," he managed. "Given time."

Greg looked away, moved. He gazed back up at the shelf - Byron, Stoker and Shelley; Edgar Allen Poe; Oscar Wilde; all three Brontes; Christina Rossetti.

"I don't know much about love stories," Greg admitted. "I… know how to start them. The problem is keeping them going."

Mycroft forced himself to speak.

"Hope," he said. "Above all things, and against all odds... hope. So I have heard."

"Thank you," he managed, at last. "I, um… I'd be - … if you'd turned off those alerts, like I told you." He hesitated, glancing down at his ruined clothes. "Do you mind if I get changed? I'm - … and I probably need to eat something."

"Of course," Mycroft said. He could barely speak. "It will help with the shock. I - shall be in the lounge, if you need me. Make yourself at home."

"I - might have a shower - if that's alright."

Mycroft nodded. "Use my bathroom - it's just through there."

"No, the… the small one's fine. Thanks." Greg hesitated. "You'll be in the lounge?"

Mycroft's heart contracted quietly.

"Yes. If you need me."
It was half an hour before Greg quietly reappeared.

Mycroft had been trying to work on the investigation, but found himself unable to cope with it. All his reason had been fried by the night's events. He'd let it go, and sought solace in an old Russian novel where not much happened. He could only hope his reason returned in the morning.

As Greg padded softly through the door, Mycroft looked up over the book.

"Hello," he said, gently.

Greg gave him a slightly awkward smile, barefoot in a t-shirt and pyjama bottoms. "Hi," he said. "Are you - hungry?"

"I had something while you were in the shower." Mycroft suddenly remembered there was a rather sinister thermos flask still lying in the footwell of Greg's car. He would have to deal with that before Greg found it. "Let me get you something to eat," he said. "Your blood sugar will be in chaos. Sit down. What would you like?"

"Oh - no, I'll - I can get myself - "

Mycroft guided him to the sofa.

"Sit," he said. "To what am I applying hazelnut spread?"

Greg flushed a little. "Erm... toast would be really nice. Thank you. Are you sure? I can make toast, Mycroft... I'm not - ...

"Sit," Mycroft said again, and Greg sat down. He'd taken off the scarf. His bare neck, freshly-showered and unharmed, was the most beautiful sight Mycroft had ever seen. It made his heart want to gasp and expire. "You - are a guest," he said, his voice tight. "Sit here, be comfortable, and I will be back in a few minutes."

Mycroft headed through to the kitchen.

As quickly and with as little noise as he could, he retrieved a sealed box from a cupboard and opened it, removing a plate, kettle, toaster and cutlery, along with a number of mugs. He'd never known why he kept all these things. Now he knew.

They were ready for when Greg got here. It had taken him ten years, Mycroft thought - but it was better late than never.

And now Greg wanted toast.

The act of preparing food was one of the strangest Mycroft had found himself performing in some time. He'd forgotten how strongly it all smelt when you handled it. Bread was softer than he remembered, and the hazelnut spread was frankly more of a hazelnut smudge. The toast ended up with a rather more liberal coating than he'd intended. Mycroft told himself it was a purposeful choice to get more sugar into Greg. He made a cup of tea, which came back to him more easily - he'd adored tea, once. He'd collected it. A hundred different kinds, from every corner of the planet, had adorned his old kitchen. There'd never been any inside this house. He'd not been able to bear it
- the reminder of what he'd lost.

Now he found himself quietly carrying a mug of it through to the lounge, and a plate of toast with hazelnut spread.

Greg was no longer sitting on the sofa. He was up, and marvelling at the fish.

Mycroft smiled quietly. He passed no comment, placing his offerings down on the coffee table.

"They are peaceful," Greg remarked, as he looked around from the tank. Its gentle glow illuminated his features. "Who are these ones that're so interested in me?"

Mycroft glanced at the hopeful crowd that had assembled by the glass. He smiled a little. They thought Greg was going to feed them. "Fairy cichlid," he said.

"They're friendly..."

"Yes. Yes, they are."

Greg stepped gently away from the tank. He settled himself on the sofa, his expression quiet once more. "You didn't have to make this for me. Honestly."

I wanted to. "You've had a very long night," Mycroft said.

Greg gathered the plate onto his lap, a little colour lifting in his face. "Thanks... I mean it."

Mycroft did his best not to watch.

It was rather difficult.

He'd not been around someone quietly eating, let alone eating food that he'd made them, for far too long. He'd seen Greg wolf down a sandwich or a bag of crisps at their desk - but this was different.

Greg was taking his time - quietly working his way through each mouthful, occasionally pausing to take some hazelnut spread gently off his fingertips with his tongue. Now pretending to be absorbed in his Russian novel, Mycroft realised it was causing him almost physical pleasure to observe Greg eating the food he'd prepared. Greg ate all of it, including most of the crumbs. He sat with his mug of tea and drank it, slowly, breathing in the quiet of Mycroft's flat.

He was wonderful.

"You don't have to stay up, you know," Greg said at last. "If you're tired."

Mycroft smiled slightly, his eyes trailing words he was not processing at all. "Are you tired?"

"I don't really know. I feel like I should be. I just..."

"It may do you some good to attempt to sleep," Mycroft noted. "Your body might not be requesting it, but will take the opportunity if given."

"D'you think?"

"Mm. Even to rest quietly will allow your mind to heal."

"Alright... I... suppose you're the expert."
Mycroft glanced up from his book, smiling. "In this instance, I am."

"We, um - in the morning, I mean, we should… call Commander Vickery, figure out if they've - "

"In the morning," said Mycroft. "If you wish to, and not until. The case will wait. Questions will wait. For your health, please - put it out of your mind if you can."

Greg took this in, holding onto it as quietly as the empty tea mug in his hands. "Alright," he said.

"Is there anything else you'll need for the night?"

"God - no, I'm fine for now. Honestly, Mycroft. You've been - more than kind."

"Hardly 'kindness'," Mycroft murmured. "Basic decency."

"All the same," Greg said. Hes hesitated. "Thank you."

Gently he put the tea mug aside.

"I'll… head off, then. See you in the morning?"

"Mm," said Mycroft. "Until the morning. Sleep well."

Greg quietly left the room. Mycroft listened to him pad along the corridor, enter the spare bedroom and shut the door.

The quiet clunk seemed to close some part of the day in Mycroft's mind - cap it, finish it, and leave it there to be reopened in the morning. He put the book aside at last, no longer obliged to pretend he was reading it. He settled himself back on the sofa, laced his hands across his eyes, and tried to think.

They'd sent someone after Greg - and what possible doubt could be in the matter now? Greg had been the target of a planned, purposeful and horrific killing. The gruesome murder of a DI inside his own flat - it was not an easily concealed story. It was a message, too. It was a warning, a stark and vicious warning that greater forces were at work than mere humanity should ever think to challenge.

But was it a warning to Mycroft?

Mycroft thought for almost an hour, and told himself there was no evidence to suggest so.

Not yet.

"Lights, Anthea," he murmured at last. "Leave the spare room, if they're on."

The lounge dimmed around him into blackness. Only the soft blue glow of the fish tank illuminated the room as Mycroft left it, proceeded through his home in utter silence, and made his way up the stairs.

He showered, dressed in a loose night-shirt and got into bed, thinking of the second soul now sleeping on the floor below.

*One last act of love,* he'd thought - to walk away. To hope that danger followed only one of them, and not the other.

How wrong he'd been.
He laid his head down on the pillow, remembering the way that Greg had clung to him, breathed for him - looked to Mycroft to guide his every step to safety. If there was danger, he thought, it was both their danger now. They would need to be prepared for the very worst.

But they would face it all in the morning.

For now, there was only sleep.

Greg thought about it for some time before he dared to ask.

"Anthea?" he said at last, into the darkness.

There was a pause. "Yes, Inspector Lestrade?" Her voice came from nearby - there must be a speaker somewhere.

"What time is it?" Greg asked.

"The current time is 02:52 GMT."

"Thanks," he said, quietly.

She seemed to pause again. "You are welcome."

Greg rolled over onto his back, gazed up at the ceiling, and tried to make peace with the thumping of his heart. He'd noticed it about half an hour ago. Since then sleep had abandoned him, and in its emptiness, all the thoughts he was meant to be saving for the morning had come rushing in.

The problem was that he didn't know where to start.

Always, he thought, always the girls - those little girls - somewhere without their mum. Why had nobody noticed? Didn't they have a single grown-up left in the world? They would have told a neighbour, he thought - if they were hungry - if they were cold. Unless she'd locked them safe in the house and gone out. Oh God. It was too awful to bear.

And Emma, he thought - frightened, choking Emma.

A few hours ago he'd been terrified enough to want to die. Terrified enough to wish he could just vaporise himself through choice, now, and just die - not have to know - not have to endure what he was about to endure. Emma had endured it. She'd known what it was like to feel herself getting pulled apart - feel herself pouring away. That was the second-to-last thing she'd ever known.

The last thing was Greg's name.

There was another girl out there, too. A girl who'd fought; a girl who got away. There was a girl somewhere who'd had no Mycroft to arrive with a revolver and save her, and hold her and tell her to breathe, then put her somewhere safe behind alarms and locks and coded doors, and make her toast, and tell her it would all be alright. She'd escaped a predator, and she was out there still.

Predator, Greg thought.

It was real.
It was all fucking real, and it was horrifying.

He didn't know how he'd been able to sleep at all. He didn't know how he could lie here in Mycroft's spare room, trying to think it through, trying to figure out what to do first in the morning. He didn't know why he wasn't just collapsing in on himself at the memory - the feeling of having his hands wrenched apart and pinned; the mocking voice, calling him 'cute'; the mouth that had dragged its tongue across his chest.

Six shots in the darkness.

That was all that had brought him here - all that meant he was lying in a bed now, warm and quiet and safe, and not gathered up in pieces into a sliding metal drawer.

Mycroft's going to be angry when he finds what's left of you...

Greg didn't know if 'angry' was the word.

He'd seen Mycroft angry. Everyone had. What he'd seen a few hours ago was not anger.

It wasn't anger that had cradled him from the floor, stroked his hair, and gasped in tears to TJ that he was breathing.

Greg closed his eyes to the darkness, pushing his hands across his face.

All love stories are happy stories. Given time.

Was it true?

Jason hadn't been a happy story. Not for anyone. Not for the boyfriend he'd drained of love and care, and never once given something back; the wife who'd given him two gorgeous kids, but couldn't possibly understand who he really was; the children whose ages he didn't even remember.

Greg realised, suddenly, why there hadn't been a happy ending - because it hadn't been an ending at all.

It hadn't ended the day that Jason handed him his resignation, nor the day he'd moved away. It didn't end with every gutting phone-call. It was still happening now - the story. It was still being told.

Because it wasn't Jason's story.

It was Greg's.

And the story had brought him here - away from Jason, out of the broken ruins of his heart - here through the darkness to this moment right now, to this quiet spare room in Belgravia, to - …

To the man who was now sleeping, one floor above.

To Mycroft.

Greg's heart reeled as he comprehended it at last - everything it was. Mycroft had trusted him without knowing a thing about him. He'd trusted Mycroft, too - two broken old souls who had more reason to hate the world than anyone should ever have.

And yet, somehow, it had happened… just the two of them.
And no matter how they tried to stop it, here it was - happening again.

*An act of love whose magnitude you cannot imagine.* Twenty-four hours later, Mycroft was shooting some bastard dead without a thought - wrapping a scarf around Greg's neck because he was frightened - cradling his face. *You are safe. Because I am here.*

Greg swallowed hard, shivering in the darkness.

He'd nearly died four hours ago.

Used and dumped like his mum. Someone's power trip. Someone's fun. He should have told her he loved her, one last time. He should have made her stay. He always let them go. Greg realised - *always* - all of them. He let them walk away, telling himself he didn't know how to make them stop - telling himself that was just what people *did* to him.

He didn't want to tell himself that any longer.

He wanted to tell a new story.

Shaking, Greg pushed back the covers.

The walk through the January darkness in t-shirt and pyjama bottoms quickly cooled his skin to a shiver. He knew he could ask Anthea for the lights - but he didn't want to do this in the light. He wanted it to be in the dark, in the night time, where nobody knew and they were safe. He made his way up the stairs to Mycroft's room, feeling as fragile as a shadow in the gloom. At the top of the stairs, he found the door slightly open.

Greg passed through it without a sound, his feet soft on the thick cream carpet. His heart beat harder and harder with every step.

As if he'd done this a thousand times, he crossed to the soft white nest of pillows and covers. Mycroft was sleeping on his side. Greg could only see his hair - soft red hair, tousled into peaceful disarray.

His heart thumped at the sight of it. He pushed his hands nervously beneath the edge of the sheets, discovering an almost liquid warmth beneath. It made his breath tighten just to feel. As he eased beneath the covers, it was like sinking into a hot bath. The entire bed was laced with Mycroft's scent - the pillows, the sheets, all of the softness soaked with that indescribable masculine warmth, and it drenched Greg in desperation and relief. He began to shiver as the heat lazily lapped at his skin.

Mycroft stirred, faintly. He inclined his head back over one shoulder.

"Greg?" he murmured.

With his heart in his throat, Greg reached out.

He laid a tentative hand on Mycroft's back. *Please understand,* he thought, as Mycroft stilled. *Please.* His night-shirt was the softest thing Greg had ever felt. *I'm here with hope.* *Please. Don't make me let you go.*

There was a moment where nothing happened, and Greg wondered if this was it - if this was the rejection that would break him for good.

Then Mycroft turned, quietly, onto his back. His eyes found Greg's across the pillows, and
something in Greg responded with a lurch of love and need that escaped from his mouth in a sob. Before he could make another sound, Mycroft was shifting across the bed to him, pulling him closer, wrapping him up in a tangle of white sheets and warmth.

"Shhh…" Mycroft breathed against his forehead, as he shook. "Shhh… it's alright." He began to stroke Greg's hair, just like before - slow, trembling strokes, and his arms were tight, and he smelt like sleep and safety. "Hush, now… you're alright."

"With you," Greg gasped, his voice breaking. "M' alright with you."

He felt Mycroft swallow slightly. "With me."

"S-Stop pushing me away," Greg pleaded. "Please. I don't care what you did. I don't care. You have to stop pushing me away."

Mycroft's voice cracked. "You would care - if you knew."

"Does that make you feel safe?" Greg said. His chest heaved. "Telling yourself you could make me leave at any second - so it won't hurt you, if I do? Stop it. Stop it, stop it. Just be mine. Please. Be mine before it's too late."

"Greg..." Mycroft's arms tightened around him. "God - Greg..."

Greg reached up to cup Mycroft's jaw, forcing their heads apart to gaze into his eyes - tear-stricken black on desperate pale grey. Mycroft shook, staring back at him in despair.

"I'm so fucking in love with you," Greg gasped. He felt something detonate inside his chest.

Mycroft let out a whimper; his expression broke. "Oh, God..." He pushed their foreheads together, panting. "Greg - oh, God - ..."

"Why don't you kiss?" Greg breathed suddenly, staring at him.

Mycroft's face froze. He said nothing.

Greg swallowed. "Look, I - I think I know. I think I know why."

"No," Mycroft whispered. "There's - nothing to know."


Mycroft mouthed; no sound came forth.

"It's because of the PT-309," Greg demanded. "Isn't it?"

Mycroft's eyes blazed with sudden, petrified tears. Greg watched the world smash into shards around him.

"Because it's in your saliva," he said. "Because it'll make me want you. Because you don't want to make me want you - you just want me to want you- and because you can't bring yourself to fucking force that upon someone, because you're good, because you're a damn fucking hero who saved my fucking life, and I know that you're a fucking vampire."

Mycroft's face opened in horror. He began to back away - white-pale and terrified, shaking, unable to speak as he curled into himself.
Greg grabbed his wrists and gripped them hard.

"Stop it," he demanded. "Stop it. Right now."

"How - how did you -?"

"Who doesn't already have milk and tea bags?" Greg burst out. "Who has to fucking bring them specially? Unless you never eat or drink anything - in your kitchen that is way too fucking clean."

Mycroft wrapped his hands over his mouth, eyes wide.

"Was it you at Princes?" Greg demanded. "With Robin?"

Mycroft's hands slid up to cover the whole of his face. "Oh - oh, God - " he moaned.

"Right. Thank you. You got transformed by Excultus, didn't you? Thirteen years ago. That's why you were compromised. They got hold of you while you were fighting them. Vickery forced you to see it through. She promised to keep your secret, if you promised to come back to the frontlines if they returned."

Mycroft's hands scrunched up into his hair, screwing tight. "God help me..."

Greg took hold of his hands, forcing them to release their grip - to grip at him instead.

"This is why you're sharp all the time," Greg blazed. "This is why you look tired all the time. This is how you shot someone through the temple across a room in the pitch black, because you can see in the dark. Look at me," he said, fiercely, as Mycroft tried to twist away from him. "Look me in the eye right now."

Mycroft could only glance at him - terrified and heartbroken, a wreck of tears and panic.

Greg gathered his beautiful face into his hands. He pushed their foreheads together, and breathed,

"It's - fucking - fine."

Mycroft choked on a sob.

"It's all fine," Greg said, driving his fingers through Mycroft's hair, staring into his eyes. "You should have told me the day we met. I would have fucking understood."

Mycroft curled into his arms, weeping. Greg wrapped him up tightly - stroked him, soothed him, whispering to him.

"It's okay - it's alright..." He closed his eyes, burying his nose in Mycroft's hair. "You're safe. Because I'm here."

Mycroft sobbed into his neck.

Greg let him breathe for a few minutes, rubbing the soft cotton of his nightshirt up and down his back.

"See," he murmured at last in Mycroft's ear, fighting a smile. "I am smarter than those fucking fish."

Mycroft let out a noise that contained all possible human emotions at once. Greg grinned a little into his hair, stroking him still. He brushed his mouth across Mycroft's ear.
"You really thought I could ever hate you?" he said. "It’s not even your fault."

"Stop," Mycroft begged him, his voice tight with tears. "Stop being so understanding."


He closed his eyes, breathing deeply as he squeezed Mycroft in his arms. Mycroft shuddered a little - then Greg caught the very moment that Mycroft began to hug him back; opening to him, needing him, the first fragile tightening of his arms. A wave of contentment rocked through Greg as he felt it. It soaked him in peace.

"Hey," he said, soft. His pulse gently quickened. "You - owe me something. Something from a year ago."

"What?" Mycroft managed. His voice was small in Greg's ear.

"We missed it out, then. I… want to claim it now."

Mycroft shivered slowly, realising. "It might - make you - …"

"Want to unwrap you from that shirt, and prove that I'm in love with you? Because I already want to do that."

"Oh... my God..."

"So just - stop this," Greg whispered. "Stop this worrying... and give me a chance."

Gently, he tilted his head.

By the time their lips met, Mycroft had gone completely still. It was a quiet press, no more - almost, almost chaste - a single gentle stroke, no more a threat than the landing of a feather. Greg's heart leapt and fluttered; his eyes eased shut. First kiss. After all this time - first kiss.

He made to draw back - to give Mycroft space, and let that gentle kiss be whatever it would be. He didn't know how long it'd been. He didn't want to force it to be more than Mycroft could bear.

But then Mycroft shivered softly, turned his head up, and caught Greg's kiss. There came a slower brush of their mouths, as Mycroft trembled - a longer stroke of lips.

Greg realised he was being handed something fragile - something perfect. He responded with infinite care. He eased Mycroft slowly onto his back, slid on top of him and returned the lingering stroke of lips, as gently as he could. He let Mycroft make the next motion, pressing and sealing their mouths for just a moment, then another shaking brush. Gently - perfectly gently - Greg tried a tiny flash of his tongue. Mycroft quivered beneath him; a second later, the soft flash was returned. Greg's heart seemed to triple in size at the shy, fearful contact. He stroked his fingertips over Mycroft's jaw, comforting him as he let his tongue ease out a little again - just meeting, touching - brushing the tip of Mycroft's, with undemanding love.

Mycroft let out a breath he seemed to have been holding for weeks. Their tongues melded gently between their lips for a while, just discovering each other, their bodies pressed close - Mycroft's mouth opened a little more, and he began to shake as Greg took the nervous invitation, coaxing his tongue just a little way into Mycroft's mouth - kissing him - stroking his cheek.

After a while, he realised that Mycroft had gone still. He drew back to check, softly easing their mouths apart.
As he opened his eyes, he found Mycroft gazing at him very closely - and very nervously.

Greg looked back. His right eyebrow lifted just a fraction.

"What?" he asked. His face broke into a grin, as Mycroft's eyes glittered wildly. "Was that alright? You're... shaking like a leaf..."

Mycroft said nothing, gazing at him in apparent amazement.

"S'not so bad, is it?" Greg asked, softly. He stroked his thumb over Mycroft's cheek. "If you still aren't sure... just say. I won't make you uncomfortable when we're like this. Not ever."

Mycroft searched his eyes, overwhelmed. "How do you feel?" he asked.

Greg didn't need to search for the words. "Crazy about you. Why?"

Mycroft's face opened into a smile; it shone from his eyes. "You're... no different..."

"Does it not work on people who're already horny?"

"No, I... I suppose it's not directly into your bloodstream this way... you'll have received only a very small dose..."

Greg couldn't help but wonder something. "When - did you last kiss someone?" he checked.

Mycroft said nothing, staring up into his eyes.

Greg realised in a cold and desperate rush.

"Mycro..." he breathed. "Not since - ...?"

Mycroft's mouth tightened.

"Now you see," he whispered. His eyes wracked with pain. "You see why I am as I am."

"I - maybe see why you thought you had to be that way, but... you were wrong. You know that? And you're gonna have to come to terms with it. You're still deserving of human affection, gorgeous. Someone can still be nuts about you."

Mycroft's eyes filled with that name. He looked as if he'd never heard anything so wonderful in the world.

"Listen," Greg murmured. "What I'm hearing is, you've got a lot of catching up to do - and - look - five hours ago, some... fucking weirdo licked me." Greg felt his heart heave. "And you shot him, and that's great. I appreciate it. But I need to get that mark off my skin. I - need to be touched by somebody who loves me. Now. For quite a while. Until I feel okay again."

"Greg," Mycroft whispered. His whole face softened.

"So - tell me," Greg held his gaze, hoping against hope. "Is that person you?"

Mycroft reached up to cup his jaw.

He pulled Greg down towards his lips.

It was over an hour before Greg eased, gently, into the oiled warmth of Mycroft's body. Mycroft -
beneath Greg on his back, his thighs up and parted like a butterfly's wings - let out a quiet cry, his mouth opening wide. Pleasure suffused his face.

"You okay?" Greg breathed to him, shaking.

"Yes," Mycroft whispered in a rush. He swallowed as Greg settled in him deep, holding tightly onto Greg's biceps. "Oh - … God, yes…"

"D'you need to come?"


Greg began to move - slow.

"Oh, fuck..." Mycroft gasped, his head falling back into the pillows. His chest heaved. "Oh - mmh - f-fuck…"

Greg shivered as he buried his face into Mycroft's neck.

"You're gonna have to stop saying that word," he husked, "or this won't stay slow for very long."

"But you feel so fucking good..." Mycroft gasped, gripping Greg tightly with his thighs.

Greg immediately dragged from the depths of his memory the face of Sergeant Lindsey Darling: her pinched little nose; her sidelong looks of deepest disapproval; the horsey noises she made every lunchtime as she ate her granola at his desk.

It worked.

He made himself a mental reminder to post the supercilious cow a thank you card.

"You're beautiful," he murmured in Mycroft's ear. He began to roll his hips in slow and deep strokes that made Mycroft's thighs tremor either side of him, made him whimper on each gentle re-entry. "You know that? You are everything to me right now. Everything."

"Holy God..." Mycroft's fingers scrunched in the back of Greg's hair. His hips rocked slowly in time with each thrust. "Don't stop… please, don't stop..."

"I won't," Greg whispered. He stroked his tongue over Mycroft's beautiful neck, glorying in the quiver it earned him. "I won't. I promise."

"Oh… oh, God…"

It was a slow, spiralling build - coaxing their way through softly rising layers of pleasure. Only Mycroft's desperate sounds kept Greg in possession of his senses. He didn't want to miss a single one; he didn't want them to end.

He wanted to give Mycroft just what he wanted, which was this: slow, rising, aching their way closer and closer with every stroke. Easing up onto his elbows after long minutes, he coaxed a little deeper and was rewarded with faint, tightened cries on each thrust. That's it, gorgeous... call out for me. Wake up all your posh neighbours. Let them hear you enjoying my cock. Mycroft grasped at Greg's biceps, gripping onto him hard and now panting, gazing up in desperation into his lover's eyes - lip bitten, cheeks blazing, his gaze a liquid sex-soaked silver. The inside of Mycroft's body felt like heaven. Not a breath of friction; just heat, slick and tight, the soft press of hard muscle that
had surrendered to Greg utterly, hugging him, warm around him. It felt so good he could barely breathe. Slowly they ground together, gasping their moans to each other on every push - sharing it, Greg thought - needing each other's pleasure as much as their own.

"Mmmh…" Mycroft's head tipped back, something sharp and sublime skittering across his face. "Th-there - …" he begged, his voice breaking.

"Like that?"

"Mhm - …"

"Like that..." Greg tensed his fingers into the mattress with a shiver, bracing. Mycroft's grip tightened on his upper arms and his panting escalated. "There ..." Greg breathed, pushing deeper, stronger, and Mycroft almost turned inside out.

"Fuck...!" he cried. It was half four in the morning. Six hours ago, Greg had nearly fucking died. Now Mycroft Holmes was beneath him, crying out for him, his mouth thrown open and his entire body shaking as he blushed and begged and arched. "Fuck, oh fuck…" Mycroft whimpered for him, sobbing. His body was tightening. He was about to come. "Now - please Greg please, please fucking now - ..."

Three more firm thrusts, and his cries rose to ardent howls. As Mycroft writhed in his throes, pleading for things that made no sense and shaking so hard he was struggling to breathe, Greg could only gaze down at him in adoration. He was perfect - he was utterly perfect. The scratch marks on Greg's upper arms would fade; the memory would not. He watched every flicker of Mycroft's climax, his heart hammering so hard he could feel it pounding against the windows, driven into a frenzy by Mycroft's desperate cries.

And then it was over - and Mycroft was letting out a rush of air like he'd never breathed before, groaning so low in his throat Greg felt it rumble through both their bodies. His thighs wrapped, trembling, around Greg's waist. He tugged Greg closer.

"You as well," Mycroft whispered, even as he shook. "You now. Your turn, now."

He reached for Greg's face, pulling him down - kissing him, sealing their mouths together without a moment's breath. Greg's entire body seared with it. Mycroft's body was the sole source of oxygen in the world. He watched every flicker of Mycroft's climax, his heart hammering so hard he could feel it pounding against the windows, driven into a frenzy by Mycroft's desperate cries.

As the ache began to build, curling tighter and tighter low in Greg's stomach, Mycroft's fingertips raked slowly into his hair. They rumpled against his scalp.

It sent a shiver down Greg's spine like nothing he'd ever felt. The gentleness of the sensation was suddenly everything, everything, and he shuddered, moaning softly into Mycroft's mouth as his control began to shatter. "Fuck... oh fuck, oh fuck..." he began to thrust, fast. Mycroft whimpered his
urgency back to him - wanting, panting, petting his hair.

As his climax broke, it shattered Greg apart. It ripped through him, igniting his every nerve in a searing, singing blaze. He heard a cry wrenched from his own throat. Mycroft wrapped all around him, heaving with him, murmuring him through the sharp, shining peaks of it. "Mine," he crooned in Greg's ear, gasping as Greg gripped his hips, pushed deep within him and panted, and the whole world ruptured into pulses of light. "Mmh... oh God, that's it... come in me..."

In the roaring calm that followed the surge, Greg was left barely able to see - barely able to think. All he knew were his own deep gasps, the sweat now gleaming across his back, and Mycroft's voice nuzzling at his ear.

"Shhh..." his lover soothed. He eased Greg gently onto his back, deep into the pillows with a flump. "Shhh, shhh..."

Greg was glad they weren't wearing wrist-sets - his heart was pounding itself to pieces. TJ would have dispatched two Armed Response Squads and a helicopter by now. Those biometrics would be off the fucking scale. He sank into the pillows and breathed, heaving, as Mycroft rested against his bare chest.

Gently, Mycroft lowered his head.

He stroked his mouth across the bear paw tattoo, shaking as he did. He painted it with gentleness and love - kissing it, bathing it with his tongue. Greg panted slowly, watching him.

His eyes fell shut.

"Jesus," he breathed.

Mycroft's whisper made him shiver. "Mine."

"Yours," he agreed, hoarse. Gentle hands came up to cradle his jaw; Mycroft's mouth reached for his own.

They kissed in the darkness, slowly and deeply. Greg could feel his soul beginning to melt - softening, all of him, blurring into the warmth of Mycroft's bed.

As their lips parted, Mycroft stroked back Greg's sweat-matted hair. "Good?" he whispered.

"Holy God," Greg managed in a rush.

Mycroft smiled against his mouth.

"Sleep now," he soothed. It was almost a purr. "Sleep where you're safe."

"Mycroft," Greg breathed. He had to say it. He wrapped his arms around the man, holding him tight, his heart banging at his ribs. "Mycroft, that was - ... I've never - ..."

"Words in the morning," Mycroft whispered. He stroked his thumb over Greg's lower lip, gazing down into his face - flushed, dark-eyed, more human than Greg had ever seen him. It made his heart squeeze tightly. "Sleep, now."

Greg swallowed. He wanted to stay awake - just wanted to look at Mycroft until dawn - but he could feel his eyes already drifting. In the last few hours, he'd been barraged by every human feeling it was possible to feel. He was just glad they were ending it like this - here - together. He'd
not been this happy in years. The tiredness that filled him was a perfect ache, and Mycroft’s mouth was soft and comforting as gently it sought out his own.

"Good night," Mycroft whispered against his lips, at last - their first goodnight kiss.

Greg let his eyes slump shut.

_Don’t let it all have been a dream_, he thought. _Please. Not this time. Let it all be real._

"Good night, gorgeous," he murmured. "Sleep tight."
Greg woke to the cosy, musky scent of someone else's pillows - someone else's bed. Kisses as gentle as snowflakes were being dotted around his mouth.

With a rush of utter joy, he remembered.

"Good morning," Mycroft murmured, nervously, against his lips.

Greg smiled. "Hi..." His voice came out soft with sleep; he slid his arms around the bare body easing against his own. "You okay?"

"Yes... are you?"

"Mm... more than." Greg smiled, stroking a hand slowly up Mycroft's back. "God... that really happened," he said. "All of that actually happened."

"The night was - certainly eventful."

Greg gazed quietly into his eyes. "Yeah," he murmured. "Yeah, it was..."

It didn't feel like he was looking at a vampire - not that he really knew how he expected that to feel. In the morning light, naked amongst the covers, Mycroft looked like any other person in the world - soft, sleepy; a little fragile.

"How long were you going to keep that from me?" Greg asked, searching his eyes.

Mycroft inhaled. "God," he murmured, faintly. "To the bitter end. And beyond."

"Why?" Greg asked. "Did you think I'd freak out?"

"I - couldn't be certain how you'd react." Mycroft gazed at him, quieting. "No more than a handful of people know. You are now one of them."

Greg let this sink in for a moment, moved. He was being trusted even more than he'd thought.

"Did it - hurt?" he asked, carefully. "When it happened?"

Mycroft's expression flickered a little. "You can't imagine."

"Oh God... I'm so sorry."

Understand

Wherever you are is my home - my only home.

- Charlotte Brontë
'Jane Eyre' (1847)
"The first three months were - hell. Living hell. In time, it... all became somewhat normal."
Mycroft paused. "I haven't tasted food in thirteen years."

"Jesus..." Greg hesitated, stroking between Mycroft's shoulder blades. He couldn't imagine it - any of it. He suddenly understood why Mycroft didn't feel like being close to people. "And you - … from Robin?"

Mycroft paled.

"I'm sorry," he breathed. "I would not support that trade for anything in the world - but I've come too close before. I've grown too ill. I've tried, Greg. Truly I have. Tried, and tried..."

"What - d'you mean, 'come too close'?"


"What you are," Greg said, feeling his heart tighten, "is human. You got hit by a virus. Gives you some different medical needs - but it doesn't change a thing about your soul."

Mycroft looked unconvinced.

*That's fine, gorgeous,* Greg thought. *We'll work on that.* He brushed back an errant red coil of Mycroft's hair, just watching him for a moment.

"You've should've told me," he said. "Right at the start... I'd have understood. I'd have kept your secret."

Mycroft flushed a little. "Most would not understand."

"Yeah, well... I'm not 'most'."


For a few moments they were silent together, watching each other, enjoying the gentle contact. Greg realised he hadn't felt so calm in months. He felt like nothing existed outside this room - like nothing mattered for a while. It was all waiting, quietly, until they were done.

"How come I've not seen fangs?" he asked.

Mycroft's eyes glinted a little. "And why do I still have a reflection?"

"I'm serious," Greg said, with a faint smile. "Robin had two scars. Just two. You... couldn't do that with human teeth. It'd leave a ring."

Mycroft hesitated, glancing down. He ran his tongue around his teeth. "Thinking," he said.

"Yeah? What about?"

As Mycroft drew back his upper lip, flashing his tongue across his teeth, Greg's eyebrows lifted several inches.
"Wow," he managed, after a moment. "You - can do that at will?"

Mycroft's suddenly-extended canines seemed to glint in the half-light.

"No," he said. "Not quite at will." He had to speak with a slight sneer to accommodate them. "It's... largely a physiological reaction. Prompted by stimuli."

Greg paused, processing this. "You - get mouth erections?"

Mycroft gave him a pained look.

"What?" said Greg. "It's - the thought of blood, right? Feeding? And your body goes ahead and…” He glanced at Mycroft's pointed, sharpened canines. "… makes that possible for you."

He tried a smile.

"Like werewolves," he said. "They get triggered by anger when their hormones are up."

"It... can also happen when I'm angry," Mycroft added, discreetly.

Greg smiled a little. "Every time I walk into the room, then?"

Mycroft's eyes glittered. "There's a difference between anger and aggravation," he said, brushing his tongue absently across his teeth.

Greg watched him do it, wondering why the sight didn't disturb him. Last night, someone sporting fangs like those had pinned him to his floor and nearly taken his throat out - but all he found himself feeling now was a protective, quiet interest.

It was the memory of another face he'd seen last night, Greg realised - Mycroft's face, as he'd hauled the vampire back. That look of utter, petrified despair - searching Greg's throat for bites - a breathless, heartbroken horror. That look had changed the world.

Gently, Greg reached out with his fingertips. Mycroft went still.

"Be careful," he warned, as Greg's hand came near his mouth.

"Why?"

"If I break your skin… even the smallest scratch - "

Greg cautiously ran the pad of his finger down Mycroft's right canine. Mycroft did not move a muscle. It felt much like a normal tooth - harder perhaps, and longer by far - but very normal. Greg cautiously avoided its point.

"Did you get sharp last night?" he asked.

Mycroft's expression shifted; his lip lowered to cover his teeth. "At - one point, yes. Perhaps not the one you'd imagine."

"No?" said Greg.

Mycroft frowned a little. "We shouldn't discuss this."

Greg raised his eyebrows.
"We're not doing that anymore," he said. "No more secrets." He brushed his hands slowly along Mycroft's jaw, gazing at him, and watched his pupils widen. "You can say everything to me now. I want you to."

Mycroft coloured slightly, composing himself. He took a moment to voice it.

"If Luke Elwood," he said at last, "ever lays so much as a finger on you again…"

Greg's face opened with a smile. "When was Luke there?"

"You were with Amelia at the time," Mycroft muttered. "He came... *riding* in, astride that gaudy little sports car of his... under some impression that your hero had now arrived..."

"And you nearly had a chunk out of him, did you?"

"If he addresses me in that chummy tone again, I shall."

Greg couldn't fight a grin. "You don't need to worry about him," he said, his heart thumping with a quiet joy. "Seriously, Mycroft, you... you don't even need to think about anyone else."

He gazed into those guarded, beautiful grey eyes.

"When I fall," he said, softly, "I fall hard. Just so you know."

Mycroft simply watched him for a while, as if unable to quite believe what he was seeing. He then reached up to stroke Greg's cheek, grazing his lower lip with the pad of his thumb.

"This will complicate things," Mycroft said. His fangs had receded; his voice was soft.

Greg smiled, unafraid. "We complicated them a year ago," he said. "This is sorting them out."

Mycroft smiled in return. He looked unable to resist. "I… rather meant the investigation."

"I can keep it to one side," Greg said. "That's - … I don't mean that's because it'll be easy. It won't be. I just mean - …" He paused. "Emma."

"I know," Mycroft said, quietly.

"And her kids."

"I know."

"And Excultus." Greg paused, his heart sinking a little. "Who now definitely exist."

"Did your attacker... mention Excultus? Did he say the name?"

"God, we've not even talked about this..." Greg rubbed his hands briefly across his face. "Okay, here comes the unbearable 'key witness' thing that I *know* you don't want to hear, but... it all happened so fast."

"Just tell me what you can," Mycroft murmured.

Greg almost laughed. "God, you're... gonna do the thing back at me. Okay. Alright, officer, I will..."

He took a moment to drag himself back through the darkness, thinking, dredging up all those things
he never wanted to hear again as long as he lived.

"The guy didn't say 'Excultus' - but he mentioned 'they'. He'd been sent, specifically, to find me. He knew my name."

"He called you 'Greg'?"

"No. He said 'are you Lestrade?' And he said..."

Mycroft waited, laying a hand upon his chest. "Go on."

"He said 'they' hadn't mentioned I was handsome. It was - all a bit like that, to be honest."

Mycroft took a moment to speak. "What else?"

"Just - getting off on scaring me. Bastard." Greg swallowed a little. He hesitated, glancing into Mycroft's eyes. "They know where I live now," he said, his voice thick. "And how to pick my lock. I... don't think they're going to be gentlemen and give up after one sporting chance."

Mycroft paused. He stroked his hands across Greg's bare chest, onto his shoulders.

"You may stay here," he said. Greg's heart silently and softly imploded. "Until all this is over. I don't - make this offer lightly, but I won't be able to function unless I know where you are, and that you're beyond their reach. Excultus, in some form, have risen. If we're lucky, it's merely a splinter cell - a neo-fan club, perhaps - but until we know, I will not take risks with your safety. Not a single risk."

He hesitated, looking down at his fingers splayed on Greg's tattoo.

"It would... also give us an outlet, perhaps," he said. "A safe space, to - ..."

Greg wrapped his fingers over Mycroft's. "To be together," he said.

Mycroft flushed, softly.

"If you would wish to," he managed.

"Desperately," said Greg. He stared into Mycroft's face. "More than you can dream."

Mycroft's eyes shone for a moment.

"Not during the working day," he proposed.

Greg was in full agreement. "Not during the working day. We've got to focus. For Emma, and for her kids. For anyone else who's in danger. This is - far from over."

He wove their hands together, slowly.

"But at night, we can look after each other," he said. "Be with each other. Keep each other strong."

Mycroft said nothing. He looked like he couldn't. He gazed down at the quiet join of their hands, swallowing around something lodged in his throat.

"D'you - mind if I put some actual food in that kitchen?" Greg asked, after a second. He smiled. "I can't live on hazelnut spread."
Mycroft covered his eyes with his hands, letting out a mix between a moan and a snort.
"God… of course. Of course you can."

"D'you have - preserved stuff in the house?"

"'Stuff'," Mycroft remarked, then added: "Yes. It's - in sealed containers in the fridge. And there's a flask of it still in your car."

Greg smiled, wondering why this only made him like Mycroft more. He laced their hands a little tighter.
A thought arose in the quiet.

"Mycroft," he said.

Mycroft knew immediately what was coming.

"No," he said, to Greg's surprise. "That is - not up for discussion."

Greg raised an eyebrow. "So you're going to leave me in front of the TV," he said, "head out to see a prostitute, and expect me to be cool with it, are you?"

"No," Mycroft said, tightly. "I'm going to rely on - 'the preserved stuff', as you termed it - and that is the end of the conversation. I very rarely - …" He bit down on something, uncomfortable. "It's not often I need a live donor. Every six months or so. For my health."

Greg wasn't fooled. "Your vampire notes said once a week. Unlucky for you I actually paid attention."

"For - absolute optimal health, perhaps - but not at all out of necessity."

"You know 'absolute optimal health' is something I'm in support of you having, right?"

"We are not talking about this." Mycroft looked into his eyes, fiercely. "I am wholly serious, Greg. I know you're developing a talent for charging head-long into the darkest recesses of my soul and wrenching me out of them, but this conversation stops here. Will you permit me to know my own mind on this? Please."

Greg rubbed Mycroft's palm with a thumb, slowly. He thought for a second of Robin. I realised he was drinking my blood while he held me, and I just wanted to screw him until I cried. That was going to be hard to forget.

Greg didn't want anyone else thinking that about Mycroft, either.

That tone of voice was final, though - as was the look on Mycroft's face.

"Okay," Greg relented. "I'm dropping this… for now."

Mycroft visibly relaxed. "Thank you."

"I don't understand, but I'm dropping it."

"That's - … fine. I do not need you to understand." Mycroft exhaled. He closed his eyes for a moment. "I've not even - discussed my condition with anyone for years. Not outside of internet
message boards. This is new to me. Strange. I'll need time to - ..."

Greg's heart ached as he remembered the forum he'd stumbled across - the discussions he'd skinned past. People who didn't dare go to doctors; people who were frightened; people who were lonely.

Mycroft had been one of them all along.

He drew an arm around Mycroft's waist, wrapping slowly around him, and gathered him close. As they hugged, he heard Mycroft's breath catch; he felt his bare chest quietly expand.

"I know this is getting scary." Greg murmured. "It's... literally been a week since Emma died. One single week. I'm now smashing through your life like a demolition crew. I know you don't want Excultus to be back, and I understand that even more now - and I'm sorry. I am so, so sorry. But whatever happens, just know... I've got your back, alright?"

He nuzzled into Mycroft's neck.

"M'gonna be here," he whispered. "And I meant it, what I said. 'Over my dead body'. They've now tried that, and they failed. So just... hold onto me. I'll get you through this."

Mycroft swallowed. "Greg..." he whispered.

As Mycroft eased on top of him and their mouths slowly met, Greg felt his soul erupt with flickering, desperate white joy. He ran his hands longingly over the body that rested atop his own: Mycroft, naked and gorgeous; Mycroft, here with him at last. It took his breath away - the smoothness of Mycroft's skin; his gentle weight; his perfect, human warmth. He was so satisfying to touch that Greg's palms tingled just to brush up and down his back. He stroked Mycroft in earnest as they kissed, relishing every shiver and intake of breath that it caused, drinking every soft sound of enjoyment.

Mycroft loved to be touched.

It made Greg's heart sting to realise it. Mycroft liked gentle hands gliding across his skin; he liked Greg's body beneath his own. He liked smooth, open-palmed strokes, steady and slow, and he liked to be gently gripped - he liked each little sign that Greg wanted him. It made his breath stutter. He'd gone thirteen years without it.

Greg cupped Mycroft's arse, pulling him nearer to nuzzle their stirring erections. As he did, Mycroft's tongue sought shyly between his lips. Greg breathed out a faint groan; he greeted the gentle exploration with his own, flushing. It felt desperately good. Mycroft reached up to cradle his jaw, tipped Greg's head back into the pillows and opened his lips a little further, and Greg could only lie back as Mycroft's tongue slowly, deliciously curled its way through his mouth - tasting him, he thought - fuck, exploring him - having him. Their cocks thickened as they kissed, sharing each shiver, as they enjoyed the feeling of growing hard and wanting each other.

At last, as Mycroft let him surface for air with a gasp, Greg needed one thing more than anything else in the world.

"Ride me," he begged. Mycroft's pupils doubled in size. "Like the first morning... please, gorgeous. I need to see you come."

Mycroft shivered from throat to thigh.

"Tell me this is alright," he whispered, gazing down into Greg's face. His expression cracked. "Tell
me this is what you want. Please. I - I couldn't bear it if - "

"I've waited a year," Greg breathed. He stared up at Mycroft, his eyes blazing. "It's been a long year. We are not leaving this bed today."

Mycroft let out a guttural groan. He descended on Greg's mouth once more, kissing him fiercely and hissing into his mouth with need. Greg arched up beneath him, panting; he raked his hands in desperation over Mycroft's body. Mycroft writhed for him, pushed against him, and he quivered as Greg's hands gripped him longingly by the hips.

Greg nipped at Mycroft's lower lip. The little cry it produced made his cock ache urgently. He wanted more.

He released Mycroft's lip, and growled against his mouth.

"Get yourself on my cock, gorgeous..."

Mycroft swore, whimpering. He scrabbled for the bedside cabinet.

A floor below, abandoned on the dresser in the spare room, Greg's wrist-set began to flash.

\[\text{INCOMING CALL FROM COMMS}\]

The wrist-set buzzed to itself for a short while, juddered its way slowly along the dresser, then toppled with a thump to the carpet.

It rung off unanswered.

Mycroft was still slick from the night before. Greg took his time nonetheless, gentling Mycroft with his fingers, coaxing him through increasingly fitful moans. At last Mycroft grabbed his hand in frustration, pushed it away from between his thighs and struggled on top of Greg.

He mounted Greg's prick in a single seething stroke; stars span across Greg's vision.

"Holy fuck, Mycroft... fuck - ..."

Mycroft planted his hands securely on Greg's chest, settling into place. He bit down into his own lower lip as he began to rock. Greg swallowed, his heart pounding. His chest heaved. Pleasure raged up in his body like a bonfire. The slow in-and-out was perfect, just perfect - tight, steady, slaking the heat scorching him from the inside-out. He ran his hands up Mycroft's freckled thighs, feeling them gently shake for him.

Mycroft gazed down into his eyes, overcome.

As Greg began to slowly rub his prick in rhythm, ecstasy shivered across his face.

A few minutes later, the fifth call to Greg's wrist-set rung off unanswered. It sat for a while on the floor, saddened by the lack of attention.

On the bedside table, Mycroft's wrist-set began to shiver.

"Oh... oh, for the love of - ..."
"Leave it," Greg managed, barely breathing. "They'll call back if it's important."

"- of all the times to - …"

"Shhh. Forget about it, gorgeous.... kiss me."

The call ended.

For a few moments there was only the soft and wet sound of their mouths, and the steady push of skin-on-skin - the sheets shifting with each thrust - Greg's faintly-breathed moans. He wanted to come. He could feel it building already, that tight ache - feel it melting through him, his breath shortening as Mycroft's tongue stirred lazily around his mouth. He wanted to do this all day: just lie here, quietly talk and touch and fuck. He wanted Mycroft in his mouth again. He wanted to hear him crying out. He wanted everything.

The wrist-set began to vibrate.

"Oh, God..." Mycroft muttered against Greg, let go of his mouth with a groan, and breathed, "This had better be important... answer!"

"Wait!" Greg gasped, his eyes flying wide. "You can't answer while we're -"

There was the click of a connecting call.

Greg shrank into immediate and absolute silence.

Mycroft - breathing hard, and with Greg currently a significant number of inches inside him - snapped across at the bedside table.

"Yes - what the hell is it?"

"Ah - sorry, Dr. Holmes..."

Greg screwed his toes into the mattress.

It was TJ.

"... I would not be disturbing you for the world this early," TJ said. "Believe me... but I'm trying to track down the King of Hearts. He's not picking up calls to his wrist-set and nobody's seen him since the thing last night. Do you happen to know where he is?"

Mycroft looked down at the fabled King of Hearts, currently located between his thighs. He raised one eyebrow at Greg.

"What exactly do you need him for, Tierney?" Mycroft asked, biting his tongue.

He then gave a rough, silent grind downwards; Greg's eyes briefly crossed. He grabbed Mycroft to hold him still and flashed him a wild look of warning, for which he received only a glitter of soft grey eyes.

"Checking he's alright," TJ's voice said, "but as well as that, we've... just had a body found. I think you'll wanna hear about it."

Instant cold spread throughout the room.

"A body?" Mycroft said, staring down into Greg's eyes. Greg stared up, his mouth open.

"Yep... brothel near Pembury Road," TJ said. "The owner's just rung it in. She wasn't making a lot
of sense, but it's throat wounds and the guy's long dead. She said there was something painted on
the wall above him. Painted in white."

Greg's throat cracked. "Which brothel, TJ?"

"Oh, there you are. Ah - …" There came a few faint bleeps. "Princes. Are you - alright to attend, or
d'you want me to get another team there for now? You okay, by the way?"

As Mycroft struggled out of bed and wrenched open the wardrobe for clothes, Greg screwed the
heels of his hands into his eyes.

"We're on our way, TJ," he managed, his voice hoarse. "Have we got an ID on the victim?"

Part of him already knew.

Even so, as TJ said it, Greg's heart evaporated into nothing.

"Half-elf in his twenties... one of the guys who works there. Owner says he was called Sam, but he
went by the name of Robin to clients."
Forensics were already here. Uniform were stationed at the door, and everything was taped off. It was a cold, clear winter's day with shocking white sunlight and a breeze that perished its way to the bone. As Greg parked, he reflected that this time could not have been more different.

He'd found Emma in the dark, alone. He would see Robin in the light, surrounded by procedure and science and people.

It made it no easier to face getting out of the car.

They'd driven here in silence. Less than an hour ago, they'd been adrift together in the white cotton ocean of Mycroft's bed, and the world had reached no further than the mattress edge.

As Greg reached for the door, Mycroft laid a hand on his arm.

"Stop," he said, quietly. Greg fell still. "One minute - please. Before this begins."

Greg waited in silence. He didn't raise his eyes.

"I faced this alone last time," Mycroft said. "I - need you to know. I'm glad you're here. Regardless of what comes to light, it… it's a great comfort, Greg."

Greg hesitated, glancing at the other vehicles. All focus was centred on Princes.

Low, where nobody could see, he caught Mycroft's hand. He wove their fingers together tightly, briefly, for a few moments of closeness. Nothing showed in either of their faces.

"This is gonna be an awful day," Greg said, in undertones. "An awful fucking day - and it's only the first of awful fucking days. Doesn't matter. Every night, when it's all over, so long as two of us make it through your door instead of one, it means we're winning."

He gripped Mycroft's fingers, gently.

"It means we'll get up again in the morning," he said, "get our hands off each other, and go finish this thing. We'll find the bastards. We'll fix this."

He glanced across at Mycroft - holding his eyes.
"And you're never alone," he said. "Not anymore. Not on my watch."

He let go of Mycroft's hand, opened the car door, and got out.

As they approached the door together, heads lifted towards their approach.

"DIs are here," a voice called, somewhere in the scene. Greg didn't see who it was. His eyes were fixed on the doorway. It was all about to begin, he thought - the next part; that transition from bad to worse, that had always been waiting to come.

The guarding constable lifted up the tape to let them pass - Greg in front, grey-faced and hard-jawed; Mycroft, in silence, just behind him.

The interior of the building was dated and dark. The carpet had been worn pale by the track of many feet, and the air was tinged with a sourness that scented bleach could not quite mask. This was the kind of place that knew what it was. It made no attempt to pretend anything otherwise. The room into which they stepped was evidently a waiting room, with cheap white leather sofas and a dusty TV currently on mute, showing a daytime soap. In one corner, a uniformed sergeant was sorting through the contents of a standing desk. She was surrounded by binders and files, and looking overwhelmed.

Greg approached her, touched her quietly on the elbow and said,

"Where am I going, Gina?"

The sergeant looked up at him with apologetic eyes. "Just upstairs," she said, and paused. "Glad you're alright, sir. Heard you ran into trouble."

"Yeah... lucky for me, DI Holmes is a hell of a shot... no harm done. Who's on Forensics?"

"Dr. Seymour, sir. Just on his way here. He's sent his team ahead."

"Right. Thanks."

Greg checked Mycroft was with him, and led the way upstairs. Every wooden step creaked painfully underfoot. The stairs were lined with someone's attempt at artistic erotica - black-and-white photos of bored-looking Olympian males, hung in cheap black frames that were knocked askew by every passing shoulder.

Forensic activity was concentrated around an open door at the end of the corridor. The sight filled Greg's chest with a quiet, despairing cold.

As they headed towards the door, he murmured under his breath.

"You alright?"

"Mm," Mycroft managed, at his side.

"Ready for this?"

"Why would I not be?"

Greg slid his hands quietly into his pockets. "Been a while since you've seen this sort of thing up close... that's all."

Mycroft lowered his voice. "Rather accustomed to the sight of blood, as it happens."
Greg bit the side of his tongue. "Not like this, I hope."

Mycroft said nothing, his expression guarded.

"Was this the room he used before?" Greg asked.

"Yes," Mycroft said, with great reluctance. They had almost reached the door.

"Right," Greg said. He braced himself, breathed, and stepped into the room.

His immediate impression was of the alarming lack of red. It was a small room, papered with a dark and noisy green print - against which the Excultus sigil now blazed in the brightest white, three-foot-high and painted with meticulous precision above the bed. There was little furniture about the room. What there was had an uncomfortably obvious purpose: a sink, a chair, a desk, a full-length mirror and a bed, sheeted in cheap and greying motel cottons.

Lying across it on his side, slumped as if asleep, was Robin.

Greg's heart sank at the sight of him. In this grotty, ugly place, he seemed unbearably young. He was almost as pale as the sheets he laid upon, fully-clothed in studded grey jeans and a white v-neck t-shirt. At first glance, he looked entirely unharmed.

As Greg came nearer, holding his breath, he spotted the two dark red puncture marks at Robin's throat. Apart from his hair, they were the only colour about him - two crimson points in a blurred ring of purple, about the size of a mouth.

"Jesus," Greg whispered.

He became aware of Mycroft at his side, looking down at Robin in silence. Forensics were moving around them like quiet fish through water, taking samples and scans, doing what they needed.

Neither of them spoke for some time.

"Was this as peaceful as it looked?" Greg asked, at last.

Mycroft breathed in. "PT-309... counteracts the usual agitation in victims of severe blood loss. He'll have slipped into unconsciousness after... perhaps two litres, based on his weight."

"Two litres..." Greg hated that his brain processed that as a family-size bottle of Coke. "That's a lot. How - long will that have taken?"

Mycroft inclined his head to a passing specialist. "Has the body been fully scanned?" he asked her. At the nod, he took the pair of gloves she offered him and stretched them on.

Greg watched in silence as Mycroft leant over Robin's body to examine him. He rested his gloved fingers on the boy's neck; he winced a little as he studied the wounds.

"Deep," he told Greg, his voice low. "One of the wounds is straight into the main artery... and there are indents from the other teeth. Bitten with intent. Could have taken only minutes."

"I'm sorry," Greg said - he didn't know why.

Mycroft's expression was unreadable. "He'll have... felt no pain. Been unafraid."

It was no comfort to either of them - and they knew it. Greg couldn't look away from Robin's face. Twenty four hours ago, he'd never even seen that face before - now the kid's eyes were shut
forever. Everything they'd ever seen was gone with them.

"I pushed him too far," Greg managed, after a moment. "I - shouldn't have..."

Mycroft looked up, his expression grave. "You can't possibly have known this would happen."

Greg bit his tongue. "Still..."

"There's no 'still' about it, Lestrade," Mycroft said, with a hardness at odds with the intensity in his face. The voice was for forensics; the eyes were for Greg. "This was unavoidable. It was out of your hands."

"D'you - think he was specifically targeted?"

"You and he, both." Mycroft's expression greyed. "For the same reason."

"What reason?" asked Greg.

"Discussable later. We need more facts first." Mycroft had begun to examine Robin's wrists and hands, his expression uneasy. "Suffice to say, you were intended as a matching pair..."

Greg began to filter through similarities, ignoring the sickly chill that crept across his shoulders.

"Both of us inside buildings," he said. "Behind locked doors."

"Communal buildings," Mycroft added. "Plenty of other humans, only feet away. Seized by a predator that can strike at the centre of the herd and vanish, twice, in one night..."

"This is... terror tactics," said Greg. "This is what they do."

"Yes, it is. I'm sorry to say they are very good at it." Mycroft had retrieved a scrap of paper from Robin's back pocket. He checked it, frowning. "Is this your writing?"

Greg's heart fell as Mycroft held it out. Robin had died with Greg's contact details in his pocket - right there. A phone call away.

"Yeah... yeah, I gave him it yesterday..."

A member of the Forensics team had appeared at Mycroft's side, offering an open evidence bag. Mycroft placed the note within it.

"Thank you," he murmured. He retrieved a mobile phone carefully from Robin's pocket, flipped it open and made a brief attempt. "Passcoded. Will your 'freelance specialist' accept a doubled workload?"

"I'll ask," said Greg. He could push TJ for Emma's phone, too - there wasn't time to wait any more. The phone was slipped into an evidence bag. "Can I say something?"

"I fear you must," Mycroft said.

"This - clearly wasn't the same attacker as Emma. Those are... experienced wounds, right? Even the sigil is different. It's neater. Whoever did that takes pride in getting things right."

"I would suggest," Mycroft added, with reluctance, "that this was also not the work of the man who attacked you last night."
"No?"

"No. Look at the room." Mycroft gestured. "Everything in order - nothing disturbed. Someone calmly entered this space, calmly killed, and calmly left. They spent longer painting that sigil than they did committing murder. Lethal efficiency. The man you encountered was a chaotic sadist who wanted to enjoy your fear above all else."

Greg quickly suppressed the rising, churning sensation in his throat.

"Why did they send - … why not the other way around?" he said.

Mycroft straightened up from Robin's body, his expression closed.

"At least three, then," he said. Greg realised he wasn't going to answer the question. "One of whom is now dead. The other two remain at large… one, a juvenile misogynist who worked his way up through a botched attack to a gratuitous and masturbatory show of gore; the other, a lethal killer of charm and discretion who didn't even need to restrain the boy. There are no marks of bruising on his wrists."

"Can we pull DNA from Robin's wounds?"

"We can, but I suspect this individual will not be on file... we're likely dealing with a powerful moroi who lives outside human systems."

"Moroi are the second-generation ones?"

"Mm. They tend to hold a hallowed place within the organisation."

"And sometimes they do this," Greg said, looking down at Robin. He realised he was still thinking of him as that name, when it wasn't even his real one. Sam, TJ had called him.

They needed to know more.

"Listen, you finish up here with forensics... I'll go and start asking questions. TJ mentioned an owner - should know the kid's full name and address at least. Come and find me when you're done, will you?"

"Very well." Mycroft met his gaze briefly. "I'll join you when I've spoken to Dr. Seymour."

The owner of the business was a broad-shouldered half-orc called Mandy, whose red hair and wide jaw made her a formidable sight, even when crying into tissues. Greg sat her down in the ground floor room that had been hastily converted into an interview space for him.

"How did Sam seem last night?" he asked, as a constable brought in tea and laid it on the desk.

"He seemed fine," Mandy said into the tissue, shuddering a little. "Just… chirpy. He was one of the good ones. Always on time. Didn't try and cheat me out of fees. Most of 'em do. Didn't bring his personal life in."

"Had he been with you long?"
"Couple years, now. Just to finance his studies. Y'know - student..."

"And he was here most nights, was he?"

"About five a week. He liked earning the money." Mandy flushed a little, lifting the mug to her mouth. "It's all casual - m'just renting the rooms out, that's all. I don't organise anything. What the guys do in 'em is their own business."

Greg reminded himself that he needed this woman to co-operate, shelved a number of harsher questions, and opted for:

"They keep their own appointments then, do they? Track their own clients?"

"Uhh… yeah. Mostly."

Greg picked up his mug of tea. "You help them out with that sometimes?"

"If they ask me to," Mandy said, gruffly. "Just as a favour. Used to work in admin, so… and people will ring up asking for them… makes sense for me to have a copy of their diaries."

"What was Sam's schedule like last night?" Greg asked, over his tea. "Busy?"

"Few standing appointments - mostly early on. Big gaps, though. S'always quiet in January."

You're not a theme park, love, Greg thought. He didn't voice it.

"So if people came in off the street," he said, sitting back in his chair. "Walk-in custom... you'd be able to check the diaries, tell them someone using your rooms was available, and send them up?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that's how it works."

"When did you last see Sam alive?"

She started to cry again. Greg gave her a minute or two with her tissues before his sympathy began to wane. He took a mouthful of tea.

"I know it's a shock," he said, putting the mug aside. "but if you can narrow it down for me, even just to before or after midnight, we'll have a better chance of finding out who did this."

"It was - probably about midnight. Maybe a bit before…" Mandy scrunched the tissue in her hand, looking down at it with red and watery eyes. "He'd had an alright evening. Good number of walk-ins. All died off about eleven, though - and he came down to say he might just go… I persuaded him to stay for a bit."

Greg bit the side of his tongue. "And he went back upstairs?"

"No, he… hung around in the lounge for a while. Watched TV. He did sometimes, when it was quiet - meant he could get off on the right foot with clients." Mandy sniffed a little, dabbing her nose. "They have a wide appeal - the half-elves. Most men are happy with 'em. 'Specially them who are walk-ins, just looking for something straight-forward. Sam liked to be there, so he could smile at 'em. Take 'em upstairs."

Greg listened, waiting, his face impassive. Mandy drew in a breath and went on.

"About half eleven, I went off into the back. Got on with my admin. Maybe midnight-ish, Sam put his head 'round the door, said he was just going up with someone and he couldn't mind the desk
any longer."

"Did you see this person?"

"No. I was sat down - doing my admin."

"Did you hear him?"

"No, I… wasn't really paying attention. And there was the TV on."

"Was anybody else in the waiting room?"

"Just Sam, watching the desk."

"Did he say anything about the person who'd arrived?"

Her face contracted a little, trying to remember. "He said he was going up with a 'gentleman'. He was - smiling about it. Seemed happy about something."

Greg raised an eyebrow. "Was that normal?"

"Well, he was…. always happy. Just getting on with his job. He was good like that."

"But this time he seemed genuinely pleased by something."

"Yeah… yeah, he did. And off upstairs he went."

"Did you listen for him coming back down?"

"I did. Didn't hear anything, though. About one o'clock, I checked the book. S'kept out on the desk. He'd filled his schedule in all night - busy - booked it off completely. I figured that was why he'd looked so pleased with himself… went back to my admin."

"I'm assuming 'all night' bookings are unusual here."

"Yeah - hardly ever see that. Most guys just want a quick in-and-out, don't they?" she added, eyeing Greg over her tea mug - as if she knew all about his kind.

Greg tried not to remember how he'd spent the small hours of this morning - slowly and decadently exploring every inch of Mycroft Holmes's body; winding his tongue across trembling expanses of snowy-white skin until a blush rose to the surface for him; coaxing Mycroft to within a single merciful stroke of ecstasy and then calming him, soothing him, blowing gently across his panting chest to ease him right back down to the beginning - then starting all over again.

Greg took a long drink of his tea, put the mug aside, and said,

"But this client had apparently asked for Sam’s services all night?"

"Yeah. It's not as lucrative as multiple clients, but it's easier work for them - just one bloke."

"And you left them alone after that?"

"Yeah. Went on with my admin." Mandy paused, drinking her tea with a trembling hand. Her fist nearly surrounded the entire mug. "Then it got to nearly eight AM, and I thought… right. Enough of this."
Greg raised an eyebrow. "You went to turf them out of there, did you?"

"He's only got the room until seven," she said, fiercely. "Seven at the latest. And he knows it."

Greg watched her face, waiting.

He caught the very moment she remembered Sam was dead.

She buried her eyes into the tissue again for a while, and when the sobs had subsided, Greg sat forwards in his chair.

"What happened when you went to check on him?" he asked.

Mandy took a moment to compose herself. "Knocked," she said, lip trembling. "No answer. So I told him through the door this wasn't on. Nothing. Went and got the spare key from downstairs. Opened it up, thinking I was about to find 'em laying around asleep, and instead… there he was. Just lying there. Freezing cold."

"No sign of the client?"

"No. Nothing."

"So you've no idea what time the guy left?"

"No," she said, her eyes reddening once more. "I wasn't listening for it. Thought he'd just be up there with Sam."

With a quiet creak, the door opened behind Greg. Familiar footsteps came inside, and the door was closed with a soft snap. Greg finished the last of his tea.

"Let's go back to when Sam told you he was heading upstairs," he sighed, putting down the mug. He leant back in his chair. "You said he seemed 'happy' - pleased about something. And he told you it was a 'gentleman'. Did he normally use that word?"

"What, for… clients?" said Mandy. Greg could feel Mycroft somewhere behind him, hear him flicking slowly through printed paper.

"Mm. Did he usually use the word 'gentlemen'? Was that standard?"

Mandy pulled a slight face. "Not really," she said. "Just… 'clients'. Not many of 'em who come here are gentlemen, to be honest. I don't think Sam meant he was a… a posh fella or anything. He was… sort of joking."

Greg raised an eyebrow. "'Sort of joking'?"

"Yeah. Flirting a bit."

"You mean the client was listening?"

"Must have been. S'a small waiting room."

"And Sam was trying to flatter him - calling him a 'gentleman'?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that's it."

A hand rested gently on Greg's shoulder. He inclined his head, and Mycroft handed him a stapled
document. It was a forensics report. As he flicked through, and Mandy busied herself with toilet roll and tea, Greg found himself looking at an additional print-out from a London DNA database.

"The business card," Mycroft intoned in his ear. "Seymour has just given it to me. We have a match."

"Thanks," Greg murmured, his heart jumping. His eyes trailed across the enormous amount of information. "That's all my questions for now, Miss Grimbley... if you could bring us Sam's address, that would be great. We'll give you a shout if we need anything else."

With a pale nod, and a slight wobble, Mandy got up from the desk. She let herself out of the room.

Mycroft closed the door behind her with a snap.

"I hope you aren't putting much faith in her testimony," he said at once.

"Not really," Greg admitted, switching off the record function on his wrist-set. "She doesn't seem to care what's going on, so long as she gets her fee and they stick to her rules... says she was in the back doing 'admin' all night."

"I didn't realise online poker counts as administrative work these days. How fascinating." Mycroft crossed to Greg's coat where it lay across a massage table, and began looking through it. "The woman also has the observation skills of a recently run-over frog."

Greg watched, concerned, as Mycroft sought through his pockets. "Why d'you say that?"

"She doesn't recognise a man who paid £800 for five minutes with the victim less than a week ago. And I hardly class as her usual clientele. If I didn't stand out to her, nobody will."

"Right..." said Greg. He suspected he should just delete the recording now. "Sorry - what're you doing?"

Mycroft tugged a small square box from Greg's coat pocket. "I will buy you more," he said, opening the packet and removing one.

"Mycroft, you... can't smoke in here. It's a public building."

"It's a brothel," Mycroft muttered. He fished Greg's lighter from his coat and sparked up. Greg was alarmed to see a tremor in his wrists. "Legality and public health are hardly their strong point..."

Mycroft leant back against the wall, dragged in the first lungful of smoke and released it in a protracted sigh. His eyes fell shut.

Greg put the forensics report aside, bracing himself.

"Go on," he said.

"I began to fear this last night," Mycroft said. "Now it seems inescapable."

"Hit me with it."

"Emma was - unfortunate. An opportunistic attack. The first woman whose attentions her killer could secure. You and Sam were both targeted. Two of you, in one night, for one reason."

"And what reason is that?"
Mycroft took a moment to say it, gazing at the opposite wall. The cigarette smoked between his fingers.

"Me," he said, at last.

Greg's eyebrows lifted. "Because - both of us - "

" - have a private association to me. Yes."

"So Excultus is... what, following you? Trying to frighten you?"

"The coincidence is too great. I've been recognised - my name, my face. Whoever is behind these attacks, at least one of their number is a survivor of the purge nine years ago, and they recall the part I played in it. It's - characteristic of them. This kind of persecution."

Greg said nothing. He'd remembered, with a sudden flash, a fragment of the night before - one awful thing, said among many awful things. It rose up out of his memory like black smoke.

"What is that expression?" Mycroft enquired with concern from across the room.

Greg looked up to find the worried grey gaze trained intently upon him.

"He, um - ... the guy last night. He said... 'Mycroft's going to be angry when he finds what's left of you'. Right before he - pulled my shirt open. He found it funny."

He watched the words, and all their horror, dawn on Mycroft's face. What little colour Mycroft possessed left him in a rush.

"He - mentioned me by name?" he said. Something awful echoed in his eyes.

Greg despaired. He wished he could take the words back - to make it not true, make it just something he'd imagined - but they were past the point of wishes now. That time was long gone.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Mycroft took a moment to compose himself. He smoked as he did, rolling the cigarette along his lower lip.

"Then I'm correct," he said at last, his throat thick. "The two of you were intended as a message."

"A - message?"

Mycroft dragged on the cigarette. "That I am not forgotten."

"And they - they were going to kill two people, just to - "

"You are human!" Mycroft burst out, in a sudden flare of fear. "You're human, you're expendable to them - you're prey, don't you realise? You're an evolutionary half-step. You are paper and blood is their ink, and nothing would please them more than to take two humans I have consorted with and lay both of you open for me to find. Both of you, in a single night. Somehow they discovered that I - ... had dealings with Sam. It means there is a link from him to them. We need to find it. And they have come into contact with us - with both of us - they know we are associated, too."

Greg couldn't speak for a second. "Excultus know you're - ..."

Mycroft shut his eyes, drawing on the cigarette. "They transformed me. Of course they know."
"What happened?" Greg said, his heart hammering. "I'm going to need to hear this some day. Just - get it over with now."

It took Mycroft several moments with the cigarette before he could speak.

"I was commanding a search of a property in Brixton," he said, at last. His voice was monotones, his words were clipped, and his expression held back a tide of detail and recollection that he did not wish to unleash. "We - discovered more than we'd anticipated. We were hideously unprepared." Mycroft dragged on the cigarette. "My - damn gun wasn't even loaded."

Greg realised, with a cold flush, why Mycroft loaded a revolver for even casual inquiries.

"My team didn't have to outrun Excultus," Mycroft said, numb. "They only had to outrun me. After five days I escaped. But the damage was done."

*Five days.*

Greg couldn't bear it. The thought made his chest constrict in stale, awful panic - what Mycroft must have endured - what horrors could be exacted upon a human being over the course of five days. Vampirism was probably just the start of what they'd done. It made Greg want to throw up.

Mycroft flicked his ash into Mandy's empty tea mug, grey and quiet.

"Excultus are well aware of what I am," he said, watching Greg's expression. "It seems they're aware that I'm hunting them again; that you and I are connected; and that I - met with Sam. This is the way the situation is progressing."

"You're - saying they're following you?" Greg managed, his throat tight. "Observing you?"

"Apparently."

"Why have they not sent someone after you? Why... why me and Sam?"

"A survivor of the purge would not wish me merely dead," Mycroft muttered. He raised the cigarette back to his mouth. "They would want me broken first."

"By - breaking your humans," said Greg.

Mycroft did not reply for a moment. They watched each other across the room, and the silence thickened around them.

"This is why 'if only'," Mycroft said, at length. "This is why I tried to - … this is the danger I wanted to guard you from, Greg."

Greg held his gaze.

"It's too late for that," he said. He brushed a hand over the back of his neck, closing his tired eyes. "They're after you again, and I'm your weak spot... 'evolutionary half-step' that I am."

Mycroft's expression creased.

"I did not mean that I think that of you," he said. "It's - what *they* think, Greg. This is their mindset."

Greg did not respond. "Why did they send someone who knows what they're doing after Sam," he asked, "and the sadistic nutjob after me?"
Mycroft smoked for a few seconds. He seemed to be preparing himself for something.

"Sam was food," he said. "He had to die. You - also had to suffer."

The inner walls of Greg's chest turned to rock. "Why?"

Mycroft tapped his cigarette ash into the tea-mug. The neutral expression did not quite reach his eyes.

"I believe they suspect," he said, "that you and I are developing a pair-bond."

Greg took a few seconds to retrieve the power of speech. His heart had forgotten how to beat.

"Why - why would they suspect - "

"We have presumably been observed together."

"We've - not been *together* for even twelve hours yet. How could - "

"Observed in each other's general company," Mycroft said. "Our manner with each other has been noted. You heard this yourself last night - that I would be *angry* when I found you. They know you're under my protection. They believe you are in some way mine."

Christ. Greg had never before experienced leaping terror and curling delirium from hearing the same fucking sentence. It left him nauseous.

"And - they figured it would hurt you more if - "

" - if they desecrated you." Mycroft pressed the cigarette to his lower lip. "Yes. Excultus are *violently* opposed to connections between humans and vampires. It's... seen as depraved. Repellent. To fall in love with one's food."

Greg said nothing. He couldn't speak.

This was beyond words now. It was beyond what he could process.

"I've written on the subject online," Mycroft said, drawing on the last of his cigarette with a sigh. His eyes closed. "I imagine it hasn't endeared me to them any more than annihilating their entire organisation already had..."

There came a knock at the door, as jolting as if it were against the inside of Greg's skull. He jumped in his chair, sat up, and drew in a breath.

"Yep?" he called.

By the time the door opened, Mycroft had gotten rid of the cigarette.

"I've got you those details," Mandy said, gruffly. She extended to Greg a piece of paper. "Most up to date ones that I've got."

Greg took the paper, feeling nearly as unwell as she looked. "Thank you," he said. "And thanks for your help. We'll - find you if we need anything else."

She let herself out without a word.

There was silence for a while, as Greg tried to make some sense of the chaos now littered about his
head. Mycroft said nothing; he was thinking.

"Okay," Greg sighed at last. He closed his eyes, inhaling slowly. "Okay, let's... take stock..."

He laid his hands over his face.

"They're terrorist vampires," he said. "You were a vampire hunter. You took them down. One of them must have survived, because they're back. They know you're on their tail again. Somehow they found out you drank from Sam, and they know you're - ... they think you're now involved in a pair-bond. So I'm target number one. And none of London's humans are safe. Is there anything else I should know?"

Mycroft paused. "Humans... or half-elves."

"Christ," said Greg. He leant back in his chair, scraping his hands up into his hair. "Good news for the werewolves, though, eh? Looks like they'll be ruling over the ashes."

"Can you not be flippant, please?"

"Would you rather I break down and sob, Mycroft? Because it's coming. Twelve hours ago, I was nearly - ..." Greg's throat closed around the words. He breathed in sharply to open it again, ignoring the shake starting in his shoulders. "And would have been forced to fucking enjoy it," he spat, "because they've decided I'm your new pet. Nobody saw who killed Emma, whose name we still don't know - whose kids are still fucking missing - and nobody saw who killed Sam, and the guy who attacked me certainly isn't going to be forthcoming with his information anymore. So you know what? I'll stick with flippancy, thanks. Because it's the only thing stopping my sanity from being hurled off the horrifying vampire-terrorist merry-go-round to which it's now been nailed."

Mycroft took a moment to compose himself, rubbing two fingers between his eyebrows.

"We have more leads than you think," he managed. "New lines of inquiry have opened up. We will weep later. For now, there's Olivia."

"Who the hell is Olivia?"

"Olivia Reid," Mycroft said. "The young woman I met near Pembury Road..."

He crossed the room, picked up the forensics report and rifled through it, showing Greg a page from towards the back - a mug-shot of a dark-eyed, curly-haired woman in a powder blue jacket.

"She knew that people were being bitten and going missing," Mycroft said. "We now have her address. I believe she'll require careful handling, but if I'm right she could be useful."

"Fine," said Greg. "We'll do that."

"We'll also need to contact next-of-kin for Sam," Mycroft said, "and speak to his university. He's likely to share a flat with other students. They'll need to be informed."

"Right... let's get round there first. They'll be wondering why he didn't come home, and they'll probably have next-of-kin and uni contacts for us..." Greg studied the address that Mandy had scratched out for him. "Knighton Grove - that's just across Hackney Downs. Fifteen minutes' walk from here. No point taking the car."

Mycroft stopped, suddenly. "Knighton Grove?" he said.
Greg checked the paper. "Yeah, I think so. Her writing's not great."

"Which number, Knighton Grove?"

Greg squinted at the address. "Twenty-two," he replied. "Why?"

Mycroft said nothing, turning the forensics report around to Greg. His thumb slid down to the last known address of Miss Olivia Imogen Reid.

Greg read it, and went still.

"That's - …"

"Yes," Mycroft said. "Yes, it is."

"So - Sam's friend - the one attacked near Gastrell's Bar - "

" - is likely the same young woman who claimed to me she knew nothing whatsoever about anything."

Greg's heart tightened. "D'you think she knew Emma?"

"I think she knows far more than we do," said Mycroft, his eyes flashing. "And I think it's about time that we know what she knows."

"Right," said Greg. He grabbed his coat. "Come on. Let's go get some answers."
Mistreated

How lone this palace is; how grey the walls!
No minstrel now wakes echoes in these halls.
The broken chain lies rusting on the door,
And noisome weeds have split the marble floor.

- Oscar Wilde
'Ravenna' (1878)

Knighton Grove was a horseshoe of dilapidated old London townhouses, long past their prime. Each one was as mournful and weary-looking as the rest. Dirty casement windows gazed out like sad eyes from the grubby grey-brick fronts; cars were few, and security bars across windows were plenty. Each house had a small garden, penned off by rusted iron railings, though few of them contained any plant life. They were strewn instead with old furniture and bin bags, recycling bins tipped onto their sides, plastic toys whose gaudy colours made them seem lost and small amidst the bleakness of this place.

There were no people around. There was no life here. The only movement came from litter trailing along the pavement in the breeze - crisp packets, dead leaves, scraps of carrier bag.

As they arrived, Greg noted a pair of old trainers hanging by their tethered laces from a street light. He frowned, pushing his hands deep into his pockets.

Mycroft spotted the gesture.

"What is it?" he asked.

"An old sign," said Greg. "Shoes thrown over street lights - powerlines… advertising a service available nearby."

Mycroft's brow contracted. "What service?"

"How about I tell you there were some outside my mum's house, and leave it at that?"

"Ah," Mycroft murmured.

They walked along the street together in silence, checking each house for a number as they passed.

With every one, Greg realised more and more that they'd entered one of those lost worlds of London - the parts that time forgot to bring along. As the centuries marched by and the buildings in the centre grew taller, bigger, and gleamed ever brighter, the streets like this one stayed exactly as they were. These houses were only standing because they were too pricey to demolish. The land they stood on wasn't yet worth the trouble.
Knighton Grove had looked like this a hundred years ago, Greg thought. It would look like this a hundred years from now.

Technology changed, but poverty never did.

At last, they reached the grim frontage of number 22. Its red-painted door was peeling to a pale and sickly pink beneath. It reminded Greg awfully of skin disease.

"Split into separate flats, do we think?" he said, frowning up through the railings.

"Apparently not," Mycroft remarked, as his eyes trailed the house. "No sign of separate doorbells… nor does the database mention a flat number."

Greg frowned, biting the inside of his cheek.

"Doesn't fit though, does it?" he said. "Two sex workers, sharing a townhouse together? This place is a dump, but... London is London. How can they afford it?"

Mycroft scanned the windows of the house, his eyes flicking from one to the next.

"A number of additional people live here," he said. "Perhaps ten or more. Multiple bedrooms… different personal items in each window. Mostly women."

Greg pushed his hands back into his pockets, wondering.

"And Olivia didn't react well to you?" he checked.

"No," Mycroft admitted. "I was… heavy-handed with her. She didn't appreciate being pressed, and she's deeply suspicious of the police."

"Okay." Greg glanced at him carefully. "Is it - alright if I take this? I get the feeling she and Sam were close. She's going to be upset. And if we blow this, we're screwed."

Mycroft gave him a pained look.

"Yes, of course," he said, quietly. "You needn't ask. This is... quite plainly your forte."

There was a moment's quiet between them.

"You are not an evolutionary half-step," Mycroft added, his eyes pained.

Greg frowned slightly. "I know I'm not."

"It's - the way that they perceived the world, Greg. They were - "

"It's fine," said Greg. "Seriously, forget it. I'm... glad they're underestimating me. It means they're gonna make a mistake."

Mycroft sighed. "God help us all, if that's our plan."

"We're still working on a plan," Greg muttered. "We need facts first."

He moved past Mycroft, and pushed open the gate.

The bell did not work. Greg knocked instead, prepared his credentials on his wrist-set and stood back.
There was a minute's delay before someone reached the door. As bolts and chains were drawn back inside, a female voice called,

"Sammie? Is that you?"

Greg steadied himself with a breath. He hated this part. It was the single worst feeling in the job, and he would never be ready for it.

As the door opened, a young woman appeared in the hallway beyond - twenty-five at the most, neatly made-up, dressed in a pale blue waitress's uniform. Her dark curls were pinned back from her face.

As she laid eyes on them, her expression changed from hope to disappointment to concern in the span of a second. It was then masked behind an instant wall of neutrality.

"Yes?" she said, holding onto the door.

"Olivia Reid?" Greg checked.

She pressed her teeth against her lip ring, determinedly not looking at Mycroft. "Sorry, I'm... just heading out to work. I can't really talk."

Greg offered the hard-light square of his credentials.

"My name's DI Lestrade," he said. "I'm - afraid I've got some bad news. Can we come inside?"

Her face tightened, suppressing her rising fear. She ignored his credentials.

"What - sort of bad news?" she asked. "I'm already late."

"Where is it you work?" Greg asked. "DI Holmes can ring your boss, while you and me talk..." He paused, looking gently into her eyes. "It's about - Sam Buckley, Olivia... is it alright if we come in?"

The truth - pale and awful - flickered across her face. She let go of the door, her mouth opening.

"Where is he?" she asked.

Greg stepped carefully into the gloomy hall. "Let's go sit down," he said. "Have you got somewhere quiet we can talk?"

She pointed, numbly, to an open archway off the hall.

"Where do you work?" Greg asked.

"Lazy Daisies," she said, flushing. "Um - just on the main road."

Greg inclined his head to Mycroft, who nodded quietly and reached for his wrist-set.

"Can you make her a cup of tea?" Greg said.

Mycroft headed towards the kitchen without a word.

Quietly Greg guided Olivia into the lounge. It was a cosy, shrouded space, crammed with sofas and large beaded cushions scattered around the floor. He got her seated in an armchair, and sat down on the sofa across from her.
There was no painless way to say this. There was no gentle route to guide people into hearing it, and there was no comfort to be given in hinting. The only thing you could do was quietly ruin their lives.

"I'm sorry to tell you… we found Sam's body this morning," he said, "at the brothel where he worked. There's good reason to believe he was killed. We don't yet know who by."

For a few seconds, there was nothing. Olivia looked into Greg's face, hearing the words but giving no reaction - processing them as if he'd just told her the time.

Then her expression crumpled; she dropped her face into her hands.

As she bent low, and her shoulders shook, Greg's chest heaved with despair.

"I'm so sorry," he said. He meant it. "I - get the feeling you two were close..."

She said nothing at all. She simply shook in silence.

For several minutes, Greg gently let her cry.

"We were hoping you could tell us a bit about Sam," he said at last, his voice soft. "Details of his family, so we can contact them - where he was studying maybe. Anywhere else that he worked."

Olivia drew herself up. She pushed her fingertips roughly across her glistening eyes - forcing away the tears.

"His family won't care," she said, her throat thick. "They disowned him... ages ago. Sam hadn't heard from them in six years."

"All the same," Greg said, "I'll... need their details. They have to be informed."

"Fine," she said, numbly. "I'll get you them."

"Is that how long you've known Sam? Six years?"

"No," she mumbled. She looked down at her hands, knotting them together. "Not quite that long."

"How'd you guys meet?" he asked.

Her face flickered - memories. "I heard him getting beaten up behind an off-licence," she mumbled. "I went to see. Brought him home and patched him up."

Greg smiled a little. "You went rushing to his aid?"

Tears brimmed in her tired eyes again. She pushed them away.

"Sam always said that," she murmured. Her smile faded into nothing. "It was - some drunk bastard - paid him for one thing, then started - …"

She stopped, inhaling.

"What killed him?" she asked. "Why is he dead?"

Greg's chest ached. Why is he dead? It wasn't often people put it so bluntly; it didn't make it any easier to answer. He knew the details should be given only to close family - next-of-kin - but he had the strongest feeling he was looking at her.
"In all honesty, Olivia," he said, "that's... something else I wanted to talk to you about."

She looked up at him from beneath her hair, her eyes dark and shining. She said absolutely nothing.

"I understand you've met DI Holmes," Greg said. He held her gaze. "And I understand he was... maybe a bit of a twat to you."

The skin around her eyes contracted, fighting the faint flicker of humour.

"If it helps," Greg said, "he's a bit of a twat to me sometimes, too. That's what happens when your mum bred samoyeds for a living."

The skin around her eyes tightened harder.

There came the quiet approach of footsteps.

"He does make good tea, though," Greg said, as Mycroft came discreetly through the door.

Olivia watched in silence as the mug was placed on the coffee table before her.

"Which was Sam's room?" Greg asked her.

She hesitated, glancing up into his eyes.

"Top floor," she said, after a moment. "His - name's on the door. Next to mine."

Greg turned his eyes quietly to Mycroft. "Go find me university details, will you?" he said.

Mycroft met his glance without a word. Seeing Greg issue orders to the man who'd been heavy-handed with her would endear Olivia to him. Greg knew it; Mycroft knew it too. There was a moment of mutual understanding, softened by a look, and then Mycroft obediently left.

They heard him head away up the stairs.

"What - actually happened to Sam?" Olivia asked, after a moment of silence.

Greg suspected she was the kind of person who wanted answers now, and would deal with the emotions of it later on her own.

"We think he was killed by a client," he said. "There's no easy way to put this, but he... died of blood loss - from a vampire bite. It won't have hurt. He'll have passed quietly into unconsciousness after a couple of minutes. He won't have known what was happening."

Olivia looked down at her hands for some time, turning a gold ring set with a bee around her finger.

"Vampires don't exist," she said, at last.

"Yeah, I'd... like to believe that too," said Greg. "Sadly one nearly tore my throat out last night. So I kinda have to believe it."

She watched him closely for a moment, figuring him out. "What happened?" she asked.

"It was... lying in wait in my flat," he said. "I'm only alive 'cause DI Holmes made a lucky shot. If he'd missed, I'd be dead now."
In truth, it hadn't been about luck - Mycroft had wasted the bastard six times over. But Olivia needed to feel like she'd been unlucky, not weak.

And she needed to think she wasn't the only one.

"Had Sam ever mentioned vampires before?" Greg asked her, as she reluctantly reached for the tea. Her brow furrowed a little, withholding her answer.

"We're trying to find out if this was a regular client," he explained. "Someone Sam had met before."

Olivia took a sip. Her expression tightened, and Greg smiled slightly.

"Told you he makes good tea," he said.

Olivia flicked her lip ring. "He's - still a bit of a twat." She took another drink, building up to something. "Sam… told me there was a man last week. Drank his - blood." She hesitated, uneasy with the words. Her shoulders lifted a little. "He showed me the scar on his neck. He said the guy had been kind to him, and paid him well, but… I don't know... maybe he was just getting Sam used to it. Knowing he could come back at another time."

Her expression closed off. She drank for a moment, quietly.

"It was early last Friday," she added.

"I'll check that out," Greg said. "Thanks."

He let her drink for a while - let her steep in her own thoughts.

"Is Sam the only person you know who's had this happen?" he asked, at last.

Olivia did not react. Her gaze was lost somewhere across the lounge, guarded and unhappy.

"Or something similar?" Greg said, and gave her time.

It was nearly a full minute before she spoke.

"There was - a boy," she said, at last. "About a month ago."

Greg's blood ran a little cold. "A boy?"

"Maybe twenty." Olivia drew her feet quietly onto the sofa, gathering them beneath her. She sat back and drank more tea. Her gaze had come to rest on the net curtains, trailing the greyness of the street outside. "He was... shifty. I thought - probably nerves. First time. Easy money. Three minutes' work."

As she told the story, she didn't tell it to Greg. She told it to the curtains and the edge of her mug.

"I - took him off behind a shop. Leant against the wall, waiting, and - he - grabbed me. I knew something was wrong. Just sort of lunged for me. For my neck. Felt him rip open my skin with his teeth like - like his mouth was full of knives - tore at the back of my neck - I got my elbow into his groin and I just - ran - just couldn't think. It wasn't... normal. I knew it wasn't. He was too strong for a boy. The way he'd grabbed me. The speed he'd - …"

She drank, pulled her knees to her chest, and said,
"I got to a bar... just... the first door I found. I thought - *get to people, get to other people* - they gave me a towel to hold against it. Then the police walked in. Asked me for ID. Some - inspector. Some sergeant. First question, was I a *professional working woman*? Second question - had someone *gotten a bit rough* with me?"

She shuddered and drank, blinking back tears, choking a little on the tea.

"As if I'd - as if I'd *agreed* to rough. As if it had just gotten out of hand and it was my fault. As if I should know to expect this sort of trouble if I was going to be a silly girl. I wouldn't let them see the bite. They were laughing at me. Then they wanted my name and address, and I just - I just couldn't - …"

The mug began to shake in her hand.

Greg moved forward, took it from her and lifted it safely to the coffee table.

"Thank you," she managed, her voice empty.

He knelt on the floor beside the sofa, and took her hand. He was surprised to find her fingers curling tightly into his. It made him think of Emma. His heart thudded in his throat.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Christ, I'm - *sorry*."

He could hear footsteps coming quietly down the stairs.

"You shouldn't have been treated that way," he told her. "*Not in a million* fucking years. You should've been listened to. You should've had the works - medical treatment, statement at the station, counselling. All of it. And if you had, two people might still be alive. I am *so sorry*."

Her face creased with pain.

"He was my *friend*," she bit out. She dug her fingers into Greg's palm, shaking. "He - he was - my only person - my only person left - …"

"I'm sorry," Greg breathed, his heart cracking. He wanted to hug her. He couldn't. He wanted to tell her they'd find the bastards and flay them alive, and she could have the skins. He wanted to tell her he was sorry that her only person was dead, while somehow he was still alive. He couldn't. He was breaking rules just by holding her hand.

As Olivia curled into herself and cried, Mycroft silently entered the room behind her. Greg met his eyes over the back of the sofa.

Mycroft read his expression carefully.

He approached, his footsteps quiet.

"S'just Mycroft," Greg murmured, as Olivia jumped and looked up from her hands. "Don't worry. Is there anyone else in the house?"

"There's - a few of us live here - nobody at the minute. All out."

"D'you want us to tell them about Sam?"

"No," Olivia managed, her voice tight. "I'll tell them."

"Alright." Greg rubbed his thumb gently, slowly across her knuckles. "Do your other housemates
know you were attacked?"

She swallowed. "I - got back to the house covered in blood. Marian used to be a nurse. She - did her best. Did what she could."

"To look after the wound, you mean?"

Olivia nodded, looking down at her lap.

"How bad was it?" Greg asked her, carefully.

She hesitated, glancing with unease at Mycroft.

"DI Holmes is a vampire expert," Greg said. "That's why he's working this case with me. He knows his stuff. And - if it's alright by you... if you let him have a look at the scar... he can tell you for sure what it was. He can tell you once and for all that you weren't making this up, and it wasn't just some dickhead who attacked you. It was the same thing that got me, and the same thing that got your Sam. Is it alright if Mycroft looks?"

Olivia paused for a second longer, her eyes locked on Mycroft. They were fierce with pain. She seemed to have forgotten she was holding Greg's hand.

Without a word, she drew aside the back of her hair.

Mycroft carefully approached.

As he caught sight of the scar, his expression flinched. Greg braced himself and shifted to see too, suspecting this sight would haunt him.

The skin had healed over - but the back of her neck beneath it was rippled, chewed and pock-marked, spiderwebbed with black blood cells and broken veins. She was a mess. It was awful. Greg's stomach lurched immediately into his throat.

Mycroft let out a quiet hiss, examining the wound with careful fingertips.

"You have been... sorely mistreated," he told her, without reservation. "These marks are horrendous..."

Olivia shuddered a little, closing her eyes.

"Is it vampire?" Greg asked him, quietly.

"Yes," Mycroft said. "Without a doubt." He let Olivia's hair ease back into place. "Very newly transformed. Utterly inexperienced, and without any idea what he was doing. I'm sorry for what you went through, Miss Reid. You were entirely undeserving."

Greg felt Olivia breathe out, her head still hung. Her grip relaxed a little on his hand.

As Mycroft sat down, he said,

"Her attacker has badly torn the skin, but without managing to administer more than the barest minimum of saliva. She'll have received no anesthetic, no anticoagulant... none of the required chemicals for the wound to heal cleanly."

"No PT-309?" Greg checked, raising an eyebrow.
"Very little," Mycroft said, meeting his eyes with discretion. "Hence her very wise decision to flee."

Greg nodded carefully.

"D'you - think this is maybe the same guy hit Emma?" he asked.

Mycroft chose his words. "There is a great similarity in the wounds. I would not be surprised to discover it."

"Similarity in the way he approached her, too…" Greg hesitated, turning his eyes to Olivia.

Her expression was wracked with discomfort, and full of grief - though strangely calm. She'd heard something she'd been needing to hear, Greg realised. She'd heard it wasn't all a lie.

"I know it's been a month," he said. "Probably a long month - but… could you write down everything you can remember about this kid for me? Everything - every detail. There's a good chance he's progressed from attacking you to killing someone else, and he's still out there now. And if you can help us find him…"

She lowered her eyes, numb. "I'll draw him for you," she murmured. "I - used to do art. School."

"Thank you," said Greg.

As he handed her back the cup of tea, he said,

"Listen… what happened to you… it wasn't just some guy. It wasn't something normal and it wasn't your fault, and you shouldn't have been treated the way you were. By anyone. Put in writing what the street team said to you at Gastrell's Bar and I'll fetch you their heads in a sack, alright?"

She pushed her sleeve across her eyes, stifling a laugh.

"What they did wasn't okay," he told her. "They don't deserve their jobs. I'm not standing for it. And I'm sorry you got spoken to that way."

Olivia looked down into her tea, grey-faced.

"Sam - wanted to contact you," she confessed. "To tell you, about the biting." Her eyes flashed apologetically at Mycroft, then back at Greg. "I told him not to. I… shouldn't have. I should have let him call you."

Greg put a hand on her arm. "It's been rough for you," he said. "You didn't get believed the first time, and you should have been. It's... understandable that you kept quiet."

He paused, watching her take a drink of tea.

"Is there anything else you'd want to tell us now?" he asked. "Anything strange going on - people vanishing? Anything like that?"

Her expression shifted a little. Before he could ask, Greg felt his wrist-set buzz beneath his sleeve. It stretched into a steady vibration.

"Hang on," he said, with apology, tugging up his cuff.

INCOMING CALL FROM
Greg reread the screen, quietly concerned. Police-issued wrist-sets weren't meant to honour withheld numbers. He'd never seen that before.

"Sorry," he said. "I'd better - ... I'll just be a minute."

He got up from the sofa, answered the call and walked with it into the entrance hall, leaving an awkward silence in his wake.

"Lestrade?" he said, warily. His voice echoed in the tiled space.

"Your majesty," came a familiar voice. "'Scuse the private number. I'm at home. You're not dead, then?"

Greg released his held breath. "Hi, TJ."

"How're you feeling?"

"Lucky. I'm alright, though... still in one piece." Greg checked the time on his wrist-set. "What are you doing up? You should be asleep, fuzzball. You need your rest."

"Not been sleeping great," TJ admitted. "Weird dreams. Thought I'd get up and do some work. So you're alright, then? You're the talk of the canteen. I'm telling everyone you got kidnapped by catpeople and had to be rescued from where they'd batted you under the fridge."

Greg smiled a little, folding his arms across his chest.

"Tell them it's my fault for catnip aftershave..." He paused. "It's good of you to check on me, TJ. Thanks."

"Yeah, well... you'd have checked on me. And we didn't get much time to chat this morning."

Greg remembered this morning with a slight wince, rubbing the side of his neck.

"Yeah, I was in the shower," he said. "Sorry about that."

"How's Castle Holmes working out so far? Wait - is he there?"

Greg bit his tongue. "Just speaking to someone. We're out on a job."

"Ah, 'kay. In that case, I'll cut to the chase. I've got you a get well soon present."

"Is it a picture of you eating some protein for once?"

"Better!" said TJ. "It's an illegally-cracked mobile phone belonging to a dead prostitute. Just what you always wanted, huh?"

Greg's mouth fell open. "You're kidding," he said. "You - you've done it?"

"Yup. You owe me fifty quid."

"Fuck me sideways, TJ - you're a star. I'll drive over after we're done here, alright? Will you still be up in an hour?"
"Probably."

"Right. Listen, have you got everything there? Messages - contacts - "

"It's all here," TJ said. "I'm scrolling through it now. I tell you what… she had a crap high-score on Ultimate Bubblepop."

"Have you found her full name anywhere?"

"Obviously. Got it from her e-mails. School emergency contact request, back in September. She was called Emma Marsden, and the kids are Alexia, Hannah and Charlotte."

Greg's heart flipped itself inside out.

"Please tell me the school mentions an address."

"Not far from where she was killed, as it happens. It's 22 Knighton Grove - just off Hackney Downs. Want me to message you it?"

Greg stared into space for a second, his mouth open.

"Did you say - "

"Knighton Grove," said TJ. "Number 22."

Oh.

Oh my God.

"Do you… want it in a message?" TJ offered the silence, tentatively.

"No," Greg said, his heart thumping. His voice came out a little hoarse. "No, it's - fine, TJ. I've got it."

"Right." TJ hesitated. "See you in an hour for the phone, then?"

"Yeah," Greg said, lost. "Yeah - sure. I'll swing by. Might be a bit longer. Is that alright?"

"Sure. You okay?"


TJ sighed. "Yes, mum."

"Seriously. It'll be worse if your system's just full of sugar. It'll last longer."

"I'll just… cry and eat ice cream for a week, as usual… it's fine, Lestrade. I've got a few days yet."

"Few days to eat some protein, you mean?"

"Bye, mum," TJ said. "See you in an hour."

He hung up.

Greg took a minute to pull his thoughts together. He then stepped back into the lounge.
Mycroft looked up from the sofa. He'd taken off his wrist-set and drawn out a hard-light screen for
Olivia, who was now quietly sorting through pictures of different face-shapes - piecing together
what she could remember.

As he caught sight of Greg's expression, Mycroft's face fell.

"What?" he said. "What is it?

Olivia looked up in concern, her fingers hesitating in the light.

Greg could think of only one thing to say. He looked into her wary eyes.

Charlotte Marsden."

Olivia said nothing.

"Where are they?" Greg asked, his throat thick.

Olivia hesitated, searching his face. "I don't know those people."

"Strange," he said, with a frown. "Because I just had Emma's phone cracked. And she seemed to
think that she lived here - along with you, and Sam, and her three daughters."

Mycroft's face slackened.

"Maybe she was a previous tenant," Olivia suggested.

Greg bit his cheek. "Easy to check. How long've you been here?"

Olivia did not reply.

"How many people are living under this roof, Mycroft?" Greg asked, still staring into Olivia's eyes.

"Thirteen or fourteen adults," Mycroft replied. "Based on a brief search of the bedrooms... I'll now
lean towards thirteen, discounting Emma - twelve, discounting Sam. Judging by the contents of
their wardrobes, all involved in sex work of one manner of another."

"Fourteen people," Greg said to Olivia, watching her eyes panic. "All of them in sex work. It's your
house, is it? Inherited, as a guess. And you've opened it up - Sam, disowned by his parents; Emma,
left by her partner - you've given them a home."

His chest strained.

“All of them,” he said. “Every woman who walks Pembury Road at night. Saw it once before in
Manchester. You've banded together. And you collect lost souls - that's what you do. Where the
hell are Emma's kids, Olivia?”

Olivia held his stare in silence for a second more.

Then she swallowed, breathed in, and said,

"You don't understand."

"Try me," said Greg, his jaw locking tight.
"You can't. You don't know what life is like. You don't know a thing."

Greg almost snapped that he begged to differ. He swallowed it, barely. "They're at school, aren't they?" he said. "What about the youngest - Charlotte - how old did you guess, Mycroft? Less than three?"

"Lottie's at nursery," Olivia bit out before Mycroft could answer. She was turning pale. "And she's fine - and you don't understand."

She dragged in a breath, starting to shake.

"You can't give them to Dan," she said. "You can't give them to social services. It's bad enough they lost their mum. And I swear to God - ..." Her teeth gritted, all calm blanching from her face. "... - if you think you're going to take those girls and dump them in some care home - "

"They're not your girls," Greg said. His skin was turning cold. "It's not for you to hide them. They need social services. They need professionals to look after them while they're grieving their - "

"We're looking after them!" Olivia shouted. She got to her feet, scattering the hard-light screens. Fear and anger raged across her face. "We're looking after them better than the system ever will! You don't get it because the system was good to you - because you came out on top - you think that means the system's good to everyone and it's not. Those girls are our girls now."

Greg forced himself not to shout. His voice shook as if it were about to break.

"It's not your decision," he said, "what happens to someone else's - "

Mycroft suddenly stood up.

"Stop," he barked at Greg. "Stop this at once."

Greg's mouth twisted. He swallowed the remainder of what he'd been about to say, breathing hard. Mycroft stared into his eyes with a furious insistence.

"None of this will be solved by shouting," he breathed. "None of it."

Greg consented to be silent, fixing his jaw into place. Olivia's hands were still balled into fists.

"How are the children coping?" Mycroft said, directing the question at Olivia. She took a moment to answer him, still staring furiously at Greg.

"They're upset." Her chest heaved. "They're not alright - but they will be. So help me God."

"Do they understand that their mother is gone?"

"They're starting to," she said. Her shoulders set. "They need routine. They need to know they're safe. They need to know there will always be someone there for them. They won't get that in a care home."

"And the first time their school wants a signature from their mum," Greg demanded, "what are you going to do?"

Olivia's upper lip curled. "I've faked it twice already," she said. "Don't tell me schools care. Don't tell me any part of the system cares. Three of us have gone missing since September. Do you think the authorities cared? No. Because they're the authorities. They don't care a thing about actual people. And those girls are my family now."
"Two people in your 'family' are now dead," Greg told her, his shoulders heaving. "On top of, what? Two others missing, Sam said? That's not 'safe'.'"

"Then go catch whatever's preying on us!" she screamed at him. "And leave innocent people alone! That's your job, isn't it? Inspector? But no - you'd rather spend your time harassing us, pointlessly upholding 'the law', than actually get out there and protect people - people like Sam - "

Greg felt it slam into his heart at full force. He reeled with it. It lashed the very breath from his lungs.

Before he could let loose another word, Mycroft intervened.

"Greg." His eyes blazed across the lounge. "Please go outside and smoke. I will join you in the garden in ten minutes."

Greg opened his mouth, furious.

"Now, please," Mycroft barked.

Greg stared at him for a few seconds more - raging in silence, too angry to argue - then turned and left the room.

He slammed the front door as he went.
Stand Down

I had a dream, which was not all a dream.

- Lord Byron

'Darkness' (1816)

By the time the front door opened, Greg was starting on his third cigarette.

"Have you talked some sense into her?" he muttered, as he clicked at the lighter.

Mycroft shut the door. "And now I shall talk some sense into you."

Greg looked up from the cigarette in alarm.

"That young woman is our star witness," Mycroft said. "She is our only witness. She knew both victims intimately and survived an attack herself. I shouldn't have to explain to you that it's worth keeping her on side."

Greg's jaw set. He put the lighter away, dragging smoke deeply into his lungs.

"Those kids need social services," he said. "They need to go to the proper people. They need to go somewhere safe."

Mycroft rolled something around his mouth for a moment, tempering it.

"I've agreed to return this evening when the children are home from school. I'll observe them to ascertain how they're coping with the loss of their mother."

"And then?" said Greg.

Mycroft held his stare. "And then decisions will be made."

"What sort of decisions?"

"Decisions about the welfare of the children - and I shall start preparing you for this now, Greg. There's a strong chance they're in the best possible place."

"Are you serious?" Greg asked around the cigarette.

"Entirely," said Mycroft. "Their emotional well-being is clearly Olivia's highest priority. They've been given ample opportunity to talk and to share their grief. She is fiercely protective of their interests. I couldn't prescribe a better environment for them."

Greg shook his head, slowly blowing smoke from his nostrils.

Mycroft quietly folded his arms.
"You're upset with me," he remarked.

Greg looked away down the street, struggling to put it into words. "They've been here the whole time," he said. "All along. Every hour I've been worrying. They've been right here."

He didn't know why it distressed him.

"They should be with professionals," he finished, his voice thick. "Somewhere safe from harm."

"Social care would disrupt their lives, Greg. It would rob them of a great deal of stability and affection. The best they could hope for would be to find a caregiver as dedicated as Olivia already is."

"She’s got them all collected here, Mycroft! Every sex worker on Pembury Road! This house is basically a vampire buffet. And you want to leave three kids in it?"

"You assume that Excultus are a danger only to sex workers?"


Mycroft paused, selecting his words. "Olivia says they do not conduct business in the house."

"Great," Greg snapped. "And how are the kids going to cope without a legal guardian? This is - madness."

He inhaled deeply from the cigarette, wondering if it was all a dream - if it was sleep deprivation, or shock kicking in after last night - some hideous mess of all three.

"Those kids need someone to be responsible for them," he muttered. "Why the hell do I have to state this?"

"Do they not already have that?"

"Look, it's - … it's more than - …" Greg put a hand across his eyes. He felt like he was falling apart. "All this time, we've been trying to find those kids. We can't just leave them in a situation where they could be left alone again. What if something happens to Olivia? It's just - … God - how will they ever be alright? Why can't anyone see this but me?"

Mycroft's brow contracted gently. He took a moment to survey Greg, reading something written in his features.

"This sudden insistence on procedure is strange," he remarked.

Greg scowled around his cigarette, dragging on it hard. "We're law enforcement," he muttered. "I shouldn't have to justify doing things properly."

"Mm. But you're usually the first to start stretching the bounds of the law, when it's right… now you're seizing for it in desperation."

He paused, regarding Greg with a calmness that only made him feel more defensive.

"You've had very little sleep," Mycroft said. "You had a traumatic night. Amelia would have my head if she knew I'd even let you out of the house. These - decisions should not be made in haste."
Greg glared down at the chipped edge of the doorstep, saying nothing. He couldn't.

Mycroft lifted his chin.

"I'm standing you down for the day," he said. "Sam is beyond our help. We've located the children. And you need to rest."

Greg huffed as he heaved the last out of his cigarette.

"You've no authority to stand me down," he said, dropping the butt to the ground and grinding it under his heel.

"As a CID professional, no," Mycroft said. "As a psychologist - and as someone who takes the closest possible interest in your welfare - I do."

He looked into Greg's eyes very seriously.

"I've given Olivia my assurances that you will not contact social services until I've had a chance to assess the children. If that is violated, Greg, we will lose our only witness. We will lose the only hope in this case. I trust that's clear to you."

Greg looked away down the street, his shoulders tense.

"Fine," he said. He hated it, but he said it anyway. They couldn't argue here forever. "We - need to go now. I have to collect the phone from TJ. There might be more evidence on it. Things to follow up."

"I will do that," Mycroft said, patiently. "I will also speak to the commander and tell her we can now say with some certainty this is not a lone attacker. Meanwhile, you are going home to sleep."

Greg attempted not to react. Mycroft caught the flicker in his eyes before he could mask it.

"To my home," he clarified. "Where I will later join you."

Greg bit the inside of his cheek. His heart felt like it was pulling itself in a hundred different directions, none of them anywhere good.

"I'm coming back here tonight," he said, stiffly. "With you. I need to see Emma's kids. I need to know they're alright."

Mycroft's expression was unreadable. "Olivia has agreed to only one of us."

"Well, she can agree to two of us," Greg said, annoyed, "or there'll be a whole lot more people round here to see the kids."

Mycroft processed this, carefully considering the threat. Calm filtered through his features.

"You need to see them for yourself," he reasoned, after a moment. "Understandable. Both of us, then - this evening. But first, I insist that you rest."

It was only as Greg's head dropped back into a pillow that he realised how ill he felt. Noon sunlight
was dappled on the curtains; Mycroft's apartment seemed to hug him within its quiet.

As Greg settled, Mycroft leant across the bed. He was still fully-dressed in his coat and shoes. He cupped Greg's cheek in one leather-gloved hand, his expression gentle.

"If you cannot sleep," he murmured, "just lie quietly. Everything is in hand."

He pressed his lips between Greg's eyes. Weakly they flickered shut.

"I'll return in a few hours," Mycroft promised against his brow.

Greg found his throat suddenly thick. He couldn't stop seeing Olivia scream at him, telling him to get out there and protect people. He couldn't stop seeing Sam lying dead beneath that sigil. *He was my only person*, she'd wept. *My only person left.*

He looked up into Mycroft's eyes, feeling his stomach knot.

"Be safe, will you?" he said. "Take my car. Tell Vickery I'm fine."

"You are not fine," Mycroft remarked. His eyes trailed Greg's face. "But I will tell her that you are."

Greg hesitated. His heart strained against the front wall of his chest.

He reached up for Mycroft's mouth.

"Ah - ..." Two gloved fingers pressed gently to his lips. "No. The last substance we need to risk in your bloodstream is that one."

Greg swallowed. "Later?"

"Later." Mycroft's gaze softened. "Now be still. Anthea will watch over you." He drew away. His weight left the mattress, and he turned to leave.

"Mycroft?" Greg said, his chest tightening.

Mycroft paused in the doorway.

"I - need those kids to be alright," Greg said. His heart beat hard. "I promised."

Mycroft frowned, gently. "Promised?" he said.

Greg bit his tongue.

"Promised myself. It's - important to me."

Mycroft held his eyes from the doorway.

"I - appreciate this is an emotive subject for you, Greg." He paused, regarding Greg with assurity. "We will make the right decision. We will make it together - later."

And without another word, he was gone.

Greg listened to his footsteps move away down the stairs. After a minute, there came the distant thud of a door being closed and locked.

It was the first time he'd been alone since he'd entered his flat last night.
Greg inhaled, slowly. The scent of Mycroft's bedding filled his lungs. It filtered outwards into his veins - like cigarette smoke, only softer. It reached its way somewhere deeper.

He pulled the covers up around his neck, burrowed into them and shut his eyes.

Sam didn't say a word to Greg. He simply wept into the shoulder of Emma's leather jacket, heaving bitter and angry sobs, as she stroked his hair in silence.

The two of them were standing beside the bed, looking down on the bodies that once they had occupied - laid together, dead, as blood soaked into the cheap and broken mattress beneath them. On the wall above, the Excul tus sigil gleamed as brightly as the full moon - vicious, mocking white. It was a scene that Greg had never put his eyes on, but one he would never forget.

As he tore his horrified gaze away, he found Emma watching him across the bed - silent, soft and waiting.

His heart thudded with despair.

"I'm sorry," he managed. He couldn't bear the look on her face. It made him feel sick with guilt - her dead eyes, fixed upon his living ones. "I'm so sorry."

Emma did not reply. She wound her fingers gently through Sam's hair, lowering her gaze. Sam buried himself in her arms and sobbed.

For some time Greg didn't dare to speak. He knew it wasn't his fault. He knew that he couldn't have known - but all the same, it had happened again. Now there were two of them, gone forever. He was meant to be stopping this. He was meant to be making it alright. He was meant to be out there, protecting people, and he couldn't.

He didn't know how.

He didn't even know where to begin.

"We found your kids," he told Emma, weakly. His throat contracted around the words.

Emma smiled a little. "You did, huh?" She rubbed between Sam's shoulders, her eyes trailing to the sigil. "They were never lost, darlin'. Well done though. Makes a lotta difference."

Greg's chest ached. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just..." He wanted to cry too. He'd never felt so helpless. They were being preyed on, all of them. "Olivia's given us a description," he tried. "We'll stop him - I promise. And I'll look after her... her and your kids. I'll keep them safe. I swear."

Emma said nothing for a while, looking down at the corpses laid together on the bed - her own, so torn out of shape it was barely human; Sam, so grey and cold he might be made of stone. His sobs were tearing Greg apart.

"I told you, sweetheart," Emma said. "Nobody can look after anybody... you shoulda gotten outta here while you still had the chance."

She raised an eyebrow.
"S'too late now. They're on your tail as well… you and that fella of yours…"

Sam let out a howl, his face contorting with misery. Emma wrapped him up and hushed him, hiding a kiss in his hair.

"I know, Sammie… I know. I'm mad, too."

Greg couldn't bear it any longer.

"Help me," he begged her. "Please. Tell me what I should do. Anything. I need to stop this happening."

She seemed unmoved - unconvinced - as if she'd heard this all before.

"Best get out there, hadn't you?" she intoned. "Stop bein' prey. Start bein' a hunter. Catch, before you get caught - or there won't be none of us left for you to keep safe."

"I always feel rather rude doing this," Amelia said, as she settled at her desk with tea for one.

Mycroft smiled, gating his fingers on one knee.

"It's quite alright," he said. "Would you believe I still find it pleasant to watch?"

Amelia pondered this as she stirred the cup.

"The little rituals of calm?" she said.

"Mm…" Mycroft murmured. "The twenty-third century, and the whole world still stops for tea."

He removed a small piece of lint from his sleeve.

"You truly notice humanity's fascination with food when you find yourself outside of it," he remarked, as he watched her add a single level spoonful of sugar. "The variety... the love of novelty. The tiny decisions that hold such weight."

_Hazelnut spread_, he thought.

He wondered briefly what Greg would eat tonight.

"What did you find at the brothel?" Amelia asked, drawing Mycroft back to the present. "The one this morning… 'Princes', was it?"

With regret, he said,

"A young man, drained… the sigil. Painted by a practiced hand. All the evidence suggests a different perpetrator than the one who attacked Emma Marsden - and different again to the assailant of DI Lestrade."

"So three of them, at least," she said. "All using that sigil."

"Mm." Mycroft looked her in the eye. "DI Lestrade's attacker... mentioned me by name. My conclusions have travelled in an unwanted direction, Amelia."
Amelia sighed. "I feared they might," she said.

She kept hold of his gaze, reading him carefully as she spoke.

"We always knew it was a possibility, Mycroft. These things are never fully ripped out. Just cut back to the root, time and time again."

"If we're fortunate," he said, "it's merely a splinter cell. An old foot soldier, reminiscing their glory days."

"We shall see," Amelia said. Her eyes dimmed a little. "Keep me updated."

Mycroft gave a single nod. "I shall."

"How is Lestrade?" she asked, sitting back in her chair. She crossed one leg over the other.


"Determined to return to duty," he told her, at length. "Perhaps too determined. He's still experiencing some shock, but that will settle with the passing days..." He paused, watching her take a discreet sip of tea. "DI Lestrade's commitment to a successful outcome is - heartening. He's a very able officer."

"Yes," she said, against the rim of her tea cup. "Yes, he is. I'm glad he's with you."

"I - fear what this might do to him, Amelia. If Excultus return to any semblance of their power... it will not be easy. Not by any means."

Amelia regarded him for a moment, envisaging that possibility. It aged her expression by ten years.

"Stop them before they can," she said.

Mycroft gave her a small smile. "An elegant solution. I'll - do my best to implement it."

"Keep Lestrade off the clock tomorrow, will you? A full day. Tie him to something if you must."

Mycroft's expression did not move. "I shall."

"Tell him he's not to step foot through the door until Friday."

"I will."

"If I catch one word of him out on inquiries, I'll have the pair of you organising this year's Christmas party. Understood? And believe me, Mycroft, I shall remember."

Harsh punishment indeed. "Yes, commander."

"Have you heard anything else from journalists?"

"No," Mycroft said. "Not yet. But then, Sam Buckley has not been dead twelve hours."

"If you do, transfer them straight to me. I'll handle nonsense like that from now on, Mycroft. I want you and Lestrade on the hunt - from Friday onwards - not wading through this sort of mess... if it stands in your way, gives you trouble or slows you down, point me at it."

Mycroft's heart stirred. "I will," he said. "Thank you."
"I've already told forensics that I want your reports fast-tracked to the top of the queue. This whole situation is moving at speed... I'm not having you sit around waiting for the lab to finish their tea break."

A tablet screen on her desk began to flash. She picked it up, read it and dismissed it with a flick of her finger and a snort.

"What's your next move?" she asked, picking up her tea.

Mycroft had been contemplating it on the drive here. He was going to download the incident board to his wrist-set, take it home and update it while Greg slept. There had been a number of major developments in very rapid succession - they needed to retain a grasp on the wider picture.

"We've made contact with a woman who I believe escaped Emma Marsden's killer... she's agreed to produce a photo-fit for us. We'll distribute it, along with the CCTV, to brothels near Pembury Road in the hope that someone recognises this man. With your permission, commander, I'd like to increase street patrols in the area at night."

"Consider it done. I'll poach from wider CID."

"Thank you. I'm also going to circulate a description of DI Lestrade's attacker, and see if we can identify him. There's a chance he was an unregistered moroi, but the man still had a landlord, neighbours and some means of paying rent... someone in this city will recognise him."

The corner of Amelia's mouth lifted slightly. "Everyone has a hairdresser," she remarked.

It would be a sad day for Scotland Yard when Amelia Vickery retired, Mycroft thought. He wondered if London would survive the month.

Not in any recognisable form.

"How are you managing?" she asked, as she took another sip of her tea.

Her tone was brisk; anyone who didn't know Amelia might think she cared very little about the response.

Mycroft had known her for nearly twenty years now. Amelia Vickery didn't ask redundant questions. If she asked 'how are you?', she meant it - and she expected a meaningful answer.

He took the time to find one for her.

"It... feels like the beginning did, before." He paused. "I wish to God that it didn't."

"And are you alright?" she asked.

Mycroft inhaled.

"I am... more worried than last time," he decided. Greg's face passed through his mind. "But - less afraid. I am alright, Amelia. Somehow."

Her smile was small. With a sip of her tea, she said,

"Once more unto the breach, dear friend... once more."

Mycroft returned her smile. "'God for Harry, England, and Saint George'."
Lexi was the oldest. She was nine, she said - but would be ten in February.

She had a quiet seriousness beyond her years, and a wariness of unfamiliar men that made Greg's heart clench with discomfort. She insisted on helping Olivia peel carrots for dinner, while her sisters played on the kitchen floor.

Greg wanted to cry just watching her.

When the carrots were done, it was a book that she reached for - not a toy. *Adventure Stories For Boys*. They were more interesting than the ones for girls, she politely explained to Mycroft when he asked. She took the book away to a corner chair, and read in silence with a blanket pulled up to her chin. The sounds of the busy kitchen did not seem to reach her. She was alone amongst it all, Greg thought. He knew that feeling.

All three girls bore an overwhelming resemblance to their mother.

Greg - whom Olivia had received at the door without a word - had placed himself away on the corner sofa, trying to be inconspicuous. From time to time the two younger girls shot him watchful little glances, but mostly left him to it.

They were far more interested in Mycroft. His gentle manner with them was affecting Greg in ways he couldn't quite explain. They chatted with him, showing him schoolwork and pictures as he sat on the linoleum in his corduroy trousers and argyle-print socks. Mycroft had insisted they change out of workwear before driving here. The children needed to believe they were ordinary visitors. Greg wasn't sure he was managing to pull it off, but he was trying.

As Olivia approached the sofa with a bowl of spaghetti in her hands, his heart twisted.

"No," he told her, in despair. "No, I couldn't..."

"It's fine," she said. She put the bowl into his hands, not meeting his eyes. "We've got plenty."

Greg rested it quietly on his knees. The heat warmed through the denim of his jeans.

Mycroft was now kneeling by the washing machine, listening patiently as Lottie talked him through her progress on her jigsaw. She had the bolshy, noisy confidence of a three-year-old - humming, sighing, filling word gaps with approximate sounds.
As Olivia returned to the pan, Mycroft said,
"Not for me, Olivia - thank you."
"Are you sure?" she said, tapping sauce from the wooden spoon.
"Allergic, I'm afraid," Mycroft said. "Garlic."

On a better day, Greg might have smiled. He silently twisted a little spaghetti around his fork.
"Really?" Olivia said, as she transferred pasta into four bowls. "That must be difficult."
"Mm. Anything in the allium family - onions, leeks. Chives."
"How do you season anything?"

"We all have our crosses to bear," Mycroft said, and supplied Lottie with the piece she was seeking. She squashed it triumphantly into place.

When the children were sitting at the table, eating in peaceful quiet, Olivia brought her own bowl across to the sofa. She sat beside Greg, leaning away from him, and curled her bare feet up beneath her.
"How did you come to own the house?" Mycroft asked, studying the crayon drawings on the fridge.

Olivia gave a humourless smile, stirring through her spaghetti. "You wouldn't believe me," she said.
"Would I not?"

"No." Olivia chewed for a moment, licked tomato sauce from the corner of her mouth, and said, "It was a gift."

"A gift?"

"A friend of mine," she said - just a little too casually. "He left it to me in his will when he died."

"A very generous friend," Mycroft remarked.

"Yes," Olivia said. Greg watched her tangling spaghetti around her fork. "Yes, he was. He was always kind. Charities. Philanthropy. He was - a little famous, I think. He didn't have any family left... and we'd been friends for a few years..."

She ate in silence for a moment, looking at no-one.
"I used to tell him what I'd do if I had money," she said. "I'd get a house - open it up... then he died, and... well, I didn't believe them when they told me. His great-niece tried to take it off me. Whole army of lawyers. But his will was water-tight, so..."

She hesitated, skewering a meatball. She'd given herself two fewer than anyone else.
"I wish he'd told me when he was alive," she murmured. "I never got the chance to say thank you."
"How long ago was this?" Greg asked. He'd stopped eating, suddenly unable to swallow.
"Three years ago," she replied, not looking at him.

"You've - been here ever since?"

"Yes." Olivia chewed, glancing across at the table. Lexi was helping Lottie twirl spaghetti around her fork - patient, quiet, her own food put to one side. "Sam, first. A couple more the month after, then more and more... people tend to come and go, but... some stay." She paused. "Sam stayed. I - thought he'd stay forever."

"M'sorry," Greg said. He gazed at her silent profile and her downcast eyes, beautifully outlined in black kohl. "It's not right. Emma, too. It's not okay."

Olivia inhaled, drawing the sadness back down beneath.

"Life," she said. She stabbed another meatball. "It doesn't care if you're good or bad. It'll kill you anyway."

Greg watched her eat for a while, his stomach hardening. He decided he couldn't bear it.

"It's not - life," he said. "It's people. It's some bunch of - ..." He hesitated, amending his language for the young ears present. "... people, deciding they've got the right to prey on the rest of us. It's nothing about 'life'. You know that, don't you?"

"You haven't lived my life," she murmured.

"No," Greg admitted. "But I've lived mine. And I bet that every problem you've ever had, there was a person at the bottom of it. If you just blame 'life' for things, and tell yourself that's just what happens, then... bad people get away with whatever they want. Nothing's ever put right."

Olivia chewed her pasta in silence for a while.

"Is that why you became a police officer?" she asked.

Greg looked down at his hands. "I suppose so."

"You were trying to put things right?"

Greg hesitated. "As much as I could... yeah."

She glanced up at him, her expression shadowed. Her eyes were the darkest brown.

"You don't know what they'll go through in care," she said. "You can't even imagine it."

For what felt like the tenth time that day, Greg's heart quietly broke. He steadied himself, aware of Mycroft discreetly monitoring the conversation from by the fridge.

"Look," he said. "You could petition for temporary guardianship of the kids... there'd be forms to fill out. And you'd need to provide documentation to prove that you're - "

"I'm a whore," Olivia reminded him. Her eyes narrowed, her voice softening. "I live in a house with eleven other whores. Nobody's going to award me guardianship of anyone."

"Well, don't put that on the form," Greg told her, frowning. "Tell them about your café job. Or just..."

He pushed his hands over his face, hating himself, realising he could now choose to be either a bad
person or a bad police officer. He thought about his mum, and he made his damn choice.

"Just... *lie low,* alright?" he said to her. "For a few days - until we get our heads together - because if they find out I knew you were concealing the kids all along, I'll be for the high jump. Alright? Then they'll never listen to me when I say the kids should stay with you."

Olivia said nothing, watching him very closely.

"We'll... get Mycroft to vouch for you," he muttered, vaguely. "He'll tell them the kids are happy here. But I *can't* deal with this right now. We've got vampires stalking Hackney, and I don't even dare go back to my flat, so... just keep your head down. Make sure the girls get off to school everyday."

Olivia nodded, numbly.

"We'll sort this out," he said. His voice hardened. "And if you hear anything, or see anything, will you *please* just tell us? Sam hid most of what he knew. *You* hid most of what you knew. Everybody's hiding things. And I *can't* keep you safe if you don't even tell me you're in danger. Help me to help you, alright? Or we're all going down - *all* of us."

She nodded again.

"Thank you," Greg sighed. He pushed his hands wearily across his eyes. When he opened them, he found Mycroft watching him from by the fridge. His arms were folded; his mouth had lifted in a small smile.

"And life's not punishing you," Greg told Olivia, quietly. He reached for his fork. "Life isn't cruel or kind. The world isn't cruel or kind. It's only people who can be that - 'cause only people make decisions."

He twisted spaghetti around his fork.

"You don't have to accept what people do," he said. "You can tell them they're wrong. You can do something about it - even if you're angry. Even if you're scared."

For a long time, Olivia said and did nothing. She watched him eat in silence, her eyes dark and shining.

Greg nudged two of his meatballs onto her plate.

"You need those," he told her, quietly. "*You're* a guardian now... you need your strength. Get them eaten."

Olivia swallowed.

"Thank you," she managed. Her voice was thick with the tears she suppressed from her eyes.

Greg decided he would cry them for her later.

"I'm police," he muttered. "S'my job... looking after people."
Greg only realised as he buckled himself in that he'd put himself in the passenger seat of his own damn car. Mycroft didn't remark upon it. He got in, closed the door and quietly fitted the key.

Before he started the engine, he inclined his head to Greg in the darkness.

"I'll - make discreet enquiries to child welfare," he said. "I'm certain this can be handled sensitively. Amelia can intervene if she must."

"We genuinely don't have time for this," Greg managed. His heart strained with exhaustion. This time yesterday, he'd not even been attacked. "We've got people being drained to death behind locked doors, how can we even - "

"Hush," Mycroft breathed - and laid a hand on Greg's knee. The quiet touch seemed to bypass layer upon layer of defences. It reached right through to the soul.

Greg realised in a rush how tired he was, how weak - how bleak the whole world seemed.

Mycroft held his gaze, very seriously.

"Murder," he said, "is taking place right now."

Greg stared at him in silence, his chest tightening.

"In this very moment," Mycroft said, "a person is losing their life on the decision of someone else. In London, perhaps - or across the world - somewhere. And you cannot be there to stop it. In seconds, minutes or hours, it will be done."

Greg's stomach heaved. Mycroft looked into his eyes, as gentle as night rain. His face was shrouded in the shadows of the unlit street.

"You can only change so much," Mycroft told him. "You can only ever do what you can. I know there's one death above them all that you're trying to put right - and I know it feels as if you never will - but in truth, Greg, you have. A thousand times over. Every life you have ever altered…"

He inclined his head quietly towards the house they'd just left.

"Every family you've protected… you have given someone else what was taken from you. By your decisions, you have put good into the world. Excultus might transmit the impression that they are a threat beyond what you and I can tackle, but… I believe we are stronger than we think. Both of us."

Greg struggled to draw the words together. He struggled to make himself say them.

"I don't know what to do," he whispered. "I don't know where to start. This is - more than I've ever - "

Mycroft's fingers stroked through his hair, calming him.

"Fortunately, sergeant… your DI has a number of ideas."

His eyes glittered, grey and bright even in the gloom. Greg's mouth twisted. He took a few moments just to take in that expression, and let it calm him.

"Where do we start then, boss?" he asked.

"We take you home," Mycroft murmured. "Two of us step through that door, at the end of this 'awful fucking day' - the first of many 'awful fucking days', as you'll recall - and we remind
ourselves that it means we are winning."

Greg gave him a half-smile. "And in the morning we get up, get our hands off each other and finish this thing."

Mycroft's eyes flicked briefly sideways.

"Not quite," he confessed. "Amelia has in fact grounded you until Friday for your health - and I am to share in your punishment if she catches you working before then. Tomorrow, there's no need whatsoever for you to get up - nor to 'finish this thing'."

Greg hesitated. His breath caught in his throat.

"Nor to - get our hands off each other?" he said.

Mycroft held his gaze.

He reached a hand to the dashboard, silently turned the key, and started the engine.

For the second time that day, Greg found his head dropping back into pillows as Mycroft leant over him.

"Shhh…" The stroke of a mouth at his temple, tasting his sweat; fingers, thick, opening him up with each slow push, slick and steady and so gentle he wanted to die; his own urgent panting, fragile in the quiet. His stomach muscles quivered. "Shhh, Greg… it's alright…"

Mycroft's body was warm. It felt good on top of Greg's - heavy, reassuring and safe. His voice came low and soft across Greg's forehead. Greg ground his head back into Mycroft's pillows, breathing hard, pulling his thighs apart for more.

"Please," he begged. "Please - I want - …"

"Mm?" Mycroft's fingers gently fucked him a little harder, sending skitters of pleasure darting wildly through his body. His hips jerked and his pulse accelerated. Every thrust only drove the feeling deeper. "Good?"

Greg bit down into his lip.

"Mycroft - Mycroft, please - i-in me - "

Mycroft's eyes blazed softly in the darkness. "Are you certain?"

"Oh, fuck… please, just - …"

"Like this?"

"Like this. I want to see your face. Want to kiss you." Greg's heart was hammering. He didn't usually take; it had been years. But right now there was nothing he wanted more in the world. "Can you please just - be inside me - God, I need - …"

Mycroft shifted gently, his fingers easing free. He reached for a pillow.
"Lift for me," he whispered against Greg's cheek. Greg obediently raised his hips, his breath now quick and deep. Mycroft was about to take him - have him. First time. Quiet, safe. Curtains drawn. The fuzzy softness of the bedside lamp. He wanted it so badly he couldn't think. He squirmed as Mycroft wedged the pillow gently beneath him, lifting him up - then Mycroft settled into place, and leant down to press their foreheads together. Greg pulled his legs up, reminding himself to breathe.

"Are you comfortable?" Mycroft whispered.

Greg gazed into his eyes, trembling a little. "Stop being such a gentleman," he managed.

Mycroft's eyes flashed.

"Shall I pretend it's the first time?" he murmured, reaching down. Greg shuddered as he felt the head of Mycroft's cock nudge at him gently - the final few seconds of a world where they'd never done this. He wrapped his arms around Mycroft with a shiver.

As Mycroft began to nuzzle inside him, Greg's mouth opened with a silent cry. The whole world shrank to that one, desperate sensation - the slow stretch, the ache, Mycroft, the first time.

He shook with it.

Mycroft whispered against his cheek.

"Thank you, Greg. For not giving up on me."

Greg's throat contracted tightly. He buried his fingers into Mycroft's hair.

"S'okay," he whispered back, closing his eyes. Pain. He'd forgotten the pain. He held onto Mycroft, knowing it wouldn't last, breathing his way through it. "Don't ever walk off from me again," he begged, suddenly. "I need you. I mean it. Don't go. Don't ever fucking leave."

"I shan't. I shan't, I promise..." Mycroft caressed his mouth across Greg's cheek, shaking a little as their bodies pressed together. "I'm - sorry I tried. I... thought this - couldn't happen. Not to people like me."

Greg felt his chest almost collapse. He gathered Mycroft's face in his hands, desperate, panting.

"People like you?" he gasped, staring into the bright grey eyes. "You're - you're wonderful... how can you - how can you not know that you're wonderful?"

Mycroft's expression tightened.

"What?" Greg whispered, frightened. "What's wrong?"

"If you realised how half of Scotland Yard look at you..." Mycroft's eyes ached. They were together now, not moving - just holding inside each other. "And now you're here," Mycroft managed. "Here with me. I can barely - ..."

"With the one I want," Greg bit out. "The one I wanted all along."

Hearing it in his own voice made it suddenly hurt - and he realised with horror that tears were breaking through in his eyes. He scrabbled to push them away.

"Oh, shit," he whispered. "Jesus. Sorry, I've just - this fucking day - ..."
"Stop..." Mycroft caught Greg's hand. He drew it gently to one side, resting it against the pillows - lacing their fingers together. He brushed the tip of his nose through Greg's tears, nuzzling them away. "What makes you cry?"

Greg gripped his hand, now fighting a strange urge to laugh.

"Is this a normal part of fucking a psychologist?" he whispered.

Mycroft smiled against his mouth. It was the most perfect thing Greg had ever felt.

"Tell me," Mycroft said, softly. "I'm listening."

Greg hesitated. He hardly dared to voice it. It was too fragile - too tiny. If he turned it from thought into sound, it wouldn't just be a wish anymore. Someone would come to take it away.

Mycroft lowered his head, nuzzling at Greg's ear; his cock stirred gently within Greg's body as he moved. Greg closed his eyes, inhaling hard.

"Tell me," Mycroft whispered. "Tell me what distresses you."

Greg swallowed. He pushed his fingers through his lover's auburn hair, laying his other hand on Mycroft's back.

"The - ... the thought we might be okay," he whispered. "And how much I want that."

He shivered as Mycroft gently began to move within him, all pain gone - just the first soft strokes of comfort. Mycroft's eyes rested protectively on his face, watching him start to enjoy it - watching his barriers gently erode.

"I'm scared," Greg heard himself say, suddenly - and there it was. He let the tears rise up in his eyes, shocked, too raw in this moment to hold them back. "I'm scared they're watching you. Scared what they'll do. Scared I'll - I'll let someone else down. Again. Story of my life. Scared of danger - didn't matter to me before, but..."

He swallowed, staring with desperation into Mycroft's eyes.

"I never had anything to lose before," he whimpered. "Now I do. I can't bear it."

Mycroft stroked a kiss across his temple. "I understand," he murmured. "It's alright to be afraid."

It was like being rocked, Greg thought - the slow and gentle in-and-out, easing him, softening up all his fear and letting it drift away - quiet eyes looking down at him - Mycroft's eyes, Mycroft's bed, Mycroft's protection. He was safe, and in some way he couldn't cope with that. He wanted to be safe forever. He wanted everyone to be safe forever.

He didn't just want it to be a love story. He wanted it to be a happy story, too.

"I'm not gonna cry every time we do this," he managed, blushing hard. Mycroft smiled, stroking his lips over the corner of Greg's mouth.

"Mm... I should probably reassure you that not all my psychological assessments are conducted in this fashion..."

Greg laughed aloud. He couldn’t help it; his head fell back into the pillows with a flump. Mycroft grinned, nosing at his collarbones as they slowly moved together in rhythm.
“Oh, fuck…” Greg sighed, dragging in a long breath. He shuddered as Mycroft’s cock steadily deepened its movement inside him. This was starting to feel like fucking heaven. "Oh God, Mycroft… what the fuck are we doing?"

Mycroft gave a firmer, more purposeful stroke, and Greg tightened with the sudden flush of pleasure. He let out a gasped moan.

Mycroft whispered against his neck.

"You’ve had an emotional twenty-four hours." He slid his cool fingertips down Greg’s side, stirring his skin with little thrills of sensation. Greg bit into his lip, groaning. "You’ve had a number of shocks. In the next twenty-four, there will be none. And you will feel better."

"Are you... sure there won't be?" Greg asked, already wary.

"I am." Mycroft nuzzled into his throat. "Because I will not permit it." He gently pushed a little deeper still, coaxing another tight moan from Greg's mouth. Greg dug his fingers into Mycroft’s lower back.

"Oh… God…” He shivered, arching. "You promise?"

"Mmhm. You will be back in the fight on Friday… until then, you are mine. Wholly and completely. And I will heal you."

Mycroft grazed his mouth across Greg's jaw, fucking him gently - slowly - a perfect and frictionless rocking. Pleasure lapped through Greg's body, as comforting as warm water on his skin. He never wanted this to end.

"Do you know what the human heart must feel," Mycroft asked, soft against his lips, "before it can feel strong?"

Greg gazed up at him, overwhelmed. "What?" he whispered.

Mycroft's eyes shone down into his.

"Safe," he breathed.

He pressed his mouth to Greg's.

Words gave way to touch - to slow kisses and soft sounds, and the rhythm of gentle sex. Heat began to sear in Greg's blood. He whimpered it to Mycroft, burning up as Mycroft stroked his face and soothed him, and whispered to him, "Shhh, it's alright… let me make it alright…” The burning deepened; Greg was full of soft white fire. He wanted to fuck all night. He just wanted Mycroft here, right here, their skin bare and warm together, hands on his body, Mycroft's voice low and tender in his ear, his cock steadily rubbing that place inside Greg that made him want to cry again - more kisses, slower, deeper, and Mycroft's neighbours were going to hate them because he couldn't keep quiet - couldn't bite down on how good it felt. Mycroft didn't want him to.

"That's it," he breathed to Greg, shuddering, stroking kisses over his throat. "Moan for me…” A deeper thrust; Greg cried out, gasping. "Greg..."

As Mycroft's mouth idled over his neck, bathing him in love, it occurred to Greg with a flash that most people would be afraid.

He'd seen the fangs. He knew what Mycroft was.
The mouth now nuzzling at his pulse could be capable of ending his life.

Instead he was lifting his chin to it, shivering, whimpering weakly as Mycroft’s fingertips trailed down his sides.

He'd never felt so safe in his life.

"Mine," Mycroft hushed against his throat. His hand eased between them, wrapped around Greg's cock and began to slide firmly up and down. Greg arched into the feeling with desperation.

"Yours," he gasped. His heart-rate suddenly surged. "Yours."

"Mm?" Mycroft's fist tightened, squeezing. "Prove it."

"Oh fuck, Mycroft..." Greg gritted his teeth, clawing his fingers into Mycroft's back and panting hard. He was about to come or die - possibly both. "F-fuuuck - …"

"Give me it," Mycroft breathed against his pulse, his voice cracking. "All of it."

Greg was wrenched at once into a hurricane of feeling. He twisted and sobbed and stretched as it blew him to pieces, swiftly losing track of which desperate voice was his and which was Mycroft, which hands were his, which one of them was inside the other. There was only the thunder; only the rush. In the ringing depths of his mind Greg worried briefly he was hurting Mycroft - gripping at his back too tightly, clinging to him too hard - but then Mycroft's arms grappled around him with a sharp moan, heaved him closer still, and in a single seamless knot of each other they came, gasping out every breath of it.

Afterwards - as rational thought swirled loosely through Greg's mind like oils in water - Mycroft returned to bed with a warm cloth.

He rested beside Greg on the mattress, his breathing slow and deep. Gently, he cleaned off Greg's stomach. As he did, he watched his lover's face with a quiet smile; his eyes seemed to glow.

Greg realised he'd never been looked at quite like that before - not once in his life.

He looked back at Mycroft, shy, enjoying the warmth of the cloth on his flushed skin.

As the cloth eased lower, between his thighs, he shivered slightly.

"Is this alright?" Mycroft asked. His voice came as a gently-roughened rasp.

Greg stirred, parting his legs. "Yes..." His lover cleaned him gently, pressing a tender kiss to the inside of his knee. It felt somehow just as intimate as the sex - almost more. Greg's eyes closed.

"How do you feel?" Mycroft murmured.

Greg let out a long-held breath.

"Christ, how can you just… ask me that? With your voice all husky?" He sighed, finding the words. "Calm."

He felt Mycroft smile against his knee. "Good."

Greg opened his eyes, watching as Mycroft tossed the cloth away into a laundry basket.

"Did Vickery really say not to go in tomorrow?" he murmured, as Mycroft eased gently back on top
"Yes," Mycroft said, and kissed between his eyes. "It doesn't matter if fifty bodies are piled on my doorstep by morning. You are not to be involved in any capacity until nine AM on Friday, or Amelia will rain down fire upon us both. You must rest."

It wouldn't be easy, Greg thought. Even now, backstage in his brain, the habits of police-work continued to whir. In the peace now soaking his soul, he made a conscious decision to trust Mycroft - to trust Commander Vickery - to let them stand him down, just once. It was twenty-four hours. London wouldn't fall.

He nuzzled at Mycroft's chin, gently.

"What'll we do all day?" he asked.

Mycroft smiled against his forehead. "Name my fish."

Greg huffed; he stroked his hands up Mycroft's back. "Then what?"

Mycroft's eyes danced with amusement. "We shall need to source you food at some point," he said.

Greg’s heart fluttered a little in his chest.

"Are we - going grocery shopping?" he said. He couldn't fight a smile. "Is that actually what's going to happen?"

"Unless you're going to live on cereal and hazelnut spread," Mycroft murmured. "Yes..."

"Alright..." Greg didn't know why he found the prospect so wonderful. He just did. He reached up to run a hand through Mycroft's hair, simply admiring him for a moment - gazing up at him, the man that everyone feared, now resting gently on top of him in bed.

A soft thrill rippled through Greg's chest.

"We just - ..." he murmured.

Mycroft's mouth curved; he nosed at Greg's palm. "Is it alright that we did?" he asked.

"Yeah… very alright." Greg smiled, watching Mycroft catch his fingers and lick at them gently. "I, um… don't usually take."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow, releasing Greg's ring finger from between his lips.

"You should have said..." he murmured.

"You mean like the bit when I said, 'can you please just be inside me'? I should have said something like that, you mean?"

Mycroft smiled, lowering his eyes.

"I'm… trying to tell you that you're special," Greg said, quietly. "That I trust you."

"It - means a great deal to me that you trust me." Mycroft leant down; he placed a kiss between Greg's eyes, feather-light. "We… have a year's worth of bonding to do, Greg... and thirty-four hours in which to do it."
Greg bit his lower lip, affecting seriousness, even as his heart cast itself up to the heavens.

"That's a pretty tall order..." he said. "D’you think we're up to it?"

"We shall need to work together," Mycroft remarked.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's the first thing..." Greg hesitated; he bit his lip. "We... might have to have a lot of sex."

"Might we?" Mycroft murmured, playing along. His expression was a mask of casual interest. "Do elaborate."

"I mean... I guess it depends how much sex we would have had in a year..." Greg idled his hands low down Mycroft's back, idly cupping his arse. "And I can't speak for you, but... that's at least four hundred times, right?"

Mycroft's eyes glittered wildly.

"Eight times a week," he noted, intrigued. "Which day of the week would have become my favourite by now?"

"Sunday," Greg said, without hesitation. He smiled, gazing at Mycroft's mouth. "Wake you up in the morning. Settle you to sleep at night."

Mycroft marvelled at him for a moment, overcome.

"Four hundred times in thirty-four hours is... perhaps ambitious," he said. "But I'm... more than willing to join you in the attempt."

"How about just a few utterly perfect times?" Greg said, softly. "Quality over quantity."

"Mm. Eminently sensible."

"Start in the morning?" Greg said. "I'll wake you up."

Mycroft's mouth curved. "Not if I wake you up first."

As they settled together in the darkness, Greg cuddled into Mycroft's arms. He kissed his lover's bare shoulder - kissed the soft scattering of freckles there, loving every one of them - and murmured,

"Mycroft?"

"Mm?"

"We'll - be okay. Won't we?"

Mycroft gathered the covers around him, hiding him away.

"You have nothing to fear," Mycroft murmured. "Nothing in this world. Not so long as I breathe."
One Soul

Chapter Notes

A huge, huge thank you to everyone following along so far. Your comments and kudos mean the world to me - I'm thrilled so many people are enjoying the story.

This chapter is specially for Liz, who is brave and wonderful, and very special to all of us in Mystrade. x

But two miles more, and then we rest!
   Well, there is still an hour of day,
   And long the brightness of the West
   Will light us on our devious way;
   Sit then, awhile, here in this wood—
      So total is the solitude,
   We safely may delay.

- Charlotte Brontë
  'The Wood' (1846)

Greg woke to the quiet clink of cutlery, and the smell of food.

He raised his head from the pillow, blinking, and the bedside cabinet slowly came into focus. A breakfast tray appeared - bacon, mushrooms, scrambled egg - the works - a steaming mug of tea.

Mycroft stood beside it. He was in pyjama bottoms, and a navy dressing robe open at the chest. His hair was still dishevelled from sleep. The morning light fell softly upon the pale white planes of his chest, warming his scatter of caramel freckles.

As Greg gazed upwards, a smile suffused Mycroft's features.

"Good morning," Mycroft murmured.

Greg realised in a rush that he was going to remember this moment. Years from now, he thought, it was this sight that he would see whenever he closed his eyes. Part of him was always going to be here, fuzzy-eyed and sleepy in Mycroft Holmes's bed, waking up to find him just standing there like a modern fucking angel. Like he had stepped out of a dream.

No matter what happened, Greg thought - no matter what people put them through - no matter if the world and everything in it fell to pieces, and some day it was all broken and gone - there would always be this moment.
It made his whole life seem alright - just for a while.

He stirred onto his side, reached out, and gently pulled Mycroft into bed.

They explored each other restlessly - hands, fingers, mouths - until Greg couldn't cope a moment longer as two separate bodies. As he finally eased down on Mycroft's cock, his entire being quaked with pleasure. His lover's hands seemed to have painted him with bliss: great shining tracks of it, daubed across every inch of his bare skin. Greg felt like he was glowing.

T*aken*, he thought - twice, in the space of twelve hours - and it had been at least a decade since he'd ridden someone, but Mycroft's low and steady panting was doing everything for him. It wouldn't be another decade. The possessive grip at Greg's hips made him feel weak from the very first moments, and the easy thickness of Mycroft's cock filling him over and over made him tremble. He stirred, and rocked, and slowly built his lover's groans.

They reheated Greg's breakfast some time later.

It was amazing.

"Just… never before in my life. Couldn't take my eyes off you."

Mycroft smiled against Greg's shoulder, tracing wet fingertips over his heart. "Because I was reading?"

"Because you were fascinating," Greg murmured. His eyes shone. "Not just 'cause you were reading..."

He placed a gentle kiss to the top of Mycroft's head - soft red hair, freshly-washed and damp. Each time the water in the bath had grown cool, they'd just added more hot. It was too good to move. Greg wasn't sure if it had been one hour or two now. He was forgetting where his skin ended and Mycroft's began.

"You were just… elegant, and clever..." he said. "You looked like you had everything under control. I loved everything about you. Your pocket-watch and stuff. All your details. I just - wanted to know more." He smiled, a little shy. "I wanted you to look at me the way you were looking at that book."

Mycroft stirred in Greg's arms. He leant up to nuzzle his lips over Greg's chin - mouthing gently at his stubble.

"Imagine if the train had been running," he murmured. "It doesn't bear thinking about, does it?"

In response Greg held him a little tighter, wrapping his arms around Mycroft's waist.

"We'd have met on Monday," he supposed, as Mycroft eased to sit astride his thighs. Their chests pressed together, wet and slick, and Mycroft's fingers soothed out across his gleaming shoulders. "In the lift, with Amelia... then I'd have been *warned* all about you by fuckers who don't know a thing..."

Mycroft snorted, softly. He looked for a moment uneasy. "Whatever they'd have said, Greg..."
"They wouldn't," said Greg. He gazed across Mycroft's face, never so sure of anything in his life. "They wouldn't have been anywhere near. You know that... don't you?"

Mycroft smiled a little, saying nothing.

"You're not a thing like people say," Greg went on. "You're brave... you're good. You're smart and you're fascinating and you're wonderful. I feel like I'm twenty-five again. Being alone with you is all I ever want."

Mycroft's eyes grew soft. He stroked his thumb over Greg's lower lip, looking at him in wordless reverence. Greg kissed it, smiling. He watched with joy as the smile spread to Mycroft's lips.

"I should've called you up that night," Greg said. "That first stupid day, after you shouted at me... should've rung you up, asked what the fuck was the problem. Got you round my flat in private."

"Mm?"

"You could've told me you were 309," Greg said - he watched Mycroft's smile twist. "And I'd have told you it was alright. We could have been in early retirement by now, out in New Zealand. Got a house by a beach somewhere. Started breeding dogs."

Mycroft's laughter echoed off the tiles. It danced in his eyes.

"You are aware," he said, with delight, "that we have been in a romantic arrangement for a grand total of thirty-two hours now? And you have already retired us abroad."

Greg grinned, reaching up to peck at his lips.

"So?" he rumbled. "S'you who wanted to move in together on the first day, gorgeous. I'm just trying to keep pace."

Mycroft's eyes widened. "You - utter scoundrel," he breathed. "You're here for your own protection, and you know you are."

"Oh yeah?" Greg said, smiling. He slid his wet hands slyly down Mycroft's back. "'My protection', is it? The fact I'm now earning my keep, warming up your bed at night, is beside the point?"

"'Earning your keep'," Mycroft said, appalled and delighted at once. "How very dare you."

"What? You don't have a lawn for me to mow. Have to make myself handy somehow."

Greg nuzzled at Mycroft's lips, grinning from ear-to-ear at the dark, gleaming look he was now being given across an inch gap.

"I'm starting to suspect this was all a set-up, you know..." he murmured. "You paid some unsuspecting bloke to chase me about my flat for a while, then shot him to cover your tracks, and insisted I move in with you at once."

"That is the single most outrageous suggestion I have ever heard," Mycroft said, his eyes glittering wildly. "How can you even produce those words in my presence, Greg?"

"It worked though... your plan. You're so crafty." Greg stole a kiss from his beautiful mouth - then slyly cupped Mycroft's arse in both hands. "Go on, gorgeous... confess. The whole case is a ruse, isn't it?"
"Gregory Mark Lestrade..."

"You couldn't stand the sexual tension a second longer," Greg murmured, brushing kisses across his mouth between words. "You missed me. Couldn't cope without me. Had to have me. You faked it all, and you were going to tell me on our golden wedding anniversary."

"Greg..." Mycroft whispered. He wound his arms around Greg's neck, carding wet fingers into his hair. "Greg, what in heaven's name are you saying? Be quiet... before you mortify us both..."

"Call me 'scoundrel' again." Greg began to massage Mycroft's arse with both hands. "It really works for me."

Mycroft shivered in his lap, easing closer.

"Mm... I can feel it does." He stroked his mouth over Greg's - too light, too soft. Greg shivered a little. "You're rather earning that name, if you genuinely want it."

"Earning it like my keep?" Greg murmured.

Mycroft's eyes glinted. "Quite."

Greg smiled. He could feel heat beginning to thrum beneath his skin.

"You could have sent me to any hotel in London," he said. He rubbed Mycroft's arse slowly, gazing up into his eyes and watching his pupils grow. "You brought me here instead. Shock's ebbing, and you could still ship me out to a hotel - and Scotland Yard would pay for it. You know they would, and I'd be safe there. But you want me here. In your home... in your bed."

Mycroft's expression flickered.

"You," he murmured, "are staying precisely where you are. Where I can watch over you. Where I can be certain you are safe."

He licked at Greg's lower lip, then caught it for a fleeting moment between his teeth. He tugged gently. Greg stiffened, a groan wrenched from his throat. His fingers dug a little into Mycroft's arse.

Mycroft released his lip, his eyes a deep and shining velvet-grey.

"Where we can fuck," he added, softly. "And sleep together, and comfort each other as much as we need..."

Greg's pulse quickened.

"What is it about you swearing that gets me so bad?" he breathed, searching Mycroft's eyes. He licked at his lover's lips, his cock aching gently as he felt himself harden. "How do you make it sound like that?"

Mycroft's mouth curved against his own.

"I simply look at you," he said, "and let my mouth produce what it wishes."

Greg's heart thumped. He bit into his lower lip.

"I want you," he murmured. "Want to hear you swear."
Mycroft's eyes darkened slowly.

"If I recall," he said, rumpling both hands through Greg's hair, "you heard me swear rather ardently this morning… a number of times, in fact..."

"Mmh... I know. Want to hear it again." Greg leant up, dotting slow and careful kisses around Mycroft's mouth. "Over, and over, and over again..."

He slid his fingers gently between his lover's parted thighs.

Mycroft's expression flashed with shock, then contracted in a twist of pleasure as Greg found and began to stroke the knot of muscle. Mycroft's eyes shut tight; his mouth opened. As Greg watched, colour flooded his cheeks.

"Oh - ..." He gasped, gripping at Greg's hair. The slight tug of pain was entirely worth it. "Oh, God - … need I - ah - remind you that we are in our forties? Not oversexed eighteen-year-olds..."

"Are we?" Greg murmured. "I'd forgotten."

As he coaxed a finger gently inside Mycroft, the full body shudder it provoked cut off his breath for a second.

"Oh..." Mycroft arched against him, almost whimpering. He was still wet from their foreplay earlier - lube and spit. Greg's heart began to pound. Mycroft moaned, restlessly pushing his thighs a little further apart and begging in quiet sounds for more, shivering as Greg gave it to him, slowly working two fingers inside.

"Good?" Greg whispered. His other arm eased around Mycroft's back, hugging him close.

Mycroft settled against his wet chest, letting out a rush of air. His fingers were still stroking through Greg's hair. "G-Good..."

"Kinda just want to lie here," Greg told him, softly. "Finger you until you come for me… just watch you. Listen to you."

"O-Oh - God - "

"Is that okay?"

Mycroft squirmed, panting, as Greg began to rock his fingers in and out. "Y-Yes - oh… God, yes..."

"You're beautiful… you know that? You're so fucking beautiful." Greg tilted his head, nuzzling for Mycroft's lips. He licked them, coaxing his lover's tongue to come and play. "Love you, gorgeous... I could watch you moan for me all my life..."

Mycroft shuddered. He crushed their mouths together with a whimper, and his hands tightened hard in Greg's hair. His thighs began to shake.

When he came, it was crying Greg's name in desperation, blushing fiercely across his chest and with his head thrown back, as Greg bit restlessly at his neck.
They dried and dressed each other in the cosy peace of Mycroft's bedroom, kissing and talking softly - small things. Quiet things. It took nearly an hour.

Greg couldn't keep his hands off Mycroft's skin. Mycroft, too, seemed incapable of staying more than a few steps away. They needed to be touching, Greg thought - needed to be close. Words came and went, but touch stayed constant. They talked with their skin.

As Greg sat Mycroft on the end of the bed to dry his hair, his eyes slid with guilt to the soft, berry-stained blotches now littered around Mycroft's throat.

"That wasn't - too rough for you, was it?" he asked.

Mycroft's fingertips eased beneath the hem of his jumper. "No," he murmured, as he stroked Greg's stomach. "No, not at all."

"You've - got a few marks, gorgeous..."

"Mmh. I saw. It's quite alright. My work shirt will cover them."

"Sorry… I - liked the sounds you made when I did it."

Mycroft smiled, quite at peace. He was still rubbing Greg's stomach for him. "I liked making them," he assured Greg, gently. "Do not worry."

A little tension eased in Greg's shoulders.

"Shall we - go find food in a minute?" he asked, as he carefully rubbed Mycroft's hair with the towel. He had magnificent hair - that dark, coppery gleam.

It seemed a little thinner today.

"Mm. I think that would be best." Mycroft's eyes closed in contentment, enjoying the rubbing. "Before you and I fall into bed again..."

Greg smiled. Something about Mycroft's second orgasm seemed to have poured liquid ease through the man's veins. It was rather appealing. "I'll try and be quick while we're out," he said, and Greg kissed Mycroft's temple. "Then we can come home... get comfortable again."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Mycroft murmured, stern and soft. He smoothed his palms gently to the seat of Greg's jeans. "You'll take your time. Last night you were rather looking forward to this."


Mycroft's eyes crinkled at the edges as he smiled.

"Yes," he said, after a moment. His face softened. "Yes, it does."

He leant up, and pressed his lips to Greg's.

An hour later, they finally got into the car.
They drove out a short distance from the city, hoping to lessen the chances of running into anybody from work. As Greg got a trolley, he mulled it over in his mind.

He supposed there was no reason to hide anything. He was in shock, and his CID partner was keeping an eye on him for the day - that was all. Picking up groceries with Mycroft wasn't any kind of secret. As he wiggled the trolley free of the others, fiddling for a moment with the chain, he wondered why they'd both felt the need to drive out here.

Then he rounded the corner with the trolley, and found Mycroft waiting by the doors for him - chinos, grey argyle jumper, the long black winter coat and leather gloves.

Greg realised, with a rush, why they'd driven out.

Mycroft watched him approach in quiet fascination, a smile playing across his mouth.

"I think you're about to become the happiest person ever to walk through these doors," he remarked to Greg. "Does the supermarket usually have this effect on people? It's been some time since I've been."

As Greg reached him, there was a moment of doubt - just one - long years of being a guilty secret. Greg pushed them all gently aside. They didn't matter any more. They were over.

He leant up, stretching just a little on his toes, and pressed his mouth to Mycroft's.

They kissed, gently, by the open door - a few seconds, no longer.

As their lips parted, Mycroft's eyes slowly opened. They were bright and shining.

"Heavens," he murmured. A small smile curled into place. "Well... dates will certainly be easy."

"Sorry," said Greg, grinning. He felt the colour rising in his cheeks, Mycroft's arms still protectively wrapped around him. "I - like this. I really like this. I figure if we're out here, we can - ... y'know. Like we're a couple. Is that alright?"

Mycroft gazed at him in gentle wonder.

"It's all you want, isn't it?" he said, after a moment. Realisation softened his features. "A partner. A home. Groceries - togetherness."

Greg flushed a little. "Everyone wants that."


Greg had never felt quite so vulnerable in his life. "I - like making people happy," he said. "That's normal... s'all that humans ever really want to do. See other humans smile."

He knew it was true.

The only evidence he needed was the smile coming down at him right now.

"It's... not 'people' though, is it?" Mycroft murmured. Greg wondered for a second what he meant.
"It's - 'a person'. Just one. One soul to share your days."

Greg tried not to be affected by that sentiment. He felt his face attempt to cover it up.

"You're... making me sound like a fairytale princess," he said. "M'not the first person who wants to get married, Mycroft. Nobody likes being alone." He blushed, letting Mycroft go. "C'mon - if you're going to psychologise me, at least let's do it inside where the heaters are..."

They walked the aisles together in quiet happiness, quite separate from the rest of the world. A cosy bubble seemed to surround the trolley, through which no noise nor urgency could pass. Greg shopped in contented peace, adding things here and there as they occurred to him, pausing now and then to read packets or to contemplate this wholegrain cereal over that one. He was about halfway round before he realised the source of the bubble that sheltered him.

It was Mycroft.

His lover was gently guarding him - discreetly, and without issue. Something in Mycroft's posture was keeping people at bay. It was in the watchful ease of his eyes, skipping subtly over every person who neared them, and in his quiet closeness at Greg's side. Nobody passing could perhaps have put their finger on why it might be best to leave the silver-haired man in his cosy red pullover well alone, but they were doing it.

"You're protective of me," Greg remarked, as he added almond croissants to the trolley.

Mycroft glanced into his eyes, then subtly observed a businessman pass by. "An attempt was made on your life," he reminded Greg. "I'm not going to apologise for vigilance."

Greg smothered his smile. "Alright." He quietly added tortilla wraps to the trolley, feeling his heart tug a little. "I keep wanting to say I'll make fajitas for you one night," he confessed. "Nearly asking if you like stir-fry. M'sorry if something slips out."

"It's quite alright," Mycroft said, with a touch of amusement. "Social rituals are very hard to break."

"Can you - …" Greg changed his mind. "God... shut up, Lestrade."


"I was - going to ask if you ever just taste things, but… I guess not being allowed to actually eat it would be hell."

Mycroft smiled, with a huff. His eyes watched a group of teenagers passing by. With the slightest skip in their conversation, they veered neatly around Greg's bubble.

"Some of us do," Mycroft said. Us, Greg thought. "But I do not. You're right that it's frustrating. The risk of accidental consumption is too high, and the consequences are too unpleasant."

"What - happens if you - ?"

"It depends upon the food," Mycroft said, "and the amount consumed."

Greg glanced at the pack of bacon in his hand. Mycroft thought about it, wincing a little.

"For a small piece, forty-eight hours of violent vomiting - at the least. Perhaps more. Then a very fragile and green-faced fortnight to follow."

"Jesus..." Greg added the pack quietly to the trolley. "D'you ever - miss it?" he asked. "Food?"
"Mm. Very much."

"I'm really sorry," said Greg. His heart heaved. "I mean it."

Mycroft smiled, thinking for a moment. "My - senses are heightened," he said. "Particularly after... fresh. It means that if I could eat, food would taste sublime. The texture of it in my mouth would be magnificent. It is a - cruel irony to live with..."

He paused for a moment - then gently laid his hand over Greg's on the trolley side. Their fingers settled together.

"Might I tell you something?" he murmured.

Greg's throat contracted. "Anything."

"Much was taken from me," Mycroft said. He took a moment to continue, his expression empty. "To have some of that returned... physical comfort. A lover. Someone to touch my skin for me..."

He squeezed Greg's hand. Of all they'd shared today, it was the tiniest of touches - barely there - secret to everyone in the world but the the two of them.

It took the breath from Greg's lungs.

"You can't imagine," Mycroft finished. "My - people tend to be lonely, Greg. The night you asked me into your flat..."

He exhaled, smiling.

"And now," he said, lifting his eyes to the world around them. Greg blinked. The supermarket seemed to reappear in an instant, as if a hard-light projector had briefly malfunctioned. The shelves, the lighting and the people all came back - the squeak of shoes on the floor, the bleep of the tills, the rattle of food cages being taken to restock. It seemed suddenly unreal. "This kind of normality is very gratifying for me," Mycroft said. "Very comforting. There are things I'll miss - always - but... being able to spend time with you... to have company... it's nothing I could ever describe, Greg. It is an utter joy to me."

He looked into Greg's eyes.

"So... yes," he said, at last. "I am protective of you."

Greg stared at him, pale, feeling heat prickling in his eyes.

He found himself unable to speak.

"What else do you need to get?" Mycroft asked, with a smile.

As he gathered Greg with one arm into a silent, trembling hug, his smile grew. He kissed the top of Greg's head.

"These, perhaps?" Mycroft reached to the nearest shelf, retrieved a box and frowned at it. "Small biscuits shaped like monkeys... for reasons unknown. Chocolate and caramel."

"Put them in the trolley," Greg managed, his voice tight.

Mycroft smothered his smile. He added the box to the trolley, wrapped his coat around Greg, and held him in silence as the world passed by, rubbing his back.
A few curious shoppers glanced their way.

They received a quiet flash of dark grey eyes, and went about their business.

Home. Greg put away the food; Mycroft spent a while adding Greg to the security systems. His wrist-set would now work in the door. They curled on the sofa in the lounge, and spent the rest of the afternoon on an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*. Mycroft knew all the dialogue by heart. They cuddled as they watched - hands wrapped, legs entwined. Greg couldn't remember the last time he'd laid on someone's chest and quietly watched a film. Jason would have caused three fights in the time it took to watch the thing.

As darkness fell, Greg quietly cooked himself some pasta in Mycroft's pristine kitchen. He plated up the rest for tomorrow, suspecting it might be a long day, and that food to come home to would help. He cleaned the surfaces off, had a spoonful of hazelnut spread with no excuse, then padded back through to the lounge.

Mycroft looked up from the sofa; he was reading.

As soon as Greg appeared, he let the book ease shut around his fingers. He put it aside, not even marking his page, and smiled as Greg came to settle across his lap.

"Hello," he murmured, as Greg cupped his face.

Greg grinned, dipping for his mouth. "Hi…"

When they parted, some time later, they gazed into each other's faces for a while. Greg ran his thumbs gently beneath Mycroft's eyes, studying the faint grey shadows there. He hadn't noticed them until now.

"Have I worn you out?" he asked, softly.

Mycroft smiled, tired and bright-eyed. "No," he murmured. "No, I'm... merely slowing down for the night."

"Really?" Greg smiled a little. "Barely eight. You feeling alright?"

Mycroft didn't reply for a moment, rolling something around in his mind. His smile remained, though it quietened.

"It's been a week since I had - fresh," he said at last. "The more... visible physiological changes are about to fade. It will take longer to work its way wholly out of my system, but I'm... returning to normal, in essence. To how I usually look."

Greg's brow contracted, gently. "It - changes the way you look?" he said.

Mycroft gave a soft huff. "You noticed it yourself," he murmured. "I believe your assessment as I entered the room was 'wow'."

Greg remembered. He remembered worrying that Mycroft had gotten laid.

"Was that - the morning after you'd...?" he said.
Mycroft hesitated, a little uneasy. Greg watched his eyes sadden.


Mycroft nodded. A corner of his mouth lifted, just a little.

"At my peak, I could bend metal. Iron bars."

Greg's mouth dropped open.

"You - ... iron bars? And what do you mean, your - 'peak' - ?"

"Fairly thin iron bars..."

"Christ…" Greg marvelled for a moment, trying to imagine that. "You - can't now?" he said.

Mycroft shook his head.

"Why not?"

Mycroft smiled slightly. "Preserved is… perfectly adequate for my needs," he said. "But it doesn't quite impart the same biological benefits. I'm afraid I shan't be looking like this for much longer, either. My hair is - likely to thin somewhat… and my skin - … I - grow paler. More tired-looking. I hope that… isn't a problem."

Greg stroked the pad of his thumb over Mycroft's lower lip.

"It's fine," he said. "Nobody gives a fuck about your skin. You're a beautiful guy."

Mycroft gave him a look of fond incredulity. "Greg…"

"What? I'm serious. Just look at you - look at those eyes. And these legs go on forever… you're magnificent, you know that? No matter what your skin's doing. So don't give me 'Greg'…"

He smiled, brushing his thumb beneath Mycroft's lips.

"Hey," he said, softly. He could feel his heart fluttering. "Can I say something?"

Mycroft smiled a little, reading his eyes. "Yes… of course."

Greg took a moment to gather together the words.

"From what I'm hearing," he said, "if you had fresh more oftne… I mean… that sounds like it'd be perfect for you. You'd be a lot happier. You'd be - top of the world, really."

Mycroft said nothing, listening in silence.

He suspected where this was going. Greg could see it in his eyes. From the look on Mycroft's face, it wasn't going anywhere good.

"I know you asked me to leave it," Greg said, carefully. "I know you said you didn't want to talk. It's just - … I'm here, you know? I'm right here."

He hesitated, wishing he could dispel the pained concern from Mycroft's eyes. Just a little further, he thought. Just to reassure.
"An hour from now," he said. "Or... less than that... it only takes a few minutes, right? If you wanted, gorgeous... you - could've - "

Mycroft stiffened suddenly.

"Off me," he managed. "Please."

Greg nervously tipped to one side. Mycroft got up from the sofa, paced the length of the living room and came to a stop in the kitchen doorway, his shoulders high. He leant against the frame with his back to Greg, breathing rather hard. He seemed to be rubbing his chin.

Greg realised with a rush that it wasn't his chin.

It was his mouth.

"Mycroft..." He got up from the sofa, anxiously. "Mycroft, I - didn't mean to - "

"It's quite fine," Mycroft said. The slight curl to his vowels betrayed a drawn back upper lip. "Kindly stay where you are."

Greg stopped, halfway across the lounge. Mycroft's fairy cichlid gathered discreetly by the wall of their tank, hoping he'd come over to give them something.

"Are you... okay?" Greg asked. "I - I really didn't - "

"It's alright. I need a moment. That's all."

"It's not though," Greg said, his chest tight. "It's not alright..." He took a tentative step forwards. "Can I - do anything, or - ?"

Mycroft's voice sharpened. "You can stay there."

"Right," said Greg, calmly. He took a long breath, forcing himself to remain as he was - and not to panic. "Staying right here..."

Mycroft audibly swallowed. He shook slightly for a moment, then said,

"We - cannot discuss this, Greg. I - appreciate the - ... but we can't talk about this. I'm entirely serious."

Greg paused, quietly curling his fingers into his palms. "Why?"


Greg quietly bit down into his lip.

"Is there a - reason you won't - ?" he asked. "Can't we... can't we talk about this?"

"My reasons are my own." Mycroft inhaled, deeply. "If you care for me, Greg, you will not offer. You will not ask. You'll let me be. I've now said my final words on the matter."

He swallowed again. Greg heard every clench of his vocal chords.

"Please go upstairs," Mycroft managed. "I will join you in ten minutes."
Greg's every instinct told him to stay. He wanted to cross the lounge, take those final few steps, and lay his hands on Mycroft's back - rub him, comfort him until the fangs had retracted. He wanted to talk this out.

He couldn't see a reason for it. Mycroft had been happy enough to drink from Robin - had paid him a month's rent for it - but it seemed Greg wasn't even permitted to offer. He wasn't even allowed to ask.

He stared at Mycroft's back for a few moments more, despairing.

In the end, it was the line of Mycroft's shoulders that made the decision for him.

He'd not been a police officer this long not to realise when someone was on the brink of sudden movement. The hardness of Mycroft's back called to mind a mouse-trap ready to spring. In the battle of instincts, Greg's profession won out. His heart retreated. It hurt.

He turned away, numb - and without another word he left the lounge.

A few moments after the lighter flared, Anthea's voice disturbed the silence of the pitch dark bedroom.

"Inspector Lestrade - this building is classified as strictly non-smoking."

Greg's hand shook as the cigarette caught. He reached for the catch of the bedroom window, twisted it and cracked it open. Black air gasped into the room. The night outside was freezing, full of traffic sounds and tiny lights, and Greg felt it perish its way at once beneath the thin wool of his pullover. He stared out across the city, trying not to look at his own pale reflection in the glass.

Anthea's patience did not waver.

"Inspector Lestrade, an open window does not alter the structural boundaries of a building."

Greg dragged as deeply on the cigarette as he could. "Sorry," he managed with a slight cough, his voice tight. "I'll do this fast. Just… look away for a minute, will you?"

"I am sorry, Inspector Lestrade. According to current legislation within the UK, any attempt to - "

Greg despaired, shuffling closer to the window. It was fucking freezing. "Please, Anthea…" he groaned. "I can't go downstairs. Can't you just - sleep mode for five minutes? Do you have a fucking lockscreen?"

" - will be triggered if not extinguished immediately, in compliance with the current health and safety procedures of the building."

Greg's eyes flew wide.

"Wait," he said, staring up at the ceiling. "What?"


"Oh - fuck!" Greg gasped. "Stop, Anthea! What will be triggered? Jesus actual - …"

"Six. Five."

In a panic Greg heaved one last desperate drag from his cigarette, close to sobbing.
"Three," she said. "Two."

Greg tossed the cigarette through the open window. It plummeted straight out of sight.

The air in the apartment seemed to relax.


Greg's chest nearly caved. "Piss off, Anthea."

"I am sorry, Inspector Lestrade. It is my job to keep you safe."

"You know stress causes heart attacks, don't you?" Greg snapped at her. He'd never been so cross before at someone who didn't fucking exist. "I am now stressed. More people die of heart attacks than in fucking apartment fires. This is the opposite of safe. And it's all your fault."

"I am sorry, Inspector Lestrade. But according to current legislation within the UK, any attempt to - "

Greg covered his face with his hands. "Fuck me up," he muttered, as she continued to lecture him. "Fine, Anthea... I'm sorry... I've learnt my lesson. You can stop now."

"AI Voice Function over-ride," said a quiet, exhausted voice from the door. "Mute. Authorisation Holmes, Mycroft. 182-00-109-H."

The apartment plunged at once into silence. Greg didn't take his hands from his face. He listened, numbly, as quiet footsteps crossed the room.

He didn't move as Mycroft's arms wrapped around him.

"I am sorry," Mycroft said at once. He pressed his face into Greg's hair. "I am deeply, deeply sorry."

Greg said nothing. He wasn't sure what could be said. He stood still as Mycroft rubbed his back for him, trying not to think and failing miserably.

"You are - kind to offer," Mycroft said at last. "I appreciate your concern for my welfare. But there is no need for - that, Greg. Thank you."

At Greg's continuing silence, Mycroft took a long breath.

"There's - something else I'd much rather you give me… if you wished."

Greg hesitated, his chest tight. "What?" he asked. His voice was small in silence. "Anything. I'll find you it. I promise."

Mycrof swallowed.

"Normality," he said.

Greg felt his soul fall quietly apart.

"I care for you," Mycroft said. "Desperately. I appreciate your affection more than you can possibly know. Your company is the only meaningful happiness I've found in thirteen years. I thought I wouldn't have a relationship again, Greg. I - crave this normality with you. I don't want it sullied by my condition, like everything else in my life. Please, just… let me have a boyfriend -"
someone who cares for me. *Please.*"

As silence wrapped around them once more, Greg found his throat had gone dry.

If Mycroft had been hit by some other virus, he thought, and was skipping doses of medication - going without what he needed, because he wanted to feel *normal* - Greg wouldn't be standing for that. Not for a minute.

But after today, he understood the longing for normality more than anyone else. The thought of being Mycroft's shelter of ordinariness in the midst of the storm made his heart heave, and he wanted it - *badly.* He wanted it more than he'd wanted anything in a very long time.

Then the thought of seeing Mycroft suffer deprivation turned his stomach.

Greg had the keenest feeling that this wasn't over.

For tonight, it was. This was their stolen twenty-four hours of peace - their time to be together, and to heal. Greg didn't want to spend another second of it in disagreement.

But he didn't think this was the last time he offered. He didn't even think it was the last time he heard 'no'. He removed his hands from his face, and looked up into Mycroft's eyes - a decision made.

One thought pulled itself to the front of his mind.

He couldn't *not* say it, he thought.

"Are you - asking me to be your boyfriend?" he said at last.

Mycroft's expression folded. Panic flooded his eyes.

"If you - … I thought - ..." he managed, paling.

"God, I - can't even tease you with it... Christ. Just - come here." Greg pushed his arms around Mycroft's neck, reaching up onto his toes and hugging him hard. "Fucking idiot. M'sorry..."

"You have *nothing* to be -"


Mycroft's arms drew tightly around his waist. "You are not in the least bit to blame for *my* lack of self-control," he said, stiffly. "I'm - so sorry, Greg - I -"

"Hush..." Greg murmured. He squeezed Mycroft slowly. "We're both sorry. S'all okay now. Over and done with. No more sad."

Mycroft's breath cracked. "*Greg…*"

Greg's heart contracted hard within in his chest.

"Come the fuck to bed, will you?" he said. He closed his eyes, pressing his face into Mycroft's neck. "With your boyfriend. Let's - find some normality."

"Greg..." Mycroft shuddered as Greg nosed aside the collar of his shirt, and began to kiss the bite marks on his throat. "Heaven help me... Greg..."
Greg took his hands.

"C'mon," he said, tugging on them gently. "Need to feel you. Need to show you."

They took it slow - eye contact and gripped hands, deep panting rather than cries. After a few restless shifts in position, searching for something they both needed, Greg found himself knocked back against the headboard as Mycroft climbed restlessly into his lap. The few seconds apart was unbearable. As it ended - as Mycroft sank down onto his cock once more, and his body squeezed around Greg, hot and tight - they stilled a shared groan into each other's mouths. Greg's soul seared with pleasure. Mycroft ground down on him, urgently, and the colour began to rise in his face. This was it, Greg thought. They was what they'd been searching for. Take from me, gorgeous. Take what you need.

Their panting deepened as they fucked this way, slow and a little hard - sharing breath, staring into each other's eyes. Greg gripped Mycroft's hips for a while, supporting him as he rocked, whispering love and softness to him with every motion. Mycroft then caught hold of his wrists, lifted them up and pinned them against the headboard.

Even tired, even mid-sex, Mycroft's grip was strong.

*Iron bars*, Greg thought.

Just to see if he could break it, he tested the hold. Mycroft let him stretch, let him stir, but kept him there, pinned. *Just where you want me, gorgeous. Just where you need me.* Greg's heart hammered.

As he resumed rocking Mycroft's eyes flared wildly in the darkness, his mouth falling open, lips a little swollen from kissing. His perfect white neck and shoulders were scattered with love-bites, visible even in the dark. It was a hell of a sight. Greg groaned, arching his hips in search of stimulation, and Mycroft hissed and screwed down harder. They began to ascend.

Three times now. Three times in a day. Each time had taken them deeper, tighter and closer, and this was it. When Greg came, it was not with explosions or fire - it was not a sudden rush of sensation, nor did his senses fry or his thoughts scatter themselves apart. It was a slow, languid, lazy *rippling*. It ached its way through him as if his whole body were moaning. He stretched in Mycroft's hold, panting, fists clenching as the peak of it kicked his heart into double-time. For every second of it, he kept hold of his senses. He watched in desperation as Mycroft stiffened, and his face tightened, and his entire body shook as climax ripped him open, too.

Afterwards, they lay tangled in the sheets in the dark.

Decorative cushions were now strewn about the floor; Mycroft's room looked like a small hurricane had passed through. Greg's skin tingled slowly as he lay against Mycroft's side, little shocks coursing through him still - and he realised that the quiet in the flat had taken on a depth and a peace it had never reached before. It nourished his soul.

"You alright?" he asked, lifting his head sleepily from Mycroft's shoulder.

Mycroft's arm squeezed around him. "Yes..." he murmured, voice husky. "Are you?"

"M'fine..." Greg stretched, stifling a yawn. He ran his toes down Mycroft's calf muscle. "Just realised something..."

"Mm? What?"

"Haven't mentioned Excultus all day."
Mycroft almost laughed. "So we haven't," he said. "It's - been rather marvellous."

Greg nuzzled at Mycroft's collarbones. "It has..." He stroked a gentle lick over one of Mycroft's bites. "D'you think this is what it'll be like, love?"

"Mm?"

"When they're gone, I mean... when things go back to normal."

Mycroft was quiet for a moment, simply gazing at him. A smile lit his eyes.

"Your optimism is very heartening," he murmured. "Are you aware of that?" He kissed the bridge of Greg's nose. "I do believe you're feeling better."

"You think?" Greg grinned, slowly. "And 'course I'm optimistic. Look who I've got at my side."

"Greg, for... goodness' sake..."

"I mean it... it'll all be over before we know it. Vickery'll give us our medals, and a massive pay rise... and we'll say thanks boss, but no thanks... start looking for property out in Auckland... next step, New Zealand."

Greg laid his head on Mycroft's chest with a grin, enjoying the rise and fall as Mycroft laughed.

"And everyday'll be like this," he said, pleased. The thought of it flooded his chest with warmth. "Every single day."

Mycroft's fingers stirred slowly through his hair. "Would that make you happy?"

Greg smiled, closing his eyes. "Probably get bored after a few weeks, wouldn't I?"

"Bored of me?"

"No," said Greg, softly. It was a promise. "Never of you. Bored of... taking it easy, maybe. I'd find my way into trouble before long, I'm sure."

"Of that, Greg Lestrade," Mycroft murmured, kissing the top of his head, "I have no doubt."

"Would you be happy?" Greg asked. He nuzzled at the skin over Mycroft's heart. "Like this?"

"Supremely," Mycroft replied. Greg felt his soul give a little squirm. "I've no great love of peril. I had quite enough of it ten years ago... a quiet life would suit me very much."

Greg laid a little kiss against Mycroft's heartbeat. "You'd like New Zealand," he murmured.

"Would I?"

"Mm. There's - space, for everything. It's not like London... not - crowded and tense. It's just - easy. Life feels like it should."

"'Easy' sounds rather magnificent..." Mycroft paused, tracing some quiet symbol between Greg's shoulder blades. "Greg, I'm... sorry that you're isolated in this. In my - condition."

Greg's heart heaved a little. The problem wasn't being isolated, he thought. It was seeing Mycroft isolate himself.
"It's alright, gorgeous," he said. "Don't worry about me." He nestled closer. "You worry about you... I'll worry about me."

"No, I... I realise it can't be easy for you. You're alone, and I'm your only source of answers. That - isn't a comfortable situation."

"So? I don't need answers," Greg leant up and kissed his jaw. "Just need you to be as happy as I can make you - whatever that means."

He gazed into Mycroft's eyes.

"You said 'normality'. Let's do normality. If it changes, we'll do something else. Seriously Mycroft... I'm not kidding about this. I want you to be alright."

He didn't break away from those desperate silver eyes - he held their gaze safe within his own, promising them they were safe, promising them it would be alright.

"I will do whatever the fuck that involves, day by day. Hour by hour. If it means you'll be safe and happy, then I will fucking do it, Mycroft. I don't care what it costs."

Mycroft couldn't speak for a while.

"I don't deserve you, Greg," he said at last.

Greg smiled. "I'm not a prize," he said. "I'm a person who's made his choice."

Mycroft's face softened. "Greg..."

"Gorgeous, just... one thing. One question."

Mycroft waited, listening. Greg watched his face with care.

"There's - nothing more to it, is there?" he asked. "You're not... saying no for some other reason?"

Mycroft looked at him.

Although his face remained still, all manner of things crossed his eyes. Greg watched them go by, one-by-one. Guilt - stronger than all of them, sharper and more awful than the lot of it, guilt. Fear, almost as strong. After them, rising up in their wake, there came hope, and need - and pain. It was an old pain. A pain turned grey, and weak, and quiet. A river of the unsaid ran through Mycroft's gaze.

"You are precious to me," he whispered, at last. "I want you to be here. Always. I - will not be okay, if you're not."

Greg swallowed quietly. He knew what he'd seen; he knew what he'd heard.

He wasn't afraid. Things would come, in time. They just had to find the space to let it out, whatever it was - they had to get past Excultus - and there were things he could do for now, he thought. There were steps he could take.

He decided to start with the smallest of things, and leave the greatest to get here in their time.

He smiled, letting love warm his eyes. He watched, soothed in his own soul, as Mycroft's expression filled with relief. It was all okay, he thought. They were together. The rest would fall into place.
"Shall I run us another bath, gorgeous?" he said. "Otherwise we're... gonna wake up glued together..."

"Greg," Mycroft said. He swallowed. "I - I need to tell you - ..."

"I know, love." Greg reached up, took Mycroft's face in his hands, and kissed him. "I know you do. You don't have to say it. Rest here for a while, alright? I'll come tell you when it's ready."

As the bath filled, Greg sat down on the edge with his wrist-set.

He ignored the glut of work e-mails, and the pile of affectionate messages from colleagues - including a couple that he spotted from Luke. They could all wait right there until the morning. He would be back to the front lines tomorrow, and there would be time for other people then.

For now, there was Mycroft.

The idea had come to him almost straightaway. It was prompted by what Mycroft had said - about being Greg's only source of answers - and Greg had realised it wasn't true.

He might only know one vampire in person.

But Mycroft wasn't the only one out there.

Greg found what he was looking for after a few careful searches. Setting things up didn't take long. He typed quickly and quietly as the water ran, and he had it all posted by the time the bath was full. Now, it was simply a case of waiting.

He then switched off his wrist-set, lit the pillar candles, and turned out all the lights.

As he padded back through to the bedroom in search of his boyfriend, Greg found himself feeling hopeful. Their stolen day was almost at an end, but it had done every good in the world.

In the morning, the hunt would begin once again - and Greg knew now what he was chasing. He knew why they were bothering to fight.

When Excultus were gone, life could be like this - quiet, and easy, and full of each other.

Nothing in the world scared him enough to give that up.

NEW MEMBER REGISTRATION

Confirmed! - Thanks, tuatara76. Your membership to "309ers: help chat and support" is now active. You are now able to read and post on all forums, and send private messages to other registered users.
Please remember to stick to the forum rules as detailed below.

***

WELCOME NEWBIE!! glad to have you :) come introduce yourself in newbies, tell us a bit about yourself..... oh and please.... NO DATING AND SEX ADS.... (please for the love of god)

main rule, please remember to be nice to your fellow 309ers. life aint easy. So put your fangs away for now and play nicely please.

Mods are around if you need us. list is on the main page and the stickie in every forum, drop us a message. Remember we have day jobs and lives and stuff but seriously, we are here, dont suffer in silence.

also pleeeeeease read the stickies. please. especially if your new and freaking out :) 

welcome to the forum new blood :)<

from your friendly neighborhood 309ers mod team x

***

Thanks again for registering with "309ers: help chat and support". Please direct all of your future questions to the forum's mod team.

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MOD'S WELCOME STICKIE:
MM pt309 LOUNGE

Welcome to the MM sub-forum of 309ers, catering for those involved in MM (male/male) relationships.

Your forum mod is DefenderOfThePeople. My inbox is always open... unless you are planning to post dating/sex ads in my forum, in which case may God have mercy on your soul.

I'm in the GMT time-zone (and full-time employment) but will reply as quickly as I can.

It's helpful if you can take a look at the stickies before posting, but I appreciate there are a few of them now. Do your best. Above all, please be polite to other members. Civility will be enforced with the block button if needed.

- Defender.

PS. Thanks to all those now humorously sending me sex ads. I'm flattered.
Hi everyone. Feels weird to write this. Sorry if I've not got the lingo right yet. But I've started seeing someone and he's 309…. been that way about 13 years. I'm the first person to know about it in a long time. Honestly I could do with some advice.

He drinks preserved (not that I've ever seen him do it) and from what he's said he has fresh about once every 6 months. get the feeling that might not be great for his health. Am I right?

I'd gladly help him out. From what I've seen its not painful/bad for donor…. and having someone to drink from regularly is kinda ideal for carriers? But well…. I've brought it up a couple of times now and he doesnt want to talk about it. Its just not up for discussion. He says he wants to just feel normal with me. But I get the feeling there's maybe more to it.

I guess I hoped somebody might give me some insight.

is there a 309 carrier could maybe give me some ideas why you would say no to someone? We're close and honestly he's kinda the world to me. I know he's glad we're together too. I can't bear the thought that he's going to suffer when I could fix that......

Is there something might be worrying him? Something I havent thought about?

Basically I want my guy to be happy. Any help would be much appreciated.

thanks in advance...... I'm very grateful. tuatara76.
Live, and be happy, and make others so.

- Mary Shelley
  'Frankenstein' (1818)

Friday. Greg woke to a world that was comfortable and calm, and dotted with the bleeping of his wrist-set alarm. He heaved a lion-like yawn, then raised his head from the pillow.

"I'm awake..." he rumbled, stretching.

His wrist-set acknowledged him with a chime. "Seven times eight?" it asked, in a polite female voice.

Greg groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. His head dropped back into the pillow.

"Oh fuck... not today..." He sighed. "Why did I install this...? Erm -"

"Sorry," said his wrist-set, brightly. "I didn't quite catch that."

"Just - hang on, will you? - five would be forty... then - uh..."

"Fixty-six," murmured a voice from behind Greg, fuzzy with sleep.

The wrist-set chirped; it played them a little tune. "Good morning!"

Perfect quiet settled once more.

Mycroft's weight stirred across the mattress to Greg. His arm encircled Greg's waist from behind, coiling around him with a languid and careful possessiveness that made Greg's heart thump.

"Hello," Mycroft purred against the nape of his neck.

The tickle of sound sent pleasurable skitters darting down Greg's spine. He smiled into the pillow. "Hey..."

"How are you?" Mycroft asked him, gently.

In response, Greg caught hold of the hand now resting on his stomach. He slyly moved it downwards.

"I see," Mycroft murmured. Greg shuddered lazily, pushing into the long fingers that curled around his sleep-hardened cock. "Are you fit to return to work?"

"Mmh. Got two hours yet."
"Then to work?"

Greg sighed, stiffening. "M'going to take Exultus down like a fucking All Black," he growled, and stretched as Mycroft slowly rubbed his cock for him. He closed his eyes with a shiver. "The second I'm done here with you…"

"Are you threatening to take me down?" Mycroft murmured against his shoulder.

His voice was honey and wine. Greg’s stomach curled with it.

"Mmmh… kinda hoping you'll go there yourself."

"Indeed." Mycroft's tongue flashed in the hollow behind Greg's ear. Greg groaned, his mouth opening. He wanted more, and Mycroft knew it - but the teasing was kinda working for him too. "I don't think a day off has ever done someone quite so much good."

"M'croft…"

"Mm?"

Greg thrust restlessly into the coaxing hand. "Mycroft…"

"Roll over," Mycroft hummed in his ear.

Greg turned onto his back, biting his lip. Mycroft pushed back the covers. As his mouth browsed its way down Greg's chest - brushing here, kissing there - he skimmed his fingertips along Greg's sides, drawing shudders up from deep below his skin.

"I love you," Greg whispered, as Mycroft settled into place between his thighs.

Mycroft nuzzled fondly at the root of his cock. "Clearly…"

Greg bit down on a groan. The first stroke of lips was enough to make him twitch; he took a quiet grip of the sheets.

"I mean it," he said. "Not just when you're -…"

"Hush..." Mycroft murmured, his eyes bright. They flashed into Greg's. "Lie back and enjoy." He flicked his tongue between his lips, inhaled with satisfaction, and gathered Greg slowly into his mouth.

As warmth and wet tightness encompassed him, Greg swore under his breath. His eyes shut at once, fists tightening in the sheets. It wasn't right how good Mycroft was at this. He wished it bothered him more how such particular oral dexterity had been honed. Strangely, when Mycroft's hands were sliding up to curl at his hip bones like this, pinning him into place, and that slender tongue was flickering and furling against the underside of his cock, he suddenly didn't care too much.

As Mycroft slowly and lazily worked him with his mouth, Greg let his head fall back into the pillows. All the gasped nonsense and the groans came pouring from him into the half-darkness. He couldn’t hold it in; he couldn’t hush himself. Bathed in the silkiness and the steady back-and-forth, he found other sensations thrown into sharp, delicious relief - the splay of Mycroft's cool against his stomach, petting him; the mattress against which he stirred; the fretful urgency of his own moans, underlaid by the rhythmic slick of Mycroft's mouth. This wasn't oral sex. It was fucking art. Pleasure and tightness began to curl hotly in Greg’s stomach. He bit down at his lip, moaning it to
the darkness.

He was within a few breaths of coming when a gentle tone filled the room. A digital voice from all around said,

"It is half past six, Dr. Holmes."

Mycroft eased himself up, exhaling slowly. Greg almost expired on the spot.

As Greg's cock slid free from his lips, Mycroft licked it with a flat rasp of his tongue.

"Thank you, Anthea," he murmured, his voice hoarse. "We're both awake. Please start the shower."

Through in the bathroom, there came the answering hiss of hot water against heated glass.

Breathing hard, every muscle in his body wound nearly to breaking point, Greg laid a trembling hand on the back of Mycroft's head.

He pushed, firmly.

Mycroft smirked.

"Mm?" He gazed at Greg along the heaving length of his torso, pupils huge, lips curved. He nuzzled at Greg's straining cock. "Something the matter?"

Greg nearly bit through his lip.

"Please," he whispered. He wove his shaking fingers into Mycroft's hair. "I'm not kidding. Please."

Mycroft smiled against the tip of his cock - teasing, brushing with his lips, not taking in. As Greg thrust up a little, groaning in despair, Mycroft's smile only widened.

"Mycroft," Greg pleaded in a gasp. He needed to come. He needed it so badly he couldn't cope. "Just - just a little more, gorgeous, please - ..."

At last - with a soft, flickering growl - Mycroft parted his lips and swallowed Greg to the root.

Greg screwed his head back into the pillow, panting. "Fuck..." he hissed. "Fuck..." Mycroft began to bob, quick and coaxing, and Greg gripped his hair a little, needing it, twisting with it, shattering open with it. "Fuck, fuck, fuck..." As he started to come, and his panting broke into cries, he felt Mycroft's hands tighten at his hips - holding him down, pinning him to the mattress.

It ignited Greg's climax like a match tossed casually into gunpowder.

It blew him to pieces - pleading, arching, dying - and through it all, as he gasped and groaned and begged for meaningless 'more', there was his lover's mouth soothing him through - and cool fingers curled at his hipbones - and the soft hum of Mycroft's satisfaction, rumbled around his cock.

An hour later Greg entered the lounge, dressed and almost ready to go. He found Mycroft sitting on the sofa, watching his fish.
As Greg appeared, Mycroft jumped a little. He hurriedly put something to one side, and reached up to press his sleeve to his mouth.

Startled, Greg glanced at the item he'd swiftly abandoned.

It was a disposable cup with a straw and a lid.

Greg's heart tightened.

"Hey..." he said, gently, and came over. Mycroft avoided his eyes, flushing with discomfort. "Hey, don't do that... c'mere."

Greg knelt down beside him on the floor, reaching for the cup. He returned it to Mycroft's hand.

"It's food," Greg said. "You need it... don't feel weird just because I'm here."

Mycroft's shoulders shifted, uneasily. He did not resume drinking, and said nothing.

"You act like I've caught you savaging the postman," Greg managed, weakly. It prompted a reluctant smile. "Seriously, don't stop just because I walk in... you're not doing anything wrong..."

Mycroft shifted, looking down at the cup with a short rush of breath.

"God help me," he mumbled. "Can you at least try to be a little less understanding?"

Greg smiled, sadly. "Sorry, gorgeous... s'in my nature." He nudged the cup. "Finish your breakfast."

Mycroft winced. "Breakfast," he said.

"First food of the day," said Greg. "That's what we peasants known as breakfast."

Mycroft seemed pale today, Greg realised - not the sudden pale of nervousness, but a deeper and greyer pallor that underlaid his skin. The shadows beneath his eyes rather tragically matched his lavender tie. Outside the fuzzy gloom of the bedroom, Mycroft looked quietly, distressingly unwell.

Greg read his face with care.

Mycroft watched him read it, waiting.

"Say it," Mycroft intoned at last, running his tongue across his teeth.

Greg raised an eyebrow. "There's nothing to say."

"I look appalling," said Mycroft. "And it's happening faster than you thought."

"You don't look appalling," Greg said. "You're just a bit pale. That's all." He hesitated, resting his hands on Mycroft's knees. "How do you feel?"

Mycroft gave a weak smile. "Rather well, actually..."

Greg smiled back. "There you go. There's no problem, then."

Mycroft hesitated, considering the tip of the straw. He glanced at Greg, then looked away as he placed the straw quietly in his mouth.
Dark red rose up. Greg rubbed at Mycroft's knee, waiting for some kind of disgust to kick in - ready to keep the feeling off his face - but it didn't. Scientists in a lab had made things this way, he thought. It was just how it was.

Besides, he'd seen enough blood in his life now. It was much worse out there on the streets, thrown over people and places it shouldn't. A small amount in a straw didn't frighten him.

"I'm sorry if I'm..." Mycroft changed his mind on the sentiment, shifting. "You should eat. We need to leave soon."

Greg wasn't so easily misdirected. "You're sorry if you're...?" he said.

Mycroft's eyes flickered. "Less appealing than I was. I hope it doesn't change - ..."

Greg steeled himself with a breath.

"Stop it," he murmured. He gripped Mycroft's knees gently. "Stop it right now. Whatever your little inner voice is telling you about me, tell it to shut up a second - alright? And listen to the real me."

Mycroft's eyes locked nervously with his own.

"I'm crazy about you," Greg breathed. "About everything you do. How you think, how you feel. How you sound. How you look. Literally, you are gorgeous. Yesterday was the best day of my life. You are amazing. I could stare at you forever, watching you do things. Nothing feels as good to my eyes as when I put them on you. You know that? Nothing."

He raised himself up from the floor, and gathered Mycroft quietly into his arms. He held him with care, so as not to disturb his cup.

"Doesn't matter if you're a bit pale," he said, softly. "Doesn't matter if you look tired. I mean it... and you're finishing your food before we go. No more murder investigation for you until you've had the lot."

Mycroft made a small, tight sound. He swallowed.

"Please stop," he begged, barely a whisper. "Stop being so good with this."

"I've not even started," murmured Greg. He would check for forum replies later, he thought. Someone out there would have some ideas for him. He rubbed his thumb in a circle over the back of Mycroft's neck, quietly kissing his head. "Gorgeous?" he said. He had to ask.

Mycroft hesitated; the straw squeaked a little. "Yes?"

"Why disposable cups?"

Mycroft didn't answer at once. He laid his cheek against Greg's chest.

"I don't like to see it," he said at last.

Greg took a moment to calm himself.

It had taken Mycroft thirteen years to get this embedded in self-loathing. He'd been alone the whole time, with only himself for company and support. That was a huge burden of care - especially for someone already ill, already ostracized from society. Thirteen years now, Greg thought, and Mycroft had entrenched himself deep.
It would not take as long to dig him out of it.

Greg would see to that.

"Are you certain you're ready to go back?" Mycroft asked, somewhere against his chest.

"Who, me?" Greg smiled, looking down, and brushed his fingers through Mycroft's hair. "M'fine, love. Ready to take on the world again... whatever it throws at us."

Mycroft shifted, quietly drinking. "Good," he said. "I'm - very glad you're alright."

"Thanks for getting me back on my feet, gorgeous. You did a great job."

"It was - my pleasure." Mycroft hesitated - he nuzzled against Greg's heart. "Quite literally."

Greg couldn't fight a smile. They'd stolen a pocket of time for themselves, he thought, and used it well.

The truth was that he'd never felt so at ease with another person. Yesterday had been a day worth waiting a year for.

But they needed to leave soon. It was time to get back on the hunt.

"Finish your food," he said, gently, and placed a last kiss to the top of Mycroft's head. "I'm just going to throw a sandwich together. Alright?"

As he started to let Mycroft go, Mycroft said,

"Greg?"

Greg held onto him a moment longer. "Mm?"

Mycroft's silence seemed to fill the room.

"Nothing," he said, at last. He nosed at the corner of Greg's jaw. "Make your lunch. I... will stay here."

As he returned the straw uneasily to his mouth, Greg's thoughts for a moment shifted against his will.

_The quiet, frequent feedings of a bonded pair._

Those words had never left him. Nor some other words, too: _a stronger, healthier and fitter mate._

Greg pushed them aside.

He squeezed Mycroft slowly, then gently let him go.

"I'll just be in the kitchen," he said. "Five minutes. Then I'm good to head out."

"Alright." Mycroft stirred a little, quietly chewing the straw. "I - need to make a brief phone call before we leave," he said, pulling back his sleeve to reach his wrist-set. "I shall do that while you - ..."

"A phone call?"

"Yes - just something to check at the office."
"Okay. No worries," said Greg. "Finish your food."

Friday. It was quarter to eight, and TJ Tierney felt like shit.

His shift had started the previous night at 11pm, and not well. As he'd come shuffling in - pale, feeling as enormous as a bull elephant and delicate as a snowdrop - Maisie had given him an openly horrified look across the monitor bank.

"TJ…" she'd breathed. "You… you look dreadful. Are you poorly? Has Officer Yardley seen you?"

TJ coughed into his curled hand as he slunk into his chair, keeping his head down. His throat didn't actually hurt. He just needed a cover for the voice. It was a habit he'd picked up at fifteen, when it all started - his oldest brother had taught him it.

"M'fine," he said, gruff. Her eyes widened at the startling drop in pitch. "Just a bit... sore throaty. S'something burning its way through the other pods, some… flu thing. Only a matter of time before it reached us."

He pulled his headset from its hook, frowning wearily at the tangle of wires that awaited him. He missed the wireless ones, he thought. Nothing was ever easy.

He could still sense Maisie watching him through her hard-light screen.

"You stay back, alright?" he growled, avoiding her stare. He could feel her looking - feel her taking in his stubble, his spots, the heavy shadows under his eyes. He couldn't bear it. "Just keep yourself over there, or you'll catch it too... last thing we need..."

"Are you... sure you're fit to work?" she asked.

TJ huffed - then shut his eyes, mortified at the thick-throated growl it had tailed into. He coughed again. "I'm fine," he said. "Honestly."

"Well..." Maisie mumbled. "If you're sure…"

TJ said nothing. He opened his desk drawer, shaking a little, and reached in for the box inside.

Isotonic gel. Thirty-six sachets, in a flavour he now thought of as 'Supposedly Summer Berries'. Lestrade would kill him if he knew. The stuff was liquid energy. It wasn't even sugar - it was off the scale. TJ was going to pay for it in a few days, and he knew it, but he just needed to delay a bit longer. Just stave it off a little more.

He'd booked time off - he wasn't stupid - but it had all started earlier than he'd thought. He'd miscounted. Fucking hormones. Never on time. And he'd gained weight - threw his calculations all off - and God, he just wanted to curl up and cry. He'd watched Les Miserables three times yesterday. He was falling apart.

He ripped open a gel sachet with quietly trembling fingers, squeezed the contents into his mouth, and grimaced as he swallowed. It had the texture of frogspawn.

Maisie watched him in silence, passing no comment. Her eyes were round and sad.
TJ couldn't bear it.

He wasn't a looker at the best of times - never had been. He was the runt, and he knew it. One brother in the army, one a bricklayer, one a personal trainer and the oldest was a professional boxer. TJ, meanwhile, worked in Technical Comms and wore drainpipe jeans and lace-up sneakers. His mum said he had a puppy face - big eyes and mischievous - and it was fine.

TJ didn't want a puppy face.

He wanted Maisie Halfpenny.

It was a quiet shift that passed. Sadly, it gave TJ time to think. By seven AM, his box of isotonic gel was half empty and he'd started fantasising about steak - just sitting here with a steak, and a fork, and just eating the whole thing. They'd hit all their targets, London was still standing, and their call times were still better than any other pod - but TJ rather wanted to crawl into the filing cabinet and die.

"Not long," Maisie said to him, gently, as the shift clock blinked to 07:45. Their calls would start filtering to nearby pods now. The day team would be here soon.

"Yeah…” he mumbled. "Not long."

"Are you going to tell Officer Yardley you're staying home tonight?"

"No?" he said, frowning. "M'gonna be here tonight."

"You're… not well, TJ. You're clearly ill."

"S'fine," he muttered. "Just need a sleep."

Maisie's reply was lost in the sudden scarlet blaze of his screen.

Weird, TJ thought. Both internal and external comms should be filtering by now. It must be a direct line.

He answered it with a weary flash of his fingertips.

"Comms 4," he grunted.

There was a pause. "Timothy Tierney, please," said a voice.

TJ despaired quietly. "This is TJ," he rasped. "Sorry. Sore throat. What's the - "

His eyes snagged on the caller's name displayed upon his screen.

He stiffened up at once.

"Oh! Dr. Holmes!" TJ held his breath. This wasn't good. "Erm - hi... what can I do for you?"

"Apologies for calling at the end of your shift," Dr. Holmes said, sleekly. "I hoped I might speak to you about something. Am I endangering your call time record?

Ohhh. Shit."

"Ah - no, they're - not logged after 7.45 - but thanks for - ..."
TJ shut his eyes tight. Someone had told the bastard. He was about to receive the dressing down of his life; this was going to hurt.

He swallowed, bracing himself.

"Listen, Dr. Holmes, about the - name... I should say that - technically I don't come up with this stuff... I just hear about it from other people. So..."

Dr. Holmes made a strange noise. "The names?" he said, startled. "How on earth did you know…?"

He sounded strangely un-angry, TJ thought - just confused.

TJ cracked open one eye, peering at Mycroft's name on the screen.

Across the computer bank, Maisie was packing up her things to go home.

"Have Technical spoken to you?" Dr. Holmes's voice asked in his ear.

"Technical?"

"Erm…" TJ suddenly wondered if they were having the same conversation here. "I - might have crossed our wires, Dr. Holmes. What was it you wanted, sorry?"

"A favour," said the voice. "I gather you're the person to speak to if the Technical Department are being… perhaps 'unco-operative' is the word I'm searching for. 'Difficult' might be another word."

TJ didn't dare breathe just yet. "I… am sometimes known as that person. Yes."

"They've told me something is quite simply impossible - and I'm inclined to believe this may not be true. I wondered if you would take a look for me."

He's not heard about the nickname. He doesn't know it was me.

TJ nearly threw up eighteen packets of isotonic gel in relief.

"Sure!" he said - so thrilled not to be shouted at down the phone that it squeezed its way out of his vocal cords as a squeak. He couldn't even bring himself to be embarrassed. "I - what is it, exactly? Can you leave it in Comms for me?"

"I'm afraid not," said Dr. Holmes. He sounded almost amused. TJ wondered if the comms line was suffering interference. "I appreciate it's inconvenient for you, but I'll be at Scotland Yard fairly shortly. Is there a chance you could meet me in Cross-Human Relations? I'm happy to pay for your time."


"Just outside it, in fact."

"Right. Cool. I'll - see you there, then."

"Thank you, Mr Tierney." Mycroft Holmes hung up.

TJ hung up his headset, shaking, signed out of the pod, and escorted himself to the canteen for a large bowl of frosted flakes to calm down.
(Thank you to Ngaijuuyan for more gorgeous art - TJ! I love him so much, Yan! You're amazing... I just want to scruffle his hair...)

Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?

- William Wordsworth
'Lines Written in Early Spring’ (1798)
They pulled into the staff car park not long before eight.

As Greg negotiated into a spot, he said,

"D'you mind if I hit the canteen before we get going? I'm starving... could eat a horse."

Mycroft cast him an amused look from the passenger seat.

"You hardly need my permission," he said. "And it is at least partly my fault that you had no time for breakfast."

Greg smothered a smile.

"I know, but... I still feel weird getting food without you." He switched off the engine and unclipped his seatbelt. "All my instincts want to offer you a bacon sandwich."

Mycroft gave a low chuckle.

"Please don't," he said. "I'd have to dispose of it somehow without your notice. Far harder than a cup of tea."

Greg smiled, suddenly curious. "What did you do with all those cups of tea I tried making you?" he asked.

Mycroft raised an eyebrow as he undid his seatbelt. "DCI Stratmann's yucca plant appreciated them enormously."

Greg couldn't help but laugh. Mycroft hid his pleased expression with a discreet turn of his head, eyes glinting beneath his eyelashes. A moment of quiet fell within the car.

Neither had reached for the doors.

"Right," Greg sighed. He tipped his head back against the headrest, just watching Mycroft for a minute - just taking him in. "Back on the clock... time to do some good."

Mycroft smiled. "Back into the fray together."

Greg felt his heart stir. He found himself overjoyed and sad at once.

"See you tonight, gorgeous?" he murmured.

He watched Mycroft's eyes dance. "Mm... tonight."

For a few seconds they sat in silence, simply looking at each other - sharing in their minds the kiss that would be happening now if they were home, and they were safe.

"Ten hours in an office together," Mycroft murmured, searching Greg's eyes. "And somehow I shall miss you."

Greg's chest softened. He understood entirely.

"I'll miss you too," he said. He paused. "Commander Vickery would - separate us, if she found out. Reassign us."

Mycroft said nothing for a moment. "It - might leave Amelia in a difficult position, if it were widely known," he admitted. "Our focus on the case could be questioned. She'd almost certainly be
put under pressure."

Greg lowered his eyes. He decided not to think about it. The idea of being parted from Mycroft in any way was not an easy one to handle.

"We'd better get in there, then," he said. "Get this mess cleared up. Breakthrough this week, d'you think? Can't be much longer now."

"I sincerely hope so." Mycroft's eyes shimmered, his gaze quiet and affectionate. "Enjoy your breakfast. I hope it was worth waiting for."

It was changeover time between shifts, and the canteen was busy. Weary night staff and reluctant day staff were queuing up for food together, some chatting, others just waiting in silence. Greg got a tray and took his place in line, feeling strangely like a cheerful canary amidst a crowd of sad pigeons.

As he waited his turn, he became aware of glances coming his way. Quite a few were accompanied by smiles or waves, which he returned. People were nudging each other, pointing him out.

One of Luke's ARS boys came over to chat, asking how he was.

Greg was discreet - they'd agreed that the details needed to be kept quiet - but he made his joke about being lucky DI Holmes was a good shot, which earned him a grin. He got a manly pat on the shoulder too, and a "Good to see you back, mate!" - and as the ARS officer returned to his table, Greg noted he was quizzed at length by his cohorts.

He supposed it was nice to know people cared.

Halfway to the head of the queue, he felt his wrist-set buzz. Greg twisted back his sleeve.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Kindly bring an additional bacon sandwich, will you?

Greg kept an eye on the queue as he tapped in a response, keeping his expression carefully neutral.

Decided it'll be worth the 48 hours of violent vomiting?
Ketchup or brown sauce?
Sent 08:08

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Neither… perhaps extra bacon though.
Intrigued, Greg paid for two hefty bacon sandwiches and asked for them to go. He couldn't think of many uses for a bacon sandwich except eating it - which he assumed, joking aside, that Mycroft wasn't about to attempt.

He got a fancy coffee from the machine, then left the canteen. Greg was aware as he went that even people he didn't know were smiling at him. Weirdly, they kept glancing at the two paper bags in his hand. *Maybe everyone just really wants bacon today,* he thought. He couldn't blame them. It was Friday, after all.

"Morning," Dawn said as he entered the department, smiling at him over her screen.

"Morning," said Greg. He gave her a careful smile. "Alright?"

"Mm," she said, her pink eyes bright. "How are you feeling? All sorted now?"

"God, yeah. Sound as a pound. Just needed a bit of extra sleep."

She glanced at the two paper bags, her expression oddly fond. "Glad you're feeling better."

Greg was very seriously starting to wonder. "Thanks," he said.

He idled on his way past reception, aware that she was watching him go.

As he made his way through the department, a few people called out good morning to him. Greg saluted them genially with the sandwiches. He rounded the corner, and was surprised to discover that the door of the office was open.

A person was kneeling half-in and half-out, examining something near the floor inside.

Greg recognised the lime green sneakers at once.

He approached, frowning.

" - I mean... *obviously,* Dr. Holmes, I've got the greatest respect for our Technical Department…”

TJ's voice, though muffled inside a cupboard, had audibly dropped into his throat. Greg's heart ached a little as he heard it.

"But yeah, I suppose the phrase 'slack bastards' could sometimes be applied... literally, this stuff is entry-level. I don't even know why they gave you fuss... 'cept if they couldn’t be bothered to walk all the way up from the basement, of course..."

The electronic panel on the office door was flashing through an urgent string of errors, spitting and spewing computer code in a panic.

As Greg stepped silently into sight of the door, he discovered Mycroft sitting in his desk chair. Mycroft was toying with a pen as he watched TJ work, one leg crossed casually over the other. TJ, armpit deep in a cupboard, hadn't noticed Greg's arrival.

He didn't notice either the quiet smile that Mycroft gave Greg through the door - nor Greg's bewildered look in response.

"There," TJ's voice said, triumphantly. There was a clunk. "Ow. Hang on - not quite there… oh, Technical... why are you still using 1394-A connections? The B's been out since August… slack bastards..."
The door's panel suddenly went dark, rebooted, and spat out another string of code. At last, with a final flicker, the code formed itself into words and locked proudly into place.

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR
GREGORY MARK LESTRADE
#18200837H

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR
MYCROFT ALEXANDER HOLMES
#18200109H

PEMBURY ROAD INQUIRY

Greg looked into Mycroft's eyes.

Mycroft looked back at him, saying nothing. He turned the pen slowly between his fingers.

As TJ wiggled backwards out of the cupboard, he chirped, "All done, Dr. H… should be showing up now."

He straightened up, took a step back, and bump into Greg. He turned around with a little jump.

At the sight of TJ, Greg's face immediately fell.

He shoved both bacon sandwiches into TJ's hands.

"Sit," he said, his voice hard.

TJ's expression worked. "I had a long shift," he tried.

"Flaming utter chaos, was it? On a Thursday night? Sit down," said Greg. "You're eating both of those before you leave this office. Look at the state of you. Christ alive, TJ. Listen to your voice."

TJ's hazel eyes flashed wildly at him.

"I'm fine, inspector," he said, hinting to Greg with all the subtlety of naval semaphore. "As I was just saying to Dr. Holmes here - there's a sore throat going round Comms. A really, really bad one."

Greg rolled his eyes. He scooted TJ inside the office, and firmly shut the door.

"You know this is Cross-Human Relations, don't you?" he said. "And you know you're in the presence of two detectives? Two good detectives. Now sit your arse down."

TJ hesitated for a second longer, still clutching the two bacon sandwiches.

Mycroft stretched lazily in Greg's chair, recrossing his legs.
"Tierney..." he sighed. "I **strongly** advise you to open those bags and get some protein into your system. Isotonic gel might be keeping you on your feet, but it's definitely worsening your symptoms."

TJ's shoulders sagged - then stiffened, suddenly, as he realised.

Greg's eyes flew wide. "Did you say *isotonic* gel?"

"I've got holiday booked!" TJ protested in a squeak. "I can't - ... I just need to - ... it's **fine**, alright? Look how **fine** I am. I just need to get to the end of next week. Then I can -"

Greg's jaw set. "**Sit,**" he snarled.

TJ gave in. He sat.

"Eat," Greg said. "**Now.**"

TJ miserably opened one of the bags. His hands shook a little as he removed the sandwich, took a substantial bite and chewed it under Greg's close observation.

"You're going to throw out that gel," Greg told him, firmly. "D'you hear? I'm going to pretend I didn't hear it." He crossed his arms, frowning. "Do I need to speak to Yardley? Get you the week off?"

TJ shook his head in a panic, his mouth full of food.

"Nnh - d'n - ..." He swallowed, hard. "No. Don't do that. He doesn't like me taking time off for it. He's already on my case. Says I'm wayward. My call times are fine, but he doesn't care. Please. **Don't** say anything."

"**TJ,** if he gets one look at you -"

"He doesn't **care,**" said TJ, fiercely. "He barely ever even comes round the pods. Just sits in his office and monitors our call times. And mine are **fine.**"

Greg raised his eyebrows. He gave a pointed nod to the rest of the sandwich.

Gloomily, TJ ate some more.

"Do you know how unhealthy it is to stave it off?" said Greg. "You're a mess, TJ. You can't cope any longer. Just tell Yardley you've got flu."

TJ glowered at him, swallowing. "Because flu causes a beard that grows back in four hours?"

Greg sighed. He shook his head. "You're going to ruin yourself like this... you know that?"

"Yeah... well." TJ gazed dully at the sandwich, running his tongue across his back teeth. "Yardley already thinks I shouldn't be there anyway. Says I'm a liability."

Greg's chest ached. "You're his star responder, TJ."

TJ met his eyes. Unhappiness flooded his expression.

"Shame I'm not his human star responder," he said.

Their internal communications panel began to bleep. As Greg put a hand on TJ's shoulder, lost for
words, Mycroft stretched across to the panel to answer it. He swiped his fingertips across the screen.

"Holmes and Lestrade," he said.

Greg ignored the slight jump of his stomach.

"There's a young lady at Front Desk to speak to you, Dr. Holmes. She says her name's Olivia Reid? It's to do with the Pembury Road inquiry."

Mycroft's eyes flickered with interest into Greg's. "Thank you, Front Desk. I shall come down."

His chair squeaked as he got up.

"I can go," Greg offered, turning his head.

Mycroft gave him a faint smile. "Not at all. I'll bring her up. Would you care for coffee?"

"No, thanks... just got a posh one from the canteen. I'm good."

Mycroft left the office, closing the door behind him. Greg watched through the fogged glass as he strode away.

He turned back to find TJ pretending not to be interested.

"What?" said Greg, frowning.

TJ busied himself with the bacon sandwich. "Nothing," he said. He seemed to be amused by something. "It's just... you two."

Greg's frown deepened. "What about 'us two'?"

"Never thought I'd see the day, that's all. Him being all... reasonable. Wanting your name properly on the door for you. Fetching you coffee." TJ eyed Greg over the sandwich, with a wolfish little smile. "No wonder everyone thinks it's funny."

"Thinks... what's funny?" Greg asked, slowly.

TJ's eyes glittered.

"The new nickname," he said.

Everything clicked into place. "Christ," Greg sighed, giving him a weary look. "Me or him?"

"Him," said TJ. "You've already got one."

"Yeah, I remember, thanks... is this why everyone's staring at me today? Dare I ask?"

"Well, it's just... cute how you're pals now." TJ took a bite of the sandwich, chewing it with his eyes still trained on Greg. "I kept it quiet that he heroically shot a vampire for you, but... half of CID saw him basically carry you out of your flat, Greg. You still sleeping on his sofa?"

Greg bit his tongue.

"My lounge carpet," he said, "has got a big vampire-shaped stain in the middle of it. It's barely even dry yet. And I can't even think about stepping foot in the place without wanting to throw up.
Yeah, I'm sleeping on his sofa. Why? And what's this bloody nickname? Is this something you've come up with?"

"I've told you, Lestrade." TJ took another bite of sandwich, chewing. He spoke around a mouthful of bacon and bread. "I don't come up with these things. I just… maybe help to circulate them a bit."

Greg rolled his eyes. "Sure you do, fuzzball..." He folded his arms. "Now tell me this bloody name."

As Mycroft waited for the lift, he found himself thinking about Tierney. The boy's intention to stave off the inevitable for another week was… well, lunacy - for lack of a better word. His health and wellbeing would suffer immeasurably.

At the same time, Mycroft - of all people in the building - could understand the fear of prejudiced treatment. A person in Tierney's position had to work twice as hard to be thought half as good, especially in a role of responsibility. It was not right, though a frightening number of people might believe it to be so.

Mycroft wondered absently if something might be done about Officer Yardley's appreciation for cross-human diversity. Amelia might even be able to assist in that regard.

He added it to the increasing list of social projects he was now managing, wondering when he had become quite so philanthropic. He had a feeling he knew what was causing that particular influence.

The lift doors gave a faint ping, and opened with a swish.

A small flock of the young ladies from Administration appeared, evidently on their way to the meeting rooms on the second floor. They were burdened with files and folders, and dressed in the unofficial uniform of Administration - long, straight hair; colourful high heels; pencil skirts and perfume. As Mycroft appeared in the gap, their conversation stopped at once. A hushed - and rather obvious silence - fell.

Coolly, with the slightest rise of his eyebrow, Mycroft stepped into the lift.

He brushed the button for the ground floor, turned his back on them, and eased his hands into his pockets to wait. The doors slid shut.

The lack of chatter was enthralling, he thought. This was a rare event indeed. The Administration team were usually incapable of being in any sort of plurality without gossiping away like pretty parrots. Suddenly, they were stifled of all sound.

As the lift descended, aware of their fervent glances upon his back, Mycroft ran his tongue across his canines and wondered.

He wondered what they would think.

These young ladies thought themselves quite the cream of Scotland Yard; covetable prizes, all of them. They were blooming flowers of femininity - and of sufficient glamour and guile to be considered in the running for the greatest prize of all.
DI Greg Lestrade was, after all, a sublimely handsome human being.

His arresting eyes, those lavish shoulders and the lack of a wedding ring made him quite the aspiration of any coltish young woman. Mycroft had heard the way that people spoke about Greg; he'd seen the way that eager eyes flashed after him as he left a room.

More than one person in this lift fancied herself a highly suitable candidate for the vacancy of Mrs Lestrade.

How sad - Mycroft thought, with a smile - that the position had now been closed.

The lift gave a gentle chime as it reached Floor Two.

Mycroft took a neat step to one side, allowing the Administration team to exit.

They flicked a few glances back at him as they left. He met each one in turn, charmed.

When they were half a corridor away, their conversation recommenced in mutters - quiet little birdlike titters. One of them, who didn't realise quite how much her voice carried, mentioned something about the Queen of Hearts.

The others shushed her, giggling, and the flock hurried on its way.

Mycroft snorted to himself as the lift doors shut.

He wasn't sure which of them had dubbed herself that.

He just hoped she wasn't attached to the title.
Shrine of the mighty! can it be
That this is all remains of thee?

- Lord Byron

*The Giaour* (1813)

It was a few minutes before Mycroft returned with Olivia, by which point TJ had left - with a stern warning to eat some bloody protein for once, to stop calling Mycroft *that*, and to stay away from anything that'd make him angry.

Their second visitor of the day looked as if she’d be rather less trouble - though Greg could tell at once that she was nervous. As she entered the room, Olivia’s eyes skipped from one official-looking piece of equipment to the next. She hugged her tan-leather bag against her stomach, and only when invited, took a seat. She'd done her make-up to come here - dark pink lipstick, neat flicks of eyeliner. Greg was reminded rather painfully of his mum.

"How are things?" he asked her, with a smile, as her gaze trailed uneasily over the incident board nearby. They lingered with sadness on Sam's picture.

"Fine," she said. Her eyes shifted to Greg. "I - wasn't sure if I was allowed just to turn up. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Always nice to have visitors. D'you fancy a cup of tea at all? Coffee?"

She hesitated. "Um - tea would be…"

Greg glanced at Mycroft in the doorway. Mycroft gave him a small, obliging smile.

"And for you?" Mycroft asked.

*You gorgeous bastard. Don't look at me like that.* "I'm still fine," Greg said, with a smile. "Thanks, though. This afternoon it's my turn to play secretary, alright?"

Mycroft gave a startled raise of his eyebrows and made no comment as he left, closing the door.

Greg got a hold of himself, smiled across the desk at Olivia, and said,

"How're the girls? I hope we didn't disturb them too much on Wednesday."

"Oh... no, they're fine." Olivia glanced down at her nails, painted baby blue. She rubbed at a small chip on her thumbnail. "They've - been asking me where Sam is. And I... I mean, that's - ..."
She sat up slightly, opened her bag and said,

"I brought you these."

From inside the bag, she slid a navy sketchbook. It was well-used, and gently battered at the edges. She opened it up to find something, and Greg tried not to notice the pencil sketches flicking by - illustrations of grasping hands, embracing couples and dancers - a few affectionate portraits of a playful, pouting Sam. Greg's heart tugged as they flipped past his eyes.

At last, Olivia reached a few torn-out leaves, eased them free, and handed them over.

Greg turned them over to take a look. An ugly lurch jumped across the bottom of his stomach.

"Jesus..." he breathed.

It was a pouchy, unhappy face - round and small-eyed, young but deeply balding, with a forehead whose various lumps and bumps made it look as if it were slowly caving in under the weight of its own scowl. The acne scars and patchy facial hair did not help, scattered across a chin that melded seamlessly into a short neck. His eyebrows were non-existent; it added to the look of a face that was shapeless and slumped, tipped forwards in a glower. Greg found himself drawn, with great reluctance, to those eyes - narrowed, mean little eyes.

Looking into them, he realised suddenly that this wasn't just a portrait. It was a moment. This was a photograph, taken in pencil, of an expression that Olivia had received.

Greg inhaled, stiffly. He flipped without comment to the other drawings. She'd done a sketch of the kid in portrait, and one of him full-length too, swamped in a heavy coat with his hands shoved deep into his pockets. She'd remembered he had ill-fitting trousers and lumpy old shoes. She'd remembered the awkward slouch of his shoulders.

As Greg stared at the sketch, he knew beyond doubt he was looking at the same person they'd seen on CCTV. This boy had killed Emma. This was their man. He'd passed within feet of Greg as he escaped that concrete yard.

He wouldn't escape from Greg's reach again.

"Olivia, these are..." It took Greg more than a moment to find the words. "I'd fire every police artist in this building and replace them with you right now, you know that? I can't tell you how helpful this is."

He looked up into her eyes. The praise didn't seem to have moved her one way or the other. She looked back at him, silent, her arms crossed over her stomach in absence of her bag.

"This... must have been difficult for you to relive," he said. "This level of detail."

After a moment, she gave a tiny shrug.

"I... hate what happened to Sam. I hate what happened to Emma." She glanced at the sketches in Greg's hands, her pain locked up beneath her resolve. "He did that. To them."

Greg hesitated. "To you, too."

Her gaze flickered. "It doesn't matter about me," she said. "Just find this guy, will you?" She paused. "For my friends."
"For all three of you," Greg said, quietly. "For the girls, too." He placed the sketches in the in-tray for Mycroft. They could have them in every evening newspaper in London, if Commander Vickery had time to breathe some fire on their behalf. "This is amazing, Olivia… thank you. You might have just handed us an end to all this."

She turned her golden bumblebee ring around her finger.

"It's fine," she muttered. "I just wanted to help."

The door opened. Mycroft entered, bearing tea, and shut the door with a quiet clunk. As he placed the mug down beside Olivia, she smiled slightly.

"Forgot you make good tea," she said, with a brief flick of her eyes.

Mycroft masked his expression. "Brewing is everything," he told her, discreetly. "People who add milk first should be removed from the gene pool." He spotted the sketches lying in the in-tray, and reached for them.

"You might not sleep," Greg warned him.

Mycroft snorted, glancing into his eyes. "I rarely do these days..." Greg watched him turn the top sketch over; the wince was almost magnificent. "Heaven help us. Male sexual inadequacy given human form... Olivia, how have you produced these without covering them in vomit? I applaud your gastric self-control with both my hands."

Olivia let out an involuntary sound, covering her mouth.

Greg had never seen her laugh before.

"These are supremely helpful," Mycroft said, studying the sketches closely. "Your powers of observation are remarkable."

"Thank you," she mumbled.

"DI Lestrade and I are deeply in your debt," Mycroft said.

DI Lestrade and I. Greg was going to have to train his stomach not to hop every time someone put their names together in a sentence - especially now they'd been sealed in a royal union. Christ.

He needed to tell Mycroft that when Olivia was gone. The Queen of Hearts.

Mycroft was going to lose his fucking mind.

"There's - something else," Olivia said, carefully, as she reached for her bag again. "I don't know if it's useful or not, but… I made some phone calls yesterday. Just to friends. I've been asking around."

There was a note in her voice that suggested these friends might not have counted as friends of Scotland Yard. Greg waited, raising an eyebrow.

Olivia bit her tongue.

"I know people you don't," she said. "People who… maybe wouldn't speak to you."

"Are these people I'd be honour-bound to arrest on sight?" Greg asked. Mycroft had taken Olivia's sketches to a spare surface, and was scanning them for the incident board with his wrist-set.
"Some of them," Olivia replied, looking through her bag.

"Okay. When you say 'asking around' - ?"

"Just seeing if they've heard anything… biting, or… vampires." The word was still uncomfortable in her mouth, Greg thought - still a fairy story, still not quite real. "I made a list," she said. "No names, but I've written down what they all said… where they tend to be..."

From inside her bag, she produced a bundle of handwritten notes - lists, crossed off; a map of London from a tourist kiosk, annotated, with large areas hatched out; what looked like written transcripts of conversations.

Greg's mouth opened.

"There's a lot," she admitted, uneasily. "Most of it incoherent. I can… summarise, if you want..."

As she handed him the bundle, Greg could not speak. He leafed through it, overwhelmed, as he realised he was looking at the results of a full investigative report. It was small-scale, but it was all there - contact lists in code, slashed out as she'd worked her way through them; loops where she'd started second-guessing herself, contacted other people to check, then surrounded her initial information in neat squares, confirming it; leads to follow, tasks to complete.

It was Mycroft who finally voiced Greg's thoughts.

"Olivia," he breathed, gazing at the notes in Greg's hands.

The two of them looked up at her in unison.

Olivia looked back, as numb as ever.

"I know you're doing what you can," she said. "But - there are places you can't reach. I thought that if I reached into them for you, it might help."

She shifted in her chair, glancing nervously at her notes.

"Long story short..." she said. "This - isn't London wide. I don't think so, anyway. Most of the people I spoke to told me vampires are made-up. I couldn't find any proper proof of any attacks outside Pembury Road."

She hesitated, awkward in the silence. She kept going.

"Most of these guys… I mean… they know their patches. They know what goes on. If people were biting their girls, they'd know about it and they'd have stopped it. There've been disappearances, but I couldn't really isolate them from the usual cases of people going missing. So… so it's just Pembury Road. I think," she added, lamely - and looked from Mycroft to Greg, biting at her lip ring. "From what I can tell."

Greg had never wanted to give someone a job so much in his life.

"These… friends of yours," he said. "They're - pimps, aren't they?"

"They don't have any reason to lie." Olivia flushed a little, lifting her chin. "Not all of them are - … some of them are only - "

"... criminals," Greg finished.
Olivia looked into his eyes. "I was on the streets at sixteen," she said. "I did what I had to."

Greg hesitated. "Is that how you met…?"

She didn't answer for a moment. "Arthur."

"- who gave you the house?"

Olivia looked away. "Yes."

There was a long silence.

Greg quietly laid the map she'd annotated out on the desk - unfolding it, studying each area. She'd blocked out more and more of the city as she'd worked her way through it. With a handful of phone-calls, she'd saved them long and painful weeks of work - weeks they didn't have.

It wasn't London-wide, Greg thought. Just Pembury Road.

Whatever this was, it hadn't spread - not yet. They could burn it out before it did. This wasn't a city-wide disaster that was too big for them to fight. It was some ugly kid, some people protecting him, and it was all happening on Pembury Road - that was it.

They could handle that.

They could beat it.

At Greg’s shoulder, Mycroft was reading through Olivia's notes in silence. Greg had become rather good at reading Mycroft's silences. This one was overwhelmed.

Greg opened his mouth to tell Olivia - to try and put some words together, somehow, to tell her the enormity of what she'd achieved - what she'd done for them - what she was capable of.

She spoke before Greg could find his voice. Her eyes burned at him across the desk.

"I just want you to stop them," she said. "I'll do anything to help. Anything. I mean it."

Greg looked back at her, his heart aching. Words died in his throat.

"My Sam wasn't prey," she said. Her voice cracked. "He was trying. Trying to climb out. His degree… he - he would have made it."

Her eyes blazed, full of injustice - full of despair. Greg looked into them and realised he knew every single thing that she was feeling. He'd felt it all before. That feeling was the reason he was sitting here, behind this desk.

"Sammie would have made it," she said. "I know it. He'd have had a normal life someday. A boyfriend and a home and labradors. They took that from him. They took it all away and they had no right. I need them to be sorry for it."

Greg's throat tightened as he swallowed. He didn't know why it mattered - but suddenly he had to ask.

"What was Sam studying?" he asked.

"Psychology," Olivia replied.
Greg felt that word roll over the man beside him in a silent, awful wave. For a moment, there was no sound. There was nothing at all in the room. It simply stopped - all of it - and nothing coped.

Mycroft laid Olivia's notes on the desk, gently.

Without a word, he left the room. The door clicked shut behind him, and he was gone.

Greg's heart heaved, watching his shape move quickly away beyond the frosted glass. He wanted to get up and run after Mycroft - to say something - anything - but that was the last thing they needed, with half of Scotland Yard thinking they were cute little friends… a tear-stricken chase through the department.

"Is he alright?" Olivia asked, carefully.

Greg found a smile for her. It didn't reach his eyes.

"He's fine," he said. "We're - up against it a bit. That's all."

He drew a breath, gathering himself back together. Mycroft needed to be alone. Olivia needed to hear something. Greg would give them both what they needed.

"What you've done here," he said, "is amazing. All this. It's incredible. I'm not trying to praise you, alright? I don't deal in praise. I'm a police officer. I deal in facts." He looked her in the eye. "I'll walk you back downstairs in a minute. As we go, I want you to take a good look around this place. You're better than three-quarters of the people sitting out there at desks. If I'd had this level of initiative from a sergeant, I'd lose my mind. Facts. Process them however you want."

Her expression didn't move at all. It was like she didn't hear the words.

"What else can I do?" she asked, her eyes locked into his.

For a moment, Greg was about to give her the default answer - polite thanks, and a smile, and a request to let Scotland Yard know if there was anything else she thought should come to their attention.

They were too deep into this to turn down help, he thought. Especially from someone willing to go the extra mile.

"Give me a couple of days," he said at last. Some relief finally opened her expression. "I don't know what you can do yet - but there'll be something. There always is."

"Okay," Olivia said. She hesitated, glancing down at her notes where Mycroft had left them. "I - hope he's alright."

"He'll be fine," said Greg. "Probably just gone for a smoke."

"You - been with him long?" Olivia asked. It took Greg a second to realise she meant professionally.

He felt like he should be answering with a stoic 'yeah, a few years now', or a joke about the dawn of time. He surprised himself with the startling truth.

"A week," he said. "And two days."

Olivia's eyebrows lifted in discreet disbelief. "A week?"
"Put together for the case," Greg said. "I know fuck all about vampires, and he knows everything about everything. S'working well so far."

"Did you... say he shot one for you?"

Greg smiled slightly. "Yeah. In the head, as it happens." Six times, he thought. Now we're living together.

Olivia watched him with quiet amusement; the corners of her dark pink lips just slightly upturned.

"You're good as a pair." She paused, twisting her lip ring for a moment. "He - Dr. Holmes - said…"

Greg raised an eyebrow, reaching for the posh canteen coffee that had now gone completely cold. "He said…?"

"When you'd been - sent outside to smoke. At my house. He said you knew more about my lot in life than maybe you're letting on." She watched Greg for a second, her eyes quiet. "He said you'd understand, if I let you."

Greg smiled against the rim of his cup. He'd wondered if something had been shared.

He didn't resent it. Whatever Mycroft had said, it had kept Olivia on their side. It had gotten them here. He took a sip of cold coffee, trying to think how to phrase this.

"My mum... didn't breed samoyeds," he said, at last.

Olivia's brow contracted slightly. She didn't want to conclude what she knew he was hinting.

"When you're at least a mile from here..." Greg said. "Blackfriars should do it - look up 'Maddy Lestrade, Farthing Downs'. Then look up 'joint enterprise law'. Then never think about it ever in my presence."

The door of the office opened.

Greg looked up, expecting Mycroft.

His heart sank as he saw that it was not.

Taking in Olivia at the desk, Luke hesitated.

"Sorry," he said. He'd just finished a shift. He was still in his combat leathers, his jacket unzipped to show the crumpled rock band t-shirt underneath. He was carrying two takeaway coffees. "I didn't realise you were - … shall I come back?"

"What's wrong?" Greg asked.

Luke paused. "Hoped I could have a quick word," he said. He held Greg's stare. "It's important."

Greg inhaled slowly, willing himself strength. It wasn't even nine.

"Okay," he said. "We were… just about done, I think, Olivia? Unless there was anything else?"

"No," she said. "Not for now. Um - thanks, for..." Her voice trailed out.

Greg took a scrap of paper from nearby, tore the bottom off it and scribbled down his wrist-set number.
"Any time," he said, as he gave it to her. He looked into her eyes. "Day or night. Alright?"

She folded the paper quietly into her pocket. "Right," she said. "Thanks."

"You look after yourself, won't you? Stay safe. Call us if you're worried. About anything."

Olivia smiled thinly. "I've walked Hackney most nights for six years," she said. "Then walked home alone across Hackney Downs. I've survived so far. Thanks, though."

Greg wasn't sure this reassured him much. Short of putting her under armed guard, he didn't know what else he could do. He got up from his chair.

"Are you alright to wait a few minutes?" he asked Luke, stiffly. "Take a seat. I'll just see Olivia out."

"It's fine," said Luke. "I was - thinking we could get some fresh air anyway... I'll come with you."

Greg smiled, without humour. He'd thought as much.

He reached for his desk drawer and took his cigarettes from inside.

If they were going to do this, he was going to need to smoke.
Liberty lends us her wings and Hope guides us by her star.

- Charlotte Brontë
  'Villette' (1853)

As Olivia headed off along Victoria Embankment, it was still quite dark. The rain promised by a grey, heavy sky was just beginning to fall. Greg stood on the steps of Scotland Yard and watched her go.

She slid her phone from her back-pocket as she walked, typing something in. Her pace slowed as she read.

Greg knew what it was.

Luke handed him one of the takeaway coffees, and Greg tore his eyes away.


Greg frowned, his shoulders stiffening.

"Not here," he muttered. "Let's… go to the car park. S'quieter."

It was more private, too. There was less chance of Mycroft stumbling across them. Wherever Mycroft was right now, he was hurting - and the last thing he needed to see was Luke, especially within close vicinity of Greg.

They headed to the car park in silence, then sheltered together beneath an overhanging corner of the building. Greg sparked up at once. He had a feeling it was going to be a smoky sort of day, one where the coffee couldn't possibly be strong enough.

"Where's your sergeant this morning?" Luke asked.

Greg frowned, clicking the lighter. "He's not my sergeant," he muttered. "He's a DI. And he's working on inquiries."


"You two are fucking," he said at last. "Aren't you?"

Greg said nothing, focusing on his cigarette.

"Quite a lot," Luke added, his voice low beneath the rattle of the rain.

Greg dragged the first lungful of smoke into his mouth. It doused his frayed nerves in a rush of chemical calm, and steadied him enough to speak.
"You tell no-one, alright?" he warned. "If I get hauled up in front of a disciplinary panel..."

"You think I'm gonna fucking tell people?" Luke lit his own cigarette with a scowl. "Firstly, you and me are supposedly mates. Secondly, who'd fucking believe me? And thirdly, if they fired every DI who ever screwed their sergeant, this place'd be empty."

"He's not my serg-"

"And fourthly," Luke cut across him, annoyed, "I'm pretty sure Dr. Holmes has enough reason to kill me already... I'm not giving him any more."

Greg frowned, blowing smoke from the corner of his mouth. "He's not gonna kill you," he muttered.

"Really?" Luke jeered, disbelieving. "He looked like he wanted to. He looked like if I'd blinked he'd have taken my fucking throat out."

Greg said nothing, concealing his expression with some care.

Luke leant back against the wall. His shoulders were high, his face set in discomfort.

"You and me didn't even do anything, Greg," he muttered. "And how was I supposed to know you were spoken for?"

"I wasn't... 'spoken for' at the time."

"Yeah? 'Scuse me if I don't believe that." Luke dragged on his cigarette, hissing a little. "Now suddenly I'm the bad guy. Warned off you, like I can't be trusted. I thought you were single, dickhead. If I'd known, I'd never have - "

"I was single," Greg said, exhausted by this conversation already. He was worried about Mycroft - and he had work to do. Actual work. Upstairs, artistic sketches of a murderer were sitting in his in-tray, and nothing was being done about them. Today was not meant to be going like this. "Look, Luke. It's just... it's new. It's really new. And Mycroft's... protective of me. So..."

Luke said nothing, shaking his head down at his boots.

Greg bit the inside of his cheek.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've told him you're just a tart when you're drunk. It didn't really help."


"Oh, c'mon... you know it's true. Everybody knows it. You're a strumpet, man. Two pints and you're anybody's."

"Well, tell him I'm actually sober most of the time, will you?" Luke snapped. "And tell him I'm not a threat... I can't stand anyone looking at me like that. Like I'm some kind of predator."

Greg reached for his coffee, uncomfortable.

"I'll tell him," he said. "I can't promise he'll believe me... but I'll tell him."

Luke heaved on his cigarette, hand shaking slightly. The rain was still coming down hard.

Blotted my copybook."

Greg frowned. "There's nothing to be sorry about," he said. "Seriously. It's fine."

"That's why you've avoided me for a week, is it?"

Greg bit the end of his tongue. "I've been busy," he said. "Vampire terror cell, two murders and I nearly became the third. Sorry if responding to texts hasn't been priority one."

Luke frowned guiltily, picking up his coffee.

"I can't believe you're shagging him," he muttered at last, and drank. "That's - … how did you even manage that, Greg? Nobody else can even get away with speaking to him, let alone…"


"Sorry," Luke said. "I just… can't get my head around it."

"He's a good man," said Greg. "And a good detective." He pulled on his cigarette, feeling his heart thump. "So he doesn't suffer fools gladly… fine. The world's got a lot of fools in it. Mycroft - cares about what matters." It still felt good to say that name, Greg thought. It made him feel brave. "That's enough for me."

Luke said nothing for a second, avoiding Greg's eyes.

"What?" Greg said, darkly.

"It's more than shagging… isn't it?"

"I swear to God, Luke. If I get dragged into Vickery's office and asked about any of this, it'll take more than Armed Response to keep you safe from me."

"Piss off, Greg... give me credit. And you've got more dirt on me than I'll ever have on you." Luke watched Greg's face, rubbing his thumb along his cigarette. "So you guys are... a thing. Seeing each other."

For a second, Greg didn't know what to say.

He didn't know what they were calling it.

He just knew that his stomach flipped itself inside out every time Mycroft called him 'mine'. That wasn't something he wanted to share with Luke - not with anyone.

"We're - …" Greg took a long drag on his cigarette, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. He decided just to fucking say it. "We're with each other. Alright? And you can stop with that look. You don't know what it's like, working these kind of cases. You don't know how tight that bond is. Then all it takes is a spark, and suddenly…"

Luke processed this for a moment more, watching Greg over his coffee.

A little of the brightness returned to his eyes.

"What's he like in bed?" he asked.

"Fuck off, Luke."
" Seriously," said Luke. "I need to know. Does he tell you off a lot?"

"F*ck right off. This second."

"Or does he sort of... go the other way? Want you to pull his hair and stuff?"

"I'm going to put this down," Greg said, nodding at his coffee, "and go to the basement - sign out the biggest laser rifle I can find - and shoot you in the head with it, if you ask me one more question."

Luke's smile curved its way right to the sides of his face. He gave a muffled laugh and a snort, and hid his grin within his coffee.

"Everyone thinks you're like an old married couple," he said, shaking his head. "Turns out you actually are an old married couple. You know what they're calling him, don't you?"

"Yeah, I heard, thanks." Greg rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "Bloody TJ, thinking he's funny... I don't know why I like him."

Luke chuckled, stubbing out his cigarette on the wall. Beyond their shelter, the rain was beginning to ease.

"Glad I've never ended up with one of his nicknames," he said. He reached for his coffee. "Those things stick."

Greg raised his eyebrows. "Yeah. Well dodged, Commander Arse."

Luke spat out a mouthful of coffee. "Is that me?"

Greg couldn't fight a smile. He threw back his coffee, ground out his cigarette and said,

"Listen... I have to go. I have to do some bloody work. Long story short: forget about it. Don't you dare tell anyone. And I'll tell Mycroft that you're sorry you tried to shag me."

Luke pulled a face. "Phrase it better than that, will you?"

"Fine," said Greg. "I'll tell him you're extremely sorry you tried to shag me."

Luke rolled his eyes. "Tell him I'm glad you turned me down," he said. "Tell him I never meant to piss him off... didn't realise you belonged to him."

Greg's heart flared quietly behind his ribs. He kept it off his face.

"You heading back upstairs?" he asked.

"Yeah, got to finish my training rotas before I go... c'mon," said Luke. "I'll walk you back."

As his foot alighted on the first step of the stairs, Greg's attention was caught by the slam of a car door.

He stopped at once, feeling his heart twinge.

He'd never realised before that he knew the sound of his own car door.

"What's wrong?" Luke asked, glancing back from a few steps up.
A lie appeared neatly in Greg's head.

"Just realised I left my lunch in my car," he said. "Might as well go get it now while the rain's stopped. See you later though, yeah?"


He headed away up the flight of concrete steps.

Greg waited until the electronic doors had shut and locked, then turned around.

Across the car park, a familiar figure stood waiting beside his car. Greg recognised him by silhouette alone - upright, chin lifted, isolated.

Quietly, slipping his hands into his pockets, Greg made his way over.

Mycroft watched him come closer.

They were almost within touching distance before either of them spoke.

"You alright?" Greg asked, gently. He offered his cigarettes.

Mycroft barely paused before taking one. It was a bad sign, Greg thought. As Greg held the lighter steady, the brief orange glow shaded Mycroft's expression - tired and grey.

"What did Elwood want with you?" Mycroft asked at last, breathing the smoke deep.

Greg noted the lack of an answer. "He was apologising to me," he said. After a moment's thought, Greg corrected himself. "To you, actually."

"To me?" Mycroft gave him a darkened look. "Why? What has Elwood ever done to me?"

Greg smiled slightly. "Nothing. Just says he never meant to piss you off. Didn't realise I was spoken for."

"Mm." Mycroft leant against Greg's car, his shoulders rather high. "You are, of course, not spoken for... not according to the common knowledge of Scotland Yard." He fixed Greg with a tense gaze. "I hope you're being discreet."

"Luke's a friend. A good friend. He'll keep it quiet."

Mycroft sighed. "Mm. That's my professional reputation resting on entirely trustworthy shoulders, then. Thank heavens I hadn't much reputation left to lose."

Greg rested against the car beside him, lighting a cigarette of his own.

"Luke's not like that," he said. "Besides... at least you know he's not a threat now. You don't have to worry about him."

Mycroft snorted, passing no comment.

For a while, they smoked in silence together. Greg wanted to lay his head on Mycroft's shoulder - butt him, gently - ease an arm around him. He didn't dare. There was nobody around, but that could change in a split second. It wasn't worth the risk.

"I'm sorry about Sam," he said, at last. "That can't have been easy to hear."
Mycroft didn't respond for a moment. "You're not nearly as sorry as I am."

"What d'you mean?" said Greg.

Mycroft's hand shook slightly as he lifted the cigarette. His eyes closed.

"Two days ago," he murmured, "that young man lost his life in some cold, dingy room in a brothel - because I used him for food. I might as well have drained the life from the boy and left him there myself."

"Mycroft…" Greg's chest constricted. "Mycroft, you weren't - "

"I caused every day of his future to be torn away from him." Mycroft's voice rang hollow; smoke furled from his mouth as he spoke. "He will never walk in this world again, because of me. That is - inescapable, Greg. I shall have to live with it."

"Hang on. You know it might not have been you... don't you? I met him too, Mycroft. I met him in Gastrell's Bar. Anyone could have overheard us. Followed him. It might have been my fault."

Mycroft shook his head. "I used him," he breathed. He swallowed, hard. "I used him... God help me."

"You didn't know he'd die," Greg said, quietly fierce. "You didn't know they were watching. It's not your fault. This didn't happen because you tried to look after yourself for once."

Mycroft said nothing, smoking in pale silence. He looked more ill than ever. His eyes were both dark and bright, full of pain.

Greg stepped quietly in front of him, caught his reluctant gaze, and said,

"You gonna use this as an excuse to punish yourself, are you? Hope you know that's not going to fly on my watch."

Mycroft's brow contracted; his stare hardened. "I require no excuse."

"Believe me, I know it," Greg said. "And it's not happening. So get used to it."

"We have been here - …" Mycroft reached into his waistcoat, drawing out his pocket-watch. Despair crossed his face. " - … a little over one hour. I am exhausted, jealous and guilt-ridden. Tell me something that will persuade me back upstairs, Greg."

"People are counting on you," said Greg, without a pause. "Including me."

Mycroft's expression flickered. He tapped the ash from his cigarette.

"Very well," he said, quietly.

"Vickery's e-mailed through a list of the street teams she's poached from CID," Greg said. "Could do with them organising into a rota, and told where to be and when. What do you think? Can you handle it?"

"Yes - yes, I can."

"Reporting in by seven AM at the latest, d'you think? Direct to one of us?"

Mycroft nodded, thinking. "To me, perhaps… I'm always awake by then."
"And we've got forensics working on the DNA from the guy in my flat. D'you fancy chasing them for it? Intimidating Dr. Harper always puts a spring in your step."

A corner of Mycroft's mouth curved, with reluctance. "If it would be helpful, yes. I shall."

"Great," said Greg. "I'll work on distributing the CCTV and Olivia's sketches. Strike while the iron's hot, and all that."

He could see the energy returning more and more to Mycroft with every word. Progress would get them through this, Greg thought. It was the one sure path out of pity.

"I'll send the CCTV and sketches out to brothels, massage parlours," he said. "I'll get uniform to walk them round Hackney… and it's a shot in the dark maybe, but I was thinking schools too. Sixth form colleges."

"Schools?" said Mycroft, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah. The kid's a couple years too old, but someone might remember him." Greg raised his eyebrows. "Doubt many people would ever forget a face like that."

Mycroft dragged out the last of his cigarette. "You're quite right," he murmured. "It's a very feasible idea."

Greg's heart squeezed. It wasn't the first compliment he'd had from Mycroft - far from it, and most of them were unrepeatable beyond the bedroom door - but there was still something magnificent about knowing he'd impressed Mycroft Holmes.

As Mycroft ground his cigarette underfoot, Greg said,

"You came to my car. For - space. For some peace."

Mycroft avoided his eyes. "If you'll leave your keys so readily accessible…"

"No, I - don't mind. I don't mind at all." Greg glanced towards the stairs, making sure they were truly alone. "I just meant it's… kinda touching. That's all."

Mycroft snorted softly. "Are you truly surprised that I find your space to be comforting?" he asked, his voice low.

Greg smiled. He tossed his cigarette to the ground. "Still touched, though." He paused, suspecting this was a rare private moment in an otherwise busy day. It was time to get something over with. "Listen, there's… something I should probably tip you off about. It's not a big deal, it's just - best you hear it from me."

Mycroft shot him a distinctly worried expression. "What fresh hell are you about to reveal to me?"

Greg braced himself.

"There's a - ... thing circulating," he said. "Y'know. Office banter."

Mycroft said nothing, waiting.

"About… us," said Greg. "Erm... you know I get this stupid... 'King of Hearts' crap? I - dunno where it comes from, but…"

Mycroft's face remained entirely unmoved, except for his left eyebrow - which quirked upwards
half an inch. "Go on."

"Well… everyone's twigged that you and me are working together now, and - we seem to be good mates. And you've - … well, you've got a pretty fierce reputation - and people think they're funny, so…"

Greg winced slightly, bracing for impact. *Now or never*, he thought.

"They've - started calling you... 'Queen of Hearts'," he said. "I've told TJ to shut it down, but… well, it's out now. And people are already - … why are you smiling?"

Mycroft smothered the expression at once, looking down at his shoes. He ran his tongue across his teeth.

"I hadn't realised that particular sobriquet applied to me," he said, coolly. Greg couldn't help but notice that his eyes were glinting. "How unfortunate. Office gossip is so ubiquitous."

Greg raised an eyebrow. "You're not... too mad, are you?"

"I am of course thoroughly displeased," Mycroft said, looking nothing of the sort. "I only hope that TJ Tierney is proud of himself. Creative little hound."

"Oh, God... don't savage him for it, will you? He's just a scamp."

"I'm sure that with no possible way to prove Tierney's involvement," Mycroft said, airily, "a confrontation would be unfruitful. I shall find some other way to repay his generosity… perhaps *after* his hormones have settled."

"You're taking this better than I thought," Greg admitted, as they began to walk slowly towards the stairs together.

"As you said yourself, Greg… office banter. It is unfortunate, but inescapable."

At the top of the stairs, as Greg tapped in the code for the security doors, he stole a small glance sideways. Mycroft was smirking to himself.

Greg bit the end of his tongue to hide his smile.

"You *like* it," he said. "*You like* the bloody nickname."

Though Mycroft's eyes remained fixed on the door, they glittered wildly.

"There are worse things to be known as," he remarked, "than yours."

Greg's stomach squirmed happily. He hid that from his face, too. "Vickery better not find out..."

"I'm sure it would amuse her just as much," Mycroft said, chippily, as the door unlocked. He held it open for Greg to pass beneath his arm. "We are 'good mates', and our colleagues believe they are amusing. That is all."

His eyes glinted as he smiled.

"Don't lose any sleep, my king. Of all our major concerns at this time, being humorously tagged as your consort isn't one of them."
As they ascended in the lift to Floor Five, Mycroft managed to resist jamming the buttons and pinning Greg to the wall. It wasn't easy, but he did it. They had things to be getting on with, and a frustrating partial erection wasn't going to aid in any of them.

Instead, he stood by Greg's side in comfortable quiet, and marvelled at the man's ability to make him feel better.

He'd almost wanted to vomit as he'd spotted the two of them stealing down into the car park. The blackest, most wretched depths of his soul had at once assured him that he was about to see Elwood ravish Greg across the bonnet of somebody's car. He'd watched in stilted panic as they'd simply smoked, and talked - and Mycroft had grown more and more guilty with every passing minute, fully aware that he was now unwittingly spying on Greg.

And spying on damn bloody Elwood, too - who could not possibly have made himself look more attractive today if he'd tried. Crumpled leathers, boots, bearing the gift of coffee. Meanwhile, Mycroft himself was gaining years by the hour, and now avoiding mirrored surfaces so he didn't have to confront his own under-eye shadows.

As he'd sat in Greg's car, he'd felt rather hopelessly miserable.

Now, he was quite ready to face the world again.

It was Greg, he thought. Greg made everything better.

He swept across every shadow like a torch beam, dispelling it all - turning the greatest phantoms into no more than the absence of light. The world was never quite as bleak when Mycroft recalled that Greg was in it.

Back up in Cross-Human Relations, Mycroft took it upon himself to do something he'd wanted to do all morning.

As he carried Greg's distinctive Manchester Police Department mug through the division, freshly filled with coffee, he was aware of the fascinated eyes that followed him. Delighted realisation was almost palpable in the air. This small act would be discussed, he thought, once their office door had shut - and, in a couple of hours, when Mycroft took the mug for another walk to the kitchen and brought it back with more coffee for Greg, it would be discussed even further.

He knew it shouldn't make him proud.

But then, Mycroft thought, it was becoming clear that small moments of joy could keep at bay any number of terrors. It was small moments like this that would see them through the nightmare.

"Thanks, gorgeous," Greg murmured, as Mycroft laid the mug at his elbow. As he took the first sip, his eyes closed over. "Mmh. What would I do without you?"

Mycroft settled himself at the other end of the desk, so pleased that he feared he was glowing.

"You're quite welcome," he said, quietly pink. He opened a new light-screen, picked up a data-pad, and reached across to the comms panel to spoil Dr. Harper's morning.
As he opened the fridge that night, not long after eight PM, Greg thanked himself with the whole of his heart for making pasta in advance. He'd never been so glad to see a plate wrapped in cling-film in all his life. He sighed, peeled off the film and chucked the plate in the microwave, massaging the back of his neck as he waited.

It had been a long day - productive, but long nonetheless. He was glad to see the end of it. With any luck, Olivia's sketches would pay off for them next week. They might even finally get somewhere in tidying up all this mess.

Greg carried his food to the lounge a few minutes later, with a disposable cup balanced in the crook of his arm.

Mycroft was busily digitising Olivia's notes. His face was lined with tired diligence, and he showed no signs of stopping for the night. As Greg reappeared, he glanced up over his reading glasses.

He spotted the cup; his entire face slackened.

"Greg - "

Greg handed him the cup, careful not to tip steaming pasta across the cream leather sofa.

"Dinner," he said. "Drink up."

"Greg, you - you didn't need to - …" Mycroft flushed with discomfort. "How could you bear to - …?"

Greg settled on the opposite sofa, retrieving his fork from his top pocket.

"Easy," he said. "Container lid gave me some trouble. They screw them on tight, don't they? Got there in the end, though…” He skewered a few pieces of pasta. "Where d'you source it, out of interest?"

Mycroft watched him eat for a moment, still uneasy.

"Amelia has - contacts," he said, at last. "She made arrangements for me."

*Good old Vickery,* Greg thought. The commander could be a machine of war at times - but if the
machine was on your side, there was no safer place in the world.

He chewed his pasta, curious. "You owe her quite a bit, don't you?" he said. "I get the feeling she looked after you."

Mycroft's expression didn't change. "You can't imagine," he said.

There was silence. It stretched on for a moment, thick.

Greg looked up from his food, picking up a few more twirls of pasta.

"Drink, gorgeous." He smiled, holding Mycroft's gaze. "There's only me here."

Mycroft hesitated for a moment more, watching Greg with careful eyes - as if sure that it couldn't be true.

Then at last - to Greg's relief - he quietly placed the straw in his mouth.

He began to chew on it gently as he drank.

Greg felt his heart relax. They ate in comfortable peace together, and quiet resettled across the room.

When his plate was half empty, Greg reached casually for his wrist-set. He opened up his e-mails with a tap.

It hadn't felt right to read them until now - not when there was work going on. He'd been quietly aware of messages arriving throughout the afternoon: a slow trickle of names, avatars and advice, all saved for later. From the look of things, his forum post had attracted quite a few responses.

He didn't know how much help they'd be.

All the same, it would be nice to feel a little less alone.

As he continued to eat, cross-legged on the sofa with the bowl in his lap, Greg opened up the thread and scrolled through.

hi tatara welcome to forum!! sounds like you need to speak to yr bf… obv this is a big deal and he is best person to ask xxx

Hey newbie. Um your guy is insane? Lol (Send me private message if you wanna, not all of us so unappreciative :-P)

Welcome to MM lounge Tatuara are you sure once ever 6 months?? Cos no that is not healthy. Feeding is not painful/bad for donor, it is FINE. My life was shit until husband came along and I was on fresh once a month…. literally your guy is hiding something :(( really sorry… you need to speak to him and ask what is going on because idk anyone who would turn that down
hav you just been hintin & stuff? bc srsly just make it clear and he will say yeh

OMG here we all are losing our minds trying to find pair bonds and there is some douch out there saying no. hahaha FML.

Hello Tautaura every 6 months is extreme. He is at serious risk of FF. Please be careful. It is actually dangerous for you to be around him if he is going that long. Please see link, it has symptoms… first sign of these & to be honest you need to get yourself away. TLDR is restlessness, big eyes & staring, very pale, struggle focusing on what you say, & twitching. If he starts with these it is feeding frenzy for sure and basically it will not end well… please look after yourself first…

LOL… How are we meant to know?? Ask the dude.

"he wants to just feel normal”…… definitely dodgy. who the hell wants to feel normal when you could be pairbonded? and he has been 309 that long? lying to you about something. Also yes, he is going to frenzy at some point. then you are jam. sorry for harsh truths… --shrug--

Are you sure you have made it obvious? Sorry but this is unbelievably weird. I cant think of a thing. Is he definitly 309?

u in states tutarra? msg me pls i have pics x

There were a number of other short messages, all with similar suggestions to make - or criticisms to offer. Greg found himself sinking into quiet despair as he scrolled, not sure which thought he hated more: that Mycroft was suffering to an extreme; that Mycroft was hiding something; or that some day, Mycroft was going to go mental and kill him. All three were equally unbearable.

Just as he began to lose hope in this idea, Greg’s eyes snagged on a much longer reply.

He realised, with a jump of his heart, that it had been posted by the forum's mod - DefenderOfThePeople, whose username he recognised. The mod's avatar showed a ruined abbey on a cliffside, and his forum credentials were bedecked with a silver star. Veteran Member. 1294 posts.

Somewhat more hopeful, Greg began to read.

Hello Tuatara. Welcome to the forum. You'll find more helpful advice in the newbies section, but I'm sure you've already been there.
As a few others have pointed out, it's hard to know what your partner might be thinking without asking him.

But of course it isn't always easy to talk in a new relationship.

309 carriers in particular learn not to talk. It's difficult for us to open up after many years of silence. When a relationship is new it can seem fragile, and we all live in fear of losing a new friend or partner because of 309. Sometimes a new partner can seem comfortable at first, until they realise more fully what's involved...

So I can see why your partner may be reluctant to talk.

But I can see why you have come here too.

And clearly you care for him very much.

You say that you have 'started' seeing him... you should know firstly that the transition from a sexual relationship to a pair bond is a significant step. Pair bonds are intense connections. Once established they are very difficult to break. You might see your offer as a kind favour to ease the suffering of a friend... but in actuality it would be a rather different arrangement.

It's never a good idea to post personal details on the forum. But you are very welcome to message me and we can talk further, if it would help.

Otherwise I wish the very best for you both.

Greg mulled the message in silence for a while, eating pasta while keeping half an eye on Mycroft. His lover was working, typing and quietly drinking, absorbed in Olivia's notes and the hard-light screen to which he was transferring them.

While Greg was grateful for quite a few of the responses, there was clearly only one person here who could give him the answers he needed.

He tapped the small letter icon beneath the mod's username. A private message window opened on his wrist-set screen.

Greg typed, carefully.

Hi defender...... thanks for your reply. It was very helpful and I appreciate your time.

do you mind if I ask are you pairbonded yourself? If you are... how long it was before you made the step?

And were all the other replies correct in that 6 months is not healthy? I cant really tell if its not ideal or genuinely dangerous. It would be kinda reassuring if you could clear that up for me.

Sorry for questions. I just want my guy to be happy.

thanks again. tuatara76.
With the message sent, Greg took his empty plate to the kitchen.

He laid his wrist-set on the side while he washed up. He was aware that this room had been as sterile as an operating theatre before he'd arrived - now, the slight scattering of toast crumbs and packaging made him feel faintly guilty. Mycroft didn't seem to mind, but Greg wanted to be a good guest. He washed everything up and transferred it to the drying rack, surprised to catch the flash of a new notification as he rinsed off his hands.

It looked like DefenderOfThePeople kept a close eye on his inbox.

Greg put the kettle on to give himself time to read.

He almost asked Mycroft if he wanted a cuppa.

*Hello TuaTara. Please don't apologise. I'm happy to help.*

_Six months is admittedly the longest someone should go without a live donor. You're right in that it's not ideal but many 309 carriers learn to live with 'not ideal'. Please see the list of FF (feeding frenzy) symptoms here if it gives you peace of mind._

_But if your partner has been 309 for thirteen years, as you say, he's likely to be good at managing his own needs. He'll be able to spot his own early warning signs._

_Essentially I don't think you should lose any sleep._

_I'm sorry to say I lost my bondmate some years ago. I'm now unbonded. But I've been a forum mod for some time and I've seen lots of other people's experiences, and you should know there is probably no 'right length of time' for a bond to develop. Like most things it depends on the people involved._

*Can I ask how long have you known your partner?*

Cup of tea in hand, Greg returned to the lounge.

"D'you mind if I go for a bath, gorgeous?" he asked. "I smell like a long day of paperwork…"

Mycroft smiled, now scanning another of Olivia's maps. "Of course," he murmured. "You needn't ask."

Greg paused, biting his lip. "Coming?"

Mycroft's eyes brightened. He regarded Greg with fondness through the hard-light screen.

"Perhaps in a while," he said. "I'd - rather finish this now, while I still have a modicum of energy. Is that okay?"


He typed his reply while water and bubbles filled the tub. As he finally sank back against the side, he tapped send and placed his wrist-set carefully out of harm's way, then soaked for a while in the warmth.
Little over a year now. Recently got closer though, and out it all came. Having trouble balancing the line between supportive and intrusive if I'm honest. not sure I'm doing a good job of it…. 

I'm sorry about your bond mate :( I imagine that wasn't easy…. 

Do you mind if I ask.... you said pairbonds are difficult to break… I get the feeling they're intense? Is that just because it's an intimate thing to do for someone? or is there more to it? 

Does the PT309 become addictive for instance? 

sorry again for questions....

It took a long while for the response to come. When it did, with a bleep, Greg placed his half-drunk mug of tea between the taps for safekeeping, picked up his wrist-set and squinted at the long message that had appeared, reading it slowly. Steam fogged across the screen.

No need to apologise. I imagine it's a relief to talk? 

'Addiction' is a tricky word. So far as I know, we can become addicted to anything we enjoy. Shopping, exercise, being rejected. Our children. In some ways all love is addiction.

However it's true that PT-309 is very potent. It can turn a complete stranger into a devoted partner with only a few doses. This is an obvious reason your partner might be nervous. He'll be aware that PT-309 will affect your feelings towards him. They'll become stronger... much stronger... but it will be chemically-induced...

Maybe he enjoys knowing your affection for him is authentic. Maybe he dislikes the thought that you'd be made to feel something you naturally wouldn't. 

I won't bore you with science... but carriers like me are hardwired to become protective of our pair bonds. This contributes to the closeness. Most of us never feed from the same person twice for fear of triggering the bond. Once is usually fine. But the pair bond urge is very powerful and is not easily fought. You're also right that it's an intimate thing to do. Your life would be sustaining his. Please understand that's enormous to a carrier like me. Often, carriers don't recover from broken pair bonds.

Maybe I should make what I'm saying clear... 

You're trying to lessen his suffering and I applaud you for that. But he'll know that in accepting your offer, he'll be bonding you to him without end. 

A pair bond is deeper than a romance. Closer than a marriage. 

I imagine that after... only weeks? Months? You're probably not ready for that. 

Maybe your partner feels uncomfortable that a chemical in his saliva will make you want it anyway. 

In a sense, I hate to say that you're lucky. Many of my kind wouldn't be as concerned about your 'natural' feelings. They'd have accepted your offer and let the chemicals take their course.
As Greg finished the message, his heart beating hard, a second one popped into place below it.

*I'm sorry if any of this has unsettled you. You shouldn't let it change your relationship with your partner... I'd hate if I was responsible for that.*

*If you're both happy, Tuatara, there's no reason not to continue as you are.*

For a long time, Greg couldn't think. He simply read and reread the message, feeling the water lull around him as his eyes returned over and over to those phrases that had briefly stopped his breath.

*All love is addiction.*

*Your life would be sustaining his.*

*Closer than a marriage.*

He found himself reliving the moment Mycroft had hauled a dead vampire off him, checked his throat for wounds and wept as he found none. He thought about the shift in Mycroft's expression whenever Luke appeared - and he thought about how Mycroft had brought him here without a second thought - into his home, just to keep him safe.

A month ago, the thought of Dr. Holmes from Criminal Psychology opening his home to someone was unreal.

Now Greg was lying here in his bath, drinking the tea he'd filled Mycroft's cupboards with, from a mug Mycroft had owned for thirteen years but never used.

He thought about the words that had been whispered to him once, pressed against the wall of a lift as his heart threatened to rupture. *You. If only, it… would be you. Know that.*

Greg screwed his eyes shut, rubbed them hard, and forced himself to reply. The guy would think he'd caused offence, and he hadn't. He was just trying to help.

*Thanks for the time to type all that out. Must have taken you ages and I'm really grateful. honestly its probably best that I know these things. At least I understand now why he freaks out and doesnt want to talk….. basically been proposing to him and we've been together for about two days. Yikes lol no wonder*

He hoped his 'lol' looked a little more convincing at the other end.

DefenderOfThePeople's response was oddly short; it arrived in only moments.

*I hope I haven't changed your feelings towards him.*
You seem to be very caring. For most of us that's far far more than we've ever had. Please don't think your affection is a sorry second place prize. I'm sure it isn't.

Gerg finished his cold tea without tasting it, his heart resting somewhere in his stomach.

Thanks thats nice of you. I dont know if its enough but you are kind. Literally all I want is him to be happy, the world has been crap to him. pretty sure he is not ready for life commitment though. Thanks for talking to me x

He hoped the 'x' would be taken as a finality, but a last message quickly came through.

I hope I haven't distressed you.

Greg wasn't sure what to say. He gazed at the words for some time, wishing he could bring himself to be breezy and reassuring in response. All of this wasn't some person on the internet's fault - some poor bastard who'd lost a person closer than a marriage. The guy was just being honest and kind.

And Greg didn't even know if he was distressed.

There was no word he could put to this feeling - this thick, strange, stagnant feeling now fuzzing up the inside his throat. He thought of Mycroft, and tried to feel his way to anything but guilt and a little awkwardness. He couldn't.

He hated that he'd pushed it.

His blood ran slightly cold as he imagined the back half of this week for Mycroft: trying to avoid explaining to Greg that he wasn't quite ready for a step-up from marriage, thank you - after a grand total of two days together.

Christ, Greg thought.

He closed his messages on his wrist-set, and tossed it out of reach into the laundry basket. He then sank down into the bubbles, closed his eyes, and tried to settle.

Love's never simple, he told himself. It's still worth it. He smiled a little as he realised that, even with vampires, lifelong blood bonds, a serial killer on the loose and a hired assassin sent to murder him in his flat, this was going much more smoothly than things with Jason ever had.

He submerged himself for a while, massaging hot water into his hair. He wondered how different things could be right now if Mycroft had taken up his offer.

Bonded - 'without end' - and from the sound of things, he'd have been pretty happy about it.

Greg pressed at that feeling, gently - nudged it, unsettled it, waiting to see what came out. Tied to Mycroft Holmes, he thought. Sustaining Mycroft's life. More deeply in love than a marriage, and
Mycroft unlikely ever to recover from his loss. Protective of him. *A much stronger, healthier and fitter mate.*

He tried adding the condition *'against my will'* - but something jarred. Not quite right.

Greg slid up out of the water, spitting bubbles, his eyes clamped shut, and reached for shampoo. As he scrubbed it through his hair, he realised that he wouldn't have known it was against his will. He'd have offered out of love, and Mycroft would have accepted - and as the days went by, and they fell deeper into love, how could he have known what was natural and what was PT-309? Presumably, it all felt like it had come from within. The chemical love wouldn't come in a different colour. It wouldn't come stained with ink, so he could track its progress through his heart.

And after all... all love was addiction.

PT-309 began as a test tube in a lab. Meanwhile, Jason's hold over Greg had been entirely home-grown. That didn't mean it was good and wholesome. He'd become addicted to Jason as surely as other people got addicted to scratchcards, narcotics and online poker. Jason had screwed him around, used him, brought him no happiness, and still Greg had been there for him - thanks to natural, authentic, genuine love.

*Isn't love a chemical anyway?* Greg thought. *Hormones?*

He didn't know. His education hadn't taken him that far.

He supposed that everything in the universe, at the heart of it, was chemical.

PT-309 caused love. It caused addiction; it caused a bond. So did red wine and sex by candlelight. Long walks, laughter and conversation all caused love, too - just more slowly, and they needed more frequent doses. Lying on the sofa together, watching *Wuthering Heights*; grocery shopping; working on murder investigations. All causes of love.

As Greg rinsed the shampoo from his hair, he was starting to realise why he felt no distress.

He knew that he *should* do - and he knew that the distress was right there, present but not affecting him, hovering in the wings just in case it was needed.

PT-309 would make him fall in love with Mycroft - make him wonder if, maybe, Mycroft was everything.

But that process had already started.

In a way, Greg thought, as he rubbed soap under his arms, it was an unhappy conclusion to come to - that it was *Mycroft* holding back - Mycroft not ready for this, Mycroft not sure - Mycroft not convinced that this person who'd come barreling into his life was the one he wanted still barreling around it, decades from now.

*Decades from now.*

Greg hesitated, looking down at Mycroft's posh lavender soap.

The bubbles gleamed brightly back at him, fragile and beautiful, sliding over the smooth purple surface.

*'Decades from now'* didn't frighten him, he realised.
And holy fuck - surely, it should.

*Two fucking days. Come on, Lestrade. Please freak out. This'll be so much easier if we're not ready too.*

But it wouldn't come.

The fear wouldn't rise.

Greg sighed, biting the corner of his lip. *Holy shit.* He wanted to feel terrified by this, but… Mycroft was *fascinating.* At the heart of it all, behind all the sarcasm and the snarking, he was good and he was brave, and Greg couldn't bear how appealing he found that. Mycroft was clever, and funny, and quick. He was dedicated. He cared about doing the right thing. The way he held himself and the way he moved dragged Greg's eye across every room, and it always had - right from the very first moments. The way he spoke left Greg squirming inside. When they got their hands on each other's skin, the whole world fell away into bliss. Watching Mycroft come made Greg feel like he could watch it for forty years.

He tried to think of what his mum would say.

But she'd probably have adored Mycroft too… fussed. Called him 'Myke'. Constantly tried to feed him.

Mycroft wasn't ready, Greg thought - and that was the end of it. It didn't matter what Greg did or did not want. If Mycroft wasn't happy, then Greg wouldn't be mentioning it again. Things would stay as they were.

*For now,* he told himself, as he quietly rinsed off the soap.

There was still time. Excultus had ripped into their lives and slowed the whole thing to a halt. Everyday, some new horror unfolded. It had made two weeks feel like two fucking years - but it wouldn't always be like this. Some day, time would start moving again. The blockage would clear, and they could head off into the future together - and do all those things that couples did.

They could bond - slowly, and naturally. See where life took them. See if the long road ahead would be enjoyable spent together.

It was a case of waiting, Greg thought. He could handle that.

He just wished the shadows would stop darkening under Mycroft's eyes.

As he began his final rinse, there came a cautious knock on the door.

Greg looked up, scooping water gently across his chest. "Mycroft?"

The door opened. Mycroft appeared in the gap, rather nervously - he'd loosened his tie and top button at last, and he seemed a little pale.

"Forgive me," he said. "You'd - been a while. I thought I'd…"


Mycroft tentatively entered the room. He sat himself nearby on a low cabinet, watching Greg with care as he washed.
"How's your digitising going?" Greg asked, with a smile. It was good to see Mycroft. It brightened his unease - just the sight of him was enough to make him feel like things would be alright in the end. "You nearly finished?"

"Yes... I've transferred the files to your wrist-set." Mycroft bit quietly at the edge of his thumbnail. "I've added some observations of my own, marked at the end... nothing too monumental - but I had a number of smaller - …"

He paused, flushed, and inhaled.

"'Work talk','" he remarked. "It's - rather late... perhaps this should wait until…"

Greg smiled. "Tell me in the morning," he said. "You've done at least thirteen hours on the clock now. Time for a rest. D'you want the bath water?"

"I might," Mycroft said, after a pause. "That would probably help, in fact."

Clean now, and calm, Greg lifted himself up out of the water with a slosh.

As he handed Greg a large white towel, Mycroft discreetly avoided looking at his naked body.

"You okay, gorgeous?" Greg said. "You seem a bit uneasy..."


Greg secured the towel around his waist. Today had been a long one by anyone's standards, he thought.

He knew how to fix it.

"C'mere," he said, fondly. He reached out his hands. "Let's start switching you off."

He undressed Mycroft with care beside the bath - this piece, then that piece, item-by-item, slowly working his way down to skin until Mycroft was naked on the bathmat. He shivered slightly, his eyes seeking Greg's for reassurance.

Greg wrapped him up in his arms for a moment, held him gently, and placed a small kiss on of his shoulder.

"You sure you're alright?" he murmured. "You're all soft and quiet."

Mycroft inhaled at the gentleness of his voice. "Yes... yes, I'm fine." His hands laid carefully on Greg's back. "Just overworked. My - head is…"

"Alright... well, a soak will help. Straight to bed with you after?"

Mycroft shivered. "That might be best."

"Okay." Greg kissed his cheek, nudged him gently towards the bath, and opened up the cabinet over the sink. There were candles and matches inside. "Let's make it a bit cosier in here for you..."

As he lit the final candle, Greg said,

"Can you switch the lights off for me, Anthea? Just leave the bedroom on low..."

The lights sunk obediently into darkness.
"Thanks," Greg said with a smile, placing the last candle by the sink.

She played him a little tune. "You are welcome."

Mycroft gazed at Greg from the bath, now safe within a pool of candlelight.

"There," Greg said, and leant over to kiss his forehead. "You soak here for a while. If work thoughts start coming, just sweep them out of your head. It'll all wait until tomorrow. Okay?"

He looked into Mycroft's eyes. They gazed back at him in wordless wonder, blue-grey and gorgeous - and a little fearful.

A gentle twinge crossed Greg's heart.

*Closer than a marriage*, he thought.

As he looked into Mycroft's face, he let himself feel it - let himself open up to that secret, if only for a moment. He couldn't hide it. He had to acknowledge it, even if just to himself.

*I would*, he thought. *I meant it, gorgeous. If it means you'll be safe and happy, then I'll do it. I don't care what it costs.*

*And I think we'd be alright.*

He smiled slightly, leant close, and kissed the bridge of Mycroft's nose.

"I love you," he said, gently. "Don't go falling asleep and drowning. That's not how this ends."

Mycroft seemed to take a moment to speak. "I won't be long," he promised.

Greg kissed him one last time, drew back from the circle of candles, and went to get ready for bed.

As Greg left the bathroom, Mycroft watched him go with a thick throat.

He *seemed* fine. Better than fine, in fact - he seemed almost relieved. Calm, and content, and collected. It was nearly enough to make Mycroft doubt.

But the evidence was just too strong.

A reptile endemic to New Zealand; a birthday date of 2176; a partner infected thirteen years ago - a year of knowing, and now recent closeness?

Tuatara was Greg.

Mycroft was certain of it.

He'd spotted the thread not long after lunch, taking a moment to clear his head from the inquiry. His mod duties to the forum had been sorely neglected of late - his non-digital life was now so occupying that he'd barely had time to keep up. Hoping for diversion, he'd ended up instead in despair, recognising himself in Tuatara's post before he'd even finished reading it.

His immediate reaction had been guilt. He'd worried and bewildered Greg so much that he'd driven
him to strangers on the internet in search of comfort. Mycroft had almost clicked out of the thread at once, telling himself he had no place in this - in Greg's tentative search for answers - and that the only noble course of action here was to give the poor man the privacy he so desperately deserved.

But he'd skimmed with rising horror the slew of replies Greg had so far received, ranging from the misguided to the callous and the simply predatory.

He'd realised that if Greg was going to get any genuine answers, they could only come from one place.

He'd worried, though - the name. DefenderOfThePeople. Mycroft Alexander Holmes; 'Alexander', the Latinized form of the Greek - meaning, defender of men. Greg hadn't seemed to make the connection - thank God.

He had no reason to suspect a thing - though still Mycroft had worried.

He'd worried, too, that he'd been blunt. Heavy-handed. Trying to explain, trying to offer some support in the convenient guise of a stranger, and he'd succeeded in nothing but distressing Greg.

But there was only so much that a voice on the internet could say.

As Mycroft sank down into the water, silently covering his face with his hands, he made a silent wish.

Wishes continued to swirl thickly through his thoughts as he cleaned himself, taking comfort in the water and the scent of the suds. He couldn't bring himself to remain here for long. There was one thing in the world that would relax him now, and he wouldn't find it in the bath.

He got out and dried himself, shivering deeply in the cold. It was affecting him tonight. It felt its way beneath his skin, and into his bones - his blood was producing little warmth of its own to combat it. Bed would help.

As he stepped from the bathroom, he found Greg was already there.

His lover had artfully drawn back the covers a little, revealing an inviting white triangle of mattress - and the far more inviting planes of his own torso. He was resting on his side, waiting for Mycroft, and his eyes were dark and sleepy. They were full of mischief.

Mycroft's heart heaved a silent sigh.

Tentatively he removed his dressing robe and came to bed.

Greg watched his every step with the greatest interest.

"Been a long day," he said, softly.

"It has..." Mycroft settled beside him on the mattress. His skin tingled as gentle hands reached for him at once - drawing him close, wrapping him up, hiding him away. Greg's mouth sought for his own, warm and soft, and Mycroft's heart began to flutter with want.

His breath tightened as Greg nuzzled him over onto his back.

"Greg, I..." The words came out; he couldn't hold them. "I wouldn't be alright without you. You're - my every comfort. All my joy."

Greg settled himself between Mycroft's bare legs, stroking gentle kisses across his mouth.
"Getting used to having me around, are you?" he rumbled.

Mycroft felt his breath catch in his lungs. It left him in a sigh as Greg's bare body then pressed against him - the muscular warmth of his chest, the nudge of his hardening cock. He was divine.

"Greg," Mycroft whispered. He pushed his hands up into his lover's hair, pulling him close for a kiss. "Oh... Greg…"

When climax finally rippled through his body, his gasps tight and fervent in the darkness, the only sensation that Mycroft could discern was his lover - Greg, in every part of him - Greg's tongue curling with his own in his mouth; Greg's hands raking restlessly up his thighs; Greg's cock, slowly and deliciously fucking him, and Greg's scent dragged into his lungs on every panting plea, Greg's groans low and soft in his ear, Greg's heart beating hard against his own.

In the rush of calm that followed, Greg held him close and kissed him - called him 'gorgeous' - told him he was perfect.

Sleep began to lap at the edges of Mycroft's mind.

Every muscle in his body had eased; every point of pressure unwound. He didn't bother to reach for nightwear - he'd stopped wanting it, after they'd made love. He liked Greg's male, human warmth against his body, and he liked the comfort of his skin in the night.

As he nestled into Greg's chest, listening to him breathe, thoughts came drifting back to Mycroft's mind - thoughts he'd been resisting for days now. Broken open with tiredness, and at peace in his lover's arms, he let them come. He let himself think those things he so dearly longed to.

*It would be like this.* His heart squeezed as he thought it. It would be quiet and safe - sleepily, at night, after lovemaking. Drunken on Greg already, soft and wild and shivering with love for him - gathered gently beneath Greg's jaw. Held. Cradled.

He could almost imagine Greg's voice. The sort of things he'd say.

*Drink, gorgeous... take what you need.* Those tender fingers stroking through his hair, Mycroft thought. Looking after him. Loving him.

That first desperate break of skin.

The rush, the gasp of red, the ferrous warmth in his mouth. Lapping, licking. Whimpering. Feeling Greg shiver slowly as he drank - hardening for him again - his Greg, his gorgeous Greg, exhausted but burning up with it and hard all over again, desperate for Mycroft's touch, for relief. Finishing - those last, sated licks - and he would ease down the bed, suck Greg slowly until he came again.

Greg's hands buried in his hair. Listening to him moan, pant, feeling health and strength and happiness coursing through his own veins, thunderous as a river, Greg's sounds clearer, the whole world warmer, and dear sweet God, how he missed it.

Dear God, how he wanted it.

Saying no was unbearable.

It was a new, quiet torture - in a life of quiet torture. The thought of lying with Greg like this in the dark, safe and quiet as Greg sustained him... it made every inch of Mycroft's skin burn with desperation. Those gentle, heartfelt offers - and his persistence - and it hurt - hurt to say no. Every cell of Mycroft's being was screaming at him to relent. His own body was starting to torture him in the hope that any day now he'd give in, throw an all-too-willing Greg across the nearest surface and
listen to him moan as life flooded from his throat back into Mycroft's veins.

And from then on, be healthy. Happy.

Be together.

If they weren't so tangled up in Excultus's thorns, Mycroft thought - perhaps there would have been the space to talk. To explain, to seek reassurance. To find some place that they could both be.

A pair-bond.

It was undreamable.

A decade now, he'd spent writing about the benefits of the practice - urging others towards it whole-heartedly, telling them to take shelter in their only chance of peace in this world. Now he spent his time begging Greg to stop asking, and begging his body not to punish him for it. For once in his miserable life, he was trying to do the decent thing - the right thing - and he was about to suffer greatly for it.

Mycroft took a moment to compose himself, swallowing.

There was nothing to be gained from tormenting himself with this all night. Indulging in dreams would only make it worse.

Greg had fallen asleep in his arms. His breath was deep and slow; his face had softened with the relief of a long day's rest.

Mycroft watched him for a few moments, his throat tight.

Shaking slightly, with the greatest of care, he placed his lips to Greg's forehead.

He closed his tired eyes.

"I love you," he whispered. His heart contracted with longing. Some day, he thought. When I can be sure. When I can bring myself to tell you. "Mine."

Greg did not wake. He slept on, undisturbed.

As Mycroft drifted off to sleep, his last waking thought was how dearly he hoped that an end to this matter was not far from their reach.

He didn't know how much longer his resistance could hold.

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Pembury Road:

We had expected an update from you by now.

We assume this means you have no good news for us. Disappointing - as you had promised us the very best.
Friends,

My deepest and most heartfelt apologies.

In my task for you, I was wholly successful. The half elf is dead.

I am afraid to say that Jareth did not return to us that night. I have now learned he was killed in the course of his duties. Officers have been circulating a partial photograph around our territory, and a description of Jareth. They are attempting to ascertain his identity.

Lestrade abandoned his flat in Pimlico at once. He and Mycroft Holmes have not been seen in our vicinity, though from my information it seems likely that Holmes is now sheltering Lestrade at his home in Ebury Street. I understand that both were present at Scotland Yard today.

Do you wish me to make a second attempt upon Lestrade? I will handle it personally this time.

- Pembury Road.

Pembury Road:

You are not to attempt entry of Mycroft Holmes's residence.

Not under any circumstances.

Security measures are in place, and you will fail.

Holmes is not to be underestimated, especially if he is now at full strength.

Continue to monitor him. If an opportunity to lay hands on the human arises, we request that you take it, contact us in the first instance and await further instruction.

We expect in future to receive updates on Mycroft Holmes's activity without having to prompt you for them. As ever, do not alert his suspicions or harm him. He is likely to be wary, and your wayward fledgling has already caused us enough disruption.

And we will ask you not to refer to Holmes's strange proclivity by name.

The thing is food.

It is not "Lestrade".
They were walking together over Hackney Downs, and the wind was thin and grey.

In summer, Greg thought, it might not be so bad - blue sky and white clouds, wide plains of grass, the sun on the residential tower blocks over on Pembury Road. In January, the park had a bleakness to it that seemed to stretch forever into the distance. It was too open - too cold. The wind built up too much speed as it blew. Greyness infused every tree, every scrubbed patch of grass, every battered swing and slide, and there were no people around to be seen. It was a lonely, lifeless place.

He and Emma walked the narrow path in silence, heading for her home - Knighton Grove across the park. The wind lifted the ends of Greg’s scarf; every step seemed to take them no further along the path.

"How's she coping?" Emma asked, after a while. "With the girls... without her Sammie."

Greg pushed his hands into his pockets. "Olivia loves your girls to pieces," he said. "They're in good hands. She's - hurting over Sam, though. Badly. I get the feeling she wants to make someone pay for it."

Emma laughed, reaching into her jacket. "Don't we all, darlin'?"

She pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and paused to light one. The wind stirred thinly through the ends of her hair. She offered Greg the packet, raising an eyebrow.

"S'alright," he said. "You keep them." He tried another smile. "You must be running low by now."

Emma huffed around the cigarette, snapping the lighter shut.

"You should let her, you know," she remarked, after a moment.

"'Let her'?," said Greg.

"Let Olivia make someone pay for it." Emma turned the cigarette between her fingers, thinking, gazing along the endless path to home.

There were no birds, Greg realised - no cars - no sounds at all - just the park, and the path, and the two of them alone in all the silence.
"Never held much with 'forgive and forget'," Emma murmured. "Tryin' to put it out of your head and move on. Funny, innit? All the people who're busy telling you to move on have never had all that much to move on from..."

Greg's mouth twisted. He knew that feeling.

"Only got my life together when I decided to join the police." He pulled his scarf tighter around his neck, closing his eyes a moment. "It… seemed like the only thing that would mean something. Trying to get other people some justice."

She smiled a little, watching him through the smoke of cigarette.

"Livs is gonna miss her Sammie. Miss him like mad." She paused. "Let her see someone bleed for it, will you?"

Greg said nothing. Emma dragged on the cigarette, slowly, holding his gaze.

"S'thicker than water, after all. Tears don't change that much. Blood does. You and me know that, darlin'."

Greg breathed it in. He wished he didn't know it.

"Are you a ghost?" he asked.

She laughed, humourless. "Sort of..." She flicked ash from her cigarette into the grass. "Been kicking about your head for a while, though... a long while. Your fella'd have plenty to tell you 'bout me."

"'Cause he's - a psychologist?"

"Mhm."

"So you're - part of me. You're part of my mind." Greg hesitated, swallowing. "How do I stop Exculus? How do I help Mycroft?"

Emma snorted, running her tongue across her teeth with amusement.

"Sorry, black-eyed boy. M'not from the 'easy answers' part of your head. I'm from somewhere darker and deeper than that."

"You're - …"

"You'll get there." Emma blew smoke between her lips, closing her eyes. "Maybe speed up a bit though, eh? Cheeky hint."

"Why are we here?" he asked, as another cold wind rasped its way between the trees.

She shrugged, looked down at her boots, and twitched her cigarette.

"Just givin' you another piece of the plan, darlin'. Believe it or not, it's all comin' together for you."

"The plan?" Greg almost laughed. "What's one of those? Sounds useful."

"Just a thought," Emma said. She paused for a moment, gazing off across the park. "Keep a close eye on that fella of yours, won't you?"
Greg's forehead creased.

"What d'you mean, 'keep a close eye'?' He hesitated, watching her face. "He's... suffering. He won't let me help him."

Emma lowered her eyelashes, stroking the cigarette. "Just another thought, darlin'."

A few minutes before four AM, Greg woke to empty sheets beside him.

Strange, sudden fear flooded his senses. He sat up, wide awake in seconds, and said,

"Anthea? Where's - Mycroft?"

She responded at once, perfectly calm.

"Dr. Holmes is in his office, Inspector Lestrade. Shall I open comms?"

Greg's heart slowed a little, his breathing still shallow. He passed a hand over his forehead in the darkness, and was unsurprised to find he'd been sweating.

He felt like he'd been dreaming. He remembered Emma - the Downs, the wind, the things she had said - but he couldn't remember what he'd dreamed about afterwards. He didn't think it had been anything good.

"No," he told Anthea, weakly. "No, I'll... I'll go find him. Can you - put the lights on a bit for me?"

"Of course." The blackness of the bedroom lifted to a muffled gloom.

"Thank you," said Greg. Nervously he pushed back the covers.

"You are welcome," Anthea replied.

Shivering, Greg pulled on the first clothes he could find - an old grey jumper, pyjama bottoms - and made his way in silence down the stairs.

The door of Mycroft's office was slightly ajar. A little electronic light glowed out into the lounge. As Greg stepped tentatively into the doorway, he found Mycroft sitting in his office chair with his knees drawn up to his chest, wrapped in a dressing gown and a heavy woollen blanket. The pitch darkness around him was unsettled only by the glare of his laptop screen, which he was reading intently through his glasses.

Resting on his knees was a disposable cup with a straw.

Mycroft looked around as Greg appeared, startled. His face opened in concern.

"Greg..." He put the cup aside. "Greg, what are you doing awake? You should be resting..."

Greg spotted the container on the floor by Mycroft's chair - it was normally kept in the fridge. "Gorgeous, why are you up so early?"

Mycroft hesitated. "A touch of insomnia," he said. "Very normal. I thought I'd - ..." He gestured to
the laptop. "Work. Make use of the time."

Greg's brain reeled. "How long have you been sitting here?"

Mycroft held of his gaze. "Not long," he said.

Suspecting something, Greg reached down. Without a word, he laid his fingertips on the container at Mycroft's feet.

It had acclimatised to room temperature.

Mycroft said nothing, watching Greg anxiously over his glasses.

Greg quietly looked back.

"D'you want to try that one again?" he said.

Mycroft's expression crumpled. He drew a breath.

"I'm sorry," he said. "The sleeplessness is... part of withdrawal. My body clock is likely to set its own rules for a while. I - didn't mean to - ..."

Calmly, Greg approached Mycroft's chair. He knelt down, reached out and cupped his face.

Mycroft was cold to the touch. His skin was several degrees cooler than any skin should ever feel. It was enough of a shock to make Greg gasp slightly, startled, and Mycroft's eyes at once filled with worry.

"It's only pronounced at night," he said - as if that made it all okay.

Greg's heart began to beat, hard.

"Gorgeous, you're - you're fucking freezing..." His throat thickened, gazing into Mycroft's eyes. This was the face of the man he loved. Part of him had loved those eyes ever since they first glanced his way - a train station platform, one o'clock in the morning. They were shadowed now beneath, and dull from a long night's lack of rest.

One thought came to the front of Greg's mind.

"It's... hitting you hard this time... isn't it?"

From the frame of his hands, Mycroft chose his words with care. The reading glasses made the expression somehow all the more heartbreaking.

"It's... starting to," he confessed.

"Starting to? It gets worse?" Greg didn't need to hear that. Mycroft already looked like he needed a week off work. "You're ice-cold and you're awake at four AM, gorgeous... I mean... how much worse can - ..." A sudden conclusion clicked in Greg's mind. "Reading glasses," he murmured.

Mycroft's face quietened. He said nothing.

"Your eyesight's fading," said Greg. He paused, feeling his heart heave. "D'you - need the day off? To sleep?"

Tenderness touched Mycroft's gaze.
He reached up from the folds of his blanket, and laid his hands over Greg's in the dark. The blanket had imparted them with little warmth.

"I'm - about to say something to you." He held Greg's eyes within his own, as if nothing else mattered quite so much in the world. "You shan't believe it. But for the sake of the investigation - for Sam, and for Emma, and her children - for our partnership - for our ability to proceed through a difficult stage of a process in the only way that we can, and find our way back to balance once more… I need you to believe it."

He swallowed, quietly. His voice shook.

"I am fine, Greg."

For a long time, Greg couldn't speak. He simply looked into Mycroft's eyes, and tried to find the right answer.

Every day, Mycroft got worse. Every day, he insisted more strongly he was fine. He didn't want Greg's help, and to offer it again would only cause a fight. Greg would end up driving his lover away by trying to fix him.

Instead, he'd have to find the strength to watch him break.

In the end, he decided to trust in the only thing he knew for sure anymore.

This was love.

And love would help. It was the only real thing in the world. As a much smarter man had once told him, all love stories were happy stories - given time. The key was hope: above all things, and against all odds.

Gently he reached for Mycroft's blankets, and parted them with care.

"What are you doing?" Mycroft asked, as he tensed. He didn't protest as Greg's hands eased around him.

"Put your arms 'round my neck," Greg murmured.

Mycroft did so, stiff and wary. "Why?"

As Greg lifted him from the chair, and the blanket fell away, Mycroft held onto him tightly.

"Greg... where are - "

"Going to warm you up in the bath," Greg said. He hugged Mycroft slowly, bearing his weight with ease. "D'you want your food? Drinking more often helps, doesn't it?"

"I - I've - had quite enough..."

"For now," Greg said.

As they climbed the stairs, Mycroft began to soften a little into his hold.

"You're - surprisingly strong," he said, in Greg's ear.

Greg almost smiled. "Fitter, when I was younger… almost went into Armed Response. Got most of the way through the training, then I was snapped up by CID."
"Truly?"

"Mm. Manchester Armed Response, too."

"Heavens... I wish I'd known."

The smile broke through. "Would you still've fallen for Commander Lestrade?"

Mycroft shivered slightly. "Dear lord."

Greg make a mental note to borrow gear from Luke some time.

"We'll go easy on you today," he said, as he dipped Mycroft gently beneath the bathroom door frame. "Make it a quiet one... head home at six, and get you some proper sleep... I think we've earned ourselves a slow day."

Halfway to work, Mycroft's wrist-set began to bleep. He pulled back his sleeve and loaded up the new message that had arrived, reading it quickly.

He gave a slight sigh. "Of course."

Greg glanced across from the wheel. "What's up?"

"Dr. Harper," Mycroft said, quietly. "Forensics. No database match on your attacker. Whoever he was, he lived off the system... he must have been moroi. A born vampire. We shall have to hope uniform find someone who recognises him by sight..."

Mycroft closed the hard-light window, pulling his sleeve back into place.

"Our first overnight patrol arrested three suspicious individuals, by the way," he said.

Greg's eyes widened. "What - really?"

"Two orc drug dealers, and a common-or-garden kerb-crawler," Mycroft said, raising an eyebrow. "None of them vampire."

"God," said Greg. His heart was still beating hard. "Thought you were about to tell me we'd hit the jackpot..."

"Mm... laying hands on a member of Excultus would be something of a miracle, wouldn't it? We could detain and question them at leisure - find out the extent of the group, who is controlling them, where they are operating from... alas. Not this day."

Mycroft laid back in his seat, closing his eyes.

"It was only the first night," he murmured, almost to himself. "Success is a question of waiting."

Discomfort prickled in Greg's stomach.

"Wish we were doing more than waiting," he confessed, as they joined the queue for traffic lights. "It's... getting to me a bit. Feels like we're being followed by something. Feeling it get nearer and
nearer up behind us."

Mycroft did not open his eyes. "Excultus's modus operandi in a sentence."

As Greg watched the lights, a thought occurred.

"How did you take them down last time?" he asked. "There must have been a trick to it… something that finally got you the advantage..."

Mycroft huffed.

"Four years of dogged work," he murmured, tired. "It would take nearly four years to tell."

Greg had feared as much. "Fair enough," he said. "Start telling me, then by the time you've finished, we might even have come up with a plan."

"A plan?" Mycroft enquired. "What is a 'plan'? Sounds like a marvellous thing to have."

Greg smiled slightly. "Yeah... I made that joke, too."

Mycroft glanced across at him, raising an eyebrow. "To whom?"

Greg realised.

He almost laughed. He shook his head, smiling, as the light turned green.

"Vickery," he lied, pressing his foot down. "Yesterday. Caught her for an update… she didn't find it very funny."

"No," Mycroft said, with a faint smile to him in the rear view mirror. "No, I imagine she didn’t."

As they entered the department, Dawn looked up from her screen.

"Morning," she chirped. Her pink eyes took in the two of them together, pleased. "Were you waiting for a call from Bromley Secondary Academy?"

Greg's forehead wrinkled. "Bromley Secondary Academy?" He’d never heard of the place.

"Regarding Elliot Webster?" said Dawn. "The headmaster called looking for you, about an hour ago."

"Who the hell's Elliot Webster?" said Greg, lost.

"Something about an e-mail yesterday." Dawn raised her eyebrows. "Mr. Davis says yes. He's a past pupil and he's called Elliot Webster. He left a few years ago, but it’s definitely him. Something to do with a - sketch, was it?"

Greg felt his stomach lurch straight into his throat.

"No," he breathed.

"The headmaster's busy with an open morning until ten, but... he's said he'd be happy to see you
after that."

*Jesus actual fucking Christ.* Greg quickly checked the time on his wrist-set.

"Bromley's a forty minute drive," he told Mycroft, who was staring at him wide-eyed. "Can you get stuff done in twenty minutes? We can be there for ten on the dot."

"What is this?" Mycroft asked, searching his face.

"It's Emma's killer. The kid who attacked Olivia. I sent the sketch out to schools. He's - … he's called Elliot. Holy *Jesus*…" Greg couldn't breathe; he couldn't think. "Christ, she only gave us that sketch yesterday! And we've already - …"

**Elliot.** It made him feel sick.

"C'mon," he said to Mycroft. He set off at speed towards their office, almost dragging Mycroft behind him. "We've got twenty minutes, then we'll hit the road. Fuck me sideways, Mycroft. We've actually *got something*!"

"Language, Lestrade!" came a bark from inside Vickery's office.

Greg winced. "Shit... sorry, commander!" he called.

"Is that the sound of progress I hear?"

"Yes, ma'am. Just off to Bromley."

"Bromley?" said Vickery. "Heaven help us all. Well, go get them Lestrade. And less of the profanity, if you please. This isn't the pub."

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The Headmaster of Bromley Secondary Academy was a genial, gently-spoken man with bushy eyebrows and a tie printed with equations. He apologised for keeping them, sat them down in his office, and took a manilla folder from the stack on his desk.

"As you can see, gentlemen… we recognised Elliot straightaway…"

As he shuffled through the folder, photographic portraits of fresh eighteen-year-old faces flashed by, beaming as they prepared to head out into the real world. Greg and Mycroft leant forwards, watching them pass.

At last, the headmaster selected and turned around a picture of a boy whose deep scowl, squashy features and florid acne sent a spike of recognition through the pit of Greg's stomach.

It was unmistakeable.

Olivia had got it exactly right - his pouchy face, his glower, the way he held his shoulders high around his ears. Elliot Webster was regarding the camera as if he didn't recall giving it permission to look at him.

Beside Greg, Mycroft shifted slightly. Greg understood the discomfort all too well.
"How long was this young man a pupil here?" Mycroft enquired, covering his shift by discreetly crossing one leg over the other.

"Oh, the full seven years," said the headmaster. "Most of our pupils join us at eleven, then head off at eighteen. Elliot was - never one of our academic stars, perhaps... but never much of a troublemaker." He smiled, pleasantly. "One of the happy middle."

Mycroft tilted his head. "And he left, when?"

"Two years ago now. He'd decided not to opt for university - I understood he had a part-time job in a shoe shop, and was hoping to make that full-time. We'd tried to push him towards Computing, which he had something of an interest in, but he... didn't quite see eye-to-eye with the teaching staff. Elliot had his own way of doing things."

Greg glanced at the photograph. He could see it. *That scowl*, he thought. He wouldn't want to be the teacher dealing with that scowl. Elliot Webster's glare was so unsettling that he might as well have been here in the room with them, sitting beside his headmaster's desk and listening to every word they said.

"I... do hope he's been found alive and well," the headmaster added, with a little flash of his eyebrows.

Greg and Mycroft both went still.

"Found?" said Greg.

"Oh... I'd - assumed..." The headmaster coughed. "Well, from your e-mail... but then, I suppose a sketch suggests - ..."

"Has the boy been missing, Mr. Davis?" Mycroft asked.

"Well - yes, I'm afraid so. It was in the news." The headmaster folded his hands upon his manilla folder, looking uncomfortable. "Of course I... know very little about it. We were terribly sorry to hear about it through the grapevine. So far as I understand, he told his parents he was going to a convention in Birmingham with friends - comic books, you know... - then, after three days, he simply failed to return home. I believe it was discovered that he'd never reached Birmingham. Never collected his tickets at the station."

Greg and Mycroft exchanged a brief glance.

The headmaster, with reluctance, went on.

"I, ah... would suggest you check these facts with the authorities - which, I suppose, would be you," he said. "But as far as I heard, a search of his room suggested that he'd left that morning with a mind towards rather longer than three days away. He'd taken everything of personal value to him."

"You're - saying he ran away from home?" Greg checked.

The headmaster gave him an uneasy smile. "As much as a twenty-year-old man can 'run away', yes... but it was highly out of character for him. Elliot was particularly close to his mother. To simply vanish, with neither note nor explanation..."

"How long ago was this?" Greg asked, placing a mental bet.
"I'd… say about six months ago now," the headmaster replied. *Yep*, Greg thought. "I do hope he's not come to any trouble, inspectors."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow, gating his fingers on one knee. He sat back in his chair.

"Would it surprise you, Mr. Davis, if he had?"

Greg lapsed into silence, his heart flaring a little. *This is your gig, gorgeous. Do what you do.* He watched the headmaster's expression shift.

"Well… obviously," Mr. David said, "I'd hate for any *harm* to have befallen Elliot."

"Naturally," said Mycroft. "Was he a fairly popular young man?"

The headmaster shifted a little more. "I'm - not sure anyone would have gone *quite* that far…"

"A modest collection of close friends, though?"

"Ah - again…” The headmaster's expression creased slightly. "Elliot was… perhaps happiest in his *own* company…"

Mycroft nodded, slowly, processing this. One eyebrow lifted just a fraction. "No obvious conflicts with his classmates, though."

Greg recognised this game. People were much quicker to correct you with the truth than simply supply you with it. It was human nature - fixing errors. People couldn't resist that urge. Mycroft was turning it into an art form.

The headmaster grappled with the statement for a second or two, then said, "No. Nothing major."

"A few of the natural squabbles of teenagehood," Mycroft clarified, "but nothing of note."

"Well… yes, a few," said the headmaster. "There was a... small misunderstanding when he was in lower sixth, but all very swiftly resolved. Elliot often had difficulty in communicating with his classmates. He could sometimes react with emotion, when he felt he was being treated unfairly."

Mycroft nodded, saying nothing - waiting.

Greg waited, too.

With a slight intake of breath, the headmaster unfolded.

"He was... 'holding a candle' for one of the young ladies in his Further Mathematics group… if that expression is in use any more. The young lady in question had gone out of her way to make him feel included in a piece of groupwork, I understand. The rest of the group were rather wary of him. Elliot perhaps... *misinterpreted* her kindness as some manner of interest, and… of course, he was unhappy to eventually discover that this was not the case…"

In silence, they waited once more.

The headmaster visibly pressed his teeth into the side of his tongue.

"He - threw a chair at her," he mumbled. "Nearly hit other students, too."

Greg attempted to stifle his intake of breath. It didn't work. The headmaster, with a look of pained apology, added,
"She... required a number of stitches. Her parents pressured us to remove him from the Mathematics course, which - based on his rather poor grades and overall lack of interest in the subject - seemed to make more sense than removing her, but... in the end, his parents rather pushed back against the decision... and then, as these things usually do when hormones are involved, it all seemed to settle in its own... fortunately, they were both able to continue."

Greg's eyebrows lifted towards his hair.

"Sorry, you - let him stay in the class with her?" he said. "With the girl he'd thrown a -"

"I imagine you were in a very difficult position, headmaster," Mycroft said, sleekly, interrupting with a forwards incline of his body and a firmness to his tone. It staunched Greg immediately into silence. "And this incident was wildly out of character for Elliot, was it?"

Greg breathed out quietly as he listened, settling himself. He was suddenly glad that Mycroft was here.

"Well - yes, entirely out of character," the headmaster said, flustered. He folded his hands. "We'd always known him to be a quiet young man. I - think he let his emotions get the better of him on that occasion."

"And his parents will have been reluctant to see his options limited too, I imagine."

The headmaster flushed. "Of course. His - father in particular was always keen for Elliot to do well."

Keen with the back of a hand? Greg wondered.

Mycroft gave no reaction. "Did Elliot have any younger siblings?"

"Ah - no. An only child." The headmaster coughed, covering the sound with his hand. "A... much-wanted only child, if I understand correctly. His parents were a little older."

"Did he seem to have a happy home life?"

"Oh yes, of course. His mother rather doted on him, in fact. She was terribly upset about his disappearance. She runs a campaign to try and find him."

"And his father was fond of him, too?"

The headmaster paused. "Yes," he said. "Very fond." He picked up the photograph of Elliot, about to return it to the file.

"Ah, Mr. Davis..." Mycroft murmured. "Might Lestrade and I be able to borrow that photograph for a few days? We have an eyewitness that I would rather like to take a look at it."

Mr. Davis hesitated.

"An eyewitness?" he said. "An eyewitness to... what?"

Mycroft retained his perfect composure. "To grievous assault," he said, "attempted rape, and attempted murder. We are also seeking Elliot in connection with a successfully completed murder."

All colour bled from the headmaster's face.

"Good God..." he whispered.
Mycroft reached over the desk, laid his fingertips on the photograph, and slid it neatly into Greg's willing hands.

"Thank you, Mr. Davis," Mycroft said, getting to his feet. Greg followed his lead without a word. "You've been illuminating. If you happen to hear anything concerning Eliot's whereabouts, please do contact us. It's rather vital that we locate him, and quickly. Might I ask the young lady's name?

"The - y-young lady?" the headmaster stuttered.

"The young lady whom Elliot attacked, whilst in your care."

The headmaster flushed desperately. "Oh, I - I wouldn't say attacked - "

"Of course you wouldn't. Her name, please?"

"Jessica," the headmaster said, his fingers tightening on the edge of his desk. "Jessica Harris. She went by 'Jess'."

"I assume she was able to complete her education," Mycroft said, "despite the unnecessary stress under which you placed her. Where did she go after leaving your school?"


Mycroft raised an eyebrow.

"Miracles will never cease," he intoned. "Thank you for your time."

Without another word, he left. Greg followed at his side. They did not look back.

Not a word was spoken until they were in sight of the car. Greg fished his keys from his pocket.

"Oxford's a two-hour drive," he warned.

Mycroft was flashing through screens on his wrist-set as he walked.

"We need to speak to that young woman," he said. "Mr. Davis is far more interested in telling people what doesn't happen at his school than what does. The boys' parents would be a similar waste of our time. A peer of Elliot's will know far more than any supposedly responsible adult."

"Can you call her university on the way?"

Mycroft pulled open the car door, showing him the wrist-set. "I have the Dean of Jesus College's details ready."

They got in, slammed the doors, and Greg booted up the sat nav.

"Do you need coffee before we leave?" Mycroft asked, as the engine growled into life.

"I'll get one in Oxford," said Greg. "Do you need to drink?"

Greg kept his eyes fixed over the wheel, negotiating the car with a crunch of tires through the barred exit.

"Filled a flask for you this morning," he said. "It's in the cool bag under your seat."

"Greg - " Mycroft's mouth opened. "You - ..."

Greg didn't look round. "When I say 'I love you'," he told Mycroft, "I mean it." With a screech of brakes he turned them off onto the main road, and set out for Oxford.
Semblance

And fire unquenched, unquenchable,
Around, within, thy heart shall dwell;
Nor ear can hear nor tongue can tell
The tortures of that inward hell!

But first, on earth as vampire sent,
Thy corpse shall from its tomb be rent:
Then ghastly haunt thy native place,
And suck the blood of all thy race

- Lord Byron
'The Giaour' (1813)

Jessica Harris was four months into her final undergraduate year.

They met in her tutor's private study, surrounded by books of almost unthinkable age, and with a blackbird singing in the quad outside. Warm, polite and unflustered by their sudden arrival, she asked them both to call her Jess, and told her tutor she'd be fine on her own.

They were left alone to talk - Greg, now supplied with black coffee; Mycroft, quite at ease in academic surroundings; Jess, settled and content in her tutor's antique chair. She had the calm, upright presence of a young woman quite at home in her environment. She belonged among these books, Greg thought. She was in just the right place.

As Greg asked the question, she smiled rather quietly.

"Yes, I… remember Elliot Webster," she said. It was Greg to whom she naturally spoke - the friendly, patient face who shared her accent. "He was in a few of my classes, back at school."

"Did you like him?" Greg asked.

She read his eyes for a moment, skimming between the lines - suspecting already what he knew. It was the same look that Mycroft often gave him.

Greg held her gaze, patient.

"Honestly, Elliot was... a bit difficult to like," she said at last, with care. "He didn't make it easy for people. He was bullied early on, which - maybe seemed unfair to me. But he definitely had problems, and they definitely affected him."

"Problems?" said Greg.

She glanced down at her hands folded on her knee. "Emotional problems."

"What like?"
She thought about it for a moment. "He was - convinced the world was out to get him, I suppose. Everyone was always against him, trying to hurt him. He was very defensive. Quick to anger." She shifted slightly, crossing one leg over the other. "Every problem he ever had was somebody else's fault, and they did it just to cause him trouble."

Greg nodded. "We've heard you had some trouble with him in sixth form, Jess."

"Mm," she said, guarded. "I did."

"Can you tell us what happened?"

She took a moment to put it into words, her gaze straying briefly to the wall of books beside Greg.

"I - got this idea he just needed to feel involved. Everyone was so unnerved by him, and I thought... maybe if someone reached out... so I went out of my way to be nice to him for a while. He found me online and started sending me messages. I chatted with him a bit."

She hesitated, glancing down at her hands.

"He - started getting upset and angry, if I read his messages and didn't reply straightaway... or if he saw that I'd replied to someone else, and not to him... I tried to pull away. He just got more intense. E-mailing me at three o'clock in the morning. Saying he was thinking of killing himself. I'm - pretty sure it was just a way to make me answer. Eventually he sent me this... weird, rambling 'confession' that he was only angry with me because he was 'in love' with me and 'always had been'..."

She shifted uncomfortably, her face tight with unease.

"I tried to let him down gently," she murmured. "I said all the kind things I could think of... it wasn't him, I just didn't want a boyfriend - I was trying to concentrate on my exams - I liked his friendship - all those things you're meant to say, not to... to damage their pride."

Her eyes fogged.

"Then next day, he stormed straight into Maths. Seized a chair and just hurled it at me. Started yelling at the teacher that I was a bitch. A cock-tease. That I thought it was fun to humiliate people, and I should feel what it was like for a change... even while I was lying on the floor, bleeding. Even while people were trying to protect me, he was screaming at me."

"I'm sorry," Greg said, quietly. "You shouldn't have had to go through that."

Her gaze flickered back to him, returning to the present. She found him a small smile. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry your headmaster kept him in the class, too."

She visibly restrained a sigh.

"By that point, I just... wanted it to go away," she said. "Everyone was acting like it was such a non-issue. Like I was creating such a fuss over the poor boy's pain, and he'd already been forced to grunt at me he was sorry in the headmaster's office, so what more did I want from him? Why was I still demanding tribute? Why did I want to keep embarrassing him, when he was trying to forget about it?"

Greg hesitated, watching her face.
"Did Elliot carry on messaging you?" he asked, and reached for his coffee.

She huffed. "I'd blocked him online," she said. "So he… moved onto paper messages. Old-fashioned romantic."

Greg paused, coffee halfway to his mouth. "Paper messages?"

"I used to find them slipped into my bag," she said. "Drawings of - coffins, with my name on. Headstones. Weird poetry written backwards. Pen doodles of dead roses. 'Why shouldn't you be sorry too?'..."

Greg's heart contracted. "Christ," he said. "And - these were from him?"

"He never signed them, obviously... but... it was the kind of stuff he was into."

"Did you tell a teacher?" Greg asked, already suspecting the answer.

"I did when I found the first." She bit the corner of her lip. "My form tutor. She rolled her eyes, and said, 'oh no, not this again'... told me not to leave my bag unattended..."

"God almighty," said Greg, before he could stop himself.

Jess smiled. "You should've been a teacher."

"Not a good idea," said Greg, finally lifting his coffee to his mouth. He drank rather deeply, then put it down. "Sounds like I'd have punched too many kids."

She smiled, rearranging herself in the chair. The seriousness was for a moment dispelled and she opened up a little, settling. "No, that... probably wouldn't have worked out well for you..."

Mycroft took his cue to sit forward, with interest.

"Miss Harris, these drawings - the ones placed inside your bag - you said that Elliot had an interest in these things... what did you mean?"

"He was just… morbid in general, to be honest," she told him. "He was a bit of a walking cliché. Graveyards... ravens. Going on about death all the time. He - thought it made him dark and interesting."

Mycroft nodded, listening. After a moment, he said, "Forgive a strange question."

Jess gave him a faint smile. "Go on," she said.

"Did he ever mention vampires?" Mycroft asked.

"About ten times a day," she replied, raising one wry eyebrow.

Greg drank, slowly, hiding his expression.

"He was interested in the subject?" Mycroft said, coolly. His face gave nothing away

"He was… obsessed, is probably the word..." She shifted, frowning. "He loved vampires. Everything vampire. We studied Dracula in year nine, and after that, he - … oh - sorry - Dracula is a novel, from - "

"'What manner of man is this'," murmured Mycroft, "'or what manner of creature is it in the
semblance of man?"

Her whole face relaxed; a pleased glow lit her expression from beneath. "Yes, that's… that's the one."

Greg put aside his coffee. "Guess which one of us went to Cambridge," he said, prompting another laugh.

"Which college…?" she asked Mycroft, a little shy.

"Christ's College," he said, tempering his smile. "An inordinately long time ago."

"And you - studied English Literature?"

"I specialised in the long nineteenth century."

"I imagine Elliot Webster's literary interests didn't take him much further than Stoker."

"No… he - moved on a bit from Victoriana... he was still crazy about vampires though. It was well known at school."

"Was he... drawing them?" Mycroft prompted. "Talking about them?"

"Sometimes drawing," she said, wrinkling her nose. "To be honest, he spent most of his time reading about them online. Even at school, he'd be on all these weird websites. He used to send me links to stories he'd 'found', telling me it reminded him of us. These... awful bits of writing where they fall in love then commit suicide at the end. I suspected he'd written half of them himself. It was just - horrifying."

"Did he used to chat to people online?" Greg asked, carefully. "About vampires?"

"I think so. I mean, he was always getting messages on his phone, but…" Jess hesitated. "He didn't have any - actual friends to send them. I know that sounds awful, but he… he acted like he didn't want any. Except me." She looked down, quietly. "I think I spotted him in chatrooms a few times. Blogs."

"Do you - remember any website names?"

"I'm sorry… it was three years ago. And I didn't really want to see it at the time." She hesitated. "He used to share pictures with people. It was disgusting."

"Pictures?" said Mycroft.

She pulled a face. "Drawings of cartoon girls with black hair and fangs, posing in red velvet corsets. That kind of thing. Drawings of them biting each other. He was - so strange."

"Huh," said Greg. "Just what he should have been concentrating on at school."

"Well, he... always seemed to think he knew better than everyone. He said school didn't teach you anything important… said he knew everything he needed to know already…"

Greg smiled. "That's why he worked in a shoe shop, and you're here at Oxford, right?"

She coloured slightly, but smiled. "I - work hard. I'm proud of what I've done."

"You should be," said Greg, leaning back in his chair. He reached for his coffee. "How's it all
going? You heading up to exams?"

"Just finished," she said. "Results next week." She paused, reading his face for a moment. "Why are you - asking about Elliot? I've not heard anything about him in two years."

Greg inclined his head to Mycroft. "Have you got Olivia's sketches?" he asked. Mycroft gave a nod, pulling up his sleeve to reach his wrist-set. "D'you remember what he looked like?" he asked Jess, hopefully. "Do you think you could identify a picture of him now?"

"I think so," she said. "It's… been a while, but… he was pretty recognisable."

Mycroft had located the file. At a nod from Greg, he hit project.

Olivia's sketch scattered itself up into the air, etching, spinning into being. Even before it had fully appeared, Jess's face fell into pale and frightened concern. She watched it build, scanning every new detail that appeared, the horror settling deeper into her face.

At last, as the image was complete, she seemed to hold her breath.

"That's - a witness sketch." She looked beneath the projection, into Greg's eyes. It took her a moment to speak. "Who's he killed?"

The question rang in the silence.

Greg looked back into her eyes. He grappled with himself for a moment. In truth, he shouldn't say. It wasn't proven - but the look on Jess's face felt like all the evidence he'd ever need.

"A... mum of three girls," he told her. He paused. "Her name was Emma Marsden."

At last, Jess Harris began to cry.

As she welled up, Mycroft produced a handkerchief out of nowhere.

"Sorry," she said, taking shelter behind her hands. She took the handkerchief graciously from him and dabbed at her eyes, staunting her tears. "Oh, God… I… always - … but I never - …"

"You - seemed to know that before I told you," Greg said with care, watching her cry.

She said nothing, shaking quietly.

Mycroft cut the projection on his wrist-set. As Elliot's glare vanished from the room, she unfolded slightly from her fear.

"Is it a shock to hear that he's suspected?" Mycroft asked her.

She took a moment to wrestle with it, pale - then reluctantly shook her head.

"He - … God, some of the stories he sent me - … he was just - …" She pressed the handkerchief to her eyes. "No, it's… not a shock. Not enough of a shock."

"Would you be able to supply us with any online aliases that he used?" Mycroft said. "Usernames - monikers - anything he might be using now to identify himself."

She breathed out, slowly. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I… of course I can. I think I remember them."

"Thank you, Miss Harris… it's a great help."
Her eyes flashed towards them, bright with fear. "Is he - … do you know where he is now?"

"We believe he's hiding in a very specific part of Hackney," said Mycroft. "And he's fully occupied with his business there."

She said nothing, uncomforted by this.

"If you're nervous," Greg added, "we can give a photo to the team in the front office - make sure he's not let into your college."

Mycroft sat forwards slightly. "Though, for your comfort, Miss Harris… I believe that Elliot Webster has long since forgotten you. Sincerely, you have nothing to fear."

Jess's face quietened with relief. "You mean it?" she said.

"I do," said Mycroft. "Whatever you once meant to him, you are a part of the past. A past he has now exceeded. He has - rather shifted his focus."

Half an hour later, they emerged from the college grounds onto a secluded side street. Greg immediately started searching his pockets for cigarettes.

"Thoughts?" he said.

"Do you truly need my thoughts?" Mycroft asked, weary.

"No... no, I don't. God help us." Greg tugged out the cigarette packet, opened it and offered it across.

Mycroft hesitated, frowning - and then took one.

"That bad?" said Greg, retrieving his lighter.

"Don't," Mycroft sighed, as he leant against the nearest wall.

He held the cigarette still as Greg lit it for him, his eyes dull.

"He was groomed online," Mycroft muttered. "An ideal subject." He took a first drag, letting his head drop back against the bricks. "He believes he's now a predator. He's not. He's a - *puppet*. Pathetic. That young woman was *stunningly* lucky to escape him..."

He was silent for a moment, smoke furling from the corner of his mouth.

"Those are my thoughts," he added, stiffly.

Greg rested against the wall beside him, lighting his own cigarette.

"What do we do, Mycroft?"

Mycroft thought about it for some time. "Return to London," he said at last. He drew on the cigarette, slowly. "Get a conclusive identification. Frustrally issue a request in the press for anyone with information on Elliot Webster's whereabouts to contact us immediately, to which
nobody will respond. Ask Amelia to increase street patrols. Seek out his online usernames in the hope he's still using them. Then... continue to wait."

Greg's heart heaved. "Is that all we've got?" he said. "Waiting?"

"Unless you're suggesting we unlawfully raid every property in Hackney," Mycroft said, tired, "door-by-door, one-by-one, until we find him..."

"Christ." Greg shut his eyes for a second, dragging on the cigarette. "I don't like this, Mycroft. I don't like it at all... I don't like where it's going. I'm liking it less and less by the day."

Mycroft gave a quiet, warmthless laugh. "Rather late for that. Do you understand yet?"

Greg looked across at him, his heart tight. "Understand what?" he said.

"Why you appeared to ruin my life," Mycroft said, "that day you waltzed into my office, bearing ISOC scans and questions."

It seemed like years ago - it hadn't even been weeks. Greg sighed, heaving smoke into his lungs. Excultus were burning the whole world up around them, and all they could do was fucking wait. He could feel despair gathering like stormclouds on the horizon. It wasn't quite here yet - not quite ready to break. But it was coming.

Between them, against the wall, he stole his free hand inside Mycroft's coat pocket.

"What are you doing?" Mycroft asked, with a small frown.

Greg found Mycroft's fingers, saying nothing. He knotted their hands together.

"We're in public," Mycroft mumbled, masking his expression.

"There's no-one around," said Greg. "Hidden by your coat." He paused, his chest hardening. "Also I don't care."

There was a moment's pause.

Mycroft's hand tightened within his.

They smoked for a while in silence, looking for all the world like two exhausted people side-by-side against a wall.

"You need to eat something before we leave," Mycroft managed at last, as he dropped his cigarette end to the ground. He twisted it under his shoe. "We have another two hour drive to make."

Greg's eyes were burning at the thought. "I'll - find a sandwich when we get back," he muttered. "Be fine."

"You'll eat before we leave... if I'm going to be mollycoddled into nutrition, so are you. We need our strength. What little of it we have."

Greg glanced sideways, pained by the exhaustion in his voice. He found Mycroft's eyes shut, and his head tipped back against the wall.

"You alright?" he asked.

Mycroft squeezed his hand in silence. He looked decidedly grey.
"You're not, are you?" said Greg.

"I - slept poorly. That's all."

"What can I do?" said Greg, hating the weariness in his voice. Mycroft looked like he was halfway through a twenty-hour shift.

Mycroft exhaled, his face creasing with despair. "Please," he murmured. "Don't ask."

"I don't mean that," said Greg, quietly. His heart sank all the same. "You think I've not learnt my lesson about that?" He rubbed Mycroft's palm with his thumb, slowly, trying to settle him. "What else can I do? D'you - want to find somewhere quiet to sit for a while?"

Mycroft swallowed, shaking his head. "We have things to do."

"Things that won't wait?"

Mycroft huffed. "I thought you were tired of waiting."

"For Excultus to fucking kill us, yeah. For you to look and feel a bit less like a corpse, the whole world can wait. What do you need? Tell me - tell me what it is, and I'll find it."

Mycroft said nothing for some time, his eyes still closed. A number of silent thoughts seemed to pass across his face.

"Perhaps a few more minutes here," he mumbled, "before the drive. We... need to secure a final identification of Elliot."

Greg squeezed his hand. "That's fine," he said. "We'll have a few minutes first. Just you and me."

"Thank you, Greg," Mycroft managed, after a moment. "That - will help."

Greg gazed at him, lost.

He wanted to help more. A few minutes standing against a wall didn't seem like much in the world - but what else was there he could do?

He hesitated - then nudged Mycroft gently with the cigarette packet.

Mycroft opened one eye, looking down.

He gripped Greg's hand for a moment, then took another.

"Thank you," he said again.

Greg swallowed quietly. This couldn't go on, he thought. "You're welcome."

As she laid eyes on the photograph, Olivia drew a long breath.

"Yes," she said. Her eyes remained locked on the glossy school portrait, and the unhappy young man who glared out of it. "That's him."
"Are you certain?" Greg asked her. The look on her face was not one he'd forget any time soon.

"Certain," she said. "He... had a bit more hair on his face. Little moustache. But that's him, I'd swear it." She hesitated, glancing into Greg's eyes. "Does this - mean you know where he is?"

They were sitting at her kitchen table with coffee, just before five. Lottie was squirming in Olivia's lap, drawing happily on today's newspaper with an enthusiastic fistful of pens.

"He absconded from his mother's house six months ago," Mycroft said, with regret. "He's been regarded as missing ever since... though, having consulted the file, it's clear to us that he'd planned to leave for some time."

He raised an eyebrow.

"His mother is under the impression that Precious was kidnapped," he said. "Taken by a person of malicious intent. He was not. The state of his room - all personal possessions removed, laptop missing, clothing for much longer than three days - says that he went of his own volition. It's clear. Missing Persons were reluctant even to keep his file on record."

"So... where is he now?" Olivia asked, numbly.

Lottie interrupted to wave an orange felt tip across the table, yapping an insistent, "Mycoff!"

Mycroft took the pen with a fond flash of his eyes, and an obliging smile.

Greg felt his stomach tug as he watched. Even exhausted from five hours on a motorway, with blue shadows under his eyes and looking as pale as Olivia's fridge, Mycroft still found a smile for a small person.

As Mycroft explained, Greg watched him adapt one of Lottie's scribbles into a bumblebee.

"At our best guess, somewhere close to Pembury Road. Precisely where, we don't yet know. Obviously Excultus must have a safehold somewhere - a shelter of some kind - somewhere to house those people they've recruited to their cause. They'll have groomed him online, in the style of most terrorist organisations. Beguiled with promises of the rightful glory he'd known all his life that he was owed... so, wherever he is now, he's being protected."

"Jesus," Olivia whispered.

Mycroft smiled thinly. "Quite."

Lottie fanned her small hand at him, grasping in the air. Mycroft smiled, teasing her a moment with the felt tip before letting her take hold of it. She gasped happily, and began to scrawl huge orange swirls across the paper.

"We're hoping that we'll come across a sighting soon," Mycroft went on. The smile faded from his face as soon as Lottie was occupied. "Suffice to say, your identification of Elliot is another great help."

Olivia shuddered.

"'Elliot'..." she breathed.

Greg wrapped his hands tightly around his coffee mug.

He knew what she meant.
It wasn't right - that boyish name, with that sulky scowl - that petulant little mummy's boy who gave stitches to mean girls who'd been unfair to him. Now someone had bestowed him with fangs, and told him he was the next step in human evolution. *Homo excultus* - the honoured man.

And he was out there somewhere, right now. This very second, he could be less than fifteen minutes' walk away.

It made Greg's blood run cold.

"So… what now?" Olivia asked, looking between them. "Can I do anything?"

Mycroft glanced at Greg, hesitating. His mouth opened slightly.

As he faced up to the answer, Greg felt his heart sink.

"We're… trying to keep our eyes open as much as possible," he said, his voice heavy. "But ultimately, we don't know where he is. There's patrols on the streets at night now. It's - just a case of waiting until someone useful falls into our hands..."

Olivia paused, twisting her lip ring with her teeth.

"I know it doesn't sound much," Greg added, weakly.

"No, I… I understand," Olivia said. She shifted. "You can't exactly go get them, if you don't know where they are..."

She glanced down at the little girl in her arms, who was now peppering Mycroft's bumblebee with purple spots. She brushed back an unruly tuft of Lottie's hair.

An awkward quiet fell across the kitchen.

"Thanks for coming to tell me, anyway," she said. "I'm - glad the sketches helped."

As the door of the house closed behind them, unhappiness coursed through Greg's soul. It was a stagnant, muddy feeling, one that had followed him ever since they'd left Oxford. It left him feeling thick and full of smog. He felt awful.

Mycroft paused at the gate, spotting the look on his face. "What's wrong?"

Greg slid his hands into his pockets, exhausted.

"I don't know," he murmured. "It just seems - …"

He shook his head.

"We've got a name," he said. "We've got the clearest positive ID you could ever ask for. We've got his parent's address, we've got his old usernames, we've got the name of the shoe shop where he worked. We could have his old Geography coursework sent over, if we wanted it. We've got everything, but... we've not got him. And they've still got all the power."

Mycroft gave him a look of quiet understanding.
"If it helps, it... took me rather longer than ten days to vanquish Excultus last time." He held Greg's gaze, gently. "Believe me, Greg. You are not behind schedule."

Greg's stomach twisted. "Jesus fucking Christ. It's only been ten days."

Mycroft looked away, tired.

"I... fear we may have to make our peace with patience," he said.

Greg didn't know about patience.

Two people were dead. More were missing. And this was just the start.

Mycroft moved towards the car, opening up his wrist-set.

"I'll see if I can track down who was involved in the search of the boy's room," he said. "I feel we should read the full report. We might be able to glean some hint as to where he thought he'd be living... some sign..."

Greg paused on the kerb, searching his pocket for his car keys. As he did, his eye was caught by movement at the other end of the street. He turned his head to look.

A gaggle of kids were playing out in the last of the Saturday sunshine.

Greg recognised the game. His heart stirred as he did, amazed to discover kids were still playing it. He remembered it well, kicking about the estate in Lambeth with his friends all those years ago. They'd called it 'Ice Cream' back then. God alone knew why. It had been one of his favourites.

A boy in a soccer t-shirt was facing a brick wall, arms wrapped over his head to cover his eyes. His friends were creeping up behind him slowly, as wary as little alley cats.

Every few seconds, without warning, he would spin round and try to catch sight of them moving. Every creeper stiffened up at once, frozen into place. Those who wobbled were immediately pointed out, with some jeering, and forced to come and stand by the wall.

Greg smiled as he watched. Easier times, he thought.

The kid had the technique right, too - resist the urge to spin round too quick or too often, and instead let them all relax. Let them get up close. Then...

As Greg watched, his heart thumping strangely, one of the creepers decided to take her chance.

She lunged forwards, slapped the spotter on the back, and with a wild cacophony of shrieks every creeper immediately sprinted for safety. The spotter whirled around and gave chase. Their happy screams rang after them all along the street.

After a few dodges, the boy in the soccer shirt got his arms around one of the girls, laughing fit to burst. She screamed as he hefted her off her feet into the air, whirling her around. Victory was claimed, with a lot of laughter from everyone.

She was duly sent to the wall, now 'it'. Eagerly she covered her eyes.

The others began their careful creeping once more.

"Greg," said a voice nearby.
Greg blinked. He broke from his reverie to find Mycroft watching him - tired, but with a smile.

"I'm sure they'd let you join in," Mycroft murmured, "if you asked."

Greg stared at him, reeling.

He'd suddenly started to think.

His heart pounded in his ears as he looked into Mycroft's eyes, slotting things together, hardly daring to breathe.

"Maybe we can," he said, at last. A prickle coursed its way suddenly up his back. "Oh - *God* - that might actually work..."

Mycroft gave him a small frown.

"Greg, with the fondest of respect... you *are* aware that I was being flippant?"

"No, not *that* - I mean... maybe we could - ..." Greg's mind was suddenly igniting, thoughts cracking through him like gunfire as they burst open one after the other. "Excultus," he said. "Maybe if we - ... *Jesus*. *Jesus*, Mycroft, I can *see* it."

Mycroft's frown deepened, his eyes fixed on Greg's.

"What - exactly are you contemplating?" he said.

Greg dragged in a breath, trying to calm his thoughts enough to get them out of his head.

"They're hunting us - right?" he said. "You and me. They want us dead. That's what they want... and what people want is their weakness. That's human nature, right there. That's the only truth in the world."

He felt his eyes fill with flame.

"Maybe we don't wait for them to strike again," he said. "Maybe we can lure one of them out. Bait them, and catch them. Catch them before we're caught."

"Greg..." Mycroft's voice lowered, his face shadowed with the greatest reluctance. "If this is leading where I think it is - ..."

"Why?" said Greg, his heart tightening hard. "Have you got a better plan?"

"Other than not placing ourselves in *unfathomable danger*?" Mycroft said, raising his eyebrows.

"People are paying for our patience with their *lives,*" Greg said. "Excultus are treating Pembury Road like a savannah watering hole. We don't have time just to sit here and watch them pick off whoever they want. We can set something up - stage it - wait for them to come for the bait, then strike. You said it yourself this morning. If we could get hold of one of them, we'll have *all* the information, Mycroft - all the information we could ever need to shut this whole thing down."

Mycroft swallowed.

"Why do I have the keenest suspicion," he said, his voice tight, "that by 'bait', you mean *you*?"

"Mycroft, this *works*. And it's the only plan we've had in ten days. I know it's risky - but we can do things to counter the risks. We can stage-manage it all. I *know* we can."
"What are you proposing?" Mycroft asked him, appalled. "That you amble around Pembury Road at night, while I hover round a nearby corner with a net? Greg, this is... ridiculous. It's laughable."

Greg shook his head. He'd driven two hundred miles today. His mind was whirring too fast to stop.


Greg looked into his eyes, his heart beating hard.

"I'm not kidding with this," he said. "I think it's workable. It's - at least worth some thought, isn't it?"

Mycroft said nothing, pale.

"Give me a day to work on it," Greg said, in desperation. "A day to put something together."

"Greg..."

"One day - just one day - while you chase up those usernames that Jess gave you for Elliot. That won't take two of us, will it?"

Mycroft's expression worked with discomfort, falling into silence once more.

"Then I'll tell you what I've got," said Greg. "And if you're not a hundred percent happy, we won't do it. Alright?" He held his breath, feeling his fingers tingle. "I promise, gorgeous. You can blast it right out of the water, and we'll do it your way. We'll wait."

"Why am I even letting you contemplate this?" Mycroft said, weakly.

Greg unlocked the car, tugging open the door for him.

"Because part of you knows I've got the balls to pull it off," said Greg. "That's why."

Mycroft hesitated. Greg looked into his eyes, still holding the door.

"Into the car with you, Dr. Holmes," he said. "I've got work to do."

Mycroft paused for just a moment more, regarding him very seriously.

"You don't - know Excultus like I did, Greg. You don't know what they're capable of."

"Then it's all the more reason to stamp this out now," Greg said, his stomach flipping. "Now, while it's still early days - while they're still relying on fucking teenage chair-throwers who worked in a shoe shop, before they've had four years of feasting on London."

They looked at each other for a moment, both quietly urging the other to relent.

"One day," Greg said - begging those eyes. They could finish this, he thought, all of this. It could all be over, and nobody else had to die. "Then it's your decision. I swear."

Mycroft bit the end of his tongue.
"Very well," he said, at last. "One day."

Greg's chest tightened. He pulled open the driver's side door.

"Listen. You're clearly knackered - and I've got stuff to do. How about we just make a flying visit to Scotland Yard, I pick some things up, and then we head home? You can catch up on sleep while I work."

Mycroft's expression folded. "That - might be magnificent, actually," he said, as he sank into the passenger seat.

"Right. That's what we'll do, then." Greg started up the engine. This was the beginning of the end, he thought; he could feel it. "Did you finish your flask?"

"I - …" Mycroft hesitated. "Yes, I did. Thank you."

"Even more good news..." Greg pulled the car away from the kerb. "I think we might just be on the up."
Feasible

My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once

- William Wordsworth
'Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey' (1798)

Just past midnight, Mycroft laid aside his dog-eared copy of *Madame Bovary* and rubbed beneath his reading glasses.

He hadn't heard a thing from downstairs all evening.

Upon arriving home, Greg had ensconced himself in a makeshift office in the living room, and not moved since. A few times Mycroft had checked on him - discreet passes through the lounge under guise of retrieving something from his office, only to find Greg surrounded by hard-light maps, torn scraps of scrawled paper lists, and complicated diagrams whose meaning Mycroft could not fathom.

The name 'TJ' seemed to feature prominently in these workings. Once or twice, to Mycroft's concern, the name 'Luke' was also clearly visible projected in the air.

Mycroft had made no comment each time, passed on his way, and occasionally brought Greg a fresh cup of coffee. The coffee had been accepted with murmurs of distracted thanks - Greg's focus was too locked into place to be disturbed. The hours had passed by, and now it was the next day.

Clearly, Greg was treating this idea with some gravity.

Mycroft didn't know what to think.

The concept of *baiting* Excultus made him feel uneasy on an almost cellular level. The Excultus he remembered were not liable to fall for cheap tricks. They were not to be toyed with, predicted, or counter-hunted. Enough of that organisation had survived the purge to begin the cycle once more - and that meant enough of their cunning had survived, too.

But he owed Greg the decency of an open mind.

And Greg was also quite correct that they had no other plans. Securing an Excultus agent might burn this horror out before it could worsen any further. Nobody welcomed the prospect more than Mycroft.

He supposed he'd have to see what was presented to him tomorrow.
Today, he thought, glancing wearily at his wrist-set.

For now, there were biological needs that required attention.

They'd driven over two hundred miles; Greg was entering the sixteenth hour of his shift. They would be no good to anyone - nor to each other - dead from exhaustion.

Mycroft eased himself off the bed, lamenting the stiffness in his back. It was getting worse. Once, at the height of his strength, he'd been able to scale almost vertical walls. He'd been able to lift and break things the size of this bed without blinking. Now, with every passing day, he felt like he aged another five years. He'd tried to get to sleep at nine PM, exhausted, but no sleep had come.

Even Flaubert hadn't helped.

The arms of his lover just might, though.

He put his reading glasses aside, brushed his weary hands across his face, and made his way downstairs.

Greg was still on the sofa in the living room, surrounded by screens. Fragments of planning were still scattered all around him in the air. His latest coffee sat untouched on the table, growing grey as it went cold, and his wrist-set was flashing an urgent need of a battery charge.

Greg was fast asleep - slumped in his work clothes, boneless against the back of the sofa.

Mycroft's heart twinged.

He approached his lover quietly, leant down, and eased his arms around him.

"Greg," he murmured.

Greg stirred a little, making an indistinct noise.

"Darling," Mycroft said, nuzzling at his temple. "Come to bed."

"Mmh? No, I'm… just… taking a minute - s'okay…"

"Greg, this can wait. Rest cannot." Mycroft lifted him gently from the couch, coaxing him onto his feet. Greg swayed a little; he dragged his hands over his eyes, like a child. Mycroft's heart tugged. "You're exhausted, Greg... for heaven's sake, come to bed..."

Greg sighed, groggily. "Maybe if I… maybe a good night's sleep…" he mumbled.

"Mm," Mycroft said, softly. "It will do you a world of good, I'm sure."

As they left the living room, Mycroft murmured,

"Lights please, Anthea."

The apartment plunged at once into darkness.

After a few nervous steps, Greg said,

"How can you even... see like this...?"

Mycroft - to whom the world had become a colourless field of shape, depth and distance - gave a
small smile. The truth was that his eyes had recently felt far more capable in the dark than they were in the light.

"Hold onto me," he said. "You are quite safe."

They moved quietly up the stairs, and into the bedroom. Mycroft sat Greg down on the side of the bed, knelt, and began to unbutton his shirt for him. Greg watched him, sleepily. A half smile lifted his lips.

"Kinda like the first time," he murmured. His eyes flickered softly into Mycroft's.

Mycroft smiled.

How well he remembered - that first feeling of Greg's hands easing beneath his shirt, just wanting to touch him. Just wanting to feel his skin. He'd almost died of joy. Nobody had wanted to touch him in long, long years. Then one cancelled late night train, and the whole world had changed.

"You been okay all evening?" Greg mumbled. "Feel like I've neglected you."

"It's quite alright..." Mycroft indicated the laptop charging beside the bed. "I made a start on Elliot Webster's last known usernames."

"Mm? Anything?"

"Ah... perhaps too much. The boy was active in several forums over several years. He had a vigorous imagination. I've barely started wading through the miasma of his psyche, I fear... I've not yet found any recent posts."

Greg leant back sleepily on his elbows, closing his eyes as Mycroft unbuckled his belt.

"If they're there, you'll find 'em. I know you will."

Greg's faith in him was stirring. Mycroft suspected it was the only thing that kept him going anymore.

"How proceeds your horrifying master plan?" he asked, dreading the answer either way.

Greg shifted gently as Mycroft unzipped his trousers. "S'not horrifying," he murmured. "All fine, so far... gotta speak to some people t'morrow." He laid back against the covers, lifting up his hips as Mycroft eased down his trousers and boxers for him. A small sigh left his lips. "Mycroft," he mumbled.

It was a request.

Mycroft's pulse quickened hopefully. "You're exhausted, Greg..."

"Not all of me," Greg said, with a sleepy smile.

"Scoundrel..." Mycroft loosened his clothing from each ankle. Too tired to care about tidiness, he left it crumpled by the bed.

As he leant back up to Greg, his lover reached for the buttons of his shirt.

"Love you," Greg mumbled, as he gently undid them.

Mycroft gazed at his face without speaking - the soft scruff of his hair, the darkness of his
eyelashes, the silver-touched shadow of his stubble.

"This… plan of yours," he said, after a moment.

Greg's eyes lifted softly to his. They were the deepest, darkest, most beautiful chocolate brown.

"I hope you realise…” Mycrof murmured. "I - won't sanction any compromise of your safety. Not one."

Greg gave him a small smile. Those brown eyes sparkled. "I know."

"Truly, Greg… if it risks harm to you, I shall veto it without a second thought."

"S'fine, gorgeous. Let me finish it first." Greg slipped open the last button. He pushed the shirt slowly back from Mycroft's shoulders, easing it down his arms. "Then you can say yes or no."

Gently he pulled Mycroft down for a kiss. He attended to his lover's belt and trousers as their mouths stroked together, undoing the fastenings he could now manage without looking.

Mycrof's blood began to stir. With conscious effort, he pushed his worries from his mind for now.

It was slow, sleepy, gentle sex. For a long time, the only sound in the room was tightened breath and the gliding of hands across skin, as they settled beneath the covers and simply touched - feeling each other's closeness, relaxing into this familiar shelter at the end of the day. Greg coaxed Mycroft tenderly onto his front, and kissed at the back of his neck as his slick and gentle fingers sought between Mycroft's thighs from behind. Something about the position left Mycroft feeling almost feline - stretching, quivering and arching as his lover relaxed him with his fingers, then hissing softly as Greg pushed himself inside - flexing from the pleasure of Greg's deeper thrusts, with a sinuous bowing of his back - clawing slowly at the pillows, padding them - moaning low in his throat as Greg took his time. Climax overcame him not in cries or howls, but in sleepy prickles that made him twist and eagerly push back against Greg for more, bearing down on the ache of his lover inside him as he panted in urgency. Greg's possessive grasp of his hip and one shoulder tightened - the groans between his shoulder blades grew suddenly ragged - and Mycroft realised with a rush that he was coming, too.

They came together, shaking with it.

Mycrof listened to his own sounds fade into whimpers.

A cloth from the bathroom, and warm water - a gentle clean-up as they whispered to each other in the quiet. Sleep was rolling thick as fog across the battleground of Mycroft's head. The day was over; they had survived.

Wrapped up in the darkness and safe in his lover's arms, Mycroft made a silent prayer to any god that was still watching.

There couldn't be many gods left by now: too heartbroken, too helpless, too bewildered by a species capable of unending love but treated preying upon its innocents as an art form.

If there was one left - somewhere in the sky, some withered and weeping god - Mycroft hoped that they could spare him some kindness.

He didn't know what this plan of Greg's was going to involve. He had a feeling that luck would need to be on their side, and in abundance. He almost hoped that, when he heard it, it was too ridiculous to contemplate.
He didn't think he could cope if it were feasible.

He didn't think he could cope with that at all.

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Greg woke to the early pulse of his alarm.

"Four times ten?" it asked.

"Forty," Greg said, slightly smug. He loved days when it was something times ten.

His wrist-set played him his mathematical victory tune. "Good morning!"

Quiet resettled.

Beside him in bed, Mycroft was still deeply asleep. They'd only turned in late last night - and then stayed up a little longer. Something about bedtime sex with Mycroft was quickly becoming Greg’s favourite feeling in the world. They didn't even need to rip into each other any more - it could be like last night. They could just come together, get close and look after each other. The early stages of something had never felt like this before.

Then again, Greg didn't think these could really count as early stages anymore. They probably weren't even sticking to stages now. The whole rulebook had been tossed onto the tracks of the tube that night a year ago, and nobody was in any rush to go retrieve it.

Greg shifted across the bed, guided Mycroft into a careful cuddle, and kissed at his temple.

"Gorgeous?" he murmured.

Mycroft returned the kiss sleepily to his jaw. You are so beautiful, Greg thought. Mycroft had no idea. "Mm?"

"Would you kill me if I wanted to go to work early?"

"No," Mycroft murmured, stretching. His arm coiled around Greg's waist. "How early?"

"Erm. There for half seven, maybe?"

"Fine." Mycroft kissed his jaw once more, shivering slightly. "Is this for your plan?"

"Mnmh. Need some people to give me a yes before I can ask you for yours."

"Which people?" Mycroft asked against his neck, nuzzling gently.

Greg realised Mycroft was kissing at his pulse.

A brief and forbidden daydream tingled through his thoughts. He pushed it away.

"There's a few," he said. "Don't worry about it for now. You have a bit more sleep, okay?... m'just going for a shower."

"Alright..." Mycroft yawned, letting him go with reluctance. "Scoundrel?"
Greg's heart thumped, hard. "Yeah?"

"How involved is Elwood in all this?"

Greg fought a smile. He leant back across the bed and kissed the nape of Mycroft's neck, earning himself a little groan.

"He's not involved at all yet," Greg said. "Not 'til he says yes. And if he does say yes, he'll be as far away from you as possible. And you're not going to be armed."

"Need I remind you I'm naturally armed?" Mycroft murmured, drawing the covers up around his chin.

Greg rather wanted to kiss him forever. "I know you are," he said, fondly. "I'll add a new role specification to the plan, shall I? 'Mycroft Holmes, to the best of his ability, to resist savaging Commander Elwood'."

"Where possible'," Mycroft added, sleepily. "'And unless given adequate provocation'."

"Such as looking at DI Lestrade'...?"

"Quite."

"Alright, gorgeous..." Greg kissed him, one last time, before he headed for the shower. "I'll tell HR to get a vacancy for an ARS Commander on the website."

At twenty to eight, up in the command office of Armed Response, Luke sucked at his teeth. He gazed across the drafted paper plans laid out across his consoles - maps, diagrams, lists. Greg had been thorough in his proposal. There was more he could give - much more - all of it committed to digital files, and ready to be transferred from Greg's wrist-set to Luke at a moment's notice.

All he needed to hear was 'yes' - the first of three.

But as Luke's brow furrowed, Greg felt his heart sink slightly.

"Greg... mate..."

It was a bad start, Greg thought. He held his breath, sliding his hands into the pockets of his coat.

"This is a big ask," Luke said, glancing up at him. "I mean... you'd be taking a massive chunk of my team off the air, for a start. And you want the best of the best, do you?"

"Only the best," said Greg. "Only your most loyal. Unblemished records. This can't get out. If Excultus get even one hint of what we're doing, we'll been in serious shit. I might as well just cut my throat now."

Luke shook his head slightly, as if in wonder. "'Excultus'..." he said, mystified.

Greg knew what he meant. "Yeah. It's... but this is my life now - and I need your help." He hesitated, licking his lips. "Is it feasible?"
"It's feasible," Luke said. "It's just - … I'm just a bit twitchy, you know? How long is this going on for?"

"Until it works, basically… I know it's a drain on your resources. Believe me, I know it. But I've already cut the numbers back as much as I can - and I'm offering to bulk it out, aren't I?"

Luke looked up in surprise.

"Shit," he said. "You were serious about that part?"

Greg shot him an injured look. "Piss off, Luke. I nearly qualified. If I'd not been snapped up by CID -"

"Right," said Luke, his eyes glinting. "How many decades ago was this?"

Greg bit his tongue, reminding himself he needed Luke's agreement right now. "Look, it doesn't matter," he said. "That bit's changeable. Just - the rest isn't. Without you and your team, this whole thing won't get an inch off the ground. I might as well screw it all up for your recycling bin. So… please - can you do it?"

Luke said nothing, gazing across the plans in silence.

"For a friend," Greg added, carefully.


"C'mon, Luke… your lot'll love this. You know they will. It's vampire tag. What could be better? They'll be coming in on their days off. You'll be drowning in volunteers."

Luke made a noise of reluctant agreement, biting the inside of his cheek.

"What about this bit?" he said, tapping at the papers. "This bit here… 'twenty-four hour armed guard' on some address in the middle of Hackney. What the hell's that about? Surely we can cut that."

'We' caused a slight hop of Greg's heart; he kept it off his face.


Luke's forehead crumpled. "You've not given me a lot of wiggle room, have you?"

"They're vampires," said Greg. "They don't tend to offer much in the way of wiggle room to begin with."

Luke sighed. He drummed his fingers against the edge of his console for a moment, swirling something around his mouth.

"I've already done the rotas," he said.

"I'll redo them for you," said Greg. He could feel his chest tightening. "Please, Luke. Don't shoot this down at the first fucking hurdle."

Luke sucked his teeth again.

"I'll need some of your budget," he said. "Can't just absorb these costs."
budget's the size of the fucking moon. Besides, you probably won't even need to pay extra staffing 
costs. Tell them it's a work night out playing vampire laser quest, and they'll all come and do it for 
free."


"This'll work," said Greg. "I know it will. You just make sure your lot are there to shoot it, and I'll 
make a vampire appear."

Luke bit his lip on a sigh.

"This is a bit crazy," he said.

"Again," said Greg, "I know. But this is my life now. And I need your help." He hesitated. "Please, 
Luke."

Luke paused for a moment more, his eyes trailing the plans.

Then he said,

"Fine. Yes - I'll do it."

Greg's face split into a wide grin. He resisted the urge to punch the air. "Yes! Thank you - thank 
you. I knew you wouldn't let me down."


"Fine," said Greg. "I've got stuff to arrange too. Plenty of it. D'you - want me on board with you, 
then? Or shall I shuffle things around?"

Luke straightened up, folding his arms across his chest with a smirk. "Ha," he said. "Go on. Seeing 
as you suggested it, why not? Give my lot something to enjoy, at least. You know you're going 
through The Range first, don't you?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"I'm not just taking your word for it."

"Fair enough. Put me through The Range. I expected as much."

noticeboard, and I'll go tear up all the lovely rotas that I only just distributed. Give me twenty-four 
hours and we'll fine-tune some of these details."

"Fantastic. Thanks, Luke. Thanks a lot."

"You owe me a massive favour," Luke said. "Now get out of my command room. Take your 
demented scribbles with you." As Greg gathered up the plans, he added, "Say hi to Her Majesty for 
me."

"I will," said Greg. He paused, folding the plans together. "By the way... about that... I - kinda had 
another favour to ask."

Luke raised both his eyebrows.
"You've just blown a hole in my budget the size of Beijing," he told Greg. "You've taken my 'best of the best' out of circulation for the foreseeable future, and wasted the entire three hours it took me to do those rotas - and now you want a favour?"


"Go on," he muttered. "What's this favour?"

Greg told Luke the favour.

"Are you actually fucking kidding?" said Luke. "After all the fucking fuss I've had."

Greg was not.

"Why d'you need to?" asked Luke.

Greg explained.

"For fuck's sake." Luke thought about it, now so broken by the first favour that the second came more easily. "Fine. Christ almighty. You're not using my fucking toothbrush though, alright?"

"I'll wash Serena for you," Greg offered, with a grin.

"You'll not lay a hand on Mrs Elwood," Luke warned. "She's a one-man lady, and that's the way it's staying. Now get the fuck out of my division, before you come up with any more bloody favours to ask. Sweet lord Jesus on a jet-ski. The things I do."
Freelance Contractor

I feel my heart glow with an enthusiasm which elevates me to heaven, for nothing contributes so much to tranquillize the mind as a steady purpose – a point on which the soul may fix its intellectual eye.

- Mary Shelley
'Frankenstein' (1818)

As he passed through the solid steel security doors barring the exit to Armed Response, Greg twisted his cuff back from his wrist-set.

"Call Mycroft," he said.

The wrist-set took a moment to connect, flashing gently as he climbed the concrete stairs towards front desk.

"Hey," he said, as the click sounded. His voice echoed in the stairwell. "You alright? How're the e-mails?"

"Copious," Mycroft's voice said, wearily from his wrist. "Are you finished with your secretive first inquiry yet?"

"Yep," said Greg, still grinning. "It's a yes. One down. Two to go."

Mycroft audibly repressed a sigh. "Dare I ask?"

Greg bit the side of his cheek, supposing Mycroft would find out sooner rather than later. "Armed Response," he said, bracing.

"Heaven help us... this plan involves lethally-armed professionals as a first port of call, does it? As well as Lu-... where are you, might I ask?"

"Just on my way up to Reception."

"I see. Well, given that your first acquisition is Armed Response, Gregory Lestrade, you can consider this plan vetoed as of now."

"You've not seen it yet," Greg said. "Can't veto it until you've seen it. Besides… two more yesses to go. Then it's your turn." He pushed open the doors to Reception with a squeak. "Anyway… just wanted to check there's nothing urgent before I head out. You alright up there?"

Mycroft's voice audibly tensed.

"Out?" he said. "Out to where?"

"Not straightaway." Reception was busy, even at this time in the morning. Greg raised his voice a
little. "Just to a café - meeting someone - I've got to go to Comms first, but I said I'd be - "

"When are we leaving?" Mycroft's voice asked.

Greg hesitated. "I'm leaving in about twenty minutes. Depends how long I am in Comms with - "

"Very well… I shall come down," Mycroft said. There came the sound of his chair wheels on the floor. "I can answer these e-mails on the move. Should I meet you in the car park?"

Greg took the wise decision to step back in the empty stairwell, and let the doors shut safely behind him. He leant against the wall.

"I'm - going on my own, gorgeous," he said. "I've got to get this thing sorted before you hear it, or you'll freak out. Not because it's dangerous," he added quickly, hearing Mycroft's intake of breath. "But because you've got to hear it all at once, when I know what I've got for us to work with... alright?"

There was a long, frosty silence.

"Excultus," Mycroft intoned, at last, "recently made an attempt upon your life."

"I'll be in public the whole time," Greg said. "Promise. I'll hurry there, and hurry back. And I'll message you every fifteen minutes."

Mycroft's voice laced with warning. "This makes me distinctly uneasy, Greg."

"I know. But that's why I've got to get this plan together - so we can go back to normal life. You remember normal life, right?"

There was another long and uncomfortable pause. "In which café will you be?" Mycroft asked, at length.

"Parkin's," said Greg. "Just down the road."

Mycroft made an unhappy noise. "Messages every five minutes."

"Fine," said Greg. His heart relaxed slightly. "And I'll turn my tracker on for you - how's that?"

"Do not," Mycroft said, sharply, "do that. Those signals are intercepted far too easily."

"Mycroft, it's a Scotland Yard wrist-set. It's secure. As secure as secure ever gets."

"Which is not secure enough," Mycroft said, flatly. "Do not touch the tracker. Do not even contemplate it. Just stay in contact, please. If you are not back within half an hour, I will be mounting a full reconnaissance mission with helicopters and dogs."

Greg shifted, uneasily. "I'm - probably gonna be longer than that. There's a lot to go over."

Mycroft made a noise of faint distress.

"Greg," he almost whispered. "Please. Stop casually making these remarks. This is taking years from my life. If this plan is anything like what I'm imagining - "

"Messages every five minutes," Greg promised. "I swear, gorgeous. I'll be careful with me. I know you're fond of him."
He hesitated, glancing at the flash of the time on his wrist-set.

"Look, I - have to go. I've got to catch TJ before he clocks off. But I'll be back before you know it."

"Greg," Mycroft said, one last time. He sounded close to despair. "You are not bait. You are mine."

Greg's heart tightened painfully. There came a squeak from the door beside him, as three members of Armed Response arrived for their shift.

"Alright, King of Hearts?"

"Put it there, Lestrade. How's life?"

Greg gave a weak grin, returning the fistbump he was offered. "Hey, fellas..."

They passed on their way down the stairs, footsteps echoing off the concrete walls. Greg glanced uneasily at the open comms channel on his wrist-set.

"I've got to go," he said. "I'll - be back soon, alright? Leave me half the e-mails to answer. Don't slog through them all."

He saw one of the Armed Response officers nudge the others, inclining his head back up the stairs. "... Queen of Hearts," he heard the man mutter, to quiet laughs.

Mycroft's tone came as cold and hard as the stairs beneath his feet.

"Have a productive meeting, Lestrade," he said, and the channel severed.

Bollocks, Greg thought. Bollocks, bollocks... There was no time to call back now. He had to catch TJ before he left, or getting a second yes would suddenly be a lot harder. He'd have to put some serious time into reassuring Mycroft later.

Greg dragged his sleeve back over his wrist-set, pushed back through the doors into Reception and headed quickly for Comms.

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TJ understood the plans before Greg had even finished explaining them.

"Is this to scale?" he asked, his voice gruff and now as thick as treacle. He picked up Greg's map and held it against a hard-light screen, his eyes skimming quickly from detail-to-detail - squinting, processing it all. "And this amount of tree cover, right? It's open, but... I mean, with a couple of days to rig up a field... and you're wanting - what? Cameras, tracking... thermals?"

He clucked his tongue to himself, humming huskily as he thought.

"We can do thermals," he said, "but I'll need to be there. The hardware's temperamental and the filters keep overheating. It's not a problem. No major burns from the headsets just yet. But it's better if I'm on hand, and I can snap a new filter into the things straightaway."

Greg closed his mouth, hardly daring to believe it.

"So - you'll do it?" he said.
TJ gave him a strange look over one shoulder. "Of course," he grunted. "I mean… I'll need costs covered, but… you can just get me in your budget as a freelance security consultant, right?"

"Are you gonna have the time for all this, mate?"

TJ hesitated, glancing back at the plans.

"Sure," he said, clearly not at all sure.

"And - how're you feeling?" said Greg. "I mean… Christ, TJ, I'm over the moon you've said yes. But this'll all be alright for you, won't it?"

"Sure," said TJ again - even less sure. "I mean… it's fine. So long as nobody goes out of their way to wind me up, it's… all fine."

"Fuzzball, you're... sure this isn't gonna be too much?" Greg said, pained. "I mean… on top of work, as well as..."

TJ reached up to scratch slowly at his chin. The scruffy, chestnut beard there looked like a good month's growth, though he'd probably arrived clean-shaven last night. His hair had grown three inches since Friday. Greg had so far resisted the urge to check his desk drawers for isotonic gel.

"I'll be fine," TJ grunted, in the end. "I… owe you."

He hesitated, his eyes wandering over the plans.

"Maybe I could ask Yardley to shift my holiday," he muttered. "Bring it forward… this week coming, instead of the one after… get everything set up for you."

Greg hooked his thumbs quietly in his pockets. "Want me to ask him for you?"

"No, it's - fine. Best if I ask." TJ glanced at Greg, awkward. "Don't want him thinking I've roped Cross-Human Relations in to fight my battles for me."

"Alright. Well… let me know what Yardley says. Honestly, I'd feel happier with you off work. You're not right."

"Yeah…" TJ said, with a soft snort. "We'd all be happier…"

Greg paused, eyeing the beard. "You struggling, mate?"

TJ gave him a small smile. "I feel and look like shit, Lestrade. Crying one minute, laughing the next. Via horny. Don't ask. Spending a fortune on food. All my drains are clogged with hair. Couldn't sleep for hot flushes yesterday, and I'm so hormonal I could throw up."

His expression creased.

"Give me something to do, Greg," he pleaded. "Something to keep me busy. I can't sit in my flat and wait. Not another hour."

Greg's chest ached quietly. "If you're sure, TJ…"

"Sure I'm sure." TJ smiled. "Buy me a bacon sandwich some time."

"You're a star. You know that?"
"So you keep telling me." TJ rolled up the plans, handing them back to Greg with bright eyes. "I'll need to go out to Hackney Downs… get some idea of where I can rig up equipment. You'll want most of it seriously hidden too, I'm guessing. Might require some planning."

"When's good for you?" Greg asked, his heart leaping.

TJ shrugged. "Now?" he said. "Not doing anything. Stop for breakfast on the way?"

Greg checked his wrist-set for time.

"I've gotta see someone else soon..." he said, hesitating. A thought occurred. "You know what, though? - we're going to a café. She's in on the plan, too. Final yes, if I'm lucky. I'm sure she won't mind. Come along."

"Oh... you sure?" TJ looked hesitant. "I'm not especially - 'people ready' right now. Got that... 'wild man of the woods thing' going on. Some might say I'm 'children-scaringly furry'."

"S'fine, fuzzball. She's not a child. You can eat breakfast, while me and her talk - then we'll head out there together."

TJ shrugged. "Cool by me," he said, reaching for his jacket. "But if I frighten your friend, Lestrade, don't say I didn't warn you."

Greg smiled. "She's faced a whole lot scarier than you, mate. Believe me."

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NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

Have you been killed yet?

No gorgeous. Not been killed yet. Just got to Parkins with TJ x
Sent 08:09

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NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

Tierney is there, is he?

So to Armed Response, you are now adding a PMS-riddled lycanthrope on the very verge of his transformation.

Well thank goodness. I was starting to worry this plan of yours would be ill thought out.
Can I just confirm that you HAVE confused Excultus with the local clown college?

Don't worry baby. Their massive rubber shoes will slow them all down.
I've got it all covered x
Sent 08:14

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NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Dear sweet Christ and all the saints.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Who the hell are you meeting at Parkins? Someone who can build you an enormous vampire-sized mouse trap?

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Do not call me baby.

Sorry for quiet, just talking. Explain everything when I'm back later, promise. I am not dead x
Sent 08:22

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
You will be, if you call me baby again.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
And what do you mean 'back later'? You presented this as a brief outing.

Just need to nip up to hackney downs with TJ just to check a few things. Won't be long.
Still not dead x
Sent 08:26

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Hackney Downs? What in God's name are you planning will take place on Hackney Downs?

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Greg. Answer me.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
God save the smoking wreckage of my sanity...

Olivia didn't speak as Greg put his proposal before her. She passed no comment from beginning to end, letting him guide her quiet gaze from section to section in order - explaining failsafes here,
back-ups there, extra preventative measures at every turn. Meanwhile TJ sat beside them in the red leather booth, nervously making his way through a fried breakfast the size of a bin lid.

"- so... that's about it," Greg finished at last, after almost twenty minutes. He'd been trying to guess Olivia's reaction since the start - she'd given him few clues. Even now, there wasn't much in her expression. No fear, he thought, but no enthusiasm either; just the same quiet, measured consideration. "I - know it's a huge request. And I know that on paper it sounds like a dangerous position to put you in... but I promise you, on everything I've ever believed in, that you will not get hurt. Not a speck of harm will come to you. I'll be there - right there - and I'll be watching you like a hawk every step of the way."

He watched her study the papers carefully - brushing her fingertips over the map of Hackney Downs; tracing her path home across the park.

"I wouldn't ask," Greg told her, quietly. "But I think it'll make the difference between Mycroft saying no, and Mycroft saying yes. And I need Mycroft to say yes. TJ here's gonna fit you out with every piece of semi-legal security technology my budget can afford."

TJ looked up from his sausages, startled. He swallowed a mouthful of food; his eyes flashed a little nervously towards Olivia.

"Can we - emphasise the 'legal' half of 'semi-legal', please?" he asked Greg. "You're a police officer. Supposedly."

"A desperate one," Greg told him. "If we get our hands on an Excultus member, Vickery won't give two shits about what specific gear we used to do it. Finish that bacon rind, please. Your beard's grown another half-inch while we've been sat here."

TJ rolled his eyes, casting a nervous glance around the café as he transferred the bacon rind to his mouth.

Greg turned his eyes back to Olivia. After a faint smile at TJ, she returned her attention to the plans, taking in every detail.

"What're you thinking?" Greg asked her.

He tried his hardest not to hope.

Olivia took a moment more to answer, rolling her lip ring between her teeth.

"And this'll help you," she said. "This'll start bringing it all to an end."

Greg nodded, slowly. "If we can get hold of one, we can talk to them. Get information out of them. Find out where they're all holed up, then send in a team and clear the place. I'll get you a front row seat at the trial, and we'll go together everyday. We'll see Sam and Emma get their justice."

In the span of a few moments, he watched her start to hope - then watched her crush the hope with a frown, in an instinct of aggressive self-defence that had its origins deep - and then at last, with a slow breath, she reversed the instinct to give up. She calmed herself, softening the furrows in her brow.

She turned her bee ring around her finger.

"They're gone," she said. Beside Greg, TJ stopped eating for a moment. "My - friends. I want to do something about it."
She paused, looking up into Greg's eyes.

"Even though I'm angry," she said. "Even though I'm scared."

As he recognised the words he'd said to her, Greg's chest ached.

"You'll be top priority," he promised her, in a murmur. "Start to finish. For everybody there."

She smiled slightly. "First time for everything." She glanced at a particular page of the plans, frowning a little - her eyes soft. "Isn't that... illegal? Impersonating a...?"

"You'd only be impersonating," Greg said, "if you were doing it under your own jurisdiction, with the intent of using the suggestion to facilitate or assist in criminal activity. What you'd be doing is a sanctioned and pre-approved deception as a freelance contractor to Scotland Yard. There's precedent and you'd be paid as an actress."

"Paid?" Olivia said, surprised.

Greg smiled. "You can duke it out with TJ whether you tear my budget in half fifty-fifty, or if you get more for dangerous duties."

TJ swallowed an enormous mouthful of scrambled egg.

"I have a lot of wires to buy," he pointed out. "Like a lot of wires, Lestrade. It's Hackney Downs. It's pretty big."

"I - didn't think you'd pay me at all," Olivia mumbled. She gave a small shrug. "So... it's fine. He can have it."

TJ flushed slightly. Greg suspected he wasn't often in the presence of attractive young women, especially in those weeks when fur was growing out of his ears.

"Well, I... won't need it all," TJ said. "And... I mean, if you're going to be putting yourself at risk -"

"- on paper," Greg added. "With extensive safeguards."

"On paper," TJ said, rolling his eyes, "with extensive safeguards, then... no, we'll - go fifty-fifty. That sounds fair."


"You deserve compensating for your time," Greg said. "And - well, you won't be able to work while you do this... it's a round-the-clock deception. And again, I know it's a big ask... but I know you can pull this off. I know you've got what it takes. And I know you wanted to help."

"It's fine," Olivia said. She smiled slightly. "Glad to."

Greg's heart squeezed. "You sure?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I'm in. What - do I do? Where do we start?"

Greg's heart leapt. This was happening, he thought. It was all coming together.

"When TJ's eaten all his scrambled egg like a good boy," he said, earning himself a frown, "we're
going to Hackney Downs - let him get an idea of what he'll need. Come with us in the taxi, and you
can have a look too. After that…”

Greg suddenly realised he hadn't texted Mycroft in some time. He reached quickly for his wrist-set,
flashed open the message window and typed *I am not dead x*, then hit send.

"After that," he went on, "I have to get Mycroft to agree to all this. If by some miracle he does, we
have to get our boss to agree to it. I'll text you both tonight - let you know if it's going ahead."

Olivia bit her lip ring. "And then?" she said.

"Then Mycroft will need you at Scotland Yard," he said. "You'll start tomorrow. Can you do that?"

Something filled her eyes that he'd never seen in them before. He wondered what it was.

"Fine," she said, her voice as expressionless as the table top. "I can do that."

"You don't know how helpful this is, Olivia. Thank you."

She shrugged. "As I said… I want to help."

As he followed TJ around Hackney Downs, scanning particular areas with his wrist-set and
emailing the files to TJ's home computer, Greg resisted the urge to joke about marking the trees
and chasing a ball.

Normally, TJ would be very amenable to banter - but Olivia's quiet presence beside them kept him
well-behaved. He had no wish to embarrass TJ.

"This is all workable," TJ kept muttering to himself, examining trees, bits of railing and
playground equipment. "All very workable..."

At last, he'd covered all of the areas of interest. The scans were sent, and work could begin. TJ
turned to Greg with a businesslike smile.

"Yep," he said. "Fine. This is happening."

Greg's stomach tightened. "Not until Mycroft's given the green light," he said. "But - thanks, TJ. I
appreciate it."

TJ smiled to himself, pulling his hands inside his sweatshirt sleeves for warmth.

"You two," he remarked, amused. "You'll be the end of me."

Greg raised an eyebrow. "What?" he said.

TJ glanced briefly at Olivia, who was waiting over on the path for them with a cigarette. Her arms
were folded across her chest, her gaze trained on the heavy cover of trees around the meadow as
she smoked. TJ's eyes lingered on her a moment, then with reluctance returned to Greg.

"He was a mess, you know." TJ gave a flash of his eyebrows. "That night you got attacked. It was
me took the emergency call. I mean... people are usually a mess, but… he was a mess."
The gentle thud of Greg's heart did not reach his face.

"I was worse," he joked. "Believe me."

The humour glanced off TJ's expression like light off a pane of glass. Before he could say another word, his eyes flickered over Greg’s shoulder - and a smile curved his mouth.

"Speak of the devil…” he said.

Greg glanced around.

Across the park, over by the nearest gate, a familiar car was now parked - his own.

Mycroft was waiting beside it. He was leaning on the driver's side door, smoking heavily, and paying no attention whatsoever to the activity within the park.

"Looks like your ride's here," TJ said, his eyes sparkling.

Greg lifted an eyebrow at him. "Got news for you, fuzzball. That's your ride, too. We'll drop you off at home on the way."

TJ smothered his smirk.

"Ahh… you know what? Just drop me off back at Scotland Yard. I've got things to do in the city. I'll speak to Yardley tonight, get the week off. This is gonna take time to set up. Needs my proper attention."


Olivia glanced up as Greg approached her. She gave him a small smile, her eyes quiet.

"Sure you're still okay?" he asked.

"Sure. Just... getting my head around how it'll go." She glanced down at the last half of her cigarette, placing it back between her lips. "He's a werewolf. Isn't he?"

Greg smiled. "You're gonna do well in Cross-Human Relations."

Her eyes briefly brightened. She hid it, lowering her lashes and smoking.

"Thanks for not mentioning," Greg said. "He's a bit sensitive right now. So long as he's eating proper protein and plenty of it, he's better... but the hormonal changes they undergo are pretty breathtaking. Science has a lot to answer for."

"Never met a werewolf," Olivia said. "I don't think so, anyway."

"TJ's just a pup. Don't worry about him."

"I'm not worried. Just - curious, I suppose." Olivia dragged on her cigarette; the January breeze stole the smoke in a gentle flurry from her lips. "Does he - change every month?"

"Every three-ish. Some strains of werewolf are monthly. Would you believe TJ's one of the lucky ones?"

"God," she said.
Greg huffed. "He's pretty laidback too, which helps… less likely to hit his trigger. It can be disastrous for some of them. One person steps on your foot on the train when your hormones are up, and suddenly you're looking at a six-month sentence for disturbing the peace…"

"Poor bastard." Olivia tossed her cigarette to the path, twisting it out. "He seems nice, anyway…"

"Yeah. He is. And he's going to be a big help." Greg paused, looking at her gently. "As are you."

"It's fine," she said. "Honestly." She turned her eyes towards home, biting her lip ring again. "I feel better. Knowing there's something happening."

Greg smiled. "Yeah," he said. "You and me both."

His wrist-set buzzed. He bit the side of his tongue; he suspected he'd just been summoned.

"I'll text you later if we're going ahead," he told Olivia. "Might - be a few hours. I've got a lot of explaining to do... but you'll hear from me, I promise."

She nodded, guarding her expression. Just as Greg turned to leave, she said,

"Thank you for involving me, inspector."

Greg's heart quietened. He turned back to her, and met her hopeful gaze.

"It's - just Greg," he said. He smiled, raising an eyebrow. "Mycroft's gonna be your inspector, Sergeant Reid."
"I don't think you appreciate what a keenly stressful morning I've had," Mycroft said, as he took a seat at their desk. His fingers steepled; he surveyed Greg with intense displeasure over his glasses. "This sort of flippant disregard for your own safety will cost us dearly. It's been disruptive to my work efforts. I am not happy."

Greg couldn't help but feel like a wayward constable getting dressed down by the duty sergeant.

"It was important," he said, calmly.

He watched Mycroft's mouth form the first sound of the word "You -", before he thought better of it. He swallowed the sentiment with a grimace.

"It was irresponsible," he said, instead. "It was unnecessary."

"I wouldn't have gone if it was unnecessary," Greg said. "But it mattered - and it's worked out fine. All three have said yes. They're good to go, if we are. That's three people who think this is feasible, think it's worth their time and effort, and think it's safe enough for them to be involved."

"Bloody Elwood," Mycroft snapped, eyes flashing, "is now a qualified judge of danger and feasibility, is he?"

"When it comes to firearms," Greg said, calmly, "yeah. Yeah, he is. He's the Armed Response commander. He offered me company, once, when I was bloody lonely and he thought I was single. Doesn't mean he's crap at his job, Mycroft. And it doesn't mean he can't help us take down Excultus."

Mycroft looked for a moment as if he were swallowing something unpleasant. He drummed his fingers on the desk, agitated, and took a sharp breath.

"Explain, then," he said. "This… plan of yours."

Greg thought for a second to get the papers out - then he realised Mycroft would skim-read them in a glance, veto them before he'd said a word, and all this work would be wasted. They'd be right back where they started, waiting for Excultus to kill whoever else they fancied next - waiting for another crime scene, another body, another sigil.

Instead Greg left the plans inside his coat, took it off, and sat down at the desk.

"There's a few parts to cover," he said. "But m'gonna ask you to do something first."
Mycroft agreed to nothing, silently turning a pen between his fingers. He waited for the request with narrowed eyes.

"Wait until you've heard it all," Greg said. "And bear in mind that if we don't do this - if we decide we won't risk it, and instead we'll wait... somebody else is going to die."

He looked into Mycroft's eyes.

"Excultus want me dead," he said. Mycroft's gaze flickered. "They want you dead. They want anyone connected closely to you dead. All we're doing here is triggering a situation that's already coming - and managing it on our terms, not waiting for them to manage it on theirs."

Mycroft said nothing once more, rubbing his thumb along the barrel of the pen.

_That's fine, gorgeous_, Greg thought. _You just listen. I'll talk._

He took a long breath, and finally settled on where to start.

"Simple enough first idea... I'll act as the draw in a simple bait-and-catch operation. We set up a recurring situation where I'm apparently unguarded, arrange that I actually am guarded, then wait for Excultus to come."

Mycroft's eyes hardened with instant anger.

"Vetoed," he snapped. "Utterly, and without compunction. I told you, Greg. I told you in the clearest possible terms that I would not sanction - "

"- so that went straight out the window," Greg added. Mycroft stuttered into silence. "Because I knew you'd throw it out without a thought."

Mycroft's eyes flashed in wary surprise. Greg held his nerve.

"It should be me," he said. "It's my plan. It should be me taking that risk, and I feel guilty that it's not. But I need this to work for you... and I need your approval. You'd never say yes if I was involved. So I've taken myself out of the equation."

Mycroft did not respond, still holding the pen in silence.

"In fact," Greg said, "I'm gonna be off their radar entirely. I'm - leaving London. First thing tomorrow."

Mycroft's mouth opened. He stared at Greg, pale.

"I'll move my stuff from your flat to my car," Greg said, "drive away, and head for the M40. I'm going back to Manchester. Can't cope with London after the attack. Been thinking about it for a while, and I've decided I'm going home. Vickery'll approve the transfer and circulate it through Scotland Yard. TJ can scrub my name off the door. If there's time, maybe get Dawn to buy a cake and we'll do a little goodbye thing at Reception."

"Greg, what - …" Mycroft swallowed. "What are you - "

"I've already called my old commander up in Manchester. She'd said she'll confirm any enquiries she gets."

"A-Are you - actually - "
"No," Greg said, quietly. "No, of course not."

He watched Mycroft's face openly relax.

"I just need Excultus to think it," Greg said. "Because... obvious deduction number one - you and me are being monitored somehow. I don't know if it's someone just skulking after us down the street, or if there's a leak somewhere - but someone's keeping Excultus way too informed of our movements. So we'll stage that I've left your flat. We'll put it about that I'm leaving Scotland Yard, that I've left the whole investigation under stress, and that I'm no longer involved in any capacity - and we'll make it look like whatever you and me had, it wasn't enough to keep me in London. I need you to be cheerful about it. Whoever's watching, I want them to think they've scared me enough to send me running for the hills - and I want them to think I wasn't that important to you after all. No longer the fast-track route to causing you pain."

Mycroft processed this, his eyes unsure.

"Where - will you be?" he asked.

Greg had arranged it already. But for the sake of his fourth and final yes, he decided to offer a slight lie for now.

"TBC," he said. "In a way, doesn't matter. I'll be lying extremely low after that point."

"Meanwhile...?" Mycroft prompted, with care.

Greg took another breath. "Meanwhile..." he said. "Enter stage left, your new bagman. Detective Sergeant Olivia Reid."

Mycroft's eyebrows lifted. "Olivia?"

"She agreed to it this morning," Greg said. "She wants to help. We'll get her kitted out, get her name on the door, the works - and I need the two of you out on inquiries. Visibly out on inquiries. Make something up if you have to. I just need the entire world outside this office door to believe that it's legit, that Olivia's your CID partner now, and the investigation's marching ahead."

Greg paused.

"And... if you're cool with it," he added, "and please try to be - it'd be helpful if you can hint that there's something more in the works between the two of you."

"You're - introducing Olivia as a substitute target," Mycroft clarified, slowly.

"Yeah. She's brave enough, she's willing, and she wants Excultus destroyed as much as we do."

Mycroft didn't like it. "This places her under enormous risk," he said. "The rest of her household, too - including the children. No, Greg. I can't sanction this."

"Luke's already authorised twenty-four-hour armed guard at the house," Greg said. Mycroft's eyebrows arched towards his hairline. "They'll be concealed inside the house in shifts. Nobody will know from the outside, and we'll get TJ to rig up alarms and early warning systems on every possible entry point. The second that someone makes an attempt on the property, they'll be taken into custody by armed response."

"I see." Mycroft paused, threading the pen between his fingers. "And if they decide to target Olivia outside the safety of her home?"
"She's under strict orders to stay with you at all times," Greg said. "From the second she leaves that house in the morning, until she's safely back in it at night, she won't leave your side. Use my car as much as you can."

"Your car," Mycroft reminded him, "will supposedly be in Manchester. With you."

"Fine," Greg said, "We'll hire you one. So long as you and Olivia have something to stay safe inside, and she's got you there with her at all times, I don't care. There's - only one time she'll be out from under your protection. One window of opportunity."

Mycroft made the connection. His eyes dulled.

"Hackney Downs," he said.

Greg nodded, carefully.

"We'll establish a routine," he said. "You and her spend the day acting as DI and DS - inquiries, Scotland Yard stuff - the works - I trust you both to make it believable. Then, after dark each night, you'll drop her off on Pembury Road. Olivia will make her way home across Hackney Downs."


"Armed Response," said Greg. "There's enough tree cover. There are enough hiding places. Meanwhile, TJ's gonna have her tracked every step of the way, and we'll arm her with something to handle an attacker in case of emergency. TJ's taken a look at the park. He can have the whole thing rigged up in a couple of days. Thermal scanners, the lot. He'll be able to tell us exactly who's there, what they're doing, and if they're on Olivia's tail. Armed Response will be ready with non-lethals to take down anyone who makes an attempt on her."

Mycroft placed his hands over his face in silence, rubbing beneath his glasses.

"If Excultus," he managed, "notice Hackney Downs being rigged up with thermal scanners..."

"They won't," said Greg. "They're not watching Hackney Downs. They're watching you and me. I've got a Technical team already organised to help TJ, and they're all going to be in hi-vis jackets - claiming they're from the council, conducting a safety assessment on the site."

Mycroft's eyes shuttered. "I see."

He took a moment to say anything else.

"And where shall I be during all this?" he asked, sounding close to despair.

"We'll need someone in command. You'll be concealed somewhere nearby, wherever TJ is. He'll have screens rigged up to show you what's going on. Luke will be out in the field with Armed Response - all on headsets, and Olivia wired in - and you can take charge of things that way. It'll be your battlefield, and everyone will listen to you."

He looked into Mycroft's eyes.

"This'll all be in your hands," he said. "If there's danger, pull it. If there's a problem, pull it. The second you start to worry, pull it."

Mycroft sat back in the chair with a squeak. He folded his arms across his chest; he drew a long, deep breath.
For some time he was silent, his expression guarded. Nothing escaped his face. Nothing crossed it. Greg took the lack of an instant no as a first good sign, and kept quiet as he watched Mycroft without speaking, hoping against all hope. His heart thudded deeply in the silence.

At last, without meeting his eyes, Mycroft said,

"You - seem to have anticipated many of my objections."

Greg didn't dare breathe. He wondered if that counted as a yes or not.

"I'm deeply aggrieved by the thought of the danger posed to Olivia," Mycroft said, his voice stiff. "Deeply. She would need to be armed and ready to use it. There need to be failsafes at every possible stage."

"Fine," said Greg. "I've got plenty of them in process, and we'll get more. She won't get so much as a bruise, Mycroft. I promise."

"And Elwood's team would need to be - "

"Best of the best," said Greg. "He knows. And he's promised. Loyal guns with flawless records only."

Mycroft despaired. "I see," he said.

Greg gripped his hands together beneath the desk. He decided to take a risk.

"I know you want to reject it," he said. Mycroft's eyes lifted with exhaustion into his. "I know you're looking for a reason, gorgeous. I can see it in your face. Just - if you can't find a reason - if you can't see one, and if you're having to scrape to come up with it - please. Please, consider it."

Mycroft's chest expanded slowly.

"I wish to reject it," he said, his gaze heavy with concern, "because it's dangerous, and because I'm afraid."

Greg's heart ached.

"We're in danger anyway," he said. "They're coming for us, Mycroft. You know they are. We can lure them out and control it, or we can wait and they'll come anyway. You say you're worried about Olivia. What if it's her next? What if it's me? If you want us to be safe, this is the best way to do it. Otherwise, she'll just keep walking the streets. And Excultus will just keep coming after me."

Mycroft's eyes faded.

"You're - very good at presenting this as if it's plausible," he said, weakly.

Greg gripped his hands together a little tighter. "It is plausible," he said.

Mycroft sighed. He pushed his hands up over his face, breathing for a moment into his palms. Without looking at Greg, he intoned,

"I reserve the right to wrench this entire operation from its cables at the very first sign of trouble."

Greg's stomach twisted. "Fine," he said. "I want you to. You're the one with all the sense. If you see any reason to stop this, at any time, then for the love of God, please stop it. I don't want this to go wrong. I don't want anyone to be in danger. I don't want us to blunder into some stupid mistake."
He wet his lips, heart pounding so fast he wondered if Mycroft could hear it.

"And I know you're scared," he said. "But this won't end until we end it. And I think we can end it."

Mycroft breathed in, slowly.

He laid his hands flat upon the desk, spreading his fingers wide.

"We have two courses of action," he muttered, at last. "One is… this plan. This - risk."

Greg held his breath. "What's the other?"

Mycroft gazed down at his hands. He looked rather close to despair. "The other," he said, "is that I haul you onto the first plane to New Zealand, buy new identities on the black market, lock you in a house somewhere miles from all civilisation, and we live out our days as if none of this had ever happened."

Greg's heart thumped.

Part of him almost wanted it. To run - to leave London to look after itself, and go live somewhere quiet and warm, and breed Huntaways, and tell himself the world and all its problems were someone else's gig.

"M'not going," he mumbled, at last. "We said 'where angels fear to tread', Mycroft. I meant it. I couldn't wake up every morning and look you in the eye, if we did that. I - wouldn't be the man you think I am."

Mycroft processed this in silence.

"Then it seems we have no choice," he said.

Greg felt no joy - no rush of victory, nor surge of happiness. His heart didn't beat any more softly. It was about to all begin, he thought. Nothing could stop it now.

He just hoped it was the right choice.

"There's - still some things to work out," he said. "Specifics. If you're happy with the basic idea, I mean… we can do that tonight… make this thing watertight. Make it as safe as we can."

Mycroft did not respond for some time, gazing at the glossy black surface of the desk.

"Why do I have the feeling," he said at last, "that this is the moment when everything changed?"

Greg hesitated, his heart falling quiet.

He reached across the desk, and laid his hand on top of Mycroft's.

"Not... everything," he said.

Mycroft closed his eyes. "God help us."

"We don't need God," Greg said. "If he ever planned on intervening, he'd have shown his face long before now. We have each other and a good plan. That's all we need."
Mycroft exhaled softly - a humourless huff. He swallowed back a mouthful of words.

"You… will be leaving my home in the morning, then," he said.

Greg gripped his hand gently. "If they find out I'm still there," he said, "they'll know it's all a trick. Even just a hint I'm still around, and it'll all be for nothing - and we'll be out of ideas. I - don't want to leave, but..."

Mycroft said nothing, silent. He gazed at their joined hands without speaking.

Greg took a try at humour.

"Besides, you - didn't want me there forever, did you?" he said. "Leaving toast crumbs on every surface. Singing in the shower. Winding up your fish..."

Mycroft's throat muscles worked.

"No," he managed, tightly. "No, I - ... of course not."

Greg almost wished he hadn't asked - but it was too late to unhear that now. He steadied himself.

"You've - been really kind to have me for a while, Mycroft. I mean it."

Mycroft's brow contracted. He withdrew his hand from Greg's, sitting up slightly, as a sudden thought crossed his face.

"What's wrong?" Greg said.

"If you are leaving in the morning," Mycroft said, "but you intend to remain in London, I - assume you have alternative accommodation arranged. Please tell me you don't plan to return to your flat."

Greg's mouth curved. "M'not thick, gorgeous... of course not. If Excultus have any sense, they'll be watching it."

He glanced down at the floor, bracing himself. This was going to come to light at some point, he thought. It might as well come out now.

"I've got a mate who's agreed to put me up," he said. "Nobody'll know I'm there. I'll make sure I'm not seen - only leave when I have to, and always under cover. It's miles from here, miles from Scotland Yard, and miles from Pembury Road. Excultus won't have any reason to be watching it. Safest place in the world," he said - adding, more calmly than he felt, "cept your flat."

Discordant emotions webbed Mycroft's face - fear, doubt - chief among them, concern.

"What am I about to hear?" he said.

Greg hesitated, biting his lip. "An apology...?"

The damning conclusion settled into place behind Mycroft's eyes. He gave a sigh - one long, exhausted breath of a sigh - and rubbed his fingertips beneath his glasses.

"There would be more humane ways to kill me, Greg," he muttered.

"Would Excultus use those ways?" Greg said. "Because if not..."

"Why not a hotel?"
"Unless their rooms come with an all-inclusive and fully-trained Armed Response commander, who owns more guns than teaspoons, Luke's place will be safer."

Mycroft's eyes narrowed. "He's going to be 'all-inclusive', is he?"

"No," said Greg, utterly calm. "He's going to be leaving me the fuck alone in his spare room. And if your only objection to this plan is that I'll have to stay with Luke a few days, that's fine - but I'll need some time to be okay with you again. Because I won't be."

Mycroft's expression worked. Greg watched him dividing up his emotions - discounting some, focusing on others, weighing up the rest and coming to a decision.

"Very well," he muttered. "As you wish, Greg. As you - see fit."

"You… sure?"

"I respect your professional integrity," Mycroft said, quietly. "This plan is more feasible than waiting for what will happen regardless. And I have no better suggestions."

He lowered his eyes to the desk.

"Proceed," he said. "However you will. I'll present this to Amelia, if you wish. She'll trust my endorsement."

A quiet ache eased its way through Greg's chest. Something about Mycroft's expression wasn't quite right. He'd hoped for a yes; he hadn't expected that look of numb resignation, though. Something was wrong.

He had a feeling he knew what it might be.

"D'you… want to go home a bit early tonight?" he said, gently. "Spend some time together, before…?"

Mycroft pushed back his chair.

"'Home'," he said, without comment.

He stood up, taking a datapad from the desk. He wasn't looking at Greg.

"No," he said. "I do not want to abandon work early in the least. You've just told me that we're using a member of the public as vampiric bait. Her life will be in the hands of a hormone-riddled werewolf who collects wires, and a man who can't connect intimately with other human beings unless he's drunk."

He crossed to the office door, his face emotionless.

"I have rather a lot of safeguards to prepare."

Without a backwards glance, he opened the door.

"I'm going to speak to Amelia," he said. "Tell Elwood that if Olivia comes to harm, I will not forgive either of you as long as I live."

"Gorgeous," Greg said, his heart tensing. "Gorgeous, don't - "

"Do not call me that," Mycroft murmured, "when we are at work." He shut the door with a snap as
TJ waited until his shift was nearly over to ask. Yardley had been vaguely alright lately, which made it seem more likely that he'd get permission - but you could never tell. The man could turn. It felt safe to approach him closer to dawn than closer to midnight.

The fact of the matter was that Yardley had never thought much of TJ. Called him cocky and too familiar - which TJ absolutely was, and made no secret of it - but it was more than that. Their long-standing Head of Comms viewed TJ's three-monthly week off the way he treated any of the girls who tried calling in sick with period cramps - as if sensible human men like Yardley had learned to suppress such biological nonsense, and so should everyone else.

Even when TJ had started taking it as holiday, rather than sick leave, Yardley was still funny about it.

He was probably going to be funny about it today.

But the only other option was to tell Yardley he wanted the week off to do lucrative freelance work for another department - and wouldn't that just go down like a brick? TJ figured he'd just have to ask, and hope for the best.

As half seven in the morning came around, TJ screwed up his courage, had a fistful of mint imperials for the sugar boost, and unclipped his headset from round his ears.

"Are you okay?" Maisie asked, glancing up as he got to his feet.

"Just going to grovel in front of Yardley," he said. "I'm - going to ask to take next week off. See if he'll let me bump my holiday forward… kick this sore throat into touch."

Maisie bit her lip. She said nothing, watching him over her screen.

As he put his hand on the door, her voice cut quietly to his heart.

"TJ?"

TJ looked back at her, cautious.

She hesitated; her face glowed in the light of the screen.

"You know that I… know, don't you?" she said.

A slow prickle crossed the back of TJ's neck.

"Oh," he said.

He didn't know if he had the nerve to be surprised. She was smart enough, he thought, and it was only so long before she'd put two and two together and come to the answer of four.

"Well… erm - it's - not a big deal," he said. "I just… y'know. Get through a lot of shaving cream."

The joke didn't do much to her expression.
"It doesn't bother me," she said, gently. "Working together. I just… wanted to tell you."

TJ fell quiet as he let this sink in.

He wasn't sure why it didn't make him feel better.

He felt like it should - like he should be grateful for her kindness. It was nice of her to say. There were people in the past who'd absolutely been bothered by it, and not troubled themselves to be discreet in asking Yardley for an immediate transfer. There were people who'd made nervous, overly casual enquiries about whether he had it 'all under control' - just checking how likely he was to rip the place apart at any moment.

Because that was what they thought life was like, being him.

They didn't realise it was less about terrifying people with his predatory majesty once every three months, and more about crying over romantic comedies, eating chocolate and worrying he was fat. Science had tried to turn his family into legendary beasts. It had made them into hormone-riddled mistakes.

He looked into Maisie's eyes, feeling his heart squeeze as he tried to come up with a response.

She was being kind, he thought. Trying to make him feel less of a freak.

Somehow, it just reminded him that he was one.

"Thanks," he managed. "Thanks, that's - …"

He waited for something else to appear in his head - some quip, some comment, some way to make her feel like it was all fine, and she could go ahead and forget about it.

Nothing came.

TJ gave up, closed his mouth, and let himself out of the pod.

He made his way in silence between the ranks of other doors, his sneakers squeaking slightly on the floor. He took a familiar flight of stairs down into the lower levels of Comms, and approached the frosted glass door whose sight he always somewhat dreaded.

Yardley took a moment to answer his knock.

"Yes?" came the eventual call.

TJ reminded himself that this was for Lestrade, and let himself in.

Yardley was sitting at his desk. He was surrounded by hard-light screens showing unfinished rotas for the week ahead, which gave TJ a small flash of hope. This might just be the right time to ask.

"Alright, boss?" he said, friendly. "Just... wanted a quick word, if I can."

Yardley glanced up through his current screen, raising an eyebrow. "Ah… Timothy. Yes." He returned to his work. "Sit down."

TJ shuffled a little nervously into the room, and took a seat before Yardley's desk. He always felt very scruffy in this office. Yardley was clean-shaven, clean-cut, and never came to the Christmas party. He gave the eternal impression that you were just teetering on the verge of disappointing him.
"What did you want 'a word' about?" Yardley enquired, continuing to sort through screens.

TJ watched the pattern of his boss's fingers for a moment, and realised Yardley wasn't actually reading the screens. He kept returning to the same sheet, scrolling, then moving across to another one. He was just making it look like he was.

TJ curled his toes tightly inside his sneakers.

"It's about my holiday," he said. "It's - coming up. Week after this one. I... wondered if I could tug it forwards a bit, and take it now."

Yardley stopped pretending to work. He looked at TJ through the hard-light screen, regarding him with severity.

"Why?" he asked.

Dickhead. You know why. Don't make me say it.

TJ comforted himself with a reminder that, for at least a few days of it, he'd actually be fixing thermal scanners to trees around Hackney Downs - and that Lestrade was going to pay him well for it.

"I'm - reaching that time, Officer Yardley. The usual. Honestly, it… could kinda happen any day now, so… probably best if I…" He trailed out.

Officer Yardley waited.

TJ coughed a little, feeling his insides squirm. "If that's alright," he added.

Yardley's forehead tightened.

He closed the screen he was working on, folded his hands upon his desk, and said,

"I don't think you quite realise the disruption you cause to this department, you know. I find myself rather astounded."

TJ gripped his knees quietly.

"I'm… ten per cent quicker than the next best responder," he said, with care. "So I'm… kinda speeding things up too. And my pod loses less than half a day a year to tech outage. The others all average six. So, I mean..."

"That might seem impressive to you," Yardley said. "But if we can't rely on you, Timothy - if you're this inconsistent, this often - how can you possibly expect everyone else to work around that?"

Holy fuck...

Inconsistent?

"Officer Yardley, with the - the greatest of respect," TJ stammered, "I know my stuff. I'm good at my job. I'm quick when it matters, and it always matters. I - I mean - my error rate is less than - "

"And when you're so constantly absent," Yardley sneered, "your error rate doesn't change a thing." He stared at TJ, as if he shouldn't even have to explain this - as if he couldn't understand how TJ's brain even worked. "It's irrelevant whether you do a good job or a bad one, Timothy, if you're not
even here half the time."

TJ reeled.

"Half the time?" he said. If this was anyone else, he'd have thought it was a wind-up - but Yardley didn't do wind-ups. He was as straight-laced as they came. "I - … boss, it's one week. Once every three months. A-And I cover it with annual leave. So really, it's no more than anyone else takes. I'm just trying to match mine to - "

"And now you're going to talk back, are you?"

"I'm not - talking back. I just want to explain the - "

"Then stop it," Yardley snapped. "You're a grown adult, Tierney. Not a petulant child. I'm not going to argue with you. I'm telling you that your attitude is unacceptable - and, as a matter of fact, it's been unacceptable for months now."

TJ gripped the bottom of his chair tightly.

He didn't know what he was about to hear.

"Sir..." he managed, weak.

Officer Yardley swished something around his mouth for a moment, glancing at his rotas.

He then sat forwards, and fixed TJ with a glare.

His eyes gleamed, strangely.

"Tierney," he said, his voice low. "I believe it's time that you and I have a long overdue conversation..."

At the same time, across London, Greg Lestrade shrugged a heavy holdall onto his shoulder.

"Right," he said. "I - think that's it… m'good to go."

Mycroft said nothing, standing in the kitchen doorway in his dressing gown. Silence was etched into every line of his face. He'd aged several years overnight, and the auburn of his hair had dulled like autumn leaves. His gaze was quiet and hollow.

Greg hesitated, looking at Mycroft with a sinking stomach.

"Are you... okay?" he asked.

Mycroft folded his arms, slowly. He looked down.

"No," he muttered. "No, of course I am not okay."

Greg's heart stilled.

"I'm - not really leaving, love," he said. "Only going to drive a couple hours out of London - Northampton. Nobody'll follow me that far. By noon, I'll be on the coach headed back."
Mycroft's tongue pressed into his cheek.

"You are leaving," he said.

Greg understood. He tightened his hand around the strap of his holdall. "You've - been kind, Mycroft. Putting me up. I'm grateful - I mean it."

Mycroft's gaze shuttered. He took a moment to speak, swallowing around something painful.

"I'd almost forgotten," he managed. "I - should not have done. My own fault."

"Forgotten…?" said Greg.

"That that is all it was." Mycroft looked down at his arms again, unhappy. "A - temporary accommodation. Not…"

Greg tried a smile. It felt weak, even to himself.

"Kinda made myself comfy here, didn't I? Sorry. I - didn't mean to put you out."

Mycroft's eyes closed. He said nothing.

Greg's heart heaved with distress. "Fish'll look after you," he said. "I've - had a word with them all. Told them they need to keep you company, after I'm gone."

Mycroft gave a sudden shudder. He covered his face.

Greg let the holdall slide from his shoulder, and dropped it by the door. As he approached, he saw Mycroft's expression crack with distress behind his hands.

"Go, Greg," Mycroft bit out. "Go, before I -"

Without a word, Greg pushed him back against the fridge. He covered Mycroft's protest with his mouth, raking his hands with longing around Mycroft's jaw and into his hair - kissing him with every bit of the desperation he felt. He kissed him until he felt tears roll between them.

Greg then pushed their foreheads together, shut his eyes tightly, and breathed,

"I love you."

Mycroft shook against him in utter silence, his hands fist in Greg's hair.

"I mean it," Greg managed. "I mean every word of it. And no, I'm not gonna be living here anymore. No, I won't be here at night. But you're going to see me everyday, and I'm not going to stop thinking about you for a single second. Alright? If you want to lie and talk all night through wrist-sets, I will. And this'll all be over soon. It's going to work. I promise, gorgeous. I promise."

Mycroft was not breathing. His tears shone as they tracked in silence down his face.

"Then things'll be normal again," Greg whispered. "We'll date. Like normal people. Do our normal jobs, and have normal weekends." He hesitated. "Maybe - spend quite a few of them together…"

Mycroft grappled with something - fighting to keep it in his mouth. His expression contorted.

"Get out of here," he gasped, suddenly. He shuddered as he struggled for breath. "Leave, Greg. Before I change my wretched mind about all of this."
Greg's throat contracted.

He let Mycroft go, watching his lover shake in distress. Mycroft covered his face with his hands again.

"It's going to work," Greg promised. "It's - going to be alright."

As he retrieved his holdall from by the door, he said,

"I'm... going through The Range tonight at six. Luke's said he'll give you clearance, if you wanna come see me."

"Don't you dare say that name to me," Mycroft breathed.

Greg braced himself. "Gorgeous, you... agreed to this last night. You said it made sense."

"Which is why I hate it with every fragment of my soul," Mycroft snapped. He took a sharp breath. "So help me, if he lays a hand on you -"

"I'll tell him to remove it," Greg said, annoyed, "because I'm not interested. I'm interested in the bloody idiot I'm in love with. And just to clarify, it's the one I'm looking at right now."

Mycroft looked away, his shoulders heaving. He said nothing.

Greg took a second to settle himself.

"Luke's the Armed Response commander," he said. "He'll keep me safe. And his flat's the other side of London. This is the best option. Believe me, Mycroft. I've thought about enough of them."

Mycroft's face flashed with anger and distress. He looked as if there was nothing he wanted to hear less in this world than Luke Elwood being termed a 'best option'.

"Leave," he said. He swallowed around the words. "You need to leave. Now."

Greg supposed he'd known this wouldn't be easy. There was no way he could make it feel alright for either of them.

"Olivia's... gonna be at Scotland Yard soon," he said. "Try and head out to Pembury Road today if you can, start showing your faces... and if you can, maybe ring TJ this afternoon when he's awake - see if he's ready to talk equipment? If you need me, I'm... just a message away."

Mycroft said nothing, staring fixedly at a meaningless patch of carpet.

"I - know it hurts," Greg tried.

"You don't," Mycroft said. Of this fact, he was entirely certain. "You can't begin to know the - instincts I have towards you. The fears. What they are all screaming at me in this moment."

Greg's chest tightened.

"Ask your instincts how they'd feel if Exculitus got hold of me," he said. "If the next time you saw that sigil, it was painted on the wall above my body." His jaw set. "And I know it hurts, Mycroft. I'm the one who keeps saying 'I love you'. I'm the one planning our retirement in New Zealand. I'm the one who's been - pushing for - ... Jesus." Greg shut his eyes. "Stop, Greg," he muttered. "Take a fucking hint."
He hefted his holdall back onto his shoulder.

"I'm going," he said. He reached for the door handle. "I'll see you tonight, if you're coming. Say hi to Olivia for me. Thanks for letting me stay."

As he opened the door, Mycroft's hand reached out and snapped it shut.

He wrapped his arms around Greg from behind; he buried his face into Greg's hair.

For several seconds Greg stayed still, closing his eyes against the hurried thudding of his heart. Mycroft's palm splayed across his chest - feeling his pulse, just there beneath his skin - cool fingers resting, listening.

"When this is over..."

Mycroft's voice was barely audible. Greg heard him swallow thickly.

"When this is over, I... I wish to talk."

"What about?" Greg asked, feeling the air thicken.

Mycroft said absolutely nothing. He held Greg in silence, his arms tightening.

Greg quietly placed a hand atop the one resting on his heart.

Their fingers laced.

"We need you at your best," Greg said. His heart was pounding. "Talk to me now." He closed his eyes, hardly daring to hope. "Please. I'm - about to go. Give me a reason to stay."

Mycroft didn't respond for a very, very long time.

"I - can't," he whispered, at last. His voice cracked. "Not yet."

Greg quietly squeezed his hand - and moved it away.

"Then I need to leave," he said.

Mycroft said nothing, standing in silence just behind him. He let Greg go without a sound.

Numb, Greg reached for the door. "Bye, gorgeous." As he opened the door, no hand stretched out to stop him. "Bye, Anthea," he called. "Look after Dr. Holmes for me."

Her gentle tones came from all around. "Goodbye, Inspector Lestrade. I shall."

With nothing left to say, Greg stepped out into the hall.

He shut the door; its soft slam echoed throughout the building. He found himself alone in the hallway - alone, for what felt like the first time in months.

The silence prickled all around. It seemed huge and unfamiliar, even though he'd spent most of his life in its company. Only in the last few days had things been any different. Greg had lived an awful lot longer with solitude than he had with Mycroft.

He shut his eyes for a moment, trying to tell himself that - trying not to think.

Walking away from this door would put into motion a chain of events that would not be easy to
stop. They would lead to danger, he thought - which was, by its nature, like fire. No matter how carefully you controlled it, there was always that risk. That tiny chance.

For the first time, a flicker of doubt crossed his heart.

This is the right thing to do, he told himself at once. Mycroft had authorised the plan. That, surely, was all the reassurance anyone could ever need. It just felt unsettling because he was leaving - because this place felt so much like safety, and now he was going to live outside its walls. Everything in him wanted to go back inside, back to Mycroft - tell him to forget it all and book the flights to New Zealand, and they'd get out of here while they still had the chance.

He had the weirdest feeling that, if he walked away, he wouldn't come back.

He took a breath, suppressing it.

He was letting Excultus get into his mind. They weren't ghosts - they weren't supernatural. They were just men, men like Mycroft, and they could still fail and bleed and die. They could make mistakes. Their trade was in terror, and they were good at it. It was how they did the things they did - by making people think they were predators, superhuman. But it wasn't true.

Greg just had to push on ahead - even if it hurt. He couldn't let thoughts like that into his head.

Before he left, he took a moment to reach through the door with his mind - to the soul he knew still stood there on the other side, just as alone. Feet apart, separated by keycodes and a couple inches of steel. It felt like a whole world now stood in the way.

Greg laid his fingertips quietly upon the panelled wood.

In another timeline, they were pair-bonded by now.

He barely even dared to think that word anymore.

Deeper than a romance; closer than a marriage. The concept of leaving Mycroft's side would be unthinkable, and he'd no sooner walk away in this moment than he would suddenly turn into starlight. The plan would work around them or not at all. They would be each other's, and it would be everything, and it would be without end. This would be Greg's home.

The thought of that didn't make him feel afraid.

Just ghostlike, and lonely to leave it.

In silence Greg slung the strap of the hold-all across his chest. Best get this over with, he thought. The sooner he left, the sooner it would all start feeling okay - the sooner this would all be done, to one end or another.

He turned his back, pushed his hands into the pockets of his coat, and walked away.
A short note from me, folks - I've not thanked you all nearly enough for your interest in Excultus. It now has the most comments of any of my fiction, and the highest number of subscribers. I can't tell you what that means to me.

Thank you, thank you. x

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The winter wind is loud and wild,  
Come close to me, my darling child;  
Forsake thy books, and mateless play;  
And, while the night is gathering grey,  
We'll talk its pensive hours away;—

- Emily Brontë  
'Faith and Despondency' (1846)

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As Mycroft entered the office with a fresh mug of tea, the clock on the incident board flickered to show 12.05 pm.

He regarded it in silence, eyes darkened, and laid the mug down.

At this very moment, a coach would be departing Northampton town centre bound for London.

Onboard -booked last minute, under a false name - was Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade. In an hour and a half, he'd be collected from Golders Green in a flashy blue sports car, driven to a bachelor pad in Lewisham and concealed where no vampire could ever lay their hands on him.

As Mycroft returned to his seat, feeling decidedly unwell, his new sergeant watched him over the rim of her tea. Her eyes reminded him of Greg's.

"Are you not having one?" Olivia asked.

It was a mark of Mycroft's mental state that it took him a moment to make the connection.

It seemed he would have to start watering DCI Stratmann's yucca plant again.

"Perhaps in a while," he said. "I've - been concerned about my caffeine levels. On something of a January detox."

Olivia sipped her tea, watching him strangely. "Oh right," she said.
Mycroft calmly picked up a datapad, masking his quiet concern. It seemed caution would need to be exercised from hereon. Olivia Reid was an inordinately perceptive person. She hadn't Greg's trusting nature, nor his faith in people's goodness by default. The past had made her wary; it made her careful. She would be quicker to spot those ripples in the water that were caused by a predator, and would not dismiss them out of hand.

It was something Mycroft had rather wanted to ask about.

"I'm not sure how much depth DI Lestrade went into," he said, scanning the datapad with a small frown. "Regarding his plan. I only hope he didn't undersell the risks to you."

Olivia glanced down. She rubbed the handle of her mug with a thumb.

"I know they'll be after me," she said. "I know I'm the bait. Greg showed me the map of the park… where the guns all be - and the - … your Tech guy said he'd get me kitted out."

She looked into his eyes, sipping her tea.

"Greg said he'd wanted to be the bait himself - but you wouldn't have okayed it."

The unspoken 'why?' was all too clear.

Mycroft laid aside the datapad, making a mental note never to underestimate his new sergeant's levels of insight.

"DI Lestrade has a certain impulsiveness," he said, calmly. "It would have led to complications. We needed someone content to follow my instructions to the letter, and not start inventing new plans midway through." He paused, ignoring the quiet hardening of his heart. "I also understand that DI Lestrade has assigned his particular skills elsewhere."

"Yeah… he mentioned. He - said he'd be keeping a close watch on me."

"I have utter faith that he shall." Mycroft hesitated, watching her drink. He needed to know. "Might I ask you something?"

"Sure," she said. Her expression was calm, but her eyes were guarded at once. It was like seeing shutters slam. "Go ahead."

"You strike me as a cautious person," he said. "I was surprised to hear you were happy with his proposal."

Olivia smiled slightly, looking down into her tea. "I - guess I could say the same to you."

Mycroft found himself surprised. He forced his eyebrows not to lift. "Are you - not happy with the plan?" he checked.

"No, I'm happy with it." She paused, glancing at the incident board. He watched her eyes follow Greg's haphazard diagrams of thought. "I trust Greg," she said. "I trust you. You both - seem like you care, and like you know what you're doing. I know there's risk involved." She lifted her tea. "Just seems like there'll be more risk if we don't," she muttered, and drank.

There it was, Mycroft thought - the truth of it. She'd seen it straightaway.

He let it settle him a little.

"So you and I… just have to be seen together?" she clarified. "And Excultus will latch onto me
"Instead?"

"If we make it believable," Mycroft said, "yes." He held her gaze with caution. "DI Lestrade suggested a number of false inquiries we can pretend to be conducting together around Pembury Road. I'm afraid we might have to feign a certain familiarity with each other. I hope that isn't too objectionable."

She smiled a strange smile at him - a quirk of her mouth.

"Sorry," she said. "That's... new for me."

Mycroft couldn't entirely suppress a smile.

It had been a horrendous day so far - but he could feel Olivia's presence starting to calm him. He sensed no need to perform cheerfulness for her benefit. She didn't seem to need or expect that from the people around her. It was of enormous comfort on a day like today.

He could no sooner perform cheerfulness in this moment than grow wings and fly away.

"Forgive me," he said. "You're a wholly admirable young woman, but I'm afraid I've never quite come around to the charms of 'female'... I also happen to be almost twice your age. I hope you don't mind if it's theatre on my part."

_I am also unbearably, desperately, irredeemably in love with the man whose name should still be on that door - and he is gone._

Olivia smiled into her tea.

"It's fine," she said. Relief relaxed her gaze. "Should... probably warn you that I don't really know how to be a police officer. I'll stand behind you and write things down in a little notebook, if you like."

It would already make her more useful than most sergeants.

"That's perfectly fine," Mycroft said. "No-one can expect anything more of you. Ultimately, so long as the two of us are witnessed together, and you are never out of my sight, this operation will be a success."

"Okay," she said, eyes bright. "I can probably manage that."

Mycroft gave her a brief smile as he reached for his wrist-set, checking it.

_No New Messages._

He didn't know what he'd expected.

"I have Technical preparing one of these for you," he said, remembering. "They're producing you identification as well. Commander Vickery has authorised whatever steps we need to take to make the deception watertight. I'll introduce you to her shortly. She's the only other person in the building who knows you are not genuinely a police officer - it's best that you know her face."

Olivia's mouth opened slightly.

"What about - the guys with the guns?" she asked.

"Armed Response believe that you are a newly-promoted sergeant."
"But - your Technical guy knows, doesn't he?"

Mycroft lifted an eyebrow. "Which one?"

He was surprised to spot her flush slightly. "He's - a werewolf," she said.

"Oh... Tierney. I'm unsure if he knows... though, he'd be unlikely to treat you any differently regardless. He's not overly moved by authority." Mycroft paused, his brow creasing. "You're - aware of his condition, are you?"

Olivia frowned, too.

"It's… not really a condition, is it?" she said. "He's not ill. There's nothing wrong with him. It's just who he is."

Mycroft wondered, in silence, if he would make it through this day with any kind of emotional stability to his name.

He doubted it.

"In essence," he said, hauling the conversation back to safer territory, "you are to all intents and purposes now a police officer. The truth is a closely-guarded secret. I encourage you to inhabit the role as fully as you can."

"What if people ask me questions I can't answer?"

"Cultivate the impression that you are deeply unlikeable as a person," Mycroft advised, with a tired smile. "I find it keeps all manner of inconvenient things at bay."

Olivia smiled against the rim of her mug.

"Alright." She finished her tea, then carefully placed the mug down. "Where do we start?"

Mycroft squeaked slowly from the chair.

"Come with me," he said. She brushed down her skirt and rose to follow him. "This is lesson one of your training... how to intimate an indolent Technical team into hurrying up with a wrist-set. We're likely to be stopped rather often on the way - do bear with me. I've so far been asked fourteen times whether DI Lestrade has truly left London... let's see if we can make it twenty times before lunch."

"Where is he today?" she asked - clarifying, "Greg, I mean."

"DI Lestrade is in the process of relocating to safer accommodation." Mycroft's mouth spoke before he could forbid it. "My - property was judged unsuitable."

Her eyebrows lifted slightly. "You - offered?"

"He'll be staying with the Armed Response commander until the operation is complete," Mycroft said, and locked the office door behind them. A thought occurred; he frowned. "Do - be on your guard when you meet Commander Elwood."

"Why?"
"He has what might be termed a 'roving eye'."

"Oh." Olivia understood all too well. "Even if I'm deeply unlikeable as a person?"

Mycroft smiled a little. "Consider this permission to be as foul to him as you think professionally appropriate, sergeant."

She looked away, quietly pleased.

"Fine," she said. "M'looking forward to it."

"Mm," Mycroft murmured. "As am I."

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NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Hey… I'm back in london. Luke's just picked me up. You ok…? How is Livs getting on? x

Olivia's induction proceeding well. She's picking up the wrist-set with speed and I have introduced her to most of the division.
I suspect she and I will work very productively together. Inquiries tomorrow but I will drive her home later via Pembury Road.
Sent 13:41

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Good… are you ok? x

Yes. Should I not be?
Sent 13:47

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Sorry. Just wondered. Glad you're ok. Will you be at the range tonight? x

What time?
Sent 13:53

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Starting at 6... listen... I'm sorry if you're upset that I left this morning. I'm upset too x

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Lukes flat is crap. Nothing like yours.
No fish or victorian literature anywhere x

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
There's no you either x

Seen 14:27 ✓✓

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Hey... can we talk tonight? after the range? x

You are aware that I'm fully occupied today, aren't you?
I don't have time for personal messages. Olivia needs my proper attention.
And I doubt I will be at The Range. I have a great deal to do.
Sent 15:41

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Please don't be like this... please x

I am busy enacting YOUR PLAN. How else do you expect to find me if not horrendously busy?
Sent 15:48

The Range is a glorified school sports day. No more.
Do you truly need me to come and cheer you on like a child?
Sent 15:49

Surely you can cope.
Sent 15:49
Five o'clock. Tired, and in silence, they set out for Hackney.

He'd take Olivia to her doorstep tonight. They had several days of work before Armed Response and TJ Tierney were ready for her to cross Hackney Downs alone, and Mycroft didn't entrust her to a taxi.

Halfway there, he realised there was something he'd meant to do.

He hadn't been in full command of himself today. He was forgetting things, distracted.

"Would it be unbearable of me to make a brief call?" he asked. She was busy beside him on her mobile phone. "I need to speak to our other freelance contractor."

"Oh, to - TJ?"

"TJ Tierney. The werewolf. Yes."

"No," Olivia mumbled. "Go ahead."

They looped around Old Street tube station, pouring with the traffic like tumbling sparks in the darkness. Mycroft addressed his wrist-set.

"Outgoing call... Timothy Tierney."

Unusually for TJ, it was some time before he answered.

"H-Hi, Dr. Holmes... you alright?"

Mycroft's heart stilled. The poor boy was gruffer than ever; he sounded dreadful.

He almost sounded as if he'd been weeping.

"Forgive me, Mr. Tierney - did I wake you?"

TJ made the sound of one painfully checking for the time, who had not previously been aware of it.
"Oh - no, no, I'm… I'm fine, Dr. H. I'm awake. You - okay? Everything alright?"

Mycroft had the keenest suspicion that something was terribly wrong.

"Have I caught you at a bad time?" he asked, painfully aware of Olivia in the passenger seat beside him. She was trying to look as if she couldn't hear a thing.

"No, no," TJ said. His voice tightened. "M'listening. G-Go on."

"I - wished to check if you needed any assistance in organising equipment - if I can help you with preparations at all."

"Oh - n-no, it's fine. Got a few things on their way already. Erm. Picking more up in the morning. The… set-up team'll be at the park at ten, Greg said - to get started. Is that right?"

"I believe so." Mycroft had never been more convinced that someone was deeply, desperately unhappy.

"Mr. Tierney, are you… quite well?" He hesitated, as a possibility flashed through his head. "Have you - started your transformation?"

If he had, Mycroft thought, the plan would need to be postponed. The boy would be incapable of operating technology with any precision or grace at all.

And Greg could come home.

"No," TJ said, with a shake to his voice. "No, m'still here. Just… had a rough day, that's all."

"I see." Mycroft's thoughts drifted towards another possibility, as he peeled off onto Hackney Road. "Has - Officer Yardley approved your annual leave change? If not, we can alter plans... it - would not be the end of the world."

TJ drew in a tight breath.

"No, he - he approved it," he mumbled. "S'fine, Dr. H. I'm off work now. Honestly, don't - fret about me." He paused; humour came through, brave and heartbreaking to hear. "Don't worry, your majesty. M'be fine."

Mycroft didn't believe it - but he'd been told clearly now. To push was intrusive. "If you're quite certain."

"Is - Greg there with you?" TJ asked. His pitch rose slightly.

"No," said Mycroft, suppressing the clenching of his heart. "No, he's - elsewhere."

"R-Right… will you - tell him when he gets home to you tonight? I, erm - just need people to go steady round me - I'm - bit fragile. Just. If everyone can be really kind." The nervous laughter twisted around Mycroft's heart. "H-Hanging on by a bit of a thread."

"Tierney, if you need to postpone - "

"Can you call me TJ, please? I - h-hate that name."

Mycroft gripped the wheel quietly.

"TJ," he said. He filled his voice with all the reassurance he could muster. "If you're close to
transformation... we'd rather you rested. DI Lestrade would agree with me wholeheartedly on this. Your well-being comes first."

"S-Seriously, I'm fine. Just go easy with me and it - it'll be fine. All of it." TJ's voice increased in pitch again as he swallowed. "I - gotta go, Dr. H. Tell Greg for me. Bye."

The line cut out.

There was a long, awful silence.

"Is that - normal?" Olivia asked, at last.

Mycroft bit the side of his tongue. There was only one answer he could give.

"No. That was - …" He gathered his thoughts into some sort of sense, unsettled. "His hormones make him - prone to mood swings, perhaps, but not quite on that scale. I suspect he's suffered some additional shock. I'm unsure what." He paused, reaching for the gear-stick. They were approaching Queensbridge Road. "I assume he'd tell us, if it were important..."

Olivia shifted in her seat, quietly. She fiddled with the tassel charm on her bag.

"When he said… 'tell Greg when he gets home to you tonight'..." she murmured.

Mycroft turned off, glad of the few moments with the wheel to think. She was going to be an excellent sergeant - and she wasn't even a sergeant at all.

"DI Lestrade," he said at last, "has slept on my couch since he was attacked in his flat. He will be doing so no longer."

Olivia processed this. "He's going to stay with - Commander Keeps-His-Hands-To-Himself-Thanks?"

Mycroft almost smiled. "He is."

"Why?" she asked.

Mycroft took another moment to bring his thoughts together. In a way, he didn't know how to begin.

"Greg was targeted because of his connection to me," he said eventually. "We now need to suggest that link is severed. We staged a visible show of him leaving my property this morning. To the outside world, he's returned to Manchester. It's critical we support that impression."

Olivia thought about this for a while.

"Why the connection to you?" she asked. "Why's that important?"

"I - previously inconvenienced Excultus on a rather massive scale." Mycroft hesitated, pulling up at traffic lights. "I decimated their organisation almost into oblivion. It seems they are still aggrieved with me for it."

Olivia thought for a while longer, quietly piecing things together. Mycroft could almost hear her coming to conclusions.

"Can I ask something else?" she said, as they set off from the lights once more.
Mycroft quietly gripped the wheel.

"I - fear you'd better not, Miss Reid." He turned them off onto Dalston Lane. "Suffice to say, you have a remarkably logical mind."

Mycroft brought the car to a stop at the gate.

Olivia hovered by the open passenger side door for a few moments, apparently nervous.

"Are you - alright?" she asked.

Mycroft glanced up from his wrist-set, jolted out of his thoughts. No New Messages. "Mm - quite fine. Thank you for your assistance today. Do wear comfortable shoes tomorrow, won't you? Inquiries involve a great deal of leg work."

"I will." She paused a second longer, as the wind blew her coat around her knees. "Thank you, inspector."

Mycroft's heart heaved. "It's - quite alright, Miss Reid. Your help is very appreciated. For heaven's sake, man. Attend to your priorities. Are the children well?"

"Yes, they're fine... I'm - just thinking about making dinner for them." She tried a smile. "Do you want to come in? No garlic. I promise."

Mycroft looked into her face.

She looked back at him, kind - nothing more.

He found a smile for her, wishing it didn't feel quite so tired upon his face.

"Thank you," he said. "But I need to see Inspector Lestrade. I have a number of updates to give him... and he should probably hear about TJ."

It was a lie.

He wasn't going to The Range. He was going to return to his flat, work on the investigation until his eyes could no longer discern the shape of letters on a screen, then lie in bed until dawn and miss Greg.

Olivia processed this, her expression unreadable.

"No problem," she said. "I'll... see you tomorrow, then." She smiled a little. "Is it... 'guvnor'? Like on TV?"

Mycroft's heart contracted quietly.

"'Mycroft' is - fine," he said. "In front of others, a sergeant might more commonly opt for 'sir'... but it isn't necessary."

"Okay." Her eyes shone in the darkness. "Good night, sir. Drive safe."
She shut the door. Mycroft watched her every step along the path, and as she struggled with the key for some time. Only as the door of the house closed firmly behind her did he start the engine, and drive away.

As he drove back along Pembury Road, lights from the passing world flashed from the darkness across his face.

He found himself thinking too many things.

He thought about how unbearable his flat was about to seem; he thought about how long the night was going to be. Sleep had been problematic enough lately, even with Greg’s warmth safe and close beside him. It would be a miracle if he managed to rest at all. The entire place was going to remind him of Greg, and he knew it. The thought of it made him almost nauseous with distress. His cupboards were still full of uneaten food.

It was all going to rot there. It would all just slowly expire.

How had he lived?

Nine years, he thought. How could it ever have felt alright?

How could it have changed so completely in so few days?

He felt so weak that he wanted to grip onto the wheel and sob. He'd not drunk since last night - even that reminded him of Greg now. The flasks quietly prepared for him; the cups brought; no flicker of disgust in those gentle eyes. All day, Olivia's need for support and guidance had somehow made him feel strong.

Now he was alone, and he would be alone until he picked her up again at nine.

There would be no arms to hold him in the night.

Once, that had been a painless fact. He'd expected it to remain a fact all his life. Loneliness had felt to Mycroft like safety - and even after nine years, safety was enough of a cherished treasure for it to comfort him. He'd clung to it, and let it keep him. He'd felt like it was more than he deserved. He would not be loved, but he would be safe. Many had far less.

Then one night he'd met a man in a train station called Greg. They'd shared a taxi home.

And now he could not cope.

At the next set of traffic lights Mycroft opened the car window with a shaking hand.

The black January air pierced its way through him with every deep, distressing breath. The coldness felt enough like calm to staunch his tears before they could form. He held tightly onto the wheel, staring ahead at the road before him, as he breathed.

It was coming up to six o'clock.

Thermal signatures, Anthea? One, Dr. Holmes. Shall I turn on the lights?

The traffic set off.

Numb, powerless to intercede, he watched his hands turn the wheel as they made the decision for him - not left, to Belgravia and home; but right, back onto Dalston Lane.
Misery rippled quietly through Mycroft's veins. He let it happen. He couldn't fight it - he was too weak. He was too far gone now. Every crumb of his dignity wanted him to drive home and suffer in silence in the dark, where no-one could see him and therefore it would be alright. He'd suffered where no-one could see him for a decade. One more night shouldn't hurt. One more night shouldn't cripple him like this.

But it seemed his dignity no longer held dominion.

His pathetic heart now governed his choices instead.

He was going to The Range.
The Range

I am an unfortunate and deserted creature, I look around and I have no relation or friend upon earth. These amiable people to whom I go have never seen me and know little of me.

- Mary Shelley
'Frankenstein' (1818)

At two minutes past six, with a heavy heart, Mycroft approached the first set of steel security doors barring the way to the lowest levels of Scotland Yard.

His wrist-set slid and locked into the panel with a clunk. It held him in place. A flash of red light warned him to stay still, before a slender network of green beamed out and skittered quickly across his face. The light studied and scanned his features at length, searching out his eyes and mapping his irises. The urge to blink was overwhelming.

"Authorisation?" the door intoned.

Mycroft faced it with far more authority than he felt.


The voice considered his request for a while. "Proceed," it said. With a hiss and a clunk, the enormous steel doors unlocked for him to pass, shaking open like a secret rock entrance into caves.

As he proceeded through the strip-lit darkness, deeper and deeper into the earth, Mycroft was watched every step of the way by cameras. Their visible glint in the gloom was unnerving. He set about convincing himself that he was here for professional reasons, and kept his black gloves on. They made him feel safer somehow - stronger than he was.

At the entrance to Armed Response, another set of steel doors awaited him - with another security check to pass. Mycroft fitted his wrist-set, took the scan without complaint and gave his details.

"Please wait," the door droned.

A minute later, it was heaved open from within.

A grinning officer appeared in the gap, dressed in the standard black tank-top and combat trousers of ARS. Her dark hair was dragged back into a ponytail, and the impressive gallery of tattoos across her arms and her chest were shining with sweat. Three separate firearms hung from the combat belt around her hips.

"Alright, Queen of Hearts?" she said. "Here selling scout cookies, are you?"

Mycroft wondered if he'd always been this woefully inadequate in every way, or if it was a recent development. He suspected some combination of both.
"I - understand there's a training session taking place here tonight," he said, doing his best to hold his nerve. "Commander Elwood has been told to expect me."

The officer gave him an easy grin. "No worries," she said. "Lestrade said you might swing by. I'll take you along to The Range - get you up top with the commander. 'Fraid we don't sell popcorn. Should be a good show, though."

She offered him a hand.


Mycroft graciously took her hand. It was quite the firmest handshake he'd ever received - a boisterous slap of her palm against his, and a grip that could have snapped his bones like dry pasta if it wanted. He imagined this young lady could maim someone without putting down her kebab.

"It's gonna be my team you're using," she said, and hauled the door back for him to pass. "Got them all in there now. Luke's putting them through heavy drill."

"Will you - also be with us?"

Her brimming, dog-like laugh echoed off the reinforced steel all around. "Are you serious?" she said. "Of course I will be. They had me at 'vampires'. C'mon - stick close, and don't get lost. All the corridors down here look the same to above-grounders."

Mycroft hadn't been within Armed Response in years - quite possibly, he thought, in at least thirteen. It was another realm. Scotland Yard's strip-lit concrete underworld bristled with gun racks, the sound of slamming doors and the clank of steel-toed combat boots on corrugated aluminium floors. Night and day had no power here. It could be noon in summer; it could be midnight in winter. There was no way of knowing. Armed Response ruled over their territory like a wolf pack, and from what Mycroft could tell, it was a siblinghood that one joined for life.

As Sergeant Medlock led him through a locker room, the walls rang with the raucous laughter of the day team getting changed after their shift. Clouds of deodorant swirled through the air.

"Ladies!" Medlock barked, beckoning Mycroft over to the stairwell. "Let's go easy on the perfume, eh? Some of us need to fucking breathe down here." She swiped her wrist-set through the door control; it flashed to admit her.

Heaving laughter broke out; calls of "Sorry, skip!" - a few rebellious final sprays. Kit held open the door for Mycroft, nodding him through.

"Heard you saved Lestrade's skin from a vampire," she said, as she led him up the spiralling steel staircase beyond. "Revolver, wasn't it?"

"Ah... yes. Good fortune rather than any skill, I assure you."

Her snort echoed off the stairs. "Pull the other one," she said. "I saw the ISOC scan - we all did. Fucking impressive. Why are you not getting out there? Should have you down in The Range with his majesty."

Mycroft despaired at the very thought.

"I… never quite had the stage presence for leather," he told her. "I'm certain your team are capable already, Sergeant Medlock."
If they pick up their times, they will be… slack sacks of turkey. The lot of them, this side of Christmas. Too much figgy pudding. Too much time off," she sighed. "Every fucking January. At least your King's gonna stand a fighting chance of keeping up with them."

Mycroft found himself suddenly glad of the harsh white strip-lights. They at least blanched the colour from his face.

Sergeant Medlock scanned them through the double doors at the top. "Nearly there..."

The area beyond was Armed Response Command. Computer banks and hard-light screens illuminated the darkness like undersea coral, shining bright blue in the gloom. Digital maps of London sprawled and flickered across the concrete walls. Specialist technicians were working on designs for the laser weapons that only Armed Response officers were permitted to carry, while a dedicated Comms pod monitored real-time feeds of the London traffic.

Kit led the way through the spotlit darkness with Mycroft at her heels, up a final flight of metal stairs and at last to a doorway marked:

THE RANGE - COMMAND STATION
AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY

She swiped her wrist-set through the scanner.

"There y'go," she said, as it bleeped. She shoved the door open for Mycroft. "Boss!" she roared. "Visitor for you!"

She turned, clapped Mycroft on the shoulder - enough to nearly pitch him off his feet - and jogged off down the stairs. The sound of her boots clanked away behind her.

The room beyond was almost entirely in darkness. The only light came from the vast right-hand wall, which had been replaced in its entirety with bullet-proof glass. It looked down upon Armed Response's enormous training range - a cavernous space excavated beneath the streets of the city. Hard-light scanners and projectors webbed every inch of the towering concrete walls, glittering like man-made geological crust. The space was of sufficient size to contain an entire projected street.

From his vantage point high above, their commander could see every detail.

Endless video-feeds and screens flagged up every detail he might miss, along with vital statistics for each officer - reaction times, response logs and accuracy rates. The room was a hive of technology, glittering with the blinks and flashes of many tiny lights and buttons and screens.

In the centre of it all, surrounded by computer banks, Luke Elwood was monitoring the drill taking place below.

"Pick your feet up, Hancock!" he barked into his headset. "Nobody's going to come and carry you!"

Mycroft fortified himself with a breath, quietly closing the door. He crossed the command room in silence, hands secure in the pockets of his coat.

"You can get moving too, Altenberg! If you get any slower you'll be lying down, man! Shift it!"

Luke reached across to the control panel, distracted, and snapped his microphone briefly to mute.
"Sorry," he said, turning his head. "Just in the middle of - 

As he laid eyes on Mycroft, the blood drained at once from his face.

"Hi," he said, startled.

Mycroft did his best not to enjoy this moment. It was a small speckle of happiness in an otherwise bleak and unsettling day. He supposed it would keep him warm tonight, if nothing else.

He gave Luke an expression of professional politeness, reminding himself this was not his territory. This was not his domain.

"Forgive the interruption," he said. "I - wondered if I might observe." He decided the gift of a small smile might be appropriate. "I'm hoping to reassure myself that we are embarking on merely madness... and not absolute madness."


"Sure," he managed, after a second. "No, you're - welcome. Greg said he didn't think you'd come."

He hesitated, slightly wide-eyed, then reached across to a pile of spare headsets.

"Here," he said, taking one. He held it out. "It'll - pair with your wrist-set. We're on channel seven."

Mycroft took the headset carefully.

"Thank you," he said.

There was a moment of uncomfortable quiet between them, as Mycroft unfolded the microphone. Down in The Range, Sergeant Medlock had re-appeared - she was distributing laser rifles to the helmeted officers with the casual cheerfulness one might hand out crisps at a party.

"I'm glad," Luke said, suddenly.

Mycroft looked up, unspeaking.

"For Greg," Luke added. He flushed. "I mean it. He deserves - well... and you guys seem to be - … I just wanted you to know. And I'm - not any kind of - …"

Mycroft looked into Elwood's handsome face, feeling his heart quietly wring itself behind his ribs. He so dearly longed to hate the man.

Tonight, Greg would be with Elwood - in his home - and that thought made Mycroft's teeth prickle and itch, ready to sharpen. Some part of him would always want to throttle Elwood. Not just for Greg - for everything he was: happy, human, and liked without exception.

But as he looked into Elwood's anxious eyes, he found he couldn't sustain the loathing.

It wasn't the man's fault he was handsome and happy.

And it wasn't Elwood's fault that Mycroft knew himself to be neither.

He prepared his peace offering carefully in his head, wanting this to go right.

"Commander Elwood, your - support of Greg is much appreciated." He fixed the headset quietly
around the back of his neck. "Your support in this operation, too. You are… gracious. Thank you."

"I'm just honest," said Luke. He watched Mycroft, nervously. "Got a lot of respect for Greg. Got a lot of respect for the man who can make him happy."

Mycroft wasn't certain he deserved such acclaim.

"Thank you, commander," he managed, hating the weakness in his own voice. "And for your discretion."

Luke took the hint. "Not a problem," he said. He glanced back at his computer bank, as the officers below began their target practice. Something quiet crossed his gaze. "Life's complicated," he said. "Happiness comes when it comes."

He reached for the microphone dial.

"Don't risk telling it to come back later," he said, and twisted the dial back to full. "Ngai. Laurie, Clark - those reloads were a disgrace. My great aunt can reload a 516 faster than that and she's dead. Let's pick it up."

Mycroft moved quietly to the glass wall, wondering.

He stationed himself where he could see both the officers below and the digital leaderboard of their statistics - currently in a state of rapid change, as every single shot altered accuracy rates and reaction times. Surnames shuffled and switched at speed. Housewright, Kszczot and Phillips seemed to be vying for the top rank; the rest surged just beneath them, snapping at their heels.

Mycroft kept his eye on one name in particular. It leapt, dipped and flatlined along with all the others - but seemed to be advancing, slowly, steadily, with every fired shot.

It was impossible to pick any one officer out among the others. The uniform was purposefully standardised - combat leathers, a visored helmet and not an inch of visible skin. Mycroft found himself watching for familiar movements, or a familiar stance. The blur of moving targets, laser shots and light flashes fired as purposeful distraction made it impossible to follow.

He contented himself with watching the session as a whole - and noted, with a discreet check of the leaderboard, that they had a very reassuring group accuracy rate.

"Commander Elwood," he said, after several minutes. "Might I ask what is measured by 'LS rate'?"

"Lethal strike," said Luke, and reached across the bank to adjust a set of controls. The speed of the moving targets increased. "It's how often they're striking dead centre."

"And - the 'escape count'?"

"As a group," Luke said, "we need them hitting everything out there. Escape count measures targets that are present for a set time without being struck by anyone. With these guys, it's only five seconds." Luke pulled a face, and adjusted a dial. "Let's call it three. Vampires are quick, right?"

Mycroft noted that the current escape count was zero.

It was quite a comfort.

After a few more minutes, Luke reached up to the controls on his headset. "Private channel, Medlock." He rocked back on one heel as it connected, folding his arms. "What d'you reckon?" he
asked her, chewing his lower lip. "Warmed up and ready to go?"

At his second-in-command's response, a grin cracked over his face.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "Still… keep them on their toes. Let's get them singing solo."

Mycroft watched discreetly from the corner of his eye as Luke laughed.

"I'm not that cruel..." he crooned. "Let him watch some of the others first. When he does though, Kit - tell the rest of them to keep heckling to a minimum, will you? Don't want them drowning out my heckling."

He reached across to a control panel at his right, flashing quickly through pre-set training modes.

"Right," he murmured. "Show time..."

The Range below plunged into utter darkness.

Mycroft felt a shiver cross the back of his neck.

"Open channels..." Luke's face shone in the glow of his hard-light screen, swiping quickly through settings and pre-programmed options. "Okay, all units: solo drill. Keep the footwork tight and shoot to stun. Pope, you're going first. Fire some actual shots, won't you, Pope? Your trigger rate's lower than my standards. Dracula's not gonna lie down out of pity like your prom date."

Mycroft swallowed his smile, twisting it into a dignified frown.

"All clear?" Luke checked, adjusting a final few settings. He glanced up over the monitor bank. "Ah... Dr. H? Channel seven, if you want the full experience..."

Mycroft realised his headset was not yet switched on. He'd been too busy watching.

"Thank you," he said, working back the sleeve of his coat for his wrist-set. It flashed quietly as it paired with the new device, admitting him to the comms channel. His ears were filled at once with the laughing voices of the Armed Response squad.

Over their chatter came a digital announcement, made by a sleek female voice.

"Now active on channel. Holmes. Mycroft. 182-00-109-H."

There was a split second's pause.

"Did that say - ?"

"Yeeeah... I think it did."

"Yup. I heard it."

"Oi, rookie. D'you catch that?"

"Yeah, thanks," came a familiar voice over the channel, whose very sound made Mycroft's heart clench to half its size. "I heard, dickhead. M'not deaf."

"Come to watch you, huh?"

"Piss off, Zubi. Concentrate on finding the trigger of your rifle, mate. You're nearly there."
Laughter and wolfish howls broke out over the channel.

"Hello, police?" someone cried. "I'd like to report a murder."

There was more laughter. Mycroft realised he was smirking, and pushed the expression with resolve off his face.

"Anyone got some aloe vera I can have for this burn?"

"You'll need more than aloe vera, mate, when I'm done with you..."

"Ladies," barked Sergeant Medlock's voice. They silenced at once to her authority. "Y'all can gossip at your flower arranging class later. Shut your flap-holes. Pope!"

A voice crackled over the line. "Ready, ma'am."

"Gonna make me proud, Pope?"

"Gonna try, ma'am."

"Right. We're all good down here, commander."

"Thanks, Kit." At the commander's touch, Luke's bank of screens flashed into darkness. They reloaded, scrambled and laid out a new leaderboard. THE RANGE. SIMULATION COMMENCE?

"Set the bar for us, Pope," Luke said, and hit the button.

With a blinding flash of blue, every hard-light projector fired at once into life. Mycroft felt his pupils shrink in the sudden glare. Webs of light scattered and spread in all directions. By the time his eyes had adjusted to the blaze, an entire London street had appeared in translucent hard-light in the training space below him - traffic, pedestrians, shops and street-lights, as active and alive as any part of the city above them, all cast in gleaming blue light.

Visible only for his solidity and depth of colour, the officer below began an immediate sweep for hostiles.

By the time the first appeared, he was ready.

Mycroft watched, silently enthralled, as the drill proceeded. The Range seemed to be quite heavily randomised, testing the broadest range of skills in the most lifelike conditions that could be simulated. Distant targets, moving targets and false targets all appeared without particular pattern, testing speed, accuracy and endurance with increasing difficulty. Mycroft kept one eye on the leaderboard, noting the presence of a ten minute countdown - and beside it, a vibrant orange 'Training Level' stat. It seemed to ratchet up in response to the officer's performance.

With two minutes left on the clock, the Training Level began to jump in wild spikes. Targets multiplied, sped up and grew smaller; distractions intensified in the form of cars, civilians and falling damage from nearby buildings. The officer took up a fallen roadworks sign and used it as a shield against incoming hard-light projectiles. At just over one minute to go, the Training Level hit 8.3.

There was then a flash, a sudden drop in the lights, and a stream of profanity erupted over the Comms channel.

"Ohhh, fuck the fuck off, sir! He didn't even hit me!"
"Really?" Elwood jeered, as applause and catcalls broke out. "Cause my stats say you're dead, Pope. You're a dead 8.3. Adjusting for sixty-two seconds left, that's a 7.3. You've dropped 0.2 since December and your accuracy's down by six percent. Now get yourself back on the bench, and I expect you sobbing into your pillow tonight. I want photographic proof by two AM or you're fucking fired. Wijesena, you're up. Let's go. Don't get comfy, Grace. You're next."

After five more officers had completed their trial, Mycroft's headset emitted a low, quiet tone in his ear.

He frowned, wondering if everyone else had heard that.

"You alright?" Luke asked at the control desk, switching his headset briefly to mute.

Mycroft covered the microphone carefully with his hand. "A single low tone?"

Luke visibly repressed a smile. "Private comms request," he said. "Dial on the side - flick it upwards to accept. Flick back down when you're done."

Mycroft kept a neutral expression, even as his heart gave an ungainly thump. He reached for the dial by his ear, and somewhat uneasily twisted it upwards. There was a faint click.

"Private channel," said the digital female voice. "Now secure."

An audible breath was drawn.

"Hey," said Greg.

Mycroft looked down at the hard-light street below, his every nerve shrinking. He didn't truly see a flicker of it.

"Hello," he said, heart heaving.

"You - okay?" said Greg. "I… I thought you weren't going to come."

Mycroft fought the urge to swallow. "I managed to clear some space in my schedule. It seemed - wise, if I observed the squad. Their capabilities."


"Mm. Just observing." Mycroft glanced numbly at the leaderboard, watching the current timer slowly fall. He knew the answer would mean little, but he asked regardless. "Where are you?"

"Just in the back… smoking." Greg audibly shivered. "Bit nervous. Been a while."

Mycroft's every vein contracted. "Are you alone?"


Mycroft was not entirely convinced. At least Greg was currently in possession of a high-powered laser rifle.

"Hey," Greg said, in a sudden rush, and Mycroft's pulse leapt. "Don't be weird with me. I can't handle that right now. Y'know? P-Please." He hissed around a cigarette, audibly shaking. "I'd rather jack all this in if you're going to be weird with me. All this. We'll just go home and wait for them to kill us. I mean it."
Mycroft felt pale coils of distress twist upwards into his throat.

"Emma Marsden," he said, as his blood ran cold. "Sam Buckley. Alexia, Hannah and Charlotte Marsden. Jessica Harris. Olivia Reid."

"I-I know," Greg bit out. "I know, I know. I fucking know. I know it'll work, but just - don't be weird with me. Please." He swallowed. "I can't cope with that. I'm not kidding anymore. Please."

Mycroft couldn't speak. He gazed down at the scene below, lost, feeling distress prickle over every inch of his skin.

"What is this to you?" Greg pleaded, suddenly. "What - do you even want from me? You freak out when I offer to - … to stick around for good - but then you freak out when I leave. What is it, Mycroft? What the fuck'm I doing wrong this time? How have I fucked it up?"

Mycroft's throat barely opened for him to speak.

"We are not doing this over Armed Response comms," he managed, stiff. Elwood was occupied for now. At any moment, he could not be. "W-We are not doing this now."

"Fine," Greg said. "I'll - go, then. 'Bye."

"Wait - "

The word ripped itself from Mycroft's throat before he could stop it - and in the quiet that followed, broken by the sounds of laser fire from below, he felt his soul shrink and crack under the feeling.

Resignation closed his eyes. He breathed it in, faced at last with the truth - all its pain; all its gleaming, jagged clarity.

He couldn't live without Greg.

He couldn't live without the man whose breath came fearful and tight in his ear - no words, just breath.

"Wait," Mycroft whispered again, burning alive with that word. "Please. Wait."

He faced the glass wall, fighting to keep his voice low, his posture calm.

"Do not go," he breathed. "Do - not go. Don't you dare go."

Greg said nothing. The line heaved with his silence.

Mycroft realised he was waiting.

Mycroft's hands curled into fists in his pockets. He gripped at the leather of his gloves, shut his eyes tightly, and heard the words break in desperate quiet from his own mouth.

"There was - … before."

Before.

He had left it in 'before'. All of it.

"Years ago," he whispered. "I - … a-and to lose that is - one thing - but - to f-feel you should - never have had it at all... God forgive me. God forgive me..."
"Mycroft, what - what are you - "

"Do not talk," Mycroft gasped. Greg shrank at once into silence. "Don't speak. I - cannot bear it if you speak."

For a long time there was nothing - just the sounds of the training below, and Elwood's commands to his team, and the hum of the hard-light from all around.

Mycroft forced himself to focus on his breathing.

Quietly, slowly.

In, and then out.

"Can't you understand that I need to be certain?" he whispered at last. "Can't you - can't you understand that...? You would be mine. Mine without end. I do not want that if it is not real."

His throat squeezed around the words, trying to stop them. He forced them to come.

"I don't want to spend my life looking into your eyes, thinking that if you were free - that if you had the choice - ... thinking that you are only mine because I injected you with something. How can you not understand that?"

"M-Myke..." Greg was in tears. It shook his voice into shards. "Myke, you - you don't have to - "

Viciousness ripped through Mycroft's heart.

"You are lucky," he seethed over Greg, hissing him into silence once more. He felt his teeth bear. "You can't - possibly comprehend how - lucky - to have encountered me, Greg. Not someone else. Do you know how lonely our lives are? Do you have any notion? Any idea how swiftly someone else would have taken up your offer? The - strength it has taken me not to - …"

Elwood. Elwood.

Bloody Elwood.

Mycroft forced himself to calm, swallowing, gripping the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb. He held it hard enough to hurt, until the pain had levelled his voice and his breathing had found some pattern that didn't make his shoulders shudder.

One thought rang over all the rest.

"I love you," he whispered. He let the words drench him in truth - desperate, ice-cold truth. It hurt. It hurt like nothing ever had. "I want it to be you, Greg. All of it. I am in love with you. I will be in love with you until no part of me remains in this universe any longer to be in love with you. I didn't want you to leave. I wanted nothing less in this whole miserable world because God help me, I am yours. But I - I can't bear to make you mine until I know that you are mine. Truly, freely mine."

He bit down into his lip, suddenly desperate. He wanted to hear Greg speak - to hear Greg reassure him, or break him into nothing - to put him out of his pain one way or another.

"Why is - is that so hard for you to understand?" he begged. "Why can you not see why I...?"

There was no reply.

"Please," he said, fighting to stay quiet and still. "Please, Greg. Say something."
Mycroft forced himself to listen; he realised he couldn't hear breathing through the channel.

He glanced swiftly around at Luke, who was speaking into his headset - busy with the monitor bank.

Mycroft cautiously switched to the open channel.

" - smoking in my bloody armory," came Luke's voice in disconcerting duality, both live in the room and over comms. "But we'll let it go this once, Lestrade - alright? I'm not even gonna dock you points for having to send Kit to find you."

"Sorry, boss," came Greg's voice, weary. "First day..."

Mycroft looked in alarm through the glass wall.

A new officer stood ready in the simulation below, visor lowered and with his laser rifle ready across his chest.
"Do you know, Poole," he said, looking up, "that you and I are about to place ourselves in a position of some peril?"

- Robert Louis Stevenson

'The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' (1886)

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Greg had never been so glad of full combat leathers. It covered up the fact he was shaking.

*Of all the fucking times.*

He hadn't been ready for this anyway - and he certainly wasn't ready now. It had been a shit day, he was about to make an arse of himself, and Mycroft was in pieces somewhere. He'd probably already left through a side door and driven halfway home.

But it was too late for Greg to go after him now.

"You ready then, special guest star?" Luke's voice asked from inside his helmet, amused. "Remember which way round the gun goes?"

In response, Greg raised a hand to the glass window high above, and extended one leather-clad middle finger.

There was a chorus of laughter over the chat. The rest of the squad were watching eagerly from the lower viewing room - he could almost see their faces squashed up against the glass. Alex Housewright had produced a fucking bag of jelly sweets to hand around. It looked like Kit Medlock was taking bets on how long Greg lasted; twenty pound notes were changing hands with enthusiasm.

"You know I'm not going easy on you?" Luke checked over comms. "I need you on a 5.0 or above, or you're gonna be a liability. Let's call it a 6.0."


Howls of laughter echoed over the chat. The squad were all high-fiving the window and each other.

"On that note..." said Luke, and the lights plunged. The simulation began to load.

Greg took hold of his rifle with an inward rush of despair. *Fuck me up, why did I think this would be a good idea?*

As the street began to render around him, a voice spoke clear and calm in his ear.
"Best of luck to you, Lestrade."

Greg's heart clenched, and ceased to beat. He primed the rifle against his chest with a whine of the fusion core.

"Thanks, Holmes," he muttered.

There were titters over the comms.

"Level One," sounded the digital voice inside his helmet. "Begin."

Greg braced.

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Mycroft watched, barely breathing, as Greg obliterated the first few targets. They flashed into being and popped at once like soap bubbles, scattered away into fragments of broken light.


"Why?" Greg twisted a-hundred-and-eighty-degrees, zapping another target out of the air. "They don't return fire until level four."

Luke opened a hard-light control panel and slashed his fingers across the settings.

"Level Four," announced the digital voice. "Begin."

"Arsehole!" Greg gasped, turned on his heel and dodged immediately for cover. Blue sparks of hostile fire rattled after him. Cheers went up over comms as he ran.

Mycroft quietly formed his hands into fists inside his coat pockets, heart pounding.

He'd never wanted someone to succeed quite so much in his life.

From the cover of a hard-light sandwich delivery van, Greg set about returning fire.

"Fuck, yes!" he hissed, as he shattered his third hostile in five seconds. He was good, Mycroft realised. His chest echoed with the shocked jump of his heart. He was very good. "Get dead, tossers!"

Luke cranked up his microphone volume.

"Less of the fucking profanity, Lestrade!" he snapped. "My comms aren't a sex chat line! And get the fuck moving, will you? You're not there to deliver sandwiches - "

"What's the point - " Greg shouted, and recharged the rifle with a grunt, " - of including the fucking sandwich van - "

He dodged out of cover, dropped another two hostiles and darted back in.

" - if I'm not even allowed - "

A further hostile lurched from the alley beside him. Greg smashed it into light shards before it even stopped to aim. Mycroft's heart ignited.
"- to hide behind the sandwich van?" Greg shouted. Cheers rang across the channel.

Luke's jaw set. He dragged open the programme settings again, flying through them with quick adjustments.

"Level Six," came the declaration. "Begin."

"Piss off, Luke!"

"Now get moving!" Luke barked. "You're Armed Response, not Armed Sit Around!"

Greg hauled himself wearily from behind the van, dodging incoming fire as he headed between patches of cover. Mycroft found himself quietly biting the knuckle of his glove; he couldn't remember lifting it to his mouth.

As the seconds began collecting themselves into minutes, Greg climbed his way up the leaderboard. Soon he was creeping into the top half. Mycroft didn't dare watch it too closely - he couldn't bring himself to hope.

By the time Greg hit Level Eight, he was panting and swearing under his breath with every shot.

Mycroft was trying not to find the sounds distressingly familiar.

"That's seven minutes!" came Kit Medlock's delighted voice. "Altenberg? You owe me twenty quid."

"Screw you, ma'am..."

"Do I get any of that, Kit?" Greg asked. A simulated explosion nearby brought masonry and shards of gloss raining down. "Shit, shit...!"

As he sprinted for cover, sudden movement from a shop doorway fired his reflexes. With a single shot he obliterated an unlucky hard-light civilian into smithereens. Armed Response cheered and roared with laughter as the lady and her shopping basket vanished.

"Bollocks," Greg hissed, skidding into an alley. He was slowing, but still on his feet - and still shooting. Mycroft couldn't take his eyes away. "Sorry, whoever the fuck you were..."

"Nice shot, King of Hearts!" came a heckle.

"Yeah, Lestrade! Fuck the innocent!"

"Shoot the bad guys, rookie! Not the pedestrians!"

Their commander's voice cut through the rabble. "You lot know he's putting half of you to shame, don't you?"

"Is that with or without the casual murder, commander?"

"Both," said Luke, as Greg was flushed swearing from his new vantage spot by another explosion. Mycroft hadn't drawn breath in seven minutes. "Maybe I should get the rest of your girlfriends in to watch, too..."

Laughter brayed across the comms line.

Down in The Range, Greg visibly missed a step. He skidded and stumbled behind new cover.
Mycroft addressed himself to the microphone, resting his fingertips upon it. "If you want them all to fire a single shot, Commander Elwood... then spend the rest of the session weeping..."

Howls of delight ripped up the channel.

Mycroft glanced coolly around at the control desk; Luke grinned at him through the array of hard-light screens, his eyes sparkling.

"I think that's the Queen of Hearts straight to the top of the leaderboard, is it, commander?" came Sergeant Medlock's voice, to further raucous laughter.

"I think it is..." said Luke.

Another simulated explosion rocked The Range below.

"Jesus Christ..." Greg gasped over comms. He recharged his rifle, dodged out of cover and swung round to counter fire from a nearby rooftop, backing off the pavement. "Luke - listen - how about we just call it quits now?"

"You gonna ask Excultus just to call it quits, are you?" Luke jeered.

"Let's just hit the pub," Greg said. "Before I do anything to - "

A hard-light car was speeding along the road towards him.

"Level Nine," came the digital announcement. "Begin."

Mycroft realised what was going to happen half a second before it did.

"Greg!" he screamed.

The hard-light car accelerated.

Greg jerked around.

It struck him at full force. He reeled sideways with the impact, rifle thrown from his grip, and hit the concrete helmet-first. The car and the street vanished in a flash. The lights blazed on.

Silence crashed over comms.


"On it."

Mycroft wrenched off his headset. "Is he - "

"It's only hard-light," Luke said, hurrying out from the command desk. "It can't hurt him that bad. Vanishes on impact."

The inside of the helmet was not hard-light. As Luke raced towards a key-coded door, Mycroft ran after him.

"You're - not authorised to be down there, Dr. Holmes - "

Mycroft resisted the urge to seize Luke and hurl him through the glass window. "How kind of you to authorise me, commander," he bit out.
Luke did not argue. He swiped them through with his wrist-set and they took the stairs at speed.

When they got to ground level, Greg was surrounded by a concerned circle of Armed Response. Sergeant Medlock was kneeling with him, carefully easing him to sit up from the concrete floor.

Mycroft got there first.

"No broken bones," Kit said to him quickly, as he knelt. Greg was holding hard onto her arms, still in his helmet. "Not as bad as it looked. Bit woozy. Hit him full-on."

Mycroft reached for Greg's elbow, gripping it hard. He didn't dare speak. He couldn't remember what colleagues said to each other at these times. Only lovers.

Kit reached forward, cracking open the clasp on the back of Greg's helmet.

"Let's have this off you," she said. "See if you're half as pretty any more, huh? Breaking a fall with your fucking face… right, Lestrade. Brace. Might hurt."

Greg braced, digging his gloved fingers into Mycroft's arm. Mycroft gripped him back.

Kit eased the helmet free.

The scent hit Mycroft as a lethal strike - a sharp, metallic odour that seized him by the throat before his nose could even isolate it from the air.

He barely had time to prepare himself. It was not enough.

As Medlock coaxed the helmet gingerly across Greg's mouth and nose, it smeared red along with it. The gleam of blood wrenched Mycroft's stomach immediately into his mouth. The helmet came free, and Greg bent forwards and spat onto the ground as he shuddered. Blood spattered the concrete.

Mycroft let go of his arm at once.

Greg convulsed, spitting, and another officer knelt to thump him gently on the back.

Mycroft could only stare. His brain shrieked - a single, screaming, strangling cord of white panic.

He could not leave. He couldn't leave now. He couldn't just turn tail and flee.

But his first attempt at a calming breath filled his lungs and mouth with that smell - that beguiling, curling, sugar-sweet smell - and if it were any other blood, he could have stood a chance - but Greg...

Sergeant Medlock had started to examine him. Mycroft watched, white-pale and feeling his pupils swell to full size, as she tilted Greg's head back and winced at the state of his nose. There was so much blood. She wiped it gently aside with her thumb, trying to see. Panting with pain, grasping her other hand, Greg swallowed and opened his eyes.

Dazed with shock, they searched the gathered faces all around.

When his eyes found Mycroft, they fixed into place. Distress and need filled his soft brown gaze. Help, came the silent plea.

Mycroft's upper jaw suddenly ached. He could feel his teeth beginning to sharpen. He took his first step away, even as his fingers reached back for Greg's hand. He couldn't bear it. Their fingers brushed; his entire body shook.

"Don't - " Greg bit out, through a mouthful of blood. He spat it down his front, seizing Mycroft's hand. "Don't."

Kit Medlock thought he was talking to her. "S'alright, Greg. Just let me see. Lea - get me gauze from the kit, will you?"

Mycroft watched his hand grip Greg's as if he were seeing it through someone else's eyes. His every scrap of reason screamed at him to leave. The rest of him raged for him to get closer, feral in its fury. He wanted to haul Medlock aside. He wanted to shove her to the concrete, drag his tongue across Greg's face and kiss him.

He forced his eyes away across the training hall, staring white-faced at the door through which he and Elwood had come.

Greg clung onto his hand.

Mycroft found himself clinging back. His shoulders felt as hard and as high as the concrete walls.

"Right," he heard Sergeant Medlock mutter. Her words did not sound like words - just noise. "Don't think you've broken your nose. You'd be crying, for a start... let's get you tidied up. Teeth all present and correct, yeah?"

Even facing away, Mycroft could still see it. He shut his eyes tightly. He concentrated on the grip of Greg's hand, and the sound of that single plea. Don't. It wrenched at his soul. He forced himself not to breathe, and just to concentrate. If he couldn't smell it, he thought, it might not be there.

"You alright?" he heard Commander Elwood ask. He suspected it was addressed to him.

He didn't respond. He didn't care.

He wasn't about to open his mouth for anything in the world right now.

He listened until Sergeant Medlock seemed to have the worst of it cleaned up. Greg gripped onto his hand throughout, at one point whimpering with pain, and Mycroft fought the urge to weep as well as run and vomit.


Mycroft steadied, too.

At last, there came the quiet click of the first aid kit being shut.

"That's all I can do on the floor," she sighed. "Let's get him a seat, something for the shock… I'll take a closer look at that nose..."

Greg's hand finally loosened. His fingers slid through Mycroft's, as nearly every member of the squad volunteered to get him up off the ground.

When they were occupied with moving Greg, Mycroft took his chance.

He waited until he could be sure he wasn't being observed, then took the door that led back to the command room. Nobody seemed to notice him go. He climbed the stairs three at a time.
Questions would be asked - his behaviour after the injury. His sudden flight. Questions he couldn't answer. Panic hammered through his veins, vicious and pounding and blinding. He couldn't think about it now. He had to leave. By some miracle he found his way back through the metal labyrinth of Armed Response, through the exit doors and out into the shocking black cold of the night beyond Scotland Yard.

He got into the hire car, slammed the doors, and wept.

When he was too tired to weep any longer, he smoked.

He couldn't go anywhere like this. He was unfit to drive. He was barely fit to breathe.

It took four cigarettes for his fangs to recede. Savagely he forced down every thought that tried to well up - every longing that howled at him to be sated. He smoked until he wasn't shaking any longer, then kept smoking for the comfort. Nicotine curled beneath his skin as warm as arms around him. He clung to it, breathing, falling into tears once more.

As the instincts of the predator began to loosen their hold, the guilt and terror of the rational man arose.

He'd fled the scene. White as a ghost, shaking like he'd been struck by a hard-light car. He'd not even been able to look at Greg. They'd been gripping each other's hands. Dear sweet God. If Armed Response hadn't noticed, the whole lot of them deserved to lose their jobs.

"Fuck," Mycroft breathed to himself, lighting a final cigarette. His hands trembled almost too much to hold it. "Absolute and utter fuck."

And, he thought - and - all this hell had followed a whispered comms conversation in which he may or may not have made an offer of unending devotion, depending on how much Greg had actually heard.

Fuck.

This was going to break him apart.

Of that, there was no doubt.

He could already imagine four or five possible ways in which it might happen. Every single one became more likely everyday. He'd joked about planes to New Zealand. He now wondered how much the damn flights cost. It was starting to seem like the only outcome to this hell in which Mycroft would retain any sanity at all.

Closing his eyes, letting his head tip back against the seat, Mycroft hauled smoke so deeply through the cigarette that it cascaded in waves down his throat.

An awful, angry, broken-hearted thought clawed its way to the top of the writhing mass.

Perhaps he should have done.

Should have taken Greg while he had the chance.

That day they'd stolen - that precious, perfect day - the supermarket, the sofa, the shelter of normality. Greg astride his lap, gently speaking and offering. If he'd given in... laid Greg against his chest, and just - ... and he would now be strong - healthy - adored. A mate who cherished him. A mate who wouldn't leave him.
Did it matter what was real?

Did it matter at all? Greg would be happy. He wouldn't know any reason he shouldn't be. They'd be happy ever after, forever, unbreaking, and the darkness would no longer be so dark. He'd be able to watch Greg suffer a nosebleed without cracking into pieces. He'd be contented now, and not a shattered wreck.

From the very depths of his memory - from the shadows into which he never strayed - Mycroft saw a pair of green eyes gently open.

They flashed at him in fear.

His own closed at once.

"I won't go, Myke. I won't. Please."

Another station; another platform. A waiting train. The dead of night, and the green eyes that gleamed with desperation in the strip-lights. Frightened hands that clung onto his coat.

"I want to stay with you. Please. Please, no matter what."

He could have forced him.

He should have forced him.

"They won't, Myke. They wouldn't. They wouldn't dare. Please don't make me go."

Chemical, Mycroft thought.

Every plea, every protest. Chemical.

But it had sounded so much like love.

The tears had looked like love. The hands that had held onto him felt like love. The love was lab-grown, but he'd told himself the pain he was causing was as real and wild and cruel as any pain - and he'd told himself that he was kind, to spare that. He'd told himself that perhaps it didn't matter how it had begun. It only mattered what it became.

And so he'd seen it to the end. He'd found out what it became.

In the silence of the car, Mycroft dragged himself another soulful of smoke.

_Not again_, he thought.

Not the guilt.

He would rather die alone, as he deserved, than live out a happiness run through with guilt.

He calmed himself with it, rubbing the cigarette between his gloved fingertips.

Years ago, he'd let himself believe he was doing the right thing. He hadn't been. Not in any way. A decade had passed, and it was too late to change it all now. Those agonies were old. There was no way back into the shadows.

He'd done the right thing this time, even though it hurt.
It was just becoming harder and harder to sit and wait.

Something had to change.

What was it Greg had said? *You freak out when I offer to stay for good. You freak out when I leave.* And how many times had he said those other words? *I love you.* Lying injured on a concrete floor, it was Mycroft that he’d reached for. *Don’t.*

*Don’t.*

In a matter of days, they would be goading Excultus into striking. Heaven only knew where it would end.

Mycroft opened his eyes, gazing with resolve across the darkened car park. The cigarette glowed orange in the darkness between his fingertips.

"God on high," he whispered. The cigarette shook. "Deliver me."

And in the prospective absence of the Almighty, he decided to take steps of his own.

This could not continue. Mycroft extinguished the cigarette, that truth resounding through him. Something had to break.

It had to break now, or this whole thing would collapse - and they would all pay the price. Olivia, Elwood. Armed Response. Greg. All of them.

If it had to be Mycroft who broke, then so be it.
At eleven PM, Luke put his head around the door.

"You alright?" he asked. He was trying not to smile. "How's your face?"

Greg gave him a weary look from amidst the bruising. He was lying in bed with Luke's latest copy of *MCN Motorcycle News*, trying to ignore his lack of text messages. It had been a long and miserable evening, after a long and miserable day - and things weren't looking any better for the night.

"The face is fine, thanks," he said. "How's the floor of The Range? Have they concreted over the crack yet?"

Luke grinned, idling into the room.

"Not yet," he said. He leant against the wardrobe, pushing his hands into the pockets of his dressing gown. "All the years I've been running that simulation, and I've never once had anyone hit by a car. I'm surprised you didn't trip over somebody's dog… skid on an abandoned ice cream cone..."

"Very funny," Greg muttered. "Just remember I was on nine-point-something when it hit me. That's impressive. And you bloody know it is."


"Piss off. There won't be any cars on Hackney Downs."

"Yeah, thank God. Did you not have 'Stop, Look and Listen' at your school?"

"Ha ha ha. My sides are splitting. No, we didn't." Greg quietly check his wrist-set. *No New Messages.* "Been saving all these quips up, have you?"

"Ever since your face hit the ground," said Luke. "Thought it best to keep 'em to myself while you were bleeding all over the place..."

He sat down at the very end of the bed.

"You... heard anything?" he asked. "From him."

Greg's heart tensed slightly. He moved his magazine to the bedside cabinet, feigning disinterest. "Why?"
"Just wondered," said Luke. "He - seemed to take off pretty quick, that's all. One minute he was there, then…"

"He's got a lot to do," said Greg. He didn't know why he found himself defending Mycroft. Hours now, and nothing. Not even a text. It just felt like it wasn't Luke's business. "He knew Kit was sorting me out. Didn't need to stick around. S'fine."

"He - doesn't think it's my fault you got hurt, does he?"

Greg didn't know.

He didn't know anything that Mycroft thought.

"If he does," he said in the end, "he's wrong. Just an accident. Should have looked where I was walking… s'not your fault."

"It was - my simulation."

"So? My decision to step in with Armed Response." Greg reached up to touch his nose, gingerly. He couldn't tell if the swelling was going down or not. *Fuck today.* "Forget about it, Luke. You can all stop treating me like I'm made of glass... let me make some bloody decisions for once."


"Yeah, well." Greg returned the smile with reluctance. "M'sorry about yours. Mine'll heal. You're stuck like that."


"Does getting hit by a holographic car count as a fail?"

"Counts as being an idiot," shrugged Luke. "Luckily the rest of them are idiots, too. You were doing alright until that point. Just stay on the pavement, and you'll be fine."

"Right… thanks."

"S'okay." Luke patted his shin beneath the covers - just once - and then stood up. "Anything you need before I turn in? If a vampire comes for you in the night, scream."

Greg felt his mouth twist. "You'll be straight in here with a shotgun, will you?"

"Funny how you're joking," said Luke. "If I raided this flat, I'd have to arrest myself for firearms offences on the spot."

Greg almost hoped Excultus tried it. That would be a memory to cherish. "Good to know."

"Door's locked anyway," said Luke. "Don't touch it - I've set the alarm. And the security guy downstairs knows not to let any strangers into the building. You'll be safe for the night."

"Right." Feeling some gratitude was probably due at this point, Greg shifted beneath the covers. He nudged aside the unhappiness he'd carried around all day. "Thanks, Luke. For putting me up. And for… putting up with me."

"No worries." Luke paused in the doorway, hands back in his pockets. He smiled over his shoulder. "Night, dickhead. Thanks for a good laugh."
Greg smiled; his lower lip stung. "Any time."

Luke left, closing the door behind him.

Greg heard him walk away along the hall. There came the quiet creak and snap of another door, and the flat fell quiet.

Dropping his head back into the pillow, Greg gazed up at the ceiling. The silence hugged him gently.

*What a fucking day.*

He’d woken up in Mycroft's bed this morning. Awkward, quiet cuddles - no response from the gentle strokes of his hands. Kisses that Mycroft didn't seem to feel at any depth. He'd left, driven two miserable hours to Northampton, driven two miserable hours back on a coach, trained with Armed Response all afternoon, fucked things up royally with Mycroft, then gotten run over by a purely theoretical car.

Now he was in Luke's spare room - with a bust nose and lip, a laser rifle propped beside the bed, and no new messages. He'd taken more painkillers today than he had in a month. It still wasn't enough.

*What a total fucking mess...*  
Greg laced his hands behind his head, eyes wandering the fuzzy ring of dust around the lampshade. His thoughts began to drift in the quiet. There was only one place they wanted to drift.

To that safe Belgravia flat - with books, and tropical fish - and the man he loved.

*Can't you understand that I need to be certain?*

It was one of the last things Greg had heard. The sudden appearance of Kit in the armory had put an end to his combined cigarette break and emotional breakdown. He was pretty sure she'd clocked him crying. God only knew what she'd thought. It didn't look like she'd mentioned it to Luke, at least.

Greg made a mental note to try and thank her.

*I don't want to spend my life looking into your eyes, thinking that if you were free - that if you had the choice...*  
Greg was pretty sure he'd made his choice clear by now.

Apparently not.

*I do not want that, if it is not real.*  
And if it was real?

Greg wanted to go home.

He'd waited all his life to feel like this.

For all his difficulties, Mycroft was somehow still easy. He made Greg happy, and he made it all seem worth it. When they were together, and when Mycroft let him in, there was nothing in the world they couldn't handle. Greg had never met someone he could laugh with, sleep with, work
with, be with - constantly, all the time, always there. He'd never had that connection with someone. Being apart hurt like hell. He'd stopped twice on the way to Northampton, sat on the roadside close to tears and smoked, and twice he'd nearly turned back.

Only the thought of Emma's daughters had gotten him back in the car.

She'd never see them grow up. It didn't matter if Greg missed the emotionally-strangled arsehole he'd fallen in love with. Their mum was dead. She'd never hold them again, and she couldn't comfort them in their grief, and she'd died telling Greg her name. It was the last thing she'd ever done in this world.

And if he couldn't pull this plan off, someone else was going to die.

He knew it. It wasn't optional now. It was hunt or be hunted, and all they could do was prepare.

Right now, he'd give the world to hear Mycroft's voice - just to make it all easier. Just to help him be brave.

Even just to see it written down, Greg thought. The heat rose tiredly in his eyes. Some gentle words - some small handful of hope.

Some comfort, even... was that so much to ask? His entire face pulsed with pain and heat. He'd taken up a laser rifle alongside people fifteen years his junior, in the name of doing the right thing. He couldn't make that walk for Olivia - but he could keep her safe as she did it. He was trying his fucking hardest.

No New Messages.

Mycroft said he wanted certainty. Then he'd slipped out a side door at the first chance he got. Gone home to his old books and his fish - like this was easy. Like he could handle it all just fine.

Maybe he can, Greg thought in the silence. The awful fear prickled through him, cold and quiet.

Maybe there was nothing more to it. Mycroft could handle being apart; Greg couldn't.

Greg closed his eyes, biting into his cheek. Christ, he thought. Crying in Luke's spare room. Might as well end this day as badly as it started. God knew Mycroft had tried to tell him enough times to back off. Could he really still be surprised by it now? Somehow, yes. Somehow, this still hurt.

Staying busy would help. He'd throw himself into the mission - keep Olivia safe. He'd let the days go by, and use the space to get a hold of himself. He'd ring Mycroft for work, but otherwise let him be. Let him settle. Let him find whatever it was he needed - which right now looked like solitude, rather than Greg.

He shouldn't have let this get unprofessional. Jason, he thought, all over again. Lesson learned, and learned too late - lesson forgotten - same mistakes again. Another round of giving everything. Another person to whom he brought affection without condition, and all the care they'd ever need - unafraid, just wanting to be near them - and somehow here he was again.

Surely you could only beg someone so many times to let you love them.

Greg wondered if normal people had some in-built limit. He wondered what had broken his.

There came a buzz from the bedside cabinet, jolting him from the first flickers of sleep. He turned his head.
His wrist-set buzzed again, then settled into a rhythm.

Someone was calling him.

Hardly daring to believe it, Greg croaked, "Answer?"

The line connected.

There came a snap of breath, sharply drawn - and the noise of whirling high winds.

"... Lestrade?" Greg tried, staring at the wrist-set.

"Open the window," Mycroft panted. At the sound of his voice, Greg's stomach threw itself into his throat. There came a crack, a gasp and a scrabbling noise. "God almighty - ... open the window, Greg. Now."

Greg's every nerve shrank back into itself at once.

He glanced at the bedroom window.

"What... do you mean?" he said. "Why are you - 'open the...'?"

"Greg, I cannot overstate the seriousness of this request!" Mycroft barked in panic. "Open the bloody window now!"

Numb, Greg pushed back the bedcovers.

No.

No, there's... no way.

He moved across the room, his bare feet silent on the carpet. The block of flats opposite glittered and gleamed in the darkness. Greg approached the window, more than a little concerned, and brought his face up close to the cold pane of glass. He peered cautiously down the side of the building.

It was a sheer drop of eight floors, broken only by narrow PVC window-sills.

There was nothing there.

Then there came a bang on the glass just above his head, and Greg nearly leapt from his skin. He looked up in alarm.

It was the heel of a boot.

"Sweet fucking Christ..." he breathed.

"Greg!" barked the wrist-set on the bedside, as the foot lunged for purchase against the window-frame. "Unless you wish to witness - "

Greg scrabbled for the catch of the window. He unlocked it, shoved the thing open as wide as he could and backed away, bumping back against the wardrobe. Wind heaved into the room.

He watched, unable to believe his senses, as more and more of Mycroft Holmes lowered itself into view. His brain told him it couldn't be possible. Mycroft seemed to be gripping onto surfaces where there was simply nothing to grip. The strength required to support his own weight was beyond
comprehension - and yet here he was, twisting himself down through the open gap and sliding in a panting heap to the floor.

Greg staggered to the window. He slammed it, locked it, and hauled shut the curtains with a shink of metal rings.

Silence pounded around them.

"How - " He stared down at Mycroft on the floor, trying to comprehend the world that he now inhabited. "H-How - ..."

Mycroft swallowed, heaving.

"F-Fire escape," he breathed, and cut the call on his wrist-set. "Four flats along. Then between window-sills." His fingers dug into the carpet, reassuring himself with its solidity. "Knew you'd be - floor nine or ten - height of the building, roughly six flats per floor - north-facing bedrooms, avoid early morning light. All obvious."

"You can climb," Greg whispered, heart lurching. "You - you can - …"

Fear burned suddenly through his blood.

"You shouldn't have come," he said. He lowered his voice, glancing in panic towards the door. Luke Elwood was a lot of things, but he wasn't deaf. "If anyone saw you leave your flat - if they followed you, Mycroft… Excultus will know where I am. You shouldn't be here."

"I was not followed," Mycroft managed, thick-throated. He pushed a hand back through his hair. "How sure are you?"

"Entirely. Tube network - over an hour. Multiple lines. I was not tailed."

Greg could barely believe this was happening. "What are you doing here?" he bit out, as he started to shake.

Mycroft drew a steadying breath. He raised himself up from the floor, with great effort, and smoothed down his ruffled clothing.

As he looked into Greg's eyes, he seemed both deeply calm and on the brink of collapse.

"I have - come to talk," he said.

Greg licked his lips, wishing his heart would beat in some recognisable rhythm. "What about?" he asked.

Mycroft said nothing, his expression unreadable.

As he crossed the room, Greg backed against the wall. He hit it with a gentle bump.

Mycroft's hands cupped his face; they were ice cold. His piercing grey eyes searched Greg's injuries with agonised severity, aching as they roamed across each one, taking in the bruising and cut lip in despair.

Greg stared back as he was examined, hardly breathing. He didn't know what to think.

He realised he was holding onto the sleeve of Mycroft's coat. His pyjamas felt suddenly thin
against the heavy black wool, and his bare toes were cold where they pressed against Mycroft's boots. The single inch of extra height difference felt like half a foot.

After some time, Mycroft's gaze flickered. He looked into Greg's eyes, and his pupils grew. There was a moment of silence between them.

With a pale swallow, Mycroft finally spoke.

"What - do you want?" he asked, his voice thick.

Greg tightened his grip quietly on Mycroft's sleeve. The cold hands kept hold of his face.

"What do I want?" he repeated, lost. "I... I don't understand."

"From me." Mycroft's gaze did not waver. "I need to know - in clear and candid terms. I need to know tonight."

Greg tried calming his pulse enough to answer.

"I want you to be happy," he said, staring back into Mycroft's eyes. "I want you to be alright."

"That is not everything," he said.

_Holy fuck._ "It is," Greg managed, swallowing. "That's enough for me. I mean it. That's all I want."

"Do not lie to a psychologist," Mycroft breathed, "or to a predator of your species. Both will see through it in a second. I need to hear precisely what you want from this connection of ours, in full, _now_, or I will not be able to bear it a moment longer."

Greg could only stare. He didn't dare to speak.

Mycroft took in his silence in pain; his fingers shook. Something broke in his desperate grey eyes.

"It has - started, Greg." His throat muscles worked. "The bond."

Greg's heart caved. It crumbled at once into dust and smoke. It was gone.

"My instincts towards you are heightening," Mycroft said, weak. "My need to be near you. My fears for your safety. It is - perhaps already some way beyond 'started'. Seeing you walk away from me, I - ... " His expression creased. "If this will end, it must end _now_. I cannot stay in this purgatory. I need to know what you want, and I need to know before I live another day. It is impacting the case. It is destroying me. Please."

Greg tried to produce sound; nothing would come.

Mycroft gazed at him, chest heaving beneath his coat.

"I am in love with you, Greg." It sounded like a plea.


"You say you are in love with me," Mycroft managed, shaking. "You tell me every day. What do you mean?"
"Wh-what - what do I - …" Greg's voice cracked. "I-Isn't it obvious?"

"No." Mycroft's expression hardened, frightened. "I cannot cope with 'obvious'. I need certainty. Please, Greg. Tell me. Break me apart or set me free."

Greg swallowed.

*Now or never*, he thought. They had come too far to go back.

He shut his eyes, opening his mouth to say it.

"Look at me," Mycroft begged. His voice strained. "For God's sake, Greg... I need to know."

Greg forced himself to open his eyes.

He stared into Mycroft's face, his chest on the point of rupture.

"I - want you, Mycroft." His fingers shook on the heavy black sleeve. "You mean the world to me... you know you do. You're amazing. You're smart and you're gorgeous and you're brave. You make me happier than anyone in my life has ever made me. When you pull away, it feels like all the lights go out. You know what I'd be for you. You know I'd be that in a heartbeat."

Mycroft's pupils were enormous. Only the thinnest band of grey remained around them.

"Do you realise what that decision would mean?" he said. Greg's heart thudded in response, fast and deep and unafraid. "Do you understand what it would entail?"

Greg knew what it meant.

It still didn't scare him. He'd tried so hard to make it scare him, and he couldn't. He'd tried for days.

He eased his shaking hands beneath Mycroft's coat.

"I told you," he managed, at last. "When I fall, I... I fall hard."

Mycroft did not yield to his hug.

"If I were presenting you with a ring," he said, his voice stiff, "you would laugh, and tell me to leave. And yet somehow this is fine."

Greg had ceased to breathe. He held Mycroft's stare. "Would I laugh?"

Mycroft's eyes flashed wildly. "You barely know me."

This wasn't a decision, Greg realised. It was the discovery of one that he'd already made.

"Fine," he whispered, his heart pounding. "I'll find out the rest as we go. Keeps it fresh."

"This is madness," Mycroft breathed. His eyes burned with fright. "Categorical madness. You have - your entire life ahead of you. You could have anyone in this world, Greg. Anyone. How - how can you possibly - "

Greg's heart gave way. It burst from him as it broke.

"Tell me you didn't fall the fuck apart when I walked out of your flat." He stared into Mycroft's face, shaking to the soul. "Look me in the eye and tell me you didn't feel it too."
Mycroft sank into silence, pale and afraid.

"Tell me you've been alright without me," Greg breathed, searching his eyes. "Go on. Tell me you didn't care when I hit the ground of The Range. Tell me it didn't matter. Tell me the world didn't end then and there for you."

Mycroft didn't say a word.

"Tell me like you mean it," Greg whispered, "and I'll listen. I'll let you go. Tell me that when I said I was leaving London, you didn't want to throw up all your organs on the spot. Tell me that if I looked at you right now and shrugged, and told you I don't want to be your pair-bond, you'd be okay with that. Tell me you'd be any kind of okay ever again."

He stared up into Mycroft's eyes, watching the truth echo with agony behind them.

"You said you needed to know," he said. He heaved in a breath, willing Mycroft with all his heart to give in - to let it be alright, just for once. "You climbed eight fucking storeys to ask me what I want. Now I'm trying to tell you, and you're not listening."

Every whisper of colour had run from Mycroft's face. "Because I can't believe it," he said. He gazed at Greg, lost and broken. "Because you are perfect..." His throat muscles hardened. "And I am a monster."

Greg's heart strained. He couldn't bear that word. He didn't want to hear it again as long as he lived.

"You're not a fucking monster." He reached up onto his toes and pushed his cheek against Mycroft's, feeling him shudder in despair. "You're - mine. You're everything. Fucking everything."

Greg squeezed his eyes tight shut, feeling heat prickle between his eyelashes.

"Don't talk about my pair-bond like that," he bit out.

Mycroft stiffened. "Greg - "

"You came all this fucking way to ask." Greg wound his fingers through Mycroft's hair, holding him as they shook. "You didn't come to hear me say no. You came to hear the truth. So here's the fucking truth."

He dragged Mycroft closer.

"I'm not afraid. You don't have to be, either. Please, just… stop. I know you're used to it. And I know it feels like you're safe if you're alone, just… please. You're hurting yourself. You're hurting us both. For no good bloody reason."

Mycroft's face buried into his neck, arms curling tightly around his body. They held him like they'd never get to touch him again.

At the brush of Mycroft's nose across his throat, Greg let his eyes fall shut.

Christ.

Christ, this is happening.

"Gorgeous, just..." He stroked over the back of Mycroft's neck, lifting his chin. He braced for pain. "Go on. It's okay."

"Myke… Myke - stop fighting. It's alright."

"We *cannot* here," Mycroft bit out, and swallowed. "You'll want to make love. And you will want to make noise as we do."

A hot, deep pulse resounded through Greg's every vein. He finally let himself want it. He shivered, rubbing a circle over the back of Mycroft's neck as he told himself to breathe, suddenly aware of his own heartbeat - the fragility of his neck - the warmth of Mycroft's breath.

"I can be quiet," he said.

"You will *not* be," Mycroft promised in a breathless rush. "P-Please, Greg. Not here. I don't want the first time to be in bloody Elwood's spare room. It should be at home. Or not at all."

*Home.*

Greg shut his eyes, suddenly overwhelmed with it. Emotion thickened his voice.

"Mycroft?" he managed.

Mycroft's arms tightened around him at once. "Yes?"

Greg bit down on the urge to cry. "I want a ring."

Mycroft stifled a rush of emotion into his neck.

"*God almighty.*" He held Greg, hard. "You can have a ring," he gasped. "I will *get* you a bloody ring. Any that you like. A ring the size of England."

Greg felt the whole world reel.


Mycroft's chest heaved against his.

"No, Greg," he said. "You are staying precisely where you are."

Greg's stomach lurched. "You're not serious," he said. He pulled back to stare into Mycroft's eyes. "I'm going home with you, Myke. Right now. I can't be away from you."

"You are staying here," Mycroft said - and without another word, he scooped Greg off his feet.

He carried Greg protesting to the narrow single bed, laid him within the covers, and started hauling off his coat.

"You are staying," Mycroft said, shaking, "where Excultus cannot find you." He cast the coat to the floor and wrenched off his tie. "Where you are *safe*, until this nightmare is over and we have one of them in custody. If I have to climb eight storeys every night to watch over you and ensure you are guarded properly until morning, then God help me, I shall. But you are *not* coming home until this is over."

Greg panted. "You need to drink," he said. "I'm done arguing, Mycroft. I love you. I'm not letting you go without."
Mycroft stiffened, fumbling with his shirt buttons. "After this is over." He fished inside his waistcoat, wrenched out his pocket-watch and threw it without a care onto the bedside table. "When the danger is passed, and not until."

Greg held his ground. "We need you at your best."

"My best?" Mycroft said, eyes flashing. "To sit by a monitor bank with TJ Tierney, and shout at you all through a headset to run faster? Elwood made it seem quite easy."

"What if something goes wrong?" Greg asked, his throat tight.

Mycroft's eyes blazed at once. "You have assured me it will not."

"And I don't think it will," Greg said, despairing, "but you look like you're about to collapse with anemia. I'm not dealing with this any more, Myke. I love you. I'm not going to watch you suffer one more fucking day."

Mycroft twisted his waistcoat back over his shoulders. His face set with resolve.

"I am not suffering," he said. "Not in the least."

He untucked his shirt, tugging buttons open without a care for the threads.

"And we are not rushing this. You are not a medical treatment. You are mine, and you will be treated as such. We get one first time, Greg. It is not happening here. Nor are you leaving here until the plan has worked and it is safe for you to do so. I have said my final word on the matter."

Enough of the buttons were now loose. Mycroft grappled the shirt over his head, unfastened his trousers and snapped off the bedside lamp.

As Mycroft climbed into bed, reaching for covers, Greg made a noise of disbelief.

"Gorgeous, it's - a single bed. You're too tall. You won't be comfy all night."

"Come here." Mycroft's tone was unyielding. He pulled Greg into his arms and bundled him up in the duvet. The shock of cold skin left Greg reeling for a second, breathless. He pushed closer all the same. "For God's sake," Mycroft whispered, voice strained. "Let me see your face. You are hurt."

He shook as he stroked Greg's cheeks, gazing at him through the darkness. His eyes lingered with distress on every injury.

"When it struck you..." he whispered, "I - ... I couldn't - ..."

He kissed Greg's forehead ferociously, raking back his hair.


Greg's heart twisted hard.

"Gorgeous, I - I'm okay..." He pulled himself closer. "I'm fine," he promised, as Mycroft gripped him. "S'just bruising... Kit says it'll go down in a couple of weeks. M'just gonna look a bit rugged for a while."

He realised Mycroft had started to tremble.
"Myke," he whispered, pushing his fingers through his hair. "Myke, I… I'm here… it's okay…"

"Please." Mycroft's voice cracked. "Tell me you meant it all. Tell me you - …"

_God - mine. Mine, all mine._ Greg curled himself around Mycroft tight, his heart pounding with protective distress.

"Of course I meant it," he hushed. Mycroft heaved with deep breaths in his arms, calming. "I mean every word, love. I couldn't cope without you. Couldn't face spending my life away from you."

He tried to fight his smile.

"Myke, we… we didn't even make it through a fucking day."

Mycroft let out a sound between a sob and a laugh.

"It's you and me now," Greg whispered in his ear, shining with it. His entire heart rang with it. "Promise. We'll get this stupid thing out of the way, and I'll come home..."

He closed his eyes, nestling closer.

"I'll come home, gorgeous," he promised. "And I'll stay."

"I love you," Mycroft whispered, his throat closing over. He stiffened. "I - _need you._"

Greg nuzzled his bare shoulder, kissing the trail of freckles there. "It's alright to need me. M'not going."

"Never."

"Never, Myke. I swear." He could feel Mycroft starting to warm in his arms. Tentative fingers combed through his hair. "Christ, I - I love you so much… I can't tell you what you do to me. What you mean to me."

"I - I've been - a _wreck_, Greg. All day. A bloody wreck."

"I - I've been - a _wreck_, Greg. All day. A bloody wreck."

"Have you drunk?" Greg asked, already knowing the answer.

Mycroft let out a sound of despair. "I - I couldn't - ..."

Greg held doggedly onto calm, ignoring the burn of gentle anger.

"In the morning," he said, "I'm ringing Vickery. I'm gonna tell her you're not looking after yourself, and ask her to keep a container in her office for you. And I'm pretty sure she'll expect you in there at least once a day, _without_ argument, or you'll be for the high jump."

"Oh... _God._" Mycroft's hands tightened on Greg's back. "How can you - "

"Because you're crap at giving yourself what you need," Greg said. "And Amelia won't be. People _love_ you, you tragic bastard. People _rely_ on you. You'd drag up every excuse under the sun not to take care of yourself, and your days of getting away with it are numbered. Believe me."

He pressed a kiss to Mycroft's shoulder - his nose stung with the press. He didn't care.

"I swear," he whispered. "The _second_ we have someone from Excul tus in the cells, I'm dragging you home. You're coming the fuck to bed, and you're going to lie down with me, and drink what
you need, and you will never get in this state again. Never. D'you hear?"

Mycroft trembled deeply in his arms. Greg held him, and stroked him, pouring warmth and loving words across his skin.

"You're gonna spend the rest of your life happy," he said. "Healthy. Mine. And we're gonna start right now with some sleep."

Mycroft shuddered quietly.

"I - couldn't have slept without you," he said. "Not a moment."

Greg wouldn't have slept either. A night crammed together in a single bed was going to be far more restful than ten nights on his own.

"You won't have to," he murmured. "Not again." The darkness curled around them, cloaking them together in its safety. "Close your eyes, gorgeous. You're safe now. I'm right here."

Greg awoke, hours later, to the gentle press of lips against his forehead.

"Darling…?" Mycroft's nose brushed his temple. "Greg, I - I have to leave... I need to smuggle myself back into my apartment. Elwood will be awake soon."

Greg's heart squeezed. Still half asleep, he tangled his fingers with the hand that was stroking his cheek.

"Text me," he pleaded. "All day… just share it with me. All of it."

"I shall. I promise." Mycroft's breath caught. "I - love you, darling. With all my heart."

Greg's entire being glowed with the words. He felt like he was brand new. "God..." he whispered. "Myke, I love you too… you'll be okay getting back in your flat, won't you? Please don't be seen. Please."

"There's a back entrance," Mycroft murmured. He was already dressed, leaning over the bed in the darkness. "Rubbish disposal. I'll use that when I come to you."

At the concerned look he was given, Mycroft's eyes softened.

"I cannot be apart from you," he said. "I - need to be here at night. I need to be sure you are okay. I won't function if I am not here."

"Myke…" Greg reached out to touch his face - tentative fingertips in the darkness. "I-If you're seen..."

"Stay close to Luke," Mycroft whispered, and kissed his forehead. "He will guard you during the day. He will keep you safe for me. Don't let anyone outside of Armed Response lay eyes on you. Not a soul."

"I won't." Greg swallowed, pushing their foreheads together. His eyes closed. "Myke, I - I need you to know... you're perfect to me. I waited my whole fucking life for someone like you. I meant it. I
meant it all."

Mycroft's fingers tremored gently on his cheek.

"A few days more," he whispered. "A few short days."

Greg swallowed.

"Then," he said.

Mycroft hesitated. "Then." He laid a final kiss upon Greg's forehead. "Lock the window behind me."

Greg shivered. "I - still can't believe you can do that."

Mycroft smiled slightly. "A number of years since I tried... remarkable what an incentive will do." His eyes glittered, gazing into Greg's. "You - will see me at full strength, some day. Perhaps some day soon."

Greg's soul flared. He couldn't keep it to himself. "Myke, I... I want you. That way." He felt his cheeks heat. "I've thought about it quite a bit."

Mycroft drew back gently from the bed. "As have I," he said. He moved backwards towards the window. "Sleep, darling. I'll be here after dark."

Greg watched him twist the catch, his heart thumping hard.

"Say hi to Olivia for me, will you?" he said. "Look after her."

"I will." Mycroft opened the window, and braced himself up onto the sill. His coat flared in the early morning breeze. As he eased his body out through the frame, he said, "Greg?"

Greg pulled the covers up around his throat, praying this was not a dream. "Yes?"

"TJ Tierney isn't well," Mycroft said. "At all. Make your preparations quickly."

Greg's heart heaved. "Like I need another reason to get this all done quickly."

Mycroft looked back at him with half a smile. "Please be safe. Please - guard my pair-bond."


Mycroft's eyes flashed; the smile took ten years from his face. He glanced upwards, reached out to grasp hold of the ledge, and heaved himself up out of sight.

A few seconds later, he was gone.

Greg dropped back against the pillows with a flump. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply.

His grin broke out in the darkness.
Self-Care

And to his eye
There was but one beloved face on earth,
And that was shining on him.

- Lord Byron
'The Dream' (1816)

Tuesday 27th January

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Hello... x

Oh my god! Hey… :)
Did you get back into your flat alright? xx
Sent 08:02

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Yes. I'm now getting ready for work.
Truly I have nothing to tell you… I wished to tell you anyway. I hope that's alright. xx

Of course it is... I miss you, you know that?... I miss you so fucking much...
I know you only left two hours ago. just can’t stop thinking about you.
Where are you? xx
Sent 08:05

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
In this moment? xx

Yeah... right now xx
Sent 08:06
NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Sitting briefly on the bed. I'm not long out of the shower… just taking a moment to dry.
Why do you ask? xx

Just want to picture you… see you in my head xx
Sent 08:07

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Tell me you meant it all. Please. xx

Every word. Every single word.
If I was there right now, you know what would be happening. xx
Sent 08:13

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Greg… xx

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Part of me worries you'll come to your senses at any second.
You'll realise the enormity of what it would all be… the normal life you would be giving up.
And change your mind. xx

You seriously think I could have a normal life after all this?
Like I could just go back to whatever to hell there was before? no… there's you now.
I won't change my mind. There's only you now.
I'll reassure you tonight gorgeous. Promise xx
Sent 08:19

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
I would like that very much. xx

Then thats what we'll do.
You told the fish your happy news? ;) xx
Sent 08:23

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Mm. Fish are thrilled for us. xx
Knew they would be. I'm gonna be an awesome step dad.

Have you drunk today? xx

Sent 08:25

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
I'm sitting in the lounge now. xx

Picture please xx

Sent 08:26

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Are you genuinely requesting photographic proof of this? xx

Yep. Until I can take proper care of you.

Do it please xx

Sent 08:27

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
For heaven's sake. Alright. Give me a moment. xx

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
There. xx

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx you are gorgeous…

I am so bloody lucky. xxx

Sent 08:29

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
You are insane. I look as if I have late stage consumption.

Delete that immediately.

Are you serious? gonna be looking at this all day.

I love you. Love you to pieces. xxx

Sent 08:33

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
I love you too.

Very much. xxx
Thank you for drinking :) Take a container to work in the car with you? Vickery says its fine in her office and you're now booked in 5pm every day til further notice. She says if you're not there she'll come fetch you. xx
Sent 08:35

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Dear Christ. xx

did you think I was joking? xx
Sent 08:36

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
I now realise my hopes were in vain. Was Amelia surprised that you know...? xx

Didn't show it if she was... just said you're a dramatergical (sp?) idiot and she should have known you'd relapse sooner or later. Thanked me for telling her. Consider yourself snitched on, holmes. xx
Sent 08:47

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Thank heavens you're handsome. xx

You think I'm handsome? :D xxxxx
Sent 08:48

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Mm. Hopelessly.
Are you at Scotland Yard? xx

Yep. Luke smuggled me into armed response through prisoner transport tunnel. Mrs Elwoods got more room in the boot than she looks from the outside. Are you here too? xx
Sent 08:50

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
I have just arrived. In lift. xx

God... You're just upstairs.
Why does that give me shivers? xx
Sent 08:53

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Were you being facetious about travelling in the boot of Elwood's car?
I have to know. xx

"Facetious"…
Remind me… xx
Sent 08:58

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Jocular. Glib.
Taking the piss. xx

You think I'm gonna let excultus see me arriving at scotland yard every morning?
I have actually thought all this through, thanks. You'll start believing me any day now.
Gonna be training in 15 mins.… Will be out of contact until lunch :( xx
Sent 09:01

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
It's quite alright. Olivia and I are headed out to Pembury Road.
Though I will be thinking about you. A great deal. xx

Me too… constant. Every minute.
Btw. You and Livs got some time spare this aft? xx
Sent 09:05

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Can be arranged. Why? xx
"Right," Greg said. "Rule one: go for the groin."

The corners of Olivia's mouth twitched upwards.

"What's rule two?" she asked, shifting her bare feet upon the dusty blue crash-mat between them.

"Rule two," Greg said, "is also go for the groin. Rules three through ninety-nine are go for the groin. Rule number a hundred is, don't curl your thumb inside your fist when you throw a punch - but so long as you were throwing it at a groin, we'll overlook that."

In the corner of the training room, Mycroft swiftly smothered his smile. He gated his fingers upon one knee, and discreetly rearranged himself into seriousness. He didn't need to think hard to ascertain why everything was delighting him today. Greg's black combat gear had already proven rather distracting.

The boots in particular might be coming home with them when all this was over.

"What do I do if I can't get at their groin?" Olivia asked, which struck Mycroft as a wholly sensible question.

With a smile, Sergeant Medlock folded her arms across her chest tattoos - black roses, lace, and lines of Latin. Aut viam inveniam aut faciam. Fitting, Mycroft thought.

"Go for the eyes," Kit explained. "Or, if you've got a sharp to hand, the neck's always worth a jab. Basically, focus your attention on the dishonourable bits and you'll be sorted. Welcome to 'Fighting Dirty 101'."

Olivia looked as if it might just be the best afternoon of her life. "Alright."

"This is assuming," Greg added, "that you've exhausted all possible access to the groin."

"Don't people tend to defend their groins?" Olivia checked, raising an eyebrow.

"Not if you're quick enough," said Kit. "Speed's your main weapon here. Most attackers expect you to struggle and panic, not lunge back. You have to hit them hard and fast where it hurts, without a second's hesitation, screaming your fucking lungs out at them, then get away while they're on the floor."

Greg was adjusting the velcro of his hand-wraps - tightening them gently around the broad span of his palms. Mycroft watched discreetly, trying his hardest not to find it interesting. He was quite sure that it shouldn't be.

Sensing the weight of eyes, Greg glanced up.

God help me, Mycroft thought.

The man who wanted to be with him. The slight lift of his eyebrow; the tiny, infinitesimal curve of his mouth. Mycroft felt the breath evaporate from his lungs.

I love you, Greg's eyes murmured. Mycroft heard it across the room, as clear as daylight.

Take me somewhere quiet, he replied. Please.

Greg smiled to himself, looking down. He sealed his hand-wrap into place, flexed both fists, and with purposeful intent stretched out his impressive shoulders.
Mycroft found himself suddenly fascinated by his wrist-set, rereading emails he'd already answered three hours before.

"We're gonna teach you a couple of basic throws and hold-breaks," Kit said, as she strode to the centre of the crash-mats. "Nothing complex. Nothing you'll struggle to remember."

She glanced around at Greg, her eyebrow cocked.

"Ready?"

He nodded, lowering his weight. "Avoid the nose, will you?" he said.

"Stop fretting, princess. I know what I'm doing." Kit looked into Olivia's eyes, and flashed her a grin. "Here's your first hold-break. Watch."

Greg braced, took a breath, and ran at her from behind.

As soon as his arms locked around her chest, she bent double in the middle. Lurched off balance around her, Greg's hold slipped and loosened.

There was then a whirl of motion, and Kit hurled Greg to the crash-mat with a slam.

Mycroft deftly turned his horrified reaction into a stroke of his chin, attempting a look of composure.

"Did you catch that?" Kit asked, grinning at Olivia's delighted expression. "S'just one movement - and it's all there in your shoulder. Nice and easy. You're using his own weight against him."

"Steady," said Greg, from the floor.

"We'll run it again for you slowly," said Kit. "Get the fuck up, Lestrade. Then we'll walk it through with me attacking you, Livs. Alright? You'll have mastered this by three."

She cracked out her knuckles, and Greg readied himself for another run.

"You taking notes over there, Queen of Hearts?" Kit checked. "In case he ever gets trashed, and makes a move on you..."

Mycroft swallowed his smile. "Heaven forbid, Sergeant Medlock."

Kit cast him a smirk, and then braced. "Let's go, Lestrade. Put some effort into it this time."

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
That was possibly the most arousing two hour period of my life. xx

Watching me get handed my arse on a plate by Kit Medlock? worrying.
Teach you some basic holds later if you want. xx
Sent 16:35
NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

Dear lord. xx

Don't worry gorgeous. I'm a good teacher. v patient. xx
Sent 16:36

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

"Go for the groin", is it? xx

Always knew you were a fast learner. Hope Luke's walls are thick.
Hows Livs? Tell her not to get caught with that pepper spray outside scotland yard or I'll be for it.
Vickery will have me stuffed and mounted on the wall before I can say "extenuating circumstances"
xx
Sent 16:39

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

Olivia is now in possession of the complete Cross-Human Relations Staff Handbook, so I doubt a pepper spray will make much difference... she's amassing quite the collection of classified material. And coming on excellently. Rather convincing this morning on inquiries.
Dare I ask if you've spoken to TJ? xx

Few texts... all sounds like its all going ok there.
They got most of it rigged up before dark. Doing the rest tomorrow xx
Sent 16:44

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

Does he seem well? xx

From what I could tell yeah...
He really worried you, didn't he? xx
Sent 16:45

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

He seemed deeply affected by something.
It has rather preyed upon my mind. xx
Right… I'll ring him in a minute and let you know...
You going to see vickery soon? xx
Sent 16:47

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Yes… I'll leave Olivia settled with the handbook. xx

Good. Thankyou for taking care of my mycroft.
He means everything to me. xx
Sent 16:51

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
What time does Elwood go to sleep?
Rather looking forward to these basic holds I've been promised. xx

I'll tell him I'm turning in at 10...
Dont you dare be seen leaving that flat… xx
Sent 16:54

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
I shan't. I promise you. xx

I love you, gorgeous.
Say hi to Commander V for me xx
Sent 16:57

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Heaven help me. xx

Greg waited until the rest of the squad had hit the showers. He found a quiet corner bench of the locker room, still in his combat gear, and loaded up his contacts on his wrist-set. He wished he could smoke. Something told him he might need it.

As he waited for the call to connect, he tried not to think. At last, there came the familiar click.

"Hey, fuzzball," he said. "Just me. How's tricks?"
TJ gave a quiet huff. "Hey, King of Hearts..."

His voice hadn't dropped any further, Greg noted with relief. He sounded tired more than anything.

"D'you - get my update?" TJ asked. "All coming together... good to go Thursday night, with no problems. I had a squirrel steal one of my audio detectors, but we got it back."

"Glad it's coming together, mate. Thanks for all you're doing." Greg wondered how to broach this. He pulled his feet up onto the bench with him, locking the tracks of his boots into the metal slats. "Can we - talk personal for a while?"

"Sure," TJ said, immediately wary. "What's wrong?"

"Mycroft said you've sounded - out of sorts. He got the feeling you weren't well... suggested I should ring and check on you."

"Oh my God," TJ mumbled. "You're like my two gay dads. This is unbearable. Are you gonna handle the adoption papers, or shall I?"

Greg smiled, waiting.

At last, TJ sighed.

"Just - life," he said. "You... do your best, and you do what you can, but... I dunno. When you're not human, you've gotta try twice as hard to be thought half as good. Then in the end, you're... kicked about anyway. That's all."

"What's happened?" Greg asked, with a quiet frown.

TJ hesitated.

"Just... been a weird week," he said. "Hormones. I'm glad I've got stuff to do. I'm fine, mum. Honest."

Greg bit the corner of his lip. "Fuzzball, you... know we appreciate what you're doing, right? This whole thing wouldn't - "


He coughed a little.

"This is awkward," he said, "but - could you - release some of the contractor fee to my bank account? I know we've not finished yet, but... well, you know where I live... you can always send Dr. Holmes round with a baseball bat if I try to scarper with the money. It'd just - help a bit."

"Sure," said Greg, with a smile. He paused. "You - generally alright for money?"

"Yeah. Yeah, m'fine."

"Are you... sure you're generally alright for money?"

"Yeah," TJ said. "No worries. Just - food's expensive. Y'know? And I mean... London. And I'm going through razors like nobody's business..."

TJ was almost as evasive as Mycroft, Greg thought. He wasn't quite such an accomplished liar, but he was having a damn good try.
"I'll get it sent this evening," Greg said. "Should be with you tomorrow morning. How's that?"


Greg smiled. "Christ, no. I miss my desk."

"Yeah." TJ's voice saddened with some thought. "Yeah, I bet."

Greg rested his head back against the wall, wondering.

"Teedge," he said.


"This isn't just your hormones, is it?" said Greg. "Something else happened."

TJ paused again.

"Everything's my stupid hormones," he mumbled, in the end. "My… stupid life is hormones." He was silent for a while. "Wouldn't be so bad, being a crap attempt at a human... if at least I could be a decent werewolf."

Greg's chest tightened with pain.

"What the fuck?" he said, reeling. "TJ... you're not a crap attempt at anything."

TJ snorted again.

"Crap attempt at everything this week," he said. "Just…" He sighed, audibly rubbing his hands across his face. "Jesus, I hate this. My brothers just burn through transformation. They get angry, get it over with... and I just… drag along. S'always like this. I put it off forever, then I get... stuck."

Greg rubbed his shoulder quietly beneath his tank top. "D'you - want me to help, fuzzball?"

"Help?"

"Prompt it." Greg kneaded gently into his muscles. "Come to Armed Response... now, if you want. We'll delay the operation. I can get you in The Range, and we'll spar. I've seen it trigger transformation before."

"Are you offering to beat me up for medical purposes?" TJ asked, amused.

Greg smiled. "Play-fighting," he said. "It works. You must've seen it in your brothers when you were teens."

TJ sighed, and gave a tired chuckle. "Few times. And that's... kind of you. Thanks." He paused. "I dunno. If this week didn't make me mad, Greg, nothing will… dunno if I could get mad at you, anyway. Been too nice to me. You and my other gay dad."

Greg smiled, still rubbing into his shoulder.

"Offer's there, if you want it," he said.

"Thanks." He heard TJ shift. "Want to get this thing done, anyway... don't know why I'm complaining. The longer I can hold off transforming, the longer we'll have. I can help make sure -
Dr H's new girl is alright."

"You spoken much to Livs?" he asked, casually.

"Eh. Not as such. But... y'know, I want her to... be okay." TJ paused. "She seems nice."

Greg raised an eyebrow. He wondered if he'd heard the note in TJ's voice that he thought he had.

There came a clang from nearby, and loud laughing voices. The squad were on their way to the lockers. Greg's time was up.

"M'gonna have to go, fuzzball... got company. Just remember I'm here, alright? Whatever's going on... I want you to be okay, too. Everybody does."

"Go have some ice cream," Greg advised, with a smile. "You'll be fine. Money's on its way."

"Right. Th-Thanks, Greg. That'll... take a weight off my mind."

"Any idea what time you'll be finished at Hackney Downs tomorrow?"

"Twelve days."

"Withdrawal then, is it? For heaven's sake, Mycroft. You're meant to be stabilising Lestrade. Not the other way around."

"Text Mycroft," said Greg. "M'still in hiding. Hope it all goes well, mate... look after yourself."

TJ paused.

"I'll try," he said, and hung up.

Mycroft entered the office to find Amelia fitting a plastic lid onto a coffee cup with a snap. As she looked up, one steely eyebrow arched.

"Sit," she intoned.

Mycroft winced internally. He sat down at her desk, suspecting this discussion would not soon be forgotten.

The cup was placed before him with all the gravity that it deserved.

"When did you last source fresh?" she asked.

Mycroft calculated, tightening his hands together. "Twelve days."

"Withdrawing then, is it? For heaven's sake, Mycroft. You're meant to be stabilising Lestrade. Not the other way around."

Mycroft thought briefly to say that such a task was far, far outside of his remit, and he wished any soul in this world the very best of luck in controlling Gregory Lestrade.

He then decided he should not make this worse, and resolved himself to regretful silence.
"Drink, please," Amelia said. "All of it."

Mycroft picked up the cup, closed his eyes, and got on with it.

Amelia remained standing as he did. He could feel the disappointment radiating from her in waves.

"The day is not long enough, Mycroft Holmes," she said, "to waste time and energy in punishing yourself. There is enough adversity in this world. There is no need whatsoever to generate yourself any more. What possible sense underlies this sort of gainless, tragic self-lamenting?"

Mycroft said nothing, drinking in submissive silence. He had a feeling he both deserved and needed every word of this.

"I expect my officers to be treated with respect," Amelia said. "That includes by themselves. You have not reached the ranks that you have by being unworthy. You have not been afforded the regard that you have by being undeserving. Did you believe I would tolerate one of my inspectors spearheading a major anti-terrorist operation while forcing himself to subsist without basic nutrition?"

Mycroft swallowed. "No, commander."

"No, commander. If Lestrade were bullying himself to stay awake because he felt appalled by his own need to squander eight hours a night on something so self-indulgent as sleep, would I tolerate such idiocy?"

"No, commander."

"No, commander. And if he were denying himself medical care because he'd so selfishly and wilfully become ill, would I tolerate that?"

Mycroft looked down at the pattern of her carpet. "No, commander."

"No, commander," she said, fierce. "And I am not tolerating it from you. You are Cross-Human Relations. That means you are not given up on. Least of all by yourself. Are you sleeping?"

As he recalled the previous night, Mycroft's heart ached quietly. The cramped closeness of a single bed; Greg's warm limbs wrapped around him, cradling him as if he were cherished; the knowledge that this was only the first night of their new, life-changing intimacy.

Greg would belong to him soon. They would be each other's - without end.

"I am sleeping," Mycroft said, glancing at Amelia coolly. "Rather well, as it happens."

"And Lestrade will confirm that, will he?"

"I'm sure he - …" A fraction of a second from disaster, Mycroft slammed his brain into reverse. "DI Lestrade couldn't possibly know, commander. He isn't there when I do it."

Amelia Vickery rolled her eyes. She sat down at her desk, and reached for her wrist-set.

"Either way," she tutted, flashing through hard-light windows. "I am revoking your access to self-pity, Mycroft. You have lost that privilege. I expect the freed-up time to be used for only the most unwavering self-care. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, I - I understand."
"Good." She typed quickly as she spoke, not at all distracted by the threads of two separate conversations. "How is your actress coming along? Is she going to pull this off?"

"With aplomb. Miss Reid is highly competent." Mycroft took a longer drink, wrinkling his nose as he swallowed. Preservative - tart. "DI Lestrade and Sergeant Medlock have started her self-defence training, and she's scheduled for further sessions throughout the week."

"Excellent." Vickery closed the wrist-set windows with flashes of blue light, then sat back and surveyed him. "What about the technical side of things? Is that all covered?"

"I understand they'll be finished setting up as soon as tomorrow."

"Good. Armed Response co-operating with you?"

"Yes." Mycroft supposed some elaboration would be fitting. "Commander Elwood has been very helpful. His team are impressive to witness. I feel secure in relying upon them."

"Marvellous. Drink, please."

Mycroft drank, bowing his head back over the cup. Amelia watched in silence as he did. After a few minutes, there came a flash at her wrist. She checked it absent-mindedly, and gave a snort as she read the new message.

"Should have guessed," she said. "Lestrade peddling me the party-line as well... at least you're both being discreet."

Mycroft hesitated, swallowing. He watched her as she typed.

"The... party-line?" he said.

Amelia read aloud, still busy composing her response. "Can't say commander, no way of knowing. But he seems very tired some days. GL."

Mycroft's stomach clenched. His hand tightened around the cup.

"Amelia, I... wish to state," he said, "categorically, that DI Lestrade and I are not engaged in any kind of intimate -"

"Good," Amelia interrupted. "Keep stating that." She finished the message, hit send, and closed her wrist-set. "And tell him to get you some proper sleep."

Mycroft swallowed. He said the only thing that his shocked brain had to offer.

"Yes, commander."

"Drink, please," she said. "You've another cup to go after that one, or you're not leaving this office."

She regarded him with close, sharp-eyed concern as he drank, crossing one leg over the other. Her patent leather heels gleamed in the light of her desk-lamp.

"You and I shall sit here until Judgement Day," she warned, "and trumpets sound - and the pair of us can have some peace at last."

Mycroft did not doubt that she meant it.
"I - rather planned to find peace before then, if it suits," he said.

Amelia's eyes flashed. "Then look after yourself, you sorry fool. We have only one of you."

"Yes, commander."

"Yes, commander. Good." She picked up a datapad, raising a sharp eyebrow at him. "If Lestrade and I have to drag you to common sense, Mycroft Holmes, then so help me, we shall."

"M-Myke..."

Greg stretched, gasping into the pillow. His cheek was warm beneath Mycroft's lips; his back shimmered with sweat as it heaved against Mycroft's chest. He smelled of the late night, and the long shift with Armed Response, and the last traces of deodorant left over from this morning.

He was beautiful.

"Myke," he whispered - struggling, panting. "Myke..."

As he drew one knee up against the mattress, he shuddered at the extra inch Mycroft sank into his body. His face tightened with a stifled moan. Mycroft nuzzled against his cheek, breathing hard, and drove a little deeper.

Something about the sight of Greg's hand grasping at a fistful of pillow made his skin prickle with sensation. Greg's sounds, too, were intoxicating. They sent shivers of pleasure scattering across his senses - quiet, carefully restrained sounds, and the soft suffusion of submission across his features - the restless push of his hips back against Mycroft - the dogged panting that deepened with Mycroft's thrusts.

He didn’t usually take.

He took for Mycroft.

"Myke," he breathed again. His voice hitched as Mycroft's hand curled around his cock. He was desperately hard - every flicker of friction made him squirm. He broke into heavier panting as Mycroft rubbed and squeezed him in rhythm; his whole body jerked.

As he listened to Greg ascend, Mycroft raked the flat edges of his teeth across his shoulder. He needed it - he needed all of it. Skin, salt, heat. He needed this pleasure, needed to keep tasting Greg's tremors, needed the strain of the heavy cock in his hand. It was all his, and he craved it. Oh, God... oh, soon...

Greg whimpered at the soft, unbreaking bites. "Myke," he begged, breath snapping.

Mycrof understood.

"Hsshh..." It would not be much longer. He carded his free hand through Greg's hair, rumpling it, catching hold just above his forehead and coaxing him to lift his head from the pillow, exposing his throat. "Hush, sweetheart... it’s alright... stay quiet for me."

"F-F-Fuck," Greg whispered. His neck muscles worked as Mycroft's mouth roamed across them.
“More.”

"Mm?" Mycroft tightened his other hand, tugging stiffly on Greg's cock in time with his thrusts. Greg's mouth opened with a gasp. "More?"

"N-nnh - ..." Greg moaned - the closest he could come to 'no' - and pushed back, shying away from the stimulation of his cock. He ground against Mycroft instead, shameless and fragile and desperate in what he wanted. He shuddered and gripped at the pillow, fighting to stifle his sounds. "More," he begged. "H-Harder. Please."

Mycroft stroked his mouth across Greg's throat, closed his eyes, and concentrated on the rhythm of his hips - slow, deep, intense pushes.

A rush of air escaped Greg, then a silent cry. His back bowed, his fist clenched in the pillow and he began to whimper - a gasped, insistent pleading of his lover's name, over and over like a prayer. **Myke, Myke, Myke.** Mycroft simply held his cock - formed a tight ring around it with his hand, and let the tender fucking rock Greg forwards in small, short motions.

Greg's sounds stiffened into silence at once. Mycroft watched, his heart pounding, as Greg bit down into the pillow and screwed his eyes shut, panting hard and urgent now.

*Close. Close, close, close.*

"Come for me..." Mycroft licked at his neck. He nosed into the sweat that spiked Greg's hair, his pulse reeling and lurching. "Come, sweetheart... bring me with you. Come to pieces for me."

Greg obeyed. He ground his forehead against the pillow and sunk his teeth into it to staunch his frantic moans, arching his back as he came into Mycroft's hand. Mycroft pulled him through, squeezing and stroking, easing out the wet heat that flooded across his fingers. With his other hand he gripped Greg to hold him still, nuzzling between his lover's sweat-filmed shoulder blades and gasping out his climax against them, as pleasure pulsed in slow and delectable waves beneath his skin. The world burned up around them. Everything sharpened. Everything sighed.

When sense returned, the first thing Mycroft heard was his name.

Greg breathed it, shocked, as he lifted his forehead from the pillow. He stirred back against Mycroft in exhaustion.

"Fuck..." He trembled as Mycroft withdrew, exhaling into the pillow. "H-Holy fuck…"

Mycroft felt his every protective instinct ignite. He began to trail kisses between Greg's shoulder blades, panting, licking his lover with a softly-pleasured thrill. Greg's sweat was salt-sharp. His skin was hot; he tasted warm. As Greg stirred, shivering, Mycroft stroked a tender hand along his thigh, adoring the pulse that still thrummed in every inch of his skin.

"I adore you," he breathed. His heart clenched with the words. "You are magnificent."

Greg's entire body quivered. "I love you, too..."

*If I had you home,* Mycroft thought. He wanted to cherish Greg - post-coital comforts. He wanted to clean him. A warm cloth from the bathroom; a hot bath. Massage oil. A warm drink. Anything he could wish for.

It didn't feel right that his lover had to relax after climax here; this borrowed space, full of a stranger's scent. Summer clothes packed in boxes in the corner.
He should be resting in the endless depths of Mycroft's bed - warm and safe beneath clean cotton sheets, all his perfection cast in lamplight reflected from the wardrobe doors. He should have every comfort.

It would be over soon. Then the proper state of things could be restored.

Mycroft began to rub Greg's back - slow, tender strokes of his hands. It didn't feel like much, but it was all he had to give.

Greg trembled, enjoying it. He released his grip on the pillow, with a sigh.

"I love you..." His voice cracked. "M'not kidding. I love you, Myke. I mean it."

*Myke.*

He thought he'd never be able to hear that name again.

For nearly a decade, that single clipped syllable had wielded the power to stop his heart. It had brought back too much. It had called to him from the darkness. Now, it softened him into instant quiet; it made him feel as protective and proud as he'd ever felt in his life.

Much had changed.

And much was yet to change.

But Greg was here, and he was safe - and the world no longer seemed quite so dark. It was all Mycroft could wish for. It was all he wanted.

He swallowed, and leant down. As he pressed his nose behind Greg's ear, he murmured,

"I love you... desperately. Endlessly. Beyond count."

Greg's eyes flickered shut, overwhelmed. "Gorgeous...?"

"Mm?"

Stirring, Greg lifted his head to nuzzle Mycroft's cheek. "I want to go home."

Mycroft breathed it, deep.

"I know, darling." He placed his lips against Greg's shoulder - chaste, and as soft as a secret. "I know."
Single Star

Thou wouldst be loved? - then let thy heart
From its present pathway part not!
Being everything which now thou art,
Be nothing which thou art not.

- Edgar Allen Poe
'To Frances S. Osgood' (1845)

Wednesday 28th January

Hey… did you get home ok? xxx
Sent 08:03

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
I did. In truth, I've seen no-one observing the building at all since you left.
I've been very vigilant. xxx

Sent 08:09

Good… I guess the plan's working then.
Stranger things have happened :) xxx

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
There's every reason it should work. I wouldn't have sanctioned it otherwise. xxx

Whats the first thing you'll ask? Been thinking about it when I'm training xxx
Sent 08:11

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
When we have one of them, you mean? xxx

Yeah. xxx
NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
I suppose, who is at the heart of it. Who survived...
I was fairly certain I’d got them all. Apparently I was wrong. xxx

If it took you 4 years though, gorgeous… someone was bound to slip through.
Don’t beat yourself up xxx
Sent 08:16

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Would you believe that most of their downfall happened in a single night?

Christ really? How the fuck did that come about? xxx
Sent 08:18

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
They made a mistake… one I sincerely hope they’re also making this time.
They were all in one place. Their high command lived like a king’s court.
They died like a king’s court too.

Jesus… you know it scares me a bit when you talk like that.
So you think they might be setting up that way again? all in one place? xxx
Sent 08:19

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
It scares me, too. I assure you.
Such an arrangement would be in their group’s mythology. It would be fitting.

So did you… just raid the place? Rip it apart?
Sent 08:20

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
We did. None escaped. So I believed, at least.
It was the only occasion of my life on which I have seen Amelia Vickery afraid.
NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
What is the first thing that you will ask? x

Why the fuck they can't just form pair bonds.
Live and let live alongside humans. Be happy xxx
Sent 08:26

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
"Since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved."

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Machiavelli. x

Huh. Good on machiavelli.
Personally rather be loved and dead, than safe and hated and alone. xxx
Sent 08:29

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
Because you are a rare and very special person.
"Safe and hated and alone" is sometimes the only option one is given. x

I love you. More this morning than ever.
Just so you know. xxx
Sent 08:31

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES
You are very easy to love Greg.
You are very calming. Very settling. xx

That's all I ever want your life to be. calm, settled and easy.
I'd do anything to get you that xxx
Sent 08:32
There came a clatter from the hallway. Greg glanced up as Luke came hurrying into the kitchen, half-in and half-out of his combat jacket.

"Christ, Christ. Sorry," said Luke, grabbing the bread-bag in a rush. "Just need some toast, then we'll go..."

Greg raised an eyebrow at him. " Took too long doing your hair, did you?"

"Ha! No. Forgot to set my alarm. Is that coffee?"

Greg nudged the mug across the table.

"Go for your life," he said, with a smile.

Luke drained it, made a grateful noise, and put the mug back down.

"Cheers," he said, and grabbed Serena's keys from the hook on the noticeboard. "Your face is looking better. Ready to set off, are you?"

"Yeah, but have your toast..." Greg returned to his wrist-set, gazing at that final peaceful message. "We can hang on a few minutes."

As he typed a reply, he could feel Luke watching him with a smile.

"Were you on the phone last night?" Luke asked at last, scraping peanut butter across his toast.

"Thought I heard you talking."

Greg kept his expression as neutral as he could.

"Sorry," he said. "Just Myke. I'll keep it down."

"'Myke'." Luke grinned to himself, shaking his head. "Sweet-talking each other on the phone all night... almost gives the rest of us hope."

"You should, y'know," said Greg, bright-eyed. He watched Luke scoop more spread from the jar. "Hope. It works out sometimes."

Luke chuckled, voice low. "Life's too short for that." He tossed his butter knife into the sink, screwed the lid onto the jar and crammed half a slice of toast into his mouth. "I'll organise your stag do," he mumbled, chewing.

The leap of pleasure escaped Greg as a laugh.

"You honestly think Myke'd let me out the house on that, do you?" he asked, grinning. "You'd be taking along a cardboard cut-out of me."

Luke smirked around another bite of toast, checking his hair in the mirror.

"Attendance of the groom," he said, when he'd swallowed, "isn't all that necessary on Armed Response stags. We'll just dress Kit up as you and set her loose on all the admin girls. It'll be great. It's like bowling."
"Christ." Greg felt exhausted just contemplating that. "Hasn't Kit had most of them already?"

"Dunno. I can never tell if she's winding me up or not." Luke flicked up his collar. "C'mon, Romeo. Let's go. You can finish your sloppy text message in the boot."

As Olivia slid into the passenger seat, Mycroft tapped the takeaway cup in the cup holder.

"For you," he said. "We're straight to it today, if that's alright. TJ and the technical team are on course to finish, which means your walk of opportunity across Hackney Downs could begin as early as tomorrow night. We need to ensure that you've been noticed."

Olivia smiled. "Fine by me," she said. They peeled away from the kerb as she carefully removed the lid. It was not at all to Mycroft's standards of what constituted tea, but it would do. "Inquiries again today?"

"I'm afraid so. I imagine you'll have my pattern of questioning memorised soon."

Olivia blew across the surface of her tea. "I'll do my best."

Mycroft smiled, glancing at her.

"That - wasn't an instruction," he said. "You needn't learn it. Truly, Olivia, if you wish to continue standing quietly beside me and pretending to make notes, that would more than suffice... many sergeants get away with far less."

Olivia's eyes lowered to her tea.

"Alright," she said. She took a quiet sip. "I can do that."

Mycroft chose his words with care.

"Though," he said, "if you happen to have picked up a feel for the pattern, my voice might appreciate a rest as the day goes on."

Her expression gave nothing away.

"Whatever helps."

"We should hear from TJ at some point this afternoon, then we'll head to Hackney Downs. Ah, and assuming no change of plan, we have your self-defence training at four... I'm afraid it's a busy day ahead of you. No objections, I hope."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Olivia rest a hand upon her leg.

She pinched herself, and drank her tea.
NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Hows things? Just on lunchtime smoke break. 
My LS rate is 73.4% now :) xxx

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
73.4 is very good btw ;) xxx

Of course it's very good. How could I have expected any less of you? 
Everything here is well. Olivia is receiving a lot of exposure.
Sent 12:49

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Good good. Is she okay with it all?

Yes. She's been very convincing… even more so than I hoped. 
She holds herself like a police officer. She opens doors like one. xxx
Sent 12:52

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Ooh fantastic! She's got the stride down, has she? 
Can you take her to a cafe for lunch please? sit in the window? xxx

Need I remind you I have a fairly serious dietary restriction...? 
I am lunch intolerant. xxx
Sent 12:53

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Tell Livs you're not hungry. Just make it look like the two of you are getting cosy. 
Someone on that road's watching you both. make it look like I'm long forgotten xxx

I hope you realise the thought of that makes me deeply uneasy. xxx
Sent 12:55

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
I know gorgeous. Means a lot to me that it does. But its just for show. 
Livs is doing a good job pretending to be police. 
You can do a good job pretending I'm out of the picture xxx
As Mycroft laid the tray upon the table, Olivia looked up from her wrist-set with interest.

"Are you not...?"

"Uncertain I could rely upon their onion safeguards," Mycroft said, as he took a seat. "I'm rather fond of having open and unrestricted airways. Do eat, though. I have e-mails to respond to."

"Surely the coffee's not going to contain any - "

"What is it you're reading?" he asked, noting the hard-light screen that she'd opened.

"Just the handbook." Olivia reached for her jacket potato, pulling it carefully across the table. "I've nearly finished."

Mycroft wasn't sure if anyone at Scotland Yard had ever finished the Cross-Human Relations Handbook. Even the person who wrote the thing probably did so under serious duress.

"Not an absorbing read, I'm sure..."

"Oh - no, I... thought it was interesting how you do things. I didn't realise there were procedures for a lot of this stuff." She picked up a few spinach leaves with her fork. "I thought you just... knew what to do. Instinct."

Mycroft smiled, watching her eat.

He missed seeing Greg eat, he realised. Hazelnut spread - stealing a spoonful from the jar, standing tip-toe by the counter.

Soon.

"Police work requires aptitude rather than knowledge," he said. "Powers of observation, logic and a strong memory. The rest can be gained in time."

Olivia nodded, processing this.

"How do you - test whether you're good at those?" she asked. The casual tone was all too telling.

Mycroft held up a gloved hand. Her eyes flashed to it at once.

"Keep looking here," he said. Her gaze fixed into place. "Who is in this café with us?"

Olivia paused, reading his face. "Plenty of people."

"Describe some of them to me. Any you can remember."

Olivia took a moment to think, her food entirely forgotten.

"The - staff wear black," she said. "Except the woman serving at the counter."

"Describe her."

Olivia's eyes narrowed with care. "Blonde," she said. "Forty-five-ish? Sort of... heavy set. Tattoo
"Here." Her hand strayed to her own wrist, curling round it. "A blurry rose… she's got a white shirt on, and she seems more friendly than the others. Maybe she's the manager? She cares more about the business. She's not got her hair tied up, either. So she's not working with food."

Mycroft didn't need to look to confirm a word of it. He sat forwards.

"The other patrons," he said. "Any of them."

Olivia drew a breath.

"There's... a table of builders. Men. Towards the back. Kinda rough-looking. They were... eating fried breakfasts. One of them's a half-orc."

Mycroft quietly grieved that her path in life had brought her to note the presence of physically powerful men in groups.

"The couple sitting immediately by the door," he said, with interest. "How would you put their relationship?"

Olivia's forehead crumpled.

"There's - no couple sitting by the door," she mumbled.

Mycroft smiled. She searched his eyes.

"It's just a woman," she said. "A beauty therapist, on her phone."

Mycroft felt his eyebrows lift. Olivia was right; he'd noted the woman's occupation himself as they entered. "What tells you she's a beauty therapist?"

Olivia gave him a look of gentle scorn.

"Those curls and eyebrows?" she said. "On a Wednesday?"

She shifted, thinking further.

"And - she's got everything right at the edge of the table. Here. Close to her. She's used to having a rack of nail varnish take up all the room in the middle. It's habit."

Mycroft's pulse drummed against his ribs. Olivia had not once taken her eyes from his.

"The second-to-last establishment we visited," he said. "What was it?"

"The - second-to-last?"

"Anyone can remember the last of something they encountered. The second-to-last is far harder."

Olivia thought about it, frowning. "The charity shop," she said. "The volunteer was really upset about the attack. She had pearls…"

She reached, quietly, for her own bare neck.

"Pink pearls," she said. "Not real ones."

"What tie was I wearing yesterday?" Mycroft asked, holding her eyes.

"Grey paisley," she said.
Mycroft's heart contracted. "When was the Cross-Human Act of Equality passed?"

"2106." Olivia bit her lip. "Been amended a few times. Last one was - 2199, I think. Read that bit this morning."

Mycroft did not take his gaze from her face.

He pushed the jacket potato towards her.

"Eat," he said. "I know you are uncomfortable with praise. It will give you something to do while you listen to me very carefully."

Olivia did not touch the knife or fork. She held his gaze, unmoving.

Very well. Mycroft hoped it meant that, on some level, she was ready.

"You," he said, "have been treated appallingly by circumstance."

Olivia said nothing.

"When this operation is over," he went on, "I would like the two of us to have a very serious conversation about your potential."

Olivia paled.

The shutters fell in her eyes.

"I'm a… waitress," she muttered at him. "I don't have - potential."

"You have a great deal of it," Mycroft said, resisting the urge to be fierce with her. It wasn't what she needed. "What you've been denied is opportunity. Such an oversight can be amended with shameful ease."

"You're mad." Olivia's shoulders stiffened. She reached for her knife and fork. "Don't talk like that."

Mycroft felt his wrist-set vibrate.

"When this is over," he said. He pulled up his sleeve. "When we have more time..."

NEW MESSAGE FROM TJ TIERNEY

hey dr h. think we're all sorted here. ready for inspection.
come to command centre first plz? also known as 11 amhurst terrace. off amhurst road.
grey door next to bike racks.
can walk you around park afterwards if needed.
you got new sergeant with you?

"Command centre?" Olivia said, glancing at the dilapidated property they approached. It was an unassuming, grubby-looking door, on an unassuming and grubby-looking street. The small terrace
was narrow and built up on all sides. Any lurking observer would be hard-pressed to conceal themselves.

Mycroft checked the aerial map he'd loaded up on his wrist-set. Through a gated fence to the right, a sparsely-lit cut across a car park could have them onto Hackney Downs in less than a few minutes. Less than a minute, at a run.

TJ had chosen well.

Mycroft knocked briskly upon the grey door beside the bike-rack. "TJ?"

After a minute, the door opened. TJ appeared in the gap, now fully-bearded and looking rather nervous.


Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "Have you at least gathered up any underpants and pizza boxes?"

TJ visibly bit his tongue, eyes sparkling. "Yes, mum."

"Then I'm sure the young lady's sensibilities will cope, TJ. We weren't expecting you to decorate and make it pleasant."

"You serious? After all the ornamental cushions I bought?" TJ held open the door. "Seriously though, watch for wires... erm, I'm pretty sure there might be mice too. I had to rent somewhere cheap, so..."

They stepped into the carpetless room. It was cold, musty and unfurnished, and crammed to every corner with technology. The stuffy air hummed with innumerable devices - screens, computers and transmitters, all winking and blinking to themselves in the cramped space. An enormous hard-light map of Hackney Downs revolved in the centre of the room.

"So... this is the main thing..." TJ coughed, indicating the map. "We can watch everything here - I thought, combine it all in one place, so you're not jumping between screens... erm, we've got thermals going. You can see that now. Red blobs are people. Small red blobs are dogs, at a guess. You can even see birds when they get close to the scanners. We've got the Armed Response trackers hooked into this map, so we'll be able to see where all of Commander Arse's lot are located at any given time - and we've got some audio-monitoring tags hidden round different parts of the park. They'll fire up when we get going, and kick off if they pick up any noises that shouldn't be there. It's in case Exultus are able to mask their thermals. Unlikely. It'll be fine, but I figured... better safe than -..."

He trailed out, then picked up a fistful of headsets.

"You'll have one of these," he said, showing Mycroft. His eyes shone in quiet hope of approval. "I've got the frequencies knitted into Armed Response's gear. Basically, everyone'll be at your beck and call. You've got the ability to mute them all, too, if you need them to shut up and listen. Wise precaution with Armed Response. Been there, done that."

He took a breath - then turned to Olivia.

"I - figured we couldn't just send you off with... a massive headset. Might give the game away. So I've got - ... come see."

He led them both over to a work-desk, hunting through scraps of cannibalised technology and
tangled wiring.

Mycroft noted that the hair was growing thickly down his forearms now - it was creeping onto the back of his hands. It was a miracle he'd suppressed his transformation this long.

"Here," TJ said, picking up a small plastic box. "They're - maybe not your style, but…"

Inside was a pair of earrings: shining silver discs of hammered silver.

"One's your microphone," he told Olivia. "The other hides the transmitter. There's a tiny ear-piece goes with them - I'll show you how to fit it. Crap battery life, but I'll make sure you're all charged up everyday… so - so don't you worry about that."

His hand trembled as he gave her the box.

Mycroft noted the shake with quiet interest. Oh, indeed?

"For simplicity's sake," TJ said, gazing at Olivia, "you're not patched into Armed Response. You'll just have Dr Holmes. He's the central comms point. If you need them, he'll handle it. Oh, and Greg - you've got Greg, too. He's got a special channel to you. Insisted."

He gave her a flushed smile, anxious.

There was a pause.

"Tracking!" he burst out. Olivia jumped. "S-Sorry - almost forgot. Tracking. This is… kinda special actually. Bit proud of it. Here."

He grabbed another small box from his work desk.

"It's another one of mine," he said. "Most tracking technology is - … well, it's just not secure. It's just so hackable. Even high-end Scotland Yard trackers are hilarious. The tech is all based on the early stuff of last century. Couple of major developments, and they became universal in everything - but those basics are where your security flaws come in, and now they're built into every piece of - … so - … s-sorry. Rambling. Basically, it's based on totally different science. Means I have to be there with the receiver to track you, but it means I'm the only one who can. It's - call and response, basically. Marco Polo in mechanics. It's got a crazy long battery life, too. Thought about selling it - military - but… I dunno, they'd probably just smash it to bits with a hammer and keep using their corrupt stuff…"

He prized open the box, shyly.

It was a sovereign ring.

"Here," he said - and placed it within her open palm. "S'adjustable, if you - … and you don't have to be gentle with it. Just forget you've got it on. It'll quietly ping every second, and I can follow you."

He pointed at the laptop on the desk.

"There," he said, looking at the screen.

A tiny white dot flashed within a generated navy map - a steady white pulse, once a second - a single star.

"That's you."
There was a rather breathless silence.

Olivia fitted the ring onto her finger. Her expression contained no emotion whatsoever.

"Sorry it's a bit chunky." TJ audibly swallowed, then coughed to cover it. "Should've - got you something a bit more delicate, but…"

Mycroft had never wanted to text Greg quite so urgently. He was already writing the message in his head.

"This all seems excellent," he said.

TJ jumped - he'd forgotten Mycroft was there. Olivia covered her small smile with a rub of her chin, looking away.

"Did you manage to source some additional defensive measures for Olivia?" Mycroft asked.

"Oh - yeah," said TJ, embarrassed. "Couple things, actually. I'll get those to you in the morning. Are we - thinking tomorrow night for kick-off?"

His eyes flicked to Olivia. He didn't seem to dare look upon her properly, Mycroft thought - as if she were far too worthy to be muddied by the likes of his gaze.

"I'll get you kitted out," he said. "I promise. You'll be perfectly safe." His voice squeezed. "Totally perfect."

Olivia smiled. She rubbed the sovereign ring with her thumb.

"Thanks," she said. "You're very kind."

TJ flushed thickly beneath his beard. The raspberry stain was visible even by the blue glow of hard-light.

"S'alright," he managed. He squeaked a little. "No worries."

---

"Wish I'd been there," Greg murmured, lying against Mycroft's bare chest in the darkness.

Mycroft's fingers trailed with tenderness through his hair.

"It was rather affecting," he admitted. "TJ seems quite taken with her. He's not his usual self by any means, but… he seemed cheered by her presence, at least…"

Greg raised his head. His eyes were the deepest, softest, most captivating brown.

Mycroft felt his heart expand at the sight of them - those wide, gentle eyes, shining with enjoyment as they looked into his own.

"D'you think he's alright?" Greg asked. "I - didn't want to push him on the phone. Didn't want to intrude."

Mycroft stroked his cheek, thinking.
"I can't be sure," he said. "He's clearly been unsettled by something. Though sadly, I fear you're correct... it isn't our place to pry."

Greg laid his hand over Mycroft's.

"D'you ever want to just... take all the people you like," he said, "and put them somewhere safe with everything they'll ever need...? So you know they'll be alright."

Mycroft gazed into his lover's eyes.

A thickness formed in his throat.

"You can't imagine how often I think about that." He paused, brushing Greg's cheek with the pad of his thumb. "It would be a very small group of people," he confessed. "Perhaps a group of only two."

Greg smiled. He lowered his eyes, and turned his head to the hand that stroked him - kissing Mycroft's palm.

"Can you do something for me tomorrow?" he asked.

"Anything." Mycroft ran his thumb over Greg's lower lip. "Name it."

Greg's smile became a little awkward. "Kiss Olivia when you send her off across the park."

Mycroft's shoulders stiffened at once.

"I know," Greg said. "But - we need them to think it."

Mycroft inhaled, wishing the discomfort he felt weren't quite so physical. He couldn't bear the thought of someone in his arms except the man who was lying in them now. He felt the fledgling bond between them strain with distress at the thought of it. The feeling was keenly close to nausea.

Greg saw it in his face.

"For the plan," he said, wrapping his fingers with Mycroft's. "I know you'd show Olivia you actually care by never touching her in a million years - because you want her to feel safe around you. But... she needs to look like bait, gorgeous."

He paused, lifting their joined fingers back to his mouth.

"Do it for me?" he said. "Please."

Mycroft held his gaze. His heart thumped painfully.

"You don't understand what I saw in her today. She - isn't a prostitute, Greg. She isn't bait. You aren’t prey. None of you."

Greg's gaze quietened.

He leant down, and placed his lips against the bridge of Mycroft's nose.

"Then we need to catch what's preying on us, gorgeous. Or your humans won't be safe... and neither will you."

Mycroft closed his eyes, breathing it into the depths of his heart.
Greg's voice murmured somewhere outside his closed eyelids.

"This time tomorrow," he said, "we could have one of them. Custody cells."

Mycroft's soul burned with relief at the very thought.

"And I'll be back home," Greg said. His lips brushed Mycroft's.

Mycroft responded, gently.

"Home with you," Greg went on, between quiet kisses. "We'll be lying in bed, like this… you can get comfortable, and hold me however you need me…"

Mycroft's heart contracted, hard.

"Then," Greg said, "five minutes later… you'll have lost your every possible excuse for self-pity." His mouth curved. "And it'll be fucking dreadful for you."

Mycroft fought a smile with all his might. He tightened his arms around Greg and held him, feeling Greg grin with happiness against his neck, and he petted his fingers through the soft grey shock of hair. He told himself this would all be a memory soon.

Greg laid his cheek on Mycroft's chest.

"Have you found me a ring yet?" he asked.

Mycroft smoothed Greg's hair, feeling his smile quieten. At first, he thought to hide it.

He decided to voice the feeling.

He'd seen the consequences of hiding his fears. They'd walked that road together far enough now, and it was tiresome. Greg deserved better.

"I… would have," he murmured. "Truly."

"What's stopping you?"

Mycroft gathered his courage. "The thought that I'll present you with it, and see your face fall… and you'll reveal at last that you were being facetious all along. You'll ask how I could have even dreamed you were serious. Then, horrified, you will leave. And it will all have been a fairytale."

Greg lifted his head.

He looked into Mycroft's eyes, his gaze filled with amusement and love. A smile played about his mouth.

There was silence for some time.

"What do I have to do, Myke?" he said, at last.

Mycroft gazed at him, hesitant. "Do…?"

"To prove it," Greg murmured. "To show you, once and for all. What'll make you sure? Name it, gorgeous… I'll do it."

Mycroft's breath caught.
"Be patient with me," he decided, in the end. His throat squeezed. "Stay."

Greg's eyes shone.

"I love you," he said, and leant up. He pressed his lips to Mycroft's in the dark. "Tragic bastard," he grinned, as they kissed.

Mycroft's heart leapt. "Your tragic bastard," he said.
"How dare you touch him, any of you? How dare you cast eyes on him when I had forbidden it? Back, I tell you all! This man belongs to me! Beware how you meddle with him, or you'll have to deal with me."

- Bram Stoker
'Dracula' (1897)

Thursday 29th January

The day's first sound was the pat of feet across the floor - small, cautious steps.

For a moment, Olivia thought she was dreaming.

She then caught the tiny cough, shy and full of nerves. Half-asleep, and with a smile, she held up a corner of the covers.

As the little girl nestled into her arms, something soft with fur squashed between them - Blue Elephant. Olivia recognised his shape. She bundled the covers around Lexi, and for a long while just warmed the small body against her own. Lexi's breathing began to slow.

Just as she wondered if the little girl had fallen to sleep, a voice asked,

"Why are there men in the house?"

Olivia stroked her hair - shiny, black and soft, like her mother's. "They're policemen, baby girl," she said. "They're keeping you safe."

"Are we in danger?"

"No. Not with the police here. Are they leaving you alone?"

"Mm hmm." Lexi was quiet for a while, keeping something back until it felt safe to share. "They've got guns."

"They have, sweetheart. You just forget that though, okay?" Olivia gently brushed back her hair. "Don't tell anybody the police are here... nobody at school. None of your teachers, none of your friends. Can you special-promise for me?"

Lexi nodded, nuzzling into her collarbones.

"Special-promise," she said.

Olivia kissed the top of her head. "Good girl."
She should have known Lexi would be unsettled first. She was the calmest of the three - but it didn't mean things went unfelt. She just hid them. She kept the worries safe where nobody could spot them.

"Are your sisters nervous about the police?" Olivia asked, gently.

"No," Lexi mumbled. "They don't care. They're not afraid."

"Okay. Tell me if they get afraid, won't you? I'll make it alright."

Lexi fiddled with her elephant's tail for a while, thinking. "Will you pick us up from school today?"

Olivia's heart sank.

"No, sweetheart," she said. "I can't today. I'm out working, and I'll only be home late. You okay if Marian comes to get you?"

Lexi shifted a little. "Okay," she said.

There came a low, quiet buzz from the dresser beside the bed.

"What was that?" Lexi asked.

"Just my wrist-set… somebody messaging me." Olivia leant across her carefully, caught the strap with a finger and lifted it over. "You done your spelling sheet for school today?"

"Mm hmm. I did it all. Who's messaging you?"

Olivia checked the screen, squinting in the early morning gloom.

NEW MESSAGE FROM MYCROFT HOLMES

Good morning. Please find attached the research notes I mentioned - with my apologies for not sending these yesterday evening. I was unfortunately occupied.

A lot of it is very dense academia. As such, you'll be best starting with the 'Introductory Notes for Lestrade' folder.

(I'll leave you to deduce for whom they were compiled.)

As ever, I'm happy to answer any questions. You need only ask. M.

Olivia tapped to start downloading the attached database, then laid the wrist-set aside.

"Just my boss, baby girl… sending me some files I asked him for."

"Your boss?"

Olivia tucked the covers around Lexi's chin, bundling her up. "He's a policeman, too. He's called Mycroft. I'm - helping him find out what happened to your mum and Sam. He came round once to see you and your sisters… remember? With the diamond pattern socks. We had spaghetti."

"Dr Holmes," Lexi murmured beneath her chin.

Olivia hugged her. "Dr Holmes."
Lexi thought for a while, deciding how she felt.

"He was nice," she said at last. "He looked at my work for school..." She began to pet her stuffed elephant. "Said I was - doing well. Should be proud."

Something quiet - something so long forgotten it might never really have happened at all - shifted in Olivia's chest.

"Yeah, sweetheart..." She kissed Lexi's small head. "He says that to me, too."

"Have you found out what happened to Mum?"

"Not yet," Olivia said. "But we will... maybe even tonight, we'll get hold of someone who knows. Then we can ask them, and find out. I promise."

Lexi hesitated, holding onto something tightly for a while.

"Special-promise?" she said at last.

Olivia closed her eyes. She pressed her nose into the little girl's hair.

"Special-promise," she murmured.

Greg awoke to the gentle weight of eyes upon his face. He blinked, sleepily, and let the fuzz clear from his vision.

Mycroft appeared, gazing at him in reverence.

He smiled as he saw Greg's eyes open. His head was propped on one elbow; he was bare-chested and dishevelled in the pre-dawn darkness. He looked at peace.

He looked young, for the first time in days - he looked happy. It was the brightness in his eyes, Greg thought. They outshone the softly-smudged shadows beneath; the paleness in his cheeks; the thinning of his hair.

Greg had never loved him more.

He smiled back, his heart bumping softly. He reached up to touch Mycroft's cheek.

Mine, he thought. He stroked his fingertips over his lover's face - his cheek, his brow; the particular point of his nose; his chin; the lips that curved with delight as he ran his thumb across their seam. Mycroft caught his fingers to kiss them. Greg softened, smiling, watching as Mycroft touched each fingertip carefully with his mouth. He cherished them, holding Greg’s gaze all the while. His eyes were the deepest, proudest blue-grey.

Their fingers curled together in the quiet.

Mycroft kissed his knuckles - the back of his hand - the join of his wrist. He idled his mouth at the base of Greg's third finger, his eyes closing in bliss. He brushed his nose over the space.

As Greg watched Mycroft nuzzle at his hand, he realised with a rush that he'd spend his life with
this man.

Waking up like this everyday - the quiet peace of being together. It didn't matter where they were. A narrow single bed in a spare room was just perfect.

What mattered was that Mycroft was here.

There wasn't any way back now. There wouldn't be anyone after Mycroft Holmes. There was no way he could lie in perfect silence with someone like this. Other people just didn't compare. Nothing would make Greg's heart jump like that bemused smile; the crinkle of Mycroft's crow's-feet, the glitter of his eyes; the cleverness and fragility in his gaze.

*This is it, Greg thought. *This is how it feels.*

And not a drop of PT-309.

He leant up, slowly, and brushed his mouth over Mycroft's. As his eyelashes fluttered shut, his last sight was Mycroft's eyes closing too. Tender fingers soothed over the back of his neck, then up into his hair, and Mycroft lowered him gently into the pillows as they kissed.

After a few minutes, his lover's weight shifted atop him. Greg's breath hitched. He shivered, parting his legs, and let Mycroft settle in between them. The kiss deepened, tongues flashing softly. Mycroft's hands brushed over his body beneath the sheets - tender, searching and familiar. Greg's mind began to melt.

Afterwards, he dressed Mycroft in the dark, closing buttons as Mycroft sat on the edge of the bed. Mycroft's arms encircled his waist, holding him close.

"How the fuck would we have coped without this?" Greg murmured, as Mycroft dotted a trail of gentle kisses along his collarbones.

"We would not." Mycroft dipped his head, stroking his mouth over the skin above Greg's heart. "Not in the least."

Greg gazed down, feeling his pulse pick up in response.

"Can I see you during the day?" he asked. "Please. I - think I need it."


Greg rested his chin atop Mycroft's head.

"D'you remember all those days sat together in the office?" he murmured. "Don't think we realised how good we had it."

"Those days will return." Mycroft nuzzled at his heart. "With a little luck, perhaps sooner than we think."

Greg felt his soul sigh. As he brushed his fingers through Mycroft's hair, a quiet thought occurred.

"TJ's due back at work next week… s'Thursday. He's not even transformed."

Mycroft sighed. "Mm. I too have become aware of that."

"What do we do?"
"In theory, another technician could operate the equipment..."

"Christ… no. Livs's life is in our hands. We need the best."

"Agreed… though, in that case, we will need TJ. We would have to postpone the operation for a few days - let him transform. Afterwards, he should be able to see Olivia safely across the Downs each night and still make it to Scotland Yard for his Comms shift."

"Yeah… he starts at eleven, so…” Greg bit his lip. "D'you think we're pushing him?"

"So far as he's told us both, he appreciates the extra income..."

"Bollocks to his income, Myke. He's already been staving off his transformation with sugar and isotonic gel. When he goes, he's going to go like a fucking volcano. Two jobs isn't gonna help him recover."

Mycroft processed this, thinking. He stroked a quiet pattern at the base of Greg's spine.

"He shall need further time off work to transform," he said. "That much is clear."

"And we won't be able to let Livs do her walk without him."

"No. But for TJ's benefit, another week of leave is the priority." Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "Do we approach Yardley?"

Greg hesitated, looking down into his eyes.

"Yardley's a - bit of a twat, from what I've seen. If you want to force him to do something, best approach him from above."

"Amelia?"

"Yep. Maybe HR, too... and just hope TJ doesn't get grief from him afterwards."

"TJ is the beating heart of his division," Mycroft said. "If the man opts to focus on his own racial prejudices ahead of that, he is a twat and a fool."

Greg smiled a little. "Can you speak to Amelia and HR, then?"

"I will." Mycroft squeezed Greg's arse, kissed above his heart one last time, and then rose to his feet. "I'll see Amelia first thing."

Greg hesitated, watching him pick up his coat and move to the window.

"Mycroft?" he said.

Mycroft pulled on his coat. "Mm?"

"When TJ's transforming… I mean - we'll be out of action for a few days."

"We will."

"No Hackney Downs. No Armed Response." Greg paused. "I'll - be a loose end. Just lying low without anything to do."

Mycroft waited, following this train of thought with concern.
"I don't want to just sit in this room," Greg said. "I mean... if I'm going to sit in one room for days..."

Realisation dawned.

Mycroft's expression faded; uncertainty crossed his eyes.

"It's - too risky, Greg. If my flat remains under surveillance - "

"You've been getting in and out," Greg said. "You could sneak me in the same way. Dress me as a porter or something... then, until TJ's back with us... I could just stay in your flat. Work on the investigation with you and Livs during the day." He paused. "Be with you at night."

As he looked into Mycroft's face, he saw there a vastly conflicting range of emotions. They all coalesced into a pale, longing sort of numbness - it made him look oddly vulnerable.

"Greg..." he said at last, weak.

Greg's heart twinged.

"Think about it," he begged. "Please."

Mycroft wrestled with it for a moment longer.

His face then relaxed; he gave a quiet nod. "I will think about it. If it could be achieved without compromising your safety..."

Greg found a smile. "Get me delivered rolled up in a carpet," he suggested.

Mycroft smiled too, his eyes shining. He opened up the catch of the window.

"'Where there's a will'..." he remarked.

The commander listened to Mycroft's request, gave a short nod, and pulled up a screen on her comms panel. It was a minute after nine. Olivia was locked safely in the office, reading through the vampire research. Mycroft only hoped she didn't start forming any conclusions in his absence.

"Will another week be sufficient?" Amelia asked. "How close is TJ to transformation?"

"Very close," Mycroft said. He took a drink from the paper cup in his hand. "If he hasn't started by Monday at the latest, I believe he'll need to be prompted... for his health, if nothing else."

Amelia raised an eyebrow, pausing as she typed. "Dangerous," she noted.

"DI Lestrade is prepared to do it. He'll have access to padded armour through Commander Elwood - and I'll ensure he takes every precaution."

Amelia nodded, appeased.

"Fine. Lestrade knows best," she said, and continued to type. "I understand you're having your trial run tonight. Are there any - "
Her comms panel uttered a jarring bleep.

She frowned, tapping the screen again.

The same error tone emitted. Amelia sat forwards with a sigh, frowning at the digital keyboard.

"For heaven's sake," she muttered, and sounded each letter as she pressed it. "T- I - E - R - N - E - Y."

The panel jarred again.

Mycroft watched with a frown, lifting his cup to his mouth, as Amelia pressed the panel for more details. An error message flashed through. It offered only the curious insistence that no current employee records were found for T-I-E-R-N-E-Y.

She tested her own name. It found her within moments; she cancelled it.

"Attempt mine," Mycroft said, with rising concern.

H - O - L - M.

Holmes. Mycroft. Cross-Human Relations. 182-00-192-H.

Amelia slashed up another window on the Comms panel, hit the general line for HR and sat back in her chair, crossing one leg over the other in annoyance.

"Harriet?" she said, the moment it was answered. "Vickery. You've got an error somewhere in an employee file. We're no longer able to reference him in internal messages. It's Timothy Tierney - officer in Technical Comms."

The voice on the other end hesitated. Mycroft caught the catch of breath.

"Did you say... Tierney, commander?"

"Yes," said Amelia, frowning. "Why? Is there some problem?"

A single minute into the morning's target practice, Greg's wrist-set began to vibrate. He'd only just reached the top of the queue for a rifle.

"Hang on… can you - ?" He handed back the rifle with care, and twisted his wrist around to see. INCOMING CALL FROM MYCROFT HOLMES. "Sorry," he told the armoury assistant, with a quick smile. "Back in a sec."

He stepped into a sideroom of the equipment store, where combat boots of every size and type sat on shelves to the ceiling like roosting birds in a rookery.

"Answer," he said, leaning back against the door. "Hey… missing me already, are you? Barely even nine."

"TJ's employment was terminated by Officer Yardley," Mycroft said. "Misconduct, poor attitude
and unauthorised absence. Three days ago."

Greg said nothing, staring at the wall of gleaming black combat boots.

"Greg?" Mycroft's voice was hard as rock. He was on the move; Greg could hear him walking, and at speed.

"I - I'm here." Greg's throat contracted around the words. "Are you serious?"

"Yes," said Mycroft. "Entirely. I'm assuming you didn't know about this."

"Christ, of course I didn't know about - …" Greg's heart began to pound. "Holy fuck - Yardley fucking fired him? Over a single fucking week off? He's faster than the whole fucking lot of them! He built most of his pod from scratch! That's - "

Greg lunged for the door handle. His jaw set.

"Right," he said. "Fuck my cover story. I'm going to speak to Yardley. I'm not fucking standing for this."

"You're about to be beaten to it," Mycroft said, his voice shaking. There came the bang of a door.

"Stay precisely where you are."

As the glass door of his office flew open, Officer Yardley looked up with a lurch. Mycroft strode into the room. At his side came Olivia, pale and angry.

" - precisely where you are," Mycroft told his wrist-set, and cut the call with a slash of his fingers.

He faced Yardley across the desk. His eyes flared.

"Timothy Tierney," he began, in a voice of iron. "We understand that you made the decision to terminate his employment contract as of seven AM on Monday morning. What prompted this?"

Yardley gripped the edge of his desk, breathing hard.

"Timothy's frequent absence," he said, in measured and angry tones, "has been an inconvenience to the running of my - "

"One week," Mycroft barked, "every three months. The boy was even covering it with his annual leave. A paper-thin excuse, and an insult."

"In addition to his attitude!" Yardley spat back. "His argumentative behaviour falls far short of what I expect from my - "

"That young man's commitment to his job was incontestable!" Mycroft shouted, white with rage as he bore down upon Yardley across the desk. His face warped with fury. "He was a credit to his division! A credit to Scotland Yard! The boy's technological skill and his speed with the system have this entire city within his debt. It is known throughout the building and I therefore conclude that you have no reasonable justification to terminate his employment."

"I had every justification!" Yardley shouted back. "This is my department!"
"And you operate it according to your own racist inclinations! You terminated TJ Tierney because of his lycanthropy - it is despicably apparent!"

"How dare you - "

"Cross-Human Relations will be contesting his termination with immediate effect," Mycroft snarled, and watched the wretched man wither like a bleached weed. "Amelia Vickery is in discussion with legal experts as we speak. The entire department will pay the closest possible interest in whatever pathetic rationale you attempt to use to mask your prejudice, Yardley, and we will be challenging it at every possible stage. You have made a grievous mistake."

Pale, Yardley mouthed at him. He looked like he wanted to cower.

Olivia stepped forwards at Mycroft's side, deathly calm. Her eyes blazed as they locked onto Yardley.

"Officer Yardley - are you aware that under the terms of Section 20 of the Cross-Human Act of Equality 2199, you can be prosecuted for subjecting an employee to unfavourable treatment because of a medical need arising from their genetic adaptations?"

Yardley stared at her, his chest heaving.

Olivia lifted her chin. "You've also failed in a legal requirement to make reasonable provisions to TJ in terms of flexible sick leave," she said. "Your refusal to do that amounts to direct discrimination. The maximum penalty is a prison sentence."

"And," Mycroft added, as his heart burned with pride, "when you are found guilty of unfair dismissal, rest assured - Cross-Human Relations will push for the full penalty. You are about to regret every harsh word you ever aimed at that young man."

He stepped back, still staring into Yardley's eyes.

"I look forward to escorting you from the building," he breathed, turned on his heel, and strode from the office.

Olivia cast Yardley a disgusted look across the desk. She too then turned away.

As their footsteps stormed off along the corridor, Officer Yardley slumped over his keyboard. He put his head into his hands.

Olivia was still shaking as she lit her second cigarette.

"What a cast-iron cunt," she said around it.

Mycroft couldn't have phrased it better himself.

"Amelia will eviscerate the fool," he said, as Olivia reached across and lit his cigarette too. "The man will come to appreciate the true horror of his actions. I will ensure it."

Olivia laid her head back against the wall, pulling smoke into her lungs. The staff car park around them was deserted; they were alone.
"Have you told Greg?" she asked, flicking the cigarette.

Mycroft shook his head. "Not yet." He filled his veins with nicotine, shut his eyes, and said, "You were extremely impressive with Yardley."

"Thank you," Olivia replied. No emotion sounded in her voice.

"Greg will be proud of you. Supremely proud. As am I."

"Thank you."

Mycroft pulled up his sleeve, reaching for his wrist-set.

He realised he was shaking, too.

"I'll speak to Greg now," he said. "Then we need to see to TJ..."

Kit was waiting at the end of the Prisoner Transport Tunnel, ready to go. Just as Greg reached her, he caught the feeling of vibration around his wrist.

"Hang on," he called, over the roar of the engine. "Two secs." Against the noise, he shouted to his wrist-set: "Answer."

"It's me." Mycroft audibly winced at the raging of the engine, raising his voice. "Olivia and I have dealt with Yardley. If the man has any sense, he'll be clearing out his desk this moment. Where is TJ?"

"Hackney," said Greg. "I checked. He's fixing stuff up at Amhurst Terrace."

"Thank you. Olivia and I will head there now."

"Yeah?" said Greg. "You're about to be beaten to it. Kit and I are setting off. See you at Amhurst. Don't be long."

"Greg!" Mycroft's voice took on a ferocity that didn't quite drown out the engine. "Greg, you are not to be seen outside of Armed Response - under any circumstances!"

"It's fine," Greg said. "I won't be seen. Promise. Meet you there."

He closed the call, took the helmet Kit offered him, and pulled it down over his head. He snapped the black visor into place.

As he climbed onto the motorbike behind her, Kit inclined her head over one shoulder.

"Ready?" she called. The helmet muffled her voice.

Greg latched his arms around her waist. "Yep," he said. "Let's go." She kicked the bike into gear.
TJ sat at the monitor bank in Amhurst Terrace, checking his way through sixty-four separate audio tags. A few had been investigated by animals in the night - he needed to be sure they all still worked. A missing tag was a gap in the fence, and he couldn't risk that.

He knew - really - that Excultus didn't even have a clue the tags were there. They certainly wouldn't know if one was broken. Even TJ couldn't tell without tedious checking.

But he still wanted to be thorough.

Even if it felt rather tragic, now.

As he worked, carefully clicking through each tag in turn, listening and adjusting volumes as he went, he was trying not to think of his pod back at Scotland Yard - the equipment he'd built up over a course of years; the system he'd mastered; the calls that would be coming through even now.

He'd had it all taken off him in less than a minute.

'Thorough' hadn't meant anything in the end. Years of work, years of keeping his pod at the top - and it was all done and dusted in the space of a single form.

He could still hear Yardley's voice.

*Frankly, Tierney, you've only yourself to blame... perhaps this will teach you that employment is a privilege, and you were lucky. I'm not surprised you've only realised it this late.*

The worst bit was that Yardley was right.

TJ had been lucky; he hadn't needed Yardley to teach him that.

Life had done it already.

There were a hundred reasons you could reject a werewolf's job application. None of them needed to be 'werewolf' - especially somewhere security-focused like Scotland Yard. *Underqualified for the role* would do. *Deciding to progress with another candidate* was a pretty tidy end to the conversation, too. If you wanted to be a nightclub bouncer or a builder, there was usually a place for you in the world. But if you turned up somewhere claiming you knew a thing about technology, you'd be squinted at, told you were surprisingly skinny for a werewolf, then politely invited to apply again in future.

The only job TJ had anymore was this one. Vampire-baiting on Hackney Downs - and it could end on any night.

He'd still do his best.

Doing his best was all he knew.

He'd thought he was getting good at it by now.

As he made his way from tag to tag, TJ rustled sadly through a cinema-sized bag of toffee popcorn. It was helping him to stay awake. He'd had weird dreams last night, and his internal clock was still haywire. It wasn't often he got to be up at ten AM. Sunlight and people were still a bit of a novelty.

He supposed he'd get used to them in time.

*A-TAG-54-QUAD3c. Loading. Please wait.*
Nearly there.

The tag came online, bringing with it no sound. TJ scowled. He adjusted the dial, and was surprised to catch only the thin, reedy whine of a motorbike engine. These things usually picked up nearby leaves and grass ahead of traffic noise. TJ opened up the audio levels, sighed, and went to adjust them - only to realise that everything was at zero; that the tag was broken; and that the motorbike he'd heard had just turned onto Amhurst Terrace.

As it came to a stop outside, TJ paused. He heard heavy boots hit the pavement.

The knock on the door made him jump.

"TJ?"

He knew that voice.

Greg shouldn't be out and about, though - and he definitely shouldn't be here.

TJ got to his feet, abandoned his bag of popcorn by the monitor, and picked his way nervously across the glittering technological lair, trying not to trip over wires.

The lock on the door took half a minute to deactivate.

As TJ eased it open, and peered out, he came face-to-face with a helmeted figure of roughly the right height. All identifying features from the ground-up were concealed in black combat leathers.

TJ raised an eyebrow.

"Is that... you?" he checked.

The figure glanced along the terrace, checking they were alone, then snapped up their visor.

It was Greg.

"It's me," he said. "Let me in? Not meant to be out in public. Mycroft'll have my hide."

TJ glanced behind Greg. A second helmeted figure was leaning against a gleaming monstrosity of a motorbike, typing into a wrist-set with cigarettes at the ready.

"Kit gave me a lift," Greg explained. "S'alright, TJ. She'll keep watch."

TJ stood back, numbly letting Greg into the room.


As TJ re-armed the lock, Greg laid his helmet down on a stack of back-up PCU units.

"How come you're here?" TJ asked. "You're meant to be squirreled away in Armed Response, aren't you? I thought you were meant to be the biggest secret in London."

He looked around; Greg looked back at him.

Greg's expression folded.

"Fuzzball… did Yardley fucking fire you?" he asked.

For half a second, TJ was about to deny it. The instinct to hide it was as sharp and real and
frightening as a sudden stab of pain.

Then he saw the gentleness in Greg's face - the pity in his eyes - and something in his heart gave way.

Before he could help it, he'd started to cry.

Lestrade's hug formed a solid wall of leather and quiet words all around him. He held TJ as tightly as a parent, and listened to him whimper and sob as if this weren't the most mortifying thing that had ever happened in existence.

"It's alright," he said softly, a hundred times. "M'sorry, mate... it's alright..."

Eventually, TJ started to believe it. He did his best to breathe it in, trembling like a puppy as Lestrade rubbed between his shoulders. He'd never been so embarrassed in his life - but his arms wouldn't bloody let go. He'd not hugged someone in months. He just wanted to cry and be cuddled.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Greg asked, at last, scrumpling his hair. "Why the fuck didn't you say, fuzzball?"

TJ shook.

"S-Sorry..." Pain creased his heart afresh. "C-Couldn't believe - then just - a-ashamed - f-fuck ... what'm I gonna do, Greg? What will I do?"

Greg breathed around him, thinking.

"Have you told your mum and dad?" he asked.

Panic spiked across TJ's heart.

"M'n-not going back to Manchester," he said in desperation. "N-No way. No way in hell."

"But do they know, TJ? They'll look after you, mate... support you."

"They'll come down for me," TJ whimpered. "Fetch me home. I - don't want to leave L-London."

Greg patted his back. "Okay... well... I think you should tell them - but it's your decision. And you won't have to leave London, mate. We'll get you sorted. I promise."

TJ pulled back, covering his face. He padded his tears with the sleeve of his hoodie.

"Dunno how I'll pay my stupid rent," he mumbled.

"We'll get your job back," Greg said. "Mycroft's already torn Yardley a new arsehole in your honour. And Commander Vickery's gonna contest the dismissal."

TJ almost laughed.

"Y-Yeah?" he said. "So I can go work for Y-Yardley again? Sure he'll be nice to me from now on..."

"It won't be Yardley," Greg said. It was a promise. "There's no way he'll stay on as Head of Comms - not when Vickery's done with him. And if you don't want to come back at all, that's fine. We'll find you a new job. Every step of the way, we're gonna help."
"Thanks, Greg…" TJ staunched a fresh wave of tears. Sweet Jesus, this was embarrassing. "M'sorry I didn't tell you."

"Hey… it's okay. So long as you know it's nothing you've done."

TJ bit his cheek, trembling again. "I - I could've - "

"Nothing you've done," Greg said, his eyes fierce. "Not a thing. Alright?"

He stared into TJ's face.

"Yardley was on shaky ground even letting you use your annual leave to cover medical. You should've had sick leave as well. And he should've found you cover without a word of complaint, because you were his top responder - because you were the best, TJ. You're still the best. You'll be the best at whatever you turn your mind to. Don't you let a single fucking word of this get to you."

TJ flapped, distressed, at his fresh tears.

Greg smiled; his eyes crinkled at the edges. "M'not gonna tell anyone, fuzzball… stop worrying." He watched fondly as TJ dried his face. "I spend half my evenings sobbing over Dr Holmes... he carries tissues specially now."

TJ covered his face, crying again.

Greg pulled him into another hug. "Christ," he said gently, as he stroked TJ's hair flat. "All this, and you've not transformed… how did you not just rip Yardley apart? The wanker's lucky to be alive."

TJ convulsed, unleashing a bubble of a sob against Greg's shoulder.

"C-Can't," he whimpered. "Stuck. S-Sad, not angry. I - I c-can't find the angry."

He felt Greg sigh, hugging him tighter.

"We'll find you your angry," he said. "M'taking you to The Range, mate. No more arguing. We'll induce you. You can't go on like this."

TJ's heart heaved. He didn't want to risk hurting anyone - not for anything in the world - but he couldn't cope with one more sleepless night. He couldn't cope with one more acne outbreak, one more hot flush, one more two AM meltdown crying into a bowl of chocolate custard while watching internet videos of happy rescue pets with their new owners.

"Okay," he whimpered, trembling.

Greg breathed out.

"Right," he said. "Good. Tonight? Get this over with?"

TJ flushed in panic. "O-Oh, Jesus - but - need to test all the - "

"After Olivia's home safe." Greg drew him back to arm's length, and surveying him. "We'll do the test run tonight, make sure it all works, then call it off for a few days. Take a rain-check. We'll sort you out, then get going with the plan again. You come first. Alright?"

TJ was too tired to protest anymore. "A-Alright," he said, and looked sadly down at his sneakers.
Greg smiled, rubbing his arm.

"I'm... sorry I didn't say anything," TJ mumbled. "Honestly. I just... I worried you'd be... or you might not wanna work with me anymore. K-Kinda need the money."

"You were always too good for Scotland Yard," Greg said, his eyes warm. "Always too good for Yardley. 'Course I still want to work with you."

TJ huffed, smiling. "Thanks. That's... thanks. I mean it."

A car was pulling up outside; they heard Kit call out a greeting.

"That'll be Mycroft," Greg said. "Unlock the door, will you? He'll want to come and make a fuss of you too... probably not so much hugging, but you never know."

TJ dried the last of his tears on his sleeve. "God..."

"I'll get Mycroft to bring you to The Range tonight," Greg said. "And we'll get you fixed. Okay?"

TJ flushed, glancing sideways as he started unlocking the door. "You know I don't get worked up easy, right? My brothers used to try and trigger me... usually just made me cry."

Greg smiled.

"I've had plenty of practice winding up Mycroft," he said. "You'll be a doddle."
(Before we begin... I need to say thank you to Tuliaart for this gorgeous illustration of Kit. I screamed so loudly opening it. The better part of my day's now spent gazing at it, and I just had to share with you all. Thanks so much, Tuliaart. You are ridiculously talented and wonderful, and have made my year.)

The gentle pressure, and the thrilling touch,
The least glance better understood than words

- Lord Byron
'Don Juan' (1821)
"How long has it been," Greg murmured, "since we stood outside and smoked?"

Mycroft huffed, stroking his thumb along the length of the cigarette. He watched with fondness as Greg lit one of his own.

"Horribly," he said, "it's only been a matter of days. It simply feels much longer."

They'd stepped into the car park beside TJ's command centre, and tucked themselves out of sight behind a parked white van. A few minutes alone; it was a rare indulgence.

Mycroft was enjoying every moment of it.

"Seems like months." Greg's eyes narrowed as his cigarette took light. He snapped the lighter shut and handed it back to Mycroft, then leant against the van beside him. Their elbows brushed. "Feel like I'm naked in public," he muttered after the first deep drag. "Not used to 'outside' any more..."

Mycroft flashed him a quiet smile. He wasn't sure 'naked in public' would be any less arousing than the motorcycle leathers, but kept the thought to himself. It wasn't even eleven yet, he thought. He needed to learn some self-restraint.

"We shouldn't be doing this," he said. "If you're seen..."

"Nobody around," Greg said, softly. "Besides... Kit's on Amhurst Terrace keeping watch." He lifted his chin, blowing smoke into the air above them. "If anyone appears, I'll hop into one of those wheelie bins over there. Be fine, gorgeous."

Mycroft fought a smile. "I was a professional police officer, once. Before you arrived."

Greg's eyes glittered. "D'you reckon Vickery thought you'd be a good influence on me?" he said.

"Alas that the influence rather went the other way..." A thought occurred. Mycroft glanced down at his shoes, flicking the ash from his cigarette. "She - knows, Greg. Amelia."

"Knows - ?"

"That we are..." Mycroft gave him a guarded look. "She and I had a rather stifled discussion about it. She seems to be under no illusions."

"I wondered what that text on Tuesday was about." Greg smiled around his cigarette, his gaze dark and playful. "My P45's in the post, is it?"

"I - believe she's willing to entrust us with our own discretion."

Greg's smile broke into a grin. "Christ. That's a fatal mistake, if ever I saw one."

"Scoundrel," Mycroft chided, resisting his amusement. "This is serious."

"Yeah?" Greg's eyes glinted. "Then how come you're grinning, Queen of Hearts? Doesn't look all that serious."

Mycroft suppressed his surge of simultaneous arousal, annoyance and delight, dragging on the cigarette. Damn those eyes. They were bewitching - big and dark, and fixed solely on his. The motorbike leathers were not helping.

He'd missed moments like this.
He'd missed them desperately. "Tease me all you wish," he said, "but we shall have to be more careful. Amelia can only turn a blind eye to so much. She has her own position to consider."

"How about I pretend to move to Manchester?" Greg said. "That should do it."

Mycroft wanted to kiss him. "You are a beast," he said. "I'm going to get no sense from you, am I?"

Greg grinned, dragging on his cigarette. "Just happy to see you in daylight for once." He looked down at his boots. "Missed this. I'm - looking forward to it, y'know... back to normal. You and me against the world."

Mycroft gave him a small smile. "I hope you realise we're now facing a delay, in that regard. If you're planning to induce TJ, the operation will need to be postponed."

Greg twitched his cigarette. "Needs must." He shivered as a breeze found its way down the side of the van. "I'll speak to Luke - tell him we've been rained off for a few days. We'll have this evening as a trial run, then wait for TJ to transform back... it's not a problem."

It wasn't ideal timing, Mycroft thought - but TJ's health came first. The boy was already under intense stress. His transformation was likely to be a dramatic one.

If anything, provoking it under protected conditions at The Range would be by far the safest course of action. It would be more comfortable for TJ, too. These things were unavoidable.

Greg released a plume of smoke towards his boots, and said, "I was - gonna have a word with Kit, by the way."

"Oh?" Mycroft glanced at him, thumbing his cigarette. "What about?"

Greg took a moment to put the words together. "She got me here unnoticed. Helmet… leathers. The bike." He paused, rolling the cigarette across his lower lip, and glanced into Mycroft's eyes. "Crossed my mind she could get me somewhere else unnoticed, too."

With a flush, Mycroft realised. He said nothing, chest tightening as he gazed at Greg.

"It'd be late," Greg added. He lowered his eyes, breathing smoke. "Small hours - after we're done with TJ. She could drop me at the back door. Hell, I'll carry in a pizza box if you want... whatever makes it workable for you."

Mycroft felt his heart squeeze. "Your life now seems to be spent making risky plans more palatable for me," he noted.

Greg cast him a little smile.

"Your life's spent denying yourself what you want. Always this excuse, that excuse... I'm just getting good at fending them off in advance."

Mycroft couldn't deny that for a moment.
"You are," he admitted. "Very good."

Greg looked into his eyes; he bit his lip. "I know you're still doubting a little," he murmured. Mycroft felt his stomach tense. "I know you give your irrational worries way too much time and respect. And we both know that if I let you, you'd agonise over this for the next ten years. Just... life's short, gorgeous. Best spend it happy."

Mycroft had never wanted to hold him more - to kiss his face; to nuzzle into his neck, and feel at peace.

"Greg... I..." He swallowed around his fear, determined to speak. "It may be short, but this is your life. Your - entire life. I only doubt because I want the best for you. The very best. Please tell me you understand that."

Greg gave a quiet huff. Something had amused him; Mycroft wasn't quite sure what. Greg studied him for a few moments, the cigarette still smoking between his fingers, then returned it to his mouth.

"You don't hear it," he murmured. "Do you?"

Mycroft hesitated. "What don't I hear?"

"You say you want the best for me," Greg said, and raised an eyebrow. "Like that couldn't possibly be you."

Mycroft's heart contracted tightly.

"I - ..." He pushed back against the rising distress, willing himself not to clamp shut - not now - not after they'd come this far. "I - I don't see how - ...

Greg's expression softened. He tossed his half-smoked cigarette aside.

"I know you don't," he said. He wrapped his arms around Mycroft's waist without hesitation, gathering him into a hug. "It's okay, gorgeous... m'sorry. I'll show you. I'll get you there."

Mycroft's throat squeezed around the words. He couldn't keep them in. Greg's arms made him feel weak and full of warmth.

"Come home," he managed. Oh God, I should be stronger. I should be stable. "Please."

Greg held him a little tighter.

"Course." He kissed the corner of Mycroft's jaw. "We'll just spend a few days together... work, and watch TV, and look after each other. What happens happens." Greg began to rub his back. "I love you. That comes first."

Mycroft let his eyes close.

"I love you," he murmured. "Very much..." His breath caught as he felt it - real, burning, whirling. This man was his everything. "Quite irretrievably, Greg."

Greg placed a gentle kiss against his neck. "Nothing to worry about, then. Life's good."

They were quiet for some time, simply holding each other.

Mycroft felt himself drifting in the warmth of the man who loved him. Some part of him still didn't
believe it. He worried he'd never truly believe it.

Not just any man, he thought - but this man. This man who could have taken his pick, and yet he was here, holding Mycroft in his arms behind a van in some car park in Hackney. It was too wondrous to be real; it felt too real to be a fairytale. Greg smelled like nothing was ever worth worrying about, ever again. His arms were safe and they were gentle.

But the fact was he could only live one life.

If Mycroft claimed that life, it would rob him of every other other he might have lived - every path he might have taken.

That seemed like an astonishing thing to claim. It always would.

Mycroft tightened his arms around Greg's back, willing his hands not to shake.

"D'you think we've been gone suspiciously long yet?" Greg rumbled in his ear. "TJ and Livs'll be wondering..."

Mycroft swallowed.

"Just... one minute more," he whispered. He stroked his fingers through Greg's hair. "Please."

Greg smiled. He nuzzled into Mycroft's neck, a warm stroke of stubble, and placed a tiny kiss against his ear.

"Sure," he said. "Let's call it a long minute."

"Before I give you these," TJ said, and regarded Olivia rather nervously, "you've gotta promise me something."

Olivia waited, making no promise whatsoever. She watched as he cleared a space on his work-desk, bent down to a drawer and retrieved a small clutch of things from inside.

"Don't worry about wasting them," he said. "I've got a few bits for you - they're all powerful - but they're meant to be used. If you get nervous and use them in a panic, it's fine. I can make more. I figure I'm... your last line of defence, as it were. If Dracula gets his hands on you, it's up to my gear to keep you safe. So... first..."

He handed her what looked like a dark grey plastic geode, about the size of a fist, filled with a crystal-like cluster of bulbs.

"What is it?" she asked, frowning.

"Seems like it's mostly a distraction game," TJ said. "So - strobe grenades. I've got you two. One for each pocket. Jam the button, drop it and run. The light flashes'll be seen from Croydon. Anyone who's not expecting it can say goodbye to their retinas for the next three minutes."

Jesus. This is now my daily life. "This button here?" Olivia checked.

TJ twitched. "Yes, but - don't now. For obvious reasons."
"Right I - think I can handle that."

"Next - on a similar theme, I guess - I've done you a mosquito," The device he handed over resembled an electronic cigarette, with a corded wrist loop. "It's easy to activate. Just wrench the cord out and run. Hold onto this one, though. Don't drop it. You won't hear it working, but it will be."

"What's a - 'mosquito'?"

"Sonic deterrent," TJ said. "They started these out two centuries ago, warding loitering teenagers away from shopping centres... young humans can pick up higher frequency sounds than older ones. It's just an age thing. But the tech works on cross-humans, too."

He gave her a nervous smile.

"Vampires can hear higher frequencies," he said. "This is high enough to be painful. They won't be able to ignore it in a hurry." He hesitated. "Just don't... activate it near me, will you?"

Olivia smiled slightly. "You can hear - ?"

He blushed. "Yeah. And it's loud."

"Alright." Olivia looped her hand carefully through the cord, testing it. "These - seem great. Thank you."

TJ glanced towards the door. He hesitated, drifted towards it, and checked the lock.

"Erm... before Dr H and the King of Hearts are done 'smoking'," he said, with gratuitous air quotes, "there's... something else. I wasn't sure if I should, but - erm - I'd kick myself if I didn't."

Olivia's heart sank like a stone.

Don't, she begged him in silence. Please. She kept her face as guarded as she could, hoping that he'd take the hint and stop - just stop talking - and then maybe they wouldn't have to do this.

She didn't want to hurt him. She didn't want to be yet another kick in the face for someone who didn't deserve it.

She didn't want to hear herself say it, either.

She didn't want to see that moment he found out she was damaged goods - that moment all interest was withdrawn with a lurch. She'd endured that moment before. She couldn't bear it - not today. Not when she was still pretending to be someone special: Detective Sergeant Olivia Reid, with all her safety precautions and her posh white blouse and her potential.

Not from the werewolf boy with the big tawny eyes.

"You can't tell Greg," he said, and Olivia faltered. "And you mustn't tell Dr H. I'd be in a cell by tea-time. They'll go postal on me if they find out. I'm not kidding. I just - want you to be safe. And I lost my stupid job, so... whatever. Let's get semi-legal."

He coughed, rummaging around in a drawer.

"Maybe a bit less than semi-legal," he muttered. "Just don't tell them... alright?"

Bewildered, Olivia watched as he lifted something out. "Alright..."
It was a clear zip-lock pouch.

Inside it were a pair of black thermal gloves.

"Get them in your bag," he said. He glanced at the door. "Quick."

Olivia unzipped her handbag at once and slid the case inside, next to her purse and her tampons. She locked the clasp.

As the gloves vanished from sight, TJ visibly relaxed.

"What the hell are they?" she asked, searching his face.

"They're, erm - somewhat banned under UK law," he admitted. "Most countries' laws, if I'm honest."

Olivia's eyes flew wide. She almost snapped that she was a police officer - then realised with a lurch that she wasn't. The concern did not ebb. "What are they?" she demanded.

"They're - CEW tech," TJ said, flushing. "Pretty advanced CEW."

"CEW?"

"Conducted Electrical Weapons." He hesitated; he bit the corner of his lip. "Taser tech. Electro-shock."

Olivia's jaw dropped. She almost heard it hit the floor with a clunk.

"Seriously," TJ added with urgency, his eyes darting towards the door, "if you get caught with those... they're a prohibited weapon. Hilariously prohibited. So just keep schtum about them, okay?"

"Oh my God," Olivia whispered, staring at him in horror. "And you've - … they're in my handbag!"

"But they work," he said, desperately. "That's why they're prohibited. I - rigged the design up myself. It's activated by gripping."

He showed her with both hands - clenching his fists in one movement.

"Like this. Both hands at once, hard. And hold on."

"Oh my God."

"The mechanism delivers the charge from all ten fingers," he said, "and keeps it going as long as your grip stays clamped. Don't hold onto someone for longer than five seconds, or... well, it's a significant voltage. That's all I'll say."

Olivia couldn't imagine what some of her less reputable friends would pay for these. It would have at least four figures.

"Three seconds is enough to knock someone unconscious," TJ said. "And for God's sake, wear rubber-soled shoes. But - look, they might make a difference when nothing else will. I'd rather give them to you than wish I'd given them to you."

"God..." Olivia bit down on her lip ring, nervous. "How do I take them on and off?"
TJ gave her an entirely serious look. "Carefully," he said.

"Oh - God..." She should give them straight back; she knew she should. "Do they - need charging, or - ?"

"They can handle about thirty seconds of shock before they blow their circuits," he said, "and just stop working. They're useless after that point."

"Right..."

"Just - promise me you'll wear them, will you? Please." His eyes rounded at her, pained. "I... I know you won't need them. And you can give them back to me when this is over, like you never had them. It's just... you can't be too sure."

Olivia swallowed; it took effort. "Okay," she managed. "Okay, I - I will."

"And don't tell Dr H," he pleaded. "Or the King of Hearts. They'll go ballistic."

Which idiot came up with those ridiculous nicknames?

"Why did you even make these?" she asked. "I - mean, they're... bloody dangerous, frankly. Do you normally - "

"No," he said - and blushed to his eyebrows. "I want you to be alright. If the worst should happen." He hesitated. "It... happens more often than you think."

Olivia's heart thumped strangely.

"You'll be fine though," he added. He looked away from her, pink-cheeked beneath the fluff. "Greg'll look after you. He's - always looked after me. He's a good guy. So is Dr H, believe it or not. You'll be okay."

There was only one word left in Olivia's brain.

"Thank you," she said, lost.

TJ hesitated. He nudged shut the drawer of his desk.

"It's - my job," he said. "My only job, now. Don't worry about it."

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE

Back safe. like I promised xxx

In Armed Response? xxx
Sent 12:02

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Five PM.

Olivia had started to think of it as five hours to go.

She arrived in the training room to find Sergeant Medlock alone, hauling crash-mats into place across the floor.

"Sorry," she said, nervous. "Am I early?"

"No, no. Come on in." Kit flashed her a smile, booting the edge of a mat into alignment with the others. "Might just be you and me for a while, chick. That alright? We'll keep polishing those hold-breaks. Big night tonight."
Olivia placed her bag down on a nearby chair. It seemed oddly quiet.

"Are Greg and Dr Holmes not here?" she asked.

"They're in command with Luke, finalising stuff for later," Kit said. "Should swing by in a while."

Olivia found herself wishing they were here. She'd not been alone with Kit before; it made her oddly self-conscious.

She toed off her shoes at the edge of the crash-mat, and placed them to one side. They were her Scotland Yard shoes. She didn't want them damaged - not for anything. She had a feeling they would always feel like her Scotland Yard shoes, even years from now, when all this was a memory.

"How're you feeling with the training?" Kit asked, sliding her thumbs into her combat belt. "Could you use this stuff?"

Olivia wasn't sure. From everything she'd heard, she'd only be coming within touching distance of a vampire if things went spectacularly wrong. She'd been trying to imagine breezily hurling one over her shoulder the way Kit threw Greg Lestrade - but she couldn't quite make it seem real in her mind.

Then again, she supposed these things only proved themselves in the heat of the moment.

"I think so," she said, in the end. "I - hope so, anyway."

Kit's eyes crinkled at the edges.

"Good," she said. "You're doing well. The more you practice, the more instinctive it'll be."

As Olivia picked her way across the crash-mat, Kit watched her with a smile.

"Don't be afraid to chuck me about today," she said. "Better find out now how hard you can hit someone, than start experimenting when it counts."

Olivia hesitated, her heart thumping slightly. "I don't want to hurt you."

Kit - muscled, tattooed, with the stripes of an Armed Response Squad Leader emblazoned at her shoulder - raised a wry eyebrow.

"Good," said Kit, still amused. "I don't want you to hurt me by accident. I want you to hurt me on purpose."

Olivia flushed. "I don't want to hurt you at all," she said, provoking a laugh.

"Why?" said Kit, more amused than ever. Her eyes gleamed like cut onyx. "Pain's just a feeling. Like cold or hunger. You can feel it, but you don't have to be it. Lestrade nearly had his nose knocked inside out on Monday… he's right as rain now."

Olivia wondered why it had taken two and a half decades for someone to put that into words for her.

"So throw me like you mean it," Kit said, with a grin. "C'mon. Let's start."
After an hour, Olivia's arms ached to the point of exhaustion. She had the feeling Kit was testing her - edging the boundaries of her strength further and further each time, trying to find where it would end. Olivia was testing herself, too. She didn't want to let Kit discover that limit.

"Take a breather," Kit said at last, and tossed her a water bottle. Her tattoos gleamed like stained glass beneath a film of sweat. "Kick off tonight... I shouldn't be tiring you out."

Olivia cracked open the lid and drank deeply, feeling her chest heave as she breathed. She offered the bottle to Kit, who masked a smile.

"M'fine," she said. "You have it. Sit down, gorgeous. Catch your breath."

*Gorgeous.* Olivia settled into a chair, panting in the quiet. It wasn't the first time she'd had that name sent her way. Normally, it was delivered in a far more threatening tone.

She wondered if men ever used that word as a weapon against Kit.

She didn't think so. If they *did*, Olivia added to herself, they probably regretted it immediately after.

It would be wonderful to be that.

She tried to imagine what choices you had to make in life to end up as Kit Medlock: sure-footed, respected and free. She wondered if circumstance made you that way, or if you made the circumstances with your bare hands and blood if you had to.

She had a feeling it wasn't a case of one or the other.

She watched Kit for a while - sifting through the equipment crates for punch mitts, hefting the heavy boxes aside as if they were nothing.

"Sergeant Medlock?" she said, at last.

Kit smiled, putting down a crate with a huff. "'Kit'," she said. "Don't stand on ceremony. What?"

"How did you - become a sergeant?" Olivia asked, her heart tight. "Where did you start?"

Kit gave her a strange look, still smiling.

"Same as you, probably..." she said. "Academy, field training. Couple years on patrol. 'Cept then I went for Armed Response, instead of CID... prefer shooting my problems to thinking them through." Her forehead crumpled a little. "Why? Did you do it different?"

Olivia turned her head, looking down at her water bottle.

She hoped it hid the colour in her face.

"No reason," she murmured, and drank.

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**NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE**

Range all ready for TJ tonight. Luke says we can have it until whenever... got an easy program
picked.
when TJs changed and settled down we’ll ship him off home, and job done.
Then Kit’ll bring me to you. Not sure what time.
Leave your wristset on loud so it wakes you up? xxx

If you think I shall sleep a single moment until you’re here, you are wrong. xxx
Sent 19:01

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
can we have a bath when I get in? please?
Been wishing I could have a quiet bath with you for days xxx

Yes. Of course we can...
That would actually be rather wonderful. xxx
Sent 19:10

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Hows Livs? She ok? xxx

A little nervous. I've made sure she's eaten. She's now sitting in your chair with a cup of tea and reading my case notes from my CID training.
She has been doing so in silence for an hour now.
Rather affecting. I was a sergeant when I was her age. xxx
Sent 19:20

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
I was a mess when I was her age.
life is full of surprises xxx

So I'm learning.
We'll leave for Pembury Road at eight. Establish some last minute visibility. xxx
Sent 19:24

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
are you nervous? xxx

Not in the least. Why? xxx
NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
me neither. Just a big night, thats all. First run.
Kinda hoping we dont spot any massive problems xxx

If we do, we have several days to repair them before TJ is fit to return.
I have no significant concerns. xxx
Sent 19:29

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
Ok. Good. Thats reassuring xxx

"Reassuring"? I thought you were not nervous. xxx
Sent 19:33

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
you really surprised to hear I trust you more than myself? xxx

You are ludicrous. xxx
Sent 19:34

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
nope. Just finally getting my head screwed on the right way.
come too far to let this fall into disaster now xxx

Why? Are you anticipating disaster? xxx
Sent 19:40

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE
I thought you werent nervous :P xxx

You thought correctly. xxx
Sent 19:46
NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE

christ, what I'd give to be home in the bath with you right now. washing your hair. Kissing you. Tonight cant go quick enough xxx

Soon. xxx
Sent 19:49

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE

soon... xxx
you leaving for hackney? xxx

Yes. Just crossing the car park. xxx
Sent 19:58

NEW MESSAGE FROM GREG LESTRADE

ok. Drive safe. see you soon.
I love you to pieces xxx

Seen 20:01 ✓✓
They reached Pembury Road at half past eight, then made themselves visible around the bars for an hour - inquiries, speaking to regulars. Olivia hardly heard a word. The minutes were passing for her in nervous gulps; it felt much safer to stay quiet than to speak.

She found herself following Mycroft like a small ghost, sticking near to his side at all times. Every pair of eyes that flicked her way suddenly felt like the eyes of a predator. Men's eyes had always felt like a threat; tonight, the whole world seemed to be watching her every step. She couldn't settle.

At half past nine, they got back into the car and drove to the south-eastern corner of Hackney Downs - facing the gates through which she would walk half an hour from now.

She'd stepped through those gates at least a thousand times. She'd walked home this way without a thought for years.

They'd never seemed so forbidding before.

The Downs beyond had never looked so poorly-lit, nor so open. The trees had never seemed so very far away from the path.

There was no sign of Armed Response - no sign of Greg - no sign of any watching vampire.

"Here," Mycroft said, handing her an ear-piece. "Fit this now, and make sure it's comfortable… the frequency is already set."

Olivia worked the small squishy bud inside her ear. She was wearing TJ's radio earrings, comforted by their heavy dangle; the pockets of her coat were stuffed with flash grenades and sonic-shriekers.

If she weren't so nervous, she'd have pitied anyone who planned to attack her.

"If - something does happen tonight," she said. "Can you just... talk me through it now? What to do, I mean."

Mycroft nodded, entirely calm.

"The route itself is half a mile," he said. "TJ and I will be monitoring all thermal signatures within the park. Some stretches of path are more isolated than others, and more likely to prompt an attack.
If someone is behaving suspiciously towards you, or following you, TJ and I will know far in advance. We will warn you, but ask you to continue walking as you are. We'll alert Armed Response, who are stationed equally along the route. The nearest officers will converge on your position. For your part, all you must do is walk quietly and calmly from the gates to your doorstep. Everything else, we will handle."

Olivia swallowed this down, letting it calm her.

"What if someone makes a run at me?" she asked. "What if Armed Response can't get there in time?"

"Deploy TJ's flash grenades," Mycroft said. "Activate the mosquito, and sprint in the direction of home. Stay on the path and do not worry. We very much wish to take any attacker alive - but in the event of your safety being compromised, Armed Response will shoot to kill. You are the priority."

"And - you'll be over on Amhurst Terrace? With TJ?"

"I'll drive there as soon as you've left me," Mycroft said. "It should take less than a minute. TJ will monitor you in the meantime, and command Armed Response if so required. He is the crowning glory of Scotland Yard's comms. You could not wish for a more diligent guardian."

Olivia's heart strained quietly. "Okay… fine. That's - all fine."

Mycroft watched her, his expression gentle. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," she said, and hugged her arms around herself. "Yeah, I'm alright. Just - first night nerves."

"You will be home within an hour," he said. "We've drafted an additional Armed Response officer to the house tonight. You will be entirely safe."

Olivia trusted him. She knew she did; she knew the nerves were natural, and meant nothing. The only thing that would take the worry away for good would be stepping safely through the front door, locking it behind her, and seeing an armed officer with a laser rifle give her a friendly nod from the bottom of the stairs.

She reached down, pinching her leg through her tights. *This has been a weird week.*

It occurred to her, in a rush, that it had somehow still been a good one.

Mycroft reached across her discreetly, and opened up the glove compartment. Alongside car hire papers, a revolver and a metal flask, there was an unopened bag of toffees.

He opened the bag - to her surprise - and transferred three into her hand.

"For nerves," he said. "The sugar will help."

Olivia smiled. She couldn't help it. "You carry therapeutic toffees."

"Greg... likes them," he muttered, returned the bag to the glove compartment and shut it. Formality tidied up his tones. "He has something of a sweet tooth."

"Are you... not a toffee person?" she asked.

Mycroft occupied his expression with his wrist-set, checking his inbox for messages he knew he didn't have.
"Not as such," he said.

Olivia unwrapped the toffee carefully. Its crinkle seemed loud inside the car.

She steeled her courage, placing the toffee in her mouth.

"What's it like?" she asked. "Never eating, I mean..."

Mycroft gazed expressionlessly at his wrist-set, scrolling through his recent sent messages. He seemed to weigh up his options for a moment.

At last, he said,

"Disparate."

Olivia's heart squeezed. "Disparate?" she said.

Mycroft bit the corner of his mouth.

"At times," he said, "easy to forget. At other times, distressing. Often problematic." He glanced through the front window into the park, watching a mother with her twins in a pram heading on into the night. "Invariably isolating."

Olivia gazed at his face in profile, sympathy tugging at her heart. "So... you weren't always...?"

"No."

"When did...?"

"Thirteen years ago." Mycroft reached for the heater, silent for a moment. "I - believe it was microwaved vegetarian chilli. I'd made some the night before, and there were leftovers. I'd brought them for lunch... unlikely I consumed anything after that..."

He leant back in his seat, his face heavy with memory.

"Tea, perhaps. Likely a darjeeling. Afternoon habit." He paused. "I - hope I enjoyed it, whatever it was."

"God..." Olivia was silent for some time; her heart fluttered with discomfort on every beat. "I'm - sorry. I mean it."

He held her sympathy for a moment, his eyes quiet.

"Thank you," he murmured. "You're - kind to say."

"Does DI Lestrade know?"

The corner of his mouth lifted, just a fraction - just for a moment - as if he should have expected that question. "Yes," he said. "He's a detective."

Olivia bit the corner of her lip.

She quietly unwrapped another toffee.

"Did he figure it out before or after you two...?" she said.

Mycroft couldn't fight a smile. "You are far too observant."
"I'm guessing nobody knows about that, either."

"In theory." Mycroft sighed, looking down into his lap. "Such things are… frowned upon. Sometimes with disciplinary action. It's not meant to happen, though it does. The pressures of the work are - …" He paused, pulling together the words. "Intimacy is a common consequence."

Olivia smiled slightly.

"I'm getting that," she said.

Mycroft looked across at her - amused, fond, and rather fragile. He returned her small smile as he studied her face.

"Might I ask how you reached these conclusions?" he said.

"Little signs," Olivia replied. She chewed her toffee. "You're - sweet together. I hope it's alright to say."

His expression worked, fighting humour. "Thank you."

"Sometimes, you talk about him like - …" Olivia crumpled up the wrapper, shaking her head. "Like he's all you ever wanted."

Before Mycroft could even begin a reply, there came a strange sound from within the car. It was almost like a breath.

They both stiffened, looking at each other.

A crackle passed over the line.

"... and comms are now online," came the voice of TJ Tierney in their ears. Every word trembled with suppressed delight.

As Mycroft slumped over the wheel, covering his face with both hands, Olivia bit down on her smile.

"Hi, TJ," she said.

"Good evening, Sergeant Reid. How's life across the park? Did I hear sweet wrappers? I hope you've brought enough for everyone."

"Are Armed Response on comms?" Mycroft asked his hands, in despair.

"Nope," said TJ, brightly. "Still whipping each other with towels in the locker room. Kit says they're on their way. Just us for now, Count H."

Mycroft stifled a whimper.

"And for the record," TJ said, "I was already pretty sure you and Lestrade were taking the magic bus to Manchester. You both smile way too much these days. What's he like in bed, Greg?"

"Why does everybody ask me that?" came the bemused fourth voice on the line.

Olivia bit down into her knuckle, grinning through the side window as Mycroft raised his head from the wheel.
"Who else has asked you that?" he demanded.

"Errr… no-one."

Realisation dawned in Mycroft's eyes. His expression set and locked.

"Tell Elwood," he snapped, "that I am mindful of my own bloody business in bed. You and I will discuss this later."

"Christ," said Greg. "Let's hope Excultus kill me first..."

"If you two can put a lid on the foreplay for now," TJ said, as Olivia clamped herself around her knuckles and shook, "I'm about to bring thermals online. Can you check your visor registers these, Lestrade? You should start seeing yellow shapes."

"Yep. Go ahead, fuzzball. I'll let you know when they're showing. Myke?"

Olivia's eyebrows lifted towards her hairline.

"Oh my God..." TJ breathed to himself, overjoyed. "'Myke'."

Mycroft gazed wearily through the windscreen, biting his tongue. His eyes glittered in the darkness.

"Yes, Inspector Lestrade?" he intoned.

"D'you and Livs want to chat by the gates a bit?" Greg said. "We'll be good to go in ten minutes."

Olivia reached across and opened the car door. "We're on it, Greg."

"Thanks, darlin'," he replied, with an audible smile.

They stood by the gates and smoked as TJ oversaw Armed Response getting into position. Mycroft was receiving a lot of messages on his wrist-set, most of which made him hastily smother a smirk before replying. Olivia couldn't help but smile around her cigarette.

At two minutes to ten, she stubbed it out on the gate and reached up for one of her earrings. There came a rough crackle over the line as she slipped it free, smothering it in her hand.

"What was that?" TJ said, his voice sharp. "Guys? Mike check, please."

"It's me, TJ," she told the receiver clipped to Mycroft's lapel. "Just give us a minute over here."

She unclipped the receiver, and tucked it into her back pocket.

"What are you doing?" Mycroft asked, with concern.

"C'mere," she said. She stretched up onto her toes, and put her arms around his neck.

Mycroft stiffened as she hugged him. He didn't move at all.

"Hug me back," Olivia murmured, closing her eyes.
Realisation dawned. "Greg - spoke to you."

"He knew you wouldn't do it," she said. "You're sweet to worry. It's fine."

After a moment, his arms uneasily encircled her waist.

"Heaven help me," he muttered against her shoulder. "Young enough to be my daughter."

Olivia suppressed a smile. "Barely."

"I - retain the right to discomfort."

"S'fine," she said, and squeezed him gently. "It'll be easier tomorrow. All of it. Is anybody even watching?"

"Not - openly," he said, his voice stiff. "A few people walking further up the street."

"Suppose we'll find out," Olivia mumbled. She hesitated. "Thank you, Mycroft."

"What for?" he asked her, bewildered.

Olivia tried to find the words; they wouldn't come. She just tightened her arms around him.

TJ's voice crackled gently in her ear. "Erm… Dr H? Sergeant Reid? We're ready to go, if you guys are done with... whatever you're doing. Just give us a shout."

She felt Mycroft breathe in.

This was it, Olivia thought.

"Close your eyes," she suggested, gently. "Pretend I'm your boy in blue."

Mycroft made a small, indescribable sound. Olivia smiled into his shoulder.

"And I'll pretend you're a wizard," she added, fondly.

There was a long pause. "A wizard?" he said, clearly suspecting he'd misheard.

"Mm-hmm." Olivia drew back. She looked up into his worried grey eyes, laying her hands around his face. He was cold as stone. "Like you could wave a magic wand," she said, as her heart broke in silence. Not a crack of it showed on her face. "And make me a real police officer."

He didn't move at all as she kissed him. He stayed utterly, desperately still.

As they parted, she slid the earring casually back through her ear.

"M'ready, TJ," she said, turning towards the gates. She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth.

"Right. You ready, Dr H?"

Olivia caught the quiet crinkle of the microphone restored to his lapel. "Y-Yes. Ready."

"Armed Response, are we good to go?"

As Olivia rummaged in her handbag for the electroshock gloves, and pulled them with intense care over her shaking fingers, there was silence on her end of the comms line. Armed Response's replies would be coming in. They were there somewhere, out in the dark.
Behind her, she heard Mycroft get into the car, slam the door, and drive away.

Fear spiked through her heart; she was alone now. Safety lay on the other side of Hackney Downs. It would take her eight minutes to reach it - there was no way back. This was happening.


"All clear, command," said the voice of their commander, calm and in control. "All units in place."

"Right," said TJ. "ARS, let's keep it to alarms only. Otherwise I want silence on my comms. All systems are online." He took a breath. "Okay, 'Livia. I'm right with you. Let's walk you home."

Olivia flexed her fingers inside the gloves. She hooked her thumb around the strap of her handbag, swallowed back her throatful of fear, and set off along the path.

She couldn't bear the silence. Her own breath seemed too loud; her footsteps were uneven. She didn't know if she was walking too fast or too slow, unable to remember what it felt like to walk in normal circumstance. She'd never been so aware of her heartbeat before.

"All okay," said TJ's voice in her ear, a little hesitant - offering comfort that he knew might not be wanted. "Nothing on thermals anywhere near you. It's just us."

Olivia's heart twinged.

"Okay," she murmured. She didn't know how loudly she should be speaking. "That's - good to know."

"Greg's watching your final stretch," TJ said. "From the north-western park gates to your door. The second you see him, you're fine."

"You're doing great, Olivia," said Greg. His voice was as reassuring as a blanket. "Just got to make your way to me. How's she doing, TJ? Are we at Station Two yet?"


Olivia took a deep breath. "I didn't see him."

"Just what you're meant to see," TJ said, pleased. "You're doing fine."

A minute or so later, there came the sound of a door opening over comms - then the rattle and squeak of a chair.

"I am here, Olivia." Mycroft's voice flooded her nerves and muscles with new, burgeoning bravery - she realised with a surge that she wanted Mycroft to know she could do this. She wanted him to see her unafraid. "What do we have on thermals?"

Keystrokes sounded over comms.

"All fine," said TJ's voice. "Small group of NFRs towards the other end. Up in 2B. S'fine. We've watched them for a couple days now. They're legit."

"NFRs?" Olivia muttered, as she walked. The wind stirred beneath her coat.

"No Fixed Residence," TJ explained. "Down-and-outs. We had them checked them out. Street teams in that area know their faces."
"Audio readings?" said Mycroft.

"All normal." More keystrokes rattled in Olivia's ear. "Sounds like there's a fox digging through the bins in Quadrant 1D. D'you want to go shoot it, Commander Elwood? Just in case."

Olivia's heart tugged.

"Leave the fox alone," she said. "They're nice."

"Sorry, TJ," said another voice on the line, amused - one she didn't know. "I've had my orders. The fox lives."

"And that's us onto Station Four," TJ said, brightly. "You okay with all those thermals, Dr H?"

"Mm. No unusual behaviour."

"Cool." TJ audibly cracked his knuckles. "Settle in, folks. Looks like we're flying."

Each station took about forty seconds to walk. As she passed each one, Olivia felt the thudding of her heart begin to calm. Beyond the path, out of sight in the darkness, heavily armed officers were watching her every step - less than a minute from one to the next. It made her feel a little less alone.

She kept her palms carefully open as she walked. She wanted to squeeze something for comfort - to toy with the flash grenades in her pocket - but didn't dare grip anything with her gloves. That wasn't how this night was meant to go.

As she neared the park's paved central circle, with its ring of steel and stone benches, TJ said,

"Station Seven. Receiving, Sergeant Medlock?"

Kit. Somewhere. Olivia didn't hear her reply; she didn't see so much as a shadow flicker in the darkness, but Kit was there.


It was hard to speak without shivering. "Don't feel it."

"There's no need to be afraid," Mycroft said, gently. "Nobody has taken the slightest - "

And without a sound, all the lights went out in the park.

Nearby buildings vanished into blackness. Olivia jerked to a halt, pulse jolting as she watched entire streets stutter and blink out into nothing.

"Dr Holmes?" She stared into the darkness, panting. "Mycroft? What's happening?"

"Christ - " Mycroft's voice sharpened. "TJ! What the hell is - "

"What the fuck?" TJ gasped. There came the urgent bang of a palm slapped on dead hardware. "What the fuck, what the fuck… what - what is even - "

"Hold," the Armed Response commander barked. "All units. Hold your station."

"Guys, the street's gone out," came Greg's voice. "Have we had a bloody power cut?"
"Medlock!" Mycroft shouted. "Medlock, get to the path! Get to Olivia now! You're being - "

Mid-blink, Mycroft found himself suddenly seeing in black-and-white - sharper, clearer. He stared at the now blank screen before him, wondering what in hell's name was going on.

"Dr Holmes?" Olivia's voice came panicked in his ear. "Mycroft, what's happening?"

With an icy thrill, Mycroft realised.

The room had plunged into darkness. He was seeing in night-vision.

His pulse spiked.

"Christ - " he gasped. He turned in his chair to find a horrified werewolf staring open-mouthed at unconscious hardware, paralysed with shock. "TJ!" he barked. "What the hell is - "

TJ scrabbled from his chair, darting across the room to the central PCU unit.

"What the fuck?" he gasped. He banged it hard. "What the fuck, what the fuck… what - what is even - "

"Hold," came Elwood's voice, sharp. "All units. Hold your station."

As TJ raced to check connections, panting in panic, Mycroft stared with mounting horror at the empty air where the hard-light map had been.

There was nothing.

They were cut off.

"Guys, the street's gone out," came Greg's voice in his ear. "Have we had a bloody power cut?"

Nausea roiled across Mycroft's senses.

"Medlock!" he shouted. It wasn't a power cut. It was the creation of darkness, and there was one species that darkness exalted. "Medlock, get to the path! Get to Olivia now! You're being hunted!"

His final words were cut off by sudden, shrieking electronic noise. It was sharp and high enough to pierce like a metal spike from one ear to the other. Mycroft cried aloud in pain; somewhere outside of his senses, he heard TJ cry out too. He grappled through instinct to cover his ears, buckling with agony as the electronic screams continued. His fingertips found his head-set.

He wrenched it off, and threw it away with a shout.

Silence crashed down. As he panted with pain, Mycroft realised he could hear the channel still shrieking through the headphones where they'd landed on the floor.

TJ had ripped off his head-set too. His hands shook as he tried to fix it - switching channels, wrenching at audio-dials, white-faced and gasping.

"J-Jesus," he said. "Jesus, I - I don't understand - it's - it's just that channel. It's just our channel. It's
a shrieker - a jarring signal - it's fucking blitzed out all our comms - but - but why is - "

Mycroft's heart detonated on the spot.

"They're here." His every nerve constricted. "It's - Excultus. They are here."

The ground lurched.

As he staggered, TJ grabbed for him.

"Fuck - no, Dr Holmes - no, it's just - just a power-cut, I - I can fix the - " TJ suddenly staggered too. "S-shit - no - no, no - I - ohh, fuck - "

Greg.

Mycroft lurched towards the door.

Olivia. Greg.

"Locks!" he barked. "Locks! Tierney, get these locks open - "

TJ was whimpering on the floor behind him, sobbing. "Why didn't I - why d-didn't I - fucking - generator - back-up generator - b-back-up comms channel - oh, holy actual shit, why did I not just - "

"Tierney!" Mycroft raged. He turned on the boy, shaking, white with terror. "Tierney, OPEN THIS BLOODY DOOR!"

TJ didn't hear. He continued to sob, harder, sharper, clawing at the floor.

Greg.

Mycroft threw himself at the door, heaving together every scrap of strength that remained in his broken body. He wrenched his fingers around the lock and gritted his teeth as he hauled at it, panting, ripping at the device with every iota of force he possessed.

It did not move.

Greg.

Balling his fists, he slammed against the hinges. He could hear TJ's sobbed words starting to strangle themselves into howls.

The hinges held. TJ had reinforced them. They were as solid as steel.

Greg.

Mycroft staggered back from the door. He fixed his stare on the opposite wall, panting. He drew a breath, braced for pain, and threw himself with all his might into the solid surface. There came a crack - from the wall or his body, he didn't know. Forcing his vision to clear, crushing back the pain, he found a site of impact smashed into the wall.

Greg.

Slamming, clawing and cracking away plaster and stone - blood from his fingers - ripping away what he could.
He was weak. He was old. He wasn’t enough.

It could be too late already.

*Greg.*

The sounds from behind Mycroft were no longer human. They mingled with his own desperate noises of pain and panic, and with the smashing and crunching of desks and hardware now being ripped apart in a rage.

At last, there came a roar - a crack that shook the wall beneath his bloodied hands. Mycroft looked around, terror tearing in gasps from his throat.

Huge, hulking and black, the creature had found the door. A slam of its clawed fist - the entire building shook - and the door cracked and splintered. A second swipe, wood splitting, plaster cracking and showering down from the frame. The beast let out a howl of frustration that turned the blood in Mycroft’s veins to ice, bracing its back-legs against the floor as it scrabbled and snarled.

Mycroft wasted no time.

He lunged across the room, dodged beneath the werewolf’s arm and slammed both fists into the splintered wood. It cracked, splitting further. Enormous serrated black claws curled into the crack he had formed, wrenching and breaking.

Together they ripped their way through. The hinge, at last, too damaged to hold, buckled and gave way beneath the werewolf’s weight.

The door smashed aside, and the beast bounded out. Mycroft staggered after it.

As they reached the car park, TJ dropped to all fours. He raced on ahead across the asphalt, a blackness as big as a bear, pounding at speed towards the Downs. He crossed the hedge and iron fence in a single leap and vanished between the trees.

Mycroft ran after him, screaming the only name that existed anymore in his head.
After some reflection, Greg was now pretty sure Luke had assigned him the easy bit of the route.

He wasn't even in the park, for Christ's sake. He was the home-stretch - and, as he'd noted with his tongue in his cheek, the only bit with a road. Once he laid eyes on Olivia, they could call the whole thing a success and go home.

If he didn't know better, he'd think Myke had slipped Luke fifty quid.

"Put him somewhere out of the action, will you? My gratitude, Commander Elwood…"

Then again, Greg thought, as he stood beneath a streetlight in civilian clothing and lit a cigarette, there were perks to being last in line.

He was halfway along Olivia's street, and she'd been walking for about four minutes now. There was time for a quick smoke. She'd be safe inside within ten minutes - tucked up with cocoa and her slippers.

Then the night's real work would begin, Greg thought.

Drawing smoke into his lungs, he tipped his head back against the streetlight and glanced along the street.

Nothing - nobody out and about. There were plenty of people inside the houses - sitting downstairs, watching TV - horizontal upstairs, lying in bed. But nobody was doing anything out of the ordinary.

It was all quiet on the western front.

TJ had rigged-up a pair of covert glasses for him - thermals, targeting, the lot - all built into the frames. Greg was thinking of asking to keep them. To the outside world, he looked like a common-or-garden lurker in a hooded top, lounging beneath a streetlight. The laser rifle strapped across his chest felt more and more like an unnecessary precaution as the minutes went by.

Not that it was a bad thing. A smooth practice-run was just what they wanted.

The more often they could do this before it all kicked off for real, the better.
Flicking ash to the ground, Greg wondered where he'd find himself this time tomorrow. Just after ten, and all the world falling to sleep.

He'd be home.

_Bath together_, he thought, blowing smoke to the stars. He closed his eyes. _Candles. Maybe just bed._

Just… bed, all evening. Bed, all night.

"Station Seven," came TJ's voice in his ear. "Receiving, Sergeant Medlock?"

"Receiving," said Kit. She sounded bored. "Got a visual. All fine."


_That voice._ Greg was going home to that voice - tonight, on the back of Kit's bike. He'd spend the night in a proper bed with that voice.

"Don't feel it," Olivia mumbled over comms, shivering.

"There's no need to be afraid," Mycroft said to her, gently. "Nobody has taken the slightest - "

The streetlight above Greg suddenly flashed out.

He looked up, blinking. With a final flicker, every other light in the street followed it into blackness.

"Dr Holmes?" Olivia's voice came over comms in concern. "Mycroft, what's happening?"

"Christ - " Mycroft gasped. "TJ! What the hell is - "

Greg watched the thermal shapes inside the houses all react in alarm - throwing up their hands in exasperation, hurrying to windows to check the rest of the street.

"What the fuck?" TJ said, panicking. There came a loud bang. "What the fuck, what the fuck… what - what is even - "


Greg realised he'd stopped breathing.

He pulled the laser rifle from beneath his top, and primed and charged it without a sound.

"Guys, the street's gone out," he said, as the walls of his chest began to tighten. "Have we had a bloody power cut?"

"Medlock!" he heard Mycroft shout. His heart lurched. "Medlock, get to the path! Get to Olivia now! You're being - "

The rest of his words were cut off by a high-pitched, keening electronic scream. It shrieked suddenly over comms like a flock of metal birds. Greg swore, creased double and ripped the ear-piece out, his head ringing with shock.

He stared down at the ear-bud in his palm, panting, as it continued to scramble and scream. He looked for controls, but couldn't find any.
What the fuck?

"Guys?" he tried, shouting into the receiver clipped inside his hood. "Guys, can anyone - "

It was no good. Even if they could hear him, he wouldn't get their responses.

"Christ..." Greg muttered, his heart starting to pound.

Something was majorly wrong.

He turned his head to the park gates, panting harder as panic threatened to rise. He could hear the ear-piece still crackling and squealing in his hand - long, piercing screams.

And then a horrible thought occurred.

Greg smothered the ear-piece with his palm, cutting out the electronic noise.

The screams continued.

"Ohh - fuck!" he gasped. The park - Armed Response. They were under attack. "Oh, holy actual fuck - "

He'd started to run before he could think.

*Olivia. Oh Christ, Olivia.*

Had Kit got to her in time?

"Outgoing call! Mycroft!" he shouted to his wrist-set as he ran. The connecting tone sounded, pulsing around his arm. "Christ… Christ, Myke, *answer*…"

TJ's thermals had vanished from his lenses; the scanners had lost power.

It meant Greg didn't see them until long after they saw him.

Before he'd even run half the street, their shapes appeared in the darkness up ahead - one at first, then two - suddenly three - Greg skidded to a halt, staggering back. Four - no, *five*. They were coming up the road towards him, silhouettes, walking quick and calm.

*Christ. Christ, Christ.*

"Light," Greg gasped to his wrist-set.

White light beamed in a fluttering ten-metre radius around him. He primed the rifle with a whine.

Hands lifted in the darkness, just outside his field of light.

"Inspector," called a voice from the darkness - a woman's voice, quite calm. "Please lower your weapon. This isn't what you think."

Greg didn't lower the rifle an inch.

"Stay where you are." His voice hardened. "Stay right where you fucking are. All of you."

The nearest figure came to a stop; she signalled with a hand. Greg's eyes flashed across the figures he'd seen - five, he'd thought.
He could now see only four.

They stopped moving at her command. They waited, just beyond the light.

"You're quite safe," she said. "We intend you no harm. Truly, Greg, that's the opposite of what I want."

_Fuck… fuck, fuck. Holy fuck._

Greg steadied his nerves, trying to keep an eye out for the fifth person. He didn't dare glance over his shoulder too long in case the others took their chance. They'd spread themselves around him - he couldn't hit all four with one shot. He might just get two. He was surrounded.

_Keep them talking._

_Play for time._

He swallowed. "You," he said - addressing the silhouette who had spoken. "Come where I can see you. Then we'll fucking talk."

There was a moment's pause.

Then quite calmly, she stepped into the light.

She was well-dressed and pretty - nude heels and a trench-coat, with straight red hair to her jaw. Her skin was clear and warm.

She was utterly, petrifyingly normal.

Greg found himself unnerved to be pointing a laser rifle at her. She looked like a secondary school teacher - like a woman in line at the bank - like she'd dropped by on her way to pick the kids up from school.

He didn't know what he'd expected.

It wasn't this.

"You're outnumbered," she said to him, almost gently. "This will only end one way, Greg. Better we reach it without violence."

Greg held her gaze, forcing out a bravery he didn't feel.

"Alternatively," he said, "if I'm going to die... I might as well take a couple of you with me."

"There's nothing I want less than you dead," she said. "I've been told to escort you back alive and well, or not to bother coming back myself."

"Escort me?" Greg jeered. He checked over his shoulder, scanning for the others. "And where are we going, exactly? To the place I will die, right? You're not an amateur dramatics group, love. D'you remember the bit where you tried to kill me before? I fucking do."

"You've been handled clumsily until now," she said - as if they'd messed up his car insurance claim, he thought. Put the direct debit for his gas bill on the wrong account. _Holy fuck, they're here. They're real. Fuck, fuck. It's all fucking real._ "This situation is far more complicated than we first thought. You're now my personal responsibility - and I very much want you to remain unharmed. So please... lower the rifle."
"Where's your fifth man?" Greg said, checking over his shoulder with a jerk.

"Fifth man, inspector? There are four of us."

"Don't even try it," Greg snarled. "I can fucking count. There were five of you. Get all five in front of me, now - or I'll vaporise you first."

She smiled slightly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We need to collect you unharmed. I appreciate that you're distressed, but... this way will work better. It will all be over soon."

Greg's heart heaved.

He wasn't a threat to her, he thought.

He was a mouse squeaking at a cat. He was a scared animal that wouldn't go nicely in its box for the vet to put to sleep.

He looked past her towards Hackney Downs.

Flashes of light glinted between the distant trees. He could still hear screams. They were cut through with the ionic cracks of energy weapons set to kill.

Myke.

*Please, please be safe in that fucking room. Stay there forever. Never come out.*

This was all Greg's fault.

Olivia.

She had flash grenades. A sonic-shrieker.

Toys.

They were meant to distract a single enemy while Armed Response got to her. Now Armed Response were being torn apart.

Greg's heart pounded with the screams.

This was only going to end one way. Wherever they wanted to take him, it would be worse than this.

He tightened his grip on the rifle, and made his choice.

Shaking, he recharged it with a whine.

"So be it," the woman murmured. She ran her tongue across her teeth. "Though, I should warn you... you're making an unnecessary - "

Greg fired. He dropped the unsuspecting figure to her left in a bolt of green light, whirled around and sprinted headlong into the shadow that was sneaking up behind him. The force of his charge, directed straight into the groin, knocked the man backwards off his feet.

"Do NOT hurt him!" he heard the woman scream. "WE NEED HIM ALIVE!"
Greg braced.

As arms lashed around his chest, he doubled-over. The rifle clattered from his hands. He hurled his attacker over his shoulder and slammed it into the pavement, head-down.

He wasn't going to be taken alive.

He was going to be found dead, surrounded by the dead.

"Medlock!" Mycroft's panic-stricken shout tore Olivia's heart in two. "Medlock, get to the path! Get to Olivia now! You're being -"

A sudden stream of electronic squealing filled her ear. Olivia jerked with shock; cries of pain vanished amongst the screaming tone. She scrabbled for her ear-piece and tugged it out. It continued to keen and crackle in her hand.

She found herself alone upon the path, panting.

The park was in pitch darkness around her.

"Light," she gasped to her wrist-set.

The dome of light seemed tiny and feeble and flickering. The Downs loomed at its edge, the blackness big enough to crush her whole. The path snaked on into darkness ahead; it wound back into darkness behind.

Olivia's heart began to contract, too hard and too fast to think.

"Kit?" Her mouth shouted without thought. "Kit...!"

Nothing.

Someone had cut the power, she thought. Someone had jammed their comms. Someone had known the exact moment to do both.

Olivia stared at the path ahead.

And then a scream went up from behind.

Olivia whirled, her heart leaping as the scream perished through the darkness - then strangled suddenly higher and cut. The silence was short-lived. Shouts went out - a green streak of light, cracking like thunder as it scored between two distant trees. Further on across the park, laser-fire suddenly showered in a hail of new screams. The panicked cries rang, reverberating through the blackness like bells as they carried from one end of the Downs to the other. More bolts of light flashed and streaked. Within moments, every corner of the park pulsed with colour and screams.

Olivia watched, her heart seizing into ice.

They were under attack. All of them.

Every single one.
Terror spiked through her throat. She wheeled around, bracing, waiting for a figure to come flying from the darkness. As she panted, and the seconds lengthened, only laser flashes moved within her vision.

"Outgoing call!" she gasped. "Greg Lestrade!"

Her wrist-set bleeped with desperate apology. *Channel in use.*

"Outgoing call, Mycroft Holmes - "

Another bleep. *Channel in use.*

Nothing was happening. She could hear no feet running this way. No attacker lunged from the dark. Olivia watched the laser battle that now surrounded her on all sides, skin prickling as confusion and terror hammered through her like a second heartbeat.

Nobody was coming.

The petrifying conclusion suddenly locked into place.

They knew.

They knew she was a decoy. Unarmed. Uninteresting.

Not even worth sending somebody after. Just a girl, she thought. Just an actress.

She wasn't the prize.

Olivia's heart broke apart as she realised.

"Greg," she whispered, staring into the darkness ahead.

They knew he was there. They knew everything - they'd been betrayed, all of them - and Greg was on his own in Knighton Grove.

Nobody was coming.

"Greg," she gasped again. Her fear ignited. *GREG!*

She began to run.

The dome of light moved with her as Olivia sprinted, following the path where it wound. The darkness writhed with screams on every side. Bullets of light flared and flashed between the trees she couldn't see; beams of acid green carved through the darkness, cracking. None of it mattered. There was only the path, and where it led.

Greg.

Up ahead, in wild glints of light, shadows lurched - people. As Olivia's light reached them, they came suddenly into being. An Armed Response officer was fighting to fend off three people - people dressed like ordinary Londoners, but who moved like demons. They were too fast to be real. They were hissing, lunging, dragging at the man as he ran, like lions on wounded prey.

Olivia wrenched a hand into her pocket. She seized the shrieker and ripped out the cord.

No sound came forth. All three vampires buckled as if crushed within huge invisible fists. Their
hisses sharpened into sudden screams and they staggered, scrabbling to clutch at their heads.

Olivia dodged between them as she ran. She saw the Armed Response officer kill two; she saw the bolt of light that flew out for the third. She didn't look back. She simply ran.

As the park gates came into view, shapes appeared within them - two guarding figure.

"What the hell is - ?" she heard a voice say.

"The girl! The bait!"

"Why is - ?"

Olivia seized a flash grenade in each hand.

TJ's voice rang as clear as if he were still there in her ear. *Jam the button, drop it and run.*

As the vampires moved towards her, she crushed the buttons in with her thumbs. The grenades bounced off the path behind her. She saw the vampires' expressions open in alarm that she was racing *towards them*, not away from them - before their eyes, their faces and the park gates behind them vanished in a wave of blinding, blistering light.

Olivia screwed her eyes shut just in time.

She hit the gates, hard. The light strobed wildly against her closed eyes - she covered them with an arm, shaking, hearing screams of agony torn out behind her. She'd never heard so many people scream. She'd never been so afraid. Bar-by-bar, she hauled herself along to the gap in the gates, pushed through it and staggered towards the road to home.

As she ran, she could hear a voice shouting Greg's name.

She realised it was hers.

She reached Knighton Grove, gasping, and saw a second dome of light up ahead. Lunging black shapes struggled within it.

He was fighting them. He was resisting with all his might.

With tears in her eyes Olivia ran.

---

Wrist-set light.

Greg glimpsed it between the arms that tried to grab him. The back of his brain saw and logged it - but there was no time to think. As he slammed his elbow back into something that howled, he twisted and ducked another lunging pair of arms.

His only advantage was their reluctance to hurt him.

He didn't have the same restriction. He threw himself like a rag-doll to escape them. He kicked out to break their bones. He clawed for faces and eyes without a second thought, raging, and swore to himself that Mycroft would find him in fucking pieces or not at all.
He'd killed one with the rifle. He'd bitten another through the hand. The other two were stumbling with headbutts to the groin, but they weren't stopping.

They were going to wear him down.

He knew it.

Their leader - the woman - hung back. She was watching without concern, her arms folded.

"Stop," she commanded suddenly, her voice sharp. "Stop. Leave him."

The three men backed away. Greg scrabbled for his fallen rifle. One of them whirled and lashed the gun with a kick that sent it spinning away beyond his light.

Greg's stomach heaved.

He panted, spitting blood. He could feel her looking down at him.

"You're tired," he heard her murmur. Greg fought his straining lungs, begging them to keep going. He needed them. He needed them to work. "This is ridiculous. Come quietly with us, and live."

Aching, Greg lifted his head to her face.

As he did, the light dome he had glimpsed met his own. Their edges met and melded.

A figure threw herself out of the dark.

"GREG!" she screamed - and before Greg could even draw breath, Olivia seized the red-haired woman around the arms with both her hands.

Olivia braced, expecting sparks - a flash - great forks of white lightning. She gripped down with every ounce of her strength.

The body in her hands jerked wildly. She held on harder. She realised after a second that the woman was not fighting her grip, but was instead thrashing without control - lurching like a puppet, kicking and shaking on the spot.

"One!" she gasped. She'd meant to think it. It ripped itself from her mouth. "Two - "

The woman continued to shake and fit in her arms. Olivia clung on, grimacing.

"THREE!" she howled.

With a lurch, she let go.

The woman in her arms simply dropped. She crumpled without a sound and hit the road, lifeless. There she laid.

Olivia didn't stop to think.

She lunged for the next vampire, screaming, "ONE!"
As he watched the vampire stagger away from Olivia in horror, Greg's brain kicked into life.

"Don't let them bite you!" he roared, turned, and rugby-charged the nearest one to the ground.

"GET THE FEMALE!" one of them screamed. "Kill it, kill it! LEAVE him! Kill the FEMALE!"

Greg struggled to his feet.

The two of them were closing in on Olivia. She backed away from them in her dome of flickering light, both hands up and braced to kill whichever made a grab for her first. Her expression was set in resolve; terror flashed through her eyes.

Greg lunged.

He threw an arm around the bastard's neck from behind, slammed a knee into the small of his spine and wrenched him backwards across it. The vampire lurched under his sudden weight. It choked. It clawed at Greg's arm, writhing, then had the sense to try twisting. Greg dodged its wild kick, shoved the man backwards as he reeled, and chased the strike with another charge, slugging his fist directly into its stomach. The vampire creased, grunting with pain. He shoulder-barged it to the ground.

Before he could charge for the second one, something struck Greg from behind.

He staggered, pitched forwards off-balance. The ground came up hard and he slammed into it full-force, his senses crunching with the sudden shock of pain. They returned, screaming, a second later as a fist clenched hard in his hair. Before he could scramble to get hold of it, it wrenched his head to one side with a spike of agony and forced his cheek against the road. A heavy knee pinned his back into place. Greg struggled; he strained away from the fist in his hair, trying to twist out beneath the sudden weight that held him down.

"THE GIRL!" he heard one of them shriek. "HOLD HIM THERE! HELP ME WITH THE GIRL!"

Greg kicked. The vampire climbed further on top of him, pinning him with the full force of its weight - one hand in his hair, the other knotting his arm behind his back. He wrenched his head up from the ground, panting in pain.

The other two were circling Olivia - one on either side. They'd begun to back her towards a fence.

She'd be trapped.

"LIVS!" Greg roared. "Livs, DON'T -"

Olivia looked towards his voice.

It was a mistake.

Both vampires moved. They seized her by each shoulder and hurled her backwards into the fence.
Olivia screamed, grabbing for one of them. Before she could take hold of him, the other snatched her arm hard enough to dislocate it, wrenched it backwards and slammed it into place against the wall.

She spat in his face; he jerked, revolted, but held on.

As they grabbed her other arm, Greg's heart shattered into nothing.

"Wicked little bitch!" one of them snarled. He sloughed her spit from his face on his sleeve, shaking. "Vicious little human whore!"

Olivia twisted, trying to fight their hold. She hauled into herself, curling, grasping and clawing with her fingers to reach them. They held her open against the fence, arms spread and helpless.

"Have you got him?" one of them snapped across the road.

The weight on top of Greg gripped him ever harder. Every movement jagged pain through his twisted shoulder. "I've got him."

Greg shut his eyes. *Fuck.* He panted into the pavement, tasting blood - broken.

"It's the gloves," he heard one say. *Fuck, fuck.* "Webbing in the fingers - look. They're charged."

"How do we get them off?"

"*Fuck that!*" the other spat. "Don't touch them! Little bitch'll fry you alive if you try." His voice roughened. "Just hold her arms, will you?"

*No.*

*No, no, no.*

Greg began to fight. Sudden strength blazed up - his last. He wrenched against the weight holding him down and kicked, grinding himself against the floor in an effort to arch free. He could not witness this. He couldn't bear it.

Olivia was fighting too. He could hear her - swearing at them, spitting, shrieking with rage for her life.

The grip upon Greg tightened; the weight crushed him harder.

And then one of them spoke.

"What the actual fuck is *that*?"

Greg hauled his eyes up from the ground.

A shadow had lurched into sight at the end of the street. It was big - too big to be a human. It didn't move like a human. It staggered, reeling, looking this way.

Then it began to run towards them.

As it did, it dropped to all fours.

"*What is it?*" the vampire holding him shouted in alarm.
The shadow sped up.

"Christ, just - hold him!" one of the others screamed. "Hold the fuck onto him! Don't you dare let -"

The shadow's feet pounded against the road as it ran.

It began to snarl - ripping, raging, closer and closer. It was enormous.

It was headed for Olivia.

As the shadow broke through into the radius of light, both vampires shrieked.

"IT'S A FUCKING - " one of them screamed.

They were his last words.

Black, hulking and howling, the werewolf tore through them in a single bound. They bowled backwards onto the ground; he ripped into them like rats. The first's panicked cries sharpened into inhuman keening as the enormous jaws snapped into his face and neck, crushing, cracking, crushing him into a mess of blood and bone with a single bite. The man gargled as he screamed out his last. The other scrabbled to his hands and knees, sobbing as he tried to crawl away.

The werewolf clawed around his middle, dragged him back across the ground, and seized hold of his legs.

The vampire screamed as he was hurled. He flew twenty-feet across the street like a doll, slammed into the second storey window of a house and dropped to the ground with a nauseating crunch. Glass showered down around him.

Greg found himself suddenly released.

The vampire struggled off him, kicked to his feet and ran full-pelt. He ran like he wanted to live.

"TJ!" Greg roared, spitting blood. "TJ, get the -"

Before the vampire had gone ten paces, a dome of white light swept out to catch him. Olivia lunged from nowhere. She leapt with both hands outstretched, her face contorting.

She grabbed him by the arm.

As she slung him to the ground, he jerked and kicked and twitched. Olivia held on. She climbed on him and pressed him against the road, panting, sobbing with anger, tears streaming down her face as she held him and he fitted and fried.

"Five!" Greg heard her sob. "Six - s-seven - eight -"

Black claws hooked suddenly beneath Greg's shoulder.

They curled into place, gripped, and slung him over onto his back.

Greg let himself go limp at once. He lolled, loose as old rope. As rooftops and stars swung round into his vision, he found himself nose-to-nose with a face that would scar most people for life.

Blood matted the creature's black fur. Saliva hung from its canines in gleaming strands; every muscle was bulked into attack mode. It shook with every heaving breath it took, snarling,
quivering, blasting the odour of blood and a predator's mouth into Greg's senses on every
exhalation.

Greg forced himself to stay calm. He remained as still as he could, breathing, gazing without fear
or anger into the tawny eyes above him. They gleamed back at him in rage. They flashed with his
heartbeat, twitching, studying every movement he made.

Greg held their stare, fighting panic.

He swallowed.

"S'me, fuzzball," he managed. "S'Greg." He kept his voice steady - no low tones; no sudden
sounds. "You did a good job, mate. You did a bloody brilliant job."

Something slackened in the hideous face.

Its upper lip twitched a little - lowering over its teeth.

The tawny eyes began to round.

Greg fought the urge to smile. The last thing he needed right now was to show any teeth. He
squeezed his hands into fists, willing his pulse to slow down.

"There you are," he said. "You got me now? You know my face? I'm fine, fuzzball... Livs is fine.
You got us both. We're okay."

The teeth vanished from sight, drawn away beneath the quivering muzzle. The creature gazed at
him in puppyish fear. The monster was shrinking away; the boy began to surface.

Greg took a breath.

Gently, fingers shaking, he reached up.

"There you are," he said. He laid his hands on TJ's snout - black fur and blood, warm - Trembling as
he panted. *Fuck. Holy fuck, we're fucking alive.* "Hey, fuzzball. You recognise me now?"

TJ started to whimper.

Greg's heart broke open with relief.

"M'here, mate," he gasped. He pushed his fingers through TJ's fur. TJ began to lick his face in a
frenzy, whimpering, snuffling and whining. "You did it, fuzzball... holy fuck... holy fucking shit...
"

Through the blinding flashes of tongue, Greg saw a trembling figure come staggering towards
them. Her wrist-set light merged and flickered into his.

"A-Are you okay?" Olivia was crying; she was shaking almost too much to speak. She knelt down
on the dirty ground beside him, ripping the gloves from her hands. As they dropped, she reached
out for him. "Is everything okay?"

Greg hauled himself up onto his elbows, nudging away TJ's urgent licks.

He slung his arms around Olivia. She sobbed as he dragged her close. He held onto her, shaking,
and she wept into his neck like a little girl.

"We're fine," Greg breathed in her ear. His throat heaved as he swallowed. "We're okay. It's all
okay. All okay."

"Armed Response," she wept. "Th-the park - there - s-screaming - "

"I know," Greg said, panting. "I know. But you're alright. You'll be alright." Relief convulsed through him in waves. "H-Holy shit, Livs - you - you were so fucking brave. So fucking brave."

TJ nuzzled into her hair, whimpering.

As Olivia let Greg go, she threw her arms around TJ's neck without hesitation. She buried her fingers in his fur and clung onto him, stroking him.

Panic flashed through TJ's eyes. Bewildered, he stood still as she hugged him.

Greg realised his wrist-set was vibrating. His heart cracked.

"Answer," he gasped.

"Where the fuck are you?" Luke's voice wracked with panic. "Where are you? Where the fucking fuck - "

"I'm fine," Greg panted. "I'm fine. I'm safe." His eyes shut, aching as the truth of it spilled over him. "Here with TJ. Livs is safe. Knighton Grove. Fucking - five of them - knew exactly where I - ... Christ, Luke, are you okay?"

Luke let out a rush of air. "You're with TJ?" he said. "You're safe?"

"Yeah. Yeah, he's here. Are the others alright?"


"Mate, where are you? Are you still - "

"No. No, it's - over. Just in the park, with everyone I could find." Luke sounded like he was about to vomit. "Got back-up coming - ambulance - "

Greg's heart clenched.

"Right," he said. "We're on our way. Stay there, alright? We'll come to you."

He cut the call, dragging himself up onto his knees.

"C'mon," he said, exhausted. Olivia was still hugging TJ; her arms looked tiny around his massive neck. He was patting her tentatively on the back, his yellow eyes nervous, claws tucked carefully into themselves. "Let's get to Armed Response... back-up are coming."

"Are the vampires dead?" Olivia asked, as she turned from TJ's arms.

"They're gone," Greg said. He could barely stand up - every inch of his body pulsed, hot with pain. He couldn't even isolate one injury from the next. "It's - over, Livs... s'all over."

She exhaled, shaking.

"God, I..." She swallowed. "I thought we - ..."
Greg put an arm around her shoulders. "I know," he mumbled. "Me too. Bring your horrifically fucking illegal gloves. TJ?"

Olivia bit her lip. "They s-saved your life."

Greg huffed, breathing it in. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, you did."

As they moved along the road together, limping, TJ padded on all fours beside them. Bodies - laser-burned, bitten and thrown - littered the ground.

As they passed the red-headed woman in her trench-coat, still lying where Olivia had dropped her, TJ suddenly stiffened. He bounded to investigate the woman at once, sniffing, huffing, nipping the fabric of her coat and giving it a sharp tug. The vampire did not move.

TJ turned his tawny eyes to Greg in distress.

"What?" Greg said, tensing.

TJ whined, his tail thumping against the ground.

Realisation dawned.

"You're kidding," Greg said. "She's -"

Olivia breathed in. "I only gave her three seconds. That's - enough to knock her out, but not to..."

Greg's heart contracted.

"Christ," he whispered. "We'd... better bring her with us, then."

He knelt down, carefully, and turned the woman over.

She was lifeless and limp - nothing moved in her face. He'd have thought she was dead.

He glanced at TJ, hesitating. "Can you...?"

TJ gave an affirmative snort, shuffled closer, and bent down.

As Greg slung her over TJ's back like a saddle, the vampire lolled vaguely. Her hair fell in a veil across her face. One of her posh high heels slipped from her foot; it fell to the ground with a clatter.

Greg found himself looking down at it - that single, elegant high heel. His chest felt oddly tight.

He realised Olivia was looking at it, too.

"I... I didn't think -" she said, with a nervous flick of her eyes.

Greg took a breath.

"Neither did I," he muttered. "Come on. The faster we get her in a holding cell, the better."

They found the broken remains of Armed Response in the park's central circle. None had escaped.
uninjured. Luke was trying to staunch one of his officer's neck wounds with the lining of his combat jacket. The young man was drip-white as he sat upon a bench, shaking, staring down at his hands in utter silence.

"I called Vickery," Luke said, as Greg came over. "She's on her way."

Greg had never wanted to see the commander more.

"Where's Mycroft?" he asked, glancing around the circle of injured people.

"Comms still." Luke glanced at the hulking mass of TJ, standing at Olivia's side with an unconscious woman slumped across his back. "What the fuck is - ?"

"We got one," Greg said. "Vampire. She's not dead. Just unconscious."


He didn't seem to care.

"Right," he said. He turned back to his officer, as TJ shrugged the vampire onto the ground. "If that thing so much as twitches, I'm shooting it in the fucking head."

Greg decided not to argue. They'd done this for a reason - Luke had lost officers for a reason - but that wasn't what needed to be said right now.

"Stay with Livs, will you?" he said to TJ, who blinked at him. "M'going to find Myke... tell him we're alright."

TJ rumbled, snorted, and nudged Olivia towards a bench. She sat down on it wearily, massaging her twisted shoulder.

As Greg moved towards the trees, Luke called out.

"Should you be going alone?" he said. He looked at Greg rather sharply. "Had enough stupid mistakes today. Wait a minute for me to finish, will you? I'll come with."

With a yap, TJ came bounding between the benches.

"Which part of 'stay with Livs'...?" Greg said, as TJ trotted to his side and whined. He gave Greg a gentle shove in the back. "Alright... point taken. Come on, then."

They made their way towards Amhurst Terrace, heading off the path and into the darkness.

Greg found himself shocked to be alive.

"Outgoing call," he said, lifting his wrist. The grass was whisper-soft beneath his feet. "Mycroft."

It started to connect, flashing quietly as they walked. The light from his wrist-set rippled over the trunks of nearby trees. TJ loped at his side, as peaceful as a labrador; Greg reached out to scruff between his ears.

"Thanks, fuzzball," he said. "Thought my number was up."

TJ huffed. He butted against Greg's leg, and kept walking.

A few moments later, the call clicked off unanswered. Greg turned his wrist-set round, loaded his
contacts, and made sure he'd picked the right entry. He tapped with purpose - *Call Mycroft Holmes* - and watched the screen as it tried to connect.

His pace increased slightly as the call failed once again.

As the third fail flashed across his screen, Greg felt TJ stiffen beside him. The werewolf came to a sudden stop.

Greg looked at him, heart tight. "What?" he said. "What is it?"

TJ stared into the darkness up ahead; his ears pricked. He then bolted into a run.

*Oh - oh, Christ...*

"TJ!" Greg shouted. "TJ, *wait!"

He took off after the werewolf, his pulse picking up. The light from his wrist-set rocked around him as he ran. Trees flashed by, shrubs and litter bins, and as he neared the edge of the park, Greg started to panic as to where TJ had gone.

He spotted a gate - *the cut-through*, he thought - the car park - Amhurst Terrace. He ran towards it, limping, his breath coming short in his chest.

As Greg staggered into the car park, the very edge of his wrist-set light found TJ.

The werewolf had something on the ground - something small - a scattered patch of something that glittered where the light reached it. Greg raced over, panting. He dropped to his knees.

Glass - glass and plastic - electronics. Broken hardware.

"What?" he gasped, hunting through it. TJ whined with distress. "What is - I don't - "

He realised some of the debris was wet - sticky.

It was white paint. It was on Greg's hands.

"TJ, what's - what the fuck is - "

As he pushed a cracked piece of plastic aside, Greg spotted a loop of black stretch-fabric.

His heart gave way.

It was a wrist-set strap.

These were wrist-set parts - smashed to pieces.

Greg stared down at the wreckage, his stomach heaving. He gazed at the white paint now daubed across his fingers. With a stab of terror, he realised that the thick white lines beneath him were freshly-sprayed. He was kneeling at their centre - a vast cross sprayed across the ground, cutting through the shattered wrist-set.

Greg turned his head in horror as he followed each arm to its end.

Three of them came to a blunt stop, just inside the circle of light.

The fourth continued across the car park - where it formed a white trident, with three jagged points.
The Excultus sigil blazed in Greg's eyes as he recognised it.

The remains of Mycroft's wrist-set glittered in his hands.
Situation

As high as we have mounted in delight,
In our dejection do we sink as low.

- William Wordsworth
'Resolution and Independence' (1807)

Friday 30th January

Darkness had fallen by the time the car arrived.

Olivia stood in the window and watched it pull up across the road, trying to stay back out of sight. The acid-orange glow of the streetlight had turned the raindrops on the window into amber; they glistened like gems in the darkness.

It had rained all day long now.

There were no signs of it stopping yet.

The car was an ordinary taxi; the woman who stepped out of it was far from ordinary. She paid the driver briskly and slammed the door, turned the collar of her coat against the rain, and cast her eyes along the street. Content that she was alone, she strode towards the building with purpose. Her coat blew in the wind around her; she carried a data-pad in a case beneath her arm.

Biting her lip, Olivia stepped back from the window.

She turned to the enormous black werewolf who waited in worried silence just behind her.

"She's here..." Olivia said.

It felt strange to hear words.

Words had been few and far between today - this place was a bolt-hole, full of silence. Nobody was speaking.

There was nothing anyone could say.

The wolf processed the news, his yellow eyes round. A tiny nod was given.

"Is he - awake?" Olivia asked.

TJ looked down. His paws scuffled on the cheap laminate floor; he gave an uneasy huff.

A harsh buzz sounded from the flat's call-point, making both of them jump. Olivia picked her way
across the room to answer it, climbing across scattered technology, cushions and pizza boxes. If someone had asked her yesterday to describe what this place would be like, she'd have gotten it spot-on - old movie posters tacked up on the walls with pins; piles of unmatched socks; DVDs out of their boxes. *Les Miserables* was still protruding from the switched-off DVD player like the shiny tip of a tongue.

As she lifted the receiver, a voice said at once,

"*It's me, Miss Reid.*"

Olivia reached over and pressed down the button. There came the boom of a slammed door far below - then a minute of tense silence as they waited.

"Can you... go see if he's...?" Olivia said.

TJ nodded, nervously. He padded away along the corridor, tail sweeping the floor behind him.

Olivia lingered by the front door. When the knock came, she took a deep breath and disarmed the small security panel. This door hadn't been opened since they arrived last night. There was one person in the world she dared to open it for.

Commander Vickery did not wait to be invited in. She stepped inside at once with a snap of her heels, and Olivia shut the door behind her with a clunk. She bolted it, her fingers stiff and shaking. Only as it locked did she take another breath.

Damp with rain, weary-eyed and exhausted, the commander surveyed her in the dim light of TJ's flat.

"How are you, Miss Reid?" she asked.

Olivia's heart strained in silence. *Where to begin?* she thought.

"M'fine," she said. "He's - asleep right now. He's okay - just - tired. TJ's gone to - "

Commander Vickery's eyes flashed. "How are you, Miss Reid?" she said.

Olivia tried to suppress the heat that arose in her face.

"I'm fine," she said again. "A bit - shocked, maybe. But I'm fine."

"From what I've heard of the night's events," Vickery said, "you would have every possible reason *not* to be fine. I understand that you experienced everything Lestrade did."

Olivia's stomach knotted.

"Not... everything," she said.

She hadn't found the wrist-set; she hadn't found the sigil.

She'd seen what it did to Greg, though.

Everybody had.

He'd held himself together long enough to find Olivia, get her to Knighton Grove, get the girls, pack what little they could carry, then rush them into a taxi. He'd told the driver to double-back at several points. He'd watched every car on the road with them, all the way here. He'd carried Lottie
up the stairs on his hip, TJ racing at his heels and all the bags slung over his shoulder, and he'd started shaking as he keyed them through the door.

As soon as it was shut behind them, he'd broken down. He'd gone into TJ's bedroom. They'd barely seen him since.

Olivia had checked on him a few times throughout the night and day - checked to make sure he was still with them. She'd seen that look in someone's eyes before. She'd seen it enough times now, and seen the consequences, to know to keep a watch on him.

The girls were asleep in the spare room - curled up on blankets on the floor.

Lexi hadn't made a sound all day.

"Perhaps we can talk somewhere," Vickery said - and Olivia realised with a thud of her heart that she was being guided. The hand of authority had reached out to steer her through a world falling apart.

She let herself be steered.

"Erm, sure... there's a lounge. J-Just through here." She hesitated. "Can I - get you a drink?"

"Not necessary," the commander said. "But thank you."

They took a seat in TJ's tiny lounge. Commander Vickery didn't seem to notice the mess - the domestic debris produced by a young man living on his own. She removed a pile of laundry from an armchair and sat down, laying on her lap the data-pad she'd brought.

Olivia sat near to her on the sofa, strangely nervous.

"Have we... had any updates?" she asked, knotting her hands together.

She didn't dare to hope.

"A number of things have come to light," Vickery said. She moved one leg across the other, her expression guarded. "Some of them, we're waiting to confirm... others seem inescapable. I'm afraid we've been unable to locate Mycroft so far."

Olivia's heart sank. "They've taken him somewhere," she said. "Excultus..."

Vickery's gaze flickered. "So it seems."

Olivia looked down at her hands.

He could even be in London somewhere, she thought. Somewhere in the city; somewhere in need of help. They hadn't just left him dead in the car park. They'd taken him alive for a reason.

She couldn't bear to think about it.

"They knew everything," she heard herself say. Her voice felt weak in her mouth. "They - ... it all happened so quickly. They knew where Armed Response were. They knew where Greg was. They knew I was a decoy. It seemed like... everything we'd planned, they'd planned around it. It was unreal."

Vickery hesitated, her mouth tightening.
"We - may have an explanation for that," she said. "I'm afraid not a welcome one."

Olivia didn't like the hardness in her tone. "What do you mean?"

Vickery began removing her wet gloves.

"The park has been searched," she said. "We've now recovered the bodies of a number of Excultus operatives... as well as those Armed Response officers who were killed. Commander Elwood lost over half of his team. In addition to Mycroft... one other person has been found to be missing."

Olivia's breath shallowed.

So they had been betrayed.

All day, the possibility had swirled through the back of her mind like gathering smoke. She hadn't wanted to acknowledge it until now. She hadn't wanted to face that awful thought.

"Who's missing?" she asked, turning pale. "W-Who was it?"

Vickery passed her tongue across her teeth.

"Katherine Medlock," she replied. "We've found no sign of a body... nor any sign of a struggle. She remains unaccounted for." She visibly bit the inside of her cheek. "Efforts are now being made to trace her wrist-set."

"Kit."

"No," Olivia whispered. Her blood at once ran cold and grey. "No, you - you can't think that Kit - ..."

All those sessions, Olivia thought - teaching her - training her to defend herself. Laughing with Greg. *Aut viam inveniam aut faciam*; the Latin inked across her chest. *I will find a way or I will make one*. Olivia had looked it up. She'd had to know what it meant. She'd needed to know. Kit was brave. She was wonderful.

And she'd disappeared.

It couldn't be true.

"Why - why would she...?"

Vickery folded her gloves into her pocket. "We have people searching her home."

For the second time in twenty-four hours, Olivia felt her heart break.

She turned her face down towards her knees. She wove her fingers together tightly, and waited until the lump in her throat had unknotted enough to speak.

"Will that tell us where Mycroft is?" she said at last.

"With any luck," Vickery replied. "We're pursuing other avenues as well. I understand that a white van previously seen in a car park near Amhurst Terrace disappeared overnight. We're attempting to trace it. We have a forensics team at the Downs - and a team investigating the power-line that was cut near Richmond Road - and street-teams are speaking to residents near the park to identify if any suspicious behaviour was noted in the area. Every possible course of action is being taken."
Something was being unsaid.

Olivia felt her stomach lurch as she realised what it was.

"... but?" she whispered.

Vickery's eyes did not leave hers. "It - seems Excultus have reached a greater strength and number than we feared. This is not a minor situation."

Olivia let it sink in, her skin prickling.

They'd planned all of this to take Mycroft and Greg alive, together. They'd risked people to do it. They'd *lost* people to do it.

She didn't know what it meant, but it made her feel sick.

"Has the woman woken up?" she asked. "The vampire woman. The one we arrested."

"Receiving medical treatment," Vickery said, "under armed guard. Not yet lucid enough to be questioned."

Olivia's heart ached. "She'll know everything," she said. She couldn't keep her voice steady. "Where they are. Where they were planning to take Greg. *Everything.*"

"Indeed she will." Vickery turned her eyes towards a flash of her wrist-set, reading and dismissing the message with a flick of her finger. "She'll require deft handling... she is a thread of hope. We don't have enough to treat them casually."

One thread might be enough, Olivia thought.

They just had to follow it.

"I must now ask you an important question," Commander Vickery said, drawing Olivia from her thoughts. She glanced up. Vickery sat back in the chair, regarding her with weighted calm. "I would like an honest answer."

Olivia hesitated.

"What question?" she asked, tentative.

Vickery watched every movement in her face. "How is Lestrade?"

Olivia constructed the lie swiftly, and with care.

She didn't want to lie - not to Commander Vickery - not to this magnificent person who was somehow calm, a pillar of fortitude who still talked in facts and plans and hard truths when the whole world around them felt like it had crumbled into ruin.

But she had to.

"He's... shocked," she said, at last. "Quiet. Just processing, I think... it was a long night for everyone. He's okay though. All things considered."

Commander Vickery said nothing for a moment, viewing her very closely.

"Knowing that I expected to hear the man is a flaming, guilt-ridden wreck," she said at last, "who
has barely been able to speak, and for whom you now have the keenest and greatest of concern... might I ask you to recreate that answer for me?"

Nausea welled in the back of Olivia's throat.

The words burst from her before she could stop them.

"He's just worried," she begged. "That's all. He and Dr Holmes were - ... close. Good friends. Greg thinks it's his fault. Please. Please don't be angry with him. He'll be fine, he just - "

Vickery held up a hand.

Olivia stuttered into silence, paling. Oh - oh, shit. She'd said too much.

"I need to know," Vickery said, her voice quiet, "so that I can decide what is best for Lestrade - and for us all. Not so that I can punish him."

Olivia's heart thudded, hard. She listened without a word.

"If you'd had to talk the man down from the roof, I would understand," Vickery said. "I can't begin to envision Mycroft's mental state, had it been Lestrade we'd lost. I'd have the man under constant supervision. I'd be doing it myself."

Olivia shook, swallowing back tears.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered. "I - I don't know what to say. He just collapsed. He got us here safe, then just - ... it's like everything he knew just - ..." She gazed at the commander, pleading with her eyes for help. "Please. Please, he's so afraid. I don't know how to make him get up."

Vickery gave her a small, quiet smile.

Olivia had a feeling she was seeing something rare.

"Fear is the first breath of bravery," Vickery told her. "It is a resource. It's to be used."

She stood from her chair, picking up the data-pad with her.

"Are the women who shared your home comfortable in the shelter for now?" she asked, as Olivia tentatively got to her feet.

"Yes, I... I spoke to some of them earlier. They're fine."

"And are the children comfortable here?"

Olivia nervously took the data-pad that Vickery held out. "They're - a bit unsettled, maybe, but they're safe. It's all I can ask for."

"Good." The commander began to unbutton her coat. "Lestrade made a wise decision to bring you here. I suggest that you both remain so for now, while we develop our understanding of the situation. Excultus are unlikely to find out with any speed, given that only myself and Tierney are aware. Let us keep it so. I have no doubt that Tierney will guard both of you well."

Olivia flushed.

As Vickery handed over her coat, and took back the data-pad, she looked into Olivia's eyes.
"None of this situation will be easy, Miss Reid," she warned. "We are in it nonetheless. Our only option is to proceed."

"Right." Olivia held her breath a moment. "Is there - anything I can - ?"

"Your moral support to DI Lestrade would be invaluable, if you're happy to offer it. They come to rely upon their sergeants for much more than fetching coffee. He has lost a great deal."

"Okay. I'll... I'll do what I can."

"Thank you." Vickery paused. A card appeared from inside a silver case in her pocket; it was offered between two fingers. "Not to be distributed. Contact me for any reason."

Olivia took the card.

She looked down at it: work number. Home number. Wrist-set number.

"Mycroft thought very highly of you," the commander added, expressionless. She then turned and left the room.

A muffled pulse pulled Greg from nothing.

He woke to find himself curled around it - feeling it, listening to it, breathing numbly along with it as it buzzed against his ribs.

As he realised what it was, he knew there was only one person it could be.

"Answer," he croaked. It hurt to speak. "Myke?"

There was a long, desperate pause.

"It's... me, mate," said a voice - the wrong voice. "M'really sorry..."

Greg felt the world drain slowly around him. He didn't answer; strained heat blurred across his eyes.

"Are you okay?" Luke asked the silence.

_of all the fucking questions._ Greg almost hung up.


"Mate, I - I know it's - ... just tell me you're somewhere safe. Please, Greg. I've not slept."

Greg was lying on TJ's bed. He was surrounded by TJ's old posters, TJ's crisp packets and TJ's laundry. He didn't really know how long he'd been here. Sleep and shock and guilt had withered his sense of time.

He curled around his wrist-set, wordless, and let the dull heat seep beneath his eyelashes.

If he longed hard enough, maybe the voice would change. It would become the voice he needed.

Greg swallowed, feeling every muscle in his throat pull against the others.


"Why aren't you back here? Where the fuck are you? You just - fucking vanished. D'you know what went through my head when I realised you'd gone?"

Anger stirred within the depths of Greg's grief.

He felt it reach upwards through his chest, and curl its sharp black claws around his heart. He was too weak to fight it. It rippled through him.

"They knew everything," he managed. His throat clamped around the words. "Someone told them, Luke. Told them the comms frequency. Told them our positions. Told them everything."

Luke was silent for a second.

"Yeah," he said, voice tight. "Yeah, they did."

"Find who it is." Greg heard his voice harden, sharpening and cracking. Rage crushed his heart within its claws. "Find them... fuck. Fucking find them. They know where Mycroft is."

"Greg, mate - it... it's not that simple - "

"They KNOW where Mycroft is!" Greg raged. He dragged in a breath, gasping with the sudden detonation of pain. He started to shake. "Get them in the fucking holding cells - all of them - and go through them, one by one, until you fucking find which - "

"She's gone!" Luke shouted. His voice crackled wildly through the wrist-set speaker. "She's gone, she's gone, she's already fucking gone! Alright? She's run already! It's too late, Greg!"

Greg's brain reeled.

"She."

"Kit?" he said.

It didn't make sense.

Luke's voice shook with anger. "No sign of her."

Greg's sluggish pulse picked up. "But - but why Kit, why would - "

"She didn't fire a single fucking shot. About a minute after comms cut, she wrenched out her biometrics. They've had people combing her section of Hackney Downs. No sign of a struggle. They got hard-light scans before the worst of the rain. Hardly anybody even went in that part. The rest of the park looks like the fucking Somme, but she - she just - ..."

Greg said nothing, staring at a poster pinned up on the wall.

Something awful had started to arise in his mind. The possibility flooded him with agitation - but the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. Facts clicked together in his mind. They slotted, locked and held fast. His heart began to pound.
He wondered, with a cold rush, if among his endless catalogue of unforgivable fucking mistakes, he'd made a single smart move.

He breathes it in.

Shit, shit. Panic and relief whirled and smashed behind his ribs. Oh fuck, Myke, why aren't you here? You're the clever one. I'm just the idiot who gets you fucking killed. You'd know how to fix this. You'd know what to do.

"Greg?" Luke said, somewhere in the hammering silence.

Greg closed his eyes, drawing breath. He couldn't cope with this much longer. "What?"

"Is there anything I can do? Anything to help?"

"Find Mycroft?" Greg said, weary. "What d'you want me to say?"

"For Christ's sake - I want you to say you're safe. That you've got someone there, looking after you - that you're gonna be alright - "

Greg reached for the button on his wrist-set, numb.

"M'not safe," he said. He could feel himself slumping; he was fading again. "Not gonna be alright. None of us are."

He cut the call midway through Luke's apology.

Silence laid across the room; it fell as thick as snow.

Greg sank beneath it, and let sleep roll across the surface of his mind.

Time passed. It no longer moved in linear strings, but in vague and rolling circles that blurred together into one.

One minute Greg was here, lying on TJ's bed as if he were dead, trying to think and not to feel, and getting nowhere. The next he was kneeling in a car park by Hackney Downs, looking down at white paint on his hands, and realising what it meant with a rush that smashed him into useless shards. He found himself in other places too - a corridor, closing an apartment door behind him, with the feeling that he'd never go back; a lift, the lights cut, and the silver-grey eyes that locked into his like he belonged to them; a tube station platform in the first days of January, watching a man who stroked pages as he read them. A man who believed that all love stories were happy stories, given time.

They should have gotten on a plane.

What did London matter?

What did duty matter?

The world was a fucked-up mess, and nothing ever changed. Greg had spent his life wanting someone to love - someone brave and good, who wasn't ashamed to love him back. He'd found it. Mycroft was a miracle, and they'd had everything. They should have packed it in, told Vickery they couldn't handle it on their own, and gotten out of here while they could.

They'd said 'where angels fear to tread'.
But they weren't angels.

Greg didn't know what to do. It was done now, all of it - Excultus had struck, like he'd known they would. They'd taken what they wanted all along. Mycroft could be anywhere right now. They could be putting him through anything. Things they'd planned for almost a decade.

The only thing that gave Greg hope hardly seemed like hope.

_There's nothing I want less than you dead_, she'd said - her trench coat, her smart little hair-cut, her posh little shoes, regarding Greg like a trapped and frightened animal. _I've been told to escort you safely, alive and well... or not to bother returning myself._

They'd wanted Greg alive. They'd gone to great pains to ensure it.

They'd taken Mycroft alive, too.

A matching pair.

Wherever he was, Myke might not yet be dead.

Somewhere in the mess, as time began to lay itself flat once more, Greg heard the door of the bedroom creak. Padded feet and claws clicked across the laminate flooring. He listened to them, numb.

When he opened his eyes, he found a muzzle resting on the mattress edge. Big yellow eyes regarded him with concern.

"What?" he mumbled, gazing back at TJ.

TJ emitted a long, low whine.

Greg pulled enough of himself together to try some bravery. It felt as weak as water.

"M'alright, mate," he murmured. "I'm - just tired."

TJ knew it was a lie. He whined again, and shuffled forwards to lick Greg's hand where it lay upon the mattress. Greg watched the flat pink tongue flashing over his fingers.

He could barely feel it.

"Fuzzball?" he said. He hadn't meant it to be a whisper.

TJ looked up at him, round-eyed.

Greg's voice cracked. Suddenly, it all came out. "I fucked up," he gasped.

TJ's ears flattened to his head in distress.

Misery shattered through the exhaustion. Tears welled in Greg's eyes at once, choked out of him by the force of the pain. TJ whimpered at the sight. With a spring he leapt up onto the bed, the mattress bowing beneath his weight. He slumped down beside Greg, curled against him, and snuffled urgently into his hair.

Greg broke down.

He pushed his fingers through TJ's fur as he wept.
It was only a day since TJ had been crying to him. Greg could hardly believe it. He'd promised TJ they'd find him a job. He'd promised him they'd make Yardley pay.

Suddenly, Yardley didn't exist anymore. None of it did. That world of normal problems had gone up in flame, and it was all Greg's fault. He'd thought it was all so safe - so under control - now Mycroft was gone; Kit was gone. Olivia couldn't go home. The girls couldn't go home. Greg couldn't go home. It was all over.

As he wept, TJ laid beside him and let him cry. He shifted now and then, and licked Greg's forehead gently.

At last, with a pained whine, he nudged at Greg's shoulder for attention.

Greg pushed his sleeve across his face, shaking as he tried to hide his tears. He supposed it was a bit late for that now.

"What?" he managed.

TJ made a frustrated little sound, like a cough. It petered into a whine and a snap of his jaws. Greg watched him, weak and lost.

"I... I don't know what you're saying, mate..."

TJ wriggled, staring at him insistently. He let out two awkwardly-shaped yaps - a word was hidden in it somewhere. Greg tried his best to make sense of it.

"Who's 'Ricky'?" he said.

There came a sudden knock at the door.

Greg jumped. As TJ shuffled back, he pushed gingerly up onto his elbows.

"Livs?" he called.

TJ slithered off the bed with a thump, padded to the door and bent to take the handle in his mouth. He tugged it open with a creak.

As Greg caught sight of the person waiting there, he hurried to cover his face.

"Jesus - commander - "

Oh Christ, oh Christ. This was the last thing she needed to see.

"S-Sorry - I didn't know you were - "

"Might I have a few minutes alone with Lestrade?" Vickery interrupted, glancing at the wolf who'd opened the door.

TJ hesitated, his ears flattening to his skull. He made a reluctant little noise.

Vickery bit her cheek.

"I have more serious concerns in this moment than the state of your bedroom, Tierney. We Shan't be long."

TJ dropped his head. He slinked through the door, sullen, and sloped off along the hall.
Vickery shut the door behind him as he left.

She took a chair from the corner, brushed the computer cables off it, and placed it beside the bed without a word.

She sat down.

Greg swallowed back his nausea, pale.

"Commander, I'm sorry. I - I didn't realise we'd been infiltr-"

"Don't you dare apologise to me, Lestrade." She looked suddenly fifteen years older; her eyes were hollow. "Of all the things I want from you in this moment, an apology is not one of them."

Greg's throat thickened.

"I messed up," he said. "My fault. A-All of it."

"Your fault that your operation was betrayed?"

Greg shook, his heart pounding, hating that she'd seen him like this. Pale, tearful and useless. "My fault I didn't plan for it," he said, and his voice cracked. "My fault I didn't know."

"Lestrade, if you spend your life planning for the world to betray you, you'll have very little done at the end of it."

And Mycroft would be here. Greg said nothing, fighting back the fresh wave of distress that rolled over him. Of all the people in the world he was comfortable with seeing him sob like a child, Amelia Vickery wasn't one of them.

"How are you?" Vickery asked, and Greg stared at her - simply stared at her - pleading with her silently to tell him what she wanted him to say. I'm alright, commander. I'm not alright, commander. Take one look at me, commander. Vickery crossed one leg over the other, sitting forwards, and Greg realised she would wait for him to speak until the sky fell down around them and the planet fell apart.

He swallowed the lump in his throat.

"Has anybody found him?" he asked.

Vickery took the non-answer as his answer. She looked down at the data-pad in her lap, raising an eyebrow, and switched it on. As it began to load, she laid it on the edge of the bed.

Screens appeared in the gloom - windows - messages.

She'd started an inquiry board.

Greg gazed at it, but didn't touch.

"This is what we know so far," Vickery said, watching him. "Everything we know. A number of lines of inquiry have launched. They're being pursued at speed."

Greg's eyes skipped from one message window to the next, trying not to read them.

"I've transferred all non-major investigations out of our department and into CID," Vickery said. "I've gathered our people onto finding Mycroft instead. They need a DCI. Someone to co-ordinate
them. Meanwhile, I have half the London press camped out on the steps of Scotland Yard, hooting at me for answers about a laser battle on Hackney Downs. I can deal with the press. I cannot also command an army."

She held his desperate stare.

"Now answer me, Lestrade." Her forehead furrowed. "How are you?"

Greg looked into her eyes. His jaw set, fists tightening in the covers to stop them shaking.

*You want my honesty, commander?* he thought.

What could she possibly do to him that he hadn't done to himself already?

"I'm - a fucking moron." His voice strained into a whisper. "Thanks for asking. A fucking moron who led everybody into danger. And Mycroft's paying for it. After all his worrying - trying to warn me. Trying to keep me safe. Trying to - ..."

His voice broke. He pushed his hands over his face. He couldn't look at her.

"Too busy being a fucking hero to listen, commander. As usual. He told me not to goad them. He said he knew them better than me. I fucking ignored him. And whatever's happening to him right now is worse than being left dead in a car park."

"Has lying here picturing it helped the situation?" Vickery asked.

Greg's fists clenched; the last of the colour bled from his face.

"Last time," he bit at her, "Excultus had five days with him. They mutilated his genetic code. They broke his humanity apart and made him decide that he's a fucking monster. They've had nine years to plan the next bit. And it's happening to him, somewhere, right now. What do you think I'm going to be picturing?"

Vickery's forehead contracted as he spoke. She watched him for a moment, working something out.

"Five days?" she said.

"Before he escaped." Greg's chest heaved as he fought back his anger. "And I think they'll be double-checking the restraints this time - don't you?"

Vickery sat back in her chair. She recrossed her legs, and in silence she thought for a while.

"Mycroft will be taking steps," she said, at last. "Those are beyond our control. What matters are the steps that we take."

Greg's stomach twisted.

"Commander, I - " He couldn't breathe. "I - don't think I should be the one to - ... if I've proven one thing in this whole fucking disaster of an investigation - "

" - it's that you're prepared to fight," Vickery cut across him, in a voice that brooked no argument. "And that you're a hot-headed bloody bull, Lestrade - who would work every hour God sent if it made a difference to somebody who needs you."

Greg paled into silence, his heart beating hard.
Commander Vickery watched him and waited.

"One fortnight ago," she said. "I sent you to Criminal Psychology - to speak to Mycroft Holmes."


"You showed him an ISOC scan and a sigil that brought his worst nightmares immediately into being. Nine years of comfort and safety vanished in an instant. Every shadow he'd outrun - every fear he'd ever fled - were handed back to him as if they'd never gone. And the next morning, he was outside my office at nine AM. Ready to become a man of his word."

Commander Vickery lifted her chin.

"I need you to get up, Lestrade." Her eyes speared into his soul. *Your partner* needs you to get up. You told me you wanted this case because you were 'personally invested'. And if you weren't at that point, Greg, you *certainly* are now."

*Greg.* The bottom dropped from his stomach. *Your partner.* He struggled for words.

"C'mmmander, I - I'm not - ... me and M-Mycroft - we weren't - " He couldn't bring himself to say it.

Vickery rolled her eyes.

"For heaven's sake," she breathed, and stood up from the chair. Greg tensed. "If you think me *that* much of a fool, Lestrade, then perhaps this conversation has run its course..."

She returned the chair to the corner with a clunk.

"I will leave the data-pad," she said. "Read it, if you wish. Ignore it, if you wish. I commend you to your thoughts - and to a reminder that you promised me, two weeks ago, that you would go the extra mile."

She reached for the door handle.

"That mile has now come," she said, and opened it. She looked back at him with severity. "At nine AM tomorrow morning, we find out whether you are also a man of your word. I hope for Mycroft's sake that you are."

"Commander - ..." Greg's throat clenched; he fought to speak. "Commander, I - I don't even have a sergeant - "

"Don't you?" Vickery said.

She slammed the door behind her.

Greg reeled in the silence left in her wake, feeling his heart hammer itself apart.

*Deeper than a romance,* he thought.

*Closer than a marriage.*

His eyes shut. He covered his face with his hands, and let his final hot tears ease between his fingers.

One face filled his mind.
"I love you," he whispered to it. He let the room fall away around him - let the walls open up. No longer here, he thought - somewhere else - somewhere he couldn't see, but didn't need to. Somewhere that his own face was being pictured in desperation. In pain, maybe; in fear. He felt his heart strain as he reached out with his mind, wrapping his thoughts around a mind that was reaching for him. "Love you," he breathed, as his throat muscles clenched. "M'coming. I'll do it. I'll f-fucking find you. Hold on for me, gorgeous. I'll get you home."

As Olivia caught the creak of the bedroom door, she put aside her untouched tea. She got quickly off the couch and reached the hall just as Commander Vickery swept her coat from the bookshelf, pulling it around her shoulders.

"Did he - I..." At the flash of Vickery's eyes, Olivia faltered. "S-Sorry, I just - I hope he - ..."

Vickery turned up her coat collar.

"Do you know what matters most, Miss Reid?" she asked.

Olivia didn't dare speak. She watched without a word as the commander tied the belt of her coat.

"Results." Vickery fixed her with a hard, searching look. "I should have remembered to decommission your wrist-set by now. How absent-minded of me."

She unlatched the front door, opened it, and left.

Her heels echoed behind her in the stairwell.

Overwhelmed, Olivia nudged the door shut. She reached for the lock, and latched it shut.

Alone, she brought her wrist up to her chest. She held it there a moment, wrapping her fingers around the smooth plastic casing beneath her sleeve.

Her eyes shut.

A creak then lifted Olivia from her thoughts.

She looked around.

Greg was standing in the doorway of the bedroom.

He was a mess - unshaved, pale with a long night's tears, still wearing yesterday's clothes. They had yesterday's blood on them. He didn't look like a police officer. He looked like a man who'd lost everything.

Olivia held her breath, gazing at him.

Greg gazed back; his eyes shone with fear and shame. He was asking her something.

Olivia realised what it was. Swallowing, she let go of her wrist-set. She drew her fingers quietly into her palms.

There was only one thing to say.
"What's our first move, sir?" she said.

Greg took a moment to speak.

"I'm - gonna shower... sergeant." His voice was hoarse. He held up the data-pad Vickery had brought. "Then I reckon we'll start on this."

Olivia nodded, numbly.

"Alright," she said. "That - sounds good."

There was a long pause.

"Have the girls eaten?" he asked.

Olivia bit the inside of her cheek. "I was thinking pasta."

He nodded, weak. "Are they - ?"

"They're okay."

"And - are you - ?"

Olivia squeezed her hands together quietly.

"Go shower," she said, "I'll be in the kitchen. D'you want coffee?"

Gratitude wracked his features.

"Please," he breathed.

There was a long moment of silence.

"We'll be alright," Olivia said. Her heart ached with the hugeness of it. She knew she didn't have the right to promise that - not a single right in the world - but she believed it. She wanted him to believe it, too. "Pain's... just a feeling," she managed. "Like cold. Or hunger. You can feel it. Doesn't mean you don't have to be it."

"If - ..." Greg swallowed, hard. "If he's - ... i-if they - "

"He's alive," Olivia said. Her stomach hardened; her fists closed. "He's alive, and that's all you need to know. There's nothing else to talk about. He's waiting for you, and he needs you to make this okay. So go shower."

Flushed, she added,

"Sir."
Prisoner Welfare

It is only when a man feels himself face to face with such horrors that he can understand their true import.

- Bram Stoker
'Dracula' (1897)

Saturday 31st January

The next morning, Amelia Vickery arrived to find her division completely deserted.

Even accounting for the weekend, this was an unexpected discovery. Most of the department had been drafted into the search for Mycroft. She hadn't expected to arrive at the 24-48 hours mark, coffee in hand, to find they were all at home eating cereal in their underpants, watching cartoons and drooling. It was not the sign she'd hoped to see.

Then she spotted the post-it note tacked to her office door.

Dawn's preferred brand; Dawn's hand-writing, slanted and slightly rushed. *Meeting Room 2.10A!*

Vickery peeled the note from the door, raising an eyebrow as she read it.

She retained her coat, and proceeded back to the lift.

Through the glass panel from the corridor, she could see that Meeting Room 2.10A was in darkness. Its electronic screen read:

0845-1100 CROSS-HUMAN RELATIONS
ACTING DCI G M LESTRADE

Vickery permitted herself the smallest of smiles, twisted the handle, and let herself in.

A few heads turned. The rest remained as they were, fixed on the front and the officer addressing them all from inside a hard-light rendering of a crime scene.

"- counteracts the usual agitation in victims of severe blood loss," Lestrade was saying, his hands in his pockets. The Excultus sigil gleamed in hard-light on the wall behind him. He acted as if it were not there. "You're looking at unconsciousness after only minutes, if the bite's deep and the vampire knows what they're doing."
"What sort of volume is that, sir?"

"Hypovolemic shock starts at around twenty percent," Lestrade said. "Milder symptoms are headache, fatigue, profuse sweating and dizziness. Getting more severe, you're looking at cold skin, rapid breathing, rapid pulse, general weakness, confusion and a blue tinge to the lips and fingernails."

People were taking notes; people were leaning forwards, listening.

"Unconsciousness is a danger after about forty percent," he went on. "Two litres, ish. Can be further complications arising from that... kidney damage, brain damage. Heart attacks. Best avoided."

"And the - the saliva, sir - the...?"

"PT-309."

"I mean, it... what, it just - overrides what you think?"

"It's not magic," said Lestrade. "It's chemical, and it's working in combination with other things. We've seen people resist mild exposure to PT-309. It's potent - so it'll have a physiological effect on the body - but that's not going to obliterate instincts like panic. Both murders we've seen have involved an element of charm and consent. By the time the bite was delivered, the victims were at least partly compliant. They weren't expecting to die."

He glanced behind him into the corner, where his sergeant stood waiting with the wrist-set. She nodded, selected a new file and projected it.

As a hard-light map of Hackney Downs rendered itself in the air, Amelia Vickery glanced through it - into the eyes of Acting DCI Lestrade.

Greg looked back at her: tired but resolved, and calm to the bone. He held her gaze.

She nodded, just once.

Lestrade glanced up at the map, took a moment, and said,

"This is Hackney Downs. This is where DI Holmes was taken during the power cut two nights ago. As you can see, this is a busy residential area. People were already at their windows trying to figure out what was going on. One of them saw what happened - somebody saw where Mycroft went - and we're going to find them."

"Sir...? A trainee sergeant in the second row raised a timid hand.

"Yep?"

"Sorry, this might be - ... erm, are we sure DI Holmes is still - recoverable?"

Lestrade's expression did not change.

"Everything we know suggests so," he said. "Excultus didn't want Mycroft dead, or they'd have left him that way. They also tried to take me alive. If we're lucky, that means whatever they planned involved us both. While I'm still here, we've got the advantage."

"Have we - had a demand yet?" the sergeant asked.
Lestrade treated him to a humourless smile.

"Let's move onto Excultus history," he said. "When I'm done, you can tell me how likely we are to receive a demand. Alright?"

He nodded to Detective Sergeant Reid; she changed the projection.

Amelia Vickery let herself out of the room, and went to make sure the rest of the building knew where their priorities lay.

Back in the office, Olivia leant against the desk and sipped her tea as she watched Greg wipe the incident board.

"Will we not need...?" she said, as the previous tree of information vanished - pictures, names and addresses, Sam and Emma and Elliot Webster. There was a flash, as a pane of clear, glassy hard-light appeared. It shimmered faintly in the air.

"We might do," Greg said. "Got it saved. But let's start like this is day one. We're going to need to keep things clean. Otherwise, the pair of us will vanish in the mud."

Olivia watched as he imported a forest of files, dragged them all to one side like a pile of old photographs, and began to sort through.

"Always start at the end with your incident boards," he told her. "If you do, you're more likely to reach it."

From the pile of images, he selected a face they both knew well - DI Mycroft Holmes, Cross Human Relations at Scotland Yard. Greg pulled the photograph to the centre of the hard-light screen, and locked it into place.

Mycroft gazed at them from the screen - fifteen years younger, brave and brilliant and ready to make a difference.

"The end is Mycroft," Greg said. His voice cracked; he carried on as if it hadn't. "Everything has to lead to him. We build our priorities around that outcome. So we start with our best options."

Olivia watched him flashing through more images, dragging and locking them down. She wondered for a moment if she should speak - if she should contribute somehow, or at least show him she appreciated the lesson - but then she realised this wasn't for her benefit.

Greg needed to talk aloud. He needed to hear progress.

"There's more than we think," he said, and leant back to survey the board. "A lot more. One of these is going to pay off - we just have to act quickly when it does. Every day he's with them is a day too long."

Olivia wanted to help. She wondered if questions might.

"Which one do you think is most likely?" she asked.

Greg considered in silence, biting his lip. He tapped a photograph on the bottom right. It flashed
blue at his touch.

"Maybe this one," he said. "The vampire you got us. Clearly has some level of authority, and she'd been told to bring me back alive or not bother going back herself. Wherever she was meant to take me, Mycroft'll be there."

"Can we be - certain it's the same location?"

"No. Not certain. Their high command used to be in one place - and if Mycroft pissed them off as much as he said, it's maybe there he's been taken. They lived like a king's court." He paused, dragging a few more lines of inquiry into position. "They'll die like a king's court, too."

A shiver ran down Olivia's spine. She sipped her tea to cover it, collecting her thoughts.

"So - the vampire is our top priority," she said.

Greg's expression wrinkled. "She's a resource," he said. "If we can crack her, we'll be straight to end game... but she needs careful handling. I really hoped we'd have Myke here for this part. He knows them. He knows how they operate. Instead we'll be making it up as we go along, and it could take time. So we need to get other things off the ground and into the air..."

Reluctantly, he laid a hand on another photograph - another Scotland Yard ID.

Armed Response Sergeant Katherine Medlock regarded them with cool disinterest from the board, her portrait illuminated.

"Kit," Greg murmured. "She took off when the power cut and comms were jarred. Meanwhile, we're looking for someone who sold every detail of our plan to Excultus."

Words stuck in Olivia's throat for a moment. She took a breath, and forced them out.

"Kit was - ... she didn't seem like the type to..."

Greg looked round at her. There were shadows beneath his eyes; it was only obvious this close up.

"I know," he said. "I've got questions, too. If we find her, we can ask them."

"Why didn't she just - when we were all training?" Olivia said, in quiet despair. "When she had you on the bike? Why would she wait until...?"

Greg bit the side of his cheek, thinking.

"Made more sense just to let us walk into the perfect trap?" he suggested. "Easier than overpowering the three of us? She could've taken me on the bike, I suppose, but... then Myke would've noticed I'd gone. Clearly this whole thing had Mycroft as the major goal. He was - ... smart. Wary. If they'd just taken me, he'd have run and gone to ground, and they'd have lost their chance to get revenge."

He held Olivia's gaze.

"If you hadn't had those gloves," he said, "they'd have got us both. Total success. End of the line."

Olivia flushed, squeezing her mug of tea. "I - know they're not entirely legal," she mumbled.

Greg looked back at his incident board, quietening. He gave a snort.
"Not sure 'legal' means that much to me anymore..." He tapped Kit's picture, opening up two new branches. "So... Kit. Something's going on there."

Olivia drank her tea, listening in silence.

"We've got people in her flat," Greg said. "Who knows? Maybe there's Excultus headed notepaper kicking around. Business cards. Payslips with their address on it. We've got Technical trying to trace her wrist-set, too. Either of those could pay off."

"Did she have her tracker turned on?"

"No - so it's not guaranteed that they'll find it. But they can look at some of the other signals, pinpoint a few of those, and at least narrow it down for us. If she was the leak, she'll have ditched it in a bin two streets away. If she wasn't..."

Olivia's heart squeezed.

"Do you think it's possible?" she asked.

Greg pulled a face.

"Not enough facts right now," he said. "Either way, Kit Medlock vanished for a reason. Maybe she's not a direct route to Mycroft - but she was important somehow. We need to follow that. Then..."

He illuminated another lead.

"Street teams," he said. "Hackney Downs. People were staring out their windows trying to see if the neighbours had power. Street teams take time. It can produce a lot of background noise we'll need to filter - but sometimes there's gold behind it. We've just got to wait and see what they find. Got them concentrated around the car park near Amhurst, and the streets where Kit would logically have taken off."

He took a breath, lighting up the final branch.

"Forensics," he said. "They're on Hackney Downs. Without comms, we don't know what happened to Myke or Kit after the power went. Forensics'll hopefully fill in some blanks. They're checking out the severed power line, too. Somebody was sent there to cut it - somebody who was part of a bigger plan. That plan was all centred on Mycroft. Maybe we can track the outskirts of the web to its centre."

"I - had a thought," Olivia mumbled, heart fluttering. "I - I don't know if it's - ..."

Greg glanced round at her, his face opening.

"It might be nothing," she added.

Greg was listening. "Go on."

"Well... I know that when the power went, we'll have lost a lot of CCTV. But some cameras have back-up power sources - they're designed to run for a few minutes after people have cut the wires. To catch vandals. Is that at least worth checking?"

Greg opened a new window as she spoke, typing. Olivia tried not to read her own words as they skittered across the screen.
"And I mean... even if we're missing the footage from last night," she said, "surely Excultus had to scope out Hackney Downs as well. They had to plan, just like we did. It seems as if they had people waiting ready in position. If we dig back through CCTV over the last few days, knowing that we're looking for suspicious people dressed completely normal... maybe we'll spot something new."

Greg was typing at speed.

"The van," he said.

"Mm?"

"The van. A white van in the car park. Vickery said it disappeared when the power went. Myke and I were smoking next to it that bloody morning. If we can trace it through the traffic systems, we can see where it came from and where it went."

Olivia's heart contracted. "Do you think it's connected to Mycroft?"

"This is what we know," Greg said. "The power went on Hackney Downs. In the next few minutes, Mycroft vanished. Kit vanished. So did a van. I'm willing to start with the obvious leads."

Olivia gripped her tea mug quietly. It seemed like a plan had come together. "What do we do first?" she asked.

Before Greg could reply, the office door opened.

"Chief Inspector?" It was one of the younger constables.

"Christ," Greg mumbled, picking up his cold mug of coffee. "Not getting used to that any time soon... what's happened?"

"Call from Prisoner Containment, sir. Medical have released the witness. She's in secure holding, but she's conscious."

Olivia glanced at Greg, her heart jumping. "The vampire - " she said.

Greg put his coffee straight back down.

"Right." He swept his jacket from the back of the chair. "Tell them we're on our way."

As the constable left, Olivia grabbed for her jacket too.

"Are we - just going to - "

"I'll handle it," Greg said. "Just stand with me, and stop me kicking her to death."

Olivia's throat tightened.

"Or help," she said.

Greg snorted, locking the door behind them.
They'd put her in one of the field containment cells. With a little effort, a prisoner could fry themselves alive on those things. It meant Criminal Psychology had ruled she was no danger at all to herself - just to other people.

As they watched her on camera from control, Greg made a brief phone call.

Medical confirmed: she'd attacked the first team. She'd played along at first, feigning acquiescence - then, at just the right moment, she'd turned.

Prisoner Welfare had already warned she couldn't be kept in there indefinitely.

"Yeah?" Greg muttered, arms folded as he watched her on the screen. "Let's chuck Prisoner Welfare in there to keep her company, then. See how quick they change their minds..."

The control officer laughed, darkly. "Pretty damn quick, I reckon... shall I start clearance for you both?"

Greg sighed under his breath. Just watching her on camera wouldn't make things alright.

But Christ, he wished Mycroft was here.

He'd thought it a thousand times today. Acting DCI Lestrade. God almighty. He wished Mycroft was here to laugh, and inform Greg he was still the junior officer in this case. He wished Mycroft was here to neaten up the incident board, and lament his spelling mistakes in their e-mails, and run a quiet hand across his back as he passed by. Two weeks ago, they'd been fighting over the office door. Now Greg was Acting DCI, and acting his fucking heart out.

Maybe if he just kept on acting, it would all start to feel real.

"Yeah," he muttered. "Let's go. Let's get this started."

The control officer reached a hand to the comms panel, requesting a containment cell team to Block C.

Greg glanced over his shoulder at Olivia. She was flashing through screens on her wrist-set, reading and typing.

He didn't know if it was for show or real - nerves or drive. He couldn't tell.

Maybe that was best, he thought. Acting Sergeant Reid. She was doing a better job than he was, at least.

They were accompanied into the cell by two officers with rifles. The containment field would hold her - it flickered faintly in the strip-lights as they entered, catching like a laser cut through mist - but Greg was no longer in a position to turn down precautions. He'd made too many mistakes in the run-up to this moment. He couldn't afford any more.

Their prisoner glanced up through the wall of energy - a lethargic, unsettling flick of her eyes.

As they found Greg, they snapped into place.

She watched him cross to the containment field, remaining exactly as she was - sitting on her bed in the standard issue grey jumpsuit. She didn't move a muscle. The security doors sealed and bolted behind them with a pneumatic hiss and a clunk, and a heavy silence fell.

Greg held her gaze. He came to a stop, inches from the field, and hooked his thumbs into his belt.
He waited.

She raised a single eyebrow.

As she uncurled herself from the bed, no breath was drawn. She crossed her white-walled cell like a pretty ghost, her socked feet perfectly silent on the floor.

She came to stand opposite him - barely a metre away - and sighed.

Her eyes hadn't left his once.

"They got him, then..." she murmured.

Her voice was soft. It was only for Greg to hear.

He frowned, ignoring the thud of his heart. "Got him?"

Her mouth curved. "Mycroft..." She studied Greg through the flickering energy wall, delighting in every detail that she found. "We succeeded. Excellent."

"Mycroft's upstairs," Greg said, unimpressed. "You're in a cell, and Hackney Downs is covered in dead vampires. I'm not sure how you're counting that as a success."

Her eyes gleamed.

"He's not upstairs," she crooned. "He's not anywhere. That's why you're a mess."

Her gaze fluttered over his shoulder.

"And you've got the decoy with you," she remarked, pleased. "She's a mess, too... not quite on the same scale as you, but..." She hummed, smiling. "Look how tired you are. How sweet."

Greg stared into her eyes, reminding himself that an energy field worked both ways. She couldn't get to him. He couldn't get his hands around her neck, either.

He took a moment to think of Mycroft.

"Let's play straight then," he said, taking in a breath. "You're calling 'success'. I'm calling 'partial', at best - because I'm still standing here - and you were told to bring me back alive."

She smiled. "And I will."

*Jesus Christ.* The bitch believed it. He could see it in her eyes.

Greg gave a snort, lifting his chin.

"Your cronies are dead, princess. You're in prison. You've not even got shoes anymore. What's the plan? Go on, impress me."

The vampire said nothing, still gazing at him. The idle blink of her eyes was deeply unsettling. She looked like she was surveying something she wanted - not a person, but an opportunity. She looked like she was listening to some sound he didn't realise he was making.

"Why did you want both of us?" Greg asked. "Why alive? Why not just kill me?"

"Because you're easy to catch," she soothed. "And because he needs to learn."
"Learn? Learn what?"

"Consequences."

"Consequences?"

"Of his actions," she said, now eyeing the collar of his shirt. She tilted her head, frowning, and in a conspiratorial whisper asked, "Where does he usually bite you? I can't see your marks..."

Greg's heart clenched, aware of the officers just behind him with rifles. He kept it off his face. "We're not talking about me."

"No... we're talking about Mycroft," she purred. "And about what he likes - which is you - because the man's a soft-hearted fool with sickly ideas about 'humanity'. He sullied the greatest gift a human could ever be given. I was born this way, you know?"

She ran her tongue across her teeth.

"I think the transformed should know their place," she said. "But Mycroft... well... the man made his choices."

Her eyes flared, bright as the energy field.

"He needs a reminder of who he is," she said. "A race traitor."

Greg bit his tongue. "And I'd be involved in that reminder, would I?"

"Obviously."

"How?" he said. "Why?"

"Because he's depraved," she said, wrinkling her nose. "He fucks his food. You're his food. Of course you'll be involved. How better way to make him learn?"

Nausea rose up in the back of Greg's throat. "Christ, you people are screwed in the head..."

"You couldn't understand," she said, gazing at him in detached pity. "You're human. You don't have the capacity... it's cruel, what he's done. Keeping you. Involving himself with you, when you don't have the ability to process it. It's like marrying a goat or a sheep. It's - twisted. Unhealthy."

Greg had been a police officer too long not to know this game.

"You know you're nothing new... don't you?" he said. "Humanity's been categorising itself into 'real humans' and 'lesser humans' since we first figured out how to group things. Probably the first thing we did, after 'good bananas' and 'rotten bananas'."

She stared at him, her eyes narrowed - as if trying to comprehend how his lower brain worked.

"You're not a predator," Greg spelled out. "You're not a step up the scale. You're a common-or-garden racist whose grandma got her DNA ripped apart by some tosspot billionaire. Now you've all formed a little gang. All reassuring each other that you're amazing. That you're different. That you're better. That's more human than anything in the world."

Her gaze rounded; a little smile graced her lips.

"You're so sweet," she said. "Look how fierce you are... even though you're exhausted, and you're
frightened, and you know you'll never see him again. Does he like that in you? The ferocity?"

"As it happens, yeah," said Greg. "He also likes that I'm not a racist fucking lunatic."

She scoffed gently. "He likes that you're pretty," she said, "and that with one bite, you obeyed him forever. Don't kid yourself."

Greg smiled the full width of his face - slow, close-lipped.

"I know something you don't know," he said.

"Yeah?" she whispered, leaning nearer to the field. "Tell me a secret."

"I'd rather you tell me where the fuck Mycroft is."

"I bet you would," she said. "Shame that I've got secrets, too."

Greg's smile didn't crack. "You'll break before I will, princess. I've got all the time in the world."

Her eyes gleamed.

"You really, really haven't," she whispered.

Greg held her stare. He wet his lips with a flick of his tongue, then said, "Olivia?"

A throat cleared behind him in the silence. "Yes?"

"Bring one of the containers that Vickery sent down, would you?"

He listened to Olivia leave, the security doors slamming behind her.

The vampire didn't watch her go. She seemed to be happy just gazing at Greg, silently enjoying him.

"What's your name?" he asked her, cold.

She shook her head with a smile. "You're not having that."

"What's the problem? You know mine."

"We're not friends," she breathed. "We're not equals. You're cattle."

"And you're in prison," Greg said. "And you're fucking staying there until Mycroft's here, and you can tell him in person all about how he's depraved."

She rolled her eyes. "For heaven's sake," she said, softly. "He's not coming back. Your one chance was to come with me. I'd have taken you to him. You blew it. God almighty, you creatures are stupid..."

The security doors reopened.

Olivia's heels tapped quietly across the hard aluminium floor.

Greg extended a hand without looking.

As she placed into it a white plastic container, he said, "Give us a minute, fellas? We'll bang on the door if she starts burning herself alive on the field."
The officers hesitated.

Greg bit the end of his tongue. "That's *give us a minute, fellas*, ordered Chief Inspector Lestrade."

The officers left without another word. The doors banged shut behind them.

With Olivia by his side, Greg began to unscrew the container.

"What are you doing?" the vampire asked - for the first time unsettled. Her pretty eyes flashed.

Greg glanced at her, bored. "See the hatch to your right?"

She did not look.

"S'for your food," he explained. "Criminal Psychology have rated you so violent and untrustworthy that we can't risk switching off the field to hand you it. So you're being given it that way."

He nodded to his left, where an identical hatch opened onto a conveyor belt.

"It's been... what?" he said. "A day, since Medical fed you?" He removed the lid, swirled the container and glanced in at the contents with a frown. "I saw Mycroft go about that long... God knows I tried to get him to drink more often, but... you people and your feeding habits. You're fuss-pots, aren't you? I bet you don't even usually drink preserved."

The vampire said nothing, staring at the container in his hand.

"Afraid it's all we've got," Greg said. "Sure you'll manage. Livs?"

As he passed her the container, Greg held onto it for a moment. He looked into her eyes.

Olivia looked back at him.

She understood. He watched it cross her face as a quiet flicker, and let the container go into her hand.

Olivia carried it to the hatch, pulled the cover open, and pressed a button on the wall to start the belt.

The vampire drifted noiselessly towards the other end. Her eyes were fixed on the container; the smile had gone from her mouth.

She was hungry. She wanted the food.

Greg wished with all his heart that Mycroft had cared about feeding himself like that. They might not be standing here, if he had.

Olivia lifted the container to place it on the belt - then took a step to one side, bent down, and poured it down the drain in the floor.

The energy field flashed as the vampire slammed against it. She shrieked in pain and staggered backwards. Her face warped; her hands wracked into claws.

"*STOP!*" she screamed at Olivia.

Olivia didn't stop. She kept going until the container was empty, then placed it without a word on the belt.
As it hummed its way round through the wall, the vampire panted and stared, her fangs flashing in her open mouth. All colour had fled her face.

"Tell me where he is," Greg said, "and I'll feed you."

Her eyes burned with fury. "This is illegal!"

Greg shrugged. "Livs isn't really a police officer. And I no longer give a fuck."

The vampire began to shake.

"You have to feed me," she whispered. "I have rights!"

"Human rights?" Greg raised an eyebrow. "I'll send for tea and sandwiches for you. D'you want white bread or brown?"

"Bastard," she breathed. Her face sharpened. "Bastard! I'll tell them! I'll tell them you're starving me!"

"Tell them," Greg jeered. "I'll tell them you're a liar who attacked the medical team we sent to care for you."

"There are cameras!" she screamed, panting. Her eyes pierced into him in panic. "Evidence!"

"Manned by tired prison control officers," said Greg, "who I happen to get along with. I'm a popular bloke. A pint buys a lot of favours, and video records go missing. And if you've not realised it yet, princess, I don't give two tiny shits about my job anymore."

He leant close to the field, his fists clenching. Energy sparked and pulsed against his face.

"I want Mycroft back," he snarled. "That's all I want. And I'm going to get it. You tell me where he is, and I'll fucking feed you. How d'you like my ferocity now? Is it working for you yet?"

The container had appeared at the other end of the hatch. It coasted gently from the belt, tipped empty onto its side, and dropped a single bead of blood to the floor.

"Don't waste those," Greg advised her, viciously. "You've only got about five drops left."

She flew at the field. It flashed and she screamed, clawing at it, then cowered away in pain.

Greg turned his back on her.

"C'mon," he said to Olivia, fishing his car keys from his pocket. "Let's see how the search of Kit's flat's going." He glanced back at the forcefield. "Does the name 'Kit Medlock' mean anything to you?"

The vampire continued to shriek at him, screaming around her fangs. Every cord stood out in her neck.

"Didn't think so," Greg said. He slashed his wrist-set through the control for the doors.
"Don't you dare tell anyone I did that," Greg muttered five minutes later, unlocking the car doors with a shaking hand.

Olivia got into the passenger seat.

"You didn't do it," she said. "I did."
An officer from CID was waiting by the door of Kit's building.

"Inspector Lestrade," he said, taking Greg's hand. They shook. It wasn't a face that Greg recognised, but there was plenty of activity going on around the property. It looked like CID had been told to send their best. "I - hear it's 'chief inspector' now, isn't it? I'm sorry."

Greg couldn't wait until people stopped calling him that.

"Not my choosing," he said. "I'd have preferred better circumstances. This is my sergeant, DS Reid."

They shook hands.

"DI Douglas," the officer said. The Scottish accent was quietly reassuring. "Shall we? I'm afraid it's not a show-stopping result, chief inspector... you might've made a wasted trip."

He led them up the stairs to Kit's flat on the second floor, and held aside the crime scene tape to let them pass.

"We've been as thorough as we can so far," he said. "Every cupboard, every corner. Sent all the tech away for further investigation - but there wasn't really a lot of it around. No passwords on any of it... bit of an open book..."

Greg wasn't surprised to hear it.

He wasn't surprised by Kit's flat, either - small, messy, and full of fucking guns. She left the bloody things lying around with her laundry. The only decoration she seemed to care about were photos from her mixed martial arts tournaments, displayed in black frames on nearly every wall. The bed was unmade, and the kitchen probably counted as a health hazard - open boxes of cereal, cider cans and pizza boxes. She had a massive collection of old sitcoms on DVD, and she subscribed to *Vintage Motors Monthly*.

As he glanced around, taking it all in, Greg's heart thudded to itself in the stillness. He tried to imagine it - Kit sitting here at night, drinking cider and watching *Fawlty Towers*, quietly making her plans to betray them all.

"What're the contents of that open book?" he asked. He needed to hear it.

DI Douglas gave him an apologetic look.
"Frankly?" he said. "Not what you were hoping for."

Greg bit the side of his tongue. "M'listening."

"Well... nobody's been here for a couple of days," Douglas began. "That, I can tell you for free. And if she was planning to leave, she wasn't planning in earnest... no sign of packing. Washing in the machine ready to hang out. Fridge full of groceries, only bought on Wednesday evening... found the receipt with carrier bags in the bin."

Greg's heart tensed; he kept it off his face. "No signs she was intending to vanish at all?"

Douglas winced. "I've seen stranger things," he admitted, "but if we're happy with obvious conclusions, chief inspector... no. I don't believe she was."

"And she's not been back here since Thursday night?"

"Not so far as we can tell. If she has, she's not touched a thing."

"Right..." Greg's heart was beating fast; his brain was moving faster. "Have you found any communication yet? Any mention of vampires or 'Excultus'? Vickery said she'd forwarded the sigil to you. The trident symbol."

"She did, chief inspector... but I'm afraid that's the only place I've seen it so far. No vampires, no 'Excultus'... of course, there's a chance that Technical might turn up something hidden deep down on her laptop, but..."

"Nothing surface level?"

"We checked every way of hiding messages that an ordinary person would think of," said Douglas, with a shrug. "Suspect doesn't strike me as the overly technical kind. Sadly, nothing."

Olivia stirred beside Greg, wanting to say something. He inclined his head towards her.

"If Kit knew she'd eventually just vanish," she said, "why go to great lengths to hide it? Why not just leave it all for us to find when she was gone?"

There was an obvious answer.

Greg didn't dare believe it.

He rolled it around his mouth for a moment, thinking, gazing at a black-and-white photograph of a triumphant Kit in her early twenties. It showed her leaving a boxing ring, blood pouring from her nose. Her grin was twice the size of the arena.

"Maybe she didn't realise she'd have to go," he said. He could hear the shapelessness of it in his own voice, trying to make it fit somehow. "The operation kicked off, and maybe something went wrong. She had to bolt out of the blue. Nothing but the clothes on her back."

"Nothing went wrong," Olivia reminded him. "They knew everything. Every detail." She hesitated, biting at her lip ring. "We're only alive because TJ gave me something he shouldn't."

Christ knew that was true enough.

Greg's heart twisted at another memory.
"The last thing Mycroft did," he said, "was scream at Kit to get to you. To get to the path, and protect you. Something stopped her doing that. I don't know much that'd stop Kit Medlock following an order - except her own free will."

Olivia looked at him uneasily, retreating into silence. She didn't have an answer.

Greg almost wanted someone to convince him. He wanted one of Douglas's team suddenly to open an unchecked cupboard and find it all there, like a shrine. Sigils. Evil plans. A sinister diary in which she laughed at their foolish attempts to thwart the might of humanity's rightful overlords, Excultus.

If it was true, this would all get so much easier.

"I'm sorry, chief inspector," Douglas sighed. His voice hung heavy with regret. "I know it's not what you wanted to hear. We've - sent a sub-team to her locker at Scotland Yard."

Greg's eyes flicked to him. "Anything?"


"Right." Greg took a breath, and pulled himself back to the incident board he'd constructed this morning in his mind - the face at the centre of it - the man who'd now been in the hands of Excultus for over thirty-six hours. They needed answers, and they weren't in this flat. "Thanks, Douglas... let me know if there's any change."

"Where now?" Olivia said, as they reached the car.

"Might go rattle the street teams," Greg said, unlocking the doors. "It's a bloody laborious process, and they fall slack if you don't keep tightening them. Can't afford them to miss anything."

As the doors slammed around them, Olivia checked her wrist-set. She grabbed for her bag.

"Before we - ..." she said, rummaging through it. Greg watched her, concerned.

She pulled out sandwiches, crisps and a flask.

Greg's heart cracked silently into pieces.

"Livs - ..." His throat closed as she handed sandwiches to him. As she unscrewed the flask, he almost said, I can't drink that. Myke drinks that.

He then realised what a flask had come to mean in his mind - and the sudden weight of her kindness threatened to buckle him like a punctured car bonnet. His hands shook. He swallowed around the rising distress.

"You need to eat," Olivia said, not looking at him. "I - don't know how to be a sergeant. Not properly. But I know how to make lunch, and I know that you need to eat."

She unwrapped her own sandwiches, and said not another word on the matter.

She'd made herself two.
She'd given him three.

*Shit... shit, oh shit...*

Greg thought of the days he'd spent - some of them sitting in this car - saying over and over and over: *you need to drink. You need to look after yourself. We need you at your best.* If Mycroft had listened, it might have made the difference. They wouldn't have to be doing this.

He didn't taste a mouthful of the food. It hurt to swallow, but Greg kept on, putting it into his system like he'd charge a mobile phone or stock the printer with paper.

It didn't matter if he liked or disliked it. Mycroft needed him to eat.

It felt like helping.

He tore the third sandwich in half, and handed it over as his fingers shook.

"You need - " Olivia began.

Greg could only manage two words. He forced them out, begging her with every ounce of his being to understand. "I can't."

Olivia quietened, and took the sandwich.

As she ate it, Greg drank coffee. He drank until his throat felt like it could permit the passage of words again.

"You heard from the kids?" he managed at last.

Olivia smiled very faintly. "Lexi's been sending me texts... she promised she would. They're alright."

"They're - not scared of TJ, are they?" It had felt unbearably strange this morning, leaving a werewolf to guard three small girls in his techie bachelor cave. Greg wasn't completely sure this was all really happening yet.

Olivia pulled her sleeve back from her wrist-set and scrolled through her messages. At last, she loaded one up and extended her arm, showing Greg the screen.

The photograph showed a dismayed-looking wolf, now wearing glasses, an apron and a wig made of paper strips, coloured in grey felt-tip. Lottie was laughing fit to burst beside him.

Greg stared.

"He's Grandma?" Olivia explained.

Greg continued to stare.

"Red Riding Hood?" Her eyes crinkled slightly at the edges. "Hannah's been doing it at school."

*Christ. Of course he is.*

Greg opened up his crisps.

"They're gonna get a shock in a few days," he warned. "When their new dog suddenly turns into a naked unemployed bloke."
Olivia closed the photograph with a sigh.

"I don't think anything shocks them anymore..." she admitted.

"Yeah?" said Greg. His throat tightened. "Sounds like a good way to be."

Olivia tugged open her crisps. "Doesn't it?"

The call came just as they finished a post-food cigarette. Greg took it, thanked the caller, and immediately started up the engine.

"Progress?" Olivia said, throwing her cigarette butt out the window.

"Yep." Greg reversed them out onto the road. "Kit's wrist-set. Tech have something. Her London street-map software tried to update itself at midnight between Thursday and Friday. They've got a signal location."

"Where?"

"Soho."

"Soho?"

Greg's heart began to pound. "Right near Piccadilly Circus."

Olivia stared at him from the passenger seat, bewildered. "What was she doing near...?"

"I don't know. Doesn't tell us how long she was there. But they've got it to within two hundred metres - and it's more than we knew ten minutes ago."

Soho; London's living heart. Shoppers, tourists and workers thronged the streets. It was a saturday, and even in January every café and shop and restaurant pulsed with people and colour and life. Later, as darkness drew across the city, the pubs and bars would light up and draw revellers like fluttering moths. Soho never took a breath; it never skipped a beat. It was a rushing river of humanity.

Greg had never felt so alone as he moved amongst it all.

Olivia stuck close to his side, watching as he followed the map on his wrist-set that Technical had sent through. Greg had superimposed it over a live map of their location. The two slowly shifted towards each other as they walked the streets, blending and settling at the edges.

As they finally fuzzed together, ghostlike, and locked, Greg came to a stop.

"Is - this where she was?" Olivia asked, hesitant.
Greg's throat contracted.

"This is where a signal went out," he said. "It had a range of a hundred metres. Kit's wrist-set was somewhere in that radius. It heard the signal, and called back."

They looked around.

The junction of Great Windmill Street and Archer Street: a chain hotel in construction, covered in acrylic hoardings that promised a grand opening early last year; a grotty red-brick pub, specialising in stout; a pretentious new wine bar, the fashionable greige paint barely dry; a tacky lap dancing club, which made the unconvincing claim to be 'probably the most exciting men's club in the world'; a bowling alley; a little newsagent; a flashy noodle bar.

Those were just the businesses in sight.

A hundred metres was a bloody big area for London - and Soho was old. Yards and backstreets everywhere; basements and side doors.

Greg's heart drummed as he tried to think.

"A van would be seen down here," Olivia said, biting her lip. "Narrow streets."

"Seen," Greg murmured, "fine. But noticed?" He tried to estimate how many other buildings fell within a hundred metre radius. It made him feel weak and nauseous.

It was so hard not to assume.

He wanted to charge headlong at this tiny, pathetic possibility, seize it with both hands and shake it until the truth fell out. His head told him they knew bloody nothing. His heart didn't care. It howled that they didn't need to know all the facts - that they had enough to be going on with - that this was something, something important. Kit had come here. Kit had stayed here. Kit was with Mycroft. Mycroft was here. Greg's heart was now beaming out a signal, and promising him in desperation that it could hear something back.

But they didn't know any of that.

Kit's wrist-set had been here - somewhere here. They had no suggestion it had stayed here, and no suggestion it had been attached to Kit. There was no suggestion she'd been with Mycroft, and no suggestion that Mycroft was anywhere nearby.

Drawing a sigh, Greg gazed in turn at each of the businesses nearby. He wanted just to walk in, ask for a manager and show them a picture. Have you seen this man? Please, Christ. Tell me you've seen him. Tell me you saw him dragged through a doorway. Tell me he was there just a minute ago. Tell me it's all over, and it'll be alright.

Olivia's hand appeared on his shoulder. It pulled Greg free from his thoughts.

"What're you thinking?" she asked.

"What're you thinking?" she asked.

Greg's mouth thinned. "Not much to go on." He resigned himself to facts - he had to keep his head. Facts were the only thing they had anymore. "We know her wrist-set was here. Might not've been with her. Might not've been with Mycroft. Probably didn't even stay here - just driving through, maybe - could be hundreds of miles away by now. There's - nothing in this..."

Olivia shifted beside him.
"But... midnight," she said.

Greg's brow crumpled. "What about midnight?"

"That was two hours after Kit vanished," Olivia said. "Hackney to Soho is only half an hour. If she was just passing through here on the way somewhere else - "

"... why'd she take an extra ninety minutes to get here?" Greg said.

Olivia's expression tightened. "At Hackney Downs, it was all over in minutes," she said. "They were lightning fast. Everything prepared."

Greg forced his thoughts to slow down, following them with care.

"Whatever happened," he said, "it happened fast. You're right. They won't have hung around and dragged their heels. They had Mycroft. They needed to get him out of there. Away from us all, quickly. If they were only half an hour away, two hours later - they probably weren't still moving to - ..."

Stop it, he told himself. He shut his eyes and shook his head. Stop racing off with this. Stop seeing what you want to.

"This is castles in the air," he muttered. "Kit's wrist-set isn't Mycroft. It's not even Kit."

Olivia held her ground, looking very seriously into his face. "Doesn't matter," she said. "While we're following other things, we should get this place searched. Unless you think there's a better place to start searching?"

She was right. Again.

Greg reminded himself he wasn't just one man anymore. This was no longer just him and Mycroft against the world. He had most of Cross-Human Relations at his command, and some of them were still unassigned. They could start searching here until he found that better place.

"Right," he said, breathing. "Right, let's - get back to Scotland Yard... I'll have to organise more street teams. It'll take me a while."

"I can do that," Olivia said.

Greg frowned. "You - ... d'you even know how to - "

"I - saw how Mycroft learned to do it, in his training notes." Olivia flushed. "And I have access to his templates. He shared them with me."

Greg's heart heaved.

"Christ," he said. "He didn't even share those with me. Said I'd mess up all his formatting..."

Olivia smiled a little. "He - said he didn't mind. If I wanted to learn."

Greg looked into her eyes.

Mycroft had been so open with her - sharing with her. He wasn't the type to indulge someone just out of kindness. He'd seen something in her. Greg was starting to see it, too.

She'd saved his fucking life on Hackney Downs. She might even save it now.
"If you're sure," he said, with care. "If you were happy taking it off my hands..."

"You could always check it when I'm done," she said. "See if I've done it right."

Greg suspected he wouldn’t need to. "Fine. That's - fine by me."

"Shall we go now?" she said, unsure. "Is there anywhere you want to do scans first, or...?"

Greg glanced around the busy cross of streets. His eyes ached a little with the sheer scale of it all. The problem was where to begin. He could spend days scanning every doorway, only to find Kit's wrist-set dumped in a bin by someone who'd found it lying in the street in Hackney. Meanwhile, Mycroft was no closer to home.

"C'mon," he said, numb. He closed the maps on his wrist-set. "Let's - get back to the car."

They were halfway to Scotland Yard before Olivia spoke.

"Can we - talk about something, please?"

Greg paused, hoping this wasn't a personal something. His stability was growing shaky as more of the day passed. He could feel it. "Talk about what?"

Olivia paused, shifting in the seat beside him. "About Kit," she said.

Greg had been wondering when this might come up

"Talk to me about Kit," he said, as they rounded Trafalgar Square. Taxis, buses and cars swept along with them - the everyday traffic of a city that didn't realise anything was wrong.

Olivia took a moment to organise her thoughts.

"If she was working for Excultus," she said, "there'd have been easier ways to get hold of you. *Both* of you. You both trusted her. She could have arranged something, a meeting for some reason, and tricked you both there. It would've been easy. And a lot less risky."

She twisted at the strap of her hand-bag.

"I mean... from their point-of-view, it cost them a *lot* of people at Hackney Downs. No matter how well prepared they were, they knew Armed Response had laser rifles. They still took the chance. It must have meant they thought they wouldn't get a better one."

Greg kept his eyes on the road. "Go on."

"There's no evidence in her flat," Olivia said. "And there *would* be. She didn't even keep her guns in secure storage, so why would she hide her Excultus links so well that even CID can't find them? She's got no motive. And she went out of her way to help us - training. Organising. And if she was a double agent, why didn't she stick around at Hackney Downs to help *Excultus*? She was perfectly placed to fuck us all to hell, but she *didn't* - she *didn't do that*, Kit was - ..."

As they pulled up to traffic lights, and Olivia ebbed painfully into silence, Greg took a glance in the rear view mirror. She was pale and unsettled beside him, thinking in desperation.
"Kit wasn't like that," she mumbled.

Greg took a breath. "Can I tell you something?"

Her eyes lifted nervously into his. "What?"

"I can't believe that about Kit either." He watched her breathe it in, her expression opening. "I'm trying to," he added. "God knows I am. Because that's a tidy explanation, and there's not a lot of tidy explanations around right now. I've been trying since Vickery told me."

"But - but if she wasn't a spy, then where did - "

"Yeah," said Greg, grimly. "Look. Here begins the problem..."

The lights changed; he released the handbrake.

"If it's not Kit," he said, as they sailed past the café bars and grand buildings of Whitehall, "our tidy explanation turns into two massive great questions: one, why did she vanish? And two, how the fuck did Excultus know so much about what we were planning?"

"Then... do you think it's someone else?" Olivia said, pale. "The leak?"

The corner of Greg's mouth twitched.

"I think we've got to proceed as if I do," he said. "Privately, anyway. I'm brewing a few ideas. Just - keeping an eye out for now. We don't have enough evidence to make a move..."

He shook his head.

"We don't have enough of anything," he muttered. "Just bloody questions."

Olivia was quiet for a moment, preparing something in her head.

"If it is someone else," she said, "they're still around."

Greg squeezed the wheel.

"I know." He glanced at her in the mirror. "Don't you fucking dare leave my side, alright? Need you safe."

"Don't you fucking dare leave mine," she said, her eyes widening. "I'm nothing, Greg. They didn't think I was even worth killing. You're what they want."

"Yeah... well..." Greg reached for the gear-stick, his pulse dulling. "Trying not to let myself muse on that too closely."

Olivia sighed. She pulled up her sleeve, checking her wrist-set.

"There's a positive side," she said. "If it's not Kit, I mean."

"Mm?"

"It means there's someone else who knows where Mycroft is. We can figure out who it is, and get hold of them - then we've got two people to question. Not just one."

Greg gazed through the windscreen as the turn-off for Scotland Yard approached, feeling his heart
He liked the way she thought. It was what he needed right now - movement. Options. Things opening up, not closing down.

"I'll speak to Luke," he said, as he indicated into the car park. "Let's see if he's glad to hear it."
Facade

I wish you to know that you have been the last dream of my soul.

- Charles Dickens
'A Tale of Two Cities' (1859)

"But... then where did she go?"


"What happened to her?" he asked.

"We don't know yet," Greg replied, turning a pen between his fingers. "I can tell you her wrist-set found its way to Soho."

"Soho?"

"It was there at midnight on the day she disappeared. Nothing from it since... smashed, maybe. Switched off. Tech said the battery should have been fine a bit longer."

"Christ, but - what was she doing in - "

"We don't know, mate." Greg glanced across at the incident board, which Olivia was updating with new information. A large question mark had been placed beside Kit's ID photo. "She might just've been passing through... might have been separated from her wrist-set somewhere else, and somebody else picked it up... we won't know until we find her and ask her."

Luke's expression flickered with distress. He looked down at his forearms, resting in his lap.

"Seems a lot to hope for," he muttered.

Greg frowned. "Finding her?"

"No, I mean... her not stabbing me in the back after all these years..." Luke sighed, scrubbing his fingers back through his hair. "It's - just been a rough couple of - ... Christ, when they told me she'd just vanished - and I checked her stats, and not a single bloody shot..."

"I know." Greg reached for his coffee. "I thought it, too. Something's off."

Luke looked up from his hands.

"Are you alright?" he asked. "I mean... with all this?"

Greg raised an eyebrow over his mug, ignoring the catch in his heart-rate. He drank, then put the coffee down.
"M'fine," he said. "Why wouldn't I be? Got a job to do, and I'm doing it."

Luke's eyes quietened with understanding. He glanced at Olivia's turned back, then sat up a little.


Greg's eyebrows drew together.

"Cause you've got a spy in your division, Luke. They told Excultus everything we'd planned - every frequency, every position, every back-up. Now I'm the only target left, and they don't need to worry about spooking Mycroft into the undergrowth anymore. If they get hold of me, I'm pretty sure this office'll be up for grabs on a permanent basis. That's why."

He turned his wrist-set to the flash of an incoming message - street-team from Hackney Downs.

As he answered it, Luke took a breath.

"I'll find out what's going on, Greg. I promise. I'll - get them all in for questioning. Work my way through." He paused. "The ones who survived, anyway."

Greg bit his tongue, looking up from the message.

"Guilt-trip me all you want," he said. "It was one of their squadmates got them killed."

"We're - certain it's my division, are we?"

"We are." Greg sat back in his chair, closing the draft of the message. "Unless you're suggesting the leak was TJ, Livs, Mycroft or me."

Luke lowered his eyes, saying nothing.

Didn't think so, Greg remarked to himself.

"One of your 'best of the best'," he added, annoyed. "'Unblemished records'."

Luke kept his head low. "Never thought I'd see the day," he muttered.

Greg bit his tongue once more. "We all wish we weren't seeing this day. Believe me."

Luke's shoulders shifted with discomfort. He got to his feet, avoiding Greg's eyes as he did.

"Anything else I can do?" he asked.

Greg reached for his coffee, gaze dark. "No. Not for now."

Luke nodded. "Well... let me know."

As he put a hand out for the door, Greg called him back.

"Luke?"

Luke turned back to his desk. "Yeah?"

Greg kept hold of his eyes. He felt his chest harden, his jaw setting tight around the words.

"Find which one of them it is," he said. They shared a moment's silence. "I need you to find them.
M'not kidding."

Luke looked down. He wrapped his fingers around the door handle.

"We'll get there," he said. "Promise. If I have to go down in gunfire, Greg... we'll get your miserable bastard back where he belongs."

Greg decided he'd believe it when he saw it.

In the silence that followed the snap of the door, he picked up his coffee and drank.

Olivia turned from the incident board; she bit her lip.

"You okay?" she said.

Greg put down the mug, pulled open his drawer, and reached inside for cigarettes.

"Not really," he muttered. He was sinking - he could feel it. He'd hoped for a breakthrough today, and all they'd got were more questions. "I - wish my miserable bastard was here, that's all. He's better at this than me. Seeing what's really there, and what's just in your head..."

As Greg got his coat, Olivia got hers too.

"Coming with me, are you?" he asked.

"Need to protect you," she said.

Greg realised she wasn't fucking joking.

"We'd better go rescue TJ soon..." He pulled his coat on, wishing his throat would stop going so dry. He was starting to hear it in his own voice. "Christ alone knows what he's dressed as by now."

"I'm sure he can cope," Olivia said. She smiled a little. "I'll make food when we get in. Keep your strength up. Pasta, maybe?"

"You've done enough," Greg said to her, gruffly. "I'll cook. Least I can do."

"You sure? I don't mind."

Greg tightened his hands inside his pockets. "Let me stay busy, Livs. M'not gonna be alright if I'm not busy."

The lift had almost reached the ground floor when Olivia spoke again.

"Will you be alright sleeping?" she asked the silence, not looking at Greg.

He gave her the only answer that he could.

"No," he said, and the lift doors opened with a clunk.

They reached TJ's flat for six. Greg set about cooking as soon as he was through the door, rolling up the sleeves of his work-shirt. He decided to go for shepherd's pie - easy, he thought. Kid-
friendly. He'd never made dinner for a family before. The urge to portion it all up for the freezer was overwhelming.

TJ sat by the oven and watched greedily while it cooked, tail thumping against the lino. Greg cleaned his kitchen to fill the time - scrubbing pans that had been waiting their turn since Christmas; wiping out the fridge; sorting a month's worth of food packaging into recycling bags. It felt safer to be moving, doing, changing. The thought of sitting down in silence made him feel almost unwell.

At the bottom of the cardboard pile, Greg found empty boxes for isotonic gel - packs of thirty. Three of them.

"Oi," he shot across towards the oven. "You."

TJ looked around from the glowing glass door, startled. Spotting the box in Greg's hand, his ears flattened at once and he let out a whine.

"Don't you even start," Greg said. "I am not impressed. This is why you get stuck. This is why you transform like a fucking volcano. You nearly had my face off on Hackney Downs. Look after yourself, for Christ's sake... life's too short."

The oven timer began to beep.

TJ wriggled with excitement and frustration. He shuffled out of the way, panting open-mawed as Greg pulled on oven gloves.

"Food for Livs and the girls first," Greg warned him, crouching to open the oven.


"Go tell them it's ready, will you?" he said.

Panting, TJ hurried from the kitchen.

A minute later, there came a shout from elsewhere in the flat.

"Olivia?" Lexi's tone was perturbed. "The dog's annoying me. He's pulling at my jumper."

Quietly plating the final portion, Greg realised he'd briefly smiled.

The rush of guilt took his breath away.

He found himself looking down at five plates of food and a bowl for TJ, in a warm and clean kitchen where everyone was safe. The sight made his stomach lurch. He asked himself, with a crippling stab of distress, what he thought Mycroft was seeing in this moment - out there somewhere in the dark. Frightened somewhere. Somewhere with them. Greg couldn't even imagine what they were doing to him - what was happening to him right now - how Mycroft would feel if he knew that, while it was happening, Greg was cooking and smiling and finding something funny. Playing happy families. Sorting out TJ's recycling like it mattered one tiny fucking bit.

Oh, fuck. Oh, Christ...

Oh shit, oh shit...

Greg felt the bottom falling from his stomach, at once on the brink of crying and throwing up. He'd
not thought about it all day. He'd tried to convince himself Mycroft was just busy somewhere - just occupied somehow - not being held by people who'd once tortured him for five fucking days. Shit, shit, shit...

Greg grabbed for the edge of the counter as he swayed. His head reeled; his chest wrenched itself open with the sudden slam of panic and distress.

Not yet, he begged. He clamped down around it, hanging his head over the counter as he shook. Cold raced up and down his neck. Please not yet. Barely seven. Work to do. Fucking hell. Please not yet.

Panting, he grappled his way over to the sink. He cupped water in his hands and doused his face, over and over, then covered his nose with his palms and breathed.

By the time Olivia appeared to carry plates, he thought he'd forced it all back down.

She looked at him strangely, her eyes edged - but didn't ask.

Greg had never been so grateful to someone in all his life.

He'd meant to eat with them all - to try and reassure the girls, who'd been casting him nervous looks since they got here. He wanted them to know he wasn't scary. He didn't have a clue how to deal with kids, and it was showing.

But in the end, he couldn't bring himself to go into the lounge. He couldn't bear to be near other voices.

He couldn't put out of his head that Mycroft was alone.

He sat by himself in the kitchen instead, working through Olivia's drafted rota as he tried to eat. He managed barely half the plate. The taste of food - the comfort of placing it quietly into his mouth - only threatened to trigger all the guilt once more. He scraped the rest into TJ's bowl, telling himself that TJ needed it more. He washed up every single item that he'd used, trying to ignore that he was now sweating, and called Commander Vickery to update her.

They spoke for half an hour.

He didn't know if she could tell it was faked - all the bravery. All the calm. It wasn't readable in her voice, if she did. She acted like it was real, and Greg did his best to act back at her. This was just the way they did things now. Nothing was real, and everybody knew it. Acting DCI Lestrade was a front - a facade. Behind him, broken and guilt-stricken and alone, was a frightened man called Greg.

What Greg thought or felt or wanted didn't matter. DCI Lestrade was a vehicle, and it was moving forward.

For now, that was enough.

Greg worked solidly through until eleven. CCTV requests; queries from the team; early reports from door-to-door inquiries, with excerpts from any promising statements that were being followed up. He didn't spot anything that gave him much hope, but he told them to pursue it all regardless. CID sent through their concluding assessment of Kit's flat: inconclusive. He requested a full background check from HR on every member of Armed Response who'd attended Hackney Downs. He forwarded requests for information from the press to Vickery.
Halfway through building a hard-light map of Soho, identifying and labelling all the buildings that he could, Greg's eyes began to shut of their own accord.

_Nearly midnight._

He couldn't go on.

Sleep was imminent. His brain couldn't function for another hour. At least when he was asleep, he wouldn't be able to think. He saved the map, knowing it was the first thing he'd load up in the morning, and took himself in silence to TJ's room.

He removed his belt, loosened his cuffs, and laid himself on the bed in the dark.

Sleep - moments before, melting his eyelids shut - vaporized into impossibility.

_Is Mycroft being allowed to sleep?_

Greg's breath shallowed. Waves of cold rolled across his skin as he realised he was thinking about cages in a basement in Brixton, and he couldn't stop seeing it.

He tried to think of anything else - anything in the world - but nothing would move that picture from his mind. His Mycroft; his fragile, brave, clever Mycroft, somewhere in panic right now, weeping for Greg to find him. Trying to show Greg somehow. Trying to reach for him through the silence, trying to send him what he needed like a bio-alert. What if Mycroft was reaching for him while he slept? He needed to be there. He needed to be awake to think of Mycroft, so that Mycroft wouldn't be alone.

"I love you," Greg found himself whispering in the dark - breathing it into his hands, shaking, praying it, over and over to the picture that he couldn't push away. "Hold on. I'll be there. I promise, sweetheart. I promise. I'm so sorry."

Tears came. Tears passed, then came again. Exhaustion wracked through Greg's bones, but no sleep arrived to break it.

When he finally surrendered, reaching out to check his wrist-set, he discovered that it was past two AM.

He'd now laid here, crying, picturing every cruelty in the world, for almost three hours.

Greg covered his face with his hands, breathing into them. He needed to function tomorrow. There was work to do. Vickery and Amelia needed him to sleep right now, and be at his best, and he couldn't even do that. He couldn't even sleep.

Mycroft might be afraid.

Greg couldn't lie here, thinking that, and sleep.

Too broken to carry on, he pushed himself miserably out of bed. His eyes were so tired it felt like they were hanging loose from his skull. He made his way to the kitchen, put together a cup of tea and stood with it by the fridge for some time, drinking and listening to the hum of the motor. The rhythmic noise blocked up some of the room in his head.

It was enough for his eyes to start to lull, telling him they were ready to sleep again.

He didn't dare try. He didn't want to lie down in the dark, and let the thoughts come back.
As he left the kitchen, holding a second cup of tea and thinking of working on the map, movement along the gloomy hallway caught Greg's eye.

It was TJ.

He was fast asleep against the front door - curled across its threshold like an enormous black draft excluder, kicking gently in his sleep.

_They'll have to go through you first, huh, fuzzball?_

As he watched TJ stir, Greg thought of Mycroft's apartment.

Anthea - thermal signatures and scanning technology - all the security in the world. Myke had been safe there with his books and his solitude for nine gentle years.

Then one utter fucking idiot called Greg Lestrade had come along.

Greg realised with a lurch that nobody had been in the apartment for several days now.

No-one had fed Mycroft's fish.

They'd all be dead.

He couldn't cope with the thought - so loved, so well cared for, chosen for their soft colours and their quiet peace - all floating there, lifeless in the dark. Mycroft would be heartbroken.

All his things - all his books. All his clothes in the wardrobe. What would happen to them if he never came back? Would they all just be thrown away?

He could already be dead by now.

He could be fucking dead.

As he laid on TJ's bed in the dark, sobbing in silence into his hands, Greg realised he might live the rest of his life like this - never knowing. He might become one of those people who lived like ghosts, unable to mourn, unable to live, unable to stop searching.

At least they'd found his mum. At least he had a grave to go to.

He wished he'd gone with the vampiric bitch - wished he'd laid down his rifle and let her. At least then, whatever was happening, it'd be happening to them together. Myke wouldn't be alone.

Somewhere in the agony, barely aware of his surroundings, Greg realised that the door had opened. He didn't care - he was too distressed to fear for his safety any more. A gentle weight hopped onto the bed with him, laid out beside him, and let him push close for comfort.

As black warmth and fur curled around him, Greg cried.

The rumble began almost at once.

He felt it as much as he heard it. It came from TJ's chest rather than his throat - deep down beneath his fur, beneath the bone, low and soft: a noise that rolled through Greg and around him, coaxing across his frightened senses in waves.

As Greg listened, startled, he felt his frantic heart begin to slow.
He'd never heard that noise made for a human.

The first time he'd heard it, he'd been only thirty - sitting in a hospital A&E department, trying to take a statement from a teenage girl who'd been attacked in Hulme. The family were werewolves, and the neighbours didn't like it. As the girl described realising that three men were following her home, she'd started to cry in fright. Her mother had wrapped her arms around her without hesitation, raked her fingers through her hair - and to Greg's surprise, begun to purr.

Over the course of barely a minute, he'd watched the girl's wracking sobs quieten into peace. She'd softened in her mother's arms, surrounded by the warmth of a noise that humans simply couldn't make. All the sharpness of her pain slackened into calm. He'd watched her unclench, muscle-by-muscle, fear unwinding and panic retreating, driven back by the sound of her mother's love. Two minutes later, she was drifting quietly as her mother held her.

He'd hardly heard it since.

Werewolves didn't share these things. Not outside their families - not with humans. Even being allowed to witness it suggested staggering trust. It just didn't happen.

It was Greg's final thought before he sank into sleep.
Sunday 1st February

It was almost ten when Greg awoke. As his dazed eyes focused on the time, his heart leapt into his throat.

He kicked his way out of bed.

"Shit - shit - "

Lying about like he hadn't a care in the fucking world.

Greg grabbed for his clothes.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck..."

With a glance in TJ's mirror, he realised he couldn't skip the shower and a shave at all. He looked like he'd been hit by a train - raw eyes, pale. He looked like a fucking wreck.

"Christ," he gasped to himself, wrenching open all the buttons of his shirt. "Christ, just kill me now..."

As he left the bedroom, half-dressed and heading for the shower, Olivia appeared in the hallway.

"I know," Greg said at once, his heart banging. "I know. I'm on it. Has Vickery called?"

Olivia frowned, gently.

"No," she said, in a voice of utter calm. "No, she hasn't. I've been sorting your e-mails in order of priority, and working on your Soho map, and you've been doing exactly what you should be too. I could've woken you up at six. I chose not to. Now have a proper shower, there's breakfast in the kitchen, and we only need to be at Scotland Yard for half eleven."

"What's happening at half eleven?" Greg said, his heart banging.

Olivia lifted her chin.

"A charity that overlook the car park in Amhurst Terrace have CCTV," she said, "and a back-up power supply. They got everything. They're bringing it to Scotland Yard."
Greg's heart pounded. "Everything?"

"From what they've said."

"Christ." Greg found himself frozen into place. "Right - I'll - "


"We don't have time for coffee," said Greg. "We'll get some at - "

"Yes, we do. You'll have some here. Then you'll have some at Scotland Yard as well." Olivia's eyes hardened. "Go shower, sir."

Christ... I'm worse than Mycroft ever was.

Greg showered, shaved, and found coffee waiting for him on the floor outside the bathroom. He was ready to do this again.

"Ten minutes, Livs!" he called. He heard Olivia get to her feet in the lounge.

"Right. Lexi? You're in charge again, sweetheart. Don't let your sisters bully the dog while we're out. Text me if you need me."

"This - sounds like it might be hard to see," Olivia warned, as Greg loaded up the files on a viewing panel in their office. The image that appeared showed the car park at Amhurst from a high angle: the van, the other empty parking bays, the cut-through that led to Hackney Downs.

Greg set his jaw. He zoomed through to just before ten o'clock three nights ago, ignoring the thud of his heart.

He hit play.

In silence, they watched. Nothing happened for several minutes. Greg skipped the feed ahead, speeding onwards to the point that the lights in nearby buildings went out.

"There goes the power," said Olivia, her voice tense.

Greg prepared himself, watching the screen in silence.

It all started suddenly. A shape, huge and black, streaked from the left-hand side of the screen, and bounded across the car park so quickly that the camera struggled to catch any detail of it.

A second later, in TJ's wake, ran Mycroft.

Greg's heart contracted in despair as he appeared. Mycroft had been trying to get to the park - to get to Greg. He probably hadn't even loaded his revolver. Greg gripped the edge of the desk, reminding himself to breathe. It was fine. He could do this.

Before Mycroft reached the cut-through, he staggered to a sudden halt. He backed away from the trees, unnerved by something he saw there - and as Greg watched, his stomach squeezing itself into nothing, they appeared from the darkness.
Seven of them. They'd taken no chances. Some were aiming weapons. The doors of the van opened and Greg jumped, knuckles whitening, as three more appeared.

Mycroft was surrounded on all sides.

As he watched the man he loved begin to panic, turning in a circle and realising the situation he now faced, Greg felt Olivia shift suddenly beside him.

"They hurt him," she warned, her voice tight. "They beat him up. The charity's administrator said it's awful. You - might want to -"

Greg watched Excultus closing in. They were speaking to Mycroft - he was responding, braced.

"What happens after they -?" Greg said.

"One of them - it's - I don't know. The administrator said you see him go limp. They put him in the van, and drive away."

"Limp -?" The first attacker came up behind Mycroft. As soon as the man got hold of him, the others rushed him too. They swarmed on top of him like rats. "Oh - fuck -"

Greg hadn't meant to look away. He'd meant to watch - he needed to see this. It was evidence, and he needed to see it. Then he saw them all start to punch and kick, raining blows down upon the single figure who vanished beneath the force of their violence, and his legs suddenly lifted him out of the chair.

Somehow the office bin found its way into his grasp.

"Breathe," Olivia said, as he emptied his stomach into it. Her voice was the only sound in the world. "Breathe."

She forced him down onto the floor, kneeling, and stayed beside him until the worst of it had passed. She rubbed his back in steady circles as he wretched. He could feel her hands shaking. Oh, fuck. Oh, fucking Christ, I can't do this. I can't.

"Breathe," Olivia said again. A bottle of water appeared in his hands, the lid already loosened. "Here. Rinse your mouth."

Greg drank, panting. He realised he was drenched in sweat, curled on his hands and knees on the carpet. Olivia had pushed him into a corner where he couldn't be seen from the door.

"I - think they drug him," she said, as Greg shook. "There's - one of them - they bring something from the van. Towards the end. I think it's a syringe. When they carry him into it, he's just -..."

Greg swallowed around the raw, ripped-up heat of his throat.

He wasn't going to survive this.

None of them were.

"Then?" he managed.

"They - smash his wrist-set," Olivia said. "One of them sprays the sigil over it. A few of them get into the van, and the others just disappear... across the car park, or into the Downs..."

There was a long, awful silence.
"I'm sorry," Greg heard his mouth say. He screwed his eyes tight shut. "You - shouldn't have to - I'm just - I'm not - "

"You're fine," Olivia said. She gripped his shoulders through his jacket. "What do we work on now?"

Now. Greg breathed the word deep into his lungs. It felt like armour, somehow - now - this moment now, this action now, this decision now. He forced himself into it with both hands, crushing everything else aside. Mycroft needed him now.

"Get Traffic onto the van," he said, and drained the rest of the water. "Get Technical onto the vampires. See if we can find them on other CCTV. We only need to track one of them all the way back somewhere, and we've found Myke."

Olivia's hands squeezed his shoulders.

"Right," she said. "I'll ring people. Stay there a minute until you're okay."

Greg pushed the bin away, shaking. "No." He got to his feet, pale and cold. "I'll ring people too. I'll ring Medical."

"Medical?"

"Medical." Greg reached for the internal comms panel, searching through the list of contacts. His hands were still shaking. "Find out if the bitch in the holding cells had a syringe on her."

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Etorphine.

"It's used as a veterinary tranquilizer for large mammals," Medical said. "It's not the cleanest of choices to use on a human - nasty side effects - but the dose she was carrying certainly wasn't lethal for someone of your weight."

"Large mammals, like... cows?" Greg said. "Farm animals?"

"Like elephants," said Medical. "Rhinos."

"Christ." Greg's brow furrowed. "Is this stuff regulated?"

"Highly. Rare to find it on the black market... difficult to get hold of, and none of the 'fun' side effects that are so highly sought in prohibited substances. Vets have to keep the full antidote for a human on hand at all times, wherever it's stored... etorphine takes effect too quickly to risk having to search for it."

"What about the knock-out dosage for cross -humans?" said Greg, thinking. "Is it different than for humans?"

Medical gave him the details - in layman's terms, more for werewolves and orcs; less for elves. She didn't have the details for vampire physiology to hand. She'd look into it for Greg, and call back.

Two hours later, the e-mail arrived.
Greg did some quick calculations, made a good guess, and rang London Zoo.

By half past three, the zoo had completed their search.

"I'm - sorry to say you were right, chief inspector... we've found an item missing from our stores. It's a very small amount of a tranquilizer known as 'etorphine'. We use it on - "

" - elephants," Greg said. "Rhinos. How much're you missing?"

The zoo's director told him.

Greg looked down at his scribbled calculations.

Much more than they'd need for one vampire and one human.

But for a vampire and two humans...

"Any ideas how it was taken?" he said, biting the inside of his cheek. "I'm not a prohibited substances expert, but I'm pretty sure this stuff is meant to be regulated. Stringently. With massive legal consequences if it's not."

The director faltered. "We're looking into the situation at speed, chief inspector. I assure you."

"How long's it been missing?"

"It was still present during our last monthly check. That took place in the first week of January."

"So it disappeared some time this month?"

"Y-Yes."

"Right. In that case, I suggest you start watching a month's worth of CCTV - so you can send me a nice clear image of who took it. I hope you're as committed to catching the culprit as I am. Otherwise, Scotland Yard'll have some very serious questions about the security you keep on your regulated drugs."

"I - ... c-chief inspector - I'm sure that you and I can - "

"I'm sure we can," Greg said, and put the phone down.

Olivia looked up from her data-pad.

"That's... how they did it, then?" she said. "With a - an animal tranquilizer?"

Greg exhaled, glancing over at the incident board. Mycroft looked back at him from the centre. "Yeah. Seems so."

It didn't add much. The zoo's CCTV might find them another face to search for - and it advanced the suspicion in his heart that they were searching for two missing people, not just one.

But far from providing any answers, it just threw up more questions. Why Kit? for one.
Greg drummed his fingers on the desk, got up, and went to make coffee.

As he placed Olivia's tea down beside her, she said,

"We've just had an e-mail from Inspector Russell. Heading the Hackney Downs street teams?"

"And?"

Olivia summarised for him, uneasy. "Everyone noticed the power-cut... and a few of them saw strangers around the neighbourhood just beforehand. But nobody had anything to say about a van. We've - not had any sightings of Kit, either..."

Greg breathed it in. *Fuck the public*, he thought. People lived inside their own skulls. If it wasn't happening to them right this second now, they didn't care.

"Have we heard from Traffic?" he asked.

"The number plate looks like it had been damaged on purpose," Olivia said. "Couple of the numbers altered, so they can't follow it automatically through the system. They're having to go road-by-road. And the power cut means they lost a lot of coverage..."

"Roughly where was it heading?" Greg said.

Olivia checked the comms panel, sticking her tongue between her lips.

"South," she said. "Towards the city."


"Last had it near Kingsland," Olivia said, "but... that's where the power line was cut. Richmond Road." She paused. "I've - e-mailed a load of van hire companies. Asking if they've had anyone fail to return a vehicle matching the one in the CCTV."

Greg put a hand on her shoulder, unable to speak for a moment. He squeezed.

"Good," he said.

"I'm going to work on the Soho map after this," Olivia said, reaching for her tea. "Start making a list of premises... divide it up for the street teams there."

"Might be nothing," Greg reminded her, his heart thumping.

Olivia paused, gathering the mug against her chest.

"Might be everything," she said.

---

At four, they went out onto the street to smoke. It was quickly growing dark - early February, and the night was here already. The hours seemed to be passing at an almost glacial crawl, but then adding together with a speed that thinned Greg's breath into nothing.

In six hours, Mycroft would have been with Excultus for three whole days.
As soon as he thought it, he realised he couldn't cope with that fact. He shut it down at once, dragged himself away, and said around his cigarette,

"We'll have another chat to Miss Human Rights in the cells before we go. See if a day without food has made her feel a bit more helpful towards our inquiries."

Olivia quietly tapped the ash from her cigarette, reaching it away from her shoes.

"Don't - learn from me," Greg said. He heard his own voice stiffen. "I know you learned from Myke. And so you should've. He's... everything. He knows everything. He knows all the procedures, all the guidelines, codes of conduct. All of it. All the stuff he taught you... hold onto those things, if you want to do this for real. Forget all the fucking things that I do. Please."

Olivia was quiet for some time, smoking.

"Commander Vickery says it's results that matter," she said.

Greg huffed. "Yeah, she does. S'why she's a good boss."

"When the things that you're doing pay off," she said, "and we get the result, I'm going to remind you that you're a good boss, too."

Her phone sounded quietly in her pocket.

Greg watched her retrieve it, his throat thick.

"Thought you used your wrist-set now," he said, as she unlocked the phone.

"There's - a few people I didn't think I should - ... because, erm... police work..." Olivia scrolled through her messages. "I-I should say, none of my friends are - y'know, dangerous - it's just that - "

She stopped talking at once, staring down at her screen.

Greg watched her freeze. "What?" he said.

"Oh - oh, God."

"What?"

"He's found something - oh God, he's actually found something - Brixton - "

"Is this one of these non-dangerous friends of yours?" Greg asked, as she quickly stubbed out her cigarette.

Olivia composed herself and explained.

"I had a look through Dr Holmes's notes from nine years ago," she said. "All the stuff that happened last time. Execultus seem to have a thing for history - tradition - they think they're some kind of unbroken ancestral line, and I thought... if they're trying to recreate that - their old glory - what about the places that they used to be? Wouldn't those places mean something to them?"

Greg's heart transformed itself at once into rock. "What've you found?"

"I got a list of addresses," she said. "Mycroft's old notes. He even made a map. Splinter cells, smaller groups - places they'd been keeping humans - I sent it to a friend and asked if he'd check some of them out for me."
"Olivia, what have you found?"

"There's a house in Brixton," she said, grabbing his arm. She started pulling him towards the car park. "Boarded up. Arlo says someone's been there recently for definite. It might be nothing."

They drove to Brixton in silence, then followed Olivia's directions from a map on her wrist-set. The estate in which they found themselves was unequivocally bleak, run-down to the very rubble of poverty. These streets were the living scrapyards of London. Greg found himself thinking of glittering Soho - wine bars and lap dancing.

He'd grown up on an estate like this one.

The neighbours thought his mum was stuck up for letting him take A Levels.

As they stopped outside the house, a shiver eased itself down his spine. It was a mournful old wreck of a property - boarded-up, battered and overgrown. The windows were obscured by filthy net curtains, and a warning notice to trespassers had been jubilantly oversprayed with graffiti.

He suddenly wished he'd brought his gun.

He switched off the engine, got out of the car, and quietly turned the tracker on his wrist-set.

"Where's your mate?" he asked, as Olivia followed him up the path. "Arlo, was it?"

"He's - headed off."

"Made himself scarce?" Christ, Greg thought. Starving prisoners. Consorting with criminals. Storming into old vampire hideouts alone. It was probably a good job Mycroft was gone. He'd have killed Greg, if he knew what he was doing. "What did he mean, 'someone's been here'?"

"He said there's stuff inside," she said. "Stuff someone's left."

"'Stuff'?"

"He - didn't say."

Greg was realising this might have been a reckless lead to follow. "How's he know it's recent?" he asked, as they reached the boarded door.

Olivia said nothing, faltering. Greg balled together the last broken pieces of his bravery.

"C'mon," he said. "Help me with this boarding. If we don't go in, we'll never know."

The wood nailed across the door to seal the house had been loosened - it fitted only vaguely into place now, looking for all the world like a problem but as easily lifted as a latch. From the state of it, this wasn't a recent alteration.

It hadn't been smashed, either. Nothing was broken - only taken apart, then disguised at some length.

This wasn't the ghoulish destruction of a group of kids, Greg thought - daring each other to go
inside somewhere creepy and old.

This house had been opened up with purpose.

"Stay near me," he said, as door creaked open. The stench of mould overwhelmed his mouth and nose. He put a hand over his face to block it out. "M'not losing six fucking sergeants in a year."

Olivia nodded, stepped close, and followed him inside.
I did not know the nights of gloom,
The days of misery;
The long, long years of dark despair,
That crushed and tortured thee.

- Anne Brontë
'To Cowper' (1842)

The whole house seemed to be holding its breath. It was a cage of dusty silence - the ceilings too high, hung with shadows thick as cobwebs. Mould was crawling up every wall. There was no furniture left. There were no signs of life.

Olivia's heels echoed softly upon the floorboards behind Greg.

"Arlo - said it was in the basement," she murmured.

'Ir'.

"Light," Greg said, and his wrist-set flooded the dingy hallway. There were stairs leading upwards, and stairs leading down. They quivered with the slight shake of his hand, casting their shadows long into the darkness.

As Greg proceeded down into the basement, every step creaked underfoot. The light from his wrist-set squeezed with him down the narrow staircase, welling between the spokes of the banister and throwing bars of shadow and light into the space below.

Olivia stuck close behind him. He could hear her trying to quieten her breath, trying to move without a sound.

The room below was only small - a windowless landing with a coat stand, a closed door, and a broken sofa half-covered by a sheet.

Greg paused as he looked at the door.

"You trust this friend of yours?" he said, suspecting he'd asked the question far too late.

Olivia shivered. She finally laid a hand upon his arm - gripping his shoulder without a word.

Greg took a breath. He told himself he was already living his worst nightmare. Whatever laid on the other side of that door, it couldn't take much more from him now. He only wished he'd left Olivia in the car. She'd never signed up for this.

All the same, she was here.

For the first time in two weeks, he found himself thinking of Lindsey Darling. It felt like a lifetime
ago. He thought about the yard that he'd entered that night, and what he'd found there - Emma - more blood than he'd ever seen. He'd not come this far to stop now.

He laid his hand upon the door, feeling his fingertips tremble.

Quietly, he pushed it open.

As the door swung, it cast his wrist-set light in an arc across the room beyond. The sight of cages made his heart lurch. They were empty, doors open - old, rusted iron - cages, nonetheless.

Beside Greg, Olivia let out a tight and awful noise that he wished he'd never heard. He put an arm around her shoulders to steady her.

"We can go," he said. "We can leave, if you need."

Olivia gripped onto his coat. "S'fine."

"It's not," Greg said. "You're fucking shaking."

"So are you." Olivia tightened her grip on his coat. "What's in the room? We need to see what's there..."

Greg took his arm from around her, carefully.

Far braver than he felt, he stepped through the door.

Five cages. Bars from floors to ceiling; barely room for a person to lie down. Greg had been picturing these rooms since he'd first heard about them, back in a world where he almost didn't believe it - when Excultus had seemed like a grisly fairytale. Seeing them was worse than he'd ever expected.

People had been kept in these - people like cattle.

It wasn't just a horror story, he thought. It was as real as these iron bars.

At the far end of the room, on the stretch of wall between two cages, there was a column of graffiti. It was done in black marker, only visible because of the wrist-set light.

```
30th November 2208
30th November 2209
30th November 2210
30th November 2211
30th November 2212
30th November 2213
30th November 2214
30th November 2215
30th November 2216
30th November 2217
```

Each line was slightly different - the same hand, the same letters, even the same black marker; only small shifts of angle and shape recorded the passage of time.
Beneath the column, along the skirting board, a collection of pale tiny stumps laid upon the floor. Greg thought for a horrifying second that they were small bones - then he realised they were glossy in the light. A simple wooden chair sat nearby, clean of dust.

There was nothing else here.

Greg stepped nearer, unbreathing. He bent down to pick up one of the shapes.

A candle stub.

He counted, turning it in his hand - ten of them. He glanced up at the dates that were written on the wall, eyes flashing over them quickly.

Ten.

A memory stirred somewhere within the depths of his mind - something he'd read, once - something he'd noted and filed away to keep safe.

30th November.

What was that date? What had happened then?

And then he remembered; and the world caved in silence all around him.

I will not be available today. Please direct any urgent matters to my team.

Please note that I will be not be in the office today, and unable to answer any messages. My team will deal with any urgent matters.

Mycroft's social profile. Two messages of absence - exactly a year apart.

Greg had never asked on what date he'd been infected.

His heart broke without a sound. He gazed up at that first written date - nine years ago - and realised just where he was standing.

This is where it had all started.

One of these cages.

A date for every passing year; a candle for each one.

Greg gripped the wax stump in his hand. He ran his eyes across the final date on the wall, in the handwriting he now recognised with a cold flush of pain. Two months ago, Mycroft Holmes had sat here in the silence. The ferocious Dr Holmes, terror of the fifteenth floor, whose very presence Greg had dreaded enough to take the stairs for an entire year, had come here in the dark to tell this horrifying place that he was still alive.

Broken - and lonely - but alive.
"What... what does it mean?" Olivia's voice asked in the emptiness.

Greg took a long, desperate breath.

He pocketed the candle stub, rising from his knees.

"Mycroft." His voice came hollow from his throat. "It's - him. That date. Nine years ago. He - must have been here."

"Nine years?" Olivia hesitated. "He... he told me thirteen."

Greg hesitated, his brow folding.

"Thirteen..." he murmured. "Yeah, he's - been that way for thirteen. Nine years ago, Excultus fell..."

Olivia came to stand at his side, looking nervously at the list of dates.

"Why did he only start...?" she whispered.

Greg wasn't sure. He gripped the candle quietly in his pocket. "Needed Excultus to be gone, maybe? Before he could make his peace?"

_Neither did he ever make his peace._

"Did - Commander Vickery really make him stay on the investigation?" Olivia said, her voice faint. "I mean... of all the things to get you excused... surely it affected him. Surely it made it hard for him to work..."

"It did, so far as I know. It - kinda ruined his life..." Greg shifted in the silence. "When Excultus were gone, he went up to Criminal Psychology... couldn't cope with CID any longer. Promised Vickery he'd come back, if Excultus ever did."

Olivia's frown lowered her voice.

"He - managed to keep on fighting them for four years," she said, "and - then he had to leave?"

Greg wondered why it made his stomach feel cold.

"He didn't like talking about this stuff," he admitted. "What he went through. I - I don't know a lot." He glanced around the cages, looming in the wrist-set light. "Honestly? Now I fucking see why. Ten years from now, I won't wanna talk about this either... and I've only done a fortnight."

Silence fell.

"What do we do now?" Olivia asked, drawing Greg safely back from his thoughts.

He took another shaky breath.

"We'd... better head back. Can you - tell your friend thanks for letting us know? S'good of him."

"I will." Olivia paused, watching him take one last look at the writing. "Are you - alright?"

_No, Greg thought. Not at all._

"I'm fine, Livs. Let's get going."
Twenty-four hours had made quite a difference.

She was at the back of her cell as they arrived - hunched and pale upon her bed, shoulders set high around her throat, her pupils fixed and enormous. From the second that Greg entered the room, carrying a white plastic container in her hand, her eyes snapped to him and followed.

She looked ready to spring at any second.

As he unscrewed the container, trying to keep his hope under wraps, Greg said,

"How's your day been, princess?"

The vampire addressed herself to the officers with rifles by the door.

"He's starving me." She raised her voice, throat muscles audibly clenching. "Do you know that? You. Over there. He pours it away. He's not feeding me. This is torture."

Greg thought about black iron cages, and nine years of candles in the dark. He huffed. "You don't know a thing about torture, sweetheart," he murmured.

He handed the container to Olivia.

"Where's Mycroft?" he asked.

The vampire glared at him through the energy field, and said nothing.

Greg inclined his head to the men with rifles.

"Give us a minute, guys?"

Without a word, the officers and their guns filed out.

The vampire began to shake, gripping the base of her bed with white-knuckled claws. She looked like she wanted to rip Greg's head from his shoulders. The stare was desperately unsettling - a fixed, feverish, unblinking glare.

But she wasn't the most frightening thing he'd seen today. He could cope with glaring.

"What d'you know about Soho?" he asked, as Olivia carried the container over to the transfer hatch.

"Soho?" the vampire spat. "You're starving me. I know that."

"You're starving yourself," said Greg. "We've got food for you right here. Tell me where Mycroft is, and it's yours."

Silence. The vampire shook, still watching him with those deathly black pupils.

"Making you angry, am I?" Greg bit the inside of his cheek. "I don't care. I care where Mycroft is. Nothing else. Tell me what I need to know, and I'll tell Livs to put that container straight through the hatch. I'll leave you to drink it in peace, and we'll be done here."
The vampire twitched violently. "Put the food through first."

Greg pulled his lower lip between his teeth.

"I'm human," he told her. "Not stupid."

"All humans are stupid," she snapped. Her expression worked. "How do I know that you'll give me the food?"

"You don't," said Greg, flatly. "Because I've got all the power here. Your options are talk, or frenzy then starve. That's it. This is the easiest decision in the world. Honestly, I don't know why we're still discussing it."

She swallowed thickly.

"If I starve," she said, "you'll never find him. You need me."

Greg's laugh echoed off the concrete walls.

"You're the fast-track option, princess," he said. "And sure, I'd rather do things that way. Quicker for all of us. But believe me, you need that container more than I need you."

The vampire said nothing, frozen into silence.

"Last chance for the day," Greg said. "M'a busy man. Things to do."

"Fuck you," she seethed. "Fuck you to hell."

Greg snorted. "Why? What've I done wrong? This is a business transaction. Not my fault you're not smart enough to make the right choice here."

He nodded to Olivia.

"Get rid of it," he said.

Olivia began to pour.

Halfway to empty, the vampire broke. She screamed the start of something, gasping it out. Greg's heart clenched. He threw up a hand.

Olivia stopped pouring at once.

"What was that?" he said, looking through the energy field. "M'listening."

The vampire shuddered, spitting as she shook.

She curled herself in a ball.


Olivia's eyes flickered towards Greg, looking for instruction.

Greg watched the vampire shake for a moment more, feeling his hope fade.

Not yet, he thought.

He couldn't push her.
If she worked out she was their best chance by far, they'd never hear another word out of her. Street teams weren't finding what they needed. Other inquiries were throwing up questions, not answers. This bitch had the ability to bypass it all, straight to the end and straight to Mycroft.

He just couldn't let her know it. It was the last thing he needed her to realise.

*Not today* was better than *never*.

Telling himself to make his peace, Greg nodded to Olivia.

Calmly, she poured the rest away.

As the empty container with its few clinging drops appeared on the belt in the cell, the vampire moved.

It was so sudden that Olivia jumped. With the speed of a spider, the vampire leapt from the corner of her cell onto the container. She grappled it in both hands, forced her mouth around it and began to lick in a fury. The plastic cracked and crushed within her grip.

She licked for a long and vicious minute - ripping apart the container to flash her tongue around every corner of the inside.

Greg watched, slightly sickened - trying not to remember the way Mycroft's hand sometimes shook as he drank.

At last, the frustration began to overwhelm her. Her gasps heightened in pitch, sharpening into sobs and snarls. She hurled the container aside with a scream, and then threw herself at the field. She lashed at it for a few moments before the pain drove her back. Broken on the floor, every muscle tense, she shrieked at Greg through the skittering wall of energy, her fangs gleaming white in the blue-green glare.

Greg let her scream at him, unmoved.

It was nothing he didn't want to do to her. Nothing he hadn't done for three days to himself. He watched her shriek with a dull, aching recognition in the back of his throat, understanding every emotion he was being shown right now.

He wondered if he'd sleep tonight.

He didn't think so.

The second he was alone, he knew exactly where he'd be - in that basement room with the black iron cages, and the memorial of all Mycroft had lost written out across the wall. Greg would be there, screaming.

Three days.

They needed something to break soon. Time could already be running out. Excultus had shown they were willing to adapt - the lack of Greg might not matter to them. Every day could be their last chance. They might have just missed another one.

"I'll be back tomorrow morning," he told the vampire, as she continued to scream through the field. "I'll bring your food. And you can tell me if you actually want it."

Her shrieks echoed in the back of Greg's mind long after they'd left the cells.
Soho - a living whirl of noise and warmth and colour.

It was night-time, and Greg was amongst them all, part of the city: one of its gently beating hearts. He was with the people in the bars and the restaurants - laughing with them, playing pool with them, sharing food with them. He didn't know who they were, but it didn't matter. They were all here together - music, talking, smelling each other's perfume. It felt good just to be with them. The night was young, and they could stay here right through until the morning.

Happy, and safe, it was some time before he started to notice the shadows.

They were distant at first: a black shape standing down the street in a doorway; a watching silhouette in a window high above.

Greg paid the watching shapes no notice. He was cosy with his people, and they were safe in a group. They talked and danced and ate in a happy flock, flitting from bar to bar like bright and tiny birds. Even as the shadows seemed to come a little closer, Greg wasn't afraid.

He caught them watching him through restaurant windows, unmoving and silent. *That's fine,* he thought. They could stay out there. His people were in here, and all was well.

Then, for the first time, he spotted one of them inside the room.

The shape stood at the edge of a dancing crowd, just watching him with his friends. It was gone when he looked back a moment later.

He found himself suddenly nervous to know where it was.

Eventually, the shapes began to gather inside with them all, waiting at the edges of the space - waiting in doorways he wanted to get through, waiting in open spaces he needed to cross. He didn't know why they were waiting, but he knew he had to take his friends around another way. Their group seemed to be growing smaller, though he'd not seen anyone leave. None of them were laughing any more. They found themselves hurrying from place to quiet place, and the shadows were silently following them.

By the time Greg realised there weren't enough people left to keep watch, the shadows had stopped trying to hide. He could see them as they moved now - slow steps, closing in. In panic he rushed his friends down the first alleyway he found, jostling them all the way to a gate at the end. Beyond the gate, they found a small stone yard.

Within it, standing in the moonlight, was Emma.

She said nothing as Greg rushed into the yard, panting in fear. They'd be entering the alleyway behind him now - easing after him. They knew he'd come down here to hide. He looked at Emma as he shook, hurrying away from the gate.

"They're coming," he told her, his voice breaking. Emma said nothing. She simply watched him, no reaction registering in her face. "There's loads of them. I mean it. More than I thought. They're coming now. We've got to hide."

Mycroft continued to say nothing.
His face held no thought - no emotion, no fear - no awareness of Greg. He just watched, waiting in silence for Greg to do something.

"I'm not kidding," Greg said, panting hard. A sweat had broken over his neck. The shadows would smell his fear - they would know. They were coming. "I'm not kidding, Myke. They're here. They're coming along the alley. What do we do? What the fuck do we do?"

Mycroft didn't move. He just looked into Greg's eyes, waiting.

Then his pupils swelled, big and black in an instant.

He lunged.

Greg awoke, sweating and swearing in the darkness.

He struggled out of bed, backed against the window and slumped to the floor, panting in panic as he clutched at his throat. His heart smashed against the front wall of his chest with every beat. He couldn't think - he couldn't breathe. It felt so real. He could still see Mycroft staring at him with that expressionless intensity, still feel the dig of fangs into his throat.

Greg covered his face, shaking, trying to blot the feeling out.

"Where are you?" he whispered. His throat clenched. "Christ, w-where are you? Just - just tell me where - just show me... sh-show me..."

He waited, listening to the void - begging the silence to let a voice come back. Just a handful of words. Just a moment to reach Mycroft's mind, wherever it was, and connect to it and hear him.

He wouldn't question it. He wouldn't tell a soul. He'd just get his clothes on, get his gun, get straight into the fucking car and go, wherever it was.

"Christ..." Greg whispered, pushing tears from his face. He hadn't noticed himself starting to cry. He'd been so close all day. Now he was here, safe, locked in TJ's flat for the night, and the barrier was thin. It all came cracking through.

_Cages_, he thought. Cages in a basement in Brixton. There, all this time. _All this fucking time_.

What did Mycroft think about when he went there?

When he sat in the dark there every year, was it relief that he felt - relief somehow that he'd lived? Or did he wish that he hadn't? Did he sit and grieve for everything he'd lost?

Greg squeezed his eyes tight shut, trying to reach into the silence, breathing through his fear. _Where are you, gorgeous? I'm here. I'm listening. Just show me_.

One vision. One image. One glance through Mycroft's eyes - that was all he needed.

If those eyes could still see things at all.

If they were still able to open and look.

_Somewhere in Soho?_ Greg thought, shaking. He begged the silence to answer. _Show me, sweetheart. Show me Soho. Show me where you are. Is Kit there, too? Are you together?_

Nothing - nothing, _nothing_. Unbearable nothing.
What if there would always be nothing?

*Shit, shit. Please, no.*

*Please, God... please, no...*

The street team in Soho had been sending their reports. Greg had watched them arriving all evening.

*The manager of The Silk Lily Gentleman's Club says they've not noticed anything unusual in the area.*

*The owner of the Archer Street Newsagents says they've not noticed anything unusual in the area.*

*The owner of Lucky Strike Bowling Alley says they've not noticed anything unusual in the area.*

They could be lying. All of them. Greg had to trust the street teams to spot it - he couldn't walk from shop-to-shop, doing it all himself. There wasn't time. Soho was fucking enormous. Even the street teams were taking too long to cover it, and every conversation they finished and walked away from could have been important.

If only Mycroft was here.

*God help me, gorgeous, you'd have fucking aced this... you'd have got it all sorted by now. Mycroft could spot liars from a mile away. He'd have had the street teams straight to heel. He'd have got forensics to hurry the fuck up. He'd have worked it all out.*

He wouldn't just be sitting here in the dark, crying because he'd had a nightmare and he was afraid.

"Talk to me," Greg begged his hands, sobbing. He scrunched his fingers into his hair, gripping until the pain stung in his eyes. "Talk to me, sweetheart. Please. Please tell me you're still fucking there."

No sound came back in the silence.

There was nothing there to hear.
Delivery

Who falls from all he knows of bliss,
Cares little into what abyss.

- Lord Byron
'The Giaour' (1813)

Monday 2nd February

Olivia wasn't sure if she should leave the room or not.

"But listen, mate. That's what I'm telling you. I've been through all of them, Greg. They've all checked out."

As Greg pushed his hands across his face, Olivia did her best to seem preoccupied with e-mails. This day had started badly, and was only getting worse. The arrival into the office of Commander Elwood at a few minutes past eleven hadn't seemed to improve Greg's mood one bit.

"You must be missing something," Greg said, his voice hard. "Look, I - shouldn't have to say this. Someone sold us out to Excultus. They know where Mycroft is. Go and fucking find them."

Commander Elwood took a second to compose himself, casting an agitated roll of his eyes around their office. He folded his arms.

"Are you sure it's someone from my team?" he demanded.

Greg visibly bit the side of his cheek. He looked as if he hadn't the strength to deal with this right now. Olivia was well aware that he'd barely slept, and there'd been no information overnight - no progress from the street-teams.

It was day four, and it seemed like Excultus had vanished back into the earth. They were chasing ghosts.

Worse, Greg was starting to realise it.

"Who else would it be?" he said, weary. "Look, you promised me you'd sort this. Are you asking the right questions?"

"I've asked every question," Commander Elwood snapped, flushing with annoyance. "It must be someone we lost. Ngai, maybe. Altenberg."

Greg repressed a sigh. "Why would Excultus kill their own leak? If it was Ngai or Altenberg, they'd have disappeared like Kit."
Commander Elwood's face worked.

"Maybe it was Kit," he said. "No evidence it wasn't."

Olivia's heart tightened. She wanted to say something, but it wasn't her place. She focused on reading the e-mail she'd now read three times, forcing herself to try harder not to listen.

"And there's no evidence it was," Greg said. "Look, I'm not interested in - "

The office door opened. All three of them looked round.

It was Commander Vickery, holding a data-pad.

"Have you been in contact with London Zoo?" she asked the chief inspector, bewildered.

Greg's brow darkened. "They had etorphine stolen from their supplies," he muttered. "Excultus have been using etorphine. Why? What's happened?"

"I've just had a message from their director," Vickery said. "Apparently we're welcome to their security footage, the moment we turn up with a search warrant."

Greg put his head in his hands. Olivia's heart fell at the sight.

"Christ almighty," he muttered. "I should've known she'd try to cover up her slack bloody - ... can you get me a warrant sorted, commander?"

"Do you have reasonable evidence to suspect London Zoo of a crime?"

"I've got reasonable evidence to suspect they have footage of Excultus," Greg said. "Stealing etorphine, to - "

"So we've got apprehension of a possible offender," the commander clarified, one eyebrow arching, "who is possibly linked to unknown suspects in an entirely unconnected case, and our only justification is etorphine use? Let's hope the judge is having a slow day."

Olivia watched Greg's grip harden on the desk-edge.

"Commander," he said, his voice measured. "My leads are starting to fray. All of them. They're not going where they're meant to be. It's been four days. I need anything you can get me."

Commander Vickery suppressed a sigh.

"Fine," she said. "Leave it with me."

She left, slamming the door.

A heavy silence settled.

Commander Elwood turned slightly more sympathetic eyes onto Greg.

"D'you need a smoke?" he asked.

Greg reached for a data-pad, annoyed. Olivia noted the sudden set of his shoulders. "I need you to go find the Armed Response leak," he snapped. "Now."

The commander's mouth twitched. He reached for the door handle.
"Right," he said. "I'll get on that, chief inspector."

The second slam in as many minutes seemed louder than the first.

In the quiet that followed in its wake, Olivia gathered together her courage. She closed the e-mail that she still hadn't read.

"Do you need to smoke?" she asked.

Greg took a moment to recover his ability to speak. "Have you heard back from any van hire companies?" he said.

Olivia's heart squeezed. She twisted her bumblebee ring around her finger, trying to keep her voice steady.

"No," she said.

Greg opened his desk drawer, pale.

The problem was they looked like ordinary people.

Olivia didn't understand how she'd not realised. Even though she'd met a vampire, survived one, listened to him awkwardly coughing and clearing his throat as he hinted that he wanted to pay her for sex, she'd pictured Excultus with gleaming red eyes and shrouded in smoke - silver sigils and bats - black coats to the floor. They would surely look like predators. They'd be easy to spot.

Now they were searching for normal people, in a city of several million normal people.

They arrived in the holding cells just after lunch, to discover that the red-headed woman hadn't moved in several hours.

"Just sitting there," the containment officer sighed, and expanded the video-feed to fullscreen to show them. "Sent someone in a few times, but... she's just not responding. Don't know if it's some kind of trance state? She didn't sleep again last night."

The vampire was sitting on her bed with her knees clasped to her chest, stock-still, staring into space. Even over video, her pupils could be seen.

They were enormous.

"She didn't sleep at all?" Greg said, his voice low. "And what d'you mean, 'again'?"

"She didn't get much the night before," the officer replied. "Few hours. Last night, not a minute. Just... paced and twitched for most of it. Pulling at her hair."

Feeding frenzy, Olivia thought. She'd read about it in Mycroft's notes. The vampire was clearly descending at speed towards the final stages. If she wasn't dangerous enough before, she certainly was now.

She glanced at Greg, who was watching the video-feed in silence.
"Is she responding to anything?" Greg asked.

The containment officer shook his head. "Nothing. It's like she can't see us."

Greg drew a sigh. Olivia watched him bite his cheek.

She understood.

They could only keep the vampire off food for so long. Greg was hoping hunger would persuade her to talk - but if they went too far, Prisoner Welfare would intervene and put an end to it. It didn't look like that stage was far away.

And if the vampire was just going to clam up and stare, it didn't get them any closer to Mycroft either.

*God, why is everything shutting down? Why is it all running into nowhere? We need more than this...*

"Should we try speaking to her?" Olivia suggested, and watched Greg's eyes fog with thoughts she couldn't see.

He took a breath, and made a decision.

"No... no, just - keep us updated, will you?" he said to the containment officer. "Tell us what she's doing. You've got my wrist-set details."

The containment officer nodded, making a note.

"Will do," he said.

Back up in the office, Greg threw his jacket over the chair and reached for the incident board.

"Let's look this in the eye," he muttered. "I need to see it. D'you want coffee?"

"No," said Olivia. "It's fine. Go on. I'm listening."

Greg opened up the tree of inquiry lines. He seemed to steel himself, glancing from one branch to the next.

"So - Kit," he said. "No sightings. Wrist-set in Soho - have we heard anything from the street teams?"

Olivia flushed. "I've been monitoring the reports," she said. "There's - ... I've not spotted anything that - ... it's a busy area. Businesses come and go quite fast. People are mostly just trying to make a living."

"Fuck the public." Greg rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "Have we had any response to our notices on the web?"

"A few people claiming they've *lost* a wrist-set in Soho," Olivia said. "Nobody claiming they've *found* one, though."
"Right." Greg closed Kit's branch of the three; her photograph and details folded away. "Basically we know less than when we started. She might be the leak. She might not be. She might be in Soho. She might be with Mycroft. She might be on the fucking moon. If she's not the leak, Armed Response have still got one and Excultus could make a grab for me at any second."

He turned to the next tree, his voice hardening.

"The bitch in the cells. Not talking, and now not responding. If we don't get something out of her soon, Prisoner Welfare will notice and she'll be moved to a hospital for medical treatment. And I'll be answering a lot of searching questions."

He closed the branch with a flash of his fingers.

"The van," he said. "Traffic can only follow it so far. Plates were damaged. No response to calls for information."

He shut the line down.

"The CCTV from the car park," he said. "Technical have pulled all the faces from it that they can. They're up on the website. We've asked people to contact us at once, but of course nobody recognises a damn one of them because fuck the public. And most of the nearby CCTV was knocked out in the power cut, so tracking them all from the scene is impossible."

Olivia could feel him lurching towards a conclusion she didn't want either of them to hear. She intervened before he could say another word.

"Look," she said. "This is - procedure. Logic. And I know we're still waiting for some things to pay off, but - what do your instincts say?"

Greg visibly bit down at once on what his instincts said. He took a moment to quieten himself, shaking.

"My instincts say we're running out of time," he said. "We're running out of everything."

Olivia's stomach tightened. "Then where do we go? Where do we search?"

"Start at one end of the world, and work to the other?" Greg snapped.

"Fine," she snapped back. "Which end do we start?"

She watched him crush down the flare of frightened anger; it took him a second or two. When he spoke, his voice cracked.

"I - keep thinking about Soho. About - about why, why would - ... then I keep thinking that it's nothing. It's next to nothing. A single signal? How can we build a bloody thing on that?"

"If it's the only thing we've got to build on," Olivia said, "then we might as well build everything on it."

She'd had enough of this, she realised. She grabbed for her coat.

"Come on," she said.

Greg's jaw set. He watched her pulling her coat on. "What?"

"We're going to Soho," Olivia said. "And you're going to walk around, and you're going to smoke,
and you're going to think. When you've walked far enough, something will come to you."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then at least you've had fresh air, and you'll sleep better. Get your coat."

"You think I'm not sleeping 'cause of lack of fresh air? I'm not sleeping because Mycroft is - ..." Greg stopped, shuttering to a halt. His expression stiffened and he shut his eyes.

Olivia forced the coat into his hands.

"Our only clue says he's in Soho," she said, fiercely. "Soho, then. Let's go."

"That's not what we've got. We've got that Kit Medlock's wrist-set was at some point in Soho. That tells us absolutely bloody - "

"What would Mycroft be telling you to do?" Olivia demanded. "Sit here and watch all your leads bleeding out? Or get your coat on, go to somewhere we've actually got something, and take a walk until your head's clear and you can cope?"

"I'm coping fine," Greg bit out, shaking.

Olivia looked into his face.

He was falling to pieces - she could see it, and he knew it. She could read it written in every line around his eyes, every fleck of stubble he'd missed, every breath he took, and he could see it reflected in her face. As she looked at him, Greg was watching himself crack and bend and break.

Olivia drew a deep breath.

"Just come and walk," she said, gentling her voice. "I won't speak. I won't ask you anything. We'll just walk in Soho for an hour."

She hesitated, watching him resist.

"Look, it's - starting to show," she said. "We need to calm you down."

Greg's heart broke behind his eyes; exhaustion wracked his face.

Olivia bundled him into his coat, guided him out of the office, and locked the door.

As they reached the streets of Soho, she looped her arm through his.

"C'mon," she said. "We'll wander."

Greg said nothing, shaking. He didn't push her away. He let her set the pace - slow, steady, taking each street as if there wouldn't be another one at the end of it - and they walked in utter silence through the crowds.

They were exactly the same height, she realised. His arm fitted perfectly with hers.

He was quiet as a lamb.
As they strolled, Olivia tried to imagine it - where she'd hide someone, if she'd brought them to Soho; why she'd choose *this* street, and not some other. She wondered if they were being watched. She watched for recurring faces in the crowd, but saw none. She looked for people lingering with no reason.

But it was just an ordinary day.

After twenty minutes, Greg's arm shifted slightly in hers. She gave him space to reach into his pocket, and a packet of cigarettes appeared.

Greg offered her one without a sound.

They stood down a sidestreet to smoke, the silence thick and cloying all around them. His eyes moved from building-to-building as they stood there. She didn't know if he was thinking, or just distracting himself. She couldn't tell.

They walked a little more, tracing the same streets over in a loop.

Olivia tried to imagine she was Kit - here in Soho, in the middle of the night. What was she doing here? Did she want to be? How had she come to be here, and why was it her and no-one else?

It was three o'clock when Greg diverted them into a coffee shop without a word. He bought two americanos and handed her one, and they drank them as they walked. Olivia had a feeling this was helping. There was no sign whatsoever that it was, but it was the only thing she could think to do.

At half past three, with the coffee cups crushed into a bin, Greg turned them quietly towards the car.

"You sure?" Olivia said. They were the first words she'd spoken in hours.

Greg nodded, numb. "E-mails."

He was right. There might have been developments - they might even arrive back at their comms panel to find the answer, sitting there waiting for them.

And he wasn't shaking any longer.

That was something, at least.

As they stepped through the glass door of Cross-Human Relations, the pink-eyed receptionist waved at them with relief.

"He's here now," she told a delivery man, who was standing by her the desk. He had a small white package under his arm, and a handheld device awaiting a signature. "Greg - this gentleman has - "

"Mycroft Holmes?" the man said, raising his eyebrows.

Olivia's heart sank. She watched Greg's expression dim at once.

"No," Greg said, wearily. "I'm - his CID partner. Why?"
"Oh, I... I need a signature specifically from him. S'special delivery. I - can't really go without it."

Greg huffed. "Take a seat, mate. You'll be waiting a while." At the nonplussed look, he added, "Mycroft Holmes's been missing for four days now. Delivery of what?"

The man showed him the package - an unassuming white packet printed with the name and address, littered in the red-stamped admin of guaranteed delivery.

"I'll sign for it," Greg said. "I'm - leading the operation to find him. Closest signature you'll get."

The delivery man handed over the device, unsure. Greg signed for it vaguely.

"Cheers," the man then said, and let himself out through the glass door.

Greg began to open it as they walked towards the office.

"Shall I get us coffee?" Olivia asked, watching him with care.

"Sure," he mumbled. He barely heard her, busy tearing along the edge of the packet. "Need to - Forensics... see if Dr Harper's got any further with - "

From inside the packet, he'd fished out a black plastic cube.

He opened it up.

As he laid eyes on its contents, Greg stopped dead in the middle of the division.

What little colour Soho had restored vaporized from his face in an instant. He looked down into the box, his mouth opening, as the world seemed to come to an end.

Olivia's heart stopped with it.

"Greg?" she said. "Greg, what's - "

She saw him sway.

"Greg - "

As she rushed forward to catch him, Greg snapped the box shut. He pushed it into her hands, and the packet slipped from her grip. Before she could grab it or stop him, Greg had turned around and hurried back the way they'd come.

"Greg!" People jumped; Olivia didn't care. "Greg, you're not meant to be alone!"

Greg didn't hear her.

He banged through the glass door of the division and was gone, away towards the stairs without a backwards glance.

Olivia's heart heaved into her throat. She looked down at the torn packaging in her hands - the black plastic cube.

It was a jewellery box.

Bracing herself - hands shaking - Olivia nervously eased it open.

Inside, there was a man's ring.
Silver, at first glance - but as she looked closer, she realised it seemed darker than that. A harder metal. As she gazed at it in amazement, Olivia spotted a slight glitter on the inside of the band. Breath held, she turned it towards the office's overhead lights.

_Doubt thou the stars are fire_

Old poetry.
The sort of thing they'd sometimes read at school.

There was a printed page inside the packaging. Painfully aware of the watching police officers nearby, Olivia tugged out the sheet and opened it with concern, reading quickly. *Men's Platinum Court Wedding Ring*. A four-figure sum was printed beneath. Under notes, the jeweller had added, _Custom engraving: [Doubt thou the stars are fire]._

Olivia's heart pounded against her ribs.

_No, she thought. God, surely this isn't...?_

Back in the office, she loaded up a data-pad and nervously entered the words.

_doubt thou...

The search string offered to complete itself for her at once. The top-most read: _doubt thou the stars are fire william shakespeare quote._

Olivia clicked.

She scanned the page that appeared, barely breathing.

_Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love._

It was from Hamlet.

Olivia realised she was gripping her necklace hard enough to twist the chain into her neck.

_Isn't that the one where...?_
Commander Vickery found him after twenty minutes.

"Kindly come to the car park, Miss Reid," her voice said from Olivia's wrist-set, weary. "Are you qualified to drive?"

Olivia took the stairs at a run, too worried to wait for the lift.

Greg was belted into the passenger seat by the time she arrived. He was drip-white, and his eyes were red. He was staring through the windscreen as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Take him home," Vickery said. "Keep watch on him. Update me in the morning."

Olivia panted from her race down the stairs. "Jesus, is he - w-was that a - ?"

"He may need to be removed from the case." Vickery's voice roughened with regret. "God help us, if he is."

She turned away at once, and strode off across the car park.

Olivia watched her go.

As she got into the driver's seat beside Greg, shaking, she didn't know what to say - but she couldn't let the silence ache on like this. She slammed the doors, locked them, and switched on the engine.

"I - I'm sorry. I didn't realise you two were - "

"Don't," he whispered. He swallowed, shutting his eyes. "Don't."

Olivia shut up at once. She tightened her grip upon the wheel, and set off home.

Greg didn't make a sound until they were inside the flat. TJ appeared as they came through the door, whining his confusion at their early return. Greg removed his coat, hung it up, and in a voice that had taken the entire journey to gather, he said,

"Do you have it?"

Olivia's pulse slowed. Her hand strayed to her bag.

It hadn't felt right, just leaving it there on the desk. It hadn't felt right bringing it with her, either.

She reached into her bag, retrieved the small black box, and handed it over gently.

Greg took it without a word.

He moved along the hall, let himself into TJ's bedroom, and slammed the door behind him.

Utter silence fell.

With a soft whine, TJ looked up at Olivia for explanation.

Exhaustion burned in her eyes.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you, fuzzball..."
Greg didn't appear for the rest of the evening. Olivia took him food around seven, which wasn't wanted. She then checked on him at eleven, as she headed off to bed.

"I'm fine, Livs," he told her through the door. "G'night."

He wasn't fine. She tried the handle, and found something had been wedged against the door on the other side.

It wasn't a good sign.

The girls were now asleep in the spare room, nestled on the floor amongst piles of TJ's technology and clothing. They hadn't been outside in days. All three had been uneasy tonight - quick to anger, quick to cry, quick to fight over small and silly things. They knew something was wrong. They could feel it in the house.

"When are we going home?" Lexi had asked, as Olivia tucked them in. "It's - weird being here. I miss school."

"We'll leave when it's safe, baby girl." Olivia had kissed her head, stroking her hair back in the darkness. "Everything'll be fine. You just sleep."

Olivia had spent the evening on what work she could without Greg - what work there was to do. When a street team told you they'd found nothing, there was little else you could say - especially with the constant awareness in your mind that you had no right to be commanding police officers; to be issuing orders; to be clarifying whether they'd done their jobs properly.

But Mycroft had been gone for four full days now.

It seemed as if Excultus had risen like a black breath of wind, claimed him and then vanished into shadow.

If Greg was removed from the case... what would happen?

Olivia would be removed, too. That was the first thing. She'd no longer be able to help - no longer be paid to do so, either. The house in Knighton Grove was still hers, but it wasn't safe. Excultus now knew where she lived. They knew she'd helped Greg. They knew she'd killed their people.

Where would Greg go? What would he do?

They couldn't expect him just to transfer to other cases, and investigate those instead - not when Mycroft was still missing; not when Excultus might still want to hurt him. Leaving the case would mean leaving the police.

But he couldn't stay on it.

Not like this.

As she lay on the floor of TJ's spare room, gazing up at the ceiling and watching dust play in Hannah's night-light, Olivia wondered if Excultus had meant to destroy their lives. What little there had been to destroy.

She would move, maybe - sell the house for the pittance that estate agents constantly offered her. Take the girls somewhere else, and just pray that no-one followed them. Work, and look after the
kids, and just keep trying. It was the only thing you could do with life - try; struggle; survive, for a while.

Closing her eyes, Olivia relived again the moment with the ring.

Greg's face. The shock that had fallen into desperate distress. *Doubt thou the stars are fire.* She'd almost made him okay again, after Soho. She'd almost got him back on his feet.

Now, she couldn't help but feel like it was over.

The thought kept her awake.

She drifted and worried until almost one AM, trying to stop her head from showing her over and over the look on Greg's face as he opened that sleek black box. She tried to forget Commander Vickery's voice - *God help us, if he is.* She tried to forget the moment she'd kissed Mycroft Holmes at the gates of Hackney Downs, and how frightened he'd been even to hug her. How carefully he'd held her. How quiet he'd gone.

She didn't want him to be dead.

She didn't know how to make it alright.

As her wrist-set flickered to show one in the morning, Olivia pushed back the covers and sat up. She rubbed her eyes for a moment, weary - there was no point lying here alone, if her head wouldn't let her sleep. She'd make tea, wash her face and check on Greg.

TJ was asleep in the kitchen - sprawled on the lino in a pile upside-down, tongue lolling from his mouth as he breathed. Olivia smiled to herself. *Some guard dog you are.* He twitched a little as she opened the fridge, but didn't wake.

Adding milk, she thought of Mycroft.

She didn't think she'd ever make tea again without thinking about him.

Him and Greg - the policemen who just weren't.

The detective sergeant that she wasn't.

Biting her lip in the dark, Olivia suppressed the wave of grief that rose up. She'd almost hoped, and it was the hope that hurt.

Greg probably understood that now more than anyone.

As she passed the door of TJ's room, she paused and knocked gently with the back of her hand.

"Greg?" she murmured.

He might even be asleep, she thought. Somehow. Some miracle.

With no answer, Olivia carefully tested the handle. It turned and opened without a problem.

"Greg?" she said again, her voice soft.

She leant inside the room; light from the hallway fell across the bed.

It was empty.
Without You

There is a reason why all things are as they are.

- Bram Stoker
'Dracula' (1897)

Tuesday 3rd February

Soho - breathing, glittering Soho. One AM had been and gone.

Greg Lestrade walked the streets, unarmed and unafraid.

He felt calmer than he had in days.

As soon as he'd made the decision, the peace had rushed over him in a wave - a peace more potent than anything he'd ever felt. It had driven his every fear from its path. Clarity, clean as cold water, swept away in a tide all the thoughts that had tortured him for days - thoughts of what Mycroft was enduring; thoughts of the silence that might last forever; thoughts of everything Greg had caused. He was free of them now. It was like stepping into his own mind again, calm and easy, and he found himself as steady as if they'd never gone to Hackney Downs. There was just peace, and the streets of Soho, and the cold night air stirring against the thin cotton of his work-shirt.

As he walked, trailing the same streets he'd walked earlier with Livs, he turned a candle stub in his pocket. He pressed it gently against the band of metal around his finger.

His mum would've adored Mycroft.

She'd have cried to see the ring; she wouldn't have cared that it was quick. Life's too short, she'd have said. He could see her saying it - hear her voice, bright with joy. He could see her hugging Mycroft, squeezing him so tight he couldn't breathe, dabbing at her mascara and sobbing that she had two sons.

She'd have been in her fifties now.

Greg still imagined her like the day that he'd lost her. Proud, brave and happy - not even thirty-five.

"It's from a play, Mum," he'd have told her. "From Shakespeare."

Even at night, Soho was alive. People strolled from bar-to-bar in happy tight-knit groups, arm-in-arm as they laughed and chatted and shouted down the street to each other. None of them seemed to notice Greg as he passed. They were in a different world - a world where everything could be made better with an unwise Monday night bender.

They didn't realise they were prey.
Some part of Greg wanted to tell them - to warn them that he'd been like them once.

He didn't think they'd listen.

He wouldn't have listened.

But it was alright - it had come to this, and it was fine. The relief of hitting rock bottom meant there was nowhere to fall. There was a stability in that - a freedom.

And there would be Mycroft, before dawn.

The thought closed Greg's eyes for a moment as he walked.

Mycroft... somewhere close? All his instincts said so. In truth, it didn't matter. They were Excultus, and they'd laid Greg's world to ruin. They'd find him. There was only one thing left for them to claim.

On my way, gorgeous... not long now.

Greg turned the ring around his finger as he walked.

He knew they were going to hurt him.

He wasn't afraid. No pain would come close to the abyss that he'd glimpsed. These past few days had made him eighteen again, eighteen and broken open and trying to imagine the rest of his life without his mum. He'd not wanted to go on, some nights. Something had carried him through - something he'd never quite understood.

He wouldn't make it through again.

That, he knew.

It was one of only a handful of things that he knew anymore, but there would be no life after Mycroft.

Not without you. Greg rubbed his ring with his thumb, passing the open doors to a wine bar. Warmth and light and company reached out to him through the dark. Barely made it without her. Not without you, too.

Greg had realised the truth. He was made of all those people who'd built him and broken him. There was nothing to him but the people that he loved - the people who needed him.

And he'd let down the two people who'd needed him the most.

There wouldn't be anyone else.

But it was okay.

Pain's just a feeling, Olivia had said. Like cold, or hunger.

Greg could handle pain, if he had to.

He couldn't handle another hour of the silence.

He'd started changing his route to make it easy for them now - side-streets, quiet cut-throughs, places without people where the street-lights couldn't reach. It almost made him smile. Come on,
you bastards. Don't stand me up. He wondered if they were watching him, and wondering what he was doing - if they were trying to figure out how it was a trap.

It wasn't.

He'd go quietly. He'd worn his coat open so they could see he was unarmed. He almost wished he could reassure them - it's fine, guys. I've got all night. Just come and pick me up, and let's do this.

Now, it was just a case of waiting.

Turning into a yard off Great Windmill Street, Greg eased his cigarettes from his pocket. He lit one as he strolled. He took his time to reach the end, and lingered there a few minutes - smoking, rubbing his wedding ring with the pad of his thumb. Closer than a marriage. He'd made his choice. 'Til death do us part.

Nearly at the end of his cigarette, Greg caught the sound of footsteps.

He smiled a little, taking a final drag. Hurried footsteps, too. At last. Another wave of cool white calm rushed through his chest, soaking him in relief. Christ, could I not have done this four days ago...? Hindsight was a wonderful thing.

Flicking away his cigarette, he glanced up as his pursuer came striding into the yard.

Horror struck him like a lightning bolt.

"Livs - " Greg's heart almost stopped. She was furious; her eyes flamed as she stormed towards him. "Livs, what the hell are you - "

She lunged. Greg dodged backwards, thinking she was about to slap him. Her hands closed instead in his shirt and she threw him up against the sliding metal shutters of a shop's delivery bay with a crash, hauling him up by his shirt.

"What are you doing?" she raged at him. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Greg grabbed for her fists. They held tightly onto him, white-knuckled. His teeth gritted and he flushed with anger.

"Get out of here!" he bit at her. "Now! Before they fucking see you too!"

Olivia's shuddering gasp cut him to the heart. "You bastard," she breathed. "You bastard! You're not doing this - no, Greg! I won't let you!"

"Livs, this is the only way!"

"It's not the only way!" she burst out. "It's not at all!"

"Yeah? Then go ahead," he jeered. "I'm listening! Tell me! Tell me what the fuck all else I can do at this stage. I'll all fucking ears, Livs - 'cause otherwise I'm out of plans!"

Olivia's face twisted with pain.

"How could you just vanish?" she hissed. "Like we wouldn't notice? Like we wouldn't care? Do you know what I went through when I realised you were gone? How could you, Greg? How fucking could you?"

Greg's heart heaved.
"Because I knew you'd try and stop me," he said. "And this is happening. Now get the hell out of here. I'm done talking."

"Tough shit," she said. "I'm not." Her jaw set. "And yes, I'm here to try and stop you - because Mycroft wouldn't want this."

Greg's stomach clenched. He realised with a sudden lurch that she was crying. Her fury had hidden the tears until now; they flashed like fire in her eyes.

"Yeah?" he said, starting to pant. "Shame he's not here to tell us. But I'll ask him when I see him."

Olivia flushed, her fists bunching in his shirt.

"And he'll tell us both when we see him that you're a fucking moron if you do this."

Greg realised all the panic was returning - all the fear. He couldn't let them see her. If they saw her, they'd take both of them, and suddenly this wouldn't just be about Greg and his mistakes. It would be about innocents. He couldn't cope with that.

"Listen to me," he said, shaking, trying to keep his voice under control. "Just - listen. Please. I've thought this through. Get out of here now. If you stop this - "

"There'll be something else," she said. The tears burned in her eyes. "There'll be another way. You don't have to do this."

"There isn't anything else!" Greg said, gripping her wrists where she still held him by the shirt. He begged her with his eyes to understand. "Why do I even have to say that to you? I've lived this for four days, Livs - five days, now - and I can't fucking cope any more. You've seen me. You've watched me, Livs. If I don't end this, Vickery's going to take me off the case anyway - and if you think a single week'll go by before they fish me out of the fucking Thames, you're wrong. You're dead wrong. Now get the fuck out of here."

Olivia shook, staring at him as she swallowed.

"If you do this," she said, "the hour afterwards, we could have had a call. A new lead. A change. We could've chased it and gone to find him, and brought him home. Miracles won't do shit for the dead, Greg Lestrade."

"I guess we'll never know," he snarled. "Cause you're getting back in the car."

"I came by taxi," she snapped. "And I'll be leaving by taxi. With you. Because I'm not going to be the one who has to ring Commander Vickery, and Commander Elwood, and TJ, and tell them all you handed yourself to Excultus on purpose."

Greg's courage cracked. Hearing it laid out made it sound reckless, and it wasn't. It was the only way. He'd been losing his mind for five days. Only this decision had made him feel like he was doing the right thing.

As one piece of him broke, he felt the others start to snap and buckle under its falling weight.

"Listen," he gasped at her. "Listen. Please, please listen."

He found her hands within his shirt - he took hold of them, locking their fingers together hard enough to hurt.
"I don't have parents," he said. "I don't have a family. I don't have a home. I don't have anything but my job, and I'm gonna lose that. I should never have come back to fucking London. I don't have anything. I had my mum and I got her killed. I had Mycroft and for all we know, I've got him killed as well. But if there's any chance that he's alive, I need to take it."

Her face contracted in confusion.

"What - what're you - "

A strange pulse suddenly buzzed between them. They stiffened, eyes widening, and stared at each other with hands still gripped.

A moment later, as the pulsing continued, they realised it was a wrist-set call.

"Is that - mine or - "

"It's yours," Livs mumbled, flushing. She let go of his hands. "You should get it."

Greg's jaw worked. "Did you tell Vickery I'd come here? If this is her - "

"No. I bloody should have, though. You'd deserve it."

Greg pulled up his sleeve, shaking. **Prisoner Containment.** "Jesus Christ," he muttered. "Answer..."

A click; a crackle. The voice came far too loud in the deserted yard.

"DCI Lestrade, sir? Sorry if you were sleeping."

"I wasn't," Greg said, glaring at Livs. She glared right back. "What is it?"

"Prisoner Containment, sir. We've got a note in a file to contact you about - ..." The officer audibly searched the file for a name, and found none. "Erm - a prisoner under guard in Block C? She's having some sort of breakdown. Been this way for a couple of hours now - ranting, screaming - then a few minutes of weird calm, and more ranting. We don't understand a word of what she's saying when she's angry, but when she's calm, she's started asking for you."

Greg's heart hit the back of his throat. "For me?"

"Yeah. Never had such a polite request from a field containment cell."

**Christ. Christ, she's - ...**

Greg looked around the yard, his pulse pounding. *But this'll work - this is the fastest way - I know this'll work..."

"Right," he said to his wrist-set, numb. "Right, I'll - thanks for - ..."

Before he knew what he was doing, he'd hung up.

Olivia shook as she started to speak.

"Look," she said. "Look, you - you can't just ignore that. You can't go through with this, thinking there was another option. Thinking you could've talked to her. Thinking it might all have paid off."

Greg's throat worked. "If Excultus are watching right now - "
"It doesn't matter. I'll - ..." Olivia bit down into her lip, shaking harder than ever. "I'll bring you back. Alright? I'll pay for the taxi. If she doesn't tell us what we need, I'll bring you right back here and I'll drop you off and hug you goodbye. And I'll let you. Christ, Greg, I'll let you. Just - we've waited for that call for days. Please. Please, don't do this now. Do it when it's over. When there's no more hope left in the world. Not before."

Greg couldn't breathe.

It wasn't even two AM.

He could spend an hour at Scotland Yard - one final, _final_ try - then be back here after three, when the streets were less busy with drinkers.

An hour wouldn't make a difference. Excultus would still be watching.

As he looked into Olivia's eyes, Greg realised with an aching chest that he owed it to her. She'd loved Emma, too. She was now the mother of Emma's children. Mycroft had taught her how to be a police officer, and Greg had spent five days teaching her how to be a flaming fucking wreck.

"C'mon," he said. He grabbed her arm, pulling her around. "Let's go. Before they make a move and get us both."

Olivia clung onto him as they strode back up the alley.

"I'm still fucking angry," she told him, as they reached the main road. "And you're still a fucking idiot for even contemplating this."

Greg gripped the candle stub in his pocket. "If you knew what he is to me, you'd understand."

"I know." Olivia's voice shook. "I know I would. You're still an idiot."

As they headed towards Piccadilly Circus, Greg kept an arm around her and an eye on the streets behind. No-one seemed to be following.

"You got engaged today," she said, as he held the door of the taxi for her.

Greg's stomach heaved.

"I got engaged a week ago," he muttered. Olivia stepped into the car. "I got a ring today."

"Jesus... haven't you only been working together for two weeks?"

"It's been nearly three," Greg snapped, and shut the door.

As he slid into the seat beside her, and the taxi set off with a jolt, she said,

"You know they all die at the end of Hamlet, don't you?"

Greg bit his tongue, pulling on his seat-belt.

"Everyone dies at the end of every play."
They drove through the dark streets in silence.

Greg spent the journey trying to think how they'd handle this. It was their final chance to do this like they were meant to - and if nothing else, it would prepare him for the alternative.

By the time they reached Scotland Yard, a half-plan had formed in his mind.

One look at the monitor in the control office, and he decided it was worth trying.

He turned to Olivia, who stood by his side in silence, gazing at the human-shaped creature now ripping at the concrete walls of her cell.

"Go and fetch a first aid kit, will you?" Greg murmured.

Olivia tore her eyes from the screen.

"A first aid kit?" She stared at him. "Why?"

She didn't seem to see or hear them for a while. She wasn't a person anymore - just a physical carrier of rage - raving, shrieking, flying against the walls like a panicked insect. She'd chipped the top layer of concrete in a couple of places. Those walls were a metre thick. She wouldn't be through them in a hurry.

They watched her smash the bed, standing together in silence just outside the containment field. Greg realised Prisoner Welfare would be down here at nine, and calling Criminal Psychology by two minutes past. She'd be ruled a danger to herself by ten, then taken away - a secure hospital. They'd quickly figure out he hadn't fed her.

Greg didn't care.

It was a few minutes to three when her screams finally started to quieten. Her frenzied violence seemed to slow; she went from ripping at the walls to merely pacing round-and-round, pupils huge and staring at things that weren't there. She started to back away from the broken furniture, panting through her teeth as if the sight of it scared her. She began rubbing at her throat.

At last, licking her lips and shivering, she seemed to find herself in her surroundings again. She looked around her cell, dazed. She gazed at the cracked walls. Her feverish stare finally flickered through the front energy field, and found Greg, standing there watching.

Her pupils swelled to twice their size.

She swallowed, repressing a shudder, and said,

"Please. Please feed me. Please, Chief Inspector Lestrade. Please give me food. I want some food."

Greg didn't move a muscle.

"Where's Mycroft?" he said.

She made a little choking noise, swallowing. Saliva had begun to pour between her teeth. As she tried to wipe it from her chin with shaking hands, she whispered,
"Please. Please, the food. Then I'll tell you - I promise. On my life, I promise. Please."

Greg bit the side of his tongue.

"Where's Mycroft?" he said.

Another choked sound cracked from her throat. "F- Food. Please. You - you don't understand - I can't - c-can't... I don't want to go mad and die - I-I've seen it happen - please - "

Greg slowly folded his arms.

"Where's Mycroft?" he said.

The vampire shuddered in despair, dragging her arms up over her head. As she bowed beneath some unbearable weight, sinking to her knees upon the ground, she spat her excess of saliva down her front.

"I can't tell you," she whispered. Her voice squeaked out into nothing, strangled by the thick clench of her throat. "I can't tell you. I can't."

"You can," Greg said. "And if you do, you'll get food straightaway. As much as you want."

She spat another mouthful of saliva, shaking. Her breath came in frantic snarls.

"Food first," she gasped. "Then. Then, I swear."

Greg took a breath. From what Prisoner Containment had said, they'd only get a few minutes of this calm. They had to use it or forget about it.

He inclined his head to Olivia, nodded stiffly, and pulled off his coat as she reached for a chair. Hearing the legs clunk against the floor, the vampire looked up from her hands.

"W- What are you doing?" she gasped. Her pupils dilated wildly as Greg sat down. "Please."

Greg loosened the buttons of his left cuff, rolling it up.

"Probably don't watch many human films... do you?" he said.

The vampire panted, saying nothing. She watched in alarm as Olivia opened up the first aid kit, holding it out to him.

Greg secured his cuff above his elbow, rolling it twice more to keep it tight.

"You must've seen that one scene, though..." he murmured, flexing his fingers, and took the pack of cotton balls Olivia handed him. She started unscrewing a bottle of disinfectant. "You know, where they... make a blood oath? Blood bond? Where they slice across their hands, and swear something..."

Soaking a cotton ball with disinfectant, he applied it in sweeps across the crook of his arm.

"Stupid thing to do," he said, with a small smile. The vampire stared, unmoving. Saliva coursed down her chin as she watched. "Worst place you could pick, the hand... all those nerves. Risk of nicking something you need. Risk of infection. Every slight movement for weeks, and you're going to rip it open again... doesn't make sense."
Olivia handed him a sealed packet without a word.

Calm as stone, Greg tore the packet open with his teeth.

As she recognised a scalpel, the vampire let out a strangled sound.

"No - " she choked. She spat in panic. "No, please - "

"Mycroft's only seen me bleed once," Greg said, ignoring her. He formed a fist, and looked into her eyes. "He held it together because he loves me. Not sure you'll manage the same. By the way... I'm not his pair-bond. Not yet. But I'm bloody going to be."

As the blade dug down into the skin, Greg bit into his lip and hissed. Blood welled at once beneath the scalpel. It rolled down his forearm, dark and gleaming.

The vampire flew for the energy field.

She scrabbled at it, clawing, screaming out in pain as it wracked her into shapes and she tried to force her way through. Light scattered in a frenzy around the room.

Greg's teeth gritted. He kept on, deeper, staring at her, pain burning beneath the pull of the scalpel. The roll of blood reached his wrist. His fist shook. He kept on.

With a piercing wail that rang against the walls, she collapsed backwards out of the field, hit the ground weeping, and screamed,

"GASTRELL'S BAR!"
"You said I killed you--haunt me, then!...Be with me always--take any form--drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you!"

- Emily Brontë

'Wuthering Heights' (1847)

Gastrell's Bar.

Oh my God.

Olivia scrabbled through the first aid kit to find a dressing, shaking. As she took Greg's arm and raised it above his head to slow the bleeding, she realised he was shaking too.

He didn't move or speak as she dressed it. The vampire was screaming against the field, sobbing in despair. They ignored her.

"Are you alright?" Olivia managed in his ear, knotting the bandage into place.

Greg grew pale as he rolled down his crumpled sleeve. He didn't make a sound. It looked as if he couldn't.

Olivia turned to the containment field, her heart now beating in her mouth.

"Gastrell's Bar?" she said. "On Pembury Road?"

The vampire dug her fingers into her hair, weeping against the floor.

"Are all of you there?" said Olivia.

The vampire convulsed. "They'll kill him," she wretched, and spat, sobbing. "The second you - ... c-cars. Guns. Police. They'll cut his throat. They'll kill him and leave before you even find the door."

Olivia's stomach lurched. "How many of you are there?" she demanded.

The vampire said nothing, curling into herself.

"How many of you?" Olivia barked, as the vampire choked and swallowed.

"H-Hundreds - ..."

Olivia turned to Greg, inhaling sharply. "That's a lie."

"Yes, it is." Greg got out of the chair. "Come on."

As they headed for the door, the vampire threw herself at the field once more. It sparked and spat and crackled wildly around her.
"FOOD!" she screamed. "Food, give me food, you promised! YOU PROMISED! Feed me, you fucking son-of-a-whore!"

Greg stiffened.

Before Olivia could grab him he turned, bore down upon the field, and raged at the top of his voice.

"Turns out I'm an utter bastard then, princess, aren't I? Turns out if you start talking about other human beings like they're meat, someone might show you the fucking consequences of it some day! Your demented little friends are putting my pair-bond through worse! Why the fuck should I treat you decently? D'you still think I'm cute, by the way? Or am I scaring you yet?

Olivia intervened. She swept under his arm, dragging him away.


Greg's throat worked, his fists clenching. He wanted to shout; he wanted to release the anger.


Greg struggled for a moment more - blanching, breaking - then let it go. He turned away. He slashed his wrist-set through the control lock.

As the doors opened, he strode through them at speed. The vampire choked and screamed on the floor where he'd left her.

Olivia flew at his side.

"Armed Response," she said, as they stormed towards the exit of the holding cells. "We - "

"No," Greg bit out. "No, we can't. Christ."

"Why?"

"Excultus," he said, banging through the exit doors. "It wasn't Kit. I think I know who it is. Either way, we can't trust Armed Response. Excultus will hear we're coming. We'll walk straight into another trap."

Olivia's heart clenched. "But... Commander Vickery," she said, panicking. "Commander Elwood. Surely we should - "

"No," said Greg. "There's no fucking time."

They jogged up the staircase together, Olivia's heels cracking against each step.

"And you heard the bitch," Greg said, his voice hardening. "If we come screaming up outside with helicopters and flashing lights, they'll kill Mycroft before we've even cordoned off the area. We made all these mistakes at Hackney Downs. We're not making them again."

Olivia couldn't breathe. The walls seemed to echo around her. "Then what do we do?" she said.

She saw Greg's jaw set.

He stopped at the top of the stairs, turned to her, and said,
"Look, this - this is more than - ... you're not a police officer. I shouldn't even think of asking you. But Christ, I've had six sergeants this year - and none of them have been a fucking patch on you."

Jesus. Jesus Christ.

"Are we - " Olivia found herself panting. "Gastrell's Bar? Now?"

"Now."

"Now."

"Now."

"Now."

"Now," Greg said, pale. "Right now. They don't know we're coming. It's three in the morning, they think I'm falling apart somewhere, and they think we're out of leads - we're not. So this is what we do. We get handguns, we get inside, and we get Mycroft. We're out of there and back before it's even light."

Olivia's heart heaved into her throat. The words jammed; she couldn't speak.

"I know you want to wait," he said, his expression breaking. "I know you're scared what's waiting there, and you want to go in with an army. But the more people we involve, the more chance we'll get ratted out again and we'll arrive to find Mycroft's corpse. I can't cope with that. We tried all the king's horses and all the king's men. Now we try with just the king."

"Holy shit." Olivia swallowed, her heart pulling at her ribs in fright. "I - I don't know how to use a - "

"Fine. We'll get you a point-and-click."

"A - point-and."

"Point it at something you want to die," Greg said, "and click."

Olivia reeled.

"Are we just going to - ... just through the front door?" she said. "They'll recognise us. They'll recognise us both."

"It'll be closed," he said. "Three AM on a Monday? And there's a back door. We heard it just now. She said they'd kill Myke 'before we even find the door'. There must be another way in. A fucking member's entrance... a cellar or something..."

Olivia's throat closed around her fear. "What if there's hundreds of them?"

Greg laughed harshly. "She was lying," he said. "There are so few left that she needed to cover it up. I'll bet my life on it."

A sudden thought flashed across his face. His expression creased, and he turned to her once more.

"I - won't bet yours, though. Christ, why am I trying to persuade you to - ..." He took a breath, calming himself. He put a hand on her arm. "It's fine, Livs. You've done more than enough. Head on home. If I'm not back by dawn, tell TJ I've - "

Olivia's mouth spoke for her.

"I'm coming with you," she said. She watched his face open with shock. "Fuck!" she gasped, her heart leaping. "I'm coming with you! Get me a point-and-click!"

"Are you sure?" His deep brown eyes hardened. "Livs, it - it might be bloody dangerous."

"Then why are we still standing here?" she burst out. "He's in danger! He's been in danger for five
days! Let's go, for fuck's sake!"

"Christ. Okay." Greg grabbed for his wrist-set, pale. "I'll - get a taxi rung. We'll stop somewhere away from the bar. Head there on foot. Jesus fucking Christ, it's happening."

"Where do we get guns?"

"Up in Cross-Human Relations," Greg said, his eyes flashing to the door. "Vickery's office. Can't use the main Armed Response store or we'll be seen. Come on - lift. Quick."

It was half an hour in the taxi to Hackney.

For the first twenty minutes, not a word was spoken.

Olivia could barely think. She watched the driver's tree-shaped air freshener swinging in the darkness, listening numbly to three AM pop classics on the radio. Greg was motionless beside her, lost in his thoughts.

They were about to storm a vampire nest together.

She had a gun in her pocket, and they'd left TJ with the children - children who'd already been orphaned once.

Greg was rubbing his wedding ring with his thumb.

The third time Olivia noticed, she pulled together a smile. It was the last thing she wanted to do in this moment - but she wanted him to be brave. One last, frightening flash of bravery. Whatever was waiting for them, she wanted to walk in beside the man who called a vicious bitch 'princess' and left her to cry on the floor.

"M'I invited?" she asked, her voice quiet.

Greg gave her a blank look, then followed her gaze to his hand.

He shivered, curling his fingers into his palm.

"Yeah," he mumbled. "Yeah, darlin', you're invited... front row."

"D'you need a flower girl? I've got three to pick from. Semi-well behaved."

He gave her a smile. For the first time in days, real warmth touched his eyes. She'd missed seeing it. "Kinda hoping TJ'd do it," he said.

Olivia hummed. "Cute," she said. "Little basket with rose petals... bows in his fur. I can see it. I really can."

There was silence for a moment.

"M'sorry you got involved in all this," Greg said. His voice tightened. "I mean it. Jesus, you... you didn't ask for any of this, Livs. I'm so sorry."
Olivia hesitated, keeping something in her mouth for a moment.

"You don't have to accept what people do," she said, at last. "You can do something about it. Even if you're angry. Even if you're scared."

Greg drew a long breath.

"Told you not to learn from me," he said.

Olivia raised an eyebrow. "Oops."

He huffed, his eyes shining in the darkness.

"Whatever's in there... m'glad I've got you with me. I'm - glad I won't be alone." He put a hand on her arm again. She didn't mind him touching her, Olivia realised. He was like Sam - unfrightening. He was like a brother. "We'll - be alright, Livs," he said.

Olivia bumped him gently on the shoulder. "You kidding? They won't know what's hit them."

"So long as we get Mycroft out. That's - ... I - can't think past that bit."

"Quick and quiet?" she suggested.

Greg nodded, lowering his eyes. "Quick and quiet." He hesitated. "Listen, I'm - not leaving without Myke. If things go wrong, I want you to run. Run and don't look back. Tell yourself I made my choice."

He was rubbing his ring again.

Olivia recrossed her legs, feeling the heavy hand-gun in her coat pocket stir against her thigh. *Point it at something you want to die, and click.*

If things went wrong, she wasn't leaving.

"Fine," she said. "I will."

Greg bit his cheek. "I mean it."

"I know you do."

"This isn't your place to die," he said, fierce. "You've got people waiting for you to come home."

Olivia reached out across the seat. She caught his hand, and gripped it tight.

"So have you," she said.

They stopped at the other end of Pembury Road, paid the driver and walked in silence together along the street. In ten minutes, they passed only one group - a huddle of tracksuited young men, who took one look at Greg's expression and decided to pass on Olivia.

A few doors down from the bar, Greg paused at the entrance to a bin passage way.
"If we're looking for a back door..." he muttered. He pulled Olivia along it, brought her to a stop at the end, and glanced along the alley onto which they'd emerged. "Wait here, alright? M'gonna go check."

It was the longest two minutes of Olivia's life.

When Greg finally reappeared, he gestured for her with an arm.

She hurried to his side, fingers wrapped tightly around the gun in her pocket.

"Only thing I can find looks like a storage cellar," he said. "Best place to start. At least we'll be inside then. You okay?"

Olivia nodded, silent. She couldn't speak.

They were flat double doors leading down into the ground, latched and padlocked from the outside.

Greg knelt, and pulled a small fabric roll from his back pocket. It contained a number of thin metal tools. He selected one, biting his lip.

"Can you pick locks?" Olivia whispered, startled.

Greg pulled a face.

"Not brilliantly. A mate taught me back in Manchester. He used to do it as a party trick. But this doesn't look too high security..."

Olivia said nothing, watching his first few attempts without comment. As he reached the verge of breaking the pick, she screwed up her pride and intervened.

"Give it here," she muttered, bent down and took it off him. She eased the pick back into the lock. "You can't just keep testing - the pins'll get damaged, then we're fucked..."

She laid her cheek close to the ground, shutting her eyes and listening with her fingers as the pick turned. It was years since she'd done this. It made her uncomfortable how easily it came back.

"Dare I ask?" Greg whispered.

Olivia bit her lip ring. "I - was sixteen. I did what I had to."

The padlock suddenly clicked, and loosened in her hands.

"Thank Christ you did," Greg breathed.

"They'll never let me into the police," Olivia whispered. She shook as she handed him the padlock, nervously easing open the latch. She realised it was the first time she'd said it, and she hated that she was saying it now. "One look at my bloody record - "

"Don't worry about your record," Greg said. "Means and ways. We'll get you into the fucking police. And I'm gonna be there for your academy induction. Me and Myke. And m'gonna cry right at the front and embarrass myself."

As they gingerly pried open the doors, the hinges let out soft groans - low, long, muffled creaks.

"Steady," Greg whispered. "Easy..."
A ladder led down into the cellar.

Greg went first. As he lowered himself down through the doors, he glanced up into Olivia's eyes. A nervous moment ran between them. Olivia reached for his hands on the top rung. She gripped them, saying nothing.

Greg gave her a small smile.

"S'alright," he whispered. "You can be afraid. S'the first breath of bravery."

Olivia's heart twinged. "Commander Vickery."

Greg smiled, his eyes creasing at the edges. "If you can't trust me, trust her."

He climbed carefully out of sight. Olivia waited until she heard him step off the ladder, then checked her gun one last time - and climbed down into the cellar.

Greg helped her off the final rung.

They were standing in utter darkness. The air stank of yeast, with the slightly bloody tang of rusting metal.

"Do we - ?" she whispered. Wrist-set light would be noticeable.

Greg shook his head. "Let your eyes adjust." She felt his words more than she heard them - barely voiced in the blackness. "We're okay."

After a minute, barrels and crates began to appear around them in the gloom - an opening to a stairwell, leading up into the bar itself - a door to the left.

Without a sound, Greg led the way across to the door.

He tested the handle gingerly. His fist stiffened around it; it was locked.

He handed Olivia the tools. She knelt, examined the keyhole with her fingertips, and bit her lip.

It took a few minutes. She was hyper-aware of every tiny click, every scrape - every drawn out squeak as she tested the handle.

"Can you - ?" she whispered, getting Greg to hold it turned. He didn't seem to be breathing beside her. Olivia bit into her lip ring and worked, closing her eyes, telling herself that Mycroft Holmes was behind this door. They'd help him up the ladder and be gone. In fifteen minutes, they'd be in a taxi to TJ's flat, with Mycroft in Greg's arms, and all of this would be over.

When the lock finally gave, it gave with a heavy clunk.

Greg froze. He put a hand on Olivia's shoulder to hold her still.

In absolute silence, they listened.

Nothing stirred; nothing shifted.

The building slept on around them.

Greg gestured for her to stand, brought his mouth to her ear and intoned, "Get behind the door. I'll go first."
Olivia flattened herself to the wall, her heart now beating so hard she could feel her ribs lifting around it. Through the darkness, she saw Greg prime the gun in his hand. He twisted the handle, let it click open, and gave it a push.

The door swung softly inwards, emitting a low creak.

They waited for almost a full minute of silence. When it seemed the coast was clear, Greg glanced around and checked.

He gestured to Olivia gently.

They proceeded through the door.

They had appeared in a narrow corridor, windowless and stuffy. Olivia's first thought was that the space smelt of a certain sort of men - the stale, almost pungent air of a place that nobody cared for, that nobody cleaned, that nobody considered their responsibility - sweat and old food. It made her want to go back. She tightened her fists and followed Greg in silence along the corridor, noting the three doors in the blackness. Two to the left; one to the right.

The door on the left came up first. It was slightly ajar. Greg paused beside it, laid his fingertips on it, and eased it open another inch. His eyes narrowed as he tried to see in the gloom.

"Bathroom," he breathed.

People were living down here. Olivia moved in silence to the door on the right, also open. Holding her breath, she looked through.

While she could see only shapes in the blackness, the sounds of breathing were unmistakable - people sleeping - quiet snores. It was only a small room, but there were several voices within it. Olivia's heart squeezed painfully, trying to discern if one of them was Mycroft - panicking as she realised she couldn't tell.

Greg laid a hand on her back. He shook his head and he gestured her along the corridor with him. She decided to trust his judgement. They approached the final door - closed.

Discovering it was locked, Greg gave a discernible shudder.

"This one," he breathed. He handed her the tools, his hand shaking. "Take your time."

Olivia knelt, trying to stop the tremble in her fingers. She needed them to be steady. She pressed her cheek against the wood to calm herself, listening her way into the lock as she fitted the pick.

Ten minutes went by. Each one was worse than the last. She wanted to speak to Greg - to tell him this lock wasn't easy, but that was a good sign - it meant something good was behind it. She wanted to tell him she only had one pin to go, and she wasn't giving up - but she didn't dare make a sound. She didn't dare break her focus.

Greg seemed to understand. He stood over her, protective and unmoving; she knew the gun was ready in his hand. She couldn't remember when he'd started rubbing her shoulder.

At last - without a sound - she felt the final pin give. She turned it slowly, inhaling with it, easing it all the way round in one movement and the door clicked. It yielded, the pick still embedded in the lock. Greg's fist clenched on her shoulder.

Olivia got to her feet, shaking.
Together they stepped inside.

Absolute blackness - nothing. Olivia wanted to whisper his name. Mycroft? She bit down on it, gripping onto Greg's arm. He'd gone very still.

Nudging her a little more into the room, he took the door and closed it behind them. It gave the faintest, tiniest clunk.

"Light," he whispered.

Light bloomed from him in a wave, painful and pure. It washed over everything - every shelf, every cabinet - and burned Olivia's eyes with its clarity.

A small office - a desk.

No Mycroft.

Then she spotted her own photograph on the wall, and Olivia's blood ran cold.

They were all there - all of them - Mycroft, Greg - Olivia, her Scotland Yard blouse, standing outside a cafe with Mycroft in the rain - there was TJ's staff ID photo, beaming cheekily for the camera. His bright-eyed grin had been framed in scrawled red pen. Lycan, someone had written beneath him, block capitals and scratchy. Dangerous. There were photographs of Olivia's house; photographs of the prisoner transport tunnel into Scotland Yard; photographs of Kit leaving her flat on a morning, wet-haired with a frown and a coffee flask. It was all here. All of it.

But no Mycroft.

The bitch had lied.

Olivia heard Greg's heart shatter in silence beside her. He moved at once to the only other door, wrenching it open - but she already knew.

It was a broom cupboard. There was an old vacuum in there, and a few boxes of blank paper on a shelf.

As Greg turned to her, his face opening in desperation, Olivia could only stare back. She wanted to cry.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Greg's widened eyes flashed across the walls - taking in his own picture, his pupils shrinking. He swallowed and moved across to the desk, pulling open drawers, rifling quickly through papers.

Olivia hurried to join him.

In the bottom drawer, she found a box of hand-written notes. She searched through them, unbreathing.

Pembury Road: Please supply immediate written description of the sergeant.

How would you put the relationship between the two of them? Please also supply description of the
Greg had found a map. He wrenched it out, unfolded it across the desk and searched it, shaking. Olivia searched with him. Red dots across London. Red words across the top in pen. *No two in one area in three months. Only from the lowest classes (whores etc).* Each dot had a date marked beside it.

Another box. Official documents - birth certificates.

The top one was for Elliot Andrew Webster.

Olivia covered her mouth, clamping down on her gasp.

And then there came a noise - and Greg stiffened beside her.

It was a creak.

A vague hum of a voice. Questioning. Murmuring.

Olivia scrabbled for her gun on the desk. Before she could get hold of it, Greg had moved.

With a speed she couldn't fight, he grabbed her around the waist and swept her over to the cupboard.

"I've got the ring," he breathed, hauling her inside. She staggered back against the shelves. Pain spiked through her ribs, and she gasped. "Get TJ. Don't make a sound."

Before she could say another word, he shut the door.

Seconds later, shouts broke out in the corridor.

"Go get Kieran! Tell him someone's in his office!"

"Hold the fucking door, hold them in!"

She could hear Greg barricading the door - dragging furniture, heaving it into place. They were trapped.

"Outgoing call," his voice barked. "Amelia Vickery."

Olivia couldn't breathe. She couldn't move. Terror had paralysed her into place. She could only listen in panic as more steps came rushing this way, and more voices, and finally the call on Greg's wrist-set connected.

"Lestrade?" Vickery's voice crackled beyond the door. "I'm here. What's wrong?"

There came another voice out in the corridor, close at hand.

"Still in there?"

"Yep. We heard it moving furniture."

"Right. All of you get out the way."

There came a slam and a crash, and Olivia leapt in panic. She clung to the shelf behind her as she
heard Greg's barricade knocked apart in seconds. Voices bludgeoned their way into the room.

"Jesus!"

"It's him - "

"Kieran! That's - "

"Stay the fuck where you're standing," Greg barked, "or I'll kill the lot of you."

Silence rang - and then a low, delighted laugh. It was taken up at once by the others.

"Inspector Lestrade..." A man's voice, delighted. "Well... I've heard miracles never cease. Been trying to figure out for days how I could get to you. I wish I'd known you were coming to me."

"Kieran Matthews?" Greg checked.

Olivia's heart crushed itself apart. He wasn't afraid. He was spelling it out for Amelia to hear.

The other voice gave a huff. "Not my real name. Touched you remember this time, though."

"I remember plenty," Greg said. "Manager of the bar here, right? Where I was stupid enough to meet Sam Buckley. You heard every word, and decided to kill us as a double-act. You sent a killer to my flat. Before that, you told Excultus that Mycroft was investigating them again."

"Your friend's got a lot to answer for," Kieran said, coldly.


"Jesus Christ... spare me human hypocrisy." Kieran Matthews clucked his tongue. "Get the gun off him. Don't kill him."

Shots fired. Olivia jerked, curling away from the door in panic and covering her ears as the sounds of a fight broke out. She didn't know what was happening. She couldn't even tell how many of them there were - five, at least. She heard Greg crying out in pain. He wasn't shooting. She heard furniture smashed.

At last, the sounds of the scuffle were broken by a shout of, "Stop! All of you, stop!!"

Heavy breathing - panting. Footsteps.

Olivia realised tears were pouring between her fingers.

"He's out cold." There came a laugh of triumph. "Perfect. One of you go get my car unlocked."

"Wait - boss, the - "

"Ah. Yeah. Get it off him, and give it here."

They smashed his wrist-set. Olivia listened to them do it, her heart hammering and breaking in her throat. Commander Vickery would be on the way. She would be coming.


"But - d'you mean we're - "

"He'll have told someone," Kieran said. "He'll have left a trail. I'm surprised we've not got flashing
Lights outside already. It's over, guys. We're done here. Time to go where we belong. Get him in the car."

Olivia wept in utter silence, listening as Greg was carried out.

"Get my papers," she heard Kieran say. "Just put them in a bag. It doesn't matter. Don't leave anything for them to find."

They gathered up the office. After several minutes, Olivia heard footsteps come close to the cupboard. Her every muscle clenched in panic.

"Doesn't keep stuff in there," someone said. "Just the vacuum."

"Right..."

The footsteps moved away.

They left for good. Olivia listened to them head along the corridor, closing doors as they went. She could smell paint.

She forced herself to wait for long minutes of silence, crying without a sound behind the door. Greg hadn't done this for her to get caught, too. She didn't want to risk coming out until she was sure.

When she finally emerged from the cupboard, she found the office in disarray.

There was blood smeared across the desk and the floor. There was the sigil, sprayed in white across the wreckage. Everything was broken. Only a few scraps of paper and the silence remained. The pick was still jammed in the door.

Olivia shook, crying, and gazed around at the chaos.

She realised she could hear sirens.
Creature

My thoughts came back; where was I? Cold,  
And numb, and giddy: pulse by pulse  
Life re-assumed its lingering hold,  
And throb by throb, -- till grown a pang  
Which for a moment would convulse,  
My blood reflow'd, though thick and chill;  
My ear with uncouth noises rang,  
My heart began once more to thrill;

- Lord Byron  
'Mazeppa' (1819)

Darkness.  
Light.  

Stripes that rolled over Greg's closed eyes. The lurch of his own weight, heavy and loose. The air - it had an echo. It smelt of concrete and damp, and something like iron. It made him feel sick. Though he hadn't the strength to move, he seemed to be moving.

Too much of him hurt to identify any one injury.

He couldn't remember.

When they came to a stop, it took him a few moments to realise. A voice that wasn't his own said,  
"How?"

A closer voice replied.  
"I told him I had information about Holmes... the idiot came straight to us."

"Mm." The first voice was not impressed. Greg listened to it, hanging like dead weight in the air. "You didn't think of this five days ago? A pity. But everything is ready. Through there."

A door opened somewhere nearby. Out of it came a breeze of Greg's memory.

Door, he thought. Olivia.

They would find her. They were coming.

He stirred, getting ready to fight - but his muscles wouldn't work. They were too bruised, too heavy. He could taste blood in his mouth, and with the realisation came another rush of memory.  
Kieran Matthews is a vampire. I have to tell... must tell - commander - still listening.
He'd rung her so she'd hear. Get to Livs quicker.

Where was Livs?

He was being carried again - cold air - a cough that echoed all around.

As he convulsed, Greg realised the coughing was him.

"Quickly," said the voice. "He's waking up. At the end there."

Greg was lowered onto something freezing cold and hard. The floor, he realised. Concrete. Hands grabbed for him, and he struggled with a sudden flush of fear - but the hands didn't care. They pulled him up, pushed him back against something and made him sit - like a doll, he thought - propped against a wall, sagging forwards in the middle. He was just a doll. The hands hauled him back. They held him upright and still.

A noisy jangle made him wince.

Greg shied away from the sound, distressed. They - and who were they? Why did 'they' make him suddenly so afraid? - were holding him against something ridged and uncomfortable - something solid - vertical edges digging into his spine and his shoulders. He tried to stretch to get away from it. The noisy jangle tightened around him - wrapping him tight to the ridges, squeezing like snakes. Not right. Not right. Something not right. Greg tried to open his eyes, trying to see where the light was - he needed to see - but the lights were too bright. They shrank his pupils to pinpricks; he let out a noise of pain.

The chains locked into place - under his arms, around his shoulders, anchored around his waist. He tried to reach to pull at them, and found his wrists were held fast too. He was chained open, his arms wide, his chest bared.

Greg panted in the stale air, feeling his heart thud with panic.

Every breath hurt. Broken rib? he thought. Two broken ribs? He couldn't reach to feel. He pulled in fear at the chains, swallowing a mouthful of old blood and spit.

A voice far too close to him laughed.

"Holmes has taste, at least..." Female - mocking. "I would."

An unsettling ripple of laughter was shared between far too many voices.

"The one before was like this, too... big eyes and boyish. His type."

"Did you know him?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I knew him. Some things never change."

"Can we not... first? Look at him. What does it matter if he's leftovers?"

"You lay a hand on Holmes's human, and you'll find yourself missing a hand. High command are already angry he's damaged. Go have one of the others. That blonde you like. The one you don't wanna share."

"Fuck off. I don't like her. Share whatever you want - I don't care."

"Good. That's what we want to hear. Otherwise you'll end up like Holmes. Go tell the others we're
As Greg's senses began to sharpen, and more and more recent memories returned, he forced himself to focus on his breathing.

This was all part of the plan. Before he'd even left for Soho, he'd known this stage would come. He just had to breathe, and stay calm.

Keeping his eyes closed, he twisted his right wrist a fraction - curling his fingers carefully into his palm.

The pad of his ring finger brushed a metal band at its base.

A quiet rush of relief tempered the panic.

Greg breathed it in, rubbing the band and calming.

He just had to survive until they got here.

Deciding to risk another look at 'here', Greg carefully opened his eyes.

Warehouse space - cavernous, neglected. No windows. Underground. Industrial striplights were suspended from a geometric steel web of roof supports overhead; their white glare in the darkness hurt his eyes. Greg was chained in one corner of the enormous space. The only doors looked to be at the other end. There was nothing else here.

Shifting, swallowing, Greg realised he was secured to a radiator.

_Calm_, he told himself. _Calm. Calm._ He let it beat inside his chest, slowing his frantic heart. _Calm, calm, calm..._

There were six of them - ordinary people. Ordinary clothes. Two were walking away towards the doors, discussing something in mutters. Glancing over the other four, Greg realised with a jolt there was a face he recognised.

As Elliot Webster realised Greg was watching him, his face dropped into a scowl.

"What the fuck're you gaping at?" he grunted.

The others looked around.

Greg steadied himself, suddenly aware that he was surrounded by vampires. _Calm, calm._ He kept his eyes fixed on Elliot Webster, and thought of Emma.

"You know your mum set up a campaign to find you?" he said. Elliot's face scrunched, unnerved. "She thought you were kidnapped."

"Shut the fuck up!" the boy spat at him, raging. "Fucking human! The fuck d'you know who I am?"

"Don't talk to it!" the woman beside him hissed. "For God's sake. Just undo its coat and stop talking."

Elliot flushed with anger, but said nothing. He squared his shoulders, shuffled over and knelt
down, jaw set as he started roughly undoing Greg's buttons.

Greg gazed into his face.

Olivia had gotten every detail right. Every single detail.

Fighting revulsion, Greg kept his voice low.

"She had three kids," he murmured. "You know that?"

"Shut up, human," Elliot growled. "Stop talking."

"Three little girls." Greg watched his face, eyes hard. "You killed their mum. Her name was Emma, and you killed her. Why'd you choose her? She remind you too much of your mum?"

"I said shut the fuck up!"

"You started all this, didn't you?" Greg's eyes narrowed as he realised. "Matthews promised you power... then told you to lie low. Some basement. They were building their numbers quietly. But you wanted to be what he'd promised... you didn't want to wait."

Elliot's face convulsed. He slugged back a fist.

Greg braced, twisting at his chains.

Before the punch could land, the woman who'd snapped at Elliot lunged. She seized him, twisted his arm behind his back and hauled him away, ignoring his yells of pain as he struggled. Twisting a fist into his hair, she dragged his ear to her mouth and hissed through her teeth.

"I said don't talk to it. Didn't I? I said don't talk to the human."

She threw him away from her. Elliot staggered and hit the ground, cringing.

"Out!" she snarled. "Make yourself scarce. Learn your place." She snapped at one of the others. "Undo the rest. Now. Before they're here."

Greg gripped at his chains as another vampire stepped forwards. This one did not speak to him - did not look at him - unbuttoned his coat without a sound, then undid halfway down his shirt. Shit, shit. Greg realised he was panting, and tried to slow his heart again. They're on the way. Livs'll have got to TJ by now. It's fine.

The vampire loosened his collar, bearing Greg's neck to the air.

Greg shut his eyes tight.

Breathe. Just breathe. So long as we live, we'll deal with the rest.

He heard doors open far away across the space - a squeak of metal hinges and a clang.

"They're here," the woman said. "Back. All of you. Ten metres, no less."

Swallowing, Greg forced his eyes to open. He watched, panting out his fear, as the vampires near to him all backed away. He looked between them across the warehouse, to where more people were carrying something between them.

At first, he thought it was a roll of canvas - something like a bundled tent, six foot long and heavy
in the middle - and he wondered what the ever living fuck they were bringing.

Then he realised the bundle was moving.

It was straining, twisting - fighting the people that carried it.

Chains trailed behind them across the concrete - chains that were wrapped into the canvas.

Greg watched, paralysed into place, as the bundle was brought near and laid down. Something about its shape - something about its movements - began to make horrifying sense. Three of them pinned it to the ground, while the others took hold of the chains - long, black iron chains.

As they were secured to the radiator too, Greg began to realise what he was about to see.

He dug his fingers into his palms, pulling at his chains. His upper body was immobile, fixed into place. He couldn't curl shut. Oh, shit. Oh Christ. No, no, no.

The long chains were locked down.

"Move," the woman said, sharp. "Let me see."

She bent down beside Greg, testing them - her grip white-knuckled, heaving them against the pipes. Her face contorted with the effort.

At last, exhaling, she let them go.

"Fine," she said. "Back! Everybody!"


As the three vampires let go of the bundle, they moved away from it at speed. It kicked against the floor, writhing. With the chains now loose, limbs appeared within the canvas - ripping at it, struggling with it, pulling it away.

Greg gripped at his chains, his heart pounding itself to pieces, as the canvas finally tore apart.

A creature wrenched itself from within. Greg jerked in panic - but it flew away from him at once, rushing to the very end of its chains. They clanged against the radiator and pulled taut, shaking as the creature struggled. It shrieked at the other vampires, clawing at the iron collar around its throat, fighting to free itself to reach them.

They backed away quickly. Some laughed. Some did not.

Choking against its collar, the vampire finally collapsed to its knees. It shuddered on the ground, broken - shaking, filthy, wearing the same clothes that he'd worn five days ago. His skin was paler than human skin should ever be; his hair was dark with oil and dirt. His cheeks were hollow. His hands were claws.

As Mycroft raised his head, looking back along his chains, he followed them to a single point of origin.

His pupils were enormous.

They fixed on Greg unblinking, finding him there bound and open at the source of his chains.

Every muscle in Mycroft's body stiffened.
"Do we get high command?" a vampire said, as Greg's pulse screamed out of control. He couldn't breathe.

Mycroft wasn't moving.

"No," the woman muttered. "When it's done."

"Seriously? This won't take long."

"I said when it's done."

Greg twisted against his chains. He took hold of the iron links around his wrists, panting.

"Myke..." he tried. Laughter broke out as he swallowed. "M-Myke. It's me."

"'Myke'!"

"God, this is too fucking much..."

"Someone filming this?"

"M'on it."

"Send me a copy of that, will you?"

"Me too."

"Shut the fuck up, will you all? Ruining my footage..."

Greg had started to cry. He clung to his chains, shaking. It hurt to speak; his throat crushed shut in terror.

"Myke..." The creature that Mycroft had become wasn't moving - just staring at him, all pupils - watching him cry. Tears burned in Greg's eyes. "I-It's me, gorgeous. It's Greg."

Their laughter tore at his soul.

Mycroft began to uncurl from the floor.

Cheers broke out - whistles. The man filming on his phone shifted to get a better view. As Mycroft approached across the floor - crawling, predatory, his eyes locked on Greg and every movement slow - Greg pulled against his chains.

He tried to remember happy memories.

Home. Gentle words. The man he loved.

This was his last chance.

They wouldn't come. There was only fear. He couldn't look away from those eyes. He cried, gazing into them, as Mycroft crept closer and closer and the cheers escalated. He could see every muscle tensed in Mycroft's arms. He could see himself reflected in Mycroft's vast black pupils - frightened and crying, framed by the thinnest fuzz of blue-grey.

As Mycroft leant towards his neck, Greg screwed his eyes shut.

He braced for pain.
The tip of Mycroft's nose brushed his throat - ice-cold.

It followed his jaw, up to his ear - cheek, brushed against his own - Mycroft pushed closer, tighter.

He started to shake.

Arms tried to reach around Greg. They couldn't - blocked by the radiator. They couldn't wrap around him and hold him.

They clung to his shirt instead - fisting into the fabric, bunching.

"Greg - ..." the voice wept in his ear. It broke. "Greg -"

Greg's heart fell apart.

"*Myke,*" he gasped. Tears coursed down his face. "*M-Myke - f-fuck, Myke... Myke, m'here. It's me. It's me, gorgeous..."

Mycroft began to sob.

Greg heaved at his chains - panting, crying. He wanted to hold Mycroft. He wanted to wrap him up in his arms, make him safe him, hide him away from their laughter. He buried his face in Mycroft's hair and sobbed with him, teeth gritted, as Mycroft nuzzled at his cheek and wept.

"It's okay," Greg heard his mouth say, gasping it, promising it. "It's okay, gorgeous... I'm here. I'm right here. It's all okay."

Three words cracked from Mycroft's throat. "*I love you.*"


The tiny fragment of him that was still a police officer threw him a scrap of something - some tiny shred of hope. *Maybe like werewolves,* he thought. *Calm. Quiet words.* "Breathe with me, gorgeous - okay? Breathe with me. Gotta calm you down... gonna settle you - alright?"

Mycroft began to breathe with him at once - drinking each breath, heaving them out through his sobs. Greg forced himself to slow down and breathe. Steady in; steady out.

Mycroft copied him, shaking.

Greg could feel the guy still filming. He hoped the bastard watched it in his nightmares. Two broken people, crying on the floor, saying they loved each other.

"S'all okay now," he whispered into Mycroft's hair as he breathed. He closed his eyes and told himself they were home. The quiet dark; the bath run ready; work in the morning. "S'all okay, gorgeous... I've got you... can you hear me, sweetheart? Can you talk?"

Mycroft shook. He bit the words out.

"Y-Yes. Yes, I - ..." Another heaving breath; he tightened his fists in Greg's shirt. "I l-love you."

Greg swallowed. He kissed Mycroft's temple, gently.

"I love you, too. More than my life. More right now than ever." He had to break the fear. He had to abort the fight-or-flight response. Werewolves responded to humour. "Baby?"

Mycroft shivered, swallowing. "W-What?"
"Vickery says you didn't get your invoices in. End of the month. You're in big fucking trouble."

Mycroft choked. He began to sob again, gasping with relief in Greg's ear.

"O-Oh God, Greg..." As he wept, he burrowed against Greg's chest. "Oh God - God help us..."

"It's alright, love... it's gonna be fine. Keep breathing with me."

"H-How will it be - "

"'Cause I'm here," Greg said, fierce. The vampires were drifting away - bored with tears - tutting, disappointed, joking, mimicking Mycroft's sobs. "I'm right here, sweetheart. That's why it's fine. This second now, it's all okay - and I've got you. I've got you, gorgeous."

"They - they m-mean for me - for me to kill - "

"I know," Greg said. "I know they do. But you're not going to this second, are you? So it's fine. You just breathe. Let's get that adrenaline down... we'll deal with all the rest in a minute."

Mycroft shuddered, mirroring his breath. He nuzzled against Greg's cheek - a brush of tears.

Greg watched over his shoulder, breathing slow, as the last few vampires left.

"Hours yet," he heard one of them say. "Get comfy."

A chair was brought in - two people were put on guard. *Fuck you to hell, bastards. You'll need more than two guards when I get out of these fucking chains.*

Tilting his head to Mycroft's ear, Greg lowered his voice.

"Gorgeous?" he whispered.

Mycroft shivered against him, now breathing even and deep. "Mm?"

"They're on their way. Scotland Yard." Greg closed his eyes. "TJ - Livs - they've got everything they need to find us. We just have to hang on tight."

Mycroft's breath caught. "I - h-how - ?"

Greg gripped his hand around the ring. He nosed at Mycroft's cheek. "How long since you...?"

"D-Days." Mycroft's voice cracked. "I - I can't - ...

"Shhh, love... it's alright... can you manage another hour for me? If we keep you calm?"

Mycroft shuddered. "Y-Yes. Yes, I - ... i-if we - ...

"Kay. That's the plan then, alright? We're just gonna wait it out."

Greg drew his lover's scent slowly into his lungs, letting it fill him - soothe him. "Two hours from now," he murmured, "home. Get you all the food you need. Hot bath. Resignations e-mailed to Vickery. We get married on a beach in New Zealand next week, and you never leave my sight for a second. Never again. Not one."

Mycroft let out a sound of despair.

"I love you, too..." Greg's heart tightened. He felt tears rise up in his eyes, a flood of relief after panic. He let them brim between his eyelashes; he let them fall. "Since the first, sweetheart. The first fucking moment I laid eyes on you."

Mycroft's chest heaved against his own. Greg kissed his cheek.

"You're safe," he whispered. "Because I'm here."

Mycroft began to cry.

Greg murmured to him to breathe, slowly filled his lungs, and let the minutes pass.

_C'mon, Livs... don't let me down._

Scotland Yard had descended upon Gastrell's Bar in force. Though the sun was still two hours away, every inch of Pembury Road had been flooded with light. DI Douglas and CID were here, tearing the place apart. Dr Harper's forensics team had already committed every speck of dust and every drop of blood to hard-light. They were now combing the basement for every possible answer. At every window in the street, curtains were drawn back in open amazement as people stood and gaped at the scale of the police presence, their faces pale in the floodlights.

Olivia watched them from the back of the ambulance, shaking. She had an orange blanket hugged around her shoulders.

_You're all watching now, aren't you?_

_You all care now._

As a coated figure strode through the front door of the bar, issuing orders to three separate people, Olivia's heart tightened. She looked down at the ground. Her Scotland Yard shoes - blood on them, drying dark. Greg's blood.

He'd saved her life.

He'd saved her stupid life.

The officers were sent on their way with their orders, and Vickery marched this way. Her coat blew in the breeze behind her.

"Medical have seen to you?" she asked, as she reached Olivia.

Olivia shivered, pulling the blanket tighter around herself. "Yes. Yes, I'm - I'm fine."

"What happened?"

Olivia had told four people now. Numb, fingers shaking, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper.

DI Douglas had given it to her, along with a pen. She'd wanted to get it all down. Even as she wrote, she'd felt it pouring out through the holes smashed into her brain by shock. Her handwriting was almost ineligible - shaking nearly too hard to write. It didn't look like her own, but here it all
She told Vickery, showing her - everything she'd written - everything she remembered.

Vickery listened in utter silence, eyes flashing alternately across the notes and then Olivia's face - reading both.

She queried only one point in the ten minutes it took.

"You're certain it was Tierney? 'Get TJ'?

Olivia nodded, pale. She looked down at her notes. Written there in short succession, towards the bottom, were three things: wedding ring. Get TJ. Don't make a sound.

"He didn't say why Tierney in particular?" Vickery said.

Olivia shook her head. "No, I... I didn't have time to ask. He shut the door next second, and - ..."

Vickery nodded, her mouth flattening. "Then we need Tierney here at once. We can only hope he knows more about it."

She turned and snapped her fingers at a nearby sergeant.

"You," she said. "Here. I require you to take Miss Reid to an address in Newham. Return with Miss Reid and the werewolf she will then be escorting, take Miss Reid's daughters to my home - " She threw the startled sergeant a bunch of keys from her pocket. " - and do not leave them for any reason on this earth."

The sergeant nodded numbly, fumbling with the keys.

"Did Lestrade give any sign why the ring was of significance to him in that moment?" Vickery asked, her eyes back on Olivia.

Olivia had been pulling it apart in her mind ever since - and getting nowhere. Greg had been touching the ring all day. It was the only thing she could think of; his pale, nervous expression as he rubbed at it for comfort, forcing himself onwards for the sake of the man he loved. She'd never seen another person love someone like that. She hadn't thought that sort of bond even existed.

"No," she said. "No, I... I just - it seemed to make him - brave. Maybe he was - ..."

She hung her head, swallowing the words back.

"Miss Reid," Vickery said, sharp. "Your instincts are vital in this moment. Speak."

"I - I thought he was - telling me he'd be okay. Like it'd be alright somehow. But then 'get TJ', as if somehow - ..." Olivia exhaled, shivering. "I don't know. I'm really sorry. It was all over in a second."

Commander Vickery nodded. She clapped the sergeant on the arm.

"Take Miss Reid now," she said. "Delay for no reason. Time is of the essence. Excultus have them both, and if we do not find them soon, we will not find them."
Hereafter

And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,
    None knew so well as I;
For he who lives more lives than one
    More deaths than one must die.

    - Oscar Wilde
    *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898)

At first, every distant sound was Scotland Yard.

Greg's grasp of time had been blown to pieces by adrenaline. He didn't know how slowly or quickly the minutes were passing. With no daylight to see, he couldn't make a guess.

He told himself it didn't matter.

The current minute was all that existed - this moment right now - speaking to Mycroft softly; monitoring his breathing. Each time it crept to the front of his mind, Greg pushed the fear away.

*It's been a while,* it whispered to him in the gloom.

He told the fear that Olivia would have needed to hide before the coast was clear. He'd wanted her to hide. It was fine.

*Surely it's been more than an hour now,* the fear whispered, a little later. *You promised him an hour. He knows it's been longer. That's why he's shaking.*

Greg told the fear their perception of time was skewed. Panic had sped it up; calm was now slowing it down. It didn't matter that Mycroft was shaking - it was fine - it didn't matter that he could feel saliva seeping through his shirt. And that distant clang - the slam of shutters - that was Scotland Yard. They were here, and it was all about to end.

As half his head waged war between frightening himself and calming himself back down, the rest locked itself onto Mycroft.

Some automatic programming had kicked into life - some instinct whose source Greg couldn't place. He found himself talking quietly to Mycroft like they were just lying on the couch at home, telling him things - nothing and everything - quiet, normal things. He told Mycroft about Livs, and how she'd been amazing; told him about how the kids had taken to TJ and dressed the poor bastard up. He didn't dare mention the engagement ring. He wanted to talk about inconsequential crap like Kit Medlock's guns lying around with her dirty laundry, all her tournament photographs on the wall.

Mycroft listened, curled close to him, responding softly where he could.
Time passed - vague, unsettling strings of time. Greg tried not to notice the guard changing. He'd started tuning out the distant noises now. His heart no longer leapt at every echo.

*They'll be here,* he told himself - locking himself around that thought - anchoring himself in this second, now this second, now this second here. *They'll get to us in time. It's fine.*

Halfway through telling Mycroft about the arsehole who'd been his first DI, Greg felt his lover stiffen suddenly.

He faltered, mid-sentence. "... - Myke?"

Mycroft uncurled from him without a word.

"Sweetheart, what - ...?"

Slowly, not making a sound, Mycroft turned away. He crawled to the very utmost extent of his chains, shaking, and settled himself down upon the floor. Greg's heart pounded as he watched. Mycroft brought his knees to his chin, gathering his arms around them - making himself small, like a child.

There he sat, and shook, and stared into the darkness.

Greg swallowed, reeling in the sudden silence.

He told himself it was fine. Mycroft knew what he needed. Scotland Yard would be here any moment - until then, they just had to sit tight. Whatever Mycroft needed to get through this, it didn't matter.

They would be alright.

As they arrived on the scene with TJ, Olivia hoped he would bound from the car, race straight into Gastrell's and lead them all to something obvious. *Get TJ,* Greg had said. She'd gotten TJ. It was going to be okay.

The huge black wolf squeezed his way from the car, shook himself in the light rain that was falling, and peered up and down the street.

The baffled look he then shot Olivia was not a good start.

"The bar," she said - she pointed. "It's... called Gastrell's. Over there. Does it... mean anything to you?"

Uncertain, TJ followed her hand. No realisation dawned in his yellow eyes. He walked at her side to the door, and Olivia led him anxiously inside - showed him around, room-by-room - helped him down the ladder into the horrible basement, and watched him quietly poke round very room - sniffing here and there - pawing at dust tracks on the floor with a bewildered expression.

At last, he craned his worried gaze back over one shoulder.
His ear flopped with a whine.

Olivia's heart heaved.

"He just told me to get you," she said. "Don't you - ...?"

TJ shook his head, round-eyed.

"You don't have - any idea?" she said, her stomach squeezing. "I mean... why you? Why did he...?"

TJ made a frustrated sound. He thought about it for a moment, shifting - then rocked onto his back legs, lifted both paws, and tapped them alternately up and down.

"Typing?" Olivia said. "Computers - tech?"

TJ nodded.

"There's... not much here," she said, looking around the smashed-up office. "It seems like they did nearly everything by hand... paper notes. Hand-written. I - suppose it kept them away from digital searches..."

TJ whined, his ears flattening to his head.

Olivia's heart strained at the sight.

"I don't know!" she said "Okay? He just said 'get TJ' and threw me into a cupboard! I don't know what he meant. I'm not - ..." The words thickened in her mouth. "I'm not a bloody police officer. I'm just - ... Jesus, I'm just - ... and now..."

She covered her face, suddenly wanting to cry.

"Didn't he say anything to you?" she pleaded. "Did he leave you some clue, some message? He thought you knew something. He thought you'd know what to do. Please... please tell me you - ..."

TJ could only whine.

Olivia looked around the office in despair. Her heart now lurched on every beat. Greg had had a plan - a proper plan - she knew it. He'd sounded so sure, like everything was happening as it should be.

Now he was gone. Scotland Yard were searching the streets for him; Hackney was on lock-down.

Things were moving quickly. They were moving quickly nowhere.

"Was it his wrist-set?" Olivia said, desperately. "I mean - they smashed it, but - maybe some hardware wasn't completely - ... did he have something on there?"

She'd never seen a wolf shrug before - nor seen one look quite so sorry.

"If I get CID to give me it," she said, "can you...?"

TJ snorted, glancing down at his paws and his four stumpy legs.

"Can you - at least help me to...?"

He trotted over to her, butted her on the shoulder, and gave a huff.
"Okay," Olivia whispered. "Okay, if... if we go back to your flat, then - you've got your stuff there, right?"

"Nnnhhh," TJ managed, shaking his head. He gave three short yaps, trying to shape the sounds into words.

Olivia's brow crumpled. "Recknicker?"

"Recknicker," TJ repeated, with insistence, and a look that suggested this was all perfectly obvious and they were wasting time. "Recknicker. Arossayah."

Olivia covered her face. This would be funny, if Mycroft and Greg weren't probably being murdered somewhere.

"Recknicker," she whispered. "Recknicker... arossayah... arossa- oh...! At Scotland Yard!"

"Recknicker arossayah!"

"Technical at Scotland Yard! Christ - okay, we need to - ... will they even let you into Technical like that? God, I suppose they won't stop you... Jesus. Okay. Let's get back in the car."

It felt like at least another hour before Mycroft came back. In that time, he didn't move at all - just sat and stared. Greg tried to comfort himself by saying Mycroft was at peace, wherever he was - but the tension in Mycroft's shoulders looked anything but peaceful.

When he finally unwound from his sitting position, and crawled back to Greg, he was pale as death and shaking. He nuzzled into Greg's chest, desperate for comfort - trying to reach around him once more - clamping around a frustrated shudder as he found his arms impelled by the radiator.

"Easy, sweetheart," Greg whispered. "S'okay... you back with me now?"


"'kay..." Greg hesitated. "D'you - need me to do anything, love? Make this easier for you?"

*It's been hours,* his fear whispered. *You know it's been hours. If they're coming, then where are they? Why aren't they here?*

Mycroft reached up with trembling hands, trying to staunch his saliva on his filthy sleeve.

"Make it quieter," he whispered.

"Make - what quieter, gorgeous?"

Mycroft swallowed. "Your heart."

Greg's breath cut for a second.

He felt Mycroft stiffen against him.

"You're afraid - " Mycroft whispered - and Greg realised he'd been able to tell through the increase
in pulse rate. He immediately returned himself to steady breathing again, and closed his eyes, resting back against the radiator as much as he could. Calm, he thought. Calm. Make this easy.

"M'worried for you," he whispered. "That's all. Want you to be comfy. I'll - try and keep it down, love."

Mycroft said nothing, swallowing thickly.

Greg looked across the warehouse. A single guard, bored, on his phone. Some bastard in jeans, killing time on his phone. They were all so fucking normal. It made his skin grow cold.

"Listen," he whispered. "Sweetheart, this - this might be - ... but if they're counting on you to frenzy - to freak out and rip me apart - is there - ... I mean, if you just tried to - "

Mycroft stiffened at once.

"Don't," he bit out. "Don't."

"But - if we forced you to stop - "

"You couldn't. I couldn't. Too late. Too much. I - can't - "

"Myke, we could buy more time for - "

Mycroft suddenly wrenched himself away, breathing hard. He struggled backwards across the floor, hands flying to the iron collar at his throat, prying at it - clawing at it - swallowing and panting through his teeth as he hauled at it.

His teeth had started to lengthen.

Greg's heart kicked into double-time. "Christ -"

The guard had taken notice. He slid his phone away at once and ducked through the door to fetch someone. Greg dug his fingers into his chains. He was suddenly aware of his bare throat, his chest heaving as he tried to steady himself.


Mycroft writhed around the collar, twisting as he heaved the chain taut with a clang.

Christ. Fuck. Shit, shit, shit...

Where are you, Livs? Where the fuck are you?

"Myke - sweetheart - listen to me. Listen to my voice. I'm right here. I need you to breathe for me, gorgeous. I need you to breathe."

The doors at the end of the warehouse opened.

A sudden influx of people came pouring in. Oh, shit... shit, what now? Greg tried to get control of his breathing, torn between Mycroft now nearly fitting on the floor and the crowd of people who were headed this way.

He could see Kieran Matthews towards the front, looking smug. Greg had never wanted to make someone swallow their teeth so badly in his life.
Beside him walked another man, the more impressive of the two by far: tall and broad-shouldered, with a well-kept dark beard and a jaw as solid as the concrete floor. He dressed like a successful man of business - coat, scarf and gloves, all in charcoal and black. He looked more like a dignitary than a vampire. The eager crowd trailing behind him only added to the effect.

They clearly expected some sort of a show.

It did nothing to settle Greg's panic.

As they reached the furthest stretch of Mycroft's chains, they formed a semi-circle just a few feet short - gathering - getting comfortable.

Greg waited, steeling himself. Whatever this was, it would not be good. He tried not to hear Mycroft choking and spitting on the ground, forcing his breath to stay steady.

There was a long, tantalising silence.

"How the mighty have fallen," the bearded gentleman remarked - a low, cultured rumble of a voice which commanded attention to itself at once. It was a voice used to being listened to.

Laughter rippled through the watching crowd.

Greg felt the sound shiver over every inch of his skin.

He saw Mycroft raised his head, breathing hard, still attempting to pry his fingers into the collar. His eyes fixed on the gentlelady who now stood looking down at him.

Confusion wracked his frantic expression.

Mycroft attempted to speak, throat clenching around the name he wanted to say. In the end, he could only spit and cough.

"Mm," the gentleman murmured, with a tiny smile. "I thought I was dead, too."

Laughter - delighted grins.

"Same mistakes again, Mycroft? I seem to remember we've been through this before..." The gentleman ran his tongue across his teeth. "I suppose it's fitting enough. We rise again, and you come crawling from the shadows. The avenging angel spreads his great white wings... the Defender of the People, still proudly at his post."

A strange spike of recognition drove itself through Greg's heart. It took his brain several seconds to realise why.

When he did, he scrunched his eyes tight shut.

_Fuck. Christ. Fucking Christ. I'm meant to be a fucking detective._

"Myke - ..." His heart thudded in his chest. "Myke - you're - ?"

"'Myke'..." the bearded man soothed, with genuine enjoyment. As the crowd laughed with him, he lifted his chin and regarded Mycroft along his nose. "The last one called you 'Myke' as well, if I recall... how cyclical. This has worked out better than I thought."

_The last one?_
"I hope you appreciate the new twist," the gentleman added, glancing at the chains. "I'd hate for this to get repetitive... and we decided you'd earned the honour for yourself this time."

This time?

"Myke," Greg tried, weak. His heart was beating too hard for him to keep up. "Mycroft - what - "

"You may wish to stop drawing attention to yourself," the gentleman advised, his voice low. He was watching Mycroft claw at the ground and try to speak. Pleasure glittered in his arctic blue eyes. "He's too far gone now... and he arrived in an embarrassing state to begin with."

Greg quietly tested his chains, flexing his shoulders against them.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The crowd laughed. Shocked glances flew between them. He seemed to have asked a distasteful question.

"Enquired the cattle of the king," the gentleman hummed, to further adoring laughter.

Greg gritted his teeth.

"Christ, give me patience..." he sighed. "I get it, mate. You're a big bloody deal in your own universe. Impress me, then? Tell me the fuck who you are."

The gentleman smiled, huffing.

"My name is Hereafter," he murmured. "That is who the fuck I am."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

The man's eyes trailed to Mycroft, who was now clawing at his own shoulders, trying to hide inside his own skin.

Hereafter lowered himself, leant closer, and said - in a stage murmur -

"Methinks this one needed a bit more training, Mycroft. It's still got quite a mouth on it. Perhaps you'd be good enough to teach it a lesson now?"

Christ. 'This one'... Christ, Christ...

Mycroft keened against the ground, spitting and gasping.

"If someone had told me, then," Hereafter said, softly, "how I'd get to see you now... I don't think I'd have believed them. After all that we did for you - all that we gave to you - all tossed aside for a human."

"He's human!" Greg snarled, gripping at his chains. "You're human! The whole fucking lot of you are human! You're acting like I'm the only - "

"I was not referring to you," Hereafter snapped. He rose to his full height once more, his eyes sharp with disgust. They pierced Greg into place. "I'm referring to the last warped deviancy he had. The one who apparently justified mass murder of the very people who'd created him, sustained him, and built him up from nothing."

There was someone before.
Someone else - someone Mycroft had loved.

Excultus had killed them.

God almighty.

"Created him?" Greg shouted, as he shook. "You fucking mutilated him, you bastards! You're talking like he owes you something! How did you think he was gonna react after what you did to him? Of course he was going to fucking hunt you down!"

"'What we did to him'?' the vampire murmured, raising an eyebrow.

"You captured him, you tortured him! You tortured him for five fucking days! You turned him into a fucking monster before he escaped! Now you're punishing him for having a problem with that? Christ, you're more screwed up than I thought!"

Something awful flickered across Hereafter's expression.

The smile it caused was all too slow; his eyes were far too bright. He inclined his head to Mycroft, now sobbing at his feet - sobs that formed a shadow of the word 'no', over and over and over.

"Mycroft..." he soothed.

Mycroft howled, choking. "N-No -"

"Mycroft... am I sensing a few facts have been kept from your pretty 'pair bond'?"

Greg felt his stomach twist. He swallowed, watching Mycroft grapple his hands over his ears, fighting not to hear.

"Shall I tell him?" Hereafter enquired, eyes gleaming. "Or would you like the chance to take his throat out before I do? I'll give you the choice, old friend. For old time's sake."

Greg couldn't breathe. "For - for old time's - ..."

Hereafter smiled, tasting his teeth once more. He savoured the words.

"I'm afraid 'escaped after five days' is rather hard for me to accept," he said to Greg. "When I'm more inclined to say 'stabbed his own people in the heart, after four years of benefiting from their grace'."

Greg's heart clenched. "A-After -"

"Your Defender of the People was once proud to be homo excultus, human. Ours, long before he was yours."
The Honoured Man

Good and evil are so close as to be chained together in the soul.

- Robert Louis Stevenson

The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' (1886)

Hereafter smiled, enjoying the look on Greg's face.

"Have I distressed you?" he asked.

Greg said nothing, gripping at his chains. He couldn't breathe.

"We raised Mycroft Holmes from the dregs of humanity," Hereafter murmured, quite at ease. "He grew strong in our care - four years of it - then paid us for it with murder, and rewrote the story."

Greg barely heard his own voice. "R-Rewrote - ..."

"Not even moroi," the vampire said, "but raised to their heights. The man only turned his back on us when his arrogance inclined him to perversion."

Hereafter ran his tongue across his teeth, gazing down at Mycroft with restrained loathing.

"And now here he is," he remarked, "nine years later... answering for his atrocities. His actions ended a golden age of peace and comfort for us. Now his death will begin it anew."

He tilted his head, raising a sympathetic eyebrow to Greg.

"Unfortunate," he added, "that you turn out to be innocent... it seems Mycroft Holmes's talent for deceiving those who love him is as honed and readily-used as ever. Not the best circumstances in which to discover it, I imagine. My commiserations." He smiled, thinly. "I was rather angry, too."

Mycroft wretched against the concrete, convulsing. He'd clawed his fingers down to blood.

Greg couldn't speak.

He couldn't bear it.

"Let us bring this unfortunate decade to a close," Hereafter said. "I for one am glad to see it end."

He inclined his head to Kieran Matthews, who straightened up at once. "A blade?"

Kieran reached for his belt.

The knife he removed from its sheath was short, curved, and sharp. Greg jumped as it appeared. Kieran offered it to Hereafter, who shook his head.

"Take the honour," he murmured. "Speed this along. Cut the human - make it bleed. That should
buckle this tedious show of resistance."

"Christ - !" Greg clenched against his chains. "Jesus - no - "

Kieran proceeded into the semi-circle of space, turning the knife quietly in his hand. Greg struggled and arched to no avail. His chains heaved and grated against the pipes as he fought.

As he reached Greg, Kieran knelt down. He tugged aside the neck of Greg's shirt.

"No - " Greg couldn't move. He panted, trying to kick out. The blade came towards him. "No - no, fuck - don't - "

"Holmes killed my parents." Kieran's jaw set. "Both of them. Stop crying. This is only fair."

He took hold of Greg's hair, gripped it and twisted his head to the side. Greg flinched and shut his eyes.

Mycroft came out of nowhere.

Before Greg knew what was happening, Kieran had lurched sideways under the sudden strike. He heard Kieran scream out in pain as he hit the ground. The fight that ensued was vicious, almost too fast to see - snarling, teeth flashing, a whirl of shrieking and claws. Greg's heart pounded against his ribs in panic.

At last, with a final hiss of "MINE!", Mycroft hurled Kieran backwards.

Kieran staggered out of the circle. He panted in pain, now bleeding from a gaping wound to the cheek. Excultus parted to make room for him. He left the warehouse at speed, cowering, as blood ran between his fingers.

The rest of them watched him go, unnerved.

No-one was laughing anymore.

Mycroft bristled after him, every muscle wound tight. Blood glistened at his chin.

"Mine," he seethed. He bore his teeth as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, hissing through his saliva. He whined the word in his throat like an angry cat. "Mi-i-i-i-i-i-ine."

Nervous eyes glanced in the direction of their leader.

Hereafter seemed unphased - though Greg realised that the smile had gone.

"Leave him," Hereafter said. His voice echoed in the silence. "It - seems some of his former strength remains."

A look of displeasure crossed his face.

"All of his former weakness, too. He will break. Send for me when he does, and the obnoxious human is dead. Then we will finish this. None of you are to speak to him."

As he turned, people hurried to follow.

The crowd began to trail away.

Mycroft stayed at the edge of the circle, watching every single one of them leave. Apart from
footsteps, his ragged breaths were the only sounds in the room. He remained at the limit of his chains, braced and ready, until only the guard was left - uneasily retaking their place by the door, reaching once again for their phone.

The doors of the warehouse finally closed.

Greg let his eyes close with them.

Scotland Yard's Technical department were very much as Olivia had imagined them.

"Well, I mean... the thing is with this kind of hardware... it's very fragile?" the officer said - as if Olivia had taken a hammer to the wrist-set herself just to be unbearable. "It doesn't respond well to being smashed up like this? So it's hard for us to recover any data. I mean... you can see it's a mess." He shrugged. "I don't know if anything'll be retrievable."

"I don't care if it's difficult," Olivia said, flatly. "Just get what you can off it. Quickly. Two lives rely on this. We need everything you can find."

"Yeah, I mean... we're Scotland Yard Technical?" he said. "Lives... kinda rely on everything we do here. We'll take a look, obviously, it's just... maybe don't get your hopes up?"

If he finished one more sentence as a question, Olivia was going to make him eat the shattered wrist-set - and see what he could recover then.

"Fine," she said. "I get your point. It's outside your skills. That's fine. Luckily, I've got an outside specialist here already. He'll need access to your studio."

"Uhhh, I never said it was 'outside my skills'..." the officer said, and waggled a set of scare quotes at her. "And - sorry - but if you want an outside specialist actually using our equipment, we need an application first? We can't just have anyone in here? We've actually got a lot of expensive kit that could be - "

TJ stepped into the room.

The Technical Officer suddenly found that the application process for outside specialists could be dramatically shortened, in the light of emergency circumstances. He also found that he was needed urgently in another room.

TJ padded over, stood up on his hind-legs and placed his paws on the bench, peering down at the remnants of Greg's smashed wrist-set.

He sucked his teeth.

"Christ, don't you start." Olivia looked at him fiercely, feeling her heart thump with repressed hope. "What do we do? How do we get something off it?"

She tried not to think that this was only a chance - a desperate grasp into possibly nothing. She didn't know what else to do.

TJ leant down to the debris. He began nosing pieces aside - bits of plastic - bits of screen.
"Not these?" Olivia said.

"Rrrrooo," he said. "Norrow."

Olivia swept them out of the way, clearing up some of the debris. TJ yapped, grateful, and watched as she spread out the remaining components for him to examine. Before she could separate them all, he got excited and started nudging his nose at a green square of plastic threaded with wires and connections. He poked it until it flipped, then peered at the underside, his tail wagging.

"This bit?" Olivia said. She picked it up between her fingers, showing him. TJ yapped. "Right. What do we do with this bit?"

TJ let out an incomprehensible stream of whines and barks.

"Jesus..." Olivia turned, snapping her fingers at another nearby officer. He looked up at her from his workstation, startled. "Hey! Help me out here? My friend and I need a hand. I'll translate, and you just do whatever the hell he says. Okay?"

The officer staggered over, not daring to say no.

Olivia turned to TJ; she steeled herself.

"Right, fuzzball. Go slow, as quickly as you can."

For some time Mycroft paced. His chains grated across the ground as he moved. He stalked slowly in an arc along the reaches of his territory - back and forth, over and over, watching the door with every step. It seemed like several restless hours before he stopped.

When he did, it came suddenly - mid-step - a sudden freezing. He folded himself onto the concrete without uttering a sound, only the rustle of his chains. He pulled his knees to his chest and held them there.

Greg watched his eyes go big.

A minute passed - an hour, then maybe another hour - twisted, meaningless chunks of time like scrap metal, broken bits of immeasurable duration that added up to nothing.

They should have found us by now.

Broken, and alone, Greg couldn't hold back the thoughts.

Amelia wouldn't have delayed.

She knew Excultus wanted both of them. She knew why. There wasn't any reason to delay. Something had gone wrong - they hadn't found his message. They hadn't checked the ring. They're going to find me dead here. Me and him.

Five days? Vickery had queried - sitting beside TJ's bed, watching Greg cry. He could still hear her voice.

She'd known. She'd known the truth.
It was why she'd treated Mycroft so harshly, when he tried to plead out of investigating the sigil.

She knew he wasn't just a broken hero. He wasn't a noble veteran of a long and painful war, who'd fought and suffered and kept right on fighting.

He was Excultus. Theirs, long before he was Greg's.

His promise to return and fight them was... amends? Reparation?

Four fucking years.

Why did neither of them tell me?

Greg let Mycroft sit in silence and stare, until the possibility that if disturbed he would frenzy and kill Greg no longer seemed all that awful.

"Mycroft?" he said at last. His throat cracked around the sound, dry.

He watched the huge eyes blink.

The solid black intensity of the pupils shrank at once. Mycroft shifted, letting out a breath. His eyes seemed to find themselves suddenly somewhere else, and he glanced around the warehouse in distraction, coming at last across his own trailing chains. He followed them to their source at the radiator.

There he found Greg, gazing at him - defiant, chained open, and exhausted with tears.

Greg knew exactly how broken he must look in this moment. He didn't care. He watched fear flicker across Mycroft's face - watched him draw a breath, and hold it in.

Greg's voice echoed in the gloom.

"Is it true?" he asked

Mycroft did not move or speak for nearly a minute.

Then, as his eyes filled with tears, he gave a single nod.

Greg's hands closed around his chains. It made it real. It hurt even more than he'd thought. "How the fuck could you?"

Mycroft stared down at the manacles about his wrists. His fingers were dirty and bloody; they shook as he spoke.

"You don't understand," he said. "You - you don't know the full - "

Greg closed his eyes. "Evolutionary half-step."

"Greg -"

"Four fucking years?"

"Greg - Greg, the choices I made were - "

"You lied to me!" Greg shouted. "You fucking lied to me! Again!"

He twisted at his chains, knuckles white, throat crushing almost too tight to speak.
"Over, and over, and over, you've lied to me. What the hell else have you kept? How much more can there be?"

Mycroft buried his face in his hands. "You think there could be more than that?"

Greg almost lost his mind.

"Yeah?" he raged, feeling tears erupt. "Then tell me about your other fucking pair-bond!"

"Greg! Greg - please - "

"Are you fucking for real? After all this time? How often have you told me something, and I've said, 'it's fine, I understand' - how many times have I shown you that I will understand - and you've sat there in silence, knowing there's more, knowing I don't have a single clue about who the fuck you actually are - "

"Greg - Greg, for God's sake, please don't - "

"- and you've chosen not to say a word! Were you ever going to tell me you were part of fucking Excultus?"

Mycroft wept, sobbing into his hands without a word.

"Four years?" Greg raged, wrenching at his chains. They didn't move. They didn't even let him shake in his grief. His tears burned in his eyes, hot and exhausted. "Kept you busy, did it?"

"I did what I HAD to, Greg!"

"Don't you dare." Greg's throat seized shut; he ripped it open with a gasp. "Don't you dare try to say you're like Olivia. Picking locks. Knowing a few dodgy bastards. You could have told me at any point that you were part of them. You didn't. You sold me 'five days', and you let me hold onto it. Fuck you. Fuck you off the edge of the planet. We were meant to be a team! You lied from the fucking start!"

"Greg , I never - I never meant to - "

Realisation crashed over Greg in a sudden wave. His blood seemed to evaporate instantly.

"Now I get to die here," he gasped. Panic ripped through his chest. "Fuck. For you. I get to die chained to a radiator for you and you never even told me the truth. Holy shit."

In response, Mycroft could only cry.

Greg found himself hating the softness of his sobs - the bitter, broken smallness of them. He didn't want to hear Mycroft cry. He didn't want to listen to it, hearing in their misery the man he loved - the man he'd wanted to spend his life with, crying in distress - a man he now discovered that he'd barely even known.

"Why did Vickery not tell me?" he demanded, biting out the words.

Mycroft pressed his dirty sleeve to his face, trying to staunch his tears.

"I - told her I'd made you aware," he managed. "I t-told her that you knew. That you - u-understood - "

Mycroft wept, curling into himself - not the vampiric fit of frenzy, but fragile human distress,
raking his fingers through his hair.

"... th-that you knew w-why - and what I endured - w-what I did to m-make it right..."

Greg wanted to wipe his own tears. He wanted to hide his face, and take a moment to breathe. Immobile against the radiator, he couldn't. He closed his eyes instead and swallowed, and told himself this wasn't happening here. They were somewhere else.

The office - the yucca plant, the incident board - facing each other across DCI Stratmann's desk, and it was two weeks ago, and this wasn't happening, and it would somehow all be alright.

His chest rose and fell beneath his chains.

"How did that even happen?" He tried to temper the anger in his voice. "How did you - ... you - were meant to be fighting them."

Mycroft shivered with his tears.

"I didn't lie about that..." He pushed his sleeve across his eyes. "I - l-lied about the duration - but I was captured. B-Brixton. My team left me. The cell who'd caught me kept me caged - five days - I s-survived those five days. Some didn't. I watched them not survive. The cell then t-told me to choose. Death - or - ..."

Mycroft buried his face in his hands, shaking.

"I was afraid," he whimpered. "I was - ... I - I didn't want to die in that place."

For a second, Greg was there again - cages - candles - a pitch black basement in Brixton.

"So I took their offer," Mycroft whispered. "I - w-wished at once that I - ... the pain. You can't understand. You won't ever understand. And for three months, I could barely - ... w-weaker than a child ... vomiting all hours. My muscles ripping apart under my s-skin... you don't understand. People feeding me. Washing me. B-By the time it ended, I - I was just glad to - to breathe without pain. Not to be twisting in every nerve, warping, just - burning..."

Greg said nothing; his breath came short.

Mycroft took several minutes to cry.

When he spoke again, wrapping his arms around himself with a sluggish clink of his chains, his voice came out as a whimper.

"I was moved to a new cell. They - l-looked after me. Told me Scotland Yard hadn't shown any sign of trying to find me. I'd thought they would. Every day that I suffered, I th-thought - Amelia - sh-she would find me, and... and yet - ..."

Greg's heart clenched.

He said nothing, swallowing back his fear. *She'll find us. She'll be here.*

"To be this way is - s-so - isolating, Greg. They made sure I knew it. How impossible it would be to lead a normal life outside of their safety. Outside of their support. Their resources. They made sure I grew to believe that this was no bad thing, and that I was valued by them. R-Recognised."

Mycroft pulled his arms tighter around himself, shaking. His chains stirred, wrapping around him too.
"My cell realised I was - s-strong. Fast. They tested my abilities and f-found I - I suited - ... and we
were fed often, and I was... strong. Not just broken - not mutilated, Greg, I was - exalted." Mycroft
gasped the word, shuddering. "I was better. I'd been blessed. I could scale buildings. I could bend
iron. They told me about things that had been done to us by humans. People brutalized or killed
upon discovery. Women who'd died in childbirth for fear of being discovered through medical
treatment - fear of being registered - being restricted in every way. They told me they were my
people and that we were mistreated."

Greg couldn't stay silent. "You knew what they'd done to you." He looked Mycroft in the eye, his
every muscle tensed. "Five days in a cage. Your people."

Mycroft's throat muscles worked.

"T-Testing me. They said. To indicate if I would survive the - ... n-not all do."

Greg bit his tongue so hard it hurt.

"'After five days, I escaped'," he quoted. "Into a better form of being, was it? The 'honoured man'?"
Mycroft shuddered.

"You don't understand the psychology of these groups," he whispered. "The - pervasiveness of it.
The support they give. The emotional investment they foster in their members."

"'Members'," Greg breathed. "Like you were a bloody book club. Did you kill people, Mycroft?"

Mycroft said absolutely nothing.

"Did you torture people?"

"No," Mycroft gasped. "No. Never. When I led the cell, it never engaged in - "

When I led the cell. Greg swallowed back rising nausea.

"And how many people did you chain to radiators to get eaten alive?" he asked.

"Greg..." Mycroft paled, panting. "Greg, I - ..."

"When I led the cell'. So you got yourself promoted, did you? Congratulations."

Mycroft shivered, fresh tears falling. "I - I tried to - ... I thought I could make changes."

"Ohh," Greg said. "Right. You were challenging the system from within, were you? Nice Excultus
when you were done? Bake sales. Leaflet campaigns to raise awareness. Well, thank fucking
Christ! For a second there, Myke, I was starting to worry you were a vicious cunt who led a terror
cell for four years."

Mycroft's expression broke with misery. "Greg - "

"Stop saying my fucking name!" Greg shouted, face contorting. "I can't bear it!"

Mycroft withered into silence, shaking. He put his hands back over his face and wept.

Greg took a minute to pull his head back together. He shut his eyes, not wanting to see it - not
wanting to see any of it.
"What d'you mean, 'changes'?"] he bit out at last.

Mycroft quivered, swallowing before he could speak. "T-To our relations with humans."

"A maximum of one brutal murder a week, huh?"

"No murder," Mycroft gasped, his voice breaking. "No preying on - ... we can live in ecological symbiosis. We're an apex predator. We exist in small numbers. It means that in a mutual arrangement with a living donor, the need for violence is no longer - "

"Suddenly 'we'," Greg breathed, his eyes hard. "Suddenly 'our'. Suddenly you can say the word 'vampire'."

Mycroft paled into silence, weak with tears.

"What changed?" Greg asked. "Four years - you must've gotten pretty cosy. Why did you leave?"

Mycroft took a moment to find the words.

"I'd always - questioned. From the beginning. Turned my eyes from extreme practice. Like most, I'd heard rumours of - pair-bonding... and I'd always heard the rumours dismissed as either baseless or vulgar."

Vulgar. Greg reeled, curling his hands for comfort around his chains.

"When I came to lead the cell, I... f-found that I was good at it. I grew our numbers and our security. My cell went from being a minor group to one of the larger cells. We were considered the best place for the newly-transformed to settle and adjust. I was - proud of that. To be responsible for - for easing others through what I'd suffered. Making them strong."

He looked down at his manacled wrists, his expression numbing.

"With a large cell, issues of feeding were - ... I realised that the larger we became, the more we risked the notice of the human authorities."

"You mean Scotland Yard?" Greg added, sharp. "That place you work, Mycroft?"

Mycroft took a moment to steady himself. "Y-Yes."

Greg bit his cheek, annoyed. "Go on."

Mycroft did so, nervous.

"And s-so I arranged - ... s-sex workers. Willing human supporters. I banned indiscriminate hunting, and I set up a system instead. I - had a bloody spreadsheet. Every vampire matched with one regular human. I assumed it would be more efficient, and it was. Though very soon, we encountered... complications."

"Pair-bonds," Greg muttered.

"Y-Yes." Mycroft breathed deeply. "At first, I couldn't believe it... but the evidence was overwhelming. One-by-one, I watched the feeding pairs become intimate, loving bonds. My cell were all suddenly at the height of their powers. Happy. Healthy. Their humans were not suffering for it... if anything, they seemed just as content. Even more so than their carriers. Some pairs took a number of weeks to form, while others were - almost instantaneous."
Mycroft flushed, gazing at Greg.

"My cell had always held leniency towards humans," he said, anxiously. "A - reluctance to - ... and now, we were..."

He breathed in again, slowly.

"Then, one day, we - took possession of a group of police officers. An Armed Response squad. An attempted raid. S-Some of the officers recognised me. One in particular was - ... I'd known him previously when I was at Scotland Yard..."

As Greg realised what story was now being told, he closed his eyes.

" - and it was h-hard to order that he be - ... instead I told my cell that we would keep him, and question him for information. In truth, I... I'd always rather - ...

"You wanted the poor bastard," Greg muttered. "So you had him."

Mycroft's voice sharpened at once. "It was not like that."

"You captured someone," Greg bit out, "killed the rest of his squad - probably within earshot - then you took him off somewhere quiet for 'questioning' - "

"It was not like that!"

"Is that what you told yourself, after?"

There was a long, awful pause.

At last, in a voice of emptiness, Mycroft said,

"Yes."

"And you kept him?" Greg shuddered. "Kept him like a bloody dog."

Mycroft's voice wracked with misery. "I was - arrogant. Believed I was e-everything they'd told me I - ... please - please, Greg, whatever you think of me - know that I've thought the same thing a thousand times since - "

"What happened to him?" Greg bit out.

Mycroft hung his head.

"By the third time I'd - ... he... wished to sleep in my room with me. Afterwards." Mycroft pushed his fingers into his hair. "I let him. I told myself I was keeping him safe. The weeks went by, and my cell were - ... he stayed close to me. He was safe. I c-cared for him very much."

Tears rose up once more.

"None of my cell would have laid a finger on him," Mycroft whispered. "I was happy. Strong, and - and he was happy, and we were - "

"Christ almighty..."

"It's true!"
"Yeah? Happy to be a prisoner, was he?"

"I tried to make him go!" Mycroft cried. "For God's sake, I tried! I realised high command had
taken notice, and I - I knew they wouldn't - ... oh, God - ..."

He covered his face, shaking.

"I took him to a train. I tried to make him get on it, but he wouldn't. He cried. He wanted to stay
with me. He - s-said, 'no matter what'..."

Greg gripped his chains in silence.

"And I realised it was true," Mycroft gasped. "All of it - all of what I'd wanted to believe for
years... all true. Symbiosis. Pair-bonds. Not a predator. Not prey. I realised - ... God help me, not a
master race. Not some glorious surmounting of science over God."

He looked down at his bloodied hands, and the manacles around his wrists.

"Just a human," he whispered. "Reliant on other humans. Just as we always have been. Just as we
always will be."

Greg turned his eyes into the darkness above the strip-lights.

"Then High Command found out?" he said.

Mycroft shuddered.

them in full what I'd discovered."

"And?" Greg said.

Mycroft closed his eyes.

"I found him," he whispered. "The next day. He - ... I-left in my room. On our bed." His throat
muscles worked. "Most of my cell a-also lost - ..."

Greg felt cold prickle across the back of his neck.

"Command told me to consider my position," Mycroft said, numb. "To - meditate on my choices.
I'd embarrassed them. Conducted myself indecently. And so I... contacted Amelia."

Greg's heart heaved.

"Scotland Yard," Mycroft whispered. "At great risk. She'd believed I'd been dead for four years... I
told her I could break it apart. All of it. Rip the heart out from the inside, and kill it. This - this
organisation that had - poisoned me - broken me apart - mutilated me and then built me up, and
told me I was a pinnacle of creation. I told Amelia they were everything we'd known they were,
and worse. She didn't trust me."

Greg bit his cheek. "Good on Vickery."

Mycroft took the wound with a shudder.

"I told her I would earn her trust," he said. "And I did, Greg. I destroyed it. I tore the soul from
Excultus. A single night. I told Amelia in advance what I would do, then I worked my way through
high command room-by-room, executing as many of them as I could. They had no warning. I cut through them like wheat. In the latter stages, Armed Response arrived. Amelia. To help."

Mycroft drew his arms around his knees, resting his head upon them.

"A number of months of counselling," he said. "A great deal of soul-searching. Acknowledging what I’d done, in their name. What I’d... justified to myself as some kind of... specialist philanthropy. A champion of the oppressed."

"A defender of the people," Greg murmured.

Mycroft shut his eyes.

"The people are not dominant over humans," he said. "We are by far the subordinate species." He took a long breath. "We need humans more than they have ever needed us. PT-309 might cause physiological changes in a donor... b-but the urges that arise in the vampire can be just as binding. Far more so. The feelings of care. The - n-need to protect - "

He began to cry once more.

"I only ever wanted you to be safe," he wept, whimpering into his hands. "Safe from me. From my poison. From what I did. I've spent nine years trying to make amends - to be normal again, to - ... and now they are here." He cried with fright, gasping. "And they have you, and they want me to - "

Greg's heart cracked.

He couldn't do this.

He shifted, twisted his foot around one of Mycroft's wrist chains, and pulled.

"Come here," he bit out.

Mycroft jerked with the chain, then scrabbled backwards at once. "No - n-no," he gasped, "no, I'll - I'll hurt - ... n-no, I need to - "

"Come the fuck here. You're not going to hurt me."

"This calm won't last, Greg - I can't suppress the - ... a-and the stretches of calm are getting shorter and shorter and shorter and I can't - "

Greg's heart broke. "Then come the fuck here while you can. Come here like it's the last chance we'll get."

Crying, Mycroft crawled to him.

He nestled against Greg's chest and he shook - cold as ice, broken open with tiredness and tears.

As Mycroft wept against his bare skin, Greg's heart beat itself to pieces. He tilted his head, nuzzling into Mycroft's hair.

"Should've told me," he muttered. The sobs were tearing him open. "Would've got my head round it. In time."

"I'm s-sorry - I'm sorry, I'm sorry - I just - the more I loved you, the h-harder it got to shatter what you thought of - "
"I know. I know, love." Greg breathed in, shuddering. "I know you only - ... Christ, just - ... look, if we get out of here? I'll resume being furious with you, you deceptive bastard. I just - oh, shit..." He screwed his eyes shut. "S-Shit. They should've been here by now. Livs should've been here."

He felt his heart start to bang against his ribs.

"And now I've said it. Christ. Christ, Myke, I - I don't know if we're going to get out of this..."

"I-I'm sorry - I'm sorry - s-so sorry - "


Mycroft sobbed.


"G-Greg - "

"I'm sorry, sweetheart..." Greg's face contorted with pain. "I'm s-sorry about - about your - ... I'm sorry they did that. I'm sorry you lost him. I'm sorry for all your cell."

"H-He didn't deserve - ... y-you don't deserve - "

"Stop. Stop, sweetheart..." Greg kept his eyes shut, trying to breathe. Oh fuck, I want to hold you. One last time. When did I last hold you? When did I last have you in my arms? Why can't I fucking remember? "Stop," he whispered. "Forget about it. It doesn't matter now."

None of it matters now.

"I love you," Mycroft whispered. He wracked with it, weeping. "I love you. I love you."

Even here - even now - chained in darkness, realising more and more that this place would be the last he ever saw - those words were like feeling his heart take a breath.

"I love you, too," Greg whispered. "I spent five days in hell without you... you know that? I couldn't cope."

"I tried to - to speak to you," Mycroft managed, swallowing. "To tell you - to s-show you, so you could find me..."

God almighty... the hours Greg had spent, begging the silence to answer.

All along, it had been begging him back.

"Gorgeous, do you... d'you know where we are?" he asked.

Mycroft shuddered. "Not - precisely."

He pushed his head against Greg's shoulder - a brush of his nose, his eyelashes - and nuzzled into Greg's neck. He seemed to take a long breath.

"I - believe I heard one of them mention Soho."

Greg shut his eyes. Christ, all along. As he'd walked those streets, Mycroft had been close by after all.
"Have you seen Kit here?" he asked.

"M-Medlock? No, I... but then, I haven't seen many - ... why Medlock?"

"She vanished when you did. Traced her wrist-set to Soho. Walked the streets for hours, but..."

Mycroft's breath caught. "You were here."

Greg managed a small smile.

"Thought I was fooling myself," he murmured. "Wishful thinking. Imagining I - I could feel you somewhere."

"Greg..." Mycroft shuddered. "Greg, I - ... i-if I - ... if we don't - "

Greg wanted to reassure him - to keep up that stream of promises. *It's okay, gorgeous. Vickery's on the way. She'll find us. I left them everything. They know exactly where we are. I don't know why there's a delay, but...*

Mycroft might not be calm much longer.

They'd spent three weeks never quite saying everything.

"If I'd had the chance," Greg said, "it'd... be you. You know that? For good. No matter what you did."

He swallowed.

"For better, for worse. Make it work. Make the effort. Always make you number one. It - would've been you. All my life."

Mycroft began to cry. "We - we sh-should have - ...

"We did," Greg whispered. He smiled, letting the tears rise. "We *did*, sweetheart. What would drinking from me have caused that we didn't end up feeling anyway?"

"Greg..." Mycroft looked up into his eyes - tear-tracks blurring the dirt upon his face, exhausted, frightened. He laid his trembling hands around Greg's face. "G-Greg."

As Mycroft kissed him, Greg felt the whole world go quiet.

*Deeper than a romance.*

*Closer than a marriage.*

He imagined they were home - home on the couch, surrounded by work - Mycroft on his lap. Kissing in the gentle glow of the aquarium.

It didn't matter where his soul ended up.

The best part of it would always be right there - Mycroft's flat, feeling things he'd waited his whole life to feel. He would stay in those moments forever, safely stored in the vaults of time. Nothing would ever change them. Nothing would ruin them.

He wanted to keep hoping. He wanted it with all his heart. He wanted to comfort himself not just with memories, but with thoughts of times to come - the kisses they'd be sharing years from now -
the relief that would be here any moment - the feeling that would come when they walked back through Mycroft's door.

But it didn't bring him comfort.

It seemed too faint a hope.

Greg gripped his chains, closed his eyes, and kissed Mycroft back like it was the first time - not the last time. They kissed as if nothing in the world was wrong. Mycroft shifted to sit astride him, nestling closer to him, and his shaking fingers carded through Greg's hair.

Greg realised they were breathing in unison.

As they kissed, his pulse began to settle - like everything was okay - like none of it mattered. For a few moments, it was all alright. The soft sound of kisses brushed back the silence all around them.

He didn't care what Mycroft had done.

If anything was going to die in this prison, it wouldn't be their love.
Unable to count hours, Greg began to count by guards.

Mycroft's calm lasted a single change. Like before, the stiffening came suddenly. One moment he was lying against Greg's chest, listening to him murmur and drawing some small shape over his heart; the next, he tensed in a single fluid shiver. He drew back without a breath, and retreated in utter silence to the extent of his chain.

There he sat, frozen in place for another two guards - not moving, not speaking; not making a sound.

Alone again, Greg watched him in silence. He tried not to be afraid.

When he woke up again, Mycroft started pacing at once. His chain dragged back and forth across the ground as he moved. Greg realised he was attempting to burn up energy. Their prisoner at Scotland Yard had smashed furniture and cracked the walls. There was nothing here for Mycroft to smash.

Another change of guard, and Mycroft started fighting with his chains - trying his utmost to crack the collar from his neck, hissing.

Greg didn't dare say his name. He didn't dare move. He could only watch, panicking in soundless fear, as Mycroft exhausted himself with the fight.

The day was passing now. Something in Greg's bones told him the night was closing in, and that a change would soon be due - a falling in the light.

If he was right, he'd been awake for nearly thirty-six hours.

His eyes ached with it - with the waiting - staring into nothing, knowing something had gone wrong, helpless to change it. Livs should have been here hours ago now. Vickery should have been here. TJ. They all should have been here by now.

In the end, his soul heavy and numb with tiredness, Greg rested his head against the radiator for a moment.

When he next opened his eyes, Mycroft had moved. He was no longer pacing, nor fighting his chains. He was sitting again, stock-still and hunched - and quite close by.

He was staring at Greg - watching him as he slept.
Greg drew a deep, immediate breath.

"Myke..." He pushed back against the radiator, shaking. *Fucking hell, that stare. How long has he been...? "Myke - can you - can you hear me?"

Mycroft didn't move. He didn't respond.

He simply stared.

Greg glanced past him at the guard.

A different person. He didn't know how many changes he'd missed.

*It doesn't matter,* whispered the back of his brain.

*They're not coming. They think you're dead already.*

*You might as well be.*

Not long from now - in hours, or minutes - Mycroft was going to kill him. He was going to forget entirely who Greg was, and what they had, and why he mattered. He was going to do what all starving predators did, and take the prey that was readily available.

Greg only hoped it was quick.

If Mycroft just crawled to him, like he had before - crawled close, as if he was settling back into calm, as if he just wanted to cuddle against Greg a while and breathe together for comfort - then quickly - bite - a rush of chemicals. Like slipping off to sleep.

Greg wished they'd unchain him.

Let him hold Mycroft while it happened. Stroke his hair.

Tell him it was all alright.

Tell him it wasn't his fault.

He could feel Mycroft still staring. He couldn't bring himself to look into his eyes. He didn't want the animal in there to know he was afraid. He didn't want to draw it closer, or attract it with his movements. In the very back of his mind, he wondered if this meant he still had hope - some scrap of it. *Just a little longer.*

He didn't think he did.

But he didn't want to speed this along.

He could feel the black pupils spearing into him, fixed on him - waiting - degenerating. The man who loved Greg was slipping away. The predator who needed him to die so it could live was drawing forwards in his place.

*This is going to end soon,* Greg thought. He felt it beating through him as hard as his pulse. They'd reached the final hours now.

One way or another, it was all going to end.
"Have we had any progress?" Vickery's voice ached with tiredness as it came through the speaker.

Olivia responded to her wrist over the noise of the busy lab.

"We've pulled data from several components." Scotland Yard's entire technical department were hard at work, analysing and data-crunching at speed all around her. "Just scrubbing it now. TJ's trying to crack our best chance - it's the main hard-drive of the wrist-set, but it's damaged and we've got comms issues - it's slow-going. I've got everyone else working on data from the other components. There's nothing relevant in Greg's cloud storage. Oh, and I've spoken to the jeweller. It was a bespoke order, but they say it's an ordinary engagement ring. Solid platinum, and that's it. Have we had any updates?"

"Not of consequence," Vickery admitted, weary. "Forensics have just informed me that Gastrell's Bar contains a lot of vampire DNA."

Olivia's eyes rolled. "Jesus..."

"My reaction entirely. DI Douglas has been able to make very little of the few documents left behind by the cell. A frankenstein's monster of CCTV from Pembury Road hasn't given us any sign of a car. We're now trying to hash together CCTV from nearby streets, but it's taking too long and we have no idea what the vehicle we're supposed to be tracking looks like. Traffic are tracing every number plate we send them. They've so far done several hundred. Kieran Matthews' identity papers all transpire to be forged, and we've had no reports overnight of people seen carrying or moving anyone from a vehicle."

Olivia's heart strained against her ribs.

"It's fine," she said. "We're getting somewhere here. We're almost there."

"Can you persuade a little more speed from those engines, Miss Reid?"

"Yep. Sure."

"Update me as soon as you have something," Vickery said. "Anything. No matter how small. Lestrade knew what he was telling you. Trust in his judgement."

"Yes, ma'am. I will."

The commander hung up, Olivia addressed the crowded lab at large.

"Guys, we're coming up on twelve hours! I need anything you can get us! TJ, how much have you got from that hard-drive?"

Greg had fallen asleep again.

He knew it, somehow. The moment that he found his eyes had opened, and he was looking at the empty warehouse full of sunlight, he knew it wasn't real.
It didn't matter.

His shoulders no longer ached in his chains. They held him here, no more cruel than gentle arms. His back no longer hurt; his eyes no longer stung, raw with exhaustion and tears. He was alright. He gazed at the sunlight that had no source of origin, warmed by just the sight of it - breathing it into his lungs.

It was beautiful.

He'd never thought he'd see it again.

It was something good, he thought. Something beautiful. One last time.

He stirred, glancing down at his body. He was clean - no more blood stains, no more dirt. A fresh white shirt with no tears.

He could barely feel the chains. They laid around him, easy - a weight that had no worry.

Other chains were still attached to the radiator. They trailed away from him across the concrete, through sunlight towards the open door.

Their ends were broken.

No manacles; no collar.

Greg's heart stirred in silence. Thank God, he thought. You're free. He closed his eyes, feeling that breath - that relief - letting himself hold it in both hands and enjoy it. I'm glad, sweetheart. Don't look back.

Beyond his closed eyes, there came quiet footsteps.

Greg looked up, his eyelashes soft in the sun.

As he saw who it was, a smile crossed his face.

He let her come into earshot - watching her idle tread, her high-heeled boots gentle on the concrete.

"Hey..." Greg said, as she reached him.

Emma smiled, easing her hands into the pockets of her jacket. "Hey, darlin'..."

Greg drew a breath.

"I tried... didn't I?" he said. " Tried to be your hero."

She huffed, gazing at him with fondness. "Life's a shithouse, sweetheart."

Greg didn't know how he could bring himself to laugh.

"Yeah," he mumbled, and exhaled. "Yeah, I... I guess it is." He gazed at the broken chains, wondering why the sight of them made him feel okay. "I'm - sorry I didn't - ..."

"Forget it," she said, softly. "Never asked you to, did I? Nice of you to try. More than anyone else ever did for me..." She came closer, her heels quiet on the floor. "I 'ppreciated it, darlin'. Really, I did."
Greg smiled. "Olivia's got your girls, at least. They'll be okay."

"Yeah. Yeah, they will."

"And I tried." That would do somehow, Greg thought. He'd been where angels feared to tread. He'd never promised himself he'd come back. "Why're you here?"

Emma came to stand beside him, laying a gentle hand on his head. He leant against her legs; the human warmth calmed his heart. One last time, he thought.

"Didn't want you to be alone," she said, stroking back his hair. "Didn't want you to be afraid."

Greg closed his eyes. "Does it hurt?"

"No, sweetheart... I didn't know a thing about it."

"Alright..." Greg breathed it in, holding onto that. "I wished I'd made someone sorry for you. I... wanted to... show them you mattered. Show them it wasn't okay you were gone. You weren't just - ... you mattered. You mattered to me."

One last time, he thought.

Emma's fingers stirred through his hair - slow, gentle.

"Darlin'?" she murmured.

Greg swallowed, his throat tight. "Yeah?"

Quietly, Emma knelt down.

As she appeared in his vision, Greg saw her at last - after all this time - and at once, began to cry.

His mother's fingers carded through his hair.

"Shhh, Greg... shhh." She cradled his face in her hands and kissed him, laying her deep pink kisses across his forehead. She smelled of jasmine and violets. "M'here, sweetie... m'here..."

"Mum - ..." Greg shook, suddenly sobbing. "Mum, I - I think I'm dead."

"Shhh, darlin'... it's okay. You're not. Not yet."

"I'm s-scared -"

"Don't be scared," she whispered, brushing back his hair. "Not for a second, darlin'... not for one moment." She kissed his head, holding him tightly in her hands. "My gorgeous Greg. M'so proud of you. You did so well. You did everything right, sweetheart."

"Mum - I - I'm s-sorry - ... Mum - ..." He'd not cried like this in years. He'd never cried like this. He'd never had the chance. "I should've s-stopped you, I - I should've - M-Mum..."

"Shhh, darlin'... you didn't know."

"I should've - I sh-should've - ..." Greg couldn't breathe. "M-Mum, I didn't mean to - ..."

A party, the newspapers had called it.

Some financial executive's swanky house in St John's Wood. Vodka. Drugs. 'Girls'.

She wasn't a girl.
She was Greg's mother, and he'd loved her.

There'd been over twenty people there. She'd been hired to work it - and what she'd done there in the first few hours, while the rest of them tore their way through speed and spirits and cocaine, Greg didn't care. It didn't matter. He cared that one of them had seen fit to spike his mother's drink, then hide their time and keep watch.

A brain-frying dose, the forensics report said. A dose strong enough to knock out someone of her weight six times over. Someone who didn't know what they were doing - or didn't care.

By the time the drugs kicked in, she'd have known nothing about the rest. Unconsciousness would have come on quickly, and never lifted.

It was little comfort to her son.

After that, the facts were blurred. Statements disagreed on almost every point. Versions of events had shifted and twisted and wriggled like snakes in a pit. Somewhere, hidden beneath the writhing and desperate mass of lies, there would be a true course of events, which led to a consequence: Maddy Lestrade was choked to death in a back bedroom of the house. The coroner couldn't be sure whether the evidence of sexual activity he found was wholly antemortem. There was no conclusive way to tell.

When her body was discovered by the gathering at large, out of their heads at four AM on drugs and drink and each other, panic had set in. The decision had been made to try and cover it up. They had reputations to protect - high-flying lives to keep on leading - they assumed she had nobody to notice she was gone.

Just some whore for hire.

No-one would miss her; no-one would report it. They didn't know about Greg. They didn't think a woman like that could have someone waiting for her to come home, watching the front window, wondering where she was.

Within two hours, dog-walkers found his mother's body on Farthing Downs.

 Barely buried.

 Dumped, like rubbish.

 The case that followed was a legal landmark. It was still studied now. Every attendee at the party hired a lawyer, and every lawyer argued that their client had known nothing of the 'tragedy' whatsoever. Over twenty statements claimed that over twenty people were innocent of every possible charge, accusing every other attendee except themselves.

 Greg had never even heard of joint enterprise law.

 Usually, it was used to convict teenagers of gang-related murders - cases where a group had acted as one, with no proof of who'd struck the fatal blow. It wasn't a perfect law. It had fazed in and out of favour for hundreds of years now - some argued it condemned the innocent; some argued it deterred those predators who thought that justice could be avoided in numbers.

 On the day the judge ruled, Greg had never supported something more.

 All twenty were convicted. Forensics got the ones who'd tried to hide her body - the host received a longer sentence, too - but every single one of them answered for it. All of their pictures were in the
Greg stood on the steps of the courthouse next to a social worker, eighteen and trying not to cry. To the watching cameras, he thanked the police for everything they'd done - all the officers who'd promised him they'd find some justice for his mum, and then found it - how hard they'd all worked.

Those people had held the world together as it all fell apart.

The day Greg joined the police, it finally felt like he was making things right. He'd spent years throwing himself around the world, travelling, trying to forget. None of it compared to that moment standing in the police academy yard - first day, his induction - the helmet, the white-shirt, the lot - nobody there to watch him, but knowing that she would have been.

She'd have been right there at the front, crying off all her mascara.

*My Greg*, she'd have told people - anyone - anyone who'd have bloody listened to her. *Trainee Constable Lestrade. That's my Greg there. Third from the right.*

He'd have put his first paycheck straight in her account. *Get whatever you need, mum. I'll look after us now. I'll handle it.*

Her parents had told her to get rid of him.

*So young,* they'd said. She told them no.

When she died, they'd tried to reach out to Greg. Barely a word in eighteen years - barely acknowledged his existence before. *So young,* they said.

Greg told them no.

As his mother hushed him, running her fingers over the back of his neck, he'd never missed her more.

"Don't cry, darlin'... it's alright now. All alright now..." He'd missed her voice; he'd missed her warmth. He'd missed her eyes, big and gentle just like his. They shone as they gazed at him, adoring him, taking every fraction of him in. "Look at you, sweetheart... look how handsome you turned out... a bloody detective. My gorgeous bloody Greg..."

Greg couldn't speak. He could only cry, gazing back at her. He didn't want to die. He didn't want her to go.

Gently she wiped his tears away with her thumbs - her gold nail varnish glittered in his tears; perfume clung to her wrists.

"You've done so well," she whispered. "So, so well... just a little further, darlin'. Just a little more brave for me."

Greg shook, crying all the more.

"They're gonna hurt him, Mum. When I'm gone. I don't want them to hurt him."

His mother's eyes softened, taking in all his pain and his fear. She laid her lips gently between his eyes.

"Sweetie," she whispered. "People like us, we - don't get a lotta choices in life. You just gotta make the most of the ones you get."
Greg rubbed his cheek against hers, crying. He didn't want to ruin her make-up - but he didn't want her to go. "I - I don't understand..."

He felt her smile against his forehead, softly bristling his hair.

"Everyone called me stupid... y'know?" Her voice was just a murmur. "Told me I didn't know what I wanted... couldn't possibly know. Told me they knew better, and I'd be givin' up my life. Then I held you first time, darlin'... they put you on my tummy, and left me 'lone with you at last... and I cuddled you. And you were everything, and you were mine. And I told myself I was gonna do what it took."

"Mum - ... f-fuck, Mum - "

"I didn't get a lot of choices in life," she whispered, stroking back his hair. "So I made the ones I made, Greg. I made them for you. 'Cause you were me. You were all of me, from the minute I met you... minute I saw your little hands. Minute you wrapped one 'round my finger."

She wiped away his tears for him, her eyes gentle.

"I wanted you to be alright," she murmured, "more than I wanted a whole world of other choices, darlin'... 'cause I loved you. Nothing felt as real as you. So I made the choice I made. And m'glad I got to love you, sweetheart... even just a little while."

Greg was starting to understand.

"Will it - be alright?" he whispered.

She brushed the last of his tears away. "Course it will, sweetie. Trust your Mykie. All love stories are happy stories..." She kissed his forehead. "Some just take a little time."

As she began to draw away, Greg pulled at his chains.

"Mum..." His heart cracked open. "Mum, don't go. Please."

His mother brushed her fingers through his hair.

"Every step you ever took," she said, "was my voice, telling you I love you. Every breath you ever drew. Every choice you got to make. I didn't ever go, Greg. I just got a little harder to hear."

Greg closed his eyes, his heart heaving into his throat. One last time.

"I love you, Mum."

Her fingertips eased from his hair. "I love you, darlin'. Be quick, okay? You've not got a lot of time."

"I've - ... what do you - ...?" Greg lifted his head.

The empty warehouse met his eyes - the striplights, the gloom, a single guard by the door.

Mycroft was lying against his chest. Greg could feel him breathing slowly, matching his breath to Greg's.

"Are you...?" Greg murmured.

Mycroft shivered slightly. "Yes."
"Why didn't you...?"

"I wanted you to sleep," Mycroft whispered.

Before Greg could reply, the door of the warehouse opened. Another change of guard, he thought - another hour passed. He watched the new guard enter, and speak quickly to the man who'd risen hopefully from his chair.

A short conversation was held - too distant to hear, too quiet by far. Glances came across the room.

Greg stayed still, doing his best to seem asleep.

He watched through his eyes as a reluctant decision seemed to be made. Together, the two vampires left the warehouse. The door closed behind them with a clang.

Greg found himself barely breathing - but strangely calm.

"Myke..." he whispered. "Myke, they're gone. The guards."

Mycroft stirred, checking.

He then laid his head back down.

"They will come back," he murmured. His voice cracked, dry. "They - shan't leave us alone for long. Not at this stage."

Greg's throat tightened. "Maybe just for a few minutes..."

He steadied himself, wrapping his hands around his chains.

"Myke, this is it. This is the chance."

"What - chance?"

"Your chance." Greg gripped the chains tightly. "You need to drink from me. Now."

Mycroft stiffened.

"No," he said, after a second. "No, you - ... no."

"Listen to me," Greg said, trying to keep his voice calm. "They're not coming. Scotland Yard aren't coming. Something's gone wrong, and I don't know what. But there's no way both of us are leaving here."

"Greg - what -"

"But you can," Greg said. "You can leave. You can get out of here. You can bend iron when you're strong. You could break those chains."

"Greg - stop -"

"No," Greg said. "You stop. Stop and bloody listen to me, alright? We don't have time for this." He dug his fingers into his chains, white-knuckled. "Any minute now, you're going to lose your mind and kill me. Alright? You're going to rip me apart. Then they're going to kill you, and they're gonna make it awful."
Mycroft had started to shake. "Stop!" he begged. "Stop, stop - "

"I'm not getting out of here." *Fuck. Fuck, this is happening.* "Gorgeous, it's not possible. I'm going to die. Do it like this, now, while they're gone, then break those fucking chains and get out of here. You'll snap them like string. *Drink from me.*"

"N-No - no, no - I won't be able to stop, I *won't be able to* - "

"*I know you won't!* I know. I'm still telling you to do it."

"*Greg, I'm not g-going to k-kill you* - "

Greg's soul whirled with the truth of it at last - calm, and clear, and unafraid.

"You are," he breathed. "One way or another. This is happening. You can do it now and get out of here. Or we can wait a few minutes, and you'll do it anyway, and they'll hurt you."

"G-Greg - Greg, how can you *ask me to* - "


When Mycroft didn't move, Greg gritted his teeth. He twisted his neck to the side, fighting against his chains to look into Mycroft's eyes. They were shocked, wide and his pupils were huge.

Greg stared into them.

"I want you to live," he said. His voice shook. "*That's what I want.* I want you to get out of here. I want you to drink from me, *now* - "

"*Greg* - "

" - and I want you to send me off to sleep while they're gone. Quiet, while it's just us. Just you and me. Then I want you to get the fuck out of here. Get to Amelia. She'll keep you safe. Just like last time, sweetheart. And you'll be alright."

"*Greg - Greg, I WON'T* - "

"*You will, gorgeous!* You *will* whether you want to or not, and it's going to happen soon! What you want *doesn't matter,* alright? Because *you won't get what you want.* I'm not going to *be here* after this. This is how it ends."

Mycroft wept, shaking so hard he couldn't speak. He swallowed hard on every breath, gasping, fighting for air.

Greg butted their foreheads together.

"But I want you to live," he whispered. "I want that. That'd be my happy ending. I *want* that. *Please.*"

Mycroft shut his eyes, tight.

Greg closed his eyes as well.

"Remember me," he whispered. Mycroft choked, hands shaking as they pushed into Greg's hair, weeping in utter silence. "Promise? Think about me now and then. Not here, gorgeous... don't think about me here."
As Mycroft shook against him, Greg could feel his soul coming free. He felt it leaving his chains, and taking him somewhere else - somewhere the memory made him smile, soaking him with a rush of calm.

"Think about me at home," he whispered. "In our bed. Where we were safe, and happy."

Mycroft made no sound. His hands clenched hard enough in Greg's hair to hurt; the pain was nothing. Greg barely felt it. He felt his lover shudder on every breath, gazed at his eyes screwed tight, and listened to his breathing grow ragged.

"Remember why I did it," Greg whispered. "Promise, gorgeous. Remember I loved you... loved you more in this second than I ever did. Remember I wanted you to be safe and happy more than I wanted to be alive. That's how much I loved you. That's how much you meant to me. Promise me, sweetheart."

Sound forced its way from Mycroft's throat - a whimper that cut off, strangled, as he began to sob.

It was a promise.

Greg closed his eyes, breathing it in.

"You'll be alright," he whispered. "You'll be okay. I promise. It'll just take time."

Mycroft wept and shook, incapable of words.

Greg's heart heaved.

"I'll wait, sweetheart." His soul glowed with a memory - one last, perfect memory. "I'll be there on Platform Six, okay? Come find me. And we'll get the last tube home."

Mycroft's sob choked into silence; his throat muscles clenched.

"Make it easy for me, gorgeous," Greg whispered. "Make it quick. I know you can." He drew a final breath - cold air. He used it to say three words. "I love you."

As Mycroft leant, shaking, beneath his chin, Greg let his head rest back against the pipes. He closed his eyes.

His final sight was the striplights above, blurring away gently into darkness.

He felt Mycroft tremble, breath coming hard and fast against his throat. Mycroft was trying to hold him - trying to reach around him - gripping instead at fistfuls of his shirt, shaking hard enough for the chains to rattle.

As Greg curled his hands shut, his thumb found the band of his engagement ring.

_Doubt thou the stars are fire_, he thought, as he rubbed it - slow, steady circles.

_Proved it, sweetheart._

_Told you I'd find a way._

The shock of pain lasted no more than a second.

Greg heard his own cry echo from the rafters. It was overwhelmed at once by a rush of cold, prickling relief, as his cry rang back to him over and over - lulling, soothing - and the sensation of
Mycroft's teeth in his neck was in moments no more than a shadow. They gripped him into place. They held him where he was wanted. They dug in and stirred, coaxing his veins to give, and he could feel Mycroft panting hard around the bite. Christ. Jesus Christ. Mycroft's body pushed against him; he pushed back, panicking too much even to tell if he was aroused. He tried to find his way through shock and anaesthesia, brain whirling as he realised he could still think.

This was meant to feel good - wasn't it? This was meant to be burning him up inside.

*All this time,* Greg thought, panting.

All the panic. All the worry.

And he couldn't even feel it.

A bloodstream full of PT-309, and this was *it.*

He shifted, frightened, trying not to focus on the feeling of draining at his neck. He could hear Mycroft moaning and shivering. He told himself it didn't matter what it felt like. This was the last - and there was no pain, and Mycroft would walk away - and it didn't matter.

He hated the chains. He wanted to let Mycroft hold him.

But it didn't matter.

In little over a minute, the feeling of rough tongue strokes began to blur into the heaving of Greg's own breath. Soon they'd become the same movement, fluid and silky, and the darkness had started to boom in his ears as fast and frantic as his heart. He'd expected his pulse to slow down. It was only speeding. Heat was suddenly rippling beneath his skin and he began to sweat, gasping, waves of warmth overwhelmed by waves of cold. The concrete floor began to roll, rocking underneath them as if on water. With each deep breath, Greg felt the room spin faster and faster - until it was a blur, and he was blurring with it.

But he couldn't move.

He couldn't move; he couldn't breathe.

As he tried, every breath slipped further and further away. Greg reached after them, grasping, but they played through his fingers like smoke. They grew thinner and thinner as he stretched, pale and insubstantial, until they were lost in the blurring and the rush and cold. His fingertips passed through nothing, fading.

But it didn't matter, really.

It was all okay.

It had been a happy story, in the end.
Into the Darkness

Perhaps, at the end, the little things may teach us most.

- Bram Stoker
  'Dracula' (1897)

Do you wish to authorise the UDL system to accept remote hardware?
  > YES   > NO

Olivia glanced sideways at TJ.

"Reff," he said.

Click.

Do you wish to connect the OCI port to external 4200-MATRIX-C?
  > YES   > NO

Olivia glanced sideways at TJ.

"Reff," he said again.

Click.

Do you wish to reformat the virtual drive to connect to the Auxiliary 56k Panel?
  > YES   > NO

Olivia glanced sideways at TJ.

"Rooo..." he said.

Click.

VIRTUAL DRIVE UPDATE IN PROGRESS.
PLEASE WAIT.
Olivia took a long breath, watching the digital hourglass turn on the screen.

"How long will that take?" she asked.

In response, TJ's eyes grew round and he whined.

Olivia suppressed a sigh.

It was past six o'clock. Outside the windows, London had grown dark. Most of Technical had left the department at five, looking distinctly worried about the werewolf still pawing at their precious hardware. None of them had dared to protest.

Olivia wouldn't be leaving until they had something.

"It's fine," she said to TJ, with a quiet smile. She wanted to reassure him. "Takes as long as it takes. We're doing good."

TJ huffed, glancing at the screen.

In truth, it wasn't fine and they knew it. From the increasing brevity of Commander Vickery's updates, the rest of Scotland Yard knew it too. Greg Lestrade had now been missing for fourteen hours. The commander was tearing London apart to try and find him - and so far, they'd found nothing.

At this stage, they didn't have many options any more.

"D'you... want something from the...?" Olivia said, to fill the quiet.

TJ sighed, nodding.

"'kay. Same as last time?"

Again, he nodded.

A few minutes later, Olivia returned from the vending machine with white chocolate buttons for herself, and six packs of bacon riffles. She hoped someone had made the girls something to eat. She hoped they were alright.

The screen was still loading, the tiny hourglass still turning.

As she picked at her chocolate buttons, suddenly wondering why she'd bought them, a large black paw settled on Olivia's arm.

It patted her, gently.

She almost smiled.

"I know," she said. "It's just... I... feel like he was trying to - ... like it made total sense to him. Get TJ. He could have said anybody, but he didn't."

TJ shuffled uneasily.

"I know you don't know," Olivia murmured. "Just... God, I wish you did."
TJ nosed at her shoulder, huffing.

"M'sorry," she mumbled. "I probably shouldn't've - ... I mean, I let myself get really deep. I let him go racing off to Gastrell's Bar. I thought it'd be fine. But I'm - not a police officer. That wasn't my call to make. I should've stopped Greg."

TJ snorted, softly.

"Yeah... yeah, I know he wouldn't..." Olivia gave him a weak smile. "I should've tried, at least."

He gave a shake of his head, an incoherent little stream of rumbled advice, then butted her again on the shoulder.

He nudged his last pack of bacon riffles across the desk.

"S'alright, fuzzball. You have them."

TJ let out a small whimper.

Olivia opened the bag for him, took one, and nudged them back.

VIRTUAL DRIVE UPDATE IN PROGRESS.
PLEASE WAIT.

What if Scotland Yard just never found them? Either of them?

How long would Commander Vickery search?

Greg and Mycroft might just vanish into nothing. Two more missing people in London's endless tide - Kit, too. All three of them, blurred out of being.

Not definitely dead.

Not definitely anything.

Just gone.

Pushing her half-eaten packet of buttons aside, Olivia glanced across at TJ. He had bacon dust around his snout.

"Greg never mentioned his - engagement ring to you, did he?" she said.

TJ gave her a puzzled look.

"The one Mycroft made for him. With an inscription in it." The more she spoke, the more lost the expression became. "From 'Hamlet'?" she said. He slowly shook his head. "The famous poem from it... 'doubt thou the stars are fire'. Greg never...? Shakespeare? Something to do with Shakespeare?"

TJ sighed.

So did Olivia.
"Worth a try..." She glanced at the screen, watching the hourglass flip itself over and over. "That's literally all he mentioned. 'Don't make a sound'. 'Get TJ'. 'I've got the ring'. If we'd had a few more seconds, maybe he'd - "

TJ lifted his head from the crumbs of his crisps.

He looked at her strangely for a moment - then glanced down at her hands.

As he spotted something there, he let out a yelp.

"What?" she said, unnerved, as he began to bark at top volume. He squirmed down to snuffle urgently at her hands. She showed them to him, opening her palms in bewilderment as her heart started beating hard. "TJ, what are you - what's the - ?"

He began to lick furiously at one of her fingers.

"Okay - look, can you not - "

"Riff!" he barked. "Riff! Riff! Rovrun riff!"

"Oh, for - ... Jesus, what are you even - "

TJ was nosing at the same finger in desperation, licking at the base as if his life depended on it, smearing bacon dust and spit across her hands.

Olivia grabbed for the keyboard.

"Stop!" she said, pushing it towards him. "Look - here, just - push them with your bloody nose!"

His nose was too big. As he depressed five or six keys at a time, and the screen filled with nonsense, he began to whine and struggle in frustration. He then shoved the keyboard aside and went back to her hands.

He started licking frantically at her bumblebee ring.

"My ring?" she said. TJ let out a volley of barks that rang from the walls; he began to leap up and down on the spot. "How could Greg have my - "

And then she realised.

Her pulse hit the roof.

"Oh my God... the RING!"

She'd taken it off after Hackney Downs - the sovereign ring. TJ's tracking ring. He'd made it himself - call-and-response - a single star on a darkened map. She'd put it down somewhere. She didn't even remember where. Greg must have found it.

He hadn't meant his engagement ring at all.

The computer let out a sudden chime, and the screen began to fill with files.

The sudden movement wrenched Olivia's eyes. She watched them all popping into being one-by-one - Greg's recent outgoing messages. Her heart jumped, panicked gaze flashing from one name to the next.
TJ had already raced towards the door. Realising she wasn't with him, he darted back and began to bark even louder, bouncing, whining, knocking over lab stools in his frenzy.

"Wait!" she said, staring. "Wait, there's - ..."

The most recent messages had appeared.

As the computer loaded other files, Olivia clicked quickly on the very last message Greg Lestrade had ever sent. It was time-stamped in the early hours of this morning - just after midnight.

"What did Greg send you?" she said, heart pounding as it loaded.

TJ made a startled noise.

"This morning," she said. "Early this morning. Before one AM. He sent something to your wrist-set."

TJ shot an affronted look down at his furry black legs, as if inviting her to suggest where his wrists were meant to be.

Olivia turned to the flash of the loaded message, barely breathing.

She read at speed.

Hey fuzzball, it's me. I need you to do something for me. I'm taking a stupid risk... but I know it's going to work. It's the only way we can definitely get to Mycroft. I'm about to head for Soho...

"Oh... fuck..." Olivia whimpered, reading. "Oh, fuck, TJ - it's all fucking here..."

He'd planned it all.

He hadn't gone to Soho to kill himself at all. He'd been bloody luring them.

Greg was what they wanted - the only thing they wanted. They'd take him straight to Mycroft, and the ring would lead Scotland Yard straight to Greg.

Fourteen hours ago.

"Outgoing call!" Olivia gasped, as they sprinted towards the lift. TJ ran alongside her, panting at full pelt. "Amelia Vickery!"

Together they smashed through the door of TJ's flat. He streaked at once towards the bedroom. Olivia followed him, grabbed his laptop from the dresser and wrestled it open.

"Okay, I've got it," she told the wrist-set. "TJ - which program?"

TJ nudged the icon with his nose. Olivia loaded it up, her chest contracting around her heaving lungs.

"Anything?" came Vickery's voice, sharp.

The program opened, filling the screen at once. It took a second to think.
The map then blinked away, replaced by somewhere new - a maze of streets, lurching around a flashing white star. Olivia's breath caught in her throat. She zoomed into the map in desperation, her eyes flashing over street signs and buildings.

*Oh, Jesus! Oh, shit* -

"Soho!" she screamed. "Soho, commander - oh my God - Great Windmill Street!"

Vickery began to bark orders at once. "Soho! Great Windmill Street! *Now!* Where on that street, sergeant?"

"It's - it's jumping around, the signal's moving, I can't - "

TJ grasped the hem of Olivia's coat between his teeth, tugging her urgently towards the door.

"Commander, I - I think we've got to be nearby to - ... it's not precise enough from - "

"Then get to Soho," Vickery said, "both of you! I shall meet you there."

---

As the taxi screamed towards Soho, the signal began to tighten itself to one area.

"Oh, God..." Olivia whispered to TJ, watching the white flash hopping from building to building to building. "God, he was there all along... oh, shit... shit, I hope it's not too late..."

She loaded up the map that she'd built - every business for a hundred metres, labelled and sketched in hard-light. Greg had given up on building it. He'd thought it was just an instinct. Olivia hadn't.

"It's somewhere here," she said. TJ watched, panting as she showed him with a fingertip in the hard-light. "These ones, here - God, but it doesn't show depth... so which of them...?"

By the time they reached Great Windmill Street, the road had been cordoned off at both ends. A news team had already arrived, filming the mysterious police presence that had brought Soho to a stand-still. With the laptop in the crook of her arm, and TJ running at her side, Olivia swept beneath the police line.

Armed Response were here. Medical were here.

Commander Vickery was here.

As she saw Olivia coming, her face opened with relief.

"Show me, sergeant - "

Olivia placed the laptop down on the bonnet of a car, prying it open as siren lights flashed in her eyes.

"Here," she said, and projected the map of the street from her wrist. Vickery's eyes snapped to it in
the darkness. "I've narrowed it down. They're here, somewhere in this building. Lucky Strike Bowling Alley. I don't think they're in the bowling alley itself though. See beneath? There are - "


"I couldn't find a floor-plan for the warehouses," Olivia said. "But TJ's tracker can lead us through. It'll save time at least."

"Good." Vickery's jaw tightened. "Elwood!"

Olivia looked up through the hard-light map, to where an Armed Response squad were charging laser rifles and securing their headsets. At the call of his name, their commander turned around from his officers.

He came over to the car at once, ashen-faced and nervous. He was in full combat leathers, with a rifle at his side.

"Have we got them?" he asked. "Are they in there?"

Vickery showed him the map. "This building here," she said. "Warehouses beneath the bowling alley. Looks from Sergeant Reid's map as if we have an entrance down here in Ham Yard. What are you thinking?"

Luke's mouth flattened, scanning the map. "Tunnel, is it? For vehicles?"

"From the look of it."

"Right. Probably guarded. But if there's one way in, there's one way in."

"Are your squad ready?"

"Ready. Taking them in myself."

"Good. Sergeant Reid and Mr Tierney will accompany you with the tracking system. We have no blueprints of the warehouse, and that signal will save you valuable time. Time we cannot afford to waste."

"Got it." Luke looked up through the map into Olivia's eyes. "Are you good to go?"

"Yes," Olivia's mouth said for her. Oh Jesus, what am I doing? I'm not even a police officer. Oh, Jesus. "Yes, I'm ready."

"Right," said Elwood. "Let's get you patched into comms. You'll be fine - just stick with me, and keep pointing us towards that signal."

Two minutes later, Olivia found herself flanked by twenty Armed Response officers and with a werewolf bristling at her side, as the warehouse's enormous freight entrance was opened by force. Scotland Yard engineers hauled back the massive metal shutters, revealing only darkness beyond - a featureless concrete tunnel that descended into blackness.

Olivia found herself gazing into a gateway to hell.
On the laptop secure in the crook of her arm, the steady flash of Greg's tracking signal had become like his heartbeat to her. *Hold on,* she thought. *We're coming. It's gonna be okay. Just hold on.* There was no time to think, or wonder if this was the right thing to do. It might already be too late.

TJ butted gently at her shoulder.

Olivia reached out, numb. She scritched without a word behind his ear.

"Right with you, sergeant," came the voice of Commander Elwood over comms. "Take us in."

Olivia tightened her grip on the laptop, told herself to think of Greg and Mycroft, and proceeded into the tunnel.

"Light," she said, as they crossed the threshold into the darkness. Her wrist-set dome filled the low wide space to either side, showing her the next ten metres of path but no further. "Can - you all see?"

"Nothing to the end of the tunnel," said Commander Elwood. "Hundred metres or so. Looks like a fork up ahead."

Olivia glanced down at the screen.

"Okay," she said. "Worth heading left, at a guess."

Before they'd reached the fork, there came an intake of breath over comms.

"Ten o'clock!" Elwood barked, and Olivia leapt as a streak of green light shrieked from the space just behind her. She saw it strike something in the blackness up ahead - something that lurched and dropped. "Three more, two o'clock!"

Three further streaks of light found their targets. Olivia stayed as still as she could, not daring to move. Her heart thumped in her throat. Things were dying in the darkness - things just out of sight - things she couldn't see.

"Okay," Elwood said - as if they'd cleared some minor obstacle. "All units forward."

Olivia took the hint, set her jaw, and followed the tunnel on.

The left-hand path led eventually to a stairwell. Commander Elwood took the lead. Olivia recognised him only by the third red stripe and star at his shoulder. He motioned for the others to come slowly, and in a steady chain they made their way down the stairs.

TJ stayed at Olivia's side, watching her every step.

He kept glancing into the darkness behind them.

She wished he wouldn't.

At the bottom of the stairs, the squad formed itself back into a shield around Olivia. Her wrist-set light found no walls or ceiling; its dome was pressed by blackness on all sides.

"Signal's - over there," she said, pointing. Her voice echoed dustily in the gloom. "About a hundred metres. What am I not seeing?"

"About that. Why?"

"Right. Looking like we've got multiple floors, then. This space is about that big. No sign of Greg. No thermals nearby."

"Jesus..." Olivia whispered. "Can you - see any exits?"

"A few," Elwood admitted. "Let's assume a similar floor-plan for each level. One big space with side rooms. We need to find more stairs."

"Commander?" came a second voice over comms. "Heat signatures, nine o'clock. Two of them. Not moving."

Olivia tensed, drawing breath. Even her heartbeat seem to echo.

"Got 'em," said Elwood's voice, calmly. "Looks like a separate area? Let's hope they stay there."

"Stairs in the other corner maybe, sir."

"Worth a start... right. Follow me."

Olivia tightened her grip on the laptop, and quietly followed Commander Elwood into the darkness.

She couldn't see anything of the space around them. Wherever they were, it must be enormous - her wrist-set light found nothing but the occasional steel pillar, supporting a roof that was far beyond her light. Just as she wondered how much bigger this room was, or how much more out in the open they could be, Elwood stopped dead.

The rest of the squad froze with him.

"Hostiles," Elwood said. "Hold."

The blood in Olivia's veins turned to ice.

"Where?" she whispered.

"Twelve o'clock. Thermals." Elwood's voice hardened. "Ready weapons."

Olivia's stomach twisted as laser guns charged all around her. She swallowed, trying to think of Greg. He'd been brave. She could be brave, too.

She glanced at TJ. He'd frozen stiff beside her, his ears bolt upright as he listened.

Then she saw him turn his head, glancing back the way they'd come.

The figures waiting behind them lunged.

Screams ripped over comms as the vampires who'd followed them down the stairs tore into the back wall of Armed Response. Laser weapons fired, striping through the darkness with deafening cracks. They were too close. They missed. The vampires fell on them, ripping at their helmets.

Olivia shrieked as a figure came racing towards her through the gap in Armed Response, and in panic hurled the only thing she had.

TJ's laptop whirled into the man's nose and mouth like a discus, snapping his head back with a sickening crunch.
Before she even saw him drop, an arm lashed about Olivia's neck from behind.

Olivia didn't think. She simply moved. A memory spoke in her ear, as real as if the voice was right here. *Just one movement. It's all there in your shoulder. You're using his own weight against him.* She bent double at once, as low as she could. As she felt her attacker lurch off-balance around her, Olivia seized him and twisted and slung.

He didn't slump like Kit had onto crash-mats. His head slammed into the concrete with a crack. She staggered, reeling beneath with his weight, and let him drop.

*Good girl,* breathed the voice in her head.

Armed Response were scattering, driven apart by the creatures now shrieking and ripping into them like harpies. Comms had descended into screams. Vickery's shouting for a status report was lost in the noise. She couldn't hear Commander Elwood at all.

Panicking, Olivia raced towards the first man who'd attacked her. He was lolled across the ground with his head twisted at an impossible angle, his eyes gleaming glassily in the light.

Olivia shoved him aside, shaking.

TJ's laptop laid beneath him on the ground - snapped into two halves, the screen spider-cracked and black.

"*No...!*" Gasping, starting to cry, Olivia picked up the useless pieces and searched them for a start button. She knew it wouldn't work. She knew that it was broken. "*No, no, no...!*"

A shape lunged into the circle of her wrist-set light, bounding towards her on all fours.

Before she could even brace, TJ shoved his snout beneath her and flung her onto his back. The broken screen clattered from Olivia's hands. She clung to TJ's neck instead, struggling to get a hold on his fur as he set off at speed, limping hard beneath her weight.

The wrist-set light lurched with them, flashing over pillars, people and bodies as laser fire carved up the blackness in flashes of bright green. Olivia held tight round TJ's neck, gritting her teeth in an effort to stay on his back. She could still hear Armed Response in her ear, screaming as they were torn apart. Something whirled out of the darkness on the right. TJ dodged. An outstretched hand raked through Olivia's hair - she felt the stretching fingers catch on the neckband of her headset, ripping it off in a lash of cables and cracked plastic. The voices of Armed Response vanished. Olivia held tighter onto TJ, panting as he ran.

At last, the circle of light swept across a wall - a doorway up ahead. TJ pelted for it and vanished down the tunnel. The concrete walls flashed by.

As they emerged into another space, TJ skidded to a stop. He lowered Olivia from his back, panting, and began to lick her face in desperation at once.

"I'm okay... J-Jesus, I'm okay..." There was blood on his muzzle - a bite-mark - she touched it, shaking. "Are you alright?"

TJ whined, glancing back up the tunnel. His fur had bristled onto end.

"Christ - Christ, I know..." The room they'd reached was small. Metal lockers, stacked and dirty
chairs, a further open doorway into darkness. "I know... oh sh-shit, TJ, the laptop - my comms - h-how do we - ..."

TJ lowered his head to his right leg, licking it feverishly. He had another bite-mark there - deep, the skin red and torn.

Olivia's heart stung.

As she reached for his muzzle again, she saw him suddenly stiffen. He looked up over her shoulder. His hackles rose at once.

Olivia twisted around.

A startled young man had appeared in the room with them. He was standing in the open doorway in amazement, staring at them as if unsure whether to believe his eyes.

"Who the fuck are you?" he blurted out.

TJ began to growl.

Olivia laid a hand upon his nose. The growls quietened.

As she rose to her feet, she eased her other hand inside her coat pocket - hiding the motion with her body, turning to face the young man in the door.

"Elliot?" she said.

Elliot Webster's face screwed in ugly bewilderment.

"Why does everybody know me today?" he said. "Who are you? And what the fuck are you doing here? You're not meant to be in here."

Olivia curled her fingers around the trigger.

Point it at something you want to die, Greg had said.

"Do you remember me?" she asked.

He looked at her as if she were stupid. "No," he said. "Should I?"

I can draw your face from memory, she thought. Every detail. I'll be able to draw it ten years from now. You wanted me to die, and you don't even remember me.

Olivia pressed her teeth into her lip ring.

"Where are Mycroft Holmes and Greg Lestrade?"

Elliot searched her face, baffled. "They're downstairs," he said.

Olivia nodded, withdrawing the gun.

"Thank you," she said - and shot him between the eyes.

Elliot Webster jerked at the noise, startled - then collapsed back against the doorframe with a thunk. He sagged to the floor, eyes wide, smearing a glossy streak of scarlet behind him.

Olivia lowered the gun.
She had the curious realisation that she'd just committed murder.

She suspected there should be some guilt involved.

"Hey!" shouted a sudden voice from the other room. "Somebody there?"

Olivia moved to the doorway, stepping over the boy's slumped corpse. The look of shock was satisfying - slapped across his face forever. It suited him.

As she stepped into the door, the light of her wrist-set washed over cages - a long corridor. Two facing rows of iron bars.

At first, they all looked to be empty.

Before Olivia could draw breath, the occupant of the furthest cage threw herself at the bars with a clang.

"Olivia!" The roar echoed from every wall. "Olivia!"

Olivia's heart leapt into her throat. She almost dropped the gun.

"Kit!" she screamed. She flew the length of the corridor in seconds. "Kit - KIT!"

As she ran towards the cage, arms reached out for her through the bars. She grabbed for them, shaking, and they hauled her close in an instant - grappling her tightly against the front of the cage.

"Fuck," Kit gasped, as their foreheads crushed together. "Fuck. Thank fuck... you're okay... you're fucking okay..."

Olivia trembled, realising she'd started to cry. The shock of the last few minutes welled up in her throat as Kit's fingers drove through her hair, stroking her - feeling that she was really real.

"I knew it wasn't you," Olivia whispered. She heard her voice break into a sob. "Oh, Kit... oh, God. I knew it. I knew it..."

Kit was still wearing her combat gear. Her hair was dark with dirt, her features heavy from lack of sleep - but she was alive. She panted as Olivia searched her neck.

No marks. No bites.

Just skin - muscles that contracted as Kit swallowed - a fast pulse under Olivia's fingertips.

She hadn't been...

God. Thank God.

Why did it matter? Why did that suddenly matter? Olivia didn't know.

Kit stared into her eyes, unbreathing.

She then pushed up against the bars.

As Kit's mouth pressed against her own, Olivia's heart lurched into her throat.

Oh.

It was a second's duration, and no more - a single, desperate kiss - crushed against her mouth in
relief.

Olivia didn't move.

Kit dropped her head with a sharp intake of breath. She shook; her shoulders heaved.

"S-Sorry," she breathed. "Sorry - I -"

_Oh my God._ Olivia's heart squeezed itself into nothing. Her hands were still on Kit's neck. Her jaw had locked almost too tight to speak. "I - I don't - ..." Her stomach twisted. "We - we n-need to go. Now."

Kit shuddered. Her exhausted fists wrapped around the bars.

"Get me out of here," she said. "Key. Over there - on the wall."

Olivia stumbled to a board on the wall, numb, and snatched up every hanging key there was. She brought them back to the cage, laid them out on the floor and sought through them, shaking, trying not to think.

"Where's Greg?" Kit's voice cracked. "What happened at Hackney Downs? Did they get him?"

"No. He's here somewhere." Olivia fitted key after key into the lock, discarding them at speed. "He's here with Mycroft. H-Here in the building. Came to find them."

"Christ, girl... mounted a solo rescue mission, did you?"

"Commander Vickery's outside. Scotland Yard. They're all here." As one of the keys slid cleanly into the lock, Olivia's pulse spiked.

She twisted the key with a jerk. The padlock cracked open in her hands.

"Everyone thought - ..." Her fingers trembled as she pulled the padlock free. "They thought it was you. Thought you'd betrayed - ... I couldn't -"

"Are you fucking serious?"

"Y-Yes. They searched your flat."

"Fuck me up..." Kit grunted, pushing the cell door open. "Why would anyone think that?"

Olivia helped her to her feet. They hurried between the rows of cages, shaking.

"You vanished," Olivia said. "They were looking for a traitor. It - it just seemed like -"

"I wasn't the only one though, was I?"

"Well - Mycroft was gone, but - from Armed Response, everyone was found dead or came back safe. There was only you that -"

"Christ," Kit breathed. "Then he's still fucking there."

Olivia's throat constricted. "Who -"

"We have to warn them." Kit's jaw set. "Vickery. Scotland Yard. Come on."

As they emerged from the cells, they found TJ hovering nervously near the entrance.
Olivia's stomach twisted as she laid eyes on him.

"Jesus - " Kit's hand twitched towards the gap on her belt where a pistol would hang. "TJ?"

TJ whined.

"Sorry, mate... didn't recognise you."

Olivia forced herself with clenched fists to stop feeling, and to think. "What did you mean," she asked, "'we have to warn Scotland Yard'?"

Kit huffed.

"Bastard appeared out of nowhere when the power went. Saying there'd been a problem... dug a fucking syringe into my shoulder. Next thing I know, waking up here... vampires ripping my wrist-set off. Pounding it into dust. Into the cage. Five fucking days later, here we are."

Olivia's skin crawled. "Who?"

Beside them, TJ suddenly stiffened. His head snapped round to the tunnel entrance. Olivia followed his eyes, panicking.

The sound of steady footsteps reached their ears.

Hackney Downs all over again.

They were being ripped apart.

The squad were scattering, screaming, running like rats. The speed of it all was unbearable. Luke couldn't keep track of how many losses, how many kills. He backed himself into a corner and kept his rifle charged, shaking, listening to his squad having their throats torn out.

Eventually, unable to bear it, he muted the feed with gritted teeth - and just concentrated on staying calm.

One-by-one, thermal shapes in his visor began to fall to the ground. Those who fell to the ground stayed right there. Luke watched them drop, his heart straining, the laser rifle braced against his chest.

At last, as his squad biometrics updated to show a single living member - ELLWOOD L. - COMMANDER - he saw the five remaining thermal shapes gather to assess the damage - investigating some of the bodies, wiping their mouths on their sleeves.

Then they turned their attentions towards him.

As they approached - picking their way across the fallen - Luke's pulse kept up its steady panicked beat.

With a shaking hand, he reached for the back of his helmet. He depressed the clasp with two fingers, felt it loosen, and pried his fingers beneath the rim to ease the helmet free.
"Light," he gasped, as he emerged into the air.

His wrist-set flooded their faces.

*So normal,* he thought. *Normal people.* Blood around their mouths.

The five of them waited, watching Luke closely as he panted.

At last he swallowed, wet his lips, and said,

"Where's Kieran?"

The woman at the front gave a snort. "Probably getting out of here, now we've been raided... they'll send more after you, won't they? Place'll be crawling soon."

Luke's chest hardened. "Is he downstairs?"

"Yeah. Most likely."

"What about Kit? A woman - a human woman - dressed like me. Where is she? He said she'd be safe."

The vampire nodded to a distant corner.

"Down the tunnel there... cells. Where the wolf and the girl went." She raised an eyebrow. "You didn't warn us there'd be a werewolf."

Luke bit the inside of his cheek. "I didn't know we'd have to bring him. I couldn't argue, could I? Or they'd have known I - "

"'Him'?" the vampire scoffed. "'It'!

He didn't like they way they were looking at him. Kieran said some of them were wary of humans - it was understandable enough.

Unsettling, all the same.

"Look... I've - done my bit, alright?" he said. "I helped you get Holmes. So back off, yeah?"

The vampires said nothing, watching him without a word.

Luke kept a hold of his rifle, turned his back, and moved in the direction that she'd pointed.

They didn't follow.

This would all be over soon. They'd get out of here, and this whole mess wouldn't matter anymore.

There were just a couple of things to finish off.

Luke primed the laser rifle with a whine, and stepped into the mouth of the tunnel.
Blood.

Blood from a beating heart - blood with heat, blood with a pulse.

The soft animal struggles of something that lived.

Blood, melting over every sense; the rush - the relief - the groan from his own throat that ripped him into nothing. He dug in and held the something still and moaned, and he felt it making noises for him - little vibrations in its throat - deep gasps in time with its frantic heart.

And he was a breath, and nothing more: one long, aching intake of breath - draining, drinking, drowning at last - breathing in the out-breaths of the something that struggled.

He could hear it, somewhere. Somewhere outside his senses.

It was whimpering.

'Mycroft', it said.

Over, and over, and over.

He didn't care what mycroft was.

The something was warm, and it was bleeding out its heat for him - all its heat, all its breath. Nothing else mattered. He wanted that molten iron warmth, that liquid relief, wanted it pouring across his tongue and down his throat like a sigh. He drank deep and fast, shaking as the relief of it slugged across his senses, and let his jaw rock through instinct to agitate and coax the heat to keep coming for him.

He suddenly hated the metal chain around his something - holding it still.

He wanted his something to squirm for him. He wanted it to cling to him and arch for him and pull him closer, but it couldn't. They'd chained his something down. It wasn't alright. He snarled, digging his fangs deeper, and the something cried out for him and shook and kept calling him 'Mycroft'. He didn't know why it kept saying that. He didn't care.

He wanted its heat, not its words.

He just wished the something was holding him.

Chains of Iron

God did not give me my life to throw it away.

- Charlotte Brontë

'Jane Eyre' (1847)
He wanted hands at his shoulders. Hands, tight - gripping him - holding onto him like he mattered.

Like his something loved him.

Why? Why have they chained it? He curled his hands around the brutal iron links, snarling again - trying to loosen them - his teeth clamped in effort and it rose new blood into his mouth, a new wave of warmth and pulse and taste - fucking taste - how long had it been? How long? - no cloying chemical - no preservative - just warmth, and life, and that metallic sweetness, that rush, that relief, and his something gasped for him as he drank.

But the breaths were speeding.

His something's soft, frantic breaths - the weakening flutter of his heart.


Mycroft dug his teeth in, hard.

I forbid you to die. I want more.

This chain. This fucking chain. Why had they chained him? Why? Mycroft wanted to be held. His shaking hands followed the chain around, searching, and he discovered his something's arms - chained down, too - he pushed his hands along them down to wrists, bound by metal to yet more metal. Anger burned in him as hot as his something's blood and just as red, just as rushing, just as wild. Not alright. Not alright.

Mycroft wrenched at the chains, knuckles heaving white against his skin.

Break! he snarled at them. BREAK!

He wanted to be held. He wanted Greg's arms - wanted fingers through his hair - not alright! Not like this! - but the chains clung onto Greg tightly, their arms hard around him, refusing to let Mycroft have him.

As Mycroft hauled at the chains, he realised Greg was sweating.

He could smell it on the air now - that sharp, animal tang. Greg's breath was coming quick and shallow as he panted in his chains.

His heart had realised what was happening to him.

It was beating faster, harder - trying to redistribute what little blood it had left.

Mycroft clawed his fingers into the wrist chains, snarling. Frustration raged in his every cell, burning him up from the inside. He wanted to be held. He didn't want Greg to be chained. They had no right. Greg was his, and it wasn't meant to be like this.

They were meant to be at home.

Home.

Don't think about me here.

That voice - the voice Mycroft loved. The voice that called him gorgeous, and called him sweetheart.
Think about me at home, in our bed. Where we were safe and happy.

Those precious days. Waking up to arms - to the voice that called him gorgeous. As Mycroft twisted his fingers between the chain links, Greg's hands appeared on top of his own - helping, he first thought - but then he realised, no. Not helping.

Just holding.

Gripping.

Quiet fingers, weak, trying to hold his hands.

Wanting to hold Mycroft's hands as he died.

Their fingers locked.

Oh.

Oh - God -

Oh, dear God - no -

Panic screamed across Mycroft's every thought.

No - no, no -

He began to lick at once - flat, broad sweeps of his tongue to start sealing the wound. He didn't know how much he'd taken.

Greg was cold.

He was already cold.

No. No, God - no, please - please, please, do not say I -

The chains.

Chains of iron.

He needed to break the chains. Greg needed to breathe. He couldn't breathe in them.

Mycroft reached for the waist chain, curled his fingers into the links, and pulled.

As his wrists began to shake he twisted - gritting his teeth and panting with panic, heaving at the iron links. Strength was pounding through his muscles, flooding his every vein.

Greg's strength.

Greg's life.

He felt the central link beginning to give.

As it broke, so did Mycroft's heart.

He wept as he pulled the chain away, struggling to loosen it from Greg's waist. It was wrapped around him, in and out of the pipes. As it eased its grip, Greg sagged - slumping forwards at the waist, collapsing against Mycroft. Dead weight. There was no time to unwind it all. Mycroft
grabbed for the wrist chains, sobbing in panic, and wrenched his hands around them.

They snapped like cotton thread.

Mycroft tore at them, pulling them free. Greg lolled loose against his shoulder.

As both wrists came free, Mycroft dragged his arms around Greg and clung to him, wretching. He scrabbled a hand around the back of Greg's neck, cradling him, pushing his terrified fingertips into place over the pulse point as he wept.

"Please - please, please - please, no - "

Nothing.

Just the shake of his own fingers against skin.

"No, no - please God - please - ..."

Was that something? Or was it his own heart, beating so hard that he thought it was Greg's?

He tried to calm himself, gasping, forcing himself to stop crying and to listen.

He pressed his fingers against the pulse point hard.

Please.

Please.

Don't leave me alone in this world.

Mycroft swallowed, listening - curling himself around Greg, breathing, pleading, every sense flaring into hyper-sensitivity as he listened and listened and listened.

And there.

A flutter.

Quick - faint.

 Barely there - but it was there.

Mycroft sobbed, feeling it now on every beat - flickering, whispering to him, speaking to his fingertips.

A pulse.

Greg was alive.

He was alive, and they were leaving this place.

They were going to live.

Mycroft didn't wait another moment. He reached for the collar around his neck, dug his fingers beneath the iron band and gritted his teeth, cracking the hinge apart with a single wrench. He slugged it off to the floor, and scrabbled for his wrists, snapping one chain and then the other.

He lifted Greg into his arms as easily as if he were bundled fabric - cradling him, crying into his
hair. Greg was unconscious.

He'd know nothing of this. Someday it would all be a memory.

*We will live. We will live, and you will be safe and happy. And I will never let you leave my side.*

Whatever had drawn away the guards, it wouldn't last.

They had to move.

Mycroft steadied Greg against his chest, panting as he looked around the darkness. The rush of blood to his system had sharpened his senses into painful precision - he could see every footprint in the dust, every cobweb in the rafters, hear the scratching of rats in the walls. He could hear Greg, too - feel it in every inch of the weight in his arms: that quick and fragile drumming, skittish as a frightened rabbit. Mycroft held on tightly, feeling his own heart speed in sympathy.

The single exit would lead to a single corridor - and then a single stairwell.

He was prepared to fight - but not prepared to risk Greg. Any attempt just to walk out of here was insane. They would never make it.

There was only one alternative.

As Commander Elwood appeared in the mouth of the tunnel, pale and carrying a rifle, Olivia's heart began to relax.

She then heard Kit snarl beside her - and before a word could be said Kit had hurled herself across the room, raging at the top of her lungs.

"You utter fucking BACKSTABBING PIECE OF - "

Elwood lunged backwards in alarm, throwing up the rifle.

Olivia screamed. She flung her hands across her eyes.

Silence slammed down.

When Olivia dared to look, she found the two of them locked together - Kit's fists buried in the front of his uniform, wrenching him up onto his toes; the nose of Elwood's rifle jutting into her stomach. They were staring at each other, panting.

Olivia didn't breathe.

"I will," she heard Elwood say, his voice hard. He searched Kit's face, his eyes wide and his lips pale. "Don't make me, Kit. I don't want to. Not after all this."

Kit didn't loosen her grip in the slightest.

"You," she breathed, "are a pretty little prancing whore. And I will make you pay for everything you've done."
Olivia's mouth opened.

Commander Elwood.

"You don't understand," he said. His eyes flashed over Kit's shoulder, to where TJ and Olivia stood frozen still. Discomfort tightened his expression. "But you will. You just have to listen for a minute. Alright?"

Kit pushed her tongue across her teeth.

"My squad," she snarled. "My team. You got them butchered like fucking animals. They were my men. Our men. You betrayed them. Give me one good reason I should listen to a single second of your bleating."

"I saved your life," Elwood said, his expression stony. "And I'm trying to save it now."

Kit's face wracked. "You sold us to Excultus, you vicious little shitweasel!"

"I'm with them for a reason! Christ, just listen and you'll - "

"What reason? That you're a disloyal little tosser, who needs his guts ripped out of his throat?"

Luke's expression worked. He tightened his grip on the rifle, steeling himself with a breath.

"I don't want to hurt you," he muttered to her. "That's why you're standing here. Not dead. Now let me go. And let me talk."

Kit's jaw locked solid. She stayed exactly as she was.

Olivia swallowed the fear rising in her throat. She decided that she dared.

"Why did you do it, Commander Elwood?" She took the smallest of steps forward. "Why did you do that to Greg?"

Luke bit into his cheek, his eyes still fixed on Kit.

"Greg's my friend. It's - not his fault Holmes messed with his head. I hate what's happened to him. To all of you."

Kit bared her teeth, hissing at him through them. "What the fuck're you talking about?"

"He's a vampire." Luke's eyes flashed. "Holmes. And he's a fucking murderer, and a liar. He's lied to you all from the start."

Olivia ignored the sharp contraction of her stomach. "What about?"

"Everything." Elwood glanced at her, a vicious flash of his eyes. "He used to be with Excultus. He was one of them."

Olivia's first thought was that it couldn't be true.

Then her memory showed her a basement in Brixton - dates, written in darkness on a wall - four missing years.

Oh.
"They took him in," Elwood said, shaking. "Looked after him. They're a vampire rights group. They're not - "

Kit's lip curled with a sneer. "Bullshit."

"On my fucking grave." Elwood stared at her, white-pale. "Holmes is the works. He's evil, Kit. He was one of them over a decade ago - but he wanted power - wanted to lead them all - wanted them hunting humans, torturing people - "

"Cooked this up yourself, did you?"

"It's true!" Elwood yelled, his face contorting. "He went mad! He turned on them, he killed most of them in a single night - entire fucking families - it's all true. And he's poisoned Greg. He's drinking from him. He's twisted Greg's mind."

TJ began to bark, raging and snarling at full volume.

"Back the fuck away or I'll kill her!" Elwood roared, spit flying. His fists clenched on the rifle.

Olivia's heart lurched. She grabbed for TJ, hauling him back by the scruff of the neck. "TJ! TJ, don't - !"

TJ bristled under her hands, unleashing a few more tearing barks.

"Stop it!" she begged him. "Just - stop it, stop it! You're not bloody helping!"

TJ strained against her hold, raging.

Kit's eyes flashed sideways, her fists still bunched in Elwood's combat jacket.

"Easy, fuzzball." She lifted her chin. "We're all fine here. Sit yourself the fuck down."

TJ shuddered. His barks lowered reluctantly into growls, fur still on end, his teeth still bared.

Kit looked back at Elwood, cold.

"How d'you know all this?" she said. "Where's your evidence?"

His face worked. "Kieran told me."

"Who's Kieran?"

Elwood braced himself.

"One of them. He's - the same. Vampire. Holmes killed his parents nine years ago, and got away with it. Kieran's with Excultus. He's been working with them to bring Holmes to justice."

Olivia felt nausea roll up from her stomach. She couldn't stay quiet.

"Kieran Matthews?" she demanded, in outrage. "He attacked Greg! I was there! He killed Sam! He let someone kill Emma! He's a - "

Elwood's eyes rolled.

"Jesus Christ... Holmes killed all those people!" he shouted. "He's a liar! He's played you all for
fucking idiots all this time, can't you see? He's trying to blame Excultus for what he's doing!"

Kit's fists clenched in his jacket, jerking his attention back to her.

"I've been in a cage," she growled, "like an animal - for five fucking days."

"You've been safe for five fucking days." Luke swallowed, hard. "I saved you. Why aren't you listening to me? Excultus want you, Kit. They'll take both of us. We can help them."

Kit shook her head, gazing into his face.

"You dig a rifle into my ribs," she said, "and you think I'm gonna trust you an inch?"

Elwood twitched.

"Let me go," he said, "and I'll drop the rifle." He wet his lips - a nervous flash of his tongue. "I'm not the bad guy, Kit. We got it wrong."

Kit huffed.

Olivia watched, her heart sinking, as Kit's hands loosened in his jacket.

They lowered carefully to her sides.

"Step back," he bit out.

Kit took two measured steps back. "When did you meet this guy?"

Elwood held his ground, watching her every movement.

"Two weeks ago. The night Greg got attacked in his flat." His eyes flickered to Olivia. "You know Holmes arranged all that, don't you? A friend of his. Then shot the guy, so he could pretend to rescue Greg."

Olivia couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Jesus Christ..." she muttered.

"It's true," Luke snarled. "Holmes has gotten into your head too, then? He's had people like you before. You and Greg. He killed the last one by accident - years ago - can't control himself. Kieran told me the night we met."

As Olivia opened her mouth to shout, she spotted Kit's right hand twitch at her side - a sudden stiffening of her fingers.

*Shush.*

Olivia shut her mouth at once. Her heart beat swiftly in the quiet.

"When did Kieran approach you?" Kit asked, keeping her voice level.

Elwood drew a long breath.

"He - came over when Holmes had driven Greg away. After Holmes had threatened me. Warned me off Greg. Wouldn't even let me see him."

"What then?"

"Kieran - asked if I was police. He told me he wanted to warn us about Holmes. That Holmes is a
vampire, and an evil son-of-a-bitch, and that he's killing people again. Kieran told me who he was, and who Excultus really are - what Holmes did to them nine years ago - told me about how they're trying to stop him."

Olivia's heart ached behind her ribs. Staying silent was torture.

"And he asked for your help?" Kit prompted him, calm.

"Yeah. Asked me to find out if Holmes had poisoned Greg already..." Elwood shifted, keeping a firm hold on the rifle. "Pretty obvious he had. Kieran told me what to look for. Greg's showing every single sign. He was long gone before we could do anything about it. He's been Holmes's puppet for months."

"And you reported back to Kieran, did you?" Kit said.

"Yeah. Yeah, I did..." Elwood bit his cheek. "And I told him when Greg came to me with this - plan that Holmes had come up with... wanting to capture someone from Excultus to interrogate. Holmes was trying to figure out how close they'd got to stopping him. He even made Greg think it was all his idea."

As he spoke, Olivia's eyes found their way to Kit's fingertips. She watched them give a tiny twitch - beckoning.

Closer.

Carefully, Olivia eased her hold on the back of TJ's neck.

He stirred beneath her hands, inching forward.

"So - Holmes has just been using Greg?" Kit said, with a frown. "He's not actually in love with him?"

Elwood shuddered. "No. It's chemicals... chemicals in their spit. He's got Greg believing everything he says. Maybe other people, too. Vickery for sure." His expression soured, glancing at Olivia. "And present company."

"Mycroft's never bitten me," Olivia murmured, weary.

Elwood huffed. "Told you to say that, has he?"

Olivia rolled her eyes. She tried not to notice TJ easing imperceptibly forward, another inch whenever Elwood focused on Kit.

"Wait," Kit said. "Look, I don't get it - and I'm trying to. How d'you know about these chemicals? This is... PT-3-... what the fuck is it called?"

"PT-309," Elwood mumbled.

"That's it. It's - mind control, right?"

"To a bastard like Holmes. Yeah." Elwood shifted, his jaw squared. "Not to all of them. It's - part of the bite, but - it relaxes you. It's only dangerous in the wrong hands."

In the pounding panic of Olivia's thoughts, something important clicked into place.

_Ah._
"Right..." Kit said. "And - look, mate - can we trust Kieran?"

"Yes," said Elwood, without a thought. "Yeah. He's legit."

"How d'you know?" said Kit, as TJ crept ever closer. "How can you be sure he's not just... I dunno - twisted all this round to make Mycroft into a villain - to get you to help him?"

Elwood tightened his grip nervously on the rifle - squeezing it for courage.

"He's - ... Kieran and me - ..." He flushed. "I don't care if you don't understand."

"It's - fine. I know you go for both." Kit lowered her voice. "So - he's - "

"He's looking after me," Elwood said. His throat tightened. "Vampires aren't what we thought. They get treated like shit their whole lives. Kieran's suffered. They all have. Bastards like Holmes give them a bad name."

Kit quietly shook her head. "This is a lot to take in."


Kit's fingers stiffened subtly at her side, stopping TJ.

He was now within one long leap of Luke Elwood.

Olivia held her breath, her fingers ready on the gun in her pocket. She didn't know how fast she could draw it. She had a feeling she was about to find out.

"So - that's why you...?" Kit asked, her voice low.

Elwood flushed with distress. "M'sorry. I - hid you in the park. It was pitch-black, so... I just had to wait until everyone was busy fussing over Greg, then I got you away. Brought you here. And nobody's hurt you, have they? Nobody's bitten you. So that's proof."

His expression tightened.

"They want you to join them. Excultus. I told Kieran about you. He said they need people like us."

Kit raised her eyebrows. "To - become a - "

"If you want. Or - or like me - w-with Kieran." Elwood swallowed. "One of theirs."

Kit paused, taking this in.

Olivia watched a number of things cross her face - some of it, she knew was feigned; some of it was not.

"You were a good mate," Kit murmured at last. "A good boss. We've - had a lot of years together."

Elwood waited, gazing at her in ashen-faced hope. "Help me take the bastard down, Kit. They need our help."

"You - gave Greg to Excultus, too?"
"N-No. I didn't know they'd found him. I only heard about it when Vickery - ..." He swallowed. "He's gone, Kit. Greg doesn't exist anymore. He's just a bloody husk."

Kit took a breath.

"Yeah," she muttered. "Yeah. Maybe... you're right."

She held out a hand to him.

Elwood's expression softened with relief.

He hesitated for a moment more - then reached out to take it.

As their fingers locked, several things happened in quick succession.

Olivia drew her gun at once. Before it was free from her coat pocket, she saw TJ start to lunge. He leapt towards Elwood, every muscle unleashing, his muzzle shrinking back from his teeth as he opened his jaw to bite.

In the same moment, Kit wrenched at Luke's hand.

She dragged him forwards off balance; he lurched into a stagger.

Elwood reacted at once.

His face twisted. He raised the rifle and fired with purpose. A bolt of green light erupted from the muzzle.

Olivia saw it flash directly towards her.

It was gone before she could even jump - and with no rush of pain, she thought at first it had missed - gone off somewhere beneath her arm.

Then heat erupted across her ribs.

Shocked released her grip. The gun slid from her hand. Before it even hit the ground, pain blistered its way up through Olivia's throat and came screaming from her mouth, wrenching her open in agony. She clawed for her stomach as she staggered backwards, lost her footing and collapsed to the concrete, feeling something between her ribs burn andrip and wrack through her insides like acid fire. Her own howls rang in her ears.

As she arched in agony against the floor, her vision whiting out, desperate hands closed around her wrists.

"Christ - Christ, Christ - "

Kit.

Kit's voice.

"Olivia - " Kit's voice in panic. "Let me see - "

Pain dissolved the words into nothing.
All love, half languor, and half fire,
Like saints that at the stake expire,
And lift their raptured looks on high,
As though it were a joy to die.

- Lord Byron
'Mazeppa' (1819)

The wound was deep.

She was panicking - fighting, screaming, struggling to keep Kit away from it. It was bad, and she knew it. The shot had burned straight through her clothing, through her skin and into flesh.

Kit could smell it.

"Steady!" she barked, seizing Olivia's wrists, heaving them aside so she could see the damage. "Steady - "

She didn't do this for civilians.

She did it for soldiers - soldiers who, in panic, listened for their commander's voice.

Olivia wasn't a soldier. The order meant nothing. She continued to scream and struggle, fighting Kit, trying to claw at the wound, trying to get hold of the pain and grab it and pull it out of her.

"Olivia!" There were no supplies here. No medical packs. Nothing to help. "Olivia, listen to me - listen - "

Olivia's screams drowned her out. She was going into shock.

Christ. Oh, Christ. Christ, don't die.

It wasn't meant to be you. It was meant to be me.

Not you.

Her own heart was going to kill her faster than the damage. The panic was shutting down her systems already.

Christ. There was nothing for it.

Kit bent, trying to scoop Olivia into her arms. Olivia struggled and fought and screamed in pain, straining against the concrete to try and writhe away from the hole that the bastard had burned through her. If she was a soldier, Kit would have shouted - ordered her to lie the fuck still, and let me see the fucking wound, sergeant - but military wasn't helping. It was only making things worse.
As Olivia struggled against her, Kit gritted her teeth and tried to take a proper grip. She didn't have the strength or the calm. Five fucking days - no food - barely able to sleep. Christ, you're going to die. You're going to die in my arms. Stop fighting. Stop fighting me. Don't fucking die in my arms.

A black shape, as big as a bear, appeared at her side.

"Medic!" Kit screamed at him, still trying to wrestle Olivia into her arms as she kicked and shrieked. "Get a medic! Go ahead, get out, get a medic! Tell them we're coming!"

TJ ignored her. He lunged forward with a grunt, butted Kit hard in the chest and shoved her backwards - then lowered himself down to Olivia.

As he leant over her, surrounded her and began to purr, Kit lost her fucking mind.

"She needs a fucking MEDIC!" she raged. "She doesn't need a hug, she's going to fucking - "

The purring only deepened - louder, harder, drowning her out.

It didn't feel like a normal sound. It rumbled outwards in waves, rolling and thickening as it spread through the room.

Kit wasn't breathing. She could feel her rage withering, warping into shock.

"What - what are you - ..."

TJ continued to purr.

Olivia began to gasp between her screams - deep and heaving breaths, sobbing. They opened into longer breaths - slower - huge, desperate breaths, her face twisting with pain around them.

The purring grew lower and lower as she breathed.

Kit couldn't speak. All urge to shout had vaporized. She could only watch, panting in fading fear as Olivia began to quieten with the sound. Her fingers unlocked from their claw-like grip, trembling - Kit watched, as they found their way into thick black fur.

They gripped, weakly.

TJ stirred.

As he nuzzled at Olivia's face, his yellow eyes closed in despair. The purr rolled on and on, over and around her, seeping through her every cell.

Her eyes closed, too.

She breathed, and held onto his fur, and she listened.

Kit swallowed, her heart straining.

She crawled to TJ's side. She put a hand upon his back, and the vibration rolled at once up her arm, slugging her with a fresh wave of calm.

She took a breath.

They had to move.
"We've gotta get her out of here." She knew this calm wasn't normal - she didn't care. "Get her out to a medic, yeah? Get that scratch patched up..."

TJ continued to purr, nosing into Olivia's hair. All pain and panic had washed from her face. She was just breathing now, lost - half-asleep.

"What if we lay her on your back?" Kit murmured. "You carry her. I'll cover you."

She glanced across the room; a flicker of muffled anger crossed her heart.

"Left us his gun, at least..." The rifle laid discarded in the mouth of the tunnel - there was blood spattered around it. "D'you get a good bite out of the tosser?"

A distressed whine sounded amidst the purr; TJ shook.

"Doesn't matter..." Kit patted his back, rubbing the shake away. "You chose right, mate. You made the right choice."

As she was gathered gently from the floor, Olivia stirred in Kit's arms.

"Kit...?" Barely a whisper.

Kit's heart tensed. She laid Olivia with care on TJ's back, still rumbling low beneath his fur. "S'okay, gorgeous," she murmured. The purr hitched. "Just rest. We're getting you out of here."


Kit gripped her hand.

"I'll come back. I'll come find them, when we've got you a doctor. Promise."

They began to move - TJ limping, every step painful and steady; Kit holding Olivia in place on his back.

She bent to scoop the rifle from the floor as they passed.

She charged it one-handed, switched the heat to the highest setting, and followed him in silence along the tunnel.

Greg's weight was easy. Climbing with him safely was not.

Brackets for metal shelving, embedded into the concrete, provided the only pausing places all the way up to the rafters. Mycroft found a way to rest Greg's unconscious body over his shoulder, leaving his hands and feet free to climb. He moved as slowly as he dared, struggling not to unbalance Greg's weight, edging closer and closer with every second to the safety of the shadows above the striplights.

There were industrial ducts in the ceiling, just visible in the gloom.

Oxygen supply. Ventilation.
They would lead to the air.

As he reached the rafters, panting, Mycroft hooked his arm around the nearest steel support bracket. He took a moment just to listen - just to feel.

The gentle heartbeat drummed against his shoulder.

He shut his eyes a moment, swallowing - then let it urge him onwards.

The nearest duct echoed with the smell of clean, chemically-purified air. It was sweet and insidious, sharp inside his nose. Filtration systems. Advanced ones. An obstacle at best; impassable at worst. Mycroft gritted his teeth, eased Greg back over his shoulder, and climbed his way along to the next.

As he moved, he felt his muscles pulsing and pounding with a vigour he hadn't felt in years. Some of it, he knew, was resolve. The rest was brutal biology. Greg's strength had bled from one of them to the other as securely and efficiently as a file transfer. The potential for lasting damage was - ...

*For God's sake, do not contemplate that now. Let us survive this minute first.*

The duct he next approached belched forth a reeking array of metropolitan odours - traffic, pollution, plastic and people. Human food. Human sweat.

The human world.

Mycroft had never been so glad to smell London in all his life.

He scrabbled his way across from bracket to bracket, eased Greg slowly up into the metal opening, then followed him with an undignified grunt.

As his feet drew up out of sight, there came the clatter of the warehouse door below. Mycroft froze, cutting his breath. At this height, it was unlikely they would hear him - but he was taking no chances.

" - are we supposed to *take them with us*, if he's so close to - "

"Wait - where - "

They had seen the empty chains. Mycroft bit into his lip, trying to slow his heartbeat.

"*Ohhh, fucking hell* - oh, *shit* - "

"*Shit, shit* - but how can - "

"*Holmes is out. He's loose. Fuck* - did he - "

"He must have. Shit."

Mycroft laid a shaking hand on Greg's chest - felt him breathe - told himself that, for this second, all was well.

"But he's - he's taken the body - Jesus, why would he take the - "

"I don't know. Okay, we need to get out of here. Quick. We need to tell high command that he's broken out. Shit, shit..."
The pair of them left at speed.

Mycroft listened to them go, closing his eyes.

A week ago, hearing Excultus fear him would have brought a savage pride.

It was what he'd wanted them to feel that night nine years ago. He'd wanted them to feel preyed on - hounded - to realise what they had done. He'd wanted them to know the horror that he'd felt, opening a bedroom door and finding there laid out for his eyes a shock of red - drenched across white covers, a person opened from throat to navel - the realisation of what he was seeing.

No guilt would ever compare to that moment.

Mycroft panted as he looked down at Greg - pale and unconscious, shining with sweat, the faintest touch of blue now fuzzing at his fingertips.

He didn't care if Excultus feared him. He didn't care if he'd entered their history as a monster, a blood traitor, a murderer whose cruelty had far exceeded its cause.

There was one person in the world who thought he wasn't a monster.

That was enough.

Gathering Greg against his chest, Mycroft began to crawl.

He didn't know the layout of the building. His five days here had been spent hooded and chained - voices, echoes - he remembered stairs at several points. Wherever they had been imprisoned, he and Greg had probably been secured at the deepest level.

It meant there was a long crawl ahead: a crawl, and quite likely a climb.

He would just have to hope that their passage went unnoticed.

TJ seemed to know where he was going. At the end of the tunnel to the prison, he stopped close to the wall for a while, his purr quietening as he gazed into the darkness ahead. Kit had a feeling he was seeing something she couldn't. She crouched beside him and waited, trying not to count the passing seconds.

Keeping Olivia's heart-rate down would buy them time - but it was minutes at the most.

That wound was too close to organs.

They didn't have time to be cautious.

At last, low to the ground, TJ set off at a sneak once more. Kit followed him without a sound. The feeling of a rifle in her hands was reassuring - the lack of a combat visor was not. Without thermals, shot calibration and targeting, this game got an awful lot harder to beat, and the stakes were too high now to lose. Olivia's wrist-set light gave her a dome of ten metres' light and no further.

After that, she had to rely on TJ's eyes.
The space they were passing through must be massive. After what felt like an age, there came a doorway and a concrete stairwell, up which TJ limped step-by-step, whimpering a little whenever Olivia slipped on his back. Kit held her steady, and they climbed their way up.

At the top of the stairwell, there came another door.

As soon as Kit opened it, TJ stiffened.

She froze with him.

Voices - a distant muffle, echoing against cold concrete walls.

"- worrying news. It's not entirely clear yet how this has happened, but we have a situation."

"A situation?"

"Mm. Holmes has - seemingly escaped his bonds. It appears that he's now loose in the building."

Kit's heart clenched. She glanced down at TJ, who gazed back at her wide-eyed.

"God," breathed another voice. "Do we know where? I mean - i-is he - "

"Little is known," the first speaker said. "It's only been discovered in the last few minutes. Suffice to say, we have the greatest interest in him not leaving the building alive."

"Holy shit..."

"The chances are that he'll try for this entrance. I need you all to stay here, in case he attempts in the next few minutes. The others are on their way."

"Wait - what? What if Scotland Yard send another raid?"

"They won't. They only just lost their first, and their commander has now defected. They'll still be trying to figure out what has happened."

"Right, so - so we should just - "

"For God's sake... just stay here, all of you - and if Holmes appears, then kill the bastard. How difficult is that to comprehend? It's a straight bloody tunnel, and there are five of you."

Kit felt TJ's eyes lift to her again.

At the sound of footsteps, she quickly let the door fall shut.

"Down there," she intoned. "Now."

TJ retreated swiftly down the stairs, slinking low to keep Olivia on his back.

Kit propped her rifle against the wall, cracked her knuckles, and positioned herself ready behind the door.

As it opened, and a figure stepped through, she reacted at speed. Before he'd even realised she was there, she jerked him through, wrenched a hand around his mouth and executed a quick upwards snap of his neck. The poor bastard let out a shocked, muffled groan into her palm. As he went limp in her arms, she let him fall.
The stairs did the rest.

He flopped into a pile at the bottom, bent backwards on himself and upside down.

As TJ rejoined her at the door, Kit muttered, "One down. Five to go."

TJ emitted a faint whine.

"We haven't got another choice," she said, her voice low. "She needed medical care five minutes ago. Unless you've got a better plan?"

TJ shuffled, uneasy.

"I'll handle it," Kit said. She knelt down, reached for Olivia's arm and carefully loosened the wrist-set, sliding it free over her hand. The light wobbled around them. "Give myself a fighting chance... you hang back here. Keep her heart-rate down."

She pulled the wrist-set on, then reached for her rifle.

"I'll take out as many as I can," she said, charging it with a whine. "Maybe clear a path for Mycroft, too. If you have to drag her out of here by the hair, do it. She's going to live."

Before he could make another sound, Kit shouldered the rifle, pushed open the door and walked through.

It was indeed a straight bloody tunnel - dimly-lit, concrete walls - and the sudden appearance of a dome of light caught their attention well enough.

"Who the - " one of them said.

They were his last words. Kit dropped him with a bolt of green light to the chest, then with her second shot took out the one beside him. By this point, they'd started to run - one away from her, two towards, and their speed made them harder to hit. Christ, these things are fast. Shooting into their path panicked them enough to slow them down - but as the approaching hostiles closed to twenty metres, Kit realised there was one way this was going to go.

She flung the rifle aside, lowered her centre of gravity, and was ready as the first one reached her.

Five fucking days, and taking a hammerfist to someone's groin had never felt quite so good. The noise he let out was the best thing she'd ever had groaned in her ear. As he sank shuddering to the ground, she went for a knife-strike at the mastoid muscles of his mate's neck.

He was quicker than she'd thought - more protective of his neck. He blocked her forearm, grabbed it, and tried to twist.

Unfortunately for him, he'd forgotten about his groin.

Curved knee strike - bam. The twisting of her forearm helped Kit turn. It gave the slam more power, and she felt something crunch. The unfortunate tosser's wail underwent a distinct increase in pitch as he folded in the middle, grappling for his balls. Kit followed the momentum of the strike around, and took the chance to stamp - hard - on the hands of the first poor bastard, now attempting to get to his feet.

Roundhouse kick - bam. Clean and easy. The guy was no longer so precious about his neck now that his groin was inside-out, and it was a shame for him. He would probably miss his neck.
As his head cracked to one side, and he slumped to the ground without a sound, Kit turned back to face his pal - who was still cradling his hammerfisted testicles with both hands.

It never felt quite right putting a whimpering man into a carotid restraint. Kit supposed there was no-one here to see - and she'd had a bad fucking day. He thrashed a bit, clutching at her forearm as she clamped it hard around his neck and squeezed - no longer whimpering, just mouthing and thrashing. Kit held on tight and counted.

It took until six.

More developed neck muscles? Something to do with the circulatory system? Six wasn't bad.

As her new friend slid unconscious to the ground, Kit awarded herself a solid 8.5. She straightened up, adjusted her tank-top, and realised there was one of them left.

As she set eyes on him, the vampire let out a panicked shriek.

"Oh my God, no! Please!" He cringed back in horror against the wall. "Please don't!"

Kit raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

She jabbed her thumb along the tunnel. "Off you fuck, then."

He didn't need telling twice.

As he sprinted away into the darkness, Kit kicked open the door to the stairwell.

"Coast's clear," she said. "C'mon. Sorry that took a while."

The ventilation shaft circled the perimeter of the warehouse as it ascended towards the surface. As soon as he began to suspect it, Mycroft realised the scale of the task ahead of him. He gritted his teeth, held Greg closer and forced himself onwards.

Over the next few minutes, with careful experimentation, he discovered it was easier to slide Greg than to carry him. The space was not large enough to keep him properly lifted, the inner surface of the duct was smooth, and time was not on their side. Dignity was not a concern in this moment. Survival mattered - nothing else. If they lived, he would add it to the catalogue of things for which Greg Lestrade might forgive him someday.

Moving with more speed now, and listening every second to the frantic thump of Greg's heart, it wasn't long before they reached a junction in the tunnel: three ways onward.

Mycroft took a moment to smell. He felt like a bloodhound, but there was nothing for it. Melding together scent, a suspicion that the path onwards would continue circling the entire warehouse, and gut instinct, Mycroft opted for the right-hand path.

He was relieved a minute later to find it ascending at a sharper angle towards the surface.

Christ almighty.
A long straight, and several turns; a harrowing five minutes in which the shaft seemed to narrow around them, squeezing, as Mycroft's awareness of Greg's need for oxygen now more than ever grew exponentially. To Mycroft's horror, there then came a ladder downwards - a ladder far too long - and a duct at its end that rattled slightly as it was stepped upon.

Clearly, the thing would adequately support a person's weight - but noise was now an issue.

This shaft was not enveloped in the earth; it was surrounded by air.

Their movement through it could be tracked.

Mycroft only hoped it was a short section. There was no way of knowing. He laid Greg down gently, feeling a rush of fresh despair as his black-and-white vision in the darkness told him something was wrong with the colour of Greg's lips.

They were turning blue - he just couldn't see it.

Mycroft kissed them, shaking. They did not stir.

"Please fight," he whispered against Greg's mouth. "Please. You're so strong. Please don't give up. Five minutes more."

He began to crawl again.

At first, he paused every few moments to listen - but as the duct stretched on, trembling and creaking with even the most painstaking care, Mycroft realised that speed was now more critical than stealth. He hurried on, his knees and elbows bruised from their repeated bumping against the ventilation shaft, and stopped only as he became aware of voices up ahead.

Staring through the darkness, he spotted their source - an opening in the shaft - an exit into an internal space.

Mycroft listened, his heart pounding.

Two voices, male: one in particular that seemed unsettlingly familiar, but distorted by distress.

" - just f-fucking t-tore into me - fuck, it hurts - fuck - I c-can't move my - ..."

"It's fine, okay? We need to keep moving. Just - lean on me and walk."

"C-Can't we - ... Christ, just for a second - please - "

There came a sharp sigh of frustration. "Look, we - ... no. We can't. If Holmes is loose, then we need to get out of here now. We need to find another exit before he finds us."

"B-But - but my leg - f-fuck, Kieran, please just wait - "

As Mycroft recognised the voice, his jaw fell.

Elwood.

"Look, you can cry about your leg later! Alright?" The second voice was agitated, uncaring - a voice that didn't bother to hide its impatience. "We need to keep moving! If anyone sees us, I'll get sent to the entrance. They've got it guarded so he can't get out. But your precious Scotland Yard are watching it, too - and if they launch another bloody raid - "
Amelia.

Amelia was here.

Scotland Yard were here.

" - I'm not getting gunned down in this dump, alright? Everyone else has screwed this up! Everyone! They were meant to be dead! Both of them! I brought them Lestrade - I brought them Holmes - I brought them both in, and now they've just fucking vanished!"

Kieran, Mycroft realising with a rush, closing his eyes. Of course.

The manager. Gastrell's.

I should have seen.

"And now you're whining at me about your fucking leg, and you think I care?" Kieran spat, even as Elwood sobbed and pleaded with him. "You brought the werewolf in here in the first place! What do you want? Sympathy? Get the fuck up, or I'm leaving you."

"No! No, don't - please, don't - d-don't leave me - "

"Then get the fuck up!"

As they left, there were no more words - just Elwood's stifled sobs of pain.

Mycroft listened to them grow distant, his heart thudding. Silence fell.

He wrapped his arm around Greg's waist, drawing him close - placed a gentle kiss upon his temple, and began to crawl.
The ambulance team wanted to separate TJ from Olivia.

Kit explained the situation to them in short, functional words.

"Stay with her," she said, standing grey-faced at the doors of the ambulance, as the team finished hooking Olivia up to oxygen. TJ looked so enormous inside the space that he didn't seem real - a teddy bear, squashed inside a doll's house. None of it seemed real. "Don't leave her."

TJ snorted, lowering his snout to Olivia's forehead. He nosed at her, gently.

Kit's heart slugged against the back of her throat.

She shut the doors with a slam, pushed her hands into her pockets, and watched it drive away.

Full lights. Full siren.

Full honours.

She wasn't sure how long she stood there in the rain. She felt too hot in the night air - too hot, ever since they surfaced. People kept trying to put a shock blanket round her, offer her a coat. They didn't realise she was wearing the blood and the dirt for warmth.

When the voice spoke at her shoulder, it cut through the pounding mess of her thoughts.

"May I speak with you?"

Kit turned to find Amelia Vickery beside her, holding out a packet of cigarettes.

Kit's heart heaved. She took three, lit them all, and smoked them as they talked.

"What happened in there?"

"Christ... where to start." There was only one place, really. "Luke Elwood's a backstabbing whore."

"Luke Elwood?"
"Excultus agent. Looks like he was targeted by them specially, because of his link to Greg... seduced him. Literally."

Kit snorted, shaking her head as she blew smoke.

"Some arsehole called Kieran? Sold him some story about Excultus being lovely chaps really, and Dr Holmes is a psychotic killer... load of bullshit. Luke's coked up to the eyeballs on homemade Spanish Fly. Wasn't, when he met the guy. He should've seen through that crock of shit in a heartbeat - should've told someone, for Christ's sake - should've checked... instead, they sang him just the song he wanted to hear, and he fucking lapped it up."

"Did you see any sign of Mycroft or Lestrade?"

Kit returned all three cigarettes into her mouth, dragging on them hard.

"No Greg," she muttered. "Not a thing. But there might be hope for Mycroft. As we were on our way out, heard one of them say he was loose in the building. He's in there somewhere. He's alive."

Vickery's face showed no emotion whatsoever - but her pause lasted just a little too long.

"And what happened to Miss Reid?"

Kit ignored the shake of her hand.


Vickery's eyes shuttered. "Along with Mycroft."

"Yeah..." Kit pressed the cigarettes against her bottom lip. "Guess that gives me two good reasons to get back in there, then."

Vickery's eyebrows rose.

"You've - been through an ordeal, Medlock. Five days of one. I would never ask you."

"Then don't," said Kit. She held Vickery's eyes. "I'll offer. Let me lead the second squad into the building. We'll get Dr Holmes out of there alive, or we'll make the tossers sorry."

Vickery was silent for a moment, reading her face.

She gave a short, stiff nod.

"Very good, Medlock."

Kit took another drag on the cigarettes, shutting her eyes. "Back-up team here?"

"Yes."

"They suited up?"

"To my knowledge."

"And have they got water pistols," Kit asked, darkly, "or has someone given them the proper
fucking guns?"

Amelia Vickery raised an eyebrow. "I understand they've been outfitted with the proper fucking guns, yes."

"Good." Kit took one last drag, dropped the cigarettes, and crushed them under her boot. "No time like the present. What comms channel are we using?"

From a makeshift command station in the back of a van, Amelia Vickery watched the second Armed Response squad approach the tunnel.

They were walking in the footsteps of dead men. Her heart heaved as she watched them on the visual display, holding headphones over her ears.

"All units!" barked a voice, carrying clear over comms. "Listen!"

Every single officer on Great Windmill Street - every medic, every tech, every member of uniform - turned their heads as one.

"You are now listening to the dulcet tones of Armed Response Commander Medlock. And I understand that when most of you woke up this morning, you didn't think you'd be storming into a fucking vampire lair. When I woke up this morning, I didn't think I'd ever be walking out of one. But here the fuck we are."

Amelia watched the squad come to a halt on screen, standing in formation at the entrance - rifles primed, backs straight, heads high.

"And I understand," Kit said, her voice ringing in every ear, "that you guys might be used to being the back-up squad. The last resort. The ones who pick up the guns when all else has failed. But here the fuck you are, listening to your back-up commander."

Amelia Vickery closed her eyes.

"And yes," snarled Kit. "All else has failed! The shit's hit the fan! We've been vigorously fucked in the arse by someone who was meant to have our back - someone who was meant to lead you right - but right now good people are gonna suffer without us! And I'm not standing for that! Dr Holmes might be a posh twat, but he's our posh twat! And we're having him back! So here the fuck we are!"

A shiver wracked down Vickery's spine.

She slammed the button for comms. "Find a way or make one, Medlock!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Kit barked. "All units, with me! Follow my signals, stay the fuck in formation, keep those lights on bright - and one of you, for Christ's sake - bring me Luke Elwood's balls!"

Roars went up over comms.

"Yes, commander!"

"Yes, ma'am!"
"Aye aye, ma'am!"

In perfect formation, they strode forwards into the tunnel.

Amelia Vickery's heart stormed with them.

Mycroft felt the first breath from some distance away.

At first, he didn't dare believe his senses - blaming wishful thinking, blaming panic. He kept crawling, found a ladder and carried Greg its full height, feeling hope climbing with him every rung, until he reached the lip of another ventilation pipe, eased Greg up into it - and then felt it with certainty.

Pure, and clean, and cold - a night breeze.

Surface air. Close enough to have life in it, to be moving - close enough to touch his face and gasp his name.

They were almost there.

He didn't know how far he'd carried Greg - how long it had taken - but it was almost at an end.

"Darling..." Mycroft's heart broke as he whispered, carrying Greg against his chest. "We're nearly there... just a little longer. Just a little further."

For the past ten minutes, he'd told himself it was his imagination slowing Greg's feverish pulse. With safety so close, it was harder to ignore. He pushed back Greg's hair, his fingertips trembling in the dark.

"You will be fine," he whispered, pale. "Any moment now." A pang crossed his heart. He pressed his lips to Greg's forehead - cold; as cold as death. "I want you to live, darling. That is what I want."

The duct continued for another minute, the breeze growing stronger with every passing second.

At last, the tunnel opened into a wider vertical shaft - fifty metres, straight upwards into darkness.

Even Mycroft's eyes strained to find their way to the top.

A grate - a barred grate - beyond it, almost certainly a short tunnel to the surface. The breeze eddied and swirled here in the pit of the shaft, whirling around him as he gazed up at the walls, Greg held tightly in his arms.

The walls were poured concrete - almost featureless. A slight indent every ten metres, marking height. A slightly roughened texture.

Alone, he'd have thought it possible.

But carrying the weight of another grown man?

"God help me," Mycroft whispered, heart tightening in his chest.
They could not go back. It was some time since he'd made a decision of which path to take - they couldn't return that far.

Greg was - ... exhausted. He needed medical attention.

He'd needed it for some time.

And he needed it with increasing urgency.

*Dear God, Greg... if only you were conscious... you're the brave one. You're the strong one. Christ help me. I cannot do this.*

Recalling that Greg had given all his strength for a reason, Mycroft approached the nearest wall. He brushed his shaking fingertips across it, trying to get a sense of purchase.

Certainly not enough to linger.

At speed... perhaps. With momentum.

But then, to carry Greg upon his shoulder would take balance and care - a steady pace - a single slip would be the death of them both. A fall the height of Nelson's Column, and a concrete floor below.

Mycroft shut his eyes, feeling fear coursing through his throat and seizing his muscles.

*No. No, if this is to be done, it must be done with faith.*

Alone, he'd have thought this wholly possible. He was not yet alone.

That was all the reason he needed to try.

Negotiating Greg over his shoulder - testing his weight, ensuring he was balanced - Mycroft told himself this was just a case of moving smoothly at speed.

He took several steps back, breathing in.

An initial jolt would be worth the burst of momentum.

*This will go quickly. It will go well. A few seconds to the top. Swift and smooth.*

He took a run, a leap, latched his fingers into the texture of the concrete and began to climb.

The first ten-metre indent came almost at once. Mycroft saw it flash past beneath his hands, heart contracting, urging himself onward to the next. At speed, with a consistent rhythm of motion, fifty metres was no more dangerous than five. The second indent was soon beneath him, and it crossed his mind that before he'd even drawn breath they were halfway. The slight shift he felt in Greg's weight was not a concern - and if it were, there was no time to stop and think. He scrabbled onwards, upwards, passing the third indent with a leaping heart and craning his head up towards the grate.

*Steel.*

Solid steel.

A steel grate embedded into concrete.
A fifty metre fall.

Mycroft scrambled his way on, rushing for the grate as he felt Greg starting to slope just a little too far. He instinctively braced one of his shoulders to compensate - and to his horror, felt the shift then swing the other way - sliding, easing - he forced himself to speed up. Panic spiked through his chest. *A few more seconds. No more. Faster - Christ, faster* - Greg was going to fall. He was going to drop. One wrong jolt, and he would slip now and Mycroft would feel him start to plummet, feel him come loose and drop. The grate was steel. He wouldn't be able to get through - even if he had both his bloody hands. Forty metres. No way back - no safe way down - no way on.

*Christ - oh, Christ*

Another opening.

There was another ventilation duct - branching away from the shaft, just before the grate.

Mycroft clawed his way towards it, panting. Just as he reached the lip, he finally felt Greg's weight give way and begin to slide - he crushed himself flat against the wall, hard, pinning Greg into place just beneath the opening.

"No...!" Mycroft struggled, scrabbling with his hands against the ledge, fighting for what little purchase he could find. He dug his heels into the scant crevices available, his own weight and Greg's now bearing down upon them and threatening to buckle. Clawing, kicking, he wrenched his fingers into the ledge and heaved upwards, shoving Greg up with him against the wall, shaking.

Inch-by-inch, he hauled their weight.

It took almost a minute of panicked struggling before he got his forearms hooked into the opening.

As soon as his own weight felt secure, he wormed a hand down between Greg's back and the wall - gripped him, *hard* - and wrenched him upwards.

It was an undignified squirm onto the ledge - kicking, fighting every fraction of the way, heaving Greg's weight with gritted teeth, heaving his own weight, heaving both of them over the edge and into the duct.

Finally, as he swung the last of his weight over the ridge, Mycroft collapsed beside Greg in the tunnel and panted - swearing - drowning in the delayed rush of panic.

*Christ. Christ almighty.*

He pulled an arm around Greg, holding him as he shook.

The faintness of Greg's heartbeat cut through him like a knife.

Slow. Weak.

Straining.

This wasn't the time to rest. There wasn't the time to feel relief.

Mycroft pulled himself onto his knees, panting, and slung an arm beneath Greg's shoulders.

Onwards through the new tunnel, exhausted now and almost blind with panic, forcing forwards along a duct that could become a downwards ladder at any moment. They were near the bloody surface - somewhere, just above them - he could not have come this far to lose Greg now. Mycroft
couldn't bear the thought of seeing him die just metres from the air, metres from help and from safety.

The tunnel turned, dipped, and then around another corner filled with voices - an opening in the shaft - another internal vent into a room.

Mycroft froze to listen, his heart pounding hard in his ears.

Many voices - low mutters, breaths.

He needed to see. This was the only way on - he needed to know what now stood between them and help.

Shaking, he gathered Greg to one side of the tunnel - laid him safe against the wall, kissed his cold forehead, then crawled forwards alone to the opening.

Deathly slow, staying as far back as he could, Mycroft craned his head to peer out through the vent.

Oh... oh, God - no...

A blockade. A barrier. Excultus's full remaining ranks - all of them - forty or more.

They were gathered here for one purpose, and one purpose only: to stop him from doing what he now needed to do.

This must be the entrance.

It was also the only exit.

Feeling his heart wrack with despair, Mycroft gazed across the gathered crowd. They were bored - talking in groups, muttering - a few of them smoking.

There was no way past.

Dropping from a vent, carrying his dying pair-bond in his arms... they would be torn apart in seconds. Hereafter would not resort to psychological torture in the name of vengeance this time - it would be death for them both, death with no doubt in the matter.

But what other option was there?

Greg was slipping away with every heartbeat.

He didn't have many left.

Mycroft drove his hands backwards through his hair, shaking, frustration burning through his eyes as tears, staring out across a more impassable obstacle than any steel and concrete grate.

They weren't going to make it out.

Somehow, the second realisation was worse than the first. He'd allowed himself to hope - to hope there would be a morning in his future that he woke up in bed beside his pair-bond, cradled Greg in his arms and watched over him as he slept - a morning where this had all become a long-forgotten nightmare.

But there were too many.
Too many by far.

Mycroft's throat contracted as he swallowed, fighting back tears. A fact, he thought. Truth. A statement. They would not leave this place. He'd hoped they would - but it could not be.

And now...

To make the most of the minutes left.

Shaking, he returned along the passage to Greg.

The faint, whispered pulse still waited for him in the dark. He had let it down. He had chosen wrong. This is where it would beat its last.

He laid down beside Greg and drew him into his arms, letting bitter tears slide down his face as he combed his trembling fingers through Greg's hair.

"I am sorry," he whispered. It hurt to speak. "I am so sorry. I - I would - I would have - ... G-Greg, I would have -"

To die gently here, in the quiet - held in Mycroft's arms - not ripped apart by monsters.

It was all that Mycroft could give him now.

Shaking, he wrapped himself around Greg - stroked him, rocked him, wept in silence into his hair. The fragile pulse drummed on for him, restless and struggling. It wanted to live. Sleep, he wanted to whisper to it. Sleep. Sleep in my arms. He couldn't. He couldn't bring himself to wish away these final moments.

When they were over, he would go back.

Go back, when Greg was sleeping - back to the grate - back to the vertical tunnel that by some miracle he had climbed - back to the fifty metre fall onto concrete below.

And they would meet on Platform Six, and get the last train home.

This was the fate that he'd sealed for himself thirteen years ago.

He only wished that it hadn't been Greg's as well.

Greg’s heart was still slowing, but not stopping - still beating - still whispering back to Mycroft's. Mycroft wept, pressing them close together - two pulses - one strong and afraid, one weakening but full of courage, even now - letting them speak together for these last few minutes.

Greg was wearing the ring.

Mycroft had noticed it not long after they started to climb.

*My stars; my fire.*

*My sun.*

*My truth.*

He brushed his lips over Greg’s, shaking.
"Mine," he whispered. "I cherished you. I'm sorry."

And then there came the first scream - and the first crack of laser fire.

Mycroft's eyes snapped open.

Excultus had laid on a welcome back party.

"Good news, boys," Kit said, as they came into view - forty of them, maybe - milling around like teenagers in a shopping centre. "This is what's known as a 'target-rich environment'."

"Doesn't that mean 'there's loads of them', commander?"

"Yep," said Kit, priming her rifle. "Right. Rules. Don't be greedy. Nobody steal my kills. And don't fanny around with headshots - I want nice clean strikes to center mass."

She aimed - some mug, smoking right near the back - and fired.

The man disintegrated with a flash.

"Like so," she said, as thirty-nine vampires screamed and turned around in shock. "Stay in formation!" she barked. "Thin them out, shut them down before they get here, and protect the man on your right when they do!"

The vampires began to run this way.

"Thin them out!" Kit shouted. "Hold your position! Don't any of you fucking move!"

The ensuing cracks and shrieks of laser-fire were nearly deafening. Bolts of light screamed from the ranks of Armed Response, carving their way through the oncoming hoard. Kit gritted her teeth, firing and charging as often as she breathed, dropping the bastards one after the other.

"Shut them down!" she shouted into her helmet mike. "Keep it up! Nobody move!"

As she aimed at the head of the charging crowd, he burst with a flare of green light and vanished.

"Fuck you, Bradshaw! That one was mine!"

"Sorry, ma'am!"

"You fucking will be!" Hostiles were about to leave optimum range. This was it. "Hold formation!" Kit barked. "Not a fucking inch! Protect the man on your right!"

She felt them brace. Shots were primed. They did not run.

As the fastest few reached them, shots fired. Flashes - screams - the next few faltered, blinded by explosions of light at close quarters. Another wave of shots fired.

"Hold!" Kit screamed. "HOLD POSITION!"

Someone in the ranks dropped.
She felt the sudden slackening in the line - heard the jarring tone in her helmet. A heartbeat terminated. Officer down.

Without needing the order, the squad closed ranks.

They crushed shut around the gap, and kept shooting.

"Keep it up!" Kit roared, blasting another of the fuckers away from Parson on her right. "Keep it up, keep it up!"

The bastards were getting wary of racing forwards now. Too many bodies to climb over.

*Christ.* Kit realised with a surge. They were forming a fucking wall. A defensive wall of dead fucking vampires.

There were still plenty of them - but the initial charge hadn't gone the way they wanted. Some of them were backing off; the ones at the front were being dropped by Armed Response.

As she recharged her rifle, and Crossley on her left took care of a fucker who took a swipe at her, Kit spotted a weird thermal suddenly appear where it shouldn't be.

Over the bastards' heads - up above them. High near the ceiling.

Kit fixed on it, alarmed, and watched as the metal vent punched through with force. As the vent swung free, the thermal climbed its way through the gap and dropped to the ground.

It vanished behind the crowd.

The second's lapse in her focus was Parson's death warrant.

Before Kit could ready her rifle, one of the bastards saw their chance and took it - leapt from a distance of nearly ten metres and landed on top of Parson, a blur of shrieking claws.

"*Christ!*" Kit lurched and fired, missing - striking *past* Parson at the man on his right. The poor bastard disintegrated in a flash. *Shit, shit, shit.* The squad buckled around the sudden puncture, staggering. The thing was clawing at Parson, trying to pry off his fucking helmet. The rest of the hoard rushed forwards, too. "Hold!" Kit screamed. "Hold, hold, HOLD!"

As lasers fired, she felt another puncture somewhere - a sudden jerk - another break in the line. The squad couldn't close in two directions. Parson was screaming and shrieking beside her as the thing did its best to rip him open, crushing its teeth against the curve of his helmet.

Then she realised half the vampires were turning - fleeing, she thought for half a second.

But they were converging on something else - something that had suddenly torn into them from behind.

As she recognised him, Kit's heart ignited.

"Oh - *Christ* - !" She primed the rifle. "Protect Mycroft!" she roared. "PROTECT MYCROFT HOLMES!"

The reckless bastard was trying to draw them off - trying to buy breathing room for the guns.

Worse, it was working.
He fought them like a demon - moving too fast for the thermals to keep up, vanishing from between their outstretched arms and whirling up behind them at such speed that it left streaks of heat across Kit's visor. When he bit them, he bit down into their necks like he wanted them to die. They were ripping at him, wrenching at him, and it wasn't slowing him down.

*Christ.*

There was only one thing for it.

"Charge!" Kit shouted at full volume. "*Stun batons, CHARGE! Chase the fuckers down!*

Roaring, Armed Response broke ranks.

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Medlock's team had decimated the numbers already. They only needed time.

As Mycroft ripped into the back ranks, he was noticed at once - and in their frenzy, they opted to deal with his far more immediate threat than with Medlock and her guns. More and more of them turned to follow as he drew them away.

He had not fought like this in years - had not *moved* like this - and as they tried to get hold of him, lunging sluggishly at him with their mouths, it was like seeing them move through water. He found he could throw them, trip them, twist them and get his teeth into their throats. They were trying to hurt him - he felt no pain.

He couldn't have fought all forty. The sheer numbers would have overwhelmed him.

But he could spread these ones out for Medlock.

Her team had broken their defensive position, and they were running this way. Laser fire streaked towards every target not in close proximity to Mycroft. They didn't dare shoot the ones in contact. It didn't matter - *Excultus* were falling - fewer dared to approach him. He fought the ones who did, hissing and keening and ripping into them with his fangs.

They'd wanted him to kill Greg.

They'd wanted Greg to die here - torn open. Torn apart.

He started pursuing the ones who turned on Armed Response. He blew through them like a black wind, realising as he raged from one to the next that there were fewer and fewer left to deal with. Some were fleeing; most had fallen.

It was ending.

---

As she saw the final few turn tail, making their escape into the tunnel, Kit shouldered her rifle.

"I don't think so," she snarled, switched to targeted shots, and wasted the bastards one-by-one - left-
to-right from wall-to-wall, igniting them into nothing as they ran.

Only as she took aim at the last one did she realise the squad had dropped their guns. They were watching.

She vaporized the tosser with a grunt.

He vanished in a flash.

The comms line seemed to detonate.

The sheer volume of the cheer would never fade in Kit's memory. Christ... we did it. We fucking did it. Her ears rang as she glanced at the stats in her visor. Five losses.

Five, out of twenty.

It was a fucking miracle.

A hand closed suddenly on her arm.

Kit turned, startled.

"Medlock - " It was Mycroft. He was white-pale, bloodied from the nose down and struggling to speak around fangs. "Help. Help me. I need your help."

Kit wrenched up her visor with a snap. "What's wrong?"

Mycroft dragged her with force towards the vent through which he'd dropped. Armed Response were hugging each other and laughing all around; comms still rang with the shouts of Scotland Yard outside.

"Stand," Mycroft said. "Stand here. Help me. Tell them medics - medics now - "

Kit reached at once for her mike.

"Medic," she barked into it. She didn't know what was happening. As Mycroft leapt at the wall, scrambled up it like a spider and disappeared back inside the vent, her breath caught in her throat. "Medic - we need a medic into the building - "

Seconds later, she saw Mycroft begin to re-emerge.

But it wasn't Mycroft.

As she realised who was being lowered towards her, Kit's heart hurled itself into her mouth.

"Medic!" she roared, reaching up. She braced to catch his fall, taking hold of his legs. As he slumped free of the vent, Greg sagged straight down into her arms. She staggered beneath his weight. He was freezing cold and unconscious. "Medics, all of them, here, now! It's Lestrade! He's alive!"
**Half-Moons**

History, with all her volumes vast,  
Hath but one page.

- Lord Byron  
'*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage'* (1818)

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Christ...

*How much did I drink last night...?*

Tequila shots... Luke - Mycroft's voice on the phone at three AM. Some alley beside a nightclub in Camden. The stars, clear and cold in the sky; Mycroft's voice, soft with sleep - close, and quiet, and honest with him at last.

After all this time.

Had that only been last night?

Surely there'd been other mornings since then. Weakly, Greg searched for the memories, and let them drift through the fuzz of his mind.

Mornings with Mycroft - Mycroft's bed, Mycroft's arms. Mycroft sitting on the sofa, socked feet tucked beneath him, drinking through a straw as he gazed in quiet fondness at his fish.

Driving to work together. Greg's car. Mycroft's gorgeous bloody legs, arranged with elegance in the passenger seat. Bacon sandwiches for TJ - two of them - idiot, staving it off... *you're going to go like a volcano, you know that?* - isotonic gel. Empty boxes, hidden under the rest. The girls would be hungry by now. Had anyone fed them? Did anybody know where they were?

No-one had fed Mycroft's fish.

It made Greg's chest ache, somewhere deep down beneath his bones. It made him sad. He didn't know why.

Nothing was making a great deal of sense.

He had the feeling there was something he needed to check - something important. There was someone he needed to see.

But he was so bloody tired. He'd been up all night with the plan - the plan for Hackney Downs. He had to make it good. He needed Mycroft to say yes, or they'd be in danger forever. This was the safest way. Prompt it - *now* - prompt it, and control it, and they'd have the red-haired woman secure in containment. She'd start talking any day now.

Then the happy ending would come.
A love story, at last.

Mycroft had got him a ring. Greg curled his thumb, wanting to feel it - that smooth metal band at the base of his finger. He wanted the comfort of knowing it was there. He rubbed where it should be, searching for it - but he couldn't find it. There was only skin.

Maybe he'd left it on the bedside.

He didn't think this was TJ's bed, though. It didn't smell like TJ - dog, deodorant and crisps. This place smelled clean, and it was quiet. The sheets were cool against Greg's skin, and the pillows were plump beneath his cheek. There was a purposefulness to the peace - like it was needed here. The light laid softly upon his eyelids.

This wasn't Mycroft's bed, either.

Too narrow for that. No fancy pillows - no warm arms around Greg. No loving voice in his ear.

But it was alright.

Greg was fine right here - wherever 'here' was. He felt safe, and he felt warm.

Those didn't seem like small things to feel.

*Best get on with it, I suppose.* Greg stirred beneath the covers, filling his bruised lungs with air. *Time to get back to work.*

He opened his eyes.

A forest of cards met his startled gaze - bright colours and big letters, cartoon animals with bandaged limbs.

*Get well soon!*

*Wishing you a speedy recovery.*

*Glad you're on the mend.*

Greg blinked, wondering who was ill.

He then realised there was someone sitting beside his bed. She was watching him wake up, with The Times crossword folded on her knee, and a fountain pen poised between her fingers.

As his gaze finally focused on her face, Commander Vickery's eyes brightened.

All of it returned in a rush.

The force of it took Greg's breath.

The bar, the office. The warehouse. The chains.

Mycroft.

*Holy fuck.*

*Holy fuck... I'm meant to be dead.*

"Commander...?" Greg murmured, overwhelmed.
Commander Vickery smiled.

"Good afternoon, Lestrade..." She capped her pen with a click, and slid it away into her pocket. "I'm afraid you've now gotten me in trouble."

Greg searched her face, hardly daring to believe this was happening. "Where's Mycroft?"

It prompted a wider smile.

"At home," she said. "To feed himself, and take a shower... after I promised him faithfully there was zero chance of you waking in the single hour that he isn't here."

Greg's heart thumped, hard.

"He's alive," he breathed.

"By some miracle." Vickery sat back in her chair, rolling up her newspaper. "As are you."

Alive.

It didn't seem real. Greg tried to wrap his mind around it, struggling. Alive.

"H-How long have I...?" he managed, his voice rough.

Commander Vickery pushed the paper away inside her bag.

"You've been on authorised leave for a number of days," she said. "Let's not narrow it down at this point."

Christ...

"Alright..." Greg breathed in slowly, feeling heavy and grey. "Is - Myke okay?"

"He is. The man's barely taken his eyes from you since he carried you from the warehouse... I've never seen a medical team intimidated to such efficiency."

Carried me.

Carried me out of there.

Myke had forced himself to stop.

Against every likelihood - against every instinct - he'd managed to stop.

Greg's soul heaved.

This didn't look like a normal hospital room. It was too big and too comfortable - airy, peaceful, gently decorated in cream and mint. It looked like a very clean hotel. There was a long green couch in one corner, with folded blankets and a pillow waiting on the arm. Mycroft had been sleeping there.

Greg's heart squeezed at the sight.

"Where am I?" he asked, glancing nervously at Vickery.

She raised an eyebrow, bemused. "London Bridge Hospital."
"London Bridge is private," Greg said, immediately concerned. "It's posh."

"Indeed it is. Mycroft has dealt with your medical bills, as well as Miss Reid's."

Greg's breath caught. "As well as -"

"Injured, during the raid of the warehouse. She sustained a serious laser wound to the stomach... Tierney managed to slow her heart enough to stave off shock, and keep her stable. He and Medlock got her out in time. They saved her life. She is expected to make a full and complete recovery."

Jesus.

Greg stared into her eyes. "Wait... Medlock? Kit?"

"Found caged," Vickery said, "very much against her will, elsewhere in the warehouse complex."

Christ. Christ, I knew it...

"In the absence of Commander Elwood," Vickery added, "Medlock then led a second team of officers back into the building to find you both... the vast majority of them returned alive, as did the pair of you. You owe Medlock your life as much as Mycroft."

In the absence of Elwood...

Greg braced himself. "Did someone get him?"

Vickery smiled slightly. "You knew."

"I'd - started to wonder..." Greg bit the corner of his lip, looking down. A year of friendship. They'd met in the staff canteen. Friendly banter over the last portion of chicken korma. "He kept asking where I was staying... telling me he couldn't find the leak. If he'd worried it might really be Kit, he'd have done anything to clear her name... but he didn't - 'cause he didn't need to. He knew she was innocent. And it worked for him, if everyone else thought she was guilty..."

Greg paused, realising he was rubbing the base of his finger.

"Who got him in the end?" he asked.

He hoped it was Mycroft.

"I'm - afraid that no-one did..." Vickery gave him a look of reluctance. "Tierney took a bite from him in the early stages - not long after Elwood had led a squad of Armed Response to their deaths - but the blood trail ran dry. As far as we can tell, he escaped the building alive."

Greg's chest tightened. "Are we trying to trace him?"

Vickery's eyebrow arched with amusement.

"I think you'll find that 'we' are concentrating on our recovery from serious hypovolemic shock," she said. Her eyes gleamed. "Efforts are being made, Lestrade. Now put it from your mind."

Greg couldn't fight a smile.

"Thought I'd be dead," he mumbled. It felt so strange to say it. "I thought - ... I don't know. That I wouldn't get to see this bit."
The realisation felt like sunlight streaming through his chest.

"M'glad," he said. "I'm - really glad."

"You and many others," Vickery said. She glanced at his multitude of cards, her expression alarmingly close to fond. "You acted with honour, Lestrade... what you were prepared to do. It was entirely noble of you."

Greg snorted, smiling. He couldn't keep it in.

"If m'honest, ma'am... I didn't do it out of honour."

She surveyed him with mirth. "As I'm well aware," she said. "It was an honourable act, nonetheless."

Greg supposed he'd have to make his peace with that. He shifted, reaching out a weak hand for the bedside rail. Vickery leant forwards in her chair.

She helped him to sit up, letting him grip onto her forearm as something flared between his ribs. The pain was tight and deep - it thinned his breath a little. He felt like he'd been flung from the top of Scotland Yard, and hit every windowsill on the way down.

"Have we - found out why?" he asked, gritting his teeth. "Luke, I mean..."

Vickery lifted the pillows behind his back, plumping them for him.

"He was influenced by an Excultus operative named Kieran Matthews... who seems to have targeted Elwood with intent. Excultus forged a chain from themselves to Mycroft, via Elwood and yourself."

*Bloody Kieran Matthews. I should've known. "When you say 'influenced'..."

"By both traditional and chemical means," Vickery said, resuming her seat by his bed. *Christ. "So... Luke was Kieran Matthews' pair-bond?"

"Mm. Though, from what I understand, he'd first given Elwood a falsified version of events regarding Mycroft... Luke was under the impression that Mycroft was to blame for the deaths of Emma Marsden and Sam Buckley."

"Jesus..."

"Elwood also believed that you were yourself under Mycroft's chemical influence... a lost cause. A fallen friend."

Greg's heart tightened.

"Why didn't he just - ... I mean - Christ, I was staying at his bloody flat. Why didn't he just hand me over?"

"By that point, you alone meant very little. Mycroft was the true prize. Taking you from Elwood's flat would have revealed their undercover operative - and potentially sent Mycroft into hiding. He's led a vigilant life for many years. Far better for them to spring the trap you'd laid yourselves at Hackney Downs, and take the pair of you at once, than lay hands on you prematurely and risk Mycroft taking flight."
Greg supposed it made sense.

He hesitated, holding something in his mouth for a moment.

Vickery watched him; one eyebrow lifted. "Say it, Lestrade."

Greg rubbed at the base of his ring finger.

"I didn't realise he'd been part of Excultus." He glanced into her eyes. "Mycroft. He neglected to mention that bit. Kept it from me."

Vickery huffed. "I did wonder where 'five days' had come from..."

"What made you trust him?" Greg hesitated. "I mean... four years..."

Vickery thought about it for a moment, turning the matter over in her mind.

"When he first contacted me," she admitted, "I didn't. Not in the slightest. I told him I'd listen to his actions, not his words... he then single-handedly gutted the entire organisation from within." She gave Greg a small smile. "It made for fairly convincing proof."

"And - he promised to come back and fight them, if they ever returned?"

"He did." Vickery folded her hands upon her knee. "And so he has."

"I - just wish he'd bloody told me... from the start."

"Is it so much of a surprise that he didn't?"

Greg grappled with it, looking down. "Told me later on, then... when we'd reached the point that I'd have understood."

Vickery recrossed her legs.

"For nine years," she said, "Mycroft Holmes has had a single social contact aware of his condition. That person is me. He's led a solitary and guarded life. He still undergoes counselling for the time that he spent with Excultus. Some regrets aren't easily shared, Lestrade."

"Commander - we - ..." Greg bit down on it for a second, swallowing. "We're - close. Him and me. And he kept it all from me. How do I...?"

"You're distressed that he wanted you to think the best of him?" Vickery held his gaze, steady. "You're unsure why he'd fear losing the first person to trust him in a decade?"

Greg wished the commander could make a bit less sense sometimes. She was far too good at it. He glanced down at his hands, biting his lip.

Vickery lifted her chin.

"Listen to his actions, Lestrade. What do they tell you?"

Greg said nothing for a moment. He felt his heart stir. "He really carried me out of there?"

"Mm... he wouldn't be parted from you. Hasn't been for days."

Greg rubbed silently where his ring should be.
Mycroft hadn't even let them be parted when he was staying with Luke. Eight storeys, every single night. When the lights had cut on Hackney Downs, he'd run for Greg. When Greg had been attacked, he'd brought Greg into his home without a second thought.

Even at the very beginning, when Greg had appeared with a sigil and an ISOC scan to tell Mycroft his worst nightmare was all starting again, he'd been there the next morning at nine.

Greg's throat tightened.

He reached a hand to his neck, and brushed his fingers over the crook of his shoulder.

As he found them, a thrill shivered through his heart: two half-moon crescents, facing each other, sunk deep into his skin.

The door suddenly opened with a squeak of the hinge.

"I thought you might be in need of caffeine," said a tired voice. Greg's heart gave a wild and giddy lurch. "I took the liberty..."

Long days had left Mycroft shadowed and thin. His hair was damp; his clothes didn't fit. He looked exhausted.

As he glanced up from his wrist-set, and saw the brown eyes now gazing at him from the bed, his face opened with shock.

The coffee slid from his grasp.

It hit the floor with a splatter - coffee gushed in a wave across the laminate.

Vickery got out of the chair at once.

"I shall deal with it," she said. "Reacquaint yourselves." She strode from the room.

Greg started to cry.

"Myke - " He reached out. "Myke - "

Mycroft's expression broke.

"Greg - " He rushed to the bed. "Oh God, my Greg -"

As Mycroft's arms dragged around him, Greg's mouth let out a sound he'd never known he could make. He buried his hands into the back of Mycroft's coat, shaking, crying, as desperate fingers drove through his hair.

They scrunched tight. It hurt.

Greg didn't care.

"Oh, God - " Mycroft gasped in his ear. "Oh, God - oh, Greg -"

"I love you - " Greg wept as Mycroft's arms tightened around him. "I love you. I mean it. I fucking mean it. I love you, I love you -"

"Oh, God - "
"You got us out - you got us out - both of us - Christ, Myke, you did it - "

"You died - you died for me, Greg - "

"I'm not dead," Greg gasped. He hauled it into his lungs with every breath, ringing with it, shaking with it - believing it at last. "I'm not dead. I'm not dead. gorgeous - I'm here - I'm right here... Jesus Christ, we're alive..."

Mycroft choked into his shoulder. He was shaking with distress, struggling to breathe.

"Myke?" Greg managed in a whimper, panting.

He heard Mycroft's throat muscles work. The word cracked from them, broken. "Y-Yes?"

"Can you - let go of my hair, gorgeous? S-Stinging a bit now - "

Mycroft sobbed. He let go, and clasped Greg's face instead - rubbing his thumbs across the tears rolling down Greg's cheeks, pressing their foreheads together, gazing at him, treasuring him.

His eyes stared into Greg's as if they'd never look away again.

"You - ..." He swallowed, fighting to get the words out. "Y-You were - prepared to die in that place - chained to - ... left there forever - so that I could walk away. Even after you - even after you knew what I'd - ..."

Greg's heart twisted.

He stroked his hands up the sides of Mycroft's neck, shaking.

"When I say 'I love you'," he breathed, "I fucking mean it."

Mycroft convulsed; his eyes filled with tears once more. He pulled Greg tighter into his arms, hiding him away inside his coat, and they held each other and wept for what could have been an hour. An attendant came to clean up the coffee - Greg barely noticed the poor woman. He just held Mycroft, and cried, and felt his soul stitch itself back together with every desperate kiss pressed to the side of his neck. He cried until it felt like it was safe to stop.

"How did you get us out?" he whispered at last, as Mycroft's fingers traced circles on his lower back - stroking the stripe of skin where his pyjama shirt had risen.

Mycroft swallowed, taking a long breath.

"The ventilation system. We crawled for - ... oh, Christ, Greg... at times I thought - I thought that you'd - ... I don't think I actually believed you were alive until this moment..."

Greg's heart heaved to twice its size. He grinned into Mycroft's shoulder, nuzzling close against his neck.

"Believe it," he murmured. He caught Mycroft's earlobe between his teeth. "Believe it, sweetheart. Not getting rid of me that easy."

Mycroft shuddered. He held onto Greg, tightly. "You will never leave my sight again. Never."

Greg hoped he never left Mycroft's arms, either. "Alright," he whispered. "I won't."

"No-one will lay a hand on you for the rest of your life."
"'Cept you?"

"Except me." Mycroft shivered against the side of Greg's neck, breathing in his scent. "And I shall never take a hand off you. Not for a moment. I shan't even contemplate it."

Greg's heart glowed.

"Take me home," he whispered. "Please. Now. Christ, Mycroft... take me home."

Mycroft stiffened.

"You - h-have to stay." His voice ached. "Medical treatment. You lost a life-threatening amount of blood. If you hadn't been in good physical health..."

Greg tightened his arms. He wanted to go - wanted it more than anything in the world - but he didn't want to risk it all now. Not after what they'd been through.

"Fine..." He cuddled closer, softening. "Medical treatment. Then home."

Mycroft squeezed him once again. He kissed Greg's scars in reverence.

"And then home," he whispered. "Soon. I swear."

As he continued to brush his lips across the marks, Greg let his eyes fall shut.

It made him feel oddly safe - his lover's breath, his lover's kiss - settling the scars - soothing them. Each quiet kiss turned them from marks of violence into love. He'd get to see them everyday in the mirror. They'd remind him what he'd been willing to give - what Mycroft hadn't been willing to take.

*First time*, he thought.

Of all the first times he'd imagined - chained to a radiator, on a dirty warehouse floor.

He stroked his hands over Mycroft's chest, humming as his pair-bond kissed his scars.

"Shouldn't have been like that," he murmured. "In that place."

Mycroft's breath caught in the back of his throat. "No. No, it - shouldn't."

"Should've been somewhere safe... somewhere you could hold me, after."

He felt Mycroft's eyelashes brush his neck as his eyes shut. "It - will be, Greg. I promise."

Greg breathed it in. *It will be.* Mycroft's apartment, safe as a fortress - a warm bath - a bed all night, the gentle darkness, Mycroft's fingers brushing his back.

He wanted to take time off work.

Maybe quite a bit of time.

"Gorgeous?" he murmured, stirring.

"Mm?" Mycroft drew back, stroking his cheeks. His eyes shone as they gazed at Greg, taking in every tiny feature of his face. "Yes?"

Greg bit his lip, enjoying their grey-blue warmth. He let those perfect eyes look at him, hoping
they never tired of it.

"Where's my ring?" he asked.

As he saw Mycroft's mouth curve, his heart strained with joy.

Mycroft reached beneath his coat - into his inside pocket. His slender fingers retrieved a familiar flash of platinum.

"I - thought that I should..." He met Greg's eyes, his gaze soft. "For safekeeping."

Greg smiled, glancing down between their chests.

He held out his hand.

Mycroft laid his lips between Greg's eyes, and took his lover's hand with care.

As he slid the ring back into place, he whispered,

"I - should have been there. To give it to you. " His gaze softened. "I'd meant to be."

Greg closed his eyes.

"You are here," he said. His heart fluttered as the ring came snug at the base of his finger, where it belonged. "And you'll be there when I give you yours."

Mycroft's breath hitched.

"Greg..." He took a moment to steady himself. "Be mine," he whispered. "Always. Without end."

Greg stroked the side of Mycroft's nose with his own.

"I was always yours, love..." He brushed his hands through Mycroft's hair. "I've been yours from the start - and you've been mine. Always. Without end."

Mycroft's eyes fell shut. He wrapped his arms around Greg's waist, and laced his fingers at his lower back - a tender, careful hold.

A tentative pause settled over them.

Then gently - as softly as if they'd never, ever done this - Mycroft placed his lips to Greg's.

Greg felt the entire world let out a breath.

As they kissed, his heart shining, he heard a door open somewhere - somewhere outside the warmth of his lover's lips.

"Ah..." There came a short cough.

It was Vickery.

Greg grinned, flushing; he turned his face against Mycroft's shoulder.

Mycroft held Greg, proud. He stroked at his pair-bond's hair.

"Amelia?" Mycroft's voice lifted with a smile. The rise and fall of his chest was wonderful. Greg had never loved it so much. He wanted just to lie on Mycroft's chest and sleep, and breathe, and be
alive. "Is everything alright?"

Vickery sounded amused. "I've been sent to enquire about visiting times," she said.

"Indeed?" Mycroft said. "By whom?"

The door squeaked open once more.

"Can we see him yet, Dr H?" came the desperate plea. "We'll be gentle. We promise."

Greg's heart leapt. He lifted his head from Mycroft's shoulder, grinning. "TJ - !"

The fur was gone - and all the teeth. TJ was human again, freshly-shaved and dressed nicely for the hospital in a clean t-shirt and a white pair of sneakers. He was beaming from ear-to-ear, overjoyed - and pushing a wheelchair in front of him.

In it, in navy hospital pyjamas and a pink dressing gown, was Olivia.

Greg's heart boomed as he saw her. Her exhausted face lit up - she was crying by the time that she reached him. As they hugged each other, she tried to push her tears away with her fingertips.

"I thought you'd be dead," she gasped against his shoulder. "I thought you'd be dead by the time we found you..."

"S'alright, darlin'... I'm not dead..." Greg grinned, drying her tears on his sleeve. "Christ, you got shot? And I missed it? Suppose we didn't cover how to defend yourself from gunfire..."

She sobbed, laughing.

As Greg dabbed at her tears, she glanced up into his eyes.

"I - I'm glad you're - ..." She shuddered. "I didn't realise you'd planned it all..."

Greg smiled, frowning gently.

"What did you think I was doing," he asked, "wandering Soho at one in the morning? 'Course I planned it... fastest way to Myke. Get Excultus to lead us there."

Olivia flushed with distress. She hid her eyes behind her sleeve, drying her tears.

Greg realised, her heart thudding. "You thought I'd given up... you - thought I just wanted to - ...

"Jesus, you should've - ... idiot!" Olivia gazed into his eyes, despairing. "Why did you only tell TJ? Why didn't you send it to - "

"If I'd told you," he said, smiling, "you'd have been straight through to stop me... that's why."

Olivia put her arms back around his neck, shaking.

"You're still an idiot," she mumbled. She gripped him, gently. "I'm so glad you're okay. I mean it."

Greg rubbed between her shoulders. "Me too, darlin'... m'glad for us both..."

He let her go, with a last gentle dab of her tears.

As Greg bundled him up and scrubbed at his hair, TJ yelped and squirmed in protest.
"Argh! Lestrade!"

"Hey, fuzzball." Greg grinned, squeezing him. "Took your bloody time getting to us, didn't you?"

TJ laughed, his hair now wildly askew. "Just waiting 'til it was top level heroic, King of Hearts... couldn't go charging in straightaway, could we?"

Greg grinned. He cuffed TJ on the jaw, fond.

"Yeah, well... don't leave it so late next time? Got a bit hairy there, towards the end..."

"There shall not be a next time," Mycroft said, with a distinct tone of finality. "It's no less than a miracle that the two of you are still with us. If circumstances had been a little different..."

"You read all your cards yet?" TJ asked, grinning.

Greg looked over at the sizeable display.

"Not just yet. I've been busy. Why? Which one's yours?"

"S'in there somewhere... had to go with 'heard you're under the weather'," said TJ. "They'd sold out of 'sorry you lost nearly forty per cent of your total blood volume escaping a vampire lair'."

Greg laughed. "Can't have been a wide selection..."

"Not really. The ones for 'sorry you took a serious laser wound to the stomach' were a bit crap, too."

"It was a very nice card," Olivia mumbled, glancing at him fondly. "Especially the drawing."

"Lexi helped," TJ said. "She's better at these things than me. She thought it'd cheer you up... Lottie did the glitter."

As Mycroft shifted, standing from the chair, Greg lifted his head. He watched as his lover leant over to fluff his pillows.

The look of quiet care was rather breathtaking.

"Hey," he said, softly.

Mycroft glanced into his eyes. "Are you alright?" he murmured. "May I bring you something?"

Greg smiled, feeling his heart stir. "Where's my card from you?"

He watched the corners of his lover's mouth curve.

"At home," Mycroft said. "Waiting for you to be there to read it."

Greg smiled. I'll hold you to that, gorgeous. "Alright..." he said.

They gazed at each other, their eyes bright.

Now perched at the end of Greg's bed, TJ cleared his throat.

"... if you're offering us all though, Dr H - coffee and a sandwich wouldn't go amiss."

As Olivia started to laugh, Greg felt his entire heart swoop with joy.
Mycroft turned his gleaming eyes onto TJ, smirking and fond.

"Sadly," he said, "your nutritional needs now fall under your jurisdiction, Mr Tierney. And you're to take proper care of them. I have rather more important duties to attend to."


Greg wasn't sure he could smile any wider.

Then Mycroft settled in the chair beside him, laced their fingers without hesitation, and said, "Quite. And I assure you, TJ... I shall be busy with them forevermore."

Greg spent the afternoon in the company of various medical professionals, all of whom were delighted to see him awake. They came to his room, sat beside his bed, and chatted to him as if he were an old friend. They all treated Mycroft with the utmost respect - and more than a little nervousness.

Mycroft was rarely out of reach of Greg.

Every quiet shift - every touch of pain, every flicker of tiredness - Mycroft saw them all. He guarded Greg with a watchfulness that never wavered. Later into the evening, he intervened when the cardiologist's questions all began to blur a little in Greg's mind, insisting that his partner was tired and this could wait until the morning. The doctor left at speed, with a sincere apology.

Mycroft then dimmed the lights, asked the nurse for a malt drink for Greg, and requested no more disturbances until tomorrow.

With the mug empty on the bedside, Greg settled beneath the sheets.

As Mycroft eased in beside him, Greg's heart jumped with happiness. He nestled into Mycroft's chest, breathing deeply, and the arms that he'd longed for wrapped slowly around him. Mycroft made a quiet sound into his hair - a gentle, humming rumble - and kissed his temple.

He gathered the sheets high around Greg's chin.

"I shan't stay the night like this," he murmured. "You need room to sleep comfortably... but I'll be close by. Wake me at any moment - for any reason."

Greg nuzzled at his jaw. "I will," he murmured. "Promise..." Tiredness was sapping his strength - he could feel it, drawing him down towards sleep. He shivered as he let his eyes close. "Will you stay 'til I'm asleep?"

Mycroft paused.

His arms drew tight.

As he kissed Greg between the eyes, he shook. He held his lips there a moment - just breathing.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, of course. And I will hold you as soon as you're awake in the morning."
Greg's heart shone.

"Christ," he whispered. "Christ, Myke... I love you. I'm sorry. You must be sick of hearing - "

"Never," Mycroft breathed, "apologise to me for those words." He gazed into Greg's eyes, fierce and soft at once. "Never make me live an hour without them, Greg."

He lifted a hand, brushing his fingers over Greg's cheek.

"I thought I'd never hear those words again," he said. "I thought I'd heard them for the last time in my life. Please. Never, never follow those words with 'I am sorry'. Never again."

Greg's pulse skipped. "Myke..."

He breathed in as their lips met.

They kissed, Mycroft stroking his face - gentle fingers that seemed just to want him. He felt the very moment that Myke forgot to hold him like he was made of glass. The kiss deepened, a little tighter - Greg cosied his tongue into Mycroft's mouth. His heart drummed as Mycroft opened to it, shivering, and their bodies pushed closer together: warmth, pyjamas and hospital sheets.

It felt good to be kissing in a hospital.

It seemed like an act of defiance, somehow. I'm not dead. I'm not broken. And I'll kiss my lover if I want to. Excultus had wanted Mycroft to end Greg's life - but here they were, kissing, safe and warm in a place of peace- and it was over.

By the time their lips parted, the tension in Mycroft's arms had eased. A gentle intimacy suffused his touches; his features were soft, and he gazed at Greg in wonder.

Greg smiled. He kissed his nose - kissed his weary forehead - kissed his pink-touched cheeks.

"Myke," he murmured.

Mycroft took a moment just to glory in the name. "Mm?"

"Would it - distress you if I asked questions?"

"Questions...?" Mycroft cottoned on. "Oh... no, I - I think you've rather earned the right to."

"I want to get it out of the way." Greg glanced down at his hands, resting on Mycroft's chest. "Then we can... this."

Mycroft smiled slightly. Nerves quietened his gaze.

"I'd - very much like to 'this'." He hesitated, watching Greg with care. "I assume these questions relate to - ..."

"To Excultus." Greg held his eyes. "To things before."

Mycroft waited; guilt tightened his expression.

Greg bit the corner of his lip. "You did some awful stuff... didn't you?"

Without a word, Mycroft nodded.
"Stuff that you regret?"

Another measured nod. "More than you can imagine. Everyday of my life."

"So you - ... on the forum? Trying to help people..."

Fresh guilt arose in Mycroft's eyes.

"As I tried to help you. When you asked, about - ... I worried you didn't realise the enormity of - ... and I knew you'd be given misleading information. I wanted you to hear it from me."

Greg raised an eyebrow.

"You know you should've... talked to me, don't you?" he said. "Like this?"

Mycroft seemed to take a long breath. "It - isn't always easy to talk."

Greg raised an eyebrow further. "Did hiding things turn out 'easy', in the end?"

Mycroft took the words to heart. He lowered his eyes, quietening.

"No," he murmured. "No - not at all. I'm sorry."

"Can you tell me the whole truth in future? Please?" Greg dipped his head, retrieved Mycroft's eyes and held them, his heart beating quick and hard. "About everything. I know you worried that you'd lose me. I know you worried that I wouldn't want to know you anymore. Just - ... I don't scare easy, alright? You should know that by now... I understand more than you think. And it pisses me off when you lie."

He cupped Mycroft's jaw, gently. Mycroft wasn't quite meeting his eyes.

"Look at me..." Greg said.

Mycroft did so, fearful - seeing things in his mind that Greg couldn't quite see. He stroked Mycroft's cheek with a thumb, watching his eyes soften - watching them slowly come back to the present.

"Never told you this," he murmured. "Maybe I should've done. We - kinda skipped this part. But I'm your friend, Myke. I'm here to talk. Whenever you want... about anything."

The tiniest of smiles crossed Mycroft's mouth.

"That's - comforting," he said. He paused, watching Greg closely. "Thank you."

Greg smiled, leaning up.

He nuzzled his nose against Mycroft's - gentle, careful contact.

"M'sorry for what you went through," he said. He felt Mycroft breathe out, slowly. "I don't know what it was like for you. But I know it made you think some things you don't think anymore - and I know that you're making amends."

Mycroft didn't seem to dare hold him too closely - as if unsure whether he was allowed. He gazed into Greg's face.

"You are wonderful," he whispered.
Greg eased his arms around Mycroft's shoulders. "M'not, gorgeous. I just know it's hard to be human."

Mycroft's embrace tightened nervously around his waist.

Greg kissed behind his ear. "What was that Machiavelli crap you quoted at me once?" he said. "'It's safer to be feared than loved'...?"

Mycroft nuzzled into his shoulder. "Yes... I - remember."

"'s'horse shit," Greg murmured. "All of it. Bloke didn't know what he was on about. Tragic bastard, just like you."

Mycroft gave an involuntary snort of laughter, stifling it quickly.

Greg grinned, and kissed his neck again.

"They made you feel alone," he said, holding tight. "Then they made you feel safe. Told you the world would be cruel, and you wouldn't be loved, so you might as well be feared. But you're a good person... good won out in the end. You shouldn't hide that, gorgeous. You should be proud. I mean it."

Mycroft's voice strained. "Greg... Greg, I..."

Greg closed his eyes.

"Don't lie to me again," he whispered. "Please. Just - please."


Greg squeezed him back. As Mycroft kissed at his shoulder, over and over, a shiver ran across the back of Greg's neck.

"You and me now," he whispered, running his fingers through Mycroft's hair. "For good. Okay? No more bloody lying. Not to me."

"No more. I promise."

"Not even little things."

"No. I swear it."

"If you ever get the urge to hide something from me, that means you need to tell me straightaway. Alright? I didn't die for you so you can keep on lying."

"I won't, Greg." Mycroft shuddered, swallowing. "I won't. I promise."

"Good..." Greg drew a quiet breath. He reached for Mycroft's mouth to kiss him, then kissed the tip of his nose. "Who was the Head Honcho Douchebag that I met?"

Mycroft's pained smile was a memory he'd treasure. "Hereafter."

"Stage name, is it? Like Madonna?"

"N-No. He was a powerful moroi... born and named that way." Mycroft paused, quietly rubbing Greg's back. "I - thought that he was dead. He certainly seemed to be, when last I saw him."
"When was that?"

"A... few moments after I'd shot him."

"Yeah, that... usually does the trick..."

"Apparently not." Mycroft paused, his eyes fading. "He hasn't been identified among the bodies in the warehouse. I assume he's escaped."


They met eyes.


"Can I apologise now? Get it out of the way?"

"For what, precisely?"

"For not letting you rip his throat out weeks ago."

Mycroft's mouth twitched.

"Hindsight is a wonderful thing," he said. "I - will perhaps state for the record that my instincts about Elwood were more correct than I imagined... but the possibility of a pair-bond, I didn't suspect. We couldn't have known."

"Do we have any idea when he turned on us?"

"He met Matthews on the night you were attacked. Matthews was probably on the scene, keeping watch... it's - likely that he witnessed my altercation with Elwood at the door."

"And they took it from there," Greg said, sadly.

Mycroft nodded, his eyes guarded. After a moment, he added,

"If it restores your sense of justice, I... doubt Elwood will be treated as well by his pair-bond as you will be. He's unlikely to find much kindness or care in his new life."

Greg's heart twinged. "What d'you mean?"

"I overheard the two of them trying to escape the warehouse," Mycroft said. "Elwood seemed to be badly injured... Matthews was unmoved. More interested in hurrying Elwood along, than giving him any sort of comfort."

Greg frowned, wondering.

"He - should be protective of Luke though, shouldn't he? Like you are." He searched Mycroft's eyes. "You've been scaring seven shades out of doctors all afternoon, just in case they're planning on boring me. I thought protectiveness just - happens."

Mycroft gently kissed the bridge of his nose. "What manifests as protectiveness in one carrier can lean towards possessiveness in another. Not all bonds are alike."

Greg processed this, chewing his lip. "So... it's not a given? The love?"
"From a moroi like Matthews," Mycroft said, "more used to seeing a human as prey than a partner... not a given. Especially if he knows that he's been exploiting Elwood, and feels no remorse for it."

"Right..." Greg didn't think he'd cry too many tears. Luke had gotten too many people killed - far too many. He reached up to brush back Mycroft's hair, thinking. "Do you feel different?" he asked.

Mycroft raised an eyebrow.

"Knowing that I haven't ended your existence?" he said. "Yes, somewhat."

Greg smiled. He'd missed the snark. He didn't want to go another day in his life without it. "Pair-bonded, I mean..."

Mycroft's eyes warmed. "I - bonded to you some time ago, Greg. My half of this arrangement was sealed long before we ever entered the warehouse." He gazed into Grey's face, his grey eyes gentle - curious. "Do - you feel different?"

Greg pulled a wry smile. "Not at all."

Mycroft looked as if he wanted to laugh - as if he couldn't quite believe it.

Greg smiled, enjoying the baffled look. "I feel happy," he offered. "Happy that we lived... happy that you're safe, and we're alright... but I don't know if I needed a chemical to feel like that."

He stroked his thumb over Mycroft's lower lip.

"Pretty sure we've just been through a bonding experience more powerful than any lab could create. No disrespect to your chemicals, love, but... supporting role at best."

Mycroft smiled, shaking his head in wonder. "I - can't say I'm glad that things transpired as they did. But I'm... at peace with them."

Greg cuddled gently closer. He could handle 'at peace'. He wrapped one leg over Mycroft's, settling their bodies together.

"You know you over-hyped it, don't you?" He kissed his lover's nose. "PT-309. Didn't seem all that stimulating, if I'm honest."

Mycroft watched him, trying not to be amused. "Perhaps - circumstances overwhelmed - ..." He hesitated. "It was not a conducive environment."

"You can say that again..."

"I imagine that - at home - i-if you wished to - ... it's likely to be different. Though I'll understand entirely, Greg, if you no longer - "

Greg reached up at once, and kissed his lips.

He kissed them until he felt Mycroft soften against him, kissing back - until fingers wound lovingly into his hair. The warm, familiar wrap of their legs was perfect. It made him feel safe.

He had a feeling he was going to sleep well.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you," Mycroft whispered, at last - the words came soft against Greg's mouth.
Greg kissed them, gently. He gave a smile. "M'glad you got us out, gorgeous. Besides... I asked you to."

"Greg, if - if you hadn't - ... if I'd actually - ..." Mycroft's voice thickened. "I couldn't have -"

"Shhh..." Greg combed his fingers back through Mycroft's hair. "Shhh, love... don't hold onto it. We don't live in 'if'."

Mycroft swallowed. His eyes flickered shut.

"No," he murmured. "No, you're... right. We don't." His arms tightened around Greg's waist. "You are here."

"I am." Greg lifted his head. He pressed a kiss between Mycroft's eyebrows. "Right here. And I'm always gonna be here."

Mycroft's fingers stirred across his back, feeling the warmth of his skin. "Are you tired?" he asked.

Greg thought about it. "A little... not sleepy, just... tired." He realised what Mycroft was really asking. "Don't - go just yet... please. I want to hold you a little bit longer."

He rested his head on Mycroft's shoulder.

"Is that alright?" he asked.

He felt his lover shiver.

"Yes," Mycroft whispered. He buried his face in Greg's neck. "Of course it's alright..."
The next morning, Mycroft awoke to the gentle disturbance of his blanket.

He opened one eye, half-asleep, as a warm and careful weight crept onto the couch with him. A smile played around his mouth. He laid still, waiting for Greg to get comfortable - settling on top of Mycroft, squirming a little, finding a cosy position to lie in. He wrapped an arm around Greg, tucked the blanket back into place, and laid a kiss on the soft grey head now cushioned at his shoulder.

Greg made a small sound, happy. "G'morning..."

Mycroft had never heard anything so wonderful in his life.

"Good morning..." he replied. He stroked his nose through Greg's hair, breathing in his scent. God alive, I nearly lost this. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long..." Greg's hand laid over his heart. "I want to go home."

Mycroft wove their fingers together. He had a feeling he was going to hear that rather a lot over the next few days.

"I want to take you there," he murmured. "More than you can imagine. Nothing would make me happier... but until your tests are complete, and we can be certain you have no lasting complications, I'm afraid you have to stay."

Greg squirmed.

"I'm fine, gorgeous," he said, as Mycroft rearranged the blanket. "I'd know if my kidneys were damaged. I'd feel it."

Mycroft stroked his thumb at the nape of Greg's neck, fighting a smile.

"While you are a master of many things," he said, "modern medicine is not one of them. I think we'll leave it to the kidney specialist to be the judge of that."

"They're my kidneys," came the mumble at his shoulder.

"Mm. And they are my pair-bond's kidneys... which means they will have to put up with my care and concern."

"This must be costing you a fortune..."
"It is," Mycroft said, coolly. "If I wish to spend my mother's inheritance ensuring that my life partner's internal organs last for the rest of our lives, then I shall."

He felt Greg smile against his neck. It was sealed with a quiet kiss - and, for now, the issue was dropped.

"Been thinking," Greg murmured, with another kiss. "About last night. What we talked about."

Mycroft's heart stirred. They'd ended up lying in Greg's bed, holding each other and talking, until almost midnight - discussing the future, and the lives now ahead of them.

It had been the most wonderful conversation of his life.

He inclined his head, kissing Greg's forehead. "Mm? What have you been thinking?"

"Just... that idea we had. What'd change. What'd be easier. What'd be harder," Greg stirred, reaching for his hand. Mycroft gave it, and their fingers tangled. "What matters, I guess... what I want the future to hold. What's going to fit around that best."

Mycroft couldn't hold in a smile. He closed his eyes, taking a moment to thank every star in the sky that he'd lived to see these plans being made.

"Have you come to any insights?" he murmured, his lips still resting against Greg's forehead. He didn't wish to guide the matter. It was Greg's decision - and it was a choice that he'd respect, regardless of its outcome.

His partner smiled, watching their fingers weave and play.

"Yeah," Greg said. "Yeah, I... I have."

He lifted his head, and looked up into Mycroft's eyes.

As their gazes met, Greg's expression softened. His smile took Mycroft's breath.

"Today," he said.

Mycroft felt the word resound throughout his being. "Today?"

Greg bit his lip.

"Today." He curled their fingers, tightly. "I... know I want - I know I'll always want - and I know you want it too, and I feel... like I can't think of a reason to wait. I can't think of a time that'd feel better than now. Right now. Today. After everything we went through, I just..."

Mycroft breathed it into his heart.

"You can accept the consequences?" he said. "It won't be possible for you to - ... the only option would be - ..."

Greg nodded, his eyes soft.

"I know," he said. "And I know it'll be a big change, like we said... but... new challenge. New start. Try my hand at some new tricks." He squeezed Mycroft's hand. "With you to support me. I mean... this is happening someday, gorgeous. We know it is. I - kinda want someday to be soon."

Mycroft understood. He understood with every fibre of his being.
It rose upon his lips as a smile.

Seeing it, Greg smiled too.

"I know some people might not get it," he said, gazing into Mycroft's eyes. "But... they don't have to. They didn't break open iron chains to carry me from some warehouse in Soho. They don't know what I'm feeling right now, just looking at you. They don't know what our lives have been like, and how happy I am right now - happy just to bloody be with you - happy that everything's come together like this... just like this..."

His grip tightened on Mycroft's hand.

"Just like this," he whispered. "We - nearly lost each other. Christ, we came so fucking close - and my mum was right. Life is short. Whatever there is, whatever comes next, I... I want it to be - ...

As he saw Greg's eyes start to shine, Mycroft reached gently for his jaw, tilted his head up, and kissed him.

Their lips sealed; their eyes fluttered shut.

For long, unbroken minutes, they kissed.

At last, with his heart straining in his chest, Mycroft could take no more.

He interrupted the kiss with his fingertips, placing them gently against Greg's lips. Greg kissed at them, swallowing.

Mycroft gazed at his beautiful face, feeling his throat thicken.

"Today," he whispered.

Greg gazed at him - big brown eyes, full of love and unafraid.

"You sure?" Greg said. "I - want you to be okay with this, too. I want it to feel right. We can wait, if you - ...

Mycroft smiled. He held his lover's eyes.

"Doubt thou the stars are fire," he whispered - and watched them fill with tears. "Doubt that the sun doth move..."

He lifted Greg's hand to his lips.

"Doubt truth to be a liar..."

He kissed the band of platinum there.

"But never doubt I love..."

Greg's hand shook. "I love you..." He watched Mycroft stroke the ring, his pupils huge, fingers trembling. "I love you. You're everything. Everything. I - can't live another day without - ... I-I need it to be soon, Myke. I need it to be today."

Mycroft's heart expanded with his breath.

"And the rest will come in time," he said.
Greg shivered. "So long as I have you."

Mycroft smiled against the ring. "That," he murmured, "you will always have. For all of your life."

He watched Greg bite his lip.

"I want that," Greg whispered. His eyes shone with love, beautiful and fragile and brave. "I want you for good. For better or for worse."

Mycroft's heart heaved against his ribs.

"I do believe," he said, "that of those two possibilities, our lives are about to incline very much towards 'better'..."

Greg gripped his hand.

"Our life," he said.

Mycroft leaned in to kiss him. "Our life," he whispered, as their lips came together.

On the seventh of February 2218, at two-thirty PM in the chapel of London Bridge Private Hospital, the marriage took place between Gregory Mark Lestrade, only son of Ms. Madison Grace Lestrade, and Detective Inspector Mycroft Alexander Holmes of Scotland Yard - son of Mr. and Mrs. A. H. Holmes, of Kensington, London.

The marriage was witnessed by Miss Olivia Imogen Reid of south London; and Mr. Timothy Jonathan Tierney of Manchester.

Mycroft and Gregory Holmes-Lestrade then spent the afternoon in Greg's room, resting in each other's arms.

It was a small gathering - crisps, caramel digestives, white wine for friends. Greg, who'd seen the kidney specialist at four PM, had been relegated to orange juice for now, and was playfully disgruntled about it.

"It's my wedding day," he protested, as his husband kissed him on the forehead, removed the wine glass from his hand, and replaced it with a caramel digestive.

"Sadly," Mycroft said, fond, "the bonds of marriage do not confer magical protection against alcohol. Nor shall we be testing whether they do or not for at least four to six weeks. The consultant's word is law - and in her absence, mine is. Your health comes first."

"At least you're still allowed caramel biscuits," Olivia remarked with a smile, sitting on the couch beside Greg. "Are you banned from smoking, too?"

Greg pulled a face, eating his digestive.
Over by the window, Kit Medlock huffed against the edge of her wine glass.

"Christ... good luck with that. You allowed coffee, Greg?"

"I think I'm allowed to smell it," said Greg. "But not to the point that I enjoy it. Enjoying things is bad for me. No more of anything I enjoy until April."

"Except caramel biscuits," remarked Kit, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah," said Greg. "Except caramel biscuits. Everything else I enjoy is now forbidden."

"Everything else?" said TJ - shooting a wry glance at Mycroft from behind his wine glass. He took a long, mischievous sip. "S'gonna be tough."

Mycroft declined to take the bait, regarding the little scamp with full awareness of what was being implied.

"Love is patient, TJ," he said, as he refilled Amelia Vickery's wine glass.

"Cripes," TJ muttered, eyebrows raised. He helped himself to crisps. "It's gonna have to be."

Amelia carefully masked her smile.

"Thank you, Mycroft," she said, as he handed her the glass. "Very kind."

"Not at all. There's more, if anyone wishes."

"If you both share a surname now," Olivia said, looking with interest at Greg, "isn't that going to cause confusion? Two 'DI Holmes-Lestrade' on the same case...?"

Greg took a sip of orange juice, his eyes flicking in the commander's direction.

Vickery smiled, sitting back.

"You haven't told them?" she said, intrigued, as he put the glass down.

Olivia glanced from Mycroft to Greg.

"Told us... what?" she asked.

Mycroft looked up from the bowl of crisps he was refilling, to find his husband watching him, smiling, lip bitten.

He smiled back, an eyebrow raised. "Shall I?"

Greg grinned a little, looking down at his hands. "Erm..." he began. "Myke and I - want to keep working together. It's important."

"Okay..." Olivia said, wary.

"But... well, our secret's pretty much out. We're not going to fool anyone now he's carried me in his arms from a vampire lair. And - that'll cause problems at Scotland Yard. Big problems."

Amelia took a sip of wine.

"I can only turn a blind-eye to so much," she said. "A spot of off-the-clock moral support never hurt anyone. But there are limits to what I can ignore."
"Understandably," Mycroft added.

Olivia turned her worried eyes between them. "So... so, what are you - ?"

Mycroft watched his husband take a deep breath.

"If we both stayed at Scotland Yard," Greg said, "we'd have to be separated. Different cases. Different divisions, maybe. That's - ... I mean, neither of us could - ... and we might have blown Excultus to shit, but at least some of them got away. They're still out there. If they raise their heads again, we want to take them down together."

Olivia said nothing, twisting her bumblebee ring around her finger.

Mycroft couldn't prolong her anxiety any longer.

"Greg has decided to give notice to Scotland Yard," he said. "He's chosen to leave the police force."

Olivia's jaw dropped.

Over by the window, Kit spat slightly into her wine. "Holy shit. Greg - are you serious?"

Greg bit his lip, nodding. "Sent Amelia my resignation earlier."

"You're leaving?" Olivia gasped. Open horror flooded her face. "But - ... but why would you - ..."

She couldn't believe it. "You won't be a DI anymore! You won't be a detective!"

"Well... I won't be a DI," Greg admitted. "That's true."

"But - you're a good detective! And what about all the people you've helped? How - how can you just give that up?"

Mycroft understood her distress entirely. Greg appeared to be casually turning his back on her dearest wish; it made his heart ache to see.

"Plans are in motion," he said, as he brought a blanket across to the sofa. "Greg will still be excellently placed to use his skills for the benefit of others."

Olivia looked around at him, unsettled. "What do you mean, 'plans'?"

Mycroft laid the blanket across the pair of them, spreading it out with care. They were not to get cold. He could feel Greg purposely not looking at TJ, who was now smiling very hard into a bowl of crisps.

"Scotland Yard detectives are not to engage in intimate relationships with colleagues," Mycroft explained. "Fortunately, there are no such restrictions when consulting with independent contractors."

"- independent contractors...?" Olivia said.

As Mycroft tucked the blanket around him, Greg kissed his chin. "Thanks, gorgeous..."

Mycroft handed him another caramel biscuit.

"In the spirit of the day," he said, "I'd suggest there's no time like the present. Perhaps the pair of you could put poor Olivia out of her worry."
"The pair of you'?" Kit remarked.

Greg grinned a little. He took a breath.

"I'm setting myself up as a security consultant," he said. "Freelance. It's a posh title, but... basically - "

"You're going private?" Olivia's eyes widened to twice their size. "A private detective - ?"

Greg's grin grew. "With... a tech consultant on hand. Joint business."

TJ toasted them all.

"Solve your murder, fix your printer," he said. "Tierney and Holmes-Lestrade, Inc."

There was an outbreak of surprise and delight.

Mycroft watched, desperately pleased, as Olivia leant forwards to hug Greg. The two of them shared some quiet words. Greg rubbed her back, saying, "I know, darlin'...", as TJ returned Commander Vickery's handshake with a grin.

"Gonna take us a while to get set up," TJ said. "And we'll have to work to get our name out there, but... well, there's advantages to getting outside the system."

"Less paperwork," said Greg, smiling.

"Yep. Not so many protocols. Choose what we do. And Dr H is right - we can still be on hand for Scotland Yard. Our rates will be unbelievably reasonable."

"Are you staying with the police?" Olivia asked, looking up at Mycroft with round eyes.

Mycroft smiled.

In truth, there were several reasons why he'd opted to stay - not least Scotland Yard's resources, and the early warnings of Exultus that those resources were likely to bring - but one reason in particular now came to the front of his mind.

It would take several days to finalise. A number of strings had required pulling, some of them rather hard. He'd put it to Amelia as the price of retaining him in her department, rather than seeing him vanish back upstairs, or into the private sector with Greg.

The place on the training course had almost been confirmed.

"I am staying," he told Olivia, regarding her with reassurance. "I have no plans to leave."

She seemed to relax slightly - then regarded herself with confusion, as if wondering why she cared. She occupied herself with her orange juice, rubbing her thumb quietly against the glass.

As Mycroft approached the sofa from behind, laying another blanket across them both, Greg tipped his face fondly upwards.

"It was hypovolemia," he said. "Not hypothermia."

Mycroft looked down into his eyes, unable to hide his smile.

"Dr Garcia said 'warm and comfortable'," he reminded Greg. "And I believe I made a rather solemn
promise to care for you today. The words 'honour and cherish' were used. Now hush, and allow me to do so."

Greg grinned from ear to ear, letting Mycroft tuck the blanket around him. "'kay."

It was their wedding day. Mycroft had never loved him more. He'd never looked so wonderful, his eyes aglow and his grey hair softly scruffed, cosy beneath blankets, with all their life ahead of them.

As Mycroft kissed the top of his head, he saw his husband's face soften in contentment.

Across the small circle, TJ Tierney held up his wine glass.

"To the happy couple," he proposed, his eyes bright. "Cheers."

Mycroft's heart squeezed with fondness for the boy.

"Cheers!" came the widespread agreement - and as the room drank to them, Mycroft bent a kiss to his husband's hopeful lips. He felt Greg grin against his mouth. *God help me... my lawfully-wedded husband. Gregory Holmes-Lestrade.*

"Love you," Greg murmured, as they parted. His decadent brown eyes roamed Mycroft's face, bright with joy. "Mine."

"Yours," Mycroft murmured. He'd be grateful for it, everyday. "Have another biscuit, please. You need your strength."

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By eight, Olivia was tiring - and the decision was made to draw the evening to a close. As TJ waited with the wheelchair, Olivia gestured to Mycroft.

"C'mere," she mumbled.

Mycroft knelt by the couch for her.

Her arms wrapped gently around his neck. He hugged her, fond, aware in his peripheral vision of Greg watching them both with a smile.

"M'glad you're alright," she murmured into his shoulder. "M'so glad for you and Greg. And for Greg and TJ, too. I'm really glad."

Mycroft closed his eyes.

He couldn't tell her yet. He'd never wanted to share something more, and it was unbearable.

Squeezing her, he murmured, "Everyone will be glad for you, too."

She hesitated, not letting go of him. "Why?"

"Let me see it in writing," Mycroft said. "Then - in a few days - you and I shall perhaps have a conversation. May I help you up?"
Her arms tensed, gently.

Mycroft lifted her up.

As TJ wheeled her from the room, Greg finished the last of his orange juice with a smile.

"She'll cry," he warned Mycroft, eyes dancing as he put the glass down.

Mycroft's heart stirred.

"Good," he said. "Then I shan't be embarrassed to be the only one."

TJ returned for hugs and goodbyes, and a scruff of his hair from Greg. He then headed off for the bus, with a happy promise that he'd be back the next day. He and Greg had plans to make.

As he left, and the door shut behind him, Mycroft noted with interest the movement across by the window.

The quieter member of the gathering finally left her station there, came across to the table, and took a caramel digestive from the small number left.

"Might I offer you a lift home, Medlock?"

"I'm alright, Amelia... thanks. Taxi's on the way." Kit helped Mycroft transfer the rest of the biscuits to a box. "D'you still smoke?" she asked him, discreetly.

*Mm. I did wonder.*

"Now in the process of quitting," Mycroft said. "Marital solidarity."

"Fresh air?" she suggested.

Mycroft glanced at his new husband. The prospect of leaving Greg alone made his stomach tighten slightly.

Amelia Vickery, ever observant, laid down her coat.

"I'll take the watch, Mycroft," she said. "If you'd like to escort a young lady to her taxi."

Both Kit and Mycroft snorted.

Greg grinned, settling beneath his blankets. "Go have a last smoke," he said, smiling at his husband. "I'll be fine."

"Are you - quite certain?"

"Certain." Greg's eyes glittered. "Amelia's gonna sneak me a glass of wine really quick while you're gone."

"She'll do no such thing," said the commander, wryly.
Without End

(More love to my wonderful Tuliaart, for more gorgeous Kit artwork. I can't believe how beautiful this is. Thank you, sweet... I'm so touched.)

To feel my hand so kindly prest,
To know myself beloved at last,
To think my heart has found a rest,
Outside the doors of the hospital wing, Kit offered the packet.

Mycroft eyed the cigarettes, fighting with himself.

"No," he said, at last. *It would not be fair on Greg,* he thought. "I shan't. Thank you."

Kit grinned a little, lighting up.

"Impressive," she remarked, around the cigarette. "Marriage does change people. Congratulations, by the way."

"For the better, I hope. And thank you." Mycroft slid his hands into his pockets, listening to London pulsing on the night air around them. The city, unaware that anything remarkable had happened within its depths, was much as it had always been - humming with people and cars and lights, traffic that never stopped, days that never ended. It was an odd comfort, Mycroft found. Some things never changed. "I think Greg's decision to leave Scotland Yard will shock people more than his new surname."

Kit hummed, smoking beside him.

"It's a surprise," she admitted. "Makes sense, though... I think he'll do good out on his own."

"Mm. He certainly has the tenacity for it... and the creative approach to regulations will help..."

Kit huffed, blowing smoke.

Mycroft was well aware she had not brought him out here for small talk. Medlock had barely spoken all night - but it seemed a certain amount of lead was required.

"What about you?" she asked. "Staying in Cross-Human Relations, are you?"

"I need to see to Greg at first. His recovery. I've been awarded time-off as compassionate leave. Though, when he's fit enough... I intend to remain with Amelia."

"Not going back upstairs?"

Mycroft tried to imagine it. The stark white office that had once been his sanctuary; a cactus for company; staff who flinched whenever his door opened. A theoretical existence of theoretical profiles, case studies and offender models.

Clean, he thought. Distant. Removed.

"I've... seen too much of the world to retreat from it now," he said, at last. "I've rather made my peace with danger."

"D'you think they'll be back?" Medlock asked.
"Without a doubt." Mycroft watched her blow smoke, unafraid. "The question is when, not if. From the number of bodies found at the warehouse, we've decimated their numbers... and if we're fortunate, it will be years before they resurface... but we'll be watching with vigilance."

Kit dragged on her cigarette. "$\text{"Strike hard, strike sure'."}"

Mycroft smiled a little. $\text{Quite.}$

"When the time comes, we'll benefit from having Greg outside of Scotland Yard. And it means TJ's transformations are no longer forced into a timetable... there are various advantages."

Kit was quiet for some time, smoking.

When she finally spoke again, she said,

"Be a while before Greg's chasing criminals over rooftops, though."

"Ah... one can only hope and pray." Mycroft gave her a weak smile. "I'm intending a very quiet spring. Recovery, first. $\text{Then} \text{ pursuit of ne'er-do-wells over rooftops.}"

Kit smiled back, meeting his eyes properly for the first time - a brief and bemused flash.

"He'll be fine," she said, and took another drag. "He's in good hands."

She meant it.

Mycroft found himself quietly moved.

"Thank you, Medlock. For your courage. We wouldn't have left that place without you."

She smiled, blowing smoke down towards her boots. "'Kit', she said. "S'fine. Couldn't have left you in there."

"You could," Mycroft said, mildly. "You chose not to. Thank you."

She huffed. "Alright... you're welcome, Holmes."

"'Mycroft', he said. 'Please. Or at least 'Holmes-Lestrade'."

She grinned around her cigarette. "Sorry. I'll be calling him 'Lestrade' for months, if it helps."

"I'm sure we can overlook such a trifle," Mycroft murmured, amused, and watched her take another drag.

As she exhaled, she said,

"Listen..."

Mycroft listened.


Mycroft raised an eyebrow, listening harder.

"I've... been thinking. A lot. About what he did. Can I ask something?"

"Of course," Mycroft said, intrigued. "Go ahead."
"It's biological."

Mycroft smiled slightly. "The offer to 'go ahead' stands."

"These chemicals," she said. "The ones you produce that - ... look, how much of it was really him? How much of it can I hate him for?"

Mycroft didn't need to think for long.

"Within Greg's hearing," he said, "compassion might be wise. For all that Elwood became, he was at first a friend. Outside of Greg's hearing, you may blame the sorry little arsehole for whatever you wish. The man started out on the path to betrayal long before PT-309 got into his system. It isn't mind control. It's a stimulant. It's there to - enhance an experience. The propensity for him to stab us in the back, he can take full credit for."

"They lied to him, though," Kit regarded Mycroft with unease. "Sold him a load of crap about you being a psycho."

Mycroft snorted.

"Elwood was a police officer," he remarked. "People lie to police officers more commonly than they tell the truth. He should have thought to question it. He could also have approached our superiors with the accusations against me, but did not. He kept them for his own ends. A minute's conversation with Greg would have confirmed I hadn't 'poisoned' the man with anything."

"I just..." Kit's jaw locked. "Look. I want to hate him. I want to make the son-of-a-bitch pay for what he did. We lost the top two layers of Armed Response. They were brave people. They were good people. He led them like lambs to the slaughter, and I need to hate him. But if he was acting under some drug... just doing what some clever bastard wanted him to - "

"In this moment," Mycroft interrupted - and she blinked into silence, "my husband is drinking a glass of wine."

Kit stared at him, concerned.

"Hopefully," Mycroft added, with a lift of his eyebrow, "Amelia will have restricted him to half a glass, rather than a full - but there is alcohol entering his system as we speak. He'll be drinking it at speed, knowing I could return at any moment. And in a few days' time, a consultant will suggest to me that Greg should stay for further tests. I'll be warned about minor chances of this complication, or that complication - and while tests so far have shown no signs whatsoever of long-term damage, I'll be advised that further testing would confirm the matter. Greg will turn his eyes onto me. He'll tell me that he wants to go home. And I will start packing his bags."

Kit smiled. She looked down at her boots, rubbing her thumb along the cigarette.

"Point taken," she murmured.

"Elwood was influenced," Mycroft said, coolly. "I'll grant him that. I'll then add that we are all influenced everyday, by everyone and everything. Some of those influences we resist. Some of them we seize eagerly with both hands. If I now ordered Greg to lead two Armed Response squads to their deaths, betray all of his colleagues and friends, and shoot Olivia in the stomach, he'd laugh and pour himself another glass of wine."

Kit grinned, rolling her cigarette across her lip. "Alright... thanks. That's reassuring."
"You may hate Elwood," Mycroft advised. "I intend to."

She looked up at him, her eyes flashing. "Yeah?"

"Mm. With some fervency."

He watched her expression harden slightly.

"I - want him to suffer," she said. "For what he did. To my squad. To you. To Greg." She bit at her cheek, her eyes shuttering. "To Olivia."

Mycroft wondered why that name had come foremost in her mind.

He kept it from his face.

"When you hear something," she said, and dragged on the last of her cigarette. "Where he's gone, I mean... where he's hiding... tell me, will you?"

Mycroft was already monitoring a number of leads.

If the most likely one was correct, Elwood had already left the country - a wrist-set flash in Slovenia four days ago. Nothing since.

It tallied.

If Matthews had any sense - and Mycroft regretted very much that he did - he'd have taken himself far away to lick his wounds. He'd opt to hide somewhere, and wait - dragging the reliable source of nutrition with him.

Mycroft only hoped that Elwood was now discovering the wider facts of the matter - of what he'd made possible.

Mycroft hoped it made him realise the truth.

Evil was easy.

It never felt like evil. It felt good, and it often seemed so fair. Evil could sell itself with ease as a courageous form of just retaliation - as rightful protectiveness. As pride. When viewed up close, day-in and day-out, decision-by-decision, evil looked no different whatsoever to good.

It was only on when stepping back that you discovered what manner of cloth you had woven - strand-by-strand, hour-by-hour.

"I will keep you updated," Mycroft promised. He watched Medlock grind her cigarette out against the wall. "I - believe that you and I now share a goal of vengeance, Commander Medlock."

A small smile flickered across her mouth.

"Not been formally announced yet," she said.

Mycroft smiled, too. Amelia's inside sources were rarely mistaken. "No-one deserves it more."

Kit shook her head, dragging her lip between her teeth.

"I'll deserve it when I've got Luke's head hanging in the armoury," she said. "Not until."
"If I can acquire such a thing for you," Mycroft said, "I shall. We'll see him answer for it, some day."

"Some day." Medlock checked her wrist-set, frowning at the glare in the darkness. "Taxi'll be here soon. I'd - better go wait on the road."

"Will you be safe," Mycroft asked, "or shall I escort you?"

Kit shot him a smirk. "Should manage, as it happens... thanks, though. You're a gent."

As she turned up the collar of her coat, she said,

"By the way... TJ?"

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "TJ?"

"Him and Olivia," she said, not meeting his eyes. "Is that a thing now?"

Mycroft forced his other eyebrow to stay precisely where it was.

"He's - visited very diligently," he said, watching his words. "And she seems glad of his company. Though - we haven't been been served official notice of a 'thing'..."


And she left - her hands deep in her pockets, her tread quiet and heavy on the pavement.

Mycroft let himself back into the building, wondering.

As he entered the room, he found Greg curled happily on the sofa beneath his blankets, halfway through a caramel biscuit.

"Hey!" he said, brightly, as Mycroft crossed over to him. "Kit get off okay?"

Mycroft placed a hand on the back of the couch, leant low to his husband, and kissed him.

Caramel and digestive did not quite disguise the taste of fermented grape.

Mycroft smothered a smile, curling his fingers beneath Greg's chin. His heart leapt with delight as they kissed, tongues flashing softly.

"You utter scoundrel," he breathed, as they parted.

Greg grinned, guiltily. "A mouthful."

"And then the rest of the glass?"

"Tiny glass."

"We shall discuss this when Amelia is gone," Mycroft said. His eyes shone. "Are you warm enough?"

Greg grinned, pulling the blankets up around his neck. "Kinda like this 'fussing over me' thing..."

"Good," Mycroft murmured. "I've barely started."

He turned to Amelia - ready in her coat, and fighting a smile with all her worth.
"Thank you, Amelia... we shan't keep you any longer."

She embraced Mycroft in the doorway: a short, functional and bracing hug - his first from her in nine years.

"Goodnight, old friend," she said against his shoulder.

She then left, closing the door behind her.

As Mycroft turned to the couch, he found his husband looking back at him in amazement.

Greg grinned. "Now that was a sight I thought I'd never see..."

Mycroft smiled; he supposed miracles were in plentiful supply these days.

It was no bad thing.

He eased his hands beneath Greg, murmuring, "Arms around my neck..."

Greg took hold of him carefully, and let Mycroft lift him from the warm nest of blankets. They slid from him into a pool on the couch.

"Is this our wedding night now?" Greg asked, playful, as Mycroft carried him over to the bed. "M'I about to be tenderly deflowered?"

Mycroft had never adored him quite so much.

"If by 'deflowered'," he said, "you mean 'given eight hours of completely unhindered rest', yes."

Greg wriggled. "That doesn't sound as much fun."

"As I think we've established, darling, you've been suspended from fun until April." Mycroft laid him down with care, resting him amongst the clean white covers. "And if you think I'm going to be 'deflowering' you in a hospital bed, where a nurse could come in to check your blood pressure at any moment, I'll invite you to think again."

Greg grinned from ear-to-ear. He reached up, caught Mycroft's tie, and gently pulled him down.

As they kissed, and Mycroft pressed his new husband gently into the pillows, Greg made a quiet sound of joy against his mouth. Mycroft's heart gave a leap - restless and happy, overcome.

"I want to go home," Greg whispered, shivering. "I mean it, gorgeous. I'm not kidding."

Mycroft carefully climbed into bed with him, his chest aching.

"I know you do, darling... I'm sorry."

"When?" Greg asked. He cupped Mycroft's face, gazing into his eyes. "Tomorrow?"

Mycroft wrapped his arms around Greg, gathering him as close as clothing would permit. "You're with the cardiology department tomorrow... it's important."

"Going home is important," Greg whispered. "Please."

Mycroft felt his heart being tugged as clearly as he'd felt the pull at his tie.

He took a moment to pick the right words.
"I promise," he murmured, "that we will go home as soon as it is safe to do so." He stroked a hand across Greg's cheek. "I won't let it be delayed any longer than it must be."

"Um... who's judging 'safe'?"

Mycroft kissed his lips, gently.

"I am," he said. He closed his eyes. "Today, I made a vow to keep you that way until the end of my life. I will be giving that vow all the gravity it deserves."

He felt his husband's chest expand within his arms.

"Mycroft..." Greg whispered. He seemed lost for words.

Mycroft nuzzled at his lips.

"Kiss me, darling... it's our wedding night."

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**Wednesday 11th February**

As Mycroft helped him with care into the taxi, Greg's grin could have powered central London.

"Gorgeous, I'm fine... I can get into a car by myself..."

The sight of him in jeans this morning had made Mycroft rather weak-kneed with relief. Something about Greg up and dressed, ready for the journey home, was a sight too wonderful for words.

"I'm being chivalrous," he said. "One must nourish the spark."

"You're fussing!" Greg laughed, as Mycroft reached across him through the open door and attended to his seatbelt. "I'm surprised you've not got a taxi full of Armed Response travelling behind us..."

In playful mood, Mycroft reached for the lapel of his jacket.

"Keep your heads down, Medlock," he murmured into the microphone that was not there. "He has spotted you."

Greg's laughter rang through his heart. They kissed, Greg's grin broad against his mouth.

Mycroft took hold of the car door.

"We're going home," Greg said, his eyes shining.

As he looked down, Mycroft realised he'd remember this sight forever, too - the man he loved, safe and well, excited on the very first day of the rest of their lives.

Once, he'd thought he'd never get to see this sight.

He smiled, quietly gripping the door.
"We are going home," he said. "At last."

The drive was not the easiest Mycroft had ever experienced. London's vehicle operators had many priorities; driving in a way that relaxed other road-users was not one of them. He kept one arm firmly around Greg, and bit his cheek each time another van swerved far too close to the taxi.

Greg slid a hand around his left knee. He squeezed.

"You sharp?" he murmured.

Mycroft checked with the tip of his tongue.

He sniffed, sweeping across his teeth. "My physiology considers all threats against my pair-bond to be equal."

"I'd love to see that..." Greg murmured, gazing at him. "You ripping the bumper off some poor builder's van, because he drove a bit too close to me..."

"If one more of the irresponsible tossers cuts us up, you shall have your wish."

Greg cuddled into his side, grinning. "Love you."

"I love you, too." Mycroft smartly kissed his cheek. "I shall relax in ten minutes."

"When I'm behind a bulletproof steel door, you mean?"

"Yes."

"How many trained killers now live with us to protect me?"

"One," said Mycroft. "His name is Mycroft."

"Christ. I love you."

"I love you, too." As he kissed Greg again, Mycroft determined to give the taxi driver a sizeable tip. This couldn't be easy to witness. "We'll need to have food delivered for you tomorrow... I have the standard supplies, but I wasn't sure what you'd want for the week."

"Delivered?" Greg said, casually.

"Mm."

Greg looked up at him, sideways. "We're - not just going to the supermarket?"

"You spent the first half of this week unconscious," Mycroft reminded him, with a raised eyebrow.

"So?" said Greg, amused. "I'm not going to swoon at all the bargains."

Mycroft looked into his husband's eyes, seeing his own wonderful doom written in them. They sparkled at him, shining - full of playful defiance and love.

Mycroft smiled, biting his tongue.

"We shall discuss this later," he murmured.

Greg's eyebrow quirked. "We could always discuss it tomorrow?"
Mycroft fought a smile with all his might. "On the way to the supermarket?" he checked.

Greg grinned. "Yep."

"Why did I not request the registrar use the version where you promise to obey me? Perhaps if I write to them, I could have it amended after the fact..."

Beaming, Greg leant up for his lips.

"I love you," he breathed, and kissed Mycroft without a care.

Mycroft stroked his fingers over his husband's cheeks. I love you, too...

God above - to think that they were going home - coming closer with every road, every street sign, every set of traffic lights... it was unreal. It was miraculous.

It was wonderful.

As the taxi pulled up outside, Mycroft paid the man in full, and told him to keep the change.

He then helped Greg from the backseat.

Inside, the list of residents had already been updated behind the porters' desk. Their name was displayed upon the wall, proud in gilded capitals beside Apartment III - HOLMES-LESTRADE.

Greg grinned from ear-to-ear as he spotted it.

He let Mycroft coax him towards the lift, not the stairs.

"Dr Garcia said I need light exercise," he said, tucking into his husband's side as the lift made its way up through the building.

Mycroft nosed at his temple. "The supermarket is light exercise," he said. "Three flights of stairs is too much."

As they approached the door, he felt Greg shiver quietly against him.

"Are you alright?" Mycroft asked. He laid down the bag to reach his wrist-set.

"Fine," said Greg. "It's - been a while. That's all."

Mycroft had suspected this might be more emotional than Greg had anticipated. He fitted his wrist-set into the security panel, placing an arm around his partner as the light illuminated their faces for the camera.

"Access?" said the door.


"Guest?" muttered Greg, as the door pondered his voice patterns.

Mycroft's wrist-set disengaged from the lock.

"We'll program your voice this afternoon," he said, "if you feel strong enough."

He pushed open the door, and stood back for Greg to enter.
Greg seemed to hold his breath. He stepped inside.

As the door closed behind them, he let out a desperate sound.

"They're alive - " Greg rushed to the fish-tank, throwing his hands at once upon the glass. "They're okay! They're alive - they're okay, they're - ..."

His voice strained into sudden silence.

Mycroft put down the bag.

He moved to Greg, wrapped both arms around him, and held him as he began to cry.

"It's alright," he murmured, his voice softening. He'd expected this. He stroked Greg's hair, rocking him gently. "It's all alright... the shock will come in stages. This is very normal."

Greg shook in his arms in utter silence, crying as he gazed at the fish.

Mycroft made a quiet deduction.

"Anthea feeds them in my absence," he murmured. "She monitors the water." He felt his lover soften; he kissed the side of Greg's neck, gently. "You feared they were dead."

Tears burned in Greg's eyes. He buried his face into Mycroft's shoulder, shaking.

"We're alive," he whispered.

"We are." Mycroft stroked his fingers through Greg's hair. "Thermal signatures, Anthea?"

Greg needed to hear it.

She answered at once.

"Two," she said. Mycroft felt Greg exhale in his arms. "Living room area. Confirm OK?"

"Confirm," Mycroft murmured. He kissed his husband's forehead.

She bleeped, gently. "Hello, Inspector Lestrade."

Greg let out a rush of air, halfway between a sob and a laugh.

"Hi, Anthea..." He burrowed tighter into Mycroft's chest, shivering as Mycroft stroked him. "I'm not an inspector anymore, darlin'. Or 'Lestrade'. It's nice to see you, though."

"I am sorry, Inspector Lestrade? I do not understand."

Mycroft slid a handkerchief from his inside pocket, drying Greg's eyes as he spoke. "Would you kindly rename Inspector Lestrade in the system, Anthea? He no longer uses that name."

"I see, Dr Holmes-Lestrade. Please supply new system name?"

Mycroft looked into Greg's eyes. He held them, as he smiled.

"Mr Gregory Holmes-Lestrade," he murmured. "Short form - 'Greg'."

"Mr Gregory Holmes-Lestrade. Short form, 'Greg'. Confirm?"
Greg's eyes filled with fresh tears. He stroked his fingers over Mycroft's jaw, trembling.

"Confirm," he whispered, and reached up for his husband's lips.

They kissed in the glow of the fish-tank; Mycroft's heart heaved itself apart.

The playful ring of wedding bells then sounded from the AI speakers. The kiss broke, with splutters of laughter.

"Congratulations, Dr Holmes-Lestrade," she said, all around them. "Congratulations, Greg."

Greg beamed through his tears, shivering as Mycroft dried them away.

"Thanks, babe," he mumbled. "You're sweet."

"Set anniversary reminder, Dr Holmes-Lestrade?"

Mycroft bit down on a smile. "Very kind, Anthea. But I believe that I'll remember."

He enfolded Greg back within his arms, and his husband gazed up at the fish - fingertips careful on the glass, watching their soft tails and their colours swirling by.

A few minutes of gentle silence passed.

"Anthea," Mycroft murmured, at last. "Could you please start the bath running?"

She bleeped. "Of course, Dr Holmes-Lestrade."

Greg shivered, nuzzling beneath Mycroft's chin.


Mycroft gathered the sides of his coat, wrapped them carefully around Greg, and hid him away.

"I love you, too," he murmured, kissing the soft grey head at his chest. "Without condition, Greg. Without end."

Greg shivered in his arms. "Mine..." he breathed.

Mycroft held his husband tight.

He closed his shining eyes.

"Yours," he whispered. "Always... yours."
The Beginning

We are strong, each in our purpose, and we are all more strong together.

- Bram Stoker

'Dracula' (1897)

Monday 11th May

Three months later.

Greg was having the most amazing dream.

He was Mycroft - which was a pretty good start, as dreams went - and he was lying in bed, watching himself sleep in the early morning light. The sheets had slipped down; there was sunshine on the curtains, soft and barely there. He could see himself breathing, perfectly at peace.

It made him proud just to see it.

He was proud of what he'd done, and proud of what they had together - a home, a happy marriage and a future. It was going to be a wonderful day. These were its very first moments, and it made him happy just to be alive.

As he leant closer, still Mycroft, and started kissing at his own neck, he enjoyed the little sound of unconscious response it earned him - the smooth warmth of his own skin across his lips. He kissed the pulse that murmured to him from beneath two tiny scars, each no wider than a pen. He was making his peace with the scars on the other side of Greg's neck, too - silvery crescent moons, facing each other. They grew easier to see every single day.

It felt good to grow.

As he eased his hands beneath the sheets, stroking bare skin that was usually his own, feeling it as if through Mycroft's fingers, it occurred to Greg that he perhaps shouldn't be enjoying this so much.

He wanted to, though - his lover was warm, and naked, and gorgeous beside him - and the sounds from Greg's mouth came soft and sleepy, the gentle motions of his body responsive towards his touch, evocative, and all he wanted was to coax more of those sounds into being. We have time, he thought - Mycroft's voice. Ample time.

He would make breakfast for Greg. Bring it to him, hold him, and watch him eat. He knew he shouldn't enjoy watching Greg eat.

But he found it fascinating - the look of quiet enjoyment his lover wore when tasting something
that he liked. He could watch it for hours.

He wanted to watch it now.

Though first...

He kissed his way down Greg's body, tasting here and there - soothing gently with his mouth, familiar trails that made his heart sing to follow them - the bloody bear paw tattoo - how had he become so fond of it? - the knife scar at Greg's side - the dark trickle of hair guiding his way downwards from Greg's navel, to a darker thatch full of scent and warmth. He nuzzled through it, feeling heat stir irrepressibly in his stomach. It was primal - Greg's smell; Greg's body. He adored the animalism of their bond sometimes. Greg kindled things in him that he simply loved to feel. They'd barely begun exploring.

As he stroked his mouth along his lover's thickening cock, licking to shape it into sleepy hardness for him, Greg had the curious sensation of both going down on himself and enjoying it. Clearly shouldn't be getting off on this, he thought. It was impossible not to. Mycroft's mouth was now sliding around him, those long fingers guiding his cock into a wet and welcoming heat that made him stretch and moan weakly for more, even as he felt the same thickness comfortably filling his mouth. No teasing, he thought. Just feeling. Just relief. He began to rub with his tongue in the way that Greg liked, steady and rhythmic and reassuring, wrapping his hands beneath Greg's thighs to hold him.

At the same time, he reached down - fingertips half-awake, searching beneath the sheets. Mycroft's head, nuzzling into his groin - Mycroft's jaw, the soft bristles there, still new, still thrilling - Mycroft's sleep-ruffled red hair.

Greg breathed in, washed with excitement as he realised he was being woken up with oral sex. Mycroft shifted, feeling him awake. He hummed, low and soft in his throat - good morning... - and continued to slide his mouth around Greg's cock.

"Fuck," Greg whispered, letting his head fall back. He swallowed, dry-throated, and threaded his fingers through Mycroft's hair. "B-Baby..."

Mycroft huffed. If you must. His tongue began to wind in lazy, serpentine patterns, soothing Greg's cock with melting curls and dextrous little flicks.

It was exquisite.

Fragments of the dream still clung to the edges of Greg's mind. He could still almost feel the stretch of his own cock in his mouth, the satisfaction of tracing the furrow on the underside with his tongue. He bit his lip towards the bedroom ceiling, feeling a little guilty.

It wasn't wanting himself that had turned him on. It was feeling Mycroft want him.

Long, lazy minutes in, Mycroft's fingertips stroked a tender question between Greg's thighs. Greg's answer was yes. He gasped it, shuddering, and reached for the bottle on the bedside, handing it down.

As Mycroft gentled Greg with his fingers, he kept up the slow care of his cock.

"Oh, God..." Greg arched, stifling a whimper as Mycroft lazily circled his prostate - teasing - promising. "Ohh - fuck...! F-Fuck, gorgeous - please - please, just - ..."
Mycroft's low, thick-throated chuckle nearly booted him over the edge.

Greg was so busy trying not to come that at first he didn't notice the chiming of his wrist-set.

"Oh - Christ - I'm awake," he told it, panting. "Shut up. I'm awake."

"Eight times nine?" the wrist-set asked.

Greg screwed his head back into the pillow.

"Oh my God. Are you fucking serious? Eight times nine? Now?"

"Sorry. I didn't quite catch that."

"Oh - f-fucking Jesus - ..." Mycroft's fingers were spiralling ever closer, toying with him, slow and stroking and soothing just a flicker from where he needed them. Greg screwed together the last of his rational thought. "Sixty-something?" he tried in desperation.

The wrist-set alarm got faster and louder. "Incorrect. Eight times nine?"

"Mycroft - " Greg groaned, well aware that the shake in his lover's shoulders was now laughter. "Mycroft - for God's sake - answer it - please - I need to come - "

Mycroft slid his mouth free, smirking; his beard rasped the tip of Greg's cock. He ran his tongue across his lips.

"The digits in multiples of nine," he husked, "always themselves add up to nine."

"Oh my God!" Greg gasped, writhing. "Answer it! Answer it or you're divorced!"

Mycroft's fingers rammed at last against his prostate.

"Seventy-two..." he murmured, rubbing hard.

Greg came crying out, heaving against the bed and clenching down on the rough, gorgeous rubbing of his husband's fingers, whimpering as Mycroft wrapped a hand around his cock and stroked him through. Each snug, lazy pull only sent another wave rippling through his blood.

In the aftermath, panting, Greg collapsed into a pool of himself against the pillows.

"Fuck..." he gasped, flushing. He felt his throat muscles flex as he swallowed. "Get inside me. Now."

Mycroft snorted, kissing the inside of his knee. Warm lips and soft red prickles. "Rest..."

"N-No. Want you. Please."

"Now?

Greg's heart leapt. "Fuck - yes. Please. I need to feel you."

As Mycroft's fingers gently withdrew from his body, Greg sunk his teeth into his lip. Fuck, he loved that feeling. The first feeling of something more. He panted, shifting back against the pillows and squirming to sit up, resting back against the headboard - drawing his knees up and apart. Mycroft leant against him, stroking gently up the back of his thighs to hold him.
Greg quivered, pinned open and panting.

"Do it," he whispered, as Mycroft nuzzled into his neck and eased into place - the gentle nudge of his cock, aligning with Greg's body. Greg's eyes fluttered shut. Share me, he thought. Share me for a while. "F-Fuck, sweetheart... go on..."

Three months - three perfect fucking months - and this was only getting easier every time. The feeling of being cosily stretched by Mycroft's cock made him want to moan so loud that the porters came inquiring.

The people in Apartment Two had moved out in March.

Mycroft said it was probably not solely due to Greg.

As Greg wrapped his arms around Mycroft's shoulders, he felt his husband shudder and come flush with his body - nestled in him deep, held inside him. They panted together for a few moments, just to breathe. Greg knew that Mycroft too was feeling that indefinable sensation they'd now spent three months exploring - that tightness - that closeness. You and me. Together. Right now, you and me.

Greg splayed his fingers over the back of Mycroft's neck, panting. He stirred, and licked his lover's ear.

"Stay in bed all day?" he whispered, as Mycroft began to move. Oh, fuck... fuck, gorgeous, yes... these careful first strokes, softening together - the tender slide of Mycroft's cock - it was everything. Fuck, fuck... fuck...

Mycroft swallowed in his ear, stiffening. "The - ... c-collecting TJ - ... at t-ten."

Greg's heart swelled. "'kay..." Bed all afternoon, then. He tightened his fingers in the back of Mycroft's hair, rocking with him now, helping build this feeling for him - gripping one-handed at his shoulder, thighs quivering on each gentle push. Christ, your cock... fuck me forever. "Gorgeous?"

"Mm?" Mycroft's voice softened, protective at once. "Are you alright?"

Greg squeezed his shoulder. He quietly lifted his chin, and laid his head back against the headboard.

Mycroft shuddered; his breath hitched. "Are you certain?"

Greg smiled, stirring to offer more of his throat. He began to rub the nape of Mycroft's neck - familiar little circles, coaxing.

Mycroft swallowed.

He nuzzled closer as he shook.

Always this way. Always together. Something about sex like this - rocking, stirring, Mycroft's desperate shudders as he drank. Greg needed it now as much as Myke. He needed these first slow, calming licks - wetting his skin, tasting his warmth - he needed the tightening of Mycroft's breath.

Sometimes, he felt the tiny scratch. Sometimes it was the anaesthetic he felt first - gentle numbness, spreading with his lover's tender licking. The more they did this, the longer Mycroft
could wait to let it take effect. It was almost lazy now; luxurious, and gentle, and quiet.

The second time had been distressing - not *quite* as bad as the first, but still difficult. Mycroft had cried with fear afterwards. It had taken half the night to calm him down; he'd not let Greg go for a moment the next day. A lot of love, a lot of care, and three months had now gone by.

And they could do this before coffee, and Greg wanted it while making love.

He barely even felt the bite.

Every single time, he found himself thinking that the fangs were small - hardly there. Just a painless pinch at his skin, lost amongst Mycroft's measured breathing and the shake of his hands holding tightly onto Greg. His jaw stirred as he drank; Greg had a feeling it was instinct, encouraging the blood from the wound. While Mycroft lapped, Greg rubbed the back of his neck for him - little circles in rhythm, comforting and calming as they breathed.

The first time they'd tried this while fucking, Greg had come just from Mycroft's sounds.

And for all the fuss over PT-309, Greg was pretty sure he could take it or leave it.

He could barely tell what point it kicked in. The anaesthetic, he could feel - track its progress up and down his neck, cold tingles - but when Mycroft was inside him, lapping at his throat and moaning, or whimpering as Greg fucked him slowly in time with his desperate licks, any aphrodisiac was showing up pretty late to the party.

Even now, after coming, he couldn't tell what was chemical - what was not.

He liked the feeling of Myke inside him; he liked the feel of Mycroft's mouth, panting restlessly as he fed. He liked the gentle dig of Mycroft's fingers at his hips, holding him, needing him, and he liked the way Myke trembled when he swallowed.

It was all that Greg knew, and he liked it.

"Don't wait," he whispered. He closed his eyes and breathed, moving his hips gently in response. "Don't wait, gorgeous..."

Mycroft let out a groan into his neck, whimpering.

Greg shivered and tightened his arms.

"I know, love..." He bit at his lip, closing his eyes a moment just to breathe. When they opened, his gaze fell on the curtains and the sunlight glowing through them - the peace of their bedroom around them, and their reflection in the mirrored wardrobe doors: Mycroft's back, his own hands gripping it tightly; Mycroft's face turned into his throat. Another shiver rippled across Greg's skin. "Good for me too..."

In less than a minute, Mycroft let out a gasp against his neck. He swallowed hard, and began to lick fervently with the flat of his tongue - rough broad sweeps to seal the wound.

Greg squirmed, locking his legs around his husband's waist. He buried his fingers into Mycroft's hair.

"Fuck me," he whispered, pulling their foreheads together. He stared into Mycroft's eyes - his pupils foggy, cheeks flushed, the nervous tips of fangs. "Fuck me, gorgeous... come inside me..."
Mycroft's chest heaved. He began to rut, deep and urgent - Greg hissed with satisfaction at each building slam. He arched against the headboard, carding his fingers through his husband's hair.

"Fuck, yes," he snarled, gripping his thighs tighter. "Fucking yes...!

Mycroft whimpered, his face contracting with effort and enjoyment. His fingers tensed tight at Greg's hips, holding him there - keeping him where Mycroft needed him - Greg groaned and called out with it, stretching in desperation as the pace picked up. Fuck, fuck... fuck, love... harder...

He watched every flicker build and break in his husband's face - pleasure and need, tightening, tensing. He felt the very moment it all became too much to hold. Mycroft gritted his teeth and gasped out Greg's name, flushing, panting full-pelt against his shoulder as he buried himself in Greg's body to come.

Greg held him tight - he crooned every breath of it back. He stroked Mycroft's face and kissed him, and carded his fingers through his beard, whispering to him as he shook, soothing him. Come, love... come for me... come in me...

The throes took almost a minute to subside.

As Greg breathed with Mycroft, feeling his lover drift into his afterglow, he knew exactly which question would be asked first.

"Did I hurt you?" Mycroft whispered, sure enough.

Greg grinned against his forehead, rubbing lovingly through his beard. "No, gorgeous... 'course you didn't..."

Mycroft drew a long breath, shivering; he pushed his cheek against Greg's. He reached at once for the bedside table.

"M'fine, love..." Greg murmured, his heart flushing. "Rest a minute..."

Mycroft huffed. "Let me," he whispered, and Greg couldn't resist that voice - those low, loving tones. "Please."

He tilted his head, eyes closing with contentment.

A few moments later, a cotton-ball swiped gently across his skin.

Greg grinned, petting the back of his husband's neck.

"Love that you do this," he sighed, as Mycroft gently cleaned the wound.

"You are precious to me," his husband whispered, without a moment's pause. Greg felt his heart start to glow. "You sustain my life... this is the very least I can do..."

Greg bit into his lip, shining. He could still feel Mycroft inside him still, softening - his husband. His pair-bond.

"Any dizziness?" Mycroft murmured, quietly opening a dressing.

"No." Greg gazed at him, sleepy and happy, enjoying the quiet concentration on his face. "You'll have to fuck me harder next time..."

Mycroft's eyes glittered. "Scoundrel..."
"Mm hmm." Greg closed his eyes, stirring as Mycroft gently applied the dressing - stroking the self-adhesive patch flat with a thumb. "Christ... that gets better every time..."

Mycroft made a soft, warm sound. "You - handle it terribly well."

"Mm?"

"PT-309... you seem to hold onto all of your senses. It's quite remarkable."

Greg grinned. "I meant sex," he said, prompting a hushed laugh. He stroked his thumbs through Mycroft's beard, gently bristling the shock of red. "You make such a fuss about PT-309... m'still waiting to find out what the big deal is. You certain you're a vampire? Or has there just been some massive misunderstanding?"

Mycroft's eyes shone. He stroked the tip of his nose against Greg's.

"Rather certain at this stage, yes..."

"Must be like with kissing," Greg hummed. He reached out gently, trying to catch Mycroft's lips. "Doesn't really work on people already desperate to fuck you..."

His husband smiled slowly, holding himself just out of reach.

"An interesting hypothesis," he mused. "If only there were a way to test it..."

Greg shivered, squeezing his shoulders. "Kiss me, gorgeous... please."

Mycroft smiled, leaned closer, and pressed him into the pillows.

As their tongues stroked, Greg ran his fingers with longing through the beard. He swore the thing was getting thicker by the day - russet red and immaculate. "It seems I'm in excellent health," Mycroft had remarked, eyes bright, when his husband first noted the increase in shaving. Keeping the beard was a curious experiment at first - one Greg took the keenest of interest in - then, it was simply easier to travel with. New Zealand, three weeks in the sun, and the red tones within it had ignited in all their glory.

The beard was now staying.

It and Greg were getting along beautifully.

He couldn't wait to see what they all thought. Today was the first time he and Myke had seen anyone since getting back. Mycroft had bought a new suit, just for today.

It was a big day, after all.

"What time is it?" Greg murmured, when they finally parted for air. His husband sighed, glancing over at the bedside clock.

"Mm... later than I thought. We shall have to make a move."

"Shower together?" Greg said, coy. "Save time?"

Mycroft's eyes gleamed. "How efficient of you... food, first." He kissed Greg gently, stroked his cheek, and eased out of bed. "Toast, is it? Coffee?"

Greg groaned. "Please..."
"Rest here," Mycroft said, taking his dressing gown from the bedroom door. He pulled it on as he admired Greg, lying comfortable and at ease in their bed. "If Olivia calls, tell her we'll be there with TJ for ten. Assuming TJ is ready on time..."

Greg stretched, smiling.

"'kay," he murmured, fanning his toes. He gazed at Mycroft through his eyelashes.

His husband smiled. He approached the bed, tied the sash of his dressing gown, then bent down and kissed the pad of Greg's foot.

"Do not get up," he murmured. "Let your blood pressure settle... I won't be long."

He headed away down the stairs.

Greg watched him go, grinning.

He yawned, stretched himself diagonally across the bed, and let his head roll cosily to one side. His eyes found the window again - the curtains and the sunshine.

It looked like it would be a pretty day.

Reaching up, Greg stroked the adhesive dressing at his neck. The feeling of it made him smile. Three months, and Mycroft was walking around London looking gorgeous as a demi-god. He hardly needed to drink preserved now. He got everything he needed from Greg, just a little at a time - the quiet, frequent feedings of a bonded pair.

Life was good.

They were happy.

Greg let himself drift in that feeling - happy - for some time, listening to hot water running in the pipes. His eyes closed, and he began to nap.

He was lifted from his sleep by the quiet buzz of his wrist-set on the bedside. He grinned, twisting onto his side to speak - the day's most important person by far.

"Answer," he said. There was a click. "Hey, darlin'," he said, bright as a blackbird. "You excited for your big day? Got my shoes polished and everything..."

Olivia made a strange, hesitant sound.

"Erm... Greg - ?"

It wasn't Olivia at all.

It was a man.

Greg frowned, raising an eyebrow. New client? he wondered. TJ had put the adverts out online now. They'd been expecting more calls to start coming.

"Yep," he said. "Speaking. Can I help?"

There came a strained pause.

"I - erm... God, don't you recognise me? I - know it's been a while, but..."
Someone from Scotland Yard? Greg had a feeling he was embarrassing himself here.

"Sorry, mate," he said, cringing. "Slightly dodgy line. I'm in the car. Who m'I speaking to?"

A long, doubting breath was drawn.

"It's Jason," said the voice.

It still took Greg a few seconds.

When he made the connection, his eyes nearly fell from his head.

Jesus Christ. He'd forgotten Jason even existed. Before he could even speak, the voice on the line said,

"Look, I... well, you've made this pretty bloody awkward, but I... thought you should hear it from me." Jason's voice thickened. "Me and Amy are... it's - it's all - ... and I wanted to tell you before you heard from someone else. We're - divorcing. Official."

Greg's eyebrow quirked onto a slant. Where the fuck is this going?

"Right," he said, wary.

Jason seemed to take a breath.

"And... well, I've been doing a lot of thinking with it... about - how I've acted. How I've been in the past."

"Right," said Greg, less impressed by the second.

"And I... wanted to apologise. Properly. I don't know if I treated you all that great, Greg, and... well, there it is."

Silence.

Jason coughed.

"I was in a difficult place. I was going through a lot of stuff when you and me were - erm, dating - "

Greg bit his tongue. 'Erm, dating'.

" - and I - probably hurt you, Greg. So... I - apologise. If you got hurt."

If you got hurt.

Greg had never heard a more self-centred and weaselly apology in all his life.

He tried to process it, and simply failed. He couldn't even decide where to begin. It was the apex of Jason's career: limp as old lettuce, packed to the seams with self-pity, and not featuring a single use of the word 'sorry'. It was nothing short of a masterpiece. 'I probably hurt you'. Jesus fucking Christ.

Jason coughed again.

"Now you say something?" he prompted - as if Greg were being slow.
Footsteps were coming back upstairs to the bedroom.

Greg bit down on a grin. He kept it out of his voice, feigning thoughtfulness.

"Yeah," he said, vaguely. "No, I... know that's the usual pattern. Thanks for the reminder. Just trying to think where best to start..."

Mycroft appeared at the top of the stairs, carrying coffee in Greg's favourite mug and a plate piled with toast and hazelnut spread.

Spotting Greg's wrist-set illuminated, he shot Greg a quizzical look.

"Thing is, Jason," Greg said, raising an eyebrow at his husband, "I've been kinda busy lately. I know you think I couldn't possibly have a life away from you... I mean - that's how it always was, right?"

Mycroft sat himself down upon the edge of the bed. He laid a hand on Greg's stomach, gently.

"Your life mattered," he said to the wrist-set. "You made the decisions. You decided if we were fine, if we weren't fine, if we were on, if we were off... I just went along with whatever fresh hell you fancied next. So... I can see where the confusion arises, mate... I really can. But I've had a pretty big few months..."

He looked up at Mycroft, smiling - and lifted an eyebrow.

"... and there's someone I think you need a word with."

"Really?" Jason said from the wrist-set - now audibly bristling. "A word? And who exactly do I need a word with?"

"Great," said Greg, and reached for the plate. "Here's my husband, Mycroft. Mycroft - this is a selfish bell-end who thinks we're about to get back together."

"That," Mycroft said, closing the shower door behind them, "was the single most satisfying phone-call of my life."

Greg dragged him down beneath the spray to kiss him.

"Christ, I wish I'd recorded it..." As Mycroft pressed him up against the shower wall, he shivered with a sigh. "That was fucking magnificent, love..."
Mycroft bent beneath his chin, kissing longingly at his neck.

"Anthea automatically records all unrecognised voices," he murmured between kisses, taking Greg by the hips. "Even when they're sobbing. She'll have it in the security files."

Greg groaned, pulling him closer.

"Fuck... Myke..." He bit down into his lip. "W-We're going to be late..."

He felt Mycroft smile against his pulse.

"No..." he soothed, sliding a wet hand down Greg's stomach. "We're going to be quick."

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"I told you we were going to be late," Greg said, grinning sideways from the passenger seat.

As they pulled into the academy car park, Mycroft smothered a smile.

"We have five minutes yet," he said, heading for the last remaining space. The car park was packed - everyone else was here already. "They'll be starting promptly. I think you'll find that we've arrived beautifully on time."

"If I miss the start," said a peeved voice from the back, "thanks to you two rocking up late - because, and I quote, 'our alarm didn't go off' - which I'm not believing for even half a second - "

"Hush," Mycroft said, bemused, turning to look over his shoulder as he reversed the car. "You're not going to miss a moment of - ..."

He stopped, with a sudden frown.

"Where is your seatbelt?" he demanded. "We're law enforcement."

"Speak for yourself!" said TJ. He'd put a shirt on in honour of the day - an actual shirt with buttons. He'd even had a go at ironing it. "If you'll remember, Dr H-L, me and the Gregster are lawless rogues these days. Seatbelts are for squares."

"For heaven's sake... you are impossible." Mycroft swatted at him playfully. "Get your head down, scamp. I cannot see."

TJ sighed, sinking sideways in the seat.

"It's better when Other Dad drives," he mumbled, lying down.

Greg bit down into a grin.

"Be good," he warned, with a flash of his eyes, "or we're not going for pizza on the way home."

"Wait - we're going for pizza? Are you serious?"

"You got that laptop cracked from the Carnaby Street case?"

"Erm, no... why?"
"Pizza when it's cracked," said Greg. "The guy rang me twice in New Zealand. He's getting twitchy. You've had it on your desk for a month, fuzzball."

"C'mon, Greg... he was in on it for the insurance! You know he was! The guy's just covering his tracks, thinking he's clever. Carnaby Street was an inside job. We've said it from the start."

"Well, crack his laptop," said Greg, "get me proof, and we'll go for pizza."

Mycroft switched off the engine, smirking.

"There," he said. "If we hurry, we should make it."

They crossed the car park at speed, followed a fluttering banner tied with yellow balloons into a reception area, and were shown out to a training yard by a member of staff with a clipboard.

The yard was ringed on three sides by an excited crowd, all held back by a barrier. Families, friends and wellwishers were gathered ready, grinning and chatting as the last few minutes ticked by.

Mycroft - the tallest of the three - scanned the watching crowd.

"This way," he said, laying a hand on Greg's back. "Scotland Yard have a designated area."

It was three months since Greg had left the police force - but there was something about being escorted through a crowd by a handsome senior detective that now gave him shivers. Mycroft had come dressed to impress: dark grey pinstripe, pocket-watch and tie-pin, shoes polished to perfection. He looked like a Scotland Yard heavy-hitter. Greg couldn't help but grin, proud at his husband's side as they were admitted without a blink into the cordoned-off Scotland Yard area.

TJ hurried along just behind them, nervously flattening his hair.

It was a good turn-out, Greg thought. The Head of CID was here, and a few other faces from management. Many of them, he didn't know by name - but they all seemed to know Mycroft. They greeted him with a handshake, remarked with delight upon the beard, and asked him genially about New Zealand.

"Magnificent, thank you... a wonderful three weeks. This is my husband, Greg - formerly of Cross-Human Relations, now in private consultancy."

Greg had glimpsed a familiar figure, right at the front - smart blazer, new boots, motorbike helmet. He shook a few more hands, greeted a few more bigwigs, then made his way over with a grin.

Kit spotted him coming. Her face cracked open with a smile. They greeted each other with a tight one-armed hug, gripping, squeezing, thumping each other on the back.

"Alright?" he said, beaming. "We were nearly bloody late, would you believe?"

Kit laughed in his ear.

"Still on New Zealand time," she said, and pulled back to have a good look at him. "Nice trip? You got plenty of sun, at least."

"It was amazing... best holiday I've ever had. Show you the photos later. We got loads."

"And I see your husband's brought back some sort of furry indigenous mammal," Kit said,
quinting across at Mycroft in amusement. "Smuggled it in, clinging to the bottom of his face."

Greg's eyes glittered. "Oi. We like the beard."

"I'll admit he pulls it off," she said, with a grin. "Marriage suits you... both of you." Her eyes glinted. "Good to see you happy, Greg."

Greg didn't think it was possible to smile any wider. "You too, Kit. You're looking good. How're the pressures of command?"

Kit huffed, easing her hands into her pockets.

"Fine," she said, "once you've delegated all the paperwork. Recruitment drive at the minute, funnily enough... and trying to get Technical down, better secure our systems... they're dragging their heels. As always."


Kit chuckled. "Surprised you've not hit me with a business card..."

Greg cast her a wink. "Already slipped one into your pocket."

Mycroft had joined them at the front.

"Kit..." he said, smiling and reaching out.

"Mycroft - good to see you." She gripped his hand, pulling him into a rough hug and grinned. "Beard, huh?"

"Ah... Greg seems to like it," Mycroft said, his eyes glittering as she released him. "I bow to his judgement in these matters. The secret of a happy marriage, so I hear."

TJ had shuffled his way over. He hovered at Greg's side, looking oddly short and quiet.

As Kit spotted him, there was a slight skip in her smile. It repaired itself a moment later. She held out a hand.

"TJ," she said. "How's life?"

It might have been Greg's imagination - but as they shook hands, TJ seemed to flush.

"Fine, thanks," he said, not meeting her eyes. "You?"

She didn't respond.

They took their places at the barrier, one either side of Greg.

Greg slipped his hands into his pockets, wondering.

His husband's chin rested discreetly on his shoulder.

"I've been speaking to the Head of HR," Mycroft murmured in his ear, now watching the empty yard from behind Greg.

"Mm?" Greg inclined his head. "How's HR?"
"Yardley's tribunal are due to rule tomorrow."

Greg's heart contracted. He kept his voice low. "And?"

"Angela believes TJ will be offered significant compensation," Mycroft said, "and his position back at Scotland Yard. Yardley will be terminated within an hour of the ruling. The fool should have put his energy into job-hunting, not fighting his case... Angela says she's never seen someone so diligently build his own scaffold." Mycroft smiled against Greg's neck. "She's already advertising his position."

"Christ - before the ruling?"

"Mm."

"Fantastic..." Greg bit his lip. "TJ's said he doesn't want to go back. He wants to stick with me, even if - ... I mean - we're doing well."

"You are," Mycroft said. "And I've told Angela as such. Rather satisfying for TJ, though. Perhaps pizza would be fitting after all?"


Across the training yard, the doors of the academy opened.

Greg's heart lurched. "Christ - here we go."

On his left, TJ gripped the barrier hard. On his right, Kit gave a slight shift, folding her arms. Both gazed intently at the doors.

Down by Greg's side, Mycroft's hand slipped gently into his.

Their fingers knotted tight.

Ten o'clock precisely - and as the strikes of the training yard clock began to sound, the latest batch of recruits to the Metropolitan Police Academy began to file out for their induction ceremony. They were uniformed in short white sleeves, black ties and each carrying a hat - backs straight, heads high, badges gleaming.

As Greg laid eyes on them, he was immediately twenty-eight again.

His heart swept away on a rush of memories: the first day of his life that he'd felt like he was finally on track. He was going to live for other people. He was going to give to someone else what the police had given to him, and he just wished his mum had been there to see it. He'd wished anyone had been there to see it.

As his fingers shook, Mycroft squeezed his hand.

All four of them searched through the faces of the new recruits.

It was TJ who spotted her first. He let out an excited noise, stifled it, and gasped, "Fourth row! Towards the right!"

Greg scanned quickly along the row, his eyes flashing over all the other recruits - and there she was.

Trainee Detective Constable Reid was trying her very hardest not to smile. He could see it in every
inch of her face. Her eyes were shining, and she was clutching her hat as if scared she would drop it. As he spotted her, Greg's heart threw itself up into his throat and he crushed Mycroft's hand in his grasp.

Mycroft gripped him back, just as hard.

In the same moment, Olivia found their faces in the crowd. Her expression opened. She fought it, holding onto her hat, and seemed to grow three inches in height. The last of the recruits filed into place along with her, and the ceremony began.

Greg didn't hear a word of the opening speech.

He caught the odd word that took flight on the air - duty, honour, proud. He imagined it was exactly like the one he hadn't heard when he was inducted. He'd spent it imagining his mum standing in the crowd, as real as all the mothers who were actually there. Just because he couldn't see her, it didn't mean she wasn't proud.

He spent Olivia's induction speech trying not to cry.

Mycroft knew.

He rubbed the back of Greg's hand with a slow, gentling circle, over and over, as they listened to the speech. Greg couldn't stop staring at Olivia. His stomach was twisting itself inside out. He could see her trying not to panic, trying to remember something of this moment - it would be gone in a flash.

As the speech came to an end, Greg glanced to his left - and found TJ in floods of tears, clutching a crumpled handful of loo roll to his face.

Greg slung an arm around him. They laughed together, eyes shining, as everyone else applauded and the official photographer was shuttled out in the yard. As the camera set up, a few beaming recruits took the chance to wave to family and friends in the crowd.

Olivia hadn't taken her eyes from them once.

She raised a nervous hand, biting her lip.

To Greg's left and right, the two of them responded at once. It was an almost identical gesture - a quick lift of the hand, as irrepressible as a lurch of the heart.

As they realised they'd done it in sync, TJ and Kit both stalled. Their hands lowered as one.

An uneasy moment ensued.

Greg did his best to pretend he hadn't noticed. The slight squeeze of Mycroft's hand was rather telling. Greg squeezed him back, trying not to smile. I know... I know they are. We'll just have to watch where it goes.

Photographs were taken. The Head of the Academy then delivered a shorter speech - thanking friends and family for coming, and wishing all the new recruits the very best of success in the intensive eighteen-week training course on which they were about to embark. After the academy, they would be assigned somewhere for two years to train on the job - learning from the officers they would someday become, as they studied for their exams.

Olivia's placement had already been arranged.
She would be training in the Cross-Human Relations division of Scotland Yard - under the careful mentoring of Detective Inspector Mycroft Holmes-Lestrade.

It would be a long journey to the badge, but she would get there - and she'd be helped every step of the way.

As the beaming recruits all filed from the yard, Mycroft leant forwards. He pressed a kiss to his proud husband's shoulder.

"I wonder who she'll watch being inducted," he mused, "fourteen years from now."

"Christ..." Greg grinned, squeezing his hand. "Don't."

"Do you regret leaving?"

As an arm went around his waist from behind, Greg's heart fluttered. He laid his arm over Mycroft's, enjoying its protective wrap.

"No," he said - wholly truthful. "New challenges. New people to help. And if the bastards ever come round for another swing, we'll be safer... that's no small thing."

"Do you honestly think they'll be back, Dr H-L?" TJ asked.

Mycroft made a noise of mild interest.

"I think it likely," he said. "In time. With vigilance, we'll catch it in its infancy... not allow it to grow for a third attempt. I believe I've now learned not to shy from those things that I fear to face."

Greg smiled, tangling their fingers together on his stomach.

"Easier to face things when you face them together," he remarked.

Kit flashed him a sideways grin. "Here, here."

Fifteen minutes later, with the barriers removed, the doors of the academy opened once more. The new recruits reappeared, back out of uniform and released like doves into the arms of their loved ones.

Olivia was one of the first through the doors.

She resisted until she was halfway across the yard - then heaved her bag over her shoulder, beaming, and broke into a run.

Either side of Greg, he felt Kit and TJ both brace to be hugged. They eased forwards on his left and his right, shifting very slightly to the fore. Olivia flew across the yard towards them, her whole face shining.

She reached them, overjoyed - and without a moment's hesitation, threw her arms around Mycroft's neck.

Greg's heart ached with happiness as he watched them. Mycroft's smile took ten years from his face. Olivia laughed as he swayed with her, delighted, and he murmured something fond and proud in her ear. It made her glow ever brighter - she smiled, radiant, against his shoulder. Greg saw her mouth form the words, over and over. "Thank you, thank you... thank you..."

Beside Greg, he felt TJ and Kit exhale as one. They unwound, stood down. No words were shared.
When Olivia let Mycroft go, she turned at once to Greg.

_Christ, you star… c'mere._ Greg buried his fingers in her hair as she hugged him, holding her so hard he knew it must hurt.

Olivia only hugged him even harder.

"Thank you," she mumbled. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"It was Myke pulled all the strings," Greg told her, grinning. "Dunno what you're thanking me for…"

"You made me a police officer," she said. "You helped. You made it real. Thank you."

The lump squeezed in Greg's throat. He smiled and shut his eyes, hugging her - letting it be.

"You're welcome, darlin'…" He could feel Mycroft watching, proud of them both. His eyes were as warm and wonderful as the sunshine. "Hey… what d'you say to pizza?"

"Ooh - really?"

"Yep… we've got a lot to celebrate." Greg let her go to arm's length, admiring her. *Trainee Constable Reid. So bloody proud.* "How about when the girls get back from school?" he said, grinning. "Come round to ours. Lottie loves the fish. We'll order in… make a night of it."

Olivia's eyes shone.

"I'd love that," she said. She bit her lip ring. "Thank you…"

Greg's heart squeezed.

He couldn't help it.

"C'mere," he laughed, heaving her into another hug. "You utter fucking star… all of you! Get the fuck in here and help!"

As arms piled around them, and Olivia's laughter rang in his ear, Greg felt a proud kiss pressed to the crown of his head - Mycroft. He felt Kit thumping them both on the back, and TJ squirming tighter in with them all, and he felt the May sunshine growing warm upon his face.

_Things'll be fine_, he thought.

He grinned, realising it with a rush of utter joy. No matter what the future brought, they would all be here together. Life would be full of little joys, proud moments and mornings in May.

Things would always be fine in the end.

It was a love story, after all.

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**The End**
Author's Final Notes

*Excultus* has been my life for six months. I can’t tell you how sad I am to see it end. Believe me that out of 315k these are the hard words to write.

I have a series planned and I’d love to know what you want to see in future stories. I can’t possibly overstate the impact you've all had on *Excultus*. This is why I love writing online - the story I planned and the story I wrote are unrecognisable as the same story. The difference is you guys - so thank you for creating this with me. It's been an absolute joy.

For beta-reading the beginning of the story, I'd like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Avid - whose diligence, encouragement and enthusiasm will never be forgotten, and whose support and love mean the world to me. For the brave task of pre-reading the end, I have two people to thank from the bottom of my heart: Liz and Bourbon, better known as lmirandas and BourbonNeat. Guys, your help made such a difference. Truly. Because of you, I got to enjoy this part and not dread it - that’s no small gift you gave me.

Thank you, reader, for coming all this way. <3 I'll see you next time.
Friends

My friends -

I only hope this message reaches you.

There are no longer so many of you to reach. You might not wish to believe it, but I tell you that this is only a good thing. Each and every one of you is now more vital to our cause than ever. Amidst the fallen, we few remain.

So it is.

So it has been before.

You might believe that you receive this message in defeat. I tell you that we've been given an opportunity to learn - to start anew, and to grow from strengthened roots.

You might believe that all hope is lost.

I tell you that hope shines brightest when all other lights go out.

It's true that we've been dealt a blow - and that our years of careful patience may seem to have come to nothing. Fortunate, then, that screeching chaos of the Sapien world has imbued you all with patience far beyond human understanding. We are not beasts of impulse; we are not dismayed by complications. We are refined, and we endure. It is our very nature.

It will take time for us to recover our strength - to replenish our numbers, and to restore our hopes.

During that time, I command you to rest.

Conceal yourselves somewhere within the masses. Find a place where the people do not watch for your coming. Lie dormant at their heart, and wait. Endure the human world with patience - and know that you will hear from me in time to come.

Some of you have reached for me in your grief, speaking words of blood and vengeance.

Mycroft Holmes will suffer at our hands.

I promise you it, friends.

He will pay for the agonies he has now caused us twice-over, and all those who aid him will suffer alongside him.

But for now, I ask you to leave him in safety.

It will be years, not months, before his vigilance wanes. Holmes shares our patience. He shares our gifts. To strike against him now, while we are weak, will only invite our ruin once and for all. Instead, have patience. Rest. Entrust justice to the grace of the future, and we will regain our strength away from Holmes's gaze. We will permit him to grow comfortable, tending to his human herd. We will allow the years to pass in peaceful prosperity, and he will soften. He will forget.

When the time comes, Holmes will pay the rightful price.

But now is not that time.
Any person who acts against Holmes or his humans will answer to me. He is not to be disturbed in any way.

Let his name leave your thoughts. Lay it aside to gather dust. Lay aside, too, the name 'Excultus' - do not speak it - do not use it, until the day you hear from me again. Lay it aside, my friends, and go to your rest.

You will hear from me.

But do not listen for me.

Our time will come - for now, let us consider one more stage of our history at its end.

I remain, my dear friends, a servant of you all.

- H.

Works inspired by this one: [Broken](http://example.com) by sinningia, [Cover for Excultus (2017)](http://example.com) by randomscientist

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!