Summary

A chance encounter with the owner of an occult shop would normally be something Mycroft Holmes immediately erased from his mind, but something about this Greg Lestrade is too intriguing for that to occur...
Chapter 1

“That is an unhappy sound for a mechanical contrivance to make, Charles.”

“A very unhappy sound, sir. Might I say… dispiriting?”

“From the tone of your voice, I would deem it apropos. We commit to rest the body of our dear vehicle and beseech the pantheon of automotive deities to take its weary soul to their bosom.”

“Amen. I’ll call for another vehicle, sir, but with traffic it will be awhile before it arrives, unless you want me to prioritize the request.”

Yes. And for… reasons.

“No, no that shall not be necessary. There are a number of ventures proceeding today that are likely taxing the availability of vehicles and those are somewhat critical in nature.”

“Shall I lend you my Oyster card, sir?”

“You assume I lack one of my own?”

“It is somewhat more than an assumption, sir. I was present when Mrs. Hudson tried to have you take possession of your brother’s to help forestall him enacting another episode of his particular mayhem upon the unsuspecting citizenry. You looked upon it as if she was offering you the rear half of a cat-mauled rat and only accepted it after you plucked your pocket square from your breast pocket and ensured it acted as a perfect and impenetrable barrier between your fingers and whatever diseases it might carry from the unwashed masses who use public transport.”

“Oh, what an amusing bit of fantasy you have concocted to entertain us. Verily, you would make Shakespeare himself admire your witty prose.”

“Shall I lend you my Oyster card, sir?”

“……………… only if the wait for the replacement vehicle becomes intolerable and a cab is not quick to summon.”

“Very good, sir.”

Evil man. But never let it be said that his driver was not fully devoted to his job of seeing his passenger to and from their destination. And, if for some reason it became necessary to use public transportation, Charles would certainly forfeit his own means and walk back to the vehicle building, despite the distance and hellish weather. It was positively irritating how well the man excelled at his work.

But, now, there was a far more pressing matter to contemplate than his driver’s unseemly integrity. It had already been somewhat of a trial to ignore the growing pressure in a certain region, born, most certainly, from the extra several cups of tea he used to calm his temper during his meeting with the Foreign Affairs baboon. The point, now, had been reached where even his iron will was beginning to rust through and leaks were imminent. Of course, thinking about that was making the situation incalculably worse.

“It’ll be at least half an hour for a non-priority dispatch, sir. That’s their optimistic estimate for reaching this part of London. I’d say forty-five is closer to the mark. Are you certain you don’t
want me to upgrade the request?”

Yes, and if you had any loyalty you would read my mind and simply do it, without my having to debase myself by throwing a bureaucratic tantrum to secure a potty break.

“There is rarely such a depleted trove of vehicles and it would be most egotistical for me to add to their burden.”

“Very well, sir. Though… might I suggest…”

Since not even a man with his eyes on the road could miss your bladder-inspired rear-seat wriggling.

“… there are a number of interesting-looking shops that might offer you some distraction while you wait.”

And a convenient toilet.

“Hmmmm… that is a suggestion of some merit.”

And offers the possibility of a convenient toilet.

“I’ll phone when the new car arrives, sir.”

“Very well, then. I shall begin with that one, I think. It looks rather… inviting.”

And is the closest to the car.

“Enjoy yourself, Mr. Holmes.”

Something that was entirely immaterial at the moment since the only enjoyment Mycroft cared about was to be found nowhere near the shops wares and he sent up a small plea to the universe that the person manning the till was an understanding sort.

“Good afternoon, sir, how can I help you? Browsing a bit or looking for something specific?”

Here? What even was this place? The volume and… cacophony of the stock was ludicrous!

“Perhaps seeking something to find your lost voice? I’ve got a brilliant herbal spray that will manage even the most fiendish case of sore throat and whatever laryngitis it decided to bring along to the party as its guest.”

Mycroft turned to have a stern word with the cheeky voice behind his back and felt both the sternness and the word shrivel to dust on his tongue. He was never a man to be taken aback by physical appearance, but not even he was cold enough to deny that the person in front of him was anything short of stunning. Especially with the lights from the shop giving his hair a vibrant, silvery glow.

“I…”

“Yes! You are definitely you. And… oh, got it. Straight back along that wall, past the cat and the door is on your right.”

“P… pardon?”
“The loo! You didn’t seem quite the type to have come in here with something in mind to purchase and you don’t have the look of a browser, either. It’s not sweltering out there, when you might be hoping for a moment out of the heat or raining and you forgot your brolly, which I see you have nicely settled on your arm. Handsome one, too. So… my guess is…”

“Past the cat, you say?”

“Lanky, idle mass of black fur, probably on his favorite chair. If not, watch your head. Balthazar has been known to sit atop a shelf and swipe at passers-by.”

“B… Balthazar?”

“Don’t worry, he’s friendly enough, even if he’s trying to show you who’s boss.”

Mycroft blinked a few times, then cleared his throat, made what he knew was his ‘oh, how droll’ smile, which was not a handsome thing at the best of times, then made a quick-footed retreat in the proper direction, finding both the cat, who shot him a menacing, emerald-eyed glare, and the loo, which was in far cleaner condition than he’d anticipated though, in fairness, he’d been fully prepared to visit an outdoor privy if that was all that was available. Even if he’d had to stalk past a veritable legion of villainous felines to find blessed relief…

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The world was now a much, much better place…

“Ah, Balthazar. I see you remain in place, vigilantly guarding your corner of the shop.”

“Arse.”

“W… what?”

“Mrarse.”

“Good heavens… you are most adept at vocalization.”

“Isn’t he? The miserable part is half the time it sounds like something rude and that’s cost me many an apology and tidy discount to the more prim and proper shopper.”

It was an odd combination, the rough timbre of the man’s voice married with the luster of his hair, but odd did not necessarily equate to unpleasant. Simply… singular.

“I suppose the benefit is in the… quaintness… he adds to your establishment.”

“And the mice he keeps from nibbling the stock. I have to admit, though, he does tend to be a draw when he sits in the window, since people pop in to chat with him, give him a pet, then decide to wander about to see what a regal feline like him finds an acceptable home. My regular customers just love the evil thing, too. Like a goodwill ambassador, in a way, except he’s a demon straight from hell. A lazy one, though, so no real harm done.”

Mycroft smirked at the cat’s well-timed snort, as well as the shopkeeper’s small ‘pfft’ in retort.

“I suppose he is also good company for days when visitors to your shop are few.”

“Absolutely! And terrible at cards, so I win loads off of him on slow days. Offsets whatever profit I’m losing because my fine wares aren’t flying out the door.”
Speaking of wares…

“Yes… might I ask… what sort of shop is this, precisely?”

“Good question! Most people would call it an occult shop, I suppose. Some people say New Age, too, which isn’t as good a fit, but if it makes them happy that’s fine with me. Magic shop is another one I hear, though I always think that’s best reserved for a place that sells saw-the-lady-in-half boxes and top hats you can hide doves in.”

Mycroft took another look around, this time more closely at individual items on the shelves and in display cases and began to lean heavily in the ‘occult shop’ direction.

“Most… interesting.”

“Meaning you think it’s a load of shit.”

“I feel the smell would be far worse if that were the case.”

Good lord, had he made a joke? That was highly uncharacteristic. However, the man was laughing so the aberration was successful, apparently, in its unintended purpose.

“You’re right! I’ll make certain to refill my incense stock, though, just in case. Toss in a bit more of the really strong essential oils in the diffuser to hide the evidence if I experience an unexpected collision with the gods of literal reality.”

“Invest, also, I advise, in rather sturdy wellies.”

“I need to make a list! I’m glad you stopped in today or I’d be caught completely unawares when the Great Shit Arrival began and what a terrible, terrible thing that would be. Oh! I suppose I should properly introduce myself, I’m Greg. Greg Lestrade and this, for better or worse, is my shop.”

So, the owner, not an employee. How intriguing…

“Mycroft Holmes.”

“Now, that’s a truly marvelous name. So many ways to say it, little inflections, pauses, facial expressions and so forth that can accompany it to make the sound span everything from sinister to angelic.”

Really? The sinister aspect, yes, which was something he had traded upon countless times, but angelic? That was not something that had enjoyed even an iota of his contemplation. Most likely the heavenly gates were already alerted to his future arrival and had specific instructions on what to do in that event. Instructions which were certainly not in his favor.

“Truly?”

“Absolutely! And… well, look around you. If there’s someone who knows a thing or two about the power of names and words, it’d be the chap surrounded by books of spells and arcane objects of every sort.”

The man had a point.

“Then I offer you my gratitude for your highly-intriguing perspective.”

“Anytime! You know how I earn a wage now, so might I ask what line of work is privileged to
claim you, Mr. Mycroft Holmes?"

Privileged? Another term that was not entirely one that had ever entered his mind concerning himself. Though, to be fair, it was appropriate since he had, on more than a single occasion, been approached by other governments and organizations to lend his shoulder to their cause instead of the one he now served. Choice kept him in place, so… yes, dash it all, the British government was privileged to have his support and all the rewards that flowed from it.

“I occupy a minor position in the British government.”

The cat’s hack noise sounded far too much like a disbelieving cough for Mycroft’s liking and he accorded said cat a stern look of rebuke, feeling no surprise that the feline simply stared back at him with a profoundly bored expression, since it was well established that felines shared, by some stochastic perturbation of basic genetics, a bevy of alleles with his infantile brother.

“Government man! Can you work a loophole in the laws, so my poor shop is exempt from being visited by the Grim Reaper of Taxes? That bastard lops off a tidy chunk of my profits with his miserable scythe.”

Can I? Verily, what cannot I do? Unfortunately…

“Alas, such is not a pie into which my fingers normally… poke.”

That went somewhat awry at the end.

“I’d never ask a man to poke a pie that wasn’t his for the poking. Can’t have you sacked for unsanctioned pie poking; I could never live with myself after that!”

Mycroft marveled that his conversation partner was actually conversing with him, seeming to enjoy it and he was actually participating, in return, rather than providing another uninspired smile and making his way back to the car. He so rarely conversed with anyone for purely social reasons, given his general dislike of both people and social reasons, however, this was not as mind-crippling an experience as usually it was when he was in a situation that required… being convivial.

“Might I suggest you consult an accountant to determine if you are adequately capitalizing upon the various rules and regulations to gain the most beneficial tax situation for your business?”

“That is a very smart idea, Mr. Holmes. I normally handle that myself, but a professional eye would certainly be of help. How about a tour of my taxpaying shop? There’s a lot of interesting things here to see, even if you’re not a believer in the occult or magic and the like.”

The ‘interesting’ label was something Mycroft would have doubted when he first stepped into the shop, but, as his eyes took in the surroundings more fully, began to suspect actually might be true, to some degree. He had always harbored a fascination for things that would be described by many as peculiar or strange, because they were often far more thought-provoking and, frankly, entertaining than duller, more commonplace objects and activities.

Unfortunately, the sound of his mobile ringing made the possibility of a tour a moot point.

“Do pardon me. Yes? Ah, thank you, Charles. Most alacritous, indeed. I shall be but a moment.”

“That sounds like a no for the tour.”
“I apologize, but that is certainly the case. I do thank you for your hospitality, however. It has been a most enjoyable respite.”

“Glad to be of help. Stop in anytime. We’re open… well, we’re open all hours, given the standard clientele, so… when you want to browse further, you know where to find me.”

Mycroft opened his mouth to politely refuse, but suspected it would be rather rudely obvious and it was a… kinder… option to simply smile, nod and beat a hasty retreat. This Gregory person deserved a touch more than his standard dismissiveness, if only as gratitude for being there in his hour of need. Besides that, however… the man seemed a decent sort, not as dreary and tedious as the majority in the vast bowl of tiny-brained goldfish that was the human species, which, in itself, was a profound rarity…

Greg watched Mycroft return outdoors and returned to the counter, so he could keep watching as the tall, elegant man got into a dark, mysterious vehicle… which was blocking traffic by stopping next to another dark, mysterious vehicle… and rode away to his utterly not-minor role in anything.

“I haven’t sensed an aura that powerful in… fuck me, who knows.”

Greg nodded at the sound of the voice and let his mind linger a moment on the instant Mycroft Holmes had entered his shop and he felt the energy shift to accommodate the new and highly-noteworthy presence.

“A very intriguing man, that’s for certain.”

“You mean a very sexy man.”

“That too.”

“It’s been a long time for you, Greg. Does the plumbing even work anymore?”

“Funny. I don’t have time to date, you know that.”

“You have time, you just refuse to make it.”

“Fair enough… I also haven’t met anyone I might want to shine up the plumbing for anyway.”

“I do not want to know what is involved in your plumbing-polishing ritual. I’d gak up a hairball and half my intestines, too.”

Greg looked down at the cat that had leapt upon the counter to join him and do its own bit of watching as Mycroft left the shop.

“And leave it for me to clean.”

“I might go back and eat the intestine bit, though. Nothing wrong with some fresh internals to feed the blood.”

“You pout if I buy food that isn’t twenty quid a tin!”

“Because the twenty-quid-a-tin stuff is full of fresh goodness. Like internals.”

“Wonderful.”
“Not as wonderful as your new friend there, though, am I right?”

“Friend is bit presumptive, don’t you think?”

“Fantasy friend, then. The sort of fantasy friend that you do utterly filthy things with in your mind when you’re engaging in a private plumbing polishing session.”

“Nothing wrong with a bit of harmless fantasy. Besides, I’ll likely never see him again.”

“Oh… I wouldn’t be too certain about that.”

Greg narrowed his eyes at the cat who lackadaisically turned, flicked its tail under his nose and jumped off the counter to strut back to its chair where Mycroft’s umbrella was currently resting.

“Oh, you bastard.”

“What? You’re too boring and honest to do it yourself!”

“That… that is an expensive brolly, you mangy cat!”

“Which is why he’ll come back for it.”

“Or send one of his minions or underlings or whatever to do it for him.”

“Pfft. You’re absolutely no fun. Want to wager on it?”

“No.”

“Because my precognition is stronger than yours?”

“Because… you may think life is like a fairytale, but I don’t.”

Balthazar shook his head as Greg simply turned and went back to filling online orders but couldn’t dispute that finding fairytale love had never been his friend’s strong suit. Too decent and kind for some, too mysterious and enigmatic for others. He was an odd combination of qualities and had never found the right person who could both see and appreciate that odd combination, even without the little… details… that went along with it.

Maybe this time would be different. The fact it never had in the past was no reason not to be hopeful that this time was the charm. Speaking of charms, time to check on the ones they had brewing in the workshop. Their local ladies cupcake-competition team would be in later to pick them up and making them wait could cost him his traditional cupcake tribute. One lonely sorcerer and one hungry cat did not make for a happy workplace…
“Hmmmmm…”

“Is that hum for the actual work you’re supposed to be doing or for your super-secret side project that you don’t think I know you’re doing when you’re supposed to be working?”

Anthea was the true demon visited upon the Earth. Mr. Lestrade’s cat knew nothing of evil compared to her.

“I was merely giving audible acknowledgement of a piece of information.”

“Which is now conclusively proven to be part of your super-secret data gathering flurry and not anything concerning the fate of the free world. Ok, time to share.”

Setting aside her laptop, Anthea leaned back in her chair, crossed her legs and made ‘get on with it’ motions that earned her one of Mycroft’s most dramatic eyerolls.

“Surely you have more important matters to…”

“Oh, I do. However, important and entertaining are two entirely different things and, right now, the latter is winning this horse race and by more than a nose. Go on, tell me what has your attention completely diverted from the Taiwan issue and making you hum.”

Scenario One – refuse and the remainder of the day would be the most bone-breaking agony imaginable. Scenario Two – comply and the remainder of the day would be subject to unending nosiness and those enigmatic female smiles that were utterly unfathomable by anyone except another female.

“Well, what is it going to be?”

“I am debating.”

“Let me settle the debate – you want Scenario Two.”

“How on Earth did you know about that!”

“Because you always have the same two scenarios every time I catch you out for a silly personal thing and I’m telling you now – the agony won’t be worth it. It won’t. Take my very professional and thoroughly informed word for that.”

Behold, Balthazar! Behold the true might of concentrated evil! Verily a supervillain would swoop in at some point and spirit her away to use her potency to power an infinite number of nefarious deeds. Which would place her somewhere other than here… hmmmmm….

“Start talking!”

“Fine! I simply encountered an individual today and was curious about both his place of work and the man himself.”

“What’s his name? How handsome is he? What sort of work? Does he smell nice? Dark or light hair? Tall or short? Nice dresser? Large or small frame? Good teeth?”

“Good heavens! Do you believe yourself working for The Daily Mail?”
“No, because then I’d be asking about the size of his penis, whether he’s kinky in bed and how many of his relatives have you slept with this week.”

“Fair point. In truth, it was more the nature of his establishment, an occult shop, and the… normalcy of the man himself. A genial fellow who was…”

“Yes?”

“… surprisingly easy to engage in conversation.”

Anthea hoped her gasp didn’t make it to Mycroft’s ear, because that was something she’d hadn’t heard employer say about anyone since not long after she first began working for him and he made a similar comment about Lady Smallwood, who she had mistakenly thought might have a little something romantic going on with Mr. Holmes. Of course, it hadn’t taken long to see why that was ridiculous, but… this occult-shop man must be a singular individual, indeed. Must maintain nonchalance about the whole business or he’d scuttle into his shell like an old crab and hide there with just his stalked eyes peering out. And glaring.

“An occult shop, you say? There are a few about, from what I’ve heard, but I’d have thought they’d be well away from anywhere you might be milling about if you needed to do a bit of shopping.”

“It was merely a convenient locale in which to bide a few moments while waiting for the replacement vehicle to arrive. The car was a touch… stuffy and I am not averse to new experiences, if they offer features of interest.”

“Oh, that was a lucky thing, then. At least you found a spot of conversation for your troubles.”

“Yes, it passed the time more agreeably than a stuffy car. With Charles.”

“Who didn’t have time to pay attention to you since he was worried about his baby.”

“Untrue. He was most solicitous, however, I had no desire to distract him from his duties with idle chitchat.”

“Of course not, so back to Occult Man…”

“His name is Gregory.”

“Ooh, I like that. Solid and strong. Like you said, normal. I wonder if he has a ‘business’ name he uses like Merlin or Nostradamus or something.”

“I sincerely doubt that as his business documents and advertising list him solely by his given name and not some childish nom de… magique.”

“A serious business man, then. Very good. Or… I suppose I should ask if he is a good businessman, which I suspect you can answer because I would wager a month’s income you have his full financial records in front of you and have already passed judgement.”

Foul hen.

“Gregory’s business is a profitable one, though not by a tremendous margin. However, I would not have expected such, given its small size and the nature of its wares. Whereas I realize there are numerous addle-minded individuals who believe in potions and hexes and the like, most people likely visit such an establishment for the occasional unique gift or to satisfy a mote of curiosity.
But, he does earn sufficient revenue to stay current on his financial obligations, pay his taxes and to have purchased the small flat above his shop as his home.”

“Lives above the shop… efficient. Is… is it a small flat?”

“From the footprint of his business, I would say so.”

Meaning unlikely to house a family, which could interfere mightily with any future matchmaking plans if this manly interest of Mr. Holmes happened to be the sort who appreciated a finely-filled-out pair of trousers. Best check, though.

“Not much room for the wife and kids to run about, then.”

“Gregory is unmarried.”

Achievement unlocked!

“Well, that means he has more time to focus on his business, which is a good thing for a merchant. Must be hard, though, running a business alone. At least, I assume… I guess he could have employees, so I could be off the mark.”

“One, from his tax records. Gregory did note that his was an all-hours business, so it would stand to reason he would need, at minimum, one additional pair of hands to man the till.”

Meaning the man had time to date that finely-filled-out pair of trousers should it beckon enticingly. Excellent.

“A body has to sleep sometime. Unless it’s your body or your brother’s, but I can’t imagine your genetic mutation is too prevalent in the population.”

“Har de har har.”

“It’s something you can get Greg’s opinion on when you talk to him next.”

Oops! There it was. The narrowed eyes of suspicion. Hand overplayed like a rank amateur. Scrumptious bread now removed from lunch-of-enormous-salad as penalty for making such a foolish, foolish mistake.

“Why would you assume I would again speak with him?”

“Uh… generally, you don’t go to this much trouble for a person you don’t intend to cross paths with ever again. Curiosity is one thing, but you’ve been at this for a good hour now and you don’t waste time like that for a whim. I… I thought that his shop intrigued you more than you let on, maybe because you can’t fathom why a person would want to buy any of the sorts of things he sells. I do know how you hate a puzzle sitting on your brain.”

There. That was a cover story par excellence. If the BBC needed a fiction writer, they knew where to find her.

“True. However, my intrigue is not so great that it would draw me back. That does remind me, however… do dispatch someone to collect my umbrella from Mr. Lestrade’s shop. I seem to have left it there by mistake.”

What? No. No no no no no. That was too perfect an excuse for you to go back and visit Mr. Magic. It was so perfect it might as well have been magic itself. Must capitalize on the magical
“That’s a shame since it would have… oh, never mind.”

“Never mind what?”

“Anything.”

“That was rather all-encompassing.”

“I like to be thorough.”

“What am I specifically supposed to never mind that, clearly, I should mind and with a notable degree of attention, based on your current degree of nonsense?”

“I… maybe I was remembering what time of year it was and that you moan like an old man bending over to tie his shoes since… your mother’s birthday looms.”

“Gadzooks! I had blissfully shielded my mind from that horror.”

“It’s the most minor horror in the universe since all you have to do is buy her a gift and see it arrives on time. I just thought… you’re always miserable trying to find something, so looking in an entirely new place might be the thing for it this year. Get her something frivolous or funny or something that’ll have her friends intrigued at how exotic a pressie her son bought her…”

“Oh.”

“Is that a good oh or a bad oh?”

If it’s not a good oh, I have to move to Plan B, which doesn’t exist so tread lightly, Mr. Holmes…

“I am not entirely certain, but it is worth considering, at the very least. Mummy does appreciate something out of the ordinary and Mr. Lestrade’s shop did offer that aplenty.”

“I wager he’d have some solid recommendations for what to buy, too, for a woman of your mum’s age and lifestyle. One of those special, herbal creams for gardener’s hands or even a cookbook that uses wildflowers or something. Candles. Sex toys.”

“ANTHEA!”

“You’re right, she probably has more than enough candles.”

“Give me strength…”

“Fine! Buy more candles, then, but see if he has those lovely ones that have dried herbs and flower petals pressed into them. Not the sort that conjures a devil, though. The poor woman already gave birth to Sherlock and that’s enough bringing of blight into the world for any one person.”

Mycroft pursed his lips, but even he had to admit that the point was an exceedingly credible one.

“Very well. I suppose it would hurt nothing if I collected my umbrella in person and browsed a moment for a suitable gift. What on Earth… why did you finger-doodle a heart on your skirt?”

Oops.
“Because you love your mother and that’s a nice thing to see in anybody.”

“You refer to your mother as The Gorgon.”

“That’s because… she’s got long curly hair.”

“False.”

“She likes snakes.”

“Try again.”

“She has a fondness for stone statuary in her garden.”

“That was truly pathetic.”

“It was. She doesn’t have a garden. I panicked.”

“Delightful. Now… may we return to the Taiwan situation?”

“I don’t know. Are you done spying on The Great Zambini?”

“Spying involves far more in the way of trench coats and exploding pens.”

“Maybe Houdini has a potion or something to turn you invisible. That would help with the spying. A lot.”

“Who, then, would see my dashing trench coat?”

“Point taken. Alright, back to Taiwan, then a late lunch, then you can pick up your brolly from its minder and take your mother’s birthday gift off your personal-matters plate.”

Which, since it was the only item on said plate, would leave the entire thing empty and eager for something new to be laid on it. Speaking of laid…

“You do have me curious now, though. Is there a photo there of Cagliostro?”

“Hmmm? Yes…."

Mycroft slid over the photo and Anthea made very certain not to punch the air. That was definitely what her employer needed to start his tadpoles swimming.

“I see what you mean about normalcy. I expected a satanic goatee at the very least.”

“I believe Gregory’s face is not quite the proper shape to successfully sport such a thing.”

You’ve noticed his face shape. It’s not much, but that’s more notice than you give the Transport Sec who you still confuse with the man who brings round the newspapers in the morning.

“Not everyone can pull off the evil wizard look, so no shame there. Taiwan now?”

“I suppose we must. Such a dreary bit of nonsense, though.”

“Tidy it up in an hour and it’s a white chocolate custard for you. A minute beyond that and you only get to watch me have one.”

“Are you issuing a challenge?”
“A creamy, decadent custard challenge. Are you man enough for it?

Now assured this bit of work would be completed in twenty minutes, Anthea picked up her laptop and did her own bit of checking on one Greg… ok, peek at the file that was now open on the desk… Lestrade and his shop of wonders. Gather a few of her own facts and ideas to have on hand if her Mr. Holmes needed a touch of nudging to stay on course. If there was a course, that is. If the man was a skirt-chaser, then this would go nowhere fast. Fortunately, she had a number of appropriate operatives to dispatch to make that determination. Trench coats weren’t the only official uniform approved for spies. Heels and a little black dress was a venerable choice countless top-secret missions…
“Here we are, sir. I shall locate a place to park and wait for your call.”

“Thank you, Charles.”

Waiting the short moment for his driver to exit and open the door for him, Mycroft asked himself for the hundredth time why he didn’t simply send said driver into the shop to fetch his brolly and continue on their merry way. Such a silly flight of fancy to return to this shop, even if it did hold the possibility of satisfying his yearly obligation to his mother. It felt... unseemly... to return here, in a way that was difficult to describe. Rather, perhaps, as if he was Oliver Twist approaching, bowl in hand, to beg for his supper, in this adaptation played by his brolly and suggestions for a gift. If he chose a different path... there was a respectable-looking establishment a few doors along that might offer an acceptable cup of tea to someone who was hoping to avoid the appearance of incompetence and... drat.

Mycroft Holmes had not always been Master of the Desk. There was a time, growing dim in the past, where he had played a role very appropriately adorned by a trench coat with an exploding pen in the breast pocket and those still-intact instincts had leapt to the front of his brain to, in less than the blink of an eye, have him pressed against the doorway of a newsagent’s, peeking surreptitiously around the frame.

He had been spotted. By the cat. The cat had witnessed the dithering! And was continuing to stare at his reconnaissance position! With intent!

“Pardon me…”

Lovely. An irritated matron was also, now, intently staring at him. Admittedly, he was blocking her access to the shop, but did she have to appear so affronted? Her copy of The Sun was not flying out of the shop on bat’s wings...

“I do apologize, madam.”

“A body should expect to be able to go where they please in this country without having to wait for some snooping pervert to finish their snooping.”

“Oh dear lord…”

Being shoved aside by a member of the public was infuriating, but being shoved aside by a member of the public wearing blue eye shadow and pink plastic parrot earrings was quite another thing altogether. This day was well and truly besmirched and there was nothing for it but... The cat was laughing at him. There really was no mistaking that particular bit of body language. He was being mocked by a creature that licked its own bottom! Well, that could not stand unaddressed...

Mycroft’s expression hardened, his back went ramrod straight and he stalked straight towards Greg’s shop, smirking as the black cat stopped its supposed laughter, stared at him, stared with wider eyes, then fled its window perch as if it was being approached by The God of Death who it had already met eight times before.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, you ridiculous cat?”

“INCOMING!”
Greg turned at the sound of bells and smiled widely seeing the formidable silhouette of Mycroft Holmes striding regally through the door of his shop.

“What are you…”

“Mr. Holmes! Good to see you again.”

Looking for all the world as if you own the world and are in the process of bending it to your will.

“Ah, Mr. Lestrade… good day to you, as well. By any chance, did I leave something here during my previous visit?”

“That you did, sir. One extremely handsome brolly. I had several offers for it, actually, but I suspected you’d miss something so fine and take steps to bring it back into the fold.”

Greg reached under the counter and drew out Mycroft’s umbrella, handing it over with another bright smile.

“Thank you. It is a particular favorite of mine and I would so hate to have lost it forever.”

Something Greg had surmised from the strong infusion of the man’s personal energy into every part of the umbrella. If this Mycroft Holmes was the type to believe in magic or be willing to pursue a study of it, he was already well on his way to having created his first focus object. An umbrella was a bit large for a magic wand, but some of the more poncy types used massive staffs, so the precedent was there. They usually opted for flowing robes and gaudy jewelry, though, and Mr. Holmes did not, at all, seem the type for that unless he led a very different sort of life once he was finished with his work day.

“Very understandable. I’d have phoned later today if you hadn’t popped back for it. Can’t imagine there are too many Mycroft Holmes’s in the directory.”

“There are none, actually.”

“Oh… OH! I get it. You’re undercover. Using an alias. It’s a good one, I’ll tell you that much. Don’t worry about me blowing your cover, though. I can keep a secret better than most.”

Said with a tap on the side of his nose that Greg hoped would earn some reaction from Mycroft. Rolled eyes did count as a reaction, however, it was not quite the one for which the sorcerer was hoping.

“Very droll.”

“Alright, I know it was a bit silly, but your number being ex-directory isn’t nearly as fun as your name actually being Todd Smith or something equally uninspired and Mycroft Holmes is just who are this week so you can foil the drugs ring being run out of the local council office.”

Mycroft cleared his throat and reminded himself that coincidences did occur and there was no possible way the shopkeeper knew of the matter involving this local council and the three resignations it suffered over the past six months.

“Whimsy, I’m afraid, is rarely part and parcel of my work.”

“That’s a shame. My day is filled with whimsy and I don’t begrudge a smidgen of it. Though, in fairness, it is rather a normal part of the trade and I can’t say I associate government work with whimsy, though some of those talking heads on the telly seem to be brimming with it since they
spin the finest of fairy stories when they’re talking about policy.”

This clearing of his throat was more to keep Mycroft from voicing his wholehearted agreement with that particular observation. If the general public were ever truly aware of how empty-headed were the nitwits supposedly running the country, the revolt would be both protracted and bloody.

“It does seem so at times.”

“Which is why I keep the telly on whimsical things whenever possible and avoid wrenching my shoulder throwing my shoe at the bloody thing. In any case… how’s your day been? Not too overrun with people complaining about the roads and wanting to know why their mail was a bit crumpled today, I hope.”

Greg nudged Balthazar away after the cat nipped his ankle and successfully, he hoped, hid his wince from the sting. Yes, he knew he was babbling, but how the fuck did you chat up a person like this? Mr. Holmes reminded him of one of those ancient kings who carried the weight of his kingdom on his shoulders and used the extra heft to power his swing when he was taking off the head of some cheeky merchant. Who might be named Greg.

“Generally, I relegate such things to others more qualified to handle them. Not quite my area, you see.”

“Of course, of course… you’re in the animal licensing division, aren’t you? They tell me I don’t need one for my cat, but I’d like to be certain, just in case. Hate to have an unmarked van pull up, two beefy blokes with a net hop out and scoop up poor Balthazar because his papers weren’t in order. What it’d cost me to replace a government van and settle the civil suits from those poor dead lads’ families would send me into penury!”

Mycroft gaped a moment, then felt a tiny smile lift the corners of his lips as he remembered a rather humiliating experience having to capture a cat that had escaped its rather privileged, and influential, owner’s arms and was loose in his office. His suit had to be binned and the number of plasters and disinfectant necessary to keep him alive in the aftermath was astonishing.

“I am discovered! However, barring the classification of your shop changing, I believe you are exempt from the licensing regulations.”

“Whew! That’s a relief. You’re an official fellow, so I trust you know the regulations up one side and down the other. What… what can I do to repay you for this welcome peace of mind? Want that little tour of my shop I promised?”

There, you miserable cat. I asked. I made an attempt, besides babbling, to get the man to linger a bit. You can let go of my sock now and if you’ve bitten a hole in the nice hand-knitted things old Mrs. Hodges made for me, I’ll be asking her to mind you for the day and we ALL remember what happened last time that happened. Unless you fancy being dressed up again as a little doll, complete with frock and bonnet, and pushed in a small pram to the market when she needs a spot of milk, you watch yourself and those teeth of yours.

“Actually, I was hoping for some advice on a gift.”

“I’d be honored! Who’s it for?”

“My mother. Her birthday is soon to arrive, and she does have an appreciation for things… that is to say…”

“ Weird?”
“Not as such. More beyond the range of standard deviation for accepted motherly gift-giving.”

“So… stepping away from the area of sweets, flowers and a new hat; is that what I’m hearing?”

“My PA thought you might offer a suitable item along those lines, yes. An unusual cookbook or something to keep her hands supple during gardening season.”

“I can do both of those and a wealth of other things besides. That’s a lot of my business actually. Not necessarily people coming in for a human skull or a book of incantations, but something made from an herb they’ve heard helps with joint pain or a lovely crystal this or that to set on their desk. We’ll find something.”

With what he hoped was a confident smile on his face, Greg made a ‘follow me’ gesture and hoped, further, that he could make good on his promise. His shop was perfect for mum gifts, but a unique man like Mycroft Holmes could also have a unique mum who’d rather torch this shop than own a single thing in it. Please let that not be the case. Cleaning up after a fire, using magic or not, was a major pain in the arse…

As much as he hadn’t wanted to admit it, Mycroft had to finally concede that Greg’s shop wasn’t quite the establishment he had imagined. Yes, there were nonsense items aplenty, but, as the owner had stated, less-nonsensical stock was also to be found and it certainly offered options suitable for mothers who might appreciate something different as a gift, even if it did not summon evil spirits or grant the ability to turn the neighbor into a toad. Which Mummy would positively have adored.

“I think you’ve chosen a few winning gifts today, Mr. Holmes. If she’s not happy with anything, though, I’ll exchange it for something different or you can have a gift voucher so she can choose whatever else she fancies.”

“I believe Mummy will be most pleased with this selection and I must offer my thanks for your help.”

“Always happy to give good service!”

Something Mycroft also had to admit, since, in the brief time he was in the shop, several other customers arrived and the owner treated each with respect and regard, even if they departed with only a small purchase of a sachet to hang in their wardrobe to keep away the moths.

“A credit to your profession, I have no doubt.”

“Something to tell your friends, I hope. Always happy for new business. Take my card, why don’t you? I’ve got a website for online orders, which a lot of people prefer these days.”

Out of politeness Mycroft accepted the proffered business card but found himself looking at it far longer than he might have expected.

“Are there… there seems to be something that catches the light…”

“Good eye! A lot of people don’t notice that, at least, not under this lighting. They’re specially-made and not by one of those 5 quid for a box of 1000 companies. As much business as I do with the casual browser, I do handle a lot of more… serious… customers and they appreciate a more mystical air about matters. There actually are a few symbols embedded in the card, in silvery
crack, that they'd look for, but others don't give a toss about.”

Turning the card this way and that, Mycroft caught quick glimpses of what seemed to be pieces of small symbols or some form of runic script embedded in the otherwise simple card.

“Most appropriate, I am certain.”

“If you’re curious, view it under candlelight. You should be able to see it better that way.”

“Another nod to the mystical?”

“Every little bit helps. Business is very much about image and I don’t want to disappoint.”

“A worthy policy. Well, I believe I am done here. Thank you, Mr. Lestrade, for your assistance.”

“Anytime. I… I hope you’ll stop in again. My stock changes more frequently than you might predict, so there’s always something new and interesting to see.”

“I shall surely keep that in mind.”

Mycroft picked up the thankfully-plain sack containing his gift purchases and only swore softly under his breath when he passed a shelf and was swatted on the head by his black, furry nemesis.

“Lovely. The man already seemed ready to never set foot in here again and you smack him on the head.”

“Got a hair, didn’t I?”

Greg groaned and walked over to pluck the hair that was dangling from Balthazar’s paw.

“Why on Earth would you do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Love spell, maybe?”

“Wrong.”

“You absolutely can use hair for a love spell!”

“You’re not casting any spell on Mycroft.”

“Spoilsport. How about a bit of divination, then?”

“That’s invasion of privacy.”

“The future isn’t here yet, so how can I invade something that doesn’t exist?”

“Philosophy won’t get you out of this, you bastard.”

“You never know until you try.”

Balthazar leapt from the top of the shelf and onto the counter, stared for a moment at the pen sitting next to the till, then casually batted it onto the floor.

“Why did you do that?”

“It was violating my territory.”
“Brilliant. Can I go back to work now?”

“You mean doing a little finger waving so the floor is clean and the books are straightened while you have a cup of tea?”

“Funny. For your information, I have some orders to place.”

“So… sitting on your arse in front of your computer. While you drink tea.”

“I hope you enjoy a little laxative in your food bowl.”

“I hope you enjoy replacing all your shoes filled with the result.”

The mutual pffts were absolutely par for the course and Balthazar waited for Greg to go into the rear of the shop to start his tea before frowning at the day’s events. Not a clear sign either way whether this Holmes person was interested in Greg or not, which was probably why the too-honest-for-his-own-good Greg was a bit testy. Mr. Fine Coat and Brolly’s energy was miserable to decipher! There was very old blood running in his veins and, in that very old time, he would have been the king or warlord or tribal chief standing alongside a powerful practitioner keeping watch over their people and land.

There was absolutely no chance this man was some minor government drone or even a mid-level government drone, no matter what he’d like to pretend. Whereas Greg was arguably the most talented sorcerer in London, he certainly didn’t have cat-level cleverness. A cat, for instance, would have realized that swatting at someone to steal a hair meant you could also swat someone and leave something behind. Like a tiny tracking spell. And how fortunate that Mr. Holmes seemed the type to work late hours because London was a large place for a cat, even one of his majesty, to traverse if it was inclined to do a bit of spying and Greg would certainly not put fresh food in his bowl if he trotted home after the stupid sod was asleep. No matter how loudly he wailed…
It actually took a great deal of exertion to leave Balthazar out of breath but chasing through London after Mycroft’s car did a good job of reaching the mark and the cat paused to surveil the scene and replenish its oxygen as Mycroft took an extended time exiting the vehicle, due to an in-progress phone conversation, and a few moments of conversation with Charles before stalking into the building that certainly did not shriek ‘government office building’ into the ether.

Now it was a matter of finding the man inside the building and gaining what information he could to help his romance-impaired boss make progress towards becoming non-romance-impaired. Which… might not be as easy as he’d expected. Government buildings were full of busy, distracted people and there was always a door or window ajar to sneak through. That… did not seem to be the case here. A uniformed, serious, mature person opened the door even before Holmes had to ring the bell and there was an air about the place that said other serious, mature people were inside, utterly failing to leave a window cracked or the door to the bins open for an easier sneaking out to enjoy a quick smoke. But, it wouldn’t do any harm to check. Luck doesn’t always visit unless you go looking for it…

Bastards. Everything locked tight as a drum and not a single of the old, moldy gents he could see through the windows even looked in his direction when he howled. It was possible they didn’t hear him, since the average age of the building inhabitants seemed to be ninety-four, but even a bit of subaural caterwauling didn’t produce the slightest glance in his direction. They should have felt that, at least! Rattled their ancient bones a bit or made them itch. And why was he sensing his prey underground! Was there a dungeon? A hidden tunnel? An ossuary would certainly fit, given the abundance of near-mummies to be found in the variety of comfortable chairs this accursed mausoleum boasted…

This was not going quite the way he had planned. Not a bit. However… well, now. That was a possibility. A very distinct possibility, but… first a tiny change in appearance might be necessary because… she’s a floofy fancier, if there ever was one.

“Look at you! Oh, you poor dear… such a tiny floofy cat. Ginger, too, which is the cutest, in my opinion, which has a lot of merit since… well, I have a few cats of my own which makes me a bit of an expert. Can I pet you? Would you like that? Oh, it seems you would… my name’s Molly. Do you have a name? I suppose you do, but I don’t see a collar or tag to let me know what it is. That’s a shame. Do you live near here? I didn’t think any actual people lived near here, but I suppose they could. You’re too small to be about on your own, though, so I’m worried you got out when you shouldn’t have. I suppose I can knock on a few doors and see if anyone knows you…”

Bloody wonderful. A do-gooder! Well, more of a do-gooder than expected…

“Why are you scratching at this door? They don’t allow cats in here, I can tell you. They scarcely allow me! It’s only because I know someone… between you and me, Mr. Cat, a very important someone… and they can get me inside, but I doubt anyone in there would have a precious little kitty like you. They’re a bit… well, if any of them had a cat, it would be one of those enormous ones that just lays there and glares at people without even a single moment in the day for chasing a toy or snuggling on your lap or anything. Probably a stone cat! One of those they sell for the garden that the old chap brought inside by accident and never got around to putting it with his posies.”

A pure soul. Save me, spirits… or anything else listening… from pure souls. Must manipulate with the deftest of paws…
“What a cute little mew you have! Surely you belong to someone who must be missing you ferociously. I would be! What’s that? That mew sounded so sad! Or hungry. Are you hungry? Look at those eyes… those are hungry eyes if I’ve ever seen them and I have seen a lot of them, believe me on that. Maybe… people can get a bite to eat in there, so maybe they won’t mind if I find a tiny something for your tiny belly. No… no, you can’t come inside, little moggie. I’ll bring a dish out here for you. No… making those eyes isn’t going to work on me. I’m immune! Veteran cat owner, if you recall. No, don’t rub against my leg, it won’t do any good. No, no wanting a pick-me-up. Look at you plopping down on my foot, trying to be sad and pitiful so I put you in my purse and sneak you inside.”

That is a surprisingly good idea, Ms. Pure Soul. Get on with it, will you? I don’t want that Holmes fellow having a heart attack in his private crypt or wherever he is before I know if he’s suitable for the most lovelorn sorcerer in the city.

“Oh, that’s a horrid little sound! You poor thing… you really are hungry, aren’t you? Probably scared, too, and could do with a little cuddle. Come on, then, but you have to be very, very quiet and no fidgeting. You’ve got loads of room in there, so get comfy and I’ll see if I can get you something to eat. Alright now, here we go…”

Molly settled the cat in her rather substantial purse, then rang the bell, which the doorman allowed to happen since the first time she visited, he opened the door at the moment she was about to press the bell and her shriek of surprise caused a great deal of perturbation among the club members. No good ever came of perturbation in the Diogenes Club. Never.

“Hel… oh. Right, I’m supposed to be quiet. But, I can’t really be quiet and tell you who I’m here to see, now can I?”

“Hushed tones are permitted at the door, madam. And you are expected. Do follow me.”

“Thank you.”

Molly poked her finger through the cracked open top of her handbag, so she could give her passenger a tiny scratch and Balthazar decided being scratched by a pure soul was not the life-stealing experience he expected it to be. Or that he didn’t have to wear his usual armor of a frock and bonnet to protect him from the thieving pure soul, as he’d had to do in the past.

And surviving was good, since his carrier was going downward in the building, which was precisely where he wanted to be. Though not, perhaps, in this particular room that seemed somewhat lacking in windows, easily-accessible ventilation ducts, or doors, once the example they’d passed through was closed behind them.

“There you are, Molly Hooper. I thought you’d forgotten.”

“Nope, just found a friend and had to stop and chat.”

Molly opened her purse and pulled out Balthazar who peered at this new person, immediately recognizing a kindred spirit. Her eyes were both formidable and fiery. And her arse was breathtaking. Just like his.

“Oh my god… if His Majesty sees that he’ll shoot laser beams out of his eyes and explode the silly thing.”

His Majesty could try. His Majesty would fail. Did England even have a king? The person on the telly looked like a woman, but it was hard to tell sometimes.
“Your whip-cracker isn’t that bad. He’s nice, actually! At least… he’s that sort of polite than almost reaches nice, which is better than some people can claim.”

“Lovely. Now, can you explain why you have a cat in your purse, that isn’t one of your thirty cats that I’d fully believe you’d tote about with you in your purse, though most likely after made a little bed for it and cut holes for it to look through to see what’s what?”

“I found him! Right outside. It is a him, too, because I saw his bits.”

And found them glorious to what precise degree? Truly, Ms. Pure Soul, do tell? Or perhaps Ms. Impure Soul would care to venture an opinion?

“Ogling a cat’s bollocks isn’t what I asked you here for, Molly.”

“I didn’t ogle! They’re a bit large and hard to miss…”

Large is a good start on the glorious praising…

“…I’m worried that might mean an infection, though. I suppose I could aspirate a little of what’s in there and run a few tests… oops! He’s a strong jumper! Made it all the way to the table in one leap!”

You want to stab my balls! I’d leap to Wales to save them!

“Molly… get your new pet and put him somewhere he can’t cause any trouble. We have work to do.”

“He’s hungry, though. Can you have a little something brought down for him to eat?”

“You want me to ask the chef to prepare a meal for a cat?”

“Yes, please. Poor little thing… oh, he’ll need water, too.”

“If you weren’t my cousin, Molly Hooper…”

“But I am, Fake-Anthea No-Surname, so you have to do what I say or I’ll tell Gran and she’ll phone you for one of her special little talks.”

“I’ll set His Nibs on you in retaliation. Say you revoked his infant brother’s morgue privileges… the rain of fire, blood and pain will be majestic to behold, as will your battered, shredded corpse.”

Was is possible to fall in love at first sight? Ms. Impure Soul was clearly the stuff of legends…

“I’ll make certain that Dennis does my autopsy. He’s very thorough and respectful, too. Warm hands! Which, I suppose, doesn’t matter to a dead body, but it’s nice when I give his hand a little pat and it’s not like fondling an ice cube.”

“CAN we get back to the reason you’re here?”

“After we get Mr. Fuzzy Wuzzy his food.”

Mental note – never appear as a fluffy kitten again as long as the sun burns in the sky.

“Fine! I’ll get him something and you start changing.”
“You brought that really nice dress and shoes, right?”

“So green it’s almost black, fits your form like a glove and heels that make those calves beckon all lusty humans in the area to beg for a lick. Just like mine.”

Mr. Balthazar Impure Soul, husband of Ms. Anthea Impure Soul and proud licker of shapely calves. Life could be worse…

“Yes! This is going to be fun, even though it’s a bit sneaky and I normally don’t approve of that sort of thing. It’s for a good cause, though, so I can make an exception this time.”

“Dress, shoes… over there. I’ll call for that one to be executed…”

“No! He’s too cute.”

“Cute cats don’t have those sorts of eyes. Anyway, I’ll call for that one to get a bite of something while you dress, then we’ll tidy up your hair and makeup. I’ve got a car waiting, so everything will stay fresh and sexy.”

The wife noticed my eyes. After all our seconds of blissful matrimony. Life is very, very good…

“Perfect! Don’t want the poor fellow to think I’m not particularly concerned with hygiene or grooming. I’m supposed to be seducing him! Nobody wants to seduce someone sweaty and smelly and looking a fright. Well, I suppose someone might, because it takes all sorts and that’s actually a wonderful thing that I support very much, but I don’t think it would be helpful here.”

His dark and perfect spouse was also a spymaster! Oh… oh, this was a visitation by the gods! Which ones was a bit unclear at the moment, but now and again you could poke about a bit and get them to come out of hiding for a quick chat, so that could be the next bit of business.

“The King of Monks thanks you.”

“I’ll take my payment in that lovely vanilla vodka we drank the other night. It was really good…”

“Got a bottle waiting, actually. Now remember… you’re just sussing out if this person has his head easily turned by a pair of breasts or if there’s reason to push forward with the mission.”

Perfect… you are simply perfect, you succulent morsel of deviousness…

“Brilliant! What was his name again? I’d hate to work my womanly wiles on some poor fellow who just stopped in for a book or something.”

“Greg…”

Ha! That’s a coinci…

“Greg Lestrade.”

… dence. Wait… His Majesty, His Nibs, The King of Monks…

“Molly, something’s wrong with your cat. It looks… stuck.”

“Wuzzers… is everything alright? Here, let me give you a little cuddle before I get my kit on.”

Yes, fair maiden… cuddle me warmly for dark magic is afoot and it didn’t bother to say a fucking
word of hello before it decided to trample through my life. We could have cooperated from the start! Apparently, this sleek and sexy beast… when not in the guise of Wuzzers… had allies and luscious ones, at that. One, already, was his devoted wife. The other, apparently, was an in-law. My… wouldn’t Saturnalia… Christmas… be a joyful time this year…

Especially if The King of Monks found his Jester…
“Ok, Wuzzy… stay here and…”

“MROW!!!!”

“No, you have to stay in the car, alright? I’ll just be right there in that shop and I don’t think I’ll be gone too-too long.”

“FMROWRM!”

“Wuzzypants… I have work to do. Well, not work, really, because my real work involves dead people and I don’t see any of those lumbering about, which is a good thing, but my just-for-fun work and I can’t do that carrying you. I’m supposed to be a seductive femme fatale and I’d need one of those white cats with green or blue eyes and a diamond collar if I wanted to carry a cat as a prop for my mission.”

“MROWROWROWRMF!”

“Oh…”

Molly dithered in indecision because leaving the cat behind could result in a very destroyed rear seat, if her other cats’ peevishness was any measure, and the driver wasn’t Charles, who could be counted on to keep an eye on the kitten and play with it or get it a treat. That really only left Plan B and Anthea would be as peevish as a cat because of it, since she wouldn’t use the small, elegant handbag chosen for the mission and, instead, tote her normal purse that had ridden along specifically to hold the cat and an assortment of treats in the side pockets.

“You’ll have to be quiet again, though, Wuzzers. I do have a job to do and I can’t do it if this Greg person is too busy paying attention to you. Ok, in you go…”

Molly signaled she was ready to exit and waited for the driver to let her out of the car, not so much because she enjoyed that sort of thing, but because it allowed her to hand the purse to the driver as she exited, which she wasn’t sure she could do gracefully with the unfamiliar high heels, short and tight dress and heavy purse overbalancing her to this side or that. With the exit safely made and purse retrieved, she took a moment to check her reflection in the car’s windows, then paused to take a closer look at Greg’s little shop, which wasn’t as dark or eerie as she’d thought, with its flowerbox under the large window, colorful goods showcased in that window and ooh… they were having a sale…

The seductive strut was somewhat unnecessary, since Molly entered the shop and only saw an older woman browsing through a display of essential oils and a Uni-age couple debating the merits of two orbs, one of bloodstone and one of amethyst, for end-of-the-workday rejuvenation. However, another figure quickly appeared from behind a shelf and Mata Hari knew she had her target.

“Hello, ma’am. How can I help you today?”

“Hi! I mean… hello…”

Said with tone Molly hoped sounded more like her cousin Anthea than her normal voice, which didn’t quite fit with her honey-trap outfit.
“… I saw your shop and thought it had… appeal.”

This said with a slight look up and down of the shopkeeper and small lip twitch that, if one was of a mind for it, should inspire the image of sultry kisses.

“Thank you… I’m so happy my little busi… your purse is alive.”

“What? Oh dear…”

Molly sighed at her squirming handbag, which contained a seemingly eager to escape cat and smiled apologetically at Greg.

“Confess, Madam Sneaker… dog or cat. Or is it something unusual, like a hedgehog or ferret?”

“It’s… it’s a cat.”

“Can I see it? I love cats.”

“You do! Oh… that’s nice. Very nice. Wuzzy, did you hear that? You can come out and meet Gr… this nice shopkeeper.”

Greg didn’t catch the near-dropping of his name because his attention was too fixed on the fact that Balthazar was being drawn out of a stranger’s handbag, wearing a form that he certainly hadn’t left the shop with earlier.

“This… is your cat?”

“Well, no, if I’m honest. I just found him! I was going to visit my… friend, and there he was, looking so sad and lost and hungry. Not really an area for a housecat to have wandered off in, so I don’t know… maybe someone abandoned the poor thing.”

“I see… well, I’m sure he has a good home now with you.”

Balthazar made a ‘ha ha very funny magic man’ face at Greg, which was only decipherable if you were a sorcerer having a long history of being shot that very look by this very cat, regardless of what form it was taking at the moment.

“Oh… I wish I could keep him. I have four cats already though… well, three permanent ones and another that visits when she’s tired of the weather or wants some Dreamies.”

Balthazar reached out and smacked Greg’s hand with his paw because his stupid sorcerer should not be giving Ms. Pure Soul such a beaming smile. Not allowed.

“It does sound as if you have your hands full. It’s good to see someone who cares about these little fellows, though. Are you an animal lover, in general, or is it more a cat-fancying thing?”

“I love them all! Mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, insects, worms… they’re all so wonderful.”

Stop smiling, Greg, you prat! Yes, she’s pretty and yes, she’s nice and yes, she’s funny but… ok, that does make for a very pleasing package, but your energy isn’t responding nearly as strongly to her as it did to The King of Monks and I’ll not have you marauder through our carefully-laid plans just because you’ve met someone to watch monkeys at the zoo with!

“Wuzzy? Why do you keep hitting the nice man?”
“I have an idea, ma’am. Why don’t you let your cat out of the bag and he can roam about the shop? My cat’s hiding somewhere and they can have a cat conference while you browse. I may also know someone who would love to have a cute little kitten like that. A sweet old lady who watches my evil moggie now and again. She could do with slightly more permanent companionship.”

“Really? That would be amazing! You… you wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all. Anything for a lovely woman with a great heart and a pretty smile.”

Enough of that, you sex-deprived wand-waver…

“Ow!”

“What happened!”

“I…”

Greg looked down to share a glare with Balthazar and decided that a few hours with Mrs. Hodges would do the miserable thing a world of good. She’d been knitting a pixie cap for her baby grandson and surely could use a model to see how it fit. And, only yesterday he’d fixed the sticky wheel for her doll pram…

“One of those random twinges that you can’t explain but remind you you’re not getting any younger.”

“I hate those! You’re enjoying a nice bit of telly and all of a sudden you wonder why your toe is being a mischief. You’d think I’d know what’s what about that since I’m a pathologist and have more than my fair share of knowledge about the human body and the silliness it can get up to when it wants a laugh, but somethings just defy explanation!”

Molly’s large grin turned into a gasp as she realized she’d left her temptress persona in the dust a few leagues back and was chatting with her target like they’d bumped into each other at the market when each reached for the same melon.

“A pathologist! That’s an interesting job. Not many people with the talent or disposition to do that sort of work. Important work, though. How long have you been working in the field?”

Balthazar hissed his displeasure, but quietly so as not to upset Molly, and tugged on Greg’s trouser leg to remind the berk he had a shop to run.

“Oh, would you pardon me a moment? Looks like someone needs my attention at the till. Do look about, though. Lots to see and I’ll be happy to answer any and all questions.”

Molly grinned, then mentally kicked herself that it was her normal grin and not the sultry one she’d practiced in the mirror. Time for the Phone a Friend protocol…

“Molly. Report.”

“Oh, I’m making a mess of everything!”

“What! What did you do?”

“I… chatted.”
“That was the whole point.”

“No, I mean really chatted. Like we were in the queue for a coffee and began talking about the woman at causing a fuss at the counter, then started on about the weather and now it’s animals and... he’s actually very nice.”

“You are not allowed to fall for him, do you understand? If I have to extract you from the scene I will, and you can say goodbye to vodka or cupcakes or that new toenail polish you wanted but only I know where to get it for a discount.”

“I’m not going to fall for him! But, now... I feel completely rotten about trying to tempt him with my womanly wiles.”

“I should have done this myself. You’re too... sweet.”

“Probably, but maybe he’s the type who goes for sweet. He... I think he may have been flirting a bit.”

“Shit. That’s not good.”

No it wasn’t, in Balthazar’s opinion, which was gaining support as he did a bit of his own spying from one of his favorite observation perches atop a bookshelf.

“I’m not entirely certain about the flirting, though, because he’s nice and sometimes niceness can be confused with flirting since... it’s sad, but not everyone knows a lot of nice people, so if someone is nice to them, they suspect something else is behind it besides niceness. Not me, though! I know lots of nice people, so... I’m not sure where I was originally going with that.”

Balthazar was proud that he was a tangible manifestation of concentrated evil and held the aorta of black wizardry between his teeth but... why wasn’t this woman protected by legions of white magic practitioners and their hangers on! She was so pure and kind...

“Oh my god... abort! Just abort.”

“No! We need to know for certain and... there’s loads of really interesting things here. On discount!”

“Maybe you can trade your cat for a crystal ball.”

“Oh, Greg’s taking the cat. He knows a dear old thing who could do with a spot of company and what’s better for that than a cat?”

“Everything.”

“You’re just mad because Daisy chewed your shoes.”

“Ninety quid worth of shoes that looked fabulous on me! Nothing left but one flappy strap and a few shat out remnants of heel. I have no idea where the rest of it went. Hell, probably. Where your stupid cat came from in the first place.”

“I don’t think Daisy fancies red. She doesn’t even like the little red mousey toy I bought. Didn’t play with it so much as mauled it until it looked like some poor bloke who fell in front of one of those big threshers and basically becomes fertilizer for wherever his bits and pieces happen to land.”
Since this seemed to be going off-script, Balthazar took a moment to peer towards Greg, who was finishing with a paying customer and felt a twinge of indecision about his direction forward. Greg had been flirting, in Greg’s typically-mild manner, and Molly would probably accept an evening or ten out with him. It wouldn’t last long-term, but there would be a period of happiness in the sorcerer’s life that he hadn’t seen in awhile and there was very little doubt Molly would be decent to him, treat him well. Was it fair to snatch that away for a chance at something else?

Seeing another customer approach the till and Molly still arguing for the beatification of cats, Balthazar leapt down and trotted into the shop’s back room, and down the stairs to the workroom, then to the back of that where he walked through the illusion wall to the other workroom and to his own area where his tarot cards were sitting on a cleared section of the floor. Greg was better at this than he was, but time was of the essence and needs must when the devil, or his designated representative, drives.

Shuffling cards wasn’t easy with paws, but batting cards about wildly was extremely easy and the issue was which card or cards deigned, during the swatting frenzy, to turn themselves face up. For him, the only card he cared about was the first since he’d been quite firm with his deck about the time issue and his lack of patience for trying to fathom out a larger meaning from a big spread. Stupid cards had one job – should Greg ply his sad game on Molly or wait for the Man Who Would Be King?

Balthazar flailed about scattering cards hither and yon until one flipped over to bring the maelstrom to an end. Looking at the card staring at him, rather commandingly, the cat raced over to the old landline phone in the front workroom, knocked the receiver off the cradle and jabbed the number for the shop. The Emperor! For his simple question that boiled down to one thing. Might as well shove Mycroft’s crotch in Greg’s face…

“Magicae Argentea.”

“Stop flirting with Molly, you ridiculous twat!”

“Balthazar? Why are you using a phone?”

“Because you really don’t need a cat yelling at you with customers about, you simpleton.”

“You have a point. Does this have anything to do with where you disappeared to and why you returned in a customer’s handbag. A customer I, now, assume is named Molly?”

“Yes, it does. She’s a spy.”

“Ok, you found some old fruit or a half-full bottle of gin someone left on in an alley and now you’re pissed.”

“Wrong. I’ll explain later, but do not flirt. I repeat, you are not to pursue the female.”

“That sounds a bit seedy the way you say it like that.”

“It is seedy! Alright, no, maybe not that, because Molly…”

“Because Molly what?”

Balthazar yowled and nearly somersaulted in the air hearing Greg’s voice directly behind him. Damn the sorcerer’s bilocation power!

“Don’t do that!”
“Just get on with it. I do have work to do and this isn’t getting it done.”

“There shall be no seediness because Molly is the sweet cinnamon-roll cousin to my dear wife who…”

“Wife? What are you going on about now?”

“I have met my intended and she is the darkest, most beguiling of flames and beckons me with an irresistible call.”

“How can Molly have a cousin who’s a cat?”

“Don’t be obtuse.”

“Then I’m lost.”

“The only important thing, for you, is not to succumb to Molly’s sweet and shapely charms. She’s a spy. A mole.”

“First cats and now moles. Are you sure you’re not drunk?”

“She’s here to see if you shag women!”

“Molly?”

“It’s… Molly is the tool. My beloved wields it with utmost delicacy and dexterousness.”

“So, your wife, who is of either the cat or mole species, wants me to shag her? I’m worried now you found some poor bastards drugs and threw yourself a bit of a party.”

“You will not entertain impure thoughts about my Anthea. Her impurity is perfect as it is.”

“I think I’m done here.”

“Wait! You have to make certain you don’t let her entrap you into a date! I can already see you thinking about which of your shirts lacks coffee stains and whether the weed patch on your head needs a trim. You will not become enslaved by her kindness and spunky energy.”

“Why not? She’s actually the nicest, most interesting woman I’ve met in… a long time and…”

“Woman! That’s the problem. I’m not saying you have to announce you’re gay…”

“Which I’m not.”

“That’s why you don’t have to announce it, but you need to resist the lure of her cheery demeanor and enticing bosom.”

“I still have no idea why!”

“Mycroft, of course!”

“What’s he got to do with it?”

“Did… did I forget to say that my Anthea works for him and is trying to get the two of you together?”

“Yes, you forgot to say that. You forgot to say a fucking thing about that, actually.”
“My bad. Anyway, Molly is the test. You must not fail.”

“Let me see if I have this straight… I doubt I’ll ever fully have the right end of the stick here, because you’re drunk, drugged and loony, but you’re saying that Molly is here to see if I prefer women, which would make something between me and Mycroft impossible.”

“That’s actually the whole stick.”

“And you couldn’t have said that yonks ago?”

“Uhh… I’m too drunk to remember.”

“Brilliant. And… this is Mycroft’s idea?”

“NO! It is my Anthea’s plan. Her talent for subterfuge rivals even mine.”

“But she works for Mycroft, right?”

“Yes. From what I gather, she is his me.”

“Pardon?”

“She is the indomitable force that enables him to function.”

“She’s his assistant.”

“Your demeaning terminology will be the subject of a future discussion.”

“Lovely. Are we done here?”

“Are you fully inured to the allure of Miss Molly?”

“I think I have the gist of what I need to do.”

“Good, then be off with you and… be nice.”

Greg made a rude gesture, then vanished to rejoin with his other self to finish ringing up a tidy sale of two hefty crystal orbs and take a quick look at Molly, who had finished her phone call and was merrily browsing through his small, but unique, jewelry selection. So… the assistants were staging a coup. Of sorts. Trying to shove their bosses together to… date, he supposed. Probably to make their own lives easier, but… it was a touching thing, nonetheless, to go to all this trouble for two middle-aged men who may be going through a dry patch. How in the world they planned to physically get them together in the same place at the same time again was another question, but allies were never a thing he tossed aside, so they could continue with their work and whatever would be, would be.

And Miss Molly seemed to be an ally in this, too. Maybe he couldn’t fall for her charms, but he could encourage her to stop in again for a chat. Romance was one thing, but a friend was its own reward and he never tossed aside potential friends, either. Life was too short and too brutal to do otherwise. Besides… a dear person like that could always use a watchful eye on them and there were few more watchful than his and Balthazar’s…
“Hmmm… I admit I didn’t consider the bisexual twist.”

Anthea quickly put down her hand, as she realized she was stroking an imaginary beard like an old Greek sage, but knew that Molly would be too polite to openly laugh in her face over the lapse of sanity.

“I didn’t either, which is rather shabby since I’ve known more than a few people who are as happy dating a man as a woman. I’m not certain how open Greg is about it, but we had a very nice chat and… well, not to be boastful… but people do realize fairly quickly that I’m a trustworthy person and they tell me lots they might not tell someone else, because they know their secret’s safe with me.”

“You shouted ‘Greg’s bi, isn’t that brilliant!’ the moment you walked in here.”

“Oh. Ok, that’s true, but you’re sort of me, for the purposes of this mission, since I was working for you, and it wouldn’t have been proper for me to withhold vital information about the target.”

“That sounded very professional.”

“Thanks! Oh, and I met his cat. Wuzzy is going to be so happy with Bazzer, since they can visit whenever Mrs. Hodges…”

“Wait. Greg’s cat is named Bazzer?”

“No, it’s Balthazar, but that’s quite the mouthful, don’t you think?”

“A cat named Balthazar… I suppose it fits for someone who sells spells and potions.”

“And jewelry! And gorgeous crystals and lovely books and bottles of very mysterious, but very nice-smelling oils. All sorts of amazing things.”

“How much did you buy?”

“I… a little.”

“Meaning if you try to lift the sacks by yourself, you’ll throw out your back.”

“No… because I’m smart and know to lift with my legs. And Greg gave me a very nice price, so I don’t feel terrible about what I spent. Here, I even got something for you.”

Molly reached into her handbag, which Anthea had noticed was Molly’s regular out-for-shopping purse and actually held the designer bag she’d added to the outfit for that additional splash of sophistication. Which, apparently, was more of a splat than a splash.

“Isn’t it beautiful!”

Define beautiful.

“What is it?”

“A selenite wand.”
“Wand?”

“I admit it’s not like what you imagine for Harry Potter, but it’s helpful and healing and… where is it… here! Greg gave me this little booklet about crystals and stones and what they’re good for. This was the nicest bit of selenite he had, too. He brought out the whole lot and let me choose the prettiest one.”

Anthea loved her cousin dearly and if she had to live with a strange bit of rock to prove that, she was prepared to do it. Besides, it looked exceedingly susceptible to having an unfortunate encounter with a duster at some point in the future.

“Thank you. It’s… highly unique.”

“His whole shop is like that! You’ll have to come with me the next time I visit so you can see for yourself.”

“You’re going back?”

“Sure! It really is a fun shop and the customers are very interesting. I got to talk to a witch! At least, that’s what she calls herself, I don’t know if she actually has witchy powers or not, but she knew about all sort of things. Useful things, I mean, like aromatherapy and herbal medicine and things that do have some scientific basis, so it’s not all turning people into toads and dancing naked. Though she says they do that, too, the naked dancing part, I mean, but they have to be a touch careful because the constables frown on that sort of thing if they catch you at it. She said I have something exciting waiting in my future, too, which is positively brilliant since I never have exciting things happen in my life. Except being a spy, of course, but I wasn’t terribly good at it, so here’s to what’s waiting for me… sometime!”

“Ahem.”

Molly and Anthea spun around, but only Molly squeaked at the sight of Mycroft Holmes standing in the doorway.

“Miss Hooper… it appears you have enjoyed somewhat of an adventurous day. A spy, you say. Might I ask which country has taken you into their employ? Or is it, perchance, a private organization?”

Said staring at Anthea who responded with her best bored expression which, Mycroft had to admit, was equally as disinterested and childish as his brother’s.

“I… that is… want to see Anthea’s wand?”

Molly Hooper was one of the infinitesimally-small number of people who were not directly tied to government that Mycroft tolerated, and not only for the reason that she tolerated Sherlock and kept him occupied much like a child minder with a rather incorrigible and voraciously-curious toddler.

“Most certainly! I have often harbored a suspicion that she was endowed with arcane and eldritch powers and now proof flies into my day as if carried by broomstick.”

Molly nudged up Anthea’s hand and Mycroft happily read in his PA’s eyes what she wanted to do at the moment with that wand and where on him it would have to be inserted for her mystical curse to be enacted.

“Terribly delightful. And, does this wand factor in, in some fashion, with your work as an agent of espionage?”
“It… might?”

“I see…”

Which, to Mycroft’s growing suspicion, he actually did.

“Might the target of your secret mission be a certain vendor of mystical arts and crafts?”

“Oh…”

Anthea honestly appreciated how her employer treated her cousin, which, admittedly, was a bit like one would treat a seven-year-old, but it was leaps and bounds better than he treated the rest of the world, so she was content. However, it appeared to be time to turn his interrogation her way before Molly confessed to stealing the crown jewels and hiding one of the Tower’s ravens under her jacket as she made her getaway.

“Fine! I knew Molly would enjoy a shop that sold things like… this… and maybe I was curious about this Lestrade person, so two biscuits eaten in one bite. Normally, I’d say two birds killed with one stone, but Molly is here, and she doesn’t approve of that sort of imagery.”

“I don’t. Not at all.”

Well aware that this was not nearly the extent of his PA’s intentions, Mycroft decided to postpone digging further into the matter since the digging would be wildly more difficult due to Molly’s well-meaning, but somewhat meandering, attempts at explanation.

“Yes, your love for our animal brethren is very well documented. Did… I believe the cat’s name was Snaffy and there was an issue with ears? I do hope that was resolved.”

“It was! The poor thing had such a nasty infection and he hated the goo that got squirted in there to help with it, but he’s absolutely fine now and I can give him a little kiss on his head without smelling something dreadful wafting off of him.”

“Excellent.”

And, with the obligatory asking about relatives over and done with, Mycroft gave Anthea a small glance that said it was time to return to work or, in this case, prepare for intense interrogation about the entire nonsense of the past five minutes.

“Molly, Mr. Holmes seems to need me for something, so…”

“Oh! Right! And, I need to get into something comfortable, so I can look through all my new treasures. Cupcakes?”

“I’ll phone when I’m home.”

“Yes! My off days are normally fairly peaceful and a touch uneventful, but this has been amazing! Goodbye, Mr. Holmes! I’ll tell Snaffy you asked about him.”

Mycroft kept his ‘how kind of you’ smile on his lips as Molly waved to both him and Anthea on the way out the door of the windowless room, then turned that smile into a ‘now – you’ glare that Anthea waved off with a touch less than her usual level of apathy. This time her boss actually had a smidgen of a reason to glare.

“What?”
“You know very well what.”

“I used my wand to erase my memory.”

“Pitiful. I expect better of a sweets wrapper.”

“I told you the truth. I knew Molly would enjoy Greg’s shop, which she did if her now-extinct bank balance is to be believed, and I also wanted a little insight into the shop owner himself.”

“Why was Miss Hooper wearing a dress I recognize is not one to be found in her own wardrobe?”

“It’s not illegal to lend someone a dress.”

“And shoes?”

“You noticed her shoes? That’s worrying.”

“I very well remember the shoes you purchased to attend the party at the American embassy, which cost more than the embassy building itself.”

“Oh. Forgot about that. They did the job, though. You got what you wanted out of that fatuous Cabinet member.”

“True, however, they are not quite in line with Miss Hooper’s more practical aesthetic, nor likely desire for podal comfort, so…”

“Ugh… you’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“Was your question a serious one or has your wand impaired your capacity for rational thought?”

Anthea knew Mycroft could go on like this forever and the end result would be the same, so she might as well cut to the chase and put her information out on the proverbial table.

“Greg’s bi.”

“Your sentence makes absolutely no grammatical sense. Greg is buying, Greg will buy, Greg’s buy, if you are somehow trying to synonymize buy with a purchased product, but that should be followed by some descriptor, unless you are using the phrase as a declaration, in which case the product should be here for you to indicate by pointing or some other gesture…”

“Oh my god… B-I not B-U-Y!”

“That is a prefix! Verily, you are compounding the confusion.”

if it was anyone else in the world, Anthea would assume they were intentionally poking her rather testy badger, but this was Mycroft Holmes. He truly was this clueless about a select number of topics, most of which centered on people and the lives of said people.

“Yes, it is a prefix. Also, it is a commonly-accepted diminutive for bisexual.”

“I… why is that relevant?”

Boundlessly clueless…
“Because, if you decide to, perhaps, get to know Greg better, in a ‘how about a drink and then we make another type of magic happen’ sort of manner, knowing in advance he won’t look at you like you’re loony might be a tiny benefit.”

“Oh. Oh, I see…”

I doubt it, but at least you’re on your way there and that counts as progress.

“I know how much mental energy and time you have to devote to your work and how little that leaves for anything else, so it seemed efficient to simply test the waters to see if any devotion of time or energy in Greg’s direction was worthwhile. Admittedly, I wasn’t concerned, now, with the possibility of a simple friendship, which was feasible regardless of his sexual orientation but, now, if you choose to explore this path a bit more intently, you’ll be collecting data on both possible relationships simultaneously and, as I said… all hail efficiency.”

“That… is not the least credible explanation you could have offered.”

“Not by a light year, but now it’s all out there and you can decide what to do about it.”

Which, from Mycroft’s frown and furrowed brow, Anthea suspected was not a decision he was comfortable making.

“I shall give that the consideration it is due.”

That could mean he was dismissing everything out of hand or would think about it, just not here, not now and, probably, not quickly. Again, it counted as progress and, at this point, any further meddling would certainly push him right into the ‘dismissing everything out of hand’ zone. Further overt meddling, that is…

“Good. Now, what actually did you come in here for besides hoping to get a peek at Molly in her pretty dress.”

“Amusing. I was hoping to begin preparations for tomorrow’s meeting with my very favorite Cabinet Secretary.”

“Can we simply phone in sick and miss the whole ordeal?”

“Given we have used that particular tactic once this month, I suspect we should wait for a later event to again extract it from our collective arsenal.”

“Oh fine. First preparation – selecting the special biscuits.”

“Of course. One must always tend to the important details at the onset. How old is our current selection of contenders?”

“At least six months. And I poked a few tiny holes in the package of Hobnobs a month or so ago so the musty air at the back of cabinet could truly get in and work its magic.”

“Excellent. Tomorrow is already far more appealing.”

And, given the particular Cabinet Secretary’s voracious appetite, the special biscuits would ensure a brief meeting, leaving time for… thought. The mere idea of pursing anything remotely romantic was nonsensical, however… there was no harm in investigating if the man might have sufficient acceptable attributes to make the occasional shared meal or collegial cocktail a possibility. He had associated with a rarified few in his life that made such things tolerable and offered avenue for
fresh perspectives on aspects of culture, society, politics and such. He would not use, necessarily, the term ‘friend’ for these associations, a more accurate label was ‘acquaintance,’ however, they had been worth the personal investment to maintain them until they dissipated as such things do in time.

In any case, it was merely a thought at this point. Nothing ventured gained, but nothing lost, either. And, many times, the status quo most acceptable and upheaval, of any form, was certainly not to one’s benefit…

Anthea was highly practiced at reading her boss when he first stepped into the office each day, as well as at points during the day and skilled at responding to what she gleaned from those observations. And what she’d gleaned in the week that had passed between her Mr. Holmes meeting a certain occult shop owner was… it was going to be much longer than a week before they met again. Much longer. Like never, unless sheer random chance found Mr. Holmes’s car hitting Greg in a zebra crossing. It was disappointing, to say the least, but not entirely unexpected. The chance had always been a small one and, apparently, ‘small’ had been an overestimation.

“Ah, good morning, Anthea.”

“Good morning, sir. You seem chipper today.”

“Sherlock spent the night in a jail cell, so my day is brightened immeasurably.”

“That does tend to put some spring in your step. Any specific charge or general mayhem and anarchy.”

“The latter. He was most pestiferous during an investigation and the Detective Inspector had him relocated to stem the tide of the brewing headache which would surely compromise his ability to actually conduct his investigation.”

“How much will it cost to keep him in that cell for a few weeks?”

“Given I have no wish to see news of a prison riot erupting during those few weeks, we shall have to reconcile ourselves to his being released this morning and mourn the cessation of calm that blanketed London so cozily.”

“It was nice while it lasted. The latest update on the Guatemalan situation is on your desk and I have our consulate in Italy on notice that you will be having a word with them this morning.”

“Very good. I believe I shall tend to that first.”

“With your standard start-the-day cup of tea?”

“Yes and…”

“What?”

“I find myself peckish.”

“Really. What do I have to dart out to buy to quash the peckishness?”

“A chocolate croissant.”

“You do realize you passed countless bakeries on your way here this morning, don’t you?”
“Charles was churlish.”

“Right.”

Anthea stuck out her hand and waited for Mycroft to sigh, count out funds for his treat, count out more funds for her treat, then waited for her to depart before letting his rigidly-controlled aplomb slip a touch.

Last night… he habitually visited Sherlock when he was incarcerated, whether it was in a holding cell or a tidy room in one of the drugs rehabilitation facilities that had clouded a portion of his brother’s youth and, this time, found himself uncharacteristically willing to follow an unexpected whim and had Churlish Charles make a small detour to a certain shop, if only to refresh his memory as to the atmosphere of the establishment and the man who had crafted it.

Who, apparently was not minding his shop this particular evening, given an unfamiliar face was smiling behind the till. And that had made his mind… engaged. The first bit of contemplation of the evening had been for why he had given in to his silly whim, at all. The second had concerned the reason for the authentic twinge of disappointment that had risen from not seeing Gregory merrily toiling away as a merchant was wont to do. The third, which was really a codicil to the second, concerned the second authentic twinge, this one of delight, seeing Gregory emerge from an eatery a few doors along, with two bags in his hand, return to his shop, hand over one bag to the person at the till, then disappear behind through a door behind the counter.

The entire event lasted but a few minutes, however… two twinges! That was a personal record for emotional response! And he could not, in any manner, ascribe to the situation an excuse of novelty, curiosity, dyspepsia or any of the myriad of limp possibilities that had sprung to mind post-twine to wave away the actual basis of the twinges. The question, now, was how to proceed. Ignoring the twinges was absolutely possible and there would be no change in his life whatsoever by doing so. Exploring the twinges, though, was potentially fraught with peril.

Perhaps that was a _teensy_ overstatement. It was, more, fraught with the potential for experiencing again what he had thought he had long left behind in his past, when his younger self was more… hopeful… than the older self that stood here now, still holding his sedate and unassuming umbrella and valise. And that hope had never brought anything but disappointment. Which, of course, was not pleasant, not gladdening, but certainly not disastrous. If he chose, and the matter was by no means settled, to take a tentative step in that direction, then the possible negative outcome was more than survivable.

However, he was now of an age where survivable was far more a debilitating thing than it was in days gone by…

_________

“What… whatever is that skull doing on your desk!”

“What watching you.”

Not a statement that Mycroft could refute since the offending object _was_ looking in his direction, with eye sockets positively radiant with unknowable intent.

“I… this is not an area I had hoped to broach today, however, perhaps the time has come. How many in your family have been diagnosed with mental illness and was it of a treatable variety?”

“Funny. Or not. I think I’ll go with not, so I don’t have to make my foundation crinkle by
laughing.”

“There is a skull on your desk!”

‘It’s not real, if that’s your worry.’

“I surmised that from the fact that it is blue.”

“It’s sodalite. Good for thinking.”

Also intuition, but Mr. Holmes didn’t need to know about that. It was utter rubbish, of course, but even the rubbish notion of enhancing her already formidable female intuition was not something to be shrugged off lightly.

“Where would you even find such a thing? I… ah, I see. You are you again surveilling Gregory.”

“No, but Molly took me to his shop yesterday and I decided this was the perfect thing for my desk. Stimulates the brain and smooths arguments, which is godsend, frankly since…”

Anthea waved her hand with a panache-rich ‘voila!’ gesture in Mycroft direction.

“It is utterly inappropriate for the workplace.”

“You have a TARDIS on your shelf!”

“First… it is British institution, deserving both of admiration and presentation. Second, it is not directly in the line of sight of any who might venture into my space.”

“Neither is Ignatius.”

“Pardon?”

“Iggy for short. And I’ve got him here, in his Cavern of Mystical Desk Organizers and Tea Mug, so he can spy on the unwary and report to me their foulest secrets…”

Mycroft had to admit that in the two weeks since his PA had gone rogue, she had not engaged in any further chitchat, interrogation or snooping as related to his situation with Gregory. Therefore, it was possible that the visit to the shop was perfectly innocent, given Miss Hooper’s previously-stated fascination with its wares and clientele.

“…I wish he could tell me what happened to Greg, though. That has to be a story worth hearing.”

What?

“Pardon?”

“Greg. Looked positively knackered and moved like he was favoring one side. Molly’s professional opinion was he took a nasty fall down some stairs or had an accident where he was hit by something, like a bicycle speeding down the street.”

“Dear me…”

“He said he’d been sick, but pfft. Even Molly knew that was a lie and she’s terrible for that ‘believe in human honesty’ nonsense.”
Another twinge! Blast and bedevilment, another bloody twinge! He had valiantly avoided them for an entire week and now one lands upon his shoulders like a harpy, digging its claws into his flesh. The thought of an exhausted, injured Gregory... oh, would his twinge generator ever stop its infernal machinations!

“Well, I suppose we must pay him the respect of accepting his cover story and move along with our day. To begin, your skull must be removed.”

“No, and I got one for you, too.”

Mycroft groaned as another skull was drawn from a sack next to Anthea’s feet, this one, he was very certain, sporting a clearly mocking grin.

“Donate that... object... to whichever local coven is in need of an altar decoration.”

“I think not. I asked what was effective for constipation and flatulence and Greg said this stone was top notch. You’ll thank me the next time your mother sends her famous shepherd’s pie.”

Untrue, but what Mr. Holmes didn’t know certainly wouldn’t hurt him.

Perhaps a local theatre company is staging Hamlet and requires a Yorick.”

“It’s simple clear quartz, so you can’t say it’s too garish for your sad grandfather decor. Good for decision making, mental clarity, all sorts of handy things like that. Yorick is a good name for it, though.”

Mycroft stared at the crystal skull in his PA’s palm and sighed. It was a garish thing, but it did have a... whimsical... aspect that he did not particular abhor. There were even a few flashes of color to be seen, which were interesting, if nothing else. And it was not large, no more than 3” across, so it would be unobtrusive sitting on a shelf, though in a location where he was not daily gazing upon it’s large, taunting smirk.

“Very well, I shall accept your gift.”

“You’re welcome. Now, you have a meeting in an hour and three hours of video footage to watch before it begins.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, an easy start to the day for once.”

Mycroft nodded and moved to his inner office where he set his new friend on his desk while he removed his coat and removed a selection of papers from his valise. He had already viewed the necessary footage, since his PA handily put the notification in his ‘want an easy morning?’ folder the night before, so he could focus on other matters to make the afternoon a more tolerable one, as well.

Taking a seat to begin the focusing, Mycroft lifted up the skull from the desk returned the its cheeky smirk.

“You are supposed to benefit mental focus, are you not? I shall be monitoring your success and woe be to you should you fail in your appointed task.”

Yes, it was unutterably silly, however... he felt oddly better about his day from the touch of silliness. And, it was a handsome specimen, now that he looked at it more closely. The carving
was surprisingly well done for what would be an inexpensive item to purchase and there were, now that he investigated more closely, more than a few flashes of color to be seen as the skull was moved about in the light. It felt rather comfortable in his hand, also, whether in his open palm or when he allowed his fingers to slightly curl around it.

All in all, it was not quite as dreadful as he had imagined and... ooh, that position certainly allowed the various rainbow colors to show proudly. A much better specimen than Anthea’s boring blue bugger. The woman obviously had no taste for objet d’... magique. That, however, could remain absent from her annual performance review...

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What an utterly strange day. Not that the events were strange, but his small amount of whimsy with his skull had noticeably enlivened his imagination and that brought about certain creative solutions which would have sprung to mind, of course, but likely after a more extensive period of time had elapsed. Magic was a silly thing, naturally, but the power of suggestion was not, he had used it countless times to his advantage. It was a singular thing, though, to have it impact him, even in a minute way.

“Do you require any stops tonight, Mr. Holmes?”

Mycroft opened his mouth to say no, however, paused a moment to reconsider the question. He did not require any stops before returning home, but... perhaps he would welcome one if, for no other reason, than it might eliminate from further contemplation the Gregory Situation, as well as any and all associated twinges.

“Yes, Charles. I... I find myself in need of purchasing another out-of-the-ordinary gift and Mr. Lestrade’s shop is likely to offer something suitable for my purposes.”

Fortunately, his driver would not comment on the obvious lie, since he traditionally purchased two gifts per year and one had already been obtained. As Christmas was not looming...

“Of course, sir. Traffic is fairly light for the hour, so we should be there shortly.”

“Excellent.”

Though, if you choose to take us via Glasgow to give me further time to second-guess myself, that would certainly be appreciated...

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Hounds of Hell!

“Mr. Holmes, are you conscious? You haven’t moved since we arrived.”

Yes, foul man. Do you not see that Gregory is, once again, not taking charge of his business?

“That I am. Simply ruminating on the nature of my potential purchases and if this is, in actuality, the best establishment for my purposes.”

Feel free to remove your disbelieving gaze from the mirror, soon-to-be-sacked Charles. I do not need to have my thwarted plans so flagrantly brought into sharp relief.

“Of course, sir. Though...”
Mycroft noticed that Charles’s eyes did break from the mirror long enough to look along the street before returning to favor him an inscrutable, and insufferable, expression.

“Perhaps a look in the window to cement your resolve? I noticed, also, that the coffee shop up the street seems the sort to take their business seriously and likely offer something acceptable for tea. A warm cuppa while window shopping is a grand thing on a night like this.”

As with his PA, Mycroft knew when his driver had ulterior motives swirling, however, the time invested to fully uncover them was often time poorly spent, given their priorities and intrigues differed significantly from his own. To be fair, though, they often produced somewhat fascinating results...

“An interesting suggestion. At the very least, I could do with something soothing to drink.”

“Yes, sir. I shall find a place to park and await your call.”

Waiting for the door to be opened before exiting to stand by the car, Mycroft briefly considered telling his driver simply to wait as he was not likely to be long, however, Charles was back in the vehicle and driving away before the words could form in Mycroft’s mouth. Given he had no option, now, but to carry on with his tea purchase, Mycroft strolled forward, agilely avoiding contact with the other pedestrians on the pavement until he opened the door of his destination and nearly collided with...

“Gr… Gregory!”

“Mycroft! Fancy meeting you here!”

You look appalling! Good lord… Anthea was certainly not exaggerating…

“Yes… it is rather a coincidence.”

“A good one, though. The coffee’s great here, if that’s what you’re in the mood for.”

“Tea, actually.”

“That’s great, too. Are you…”

Greg looked out and noted the pointed lack of a large, dark sedan.

“… enjoying your beverage here or having it to take with you?”

“I… had thought of taking it with me so as to indulge in a small amount of window gazing among the local shops.”

“Excellent idea! This is a brilliant area for quality shops. We get a lot of foot traffic in everyone’s business because people come to look for one thing and meander about seeing whatever else is on offer nearby. Anything, in particular, on your mind tonight?”

“Something, again, offering uniqueness for a gift…”

If this was to continue beyond the ‘well, good luck with that’ stage, Mycroft knew he had to, as they say, take the lead.

“… perhaps in your own shop. You did say your stock was somewhat fluid, with new items introduced regularly.”
“That I did! And it wasn’t a lie, either. I’d love helping you find something.”

“I would appreciate your assistance, though, I would hate to take you away from some other planned activity.”

Such as sleeping. Sleeping for a goodly number of hours, with any manner of pain medication making it the most pleasant sleep possible. You are favoring a side and that is unquestionably a bruise upon your cheek. For now, though, a gentle browse through your shop will suffice.

“Nah, I’ve got nothing on but some telly and there’s no hardship in losing that. Come on, let’s get your tea, then you can have my full and undivided attention for your shopping experience. John’s got the till, so I can focus on finding the perfect gift for you. Maybe even give you a look in the mysterious ‘back room.”

“Mysterious?”

“Haven’t you always wondered what lurked and what happened in the private room behind the counter in a shop?”

Point taken.

“Naturally, so I would be honored to receive the privilege of the proverbial peek behind the curtain.”

“Alright, then, let’s get started. And, don’t worry… I won’t try to read your tea leaves.”

“My sense of relief is profound.”

“It’s got you curious now, though, doesn’t it?”

Yes.

“Certainly not. One does not meddle in forces man cannot fathom.”

“Really? Looks like I’ve been doing it wrong all these years.”

Greg’s grin was as large and bright as Mycroft remembered and the British Government braced himself for socializing. His efforts were, so far, laudably successful, as his companion was as affable as ever and offered the ease of conversation he had noted previously. At minimum, the notion of an occasional meal or evening of drinks seemed possible. That, already, was something to note in his diary. Now, to see what else the future might bring… though, without tea leaves telling the tale…
“One cup of whatever this is for you, John, my friend. I told Margot to sweep up the flotsam and jetsam on the floor and pour a bit of hot water over it all, so this should be interesting if nothing else. Like flavorful. Or non-lethal.”

Mycroft admired the surreptitious rude gesture the man behind the counter gave to Greg and suspected that if there weren’t a number of customers in the shop, the gesture would have both been more vigorous and far more obscene.

“Thanks, Greg. You always make me feel so special.”

“You are special, John. In all the terrible, horrible ways. This is Mycroft Holmes, by the way. I’m going to help him with a few things, so no sending difficult customers my way. I am officially off duty.”

“I’ll let Balthazar handle them.”

“Sounds good. They buy more when he’s promoting our stock than when either of us do, in any case.”

Greg motioned Mycroft away from the counter while John nodded his agreement with Greg’s assessment of the cat’s salesmanship. When he wasn’t being evil, the cat was actually very good for business and it was worth the occasional swat to the head, bitten finger or shredded shoe for the extra that flowed into the accounts each month.

“Lots of new things in recently, Mycroft, so I know we’ll find the perfect gift. Who are you shopping for?”

Oh yes… forgot about the blatant lie. Well, it was time Sherlock was good for something besides chaos…

“My brother. He has a staggeringly-curious nature and a keen scientific mind. It seemed many of your wares would offer perspectives and information that he might not encounter in his normal course of reading or investigation.”

“Ooh! Sounds like a smart fellow. I’ve got loads of possibilities for someone like him. Books written for a more academic audience, uncommon minerals and essential oils, star charts, old formularies… admittedly the last one is for potions and the like, but large sections are dedicated to healing or improving plant growth and other things that I do get researchers like chemists and botanists asking about, so that might pique your brother’s interest, too.”

Surpassingly, that actually might. At least his purchase-to-cover-the-lie would not be monies entirely wasted.

“There is promise there, I admit. Shall we look more closely at a few suitable examples?”

“Absolutely! Are you in a hurry?”

Given Charles would make excellent use of the time with his tablet, phone and off-the-books expense account for small amenities during extended waits, time was not an issue.

“Not particularly.”
Though I shall remain vigilant that you are not overtaxed as… it is difficult to believe you have an erg of energy to spare.

“Great! Then I’ll make sure you get a look at everything that might work and if nothing tickles your fancy, we can think about what might that I can order for you.”

“Dear me, I have never felt so pampered.”

Or aghast at the inanity of an utterance.

“Prepare for extreme pampering, then! Special customers deserve special treatment.”

Oh my… if one was of a certain mind, one might interpret that as… inviting. Of course, if one was of another mind, it was simply good business. At this moment, his own mind was taking a third tack which was dithery confusion and it was a very good thing that Gregory was already browsing his own shelves and cases because a dithery Holmes was certainly not a desirable Holmes. Not that he was thinking in terms such as desirable, of course. It was merely another symptom of the confusion and inanity with which he had been infected. Perhaps Gregory had a potion or tisane that would be helpful…

Well, well, well… skulls…

“Crystals, gems, minerals… people love them. Practitioners and non-practitioners alike. And who can blame them! Each one with its own brand of loveliness, regardless of any other attributes they might have.”

“You seem to have a number carved as skulls.”

“A particular favorite of the occult-shop buying population. Spheres, wands, obelisks, skulls… they look more impressive, I suppose than a simple polished or rough stone. I have some special orders, for example, waiting to be collected. One’s a dragon skull and one’s a raven skull in shape. I know a bloke who specializes in that sort of thing and he hooks me up when someone has a special urge for something out of the ordinary.”

“Most… colorful.”

“But not for everyone, that’s for certain, but some enjoy having a unique piece to show off or just to enjoy themselves. How colorful is this brother of yours?”

Immeasurably.

“Oh, quite a bit, actually, but I believe he would balk at a carved dragon or raven skull. The dragon he would argue is a fantastical creature and not worth his attention, and the raven… he would be far more likely to advertise for a now-deceased raven so that he could practice the process of preparing a skull for display as they do for museum and university collections. I am not entirely certain if the human skull he possesses was not obtained in the very same manner.”

“Definitely colorful! And he’s got an authentic skull, you say.”

“One he has named Billy. I suppose… do you have any other human bones in stock. He might appreciate an additional few examples for his mantle.”

Now that the lie was fully birthed, it might as well grow and flourish.
“Nooo… that something I don’t stock. Actual bones of any form, to be honest.”

“Oh, is there an ordinance prohibiting their sale?”

“No ordinance, it’s just… while there are certain rituals involving this or that bone that practitioners of … we can use the term white magic, if you like… might perform, they’re far more common for the darker business and… it’s not for me, precisely, to say what people can and cannot do, but I certainly don’t have to encourage it.”

There was a seriousness about Greg’s tone that surprised Mycroft, given the genial manner of the man, and it was especially curious given the topic was obviously a nonsensical one. Unless Gregory genuinely believed in magic.

“And… it is your opinion that these dark wizards, or whatever appellation they might prefer, are actually harmful?”

“I know you don’t believe in magic and such, which is fine, but… consider a person who intentionally seeks to practice rituals and observances that are designed only to serve an evil purpose. Would you feel particularly comfortable having those people milling about your community? Maybe they can’t turn people into rats or whatever your mind might imagine that lot could do, but if you hold evil in your heart, nurture it, embrace it… that’s not someone I’d feel safe around the people I care about.”

Given Mycroft had to mingle with individuals like that on what seemed to be a daily basis, he was a bit inoculated to their impact, however… if he thought about someone like Molly Hooper or his brother’s landlady, Mrs. Hudson… no, he would not want any of those particular villains within a continent of such people, magic powers or not.

“I see your point. It is not the reality of magic that is the point, it is the intent behind the pursuit of it.”

“Yeah. And… well, people are curious, you know? They like novelties and unique things. Which is how I stay in business! They buy something they think is a lark and…”

“Are you implying that the object would gain some malevolent hold over them?”

“For some objects, yes, I would think that very thing, but a simple thigh bone from a bloke who was a kind father and worked for the Royal Mail? No, that wouldn’t be my concern. It’s more the planting of a seed. Person buys what they think is a conversation piece for their side table. They start joking about with it, waving it around, poking at their guests, stupid things like that. Someone asks where they got it and they say an occult shop. Well, why would an occult shop stock something like that? For magic, of course!”

“And that begins a casual exploration which could, potentially, grow into something more serious.”

“Yeah. For most people, it would be meaningless. But… you know how minds can latch onto a thing. Be tempted and nudged in a certain direction. Done slowly enough and with their own conviction that it’s all in fun…”

“The effect takes hold without them consciously being aware it has occurred.”

“Basically. Everyone has the capacity for good and bad. It’s part and parcel of what they’re born with and how that is shaped as they grow and continue on in life as an adult. Some people resist influences well, others don’t.”
It was with sincere admiration that Mycroft nodded at Greg’s words, because those words demonstrated a clear understanding of some basic truths of human nature that far too many in positions of power, both in politics and media, completely ignored or couldn’t comprehend if you used very small words and a picture book to explain it to them.

“A very good point. So, you avoid having in your shop items associated with the so-called dark arts as a precaution against supplying those with directly evil intent and those would come to see that as a productive path.”

“As best I can. Most things don’t lean either way and I do keep a few academic tomes about magic, its history or practice, that have some very pointed and detailed sections about those dark arts, but they’re written for the anthropology or sociology crowd, so they’re dry as dust, in tiny print, and nobody thumbs through more than a page or two without putting them back on the shelves. Unless, of course, they are part of that crowd, which I do see more often than you might predict. Students or profs from the colleges doing research about magical practices and the cultures that gave rise to them.”

“In truth, those might interest Sherlock quite a bit. He derides the ‘soft’ sciences, but does, on occasion, turn to their findings or theories for some aspect of his own work.”

“We’ll put that on our list, then! And Sherlock, you say. That’s almost as interesting a name as yours.”

Was that flirting? Or good business? Or neither? Why was there no instructions manual for this sort of thing!

“Thank you. Mummy will be very proud.”

“She should be with two colorful sons playing about under her skirts.”

Colorful? Him? That had to be flirting! Or affable banter. Damnable human interactions! Why were they so foolishly difficult?

“I… that is…”

Greg saw the look in Mycroft’s eyes, which was an unhappy mix of confusion and frustration and kicked himself for being so forward.

“Was that a touch out of line? I’m sorry if it was. I… it’s just easy talking to you and I understand if I crossed a line.”

“NO!…”

Good heavens, man – control the volume of your voice! Mental and audible…

“… I harbored nary a thought about that. It… I was simply taken a moment by the particular gleam of that rather eye-catching sphere and it rather sent my thoughts off track.”

“Oh! Good, glad I didn’t offend you. And, isn’t that a beauty? Labradorite and a stellar specimen of it, if I do say so myself. Here, have a better look…”

Greg began to lift the large, heavy sphere and found Mycroft taking it out of his hands, a look of clear concern written in his eyes.

“Gregory… I am well aware that something has befallen you and lifting objects such as this
infernally-heavy sphere is certainly not recommended. What has happened, Gregory? I… I am worried about your condition.”

That was far more concern for another person than Mycroft remembered expressing in eons, however, he was sincere and that, oddly, blunted any embarrassment from being so, for him, emotionally demonstrative.

“Nothing, really. Little under the weather.”

“You manifested clear signs of pain when you lifted this and have taken great care to protect your left side as we have moved through the shop. I have not read a manual of symptoms in recent years, but I do not believe either of those is associated with a common cold.”

“It’s nothing, I promise. Just a silly thing.”

“That statement was at least sufficiently vague that I cannot denounce it with detail, however the vagueness is most telling. I doubt you should even be standing at this point.”

It was the tiniest of slips, but the ‘it’s all fine’ mask dropped for a fraction of a second and Mycroft saw the full flower of Greg’s fatigue and ache play out on his face.

“Let us… you said you were amenable to showcasing your mysterious back room, did you not? Is there, perhaps, a place to sit a moment while we finish our beverages and… chat?”

Which is something far beyond what I ever do, but needs must, apparently, when this particular devil drives.

“That sounds great, actually. I can even brew another cup of tea for you if that one’s gone cold. One thing you can count on with a shop like this – we have excellent tea.”

Mycroft felt a small stab of pride that Greg’s words were accompanied by a clear flash of relief at the thought of a moment’s rest. Human interactions were damnable, indeed, but they apparently could be stumbled through with some measure of success by even one as unpracticed as him.

“I would very much appreciate testing that claim.”

“On we go, then!”

Mycroft set the large sphere back on its stand, making mental note that he was most fortunate his PA hadn’t purchased that for her desk as it would immediately transfix most who approached it via it’s rather peacocky display of color. On second thought, if the dolts and dunderheads simply clustered around it, like moths at a flame, he could simply sneak away and not have to deal with whatever idiocy they were hoping to bring to his doorstep. Perhaps something to consider for the future…

“My… I truly was expecting something far more… mundane.”

Mycroft looked around the large space, which better resembled a witch’s cottage than the stockroom of a bustling business, and hoped his eyes weren’t widened with surprise. It certainly was not his most attractive look.

“Told you it was worth peeking behind the curtain! The stock area is fairly boring, I admit, but this is where we make up a lot of the things we sell, keep items that need special handling or do a
bit of experimenting with something new.”

There was even a cauldron! Perhaps not quite as large as one saw pictured in storybooks, but substantial and actually bubbling merrily away in what he hoped was a properly maintained hearth.

“Like that? One of the reasons I took this space was that it still had some features from the proverbial days of yore that weren’t too expensive to bring up to snuff.”

“I have to ask… is such a dramatic vessel necessary?”

“Yes, actually. That particular potion requires extremely long simmering and something heavy, with a rounded bottom so there are no hot spots that might scorch, is the proper tool.”

“Oh… I had not thought about it in such a… culinary fashion.”

“It’s also cool looking.”

His tiny snort of laughter shocked Mycroft to his core, however, given there was nobody else to hear it but Greg, he felt far better about his small display of humanness.

“But of course! Ambience is, as always, key. I do hope, however, that is not my tea you have stewing over the fire.”

“Drat. You discovered my fiendish plan. Guess I’ll have to put the kettle on, instead.”

Greg motioned for Mycroft to have a seat in one of the two chairs at the worktable and put fresh water in the very modern kettle from the very modern tap, much to Mycroft’s relief. He very much supported tradition and traditional methods, however, he had no wish for a visit from cholera today.

“And what percentage of the remainder of what I see here is for ambience, as opposed to practical use?”

“Very low, actually. I do things the old ways when possible, but some things I’ve learned can be modernized easily enough with no ill effects and an easier effort for me.”

It still baffled Mycroft how someone as seemingly intelligent, rational and grounded as Greg could hold a clear belief in the power of magic, but it did not seem to impact much in the man’s life besides his business. Of course, he had no knowledge of the man’s life besides his business, so speculation was actually a rather pointless endeavor.

“Here, have a sniff of these and tell me which you’d prefer.”

Staring at the large selection of jars Greg was putting on the table, Mycroft wondered if his new acquaintance should purchase the space next door and open a tea shop.

“Heavens… you have quite the variety.”

“That I do.”

“Are they intended for some purpose, besides flavor?”

“Some are, yes. I do make blends just for flavor, but we do a brisk business in teas for relaxation, digestive problems, mood issues, and a host of other things. See if one sparks your interest.”
Mycroft wafted the scent of the various jars in his direction and tried not to show that several enticed him in an astonishingly-strong fashion. Which was an unusual thing as he was terribly fussy about his tea and not, at all, approving of the new oddities that had flooded the various, once respectable, tea providers. It was almost as unusual as him sitting in a rather rickety chair, in the cellar of an occult shop, with a cauldron simmering a potion, while an electric kettle heated his water for tea.

“It is a somewhat difficult decision as several are highly intriguing, however, I shall, I believe, begin with this one.”

Greg smiled as he took the selected jar and gave Mycroft an approving smile.

“Nice choice.”

“Thank you, I… Gregory. Your cat is laughing at me.”

There was no other way Mycroft could interpret the cat’s behavior, especially having seen the evil creature do the very same thing once before.

“What? Oh, ignore him. Seriously, it’s the smartest thing you can do because he does nothing that’s not designed to cause trouble. Balthazar, go up and keep John company.”

It seemed to the British Government that the shop owner and shop cat had a staring contest to determine whether said cat would obey and the laurel wreath was awarded to the shop owner for winning the battle as the cat finally trotted up the stairs, flicking its tail imperiously with its step.

“Miserable moggie. Thinks he owns the place.”

“It has been my observation that is the belief held by most cats for whatever location they call home. Be it permanent or temporary.”

“True! Very, very true…”

Greg set two portions of tea on the table and Mycroft noted that Greg’s was in a heavy, chipped mug and his was in a very handsome cup, with saucer. Setting himself down next, not even Greg’s formidable will could hold back the small contented sigh from being off his feet for a moment.

“You appear content to finally be sitting. Now, as to the reason for your predicament, Gregory…”

“Oh… thought you’d forgotten about that.”

“My memory is flawless.”

“One of those, huh? Can’t say I’m surprised, with a mind like yours. And, really, it’s… nothing exciting or fancy, but I’ll give you the story. I had a bit of a dust-up with some punk and came off a touch worse for wear. I’m proud to say, though, the thumping I have him was much, much worse.”

“Gregory…”

“It’s true! I may be a little sore, but I doubt he even recalls his name yet, I thumped him so hard.”

“I am most distressed by this news.”
“Why? I’m not planning on thumping you.”

“Amusing. I had assumed, from your description, that this was a safe area.”

“It is! I was actually… ummm… at a pub in another part of the city.”

“And the proprietor did not bring this assault on you to a halt? Phone the police?”

“It… happened as I was leaving. You know the story, young punk with enough booze or whatnot in him to feel invincible and he decides that the old geezer walking by looked at him funny.”

“Is the old geezer you?”

“For the point of this story, yes.”

“Very well, do proceed.”

“There’s nowhere to proceed to. That’s it.”

“Untrue.”

“Pardon?”

“I have some small talent for knowing when an individual is lying and, also, when they are withholding information. You are doing both.”

Mycroft was turned so he couldn’t see Balthazar sitting on the stairs, but Greg could. And bathe in the mockery of the feline’s laughter directed, this time, at him.

“Ok, I’m not putting every punch or kick out there for inspection, but there’s no need for it. Little bastard found out what it means to take on someone with more experience in fighting than him and it won’t be a lesson he’ll soon forget.”

“You have significant experience in fighting. Again, I am most concerned.”

“What fellow doesn’t by my age?”

“A considerable number.”

“Yeah, ok… let me try that again. What fellow my age who grew up a bit rough and punk himself doesn’t have experience putting the boot in?”

“Perhaps… however, I am not convinced that is the entirety of the truth.”

“Can I buy more conviction with a biscuit?”

Mycroft ran a quick mental analysis of the current data and decided that further pursuit of the issue would not bring an appreciable amount of new information but would likely serve to irritate his companion, something he had no wish to do simply to satisfy curiosity.

“It might purchase… a smidgen.”

“I’ll take it. You get what you grab, as my gran used to say, before she loaded her handbag with the fruit she nicked from the grocer.”
“At least she pilfered healthy goods.”

“Always a proponent of good health was my Gran. Fresh air, lots of fruit and veg, hard work instead of exercise, but if you do enough of the first one you don’t really need the last. Also a proponent of a stiff drink or two in the evening and something decadent now and again because fruit and veg don’t keep your spirits up as much as a bit of cake or some heart-killing fish and chips.”

“Definitely a wise woman. Now, where is my biscuit? I trust it falls squarely in the category of decadence and is not some vegan, gluten-free mass of parsnip paste and agave syrup.”

“I’ve got some very high-end shortbread and Jammie Dodgers.”

“Oh dear, that is quite the conundrum.”

“Feeling hedonistic? One of each?”

“A stellar suggestion. I can feel the hedonism flowing through my veins this very instant. It could however be an effect of the tea. It is truly superb.”

Greg made to hop up, then decided it wasn’t worth pretending and settled for a slow, chair-back-assisted rise to take the biscuits from their cupboard and put two of each, then two more of each, on one of the plates he kept for when one of the local mavens decided to pay a call and check on the ‘nice young men with the witch shop.’ They appreciated a slightly more proper service with their tea and, apparently, so did Mycroft. That was a positively gorgeous light in those clear, blue eyes right now and he could spare one silly hope that some of it was for him and not just the biscuits…

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Mycroft did feel a bit ashamed about how long Charles had to wait for what was supposed to be a quick trip for a gift, however, the two hours had passed in scarcely a heartbeat! He and Gregory had talked, laughed, debated, shared the silliest of stories… nothing like anything he had experienced with his previous forays into the arena of companionship. True, he could claim some of that even with individuals in his life now, but there was an ease, a comfort, with Gregory that was a very different, and welcome, thing, indeed.

“Ok, looks like we have you properly sorted. I do feel bad for your man carrying it all himself, though.”

Maybe he had bought slightly more than anticipated, including the enormous labradorite sphere that refused to let alone his attention until he simply waved a hand towards it for John to eagerly dart over to collect, along with the handcrafted stand, but hell and be damned his frivolity! Sherlock would get his books and a few other items, and the rest… would stay safely at home where his nosy PA could not smile knowingly each and every day at his small lapse of control. The tea purchases, alone, were worth the entire investment, though, and they would definitely remain at home away from thieving, and immaculately manicured, hands.

“He is most familiar with any manner of portage, so I would not worry unduly. I… I would like to thank you for tonight, Gregory. It was both productive and enjoyable.”

Was that stilted? It felt stilted. Which was the last thing on Earth he wanted. How might he negotiate another meeting with Gregory if he was spouting wooden, stilted dialogue!

“The pleasure was all mine. Genuinely, I had a great time.”
That sounded promising. Or polite. And the cat was laughing at him again from its attack perch. Joyful.

“Excellent. Then… I suppose I should go. Your telly awaits.”

“Patiently and lovingly. As does my sofa and beer. Just a common man with common pleasures. Ummm… one of those pleasures is a good film with someone who would appreciate it.”

“Oh, that does sound pleasant.”

Why are you smiling at me, Gregory? Now with a touch of confusion appearing around the edges…

“Good. Then… would you consider doing something like that? With me, I mean, not just toddling off on your own for a night at the cinema.”

Greg had to reach out, with his good arm, to steady Mycroft who actually reeled at the invitation. Since Greg had never seen someone reel in real life, it was a momentous thing to witness.

“You… wish me to accompany you?”

“If you’d like. There’s an independent cinema not far from here and they do a lot of special screenings. They’re showing The Raven next Saturday night and, I know it’s a silly thing, but I’ve adored it since I was a kid and I think it’s something you’d appreciate, too.”

“I… with Boris Karloff?”

“And Vincent Price and Peter Lorre, yeah. You might think that sort of film wouldn’t be what I’d want to watch after working here all day, but I love those old horror shows. The sort that… ambience is the right word for them. Atmospheric and, in their way, rather innocent. The sorts of things that seemed frightening and scandalous then feel so quaint now and that adds to the appeal somehow. I used to be glued to the telly when I was a kid watching those sorts of films and The Raven is such a good pastiche that… you wanna come? We can grab a bite to eat before or a pint after or just the film…”

He was being asked out. Here. In public! In a rather babbly, but sincere manner. Alright… must answer and with something other than dry, dusty words.

“I would.”

Lovely. You can recite the works of Shakespeare from memory, but you cannot concoct a better response than that. Clearly, some dedicated practice in the art of assignation-acceptance was in order.

“Great! Can… I have your number? I’ll phone so we can finalize things.”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

Mycroft thought a moment about which number to provide, then wrote down his personal mobile number on a small piece of paper to hand to Greg.

“Thanks! I’ll… talk to you soon, then.”

“I look forward to it.”

Mycroft had just enough social awareness to recognize it was time to leave and not continue to
stand there like an awkward teenager, so graced Greg with what he hoped was a genial smile and left the shop, pointedly ignoring Charles who was standing in wait to open the rear door, tapping his foot in faux impatience. He wouldn’t have cared if it was real, however, because he had been propositioned! No, that was not the proper term for such a wondrously proper invitation. Gregory had deemed him sufficiently interesting to ask out for the evening and… and it was an evening that he would dearly adore. An old favorite on the large screen, perhaps a cocktail afterwards to sip while they discussed the film in detail… he might, and this was a heady thing… he might have fun. No... he would have fun. This he vowed.

Of course, to prevent Gregory from racing away in terror, best start that speaking practice sooner than later because a man who ended thoughts with ‘and this I vow,’ was standing heavily on very fragile ice and Saturday would come much faster than expected. Time always flew when one was having even the anticipation of fun and his anticipation was at positively giddy levels…

Greg only oofed when Balthazar jumped down on his shoulder, the non-destroyed one in an uncharacteristic act of courtesy that surprised Greg and John both, and remained perched there as Greg sighed and walked them both back downstairs.

“My dark mistress has bestowed upon you her pompous, but single, employer, surely as a show of devotion to me.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Maybe it’s a bribe so you don’t disgrace yourself again if she visits.”

“Demonstrating my love is not a disgrace!”

“You spent their entire visit winding yourself around her ankles, begging to be held, bringing her ridiculous gifts… what did you think she was going to do with a sock?... and all you got for your humiliating display was her calling you mangy.”

“My bride properly pointed out that I had not groomed myself in at least fifteen minutes and looked… shabby.”

“You sure you don’t want Molly for your Bride of Balthazar? She adores holding you.”

“Her bosom does offer a comfortable rest, I admit, however, she lacks the sultry, ebony-dark presence of my Anthea. She would, however, make an acceptable new owner in the event you meet up with something that can finally do more than break a few ribs and shoulder bones.”

“Don’t forget the bruised spleen.”

“John wasn’t sure about that, so stop padding your tale of woe.”

“At least I was truthful with Mycroft when I said I gave that nasty bastard a good thumping.”

“And lied about everything else. First, that demon was six hundred years old if it was a day. Second, I’ve met punk demons, and that one was more a lumbering thug. Not a bit of fire or cleverness in its enormous body. And you didn’t just thump it, you obliterated its connection to this world. It’ll take a century, at minimum, for it to pull the pieces together to reach back onto this plane, no matter who tries to summon it. Still… you still think it was Moriarty?”

Balthazar leapt off Greg’s shoulder and landed on the workshop table, waiting with far less patience than Charles for Greg to put a few treats out as tribute for him being a cat.
“If Moriarty didn’t directly summon him, he advised who did. The tendrils of the spell were still visible and… they reeked of his handiwork.”

“We don’t need him training another apprentice. The last one was enough of a bastard.”

“No, we don’t, but it’s not illegal to take on a student, so I can’t do anything if he’s done that, other than step in when the new bastard crosses the line.”

“Let’s hope that doesn’t happen on Saturday or your love monkey is going to be furious.”

“He’s not my love monkey. Just… getting an idea of where all of this might go or end up or swirl about.”

“That makes as much sense as your love for 50’s music. Are you even going to be ready for monkey love on Saturday? You’re still moving like an arthritic pensioner.”

“Hey! Do you have any idea how much energy it takes to knit bones this quickly!”

“Yes, and I’m appalled at your weakness.”

“Lovely. Anyway, it’s just a simple date. No monkey and certainly no loving.”

“Simple date? Wrong. You haven’t been on a date in a million years and it’s clear he hasn’t either. My radiant reine wouldn’t go to these lengths if the need wasn’t desperate.”

“It’s still a simple date. Two men stepping out for a film. It doesn’t get simpler than that.”

“It’ll take you until Saturday to decide what to wear. That kicks your simplicity to the curb.”

“It will not. Though… I may need to do a bit of shopping before then.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“Yeah. But, I’m hopeless with a love monkey waiting for me on Saturday.”

Greg did an extremely careful shimmy that had Balthazar snorting with disgust until Greg turned to start another cup of tea, when the cat’s expression softened. Greg was a cautious man and genuinely didn’t believe that Saturday night would be anything more than a nice evening with a film, a drink and a chat, but… there was a tiny spark of hope in him for something more. Not much more, because it would probably scare the silly berk, both of them, but maybe the chance for a few more fibers to be woven into the tapestry they were creating. It wasn’t much more than a few dangly fibers, at this point, but it was a beginning. And beginnings were called that precisely because there was something that followed. Now, he just had to make certain that something wasn’t as disappointing as Greg’s usual somethings… a hemorrhoid wasn’t as disappointing as Greg’s usual somethings, so it was a nice low bar to meet for success…
“Really? For me? Oh, it’s smells lovely…”

Mrs. Hudson took another long sniff of the container of tea Mycroft had given her and smiled even wider. For all Sherlock’s screeching and snarling, his brother was a good sort. Pompous and a bit stodgy, but the man did know how to pamper a landlady.

“I was told, Mrs. Hudson, that this particular tea was a calming one, well-suited for days when the level of stress and discord is particularly high.”

Said as Mycroft looked upwards towards his brother’s flat, which made the landlady giggle in understanding.

“I’ll be having two cups, then, today as he’s been such a mischief. Stole my mail for some nonsense about what ink looked like when it burned and now I have a heap of ashes instead of any actual paper. It’s mostly adverts, probably, and other silly things, but if it’s a notice or something important I’ll never know now!”

Fortunately, though Mrs. Hudson had no knowledge of it, Mycroft had her various accounts and records monitored, and any detrimental issues could be quietly handled without her being bothered with the headache. It was one of the tiny bits of in-trade payment for allowing his chaotic brother to inhabit her quiet household.

“I do not recall this being a day of import in the correspondence schedule of the various government offices, so I suspect you have only lost a plethora of mailings for take-away restaurants and discounted prices on gardening supplies.”

“Let’s hope so. At least he’ll be occupied for a bit with all of what you’ve brought him. Such a curious mind… none of it is flammable is it?”

“I… well, the books…”

“He respects books too much to burn them. Sherlock’s a good boy that way.”

“Then he should be bereft of further materials to quicken an inferno.”

“Yes! I can enjoy my new tea in peace. I already feel more at ease.”

“Excellent. Now, onward goeth I to brave the ogre in its cave.”

“It’s a smelly one today, too, so take a few extra clean breaths before you go in.”

Glorious. But, this was the reason he began each visit with his brother, when possible, with a small chat with Mrs. Hudson. Forewarned was forearmed…

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“Potions! Have you gone mad? If you have, then Mummy owes me twenty pounds because I said it would happen before your fifty-sixth birthday, but she said it would take longer.”

Actually, Mummy was not entirely convinced that either he or Sherlock was, in any manner, sane at this point, however, since it did not interfere with her tea and scandal afternoons with her friends and she received her mandated weekly phone calls from said insane sons, she was perfectly content
with any potential madness.

“So, you have no desire to analyze what is in these particular formulations to verify they are, as you suspect, fraudulent in their claims?”

“I… hmmm. I suppose that is not a completely idiotic suggestion. Someone should reveal these charlatans for who they are.”

“Then how fortunate it is that I acquired a diversity of their wares for your inspection. I believe several of the books, also, document something about these various mixtures, however, I cannot be certain the shop follows the recipes precisely.”

“It is an occult shop. I doubt the simple-minded merchants, as well as the clientele, have a reading level above that of a poodle.”

“Of course.”

“At least the mineral specimens offer some small sliver of interest.”

The large, natural samples of amethyst, bismuth and malachite had been pounced on quickly when Mycroft drew them out of the sack and unwrapped each slowly to further tantalize Sherlock’s anticipation. Others may not have realized the rather lofty level of that anticipation, but years of evaluating Sherlock’s expressions meant there was little to nothing that could be hidden from his older brother.

“I thought the natural formations would appeal to your practical sensibilities. There are various meanings and uses ascribed to them, however, I shall not insult your intelligence by narrating them.”

Because I have no doubt you shall research that yourself, brother dear, if only to scoff and deride them, as well as find any possible use in or connection to your various experiments and dabbles in criminal investigation.

“Good. I have no desire to be put to sleep by your droning voice.”

“It might serve to purchase for Mrs. Hudson some measure of peace. Really, Sherlock… violating her mail.”

“The experiment produced highly useful data!”

“Did you even check that any of the correspondence was of a personal or significant nature?”

‘I… yes.”

“Meaning, no, you did not. In the future, if you perpetrate another crime against her mail, kindly ensure that nothing besides the detritus of mercantilism is meeting your matchstick?”

“Boring.”

“As boring, likely, as my covering the remainder of your rent when you cannot raise sufficient funds, but we all do what we must in this world. Now, before I leave, please remember that Mummy’s birthday is looming, and I will not be placing both our names on the gifts I have purchased for her.”

“I fail to understand why. How many gifts does she need?”
“As many as are appropriate for enduring the agony of your birth and subsequent life.”

“Pfft. Your birthweight was that of the average adult hippopotamus, so that birth was better described as agonizing than mine.”

Mycroft felt a twinge of familiar irritation at Sherlock’s mention of his weight, which had, at times, been somewhat greater than others of his age, even as an adult, however… he had a date, so hell and be damned his brother’s juvenile jibes.

“Oh, how deeply am I pierced by the sharpened barb of your wit.”

“Your only use for a sharpened barb is to stab cheese.”

“That reminds me… I do need to purchase more of the aged Gouda I encountered a few weeks ago. A terribly flavorful find.”

“Oh good… more cheese packing your colon. Your level of constipation has seemed a touch low of late, so that should bring you directly back to normal.”

“My, how my sides ache from laughter. A final matter… I will have delivered to you the incidentals of a matter into which I would like you to peer somewhat closely.”

“No.”

“It is a simple thing, brother dear, however, I would prefer it be conducted with a certain level of observation not typically found in those employed in government service.”

“No.”

“I counter with yes. You shall be compensated, of course…”

“One hundred thousand pounds.”

“Most amusing. Kindly do not be as amusing with the messenger who brings the file. I would hope to discuss your results by Saturday… no, Sunday. Sunday will do.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes and Mycroft brought every bit of expertise in inscrutability to the fore to keep his brother from deducing a single thing from his expression.

“Why not Saturday?”

“I remembered several meetings on Saturday and I have no specific idea when I might be able to converse with you about this matter in the detail I require.”

“That story is as flimsy as tissue paper.”

The hound was on the scent!

“Good heavens, Sherlock. I am occupied more often than any human should suffer with mundane meetings and dreary discussions.”

“None of which you forget.”

The hound’s nose was to the ground! Time to take bold, preemptive measures.

“Verily I am discovered! I have a date Saturday night with a handsome, virile man, which
precludes meeting with you and discussing my little issue.”

Triumph! Sherlock was nearly shrieking with mocking laughter.

“The mental image is positively revolting, even if it is naught but a pathetic lie.”

“So sayeth you. In any case, I shall speak with you Sunday. Do try and maintain the roof over Mrs. Hudson’s head in the meantime.”

“I make no promises.”

“One day, brother dear, her patience and my bank account might not be terribly forgiving of your shenanigans.”

Sherlock’s rude noise was precisely as loud and moist as Mycroft expected and he made certain to have taken an extra step towards the door in preparation. Then, it was only several more until he had cleared the boundary of his brother’s lair and he was, again, feeling the sweet freedom of the world outside his brother’s lair. Most critically, any suspicions or further nosy questions about the true nature of his Saturday plans were handily quashed. The havoc Sherlock would wreak, the sheer level of lunacy he would perpetrate… Saturday would be sufficiently delicate to navigate without the interference of a spoiled toddler with no impulse control. And, now, of course, he also had to keep this particular information away from his PA. She had far better impulse control than Sherlock, however, she was fully as tenacious and had a villainous streak that his brother could not match if he tried. Which he had. Many, many times…

Intolerable! These stupid potions... it was not enough that the components he was able to isolate and identify were... not entirely without scientific merit for the uses they were touted, but there were components he was not able to identify or properly isolate and that was not allowed. Not in the slightest! This was Mycroft’s fault. Not only was he the bringer of these frivolous formulations, but he refused steadfastly to provide the necessary laboratory equipment to do a thorough and suitable analysis of any material of merit. It was like working with equipment Aristotle might believe the lackluster in technological sophistication!

The books Fatcroft purchased might be of help, but... boring. A quick skimming had revealed a wholly chaotic structure where useful information was inexorably mired in tedious and utterly irrelevant, not to mention nonsensical, detail. Why could the author not collect it all in one chapter! Chapter 1 – Everything that is Useful and Interesting in this Otherwise Ridiculous Book. That would have been both simple to accomplish and incredibly considerate, something the author, apparently, was not.

Where was... ah. Mycroft could have been considerate, a trait in ferociously short supply, it seemed, and taken his refuse with him after he delivered this rubbish, but this single time, his slovenliness proves useful as the packaging for the rubbish was emblazoned with the name of the vendor from which it was purchased. And... very convenient. Open All Hours. Someone, then, should be available to answer questions. Of which he had many. In no manner could the excuse of ‘oh, we’re closing now, sir’ be employed to evade his interrogation, either. As if he did not recognize that particular ploy when it was implemented. Proof that the shopkeepers of London were truly a dull-witted lot came from the shocking number who did believe that a workable strategy when he paid them a visit...
Ugh… the scent of simplemindedness. Or incense.

“Good evening, sir. May I help you?”

Former military… interesting.

“These.”

Sherlock took the various bottles from his pocket and deposited them, one by one, with appropriate intent, on the counter.

“Oh, yes. Some of our most popular items. I hope they were successful for you.”

“I do not subscribe to your fantastical notions about magic potions.”

“That’s quite alright, sir, it’s not a requirement for them to work. Especially if you’ve got a touch of arthritis, which this one is helpful in relieving.”

“I do not have arthritis.”

“Oh… what symptoms were you experiencing when you bought this?”

“I did not make the purchase.”

“A gift, then. Oh… one of those silly gifts you give to someone as a joke. I can exchange it for something else. It’s… it’s empty, though…”

In fact, as John looked through the bottles, not a one had a drop of its original contents left inside.

“Oh course it’s empty! How am I supposed to run my tests without actually utilizing the material which I am testing!”

“I’m lost.”

John’s confusion was interrupted by Sherlock’s bottles plummeting to the floor, one by one, as Balthazar decided that this conversation was stupid and the bottles were invading his personal space.

“Your cat shares my opinion of your wares, apparently.”

“No, he’s just a pest.”

Which I’m beginning to believe is also something you two share, Mr. Customer.

“An interesting pest, however, which already puts him leaps and bounds above this preposterous shop. His eyes… hmmm… they are chatoyant.”

“Does that mean evil?”

“No. It means the color or suite of color shifts with viewing angle.”

“That sounds fairly evil to me.

Which Balthazar emphasized by biting John’s finger, then knocking over a small display of gift vouchers. Of course, Sherlock smiled proudly at the chaos.

“I would deem this a most worthy feline.”
Oh good. Mr. Pest likes the miserable moggie. Bloody fantastic.

“Want to buy him? I’ll make you a very good deal, what with him being second-hand.”

“Hmmm… it is tempting, however, given his propensity for carnage, I cannot trust that my experiments will not meet the same fate as your childish potions.”

“Experiments… ok that does fit with what you said earlier about tests. You a chemist?”

“My skills with chemistry are unquestionable.”

“That could mean they’re unquestionably crap, you know.”

“I… yes, I suppose you have a point. Let me, then, clarify. I am enormously talented with chemistry, among a great number of other things.”

“Lucky you! Always good to be talented with things. Things are very important for the function of our society. Now… why are you here again?”

“The formulas! I require the formulas for these concoctions.”

“Uh… no.”

“Unacceptable.”

“Acceptable or not, I’m not giving our product specifications to anyone, let alone you.”

“Why am I singled out for additional refusal?”

“Because you’re a bit rude and the cat likes you. He bit me, so the battle lines are drawn.”

“I am not rude, I am honest. And… battle lines… Afghanistan or Iraq?”

“Pardon?”

“You obviously served in the military, the clues are numerous and unmistakable, so which is it?”

“Afghanistan. How did you know?”

“Parlor trick.”

“Really. That’s your answer. In this shop?”

Sherlock looked around him for a moment then mentally credited John with another point and that, for once, him calling what he did a parlor trick to preempt someone else denigrating his talents had proven the wrong strategy. So, he took a breath and outlined in excruciating detail how he discerned John’s military service, including his officer’s rank and injury, though he did make the uncharacteristic concession of pointing out he could not definitively state where the injury had occurred. Now the shopkeeper could truly call it a parlor trick or a bit of busybodying and things would be back to normal.

“That… was amazing.”

“Do you think so?”
“Well, of course it was. It was extraordinary. Quite… extraordinary.”

“I… yes. I agree. I was simply confirming your observation.”

“Well, it was the truth, confirmation or not. That truly was inspired, though. And spot on. Injury was in the shoulder, by the way.”

“What was the cause?”

“I was shot.”

“Oh. That… that must have been painful.”

“It was. Rather nerve-shreddingly so.”

“As expected, given nerves were shredded in the process of the bullet moving through your flesh.”

Sherlock’s completely practical tone made John laugh, and he shared his good humor with Balthazar, who he deposited gently on the floor, as opposed to dropping him, after the cat attacked his hand for having the gall to move its position a millimeter in a direction that did not meet with the cat’s approval.

“I suppose you’re right. My name’s John, by the way.”

John extended his hand and was a little concerned by how long it took Sherlock to extend his own, as if he was a bit unused to the greeting.

“Sherlock.”

A strangled squawk preceded Balthazar jumping back on the counter to peer at Sherlock, then peer some more, then begin laughing.

“Your cat is choking.”

“Probably a hairball. He gets those.”

“Apparently. Don’t you have a potion for that?”

“Uh… you know, we actually do. It’s for general cat health and blended up with coconut oil. You put a little bit in their food twice a day and it helps lubricate their digestive system, so the hairballs pass through. Other benefits, too, and we encourage the basics, like brushing their fur to keep the loose hair to a minimum.”

“A pet groomer would advise the same.”

“That they would, but it’s our job to give the customer satisfaction and it doesn’t matter if someone else might give the same advice.”

“It’s not particularly magical.”

“Depends on what you mean by magic. If you mean accomplishing a goal through providing the necessary supplies and equipment to successfully leverage a person’s hopes for a positive outcome into that positive outcome…”

“Boring. Pablum for the simple minded.”
“Wrong. Sometimes people need… the idea of magic. You can scoff at the idea, but belief in something can work wonders. People with cancer who go on longer than anyone might have predicted because they genuinely believed in their therapy, whether it was traditional or not.”

“Ugh… by that argument, everyone in England should already be winners of the lottery.”

“I’d say you don’t have the same intimate relationship with the lottery people as you do your own body.”

“Thank heavens. The mere thought of the bloated bureaucrats who occupy that particular office is enough to reduce my brain to liquid.”

“Ooh, sound painful. We do have potions for cognitive function, though, so maybe I can pour a bit in your ear and it’ll keep your goo smart and sharp. We got some crystals, too, and a few rituals that might help.”

“The goo-ing has officially occurred.”

“Balthazar, think we should try and keep his brain active or just leave him this way and use him around the shop? Always glad to have an extra pair of hands about for opening boxes, packing orders, stirring the cauldron…”

“Cauldron! I demand to see it!”

Said with Sherlock’s most strident tone and looming lean across the counter for emphasis.

“Oh look, your brain revivified.”

“I must see this ludicrous nod to the even more ludicrous notion of magic spells and potions.”

“Ummmm… no.”

“Intolerable!”

“Very tolerable and for two excellent reasons. First, we don’t allow customers in the workroom and, second, I actually have work to do and need to stay up here to do it.”

“I am the only customer in this accursed shop.”

As if by magic, which niggled Sherlock like a flea in his hair, the chimes rang signaling someone had entered the shop and John’s large smile made the niggling that much more annoying.

“Voila! Speak of the devil and he shall appear. Though, for the record, that’s actually Jeff, and he stops in several times a week to top up his cupboards for his own potions and spells.”

“Does he have a cauldron?”

“He does, actually. We ordered it for him. Fairly small, but he uses it on the stove, sometimes in his yard on the BBQ, so anything large isn’t going to work.”

“There is nothing at all mystical, arcane or sorcerous about anything you do, is there? Oh… your cat requires coconut oil again.”

John grinned in agreement with Balthazar’s laughter, and actually drew out a small crock of their special cat health product, set aside for the shop’s resident feline, putting a small dab on his finger for the cat to eagerly lick off. What he didn’t expect was for Sherlock to stick in his finger for a
dab to also lick off.

“Hmmm… not entirely unpalatable.”

“You have no idea what’s in there and you put it in your mouth.”

“The affection for and attachment to their pets by the lumbering public precludes your using any ingredients that would be, in any manner, harmful.”

“You do know that not everything one species can safely consume can be safely consumed by others, don’t you?”

“I will wager that greater than 60% of the purchasers of this tasted it before they gave it to their cat.”

“That… ok, that’s probably true. But don’t take that as a general license to eat pet products. If you show your face at the clinic with stomach pains, I’ll just wave you along to wither and die.”

“Clinic… oh god, don’t tell me the NHS has taken to employing bone wavers and fortune tellers.”

“For your information, alternative healing can work successfully as a supplement to the more familiar medical practices for a lot of people. Also, for your information, I am a doctor.”

“Of cats?”

“People, you prat. I have a medical degree. I was a surgeon in the army, until…”

“You were shot.”

“Basically. I still do a few shifts a week, cover for someone on holiday, that sort of thing. Greg and I have a schedule that keeps the shop open, but allows me time to practice medicine, too.”

“Greg?”

“He owns the shop. I have to confess, cover your ears, you evil cat, that he’s about the best boss I could ask for, since he does work the schedule to let me do both jobs and is a great teacher for what you’d call the mystical arts. It’s a good situation. Now, if I can only find a better flat in this city than the closet I live in, I’ll be a happy man. It’s stupidly expensive to live in London.”

“Yes… that it is.”

Sherlock’s tone puzzled John, but he didn’t dwell on it as his second customer was, as typical, making a mess of self-service area for loose herbs and whatnot.

“Pardon me a moment, will you? Do… browse awhile. Something might strike your fancy.”

Sharing a look with the cat, Sherlock snorted loudly and spun, gazing again at the shop area. It wasn’t overly spacious, but the organization was smart, so there was a surprisingly large and diverse selection of goods on offer. The likelihood that anything any here was of more than passing interest was miniscule, besides the potions and cauldron, however, it would be a violation of basic scientific principles to maintain his hypothesis without evidence to confirm it. And the cat seemed amenable to conducting a tour if its hopping from the counter onto the floor and fixing him with a ‘well, are you coming?’ stare was correctly interpreted.
“Very well. I will follow your lead, so long as you only show me items of significant scientific interest. Absurd examples of your typical hodge-podgery will not be tolerated.”

Balthazar dearly wished he could give Sherlock an example or two of what the shop could offer but decided that it was silly to divulge all their secrets in a single visit. After all, it was more than evident that this would not be Sherlock’s sole visit to their tidy establishment. In fact, if the berk wasn’t back before a week passed, he’d be very, very surprised…

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“Well… that comes to £387.42. Will that be cash or credit?”

Sherlock lightly cleared this throat and ignored John’s falsely-innocent smile as he handed over his bank card. Perhaps he had found a few items of more than passing interest, however since this was Mycroft’s fault, as had been previously and undeniably established, he could cover the cost when the bill arrived.

“Thank you, sir. I hope you had a pleasant shopping experience. And, yes, I know… the cat is choking again.”

Perched atop the shelves nearest the door, Balthazar was having a grand time laughing it all. But, as expected, the cat had worked its wonders drawing this Sherlock fellow this way and that right towards the sorts of things that would pique his interest, so John tossed it a catnip mouse, which Balthazar caught in midair and flopped down to begin the rear-paw disemboweling maneuver that humans found amazingly cute to watch.

“Now, anything else I can get for you? Besides our business card, that is. We take phone and online orders, too, if you can’t make it down here for whatever reason. Website’s on the bottom.”

“I sincerely doubt that will be occurring.”

“Well… pays to be prepared in case you change your mind. It was nice to meet you, Sherlock. I do hope you stop in again sometime.”

John extended his hand another time and was happy to note Sherlock didn’t hesitate to shake it.

“Yes, goodbye.”

Sherlock quickly snatched up his two large sacks of merchandise and made a dash for the door, stopping only to glare at the cat who had swatted his head when he was in range.

“Hitting the customers… nice. Just so friendly and polite of you.”

“Got a hair!”

“Not this again. Give it to me. Greg specifically said you can’t take hair or anything else from customers.”

“MINE!”

John just rolled his eyes as Balthazar leapt from top-of-shelf to top-of-shelf across the shop, then down to the floor to race full speed towards the workroom, the hair gingerly clutched between his teeth.

“Don’t do anything with it, Balthazar! Greg’ll have your head and I won’t step in to keep it on
your shoulders."

Balthazar’s rude noise was rather muffled by the hair in his mouth, so he spit it out, made the nose again then crept towards the hearth where he’d hidden the second hair he’d originally plucked from Mycroft that Greg certainly didn’t know about it, since he’d sat on this one while Greg was distracted by confiscating the first, heretofore known as the decoy, hair.

Now, with Mycroft’s and Sherlock’s in his clutches, he could test his theory. The energy wasn’t as blinding, in certain ways, as Mycroft’s, but if that Sherlock fellow wasn’t related to the Great and Powerful Holmes, he’d be a monkey’s uncle. The names alone… you don’t have a child named Mycroft then give the other something common and boring like William or Scott.

And that made life extremely interesting since John… John’s aura was always a hard one to read because the man had a rather spectacular talent for emotional repression, which clouded the picture worse than milk in tea. But… there certainly had been tiny tendrils of interest reaching out for that enormous curly-haired baby and that was something new. What was new was interesting. What was interesting was fun. He was a cat, so if it was fun, there was a mandate that he must do it.

He’d do it even without a mandate, though. He was a cat. He didn’t need a reason, actually, to do anything, let alone something fun…
“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s ugly.”

“You’ve said that about every shirt I’ve tried on, you horrible cat.”

“Because every shirt you own is ugly. Why can’t you have taste?”

Greg sighed loudly and took off the latest shirt to adorn his back in the Great Dressing for My Date ritual, and tossed it onto Balthazar’s smugly-sneering head.

“I have taste. I… I just don’t like shopping for clothes. It’s such a waste of time.”

“You mean you get confused when you walk into a shop and there’s more than cheap trousers and even cheaper button-ups, so you grab the first things your hand hits and race to the till like your arse was on fire.”

“Wrong. But… not entirely.”

“Wear your ceremonial robes. That should make an impression.”

“No. Besides, you put a hole in them.”

“That’s easy to fix. Of course, you do look short and fat when you wear them, so that might not inspire a quick blow job in the nice, dark cinema, even though robes are very good for that sort of thing, especially if you don’t wear pants underneath them.”

“First, that’s completely disrespectful to Mycroft. Second, I do not look short and fat in my robes.”

“Fine. Short, fat and fashion-challenged.”

“Wrong.”

“It’s the shirt fiasco again! You grabbed the first thing you saw, didn’t bother to have it fitted, which is completely in line with your signature look of dreary dad with a highly-embarrassed child.”

Greg flopped backwards onto his bed, uncaring if he squashed his personal troll in the process. The fact his face got swatted several times, each with increasing petulance, said he needed to work on his aim.

“What am I going to do? Mycroft is the epitome of grace, elegance, bespoke resplendence and I look like a dad taking his kids out for some ice cream.”

“Where you order some mint garbage for yourself to make the tableau all the sadder.”

“I like mint.”

“Sad.”
As the days passed and the time for his date crept closer, Greg had felt his confidence twitch, shudder, falter and fail until he was, now, splayed on his bed, surrounded by rejected shirts, with a cat rubbing its bottom against his cheek. The urge to phone Mycroft and make his excuses was growing by leaps and bounds.

“Maybe I should cancel.”

“What! Reject the gift bestowed by my dark empress!”

Balthazar’s bottom was removed from Greg’s face replaced by a clear display of a paw with malevolently extended claws, which reminded Greg that the cat needed a nail trimming soon.

“You’d rather I made a fool of myself, so she feels foolish for orchestrating her little scheme?”

“Hmm… you actually have a point. However, neither option is ideal for my Anthea’s satisfaction, so… I suppose I will have to help.”

“By doing what? Murdering me?”

“Tried and failed many times, so no. Go out, right now, and buy a black pullover. Solid black, no fussiness. With your slightly-faded jeans and black shoes, you’ll look marginally acceptable. If it’s chilly out, you can wear one of your ridiculous scarves.”

“They’re not ridiculous! They’re warm.”

“Which is why you look like you’ve been dressed by your pinafore-wearing wife when you wear one, because she doesn’t want her sweetie weetie to be cold. However, with a simple black pullover, you have a few that might actually look masculine and not pathetic.”

“That’s an idea.”

“It won’t be much of one if you don’t get off your arse to buy the black pullover to wear in the first place. If you go now, you’ll have time for the 29-hour marathon of shaving, reducing your body odor to a manageable level and taming your shrubbery.”

“I am not grooming myself… down there.”

“I mean the hair on your head, not your bollocks.”

“Oh. That makes more sense.”

“Ugh… leave. Just leave and bring back a suitable reward for my help.”

“I turned my back for one moment and you stole the bacon off my plate this morning at breakfast. I think that’s reward enough.”

“It was overcooked, so the reward was pitiful. I demand more.”

“You know where the pan and bacon are, so make all the reward you’d like. Oh wait, forgot, you can’t. Boo hoo.”

“Scoff all you like, but your black shoes are critical to tonight’s sex outfit and what I can do with those while you’re out shopping…”

Greg sighed in defeat and made a mental note to buy the evil cat a new toy or sack of cat treats while he was out. It was fair, really, because that would be a sex outfit he’d be wearing tonight,
even though he was absolutely certain the sex part wasn’t going to be on the agenda. Reminded him of what he used to wear when he was a little younger and brasher, not as tired and old man-ish. Younger Greg Lestrade had a sparkle in his eye, fuck-me hair, the wickedest of come-hither grins and the sexual stamina to make good on all those promises.

Old man Greg Lestrade needed reading glasses, fought daily to comb his hair into submission and looked more gassy than sexy when he flashed a grin. As for the sexual stamina… there were no current data points relevant to that topic on which to base any judgement. What a prize… but, that hadn’t stopped Mycroft from accepting a date. And the man certainly didn’t seem the type to accept because he felt bad turning down the old duffer who looked like he’d been left on the shelf. Even if the old duffer now had a feline crawling onto him and curling into a cat ball on his belly.

“Get off of me, cat.”

“No. Warm.”

“I have to buy a shirt.”

“Warm.”

“It was your idea.”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaarm.”

“Five minutes. Not a second more.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

Tomorrow, he’d really overcook the bacon, so this miserable cat got nothing but a mouthful of stolen charcoal for its thievery. It’d be worth the retribution-theft of a sock or two for the chance to watch the overly-dramatic death throes of a bacon-poisoned cat. Life was hard, so any entertainment opportunity that presented itself should be indulged to the fullest. Especially if it involved vexing a cat…

Atrocious.

Ghastly.

Horrifying.

Dreadful.

Vomit-inducing.

That one was not entirely eye-searing…

“Are you going to do any work today?”

Villainous woman.

“For your information, I have completed today’s scheduled tasks.”

“And the unscheduled ones?”
“Those, also.”

“And sent out a little reminder that if anyone tries to reach you tonight it’d best be for nothing short of Armageddon or they’ll not only be sacked but in front of a firing squad at dawn?”

Revealing that he would not be, as was often the case, in his office on a Saturday night had, as expected, unleashed the most diligent bloodhound in existence to sniff out the reason for the aberration. Needless to say, Anthea was the one person to make his life sufficiently miserable as punishment for a refusal to confess, that his reticence on the subject had wilted like a rose on a very hot vine.

“Dispatched just before lunch.”

“Good, then everyone will have seen it as they always check their email just before lunch to see what’s on for tonight that sounds fun. Not that anything on a Saturday night involving anyone in government service can be considered fun, but it’s the most they can hope for, I suppose.”

Au contraire, Madam. Tonight shall be extremely fun for one person in government service and how fortunate it is that said person is moi.

“Quite. In any case, do feel free to consider your day completed and…”

“What are you wearing?”

“A grey suit. Is something wrong with your vision?”

“Pfft. What are you wearing tonight?”

“Something appropriate.”

“You were sitting there mentally thumbing through your wardrobe for that something appropriate, weren’t you? Mustn’t have been going well since you looked like you were viewing the entries in a children’s sculpture contest, where the medium of choice was chewed gum and mushy peas.”

“Untrue. I had lit upon a rather workable idea, in point of fact.”

“Tell me.”

“No.”

“Who saved you from the pocket square debacle last year?”

“The only person who believed it to be a debacle was you.”

“After speaking to the ambassador with whom you were just entering some very touchy negotiations and learning that that they had no idea why the English insisted on wearing such boring and lackluster pocket squares. You were just lucky I keep an assortment for when you have an accessory emergency.”

“Along those lines, has Lady Smallwood returned the tie she borrowed for her nephew?”

“No and for good reason. I saw the photos. He looks a lot better in it than you.”

“Wonderful.”
“It doesn’t matter, in any case, since you are not wearing a tie tonight.”

“I… I was not planning on such a thing.”

“That was a very telling pause. Please tell me you are not thinking about wearing a suit.”

“Heavens no. More a… jacket-based ensemble.”

“So, jacket, tie, work trousers and you’ll bring along a pen to do his accounts since you’ll look like a banker.”

“Oh. That is not entirely the image for which I was striving. I had hoped for casual, yet respectful.”

“Ok… ok, that’s actually not bad. Respectful doesn’t mean stodgy, though, so let’s keep with that theme, but loosen it up a bit so Greg doesn’t think he’s out on a date with his accountant. Let me think… I would wager, rather a lot actually, that Greg’s an eye man…”

“What on earth does that mean?”

“That he notices and appreciates eyes. So, you’ll need something to make yours pop. Purple or lavender would be amazing…”

“Under no circumstances.”

“Under yes circumstances, but maybe not tonight. And I’ll keep some of the other more flagrant choices off the table. Hmmm… you always wear grey and such, so we do need to do something different to show Greg you can let down your hair.”

“I am not adopting a new hairstyle simply for a film evening.”

“Stop it; I know you’re not that clueless. Close, but behave. Could do browns or creams… but I worry it won’t be enough, since it will be dark, which will reduce their eye-pop support. Blues can work… but that brown hair/blue eye combination can also be boosted by jewel tones, so a rich cobalt blue or deep green would make your eyes shine and, also, show you’re not allergic to color. Comfortable pair of tan or taupe trousers would work with that. None of your fussy shoes, though. Wear those loafers you keep for walking your mum around the flower festivals.”

All sound suggestions, so it was a shame that Mycroft had not heard a word Anthea was saying since he decided his input wasn’t needed for this conversation and took the opportunity to tend to an email that popped up in his Inbox while he was waiting.

“Are you paying attention?”

“No.”

“Oh my god… leave. Leave now, so you have time to shower, shave, have a calming drink and I will text you exactly what to wear so you look amazing, yet perfectly respectful of Greg’s invitation. But, back to letting your hair down… release the curl.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Free the floof.”

“I steadfastly refuse.”
“You need some help to seem fun-loving, and I can’t think of anything in your personality to do that, so give him a visual indicator. Liberate the whorl.”

“And on that nonsensical note, I shall depart.”

“Remember – garlic on the breath, romance will meet with death.”

Mycroft sighed and rolled his eyes, while snatching up his valise and outerwear in preparation for fleeing the scene of this poetic crime. What a ridiculous hen was his PA… however, avoiding garlic was not a wholly poorly-given piece of advice. And… perhaps he could reduce a tad his normal quantity of hair-management product. Certainly not enough to allow his accursed curl to blossom full flower, however… he did wish to present a more casual image than was his norm. Something to say that a pleasant evening with agreeable companionship was something he both enjoyed and encouraged. The fact that he rarely had the opportunity to do either could remain his little secret for now…

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Hmmmm… taken in sum, the locale was not particularly abhorrent. A small venue, however, the exterior seemed well maintained, the advertisement posters were new and presented in cleanly washed cases, the people already mingling about the entrance were of the mature type, so hooliganism of any form, such as mobile phone use or talking, was an unlikely thing. So far, as they say, so good…

“Mycroft!”

And good is an exceedingly insufficient descriptor for your appearance, Gregory. My god, but you are a stunning man…

“Gregory, good evening to you.”

“Any trouble finding this little gem?”

Not that this old cinema could approach you in the gem department, sir. That shirt is the most gorgeous sapphire color imaginable and doesn’t it make your eyes glow even brighter than normal…

“Not at all. Your directions were both concise and precise.”

“I’m glad. And… if it’s not too forward… you really look handsome tonight.”

Oh dear… that was a compliment. Gregory has already issued a compliment and they were not five minutes into their evening! Of course, responding to it and not standing here like a dull-wit would probably serve to ensure their evening would last longer than five minutes…

“Thank you, Gregory and, if I may, I would offer you the same kind words. Truly you cut a striking figure. Might I go so far as to declare that a jaunty scarf?”

“Thank you! Something to turn away the chill and, I promise, not a pentagram or bat or crescent moon anywhere to be seen.”

What a lascivious wink, Gregory Lestrade. I do hope to see more of those tonight.

“Does that mean you are, as they say, undercover?”
“HA! That’s it, precisely! I am an undercover sorcerer entrusted with keeping this silly city safe from things that go bump in the night.”

“Lawks! I stand in awe of your power and might.”

“You’ll be able to sit in awe soon, too, because it looks like the ticket window is opening. My treat, alright? I’m the one who asked you out, after all.”

It was utterly foolish to feel a touch giddy at being… treated… however, Mycroft was a firm believer that what was not openly expressed was excused from any and all accusations of foolishness, no matter how merited they might be.

“I happily accept your gracious offer.”

“Great! Let’s queue up, then, so we can get good seats. Nothing worse than crap seats for a brilliant film.”

“I wholeheartedly concur. Do… do we plan to acquire snacks?”

Did that sound gluttonous? It was not meant to present that way, simply as an overture for instigating a plan of attack to ensure this initial phase of the film-going objective was successfully staged. Something, now, very much in doubt if his mind could not frame even a jubilant personal event in terms other than those useful for coordinating the downfall of a hostile foreign regime.

“Oh, I hoped you were a popcorn man. Yes, the snacks initiative is a go.”

Apparently, Gregory had a taste for bringing down foreign regimes. Or, at least, for the vernacular suitable for promoting such a thing.

“Then, I suggest we divide and conquer.”

“One man on snacks, one man on seats?”

“It would be the most efficient use of our available human resources.”

“I like efficiency. It’s a useful thing, especially with popcorn and good seats are involved. I suspect you’ve got a clear and practiced strategy for obtaining those best-quality seats, too, don’t you?”

Gregory has properly noticed my analytical and strategic mind. Verily, this evening could not be starting on a better foot.

“You would be correct in that. Once I make note of the architecture of the space and the orientation of the seats, screen and speakers, I shall be able to place us precisely for the optimal viewing experience.”

“Then I’ll handle the consumables and you handle the film-watching placement. I’d say, so far… we make a good team.”

We make a good team? That was pitiful. Greg Lestrade – Master of the Lame and Limp Sad Dad Dialogue. Why did he have such bad words? Mycroft was so eloquent in his speech and he was a caveman. Admittedly, a caveman with a jaunty scarf, but he definitely needed to step up the vocabulary game.

“Oh, I say… I… I do find effective teamwork a bracing thing.”
By the lost tomes of Alexandria! That was puerile. Mental note to self – do not attempt flirtatious banter lest ye be exposed as a… fuddy-duddy. Who were the only ones sufficiently tedious to use terms like fuddy-duddy! Gregory was masterfully flirtatious, and he was as skilled at the craft as a prune. Efforts much be made, beginning now, to bolster the suave, sophisticated flirtation so the prune could be safely laid to rest. Which made no sense whatsoever, proving he was destined for eternal prunehood.

“Great! I’ve been very much looking forward to tonight, Mycroft, and I have to say, it’s already worth every bit of that anticipation.”

Now, try and remember your young Greg sexy smile, with the hip cock to go with it and try to rise above sad dad status to show Mycroft you’re really happy to be here, with him, and that you’re already hoping this won’t be a one-time thing. It wasn’t easy to meet someone you felt comfortable with, despite first-date nervousness, and genuinely had a physical attraction to, as well. it would be so, so nice if this went well. Maybe it was the best thing, given his line of work, to be alone, but… a little companionship shouldn’t be too much to ask for in this world. Or maybe it was. Regardless, he was going to hope for the best, but not be surprised if he got the worst. Wouldn’t be the first time and certainly wouldn’t be the last.

But he really, really hoped this time would the charm. Something about Mycroft made that seem almost possible…

Stellar. What a profoundly stellar experience. Gregory was an exceptional film-watching companion. Quiet comments made only when relevant to the film, and all of interest or successful humorous intent, only a single trip to the loo to disrupt the proceedings. Gregory’s chivalrous offer to purchase fresh beverages during that loo break was another nod to efficiency and courtesy that was greatly appreciated. He hadn’t had so enjoyable an experience with another human in… far too long a time.

“Well, that was exactly as wonderful as I remember. When I win the lottery, I’ll buy a cinema and show all the films I loved as a kid just so I can see them large on the screen as they were meant to be seen.”

“A most laudable goal, I do admit. It is a rare and delicious treat to have the opportunity to take a step back into the cinematic past for a proper viewing of a beloved film.”

“I’ll make certain you have a special seat, extra plush, in the perfect spot for when you stop in for a night of entertainment.”

“I would be most grateful. A standing reservation is an exceptional thing of which to boast.”

“Bank on it, then. In the meantime… it’s not terribly late. Can I tempt you into joining me for a drink or two? There’s a decent pub a few streets along that I like for a good pint when I’m in the area.”

Gregory was extending their evening! It had not been a certain thing, but it had been a wished for thing that, now, apparently was about to come to pass.

“That would be most delightful. Thank you, Gregory.”

“Alright, then. This way; it’s quiet there, too, so no worry that we’ll have to shout to carry on a conversation.”
Which was very much to Mycroft’s liking. A pub, alone, was a stretch of his normal comfort range, but a boisterous one would have been a distinct black mark on an evening that had not yet a single blemish on its record. It was a singular thing, a night as this, and he had every hope of preserving its memory in his mind. Especially… Gregory running his fingers through his hair, as he was doing at the moment, was a rather breathtaking sight. And the man did it so very often…

“Fantastic… my favorite table’s available.”

Greg smiled and nodded for Mycroft to follow towards a table along the rear wall near the hearth which was as cozy, and private, as Mycroft could have hoped.

“A excellent choice and, I must confess, a most agreeable establishment. Too many are neglected or overly garish for my tastes.”

And were filled… people. Not that this example was empty, far from it, but the space to person ratio was within his range of acceptability and there was not a sports-logo-emblazoned shirt or underage ruffian to be seen anywhere.

“I know what you mean. I frequented a few of those, or more than a few, if I’m honest, when I was a lad, but I was stupid then. Stupid and perfectly willing to drink lager that I’m fairly certain someone had drank before and recycled through the drains. With age comes wisdom, I suppose.”

“Thankfully so. I am taking you at your word, however, that the libations offered here are above that abysmal level of quality.”

“No worries there. They have a respectable wine selection, too, if you’ve more a taste for that. In fact…”

Greg darted over to snatch a card with the wine offerings before the server could get to the table.

“Here you are. I enjoy a nice whisky or scotch here, too, when it’s been an especially rough day.”

A quick eye along the listed wines made Mycroft’s normal suspicion of the claim ‘respectable wine selection’ get brushed aside. Nothing terribly fine, but the choices were perfectly appropriate for a flavorful glass of moderately-priced, good-quality wine. In fact, he had several bottles of a few of the labels at home…

“A commendable list, to be certain. I see several that would make an excellent accompaniment to a robust discussion.”

“Great! Let me see if I… where’s… huh. Wonderful…”

The tone certainly didn’t match the word, so Mycroft’s interest immediately perked to see that was obviously not wonderful in the room. Not that he could be certain, at first, but he assumed it was the man striding towards them. The tall, dark and heart-stoppingly beautiful man.

“Greg. Greg Lestrade. Fancy meeting you here.”

The tall, dark and heart-stoppingly beautiful man with a voice that could seduce the most pious and celibate of monks.

“Marcus. Lovely. What brings you out tonight?”
“Oh, as you well know, I am out every night. Not always, though, in such a… quaint… little pub. But, you do meet the most… interesting people when you venture beyond your own little world. Such as this rather… vital… individual whom I have yet to meet. Marcus Varnas, at your service.”

What a captivating smile… though a smile that seemed to be trying to captivate, rather than it being the natural state of things. Interesting…

“Mycroft. Mycroft Holmes. It is very good to meet you.”

“Mycroft Holmes… what a delightful name and one… I am certain I have heard before. The reason escapes me at the moment, however, and it is certainly not important.”

“Oh, well…I suspect you are correct. I occupy the most minor of positions in Her Majesty’s government, so very little I do can be described as overly important.”

Greg sighed and kicked the vampire prince out of sight of Mycroft’s curious, and somewhat intrigued, eyes and kicked a second time when Marcus didn’t respond to his first kick.

“Very rude of me, Greg. I do apologize. Might I bother you for a small moment of your time? A… matter of business. I hope you won’t mind me stealing away your companion, Mr. Holmes. Or may I call you Mycroft?”

Greg kicked a third time and stood to start the process of getting this interruption over and done with.

“Mycroft, if the tired baggage here is this desperate for my attention, I should probably listen or he’ll never go away. Excuse me for a minute?”

“Oh, of course. Shall I order if the opportunity arises?”

“Please. A pint of lager for me, ok?”

“Very good.”

Greg narrowed his eyes at the vampire and drew him over to the other side of the pub, far out of earshot of Mycroft or any of the other patrons.

“Thanks for that. Did you really need to try to seduce him? Right there. In front of me.”

“He didn’t bite… he felt it, but didn’t even nibble. Curious.”

“Maybe because he’s on a date. With me.”

“Heavens no, the man clearly has standards, so I am the obvious candidate for indulging his lusts, but… he has power. Rare for one not magically inclined. Who is he?”

“Exactly what he said… ok, not exactly what he said, because he’s not a minor anything, but that’s not what we’re here to talk about. Why are you spraying your stinky pheromones all over my nice night out? And why are you here, in any case. A bit downscale for you.”

“True, but one does what one must, or what amuses one, and John said this was a likely location to find you.”

Shit. If John steered the berk this way, there was a reason. And not a happy one, either.
“What’s the story? One of yours?”

“No, not this time. Though, I do have to thank you for your help with that last little bit of nonsense.”

“A rogue vampire who killed twenty-three people goes a touch beyond nonsense.”

“Semantics. No, this one is on your side of the line.”

“Magic’s involved?”

“A fresh face, apparently, in the city. And one… making a lot of mistakes. Your recent demon encounter, for example.”

“Really? Dark wizard?”

“Not sure. From what I gather… he’s new. To his talent, I mean. Late bloomer.”

Shit. Those were a problem. Sometimes, not often but sometimes, magical talent didn’t manifest until later in life and that led to lots of problems. Such as summoning a demon… however…

“Late bloomer that someone’s found, because I sensed traces of that bastard Moriarty all through the spell that summoned that lumbering oaf of a demon.”

“Moriarty… what an intriguing little fellow. He would be one to capitalize on a, shall we say, innocent virgin.”

“Yeah, he would. Ok, you got a name? Address?”

“ Perhaps.”

“What’s it going to cost me?”

“Well… my mirror visibility charm is nearly depleted.”

“I… the last one I gave you was good for at least a hundred hours of looking at yourself in the mirror. How vain are you?”

“Very. So, another one of those and… cough, cough… my throat is ever so dry.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

“Cough. Cough.”

“Here? While I’m on a fucking date?”

“Oh, don’t play as if you can’t keep everything from your dear Mycroft’s eyes.”

Greg gritted his teeth, but it could take him awhile to get the information another way and… it wasn’t really a big deal if you were familiar with vampires and magic which nobody in the pub actually was except for the two people standing here having what appeared to be a friendly conversation. And that was exactly what the pub patrons continued to see after a quickly muttered spell crafted an illusion of that image while he extended his wrist for the vampire to sink his long, sharp fangs into for an extended drink.

“Delicious. As always. Your blood is truly... inspiring, sorcerer.”
Which was why Greg never visited vampire haunts if he could avoid it. The more powerful the magic, the more treasured the blood and not even his sad dad presentation could protect him from being hit on by every vampire he met. Which wasn’t actually as brilliant a thing as most people might believe.

“You’re welcome. Name and address?”

Marcus sighed mournfully, then took a crisp white card from his pocket and passed it over.

“Are right here. My charm?”

“Is fake as ever. But, stop in at the shop… give me a couple of days and I’ll have it for you.”

“Excellent. As always, mano vyras… it has been a pleasure.”

“Bugger off.”

Greg dissolved the illusion and honestly felt no surprise that the vampire waited until that moment to lean in and lay kiss on his lips. Since punching him would have accomplished nothing but making the prat giggle, which he was already doing as he glided out of the pub, there really was no point to it at all. Besides, he had to save his energy for lifting that greatly disappointed look off of Mycroft’s face… walking forward with a ‘nothing to see here’ grin to get started.

“Well, that’s done.”

“I… I see. You seem to know each other quite well.”

More well than I would like, but some things simply can’t be avoided.

“I see him about now and then. Stops in at the shop. He… he’s in a similar line of work, so we share tips, lines on vendors, goings-on in the area that might stimulate some business. That sort of thing.”

“I see.”

You’ve said that twice and both with a tone I can’t say isn’t warranted for someone who probably is convinced he just watched me be more than slightly friendly with an old flame.

“If you’re wondering… he did that… kiss me, that is… to be a pain in the arse since he thinks that sort of thing is funny. Nothing to read into it beyond that.”

“No? I… I suppose I should be honest and say it did appear you might… share some history together.”

“Uh…”

If you lie outright he’ll know. His energy is swirling into a net to catch the lies as they come spilling out.

“… history is the right word for it. As in, in the past and not the present. We stay cordial, be of use to each other, business-wise, when necessary, but that’s about it…”

All true. The fact that the history contains a few raw, wild nights of sex to satisfy certain necessary rituals shall go unmentioned. And that was in the past. Except six or so months ago when Marcus split with his latest interest and stopped in at the flat, wanting some pity. It’s very hard to turn down pity sex with a vampire, especially when you’ve had more than a little to drink and are more
than a little lonely, to boot. But that was it! Very much it.

“… besides, I can honestly say I never have invited him to join me to watch one of my favorite films. Takes a very special person to merit that. And he’s certainly not got the scintillating intellect, great sense of humor and lovely eyes that you do.”

Come on, Mycroft… smile for me… a little more… yeah, there it is. And as beautiful to view as ever.

“I suppose we all have history into which we bump now and again.”

“That we do. Oh, and it looks like our drinks are here.”

Greg took a long sip of his ale and felt a sense of contentment wash over him. Not because of the alcohol, but because Mycroft’s face had lost its look of disappointment and that was a far more valuable thing. If that stupid vampire had ruined his date, he would have found the prick and hexed him good and hard, so it took a fucking year for him to be able to move again. And he’d be there when it wore off to do it again. That would keep him out of the way long enough for whatever might happen between him and Mycroft to have a proper start.

Not that he was thinking long term, of course. That would be silly! Not on a first date. He wasn’t fourteen and thinking that he’d fall in love at first sight and be whisked off to a romance that could burn up the pages of the most torrid romance novel ever written. Tommyrot. There! That was a vocabulary word he could use. Insert that somewhere into the conversation to prove he wasn’t an intellectually mushroom. Not a mushroom and not a romantically-addled nitwit, either. Life was good. And getting better since Mycroft looked fucking amazing in the firelight, sipping wine…

They didn’t close the pub, but it was a near thing and neither Mycroft nor Greg could find a single reason to mind the late hour. What a phenomenal evening it had been…

“Well, Mycroft… this has been great. Really great.”

“I concur. A most pleasant experience from all perspectives.”

“Would… would you be willing to do something like this again?”

A second date! Gregory was propositioning him for another evening out! This was positively the best outcome for their time together. And a much-desired outcome, as well.

“I would greatly appreciate such thing. Shall I phone you to craft a plan?”

“Sounds good. I… I’m already looking forward to it. Both of its. The call and the night out. Yeah. Shutting up now because I sound daft.”

Which, to Mycroft, was a high compliment. When he was engaged in a matter of work, reducing a person to a dithering mass of DNA was very much his intention, however, this was a different matter altogether, and a highly flattering one, too.

“No daft, Gregory, simply enthused. A sentiment I fully share.”

“Until… next time, then.”

Each man was highly aware of that scene in romance films where the couple stands there,
awkwardly, not sure which one, if either, was going to lean in for a kiss and thought those people were both cowardly and stupid for not taking the bull by the horns and doing what each of them so obviously desired. Now it was a contest between Greg and Mycroft as to which was the more cowardly and stupid as they stood there, shuffling their feet and wavering between wanting to catch the other’s eye and wanting to avoid it. It was only through infinitesimal, tentative motions that each moved a little forward until the pretense of not moving forward couldn’t be maintained and they fell into a slow, gentle kiss that settled something into each man’s core that they had no words to describe, but would fight to the death to protect and nurture.

“Wow… is there anything about you that’s not amazing, Mycroft? Anything at all?”

“A question I was preparing to pose to you, Gregory. It shall be far too long until we again meet.”

“Then let’s… let’s hope that we can make that meeting happen soon.”

“Most certainly. Goodnight, Gregory.”

“Goodnight, Mycroft. Take care.”

Greg started walking backwards to take as long a final look at Mycroft as possible, and only turned around when he bumped into a lamp post, the back of his head taking the brunt of the bump which he sheepishly grinned away to Mycroft’s great amusement. Now it was Mycroft’s turn to make his retreat, but his began with a quick text to his driver who was waiting somewhere to deliver him home safe and sound. Which, now that he thought about it, was an amenity he could have offered the man just now disappearing around a corner, though he swore he could still feel Gregory’s presence in his heart.

Which was ludicrous. He was not a fourteen-year-old, secretly reading Mills & Boon novels and dreaming of the day he would be swept away by a romance of which the bards would sing their finest songs. What utter tommyrot! He was a practical, mature man who had seen the very worst of what the world offered and bore the scars and battle-hardened soul to prove it. However, not even his formidable mind could deny that there had been a connection. A genuine one. Which was astonishingly rare in his life.

And it was a connection he was very hopeful to develop. Now, what did his schedule for the week hold in store… or, more precisely, how could he organize his schedule for the week, so that said development could see its next step forward. Not that it mattered much. When Mycroft Holmes willed it, the world obediently bent to his will. And if it did not, the bill presented for the affront was a staggering one, indeed…

Greg wished he could find a simple incantation that worked as a teleportation spell, because finding a cab at this time of night was never fun, and expensive, as a bonus. Especially when he wasn’t going the short distance home, but nearly to the other side of London where the address in his pocket happened to be found. Not the nicest neighborhood, that was for certain. And not the nicest building in that not the nicest neighborhood, but that didn’t mean much. Some of the weakest practitioners he knew lived in mansions and some of the strongest lived…. well, like him. This was a bit below the norm, but everyone had their own story and path in life and magic wasn’t the only factor with a say in the matter.

It took Greg a moment to find the flat in the darkened corridors of the fairly dilapidated building and more than a moment for his knocking to produce any result, though he had used a bit of his
own talent to verify that someone was at home and his cab fare hadn’t been wasted.

“Yeah?”

Lean. Too lean. The sort of thin that said meals were a rare and precious occurrence.

“Philip Anderson?”

“Who are you?”

“Greg Lestrade.”

Ok, that little narrowing of your eyes says you know the name, at least. That could make this easier or harder. Not sure which, yet.

“So?”

“I’d like to talk to you, if that’s ok.”

“Talk, huh?”

“Yeah, nothing more. I heard you’re new to… certain things… and I’d like to chat about that. If you’d like, I know a few places not too far from here that deliver, so we can have a bite to eat while we chat. I’ve had a few pints already and something in the stomach wouldn’t be amiss at this point.”

Oh yes, you like the possibility of food. Well, a bit of something hot and nourishing will be first on my agenda if you just let me through your door.

“Ok, but remember you’re only here to talk.”

“Absolutely. I like to get to know people in the city, people like us, so this is nothing more than a chance to do just that.”

After a long moment, the door was unlatched and opened far enough for Greg to walk in. Looked like it was going to be a long night, but that wasn’t something unusual in his life. Getting some food inside him was definitely a good idea, though. If this Anderson person had another conjured demon lying about, it was best faced on a full stomach rather than an empty one. They were a proper mischief to vanquish and he’d already lost a good pint of blood tonight, which was more than enough for one night’s adventures… especially when the rest of the adventures were still sitting very fondly at the forefront of his mind…
Chapter 10

Greg looked around the tiny flat and felt a twinge of disappointment that the interior didn’t hold secret riches that Anderson’s personal appearance would never lead a person to suspect. This level of penury was not what you typically saw with practitioners, but late bloomers did offer up more than their fair share of aberrant data points on the mystical line graph.

“Cozy.”

The small pfft from Anderson told Greg that this new face was well aware of his circumstances and wouldn’t appreciate attempts to layer buttercream over them in the interests of cordiality.

“It can be tough to find anything in London, especially if you’re new to the city and coming in with nothing in your pocket but lint.”

“I could use lint, at least, to start a fire.”

“Good point. Anything you’re allergic to, foodwise? I’d rather not have to spend the time pulling you out of anaphylactic shock just to see my food go cold.”

“No allergies.”

“Ok then, give me a moment.”

Greg plucked out his mobile and phoned a very late-night Chinese restaurant he knew. Excellent food and lots of fresh vegetables to put some additional health in his new friend’s frame.

“There. That’s sorted. So… shall we sit?”

At the kitchen table, since there’s actually two chairs there though one looks about ready to donate its life to be the wood for the lint fire being planned.

“Sure. Um… you want something to drink?”

“Got anything?”

“Water.”

“That works for me.”

Greg took the wobbly chair, though he gave it a little bolstering so he could be sure it would hold his weight long enough for their conversation to occur. Which began as soon as Anderson set two mismatched glasses of water on the table and, himself, took a seat.

“What do you want, Mr. Greg Lestrade?”

“Like I said, just to talk.”

“Out of the blue, this time of night, you stop in for a chat. That’s not terribly believable.”

“I just got your address tonight. I was, if you can believe this, out on a date and your address was passed to me by someone who thought it might be helpful. Wasn’t about to end my very successful evening out just for our friendly chat but, when it was over, I realized I wasn’t terribly far from here and thought you might keep hours that ran on the late side. A lot of us do.”
Greg routinely made a point to be as honest as possible, whenever possible, as people with talents were better than average at detecting deception. So, only one small lie tossed out in all of that blather and it was an easy one to wave off if he was caught out.

“Who gave you my address? And why?”

Cautious or paranoid? The slightly feverish gleam in Anderson’s eyes leaned Greg towards the latter, but not enough for him to prepare for something that would be hurtling his way intent on melting the skin off his face. Not that he suspected Anderson could do that, though. It took some fairly rigorous practice and control for that particular spell and this poor bastard didn’t look like he could control his breakfast toast. And that was likely why his little demon buddy was storming through Islington, rather than a darker reason, because the person in front of him really didn’t seem the type to think putting people in harm’s way was a jolly bit of fun.

“The why is because you’ve been causing a bit of a fuss and it’s been noticed. When fuss is caused, people tend to bring it to my attention.”

Greg sighed softly, since it was not a proud or satisfied look that rose on Anderson’s face, but a sad mix of frustration, chagrin and regret.

“I don’t mean it. I don’t mean any of it.”

“It’s hard to summon a demon by accident, mate.”

“It wasn’t… I didn’t intend it to…”

“Go rampaging? Because that is what that sort does when you don’t have them under control.”

“I know that. Now.”

“That’s why you don’t try those sorts of things without knowing all the ins and outs first. I’ll give this to you, he was an oaf, but a strong one. Old and strong, which means you’d need a hefty amount of power to call him up. That says you have the makings of a strong addition to our community with some instruction and guidance.”

The bit of praise, unfortunately, didn’t produce the lifting of mood that Greg had hoped, which motivated Greg to dig deeper. A powerful late bloomer who seemed terribly poor in both money and peace of mind was something that did not sit well with him.

“Tell me a little about yourself, Mr. Anderson. I genuinely do want get to know you better. We’re a fairly chaotic bunch here in London, but I do my best to know everyone, keep my eyes and ears open for when someone needs a helping hand. I’ll be honest, you seem like you could use one.”

“I’m just… getting back on my feet.”

Back… that meant at one point he had been on his feet? Or was that just an attempt at face-saving since a bit of hard luck was easier for some people to admit to than a lifetime of it.

“That’s a tough thing. I know a lot of people who go through rough patches. Need a job?”

“Got one?”

“Let me see what I can do. Like I said, we’re a chaotic community, but we are a community, the various practitioners and associated folk in London, and that’s a lot of eyes and ears than can
get turned towards something when necessary. I can give you some hours here and there of work, though, at my shop. There’s certain matters I tend to at night while John’s at the till and he can’t always step in and lend a hand with my business because he’s got customers to tend.”

“What sort of work?”

“Preparing the various things we sell; I’ve got an occult shop if you didn’t know. And I have other matters to work on that my shop assistant can’t always help me with because he’s not got the gift. He’s great for things the non-gifted can do with the right spells and rituals, but the rest I have to manage myself. An extra spot of help with that, when necessary, would be nice. I can’t afford another full employee, but I can cover some hours until you can find something more permanent.”

“That’s… I’ll think about it.”

However, the gleam that flashed in Anderson’s eyes before he hid it told Greg that whatever Moriarty had offered, it hadn’t been anything that paid any semblance of a wage.

“Good! And I will put the word out about full employment. Even then, though, I’ll be happy to have you in for help. It’s… it’s a good way to learn, too. Do things with someone who knows how they should be done properly and can point out where it’s easy to make mistakes. Good to learn the trade from someone who’s been at it awhile.”

“I… I’ve got someone I’ve been working with.”

“Moriarty’s not a great choice, mate, I have to be honest with you.”

Anderson fixed Greg with a stare that Greg answered with what he painfully realized was a picture-perfect sad dad moue of disappointment.

“How’d you know about that?”

“That demon you unleashed. When you get to a certain level of mastery, you can… see the energy of a spell or curse or whatnot and there are clues in that as to who was behind it. I’ve seen examples of Moriarty’s work before and this had traces of his techniques running through it.”

“He… Fine, he helped me a little with that spell, what of it?”

“First, let me remind you of the rampaging bit and the fact that you had no plan or ability to control the demon once it went marauding. Second… that sort of thing isn’t what you teach someone new to the craft unless you’re wildly irresponsible or simply like to cause chaos. Did he even bother to talk about controlling the demon before you got all of that started?”

The look on Anderson’s face couldn’t have said a louder ‘no’ if it started screaming like a banshee.

“Thought not. You teach a spell, you teach it from start to finish, with all the precautions and possibilities spelled out clearly. You talk about the consequences and ways things can go very, very wrong… all before you even consider going forward. I don’t doubt Moriarty knows a thing or two, but I can’t say he’s a person you’d want helping you develop your talent. Can I ask where you met him?”

“It… it doesn’t matter.”

Meaning you don’t want to say. That could be because it’s embarrassing or puts you in some danger. Might as well find out.
“Does it not matter because it’s embarrassing or because your telling me might put you in danger.”

“Danger? Not likely.”

“Alright then… what’s the story?”

“He… he collected me from jail.”

Jail, not prison. That meant minor and short term, most likely.

“What were you in for?”

“Constable got angry I was…”

“Yeah?”

“I was looking for something to eat and I don’t think he liked that sort of person on his patch.”

Greg did a quick mental thumbing through his accounts and set a few bookmarks for pages where he could trim and tighten to toss a few more hours of work than he’d planned Anderson’s way.

“Most of our police are a decent sort, but you do get the arsehole tossed in to make the rest look bad. I’m sorry about that, Philip. How’d Moriarty know you were locked up?”

“He said he’d had his eye on me.”

“Ok, that’s certainly possible, if he’d caught any wind of or saw you do something magical in nature. A new face showing talent… people will keep an eye on you. I rely on that, since I can’t keep eyes on everyone all the time.”

At least, not easily.

“He said he could help me. Learn about what I was.”

“Well, he’s not wrong, I suppose. But it’s a bit like learning what a policeman does from the berk who arrested you versus someone who actually cares about the people he’s supposed to serve and protect.”

“There wasn’t anyone else offering.”

“You’re right and I’m not berating you, if that’s what you’re thinking. You can only make decisions based on the situation at hand. You didn’t do anything wrong in that, Philip, not at all.”

“You don’t want me to work with him anymore, though, do you?”

“Honestly? No, no I don’t. I can’t stop you, though. There’s nothing that says you can’t associate or apprentice with whoever you want. The only thing I can say is that it’s my job to keep order in this city and I take that job very, very seriously. Moriarty stays in the shadows, gets others to do his dirty work and I have had to deal with a few of them, much to their displeasure.”

The small knock at the door broke some of the growing tension and Greg smiled in as friendly as fashion as he could while he rose to go and collect the food. All in all, this Anderson didn’t seem a bad sort, just a very beaten down and confused sort, which made him a perfect target for Moriarty’s miserable claws.
“Oh, this smells good. Help yourself, I ordered enough to feed a primary school because, to my credit, I can beat any of those little buggers in an eating contest, especially when I have a few pints in me. You’d think all that liquid sloshing around in my stomach might fill the hole a bit, but nope. It’s magic! Always room for something more.”

Nudging various containers towards his dining companion, Greg waited until Anderson pulled down one plate and one shallow bowl from his single cupboard and held them up for Greg to choose.

“Plate, please.”

Because the bowl is larger, and you need to fill it up to the brim thrice before I’ll be satisfied you’ve gotten enough in you to manage until we can see that cupboard with a few groceries in it.

“What did you do to them?”

Greg actually looked behind him to see if someone had entered the room without his knowing, since Anderson’s question came out of the blue and certainly didn’t relate to the large helping of food the skinny man was spooning into his bowl.

“What did I do to who?”

“The people who work for Moriarty.”

Oh. Those people.

“A fair bit of damage, nothing that wouldn’t heal though. Hard to avoid that when you’re in a fight. For some I had to take further action, not that I particularly wanted to, but I can’t have anyone in our community working to cause harm, any more than the police can tolerate that with the non-talented population.”

“What are you going to do to me?”

There was more than a slight tinge of fear in Anderson’s voice and Greg, again, put it down to two possibilities. One was that Moriarty had talked about this very thing, with some or a lot of exaggeration. The second was that someone had done something to his new friend in the past and that past was not something Anderson wanted to see repeated.

“Nothing. That demon business was a black mark, but it wasn’t entirely your fault and my bones mended nicely, so no harm done there. I won’t be so obliging for another escaped summoning, though, so give that some thought before you go down that road again. You were very lucky nobody but me got hurt.”

“I’m… I am sorry. I didn’t… wait. Your bones knitted? There hasn’t been nearly enough time for that. Are you joking?”

“Nope. It’s a handy thing to be able to do, but the energy cost is enormous. If another beastie had decided to go on a spree, I’d have to have called in help because I was having a hard time even keeping my shop running for a few days after our little skirmish.”

“Is that… something that can be learned?”

Ooh, is that a spark of interest? Doubtful Moriarty would be tossing out information on anything but causing mayhem, so it’s good to know you, my friend, might want a little something different.
“It is, actually. How fast it goes and how much damage you can repair depends on how strong you are, both physically and magically, but it’s a useful tool in the arsenal.”

Greg calmly focused on his food so as not to appear too eager or pushy in order to give Anderson time to chew a little, both on his own food and the information.

“Does it matter… how old you are? To learn magic, I mean?”

“No. I’m old and I’m learning new things all the time. Admittedly, the longer you work at it, the more time you have to discover new things, but I know some fairly old duffers who never put much effort in, so don’t know terribly much, and some young practitioners who rabidly study everything they can, so they have an amazing amount of knowledge, even if they don’t have the power to put much of it into practice. Can I ask when you realized you were talented?”

The bit of light in Anderson’s eyes vanished and Greg realized that the question might not be as much a toss-away conversation starter as he realized.

“I… I don’t know.”

“Huh? I’d expect that if you were very young when you fathomed it out, but not if you caught on as an adult.”

“I’m not sure I did.”

“Did what?”

“Catch on as an adult.”

“I honestly don’t know what that means.”

“I don’t either, sometimes.”

Not at all certain how to approach this odd tangent, Greg flirted with just letting it drop, then decided he’d kick himself later if he let the opportunity slip past him.

“Can you explain that?”

“Nothing to explain, really. I… I’ve seen things all my life. Things that weren’t there. Things nobody else could see. Things would happen, too, and I was certain it was me that did them, but nobody believed me. I… I can’t remember a lot of things well, but I don’t think I was wrong about all of that. Some of it maybe, but…”

Greg watched Anderson’s face closely as he spoke and felt an uncomfortable idea thread its way into his brain.

“When did they put you in hospital?”

“The first time? I was eight, maybe. Standard thing, I suppose. Observation… let the professionals watch me awhile and ask questions. Run tests.”

“And then?”

“Off and on, after that. The drugs helped, oddly. I didn’t see things anymore but… I didn’t feel anything either. Day after day of being… a bit lost in my own head. Walking about with as much awareness as a zombie. Now and again, they’d draw down the medication and I was so, so stupid, because I’d say I saw things again. Say I made a ripped shirt repair itself and back to
Zombieland I’d go.”

“How long did that go on?”

“Most of my life. I’d get released eventually, but my family would only tolerate so much lunacy before they’d put me back in. The final time I… just didn’t go back home. Decided that if I was loony, I might as well just be loony. I never hurt anyone, never was violent or started fires or anything like that. Never hurt myself, either, so why not just be crazy and go about my business. Not that going about my business was easy. It’s not as if people are racing to give a job to someone who startles at a noise no one else hears or asks if others see that tall bloke standing by the door when there’s nobody there.”

“Sounds like ghosts. Most of them are harmless, but a few are right bastards.”

Greg caught the slightest narrowing of Anderson’s eyes and wondered if anyone had ever just said to him outright that ghosts were real.

“They don’t talk much.”

“Some do. Some are as chatty as the nice old ladies who visit my shop after their Wednesday knit-and-sip at their local. You may have to build a relationship with the apparitions, though, before they’ll open up to you. There are ways to banish ghosts or, conversely, bind them to a location, as well as other ways to make their lives… deaths… miserable, so they often do as little as possible to cause a fuss when a suitably strong practitioner crosses their path.”

“Oh… I suppose I’d stay mum, too, in that case.”

“But, it doesn’t help when nobody else can see them and you’re asking for their name or complimenting them on their hat.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“How’d you finally decide that you weren’t mentally ill?”

“I’m still not entirely certain about that, honestly, but… I decided to get some… corroborating evidence is the best word for it, I guess. I couldn’t do that for what I was seeing or sensing, but I could for the things I was actually able to do. Show someone a pencil, say, then, out of their sight, do something to it, like make writing appear or change its color then show it to them again and see if they recognized the change. I did that a lot, because I couldn’t be sure that I wasn’t physically doing something like just getting a different pencil and being too delusional not to know it, but… I couldn’t deny the truth forever. Started to try and change the things I saw, too, or at least notice when what I did made something change.”

“How?”

“I can see what Jim called an aura and I’d do things to see if I could change it for someone. Maybe tell a joke, though I’m not particularly good at it. I’d make note of what I did and what change occurred. Then I’d try again at a different time and see if the same change occurred. I looked for patterns. Did a joke do something different than telling an upsetting story and were the results consistent. I could still have been making it up in my head, but… it made me believe that I hadn’t been loony all along.”

“That’s pretty amazing, actually. Very scientific.”

“I used to want to be a scientist. I suppose I never lost the drive, though I never could begin to
pursue that dream.”

The perfect Moriarty victim. Reassure him he’s not loony, admire his talent, offer to show him wondrous things, make him a powerful man. It wouldn’t be long before Moriarty would thread in tiny, subtle messages that the power and wonder would be very effective for paying back, with interest, the people who’d made his life a misery. Then, extend those messages to include people he’d never met but, obviously, were standing in his way of even greater things or who weren’t worthy of the things they had, so they needed taking down a peg or two. Villainous stuff, but not at all unique or shocking from that manipulative bit of nastiness.

“It’s a good mindset for our type of work, too, though. Practitioners craft their own spells, devise their own rituals and using that scientific method whatsit is a good way to go about it. Methodical, detail-oriented, taking careful notes about results… it’ll be very useful to you.”

“You can make your own spells?”

“Absolutely. The little things you were doing like changing a pencil’s color is making your own spell. Magical talent has existed long before there was easy communication with anyone besides the people in your village, so people had to create their tools without the benefit of knowing what anyone else was doing. Take five different books and you’ll find spells for the same sorts of things, but differing in what they need to work. There are some common threads and, again, that’s where that science-y brain comes in handy to notice and make use of, but there’s no single way to do much of anything. Admittedly they may have greater or lesser effectiveness, but you take my meaning.”

“That… that sounds interesting.”

“Some practitioners make it their life’s work. Studying spells from different people, cultures and eras so they can gain a greater understanding of magic as a whole. Some work to refine spells to make them stronger or create books with their own to share with others.”

“It seems I have a lot to learn about the world of magic.”

“I’d say so, but not as an insult. Anyone would have a lot to learn if they were just stepping into it the way you are.”

Another few long moments of silent eating occurred with Greg smiling slightly at the large second helping that was being deposited into Anderson’s empty bowl.

“Moriarty says you fancy yourself the King of London.”

The sorcerer’s smile grew larger, as much for the ridiculousness of the statement as for the show of trust from stating that information plainly.

“If I was a vampire or member of a number of other groups, he might have some possibility of being right, only because that lot do have kings and such, but it’s bollocks for us.”

Though other titles and nonsense did apply, but this wasn’t the time for any of that. Never was the time for some of it, but his job did come with its fair share of benefits to balance the irritations.

“I think he meant you were pretentious.”

“Probably. He’s a touch subject to projection, so it stands to reason.”

It was a small thing, but Anderson’s tiny snort of laughter gave Greg more hope that he wasn’t
going to be lost to Moriarty’s machinations or slip through the cracks without realizing his potential.

“Not a bad observation. For a not-King, that is.”

“I have one now and then. More water?”

Greg stood and reached out to accept the glass Anderson held up and filled both from the tap that he was resolutely ignoring as a likely source of uncountable disease vectors. He’s have a small glass of something suitable when he got home, though, just in case. It would be a terrible shame to eat all this tasty food and have it race out of his system in one night, along with everything else happily inhabiting his colon…

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“You sure you don’t want these two? I’ve got more than enough cold takeaway in my refrigerator right now.”

Waggling the two unopened food containers enticingly, but as nonsensically as he could, Greg very much hoped Anderson would refuse, but knew he had to do whatever he could to protect the man’s dignity.

“Ugh, no. I can’t even think about food right now. It was good, though. Very good.”

Said with an unintended look that expressed how clearly Anderson wanted to keep those two containers but refused to appear any needier than he already was.

“All right, then, take this instead. It’s my card. I work days and John works nights. Stop in sometime and take a look about; see if it’s an atmosphere you wouldn’t mind working in or visiting to learn more about the trade.”

“I will, I appreciate, too. Both the offer and the food.”

“You're welcome. See you again soon, I hope.”

With a genial smile, Greg, walked towards the stairs and Anderson’s eyes stayed on him until he was fully out of sight. The sorcerer was not, not at all, the person he expected but that was a good thing. He hadn’t hidden his intentions or tried to pretend he was an affable chap when it wasn’t the case, the way Moriarty had tired when they first met. Honesty wasn’t high on his list of virtues, but it was on the list and Greg won a few points in that category tonight. He’d wait a few days, though, before visiting this Magicae Argentea. Couldn’t appear too eager. He may not have much, but he did have his pride. Not so much pride that he wouldn’t accept whatever hours of work Greg could offer. The rent here was due in two weeks and he didn’t have it. Not even close.

Maybe that few days could be shortened. Two days was enough, surely, to maintain a necessary level of pride. Starting now. Which meant day after tomorrow. That wouldn’t look desperate. Just anxious to learn, which was always a good thing in anyone’s eyes…

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Once he was outside on the pavement, Greg used his foot to draw a sigil on the ground and muttered a few words before reaching into a food container, picking up a small piece of chicken, and dropping it onto his artwork where it disappeared without a trace. Now, it was a slow, meandering walk along the empty street and into a darkened alley where he waited to hear the heavy sound of large paws padding towards him.
“That was quick. Hunting nearby?”

The enormous pale-furred wolf nodded and bared its teeth as if to say that if this wasn’t important, Greg would serve just as well as anything else for a meal.

“Lovely. You need to see a dentist. In any case, here, have a sniff.”

Greg set down the food containers and held out the small bit of notepaper he’d snatched from the bin when Anderson was putting away his share of the food so the wolf to learn the man’s scent.

“His name’s Philip Anderson and he lives in that building over there, second from the corner. Keep an eye on him for me, nothing more than making certain he’s not bothered. Moriarty’s been trying to latch onto him, so let me know if that bugger’s skulking about, too.”

The wolf peered out from the alley to gain sight of Anderson’s building while Greg dumped out the contents of his food containers onto the ground, which quickly attracted the wolf’s attention.

“Hope you like Chinese.”

It was hard as fuck to read the expression of a wolf, especially one who pointedly made it difficult because it was a true and proper bastard. Of course, the expression wasn’t any easier to read when the wolf was wearing a very different face, though the blue eyes and scar were two things both man and wolf shared.

“Stop in at the shop tomorrow during the day and I’ll have more of that flea treatment ready.”

The wolf growled menacingly but being a werewolf didn’t bring with it a magical protection from all the ails of the canine population, so the growl was more to satisfy principle than express genuine irritation.

“That won’t win you a spot on Britain’s Got Talent. Completely off pitch and so garbled I couldn’t even identify the tune you were trying to sing. Now, eat and see that Anderson fellow is kept safe. I’ve got to find a cab.”

An obliging nod to the right had Greg giving the wolf its own nod, this one of gratitude, before he stepped out of the alleyway with the sounds of food being greedily gobbled accompanying his exit. If he was lucky, and his furry friend wasn’t being an arse, he’d find a cab in this direction and finally make it home. Where he could see a rollicking eighteen seconds of sleep before he had to take over from John at the shop.

Fortunately, he had coffee aplenty and mornings were usually a bit slow so there was time for his chemically-promoted energy to work its wonders. True, there were countless potions to keep his energy high, but none tasted as good as coffee. Most tasted like spoiled milk and foot fungus, but not all. Some tasted much, much worse…
Door 1 – Door 2 vector targeted. Vector appears clear. Stride pattern FeatherLight initiated with speed at Max + 7...

“You can’t run from me!”

ANTHEA!

“You are skulking behind the coat stand. Positively shameful.”

“I was lulling you into a false sense of security. Which worked. Don’t think I don’t know you’ve been avoiding this office all morning, like an enormous cowardly baby.”

“Utterly untrue.”

“You stopped to chat with the Transport Minister!”

“We had business to discuss.”

“No, you didn’t, and you’ve said time and again that conversation with a corpse is both livelier and more intelligent than speaking with him.”

“I… I concede that much is true, however the rail situation is of paramount importance.”

“You live in hopes that entire transportation mechanism meets a gruesome death so it’s harder for your mother to pay you a surprise visit.”

Damn his PA and her flawless memory!

“Your hysteria is, as always, ludicrous.”

Anthea stalked to her desk and lifted her skull to add its condemning stare to her own.

“İggy and I have a difference of opinion. He says you’re in hiding because your date was a complete failure and you’re embarrassed to admit it. I say you’re in hiding because your date was a complete success and you’re embarrassed to talk about it. One of us is right – who is it?”

“Neither. The correct choice is that my personal business is not something I wish to share, and your histronics is nothing more than infantile nosiness.

“It was a flop. Iggy wins the chocolate.”

“Your skull is incapable of eating chocolate.”

“Which makes it worse. It’ll sit there, in front of his smug smile, taunting me all day. Remember, this is your fault, so prepare for the fallout.”

Mycroft’s rolled eyes accompanied him into his office where, as expected, his PA followed to continue her interrogation.

“So, which parts of the date were a crashing failure and which were simply sad morsels of disappointment?”
“I am ignoring you.”

“You did that yesterday when I left messages on your phone and computer. Were you weeping? Curled in a small ball on one of your plush rugs, weeping softly from the pain of crushed hopes?”

“The creative writing class you sat with Ms. Hooper has certainly paid dividends.”

In truth, embarrassment had been a visitor yesterday, only in the sense that he had somewhat floated on a cloud of both relief and contentment at the outcome of his date. He had hoped it would go well, that there would be a general enjoyment of the time that might lead to another pleasant evening, but none of his predictive analyses had forecasted such a deliciously-delightful experience. And to end it with a kiss… he was not unfamiliar with the protocols of dating and a kiss, of such soul-enriching tenderness, combined with the eager seeking of another meeting... the indicators could not be stronger that their date was a...

“Are you dead?”

Your shrieking in my ear might render me such, yes.

“Good heavens, no.”

“Could have fooled me.”

Mycroft opened his mouth to reply but closed it again with a snap seeing Anthea waving his pilfered pocket square about like a flag of liberation.

“Very well… we enjoyed an exceedingly pleasant evening of a film, followed by drinks. It was as relaxing and entertaining an experience as one might hope for an introductory assignation.”

“Introductory assignation? That’s too many syllables. You’re hiding something.”

The keenness of her perception with respect to gossip was incalculable! Which bone shall the bloodhound be thrown...

“I am hiding nothing. Ultimately, the details are irrelevant beyond, taken in sum, they were sufficiently enjoyable to warrant both Gregory and me agreeing to another evening out at a later time.”

“A second date! Good, that’s good. That’s very good, indeed.”

“You are not a supervillain, so kindly stop rubbing your hands together in evil-scheming glee.”

“No. It’s fun and it’s merited. Any idea when Date 2.0 is going to happen?”

“Not at the moment, for I have yet to discuss the matter with Gregory. The assumption, however, is that it will occur sooner rather than later.”

“Better and better. First order of business today is arranging business so you may have an evening free this week. There are a few embers glowing you should probably stamp out now, so you have time for Gorgeous Greg.”

Yes… proactive was boundlessly better than reactive, even when a romantic evening was not at stake.

“Very well, return your skull to his lair and let us tend to those matters first.”
“I’ll bring him. He can play with yours while the flesh-wearing humans work.”

“That is nonsensical.”

“It’s mean, you know, to hoard all the happiness for yourself not leave behind even a scrap for a couple of lonely skulls.”

Mycroft’s anguished groan was music to his PA’s ears and she merrily skipped along after him into his office, keeping her skull in her hands to continue the pestering of her boss. Which was what she did every Monday morning and this one would be no different, despite the Hermit King successfully exiting his cave and not being seared to ash by the rays of the sun. All must be perceived as normal so as not to spook him back into that cave to continue moldering. With a second date on the horizon, moldering must be kept to a minimum for the sake of all involved…

But, a maximum of planning must occur. First dates had a bit of wiggle room in them since you had that giddy anticipation putting a rose-colored sheen on things, but that was gone by Date 2 and you were working more with reality than before. Little things not noticed or waved off the first time come into focus now, so this had to be taken seriously and overseen by a skilled professional. There was only one person here that qualified, so it was her duty to help the hermit plan a second date that would showcase his best features, keenest skills and keep him interested in the goings on, so he didn’t get bored and become pedantic. Given he’d medaled in pedantry at school, the last one was paramount…

Anderson stood a moment and looked at the exterior of the shop that might be something of a gateway for him and found it was a bit more inviting than he’d expected. Not that he had much of an expectation for the appearance of an occult shop, but he’d assumed black would be involved somehow. With a few skulls or bats or moons or something else from the Halloween line of shop décor playing a role. That being said, the owner of the shop could have been mistaken for a dad about to set off for the school run, so perhaps he needed to bin his assumptions and expectations since they seemed complete bollocks. Ok… time to see if this particular path was one he might be able to walk…

Why was that cat in the window laughing at him?

“Doctor Strange! You’ve got a customer.”

Greg peeked out from the stock area just in time to see his potential employee hesitantly open the shop door and peer inside as if making a final decision whether or not to enter.

“Anderson! Good to see you.”

“Hi. I… uh… I thought I’d stop in to see your shop.”

“Glad you did. It’s my pride and joy, at least for some days. For others it’s my headache and reason to drink, but that’s the way it is, I suppose. It’s a good location, though, for people to find me or leave messages, as well as buy a few things once their business is done. Come in, I’ll show you about.”

In an impressive show of neck dexterity, Anderson avoided the swat to his head being aimed by Balthazar who hissed at having his fiendish hair-stealing plan foiled.

“Your cat seems…”
“Evil?”

“I wasn’t going to put it quite like that.”

“You should. And if you’re decide to work here you’ll painfully learn why there’s no use mincing words for that foul and furry fiasco.”

Balthazar waited until he had jumped from his perch onto the counter and walked directly under Greg’s face before he released the perfume of this morning’s breakfast into the air.

“Ugh… there’s something wrong with you. And I don’t just mean in your colon.”

“Does he live here?”

“Basically. He lives with me and I live…”

Greg pointed upwards towards his flat and Anderson gave a nod of understanding in return.

“Convenient.”

“It is. Like I said, it’s a good place for people to reach me, whether I’m at the till or not.”

“Does that happen a lot?”

“Yes and no. It comes in fits and spurts. I’ll have a few normal months of being Greg the shopkeeper, consulting with the local practitioners about this or that, then it’ll be a few weeks of lunacy. Someone’s causing trouble, maybe, or it’s one of those periods when the barriers between this world and others grows thin enough for something with enough willpower to push through. Keeps things lively, though. Balthazar, mind the shop while I give Anderson here the tour.”

Greg sat patiently through having his hand attacked until Anderson plucked the cat off the counter and set it on the floor.

“How long until he takes his revenge on me for curtailing his assault?”

“Don’t make any plans for tonight.”

“Good, then I have free time to contemplate my navel.”

“That reminds me of a story.”

“Why do I suspect it’s not a happy, jolly one?”

“It’s not… that bad.”

“Right. I did see Alien, you know. Are we talking that level of ‘that bad’ or something else?”

“Oh. Well, then you already have the basic outline, so no need to belabor the details. Let’s start with the shop floor itself. Guaranteed to have nothing to prompt a rather ill-tempered sea goblin to make a surprise appearance in your body cavity, which was one of the details I plan not to belabor.”

Anderson honestly had no idea if Greg was or was not joking, so settled for a ‘yippee’ grin and followed the sorcerer to view the merchandise. So far, though… this was looking good. Good in the sense that he didn’t feel out of place or that someone coming through the door would look at him strangely. In fact, as someone did walk through the door and Greg paused to be of assistance,
they didn’t pay him any mind, at all. And that was… nice. The cat trying to steal his shoelaces was another matter, however.

“I need those, cat.”

“I need them more, human.”

Somehow, a talking cat just fit in so well that he wasn’t even going to question it. If sea goblins existed, why not a talking cat?

“Tell Greg to buy some for you.”

“I want these.”

“Too bad, they’re mine and actually do a decent job of keeping my shoes on my feet.”

“I want those, too.”

“My feet?”

“Your shoes. They are particularly redolent and will surely attract any manner of rodent for my entertainment pleasure.”

“First, my shoes don’t smell. Much. Second, I will not be party to animal torture.”

“What torture? Do you have any idea what rodents learn in this city? What they can show you that would shock a demon? A sex demon, especially? When I say entertainment, I mean entertainment.”

“Oh… well then, maybe I can let you have these when I can buy new.”

“Very well, we have a pact. Do not break it.”

“Fine. And… maybe I’ll be here now and again for you to remind me, just in case.”

“Another minion for my legion. Excellent.”

“How big’s your legion now?”

“Vast. It is vast.”

In another part of his life, Anderson would have been very convinced this was part of his psychosis, but now… talking cat, goblins, magical powers… just another day in the life. A life that just might be taking a turn for the better. Not that he’d say that out loud. With magical powers comes a healthy belief in the power of the jinx and that wasn’t something he could afford now. Not when he was on the verge of being able to, someday, be able to afford a new pair of shoes so the cat could have his rat-hosted peep show…

So, in one morning he’d learned more practical information than he had from a few weeks of suffering Moriarty’s supercilious orating. Some people were good teachers and others weren’t. Greg was one of the good ones…

“Well, that’s about it. Likely not as arcane and eldritch as you probably expected, but magic, like anything else, is really just hard work, which usually isn’t benefitted by pointy hats and a
Hammer Horror soundtrack playing in the background.”

“There’s a cauldron. That’s fairly eldritch. And I know a shop or two that could probably provide old vinyl of some appropriate music.”

“Well, if you wear a pointy hat, try not to have it be one of those the little girls wear when they want to be princesses.”

“Why not? I think I’d look quite fetching in a pointy, sparkly hat with a pink or lavender bit of cloth at the top that blows in the breeze.”

“I don’t have an attire policy so feel free to wear what you like, but I won’t recompense you if Balthazar goes more nutty than usual trying to steal it off your head."

Anderson’s reply was cut short by the door bells ringing and Balthazar going nutty, hissing and launching himself at the new arrival who caught him midair by the scruff and left him to dangle while he used his free hand to remove his sunglasses and shoot a ‘tired of his shit’ look at Greg. Who simply shrugged and took the cat, banishing him to the rear of the shop, where a series of rude noises and eye-watering words indicated Balthazar’s opinion of the exile.

“Expected you yesterday, mate. Got your potion ready to go.”

This time it was the new arrival who shrugged, and Anderson took the whole scene to mean the tall, blond man with the scar across his face was a familiar visitor and well aware of the nature of the shop and the man, as well as cat, who ran it. He didn’t look like an occult shop regular customer, though. He looked like one of those fellows the Bond villains had on hand to send off to murder a few government officials so they could be replaced by androids.

“Chatty as always. Phillip Anderson, this is Sebastian Moran. He stops in now and again for erectile dysfunction help and collect the little doll frocks my neighbor sews for his teddies.”

Anderson snorted, but whistled in admiration as Sebastian drew a small card from his trouser pocket and flicked it perfectly to smack Greg directly between the eyes.

“Ooh… I suppose teddy collecting doesn’t mean you can’t have impressive aim. Good to meet you, Sebastian.”

Extending his hand wasn’t something Anderson often did, but he decided he should likely start if he was going to be out in public more often than his previous norm. The fact that this new face stared at his extended hand as if it was a festering, disfigured mess at the end of a zombie arm didn’t inspire him with a lot of confidence, however, in the continued success of his leap into civilization. Eventually, though, Sebastian gave the zombie hand a shake and that confused Anderson even more as it tingled with an energy he’d never felt before.

“Uhh.. yeah. Yeah, very good to meet you. I… oh, yes, ummm…”

Greg laughed and congratulated his… hopefully… new apprentice on sensing something different about their visitor.

“Oh oh, Seb. Looks like you’ve been rumbled. You see, Anderson, our friend here has his own relationship with the mystical forces and good for you picking up on that.”

It was a silly thing, but it was a wonderful feeling to have had an ‘acting odd’ moment and have it not do anything more but gain him some useful information about that acting odd moment.
“Oh. Well, good. Are you… I admit I don’t know the right terminology yet, but a wizard or witch or warlock or whatever?”

Greg gave Sebastian a look that said any response was completely up to him and, to be honest, Greg was more than a little curious as to what the extent of that response would be.

“No.”

The typical Sebastian extent! Greg couldn’t claim surprise, as announcing you’re a werewolf wasn’t something to take lightly, but he could hope that, one day, Sebastian might use a few more syllables when protecting his secret.

“Oh… alright then. Everyone’s got their own… thing, I suppose. It’s still very nice to meet you, though. Do you stop in often?”

The senior sorcerer in the room wasn’t sure what was amusing him more… Anderson being awkwardly, but sincerely, friendly or Sebastian’s clear confusion that Anderson was still trying to talk to him after he’d used his ‘fuck off, I’m a lone wolf’ tone. You couldn’t buy this sort of entertainment, even with a television license.

“No… sometimes.”

Greg made a thumb’s up sign behind Anderson’s back and grinned widely at Sebastian’s scowl.

“Good. I’ll have a face I recognize, then.”

Sebastian cut eyes at Greg who was beginning to puff up a bit as he realized his pitch had, apparently, done its job.

“You work here?”

“Ummm… well, now and again. Not yet, but soon. Hopefully. Just a few hours whenever Greg needs some help. Not a proper job, that is to say, but something to do. That’s always nice.”

This cut of Sebastian’s eyes held something Greg couldn’t quite decipher, but he had no doubt that he’d have a visitor scratching on the illusion-hidden door to his workshop tonight to do the deciphering for him.

“Huh.”

Anderson opened his mouth then closed it again since he had absolutely no idea what to say. Which made it a good moment for Greg to capitalize on Anderson’s decision to step away from the little misery that was Moriarty.

“And with that erudite reply, Sebastian, I have your bit ready to go and, Anderson, do you want to get started today with a few things? I have a matter or two I’d like to tend to and I could certainly use the help.”

“How much?”

Greg wondered a moment why Anderson’s voice had changed, then sighed and looked in Sebastian’s direction.

“Enough to make a most-of-the-day matter into a part-of-the-day one.”

“Not help. How much is the pay?”
That was a question Anderson found very interesting and turned a hopeful look in Greg’s direction to encourage an answer very much in his favor.

“I… ok, fair question, and the answer is I’m not exactly certain because I haven’t done the number work to put a set per-hour value on the time, but it’ll be an honest wage for honest work, that much I can promise.”

Greg weathered Sebastian’s typical ‘yeah, right’ stare, but narrowed his eyes slightly when the tall, surly werewolf crooked his finger to motion Anderson over, then leaned down to whisper something in his ear.

“Greg can make gold!”

Fucking wonderful.

“Uh… about that…”

“Do you have to start with lead, because that’s what you always hear, turning lead into gold, but I suppose another similarly dense material might work. Does it have to be a metal? The implications of transmutation on that scale are enormous! I mean you could…”

Anderson’s excited babble rolled off into decidedly non-monetary areas, which Greg appreciated, and it distracted the novice sorcerer from the long series of gestures Greg made at Sebastian’s grinning face, which quickly lost its grin as the werewolf suddenly ran at full speed towards the loo.

“Oh. That’s worrying.”

Must be a touch of the stomach flu. In any case, yes, you can turn lead into gold, but it’s a brutal process and it gets a bit suspicious when a bloke is gadding about London foisting off unmarked lumps of gold in seedy places that are the only people who will accept unmarked lumps of gold unless you’re one of the glitterati who probably do that sort of thing all the time because being a rich twat does have its benefits.”

“Ah… didn’t think of that.”

“Yeah, it’s shit when reality intrudes on a nice fantasy.”

“It is. It really is. But, yes, I don’t mind helping today, if you need a pair of hands.”

“Great! I have a couple of charms to prepare and a fertility-enhancing potion to brew. All good things to get your feet wet in the more mundane aspects of the work.”

“That doesn’t sound mundane to me.”

Compared to filling a werewolf’s bowels with water, they’re a touch mundane, but that can be left unspoken for the time being.

“Let’s get started, then! I’ll have you start setting up a few things while I tend to Sebastian, if he’s still alive, then show you how to lay some groundwork spells for the charms.”

“What if a customer comes in?”

“I can hear the door from the workshop and it’s not a bother to pop up and see to them.”

Especially when there’s two of me available to ring up a sale.
“Alright… I have to admit, this is going… more smoothly than I… well, I can’t say expected, because I didn’t know what to expect, but it’s certainly seeming like something I’ll enjoy.”

No magical abilities were necessary to interpret Anderson’s smile and Greg mentally prepared himself for the task of ushering a new practitioner into the world. Never an easy task, to be sure, but a rewarding one and, frankly, the more good and decent magic workers there were in London, the better it was for everyone. Magical and non-magical alike.

“Your fucking cat is attacking me on the toilet!”

The day just kept getting better and better…

Ok… Sebastian checked for rabies and sent on his way. One potion simmering to be bottled tomorrow, two charms successfully crafted, one new apprentice inaugurated and paid appropriately for his time, plus a healthy stream of customers making the till sing merrily. This glass of fine whisky in his hand was very richly deserved.

So, of course his mobile had to start ringing.

“Greg here.”

“Ah, Gregory. I hope I am not calling at an inopportune time.”

I would not be calling now, in point of fact, were it not for the threat of emasculation by my PA that made the act a self-preserving one. Her fingernails were capable of perpetrating any manner of unspeakable acts…

“Not at all!…”

Really, whisky and Mycroft all in one place? At least in a virtual sense? What had he possibly done to deserve this? Probably something best not spoken of, but you get what you grab, and this was all very grabbable stuff!

“… I’m just sitting back with a bit of telly, so this is a very welcome change. How are you?”

“Well, thank you. Surprisingly so, given a rather boisterous day.”

Sherlock on a rampage, his PA pointedly asking about the status of his underpants and a certain Eurasian country competing with Sherlock on the rampage front. Not a day for the weak-willed, to say the least.

“Ooh, sounds exciting. I helped make a baby, and a few other things.”

“P…Pardon?”

“That didn’t sound good, did it?”

“No.”

“Right, let me try again. I worked on a fertility-boosting potion for a customer, as well as a few other things.”

“Ah, yes, I see. A noble endeavor, I have no doubt.”
“If you want a kid, I suppose, otherwise it’s a bit pointless. But, it’s actually a good potion to teach a few useful skills and I had my new apprentice helping me, so it did double duty.”

“Apprentice?”

“Uh… yeah, I know that sounds pretentious, but that’s the term that’s used.”

Student for John, since he’s not magical. Apprentice for Anderson because he is. See! It’s actually informative to separate them, not that you can hear my thoughts Mycroft, but I have no doubt you’d be very impressed by my logical, nigh on academic, argument.

“Each trade has its own vernacular, therefore, it makes a form of sense.”

A rather odd form, Gregory, but I shall credit you the point.

“Thanks! So it was a productive day all around. Tomorrow looks to be the same. I’ve got a group class in the afternoon and those are always interesting.”

“Class? What… a magic class?”

“Not this time, precisely. It’s a gardening class.”

“Have you changed professions?”

“Nope, though it’s tempting some days. I grow a lot of the herbs and other botanicals we use, so I offer a class here and there on how to grow them, time the plantings, what to plant with what, and things like that. I try to have a little something for everyone, from the people with a bit of property for a garden, to the allotment folk, to the people who can only do a few pots of this or that in their house or make use of a window box or two.”

“Good heavens… I admit I did not expect such a… strategic plan.”

“I want it to be helpful to as many as possible. We do other classes, too, leaning more towards the magical side, like using the tarot or wand craft. They all bring people to the shop, though, gives them a chance to learn something new.”

“And purchase some supplies in the process?”

“You know, you’re right. I never thought of that.”

Mycroft rarely chatted on the phone and more rarely still found himself laughing during a phone conversation, but the rules were very different, apparently, when he spoke with Gregory the Magnificent, master of the macabre. And gardening.

“I am happy to be of service…”

Was now a good time to approach Gregory about their next meeting? It felt like a good time, but his instincts were lamentable for matters like this. However, fortune favors the bold…

“… along those lines, somewhat… I was hoping to invite you for a rather bookish experience, perhaps on Thursday evening?”

That it only took myself and my PA an hour to think of as a unique happening that would be of interest to you and me both for our second outing.

“Sounds good so far, what are you suggesting?”
“I have a small amount of influence with the British Library Board…”

In that I have had more than a few removed from their position, so the rest are well aware of my interest in the function of the venerable institution.

“… and I can arrange for us access to some of their more esoteric and restricted collections. They have a most impressive gathering of mystical manuscripts and associated documents and I thought they might hold some interest for you.”

Interest? If Mycroft had any idea how interested he was he’d probably mistake it for sexual excitement, which might not be a bad thing, but it would be a touch forward, so his mental erection needed to keep itself in check for the moment so he could actually stammer out a reply. The rumors about what was in there were both tantalizing and frightening. The perfect combination!

“I’d love that! I’ve heard talk about how big and diverse the library collections were and that there was stuff in there that… well, let’s say they don’t let the public muck about with.”

“Quite a bit of that is public-prohibited, actually, but I do hope little is contained that will, shall we say, usher about the end of the world should the title page be read aloud.”

“Ummmm…”

“Oh dear…”

“You can lay a trap in a book like that, though it generally doesn’t wave in the Horsemen of the Apocalypse and strap on feedbags for their horses while the chaps get on about their business.”

Except for one or two that should, at present, be safely hidden away and guarded as if life on Earth depended on it. However, it was generally understood that it wouldn’t be that much of an Apocalypse if a few reasonable people decided to work together to do some pushing back. Of course, that didn’t stop his own mentor whinging about it whenever his back was being a mischief. Having to regrow every bone in your spinal column that was disintegrated while being one of those reasonable Apocalypse stoppers was, admittedly, a tricky business and fraught with potential for little niggling mistakes, but the man certainly didn’t have to have him rub on the pain balm, now did he? If Greg Lestrade was going to rub a hairy back, there better be dinner and drinks involved beforehand, which miserly old Gregson certainly didn’t offer up willingly.

“Very good to know. Therefore… I take it you are willing to accompany me?”

“Absolutely! Thursday, you say? That’s perfect, actually, because I’m taking over for John tomorrow night to give him a chance to go to a lecture about some medical thing or another and Wednesday is…”

Yeah, can’t talk about Wednesday since Mycroft would assume insanity from announcing it was the quarterly meeting and drinks night for local fae that he, by tradition, had to attend and he had to remember to bring crisps or stuffy old Maureen would give him a look and spend the entire evening being passive-aggressive about him arriving without his contribution to the festivities.

“… a little get-together with some friends that I promised to attend. Thursday works very well for me.”

“Excellent. I am, I admit, most anxious myself, given… I do have a rather embarrassing affection for books.”

“An affection I share, so no embarrassment there. Rainy days, when the shop is slow, is
perfect for reading. I always have a few books here by the sofa, too, for when I have the opportunity to read.”

A man who read. In Mycroft’s opinion, there were few more significant selling points for a romantic relationship that a true appreciation of the written word. He would make a point of proffering his gratitude to his PA, who happily hacked into the British Library’s full, and encrypted, catalog to ascertain if there were any particularly-enticing items to inspect. Perhaps an extra ten minutes for lunch tomorrow. That she took as long as she pleased, in any case, would, in no manner, diminish the graciousness of his gesture.

“Then, as they say, we have a plan.”

“And a brilliant one. Really, that is a fantastic suggestion and I’m already fidgeting at the idea of what we might find.”

With a memory spell at the ready so every bit of any intriguing spell or ceremony goes straight into the brain.

“As am I. Well, then, I shan’t keep you from your relaxation. Thank you, Gregory. I look very forward to Thursday. Say seven o’clock? That should provide us sufficient time to indulge ourselves most shamefully.”

“Perfect. I’ll see you then.”

Greg was happy Mycroft hung up first, because he was the cliched how-to-end-the-call? ditherer when it came to social things and being a ditherer was not the impression he wanted Mycroft to take away with him tonight. What a stupendous opportunity! Not only the access to what had to be a mind-blowing collection of rare volumes, but the chance to look through it with someone who would value them, if only for their historical importance.

And, of course, just to spend time with Mycroft. Someone who he was connecting with in very good ways. After another few dates, maybe some new good ways of connection could be explored. Mycroft would be unbelievable in bed. Didn’t need magical talent to know that. Just watching the man move was enough for confirmation. Knew his body, used it to his advantage…

Ok… needed to be ready, just in case. Underpants… deplorable. Bed linens… worse. Flat… putrid. Pause a moment, maybe the last one wasn’t wholly true, but Mycroft seemed the type to prize tidiness and there was nothing tidy about this hedgehog den. Starting tomorrow, the Clean Up Your Shit and Buy Underpants initiative would begin. Maybe he could call Anderson back in and do a quick bit of training on running the shop, so he could nip out and find acceptable underpants and sheets. And another date outfit! Something serious and scholarly, as befitting the situation.

Should he get a pipe? They looked serious and scholarly. Probably couldn’t smoke it in a library, though. Maybe he could just chew on the end to look contemplative. Or ridiculous. Probably ridiculous. Did tobacconists still exist anymore? Maybe he could stop in and try a few pipes for visual impact. Which was not loony, no matter what his rational brain was telling him.

Let’s see… where was Anderson’s number? It would take forever to find a good pipe, so starting early was paramount…
Chapter 12

“Brrrrring…”

John frowned at the phone on the shelf behind the counter and wondered why it was that the phone always rang when the shop was packed with customers and sat there silently smirking at him with the shop was empty? He could have used the useless sorcerer’s help to manage this lot, but he’d finally pushed Greg out into the night to go for a few at the pub, on him, as a little extra ‘thank you’ for staying late so he could hear that talk on new surgical techniques for leg injuries. He’d seen more of those than he ever wanted to see in the Army and a few of the things he heard tonight would have made a substantial difference in healing time and level of post-surgical limb use if he’d had that knowledge when working on the poor solider on his table. However, it was also knowledge he could use now, if he ever dove back more fully into medicine, so it was a good experience overall and Greg did him a big favor by covering the hours.

Of course, he did, before the Great Pushing, have to listen for half an hour to Greg’s mix of excitement and insecurity about his next date with Mycroft. Which sounded positively brilliant, truth be told. What he’d give for access like that… fortunately, Greg would be carrying a memory spell in his head, so he’d absorb everything he saw and could let it flow back out at a later time to examine more closely. Of course, the bastard would also have to drink a camouflage potion beforehand, so his talents were concealed from certain texts that might be lurking about in the shelves. Some magical books were actually, well, magical and could detect when a practitioner, especially a strong one, was about, which would lead to some uncomfortable conversations with his date as the damn thing leapt off a shelf to attach itself to the person who might free it from its life of leisure and put it back into active use.

However, none of this was helping him pick up the phone and see what the caller wanted.

“Magicae Argentea, how can I help you?”

“I have a number of items that I require you deliver.”

He knew that voice…

“Sherlock? Is that you?”

“Why would I be anyone else?”

“Because they’re richer than you?”

“Pfft. Monetary concerns are for lesser minds.”

“And poor people. Now, given we’ve established it’s definitely you, let’s move on to my second point. We don’t deliver.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Terribly incorrect, old nut. Sorry about that.”

“Was than an accent you were affecting?”

“Trying to. That’s my Jeeves and Wooster voice. I use it when someone’s being a twat.”
“I am not a twat. I am a customer placing a phone order. You stated clearly that is a service you perform.”

“We do take phone orders and I will happily take yours now. Got a pen in hand ready to go. Along with your address so I can ship your package to you.”

“Ridiculous. That is both inefficient and intolerable.”

“It’s very efficient, actually. The cost of a delivery service is larger than my or Greg’s wage for the time it would take to pack up the items and see them posted. As for intolerable… I have no idea what to say about that except tolerate it.”

“I require my items now.”

“Oh, well then. That’s a nasty bit of bad luck, old bean.”

“Your mockery is unappreciated.”

“I’m not mocking. I’m just using my twat-battle voice to commiserate with your dire fate. Besides, I know very well that you’re perfectly ambulatory and can come here to the shop if your need is that pressing. Otherwise, you wait the day or so for your package to arrive. We don’t inflate the cost, if that’s your concern. You tell me what you want, and we’ve got a chart here for estimating what it will cost to post to your address. Greg’s hoping to get it all computerized one day, but that takes time, which neither of us has to spare. And, when we do have it to spare, we don’t want to spend it fiddling with the shop computer.”

“I cannot leave my flat, so you must deliver my items.”

“Child minding for someone, are you? Well, bring the tot along! We’re alright with having kids in here, as long as they’re well-behaved and the parents pay for whatever gets broken or eaten. Usually the biscuits we keep under the counter to entice the children keep the latter from happening, but it’s amazing what a toddler thinks looks tasty. Maybe it’s just a chewing thing, though, while they’re teething or just what to chew on something for the fun of it, like a dog with a toy. We try to keep that sort of thing on the high shelves, but it boggles the mind what the little tykes will grab and gum when their mum or dad isn’t looking.”

“There are no children here.”

“Oh… sick then? We still don’t deliver, but if you tell me what symptoms you’re experiencing, I can give you some advice on what to do to feel better.”

“I am not sick. I have an experiment in progress and I must observe the progress carefully.”

“That’s… ok, that’s a new one, but I can understand it. We do a lot of experimentation here for new products and it’s not something you can just walk away from on a whim. We still don’t deliver, though.”

“JOHN!”

“If you didn’t have everything you needed for your experiment, you shouldn’t have started it, should you?”

“I do not need these items for this particular experiment.”

“Then why are you loony?”
“I am not loony. I merely thought of a new experiment I wish to conduct when this one is concluded.”

“Then, when you’re done with what you’re working on now, you tidy up and come to the shop to buy what you want for your next project. See? Easy and efficient.”

“Wrong…”

As Sherlock began to enumerate a list of what was wrong with John’s plan, John rang up two sales and helped a man choose a new ceremonial altar cloth. Sherlock, it seemed, believed there was a _lot_ wrong with his plan, but it was probably for the best to simply let him talk it out of his system than try to counter the points in question. Which, for the record, were loony.

“… and I have yet to begin to delve into why this policy is profoundly anti-science and clearly promoting the deconstruction of education, though I will concede the current state of education in this country is deplorable, at best, and there is little remaining to deconstruct, even by the most educationally-hostile shop guidelines.”

“Well, let’s save that for another day, shall we? For my part, I’ll offer that, first, we don’t deliver. Really, that’s the end of it, but I’ll add on that I’m the only person working, so delivering isn’t possible, even we did offer that service.”

“Find a street urchin to mind the till.”

“Since this isn’t _Oliver Twist_, and its near midnight, I’ll have to say no.”

“How am I going to get the things I need!”

If a body looked in the dictionary under the word ‘persistent’ they’d find Sherlock’s picture as an illustration to underscore the written definition. A different picture was used for the word ‘loony,’ in the spirit of variety.

“Roll back the transcript to when I told you to come to the shop when you’re done with your current hullabaloo.”

“My experiment will not be completed until nine in the morning, at the earliest.”

“You mean when you might expect a shop normally to be open? Even one not open all hours like ours?”

“Ah, so your work hours extend until then.”

“Our work hours are _all_ hours, so yes. I’ll have what you need set aside with your name, so Greg will know…”

“Who is Greg?”

“My boss.”

“I thought his name was Graham.”

“It’s not and I’ve said it enough for you to know that, meaning you’re just being peevish.”

“I am not being peevish. It is not my fault that his name is astoundingly common and easy to forget.”
“As if John is something unique and flamboyant?”

“You are inane. What if I arrive and Graham is incapable of providing the service I require?”

“Greg owns the fuc… flaming shop and is perfectly capable of picking up a bagged order, handing it to you and taking your money in return. Your imaginary street urchin could do that, though they’d likely steal the money rather than put it in the till to count with the day’s receipts.”

“Unacceptable.”

“I have no idea why, but good on you keeping your feet to the path and not veering off it one tiny bit. Now, since I do have real customers in the shop…”

“I am real customer.”

“Since you haven’t ordered anything, no, you’re not. I’m beginning to think you simply phoned because you were bored and wanted someone to harass so you were a bit less bored and I won the lottery.”

“Untrue… very well, there is a modicum of merit to your assertion, only because the ordering and delivery of my highly necessary goods would have been some small break in the tedium, however, my need to see my list filled and delivered is paramount and stands unmet, so I am revoking that credit as penalty for your scurrilous refusal to do your job as a merchant.”

“I’ll live. Now, if can get back to being a merchant…”

“Why doesn’t Graham hire more help?”

“GREG isn’t a rich man and the shop can’t afford it. Actually, though, he did just bring on a bloke for a few hours a week to help with the back-of-shop end of the business, but even that was a bit of a stretch.”

Though it would be worth every bit of cash Greg tossed poor Anderson’s way. The man dearly needed it and too often Greg saw no sleep for a couple of days because of having to mind the shop, handle alone the aspects that required magical talent and perform his other functions for the denizens of the city. An extra pair of talented hands was going to be something of a blessing, financial pinch or not.

“Phone that person to deliver my goods.”

“Pointing out, yet again, that it’s near, make that after, midnight.”

“How is that relevant? You are an all-hours shop, as you like to proclaim.”

“And we don’t deliver.”

“Also not relevant, compared to the severity of my situation.”

“Goodbye, Sherlock.”

“Wait! If… if I am forced, due to your almost-criminal intransigence on this issue, to wait for my items…”

“Yes?”

“Then you may deliver them once Graham has relieved you for the day.”
“Uh… no.”

“I counter with yes.”

“First, for the trillionth time, we don’t deliver. Second, my plan upon being temporarily relieved of command, is to get a bite to eat, then do a bit of research on the topic of the lecture I attended tonight.”

“Boring.”

“Not at all, actually, if you’re a surgeon.”

“Very well. It is a tremendous inconvenience to me, however… I will prepare breakfast for you when you deliver my order.”

John shook the handset of the phone a moment, then shook his own head because the first shaking hadn’t erased the obvious auditory hallucination that had entered his ear and settled into his memory.

“What?”

“Have you become hard of hearing?”

“I… no, but…”

But what? It was now extremely obvious that Sherlock’s need for whatever was on his mystical grocery list was only part of the reason he called and… how often was it, John Watson, that someone phoned to chat with you? Or suggest meeting for a meal? Yes, there were strings attached, but they didn’t feel very stringy at the moment. Wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to take a step to, potentially, have a friend in London. Besides Stamford, that is, who was on a schedule that normal people generally enjoyed so getting together for a coffee and a chat was something that happened only rarely. If nothing else, it was bound to be entertaining and there was always room for that in his life.

“…but if you order anything heavy, don’t expect me to carry it because bugger that.”

“Sloth is not a virtue. Now, be aware that I will not accept any substitutions for the materials I require. First, let us begin with the dried herbs…”

John smirked and used one hand to take notes and the other to shove Balthazar away from the basket of impulse-purchase items on the counter which happened to contain a number of catnip toys that their customers bought in droves because Greg’s special catnip was enormous fun for the cats and the owners who got the fun of watching their cats inhabit a hallucinated world of joyful cat wonder that kept the felines very happy for a few hours after playing with their new treasure.

“Oh… you, apparently, want me to package up the entire shop and bring it with me. Are you certain you need all of this now? There have to be thirty things on this list.”

“Do not omit a single item. I will inspect thoroughly when you arrive.”

“Fine! Not a problem. Give me your card number and…”

“You may use the card number on file. Deliver to 221B Baker Street. Do not be late.”

John’s ‘You don’t have a card number on file!’ was a shout into the void as Sherlock had already
terminated call, which also rendered his intended follow-up of ‘We haven’t decided on a specific time!’ a moot point.

“What a bastard.”

“Your boyfriend?”

John made a soft rude noise at the cat who was now winding it’s tail under his nose, hoping for a sneeze that would give him just cause to launch a truly elaborate attack on John’s fingers.

“Funny, stupid cat. And no talking when there are customers in the shop.”

“Fine, then I won’t tell you who your phone pal actually is.”

John screwed up his face and snatched the cat off the counter, stepping into the rear of the shop where he could hear the ‘please ring bell for service’ bell but the customers weren’t likely to hear them speaking.

“Alright, I’ll play along. Who do you think Sherlock actually is?”

“Not think – know. What’s his surname?”

“Holmes.”

“And that’s not enough of a clue?”

“There are scads of Holmes’s in London.”

“Not one with a name like Sherlock. An unusual given name. Who might have siblings with an unusual given name and, by happy coincidence, the surname of Holmes.”

Balthazar had an annoying habit of making him feel thick, so feeling thick now wasn’t much of a surprise, however some small flicker of insight began to glow in John’s brain and he gasped slightly when it grew to a full 10,000-watt searchlight.

“Wait… are you saying Sherlock is related to Greg’s Mycroft Holmes?”

“Brothers.”

“Are you certain?”

“I had hairs from both of them and there’s no doubt about it.”

“You have got to stop stealing hair.”

“Why? They’re useful.”

“Invading people’s privacy is wrong.”

“But interesting, you have to admit.”

“I… you’re evil. But, I suppose it’s not really a huge coincidence or shock that Sherlock is Mycroft’s brother. Greg said Mycroft stopped in once to buy his brother a gift, so they probably had the conversation about where it was purchased. Now that I think about it, Sherlock first visited here with a pocketful of empty potion vials and I bet if I check that order, I’ll find Mycroft bought them. Those would be a good gift for that prat. Interesting Sherlock didn’t mention it.
That he was Mycroft’s brother, I mean.”

“Greg’s never mentioned that Sherlock is Mycroft’s brother and you think when you brought up his visit and said his name, that would have raised the topic.”

“True… do you… Sherlock has to know Mycroft’s dating Greg, right? The conversation must have come up at some point, especially if Sherlock’s visited the shop though, admittedly, I think he’s only been here the once and that’s when I was working.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. Regardless, you must capitalize on this.”

“What? What nonsense is in your head now?”

“Imagine what you can pry out of Greg now that you have a connection to his pompous paramour’s baby brother. The possibilities are endless!”

“Then why can’t I think of a single one?”

“Because your creativity is stunted. I shall instruct you in the ways of leveraging assets, young padawan.”

“You hated those Star Wars movies.”

“Only the blasphemous ones.”

“Ok, moving on. I have to get back to work, so go and see if Greg’s home to bother him instead.”

“He’s home, I felt him enter the building.”

“Then go and annoy him for awhile so I can do the job I’m paid to do.”

“I’m having enough fun annoying you. Though… hell and be damned. One ringie dingie…”

John scowled at the cat, but quickly replaced it with a smile as he moved to help the customer who’d dinged the bell on the counter. Balthazar was a monumental pain in the arse, but he did have useful information, at times. Not that it made any difference that Sherlock was Mycroft’s brother, but it was… interesting. Greg said Mycroft’s energy was staggering, though wholly of the standard-human type, and now he was wondering about Sherlock’s. There was an incantation he could use to help him see that sort of thing, but it was a bit tricky to work and he’d just lectured the evil cat about privacy so he’d be a hypocrite to use it.

Of course, if he was magically talented, he would see it as a matter of course, so, looked at a certain way, this was just a tool to help overcome discrimination based on his non-magical state. Which was indescribably disrespectful to people who genuinely experienced discrimination, but Balthazar’s self-centered wickedness was obviously contagious, so the cat was clearly to blame. At least, that would be what he told himself if he actually performed the incantation properly and retained the fingernails on his hands, otherwise, nothing to see here… nothing at all…
“Really?”

“Admittedly, it’s Balthazar’s ravings, but his evil lunacy isn’t always wrong.”

Greg nodded and gave John a there-you-go smirk at his somewhat lackluster surprise at the news.

“Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes… I have to admit when you mentioned him before it never clicked, but… small world, I suppose.”

John returned Greg’s nod as he hoisted the large sack of Sherlock’s yet-to-be-paid-for purchases and reminded himself that if he had to tackle Sherlock and steal his wallet for this order to be paid for he’d do it and do it willingly. Already between him and Mycroft, several of the shop’s monthly bills were happily paid for with a few pence to spare.

“Didn’t click with me either, but it’s funny nonetheless. I have the late-night brother and you have the business-hours brother dogging our heels in their own special ways. Speaking of late night, you look like shite for having gotten in at a not-abysmal hour.”

“Getting in is not the same as getting to sleep. Sebastian decided to try and claw through my door for one of his conversations that I have to somehow telepathically read in his head because he can’t be arsed to say more than three words aloud.”

“And telepathy is not your strong suit.”

“No. Not that I mind, though, since I really don’t want a rummage around anybody’s head, mine included. But, he did say that our boy Moriarty paid Anderson a little visit, was shown the door in fairly short order and looked none to happy about that fact.”

“Unhappy enough to do something about it?”

“Sebastian followed him to a café where he got one of those fancy bits of cake and tea, then did some shoe shopping. Moriarty’s got something wrong in his head, no doubt about it, but that doesn’t sound like the actions of a man planning imminent revenge which, frankly, he could have enacted on the spot. Seb’s staying on watch for awhile, though, just in case I’m wrong.”

“That’s good news, then. It’s not as if Moriarty doesn’t have his teeny claws in other people, so he hasn’t lost his only potential apprentice.”

“Anderson’s supposed to stop in today for an hour or so and I’ll feel him out about it all while he’s sorting through the new shipment of quartz points.”

“Yes! Thought I was going to have to do that.”

“It’s good practice for him and it’ll let me see how well he can detect their levels of energy.”

“Testing the man on his second day of work? That’s harsh, Greg.”

“On my second day as Gregson’s apprentice, he tossed me into a bonfire.”

“Lucky thing you tan so easily.”

“Oh, I tanned. Couldn’t smell grilling meat for months after that without gagging.”
There were times John was depressed he didn’t have magical talent and there were times he was elated. This was a nice example of the latter.

“I’m leaving now before you tell me what happened on you third day.”

“Probably a good idea. Have fun with Mycroft’s brother. Don’t forget he owes us money.”

“He’ll pay. Not to mention, you can rat on him to his brother if he tries anything sneaky.”

“Very true. I’d rather talk about other things with Mycroft, though, than his having a shady character for a brother.”

“Somehow, I suspect he already knows that.”

“Yeah, probably so. Geniuses are good at picking up on the little details…”

Alright… hmm. Nice building. Why they’d let a maniac like Sherlock Holmes live here was a bit baffling, but maybe he was locked in the attic most of the time. Well, let’s see if the person who answered the door looked at him with pity, suspicion, scorn or amusement when he said who he was here to visit.

“Oh, there you are, dear. Sherlock’s been all in a bother waiting for you to arrive.”

John looked at the happily-smiling, older woman who answered the door and decided that ‘amusement’ was the closest of his predictions to her actual expression. Actually, she seemed genuinely glad he was here.

“Good, that’s… that’s good right?”

“It is, though, I do have to admit for some people that might not be the case. Come in, come in… breakfast is almost ready but I’ll bring up a little tea now. Sherlock’s told me a bit about you and I wager you could use it after a long night.”

“Sherlock said he was making breakfast.”

“And you believed him?”

“I did. When did I become this stupid?”

“Not for me to know, I’m afraid. Now, straight up the stairs and don’t… we’ll you seem a bit like a tidy man, so don’t be put off by the clutter. Sherlock says he’s got a system for it all, which I suspect is a bit of a stretch of the truth, but he might be a touch self-conscious if you mention it and… well, it’s something you can work on changing later, isn’t it.”

Mrs. Hudson gave John a welcoming pat on his arm, then hurried off to put the kettle on while John narrowed his eyes a little in confusion before starting up the stairs where he was confronted by a smell that was unfortunately as bad as some of the potions they cooked up in Greg’s workroom, which was thankfully enchanted so aromas couldn’t waft out to send customers racing for the door.

“What… what are you doing in here?”

Oh, and Mrs. Hudson was right about the clutter. Luckily, she wasn’t wholly right about him being a tidy man as he was alright with a bit of mess about a flat. This flat was near to approaching
Ah, John. My experiment took an unexpected turn and lingered longer than I expected.”

“Are you burning hair in here?”

“Yes, among other things.”

“I was actually joking about that.”

“Oh. Nonetheless, you were correct.”

John walked further into the flat which, now that he had a better vantage point, could see was a decent size, despite the clutter, and the location certainly was respectable. The rent had to be punishing, so there would be no crying poor about paying for the latest order of their fine wares.

“I receive a special rate from Mrs. Hudson.”

“Pardon?”

“The rent. You were thinking about the magnitude of the rent.”

“I was, actually. It’s a nice flat; you’re lucky to have something like this given… well, given a lot, but I suspect your experiments and such benefit from the space.”

“True. Also… there is another bedroom associated with the flat that is useful for storage.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of space. Absolutely a lucky find.”

“The location is convenient.”

“Very true, as well. My flat isn’t near anything that a human might actually find useful or entertaining. So, want to inspect your hand-delivered package, Your Highness? And cross my palm with the suitable amount of gold?”

“Gold is an idiotic standard of wealth. Beyond a few scientifically-interesting properties, it offers nothing of worth in trade for the goods received.”

“Paper money can’t be much better, though, I suppose you could use it as kindling to get a fire going in an emergency where you couldn’t, instead, use it to get a nice room at an inn that had a pub with a cozy fire already waiting for you. I’ll happily take it in exchange for your stuff, though. Or a bank card.”

“Later. At the moment, you have the much more important task of refilling that flask with xylene.”

“Please tell me you’re not going to splash that on any burning hair.”

“I… fine. I will postpone that particular trial until your anti-science negativity has been cleared from the flat.”

“It’s not anti-science to not want you to burn down the flat! That would be positively criminal and not just because it was… legally criminal, which is enough of a reason on its own.”

“Ah, so you… approve of the residence.”
“Yes, it’s a nice flat and I sincerely doubt your landlady would appreciate seeing it destroyed by your looniness.”

“You are concerned about Mrs. Hudson’s feelings.”

“I am concerned about Mrs. Hudson! Burn down her property and maybe her, too. Yes, that is a definitely concern I have right now.”

“That’s because you’re a good man, Doctor Watson. Not like this horrid thing. He’d see me without a roof over my head and not shed a single tear. At least, until he wanted tea and a biscuit, then it’d be a flood of them.”

John grinned at the pouty schoolboy scowl that rose on Sherlock’s face and began to understand the foundation of why Sherlock had a special rate under Mrs. Hudson’s so-far-intact roof. A rate that seemed a very special blessing after John took a sip of the tea Mrs. Hudson had brought up and poured into two delicate cups.

“I’d be weeping over the loss of a good cup of tea, myself. And this is one especially good. Just the thing after a busy night.”

“Sherlock said you sell witchy things, that has to be fun.”

“It is! We get a very interesting assortment of customers and that certainly keeps things lively. And, I have to admit, that our wares are far more entertaining to talk about than, say lettuces or belts.”

“I’ll have to stop in sometime and see for myself. Always happy to see and learn new things! I already know I like the tea Sherlock’s brother bought there. Wonderful stuff. I hoard it, though, so that’s why you boys didn’t get any for yourselves.”

“You’ve tried our tea? I don’t feel too smug boasting about that because even I know we do an amazing job with those. We take a great deal of care and pride in making our tea blends and I honestly think it shows. Did Mycroft buy any of the Crimson? That’s one of mine.”

“Yes! Oh, and doesn’t it remind me of…”

“Red?”

“Yes! I have no idea how you do it, but I smell it, take a sip and that’s exactly the only way to describe it. I adore that that one. Yours, you say?”

“WAIT!!!!”

Sherlock’s bellow had Mrs. Hudson jumping a bit and John glared at his breakfast companion with his best annoyed-Captain’s expression.

“Was that necessary, Sherlock?”

“How did you know my brother’s name?”

“I know your brother’s name because I know your brother. Met him, at least. Nice fellow.”

“No.”

“What?”
“Mycroft is not, as you say, a nice fellow.”

“Sherlock Holmes, don’t say evil things about your brother. He’s nice enough for someone with his job and he certainly sees you aren’t tossed out of here when you have one of your little accidents. Be a dear and try to remember that he loves you and, if you can’t do that, then write a note to remind yourself to not be so horrid.”

“No, Mrs. Hudson, I will not because horrid is the best from me Fatcroft deserves.”

Mrs. Hudson snorted and, as she left to get the rest of breakfast ready, resolved that Sherlock’s portion of breakfast would have the one scone that she’d accidentally squished a bit before baking so it looked a bit… ill. He’d get the message.

“Why on earth do you call your brother Fatcroft? He’s lean as a whippet.”

“You obviously need spectacles, John.”

“Your landlady is right – you’re horrid. Doesn’t matter, though. Greg’s not opposed to either. Leanness or plumpness, I mean.”

“Who is Greg?”

“Oh my god… my boss!”

“You meant Graham. In any case, why would it matter what Graham thought about Corpucroft?”

“Uhhh… they’re dating?”

“No, why would you say that?”

“Because it’s true.”

“Wrong. Mycroft does not date.”

“Yes, he does. He dates Greg.”

“Wrong. Graham is, presumably a human, and humans turn to stone if they come within three steps of Mycroft.”

“GREG is human…”

Albeit a somewhat special one.

“… and he dates your brother. Well, they’ve had one date and have another tomorrow night. You genuinely didn’t know?”

“Mycroft is not dating. His microprocessor would never be able to run the necessary algorithms for successful human interaction at that level. Which acts in addition to, not in replacement of, his physical repulsiveness, droning voice and lice. You are obviously mistaken.”

“Your brother… there’s no way a man that meticulous has lice, so I consider that proof you’re off your nut over the fact that, first, Mycroft has an active dating life and, second, you weren’t in the loop for that information. Which, seeing your reaction, I completely understand.”

Sherlock turned the full force of his observational power on John and scowled that he couldn’t find
a trace of a lie anywhere.

“This is disastrous.”

“What, the tea? I thought it was excellent.”

“Not the tea. Fatcroft is fornicating.”

“Ugh, that sounds… filthy. But, I don’t actually think that’s the case, because Greg would have let it slip if that happened on their date. He thinks he’s suave and inscrutable about things like that, but he’s not. Not at all. He’d need lessons just to be considered bad at it.”

“The contemplation of coitus is sufficient to make me vomit. And bring about the destruction of the universe.”

“Can you be anything but a snotty toddler about your brother?”

“No.”

“At least you’re honest about it. And here’s Mrs. Hudson with what looks like an amazing reward for your honesty.”

And a highly-welcome reward for John’s stomach. One heaping plate of delicious-smelling food was what his body needed at the moment. It’s what it needed at any moment, really. Quality cooking and an appreciation of hefty portion size was always a welcome blessing in his life.

“Sherlock was honest? That does deserve a reward. Well, here you are, and I’ll bring up more tea to accompany this nice food down your neck. I’ll make something especially pleasant if… John, isn’t it… if John agrees to, shall we say, replenish my supply?”

John Watson was inherently incapable of refusing a request by nearly any woman, but a kindly, coquettishly-smiling woman was near to Kryptonite for his mental fortifications.

“I’ll be happy to. Maybe sneak in something new to try to broaden your horizons, too.”

“I’m very much in favor of horizon-broadening, so make it as witchy as possible.”

“I’ll double the eye of newt and triple the tongue of bat.”

“Lovely, that’ll brew up nicely on a cold winter’s night.”

John grinned at Sherlock’s snort and continued to enjoy his breakfast while pointedly ignoring Sherlock’s lecture on the idiocy of both witchcraft and Shakespeare.

“You are ignoring me, John.”

“That I am.”

“Why?”

“This bacon is far more interesting.”

“I am more interesting than a pig!”

“I can’t make that particular assessment since I haven’t had breakfast with a living pig.”
“That… very well, I must acknowledge the point, however, I stand by my assertion that I am more interesting than a pig and, as a genius, the weight of my opinion is far greater than that of the average person.”

“Geniuses do seem fairly opinionated, that’s true. This is really good… you’re lucky to have someone like Mrs. Hudson to cook for you.”

“She doesn’t. She is cooking for you. Some nonsense about being hospitable to guests or the like, I paid scant attention to her nattering.”

“Oh, leaves you to your own devices, does she? Can’t say I blame her. Maybe you could buy her flowers or sweets or something and win a bit more of her favor so you get a nice meal now and again and don’t have to eat the hair you’ve been burning. With or without the xylene drizzle.”

“Mrs. Hudson is notably susceptible to bribery…”

“Got cash? We can probably work a cash to tea to food bribery pipeline.”

“Graham can demand cash from Mycroft.”

“Do you do anything on your own?”

“Whyever would I want to do that?”

“Good question.”

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“Such a nice man. Oh, Sherlock, you have friend, don’t you?”

Sherlock watched through the window at John walking away down Baker Street after their long morning of breakfast and discussion his current experiments, and thought a moment before answering Mrs. Hudson’s rather gleeful question.

“I have no need of friends.”

“That’s a ‘yes’ if I ever heard one. Your brother has a suitor and you have a friend. This is day I never thought I’d see! It’s too early for a tipple to celebrate, but I’ll have two later to make up for it.”

“What do you think of John, besides the irrelevant niceness?”

“Hmmm… he’s a smart one. Polite, but not so much it makes him seem a bit… wet. Good sense of humor. Good appetite, too, which is always a sign.”

“Of what?”

“Character.”

“I… I shall not argue for I highly doubt I shall be able to make heads or tails of your side of the debate.”

“That probably true.”

“So… you…”
“What, dear?”

“Nothing.”

“Try again.”

“You seem to… approve of him.”

“Oh. Oh… Sherlock Holmes. What are you planning?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re so cute when you lie and since you lie all the time, that makes you an adorable little thing.”

“I am taller than you. Much taller.”

“Only in certain ways.”

“Such as height.”

Mrs. Hudson’s girlish giggle made it hard for Sherlock to implement his super scowl, so he was highly relieved that she used the opportunity to quickly clear the dishes and hum her way out of his flat. Besides, he had exceedingly important matters to consider and distraction was counterproductive to the thinking process. There was the John issue, for one, then…

Mycroft. Who was, obviously, having some form of unseemly middle-aged mental breakdown and a reproduce-then-die urge much like a portly salmon. That was potentially detrimental to a host of things such as the continued function of the free world, more importantly, fulfilling his agreed-upon share of Mummy-managing. It was a situation that must, however, be handled delicately. Clearly, his brother was teetering on the edge of personal destruction and it would take only the tiniest of pushes to send him over that edge and straight into the nearest bakery.

Fortunately, there was an exceptional one within fleeing distance of Fatcroft’s office…

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“Iggy… I sense a disturbance in the Force. Nod if you agree.”

Anthea lifted her skull and made a nodding motion with it, setting it back down on her desk only a moment before Sherlock burst into Mycroft’s outer office with a typical look of affronted annoyance splashed across his face. A face which splatted against the inner office door since Anthea used her magic button to lock it tightly.

“That was positively fiendish!”

“Yet you fall for it every time. Did it ever occur to you, Sherlock, to simply walk in here calmly and ask if your brother is free for a chat?”

“Ridiculous.”

“You deserve ten door-bloodied noses.”

“Ha! My nose is not bleeding. This time.”

“Mr. Door will get another chance. There’s always another chance for Mr. Door since
you’re… you. Now, what do you want, Sherlock?"

   “That is a private matter between me and Her Majesty.”

   “Funny you say that, since your brother is visiting with her later today.”

   “Old women have lots to gossip about, I’m sure, however, I have questions for him that must be answered.”

   “No, he’s not making you the Chief Scientist of Britain.”

   “He should.”

   “Not even as a Christmas gift. Now, toddle along and…”

   “I demand information about the awakening of his libido.”

   “I… ok, I’d like that, too, so I can’t blame you for it, but, for your information, Mr. Holmes isn’t in at the moment.”

   “Untrue.”

   “Very true. He has a meeting in his office in… a little over an hour, so if you want to wait until after that, he has ten free minutes before the next item on his agenda.”

Sherlock ran an eye over Anthea’s features, irritated, as usual, that she happily did the same to him, and came to the frustrating conclusion that she was not lying. Or maybe she was. And she didn’t care if he knew or not.

   “Very well. You will act in my brother’s stead.”

   “I usually do. Several members of the financial sector believe Mycroft Holmes is woman because they’re more easily managed by a sultry female voice on the phone than by a man’s. They send amazing Christmas gifts, though, so it’s totally worth bothering with their nonsense.”

   “Mycroft’s voice can only manage a battalion of baguettes, so I suppose it is a smart strategy. Continuing on with my original purpose for being here, I demand all details about his relationship with Graham.”

   “Greg.”

   “No, his name is Graham. John confirmed that today.”

   “John? John. John John John John.. that rings a bell… oh! That’s the other fellow who works at Greg’s shop. You know John?”

   “We are acquainted, yes.”

   “Interesting. In any case, details are few at the moment, truth be told. Your brother and Greg have been on one date, a successful date, at that, and have plans for a second one.”

   “And the fornication?”

   “Would be none of your business even if it had happened yet. Which it hasn’t, but I have a wager with my skull that Date 3 could be a very lucky one for all parties involved. Date 2 is a scholarly and bookish affair, though, and that does get your brother’s humours inflamed from time
to time.”

“Hmmm…”

“Something wrong?”

“I am here, so the answer to that is a resounding yes, but if your question concerns any additional wrongness… perhaps.”

“Want to share?”

“No.”

“Let me rephrase. Share or your brother learns how £1000 vanished from his account when he was busily doing some on-site crisis management in Greece.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“You may not, but the security footage from the bank certainly does. I’ll give you credit for sussing out the new teller, but I’ll subtract the credit for thinking your brother would ever stand in the queue at the bank. Or anywhere. Queues give him hives. He just strolls into whichever office is the largest and gives them their marching orders.”

“Yes, but the manager would certainly have foiled my plan. It was a calculated risk.”

“Nice job on the suit and air of quiet menace, though.”

“Thank you.“

“Now, anything else?”

“What do you know of this Geoff person?”

“Funny. And, I know a lot, actually. The dry details of a person’s life and I have met the man, too. Good fit for your brother.”

“Why? Is he deceased?”

“No, or there would have been a death certificate included with his file. And he would smell somewhat foul, which would certainly put off potential customers and prevent his business from being the thriving thing it is.”

“Then explain why…”

“Why he likes your brother or your brother likes him.”

“Both.”

“Alright. They’re similar in age, have things in common, communicate well… the standard slate.”

“But…”

“Yes?”

“Mycroft is best described as a Dalek made of cake and this Gordon person is… normal.”
“What’s wrong with normal?”

“It is… common.”

“I can get a thesaurus, too, you know and play the synonym game.”

“The cake Dalek is about as diametrically opposite in position from common as the universe can possibly tolerate without imploding.”

“Opposites attract.”

“That is true only for electrical charges and magnetic poles.”

“Wrong, and I have far more experience in this area than you do.”

“You are mistaken.”

“I have read your file, you know.”

“How dare you! I have a file?”

“It’s thick as a politician’s skull, too. So, bow to my expertise and acknowledge that… it’s a good thing. If you’re genuinely curious, wait until they have their second night out and ask how things are going. I think he’d appreciate you taking an honest interest.”

“I cannot take an honest interest, because I am not interested in the slightest.”

“You embarrassed yourself there, just so you know. Remember not to contradict yourself so blatantly next time or people will think you are one of our thick-skulled politicians and nothing good can come of that.”

Sherlock snarled but accepted the rebuke with rare good grace because he had certainly lost track of things a bit and the reminder was a just one. Anthea, though, was still as villainous as his brother, in Sherlock’s eyes, and deserving of no actual mention of her scored point.

“I pity your lack of sense and reason.”

“Yeah, ok. So… time to take yourself home for your nappy change?”

“No.”

“If I give you five quid will you go away?”

“Ten.”

“Five or my gorgeous shoe up your skinny arse.”

Sherlock’s enormous put-upon sigh was accompanied by an extending of his open hand to receive the £ 5 note Anthea extracted from the Mycroft-provided fund for sending his brother on his way with a minimum of fuss and bother.

“Goodbye, Sherlock.”

“Notify Cakecroft that I will demand a report of his activities on…”

“Friday.”
“Friday.”

Whirling towards the door, Sherlock pocketed his cash and stalked away, feeling oddly satisfied by the meeting. Nobody was more fiercely protective of this brother than Anthea and if she was content with the situation between Mycroft and Gladys, then… it might not be as horrifying a thing as he predicted.

From Mycroft’s perspective, having spied on the conversation after seeing the emergency door lock signal flash on his monitor, oddly-satisfied was very much the theme of the moment. Sherlock was clearly curious and concerned about the turn of events, which had been kept from his ears to prevent an eruption of body parts that would take ages to sew back into human form but… perhaps that had been the wrong approach. Could it be his little brother actually cared whether he was happy with his new romance? It was devilishly difficult to know for certain without a direct interrogation, as opposed to his remotely-gained intelligence, however… such might be the case.

Well, the situation was certainly taking on new levels of complexity and by leaps and bounds. Sherlock’s interest in his personal life and an apparent new association with Gregory’s employee. That was most unexpected. And actionable. Which would begin with the touch of one tiny button.

“Anthea?”

“You could come out here to talk to me about your brother.”

“That would require I rise from my chair and I am finding myself far too weak of limb to accomplish the task.”

“I’ll bring the pastries and tea in a minute. Now, what else shall I bring with your little nosh?”

“Whatever information you can gather on John Watson, currently employed at Magicae Argentea and formerly a member of our military.”

“I’m already on that, so I should have something for you by the time you finish your break.”

“Good. Gregory speaks highly of him, however, circumstances now warrant a closer inspection.”

“Are you going to kidnap him?”

“Of course not. Kidnapping implies an individual taken against their will. I shall make it very much in accordance with Doctor Watson’s will that he accept my gracious invitation.”

“Very polite of you, sir. For that, I believe there may be a particularly-succulent morsel coming your way soon.”

Mycroft was happy he was not using the video feature of their intercom, because Anthea surely did not need to see him rub his hands together in glee. And, regardless of the nature of the information she acquired, he would tease from Gregory what personal insights he could on his employee. Sherlock had seemed most comfortable using the man’s given name, which was unusual, and that implied a connection had been formed. His brother was as replete with friends as was he and if there was a chance to nudge the good doctor further into Sherlock’s sphere, then the nudging would certainly take place.

Fortunately, if there was one person in the world highly skilled in the use of the strategic nudge, it was the fellow sitting in this very chair, anxiously awaiting a plump, palatable pastry…
Kidnapping certainly had its uses, but, as Mycroft pondered the situation, sometimes other methods were equally effective. Given the Gregory situation, which was absolutely not to have its foundations shaken by an angry and offended report by an employee, the lure of other methods grew in appeal to the point that Mycroft decided not to return home directly after work but to pay a visit to a certain shop which, at this very late hour, should see a certain individual manning the till with another certain individual otherwise occupied.

“Oh, Mr. Holmes. How are you tonight?”

“I am well, Doctor Watson, and I hope the same is true for you.”

“It is, I’d say. Steady stream of customers, with the buyers outnumbering the browsers.”

“Very good, very good, indeed. However, I was more inquiring about your non-work life.”

“Oh! Thanks for that. It’s going well, too. Introduced to some very useful new surgical techniques yesterday, the library had a couple of books I’ve been hoping to read back on the shelves… can’t complain.”

“Excellent, truly excellent.”

“So, what can I help you with tonight?”

“And how is Doctor Stamford? I hope he, also, is well.”

John’s genial smile faltered slightly as he replayed Mycroft’s words in his mind.

“How… first how do you know Mike and, second, how would you know that I know Mike?”

“Information is a useful thing, Doctor Watson, would you not agree?”

John narrowed his eyes, then clucked his tongue and nodded his head as the neon sign lit up in his head.

“How quickly did you learn about me visiting Sherlock?”

“As quickly as it took him to race to my office to confront me on a certain bit of information he obtained concerning me and your employer.”

“I… yeah. Yeah, alright, that was me. I honestly didn’t think he wouldn’t know about you and Greg, though, in hindsight, I can understand exactly why you wouldn’t tell him, since he’s a raging loony, but… it slipped out while we were chatting. I hope he wasn’t too much of a bother.”

“As much of a bother as one would expect from a raging loony.”

“I’m sorry. Really, I apologize. Did you kill him? Are you here to make me dispose of the body as punishment for my loose lips sinking your ship?”

“That idea did occur to me, however, the matter was handled in a slightly different way and is, now, water under the proverbial bridge. I was more interested in the visit itself. The fact that you called upon my brother personally. You have only one actual friend in London, who you rarely see, yet you take time to visit Sherlock, of all people. That is a remarkable thing, wouldn’t you
agree?”

“Uh, no. He placed a large order and asked if I’d deliver it, since he was busy.”

“I see. Very… business-minded of you. And if I was to request similar service?”

“I… ok, you already know we don’t deliver, don’t you.”

“Gregory and I had some small discussions concerning his business practices, yes.”

“Ummmm… I was going in his direction anyway?”

“Wrong.”

“I was interested in Sherlock’s experiment?”

“Perhaps. Do tell, what was today’s level of lethal aroma and how utterly nonsensical were the tests being performed?”

“Ok, you know about his experiments.”

“A great deal and you may take as fact that whatever you experienced today is the least of the mayhem he can create when he follows his scientific urges.”

“Lovely. Oh, one moment…”

Mycroft smiled and stepped aside for the young man standing in wait to pay for what appeared to be a moderate-sized goblet and plain pottery bowl.

“… alright, back to being interrogated.”

“If I were to interrogate you, Doctor Watson, I can assure you, you would not be smiling.”

John had no real idea what Mycroft did for a living, but he believed to the depths of his soul that statement was painfully accurate.

“Back to our… friendly chat?”

“Much better. Now, I am most curious as to what would prompt you to make the journey to Baker Street to hand deliver my brother his various purchases. I admit his infantile demands can be most strident and raise the blood pressure to levels hitherto unknown to medical science, however, I would have assumed you to be a man with a greater than average capacity to withstand such a barrage of nonsense.”

“It wasn’t a bother.”

John, at least, had the good sense to look as embarrassed by the limpness of that reply as he actually felt.

“Be that as it may, someone who you have met but once makes a dictatorial demand and you oblige. You can see how that might pique my interest.”

“Hoping for the job of my therapist, are you?”

“Ms. Thompson is more than adequate for the task, though you rarely anymore make an appointment to see her.”
John had felt a cold wind blow through him before in his life, but never one with quite such a frightening bite.

“How do you know about her?”

“I know many things, Doctor Watson. Many, many things… however, if you are concerned, they are not things about which I feel obliged to inform Sherlock. Not that he would care, but there is no reason, during the normal course of events, to spread about the details of a man’s life like butter on toast.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat?”

“Not at all! Merely an assurance, should one be required. I cannot help but feel that your foray into Sherlock’s malodorous den may not be an isolated example. Care to comment?”

“No.”

“Very well, it is not obligatory. Nevertheless, do be aware that my brother… he sees the world from a different vantage point than most. And acts accordingly. Choose carefully, Doctor Watson, before you continue further along the path of… association. You have seen many battlefields in your life, John. Are you prepared to enter another?”

John’s small sniff was accompanied by a look that Mycroft grudgingly admired for it certainly wasn’t one of submission or defeat. If the good doctor did wish to, perhaps, befriend Sherlock, then he must be prepared for what such a friendship would entail. Which was not something for the faint of heart.

“Enjoying your turn as a Bond villain, Mr. Holmes?”

Mycroft smiled an enigmatic smile and wondered how John would react to knowing that the various ‘secret’ service divisions within the government had many a manipulated photo of him as a villain from the James Bond universe. A selection of which were created and distributed by someone who would remain nameless, though she answered to the appellation of Anthea.

“Very droll, indeed. Oh, do pardon me, madam. I did not wish to obstruct your transaction.”

Mycroft graciously moved out of the way, so the customer could pay for her supply of candles which, from the labels, Mycroft knew were made in-house.

“I think our conversation is finished, anyway, Mr. Holmes. Why don’t you browse a bit, though? Might as well get something since you have to pay to leave anyway.”

“I do?”

“Two hundred and eight-seven pounds plus change. Sherlock somehow forgot to pay for his purchases this morning.”

It was a small bit of revenge, but John happily drank in Mycroft’s loud sigh and rolled eyes as he began to draw out his wallet and count out the necessary cash. It was good to know, though, that as much of a baby brother as was Sherlock, Mycroft played the big brother role with just as much fervor. Two very atypical men with a very typical sibling relationship and that, somehow, made it easier to not feel a bit of dread that Mr. Unknown-Role-in-Government Holmes was going to send some serious-faced secret agents to make his life a misery. Sherlock was enough misery for one person’s life, thank you very much…
Greg felt foolish but, in fairness, he didn’t mind that since he was feeling foolish for being at the British Library a full thirty minutes before he was supposed to arrive out of fear of being thirty seconds late for his date with Mycroft. He was looking far too forward to this to start the whole business on a bad foot.

Speaking of bad foots…

“What the… spectacles?”

The vampire prince peered over his studious, yet scandalously expensive, spectacles and grinned impishly.

“All the better to affect an academic look, don’t you think?”

“You are not an academic. I’m not sure you know how to spell academic without using a ‘k.’

“One must blend in with the environment.”

“It’s a library. Small children visit libraries. Can I look forward to seeing you in a nappy next?”

“If that excites you, then by all means.”

“Why are you at the library, Marcus? This early, especially. There’s still some sun in the sky.”

“One of the many benefits of my position, and our association, is that I can spit in the face of the sun, as you well know.”

“You tried to dart out for chips once at noon and needed a king’s ransom of my special burn cream to heal.”

“Fine. Maybe it’s a spittle dribble more than a full spit, but the principle applies. And you got half the chips, so fuck off. To answer your actual question, though, I was engaged in a bit of historical research.”

“That’s a lie.”

“Not at all! I was hoping to purchase a small amount of property that caught my eye and simply wanted to delve into its history to ensure… well, a number of things.”

Which Greg knew could range from it being a former brothel, which would appeal to the vampire’s sense of humor, or former use as or being the location of a center of magic, which might pose a problem for those who were subject to being affected by that sort of thing.

“Want me to check it out?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to ask… until tomorrow, that is. But, yes.”

“Lovely. Text me the address and I’ll see if there’s anything you need to worry about.”

“So kind of you. Actually, it’s not too far from your interesting little business venture, so I doubt it will take you long to… do whatever it is you’ll do.”
“Meaning you won’t be there to help.”

“And possibly disrupt your concentration with my good looks and charm?”

“Arse. But… let me see what I can do.”

“Well, we both know how creative that can be when you have a mind for it.”

“Would you… none of that sort of thing when I’m… shove off.”

“Not now! When you’re what, Greg?”

“Can’t hear you. Gone deaf.”

“Let me see… you’re actually dressed…”

“I’m always dressed.”

“Not as if you put any thought into it. Your fashion sense will never approach acceptable, but tonight… not bad.”

Greg scowled at his own small surge of pride because fuck that vampire. But… Marcus was the sort that fashion designers chased down on the street to model their clothes, so the pride wasn’t entirely misplaced. And he’d dressed himself! No feline assistance whatsoever.

“Thanks. Now, fuck off.”

“No… your hair is combed, you’re not in rags, you shaved and… oh, used that soap I particularly like. Is your date with the same person or someone different? And why are you having it at a library? Are they elderly?”

“Funny. Yes, I’m seeing Mycroft again tonight and he very rightly thought that I’d appreciate a look behind the scenes here. They have a collection of material near and dear to my heart that I’ve been wanting to peruse forever and peruse it we shall.”

“Ooh, I’ve heard rumors. You will keep an out for…”

“Yes, if there’s something relevant to your interests, I’ll let you know.”

“Perfect. Though… wait… ah, yes. Yes, that is where I heard it.”

“ Heard what?”

“Your date’s name. I attended a function, this politician, that philanthropist, etc. and someone mentioned the British Library had to replace yet another board member. This prompted the question about what said sacked board member had done to anger one Mr. Mycroft Holmes.”

“ Oh. What… what does that mean?”

“That your date is staggeringly rich, staggeringly powerful or staggeringly both.”

“He said he has a minor role in government.”

“Staggeringly powerful it is, then. At minimum.”

“I suspected he wasn’t being quite honest for that, but I can’t fault him because I haven’t really
been honest about myself, either.”

“Will you?”

“Depends on what happens between us. If this works out, I won’t be able to hide things and I’ll *have* to tell him.”

“Won’t that be fun.”

“Oh, laughs aplenty. Shouldn’t you be leaving?”

“Ooh, somebody doesn’t want his date to catch him talking to a fabulously handsome man wearing a very serious pair of spectacles. In any case, yes, I should be leaving because I do have a dinner to attend. Family business.”

“Please tell me your father isn’t in London.”

“I wouldn’t be in London if he was. The old bastard has been in a vile temper lately. Witch troubles, but that’s ever the case with him.”

“Then he needs to stop trying to burn them at the stake.”

“It’s not as if he succeeds. I think they like him trying, though. It keeps him busy and keeping old people active is helpful, so they say on the news. Witches like to be helpful, from what I’ve gathered, so their little games continue. Besides, what else is there to do in the gods-forsaken nowhere that he lives? I’ve told him, get out of that drafty fucking castle and buy a nice villa somewhere warm, but will he listen to me? No. All I get is a lecture about tradition then another on why my wearing color means he’ll never have grandchildren.”

“To be fair, that yellow jacket you own makes *my* sperm shrivel in second-hand embarrassment.”

“It’s not yellow, it’s goldenrod. And… I binned it. Shopping online while drunk isn’t a good idea.”

“No, it’s not. So, about that should be leaving business…”

“So testy tonight. Better take a pill or something for that before your date arrives or my revolting jacket won’t be the only thing making your sperm shrivel. I’ll hear from you tomorrow about my property?”

“If I get the chance. You’re not the only thorn in my side, you know.”

“I bet I’m the biggest one. If not tell me I am anyway, because my ego is actually large enough for that to be important.”

“You’re the biggest thorn in my side. Go away.”

“Always a pleasure, mano vyras. Enjoy your date.”

The vampire gave Greg a peck on the cheek, then sauntered away while the sorcerer sighed and checked his watch. That nonsense killed some time, as well as brain cells, so now he only had fifteen minutes to wait. Which was more than enough time for a pigeon to shit on his head, a surprise rainstorm to hit or the need to piss to reach crisis level. At least he didn’t have to worry about visits from annoying vampires. That was already checked off of his potential catastrophes
“Ah, Gregory. How good it is to see you.”

Greg turned at the sound of the familiar voice and smiled brightly. Mycroft was precisely on time and looking like a gorgeous dream come true.

“Mycroft! Good to see you, too. I’ve been excited for this all week.”

“As have I. A shared adventure is something to be cherished.”

“As are books.”

“Most certainly! And, tonight, we have both. Shall we?”

“I’m more than ready. Quick trip to the loo first, though?”

Something Mycroft was going to suggest himself, since he’s spent the past half hour riding through the streets of London because sitting at home waiting to leave for his date was making him too nervous to breathe and just being in motion within sprinting distance of the library had been a preferable option.

“An excellent suggestion. I would hate to have a… pressing concern… limit our enjoyment of our evening.”

Greg was always of a mind that good relationships had shared understandings, and this was one he could certainly put on that list. It was nice to have a list besides his catastrophes list with an item checked off for the night. That certainly boded well for things to come.

And, since Mycroft seemed to have the run of the institution, finding a convenient location to make themselves more comfortable was a quick affair, followed by a slate of introductions between Greg and library personnel, one of whom escorted them into the recesses of the collections to a rather large room, with several smaller rooms branching off on both sides that held the items there were there to see. Not that Greg needed an escort to find this treasure trove. He could feel the books, scrolls and artifacts calling to him every time he stepped inside the British Library and that call only intensified the closer he got to their carefully regulated location.

“Oh my, Gregory. This is… astounding.”

Greg nodded but wished with all his heart that Mycroft could see just how astounding it really was. See the wisps of magical energy floating through the room and glow of illuminated writing on the spines and covers of many of the books. This many powerful texts in one place was dangerous, but someone had designed the cataloging and storage system to diffuse the build up of synergistic forces. Probably one of his predecessors. It would need some revising and tidying at some point, though, or there’d be trouble, but there was time to see a knowledgeable, willing someone work their way into the library personnel structure and put things to right. Accomplishment! Already the visit was justified and not only because he’d probably be the one to have to deal with any potential problems that erupted when the wrong sorts of books were within insult-hurling distance and those insults took on a slightly more physical shape than silently-shouted words.

“I agree. I’d heard there was a lot here, but… this is a lot. Got your gloves on?”
Mycroft proudly held up his gloved hands, the gloves being provided by the library and a little extra bewitching provided by Greg so Mycroft wouldn’t be affected by the influence of any of the books and wouldn’t provide the spark of force needed to help one of them get up to mischief. Mycroft’s personal human energy was great enough that it paid to be cautious.

“Alright, then. Let’s get started…”

Greg could only hope that his eagerness wasn’t as ridiculous as it felt when he lunged towards one book that had already caught his eye, but since Mycroft’s lunge for another tome was just as comical, he decided that it really didn’t matter either way. And there was no possible way they’d look through all of this tonight. Which meant more outings to read, memorize, learn… and spend time with Mycroft. Really, this was what you found in the dictionary when you looked up the word ‘perfect’…

Mycroft Holmes did not believe in magic. Mycroft Holmes did not believe in hocus-pocus or hoodoo or spirit communication or any of the tommyrot pushed by the robe-wearing, crystal-peering mystics. However, it was more than apparent that many people though time did, and took it very seriously, as well. The books, the ones he could read, were not mad, feverish treatises on the subject… at least not all were… and it was fascinating to read through detailed, coherent passages which, if you read enough of them, had a strange logic to their narratives. Things began to make sense, in an odd way, to the point where he could see patterns, sense connections that were verified in some other text through which he browsed. Fascinating…

More fascinating still, though, was experiencing all of this with Gregory, who was positively transfixed and laser-focused on his inspections. It seemed almost criminal to interrupt the man to ask a question, though Gregory answered eagerly and with a depth of knowledge that was… he certainly needed to find another word than fascinating, but it was! Gregory presented as a typical, albeit majestic and delightful, shopkeeper, despite the nature of his wares, but tonight… he was as erudite and informed as any of the doddering old scholars at Oxford who had been working in their field since Elizabeth I was on the throne. The languages the man could read, the sigils he could decipher… could one be sexually excited by mental ability? Apparently one could because his libido certainly was shining its shoes and combing its hair in preparation for a fine evening once they were done here…

“Heavens… Gregory, do take a look at this.”

Greg shook his head to clear the memorization spell from the forefront of his mind, so he could concentrate on actually communicating, then immediately wished he hadn’t.

“Oh… that’s an ugly fellow.”

“Amusing. He looks exceedingly like you.”

That’s because it is me and fuck the world.

“Really? You think so? That’s not my nose.”

“That is absolutely your nose. And your eyes. The curve of your cheek. Maybe a touch wide of chin, but it is a drawing, after all.”

Now the fucking fae were trying to ruin his date! Stupid faeries and their premonitions. Why
couldn’t they keep their busybody selves to themselves? And why write it down? In a book, no less. With drawings!

“What does the text say, Gregory? I am most interested in this…”

Of course you are, Mycroft. And there’s that lovely aura of yours weaving the familiar net to catch my lies. It’s good at that. You should be proud.

“Apparently, this homely chap supposedly will be a sorcerer of the realm. Doesn’t say which realm…”

All true, though I know which realm but am not under any contractual obligation to share that information at this time.

“… and protector of the great city…”

Which is an arguable point since, some days, London is a bit crap.

“… from the forces of darkness and evil. Standard stuff, really.”

“What is the date of this text?”

“Ummmm… let’s see…”

And make a few more ummm sounds as I pretend to look about for a date when I’m really trying to convert the fae calendar into ours and I’m balls at maths.

“Looks to be 1710, if I’m reading this right.”

And my sums are correct.

“How astonishing. Will be a sorcerer of the realm, you said? The person who wrote this was making a prediction?”

“I…”

Should have thought faster and said is a sorcerer of the realm, but my brain is old and slow and I can’t blame maths this time, though I really would like to.

“… guess they are. Not uncommon, really. Like that Nostradamus fellow. Have some dream and write it all out, thinking you’ve had a vision of the future. The ‘60’s wasn’t the only era where people fancied their mind-altering drugs, either, so a mushroom here or undigested bit of potato like Scrooge and who knows what the mind tosses out.”

“What an astounding find! Gregory, you were foreseen centuries ago… quite the honor, I must say.”

The honor bit is debatable, but so is the astounding, since there’s a few predictive texts scattered about with a certain face besmirching their pages, but none are in London for you find, as best I know, so yippee.

“What’s that saying about monkeys and typewriters and Shakespeare? My monkey must have had a bit of charcoal and an eye for facial anatomy.”

“I am photographing this, sans flash to safeguard the document, but I can lighten it afterwards. A treasured keepsake and a most unexpected one, at that.”
How nice. Greg Lestrade now lives on Mycroft’s phone. Actually… that is nice. Stop being negative, brain. Look at how happy Mycroft is taking his snaps.

“How nice. Greg Lestrade now lives on Mycroft’s phone. Actually… that is nice. Stop being negative, brain. Look at how happy Mycroft is taking his snaps.

“Excellent. I shall, of course, provide you with a copy of the finished product.”

“My cat will probably shred it.”

“A digital copy.”

“That works. Shall we continue on?”

“Yes, and I shall keep a weather eye out for additional renderings of your noble visage.”

“And burn them.”

“Pish tosh. I would never stoop to burning a book. I would simply add them to my digital photo album.”

“And burn it.”

“Begone, foul spirit.”

Though said in jest, Mycroft’s stentorian order was something that Greg felt strongly enough that it made him step back in surprise. It wouldn’t banish a foul spirit or have much impact beyond being a ‘what the hell’ moment, like having a bug crash into your face, but it was an extremely formidable display for a non-magical person and made the previous assessment of ‘staggeringly powerful’ a certainty. Whatever Mycroft did in government, it wasn’t pushing a pencil… he was in something high-level and significant. Nothing else was possible.

“Yes sir, right away sir.”

Mycroft laughed at Greg’s repeated bowing as he walked away backwards towards the book he’d previously been examining, then took another look at the photo on his phone and the drawing that inspired it. What a marvelous thing to find, hidden away in a musty old tome. And how pleasant it was to feel… surprised. Surprised, whimsical, excited… he experienced those so rarely, with surprise being the more common though only in the manner of failing to predict how utterly stupid was this or that person in government, theirs or another. This was a jubilant surprise and… no, Mycroft Holmes did not believe in magic, however, if he carried on with the whimsical theme, he might allow himself to hope this was an omen. A good one, at that. Good enough that he was now, in the confines of his mind at least, proclaiming that not only would a third date exist, but it would come on swift wings.

Or, at least as swift as his and Gregory’s schedules could be made to properly align…

“That. Was. Amazing.”

Greg’s head was reeling from the hours they’d spent in the collection and he was actually surprised he still retained the ability to think well enough to form words of more than one syllable.

“I agree wholeheartedly. Such an enlivening and thought-provoking experience. I am positively chomping at the proverbial bit to return for a second examination.”

“When? Seriously, when. You tell me, and I’ll pack food and a nice bottle of whisky to keep
us company.”

Gregory was on board with another date! Their minds were laudably synchronistic.

“That can easily be arranged, perhaps on a day where we can have an earlier start.”

“Yes! Oh, that’s brilliant. And… we… well, we can do other things, too, if you like.”

That implied… Gregory was proposing additional dates. Beyond the agreed-upon three! This was a stupendously-successful turn of events!

“I would be delighted. I am greatly enjoying our time together and would appreciate further opportunities to indulge myself with your company.”

“Then want to start now? Or continue with the current now? It’s late, but not so late that there aren’t a few pubs open for a drink and quick bite if you’re hungry.”

“I would welcome both after our endeavors. I feel somewhat like a schoolboy who has devoted hours to revising for an exam and finds himself craving something edible or potable as a reward.”

“Then we shall award ourselves kingingly. I know a nice place not too far from here if you don’t mind a walk.”

“The night seems most conducive to a stroll. Mild, clear… the more cacophonous sounds of the city calmed to a gentle hum…”

Greg grinned at Mycroft’s words and knew in his core that Mycroft’s house was likely a very richly appointed thing, with plush rugs, thick draperies and heavy wood so the sounds of the world dimmed to nothing once he stepped across the threshold.

“You’ll definitely like this pub, in that case. Off we go?”

“Lead on.”

Greg skipped like a seven-year-old for a few steps, then giggled like one, too, while Mycroft sedately strode up to meet him and cock an eyebrow at the tomfoolery. Which, in truth, had pleased the British Government to no end. His companion’s arse was a thing of beauty when engaged in the act of skipping…

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“You’re right, Mycroft. A picture-perfect night for a stroll.”

“I’m somewhat relieved that my praise of the weather did not inspire some contrarian response that prompted a blizzard to descend upon us.”

“Weather’s a bastard like that. You have an off day and beg for something dark and rainy so you can curl up with a good book and, instead, it’s brilliant sunshine mocking you through the window.”

“A diabolically-cruel disappointment. I do enjoy a long rainy afternoon with a good…”

Greg’s mind did notice that Mycroft stopped walking the same moment he did, but didn’t process it fully since the rest of his brain was on alert from the very strong presence he was sensing up ahead, most likely in the alley to their left.
“Hmmm…”

“Uhhhhhh…”

“Gregory, do wait here a moment.”

What?

“What?”

“Please, wait here just a moment. I believe I… let me see…”

Mycroft began to walk forward and it took Greg’s still racing brain a second to realize it was sitting in a body that was continuing to stand there like a mannequin while its date was, apparently, off to investigate. This would not do.

“Hold on, Mycroft. Let me check things out, alright?”

“I think not.”

“I think yes.”

“Gregory… I am, first, well trained in self-defense and, second…”

“Second, I’m not shabby with that myself, so let me take a look ahead and…”

“I shall not risk your safety, Gregory Lestrade.”

“And I won’t risk yours, Mycroft Holmes.”

Both men glared at each other and threw up their hands when the other didn’t back down, which was followed by an in-stereo creep forward to the looming alley for a careful look around the corner to see what their senses were telling them might have a taste for ruining their pleasant night.

What neither was expecting, though Greg might have expected it a bit more than Mycroft, was an enormous, slightly luminous creature with spiraled horns that had in its platter-sized hands a young woman that Greg recognized as a witch from one of the local covens.

“Gregory…”

“You’re not crazy or hallucinating.”

“Oh good. Less for me to worry about.”

“That’s nice. Any chance I can convince you to run screaming from here and not look back?”

“No.”

“Didn’t think so.”

“Very well… stay here, Gregory, while I…”

“No, Mycroft… this is my area.”

“Whereas I will concede, though I may have a mental fracture upon later reflection, that this seems… magical in nature, the selling of books and crystals does not count as valid credentials for engaging in… mortal combat with a creature of supernatural persuasion.”
“Oh, those aren’t my only credentials.”

“No?”

“Ready to be amazed?”

“If the situation warrants it.”

“Fair. I’ll put on the best show I can.”

“Gregory!”

Greg stepped into the alley and drew in a breath. Another fucking demon. On date night! Whoever summoned this cock-blocker was going to get a right thumping when he had a free moment.

If he survived, that is. This one was bigger than the last one. And uglier. And he didn’t have two people to safeguard last time, either. Oh well, Mycroft couldn’t say their dates were boring. And he probably could plan an amazing funeral for overworked and underpaid sorcerers, if the situation arose…
Greg took a long look at the demon and was a bit puzzled by what he observed. First, it was a demon. Not that they were rare, but London saw one every six months or so, at best, and those generally weren’t running amok, so his involvement was limited to paying a call on the summoner to remind them about the seriousness of potential amok and that they should send the demon back to its realm as soon as possible because they were tricky bastards and found ways of escaping their binding spell to accomplish the aforementioned amoking.

This was two amok crises in a pitifully narrow timeframe and that was unusual. More unusual was the traces of the summoning spell that lingered on the beast. There were signs of that miserable shit Moriarty in the mix again, but… not the same as with Anderson’s attempt at being a demon master. It had been clear, in that case, that Anderson simply followed a ritual Moriarty had laid out for him, but this… this was taking a tool from Moriarty’s bag of tricks and manipulating it into something new. Something personalized to this particular practitioner.

And Moriarty wasn’t one to appreciate that in an apprentice. He liked his minions predictable and controllable. So… someone who had some association with the little fucker, but either severed it, like Anderson, or never stepped fully into an apprentice’s role. And he’d not heard of anyone like that milling about the city. Not that he’d heard of Anderson immediately, either, but it was strange that there were two people out there he’d missed. Ultimately, none of this was helping him with the immediate problem, but it was certainly something to investigate once he was done here. If he wasn’t dead, that is.

“Gregory! If your credentials are limited to standing still and staring, then kindly come back here and let me handle matters!”

Thank you, Mycroft. Both for your concern and for providing the necessary arse kick to set me in motion.

“You stay where you are. I’m… just readying myself.”

Greg drew in a breath and used the moment to decide on his first strike. With some demons, you could actually distract them with conversation, but this species wasn’t known for its interest in intellectual discourse. So, moving straight to Plan B.

Which made Mycroft’s mouth drop open as he watched the nearly blinding violet-white ball of energy fly from Greg’s hands and impact the demon’s large, horned head. The shock made the demon snarl angrily and drop the woman in his hands, who fell heavily to the ground. Dragging his dropped mouth behind him, Mycroft’s legs made an executive decision to launch forward and race past Greg, while the demon’s attention was focused on the person who had just interrupted his fun, to grab the dazed woman’s arm and pull her out of the alley and to safety, where she kept running, something that suited both Mycroft and Greg very nicely.

All of which Greg’s brain registered and filed away as a profoundly sexy bit of bravery by his date because now was not the time to think about sexiness but, if he survived, later would be a very good time to think about it. A lot. Now, his brain could think about the fact that Mycroft had just cleared a major problem out of his way since he didn’t have to worry about hurting the witch while he gave the demon a thumping. And… he had less worry about having to actively protect Mycroft, who did seem fairly capable of looking out for himself.

Realizing his captive had escaped, the demon let out a roar and pounded a large metal door so it
gained a deep, fist-shaped impression that quickly found three siblings joining the family. Another would have been added to the collection except the demon’s attention was brought back to Greg who had sent another energy ball its way, this one tinged green and resulted in the demon howling loudly and contorting its body as if in pain.

“Run along back to whoever summoned you and this ends now.”

The demon snarled, baring an unsettling mix of tearing and crushing teeth, and Greg translated it into the usual response he got when he gave a brutish demon the chance to scamper off and pout instead of continuing on.

“Ok, then.”

This next barrage wasn’t a single ball of power, but a thousand tiny motes of it, all swirling around the demon, laying little bursts of energy wherever they touched and lighting up areas of the demon’s exposed skin with a harsh sting that would certainly not be damaging, but would be distracting so Greg could concentrate on preparing a larger spell that involved, as Mycroft watched, a number of complex gestures and drawing patterns in the air that were visible as glowing threads of different colors, all of which weaved an intricate tapestry that exploded towards the demon like a launched missile and blew the creature back a full ten feet to crash into an unyielding brick of a wall erected when things were built to last.

Mycroft gave a small cheer which quickly died as the demon retaliated with an invisible blast of force that knocked Greg off his feet and had him rolling along the ground to finally stop very near the spot where he’d left Mycroft to watch the show. Which was going about as well as Greg had expected. He’d done this often enough to know what to expect. The variation was mostly in the level of power the demon possessed and this one, unfortunately, wasn’t a weakling.

Getting to his feet, Greg sent a quick spell forward that did nothing from Mycroft’s point of view, but temporarily blacked-out the demon’s point of view and started him flailing for the now-unseen enemy that had stolen his sight. This gave Greg the opportunity to send another spell forward, this one to attack not the demon himself, but the magic that had summoned him and acted as an anchor keeping him in this realm. Snap the tether and it’s easier to send the creature on its way. Though, ‘easier’ was a very relative term…

As the demon’s vision began to return, it quickly returned its gaze to Greg, who was busily preparing the next spell in his attack, and followed it’s instincts for basic combat to grab the closest thing on hand, which happened to be a metal post he tore from the ground, and sent it whirling towards Greg who almost dodged it in time. The ‘almost’ bit meant it slammed his shoulder and not his head, though the sickening crack as newly-healed bones snapped in protest of their mistreatment was not a welcome consolation prize.

With a muttered ‘fuck, not again,’ Greg diverted some of his energy to dulling the pain enough to continue fighting at peak capacity and choked off a shout as he quickly tested the mobility of his arm. Dulling was not a precise synonym for numbing.

“Gregory! Can you not defend yourself?”

Yes, Mycroft, I can, but every bit of energy that goes towards defense comes from offense and getting this bastard out of here is more important than me having to heal up afterwards in the comfort of my flat with lots of beer and telly.

“I’m alright!”
Except my shoulder isn’t really willing to move and preferring to play dead, so I’ll have to invest some energy into zombifying the fucking thing and that means more damage to heal later. What a great date this is turning into!

“Does the creature have any vulnerable areas?”

Oh good. Mycroft wanted to give it a bollocks kick. Well, it was a nice gesture. Actually, it felt good to be supported while he was being mangled.

“Maybe the eyes or…”

Greg never made it beyond the ‘or’ because Mycroft got to his small, concealed pistol first to unload the clip with pinpoint accuracy into the demon’s left eye. It wasn’t a powerful firearm but when used strategically could do a lot of damage. Such as enraging a now one-eyed demon who was feeling a creeping bit of worry from the sensation of bits of metal lodged in its admittedly not-very-useful brain.

“Oh… thanks.”

“You are most welcome. Now… do something.”

Strangely, the brief moment of banal conversation cleared Greg’s own head a bit and he took advantage of the demon’s disorientation by sending forward long ropes of energy that wound around the demon’s legs so it’s halting motions caused it to trip and fall to the ground with a heavy thud. It was a bit childish, but it gave Greg the necessary moment to use his functional and zombie arm to weave another gesture-based spell that erected a magical cage around the demon which, if it worked as expected, would continue to shrink in size, along with its prisoner, until it winked out of existence in this particular plane of existence.

Working as expected, however, did not include the demon somehow using the spell-based energy around his legs to short-circuit the new bit of magic which, as an additional benefit, freed his legs so he could rise, rip a door from its frame and hurl it at Greg, who succeeded at dodging, this time, by leaping out of the way and thudding loudly on the ground.

“Gregory! Roll right!”

Not hesitating a single second, Greg rolled to his right and avoided having a demon’s foot come crashing down onto him. A foot that had talons on the ends of its toes that could gut a person like a fish. Jumping to his own feet, Greg noticed a high-speed projectile colliding with the demon’s remaining eye and conceded that Mycroft’s aim with a shard of brick was as good as his aim with a firearm. Unfortunately, the brick didn’t have quite the effect and the eye remained in the game, turning towards the source of the irritation with a pointed gleam.

Greg felt no small amount of pride that Mycroft returned the demon’s glare full force and punctuated it with another hurled bit of masonry, which Greg gave an extra burst of speed so that it nearly traveled through the demon’s hand, which had been held up to shield its vulnerable eye. Unfortunately, that also gave the demon his own handy projectile that he dug out of his flesh and sent racing towards Mycroft who caught it in the flesh of his thigh.

“MYCROFT!”

“Focus, Gregory. Remain on his blinded side and… do your worst.”

Growling under his breath, Greg ran further to the demon’s left side, but his bilocated self moved right which garnered a greater share of the demon’s attention and kept him distracted a moment for
the sorcerer to fling what appeared to Mycroft’s eye to be actual lances of power, which penetrated the demon’s torso and made the creature sag to its knees. The next moment was difficult, however, for Mycroft to follow since three events happened at once. One was the right-side Greg flinging a large ball of blinding energy that was designed to do exactly that – flash blind the demon so that the second event could happen, which was the left-side Greg crafting a spell that enrobbed the demon in a thick shimmer of deep red energy that had the demon beginning to quiver with a strange, unrhythmic vibration. The third event was the left-side Greg being launched into the air by the demon’s own last bid to win the battle, and slam against a wall, his head crashing sharply with the brick before he fell in a heap at the back of the alley.

As Mycroft ran forward as quickly as his injured leg could manage he noted that the right-side sorcerer had winked out of existence the moment Greg hit the ground and it was only a few seconds more before the demon appeared to erupt in a shower of particles, none of which remained visible after the initial flash of light that accompanied the disintegration.

“Gregory!”

Mycroft looked for obvious signs of life and felt an enormous rush of relief that the sorcerer was still breathing. Hesitant to move him, for fear of neck or spine injury, Mycroft gently pulled open an eye to check Greg’s pupils, then wiped away the small trickle of blood from coming from Greg’s nose before softly tapping his cheek to stimulate some form of response, which came after a few moments in the form of a loud groan and fluttering of Greg’s eyes as he tried to find his way back to the conscious world.

“Gregory, try not to move. I will have an ambulance dispatched immediately.”

“N… no.”

“Yes. I have no idea the degree of your injuries, but am certain they fall squarely in the dire range of physical insult.”

“Oh, they are. But… no ambulance. I… I need to go home.”

“Eventually, that will occur, but only after you are discharged by the doctors.”

“John…”

“Doctor Watson, yes. I will have him meet us…”

“No, take me home… John… John will know what to do.”

“What to do? Gregory… Gregory, is John aware of your… secret?”

“Yeah and he… he can help. Got one of your… cars?”

Mycroft battled the urge simply to ignore Greg’s words and get the man to the nearest hospital, but wavered given the entire situation did not seem to be one with which Greg was unfamiliar. And if they often ended this way, or even occasionally ended this way, he would likely have a protocol in place to manage the outcome. Hopefully, that protocol would stretch to addressing the rather distressing situation that was his own leg. How fortunate they had yet consumed any alcohol, for the blissful effects could potentially make the already-worrying bleeding much more of a pressing concern.

“Very well. However…”
“Just… get me home, Mycroft.”

With a quick nod, Mycroft made a quick call, using the correct code so that his request was not only first on the list, which it always was, in any case, but the dispatcher would plan the route and tend to any pesky traffic signals or other botherations that might slow the vehicle’s trip. Watching Greg’s eyes close and not open again despite a few more small taps on his cheek, Mycroft place a second call, this one to John for nothing if not additional reassurance that this was the correct decision.

“Magicae Argentea.”

“John, Gregory is injured and asked to be brought back to his flat. Do you concur?”

“I… how was he injured?”

“In a battle with a creature of supernatural origin.”

John blinked at the phone in his hand and let the full ramifications of that sentence race through his mind.

“Oh. Ok… how injured is he?”

“One arm is certainly broken and… he suffered a terrible fall from a notable height after impacting a brick wall. He only regained consciousness for a short time.”

“Then, yeah, get him here. I’ll phone Anderson to cover the shop and get some things ready for when you arrive.”

“Very well. We shall be there shortly. Is there anything I can do in the interim?”

Normally, John would have said no, but Greg going unconscious was fairly rare even after a nasty battle, so the possibility of head injury was rearing its ugly… head. And, the person doing the asking was Mycroft, who had a bit of an edge over the average person Greg might escort out for the evening.

“Ummm… yeah?”

“Are you uncertain?”

“Well… how comfortable are you casting a spell?”

“Are you serious?”

“I am. You… I think you can do it. Most people wouldn’t be able to without training, but I think you might have a chance. It won’t hurt to try, at least. It’ll… protect him a little so if something is very wrong, like internal bleeding or a neurological injury that transport could exacerbate, they’ll stay steady for a short while. Long enough to get here, at least.”

“What must I do?”

“Is there any water nearby?”

“No.”

“Not a problem. Spit on a finger and draw this design on Greg’s forehead.”
John described a relatively simple symbol that Mycroft copied faithfully then had Mycroft carefully repeat a series of words three times before tracing the symbol again with a fresh bit of spit.

“Is there a sign should I observe, John, if this has worked?”

“Check his eyes.”

Mycroft quickly lifted an eyelid again and gasped that Greg’s eyes had shifted from brown to green.

“They are green.”

“Good. And bad. The good is the spell is working, the bad is there was something for it to actually work on. I need to get ready. He’ll be safe to transport, but… take normal care.”

“I will, John. Goodbye.”

Mycroft terminated the call and took a moment to reposition, so he was sitting on the ground rather than crouching which was making his leg bleed all the faster. And it would give him a more comfortable position from which to… think. Not that he particularly wanted to at the moment, but he would need to and for many reasons.

“Dear Gregory… we will see you healed and well soon. Then, I believe we need to have a little chat. It is exceedingly rare that the world offers me any surprises, but you have gifted me with a bevy of them tonight.”

The least of which was how in creation was he able to cast a spell. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy… many more things, indeed…
Chapter 16

Mycroft suspected, now and again, and that his driver slept in the car, so he was ever available when necessary. However, seeing him step out of the large vehicle at the mouth of the alley made Mycroft extremely happy for the atypical sleeping habits and committed him to purchase Charles whatever supplies were necessary to make his mobile bedroom as comfortable as possible.

Especially since Charles accepted none of his well-meaning but knowingly-foolish offers of help carrying Greg to the car and getting him settled. That Charles also accepted none of his well-meaning but knowingly-foolish refusals of help getting his leg fitted with a makeshift bandage was less of a joy, however, Charles in no-nonsense mode rivaled his own no-nonsense immovability, so resistance was something of a Sisyphean struggle for which he had neither the time nor energy at the moment.

“We’ll be at hospital in…”

“To Gregory’s shop, Charles.”

“Making note that you also have suffered a head injury, sir. Is there anything else I should know to inform the doctors on staff?”

“To the shop, Charles. This is a battle I have already fought and lost, though the loss was, in hindsight, a beneficial one as… as it is the correct decision.”

Charles honestly didn’t care if he lost his job because he made the right decision that Mr. Holmes or another person simply didn’t like or agree with, because sometimes it took a perspective outside the immediate bubble to see the truth and act upon it. If, though, Mr. Holmes had genuinely analyzed the situation, as opposed to acted on impulse or emotion then… regardless, he could always change his mind if the latter was actually the case. It was highly doubtful that Mr. Holmes would be physically capable of mustering much resistance to being dragged to hospital, though getting him into a hospital gown might require a brace of burly men. Or one standard hospital matron.

“To the shop, it is, sir. However, I will be standing by continually until satisfied that your beneficial loss is as beneficial as you claim.”

The possibility of someone learning of tonight’s events and the further events that would be necessitated because of them was not to Mycroft’s liking, but he had always acted on the principle that you expected the worst and planned accordingly, knowing those plans might never be called into action. If this was somehow all a mass delusion, then a car and driver who would take appropriate action was a resource he couldn’t afford to toss aside.

“Very well, though… I would remind… no, I would ask that you treat anything you see and hear as confidential. Extremely confidential.”

“Of course, sir. Not even Ms. Anthea will be apprised of any details.”

That really was the highest level of secrecy possible, so Mycroft was content. And that contentment was savored for a moment as a small, cool island in the large, hot sea of pain that was his leg, now that the adrenaline was wearing off and his body was helpfully providing an in-depth status report. This was going to be very difficult to explain in a manner that did not raise questions, but he was nothing if not exceptionally-talented at the weaving of credible explanations for
inexplicable matters.

But, that was a worry for another time. The only worry now was for Gregory and not a mote of attention would he spare for anything else. He had to hope, though, that his worry was sufficient a contribution because it seemed he had very little tangible assistance to offer. Not a feeling he enjoyed, but one he might have grown accustomed to if Gregory oft behaved as someone ripped from the pages of a fantasy novel, though the blood and pain were real and not constructs of ink and a writer’s overheated imagination…

Charles pulled the car to the curb squarely in a No Parking space and quickly moved to open the door, nearly colliding with a thin, bearded figure who was darting over to do the job himself.

“Sir? May I help you?”

“Oh… I’m… I’m the one here to help, actually. Greg, that is.”

Trusting his instincts that the person trying and mostly failing to smile confidently and genially at him wasn’t a threat, Charles opened the door and directed his new friend to assist Mycroft while he went to the other side of the car to tend to Greg. Mycroft was slightly less trusting, however, since the driver had two good legs to use for defense and he was reduced to one.

“Oh, I see. And you are?”

Mycro further hesitated accepting Anderson’s offered hand, given that hand seemed to be consciously trying not to tremble in what could be nervousness, worry or drugs-related issues.

“Philip Anderson, Mr. Holmes. Greg’s… I help in the shop.”

And was supposed to be minding the till, from what Mycroft remembered, but a quick look through the shop window showed a tall, blond, rather severe looking man doing the task instead.

“Very well…”

Finally accepting the necessary hands-on help, Mycroft heaved himself out of the car, having acquired a near arthritic stiffness from even the short ride, then turned attention to a Greg-toting Charles who was moving back to the pavement side of the car, sporting a look that was easily interpreted as ‘Where to, sir?’

“Lead on, Mr. Anderson.”

Mycro had expected to go through the shop which, in hindsight, was evidence his brain wasn’t fully recovered from the mental bludgeoning of the evening, but was assisted, rather unsettlingly, into an alley which, after a long look at Charles and a nod by Mycroft, Anderson continued along to an expanse of solid masonry where he made a gesture, then put a foot through with the caution to Mycroft and Charles to be careful on the steps. Steps that Mycroft only saw once he had put his head through the not-solid masonry and which lead downward to a door to the basement of the shop that Anderson opened after a few muttered words that acted as a key. The casualties and their porter were then led through the work area Mycroft had visited before, though he’d not had the good fortune to have his tour extended through another formerly-solid wall to their final destination, that being a second work area, this one now boasting a large and highly ornate circle drawn in the center.

The artist was just setting down his chalk when they stepped through and he motioned Charles to
lay Greg down in the center of his artwork, making note of a small cushion to place under Greg’s head. Anderson helped Mycroft to a chair, then stood by John while John helped him through an incantation that made the air shimmer for a few seconds along the perimeter of the circle. Once that was completed, John turned attention to the other combatant who his brain had been doing its best to remind him was not looking much better than the man on the floor and was very much awake to feel every bit of it.

“Alright… let me take a look at that first. You should have told me you were injured, too, Mycroft. This looks… bad.”

And John was an expert on what was and was not bad in terms of injury. Seventy quarts of blood staining a pair of trousers was one very useful bit of evidence for the level of the badness. Along with the fact that more was slowly dripping onto the stone floor.

“Inconsequential, at the moment. Kindly focus your attention on Gregory.”

John waved off Mycroft’s pomposity and took a moment to peek beneath the bandage.

“Yeah, ok… Greg’s on hold for a moment while I tend to this. You were lucky that an artery wasn’t severed, but… what is in there?”

Something that made Mycroft suddenly a little queasy now that he thought about it.

“A sample of London’s finest brickwork, married with an unknown vintage of demon blood.”

“Oh… definitely tending to you first.”

John moved immediately to doctor mode and did a quick examination that had some features Mycroft recognized and others that were unique to his experience, such as a close examination of his fingernails and having his shirt raised to view his back. The questions were also of the same vein, ranging from the status of his vision and feeling lightheaded to whether his teeth were tingling or was he craving the taste of mercury.

“The good news is I don’t see any immediate signs of poisoning and they usually appear fairly quickly, so I’ll assume whatever sort of demon you encountered was just a bruiser and not a venomous species.”

“And the bad news, Doctor Watson?”

“You’ve got a slug of brick in your leg.”

“Yes, that does qualify.”

“It’ll have to come out surgically, but I can do that here.”

“Mr. Holmes, I am beginning to feel the need to exercise my executive-decision emergency exit protocol.”

Mycroft smiled softly at the sternness of Charles’s tone and that the man wasn’t letting either what he had seen or heard muddy his mission. Some people were utterly undone by the smallest perturbation in their perceptions and then there was his driver who had witnessed a terrifying assortment of reasons much of what happened in government was hidden from public view and never so much as batted an eye. What was the discovery magic was real compared to that?

“Despite appearances, Charles, Doctor Watson is a certified physician and not one who has
self-applied the title to bolster his ego or assist in the selling of his snake oil and magical charms.”

John gave the driver a small nod and made clear note of the look in man’s eyes that enunciated a clear message about the importance of Mycroft’s welfare and the driver’s certain and painful retribution should that be, in any way, compromised. It wasn’t often that Captain Watson squirmed under someone’s glare, but this one was doing the trick. The ‘ok, message received’ throat clearing would be another in his collection of things never spoken of in this life or the next.

“And, as an actual doctor, I’ll give you something for the pain, Mycroft, and get the bleeding stopped for now, then do the excavation work after I’ve checked on Greg.”

“Very well, but do make haste. I… I am most concerned about him, John.”

A sentiment apparently shared by someone else who made a screeching leap into the room to howl and scratch at the edge of the magic circle until John gave Anderson instructions how to open it temporarily to let Balthazar though, where the cat made a long circuit around Greg’s prone body, sniffing, patting and making long, plaintive yowls before gently curling on Greg’s chest and purring loudly.

“Good heavens, Doctor Watson, remove that cat immediately.”

“Silence, human!”

Mycroft gaped at the evilly-staring cat, but found he couldn’t muster much surprise over the existence of a talking cat. His supply of surprise for the day was well and truly gone.

“You, feline, are impairing Gregory’s breathing.”

“I am healing him.”

“You are using him as a source of warmth.”

“Do not deride my methods.”

“Mr. Holmes, has your brother been turned into a cat?”

Mycroft and John both found themselves laughing at Charles’s small joke, if only to release some of the tension that Greg’s still-unconscious state was keeping at an uncomfortable level.

“No, but I shall ask Gregory if he can perform such a feat for I feel it might be a useful strategy when Sherlock is being especially nettlesome.”

The fact that the answer to the request could be ‘yes,’ was something Mycroft’s brain deigned not to chew upon with any appreciable fervor. All remarkable aspects of the evening were being shown to a comfortable suite in his mind, provided with refreshments, and politely asked to wait until they could be given further attention. Besides, John’s sticking him with a very non-magical hypodermic was far more attention getting. How such a small needle could make him wince given the agony that was his leg was utterly unfathomable.

“Ignore him, Mycroft, though, for the record, Balthazar generally doesn’t perpetrate any truly harmful offenses. Oh yes, the torn flesh, bitten fingers, shredded socks… but he holds his evil below the lethal level, if only to keep us alive to continue the torture. Now, this will help with the pain and Anderson will kindly smear on a little rather stinky paste onto a fresh bandage that will quiet the bleeding. While that’s happening, I’ll see about Greg.”
As Anderson busily mixed a selection of herbs with a few spoonfuls of a pale yellow goop, Mycroft focused on John, who was taking out a silver mirror and murmuring words over it just out of Mycroft’s range of hearing. He then said a few more words, these louder and more emphatic, before carefully stepping over the circle’s edge to begin his work.

“Might I ask, John, what you are attempting?”

“Strangely, something very much along the lines of what I’d do if Greg was in hospital. Do a basic physical exam, checking for both external and internal issues.”

“And, it is a minor thing, but why was the villainous feline excluded, but you freely crossed the circle’s boundaries?”

“For precisely the villainous reason. Balthazar… let’s just say he tends to set off black magic alarms and bring the gates slamming down.”

“Blatant discrimination!”

“Hush, cat. Thank you, John, I believe I understand and I appreciate the effort to keep Gregory safe.”

Though Mycroft was not as appreciative of Anderson shakily approaching him with scissors, so a quick glance to Charles had the driver intervening to do the necessary cutting of the trouser fabric to better expose the wound area while Anderson handled the non-sharp duty of dabbing the skin somewhat clean and applying the new bandage with its frosting of something that would normally have both Mycroft and Charles wrestling the perpetrator to the ground for the assassination attempt. The smell alone would kill a wild boar at thirty paces.

“Ummm… this is Greg’s and John’s special formula, Mr. Holmes. It’s dreadful to smell, but the bleeding will stop fairly quickly. Greg has a customer with clotting issues and this works very well when they have a cut. I saw it! So… yes, this is good stuff despite the smell.”

Mycroft had decided that Anderson’s nervousness was akin to what he had seen when some new assistant or junior minister had to participate in a meeting with individuals far higher in position and having far greater experience. A mouse among the hawks. With the mouse having to lead a discussion on the political ramifications of forming a hawk-raven alliance given the current anti-corvid sentiment within their feathered citizenry.

“Thank you, Mr. Anderson. You did an excellent job with the… distribution.”

Yes, Charles, that was the tone I generally reserve for speaking to Miss Hooper, but the poor man certainly would benefit from a few words of confidence. So, kindly stop smirking and return to… looming.

“Oh, thank you, sir. There’s so much to learn and… well, I’m doing my best.”

Mycroft smiled his ‘very good, Miss Hooper’ smile, which was blandly genial, but seemed sufficient a response to forestall further verbal commitment on his part.

“Philip, if you could check on the potion I’ve got brewing and… Charles, was it?... if you could lend a hand a moment?”

Mycroft gave Charles a small nod, prompting the driver to lose his jacket and hat and begin rolling up his sleeves as he carefully stepped over the circle boundary and knelt near the squatting John.
“Thanks. What I need from you…”

“I will not be moved!”

“…is move the cat, then help me get Greg’s outerwear off. Try not to wince at the state of his underpants, which are probably not a sight for sensitive eyes.”

“Doctor Watson, might I ask…”

“Physical exam, Mycroft. Just like going to your own physician, but I also need some bare skin for a bit of artwork, non-permanent, so don’t worry he’s getting a tattoo, and this will also make it easier to see inside.”

“P… pardon?”

John grinned and tapped the mirror on the ground next to him.

“My own device. Not an original idea, but I’ve worked hard to improve the spells, so it’s a proper diagnostic tool. It doesn’t let you visualize things quite like standard medical technology, but gives you information on what’s wrong and where, soft and hard tissues, alike, so it’s a bit of a Swiss Army knife.”

“Oh… interesting. Why did you not use it on me?”

“You’re not magical. It creates a sympathy with the magic in a sorcerer, witch, fae, vampire…”

“Good lord! They… exist?”

“Faeries and vampires? Oh yes. Lots of other things that go bump in the night, too. You’ve fallen into the deep end, Mr. Holmes. Hope you like to swim.”

John’s cheery smile had Mycroft’s mind briefly flitting with the idea of having the man’s taxes audited but decided against it in the spirit of camaraderie. Or, truthfully, in the spirit of very much wanting a trained medical man easily accessible to Greg given the rather violent reality of his life. Having Doctor Watson languishing in prison for the glorious nitpickery the tax collectors could manipulate when suitably motivated would not accomplish that feat…

Mycroft watched closely as John worked, first drawing symbols with a pale, white-silver fluid on Greg’s body, which Mycroft also watched closely for said body was nothing short of glorious to his mind, then used the mirror to examine every square inch of Greg’s still-unconscious form. Then, a little of the newly-prepared potion was dripped into the sorcerer’s mouth and the mirror scanned over him a second time, after which John set it down and sighed.

“Well, John?”

“Ummm… we’re back to good news and bad news, but I’ll start by saying he’s not dying and nothing is beyond repair.”

The sag of relief John saw in Mycroft’s frame only spotlighted how worried Greg’s date had been about his welfare. At some point, he’d get more information about the date, prior to the surprise ending, and he suspected Greg would be positively giddy about it.
“He’s got an assortment of bruised organs, but none immediately preparing for failure so no tasty snacks for Balthazar, his arm and shoulder are snapped like twigs, but ribs came through fine this time… can’t, unfortunately, say the same about his skull.”

Mycroft’s posture returned to bolt-upright and rigid and he shot a look at John that said the order to speed Greg to hospital, regardless of any other complicating factor, was rising quickly.

“Calm down… even with a non-magical person, a skull fracture isn’t necessarily as bad as you’d imagine. Basal fractures and a few other issues aside, they usually heal well with a minimum of fuss and the victim suffers a headache and not much else.”

“Is that why he remains unconscious?”

“It may be contributing to it, but I think it’s more… he’s drained.”

“Drained?”

“Like a battery. Greg battled one of those fuckers not very long ago and was just bouncing back. What’d he do tonight? Magic-wise I mean?”

Mycroft described the battle as best he could, not knowing the proper vocabulary for Greg’s actions.

“… and there could have been a plethora of other actions that I simply did not notice or was not able to notice, of course.”

“Yeah, that’s a lot. And in a short time, too. Normally, Greg would prolong an encounter, so he could moderate his energy use, but it sounds as if speed was important, so… he overextended. A person may be able to do a 5k run in full sprint, but they’ll be a mess by the end of it. No permanent problems, don’t worry about that, he’ll just need rest to heal and build up his reserves.”

“I see. I suppose, that is not a truly devastating diagnosis, taking the long view.”

“And you’re right. Before you ask, yes, he can be killed, yes, he can be permanently injured, though it’s terribly hard to accomplish, but Greg and other sorcerers are hardier for some things than the rest of us.”

That piqued Mycroft’s curiosity, especially given John’s burgeoning connection to Sherlock.

“The rest of us? You are not…”

“Magical? No, not at all. Anderson is. New to the game, but he’s got magical talent. I don’t, but that doesn’t mean magic is entirely off limits for me. It’s just harder, a lot harder in some cases, and there is a great deal I simply can’t do at all or nearly at the scale of someone born with the talent.”

“Ah. Is that why… I was able to perform a spell on Gregory?”

“Yes, actually. Normally, that would have taken a lot of practice and training, but…”

John paused and looked hesitant, mostly because Greg could do a much better job of explaining it, but since Greg wasn't available, the lazy sod…

“… first, I had the impression you were very detail-oriented and meticulous. The symbols you drew and words you spoke have to be done very precisely or it won’t work. Second… being non-
magical is like being magical… there are degrees of it. Or not, since that’s not quite the right idea. It’s more that there are degrees of human energy, which sounds wrong because magic practitioners can be human, too. But… you know how some people are more powerful than others? I’m not talking about position or money, but personal power that exists no matter what you do for a living or how much money you have. The person that everybody stops to listen to when the speak. The one who steps right into positions of command, even if it’s just organizing a flower sale for the church. Some people have power. It’s not magic, but it is power. The strongest, most consequential sorcerers have both, but the non-magical can use their human power to make doing the magic we can do easier.”

And your level of power is staggering, Mr. Holmes.

“And… you are saying I…”

“Are you going to embarrass yourself by asking if you’re a powerful man?”

No. No, that would be foolish. However, it was an intriguing point and one certainly worth reflecting upon in the future.

“No, I was simply going to remark on how unusual it is, therefore, to see magic not practiced more freely.”

“Really? I think you, more than anyone, would realize the chaos of that happening.”

Yes, he could and Mycroft frowned that his attempt to save face further besmirched it.

“You are correct. I suppose… I am simply not at my best right now.”

That much John believed and he stood, thinking a moment, before organizing both Anderson and Charles into a crack medical team to work on gathering necessary supplies, both magical and traditional, in preparation for both Greg’s and Mycroft’s treatments. Then, seeing the oddly sad sight, lifted Balthazar, who had spent the past several minutes sitting just outside the circle never taking his gaze from Greg’s form, and replaced him on Greg’s chest. If Greg’s condition suddenly took an unexpected turn, there was little doubt the cat would sense it and alert him while he worked on Mycroft. Besides… warmth and comfort had their own healing properties, even if the recipient wasn’t conscious to notice…

Medical procedures had never been an area of pressing interest for Mycroft Holmes, so viewing the surgery to remove the brick from his leg was somewhat unsettling, though the various efforts John had taken to mask the pain were doing their job and doing it well.

“Ok, that’s you sorted. I’ll do what I can to speed along the healing, but you’re not Greg, so it won’t happen nearly as quickly. I’d use crutches for a few days to lessen the strain on your leg and I’ll prescribe some additional painkillers to see you through the worst of it. When Greg’s awake and regaining his energy, he can do more, but I’d ask you to refuse his help, which he’ll undoubtedly offer, for at least a couple of days.”

“I shall not do a thing to further stress Gregory. Might I inquire, though, how long it shall be before he regains consciousness?”

“Hmmm… Balthazar? Anything to say on that score?”

The cat reached out a paw and batted Greg’s nose, which twitched in response.
“Another hour or so.”

“There we have it. We’ll move him up to his flat before then, but I’d rather not take him outside the circle until the last possible moment. It helps concentrate the healing magic and protects him from outside forces. Not that I anticipate any of the later, but it’s always possible someone catches wind of Greg being vulnerable and tries to get at him.”

“Then leave him there, if he is in danger.”

“Once he’s awake, it’s not as much of a worry and Greg being comfortable so he may actually stay off his feet for a bit is more important. A pants-clad, peevish Greg will make nobody happy.”

“He shall receive the full rest he requires, worry not.”

The adamancy of Mycroft’s tone made it difficult for the three other people in the room to not give him a knowing smile, though Balthazar laughed loudly and with a great deal of knowing, but it did make John wonder how well Greg was set up for an overnight visitor. And what was the state of his sty. Mycroft seemed to be a very tidy man...

“Ok… well… I’ll see what I can do to cover as many hours in the shop as possible, since Greg doesn’t like it to close if there’s any possible way to avoid it, but…”

“I’ll help.”

John smiled at Anderson, but wondered if Greg would smile since the sorcerer being off his feet, again, meant certain things wouldn’t get done and that translated into products not being made which further translated to lost sales. But, they certainly weren’t strangers to lean times for one reason or another.

“Great! Let me talk to Greg about what he can absorb right now for wages and…”

“That is not a concern, Doctor Watson. Do what you must to maintain the function and profit of the shop and I shall see the initiatives funded.”

Anderson cut eyes towards John and John sent a ‘well, there you have it’ shrug his way. Not that John minded, of course. There was little doubt Mycroft Holmes was a wealthy man in the particular stratum of wealth where paying a week of shop wages was roughly equivalent to funding a new tie for himself. Maybe less. Probably less. Mycroft had nice ties.

“That would be a great help, thanks. I’ll put a schedule together. Sebastian might be willing to put in a little time, too…”

Anderson saw Mycroft’s confused look and helpfully pointed upwards, smiling at Mycroft’s little nod of acknowledgement.

“Whatever is required, John. Gregory would be most upset if his business suffered due to his situation.”

A situation that, Mycroft had been mulling, was very likely this severe because of him. Would Gregory have engaged in such a fast and ferocious battle if he was not present? Potentially, given the presence of the young woman, but he could have made himself absent after pulling her from the scene and allowing Gregory the peace of mind that there were no bystanders to protect. Ultimately what was done was done, for whatever reason, but he could certainly see that the man’s suffering did not extend to a financial downturn. Heavens knows he was suffering sufficiently as it was.
“If you have a moment to provide the prescription, Doctor Watson, I will dart out and have it filled so Mr. Holmes has his medication readily on hand.”

John nodded at Charles and it just registered fully in his brain that another non-magical person was now privy to their little secret. However, he also suspected that if Mycroft trusted the man’s discretion, that trust was well placed.

“That would certainly help. I don’t keep more than an emergency supply of potent stuff here, as any doctor might, and what I’ve given him will start to wane a bit before morning. I’ll put antibiotics on the list, too, though the poultice that’s over the injury site also helps ward off potential infection. It’s not foolproof, though, so a two-pronged attack is smart.”

While John moved to grab his prescription pad from his bag and Anderson began tidying the various bits of used this and dirty that laying about, Mycroft took a deep breath and let his brain begin processing data to plot a course of action. For the immediate future, that is. Gregory would need care, that much was certain. Yes, there were individuals, apparently, who were prepared to offer as much help as possible, but… he felt a strong urge to be a vital component of whatever might be required. So, he would need clothing, toiletries, his laptop, and…

… to create a story that would satisfy Anthea, who he would need to rely upon, as always, to maintain the smooth function of government regardless of his personal state at the moment. It might be only for a day or two, but any absence from his office was looked upon with suspicion and her demands for explanation were both clamorous and saturated with the foulest forms of extortion. Oh well, it would not be difficult to use his time tonight to put into the appropriate location a police report concerning some form of accident or ill-fortune to support whatever story he might concoct. Because she would check. She would not be Anthea if she did not and being Anthea was an especially helpful thing at present for one demon- mauled bureaucrat and his…

That damnable book! Oh, Gregory… sorcerer and protector of the great city… you do have some explaining to do, do you not? Well, rest assured I shall be present to hear every word of it and know well that every word is precisely what I expect to hear…
Chapter 17

“Ugh…”

Mycroft looked up from his laptop at Greg’s gurgle of resurrection and smiled gently at the man who looked very much as if he was waking up from a long night of revelry involving excess quantities of food, drink and roguish mischief. He had made himself as comfortable as he could in a chair by Greg’s beside and was filling the time with work and concealing the details of his night from Anthea. Charles had dutifully filled a bag with necessities for him to spend the night, and a few more if necessary, so he could provide what assistance he could to the one person in the building more injured than his own sad self.

“Remain calm, Gregory. You are in your flat, in your bed and John has already taken steps to advance your recovery.”

Greg kept his eyes closed and let himself take a deep breath and reflect for a moment on this tidbit of information. First, it was given in Mycroft’s voice. That was interesting as it implied he was either hallucinating or Mycroft was in his bedroom. At this point, it was even odds either way. Second, the implication by the hallucinated or real voice was that he’d been completely unaware of John working on him. If disembodied voice was a hallucination, then that could be a lie and he was still in the alley, waiting for the demon to bring an abrupt end to his tragically misspent life. If said voice was Mycroft, then he’d been out a long time, which was worrying, but not preparing to meet a violent death, which was the opposite of worrying, so… he’d been going somewhere with that, but his brain had wandered away and got lost in the weeds.

“Might you be able to take some water? John was clear that you must stay hydrated.”

Brain shuffles to the edge of the weeds and peers out cautiously to have a go at thinking again. This, his brain decided, was real. His hallucinations surely wouldn’t disappoint him by being so boring that they’d bring up hydration and have it spoken about in tones a person might use with some poor old thing who needed a bit of encouragement when they had a confused moment.

“Beer?”

Mycroft let out a long, relieved breath and cleanly excised a measure of his concern to consign to the dustbin. Only a sliver, though, because there remained an enormous number of concerning issues to address, though, admittedly, he hadn’t had beer as an item on his list.

“I think not.”

“It’s got water in it.”

“As well as alcohol and suffers a paucity of nutrients, neither of which is advised, given your condition.”

“That sounded very professional, Doctor Holmes.”

“You are gravely injured, Gregory, and must take due care. Let us begin with water and use more potent potables as motivation to follow John’s instructions so you improve to the point where you may have a beer of your choice.”

Greg started to make a loud rude noise, then winced at the pain in his head, and continued on softly, but with added duration to preserve the original sentiment.
“Behold! Already the idea of your small treat is bolstering your vigor. Here, I have a glass of cool water at the ready as well as a straw to help you drink. Now, do not turn your head, I shall facilitate your drinking.”

Mycroft was surprised at the supply of straws on hand in the kitchen, but it pointed, unhappily, to Greg being often in need of a bendy straw to manage drinking while reclining. Or the man simply liked straws. He did seem to have a rather whimsical side that might find such a thing amusing. It was heartening to see, though, that sense of whimsy confined to things like straws and the few framed film posters on the walls. The rest of the flat was satisfyingly mature and sedately masculine, both being characteristics of dwellings…and men…that had his unwavering approval.

“There. This shall remain close by, so do notify me when you again require it. What else… the temperature of the room? Is it comfortable for you?”

In truth, Mycroft had no idea what one did while acting as nursemaid to an injured party, at least, not beyond the immediate care necessary to see the injured party to safety and hand them over to more appropriate hands. The longer-term matters were something of a mystery, but he was determined to see this one through to the final page.

“It’s fine. I’m… you…”

“Pardon?”

“I… had thoughtus interruptus.”

“That was not helpful for clarification.”

“Didn’t really help me, either. My brain slipped off the rails a moment because it remembered what happened to you and that…I know you didn’t bleed out and die, because ghosts can’t fool me, even with my head being a little fuzzy, but… are you alright, Mycroft?”

Which was a thought now dragging Greg’s brain further out of the weeds because… Mycroft had been hurt. Not a tiny ouchie, either, but a nasty sort of hurt that made people squirm and cringe in their seats when they saw it happen in a film.

“John kindly tended to my leg and provided a most agreeable quantity of pain medication, so I am not experiencing undue discomfort. A few days with crutches and another few with copious rest for my leg, will see me well on my way to putting my little scratch behind me.”

“Scratch! You took a brick in the thigh!”

“Pish tosh. Merely a sliver of masonry. Naught but a memory.”

“Look at you trying to be chipper and pithy. That either means your leg is far worse than you’re saying or I’m far worse than I’m feeling and you’re trying the jolly-along technique to keep me in good spirits while I die.”

“Somehow, I suspect you would know if you were in imminent danger of death.”

“Uhhh… yeah. Probably so. My head feels a bit deadly, though. And my arm… how many pieces is it in? Are they all still attached, or did a few fall out along the way?”

“You retain ownership of the entirety your appendage, though the continued attachment to your torso is mostly attributable to the stalwart actions of your soft tissue as the bones are rather unwilling to perform their appointed duties.”
“Yeah, I knew it when it happened. Splintered like a dry-rotted beam hit by a speeding lorry.”

“Yet… I saw you continue to use that arm during battle.”

“Oh… ok, true. About that, I… did what I had to do.”

Greg had endued more unpleasantness in his lifetime than he could even remember, so he shouldn’t be squeamish about much in this world, but imagining what was going on under his skin as he forced the splintered bones to continue to work made his stomach roll. Some things are just gross…

“You used magic?”

Greg made a face Mycroft generally associated with men whose partner just caught them eating the last piece of cake when said partner had already staked a claim on it, complete with a toothpick-supported sign that said ‘Hands Off! This Means You, Kevin!’

“I… yes. There are certain spells I knew I’d have to use and they’re gesture based. Some spells use one hand and arm, but others need two operating together, so I dulled the pain and gave it some help to stay moving.”

“That would have resulted in a significant amount of extra damage to the tissues.”

Hence the grossness. Glad he and Mycroft were so complementary in their thinking.

“True, and it did, but… we won!”

*This* look was one Mycroft generally associated with men named Kevin who, having been caught eating the last slice of cake, was claiming a moral victory by saving their figure-conscious partner the additional calories. Life went downhill for Kevin after that, but Greg still had hope.

“Yes, we did, however…”

“What else is on my buggered-beyond-belief list? My handsome face doesn’t feel rearranged, so I am hoping that’s one worry I don’t have on my plate.”

Mycroft glared at Greg who did his best to communicate with his eyes that he was a guileless, childlike man whose simple brain couldn’t manage conversation with any greater depth than the day’s sports results, so let’s stick to easy, concrete things, what say? Nobody wants to end up like Kevin, do they?

“Very well. In sum, you suffered the expected assortment of abrasions and contusions, as well as general internal perturbation and… a fractured skull.”

Even Greg had to concede there was no way to be a silly arse about a fractured skull and not seem… well, like a silly arse.

“Lovely. That does explain the headache, though. John seem overly upset about it?”

“No, which I do admit, left me uneasy, if only because… well, there is little worse sounding than a fractured skull.”

Again they were thinking alike! That was nice… and he’d take all the nice he could get right now because his body wasn’t giving him any nice, whatsoever, to speak of.

“If John’s not calling in more experienced healers, then it’ll be alright. I trust his judgement.”
I’m still worried about you, though. That was a nasty wound.”

“It has been dealt with and if you trust John’s judgement, then extend that trust to his work on my little scratch. I would suggest, in addition, you provide a word of thanks and encouragement for your Mr. Anderson. He seems… as if he could benefit from it and he was most helpful through the proceedings.”

“Anderson stepped in? Well… good for him! John guided him through things?”

“Yes, though it was apparent that without John’s help, the man would have had little idea what to do. He seemed somewhat overwhelmed by it all, but carried on, nonetheless.”

“He’s new at all of this and I doubt he’s ever seen any healing work, let alone participated in it. That was actually a good learning experience, though. Lots of new techniques to learn and having to practice working quickly and precisely. I’ll have to have to quiz him later to see how much he retained. Poor man probably thought he was done with exams when he left school, but life’s all about surprises, some better than others. I’m fairly generous with my expectations, though, so I suspect he’ll earn his credits. If I were him, I’d bribe me, though, just to be certain.”

Something had been scratching that a corner of Mycroft’s brain and he had been working behind the mental scenes to attribute it to a specific source. It had taken a few moments, but he felt he had found his answer.

“Gregory… how much… energy… are you using to maintain your current level of, shall we say, joie de vivre?”

There wasn’t any of the cheeky little boy in Greg’s eyes as he looked back at Mycroft and he finally nodded when he realized Mycroft wasn’t likely to let the issue lie.

“Probably more than I should be. I… I didn’t want you to worry.”

“I will worry regardless, so please do not do yourself further harm. Rest, Gregory. That is what you need most at the present time.”

After another sharing of pointed looks, Greg sighed loudly, and Mycroft immediately noticed the difference in the man. It was as if the sun had lost half of its brilliance.

“I hate feeling weak.”

“So do we all, however, there are times we cannot ignore the situation.”

“You’re ignoring your leg.”

“No… I am heavily medicated. It is doing the ignoring for me.”

Greg laughed weakly and remembered just in time not to shake his head and roll his eyes. His own poor, broken melon wouldn’t thank him for it.

“John’s good for that. You talked to him, I take it. About… things.”

“Yes, about things. The good doctor has been most informative and very helpful with my understanding of… well, a large number of startling matters.”

“Which you… I suppose you have questions.”

“I do, but not ones I feel I need to pursue at this point. John has been most accommodating
with information and any questions I have he can answer, no doubt, until you have had time to reinvigorate.”

Greg could see, in full, living color that Mycroft was nearly bursting to find out more about what he’d seen and learned tonight. His aura was reaching out like an octopus to ensnare him with long tentacles of extreme curiosity, but those tentacles stayed just at the edge of gaining what they wanted because Mycroft put this old sorcerer’s welfare as a higher priority than satisfying his lust for knowledge. That was... he didn’t know what that was, but it said good things about how Mycroft felt about him. The man didn’t seem the sort to squander things like compassion and sentiment. Besides, he had questions of his own and not nearly enough energy to dig for answers. Questions like why was Mycroft carrying a firearm and how he could hold his own, so to speak, in a battle with a demon. And those were only the most recent ones! A long talk, with both of them feeling well enough to have that long talk loomed large in the future…

“Fair. I’m not feeling very invigorated at the moment, truth be told. Beer would help with that, though.”

“I suspect and will verify with the good doctor that beer does not possess healing properties suitable for your various infirmities.”

“Completely untrue. It’s the elixir vitae.”

“It is not. Especially not the sort of beer I have observed in your kitchen.”

Shit. Mycroft had seen his crap beer. Any illusion of him being a genuine man of taste and sophistication was officially shattered.

“Ok. You have a point.”

“Consider it an incentive that if you are a good patient, I shall purchase for you something worthy of a celebratory drink.”

Given Mycroft was a genuine man of taste and sophistication, Greg was more than eager to snatch at that particular brass ring.

“I like that idea. You have the best ideas in the world, Mycroft, you really do.”

“Then we have an accord. Now, is there anything that I should report to John about your condition? He did wish to be kept informed.”

Everything hurts and I long for death.

“Nothing really. Nothing at all.”

No! Don’t grab my lies you fucking aura! Miserable mystical octopus…

“You are lying.”

“I am?”

“And doing a terribly poor job of it.”

“Oh. Should I try harder?”

“Gregory…”
“Truth – I feel like shit. Truth – this isn’t unusual or unexpected.”

Exactly what Mycroft had already surmised, but hearing and watching Greg say it himself confirmed, to his own mind, that more was not being held back.

“But it is useful information and precisely the sort of thing that should be reported to John, so he is aware of your current status and has a benchmark for further evaluations.”

“Yes, Mum.”

“I do look most fetching in a colorful frock.”

Greg giggled softly, and his brain shifted to a gear it hadn’t used since he woke. That was the ‘date’ gear. They’d been on a date, a wildly successful one, before it all went to hell in a lovely handbag to match Mycroft’s frock. And Mycroft was here. Still here. Keeping a watchful eye on him. Meaning Mycroft hadn’t been put off by what happened or what he’d seen and experienced. Further meaning… good things. Very good things. Extremely very with a dollop of cream on top good things.

“Gregory, are you trying to dance?”

Must remember not to shimmy in bed when, first, you have something attached to you only vaguely called an arm and, second, a not-blind person is in the room to see you do it.

“Ummm… no. Scratching my bum on the bed.”

That came out of his mouth? Longing for death even harder now…

“I advise that you not do that again. The jostling is certainly not advised for your condition.”

“Man has an itch, man has to scratch.”

“Verbalize your need and I will tend to the scratching for you.”

If sweet, sweet death is upon me, let it be accompanied by a bum scratch from Mycroft.

“Even my bum?”

Mycroft glowered for a second, then let a smile creep out onto his lips that would have set Greg’s brain into the gear above the ‘date’ gear, which was the ‘post-date-filthy-sex’ gear if a single piece of equipment involved in the post-date filthy sex was operational at present.

“Most especially your bottom. Once, of course, John approves a range of motion that allows you to roll onto your side so I might reach it.”

Mycroft was the master of practical and sexy, which was a combination that had Greg’s wholehearted endorsement.

“Fair.”

“In the meantime, I will make my report to John.”

“And then?”

The words slipped out faster than Greg could stop them, but he was able to hold back the ‘you’re not leaving, are you’ and, to his mind, salvage a wafer-thin slice of dignity.
“And then, I will return to matter on which I was working, and you will continue to rest.”

Mycroft nodded towards his laptop which Greg now noticed and stared at a moment because it reminded him that he had work to do, too, and, also, that it meant Mycroft had seen the laptop brought to his flat. Which implied Mycroft wasn’t planning a quick getaway. There was a lot of happy thoughts to grow from that bit of fertile soil. Normally, he healed up on his own, with the occasional visit by John to check on his progress, but… having Mycroft here was comforting in a way he couldn’t quite describe, but valued, nonetheless.

“Oh no, the human is still here.”

Greg didn’t need to turn his head to know who was speaking and easily shot his rude gesture in the direction and height of the invading cat.

“We agreed that you would leave Gregory to rest for…”

Mycroft checked his watch so as to be precise.

“… a further hour and fourteen minutes.”

“I was bored.”

“Boredom does not abrogate our agreement. Paragraph two covers that in some breadth.”

“The entire negotiation was based on Sir SagsaLot being crippled and weak and pitiful. Two out of three of those aren’t true, so I consider the contract null and void.”

“Untrue. Gregory is still very weak and the term ‘crippled’ is a most malleable one, easily molding to fit this particular situation.”

“I notice you didn’t argue the pitiful bit.”

“I do not waste time on nonsense.”

“Then why are you nannying Greg?”

Balthazar’s shrieking and hissing were far more dramatic than necessary when Greg eked out enough power to toss the cat out of the room and shut the door behind him, but if he had to be evicted, Balthazar was not one to let an opportunity for drama stroll by without snatching it.

“Gregory… that took a visible toll on your well-being.”

Mycroft glared at the ashen-faced sorcerer, who mustered the strength to make his best sad puppy face, with a wobbly lower lip tossed in for extra punch.

“I believe the term ‘pitiful’ must now be fully seated as a final member of the unholy trio of your physical condition.”

“Mean Mycroft.”

“Would you, for the next occurrence, simply ask me to remove the cat?”

“He might kill you.”

“Is… I feel rather strange asking, however…”
“Could he? Probably. He’d likely just maim you, though. Can’t mock the dead. Well, you can, but it’s not as much fun if they can’t hear you.”

“Ah. You previously did, however, mention ghosts.”

“Shit. You’re right. How’s your haunting skills?”

“Stellar. Ahem… I wear the chain I forged in life, I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free-will, and of my own free-will I wore it.”

Mycroft’s anguished face and raised hands of sorrow had Greg laughing, which was its own magic for raising both his spirits and his energy level. Apparently, Mycroft Holmes was very good medicine for his poor, battered body and soul…

“I’m convinced! And… yeah. You can move the cat next time.”

Not an admission Greg wanted to make, but it’s shouldn’t have dragged him almost back to sleep just to give the bastard cat and one flimsy door a magical shove. He was at that frightening almost-invisible deep red line when your phone was two heartbeats away from leaving you disconnected from the world and if his body had to disconnect him from that world for a few hours to show him the error of his ways, it appeared very willing and able to do it.

“Thank you. That might, just might, warrant a chocolate reward.”

“Chocolate?”

“Very.”

“Gasp.”

“I concur.”

“Now?”

“I shall obtain it in a trice. First, let me speak with John.”

“Could you make that half a trice?”

“I shall do my best.”

Greg winced slightly seeing Mycroft reach down for the set of crutches that Greg had failed to notice and carefully stand to make his slow way out of the bedroom. HAD to remember that he wasn’t the only injured person here and, in truth, Mycroft had the worst of it because, after a few days of rest, he could accelerate his healing and very likely be back to normal before Mycroft’s leg could support the man for a long day on his feet. Unless, of course, he did something to help with that. Which he could do and without a great deal of effort. It was actually easier than healing himself, because healing himself used his own energy, but giving Mycroft’s healing boost used Mycroft’s energy, instead. Of course, he had to expend that initial infusion of power to get the ball rolling, but it wasn’t something he couldn’t manage with a minimum of fuss.

Especially if the fuss was for Mycroft. Who, after two dates, was voluntarily taking care of him. That said something. Could be pity, but pity didn’t sound nearly as nice as attraction, affection or any other delightful ‘a’ words. Like arousal. That was a good one. He’d keep that one in mind, especially since Mycroft might, must might, be bringing back chocolate…
“So… we meet again, human.”

Mycroft looked down at the cat, who was fixing him with a look that would have been called a sneer if it was on a human face.

“Given you are outside Gregory’s bedroom door and I would have to exit at some point, the situation is a highly predictable one.”

“You know what’s not predictable?”

Balthazar moved slightly so Mycroft could see what he’d been sitting on. Which was Mycroft’s mobile.

“Where did…”

“I am the night!”

Grabbing the mobile in his teeth, the cat raced away towards the conveniently-open door to the flat and Mycroft heard its feet padding down the steps towards the shop. That cat… now that he thought about it, he had only noticed the animal after it spoke, not before. The nefarious feline… his mobile had been in his jacket, which was slung over a chair in the bedroom. What else had it stolen? Probably his wallet. It’s what Sherlock would have done. Marvelous. Now he had to retrieve his phone before the foolish creature mobilized the military to invade Disneyland Paris or have forty cases of premium cat food delivered to the shop. All of which, again, Sherlock would do. Well, he had his ways of dealing with his brother and they would probably translate well to feline form. And as loudly as Sherlock howled in the clutches of agonizing revenge, so would the cat. Though, to be fair, Balthazar would likely be somewhat louder…

Yes… his magical hacking skills were more than up to the challenge. Now… where… ah. There. How nice that smartphones were so easy to operate with taps. You could do anything! Make a call, send a text or email… to anyone in the world. Say, for point of argument, a dark vision of perfection that would certainly want to visit her poor, injured employer wherever he may be found. And bring dinner. Which should be steak. Or lobster. Or both. He’d skip his meals tomorrow to make room for the bounty his beloved would bring…

He’d deserve the bounty, too, since he’d be out and about keeping an eye out for potential problems. News that Greg was hurt would travel through the community, as it always did, and that could inspire someone brash or stupid to try something Greg generally frowned on. Fortunately, even when Greg was on his back, there were eyes and ears to catch the early signs of trouble and engage some secondary lines of defense to kick that back down until Greg could put the final boot in, if necessary. It wasn’t an easy life being the sorcerer’s invaluable and irreplaceable assistant, but everyone had their part to play in the grand scheme of the universe. And if his part gained him steak and lobster from his sultry seductress, he certainly wouldn’t complain…
Chapter 18

Mycroft checked a final time that Greg was asleep, then tucked his crutches under his arms and made the slow journey to the kitchen, which wasn’t physically far from the bedroom, but with said crutches and the fiery pain in his leg that pain medication had abandoned, even a short distance took an age to traverse.

A quick rummage through the cupboards gained him nothing but a scowl since there wasn’t anything to be found for tea, meaning that Greg’s supply had been exhausted, that he brought from the shop only what he needed for the moment or that the man was far more wedded to the lure of coffee than he had anticipated. Regardless, it left him without something to… do everything that was necessary at the moment to restore his sense of humanity and that was not a situation that sat well with him.

Not that sitting was particularly pleasant at the moment. One forgot how affected was a thigh by the simple act of sitting until said thigh was a howling beast of pain roaring up from its tortured den to remind you. No tea and a leg hellbent on bringing about the destruction of the rest of him through the sheer intensity of its displeasure with its own life. But, since he did have his mobile returned from the foul feline…

“Magicae Argentea.”

“Ah, John. You remain at your post.”

“For a bit. Anderson went back to his flat to shower, but he’ll be back soon to take over for awhile. It’s a lucky thing he’s available, since covering the shop when Greg’s… sick… is always a problem.”

Mycroft made note that customers must be nearby and found the information a bit jarring, as he’d completely forgotten that, at the heart of his matter, was an actual shop, with customers, a till, stock and all the other trappings of mercantilism.

“Do take what steps are necessary to keep the business running at peak efficiency, John. If you require temporary personnel, simply ask and I will have someone suitable brought in for the day. Or night.”

“Thanks, I’ll remember that. How’s Greg doing?”

“Somewhat fussy when he wakes, but that has been a rare occurrence, fortunately. He is taking a great deal of rest, much of which is actual sleep.”

“Good. That’s absolutely the best thing for him right now. And you?”

“I also agree that the best course of treatment at present is for Gregory to have as much rest as possible.”

“Funny. How’s the leg?”

“Still attached, therefore, I give the situation a passing mark.”

“Meaning the meds wore off and you’re in agony. Take more. You have lots.”

“I shall, however, there is a matter far more vital to my overall wellbeing.”
“Which is?”

“Tea. Or, specifically, my lack of it.”

“Got it. Greg tends towards coffee, especially in the morning and simply darts downstairs if he wants a bit of tea in the afternoon or evening. I’ll bring some up for you in a moment.”

“Thank you, John. Once Gregory wakes, should I attempt to coax him to eat?”

“I doubt a lot of coaxing will be necessary, actually. He should have bread up there, he always has bread, so a bit of toast and jam will certainly do no harm. Ooh, looks like I’m needed. Take your pill and I’ll be up shortly.”

Mycroft hummed a moment in celebration of his upcoming tea and began to verify the presence of the necessary supplies and equipment to prepare toast to accompany the tea. Of course, he could simply make arrangements for a delivered breakfast, however, he was actually taking satisfaction from managing this situation on his own. He was never one to shirk from a challenge and taking on this particular one was proving he had skills that ventured outside the arena of work.

Which he would deal with accordingly today, in the limited manner available. His PA was fully capable of managing alone for the day, though, there was little doubt that Anthea was already curious about their brief phone conversation this morning. It wasn’t altogether uncommon for him not to be forthcoming about the reason he was not to be present in his office on a particular day, however, she had seemed… suffused of a greater curiosity than normal for such a mundane thing.

Perhaps… yes. Yes, of course. Today would, under normal circumstances, be the day after his date with Gregory. Admittedly, it still was, in a technical sense, however it was colored with a very different hue than expected and the one she was expecting was some shade of tawdry red to signify an event or series of events that should not be discussed in polite company, though Anthea would want to discuss them in great detail. Yes, that certainly was the root cause of her tone this morning, as well as her insufferable nosiness. Well, let her imagine what she will. It would give her something to occupy her time today after she barricaded the door against panicked bureaucrats and settled into a quiet day of work…

“A trained chef couldn’t do better, Mycroft. This is great!”

Mycroft rolled his eyes but couldn’t stop the tiny smile emerging on his lips at Greg’s praise.

“It is toast, Gregory.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew how easy it is to fail at toast. I can tell you all the ways because I perpetrate them regularly.”

Watching Greg happily eat his breakfast, sitting up in bed, though propped with pillows and under orders to lay back down again when he was finished eating, Mycroft looked closely for signs Greg was overexerting and trying to hide it, but saw none. It was clear the pain still existed, but the hours of rest had certainly put a little color back into his companion’s cheeks.

“Then I am happy my culinary skills pass muster. I must admit that John was critical in the crafting of your coffee. He seemed a better source of expertise on the matter than me.”

“John does know how I like it. Black and strong enough to strip paint off the wall. I do want to know, though, how your leg is this morning? Or, I should say, how is it after this few hours
since I last asked you how your leg was feeling?"

“Doctor Watson’s pharmaceuticals are performing admirably.”

“And when they’re not performing?”

“I… it is a slightly different matter.”

Whereas a painful leg was a mournful thing, Mycroft truly didn’t understand the sudden downward cast of Greg’s eyes.

“I’m sorry, Mycroft. I should have redirected that stupid piece of brick before it got to you, but I was too slow.”

“Gregory… I pride myself on quick reflexes and I was not quick enough to move position. I sincerely doubt you could have responded in time to change the inevitable.”

“You’ve never seen me snatch a dropped chip before it reaches the ground.”

“Hilarious. This was not your fault, Gregory. It is the fault of… the demon was summoned, correct?”

“Yeah, and I have to find out by who.”

“Because it is your job.”

The note in Mycroft’s voice had Greg slowly turning his gaze towards the man who was looking at him with a knowing gleaming in his eyes.

“Uhhhh….”

“The book, Gregory. That was you.”

Stupid faeries. But, it wasn’t as if there was any more cat to let out of the bag…

“I could say no, but you’d know that was a lie and… well, I suppose there’s no point in keeping things from you anymore. Yes, that was me. Didn’t know that book existed, to be fair, or I’d have shoved the bloody thing to the back of the stacks. Some fucking faerie had a premonition and was kind enough to not only write it down, but to provide illustrations.”

“It was a touch vague, as all are such things, I believe. Might you be willing to provide additional detail?”

“A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away…”

“I have seen Star Wars, Gregory.”

“Really? Did you like it? It’s one my favorites, actually.”

“Stay on target.”

Greg laughed at Mycroft’s pitch-perfect mimicry then took a large bite of his toast. Mycroft was amazing, he really was. And you don’t reward amazing with cowardly deflections.

“Alright. I keep an eye on the city. For issues involving magic, I mean. If people have a problem or know of one, they bring it to my attention. Seek my help or advice. I keep touch with
the practitioners and have a feel for what’s what in London, so I can read the change in the winds when something might be going awry.”

“Are you… a leader of some form?”

“No, not really. But… yeah, sort of. Not leader, maybe, so much as representative. When there’s an issue involving the magical community, sections of it, at least, it’s me who is expected to deal with it and the one who is held to account if problems arise. When there are issues that affect more than one community, it’s me that shows up to whatever meeting or ritual that’s needed to keep things running smoothly. I’m the one people talk to, negotiate or argue with when the magical side of London is involved. And, yes, it’s me who does a lot of the fighting to protect London when it’s required. The big fighting, that is.”

“I see… do you have…subordinates?”

“Nope. At least, not officially. If I need help, there are people I can ask who I can more or less count on, but there’s no organization or recruits or anything like that. It’s basically just me. That’s the way for what you’d call my position.”

“Is it hereditary?”

“No, though there’s no rule against it. When the current poor bastard gets too old or dies, then someone new takes over. There are traditions and practices to determine who that will be but, in truth, the city decides. Places, especially old, established ones, have their own magic. There have been sorcerers who tried to do the job and… it sounds strange, but London wasn’t having it, and someone else had to take the reins.”

Greg had been watching Mycroft’s expression and was both happy and puzzled that his story hadn’t produced more of a reaction. However, the former was greatly overbalancing the latter since scaring off a person he sincerely hoped he’d see a great deal more of was not on today’s approved list of activities.

“Merit-based, then. Interesting.”

“I suppose. You do have to be strong in talent for the job. Someone with less power, for example, wouldn’t have been able to shove that fucking demon back into its closet. At least, not without another practitioner or two throwing in their help. You have to have some people skills, to a degree, too. There’s a lot of… agreements, arrangements and understandings that’s go with the job, formal and informal both, and you have to keep a cool head with cooperative ventures and alliances. Be… diplomatic isn’t the right word, because that’s not really a strength of mine, but… people have to trust you. Believe you’re a man of your word. You have to mediate differences of opinion or misunderstandings, sometimes acting as a judge to sort things out and that can be tricky, given the people or beings involved. And I have to run my shop because there’s not a wage for any of that, so…”

Greg started to shrug then was rudely reminded by his body why that was a profoundly stupid idea.

“There is no compensation for your service?”

“No, not monetarily, at least. There are other things… a genuine sense of accomplishment, satisfaction from helping people who need it, the chance to do and experience a lot of interesting things, the legacy of being remembered as… someone who made a difference or tried to, at least.”

“Hmmmm…”
“Is that a good or bad hmmmm?”

“Neither, truth be told. Is it part of your work to conceal the existence of this magical community from the rest of the world?”

“Ooh, that’s a pointed question.”

“Verily.”

“Well, yes, it is. Part of the job, I mean. Not as much of it as you might believe, though. Practitioners and the assorted other denizens of the community…”

“Like faeries and vampires? John mentioned the latter.”

“Those and others are certainly a part of it. In any case, we all do an exceptional job of self-policing because… well, nobody wants to be a lab rat on some government dissection table or kept in a cage for the rest of their lives for some scientist can study. Information does leak out, but it’s never taken seriously as any person, even a journalist, who tries to report that magic is real is laughed off. That doesn’t mean we don’t stay vigilant, though. A fucking demon like the one last night would be hard to laugh off, for example.”

“Those sorts of events… are they common?”

“No, not in the slightest. The one last night… it either got away from someone by accident and they’ll get a stern lecture from me when I find out who they are, or they let it go deliberately and they’ll… well, they’ll get more than a stern lecture. Shit… I have to check on Sarah.”

“Sarah?”

“The witch the demon snatched. Could be coincidence, since she doesn’t live too far from there, or could be something else. I need to see how she’s doing in any case. I don’t think she was hurt, but…”

“I noticed no injuries beyond several cuts and reddened areas that are likely sporting bruises today. But, given your position, I understand why you would want to reach out and verify that yourself.”

“I’ll put out a few other lines, too, for information.”

“I fear you may be moving closer to overtaxing yourself, Gregory. I admit you seem much stronger today, however… please take due care.”

“I will. And I am stronger. I heal much quicker than the average person, even when I’m not hurrying it along. I’m not ready to be up and about, but I’ve got more zip and zing than I did. That’s why I want you to focus on yourself and not on me. I’ll be fine, but I’m worried about you. And speaking of you…”

“Must we?”

“We must. Why in the world did you have a gun on our date!”

“Ah. Yes…”

“That was not informative.”

“No, I concede it was not. I suppose, however, since you have been forthcoming…”
“I came forth like a champion.”

“That you did. To answer your question, then… I routinely carry a weapon if I shall be out in public… without a security detail of some form.”

“My tax money stretches far enough to provide security details for minor government officials?”

“I may have slightly understated the degree of my standing.”

“I suspected that, I have to admit.”

“It is not a fact I announce readily for… well, for a variety of reasons, however, I would, at some point, have given a clearer picture of my role in things.”

“Well, I can’t blame you for that, and I don’t. You meet someone and, even if you think there’s something there, you really don’t know how it’s going to go, so you don’t toss about your secrets like you’re old friends. Can I hazard a guess that you’re higher up in government, though, than you even let old friends know?”

Mycroft’s newly-discovered intelligence kink surged up and begged him have his schedule completely free on the day this happily grinning man was fully cleared for any and all acts of sexual debauchery.

“Higher is a… it is not as precise a word for what I am. Broader is closer, perhaps. Some might say integral, however, I would not boast such a thing.”

“Because you’re a very humble man.”

“My humility serves as an exemplar for all those who aspire to a life of modesty.”

“I’m honored to be in your presence. This not-integral position of yours, is it hereditary?”

“Scamp. And no, though I did come to government service through an uncle. He thought it might be a good place to utilize my, shall we say, unique talents.”

“Such as marksmanship?”

“That is the product of many hours of practice though I will admit to having naturally keen aim. In my youth, I led a somewhat more active life, which was not really to my taste but necessary at the time. Now, I can restrict my physical exertion to opening my desk drawer to see what sorts of biscuits I may on hand for my afternoon tea.”

“That’s why your arm looks so sculpted and muscular. I was wondering about that.”

John paused outside the bedroom door and smiled for a moment. Greg sounded happy. For a decent, kindhearted man, that shouldn’t be notable, but Greg spent a good bit of his time worried or hurting, so simple, happy times came less frequently than one might expect. And, given Greg’s abysmal history for romance, this was a double victory and one worth celebrating. When the stupid sorcerer wasn’t a collection of broken pieces, that is.

“Knock, knock time for a prostate exam.”

“Mycroft, protect me!”

“Gregory, I have full confidence in John’s medical decisions. Prepare to lose your trousers.”
“I’m actually confused about how I feel now.”

John simply grinned at the shared middle-aged giggles and tried to remember if Greg ever mentioned seeing anyone who knew the truth about him. Maybe he had, but it was hard to imagine anyone being as comfortable with it, especially so quickly, as Mycroft Holmes.

“Maybe that will keep your ridiculous mouth shut for awhile, then, while I see how much damage you and Mycroft did to yourselves while I was keeping you out of penury. Anderson’s back and he’ll cover today. We may have a few deliveries, but I told him to sign whatever they shove in his face and I’ll handle the unpackaging and inventory work tonight. He can bloody well do the stocking tomorrow, though. And the dusting. I think Anderson actually likes doing the fuddy duddy things, so this could be a very good arrangement.”

“Wait… I can probably take the day tomorrow, so there’s no use having Anderson… why are you both looking at me like that?”

Now John and Mycroft were looking at each other, with John smiling a smile that Greg didn’t understand, but Mycroft certainly did, much to his annoyance.

“Gregory, you need rest, not work, to properly heal. Allow yourself the time you need.”

“By tomorrow, I’ll be able to sit my plush posterior behind the till and smile at the customers as well as anyone.”

“So can Mr. Anderson.”

“Who I have to pay for his time, unlike myself.”

“Money matters will sort themselves properly, I have no doubt, so kindly take a full measure of rest so you do not prolong the time you cannot conduct business personally.”

“Money doesn’t sort itself, Mycroft, you have to do the sorting yourself and myself says I’ll be back in the shop tomorrow.”

Mycroft hadn’t wanted to broach a certain subject until, perhaps, it was an after-the-fact matter, however, the universe had another plan in store for him, it appeared.

“I have already pledged to see covered fully whatever undue expense is incurred due to your incapacity.”

“What? I mean what does that mean because I didn’t understand a bit of it.”

“It means Mycroft told me and Anderson that he’d foot the tab for the extra hours.”

Mycroft scowled at John, who was having a great deal of fun, the way anyone has fun watching a couple gear up to a spat, knowing they’re not part of it so they can simply eat their popcorn in peace and enjoy the free entertainment.

“No. No, and in case I wasn’t speaking clearly, no.”

“It is a minor matter, Gregory, and one about which you should not trouble yourself.”

“It’s my shop, so I’ll bloody well trouble myself if I want to!”

Greg started to rise from the bed to have the argument on his feet, but was quickly finger wagged and ‘oh no you don’t you bastard’-ed into changing his mind.
“It is your shop, Gregory, there is no denying that fact. However, this is a situation where… it is not an unprecedented thing for a person to offer assistance to one who has a need.”

“You help a bloke move to a new flat, yes, you don’t pay his staff’s wages!”

“Gregory, I shall be blunt. I do not wish to, but I feel it is necessary. Your staff’s wages are most likely less than the cost of many of my ties.”

John beamed brightly at having correctly estimated Mycroft’s level of fat-cattedness.

“That… really?”

“I have exquisite ties.”

“You do. That is true. But… I’ve got my pride. It’s not an ego stroke to have someone cover my expenses.”

“Perhaps, but pride goeth before the fall and this fall would be as damaging to your health, I fear, as the one that brought you your painful cranium.”

Greg fumed and seemed content to fume, so John nodded for Mycroft to pull up the leg of the loose pants Charles had found for him to wear, so some good could come from the quiet interlude.

“Oh, this looks… I was going to say good, but let’s not kid ourselves. It looks appalling, but the level of appallingness is what I’d expect if you weren’t showing early signs of flesh-eating bacteria or plague. That’s not a prediction for the future, though, so keep to my instructions and don’t cut short your course of antibiotics. And don’t stress the leg. There’s a lot of damage to heal and if it doesn’t heal well, that could mean long-term problems that you don’t want.”

“Thank you, John. I will pay close heed to your advice.”

“Good. Now, I’ll change the dressing on this and…”

“I’m going to pay you back!”

Mycroft and John looked over at Greg who looked exactly as he did a moment ago, a tight-lipped, pouting misery, despite the unprompted outburst.

“I… if you wish, Gregory, I have no objection.”

“May not be right away, but I’ll pay back every bit.”

“I have no doubt you will do so if that is your chosen course of action. I feel confident John will have a record of the hours worked by each individual, so that any extra wage cost can be properly determined.”

“Fine, then. John, you heard him. I want everything on the record so I can wipe the slate perfectly clean.”

“Oh, though it’ll be the only thing clean in this flat.”

This time, Greg was strong enough for a properly-loud rude noise and felt good about giving it. However, a tiny secret part of him was feeling some relief that he didn’t have to worry about running the shop for a few days. He had his limits, wider-than-normal though they may be and, like anyone, pushing them was never fun. And, the older he got, the less fun it was.
Besides, this might give him a little more time to spend with Mycroft, who certainly wasn’t going to be scampering off to work himself for a day or two, either. Maybe, if he asked nicely, he could convince Mycroft into spending some or a lot of that free time here. It wasn’t an exciting place for an extended date, but there were films to watch, books to read, conversations to have… he could certainly use the time to learn more about Mycroft’s actual work and Mycroft could learn the same about him. Now that he was aware of the world of magic, there was no doubt Mycroft would want to learn all there was to know about it and wasn’t it fortunate that he was in a medical ward with a person who was very well versed in the subject and more than eager to share the knowledge with a willing ear…

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Rested? Check. Medication working? Check. Fed? Check. Watered? Check. All matters of personal hygiene and comfort tended to with minimum of embarrassment? Check, though using a little magic for the last one was a hotly negotiated list item, but he was not about to have Mycroft handle anything remotely related to a bedpan.

One full day of malingering neatly tucked under his belt? Check. And what a day it was. Naps, of course, but also quiet day with Mycroft’s laptop being used as a telly to watch a few films and a lot of chatting about simple things that were light and fun and made the day the relaxing sort of thing they both needed.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!!!!”

Balthazar shooting into the room to jump on Greg’s bed and sit posed like he was starring in a cat food ad was, honestly, not the strangest thing either man had seen him do, but it was the strangest in the past hour, so it merited some interest.

“Cat, what in…”

“If either of you are naked… well, too bad, I’m coming in anyway.”

Mycroft froze at the sound of the voice, but it took Greg a moment to catch on. The catching-on moment was when Anthea strolled into the bedroom carrying two large sacks that seemed to perplex the males in the room except the one wearing fur.

“Now, you, Royal Highness, will begin by telling me why you thought you could lie and get away with it. You will follow that with an explanation for your command to bring dinner when you know I would already have sniffed out your ridiculous lie and this would just make me consider putting laxatives in every dish as a reminder not to lie to me. That cat is strange but absolutely right to laugh at you.”

Mycroft scowled at the sniggering Balthazar and promptly removed him from Greg’s bed, sighing when the cat simply jumped back, this time onto his own good leg, so as to contort precisely and position his bottom as close to Mycroft’s face as possible. It was like having a loaded gun pointed at you when you knew the gun owner was very willing to pull the trigger. At least, though, Anthea had turned her glare on Greg, so Mycroft only had to fight for his dignity on a single front.

“And why are you in bed looking terrible? Again. The police report that horrible liar placed in the system about a car accident is completely phony, and insulting, as well, because it wasn’t even especially well done, so I want to know what happened to make you look like a lukewarmly reheated plate of lackluster death.”

“Uhhhh….”
“Brilliant. You. When the cat stops farting at you will you say something to, at least, try and earn enough goodwill that you don’t return to an office that’s been painted hot pink. And I do mean an office, not the walls or the ceiling, but every single thing in there including the rug. And your TARDIS.”

“As… as you perceive, Gregory was most foully injured last night and I…”

“Why is that cat avoiding one of your legs?”

“I assure you that…”

“He’s taken pains to avoid any contact with it and, now, he’s gently patting your leg and giving me ‘oh Anthea, he’s hurt, pity him’ eyes.”

“He certainly is not… he is. Lovely. In any case, it is a cat. Who can fathom what occurs in their minds?”

“Molly.”

“I concede the point, however, given she is not here, we shall continue on in ignorance. Now, turning attention to the savory-scented sacks you are sporting…”

“You get dinner only when I get the truth. And it had better be a very good truth, because this is a very good dinner. Though, I’ve never known you to be a lobster lover, Mr. Liar Holmes. It wasn’t easy getting steak and lobster, but I’m happy to walk out with it if my truth isn’t just as succulent and juicy.”

Mycroft’s confusion soared until Balthazar hopped off his leg to begin rubbing himself on the bags, sneaking a stuck-out tongue at the British Government for good measure. He had been foiled by a cat. And for the cost of a single meal. That was rather demeaning, which only served to boost the severity of the necessary revenge to be enacted sometime in the near future.

“Gregory, if you already have not surmised, this is my PA. I am not certain if she mentioned that fact when she previously visited your shop. She is also the nosiest and most bothersome person in London.”

Greg wisely didn’t reveal that he knew Anthea’s identity or her actual intentions in visiting the shop with her cousin Molly. Some secrets were fine to keep secret until you were old gents wearing warm jumpers, doing a turn through the flowers at your retirement cottage in the country. Not that he was thinking that far ahead, of course, but… it had been a really nice day…

“An excellent customer and an exceptional PA if she’s bringing food. And taking none of our shit.”

“You, beat down and rather smelly man, might survive the night.”

Greg lifted his good arm and took a sniff, reminding himself that quickly running a wet flannel across face and bollocks wasn’t a proper substitute for a good shower.

“Hurray?”

“Yes. Now… either of you. Truth.”

“The truth was in the report. Gregory was injured in a rather nasty collision…”
“So he’s not ‘sick’ this time like the last grand lie event on his part?”

“Gregory is… a man of…”

What Greg was died on Mycroft’s lips at the sound of the soft knock on the bedroom door, which was accompanied by two sets of eyes peering around the door, which was now, apparently, open as an invitation for the world to stop in for tea.

“Oh look, it’s Anderson and Moran, the Snoop Brothers. Why are you spying on me?”

Anderson took that as Greg’s ok to step into the bedroom, with Sebastian following, then immediately snatching the hissing, yowling and claws-extended cat out of midair, without so much as blinking an eye.

“Cat’s gonna die, Greg.”

Anthea thought that was certainly possible, given the wild attack was still ongoing which might cause a heart attack or stroke, if cats were prone to that sort of thing. The fact that the large, blond man was also holding the cat in such a way that snapping its neck wouldn’t be difficult, and looked like he was contemplating that very thing, increased the probability to even odds.

“Don’t kill my cat, Sebastian. He’s loony, but… that’s all really. I’ve got nothing better for his defense.”

Balthazar had some prime commentary ready for that wholly unsatisfying defense, but remembered Anthea was in the room and that he was acting like an unhinged loony, which was not an attractive look, and she wasn’t aware yet of his gift for scintillating conversation.

“Sebastian, I think you might be hurting him.”

The worried tone in Anderson’s voice did two things. First, it drew a quiet sigh from the tall werewolf before he set the cat down on the floor. Second it drew an inferno of curiosity from Greg about why the tall werewolf would sigh gently and set down the evil moggie.

“One bite and he’s dead.”

Sensing that one bite might be coming, Anthea reached into one of the bags and pulled off a morsel of a still-warm steak and tossed it on the floor to distract the potential murder victim.

“GREG! You horrible shit! I ask one little favor and you completely ignore me, which…”

Marcus strolled into the now overly-cozy bedroom and stopped short seeing both the number and diversity of people enjoying Greg’s drab décor. Well, most of it was drab…

“And who is this, might I ask? I thought I was the most beautiful thing you ever had in your bedroom, Greg, but I was very, very wrong. Marcus Varnas, at your service, my lady.”

Anthea didn’t have the chance to either shoot down the vampire or let him carry through with kissing her hand because he was now too busy to notice either way, what with Balthazar launching an even more vicious assault than he had on Sebastian.

“You will not touch my bride, you fiend!”

Mycroft looked over to Greg, who was wearing an even better long-suffering expression than he could ever muster and decided that this evening might just be another on their ‘oh good heavens
what now’ list. Already they had a list! Admittedly it was a list of evenings gone staggeringly wrong, but anything to share as a couple was something to be treasured…
Chapter 19

“Fucking cat!”

Anthea rarely had moments in her life where she had no idea what to do, but a raging cat attack… a raging talking cat attack… especially one this raging and on the heels of a previous raging attack was leaving her a little dumbfounded. And a check of the expressions on the faces of the rest of Greg’s bedroom party wasn’t helping matters. The first person the cat tried to maim was merrily grinning at this new round of savaging. His friend looked terrified. Greg seemed not to care particularly. Mycroft appeared to be contemplating intervening and wondering why others more capable, such as the tall, blond grinner, weren’t stepping in to do it themselves.

That analysis took roughly a second. In the second and subsequent few seconds, she stood in shocked awe at the fury of the assault and… paused. She was absolutely certain the cat had gotten in a long, deep scratch on the hand-kisser’s face. But it wasn’t there now. And there had been visible damage on the hand and… hmmm. There was the faint remains of the gouge, but it was… going, going, gone. No longer there at all. Ok, that was strange. Stranger even, maybe, than a talking cat. Maybe.

“Gregory…”

“Uh… Marcus can handle this, Mycroft.”

Neither Mycroft, Anthea or Anderson had any idea how, at least, not until the new arrival suddenly sported fangs to rival that of the cat and hissed with a frightening ferocity.

“Ummmm… Sebastian…”

Anderson knew there were things in the world he had yet to discover, but he didn’t expect to find one in Greg’s bedroom. Especially one that only made his new, quiet friend chuckle softly and smile a very satisfied smile.

“Sir, do you want to weigh in on this?”

No, Mycroft did not, no matter how pointedly his PA was glaring at him. And, speaking of glaring, what had happened to Marcus’s eyes… that was the deepest, most venom-laden crimson he had ever witnessed… they were nearly obsidian, with a volcanic glint…

With the population of the room being utterly useless, Anthea realized it would be her, as usual, to ride to the rescue.

“Balthazar… you’re embarrassing yourself. Stop it, now, or forfeit any lobster you probably think you’re getting from these bags.”

The time interval between Anthea’s words and Balthazar unhooking his claws and teeth from Marcus’s quickly-repairing flesh was not measurable by any modern timepiece.

“My beloved offers me the finest of food to accompany my drinking in of her dark, exquisite beauty. Truly, I am… oh shit.”

Balthazar’s brain was finally able to hack through the residue of his jealous rage and remind him of a little fact that he had lost sight of during his lapse of decorum.
“You’re still strange, cat. But, you’re also right. I am a dark, exquisite beauty and one who is now going to get an explanation for why you talk and this one looks like a vampire when he’s fighting off crazy, apparently jealous, cats. Who would like to volunteer to fill in the gaps?”

“You’re still strange, cat. But, you’re also right. I am a dark, exquisite beauty and one who is now going to get an explanation for why you talk and this one looks like a vampire when he’s fighting off crazy, apparently jealous, cats. Who would like to volunteer to fill in the gaps?”

“Stupid vampire couldn’t fight off a cat. That’s great.”

Greg smacked Sebastian on the leg, but the werewolf just grinned wider, making a rude gesture at the snarling Marcus when Anderson whispered ‘He’s a real vampire?’ in what the fledgling sorcerer probably thought was a surreptitious fashion.

“Watch your tongue, puppy, or it may not remain in your mouth.”

Now it was Sebastian’s turn to snarl, which lay over a deep growl that reverberated deep in Anthea’s core while she marveled at his own eye shift, this one towards something that reminded her of nature videos… and horror movies. Wonderful. All they needed was a witch in the room and it’d be Hammer Horror night…

“Don’t call me puppy, leech.”

“Leech! You want to see bloodletting, I’ll be happy to oblige.”

Greg had zero doubt that a fight, a bloody and violent one, was primed to erupt, because it was the sad norm for these two morons, but rather than let it rage until they just tired each other out, he decided to step in and save the innocent, slow-to-heal bystanders from an accidental mauling. Taking a very deep breath, he murmured a few words and smiled weakly as a thunderclap sounded so loud it rattled the windows of the building and made Greg hope there’d been nothing expensive and breakable sitting close to the edge of a shelf in the shop.

“Now that I have your attention… fuck off the both of you. No f…fighting in my flat.”

The in-stereo ‘he started it’ didn’t surprise Greg, who simply rolled his eyes and avoided meeting Mycroft’s because he could feel Mycroft’s disapproval at the expenditure of energy warming his skin with its toasty wrath.

“I don’t care; I’m ending it. And, no, I’m not erasing any memories, so you’ll have to live with your idiocy being remembered by everyone in this room. That goes for you, too, Balthazar, so stop laughing. I haven’t forgotten you’re the one who actually started all this nonsense.”

Mycroft was happy to see the cat’s contrite face join that of the other two who, apparently, were a vampire and… could it be a werewolf? He, that is, not it. That was probably considered impolite whether one was fully human or not. At the moment, though, Anthea wasn’t particularly concerned with politeness. Basic information about what in the hell was going on was a much more pressing concern to her mind.

“I’m still waiting for my answers and if any of you think you’re making it out of here without me being fully satisfied with those answers, you’re as foolish as most of you look right now.”

Except, she had to admit for the thin, bearded man, who looked confused more than foolish. And there had to be a story behind why he kept looking up at that Sebastian character with a mixture of things in his eyes that was very hard to disentangle, but wariness was certainly one thick thread amongst the rest.

“I… I would like some answers myself.”

Anthea nodded supportively at Anderson, who looked like he could use an ally, poor thing being a
little on the trembly side at the moment.

Marcus shook out his hair, running a hand through it to ensure his longish black locks presented exactly as he desired to woo the fair maiden. Though the maiden bit probably shouldn’t be said aloud because she looked the sort who could do more her heels and fists than the stupid cat with his claws and teeth. What a treasure…

“Very well, since that one looks like a frightened rabbit, the mongrel is more than a bit stupid, Greg is… I have no idea what’s wrong with him, but he looks like halitosis made human and Mycroft there… he probably has money to count. In any case, let me introduce myself… again. Marcus Varnas, heir to the Varnas line, prince of… the vampires of this ludicrous island and a massive swath of Europe and Scandinavia, though not the really cold parts because fuck that, at least until Father finally gets his bony arse off the throne, which is murder on his bony arse and I get to hear about it almost as often as his latest failure to burn one of the local witches. But I digress. Just focus on the vampire prince and my unquestionable sexiness for now. Anyway, that surly mass of dull-eyed dog breath is Sebastian Moran, werewolf that no pack, even the most raggedy and flea-ridden, would have as a member. His little chum… I think Greg found him on the stoop or something like that. Baby sorcerer, in any case. Greg himself, when he’s not looking like death having a nap, is an old sorcerer, watches over this little city as best he can with help, of course, from me. Balthazar there is a festering mass of infantile irritation stuffed in a moth-eaten cat suit someone stole from the world’s most incompetent taxidermist. He’ll tell you he was birthed in the fires of hell and nursed on the foul milk of the darkest demons, but wave a fluffy ball in his direction and witness the sad, pitiful truth.”

“You do love the sound of your own voice, don’t you, Mr. Prince of Vampires.”

A treasure…

“Only one of the many things I love about myself, dear lady. And I will be happy to discuss, and demonstrate, each and every one to your… satisfaction. What say you and I leave this primary school Halloween play and go somewhere with wine, candles and small bites of food that we can eat with our fingers. Or feed each other with our fingers. Fingers and mouths will be involved and in the most delightful ways imaginable.”

Before Anthea could answer, Sebastian grabbed Marcus by the collar, strode to one of the bedroom windows, threw it open with his free hand, and tossed Marcus out, and closed the window post-exit.

“Idiot.”

“Lovely, Sebastian. You know he’ll make my life miserable for that, don’t you?”

Sebastian just shrugged at Greg’s lament, then gently pulled Anderson away from the window where the sorcerer had been looking in hopes of not seeing a bloody aftermath.

“Is that meat in those sacks?”

Anthea huffed at werewolf, but reached into one of the bags, opened the container and held up the steak she’d already raided for Balthazar’s nibble. She felt no surprise that Sebastian took it and popped the whole thing in his mouth, contentedly chewing while Balthazar began yowling the most pitiful, mournful yowl he could muster. For his trouble, he got a lobster tail stuffed with crab that he was happy to eat messily off the top of Greg’s dresser. With that done, Anthea sniffed and turned to fix Mycroft with… a look.
“Mr. Holmes… I blame you.”

“WHAT! I… I have done naught but sit here.”

“Exactly. You sat there and have been sitting there not informing me of any of these little facts.”

“I… had no idea of them myself until, partially, last night. The remainder, today’s information, is utterly new to me.”

“Really, then why… oh. Oh, he is very dead.”

“Who is dead?”

“You know who. He answered the call out last night listed under your name.”

He had to phone Charles as soon as possible. If the man hurried, he might be out of the country before Anthea descended on him.

“I have no doubt Charles would have duly informed you, however, I allowed him a free day today owing to our rather late hours… conducting business.”

“Uh huh. You, in the bed. Is this business the reason you look as destroyed as the last man who tried to lie to me?”

“Ummm… yes, ma’am.”

“Tell me.”

“We fought a demon. And won!”

“Brilliant. What’s the damage?”

This said facing back towards Mycroft who was reminding himself exactly why Anthea was his PA. She might have an ‘oh my god’ moment at some point, but not when there were important matters to tend to. Such as putting a room of bothersome people very much in their place.

“A somewhat substantial wound in my thigh.”

“Length of debilitation?”

“Several days on crutches, then light use for a goodly number more.”

“Ok, that could be gunshot or stab wound, which would bolster your reputation, or a pulled muscle from jumping when you saw a mouse in your kitchen, which would not. We’ll go with a vague version of the former for the official unofficial story and some leg-wrenching business that coordinates with your pathetic police report for the official official story. Now… could someone let in the vampire?”

Given Anderson was the only one who seemed happy Marcus hadn’t met a sad fate, or was simply amused by the sight of the vampire, hovering outside and scowling at them, he did the job of opening the window so Marcus could stick a leg through and make his way back into the room.

“That was your fault, Greg.”

“Told you, Seb.”
Sebastian shrugged and took the remainder of the bags from Anthea to begin rooting through them for more food, passing Anderson the second lobster tail and some bread, which Anderson ate using a napkin for a plate after sitting carefully on the edge of Greg’s bed. For his part, Greg was wondering how his night of quiet recuperation had become a larger party than he’d ever hosted in his flat, let alone his bedroom. But, sometimes the only way out is through.

“Mycroft, hand me my mobile, will you?”

“For whatever reason?”

“Food.”

Sebastian’s ‘good’ was roundly ignored, but Greg mentally ticked up the quantity he had planned to order from the little Chinese restaurant a few blocks along that was happy to deliver right to the door of his flat by sneaking up through the shop. Very useful when it was all he could do to limp his way the few steps from sofa to door to collect his dinner.

“And, if you’ll help me, we can actually move this information-sharing session out of here and to a larger arena. Like my sitting room and kitchen.”

“Gregory, is that wise?”

“I get the sofa.”

Mycroft frowned, but conceded that reclining on a sofa was not significantly different than reclining in a bed and the sofa was approximately the same number of steps away from said bed as the loo, which had already greeted Greg several times today.

“Very well. Place your order and… Anthea, I presume you are remaining?”

Balthazar used only a small amount of magic to leap from lapping the last of the buttery lobster essence from the dresser and precisely land on Anthea’s shoulder to purr loudly and rub his face in her hair.

“As long as nobody rubs their stinky faces in my hair again.”

Balthazar gasped at the jab, but didn’t fight Anderson lifting him off Anthea while whispering in his ear ‘ladies probably don’t like the smell of crustaceans in their hair,’ and setting him on the floor.

“Very well. In the spirit of disclosure, and the potential for… future encounters, I will invite Charles to attend our little tete-a-tete. You will, of course, forestall enacting any desired revenge until a later time.”

“If I have to.”

Marcus sidled up to Anthea for his own whisper, one which made the sides of Anthea’s lips twitch into a brief, wicked smile that had Mycroft pining for simpler times. But, looking again at Greg, he summarily waved away that particular wish. Simpler times would not include a man as tantalizing as Gregory Lestrade, and he very much liked times that included both him and Gregory in them. They certainly could do without this rather riotous supporting cast, however, soon enough, they would, again, be alone to rest and take pleasure in the joy of each other’s company.

Of course, this riotous supporting cast did include some highly interesting, and potential useful, characters that he would very much like to speak with again, at length, at some point. One did not
waste potential resources; Uncle Rudy was always adamant on that point and it had served him well throughout the years. Not that dear uncle would have anticipated resources of the supernatural kind. Then again, maybe he would. The man was certainly one with his own secrets and highly skilled in keeping them…
Chapter 20

Mycroft looked around Greg’s the small sitting room and marveled at what he saw. One powerful mage, one novice mage, one talking cat, one vampire, one werewolf, all happily eating takeaway directly from the containers, but nothing was as astonishing as his driver, in faded jeans, a paint-splattered t-shirt, trainers and messy hair, sitting on the floor merrily consuming his weight in the excellent Chinese food. The man had taken his ‘Please make haste to Gregory’s flat, uniform not required’ somewhat to heart.

“I think that’s fascinating, actually. I can’t draw a believable-looking rock, so I admire anyone who has artistic ability.”

Thank you, Mr. Anderson, for plumping my driver’s ego. He positively shall be insufferable for days…

“I appreciate that, sir, thank you. It’s a relaxing hobby that I can exercise even when I have a free moment during the work day, with the various drawing apps for tablets and phones. Many are rubbish, but there are a few good ones and it helps pass the time when I’m waiting several hours for my passenger to choose what tea they want to accompany the muffin they haven’t decided upon yet because they all look lovely except that strange vegan gluten-free one that reeks of something a caveman might have mashed together for a thoroughly-disgusting brunch.”

I only said that once, Charles, and, as you well know, it was properly on point for that ghastly thing.

“Once I’ve gotten a proper job, the first thing I want is a mobile, not only so I can actually communicate with the few people I know but because… there seems so many fun little things you can do with it. Like drawing or taking photos or playing a game or two.”

“I’ve got loads of games on my devices. I can recommend a few when you’re ready.”

“That would be very helpful, thank you.”

Greg gave the back of Sebastian’s head a kick, both since it was placed within easy reach of his foot and because he’d heard the subaural growl the werewolf was beginning to emit. He had no idea what the man was upset about, but it was Sebastian, so an actual, logical reason wasn’t in any manner necessary. Besides he had other matters on his mind, matters that his shared look with Mycroft confirmed was a mutual one. It wasn’t precisely his role in their society to act as a job centre for unemployed sorcerers, but he needed to make a real start on finding Anderson some steady, paying work. It seemed Mycroft might be willing to lend a hand with that, so it might not be as hard to accomplish as he’d anticipated.

“I should get a driver.”

Mycroft had a world of ideas about what the vampire should get, starting with away from his PA, but decided to keep his list to himself. For now.

“You do not need more to inflate your self-importance, Marcus. There’s barely room enough in here for us with that hot-air balloon hovering about, too.”

“You’re ugly with envy, Greg. Or just ugly. It’s hard to tell. Fancy a change of pace, Charles? Night work, excellent benefits, since you’ll be chauffeuring me, and we’ll find someone to create a truly fashionable uniform for you. Something daring and mysterious, I think.”
“Hmmmmm… that’s an interesting offer. I’ll give it some thought.”

“CHARLES! You… blackguard.”

“Daring and mysterious, Mr. Holmes. That’s difficult to ignore.”

Mycroft fixed his driver with a steely glare that Charles held fast while he continued to use his chopsticks, with exaggerated slowness, to place morsels of food in his mouth. Anthea had a wager with herself about when Mycroft would huff, snort or otherwise acknowledge his opponent’s show of will and lost her imaginary five quid when he pfft’d a full three seconds before her predicted time.

“I see. This is the sunglasses and newspaper argument again, isn’t it.”

“I am not that petty, sir.”

“You are and we both know it.”

“A man should be able to enjoy his job.”

“You wanted to wear sunglasses and carry a newspaper under your jacket so attendees at the intelligence summit thought you were… packing heat.”

That Marcus and Sebastian both nodded approvingly did not brighten Mycroft’s day.

“I was acting as your bodyguard that day, sir, since half of the poor buggers in government service were home with flu and it was me or the lad from the mail room you said likely couldn’t perform a successful tackle on an elderly budgie. It was only fitting that I looked the part.”

“You currently look the part of a man in the dole queue, so tread lightly.”

“I always do, sir. That’s why I’m told I am an incredible dancer.”

“Ohh! Now, you have to come and work for me. I adore dancing. Vertical or horizontal, I’m fantastic at both.”

Charles smothered a grin at Marcus’s grin, directed squarely at Anthea, who simply rolled her eyes in response, but he credited the vampire for trying. Truthfully, he had no idea what sort of man might appeal to the Almighty Anthea but, he honestly couldn’t rule out it being the vampire sort. It actually suited her.

“Stay away from my empress, bloodsucker!”

Anderson wondered how long it would be before he could do things like freeze a leaping cat in midair and hoped it would be soon because Greg shouldn’t be exerting himself like this right now and it was actually a pretty cool use of power.

“Mycroft, could you set Romeo down… right next to your chair?”

“Gregory… that was utterly unnecessary.”

“I don’t need Marcus pouting at me again.”

“Being pouted towards does not tire a person. Using your magic does.”

“You haven’t seen one of Marcus’s power pouts yet.”
“They are spectacular, Mycroft, let me assure you.”

“Shut it, Marcus.”

“I feel a power pout coming on, Greggy…”

It was finally Sebastian who reached up and grabbed the cat, unfurling his tall body from the floor to move across it with his frozen-cat handbag and take a moment to arrange Balthazar so he was on his back with his legs in the air.

“Funny, Seb. I have to live with him, you know. Go eat an egg roll.”

“Ok.”

While Sebastian snatched more food from the enormous pile on the sofa table, Greg muttered something and made a small gesture with his index finger which accomplished two things simultaneously. The first was a very brief flash of orange light around the cat and the second was the cat unfreezing and realizing it was imprisoned within the circle of power Greg had established around it.

“Unfair!”

“Want some chicken, you evil mog?”

“Less unfair!”

Greg motioned Anderson to set several large chunks of juicy chicken in the circle to pacify the prisoner for a few microseconds. Then he smiled weakly at Mycroft and added this new look of displeasure…and worry…to the list for what would certainly be a future conversation on his health. Marcus took notice of both men’s expressions and rubbed his mental hands in glee. Greg deserved someone who could scowl him into a tiny, quivering ball when he was being a berk. Actually, he needed someone like that. Greg was stupid. Brave, dedicated, good-hearted, but stupid. Pushed himself too hard, put himself in harm’s way more often than was probably necessary…Mycroft seemed exactly the type to make sure thick-headed Greg realized his thick-headedness and, maybe, get him to do something about it. However, that wouldn’t stop him treating Greg exactly as he always had in the past. It was far too much fun…

“If you think, Greg, that saving me from a non-threat erases your not checking out my building today, you’re wrong. I still want it looked over. Can Baby Wizard do that? I’ll toss him a quid or two to buy a razor, for his trouble.”

Another menacing growl from Sebastian earned him a quizzical look from Anderson who interpreted it as a desire for more food, though there were still two perfectly good egg rolls in the carton the werewolf was clutching, and prompted Anderson to hand the werewolf another carton, this of very spicy pork, while he mulled over Marcus’s question.

“Oh… Greg, is that something I can learn? Whatever ‘checking out’ means? I’m happy to be of help, especially if I have the chance to learn new skills.”

One of Sebastian’s two, lonely egg rolls now lived in Anderson’s mouth, having been pushed there by the werewolf, himself. Not that Anderson minded much. Abundant, high-quality, free food was something he was happy to take full advantage of when it crossed his path.

“Ummm… right now, I’d say that you can certainly check for ghosts or other manifestations, but it’ll take some training to look for deeper things. Spells woven into the construction, how the
architectural configuration might have been manipulated to draw in dark magic and those who work it, outright curses, accumulation of negative energy that doesn’t actively manifest, but has chronic effects on people who live there... that sort of thing. When is the latest you need this done, Marcus?”

“Gregory, have you no concern, whatsoever, about your welfare?”

The three non-humans in the room shook their heads, and not even a mournful way. More a ‘nope, he doesn’t,’ casual sort of fashion that bothered Mycroft greatly, because it indicated they had passed the mournful stage long ago and were fully in the ‘just another day of Greg doing something daft’ mindset. Which was not to his liking.

“What’s the address?”

Now Mycroft was frowning at his PA, who was pulling out her mobile, licking her fingers clean and starting in on the login procedure for some rather high-level access, which Mycroft knew from the specific motion of her fingers and the virtual keystrokes they represented. And, once the vampire provided the property address, he understood why.

“Oh, survey maps, architectural blueprints, ownership and tax records, leasing records, police/fire reports, insurance documents… it’ll take longer for a prowl through the newspapers for articles and background information on the builders, architect, owners, people who leased or used the property, neighbors, etc. but no more than a day or so. I can get utilities records, too, quickly enough, usages and maps for where various lines run, with respect to the building. Can you do something with any of that? Weather information is available, but depending on how far in the past you’d want to look, that’s a lot of data, though if you have specific search parameters it can be narrowed down.”

The male members of Team Muggle smiled smugly at the slightly dropped-jaws of the magical contingent of the party. Putting a data-collection problem in Anthea’s line of sight was nearly as bad as putting it in Mycroft’s. The various information networks better be ready for a pounding because it was coming and coming hard.

“My beloved is truly an enchantress... and an incomparably beguiling one...”

Anthea chucked a hunk of beef at the cat, feeling only slight surprise as it passed cleanly through the energy field, then turned attention back to Greg who was just shaking off the information avalanche.

“Uh... yeah, that’s all useful, actually. There are signs I can look for in all of that. It’s not a guarantee, but I can draw a reasonable conclusion, especially if Anderson can nip out and have a look for a few things I’ll point him towards.”

“Alright, I’ll gather it all and put it in the cloud. You’ll get an email with the access code.”

“Thanks! My personal email address is...”

“You’re so cute.”

Greg’s mobile dinged its ‘new email’ alert and he checked it only to give Anthea the satisfaction of seeing his face when he read the subject line which, being ‘All Hail the Queen,’ fell very much in line with what he expected.

“Great. But, really, thanks. There are times I have to look for stuff like that, for this or that reason... could you show me some tricks?”
“No, because you don’t have clearance, but I’m amenable to cooperating. For a fee.”

This growl was from Marcus, though it was a very different sort than Seb’s particular variety and stretched into a purr that had Anthea waving him off with one hand while she continued to type and tap with the other.

“You have my gratitude, also, Anthea as this may, just may, convince Gregory into taking the rest he requires.”

Mycroft’s own mobile dinged a moment later, this with the high-priority message alert, and he rolled his eyes at the ‘Brace for my bill’ staring up at him from the screen.

“Lovely. In any case, it is… heartening to see that the various… communities within London can pool their resources towards a common goal.”

“As long as that goal is me, I’m fully on board. I hope to close this deal quickly, Greg, so find your reading specs and start revising.”

“Let’s see… Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs records… is that Marcus with a ‘c’ or ‘k,’ Mr. Vampire?”

Marcus gave Anthea an overexaggerated gasp and ‘I am betrayed!’ clutch of his heart, while Balthazar laughed loudly, but Mycroft was very aware of the tiny mote of ‘oh dear’ in the vampire’s dark eyes. Apparently, vampires did pay taxes and cheated on them as would any other citizen. A handy thing to know…

“I’ll look things over as quickly as I can, you bastard, and… Anderson, can you dart out there tomorrow, maybe after you’re done in the shop?”

Sebastian’s ‘no’ was drowned out by Anderson’s enthusiastic ‘yes!’

“Tomorrow night will be fine, Greg. That’s not a problem. It’ll be fun, actually. Rather like I’m a Ghostbuster or something.”

“Whazzat?”

Sebastian with food in his mouth was only slightly less garrulous and intelligible than Sebastian without food in his mouth.

“You… you don’t know the Ghostbusters?”

The fact Anderson looked genuinely shocked drew out a ‘oh shit’ expression on Sebastian’s face and the fact that he glanced at Greg for help said a lot about how clueless he actually was.

“It’s a film, Sebastian. I bet… I have a DVD of that somewhere about, the original, sequel and reboot, and I believe I remember a player in your flat, Anderson?”

“I do have one! It’s old, but it does still work.”

“Then why don’t you take those away with you tonight and you can educate Seb here on what he’s been missing.”

Because Sebastian seems, strangely, to like you, which puts you above 99.99999999999999999% of the universe, so if it’s possible for you both to make a friend and have someone to do things with, then it’s the job of Greg Lestrade, Child Minder Extraordinaire, to
make that happen.

“That’s a wonderful idea! I adore those films. Sebastian… would you like to watch some films at my flat? Any night is fine, I’m not really busy, at all, so when you can spare the time…”

“Tomorrow.”

“T… tomorrow?”

“After you bust the ghosts for the leech.”

“I am not a leech, you arse-sniffer!”

“Not yours. It stinks.”

“How dare you.”

Sebastian simply tapped the side of his nose a few times to the accompaniment of Balthazar’s uproarious chortling.

“Oh, it’s on, fleabag.”

“Yep. It’s on your arse and it stinks.”

As Marcus’s fangs lowered, Greg decided it was time to disperse the crowd, so any carnage took place elsewhere and spared his flat collateral damage.

“Alright, I think the party is officially over. Everyone take what food you want and make your way calmly to the nearest exit.”

Charles dove over Sebastian’s long arms that were corralling the remaining takeaway containers and grabbed a few, holding them over his head like trophies.

“I’m good.”

Not to be outdone, Anthea elbowed Sebastian in the ribs and used his distracted wince to grab a full container for herself and one half-full one that she set down in front of Marcus, though one prawn was extracted to toss at Balthazar before the cat died of apoplexy. Charles smiled widely at the various messages being sent and made a mental wager with himself as to how well each food recipient interpreted the messages. He had no clue about them, himself, other than Anthea did nothing if not for a precise, calculated reason when it came to food sharing. Or when doing anything, for that matter.

“Now that my staff has robbed the proverbial bank… I shall not be in the office tomorrow but shall consider myself available for more important matters that can be managed by phone or computer. A courier can deliver documents, if need be.”

“Charles can deliver them. He has nothing better to do.”

Given his choices were to remain assigned primarily to Mycroft or be placed back into the general driver pool, Charles decided the Anthea-assigned duty was getting his seal of approval.

“That I can, sir. Or… anything you might need. Neither of you are terribly ambulatory, at the moment.”

Mycroft was very aware that the phrase ‘while the cat’s away, the mice will play’ was wholly in
play here, however, since he was also very aware that this would not, in the slightest, impair the efficiency of their, or his, work chose to allow his mice their wedges of cheese.

“Very well. I will consider your employment extended to encompass additional services for the duration of my locomotory impairment.”

Anthea mouthed ‘cheesecake’ at the driver out of Mycroft’s range of vision and Charles added a visit to a bakery tomorrow to his yet-to-be-determined additional services.

“Then I shall await your or Ms. Anthea’s call, sir. Mr. Lestrade, thank you for the lovely evening, it has been… quite the experience.”

Bidding everyone quick goodbye, Charles hoisted his containers and made his exit just as Anderson was standing to make a start on his.

“This was definitely a nice evening, Greg. I’ll stop in tomorrow after John relieves me and you can tell me what to do when I look about Marcus’s property. I’ll get the DVD’s then, too, in case you want to watch them tomorrow now that they’re on your mind and really are a lot of fun, which is good when you’re feeling poorly.”

Anderson smiled, then gave a slightly awkward wave to everyone else in the room before starting to back towards the door and nobody was particularly surprised that Sebastian heaved himself and his armload of food off the floor to follow after him. Without an awkward wave or any form of acknowledgement to anyone in the room.

“My lady, might I offer you a ride home?”

Balthazar’s hissing and spitting was predictable and ignored by Anthea who pointedly also ignored Marcus.

“Mr. Holmes, stay off of your leg or there will be consequences. You, Dumbledore, make certain he stays off his leg or you will learn about consequences.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Vampire… you said you don’t have a driver. Do you have a car?”

“I do. And it’s nearly as sleek and gorgeous as me.”

“Then you can drive me home. When we arrive, I will leave the car. You will stay in the car. If you’re lucky, and behave yourself, you might… might… be allowed to watch me walk towards my door.”

Marcus wasn’t sure if he’d ever been offered so little and been so delighted about it in his life.

“We have a deal. Greg… don’t die. Or, if you do, leave me the deed to this space and your cottage in your will. Mycroft… you poor bastard… yeah, that’s all.”

Marcus leapt up and snatched Anthea’s jacket off the kitchen chair it had been arranged over, then held it up as she donned it and gave her hair a flick when she was garbed to her satisfaction, which Marcus chose to believe was his reward for a job well done. The woman knew precisely how to flick her hair, too, a skill many tried but at which few truly succeeded. And, of course, she stalked out the still-open flat door first, so he had to hurry to catch up.

“My queen! Do not abandon me!”
Greg released Balthazar from his circle and used more power to close the door of the flat so the cat couldn’t dart out to follow Anthea.

“You’re not going to spy on them, you bastard.”

“Spy is a harsh word.”

“Accurate, though. Go down to the workroom and cast the cards. That’ll tell you well enough how far that ridiculous vampire isn’t going to get tonight.”

“That’s true. I feel certain my sultry seductress will not succumb to his flaccid charms, but how far he’s willing to press those charms is something I must know.”

“Why don’t you start on a protection amulet when you’re done with that? Some little thing she can wear on a chain under her clothes so if Marcus tries anything caddish, he’ll learn the error of his ways.”

“That’s… that’s not a terrible idea.”

“Go read the cards first and you can start on the amulet tomorrow. I’ll let Anderson know what you’re doing, so he won’t yell when he sees you stealing things. However, he will know what you’re allowed to steal, so don’t press your luck.”

The cat made a rude noise, then ran to the door of the flat, which opened slightly for him to dart through.

“It’ll take him forever to plan and create a protection amulet and he’s balls with them, in any case. He’ll stay busy, but it won’t lead anywhere. He always manages to make something that’s the size of a saucer and makes fizzy noises at random intervals or something equally ludicrous, so I’ll be surprised if Anthea even lets it stay in her flat. It’ll probably keep pests away, though, so that could be useful.”

“I… I am beginning to think I should request some form of protective item be made for you. More of a self-protection item, however, since I am becoming convinced you are your own worst enemy.”

Greg smiled a ‘yeah, that’s not a bad idea,’ knowing smile and started to rise from the sofa only to be told by all parts of him what a blindingly idiotic idea that was. He was an idiot, though, so it was fair. He definitely shouldn’t have used that much power tonight, even though it was fairly pathetic in the grand scheme of what he could do. Was he trying to show off to Mycroft? The man had watched him battle a demon, so there’s really no higher to climb on that particular scale. Maybe trying to prove that he wasn’t as battered as he appeared. But, Mycroft already knew fairly well his level of battered. And fried. Hoping to show that he could do simple, little things and power could be as boring and normal as… no power? That didn’t even make sense. Was he just an idiot? Yeah, Occam’s Razor. Simplest solution is probably the right one.

“If I could explain why I was a bit stupid tonight, Mycroft, I would, but I can’t. I can say I’m sorry, though, and I am. I shouldn’t have worried you like that.”

“For that much, I do thank you, Gregory. And, in truth, I have conducted myself in a similar manner on this or that occasion. Refusing to take proper care when I believed the situation warranted the self-neglect. Or, I simply refused to acknowledge the weakness and carried on as if I had something to prove, if only to myself.”

“That… yeah, that’s a familiar song. Forgive me?”
“We shall see...”

Though the twinkle in Mycroft’s eyes told Greg that the seeing would happen sooner than later.

“… now, however, we should return you to bed.”

“Don’t wanna.”

“Gregory Lestrade, I will not tolerate any churlishness.”

“Churlishness, schmurlishness.”

“I… I have no idea what to say in response.”

“I’m dastardly that way. I have to admit, though, I’m impressed that neither you, your PA or your driver really batted an eye at all of this tonight. Most people would be rattled, at the very least, but you lot were like this was just another normal day in the life. Is it really that weird in government service?”

“You have no idea.”

“Glad I’m well out of it, then. I have enough weirdness in my life as it is. But… that was an amazing thing Anthea did with just her phone. All that information with a few taps of her fingers.”

“It is… part and parcel of the work I do that I have access to a certain depth and breadth of information; information that is often needed quickly, so efficient paths of access have long been learned, established and maintained.”

“It made my mind whirly, I’ll admit. Information in my world isn’t so freely accessible. Or given. There’s lots of secrecy, for good reasons as well as selfish, so it can be time consuming and require a bit of diplomacy to wrest a spell or location where a certain plant is grown away from someone. Let alone really secret things, like burial sites, real names…”

“Names?”

“Certain spells can be cast only if the practitioner knows the real name of the person they’re going to attach it to. It’s pretty common for mothers in the various magic communities to give their kid a name only they ever know and give it before any other, it’s the first and real name, to protect the kid from those sorts of spells which, invariably, are nothing but trouble.”

“Fascinating. What about those of us in the non-magic communities? Does this render us vulnerable to that sort of thing?”

“No, because there’s not the same sort of name link between you and, say, what we see for the elves. It’s a different thing, from a magic perspective, so even someone with as unique a name as yours isn’t really at risk from those sorts of spells. Of course, you’re still at risk from scads of others, but that’s why the community stays vigilant for practitioners who are risking exposing the rest of us by being evil or incautious.”

“Another thing learned! I feel very much like Mr. Anderson.”

“HA! Oh, he’s eager, that’s for certain.”

“And you are expending energy maintaining your bonhomie again, aren’t you, Gregory?”

It was a good thing, likely, that he couldn’t hide things like that from Mycroft. Even when he
didn’t think it was a good thing, it was probably for the best.

“Oops.”

“I suppose you were relatively quiet during your gathering, so I shall not chide you overmuch.”

“I appreciate that. I’m chiding myself enough for both of us. I really do need to get some sleep.”

“Then let us get you to your bed so you can make a start on that.”

“That does… ummmmm… leave the question of you.”

“Was that supposed to make sense?”

“Yes, but I’m not surprised I failed.”

“Care to try again?”

“I’m not one to rest on failure, so trying again like a champion. The question I made a dog’s breakfast of asking is about you and sleeping and bed. I know you were awake last night, but that cannot be the case tonight, since you need your rest as much as I do.”

“Ah, I see. Not a problem, from my perspective. There is the sofa, upon which you seem most comfortable and I am not unfamiliar with the experience of crafting a makeshift bed for a night spent on the floor.”

“What! No. Have you looked at my floors?”

“Yes and…”

“You’re reconsidering, aren’t you?”

“I suspect I can find some form of oilcloth to lay betwixt me and the floor to repel the various vectors of plague and insanity.”

“Mycrof…”

“Verily, my ability to procure the even most esoteric of items is very well known.”

Filing that away for the times a spell or extended ritual required something esoteric. Which was often.

“How about leaving your driver to continue home and not gad about London getting penicillin or a plague-doctor’s mask and turn attention to the fact that I’ve got a big bed.”

“I… Gregory Lestrade! We will not be having relations while you are injured!”

Implying they would be having relations when he wasn’t injured. Goal! And the crowd goes wild! Oilcloth for everyone!

“What a filthy mind you have, Mycroft Holmes. Which is a good thing, in my humble opinion, but I was actually thinking it’s large enough for two people to sleep, just sleep, and do it comfortably. Or as comfortably as my old mattress can manage.”

“That cannot be well-advised for your situation.”
“I don’t see why it wouldn’t be advised. I doubt you throw punches in your sleep. In fact, I suspect you’re one of those that scarcely moves at all when you sleep. Go to sleep in a position and wake in exactly the same one.”

“Hmmmm… I do confess that describes me well.”

“I knew it. You probably see so little sleep in your job that your body just shuts down when it gets the chance, like an android with its switch flipped to off.”

Mycroft’s tiny grin was truly one of the handsomest sights Greg had ever seen.

“When I was a young man, a very young man, I used to envision the life of an adult where I did not have to rise early each day for some obligation, school, in this case, but could, instead, linger in bed with a book, an activity that might see me through the day so that, come nightfall, I was still in pyjamas and not a bit caring that such was the case.”

“And now you’re just happy that the sleep you do see that day isn’t in your suit, at your desk and the tea you can find to try and reinvigorate yourself when you pry your eyes open is weak and disappointing, so you feel all the worse for drinking it.”

“A most astute analysis.”

“Which means you’ll take the other side of the bed tonight, won’t argue about it, will sleep in your one position all night which won’t disturb me in the slightest, and get strong, excellent tea in the morning.”

“That is rather a lot of meaning.”

“And all of it correct. I shall now commence the rising process and we shall proceed towards the bed.”

“Most definitively stated, Gregory, however, I am unconvinced that you can commence the rising process without some form of block and tackle system and a sturdy sailor to pull the requisite rope.”

Mycroft was the smartest man in the world.

“True, I’m in agony and stiff and will probably cry like a little boy who’s dropped his ice cream but, dammit, I’m doing this.”

“Might I suggest this, then, as an alternative. I will phone John and ask him if you might have one and one-half doses of your pain medication so that you are better able to sleep, and we shall watch a half-hour of television or listen to the radio while the medication takes effect. Therefore, you will be more comfortable both rising and moving to bed, as well as settling into sleep.”

Smartest man in the universe. All of them!

“That’s smart. You’re smart. I wish I could brain like you.”

“With your medication, your brain might have opportunity to focus on more than discomfort. Such as grammar and vocabulary.”

“Brain focus good.”

“Oh dear, we seem to be treading the boundary of dangerous waters. I am phoning John.”
While Greg made faces, each more foolish than the last, Mycroft simply rolled his eyes and smiled indulgently. He had no idea why all of this was so easy when he’d had abysmal luck with romance in the past, but Mycroft Holmes was not a man to look a gift horse in the mouth. Well, yes, he was, but some horses received special dispensation…
Chapter 21

Anderson was used to walking in silence with Sebastian because silence seemed to be Moran’s natural state of being and, frankly, it was a relief not to have to try and carry on conversations sometimes. Not that he was asocial or awkward… entirely… but he’d spent so much of his life trying to avoid people, to avoid conversations that he’d become used to not doing those things and working his way back from that set of habits was proving a little harder than he may have expected. Now, though, silence wasn’t bringing him relief. It was highlighting what the previous silences had allowed to remain unsaid…

“Sebastian, why didn’t you tell me you were a werewolf?”

Some people mistook Sebastian’s natural inclination towards quiet for lack of intellect. In that, they were profoundly wrong. Sebastian was a smart, clever man who simply didn’t feel the need to prove it and was more than happy to let other people blather on and on with copious amounts of their own proof that, unlike him, they were idiots. Therefore, he’d anticipated this question was coming his way and wasn’t blindsided when it arrived on a quiet street when he had bags of takeaway in both hands. What he hadn’t entirely anticipated, however, was the look of genuine hurt on Anderson’s face as the question was asked. Ultimately, though, it didn’t change his response.

“Didn’t want to scare you.”

Sebastian gave his answer while staring straight ahead along the pavement, not wanting to see whatever new emotions might skitter across Anderson’s face from his words.

“Are… are people usually… is that the normal reaction?”

And here was another thing Sebastian didn’t anticipate. He’d expected Anderson to be a bit insulted about being considered easy to scare, maybe grateful for the consideration inherent in wanting not to distress him, but he didn’t predict that particular reply. And it was something he wasn’t sure how to address. Normal? That implied it was an issue that was raised frequently. Or, at least, with some degree of frequency. Which it wasn’t. The local pack knew who he was because werewolves know other werewolves on sight. Or, more accurately, on sniff. You knew when one was around long before you actually saw them. Some of the magically talented were good at spotting werewolves, too, but not too many of them, surprisingly, lived in London. The various people he did work for certainly had no idea who he was, only that the jobs they wanted him to do were done quickly and thoroughly. Greg knew… but there was a reason for that. John knew, too, because that fucking cat had one of his stupid meltdowns and let it slip when John was there to hear it. That was ok, though, because John could be useful. In wolf form, he could heal almost anything, but in human form… knowing an Army doctor who was used to patching up a diversity of wounds and injuries definitely had its benefits.

“Sebastian?”

“What? Oh… yeah. I suppose it’s normal. Wolves are scary.”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. I’ve never seen one in the flesh, so to speak, but from what I’ve read and seen in a few nature programs, they seem smart and loyal. They’re beautiful animals, too. I wouldn’t say scary, unless you’re talking about the fictitious ones on the telly and in films where they try to make them scary.”
“Yep.”

“Oh. I see what you mean. Those aren’t real, though.”

“People are stupid.”

“I… well, I can’t say that’s not true, precisely, but I’d say they’re liable to fall into stupid patterns of thinking, even when they’re actually quite intelligent. It’s due to emotions, I suspect. Light that fuse and the brain toddles off for a cup of tea and lets the fire rage.”

“Same result.”

“True. I’m sorry, though.”

“That they’re stupid?”

“No, that you’ve experienced people being scared of you. It’s not… well, it’s not a good feeling, that’s for certain.”

Sebastian sighed and reminded himself that the shit he’d endured in his life wasn’t the same and, in some ways, not as insidious as the shit Anderson had endured and Anderson wasn’t nearly the cold bastard that he was so the shit sloughed off with a quick shower and a stiff drink.

“Talk.”

“I… aren’t we?”

“Talk about what it feels like.”

“Oh… what’s there to say? I understood it; I still do. You say there’s some fellow standing in the corner of the room and everyone can see with their own eyes that it’s not true. Things happen, physical things, I mean, and people begin to worry about their safety when you’re about. Nothing I ever did intentionally… I simply had no idea how to do or not do anything and… the anything happened now and again all on its own. I just wish…”

“Yeah?”

“I wish… people had been more kind. I honestly do understand it all, being put away, being kept on the fringes but… well, it’s in the past and that’s that. I just wish, now and again, that there had been more kindness, that’s all. It would have helped.”

Sebastian Moran considered himself many things. Most were things other people might not score as positives, but he didn’t care what they thought. One thing he never considered himself, though, was kind. Fair, yes. Contemptuous of cruelty, sure. Always ready to bring a swift and painful end to people to took advantage of the vulnerable, the ones who couldn’t fight back… absolutely. But kind? Maybe he could fake it…

“Better now?”

“I’d say so. Greg and John are… well, life would have been much different if I’d known them before now. Even Mycroft is kind, in his own way. At least, he doesn’t go out of his way to make me feel… like I’m a bad person. The vampire treated me like everybody else, too. No special silliness for me or leaving me out of things… in a way, it was nice. I was part of something, included. Nobody was giving me strange looks or whispering when they thought I wasn’t looking. Not only because I helped with Greg, either. It’s… it’s something I’ve wanted but never
found. And I have a friend!”

“Who?”

“Uh, you.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“I’ve wanted to ask… why did you offer, not really offer, per se, since you just did it, but why did you see me home that first time we chatted in Greg’s shop?”

“No reason.”

“That’s a strange thing to do and not have a reason.”

“Whatever.”

Anderson narrowed his eyes and thought a moment. He greatly enjoyed spending time with Sebastian but… it had always struck him as slightly odd that a man like that would so quickly befriend someone like him. You couldn’t miss the looks Sebastian got in the street, from men and women alike. Lustful, admiring, scared, but in the way you were scared of any powerful and menacing looking person. Which, now that he had the thought could be a good or bad thing, but it wasn’t quite like being scared of a werewolf because people were making judgements based on things that weren’t real compared, perhaps, to actual experiences from their own lives. And, to be fair, Sebastian encouraged that along with a few pointed scowls and glares.

“I’d like the truth, please.”

“I like potatoes.”

“Try again.”

“Why? It’s the truth.”

“I’m looking over Marcus’s property alone tomorrow.”

“No.”

“Sorry, not an option unless I get my truth. Let’s hear it.”

“No.”

“You know you’ve made it clear that you’re hiding something important, don’t you? And that refusing to tell me is… well, it’s rather insulting. I did think we were friends and friends don’t lie to each other. That’s not entirely true, though, because it’s ok if you tell someone you like their new shirt though it’s actually ghastly when they love it dearly, but not about things that really matter.”

This species of Sebastian’s sighs was one Anderson recognized as his friend preparing to listen to him though, perhaps, he’d rather not, all things considered.

“I saw you home because… it’s what Greg wanted me to do.”

“What? What does that mean.”

“What I said. Greg wanted me to… keep an eye on you.”
Anderson stopped walking and gaped at Sebastian’s broad back, at least for as long as it took for Sebastian to realize he was now walking alone and turned to establish the reason for it. Then wished he hadn’t. Anderson looked **appalled**.

“You’ve been spying on me?”

“No.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

“Greg was worried about you. Thought… you might be in danger.”

“From who?”

“Moriarty.”

“Oh. Oh… that’s…”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t Greg, or you, just tell me? Was it… didn’t Greg trust me?”

Appalled and hurt was a miserable combination…

“Didn’t want you doing anything… out of the ordinary.”

“Because it might make Jim suspicious?”

“Yeah.”

“But… he didn’t seem *too* upset when I said I decided not to apprentice with him.”

“He’s hard to read.”

“You know him?”

“By reputation. And…”

“Yes?”

“Greg’s had me spy on him.”

“I see. So… you’re *not* actually my friend. You’re just doing Greg a favor.”

Sebastian once took the head off of a man’s neck and that head hadn’t looked as despondent as Anderson did right now, even when it was lying on the ground staring at its former body. Walking back the few steps to stand at Anderson’s side, Sebastian gave him a nudge with one of the bags of food and tried to remind his face what it meant to smile at something other than another person’s well-deserved misfortune or a very successful bit of particularly-clever violence.

“I’m not keeping an eye on you anymore.”

“Meaning?”

“I do stuff… because I want to.”

“Really?”
“Yeah.”

“Ok… that’s… good.”

It is, because the appalled, injured expression was gone and something like a smile was taking it’s place.

“Yeah.”

“Well then… on we go. And tomorrow should be fun, too. A real bit of sorcerer’s work then some great films. Do you like popcorn?”

“Got meat in it?”

“Uh, no?”

“Then, maybe.”

“If I put extra butter on it, will that be meaty enough?”

“I like butter.”

Anderson smiled and reached into one of the bags, opening a container to grab a cold piece of spicy beef and hold it up for Sebastian to slurp into his mouth. It seemed the appropriate thing to do, for some odd reason. Friends did silly things together. Didn’t they? He’d never really had friends, so was a tad lacking in expectations and norms for interacting with one. It seemed to be going well, though. And he was enjoying it immensely. Tomorrow night should be a great deal of fun and he’d make a mental note to tidy a bit, not that he had much to make things untidy, and see he had at least the barest essentials for a film night. Nobody had spelled out his wage schedule, so it shouldn’t be impolite to ask for his pay tomorrow to fund those barest essentials. It was doubtful the two tablespoons of butter he had remaining in the refrigerator was going to be sufficiently meaty for even a handful of Sebastian’s popcorn. And the popcorn he had remaining in the container wasn’t likely sufficient for a handful of Sebastian’s handfuls. Maybe he could ask John for a loan…

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“Well…”

“Well what?”

“Like the car?”

Anthea made her sniff as disinterested as possible, but it certainly wasn’t her best showing, given she was being chauffeured home in a very nice BMW by a vampire, who claimed to be a prince in addition to his general bloodsucking nature. That… was a lot to take in.

“It’s acceptable.”

“It’s my toddling-about car.”

“Looks like one. You have others, I take it.”

“Scads. Or slightly less than scads, but so close as to make no real difference. A number of them are mostly for appearances sake, rather than driving sake, because some people are very susceptible to and easily manipulated by appearances.”
The vampire should not be scoring valid tactical points. It wasn’t fair.

“True. Do you actually do anything worth manipulating people over or just sit on a throne and count money all day?”

“Wouldn’t that be brilliant! I’d look magnificent in full Crown Jewels regalia with stacks of gold and banknotes surrounding my regalness. But, alas, I do have to do something. Not much, admittedly, but I putter about with this and that to keep the vamp community in line and not doing their best to muck up things for themselves or others. Keeping Father happy, too, which is more work than anyone, especially someone as gorgeous and interesting as me should ever have to suffer. Regardless, I am very efficient at doing my this and that, so that leaves me all the time I… or anyone else… might want to have a bit of fun.”

Fine, Lugosi, you have the right sort of face to actually make a sexy smile look sexy and not pathetic. That’s rare. Damn.

“Cluedo? Old Maid?”

“I do enjoy a rousing game of Monopoly, but I cheat, so there’s little doubt who ends with the bank in their pocket at evening’s end.”

“I specialize in crippling cheaters.”

“You shag them so hard their legs don’t work anymore? Please tell me that’s your favorite technique. Actually, I’ll just picture it in my mind and resign myself to sacrificing the choice properties and all my papery cash for a leisurely hour of the sort of sex that not only leaves my legs non-functional but sets my superb Egyptian cotton sheets on fire. Which is ok, because I have lots. Sheets don’t last long with me, for all manner of delightful reasons.”

You’re loony, vampire man, but there’s something beneath the loony that’s probably given more than a few people a highly unpleasant surprise when they underestimated you exactly as you expected them to do. That’s… intriguing.

“I’ll have to find a new strategy. You seem to heal fast.”

“I do! Which makes any happy marks on my pristine, alabaster skin not even a minor worry. If you were worried, that is. I wager you enjoy your slave boys wearing their marks for a nice long time, vixen that you are.”

“Do you think about anything other than sex?”

“That wasn’t a no, don’t think I didn’t notice. And yes, I do. Lots of things, all fantastic and amazing and easy to share. They’re better if you share, actually, so let’s say I simply pick one thing on my loooooong list and we get started?”

“There’s my building.”

“Shit.”

“Is that on your list?”

“Near the bottom, in the ‘not so fun to share so keep this fucker to yourself’ section. It’s a tiny section, though. More of a footnote than an actual continuation of a list. I’ll pick something from higher up for our next outing which will be…?”
“When and if I decide I need an extra helping of loony in my life.”

“Tomorrow, then. Got it. I’ll clear my schedule. Poof! It’s cleared! It’s good to be rich. And royal. And spectacular.”

Anthea rolled her eyes but mentally paged through her own schedule to verify that she had time this week… no, next week, which was much smarter… for something fun. Small fun, but expensive. It was almost a certainty that Marcus could get a table at any restaurant in London and, perhaps, seats for one of the sold-out shows she’d been dying to see but unwilling to pull the necessary strings to gain her own ticket since those strings had far better uses for other things and it didn’t do to overstretch strings when one could help it. Besides, her curiosity was piqued and that would niggle until she could fathom out this jackanapes. Who was surprisingly more entertaining than she imagined.

“I’m leaving now.”

“And do I get my reward?”

Make a show of thinking… it’s not going in his favor… going more poorly in his favor… settle into ‘what does it matter since he’s, at best, a pesky fly’ mode…

“You do. This single time.”

Anthea stepped out of the car and pointedly didn’t notice Marcus scrambling over to the passenger’s seat to stick his head out of the open window like a dog getting a breath of air as he watched Anthea walk with greater-than-normal slowness to her building, key open the door, then flick her hair once before disappearing inside, never once looking back at her escort.

“She is astounding. I wonder what flowers she likes? Fuck it, I’ll send a whole flower shop’s stock. Something will have to work. Unless she’s allergic. Shit. Humans can screw anything up. However…”

Vampires had their own share of tricks up their sleeves, magic-wise, and Marcus called up one of his to give himself a general direction to point his car and continued using his innate GPS system to slowly narrow down his intended location, something he could only do if he’d interacted with his target recently, which he had, so hurray for him. And, lo and behold… there it was. How nice that that side of the building was darkened and not facing any of the other buildings on the street, so his singular method of entering would go completely unnoticed…

Inspiration came from a lot of directions and sources and anyone who didn’t feel inspired by a gathering of fantasy-novel characters and felt the need to act on that inspiration simply lacked a soul. Or, at least, that was going to be his excuse for being a bit slow tomorrow morning which would probably arrive with zero sleep to his record. Of course, it would be hard to sleep anyway with that banging going on. Was an owl or something knocking on his window? One of the Queen’s ravens? Oh… it was a vampire. Lovely.

Charles reached over to his work table and grabbed a piece of charcoal and his sketch pad, writing a few moments before holding it up over his easel for Marcus to read.

“Funny. I hath not permission to enter? Who says hath? Constipated people, that’s who. And I don’t need your permission, so there. I do need you to flip the latch, though, because I don’t want to break the glass and risk damage to my shirt. It costs loads. Not that I can’t afford another one,
but the owner of the shop where I bought it is irritating and I don’t need any of that in my week. Oh joy, another sign… you saw Salem’s Lot. Good for you. I did, too, and, for your information, I am not a creepy little boy and, for your further information, if I’m ever that creepy I’d want someone to stake me because that was fucking disturbing, and it takes a lot to unsettle a vampire. My uncle Petras does look like that Barlow chap, though, which infuriates Father since Uncle is tall, bald and malevolent-looking and Father… isn’t. But enough of the family gossip… open the window, Chuckles, or I’ll hover out here talking to you all night until you go insane. I can do that, you know. Secret vampire powers and all that.”

Charles looked around him a moment and found a rag that was easily torn and with appropriately-manly wadding, turned into two cozy bundles to nestle in his ears.

“You are an evil man, Charlie. They say my sort is evil, but ‘they’ never met you, did they? No, they didn’t, lazy fuckers. Open the window so we can chat. Pretty please? I’m not even hungry, so you don’t have to worry about your blood being sucked out. But, if you want to offer, out of courtesy or pity’s sake, do feel free. Pleeeeeeepaiser…………”

Charles had known the vampire only for a few hours and that was more than enough for certainty the creature of the night would spend every minute until the sun rose wheedling at his window. Anthea’s cheesecake offering was officially in danger. She obviously hadn’t fastened Marcus’s leash tight enough around his neck and for that, she would pay.

“Don’t you have a home to go to?”

“A fabulous one, but it doesn’t have what I need.”

“A straight jacket?”

“You and, for the first time in my life, I don’t mean that in a sexy way.”

“I’m flattered.”

“You should be. Or not. Really, you shouldn’t be, come to think of it. But I’d definitely shag you if you didn’t smell of paint, which tickles my exquisite nose, so don’t be insulted. You can have a little wash up when we’re finished talking and we can shag then. How’s that?”

Dealing with the vampire was still leaps and bounds easier than dealing with many of the buffoons in government, so Charles couldn’t say this was the most ridiculous encounter he’d ever experienced and honestly wasn’t certain what that said about his life choices to date. Deciding that the only way to end this nonsense was to officially start it, one paint brush was set aside, one body rose from its stool, one window was unlatched and thrown open and one vampire moved with practiced daintiness into the flat.

“Ooh, it’s a real artist’s flat, isn’t it? Messy and horrid in that marvelous way they have about them.”

“You’re too kind.”

“I notice you’ve dropped the ‘sir.’ “

“My house, my rules.”

“I like that. I have a similar philosophy, but I suspect my rules are a lot more fun than yours. Have any weed? Artists always have that lying about.”
“No, I don’t have any weed. Does that even work on vampires?”

“Mildly. Like a glass or two of wine for a human, but who doesn’t like a glass of wine? I know I do. Lots of glasses, actually. Got any wine?”

Knowing his grandmother’s ghost would certainly tut-tut if he lied and said no, and now growing concerned that her ghost actually could be floating about to do the tut-tutting, Charles sighed and retrieved an unopened bottle of wine and two glasses. He hadn’t planned on drinking any more tonight but drinking seemed the very best way forward at the moment.

“Ooh, this is good. I’d expected far worse, but this is nice.”

“Life is too short to drink bad wine.”

“You, my good man, are wasted as a chauffeur. Unless you’re mine, of course, which would be a dream job for anyone.”

“I’m content. The wages are good, as are the benefits. And I normally work for Mr. Holmes, so there is always something interesting to color my day.”

“Mycroft’s interesting is anyone else’s boring, so I’ll keep reminding you about how sweet your life could be if… when… you vault over to the dark side.”

“Is there an actual reason you are here or is this a sad attempt to tempt me into a life of fairly-ludicrous evil?”

“My evil is tremendously ludicrous, I’ll have you know. In any case, no, that’s not why I’m here. I want to pick that clever little brain of yours about the oh-so intriguing Ms. Anthea.”

“No.”

“Wrong answer, no goldfish in a sack for you. We’re friends, Chaz, so I know you want to help me with this…”

“No.”

“Is your brain stuck? Have more wine and lubricate the synapses.”

“Anthea is her own person. If you want to learn more about her, ask. If you do it politely and with genuine interest, I suspect you’ll get some form of answer.”

Which may or may not be true, given the security concerns she has to mind, but the little things could see the light of day, such as her favorite flavor of cheesecake which would now not be arriving tomorrow to brighten her day.

“I don’t want what she’ll tell me, I want what she won’t. The really important things that she won’t reveal because it would make job too easy.”

“What job?”

“Capturing my prey.”

Charles’s eyes hardened to a steely glare that gave Marcus one of the strongest cases of ‘oops’ he’d suffered in a very long time.

“Anthea is nobody’s prey. Time for you to leave.”
“No! Wait… wait…”

It was a hazard of Charles’s work to have occasion to interact with Sherlock Holmes but on a few of those occasions he’d had the opportunity to see the detective realize when he’d made a terrible mistake with his words. His childish arrogance would slip, and you could see the actual person beneath the mask. Marcus was looking much the same right now…

“… You’re right and that was dreadful of me to say. I didn’t mean it, honestly. I was hoping for a few tips to… make an impression. The right impression. I always make a good impression, don’t get me wrong, but this person’s good is that person’s…”

“Frivolous?”

“That’s not the most flattering… or insulting… way to put it, so I’ll take it. I do tend to keep a certain type of social company, for a variety of reasons, and dear Anthea doesn’t fit the mold so… I’m a bit unsure how to proceed. Normally, I’d ask Greg but he’s got other things on his mind. And in his bed. So, Charleston… lil’ help for a very old and dear friend?”

Charles watched Marcus’s mask slip back into place, but it had been down long enough to earn the vampire a second chance at a touch of goodwill. He honestly had no idea what the social life of a vampire was like, especially one as fatuous as Marcus, but he had a few suspicions and at least some of them would ensure Marcus found himself on the wrong end of one of Anthea’s campaigns of misery, which would culminate with the fool learning exactly what a pair of heels and a well-thrown punch could do when necessary. And, strangely, he suspected the vampire would take pains to see that unhappy fate didn’t befall him but, if it did, he’d honor the sentiment and that would be the end of that. However, if his impression was incorrect, he knew of another set of fists that would gladly add their opinion to Anthea’s side of the argument and this set also drove large, heavy cars that easily did astonishing amounts of damage to living creatures. Unliving ones, too, most likely.

“What were you thinking about?”

“Flowers.”

“Not a bad start.”

“Ten dozen or so long-stemmed red roses.”

“That’s a bad start.”

“Really?”

“Cliché, overdone… Anthea does appreciate the bold gesture, but… it needs to be unique, too. Special. Shows you put thought into it and didn’t just leap to the most expensive option, though an expensive option would not go unappreciated.”

“See! This is why I need you, Chazzerson. You have the inside track. And I adore this, I really do. What a delightful challenge. Fantastically-expensive, but unique and special. The perfect thing to sink my fangs into.”

“Good to hear it.”

“So, what do I do?”

“Sink your fangs into whatever’s convenient and get on with your thinking.”
“That’s what you’re here for. The thinking part, at least. Though… you do have an alluring neck, I will confess. We’ll talk more about the fang-sinking part later, after we’ve had our wine and you’ve gotten the paint smell off of you.”

Charles stared at Marcus, who was grinning happily and reached out for the wine to fill his own glass nearly to the brim with its blessed and brain-numbing nectar. It was going to be a long night…
Chapter 22

Mycroft checked for the fifth time that Greg was sleeping and took an extra moment to pull the blanket up higher on his chest for additional warmth. Nothing should disturb the poor man’s rest, he needed it too desperately and, having slept a night in the same bed, Mycroft had to wonder how much genuinely-restful sleep Greg saw in a week. The pain or long nights of work aside, he sadly suspected the bouts of clear distress he witnessed as his poor Gregory suffered a nightmare were not an infrequent occurrence.

Given the sorcerer’s life, though, such a thing was not entirely unexpected. He suffered his own periods where the mental stresses gathered strength and punched through the calming veil of his rest to set the demons free. Part of him hoped that his reaching out to provide a small soothing gesture being sufficient to send his bedmate back to a quiet sleep was a good sign of trust and, perhaps, affection; however, part of him wondered if such a gesture was so pitifully rare in the man’s life that anyone’s act of compassion would have given the same result.

For his part, sleep had not easily come, despite being more comfortable in a bed than he’d known in a very long time. Far too much had occurred for his brain to allow him time for silly activities such as sleep, but laying quietly next to Gregory had not only allowed him to intervene during an upsetting dream, but also to do a large quantity of thinking. Not nearly enough to process the entirety of his recent experiences, but sufficient to organize matters in his mind so that issues could be addressed in an orderly and productive fashion. Which was his first intellectual step whenever he was presented with a gargantuan situation outside his immediate experience. It was not often he was presented with such a thing, but it did occur, and this was a stellar example of the breed.

Magic was real. Not just magic with respect to Gregory’s powers, but the whole universe of creatures associated with a magical world. Vampires, werewolves… a fairy tale had been merrily playing out in the world and he’d had no inkling of its existence. Everything that tantalized his interests as a boy with the innumerable horror novels and films he consumed were real. Not simply real, but living alongside him throughout his life and he’d not suspected a thing. The tax and voting rolls were filled with individuals who were not human! Or, perhaps they were. Were vampires and werewolves simply a subspecies of the human race? After consciously interacting with a representative of each group, his instincts said they may not appreciate being brought beneath that umbrella, however, he would verify with Gregory before contemplating the matter further.

For now, though, there was another matter to tend to and that one was sufficiently draining to put all other considerations on hold. Perhaps he should have let the accursed cat keep his mobile…

“Finally! Why have you been ignoring me, Fatcroft? I require an exemption from your ridiculous hazardous materials laws and access to a suite of substances necessary for my experiments and you choose now to pretend that my birth never occurred.

Pretend, no. Dream about with a disquieting regularity, yes.

“Despite your belief to the contrary, Sherlock, you are not connected by an umbilicus to either my mobile or my bank accounts, so there are times that my immediate attention cannot be secured.”

“I have left thousands of messages; therefore, your claim of immediacy is refuted on its face.”

“And, given I was not informed of an emergency by either your use of your emergency call
number, let alone the police or hospital, the need for my attention was not pressing and I tended, therefore, to matters that were.”

“My needs are always pressing, far more than your discovery of a new bakery or ongoing love affair with your aged tailor.”

Love affair… what a blissful combination of words…

“Most amusing, brother dear. Now, to address your demands – no.”

“Intolerable!”

“Yet, I suspect you shall tolerate it sufficiently well for continued existence. Now, if that is all…”

“Certainly not. Where are you?”

“At a place you are not.”

“You are not amusing, Mycroft, so kindly do not embarrass yourself with the attempt. You are not at home, nor at work.”

“I take it you have personally visited both locales.”

“Yes.”

“What remains of my personal possessions?”

“Items that failed to interest me or anyone who might trade them for cash.”

“Lovely. Goodbye, Sherlock.”

“No. You are not at home, not at work and are not phoning from a vehicle since I can hear none of your driver’s characteristic odiousness assaulting the phone line. You PA, as usual, was resoundingly unhelpful for everything, and smug about the fact as an additional insult… where are you?”

“Sherlock, I am often away for extended periods due to matters of work.”

“For which you take your luggage. You have not.”

So, Sherlock was worried, not simply aggrieved. Interesting.

“True, however, matters arise quickly and I must, at times, make do with what I can acquire from my environs.”

“What matters?”

“Emergencies that require a rapid and proximal response, so I lack the time to return home to pack a bag.”

“You do not sound as if you are embroiled in one of your nonsensical emergencies.”

“Untrue. I am gasping for a cup of tea and do not have one. That certainly qualifies as an emergency.”
“Pfft. Your inanity is boring.”

“Which also indicates a profound lack of emergency.”

“Then why will you not divulge your location?”

Because, Sherlock, I have not put my mind to crafting a cover story that will satisfy you. Explaining my injuries will be sufficiently difficult, let alone Gregory’s, since you will likely see through the vehicle collision in a trice and that will only inflame your suspicions to a greater degree. However… I shall not be able to keep you entirely in the dark and if this is properly spun…

“Very well. If you must know, I am with Gregory.”

“Why? Is he being served with a balsamic drizzle and roasted potatoes?”

“You, also, are bereft of wit, brother, which makes ours the most humorless family in England. In any case, your question has been answered, so if I may…”

“You may not. Why are you with Graham?”

“His name is not Graham and I am with him because it pleases me to be here.”

“Unlikely. He, perhaps, is more boring than you.”

Oh Sherlock, if you only knew how wrong you were…

“I find his tedium a stellar match to mine and, thus, we are content.”

“I see.”

“Do you? Huzzah! Am I now freed from this conversation?”

“No. I must know how your new, sexually-conjoined state affects me. I will not tolerate my wants being ignored when you choose to wander off to have an unseemly, middle-aged itch scratched by a doddering shopkeeper.”

Doddery? The man bested a demon in mortal combat, you silly boy. However, that does provide highly agreeable cover for this situation and, most likely, for others when itches are most certainly being attended to by the most vigorous and torrid of scratchings.

“On this particular issue, your wants will be ignored in their entirety, since they are both ludicrous and staunchly against the health and safety concerns of the general public…”

“Boring.”

“…Nevertheless, my situation with Gregory shall, of course, occupy a measure of my time and attention and you must adjust accordingly. I shall, of course, remain available to you, however, I would not advise further unannounced visits to my home, lest you witness something that would surely turn your hysterical self to stone.”

For I am most hopeful of entertaining Gregory in my home, with the amenities it provides beyond, even, my joyfully-large and comfortable bed.

“My disgust nearly erupted out of my mouth.”
“Next time, perhaps, you will meet with success. Goodbye, Sherlock.”

“Wait! I have far more to say about your neglect and saggy-scrotumed sexual fantasies.”

Mycroft terminated the call and considered asking Greg to perform some magic to create an app that would turn Sherlock into a toad with but the touch of a jaunty icon. Mayhap he could learn to do so himself... one spell had already been successfully performed, so why not another? Actually, that topic of conversation was one he was eager to explore, though without the specific amphibian leanings. *He* did magic. Mycroft Holmes performed an actual spell, replete with mystical symbols and incantations. It was a heady thing to contemplate. What else could he do? Not that he had an abundance of time for lessons or practice, but he certainly had a desire to explore further the possibilities of this hitherto unknown talent. Fortunately, he knew an exceptional teacher and one who would likely be very happy to take his instructor’s fees in trade...

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“That sounds like fun, actually, Philip. If I wasn’t working, I’d love to go with you.”

John meant that, too. Snooping about looking for nasties in some old building... he’d done some work with cursed objects and was getting fairly skilled at detecting them, but to take on something larger would be a challenge he would relish. At least Anderson could have the fun and report back. This time. Next time, Greg’s lazy arse could mind the shop while he joined the ghostbusting party.

“I’m *very* excited for the chance, that’s for certain. It’s... it’s nice to know Greg has confidence in me to do something like this.”

“I’ll give Greg credit, he’s always willing to give someone a chance. Good at helping you understand what went wrong if you fail with it, too.”

“That’s helpful to know. I’m going to do my best though, so fingers crossed! Sebastian is coming with me, so maybe he can give me some ideas if something goes wrong. I’m not sure what... his sort... can do for magic, but I’m sure it’s useful, whatever it is.”

John smirked at the careful phrasing, given there were customers in the shop and, also, that Anderson was content to go on a secret magical mission with a werewolf in tow. Sebastian hated doing almost anything a normal person enjoyed, so this was somewhat a noteworthy event on both counts.

“Sebastian can be extremely helpful for certain things...”

Like killing people, maiming people, crippling people, giving people angry looks and carrying things that are a tad too heavy.

“... so I’m certainly you’ll make a great team. As for this fine establishment, we should see a delivery this afternoon of glass containers and other packaging, so give it a look to see that it’s all there and nothing’s broken before you sign for it. Now and again, we’ve had...”

“Where is Mycroft?”

John’s ‘fuck me’ groan was lost on Anderson who was regaining his composure from having a stern-faced man lean over his shoulder and nearly shout in his ear.

“Sherlock... you are an infant. Philip Anderson, may I present the infant brother of Mr. Mycroft Holmes. Baby Holmes, this is Philip Anderson, one of our shop associates.”
“The only people foolish enough to work here are you, Graham and the mentally diseased.”

“I am not mentally diseased!”

“Your cognitive impairment would prevent you from being an appropriate judge of that.”

“I… you are very rude person.”

“Why is that relevant?”

Anderson opened, then snapped shut his mouth, having no idea how to respond.

“Anderson, ignore him. Not only today, but every day for the rest of your life. Sherlock, why are here, yelling about your brother?”

“Because he is here and not elsewhere. Oh look, your cat is attacking an elderly widow…”

John knew not to look, but he did anyway and missed Sherlock darting towards the back room, but Anderson was better positioned and did a credible job of blocking the detective’s rampage through the stockroom. The resulting slapping-hands war was merrily watched by John and the customers, alike, until Anderson performed an inspired slap up instead of down and propelled Sherlock’s own hand into his nose.

“John!”

“Sherlock, you can’t invade the shop and root about looking for your brother. For your information, I will personally attest that he’s not hiding among the packing materials and refill supply for our dried herbs.”

“I spoke with Mycroft and he confirmed he is with Geoff.”

“And, if you notice, Greg isn’t here, so neither is your brother.”

“I suspect he is in Geoff’s flat, which, I believe, is above this shrine to superstition.”

“Ok, true. But, if they’re not expecting you, then you aren’t going to barge in on their morning. Hold on a moment…”

John nodded to Anderson to mind the till while he pulled out his mobile to phone up to Greg’s flat, feeling no surprise when Mycroft answered.

“We’ve got a situation in the shop, Mycroft.”

A dire one?”

“Very.”

John’s tone was mightily toneful and Mycroft sighed softly in understanding.

“With dark hair and a practiced scowl?”

“Got it in one.”

“Marvelous. I put the odds only at 40% that Sherlock would immediately move towards the shop when our call was concluded. He has, in this, exceeded my expectations. I presume he is demanding to be allowed to visit Gregory’s flat.”
“That’s the long and short of it. Want me to toss him out on his ear?”

Sherlock’s affronted squawk was audible through the phone and Mycroft savored that highly entertaining mental image for a moment before sadly sending it into oblivion.

“Nothing so forceful, I think. However, Gregory is only now stirring, and I would rather not have Sherlock here until I have ascertained the status of Gregory’s heath and prepared him for the landing of the typhoon upon his proverbial shores.”

“Half hour? Forty-five minutes?”

“The latter would not be amiss. It would allow me time to see Gregory with what he might wish for breakfast and his beloved coffee.”

“Not a problem. I’ll keep your brother occupied, then Sherlock can come up with me when I pop in to check on things.”

“Thank you, John. This is much appreciated. And I should confess that Sherlock has not been apprised of either my or Gregory’s physical condition.”

“Want it to stay that way?”

“Yes, for the moment, else he will be positively rabid to scrutinize the situation himself, if only to gloat over my incapacity, and will be horrendously-difficult to manage for our negotiated respite.”

“Mum’s the word. We’ll see you soon.”

John pocketed his mobile and clapped his hands together to signal the moving on of the day was ready to begin.

“Sherlock, we are leaving. We’ll return later when your brother and Greg are accepting visitors. Anderson, we’ll be having a spot of breakfast at Angie’s if you need me. Want me to bring something back for you?”

“No, thank you. I had beans on toast and that keeps me humming.”

And was cheap enough even for his depleted budget to manage in hearty abundance.

“Alright, then… Sherlock, you are accompanying me for breakfast while your brother and Greg have loud, unbridled sex and, maybe, shower before we pay them a visit.”

“I’m going to be sick.”

“Looks like I get your breakfast, too! Lucky for me, you’re paying.”

“I have no money.”

“If I throw you to the ground and steal your wallet, how big of a lie will I find that to be?”

“I will pay for half of breakfast.”

“And it’ll be my half, because if it’s yours, you’ll demand a free cup of water and grin smugly at me while you do it.”

“You are a suspicious man, John.”
But a correct one."

"No, for I was going to demand free tea, not water."

"Thank you for your honesty."

Mycroft breathed deeply and gently patted Greg’s leg before rising to answer the door where John was knocking to announce his and Sherlock’s arrival. The fact that the door was not being pounded upon as if being battered by a siege machine was a tiny clue that Sherlock was not, in fact, the knocker. It had been a cozy morning for him and the sorcerer, even with the various levels of agony for various areas of injury and not even Sherlock’s riotous presence would dim that warm light. Hopefully.

"Ah ha! You are discovered!"

Sherlock took one commanding step into the room and pointed his finger directly in Mycroft’s face to emphasize his words.

"Sherlock… John, did my brother consume a quantity of stimulants during his breakfast?"

"Nope, unless they were tucked into the sausage he stole off of my plate because he was too cheap to order anything for himself."

"This is a hovel."

Mycroft sighed and wished the imaginary stimulants had run a longer course since they offered an entertaining diversion from his brother’s standard discourse.

"Hey! I like my flat. Nothing hovelish about it."

Well done, Gregory, defending your home from the evil goblin souring the air with its noxious presence.

"Hovels are the expected dwelling for elderly believers in witchcraft and supernatural claptrap, so I fail to see why you would take offence at the statement."

"I… ok, that’s not the worst point you could have made, if you lived your life watching crap telly, so I won’t have John toss you out onto the pavement. Come in! Enjoy the hovel in its full and glorious glory."

Sherlock began to walk further into the flat, then realized that his focus upon Mycroft’s exasperated face and the condition of Greg’s flat had kept his attention far from a very important and hard to miss detail, the latter aspect stinging like a swarm of angry wasps.

"Why are you using crutches, Lardcroft? Have you become unable to lift your elephantine bulk without the help of external support?"

Greg and John might not be experienced enough to hear the undertone in Sherlock’s voice that spoke both to his shock and his concern, but Mycroft was, and he made very certain to let neither his recognition nor his appreciation of them thread into his own voice as he responded.

"I believed them to be fashionable. Alas, Gregory tells me that I was misinformed."

"Pfft. It is physically impossible for you to approach any state of appearance that might be
termed fashionable, so kindly reveal the real reason and your inevitable shortcomings that brought it to pass.”

Mycroft moved back from the door to make his way the short distance to a seat and slowly settled himself upon it, while Sherlock continued to glare from across the expanse.

“Shall you stand for your entire visit, brother? If so, kindly make use of your verticality by retrieving for Gregory a glass of water. I was preparing to do it myself before your arrival sent it out of my thoughts.”

Sherlock’s scowl was a mighty one, but now that he was alerted to his brother’s situation, he made certain to scrutinize Greg and that scrutiny both confused and worried him further.

“You look, and smell, like an unwashed zombie. Why?”

“Zombies probably have a hard time finding a public shower, let alone having the time or materials to sew back on the bits that fall off when they scrub a bit too hard. Can’t blame the poor buggers for lower-than-standard hygiene.”

Mycroft’s snort of laughter made Greg feel very proud and Sherlock’s eyes narrow with even greater suspicion. Knowing the direction this would ultimately go, Mycroft decided an intervention was required.

“If you must know, Sherlock, we were involved in an accident that merrily bestowed its mayhem upon us both. Gregory received a larger portion than myself and, since I was also ambulatory, albeit to a lesser degree than my norm, I have remained to assist him in his recovery. Voila! Your mystery is proved a tale of banality with nary a zombie to be found.”

“A… accident?”

That his brother was unable to camouflage his concern this time made Mycroft’s heart grow three sizes larger within his chest.

“I was remiss, perhaps, in not notifying you, however, my attention was fully on Gregor’s welfare and, further, I did not wish to worry you with such a petty matter.”

Sherlock glared harder, then took the moment to find a glass in Greg’s cupboard, filled it with tap water, and set it down on the sofa table in a position Greg could reach it. He next set himself down in Greg’s last empty chair, leaving John to perch on the arm of the sofa.

“Details. I demand details of your condition.”

“Very well. I sustained damage to my leg that shall require some time to heal, but heal it shall. Gregory… he is enduring damage to his arm and shoulder, as well as a head injury that renders him somewhat a devotee of the prone position for several days before he might sit upright for any period of time.”

“That, in no manner, satisfies the definition of ‘details.’ “

“Yet, it is sufficient. If you wish to examine my injury, I will permit it, but Gregory shall not be distressed by your curiosity.”

“I will inspect your malingering, however… have you informed Mummy?”

“Ah, no. Nor is it my intent to do so, as she would simply worry for a situation that shall soon
pass into the realm of memory.”

“I shall make that decision once my inspection is completed. And… John.”

“You intend to inspect John? I do hope your plan is to conduct your examination in private.”

John cut eyes at Greg who was smiling widely at the brotherly back-and-forth. Which, in John’s opinion, was a very good thing since Sherlock came bundled with Mycroft and it didn’t seem as if Greg would be bidding Mycroft farewell anytime soon. They made such a… cute couple… which was a tad ridiculous at their age, but nice to see, nonetheless.

“John will verify that your whinging is exactly as overwrought and attention-seeking as I fully anticipate.”

“I see. In that case, prepare to weep, for John has overseen both my and Gregory’s recuperation and is well aware of the nature of our injuries and the precise degree of whinging and moaning that is appropriate for the situation.”

Greg’s feeble, pathetic groan punctuated Mycroft’s speech and earned an irritated hand wave from Sherlock as his reward.

“John… you failed to disclose any of this. And you villainously stole my money to feed your traitorous maw, knowing you were withholding from me vital information.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But my maw is a lot happier now than it was before my villainy, so I’m alright with it.”

Greg gave John a hearty thumb’s up with his good arm and John made a mental note to use his handy magic mirror soon to check the status of Greg’s turned-to-confetti bones. Oddly, there were no books Greg had known about that documented how a sorcerer’s healing ability changed with age or repeated injury and he couldn’t help but suspect that even a magically-talented person suffered some of the same health-related patterns as a plain vanilla human. Getting older wasn’t easy, no matter who you were.

“I will remember this, John, and enact my retribution at the earliest possible opportunity. Until that moment, however, you will provide detailed medical information about this circumstance and any photographic evidence that might exist to document the beluga’s and his remora’s injuries. The blackmail potential, given Mummy knows neither about the remora nor the injuries, is without limit.”

This time, it was Mycroft cutting eyes at Greg, who returned them warmly. Sherlock was upset, but a bit less now that he knew John was keeping a professional eye on things and that said professional eye hadn’t spotted something that warranted an ambulance ride to hospital for either of the happy couple.

“Ooh, I’m trembling. But, I’ll agree to share what Mycroft and Greg allow me to share, because I do take confidentiality seriously and, before you say anything, I consider both my patients for whatever intents and purposes you’re about to try and wave away as irrelevant. Oh, just a moment…”

John took his ringing mobile out of his pocket and frowned that it was the number for the shop.

“Anderson?... Here? Now?... Ok, not a problem, hopefully. I’ll be right down… No, it’s not unusual, actually, so don’t worry… yeah, coming now.”
“John?”

Greg had a small suspicion about the conversation and that his raised eyebrows received John’s nod in return confirmed that small suspicion tidily.

“Like you said, John, not unusual.”

“No, but it’s still a bother. I don’t want to leave Anderson down there alone, though.”

“I don’t either. I’ll entertain Sherlock while you sort out the rubbish.”

Entertaining Sherlock was suddenly hard to do as the detective made a rude noise and immediately followed John out of the flat.

“Gregory?”

“Nothing to worry about, Mycroft. Just a customer who is a tad… let’s just say he’s not a favorite. And he’s somewhat a nasty character in the community, too, though his nastiness is layered over with all sorts of affected manners and presentation so many don’t notice until… later.”

“And you are worried about Mr. Anderson.”

“A bit. Anderson’s had dealings with him. Remember I mentioned that other demon I had a scuffle with? Anderson was the one who called it up. Didn’t mean it to cause any harm, but Moriarty was the one who’d been teaching him about magic and showed him how, not that teaching is really the word for giving people information only to help you manipulate them in the long term, and Anderson broke off their association after I had a word with him to set him right on the issue. He won’t try anything rash in my shop, but Anderson’s got enough to worry about without that little weasel goading him because he feels like a laugh.”

“He sounds ghastly. I am surprised you allow him to frequent your business.”

“He’s a miserable prick, but his money is as good as anyone else’s and I can’t fault him for having to shop for things he needs. Frustratingly, too, he’s very talented at staying just on the edge of the right side of the line, that anyone knows, so I can’t toss him out of London for violating our somewhat fluid code of conduct. Mostly we avoid each other, but he pops in occasionally to fill his wants list or have me order something, as well as do his utmost to be an evil little twat with a calm voice and twinkly eyes.”

“Could you not have that werewolf chap eat him?”

Greg snorted a laugh, then giggled in a very unmanly fashion as he imagined Sebastian shoving the small-statured Moriarty into his mouth in one gulp.

“Nah, Seb’s actually had dealings with him and they have a basic understanding of ‘you do your thing and I do mine.’ Sebastian is in a… touchy position here in London, so making enemies in the community isn’t to his benefit. Given he treats everyone the same, with surly apathy, he keeps himself in good graces, odd as that sounds. When he has to do something spectacularly violent, it’s out of self-defense or because someone else is being spectacularly violent or evil and the community simply clears its throat and gives him a ‘job well done’ nod.”

“Why is his position, as you say, touchy?”

“Lone wolf. Literally. He’s a werewolf without a pack, and that’s not a good thing for that population. It makes people suspicious and wonder what he did to earn that, since werewolves are
highly pack oriented and it takes a lot to toss out a member. There are examples that don’t fit the expectation, like orphans who don’t grow up with a pack and never develop that particular bond, but the pack structure is absolutely vital to the werewolf culture and when someone doesn’t fit into it… it raises eyebrows.”

“Was Sebastian an orphan?”

“No… his situation was different.”

“That sounds dire.”

“Oh, I suppose. It’s…”

It was obvious Greg didn’t want to go into details and Mycroft gave him a smile, preparing to say so aloud, but the sorcerer sighed and continued on before he could do it.

“Seb was in a pack with… their leader was an utter bastard. It’s not a common thing, but it does happen. Usually the pack leader does what they’re supposed to do, look after the members, help the elderly and the injured or sick ones when they need it, protect their territory, that sort of thing. I know quite a few of them and they’re solid, decent people who recognize the obligations and importance of their position and don’t take it lightly. Now and then, though, you get one who makes their way to the top of the pack order who… shouldn’t have. This prick was a nasty one. Greedy, cruel, didn’t care about his pack except for what he could take from it. Took advantage of those he was supposed to be supporting, especially the ones least able to push back.”

Greg ran his hand through his hair and stared at the ceiling a moment prompting Mycroft to stay quiet and let the man have a private moment with his thoughts.

“Sebastian hates that; something we share. No tolerance for bullies and arseholes who think it’s fun to brutalize the vulnerable. And brutalization can take a lot of forms… physical, emotional, financial… that fucking animal loved it all.”

“Why… why did the pack not… I have no idea, vote him out of office or their equivalent?”

“Doesn’t work quite that way, unfortunately. Werewolves are still… wolves. Pack leadership comes from challenge, usually more of a formality than anything else because when the leader decides they don’t have the energy for the job anymore they start chatting with the other elders about who should take over and there’s a ceremonial challenge made by the one they pick. It’s a bit of theatre, really, but everyone knows that tradition has been satisfied and, to be fair, that if a physical challenge was issued, the candidate would likely win, in any case. That’s the problem when you have a truly evil person in that seat. They’re vicious, happy to cheat and don’t mind taking revenge on families if a challenge fails.”

“Did Sebastian challenge him?”

“No, and that’s ultimately the problem. Seb didn’t issue a challenge, he simply couldn’t bear that fucker hurting the pack anymore and straight up murdered him. Messily and spectacularly murdered him, so that the sycophants who had scurried about the bugger like rats knew very well not to even try stepping up to take his place. That was the problem, though, see? There was no challenge, no satisfying tradition and the pack… didn’t know what to do. A few approached Sebastian about trying some… after-the-fact challenge for show, but he wanted no part of the job. So, they had no leader and no idea what to do about Sebastian. They eventually consulted a few other packs about how to handle things and it was agreed the way to go forward was how they used to do it yonks ago when werewolf packs would go to war with each other over territory or
some stupid offense, because they were a prideful lot, and still are, to some extent. When half your pack’s dead, pack leader included, you rather have to take a different approach to appointing a leader than the usual bloody and likely-lethal challenge because you really can’t afford any more dead werewolves in your pack. Effectively, the oldest members ask anyone who might want the job to step up and… yeah, I guess it’s back to what you said, they sort of vote them in. Look at what each candidate can do to rebuild the pack and help the ones left alive, then present their choice to the survivors for a final yes or no. Not really something that happens now, since territorial disputes and insults aren’t handled with full-on claws and teeth combat, so it was a… unsettling thing for Seb’s people.”

“And Sebastian was blamed for the disruption to the norm.”

“Yeah, though nobody was upset about the fucking maniac being murdered. They were thrilled the rubbish had been bagged and set out on the pavement or, in this case, murdered, dismembered, shredded and strewn over the village green, but, at the end of the day, Seb had violated werewolf law and left the pack in a bit of a bind. Nobody officially excommunicated him from the fold, but…”

“There are ways of making a point clear without directly saying the words.”

“Basically. Deep down, Seb’s more of a lone wolf than a pack member, but the pack instincts are there and… it hurt. He came to London thinking that a city this size was large enough for a lone wolf to go about their business, but word about what happened spread fast and far and London’s pack is actually one of the best organized and territorially-protective in existence. When they found out he was here… the welcome wasn’t a warm one.”

“Yet, Sebastian remains in London.”

“That’s… my doing. Like I said, neither he nor I like the vulnerable being done wrong. Yes, Sebastian’s about the last person one would think of as vulnerable, but all he wanted was a place to be left alone to live his life and being hounded constantly by werewolves who don’t want a dubious stranger on their patch didn’t seem fair. Of course, he didn’t help matters by sending more than a few of their lot to a healer with some truly impressive damage to heal, but… I finally found him and…”

“Yes?”

“Indentured him.”

“Pardon?”

“In the old days of yore, the real fantasy-novel days, sorcerers might make deals with lone werewolves, trolls, demons, and other things that go bump in the night. A lot of the time it was because the night bumper had done something rotten and they either pledged their servitude or found themselves immolated or handed over to the human or other population for their own bit of deadly vengeance. The imp or goblin or whatsit bartered their freedom, for some period of time, for not being sent to their version of the great beyond and, with that deal struck, nobody had best do a single thing to harm said whatsit unless they really wanted to learn firsthand what it meant to piss off someone powerful and creative with magic.”

“And you did that for Sebastian.”

“Werewolves respect tradition. Technically, he’s part of my household, though I have no fucking clue what he’s doing most of the time, because he’s a free man and I have no intention of it
ever being otherwise, except on the parchment that says otherwise, again, to satisfy tradition. But, the long and short of things is that he’s left alone, because anything done to him is an insult to me and one I am honor-bound to address. It’s a load of malarkey, everybody is clear on that, but with our version of the legalities tended to, the matter is considered closed. Seb can come and go as he pleases without the local pack being offended or feeling their territory is being violated, since he’s an acknowledged and accepted exemption to the normal way of things. They were actually happy for it, since trying to catch and evict Sebastian was proving more of a bother than they ever dreamed possible and, pack business aside, they all have normal lives and jobs, and you’re not tending properly to either of those if you’re spending half your time in wolf form racing about the city to have your arm torn half off. Win-win all around.”

Mycroft sat there, processing the information and felt both a sense of overwhelm and a surge of pride at how masterfully his Gregory had handled the situation. Managing matters so face is saved on all sides, while still gaining one’s objective, was a laudable talent. And an attractive one, as well. However…

“Why do I suspect Sebastian’s agreement was not as easily gained as you seem to imply?”

“Because you’re a wonderfully-brilliant man! Meredith thought it was a stellar idea…”

“Meredith?”

“She’s the pack leader for London.”

“Oh…”

“Surprised she’s a woman?”

“More surprised… I suppose the idea of a werewolf with such a prosaic name as Meredith is not quite sitting easily in my mind.”

“Regular jobs and lives, remember? Normal people you’d meet on the street and never think twice about being anyone particularly special. In any case, she was on board, but Sebastian… yes, he took some convincing.”

“How much of your magical-combat prowess did you have to engage to secure his agreement?”

“Oh, we had a right old dust up, but more to prove to him, I think, that I was willing to fight for him, even if I was fighting against him at the moment. He has his self-respect and I don’t begrudge him that for an instant. He’s also not one who trusts easily, but… here we are.”

“And you gain an ally for certain situations requiring Sebastian’s special talents.”

“Not a bad side benefit, you have to admit.”

“That I do and gladly. So very much for me to learn… I concede that my mind is still awhirl with all of this Gregory. Your abilities, the world of beings I know of only from books, the entire concept of magic… magic that, I, to my profound surprise, can wield to some extent. I have never had even an inkling such a thing was possible.”

“John told you how hard that spell was to get right, didn’t he?”

“He said it required a certain meticulousness, yes.”

“More than that, though the meticulous bit is important, too. You are a remarkable man,
Mycroft Holmes, in many ways, only one of which is your limitless sexiness.”

If you could but see your smile, your scamp. The rougishness is positively scintillating yet… the honest admiration that lies beneath makes this old, shriveled heart beat a bit more strongly…

“Gregory Lestrade… such a flatterer.”

“Only stating the truth. Think I can see a little of that sexiness later, once we’ve got your brother fed, changed and set down for his nap?”

“At my very first opportunity, I shall consult with John on the level of sexiness I may currently evince in your presence. I would hate to set back your recovery with the force of my physical glamor.”

“If that’s the way I die, then I die a happy man.”

Mycroft slowly heaved himself upwards and did an awkward one-legged hop over to the sofa to carefully sit near Greg’s now budged-over legs. After a very dramatic show of looking about for anyone who might be spying on them, Mycroft grinned slyly and snaked a hand under Greg’s untucked shirt and rubbed a lazy figure-eight pattern on his belly.

“Oh, Mycroft Holmes, you incredible man…”

“Someone, it seems, is appreciative of a small amount of hand-to-skin contact.”

“I could lie here all day and have you do that. Really, that’s the utter and complete truth. And, I’m sure you know they say that belly rubs are extremely good for promoting healing and… stuff.”

“Do they now?”

“Yes, all the theys agree on that point. A body heals much faster and much better when helped along by warm belly rubs. And other rubs, too.”

“Once John has granted permission.”

“I will pay him for the permission. He’ll fold like a beach chair and the other rubs will be mine!”

Mycroft gave the tactilely-pleasing flesh a teasing pinch, then continued on with his leisurely exploration of the most tantalizing skin he had ever felt beneath his fingers. If Gregory was not so terribly hurt, he would happily ignore his own injury and ravish the man until there was naught left in either of their bodies for energy or ability to think. Until circumstances changed, however, this would do. And do nicely. Perhaps that Moriarty chap would keep Sherlock occupied so that they might linger awhile doing exactly as Gregory desired – whiling away the time in this delightful pursuit. Unfortunately, Sherlock was terribly difficult to intrigue, so they’d best take advantage of the moment while they could…

“You are purchasing garden waste. Boring.”

John had already worried when Moriarty’s eyes fixed sharply on Sherlock when they entered the shop and Sherlock’s verbalized views on this arrogant bastard were not helping to settle John’s mind.
“Oh, is that supposed to mean something to me?”

For his part, Sherlock hadn’t found Anderson’s nervousness particularly noteworthy, since off-footedness seemed the man’s natural state, but the smug satisfaction the small, tidy man took from it was of interest. Not that banal arrogance or self-importance were, in themselves, interesting, but combined with John’s rush down from the flat and the fact that the shop cat was sitting atop a bookshelf softly hissing at the man summed to a quantity that engaged his curiosity. And, now that his salvo was waved off with pretentious disdain, his curiosity grew even greater.

“It was a simple statement concerning your bags of weeds. What meaning you glean from it is entirely irrelevant to me.”

John sighed and motioned Anderson towards the box of incense waiting to be added to the floor stock and was happy that Anderson quickly took the hint and bustled off to refill their display.

“Those botanicals all you need today, Jim? Greg’s found a new supplier and we just got in some very nice pure silver in quantity. Easily enough for a new athame if you’re in need of making one. Seems you mentioned yours being a bit uninspiring lately, if I remember correctly.”

Mine has gotten rather dull and drab. Rather like the average citizen of this tedious city.”

“Want to take a look at what we have in stock?”

“Another time. Your… friend… seems rather anxious for your attention and I’d hate to get in the way of your… whatever it is that tickles your fancy.”

“Funny. Let’s get you sorted, then, and…”

“Were you implying that John is my lover?”

John had a look-into-the-camera moment that broke Balthazar’s hissing streak so that the cat could laugh loudly, instead.

“It was a simple statement concerning his attention. What meaning you glean from it is entirely irrelevant to me.”

Now it was Sherlock’s turn to perform some waving off with pretentious disdain, though he chose to add visuals to his reply with a contemptuous flick of his wrist.

“Childish.”

“Children seem to have such fun with tit for tat, so I thought I’d give it a try. It’s not surprising that it was as boring as, well, children.”

“I disagree. Even an average child exhibits a clarity of observation, despite their infantile flights of fancy, that the adult mind, through atrophy or intentional obtuseness, is unable to demonstrate. That they freely give voice to their observations, much to the embarrassment of the adult minds in the vicinity, is an amusing, albeit ancillary, benefit.”

John made short work of taking the herbs from Jim’s hands and tallying the order, so he could send their irritating guest on his way.

“You do have a point. Humiliating dullwits does amuse me. Greatly.”

“Which is why I humiliate my brother whenever possible. Now that he is romantically
besmirched by the wand waver who owns this farce of a shop, the potential at my fingertips for future humiliation is legion.”

Balthazar nearly rolled off the bookshelf from laughing, though John certainly didn’t join in. The gleam in Moriarty’s eyes at this tidbit of information didn’t bode good things. Not that Greg’s romances were ever a secret for very long in the community, but a few more days of privacy would have been nice for the new couple.

“Wand waver… has Greg been wagging his limp little cock about again?”

“Again? Why am I failing to experience any surprise whatsoever?”

Clearing this throat loudly, John interrupted the exchange and dropped Moriarty’s purchases into a sack, presenting both the sack and the till slip to the sorcerer, who was showing a tiny glimmer of smile on his thoughtfully-pursed lips.

“That’s £65.10, if you please, Jim.”

“Put it on my account.”

“Which you don’t have.”

“Though I should. I am Greg’s most interesting customer. By far.”

“Cash, cheque or charge, sir. Which shall it be? Can’t hold up the queue, you know…”

John’s snippy shopkeeper’s voice made Moriarty’s small smile curl into a look of mild distaste but, given there was a queue forming behind him, chose to forestall comment for later time.

“Charge, then. I despise soiling my fingers with cash.”

Moriarty primly extracted a bank card from his wallet and made note of Sherlock glancing at his name on the card as it was passed to John.

“Oh and tell Greg I heard about his little… altercation… two nights ago. Nice to see he hasn’t lost his edge. I’m sure he’s very proud, what with being on the elderly side and a bit thick. Always good to add little victories to one’s ledger as years creep into ones bones.”

Knowing that if he just threw the sorcerer out of the shop, Moriarty would be quick to exact revenge and John had enough of the peevish conjurer in his life as it was, so he simply smiled a ‘you’ll get yours someday, you massive tit’ smile and stared at Moriarty until he signed the charge slip, gave Sherlock a long, slow look and, finally, sauntered out the door.

“Hmmmm…”

“Oh no, no, Sherlock, whatever you’re thinking… no.”

“I disagree.”

“On what point?”

“I… very well, you actually made no point, so my words were not particularly well chosen.”

“Alright, then. Now that’s sorted, you can continue with your visit to your brother and I…”

“We are going to the morgue.”
John looked behind him to see if someone had crept behind the counter to be the target of Sherlock’s declaration.

“What?”

“I shall deal with Mycroft and his dissembling later. I will also demand from Graham the details of his ‘altercation’ and if it involved an imperiled cake, given that is the only situation I can imagine for which my brother would hurl himself headlong into the fray. Now, though, I need to see the corpse that was brought into the morgue last night. Molly texted it had features of interest to one of my areas of experimentation.”

“You experiment on corpses? And you know Molly?”

“Yes, and how are you aware of Molly Hooper?”

“She’s a customer.”

“I… again, I am feeling no surprise whatsoever, given the ridiculous nature of this shop. Come along, John. Your medical knowledge may be of use to me.”

John watched the tall figure stride to the door, narrowly avoiding collision with a well-dressed couple carrying an expensive hand-carved chest John knew would make Greg a tidy profit and made certain Anderson knew to treat the profit carefully before he darted out the door after Sherlock. Yes, he was tired and, yes, he really should be checking in on Greg and Mycroft, but neither of them had looked unusually concerned about themselves or their counterpart, so waiting until tonight for a physical check wouldn’t be the end of the world. He hadn’t visited a morgue in a long time and certainly not to participate in anything more fun than listening to a lecture where a corpse had been wheeled out to highlight some medical point, so this was a touch too tempting to miss.

Not that experimenting on a corpse was fun, of course. That was just… wrong. Unless you were a necromancer, which he certainly wasn’t. Sherlock would make a good one, though. They tended to be scowly and haughty and cryptic. Snappy dressers, too. Not many short ones in the job, either, so the big raven’s height was another selling point. Ok, maybe he actually needed to watch Sherlock a bit more closely. If their corpse got up and started walking about the morgue, he and Sherlock were going to have a long talk about dark magic and why that was a bad thing in polite society. Not that Sherlock cared much about being polite. Maybe he should use his Captain Watson voice when having the talk. That always worked. Usually. Though it was 50-50 to date on scowly, cryptic necromancers, but never let it be said that John Hamish Watson wasn’t an optimist…
Chapter 23

Mycroft was well aware that, anatomically, he did not have eyes in the back of his head, but that did not stop him from knowing with perfect certainty that a cup of hot coffee had been poured and levitated across the room behind him while a certain sorcerer was trying to distract his attention with the film they were currently watching.

“Gregory, you could have asked for me to pour for you the coffee. That was a terribly rash use of your limited energy.”

There was something wrong with the universe that the man who defeated a monstrous demon could also affect the most adorable set of sad puppy eyes said universe had ever witnessed.

“That’s why I need the coffee! Blessed, blessed caffeine to make my energy more energetic.”

“Whilst it is true that caffeine is a stimulant, I doubt it acts in equivalence to your natural energies; therefore, I shall pooh-pooh your argument and ignore your attempts at eye-based persuasion.”

“They’re amazing eyes, though, you have to admit. All sad and whimpery.”

“Verily you are the master of the art form. In the future, however, simply ask me to retrieve for you your beverage.”

“You already had to hobble over to start it brewing. Wasn’t fair to make you suffer another hobble when I could just ‘Presto!’ and my cup of beautiful black beverage was in my hand.”

“It is on the floor.”

“Yeah… I sort of forgot that you’d see me drink it, so my entire fiendish plan went up in flames.”

“That, at least, shall keep warm your drink. Which, I am certain, is patiently awaiting your tender affections.”

Greg grinned sheepishly and called up the large, heavy mug from the floor to settle into his hand.

“Might I take it, from your lack of grimace or heavy sigh that… are you feeling better, Gregory?”

“I am, actually! I told you, I do heal quickly, even without me taking steps to hurry things along. My head’s definitely better and I feel more… limber, strange at that sounds. Like my muscles have decided to unclench and finally take a deep, relaxing breath.”

“That is most encouraging.”

“It’s my pattern and, yes, it’s pitiful that this has happened enough to me that I have a pattern. Aches and pains vanish first, unhappy organs heal next, cracked bones after that, simple breaks follow after then more complex breaks and so forth and so on. Never understood why softer tissues heal faster than the bones, but it’s a familiar song that I can hum in my sleep if I had to.”

“Perhaps because the organ tissue is more vital to your survival than bone. One can exist with a shattered shoulder, but a non-functional liver is another thing altogether.”
“Oh, that’s smart. Speaking of my liver, I was thinking about some mouth-watering Italian for dinner tonight and I have the perfect bottle of wine hidden away to go with it. Fancy some wine, candles and luscious food later, before we retire for the evening, Mr. Holmes?”

Mycroft smirked and admired the fact that Gregory’s sad puppy eyes had taken on a distinctly different gleam. A salacious one. Which was inviting in the extreme…

“Veal!”

The in-stereo sigh at the very non-inviting declaration was wholly from the humans in the room and directed at the feline denizen who had snuck in through the cracked window in Greg’s bath.

“Nope. You know I don’t approve of veal, you evil mog.”

“Veeeeeeeeeerreeeeeeeerreeeeeeeal!”

“Nooooooooooonooooooope.”

“Then I will not divulge my extremely important and sensitive information.”

Greg narrowed his eyes, but quickly changed his expression to a perfect example of ‘who cares.’

“Fine. Have fun letting it stew in your brain because you wonder if there’s a possibility I’ll give you something for telling me, but you’re certain you’ll definitely get nothing for keeping mum.”

If Mycroft was not already attracted to the man lying on the sofa with his feet tucked warmly behind Mycroft’s back, that scrumptious use of manipulation would have certainly done the trick.

“Ummmmmmmmmm…. Sherlock told Moriarty about you and Mycroft. Chicken?”

“Ah. Shit…”

“Gregory?”

“Nothing to worry about, Mycroft. The news about us would be out in the community soon enough, but I’m more concerned about Sherlock being the one to tell that little bastard.”

“Is… is Sherlock in danger?”

“No, well, I can’t say that because who knows what the world has in store for us at any given moment, but not from Moriarty. Probably. At least, not directly. Jim knows better than to act outright against anyone, but… I can see Sherlock being someone that would pique his interest. The lad is smart, unique, willing to speak his mind, thinks the common person is a dimwit… Sherlock’s not boring and if there’s one thing Moriarty despises it’s being boring.”

“But he would not hurt Sherlock?”

“Doubtful. More he might try to influence him. Tempt him. Your brother doesn’t have your level of power, but he’s not too far off and that would be an enticing thing for someone who prefers to work his nasty schemes through the use of others.”

“I see… confound it. I would hate to actively warn Sherlock…”

“Because that will have him racing towards Moriarty as fast as his legs will carry him.”
“Precisely, but also because it would be difficult to articulate a reason for my concern that he would believe without drawing Sherlock further into your world. That is not something I feel is appropriate now or, perhaps, ever.”

“Then leave it for now. Balthazar, was John there when Sherlock was talking to Jim?”

“Yes, keeping your apprentice out of the spotlight.”

“Good. Then definitely leave it for now, love. John knows what’s what and will keep his eyes open, especially since those two seem to be becoming fairly good friends. Speaking of John, he was supposed to come back here and give your leg a peek…”

“John decided to go with Sherlock to experiment with corpses.”

Greg stared at the cat, then at Mycroft, who held up his hands in the universally-recognized gesture of ‘we may share genes, but his looniness is fully his own concern’ of big brothers everywhere.

“What, cat?”

“Sherlock is acquainted with my sultry bride’s sweet, pure and soft-bosomed cousin.”

“Got it. Ok, so Sherlock and John are visiting Molly to defile the dead and that means we have a guaranteed quiet for a bit longer. Mycroft… life is good.”

Something Mycroft was just realizing himself…

“Yes, you make a highly valid and exceedingly interesting point. Cat, thank you for your report, however, I believe it is time to take your leave of us.”

“No.”

“I respond with ‘yes’ and remind you that the dinner order is still somewhat a matter of debate, one that could veer either towards your benefit or your detriment.”

“You can’t scare me. I am a creature sprung from the dankest depths of the netherworld.”

“Gregory, have you ever sampled the fare from the city’s various vegan restaurants? I hear a few are most clever with their cuisine, so much so, that the utter lack of meat or any animal product in their dishes is, in no manner, a detriment to the quality of the dining experience.”

The shocked gasp was surprisingly loud coming from the relatively small mouth of the cat.

“N… no meat?”

“Not a smidgen.”

“I… I have important business I must conduct and the both of you are preventing me from doing it. I am leaving now.”

Strutting with the self-assurance only cats, and Sherlock, could easily muster, Balthazar made his stately exit from Greg’s flat, again through the bathroom window to find his way back to the shop where he knew there was an unopened container of treats behind the till. And those treats, those tasty meat-based treats would be his. Anderson was so, so much easier to manipulate on treat-related issues than were the other two humans who guarded his sacred supply…

“Your feline, Gregory, is most troublesome.”
“You haven’t seen the worst of it. He can work magic, remember?”

“Dear god… yes, that had slipped my mind. However, it does draw me back to the subject of the feline in my life.”

“The tall one with curly hair and a scowl?”

“The very same. If Sherlock learns that he may be able to perform works of magic…”

“It won’t be as catastrophic as you’re imagining.”

“I believe ‘you haven’t seen the worst of it’ is as readily applied to my brother as to your cat.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that, but the trouble he can get into with magic is fairly limited. Non-magical humans can’t do much of what you might call ‘active’ magic. Nothing like I did when I was giving that fucking demon a good thumping. And all of it would take practice.”

“I was most successful at my very first attempt at a spell.”

“That you were and don’t think for a minute that I don’t find that amazingly sexy, but you’re more powerful than Sherlock and, I suspect, better at following directions precisely and being very precise with your actions, too.”

It would require interrupting his preening at being viewed as sexy to mount a response, so it was with great reluctance that Mycroft set aside his giddiness and nodded.

“Sherlock’s impatience and assurance he knows better than the scripters of the various chemical procedures he researches are noted impediments to his progress on many an issue, however, his persistence and creativity most often deliver victory to him.”

“They’ll be larger impediments for magic. That’s not to say that persistence and creativity aren’t useful, they are, but anyone can do a chemistry experiment if they have the right equipment and supplies, that’s not the case for hocus pocus. Here…”

Mycroft frowned at Greg’s finger motions, which preceded a piece of paper and pen moving from a drawer in the kitchen into Greg’s hands, so Greg could scribble a few sentences before handing the paper to Mycroft.

“Give this one a try.”

Staring at the various symbols and sigils on the paper, Mycroft began to worry about the status of Greg’s head injury.

“This is not a language I recognize.”

“It’s Latin! Sort of.”

“I disagree. Completely.”

“It is! Some of the words, at least. The others are written-out series of sounds that invoke elements of power and mold them into a fit state to fulfill the action you’re trying to achieve. But a lot are Latin, or Latin-y and I know for a fact you read Latin. I saw you reading books at the British Library that were in Latin, so you can’t fool me with that flimsy disagreement.”

“I am most adept at Latin, however, this… wait. By Virgil’s flowing toga… your handwriting is positively atrocious.”
“That’s… well… let me see… ok, that’s fair. I was writing quickly.”

Mycroft glared suspiciously but, after verifying the identity of a number of letters, mouthed the words once, silently, then spoke them aloud. The crash from the kitchen made both men jump, which gave Greg more to grimace about in terms of pain than Mycroft, though both placed well enough in the race to consider it well run.

“Gregory… my teacup… fell. Off of your counter top.”

“That’s amazing!”

“That was… messy.”

“That too. The spell is designed to move an object of choice, but I rewrote a bit so you’d have the best chance of success moving something, in this case, something that you’d… it’s like this. When you work with things, you begin to… put some of yourself into it. It grows to know you, to resonate, in a sense. It’s how wands and other objects of power are made. Your brolly is a terrific example and if it was here, we may have seen something even more dramatic! Honestly, I thought it was going to be that pen of mine you’ve been using to jot down notes but, apparently, you love the teacup more than my cheap biro. And I only thought the pen would shift a bit, maybe budge a quarter inch or something, but that teacup is heavier and you moved it at least three inches! That tremendous!”

“It… really? It does not sound particularly tremendous.”

“John’s been practicing that spell for some time and he probably could do what you did, but it would take him a bit of effort. You haven’t had to practice and you didn’t look like you were really consciously focusing energy into the job. Don’t think that you’ll be able to float a teacup from your kitchen to your hand, because that won’t happen, but you could likely stop a teacup that someone accidentally nudged from spilling off onto the floor or shift things six inches, maybe even a bit more if it was a personally-relevant object. That’s actually very impressive, even if it doesn’t sound that way, at the moment. You are a powerful man, Mycroft Holmes – Destroyer of Teacups.”

Even though he was still unconvinced about the tremendousness of his accomplishment, it was an accomplishment and a magical one, at that, which were enough, on their own, to make Mycroft slide back into a bit of happily-indulgent preening. Frankly, even making something shift an inch or so could be extremely helpful if it was say, a paper or photo in a folder that was purposefully being concealed from his view. Often it was tiny things that made large differences in the situations through which he trod, so any ability to further manage or manipulate those tiny things was to be considered beneficial. However…

“Thank you, Gregory. I shall strive to do justice to my newly-bestowed mantle of authority and show no mercy to errant teacups. I did want to ask, though… and please do not do what I know you will ache to do after I utter my request… do you have a wand?”

“You expect me to say something filthy and wrong, don’t you?”

“Most certainly.”

“And you’d be right! I’d go on and on about how long and hard and gorgeous was my wand, how it loved to be stroked and handled, either by me or another worthy, and skilled, hand… oh, I could do some very naughty things with an opening like that.”
“But you shan’t for you are a man of dignity and modesty.”

“I’m glad you recognize that very true thing about me. No talking about the fun I can have with my powerful, magnificent, high-stamina wand. But, to answer your question – yes! I do have a wand. Want to see it?”

“I would, actually. I find that I am most curious about not only it, but… well, everything, I suppose. If you but point me to it, I shall…”

“This one I’ll do on my own and no… don’t glare at me. I’m not certain it would let you pick it up and this won’t use much energy, I promise.”

Mycroft’s confused look lingered easily while Greg made a ‘come here’ motion with his fingers and whistled, which was answered by a flash of motion as an object flew out of the bedroom and into Greg’s hand.

“Here we are… Mycroft, this is Wand, Wand, this is Mycroft.”

“Am I supposed to greet it?”

“No, I was being an arse. Though not entirely. It’s not aware, but it does have the ability to react to energy patterns, auras and other things, so if you’re on the black-magic side of the line, it’ll give you good reason not to try and touch it again if you were stupid enough to do it once. And, it won’t let itself be stolen or picked up by someone it doesn’t recognize or feels might try something dangerous with it. It’s the work of the person who made it and uses it to build those sorts of things in, but given how important this little bugger is, the time and effort is certainly worth it.”

Mycroft stared at the wand in Greg’s hand and wondered how often someone might have tried to pick it up, likely to toss it out of a window to return to its twiggish brethren. For it very much resembled a twig! Perhaps a bit straighter and smoother, but it looked for all the world like a twig, perhaps the thickness of Gregory’s own thumb, that had been hand-worn to remove the fiddly bits on the exterior and received, as a bonus, a dull shine that would arise from skin oils massaged into the grain.

“You were expecting something with a jewel or highly carved with runes or something, weren’t you?”

“I admit that I did harbor a somewhat cinematic expectation, yes.”

“And for a lot of practitioners, you’d be right. Some put a great deal of work into making their wand look wandish, because that’s something meaningful to them, personally. In turn, that makes the wand more attuned to them and work better for their practice. Me… well, I’m not really a fussy, dramatic fellow, more plain and practical, so this is right for me. Still took a lot of work to make it, though… and time. I tried all sorts of bits of wood, tried doing a bit of shaping with pieces that didn’t feel right, but I thought might just needed a little personalization… finally stumbled upon this little chap when I was having an absolutely crap day and took a walk to try and clear my head. Reconnect with what wasn’t crap about the world; remind myself that there was still beauty and decency and happiness to be found and you didn’t really have to look that hard to find it. Of course, I simply had to stumble across a collection of lager cans littering my happy, beautiful walking area and, when I did a bit of rubbish cleaning, there it was. Lying under some bloke’s alone-party was my wand.”

“As if it appeared by magic.”
“Exactly! It’s that way with wands.”

“Are they all crafted from wood?”

“Not at all. Wood’s common, but a wand can be made of anything, really. It’s all about the person who’ll use it. If a body has a fascination and affinity to glass, for instance, their wand is probably made of glass or, at least, it’s a major component of the construction. Same for stone or clay or any material. I know one chap, he’s a mechanic by trade and his wand was put together with various bits from cars he worked on.”

“That… that is possible?”

“Sure! He’d tried to make one of metal and it just didn’t sing the right song, no matter what he tried. I did my best to help him with it, but had to agree that nothing was working. Then, one day, he was having to do a bollocks-breaking bit of work on someone’s engine and when he had a piston rod pried out… he knew. It sat there in his hand and he just knew. He also knew, though, that it wasn’t complete. So, he gave it a spot of cleaning and started carrying it in his pocket, handling it when he was sitting at home watching a little telly and, sometime later, he found another bit that he studied and carried with the rod until he knew how they’d work together and started welding. Continued for over a year collecting the parts that spoke to him and kept collecting until he knew, in his heart and soul that it was finished. It’s a thing to see, let me tell you, but it’s perfect for him and he’s really developed a lot of skill in using it to focus his talent and do its part in various rituals.”

“I honestly would never have conceived of something like that.”

“I doubt many outside of the community would because… well, real magic isn’t quite like fantasy magic. There are similarities, absolutely, but differences, too.”

“I assume then, given the difficulty in creating one, that you have but a single wand in your lifetime.”

“For most people, absolutely. There’s no reason to make another and the longer you have it, the more you use it, the more it becomes a part of you and your magic and, so, it’s a more powerful tool with time. Not every practitioner has one, though, they’re not much besides a prop unless you reach a level where you’re working certain spells and engaging in particular rituals. And some reach that level of magic young, others when they’re much older. Lots of variation there, too.”

“I… I cannot conceive of something as… delicate… as your wand lasting your lifetime. Are you one of the examples that stands apart from the ‘most people’ category?”

“HA! Oh, it’s not as delicate as it looks. Good luck breaking this like you would any twig you pick up from the ground. This old thing could be rolled over by a tank and just lay there looking bored. But, you are right that isn’t my first wand. Not nearly my first. More… uh…. my fifth.”

“I see. Might battling demons contribute to your rather lofty count?”

“It might at that. And battling other things. And working extremely powerful spells that go wrong. Or right. Had to sacrifice one of my wands once to a spell to infuse it with enough power to work. Worth it, though. Wales is still here.”

“W… Wales?”

“Massive old bastard from the sea. I won’t say it was a god, thought that’s what it, and one very old and very extinct cult, believed. And, to my misfortune, the old and extincts were helpful
enough to leave behind a chronicle of their magic and instructions how to call up this egotistical sea monster, which wasn’t punishingly hard to do, actually, because that foul thing wanted to be let loose to wreak some entertaining havoc. Fortunately, one of our lot felt a disturbance in the energies along the coast and passed the word along when a miserable black-magic bugger decided to have a little fun, so the entertaining havoc was avoided. Had a lovely holiday by the sea once it was done, though. That was nice.”

Mycroft found himself simply staring and blinking because his brain was having a tortuous time imagining this man, who absolutely appeared as the shopkeeper he was most days of the week, also fought ancient sea gods. And won! He’d seen one battle, personally witnessed it, and still his mind was spinning at the thought. And that all of it never made even the slightest mention in any of the reports he read. He was completely unaware of all of this and that was not growing easier to contemplate.

Of course, amidst the head spinning… the mental images of Gregory combating a sea monster were positively delicious fuel for his libido.

“I am in awe of your abilities, Gregory. And in your dedication to your work.”

“I like to help when I can. The world can be a horrible place and if you can do something to make it a little less horrible, I think you have an obligation to do it. Not everyone feels that way, hence the miserable black-magic buggers that make me miss more quiet nights reading at home than is right and proper.”

“I am more concerned about the damage to your health, but your point is taken. It is a tragic thing when…”

The ‘when’ had to wait as Greg’s mobile sounded with the ringtone Mycroft had come to recognize as the phone downstairs in the shop.

“Just a second… Problem, Anderson? Shit… completely forgot about that. No, he needs it and it’s not his fault it slipped my mind. I’ll be down in a moment to make it.”

Mycroft felt no shame putting a hand on Greg’s chest and refusing to move it as Greg tried to rise from the sofa.

“Under no circumstances are you returning to work, Gregory.”

“I have to. I have a customer who has tremors and there’s an herbal concoction I make that helps him a lot with that, so I’m not going to ask him to wait a day or two when he needs my help. He phoned to say he’s on his way, so I have to get started now as the potion takes a bit to make. Luckily, he’s on the other side of London, so I’ve got enough time to see it done before he arrives.”

“Can’t Mr. Anderson accomplish the task?”

“Uh… probably, if I gave him the instructions, which are a little fussy, but he could likely do it. That would leave the shop unattended, though, so I’d have to be down there, in any case.”

“Ridiculous. I can manage your shop for the duration.”

“You?”

Now that his brain had time to catch up with his mouth, Mycroft found Greg’s question an extremely valid one. However, it would not dissuade him from following through.
“Yes, me. I am ambulatory, most skilled with financial transactions, know your stock…”

“How could you possibly know my stock?”

“My memory is somewhat… noteworthy. I concede that I will not be terrible useful for offering suggestions, making recommendations, or detailing various functional aspects of the items, but I do remember what is present and where it might be found to lay hands on for purchase. For any more elaborate inquiries, I can phone you.”

“I… I can’t ask that of you, love. It’s not fair.”

“It is certainly fair, and I am eager for the new experience. Please do alert your assistant that I am on my way.”

Suspecting, quite rightly, that Mycroft was not going to be moved on the subject and knowing that the man was wholly capable of watching the shop for an hour, Greg simply stuck out his tongue, grinning like a schoolboy when Mycroft tried to snatch it before it could be slurped back in.

“And with that vision of loveliness in my mind, my dear, I shall depart.”

Which would take Mycroft more time than he found acceptable, but there was little haste to be made with crutches. At least, not if one hoped to be rid of said crutches in the near future and not have to endure them for an eternity while one nursed a freshly broken leg from tumbling wildly down a rather narrow staircase…

“Thank you, madam. We appreciate your custom. Do come again.”

The agony! Smiling, making chitchat, acquiescing to the nonsensical demands for two sacks for merchandise that easily fit into one… how did anyone endure this? Battling a demon must actually serve as relaxation for Gregory compared to this soul-draining experience…

“Huh.”

Perfect.

“Hello, Sebastian. I presume you are here to escort Mr. Anderson on tonight’s errand.”

“Yeah.”

Perhaps relief from the soul-draining was at hand.

“Excellent. He is currently occupied with a task, however, if you would but step behind the counter to mind the till, I shall inform him of your arrival.”

“Nah…”

Drat.

“… gotta talk to Greg.”

“To receive the details of tonight’s work, I assume.”

“Partly.”
“Well, it is not my business to pry further.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Thank you for the confirmation. Gregory is currently alone at the moment and surely would be happy for a visitor. I cannot guarantee, however, when John will return to take over from your companion.”

“Why not?”

“He is currently with my brother wreaking terror on the city’s undead population.”

“They’re fighting leeches? Or zombies?”

Must remember that certain matters would be taken more literally by his new acquaintances than his more familiar ones.

“Neither, for I misspoke. The individuals on whom the terror is being wrought are dead and content to remain in that condition.”

“Oh. Who?”

“Pardon?”

“Who’s dead?”

“I have no idea. Some poor blighter at the morgue, apparently.”

“Huh. Know when they died?”

“Again, I am without the information you seek. Is it important?”

“Wonder if it’s one of mine.”

“Meaning?”

“Heh.”

Smirking at a witticism I am not aware I made is dastardly, Sebastian. Though I am well aware you would not care about that one bit.

“I fail to see why that is amusing.”

“I see it. That’s enough. Tell Philip I’m here.”

Sebastian grinned and made his way to the back of the shop to take the stairs up to Greg’s flat, while Mycroft frowned slightly in his wake. He was still frowning when Anderson returned upstairs from the workshop, beaming proudly at the bottle in his hand.

“I did it! And I’m sure I did because I checked it the way Greg said to…”

Mycroft startled as Anderson leaned over to whisper in his ear.

“… using real magic.”

“My congratulations, then, on a successful endeavor.”
“Thank you! It’s amazing to learn all these new things, but when they help someone, it’s all the more satisfying.”

“A philosophy Gregory, himself, avidly endorses. In any case, Sebastian has arrived and it currently keeping Gregory company.”

“Oh, he’s a bit early.”

“Perhaps it was for the reason of conversing with Gregory.”

“That’s certainly possible. And it will give him something to do while I wait for John to start his shift. I hope he’s not late, since I’d hate to cut my film night with Sebastian short because we were later than I expected finishing our work for Marcus and Greg.”

And speaking of work…

“Philip, an odd question, perhaps, but do you know what Sebastian does for a living?”

The lack of immediate response and pursed lips were a good sign, to Mycroft, that no, Anderson did not.

“Funny, but it’s never really come up. We talk about lots of things. Lots and lots and it’s all terribly interesting, but I’ve never asked what he does. He must do something, because he does have money to spend but, now that I think about it, he seems to be able to do what he pleases when he pleases. Maybe he’s just independently wealthy.”

Sensing that Sebastian’s history was another thing that had not ‘come up’ in their discussions, Mycroft decided not to be the one to impart to Anderson that particular story and simply smiled a noncommittal smile.

“One never knows, does one. Well, I believe I shall use this opportunity to slip away to the café and procure for Gregory a small indulgence. He mentioned a taste for something sweet and there is little in his cupboards but some rather unfortunate biscuits that I am not certain a dog would wish to consume.”

“Oh, yes. I saw those. Not… well, food is food, but some food is certainly more worthy of the title than other examples.”

Mycroft smirked and relinquished his post, slowly making his way around the counter to make his first foray into the world since his injury. Which could still reasonably be classed as hours-old, but it felt good, nonetheless, to demonstrate some independence and shake a proverbial fist at his infirmity. One thing, however, his infirmity certainly did not benefit from was a collision with an old, small, grizzled man who scowled up menacingly at him, though the tall gentleman in the well-cut suit walking behind him rolled his eyes rather than scowled.

“Are you blind?”

Old, small, grizzled and with that particular quality of screech in his voice that sent a cheese grater across one’s eardrum. Delightful.

“No, good sir, but I would return your query as you were the one who collided into me.”

“Bah.”

Being given a shove aside by anyone was insulting enough, but when the shove was to someone on
crutches and given with the sputter dismissiveness of a crotchety old blackguard, one had to wonder how long said blackguard had been constipated and when the building up of toxins would bring an end to his discourteous life. Perhaps that was why he was visiting Gregory’s shop… they did offer herbal assistance for such a vexatious malady.

Regardless, the £50 note he was slipped by the rude pensioner’s companion, had the surprising effect of making him more tolerant of both discourtesy and vexatiousness… apparently one was never too rich not to appreciate depleting the pockets of the pests that infested one’s day…
“Mr. Holmes! Do let me carry that for you, sir.”

Not that Mycroft had much of a choice, since Charles quickly took the sack of baked treats from him, as well as the coffee he’d decided Greg would enjoy with said baked treats before realizing that moving with crutches, whether along a busy section of pavement or not, required the use of hands and arms, neither of which was now fully able to be applied to the task.

“Ah, Charles. Thank you. I… my good intentions rather clouded my mind to the practicalities of my current situation. You have something for me?”

A pro forma question only, given the thick envelope the driver had tucked beneath his arm.

“Yes, sir. Ms. Anthea asked that I drop this off for you to peruse. She is arranging a video conference for you tomorrow morning and these may be of use for it. She’ll be uploading a number of other documents, as well.”

“No rest for the wicked, it seems.”

“To be fair, she did tell the various other parties to get bent when they wanted the conference this evening, because it really wasn’t terribly time-sensitive, and she didn’t want them bothering you with their need for hand-holding, warm bottles and a lolly.”

Excellent. Cementing his own suspicion this was not something requiring swift action, so he could devote the evening to his dear Gregory and his tantalizing belly.

“Then I shall award her an extra five minutes for her lunch hour as a token of my gratitude.”

“I shall wear earplugs when she receives the news, so operatic will be her glee. Let me assist you to Mr. Lestrade’s flat, sir.”

Something Mycroft hoped his driver would suggest, since he hated to sound needy and feeble by making the request himself. Smiling in agreement, Mycroft made his slow way back to the shop and gladly accepted the opened door as a further help in maintaining his dignity. His dignity noticed, however, the rather distressed look on Anderson’s face when he walked inside and his expected look about to see the elderly, fractious patron and his mobile cash dispensary produced a somewhat unsettling insight.

“Mr. Anderson? Is there something amiss?”

“Oh… I don’t know. I really don’t. I mean…”

“Does this, perhaps, concern a rather contentious gentleman and his companion?”

“Yes! I asked to be of service and he made a rude comment about me being too skinny and stormed up towards Greg’s flat even after I tried to stop him. He… he knew where he was going, and Greg hasn’t phoned down to say there’s a problem. Not that I’d expect there to be one since Sebastian is up there and I can’t imagine many problems being too troublesome for him to fix but…”

Anderson’s eyes followed Charles, since Charles’s eyes had followed Mycroft’s towards the rear of the shop and the driver took the hint to get upstairs quickly to be another fist in the fray, if such
“Well, I suppose I should also greet Gregory’s visitor…”

Mycroft kept his voice confident and maintained a reassuring smile on his lips as he made his way towards the stairs, not wishing to further upset Anderson. Though, if necessary, he would greatly upset the man by shouting to bring the sorcerer up to add more than a pair of fists to the situation. A werewolf was certainly an effective bodyguard, however, given the sort with whom his Gregory consorted, the potential for someone even more dangerous than a werewolf could not be dismissed out of hand. Even if that person was a cantankerous old reprobate with a corn crake’s voice and a wispy little frame…

Oh dear…

“Gregory?”

What Mycroft was expecting when he made it up to Greg’s flat was an assortment of many perplexing and worrying things, but not quite the combination of Sebastian staring down and growling menacingly at the grizzled old man, who was staring up and hissing petulantly or his driver standing toe to toe and staring fixedly into the eyes of the old duffer’s companion, who was staring back just as fixedly, like two cats who were waiting for the other to make the first move to begin the onslaught of teeth and claws.

“What?”

“Hello, love. Welcome home.”

“Pfeh… feckless witch! This is the best you can do… pfft.”

Mycroft had a few very choice words ready to fling in response, but decided the sudden eruption of flames from the old man’s trousers which, unfortunately, a few quickly placed pats extinguished, could serve in their stead.

“Leonas… shut it.”

“How dare you! You will not speak to me in that manner, witch!”

“You’re an evil bastard who is very lucky the witches in his area have a fondness for evil old bastards or they’d have had the ravens dining on your stringy old flesh by now.”

“Ridiculous biddies… they think a bit of soup and a few biscuits now and again will buy my goodwill. Do they think I’m stupid? Trying to lull me into complacency, but it won’t work! I’ll see them all burn like a sausage over a campfire!”

“Sick of that voice, Greg. His throat really wouldn’t be hard to tear out.

“Truculent dog! I’ll have you in irons for threatening me! Goraseth, attend me!”

“Rather busy at the moment, sir.”

“Then kill the crippled witch-concubine’s hired boy and come to my aid!”

“That would violate the code, sir. Not sporting, I’m afraid.”

“Sporting! Sporting? What code?”
“The hired boy’s code. It is clearly writ in our code of ethics so, unfortunately, I must decline to murder him outright unless he poses a direct threat to your life.”

“He is!”

“In what manner?”

“He… he is appallingly ugly and the mere sight of his grotesqueness is sapping away the lingering years of my valuable life.”

Mycroft smirked at Charles’s reaction, which was to turn away from the imminent feline fury and cast an extremely faux-mournful gaze at the old man, using one hand to trace an imaginary tear down his cheek. Apparently his driver had read, as had he, that the threat level in the room was actually low and the posturing by the new arrivals was more a matter of style than substance. Though the tall fellow still standing toe-to-toe with Charles did appear most capable of bringing substance to the table should it be warranted, his current scarcely-smothered grin notwithstanding.

“Leo, you rotten old nutter. If you’re here for a reason, sit down and let’s get to it. If you were just passing and decided to pop in to be a misery, then fuck off.”

“I have better things to do, witch, than pass by, let alone enter, your horrid little shop. Why don’t you sell any boiled sweets?”

“Because it’s not a sweets shop, but I have a few of those horehound thingies you like in the cupboard.”

“Lackey! Retrieve them.”

Greg just motioned Mycroft over to join him on the sofa as the geriatric pestilence’s ‘hired boy’ grinned at Charles, who finally felt the penny drop and sighed dramatically before moving into the kitchen to rummage about for the sweets.

“Love, let me unfortunately present to you Leo…”

“Use my title, witch!”

“Let me doubly-unfortunately present to you His Majesty, King Leonas Varnas, ruler of the vampires…”

“Leeches.”

“Thank you, Sebastian… ruler of the vampires of the fourth kingdom and a few other fiddly bits that none of the other three kingdoms can be bothered to claim because their boundaries were settled a long time ago and nobody wants to muck about learning a new language or being invited to some feast where they eat strange things that nobody with sense would put in their mouths, like fermented shark.”

Mycroft took a brief moment to parse the information and drew several conclusions. First, this man was that ridiculous buffoon Marcus’s father. Second, the buffoon’s claim to being a prince had merit. Third, the buffoon’s claims about his father’s nature also had merit. Fourth, he was now feeling some degree of sympathy for the buffoon. Drat.

“Ah, fermented shark. An Icelandic tradition and one for which, I am afraid, I also lack the appropriate palate.”
“I like it.”

Greg’s ‘well, you would’ gesture at the still-unintroduced guest earned him a small poke from Mycroft who made a mental wager with himself that the gentleman was surely another of the bloodsucking race.

“That one? Oh, he’s a jolly fellow to have on hand. Especially if you do want to roast a few sausages over a campfire. Meet Goraseth Drothtosias. He’s a dragon.”

Mental wager lost!

“P… pardon?”

“Disappointing, isn’t it? I have to admit, when he has the chance to let his hair… or scales… down a bit, he’s a more impressive sight, but it’s not really the most convenient way to drive that old baggage about. Talons probably get stuck up under the brake or something.”

The ‘yeah, that’s about right’ shrug of the tall man’s shoulders did a great deal to diffuse Mycroft’s growing alarm that he was in the room with a dragon. A dragon. A living, breathing d-r-a-g-o-n. That was far more startling than being in the room with a vampire. Even a vampire king. Kings weren’t that impressive, in any case. Heavens knows he’d met enough of them in his life to make an informed judgement.

“I am a king! Why is nobody paying attention to me?”

Charles cleared his throat, bowed slightly when the old man turned and presented the bag of sweets he’d found languishing at the back of Greg’s cupboard.

“The sweets you requested, Your Majesty.”

“There! Showing proper respect. Goraseth, you are sacked. How much do you cost, lackey?”

“My current wage is one billion pounds per year, sire.”

“Bah. Another servant who believes himself a comedian. You should beat your help more often, witch-shagger.”

Given he put the chances at 0.00% the irritating vampire beat his dragon-born chauffer, Mycroft simply flicked his wrist in a way that would make Sherlock proud and motioned Charles over and handed him the £50 note said dragon-born had paid in hush money. Perfect nonchalance in the face of, if not the enemy, an annoying pest, was deserving of a reward.

“Humans are useless. More useless than witches!”

Shuffling forward to wave Charles away from the chair he was claiming, the vampire king sat down heavily for such a small man, unwrapped a sweet, popped it into his mouth and began to noisily suck on it, adding to his limitless charm.

“So, who is this useless human?”

Mycroft arched an eyebrow and Greg settled back to watch the show.

“My name is Mycroft Holmes, good sir, and I occupy a minor position in the British Government.”

“No you don’t.”
“I assure you that, despite appearances, I do.”

“False modesty is a character flaw, Iceman.”

Mycroft pursed his lips, then gave a careful, concessional nod.

“You have heard of me.”

“Oh yes… the British Government. Among other things. You don’t look it, though. I expected someone… more manly.”

Sebastian’s sniggering earned him a glare from both Mycroft and Greg, but the werewolf only grinned more widely and started his own raid on Greg’s cupboards, as well as refrigerator, for whatever consumables might be available to claim.

“Mycroft’s manly enough, Leo, thank you very much.”

“Doesn’t need to be too manly to shag a witch, witch.”

“That’s it. Give me my sweets back.”

“No.”

“Then be nice or it’s out on your arse and you know I’ll do it. Or… I’ll have Sebastian do it, since me and my shag partner are a bit under the weather at the moment what with having to battle a demon and save London and all.”

“Pfft. Demon shmemon… I’ve battled a hundred. A thousand! Never even broke a sweat.”

“You’re a vampire, you don’t sweat and the last time you had demon troubles I seem to remember my plump arse racing to the rescue.”

“Lies! Filthy, filthy lies. Goraseth! Trounce the witch!”

The dragon simply gave a ‘not now’ wave over his shoulder, which was busily assisting it’s arm cooperate in Sebastian’s task of raiding the larder. A task which also had Charles occupied, though he had taken on the special burden of liberating Greg of any unnecessary, yet respectable, bottles of spirits.

“Traitor. I’m surrounded by liars and traitors!”

“Which makes me wonder why you’re here, Leo?”

“I’m looking for Marcus.”

Mycroft tried not to laugh as Greg peeked behind a sofa cushion and shook his head slowly.

“He’s not here.”

“Foolish witch. His phone must be switched off because he hasn’t answered any of my calls.”

Greg cut eyes at Mycroft who held a placid smile on his lips that nicely expressed how much he believed the situation was due to a turned-off mobile. Inwardly, Mycroft was applauding the prince’s wisdom and dedication to ignoring this yapping terrier of torment.

“Maybe he’s at the cinema. They frown on phones ringing during a film, you know. Or
maybe you don’t. Things have changed a bit since the cinematograph was all the rage here in London.”

“I know where he is.”

Ann eyes turned to Anderson, who was standing in Greg’s open doorway, looking confused by the tableau, but happy to be part of things and making a contribution.

“Where? Where is my fop of a son?”

“He phoned a moment ago to say he was shopping, but he’d meet Sebastian and me after we check on the property he wants to buy.”


“Ummm… actually, I’m not sure, sir. I didn’t ask.”

“Useless! Another useless witch.”

This growl from Sebastian was more menacing than the first, even if slightly muffled by the mouthful of cheese he was chewing.

“You don’t frighten me, mongrel! I’ve slain a hundred werewolves in my life. A thousand! The rugs and tapestries in my castle are made from their mangy hides.”

“That… well, that sounds cruel and horrid, even if you do have a castle.”

Anderson accepted the bread and cheese Sebastian handed him and did his best to glare at vampire king who was giving him a wrist flick even more tetchy than the one Mycroft had given him earlier.

“They deserve it. Howling at all hours of the night. Can’t even enjoy a nice book! I am a king and can’t enjoy a book and glass of wine because of the dogs roaming about. And witches.”

Greg grinned at Mycroft who, he was happy to see, was taking all of this in stride. Maybe a wobbly step or two now and again, but mostly all in stride.

“I’d been meaning to ask you, Leo, how was the wine your fiendish witches brought you last year? They said to cellar it for a bit to really bring out the flavor.”

“Barely passable. I only drink it when I have nothing left in my cellars.”

Mycroft knew very well his mother was not the sort to be unfaithful to his father while he was alive, however, there must be some unknown mechanism to transmit genes from a fiendish malcontent into a female egg to produce viable offspring. Add fifty years and remove a good deal of height and, magically, his own brother would appear with the same level of petulant vitriol and dismissive hyperbole.

“Thought so. Anderson, why don’t you and Sebastian be off on your errand and…”

“We’ll bring the lizard. Could be useful.”

Anderson’s confusion was a bit on the constant side since he’d walked in, so Sebastian’s statement really didn’t make any waves in his brain, even when a forked tongue flicked out of the dragon’s mouth to accompany a narrowed set of strangely-glowing eyes. Mycroft’s tiny shocked gasp made Greg promise himself that Mycroft Holmes would, sooner than later, see dragons. And not ones
strolling about London in human form.

“That’s not a bad idea, actually, Seb. Seth’s got his own tricks up his sleeve that could help with this, not that I think you’ll find anything one way or the other. Pays to be cautious, though. Besides, he’s surely got a car, so you won’t have to take the Tube. Leo, you old wanker, care to free your man for the evening so he can go with these two and inspect the building your layabout son wants to buy? Better safe than sorry.”

“Might that be these three, Mr. Holmes. It is nearly the end of my workday.”

Mycroft would have said yes, in any case, seeing the eagerness in Charles’s eyes, but the burbling cauldron of offense primed to boil over in King Leonas Varnas made the assent a certainty.

“Of course, Charles. Do enjoy yourself.”

As well as the bottle of rather exceptional wine the dragon slipped into your jacket pocket because you were the only one with a jacket to conceal the theft.

“That… under no circumstances! I shall not be abandoned in this bilge of a dwelling!”

Which would also mean, Mycroft realized, that they would be stuck with vampire king until such time as his driver returned, a fate that neither he nor Greg deserved in the slightest.

“I shall arrange a vehicle for you, sir, if you like. In the spirit, so to speak, of camaraderie.”

“What say ye, Leonas? Mycroft has access to very nice cars. And this is for your beloved son, so some ancient curse doesn’t latch onto him and turn his blood to dust. Wont see any grandchildren if that happens, now will you.”

“Hmmmm… I will accept nothing less than the most luxurious vehicle in this wretched city.”

Greg looked over at Mycroft with a look in his eyes that said he would give Mycroft anything he wanted if he could make that happen. Quickly.

“Easily done. I shall have a suitable vehicle here, posthaste. Gentlemen, do have a successful venture with your… ghost busting.”

Taking that as their get-out-of-the-curmudgeon’s-clutches card of freedom, four people darted out of Greg’s flat, with enough of Greg’s food and drink to tide them over until they met with Marcus later and demanded more food and drinks before delivering their report.

“Witch! I desire a brandy.”

“So?”

“Bah!”

Mycroft quickly extracted his mobile from his pocket to set the car-summoning ritual in motion. The quicker the old vampire was evicted from Gregory’s flat, the happier everyone would be. Well, it was actually hard to be certain of that for his regal majesty. This likely counted as entertainment for him but, although it was compassionate to show kindness to the elderly, some elderly were more deserving of it than others…

It was utterly unnecessary for Mycroft to have to escort King Leonas to the limousine waiting for
him outside the shop, however, the vampire seemed to believe he merited an escort and Mycroft, frankly, wanted to be certain the man actually exited the shop and didn’t hide in wait to interrupt their sleep like an undigested piece of potato.

“Here. Don’t lose it.”

Mycroft looked at what was being presented and gracefully took from the old man’s fingers the surprisingly pristine card, which bore only the name Leonas Varnas and a telephone number, both inscribed in tasteful Copperplate Gothic. Before he could comment, the suddenly spry old codger was inside the limo, bellowing for the driver to close the door to keep out the chill and the vehicle was driving away to wherever the vampire king deemed appropriate. Tottering back into the shop, Mycroft frowned at John and Balthazar’s laughter, then ignored them completely as he made his way back up to Greg’s flat.

“Is there a reason that deplorable man gave to me his card, Gregory?”

“Oh… probably because he thinks you’ll be useful to him. He did know who you were, so likely sees you as a ripe field to harvest.”

“Lovely. But… is he truly a king?”

“Absolutely, and the community takes that seriously, no matter how much of a test of patience he is in person. Leonas is the final word and uncontested leader for about a third of the world’s vampires. In truth, he’s probably a good person for you to know. I honestly have no idea what pies your fingers are in, but I would wager all I owned they overlap some of his, even if you’ve never known about it. Now, though… maybe it would pay to discuss a little baking.”

“An interesting notion. You feel he would be amenable to a degree of cooperation or information sharing?”

“Probably. Despite his unfortunate personality, he’s smart. Very smart. And surprisingly strategic for political or business interests. Wait a few days, then ring him up for a chat. Any excuse will do. If he gave you easy access, he’s considering you as a potential ally and will be interested to see if you’re willing to take him up on the offer. Let’s see why he’s in London first, though.”

“It did seem odd that he was here. I was not convinced that his story about looking for his son was truthful.”

“Neither was I. To be fair, Marcus does hide here occasionally when his father descends on London, because Leo really does hate to set foot in my shop, let alone my flat, but… I suspect he actually came to see me.”

“You?”

“Call it intuition, but I got the impression he wanted to talk to me, but Sebastian, then you, made that impossible. I suspect we’ll hear from Marcus soon enough and it won’t only be because of whatever the Fantastic Four find at his property. One thing about Leo is that, peevish as he is, word is usually put out into the community when he’s scheduled to arrive, and he behaves with a bit more pomp and circumstance. I heard nothing about him planning a visit and I would have unless he specifically didn’t want it known he was in the city, at least not yet. He also didn’t ask about the demon we battled after I mentioned it. That, normally, would have got a laugh out of him, at least.”
“Perhaps his son informed him.”

“I wager he did, but he still would have taken the opportunity to rub my nose in being the worse for my efforts. It’s off pattern for him, so I think he had something bigger on his mind.”

“Something he did not want anyone else to hear.”

“Perhaps. He might be reconsidering your hearing it, though. Like I said, we’ll wait to hear what Marcus has to report, then… maybe invite Leo to dinner or something, to see what he has to say. There are a number of places I know where we can talk community business in private, but be seen doing it, which can be helpful for letting people know that diverse representatives of our merry group do communicate and keep in touch. It reassures people, somehow. Bolsters that sense of unity.”

“Gregory… how utterly political of you. Very admirable leveraging of impressions and appearances.”

“Like that?”

“Oh my, yes. It is most… stimulating.”

“Belly rub for my being a laudable leverager?”

“I deem that a suitable reward. Shall I first pour us a glass of whatever remains from the outright banditry of your potables?”

“They were so cute, weren’t they? Little thieves thinking they’d gotten away unnoticed. It warms the heart.”

“That it does. Now, do not dash away before I can return your beverage, my dear. I would hate to have to consume both and rub my own belly while a fine old film plays for my solitary enjoyment.”

“Oh, fine. I was going to have a quick jog, but I suppose that can wait.”

Mycroft chuckled, but noticed that Greg punctuated his silliness with a few gestures made with his injured arm, which was very encouraging to see. Given the level of damage it sustained, it would have taken another person ages to heal but, apparently, the sorcerer’s healing was as rapid as had been claimed. Very good. He could, it seemed, lose the last of his worry about his dear Gregory’s health and focus his attention, instead, on other matters. Such as how one capitalized upon a resource such as a vampire king. There was hardly a training manual lying about with that information but he, Mycroft Holmes, was most adept at, as they say, flying blind to reach his goal.

He could also spare attention for whatever it was Gregory believed was the true reason the annoying vampire was in London, at all. Though he never knew of this reality running alongside his own, he now felt an obligation, perhaps inherited through Gregory, to keep an eye on its welfare. Maybe Sherlock was correct… he was a meddler. However, since his meddling kept the world on an even keel, he would gladly accept the appellation. Now, there was another world that might benefit from his personal talents in meddling. At the very least, he could be a steadfast presence at his Gregory’s side if a problem arose.

Which implied that he would be at his Gregory’s side and for some time to come. That was somewhat an appreciable nod to commitment. Not that he cared a whit. He would happily blame magic for any flights of fancy on his part and how wonderful it was that he had a rather good chance of being correct…
From a professional standpoint, Charles admired the elegant Mercedes in which he was riding. From a personal standpoint, Charles adored the elegant Mercedes in which he was riding because it was gloriously comfortable, and it was a joy to be in a nice vehicle and sitting in the passenger seat, as opposed to his normal position, wearing his normal hat, at item which was currently tossed on the floorboard as a symbol of his freedom. It was almost a shame that they were nearing their destination, which was very likely the darkened building looming large on their left, because he was happy to soak in the luxury of passengerhood for as long as possible.

“I believe this is the address, Mr. Sorcerer?”

Sebastian growled at Goraseth who met his eye in the rearview mirror and flicked out his tongue again, this time accompanied by a professional-quality rude noise. The fun part was they both knew that, in a fight between a dragon and a werewolf, there might be something left to be called a winner, but that something wouldn’t be more than few loose strips of bloody flesh, so the taste of victory would be a touch bitter.

“Yes, the number matches, so I suppose we’re here. It seems to be a nice area, too, so I don’t think the car will be bothered if you park on the street. If this was my building, I’d say we may need to leave a guard with the car because... well, it’s not a very nice area, though not everybody is shady. I know at least three people who are a decent sort, as long as you’ve got an open mind about sex work.”

Given nobody in the vehicle looked down on sex workers, they were prepared to believe Anderson knew three decent people in his area which, being London, meant three out of a substantial number of citizens, a ratio that didn’t fill any of them with confidence about leaving unattended so much as a child’s plastic car for more than two seconds lest it be stripped of it’s immovable parts and sold to whoever might need a tiny plastic tire or door that actually didn’t open and close before it was cut off its vehicle with a pocketknife.

“Very well, then. Let us leave my exquisite and highly insured car unguarded and make short work of this building inspection. I could murder a vodka right now.”

Goraseth pulled the car to the curb, waved everybody out, then hopped out onto the pavement and engaged the security system, despite Anderson’s assessment of the decorousness of the neighborhood. Moving forward a step or two to join the others in looking over the building’s façade, the dragon wondered if everyone was as oddly unimpressed with it as he was. The ‘oddly’ bit was because it was a lovely building, constructed when architects prized detail and aesthetic appeal in their work and ensured that what a person saw when they stared at their creation was something visually pleasing. Not at all what one would anticipate when on a ghostbusting mission. Or maybe it was. Why shouldn’t a ghost prefer to haunt an attractive structure compared to a dreary steel-and-glass block that was as sterile as a surgical theater? He would. In fact, he’d put it in his will that a sorcerer be found to ensure that if he remained after death to haunt the living, it would be in a dwelling that was not an artistic abomination.

“S’ok. I’d haunt it.”

The dragon wasn’t sure he was happy or not that the werewolf shared his line of thought, but mentally appended a codicil to his future will that he would not be installed for his haunting in a place also haunted by the ghost of a surly werewolf. The eternal frustration would, in no manner, be offset by the attractiveness of the ambience.
“We’d best be at it, then. Sooner started, sooner ended.”

Anderson had thought his perky pronouncement would set the group in motion but, now that they were here, it seemed the party was content to hang about like members of a boy band waiting for their fangirls to arrive. A quick look at Sebastian was met with ‘huh?’ eyes, which finally sparked with understanding and prompted a shove of Charles to start moving in the direction of their mission.

“Thanks for that. I always appreciate a cordial shove to the back by someone who seriously needs to trim his nails.”

While Sebastian snuck a look at his fingertips, Charles squared his shoulders and began walking forward and was fully aware that he was the only standard-equipment human in the group, so he had no idea why he was the one leading the procession towards the large building they were there to investigate, let alone the first one to walk through the sizeable, tastefully-ornate front door having been slipped the key by Anderson who’d gotten it from Marcus the night before. The term ‘arrow fodder’ was beginning to form in large letters at the front of his mind…

“Well, this is nice. It looks like it was an old office building. Maybe from the 1920’s? Made it through the war intact and nobody did a lot to update it over the years.”

Something that suited Charles just fine, as well as Anderson, who was looking around the large entranceway with slightly widened eyes.

“Oh, it is nice. I like buildings like this. They have character. The ones they build today are just… bland. Nothing lovely about them, at all. It reminds me a bit of something you find a detective’s office in. One of those film noir types, though, now that I think about it, their offices were a touch seedy and this doesn’t strike me as a place that would tolerate a seedy business operating out of it.”

“That leaves the leech out.”

Anderson wagged a finger at Sebastian but didn’t do much to hide his snort of laughter at the rudeness or the one from the vampire king’s personal assistant.

“Whatever you do, please mention none of this to Prince Marcus because he would find it immensely funny to begin dressing like an American gumshoe and I’ll have to deal with his father when the inevitable photographs begin to arrive.”

Charles had a deep suspicion that the dragon made that statement specifically to get someone, likely Sebastian, to mention the detective business so that photographs would be taken, would be sent and would boost the entertainment level in his dragony life to delicious proportions. Though, Charles had to concede, if he tucked his hair beneath his fedora, the vampire would cut an acceptably noirish figure in his trench coat and non-bespoke shoes.

“Heh. Vampy Marlowe. Let’s bust ghosts.”

With his deep suspicion now upgraded to an absolute certainty, Charles grinned at the dragon who very pointedly did not smirk in response, then turned to Anderson, who was the actual official leader of their league of ghostbusters.

“Well, sir… what do you suggest?”

“Greg gave me, basically, an outline of what to do, so we’ll start at the top and move down from there. First thing is to check the door… oh, I was supposed to do that before we came in.
Well, I can still do that for things that haven’t killed us yet, but might consider it if we do something horrid to their house.”

Given it was his first go at ghostbusting, the remaining three members of the party decided not to chide Anderson about letting them walk into a potential murder house when he had instructions to clarify its murdery properties beforehand. They could act like adults when they had cause to, despite occasional evidence to the contrary.

“That’s… that’s probably a grand place to begin. Should the rest of us… surveil the premises?”

“Ooh! That’s on my list. I’m not sure what the three of you could see, but I’m certain anything will be helpful. Sebastian… is it rude to ask if you can… smell things?”

Being given knowing grins by two hired boys was not on Sebastian’s list of happy-making occurrences and made sure his hand gesture properly signaled his opinion of both their grins and the faces that sported them before answering.

“That’s not great in this form. Want me to go wolf?”

Charles and Goraseth got another filthy gesture thrown their way as they laughed and the dragon began to pantomime being a stripper while Charles hummed a suitable soundtrack for the performance.

“There’s not on my list of things to do, but it could be useful. And I’d make sure you had some privacy before… changing. Let me check this door, while the rest of you look about, then we’ll start trying other things.”

Sebastian didn’t seem to like the idea of leaving Anderson alone, but decided that his hearing, even in human form, was exceptional and the fact the door hadn’t attacked them yet didn’t incline him to believe it was poised to wreak havoc, but was a bit shy about doing the wreaking with a large audience presence to judge its performance.

“Yell.”

“Why?”

Sebastian glared in a surprisingly soft fashion and Anderson felt the message burrowing into his brain.

“Oh, right. I will.”

With that settled, the three non-sorcerers began to roam, taking different tangents to first inspect the ground floor before moving up a level. Charles had a feeling that both the dragon and the werewolf had a few senses for the supernatural that he lacked, so he supposed that he wouldn’t notice much unless it was writ large in a very obvious place. So when he spied something writ large in a very obvious place, he ducked back behind the door frame to look harder at the room he’d been about to enter.

It was a room. Nothing particularly special about it. For the most part, it appeared as if it may have been an office for use by the owners of the building or whatever company was acting as the management. The original wallpaper was intact, but surely hadn’t sported a large, crudely-painted mystical symbol when the building had been bustling with activity. Or maybe it had. People had strange ideas about decorating.
“Gentlemen... I may have spotted something.”

As Sebastian and Goraseth turned and started moving towards him, Charles took a careful step into the room, looking for goblins or bandersnatches that might be hiding in a corner, then took another step inside when an army of the flesh-eating creatures didn’t immediately launch an attack. After that second step crossed the threshold, Anderson has the best vantagepoint to see what happened, though he didn’t see it for long as a large mass of moving Sebastian knocked him out of the path of what, ultimately, never made it as far as the novice sorcerer.

If he was to describe what he saw, Anderson would say he saw Charles enter the room, with the dragon several steps behind, when a large mass of light shot out from the wall across from where Charles was standing which collided with the chauffer and seemed to move through the man, emerging on the other side as a brilliant mass of... something... with bright swirls of colors for which Anderson had no words and a nearly pulsating quality that continued moving until it seemed to Anderson that he caught a flash of large wings spreading to capture the mass before both the dragon and the driver collapsed onto the floor, though the dragon coughed a few times and began to sit up by the time Sebastian and Anderson raced over to check on him.

“Lizard?”

“I’m... I’m... yeah. Ok, that’s... that’s not good, but very good at the same time.”

Crawling over to the still motionless form of Charles, Goraseth was only seconds behind the other two who were trying to rouse the chauffer, Sebastian being a little more forceful with his attempted rousing than Anderson, though neither was meeting with success. When Anderson checked for a pulse, he gasped loudly and made to start CPR before being stopped by the dragon.

“No... won’t do any good.”

“But, it might! He’s only been dead a few moments and...”

“He’s not dead. Actually, he is, but it may not be permanent. Where’s my mobile? Right, in my pocket...”

While Goraseth tapped a contact number, Sebastian hesitated a moment, then wrapped an arm around Anderson’s shoulder, drawing him close for a bit of physical support. The dragon better have a good idea about how to fix this or the sorcerer was going to be plagued with guilt, probably blaming himself for the stupid door issue. Not that he believed for a moment that had any impact, especially after seeing the symbol on the wall that had been the source of the problem, but Philip wasn’t as clear-thinking as he was about stuff like this. Greg would set him straight, though. Greg would fix this mess, set his apprentice straight and then it would be like nothing ever happened. Greg could do all that. Greg could do a lot. He had to do this, though. There wasn’t any other option...

__________

“Is there a song you know of about belly rubs?”

Mycroft kept gently stroking Greg’s happily-exposed belly and pondered the question seriously.

“I cannot think of a single example.”

“I’ll have to write one, then. Belly rubs are absolutely worthy of a song to immortalize their amazingness.”
An evaluation that had Mycroft’s wholehearted approval. Though, his musical tastes would likely cringe at the eventual product, given there would surely be a lack of orchestral instruments in the score. Ukeleles, banjos and kazoos, however, would likely be prominently showcased.

“Yes, you possessed of musical or poetic talent, my dear?”

“No, not even that will stop me.”

Adding a tambourine and hunting horn to the ensemble.

“Commitment to a goal is a lauda…”

Mycroft’s voice tapered off when he saw the look on Greg’s face from the ringing of his mobile.

“Gregory?”

“Ummm… let me take this.”

Feeling it was appropriate to remove his hand from Greg’s skin, Mycroft commended himself on his perceptiveness as Greg’s face grew tense listening to his caller.

“Shit… Really?… No, you’re right, but get him here as quickly as possible. The truth? I haven’t got a clue, but there are a few sources I’ll check that may be of help… No idea… Yeah, do that. I doubt he can help, but I’m not discounting anything at this point… Ok, see you soon.”

“Gregory?”

“Mycroft… I don’t want you to be upset yet, alright?”

“You do realize that has now escalated my upset to an even higher degree?”

“Yeah, that was stupid of me. Anyway… that was Goraseth…”

Mycroft prided himself on his intellect but cursed it this time as it didn’t even allow for one blissful moment of ignorance before the situation slammed into his brain with punishing force.

“Charles.”

“Yeah, ummm… there’s been an… I was going to say accident, but that’s not true. It was a trap, by the sound of it and…”

“How is he?”

“Well… that’s hard to answer.”

“Unacceptable.”

Mycroft actually knew he didn’t want to hear the truth, but also knew there was no benefit to hiding from it, either.

“I know, it’s just… right now, Charles is dead.”

No. No, that could not be correct. He had just seen the man! However, something was a touch more puzzling than the death aspect alone…

“Why do you say ‘right now?’”
“Because there’s a chance I can bring him back. It’s not a good chance because I honestly
don’t know how, though I do have some idea about what to try. As far as I know, it’s never been
done, though, at least not in these circumstances, but… I will try. It’s his only hope.”

Mycroft blinked a moment as his mind flipped through the pages of his driver’s personnel file and
his personal portfolio of information on the man. Married young and divorced, no children, but
living parents with whom he was in frequent contact and visited often. Non-religious, but donated
both money and time to several charitable causes. Well liked by those with whom he worked with
a respectable cadre of friends and acquaintances. Artistic and a talented artist, at that. He could
not be dead. Not for a simple evening out for a spot of adventure. That he
could have prevented
by simply saying no.

“I… I see. But, Gregory…you are not well.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s this or nothing. Help me up, will you? We’ve got to get to the
workroom so I can get started.”

Mycroft dithered a moment, but seeing Greg start to heave himself upwards, went into action
supporting the sorcerer so he could adjust to sitting upright before slowly getting to his feet.

“Are you stable, my dear?”

“On my feet? Mostly. In my head, not at all.”

“Very well, but please… exercise all due caution.”

Greg reached down and ran a hand along Mycroft’s cheek, then extended the hand to assist
Mycroft getting to his own feet before taking up his crutches and nodding towards the door of the
flat. He’d sounded confident, right? At least, not as if he was carrying a mountain of worry
because he really hadn’t done this before and… was not at all sure anyone could. This sort of
thing… didn’t happen. At least, not in a way that didn’t leave the victim permanently dead and
that was the end of it. Best think of it, for now, as a learning experience. Sort this out properly and
make sure to record all the details so if it ever happened again, no poor sod would have to suffer
his stomach being eaten through by acid while unable to forget that his failure would leave a good
man very, very dead…
Chapter 26

After a stop to speak to a startled John and fill him in on events, Greg and Mycroft continued the slow progress down to Greg’s workshop, feeling no surprise that Balthazar ran down ahead of them and was waiting on the large table when they arrived.

“A Hollowing? You think you can reverse a Hollowing, you idiot sorcerer?”

Greg’s response to the cat was given as a gesture rather than in words, which Mycroft thought was extremely apropos in this situation.

“Gregory is attempting to help someone, cat. For that he deserves our full support, especially given the condition of his heath.”

“You have no idea what’s going on do you, human?”

“I… no. No, I do not, however, I have faith that Gregory would not make this attempt if he had lacked confidence that success was possible, even if the possibility was a miniscule one.”

“Pfft. Greg is the king of lost causes and this is the lostest cause I’ve heard of in… I can’t even remember how long.”

Mycroft frowned at Balthazar, but it was mostly to hide the slightly sinking feeling that had developed in his chest. He didn’t know what was involved here, had not a single frame of reference to evaluate the situation… but the cat did. And this did not feel like the evil creature’s standard level of naysaying.

“Shut it, you bastard. This is different than a standard Hollowing.”

“Might I inquire, Gregory… what, precisely, is a Hollowing?”

Greg didn’t stop pulling books out to thumb through but divided his attention so he could shine some light on the situation for Mycroft.

“It’s fucking black magic is what it is. There’s no gray about it and no chance it happens accidentally, so this was an intentional act that I’ll have to deal with if… when… we get Charles back. What happens… the spell launches at a person and… it knocks out the… there are different terms for it. The spirit, the soul, the essence, the energy… it’s what makes the physical body an actual person. Normally, there are two possible outcomes. One is that the whole business was designed to capture that essence for even blacker magic. I mean truly evil stuff and there’s nothing left of that energy when all is said and done. The other option is… it just gets scooped out and has nowhere to go. Sometimes it disperses and, whatever fate it was slated for, never happens. Other times… let’s just say those stories you hear of angry, violent, vengeful ghosts aren’t just stories. A fair number of them are these displaced spirits who are simply caught here for one reason or another, like this one. Even though practitioners have to take action when we learn about them… it hurts. You know how they got that way, that it’s not their fault, but that doesn’t excuse them hurting the living.”

“I see. But… neither of these outcomes happened to Charles.”

“This is completely unique… I can, though, see the outline of an opportunity that maybe I can use to restore him. I just have to craft the proper strategy to make it happen.”
“But what has happened that said opportunity even exists? If there is anything I can do, any resource I can provide, I will do so immediately. My reach is both wide and deep, Gregory, so do not hesitate, not even for an instant, to ask.”

Greg paused the briefest of moments to smile at Mycroft, then returned to gathering supplies at his frustratingly-slow pace. But, if he went faster he could deplete too much of his energy and he needed all he had for what was to come.

“If I think of anything, I will ask, Mycroft, I promise you that. As for what happened… Charles was very, very lucky a dragon happened to be there. You know those stories about dragons hoarding things like gold and jewels?”

“They are somewhat a staple of the fantasy genre.”

“Well, they’re based on fact. Just as humans have that instinctive drive to adore and take care of things with large eyes and heads that are big for their bodies…”

“Yes, the visual indicators of an infant.”

“Right, people do that with human babies, or kittens or dolls or whatever. Evolutionary help to keep the young safe. Dragons have a similar urge. Some believe that the Fabergé bloke must have seen a dragon’s egg at some point, because they’re very much like what he created. Gleaming, colorful… what you think of when gold, silver and jewels are involved. They’re absolutely gorgeous and dragons have evolved to have an attraction to things that have the same characteristics. Go into any dragon’s lair or house and you’ll find it filled with stuff like that. Your essence is a spectacular mass of color and gleam and shine and sparkle and glow and every other thing you can think of to make it the most dragon-pleasing thing possible. Goraseth saw that and his dragon instincts raced forward to grab his prize. And… it worked.”

“It did?”

“Yeah, though he’s not got something in his hands, it’s… it took up residence in him somehow. Normally, you have to prepare a vessel to contain it, infuse a jar or bottle or box with countless spells and protective as well as containment, symbols, etc. but this time… Mr. Dragon saw a shiny object and grabbed it. I know humans have tried that sort of thing and it doesn’t work, tried to steal a soul and internalize it, thinking the energy will boost their own and can’t do it. I’ve never heard of a dragon or any other non-human being trying and having it succeed, though. I’ve never heard of any who even tried, actually.”

“So… to summarize…”

“Please do.”

“My driver has lost his soul, which has become a rather aberrant addition to a dragon’s hoard.”

“That’s about it.”

“Will not the dragon… resist having it re-stolen? Again, that seems a rather standard plot device for the fantasy writers.”

“That’s… that’s a good question. Normally, I’d say yes, because they do protect their hoards, even those dragons that wear nice suits and work in the cities alongside non-fire breathers, but this time… dragons also have a sense of honor, tailored to them, of course, but it exists. There’s nothing honorable about this acquisition, so I doubt Seth’s instincts will race in to try and stop it. In fact… I genuinely don’t know what it’s doing to him right now. We haven’t gotten any calls
about two ghostbusters being down, but… who knows what’s going on inside him with another person pulling up a chair at the table and asking when’s lunch.”

“I had not considered that.”

“It’s actually something I’m hoping for, his body wanting to reject this new energy, so it won’t fight me or, if I’m unbelievably lucky, give me some help pushing it out.”

“Dragon magic is tricky, Greg.”

Mycroft scowled at Balthazar, who had been strangely quiet during the conversation, but his scowl wasn’t nearly a full-intensity example of his scowling expertise.

“I assume Gregory would not have added that to his portfolio of potential assets if even the ‘potential’ aspect was in question.”

“Something in a portfolio is meaningless. It has to actually work and… dragons are tricky. Want me to get the De Ursus, Greg?”

“Uh…”

“Baby.”

“Wrong. I just don’t want to be a deady.”

“Gregory… what is your feline suggesting?”

“It’s a book, a very old, very rare one that centers on dragon magic. The problem is… it’s a bit sentient.”

“Pardon? It can think?”

“Not quite in the way you’re imagining, more like my wand. It’s got a very rudimentary awareness but, unlike my wand, it’s a fucking bastard when it wants to be and has a bevy of built-in defensive… and offensive… spells that can make life very, very miserable for someone trying to use it.”

“The stench of your cowardice is singing my whiskers! It’s the best work on dragons and their ways and you know it.”

“Which won’t do anyone any good if it’s in a foul mood and gives me a stroke or vaporizes a couple of my limbs. Maybe I’ll get lucky, though, and it will just deprive me of my cat. That wouldn’t be so bad.”

“In what language is this book scripted, Gregory?”

“No.”

“From which region of the world does the No language originate?”

“You’re not touching it.”

“If it would assist you, then I see no reason to…”

“Did you not hear the part about a stroke or vaporized limbs? I wasn’t jesting, you know.”
“I… your cat seems well-versed in the nature of this tome… he shall assist me.”

“WHAT!”

“Hush, cat.  Be useful or begone.”

“Greg! Hex him!”

“No, and no.  I really don’t care which of you takes which no, as long as you both get one.”

“Come, Balthazar, let us see if this volume offers any information of assistance.  I shall reward you if our objective is successfully realized.”

Greg’s shouted ‘Hey!’ was shrugged off by both Balthazar and Mycroft, who actually felt far less confident and collected than they were willing to show.  However, Mycroft felt certain the cat would not have mentioned the book if it there was no possible benefit to exploring it.  And… Gregory’s shout was not followed by any further action to dissuade them, inclining him to believe that the sorcerer’s own thoughts were trending in the same direction, though the dangers were in no manner nullified because of it.

“Stop, human.  Press that stone.”

Mycroft looked down at the voice, then up and about at the wall of stones, all of which looked alike in that each was different, giving no indication which was the target.

“Some identifying detail, please.”

“The one on the left with the big mica fleck.”

Quickly pressing the desired stone, Mycroft’s eyebrows rose at the sound of a small click, followed by a louder sliding sound as a section of wall opened slightly for the cat to dart through and him to follow into what appeared to be a library.

“These are Greg’s special books.  Rare, valuable, dangerous, that sort of thing.  If he really wanted to stop us, he would have let the spell concealing the door stay intact and pressing the stone wouldn’t have worked.  If you were feeling bad about spitting in his eye and being defiant, that is.”

“I would not stoop to spitting unless I was some form of venomous reptile, in which case it would be a prudent combat strategy.”

“There.  You’re already thinking like a dragon.  See the bookcase with the scratched leg…”

“Why did you defile a bookcase, cat?”

“I… cat has needs, what can I say.  Top shelf on the right, the book with the red-brown binding.”

“Are there special instructions for obtaining it.”

“No, but… it’s best not to be afraid of it.  It’s a bit of a bully and can sense fear.”

“Joyful.”

Fortunately, Mycroft was more concerned about Charles than afraid of a book, so the extraction process was accomplished successfully.
“And now?”

“We start looking. Let’s go.”

Mycroft carried the book back into the workroom proper and only took a steadying breath before opening it as Balthazar jumped on the table next to it.

“This is an old Germanic dialect.”

“Can you read it?”

“Acceptably.”

“Good, then I don’t have to translate.”

How a cat could grin was somewhat unfathomable to Mycroft, but since this also successfully laughed when it so chose, the mystery was a minor one.

“Not my fault if either of you lose your cock for this!”

The in-unison shushing sound assured Greg his message had been received and that the two were still possessed of both their limbs and their brains. That fucking book was quick to act if it was unhappy, not one of the peevish lot that waited to be an arse until you were complacent and unsuspecting, so it likely wasn’t unhappy about being brought into service. Actually, it might have had some interest in the situation. De Ursus was a mean-spirited bugger, but a genuine scholar of dragons and their lore, so the book might well be intrigued by this very new piece of information.

Or he could just be looking for a bright spot in all of this where everything else was a confusing shade of fog gray. It was a 90-10 split right now, as far as he could tell, with him being on the wrong side of those odds. But, he’d read enough Terry Pratchett to know how million-to-one shots were nothing to be sneezed at and his odds were far better than that! Which, now that he thought about it, might be bad. Shit. Ok, here goes… it’s a million to one shot, but it just might work. If that wasn’t its own form of magic spell, he’d sell his Discworld books and find some Jackie Collins to fill his shelves instead…

Greg was used to Sebastian crashing through his doors but carrying a limp body in his arms was a new twist. Goraseth was following closely behind, looking hale and hearty, which was good, and Anderson had the rear, walking slowly, his arms crossed across his chest as if he was giving himself a large hug. The distraught look on his face, though, said a hug wasn’t quite the purpose of the gesture.

Happy they’d gotten a relatively quick start on the preparations, Greg motioned Sebastian to lay Charles’s body in the center of the highly-elaborate circle drawn on the floor, then knelt by the body to draw a series of symbols on Charles face, one on his forehead and one each on his cheek.

“Sebastian, if you could get him out of his togs, that would be helpful.”

“’k.”

While Sebastian made short work of Charles’s clothes, Greg took a steadying breath, stood up and moved to give Goraseth a look.

“How are you feeling, Seth?”
“Fine. Very fine. No problems here.”

“That’s perky.”

“I’m a perky person.”

“You work for a vampire who’d be one of those old duffers who hasn’t left his seat at his local for thirty years, including to change clothes or bathe, if he wasn’t a king. You’re not perky.”

“Ok, maybe I’m feeling a little… buoyant, but that’s the adrenaline.”

“Do you actually have any adrenaline?”

“No clue. It sounded good.”

“Alright, then. You’ve got something going on, but we’ll make it lower priority, since we can use all the optimism and perkiness we can get right now.”

As he turned to talk to Anderson, Greg held back, seeing Mycroft had already moved in that direction to have a quiet word, which seemed to be helping. That spared his attention for the person currently dead.

“You about… oh, wasn’t expecting that.”

Greg’s words got Mycroft’s attention, who nodded gently at Anderson before moving them both over to see what was the issue, which was an interesting revelation about his driver.

“Oh… I did not expect that, either. He does not seem the type to have tattoos, but I suppose it is the thing nowadays.”

“Heh… that one’s sleeping.”

“That’s Snorlax, Sebastian.”

All eyes turned towards Anderson, who seemed to have momentarily brushed off his gloom to gaze happily at the small characters on Charles upper arms with a cluster on his chest.

“How?”

“Snorlax. He’s a Pokemon.”

“How?”

“You never played Pokemon?”

“How?”

It was testament to Charles’s death that a cat leaping on him to try to catch the tattoos went completely unnoticed by the hopefully-temporary corpse.

“Balthazar! Stop being an evil fucker for one minute, will you?”

“Um… sorry.”

“Then why are you still batting at that one.”

“It’s mocking me!”
Greg shook his head carefully, mindful of the headache that had crashed on him longer ago than made for a happy sorcerer and focused on Anderson who seemed delighted by the whole business.

“That’s Pikachu! He can be a bit of a scamp, but so sweet, too. And.. oh my, Mewtwo! And an Articuno on the other arm! And there’s Squirtle and Bulbasar and Growlithe, he’s a little like Sebastian, now that I think about it…”

Which Sebastian proved by growling softly at the excited Anderson.

“But… that’s odd.”

Greg thought it *all* was odd, actually, but if the expert here was perplexed it was time to investigate.

“What’s odd, Anderson?”

“I see lots of little Pokemon here and, by little, I mean early evolutionary forms, and I’d expect to find Charmander with these… oh. Oh… Greg is it safe to turn him over?”

“Sebastian carried him in here like a sack of turnips, so yes, it’s safe.”

“Then someone help me a moment…”

Sebastian and Goraseth both heaved Charles onto his side, then fully over as Anderson began pushing to complete the motion.

“Look!”

As Anderson actually laughed at the large tattoo on Charles’s back, the others looked a bit wide-eyed as a piece or two of the puzzle may have fallen into place.

“It’s Charizard! It’s… it’s a Charles Lizard. Charlizard! Charles is a dragon, even though Charizard isn’t a Dragon type Pokemon, but it’s more like what we think of as a dragon than, say, Dratini. Greg, could that… be important?”

Greg blew out a long breath and held up his hands in a ‘I have no fucking clue but maybe’ gesture, but his brain was busily turning over the idea and not finding a reason to dismiss it completely. The other tattoos were small and intentionally cartoonish. This one was large and more realistically drawn, indicating it was more meaningful to the wearer. And there were no others on his back, again, giving this one prominence and significance. What the root of it was, he didn’t know, but it could be enough, *possibly*, to create a symbolic link with an actual dragon. Especially in a live or die situation, so to speak. And a link could work both ways…

“Maybe. I have an idea of what to try and this… this actually makes me more confident. I can use this… I was thinking of establishing a resonant connection to try and entice Charles’s essence back to his body, but there may be one in place already.”

“Gregory… I saw mentioned in the De Ursus book…”

“You have that, Greg! Leonas has been dying to get his hands on a copy! He wants to command a legion of dragons to burn witches because I refuse to do it, you know how he is, but not even I could find one in existence! What’s in it, is it filthy? De Ursus was supposed to have a taste for anything that breathed, and a few that didn’t, so what’s the news?”

Greg patted Goraseth calmingly on the shoulder, then motioned Mycroft to continue.
“As I was saying, there were a number of pages devoted to what he termed ‘dragon affinity,’ how dragons bonded with members of their… group. When there was an orphaned egg, there was a… procedure… to create a bond with its new family and their associates. Cat, which of these did you say was relevant?”

Balthazar jumped on the table to slap at pages until it found the one it wanted, then tapped the parchment on the bottom three inscriptions, which were mixes of symbols and a language Mycroft couldn’t place.

“Seth, you want to weigh in on this?”

“Happens! Poor little egg, parents get chased off by who knows or die and there it is, all alone, but you can rescue it! I’ve heard. There’s something you do, inscribe something on the egg and some other things that elder dragons know about but I haven’t had reason to learn, so yeah. Ok.”

“Useless lizard.”

“Charlizard, thank you very much, Wolfie! Or Gorlizard. Sethlizard? No, that one’s shit. Yeah. Ok.”

Anderson’s own distress had abated enough that he had sympathy to spare for the dragon and led him to a chair with a promise of a cup of tea to come quickly.

“Mycroft… this is good. See the way those are scripted? Follows right along with the basic sequence I was framing for my ritual.”

Mycroft saw nothing of the sort, but politely kept that to himself.

“I think this is the bit I was missing. I felt certain I could extract Charles’s energy but beyond capturing it in a bottle or something, the rest was speculation. If Charles’s energy has some, even joking, connection to dragons, with this bit here in the book… I’ve got an idea.”

Grabbing the book with his good arm, Greg made a few changes in the circle he’d inscribed on the ground and added a great deal of script to Charles’s decorated body. Then he began calling out a long list of things that had Anderson sprinting from cupboard to shelf to drawer to amass a collection of things that Greg began working into first a series of powders, then two separate pastes, one green and one an oddly-swirling blue, then a potion in a similar swirling blue, but flecked with sharp flashes of gold, orange and green. It was only when he drew a slim-bladed knife from a folded black cloth that Mycroft could no longer contain his curiosity.

“Gregory, please do not tell me you are going to stab my driver.”

“No, well, yes. More a prick, really. I have to draw a bit of blood from a few key areas, but nothing worse than a few cuts you might get from pruning your roses. I’ll start with Mr. Chatty first, so you can see how little of a problem it will be.”

“Is that me? I like it! Mr. Chatty. Mr. Goraseth Slvenvaldal Drothtrosias Chatty. I need new business cards.”

“Incoming leech.”

Greg followed Sebastian’s eyes, and ears, which announced the arrival of one harried-looking vampire prince, the harried bit vanishing in the deluge of shock and concern when Marcus saw Charles lying on the floor.
“Shit! What happened?”

“He was Hollowed by a trap laid in your building and your father’s pet dragon caught the energy before it vanished.”

Marcus stared at Balthazar but the rest of the group thought the summary sufficiently succinct not to chime in with clarification.

Charles… was Hollowed? Greg, tell me you can do something. If there’s anything you need, anything I can do…”

The genuine concern on Marcus’s features thawed further Mycroft’s attitude towards the vampire and he also credited his driver with a character that could build a connection to even this most vapid of individuals, whether supernatural or not.

“There may be, actually. Hold on a moment…”

Greg made a few quick flicks with his athame, nicking Goraseth in several places and used the small amount of blood on the blade to paint a symbol in the center of Charles’s chest.

“Now you, Marcus.”

Mycroft was finding his curiosity harder and harder to control, but didn’t feel even slightly ashamed of the fact. Curiosity was a sign of an advanced mind and his was far more advanced than most.

“His role, Gregory?”

“Vampires are natural connectors. They’re connected to other beings by a need for blood and can connect in other ways, too. Call it adding some fuel to the fire I’m creating.”

“Whatever you need, Greg. It’s not right him just lying there. Not for a stupid little look about my building.”

Marcus’s worried eyes never left Charles as Greg made a few small nicks and used the result to trace another symbol beneath the one he’d drawn with Goraseth’s blood.

“Now you, I’m afraid, Charles. And don’t grass on me to Mycroft that these nicks aren’t quite as small as the ones these two got.”

Before Mycroft could object, Greg made slightly longer cuts on Charles’s inert form, one on the back of each hand, one directly above his navel, one in the expanse of skin between his eyes and one tiny prick at the center of the symbol he’d drawn in dragon blood, a symbol which was now retraced with the newly-collected gore on the shining blade.

“Oh, this is going to take awhile so… Anderson’s got the kettle on and I advise tea or a quick run up to my flat for something stronger. Balthazar, could you give John and update? He’s probably dying to know what’s going on.”

Greg was as surprised as anyone that the cat had no snarky refusal to offer but, instead, padded up the stairs towards the shop.

“Alright, then, I’ll get started. And, before anyone kindly asks, this bit I have to do alone.”

This was mostly directed at Mycroft who frowned slightly but nodded and smiled supportively. He
could see an ache shining in his Gregory’s eyes, but not an agonizing one, so he relaxed a little and accepted the cup of tea that Sebastian handed to him. What he could do, though, was take the time to engage in one of his own areas of expertise… interrogation. A gentle version, however, one designed to determine what exactly was known about this situation from the persons involved and begin outlining the profile of potential persons of interest who might be behind this brazen attack.

They would pay for this. Pay and pay dearly. Whether they were human or not, the reckoning would be one that left nothing in its wake but scorched, salted ground. And with Gregory’s assistance, that might only be the starter course…

“I have no idea! Really, all my dealings have been with the estate agent handling the transaction. It’s some corporation that owns the property and I’ve had no direct dealings with them at all. You’d likely have more information about them from Anthea’s bit of research than I have."

“Very well, however, you must have informed someone of tonight’s events, what are their names?”

“I… a few of my business associates. I said it was a general building inspection, nothing but boring and standard business. I had to get the key from the agent, but I got that yesterday from the secretary and I… I don’t remember if I said when I’d be using it, precisely, only that I’d have a few people in to check it over in the next day or two. I told her it was for a final appraisal. And I had no idea that Charles would be there. Or Goraseth. If I’d known Father was coming to London, I would have postponed the whole thing and fled to somewhere he wasn’t for several days.”

Mycroft looked over at the dragon, who had been summoned by Greg to take active part in whatever was going on, which seemed to involve a great deal of repeating of words in between sips of the jewel-like potion.

“After meeting the man, that much is understandable."

“You met, Father? Bloody bad luck on your part.”

“He gave me his card.”

“Well, you’re done for, then. Nice knowing you. I wondered if he’d recognize your name, but he apparently did and now you’re going to be one of the legion of harassed and beleaguered victims he considers business or political connections. Have fun!”

“You are too kind. Currently, who do you list as personal enemies or rivals?”

“I don’t know! Lots! Not really enemies, though. More like people who are peeved at me for one reason or another. Certainly nobody irritated enough to do something like this. A Hollowing works on vampires, too, in case you didn’t know. If you find out who did this, you’ll tell me, right? You may have your own plans for them, but Charles suffered doing a favor for me. Maybe took a proverbial bullet meant for me. Besides… I like him. I consider him a friend. I take care of my friends. And revenge them, if necessary.”

Mycroft made note of the deep red-black gleam in the vampire’s eyes and simply nodded. Another ally in the fight would certainly not be shirked. Especially one who could withstand the ravages of a demonic cat with scarcely a hair out of place in the aftermath…
“Oooohhh… I feel strange…”

As the final sip of potion went down Goraseth’s throat, the dragon knew something was happening and now, a few seconds on, he was in that strange place of feeling something escalating and being unsure what to do about it, as when gas pressure is making you bloat, but neither of the available valves can be bothered to offer you any relief.

At the same time everyone else in the room felt the air thicken and the light dim, growing the feeling of impending… something, and felt compelled to move towards the circle to see what was going to happen, sensing it would be an event worth watching. And they weren’t wrong. In another instant, a large volume of what looked to Mycroft like the most vibrant and glittery nebula imaginable separated from Goraseth’s body and hovered a moment in the space between the Charles and the dragon before covering the rest of the distance quickly, entering Charles in the area outlined by the symbol on his chest flaring it brightly for an instant before disappearing, leaving in its wake what seemed to be a variation of the symbol imprinted on Charles’s chest in what now would be a new tattoo for the driver to admire.

“Gregory? Did it…”

Greg gave Mycroft an ‘I think so’ face and nodded at him to check on Charles while he looked over the dragon who was swaying slightly and looking more than a bit confused.

“Seth? You alright?”

“I… yeah. Yeah, I am.”

“Mr. Chatty gone on holiday?”

“I think so… there was definitely a positive synergy occurring there and… ha! I miss it. Strange, but I’m just me now and I rather miss that feeling of being more-than-alive. But, yes… at least right now, I don’t seem to have any after effects. I’ll let you know if that changes, though.”

“Do that. I don’t expect you would, I’d expect we’d know now, but given what I actually know about all of this, that statement isn’t worth the price of a carrot. Mycroft?”

Mycroft was a bit late to answer, given the slowness and amount of help he’d needed to get down on the floor to check on Charles, but as the rest of the living circle of Sebastian, Anderson, Marcus and Balthazar crouched along with him, he made the necessary checks and sighed slowly.

“Nothing. No pulse or respiration.”

Anderson’s soft ‘no’ echoed loudly in the small space, but quickly became drowned out by a loud intake of breath from the pronounced still-dead Charles, who took a few more after it, either to refill his lungs or to test if the first was actually real or the universe’s cruel joke at his expense.

“Charles? It is Mr. … Mycroft. Are you…”

“A… alive? I wasn’t, was I?”

Mycroft looked at Greg whose expression said honesty was best and took the advice to heart.

“No, you were not. There was a… situation, however it, apparently, has been rectified.”

“I remember… a light.”
“Gregory can provide the salient details, but the most important matter, that you are returned to us, is what concerns me at the moment. Might you sit up, so we can better gauge your… status?”

Charles’s first attempt was a sad affair, but a bit of help brought him upright where he was kept steady by both Mycroft’s and Marcus’s supportive hands.

“There… excellent. Will you open your eyes? I suspect you will gain a touch more confidence and equilibrium if you utilize all of your senses to… acknowledge your vital condition.”

Charles nodded slightly, then shook his head, as if the act of doing anything like opening his eyes was indescribably difficult. Finally, however, they opened for him to look about the workroom at the gathering of individuals who had helped see him back from the dead.

“Why are you all starting at me like that?”

This time, when Mycroft cut eyes over to Greg for guidance, the sorcerer, simply stared back with no guidance to give. Standard vanilla humans simply didn’t have eyes that glowed like that.

But dragons did. It could very well be a long, long night…
“Charles… do you feel… alright?”

Charles was very aware of the nuances of his employer’s voice, but this was a new twist. He’d never heard his Mr. Holmes so trepidatious before and that could not be a good thing, for any reason.

“I… tired. I’m tired. Hungry, too, but I didn’t have the opportunity to eat since breakfast beyond the few bites I had before we left to inspect the building. What happened, sir? Why… how am I alive if I… wasn’t?”

Mycroft was exceedingly happy his driver already was aware of the existence of magic and creatures who could wield it for it would make the explanation far less shocking that it otherwise might be.

“There was an accident, in a sense…”

“In the completely wrong sense. It was a trap!”

Balthazar’s reappearance on the stairs simply had to occur at precisely this time, in Mycroft’s opinion, because the watchword for the night seemed to be ‘foul deeds.’

“Thank you, cat. We are investigating all possibilities, but that is not a worry for you, now, Charles. According to Gregory, your… being… was removed from your body through magical vectors; however, it was collected by Goraseth before it had time to escape or dissipate. Gregory was able to return it to you, as well as the life it bestows.”

“C… collected?”

“The dragon ate it like a kipper.”

Balthazar dodged the empty vial of dew-gathered-by-moonlight Greg threw at him and made a rude noise to celebrate the sorcerer’s ongoing struggles with aim.

“What!”

“The cat is being contentious, Charles, be at ease. There was a… unification… of your essence with Goraseth, however it was a temporary one and you are again in possession of yourself. A live self, which is the important thing.”

Charles looked at the dragon who gave him a quick ‘he has a point’ nod, then breathed heavily for a few moments trying to gather his wits, which were being intolerably stubborn and running from every single one of the wit gatherers his brain had dispatched with nets and sacks aplenty.

“Now… is there anything else you notice about yourself at the moment? Even the slightest perturbation of your normal condition could be informative.”

“Alright. I… well, I’m a bit cold what with wearing nothing, apparently, but my pants, so that’s to be considered normal. I feel… tingly, but I just resurrected like a zombie after being eaten by a dragon, so I suppose that’s not out of the ordinary, if there is an ordinary for this sort of thing. No headaches or internal pain… some confused thinking but that’s more because I genuinely am confused right now, rather than a symptom, I feel, of mental impairment.”
“That bodes well, I would suspect. Gregory?”

Greg had been whispering with Marcus and paused a moment to take in Mycroft’s implied question.

“Yeah, so far so good, I’d say. Marcus here says his senses tell him, despite everything, we’ve got a living, breathing, human sitting on my floor. There’s definitely something, though, not… exactly human in the mix, but the basics are there. Sort of.”

“That is not particularly confidence-inspiring.”

The vampire blew a lock of dark hair out of his eyes and turned a ‘why are you like this’ look at Mycroft.

“Give me some of his blood to taste and I can tell you more. What say, Charles, old and dear friend? What’s a little nibble between friends, especially for medical purposes?”

Mycroft made to object, but Charles extended his wrist and overrode his employer’s silent objection, though the driver wasn’t certain it was the smartest decision he’d ever made. The fact that Marcus seemed startled at least reassured the British Government that the vampire had been making a jest, but given the opportunity, quickly moved forward and sank his fangs into Charles’s upraised wrist, drinking for a moment, during which Mycroft felt only slightly ashamed he watched closely in a somewhat voyeuristic fashion. When it was done, Marcus laid a few quick licks over the wounds to speed their healing and took a seat at the workroom table.

“Human. Mostly. I’ve never tasted dragon’s blood to know if that’s the additional flavor I’m getting, but there is definitely a strong tang of something… exciting… I haven’t sampled before. Goraseth, faithful retainer who I’ve bribed many times for some truly amusing reasons, how about a small sip so I can do a bit of comparison?”

Goraseth hissed softly at the vampire but extended his wrist and kept a wary eye on Marcus who enjoyed a long drink of something new, even for his rather experienced tastes.

“Ok, I’ll be doing that again, so I’ll boost this month’s bribery fund tidily in preparation. Such piquancy, such richness… and so nicely threaded with something that is definitely different than the rest. That surprise saucy center of the tidy little cake. I’d say… in about the same ratio as for our man Charles, there. Very interesting…”

A sentiment that had Greg’s agreement, though he wish he had a better idea about the ratio for good/bad than the vampire would be able to provide.

“So, to summarize, we’ve got a human and a dragon with a bit of extra… piquancy. Whatever the fuck that is.”

“In a nutshell, Greg, you culinary plebian. What I don’t taste in either of them, though, is anything… sick. If there is a physical or magical sickness brewing, I’m not getting it. You and John may be better at detecting that than me, but I can say I’d happily have a full meal off either of these manly specimens and I would not feel that way if I tasted anything… off… in that little amuse bouche.”

Both Charles and Goraseth looked slightly relieved at the pronouncement and Greg added Marcus’s assessment to the evidence pile.

“Ok, that’s good to know. I will try a few things that are good at uncovering lurking issues and John will certainly give a physical exam, at least to Charles, since Seth isn’t exactly human under
his rather unattractive illusion, but… that’s more confidence I had than before you fed your foolish face.”

“Foolish? I’m hurt.”

“No, you’re scheming about how you can get Charles or Goraseth alone for that full meal that nearly has you licking your lips in anticipation.”

“True. But, for your information, I’m also scheming about how to find who set out this trap. I cannot believe that it was set for anyone who might buy the property. The odds are too great against that. It was either set for me or, somehow, for one of the ghostbusting gang and there has to be a way to find out more.”

“Maybe it has something to do with why Leo paid his respects today. I think he wanted to talk to me about something and hadn’t anticipated I’d have guests, so the conversation didn’t happen.”

“Hmmm… if he came to visit you, without letting me know first, then there is something afoot… Goraseth, you must know. You live in his pocket like one of his miserable boiled sweets.”

The dragon shook his head and shrugged his shoulders to further make his point clear.

“He said he wanted to come to London to do a bit of business. However, he has been cloistered with his brother a lot in recent weeks and that might have something to do with it.”

“Oooh… now that’s interesting. For those of you not in the know, Uncle Petras is… you know those looming figures who positively radiate malevolence that seem to hover about wretched little Blofeld types? Well, that’s Uncle, but do not tell Father I likened him to Blofeld because I’ll never hear the end of it and I honestly don’t want to hear the beginning of it, let alone anything that comes after. Anyway, Uncle is Father’s second-in-command for all intents and purpose and his most successful information collector. Spy, if you will, and I do, so he’s Father’s master spy and don’t think for a moment he doesn’t adore being viewed that way. Petras is as dramatic as Father in his own quiet, lurking manner.”

Mycroft narrowed his eyes and made a mental note to learn more about this master spy. He actually had a suspicion as to who was this person, in terms of his interactions with the non-magical world, and firmly establishing his identity had been somewhat problematic for his own sources. Perhaps an association with King Leonas would be beneficial and for a number of intriguing reasons.

“Might you, then, Marcus, take charge of learning the reason for your father’s trip to London? I suspect he might be forthcoming after hearing the events of tonight.”

“That means I actually have to talk to him, Mycroft, and… uggghhh.”

“Given that was a rather lackluster death rattle, I shall consider it your agreement to my proposition and encourage you to make haste as time could be of the essence.”

Greg gave Mycroft a surreptitious thumb’s up, since Mycroft gave off a much stronger ‘and do not consider saying no’ vibe than he did, and it was evident Marcus was already resigned to doing as he was told.

“If I must. Father should be awake for another hour or two… Seth, is he at his townhouse?”

“Unless he decided to stay at your place, instead.”
“Do not even joke about that. Seriously, never. Alright, I’ll steal something lethal to drink from Greg’s flat, then see if I can cut through the old bastard’s concertina-wire personality to get the story from him. If it’s anything useful, I’ll phone. Charles… I’ll pop in tomorrow evening to see how you’re doing. If you need anything before then, call this number and they’ll handle it. Immediately.”

Quickly slipping Charles a card from his wallet, Marcus made a break for the exit before anyone could comment on his lowering of affectation, pausing only once more to give Charles’s shoulder a squeeze, then darted up the workroom stairs, deftly dancing around Balthazar who tried his best to trip the darting vampire and howled at his lack of success. After that dismal failure, Balthazar padded down the stairs far enough to be able to leap onto Anderson’s shoulder and hiss at Sebastian who tried to glare him into a state of death more permanent than Charles’s. All in all, Greg thought, despite the earlier, nearly tragic events, the evening was going much as they ever did when he was besieged by the various members of his rather raggedy social circle.

“Well, Marcus has a mission. That’s always nice, since it takes him away from here. Now, back to you, Charles.”

“Do we have to, Mr. Lestrade? I’m fine, actually, with being classed as mostly human. It’s better than most of the alternatives.”

“Squirrel monkeys are mostly human. Are you fine being a squirrel monkey? I saw that on the telly and Richard Attenborough was narrating so you know it’s true. Think carefully.”

“You’re not saying I am likely to morph into a monkey, are you, sir? Frankly, that sounds farfetched even for this situation.”

“No, I’m not saying that, though I have to concede there are benefits to being a monkey if you did morph into one.”

“Name three, sir.”

“They’re cute.”

“And?”

“Want me to say it twice more?”

“I believe you have made your point, Mr. Lestrade. What would you like me to do? I would assume you have some magical means of assessing my condition.”

“I do and I will use them, but… ok, right now I can see your aura has changed. Fairly significantly. That can happen after a traumatic event and dying certainly qualifies, but Marcus’s perceptions indicate it could be for other reasons, too. Right now, I just want to see what else we can learn before I go digging deeper. That can help me home in on possibilities faster and more accurately than if I’m flying blind. Think of it as going to the doctor and saying I don’t feel well versus going to the doctor and you can tell him where it hurts, what type of hurt is it, when did it start, is it worse at certain times than others… that sort of thing.”

“Oh, I see. Then, I ask again, what would you like me to do?”

“Right now, just focus and see what feels unusual, new or different.”

Charles sighed softly and relaxed as best he could with six pairs of eyes watching him intently and did a mental inventory of sensation, starting at his toes and working his way upwards, making note
of everything he could from extra-tingly tingles to his breathing to…

“I… ummmm. Mr. Lestrade, is there something… of consequence… over there.”

Charles pointed in the direction of the workroom’s hidden library and Mycroft’s ears caught a slight ‘hmmmmm…’ from both Greg and Goraseth.

“Could be, lad. Why would you think there was?”

“I… I don’t know. It’s simply that, sitting here, I feel a touch drawn towards that wall, though I have no idea why.”

“Ok… that’s where my library is. A nice collection…”

“Hoard.”

“Thank you, Goraseth, for your unasked-for information. As I was saying, that’s where I keep my rarest, most valuable or most dangerous books.”

“That sounds interesting. Can I have a look?”

With that gleam in your eye? Hoarding instinct is operating at full power, it seems.

“Later, perhaps.”

Greg shot a look at Mycroft that Mycroft genuinely couldn’t decipher, which was followed by a gesture he couldn’t decipher, this being an elbow jabbed into Goraseth’s ribs, followed by a strange rubbing of the sides of this throat with his thumb and forefinger. A moment later, Charles was looking about with curiosity in his eyes, which intensified when he noticed nobody else seemed to be reacting the way he was.

“Doesn’t… doesn’t anybody else hear that?”

Sighing loudly, more to buy him a moment to think than for a need for oxygen, Greg contemplated the sight of Goraseth staring at Charles with a jumbled look of confusion, delight and pride. Glad to know someone was happy about this turn of events. Though, he had a sneaking suspicion that Charles wouldn’t, ultimately, be unhappy about the answer.

“No, they don’t. Only dragons can hear dragon song.”

Anderson clapping happily made Sebastian frown, but he didn’t add a petulant growl to the frown, so Anderson continued to smile cheerily at Charles, who was shaking his head in confusion.

“I… what?”

Greg nudged Goraseth again who quickly complied, humming a tune, then giving it a more full-throated delivery, none of which showed physically and none of which was heard by anyone except Charles who Mycroft noticed seemed to be trying to sing along without realizing it.

“Seth? Got another member of the choir?”

“I think we do. I heard a few hesitant notes, more like someone who wants to sing but isn’t sure quite how. It actually reminded me of very young dragons who are first learning to use that voice and haven’t been taught. But… the energy was willing. That I heard anything says his spirit responded to the call and followed its ancient instincts.”
Anderson clapped happily again and found himself thinking of Charles as a new species of Pokemon, which the driver would likely appreciate, along with his new musical ability, if he could read minds. That ability, however, had not made an appearance so Anderson’s musings stayed private.

“Isn’t that great! Charles – you’re a dragon! More than tasting like one, you want to hoard and sing… having one on your back isn’t nearly as exciting as this, you have to admit!”

Anderson’s beaming smile actually made Greg laugh because it was nice to see someone excited about Charles’s new… Charles. He wasn’t sure, himself, but… Charles was alive and that was the key result they were hoping for, so he’d call it a victory. However, that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to throw as much magical analysis as he could at Charles to fathom out the extent of… whatever the fuck was going on. No use being alive now if that was slated to change a month from now.

“That’s… no. I mean, maybe, as Marcus said, I have a little *piquancy*, but…”

Anderson darted over to a drawer and took out a mirror, merrily holding it in front of Charles’s face so he could see the luminescence in his eyes.

“Shit.”

“I’d say they’re lovely, actually.”

Sebastian *did* growl this time and took the mirror away, scowling at Charles as he did so.

“I… Mr. Holmes?”

Mycroft really had no idea why his driver was turning to him for advice except, perhaps, out of habit. Normally, he was the best informed and most capable in any group with which he might find himself interacting. Here, though… he was sadly useless. Fortunately, not everyone here could be described that way.

“I am certain, Charles, that Gregory will do his utmost to ensure that your health, both physical and mental, will not be impacted by your experience.”

“But… how can I work with glowy eyes, sir? How can I do anything? I know, better than some, that the government does *have* secret laboratories and while I don’t have evidence they’ve dissected aliens or a yeti, I feel certain there’d be a dark sedan and a couple of beefy men visiting my building in a week to whisk me off for a rendezvous with a scalpel and electroshock apparatus once some old woman gets a fright because my sunglasses slip down my nose when I’m buying a newspaper.”

Mycroft knew that his own authority would prevent that occurring but, in fairness, he could not rule out abduction by darker interests or, at mildest, a dramatic upheaval of his driver’s life due to his new appearance.

“Let me try something.”

Given the person offering assistance was actually a dragon, Mycroft was more than willing to cede the floor to him. If, of course, his driver was willing.

“Charles, would that be permissible?”

“I suppose it is, sir. I’m not certain there’s worse than can be done to me than death, so…”
There was a shift in Charles’s tone and posture that told Mycroft the enormity of what had occurred was now hitting the driver and whatever might be the plans to further investigate matters might best be postponed a short while so the man could come to grips with his situation. The idea of magic had seemed a rather thrilling thing but, with injury and death apparently a common occurrence, the bloom was coming off the proverbial rose.

“I promise I won’t kill you, human, and you promise that you’ll tell me about these ridiculous creatures roaming your skin.”

The in-unison ‘They’re not ridiculous!’ from Anderson and Charles was handily waved off by Goraseth who sat down on the floor, said fuck it and stood, helping Charles to his feet and over to a chair at the workshop table.

“Alright, this isn’t going to hurt a bit. I just want you to think about the idea that eyes are the windows to the soul. Your essence or whatnot is just having a peek out to check the weather. In dragon form, we don’t give a fuck and let it keep the curtains open all the time, but when we need to go about in this silly human form, we draw them closed and tend to business or stop in for a coffee. Easy as that. Think about closing curtains. Tugging a shirt over your ridiculous cartoons. Just putting a little something in place so your energy can’t see out and nobody else can see in. I’ll hum a little to help you concentrate…”

Not that anybody else could hear anything, but they could see the small smile that crept onto Charles’s lips when the inaudible music began and, after a few moments of watching the two men, Mycroft slipped a piece of paper and pen over towards Goraseth who absentmindedly took it with his fidgeting fingers and began scribbling away while they waited for some sign from Charles. Which came as a few flickers off and on of the light in his eyes, though they stayed glowing when it was done.

“Great! That wasn’t bad, actually.”

“It worked?”

“For a moment. At least you were able to dim it, so it’s likely just a matter of practice and becoming a habit, like it is now for me when I’m out and about.”

Mycroft nodded congratulations at his driver and ignored his own sense of relief that there likely would be no need for ordering emergency research into contact lenses that could camouflage a particularly rare ocular condition for whom they, as if by a miracle, had a willing test subject for the final product.

“Excellent, Charles. I had full faith you were up to the challenge. And how nice that your companion commemorated the event with such a delightful portrait of you.”

Greg looked over at the paper under Goraseth’s hand, which he had failed to notice previously and frowned perplexedly.

“You can’t draw, you bloody lizard. I asked for a simple sketch of a dragon-scale pattern once and you drew something that looked like a drunk oyster.”

“I… I can’t draw. Not at all. Not even drunk oysters!”

Mycroft lifted his eyebrows and looked at Charles who was studiously examining the sketch.

“No, but Charles can. And he’s exceedingly talented at it, as well.”
The sketch on the paper was certainly not a drunk oyster, it was highly-accomplished, though unfinished, sketch of the man now smiling at it with his eyes glowing even more brightly than before.

“That’s good. It’s really very good. You’re being modest if you say you can’t draw, because that shows genuine talent.”

Mycroft and Greg shared a glance and were reassured that they were, again, on the same page.

“Oh, I think we’re starting to see a pattern here and I suspect we’ll discover things like this for a bit while… well, while we’re discovering things! How about we let Charles get dressed and find him something to eat…”

“Anderson needs to eat, too.”

Greg huffed at Sebastian who met his eye and scowled until Greg huffed again.

“And find anyone who is hungry something to eat and… we’ll talk about tonight and what happened. How does that sound?”

“Veal!”

Greg shot a look at Balthazar, who was still perched on Anderson’s shoulders and grinning smugly.

“Fuck you. If you’re lucky, you’ll get that drunk oyster than Seth can, apparently, draw now.”

“I’ll eat it. Especially if there are prawns, too.”

Mycroft shook his head at Balthazar’s typical nonsense and returned his attention to his driver, who was currently being helped back into his clothes since his limbs were still on the unsteady side and made a mental note to dispatch word that Charles would continue to be at his disposal for the next several days, at minimum, and was not to be assigned any other duties until further notice. The man would certainly need time to recover and restore his equilibrium after his harrowing experience. This time, fortunately, a cover story for his PA would not be necessary. And, as fortunately, she had her own relationship with his driver that would give Charles another ear to listen when he might wish to discuss his experience.

Of course, if anyone would be envious of someone now infused with dragon essence, it would be his PA and she would certainly enact some sort of revenge on Charles for his discourtesy of gaining superpowers without providing her a share. All in all, it would be a familiar situation, much like that when Charles bought a large ice cream on a very hot day and was addle-witted enough to parade his treasure tauntingly in front of Anthea. He had no idea how much was the cost of having a driver’s hat cleaned, since he was prohibited by dire threat of dismemberment and having the bits fed to rats, from authorizing any reimbursement for the cost, but the laundering job was laudably performed. Not a bit of the ice cream, chocolate sauce or cherry left any trace after Anthea forced Charles to use his hat as an ice cream bowl. The woman was most formidable when she was denied her mid-afternoon delicacies…

Charles had listened wide-eyed to the full story of the night’s post-Hollowing events and found himself, oddly, more interested in the whole matter than distressed by it. A dragon had captured his soul! A real dragon had thought his essence was a treasure to add to its hoard and snatched it. Kept him from dying, ultimately, but… how amazing was that! He’d had a fascination with
dragons his entire life and now he not only knew they were real, but he’d spent a brief time inside one. And now might be one! Not completely, but it seemed there’d been a bit of bartering going on while the dragon’s and his energies had shared a flat and gotten to know one another.

He could sense… shifts… inside him. Nothing extensive, merely minor changes in perceptions, judgements, picadilloes. He seemed to, now, be quite ambidextrous, a change from his norm, and was noticing that his head kept wanting to tilt right slightly, something he had previously noticed for Goraseth. In fairness, the dragon was now rubbing the fingers of his right hand together in the manner he typically did when his hands were idle. How many things, little and big, would they discover in the coming days? So far, beyond his eyes, nothing seemed harmful and not even his eyes were harmful, really, just noticeable. But, if he could get that under control, then nobody would ever know what he carried inside.

And he could hear the song of dragons. Greg said it was pure modulation of energy and didn’t use vocal cords or anything physical, just manipulation of energy somehow that maybe, just maybe, he could learn to do, too. It was highly unlikely he’d sprout wings, surely those would have sprung out by now if it was possible, but he could, one day, sing with dragons. See them for real and sing with them. It was like a dream. A dream come true…

That he was actually alive to experience it was nice, too.

“Are you certain, Charles? It might be best if you remain here for Gregory to keep a better eye on your condition.”

“Yes, sir, I am. I’d rather spend a little time at home, resting and... I really would like to do a bit of painting. It’s very effective for helping me... sort out matters in my head when necessary.”

“Besides, I’m going with him, so if there’s a problem, he won’t be alone.”

Charles cocked an eye at Goraseth, who ignored him with the ignoring power of lizards everywhere for minor nuisances. Greg, however, had more than an eye ready to cock.

“What’s your game, Seth?”

“Nothing. Call it camaraderie, call it curiosity, call it Leonas will be going to bed soon and won’t need me so why not use my time in a better way than watching telly. Your choice.”

“Heh… lizard wants to make eggs. The sexy kind.”

Even Sebastian realized that was not quite as nuanced and sophisticated as he’d hoped and simply made himself busy spooning any and all remaining food into two large containers to put aside for Anderson’s lunch today, since he’d been unable to convince the novice sorcerer to forgo his turn at the till, no matter the amount of frowning and glaring he tried.

“Oh, moving on from that. I’d like to keep an eye on you, too, Seth. Honestly, I have no idea what repercussions are in store for either of you and it’s best to act quickly when something happens.”

Watching both Charles and Goraseth look at him with the same cock to their head was slightly unnerving, but Greg had to admit to himself that the actual magnitude of repercussions he’d been privately dreading weren’t manifesting and both had passed his various preliminary tests with acceptable results. Anderson had taken, despite Sebastian’s objection, an hour behind the till so John could pop down and look for medical issues, but gave Charles a clean bill of health so there
wasn’t really a reason to keep them here besides worry. Truthfully, that was reason enough, but there came a point where a body simply needed time alone and maybe alone stretched to include with the person with whom you just shared something remarkable was the best medicine, at present.

Besides, you’d have to be the most oblivious person in existence not to notice that his Mycroft was exhausted, in pain, and doing his level best to show neither. Time they all saw some rest.

“Alright, nobody is taking me up on my kind offer, so fuck off the both of you. But, I want to see you tomorrow, at the latest, for a quick check on things.”

Charles and Goraseth shared a quick look, bowed to Greg in unison, then began to march towards the stairs, though pausing a moment for Charles to step back and shake Greg’s hand, muttering something in his ear before returning to his marching, assisted for the occasionally wobbly step by the dragon.

“That’s trouble waiting to happen, but I’m not sure to whom and, since it’s not me, I don’t care. Sebastian, your turn for some off-fucking.”

“Nope.”

“Yep. You already lost the Anderson’s Big Day at Work argument, so…”

Sebastian puffed a small breath of exasperated air, then scooped up Greg, being careful with the sorcerer’s healing shoulder, and nodded towards Mycroft to follow along.

“Put me down!”

“Nope. You’re on fumes. Stinky ones, too.”

Greg scowled thunderously, but Mycroft caught the tiny glint of shame in his eyes because Sebastian was absolutely right, and the sorcerer was well aware of the fact. Time to lend gentle support to the werewolf’s more forthright claim.

“Consider it being born aloft as the victor of a mighty battle, Gregory. You do deserve such and a great deal more for your superlative work, which saved a man’s life.”

Greg glared at Mycroft, who could not, for the life of him, stifle an amused, and pleased, smile.

“Fine! Fine, Mr. Smiley. I’ll let Sebastian port me like a sultan up to the flat. But then he’s coming back down for you.”

“Au contraire.”

“Au conyes! Anderson, guard the captive until Sebastian returns.”

Anderson snapped off a smart salute and mimed holding a firearm at Mycroft while Mycroft pressed his lips together peevishly. However, if it would relieve his Gregory of the walk up the stairs, which Mycroft wasn’t entirely convinced the sorcerer could successfully complete without having a nap on the first landing, then he was content with the playacting. If he was fortunate, there would scarcely be a handful of minutes between Gregory being cozily ensconced in bed and him falling into a deep and prolonged sleep, so he would have the time free to focus completely on a few matters of his own work and, then, beginning a more thorough investigation of the building that had nearly deprived him of a driver. And those who owned it. Perhaps there was no connection to the current owners and it was a third-party who had simply taken advantage of the
news that it was being considered for purchase by Marcus, but that avenue would also be pursued.

Mycroft Holmes was nothing if not tenacious and his tenacity was positively tugging at its chain to be unleashed on this problem. How fortunate that he now had allies in rather special places to assist…
“YOU!”

Charles had felt some small measure of confidence donning a pair of sunglasses from the box of lost items John and Greg kept in the stock area, but having an innocent citizen shout YOU! in his direction made that confidence scamper away like a rabbit startled by a hungry fox.

“Why are you visiting Fatcroft at this hour?”

Oh, it wasn’t an innocent citizen. Not in the slightest. It was however, one of the most observant people in the city, so caution was warranted.

“Good morning, Mr. Holmes. As you are aware, your brother keeps rather unpredictable hours and, thus, so must those in his employ.”

“You do not work for him. You work for me.”

“In what capacity, sir?”

“You are a government automaton funded by taxes, therefore you toil in benefit of the citizenry in general.”

“Might I inquire as to which of the past five years was blessed with a tax contribution from your personal pocket?”

“I… I have no idea. Fatcroft tends to such insignificant matters.”

For dragons, family bonds were strong and cherished, but Goraseth had to admit, watching the exchange, that if his family bonds connected to this stranger, he’d be at Asda tomorrow buying a pair of shears to make a few strategic cuts.

“Very good, sir. Now, if you will excuse me, my work day has, in actuality, ended and…”

“You are uncharacteristically rumpled and… I have no idea what to say about your hair beyond it is ridiculous and lacking your hat.”

Goraseth cut eyes towards Charles and was glad his companion had a dragon’s calm when faced with pestiferous nuisances, especially those making valid and inconvenient points.

“I recently spent some significant time deceased, sir, and the rumpling and ridiculousness you noted are likely a result of that tragic, yet temporary, condition. Though the fate of my hat is somewhat of a mystery.”

“It’s in my car.”

Sherlock shot a glare at the person he didn’t know in this conversational triangle and quickly flipped through his mental portfolio of Mycroft-associated minions to put a name with the face. Something which did not occur, must to his well-camouflaged surprise.

“And there you have it - the mystery is solved! If you will excuse us, Mr. Holmes…”

“No. Explain the very obvious and suspiciously linear cut directly between your eyes.”
Ah, yes. Something Charles had forgotten, much like his hat. It had stopped bleeding rather quickly, which indicated, to John, that his clotting ability was still on par for human standards, but beyond a quick cleaning, he hadn’t worried about tending to it. Not that a bandage in that particular location would have been any less noticeable...

“Dear me, perhaps that is the extraction point where those summoned to mummify my corpse began to extract my brain before I rallied, in true British fashion, and returned to the land of the living.”

“Your knowledge of the mummification process is pathetic. And you are further attempting to deceive me, which is ludicrous since I am a genius and you are not. Examine the evidence! You are rumpled, ridiculous, hat lacking, intentionally cut in an extremely unusual location and in the company of someone not enslaved to my brother. What is going on?”

“Mr. Drothrosias and I…”

“That is not his name.”

“Oh, do pardon me. Mr. YesThatsHisName and I are taking an early-morning constitutional subsequent to my discharging my final duty for the day. Pursuant to that, we shall now begin walking. Do enjoy your day, Mr. Holmes.”

If Charles believed this would satisfy Sherlock, he was sadly mistaken.

“You are wearing sunglasses. The sun has not yet risen.”

“It is always sunny in my heart, sir.”

“Which are not connected to your eyes.”

“It is gladdening that your education has served you well in the area of basic anatomy, sir.”

“You are as infantile and nonsensical as Mycroft.”

“That, sir, is a high compliment. Good morning, Mr. Holmes.”

Goraseth made certain to turn his head as they strolled away and let his eyes flash once at the scowling Sherlock, who gasped slightly but didn’t chase down the retreating pair since there was sufficient light streaming through the windows of Greg’s shop and the small café just welcoming its morning staff and deliveries to perhaps cast a spark of color into the unknown man’s eyes. Besides, he may be on his thirty-fifth hour of no sleep and suffering the effects of Mrs. Hudson’s refusing to bring him cake last evening, even though he could smell it baking. That bit of cruelty easily could have his perceptions a bit off the mark. It was chocolate cake, for heaven’s sake, and not even his lack of need for food was great protection against it’s delicious wiles...

For their part, Charles and Goraseth strove to give their strolling away a touch of swagger blended with supremely-confidence nonchalance that was certain to make Sherlock seethe, although their near-identical swaggering was a bit more evidence added to Sherlock’s mental folder and this bit wasn’t clouded by the influence of a lack of Mrs. Hudson’s special chocolate gateau. Fortunately, there was someone nearby to badger for answer and this person was profoundly incapable of swaggering away in any manner whatsoever.

“We have two vehicles, and no further interruptions, I believe, Charles. First, do you feel
capable of driving?”

Charles made a mental examination of his physical and mental capacity and judged both to be sufficient to pilot an easy-to-maneuver vehicle through the low-traffic, pre-dawn hour of London’s start to the day.

“I think so, yes.”

“Then… whatever shall we do with our abundance of wealth?”

“Hmmm… if Mr. Holmes has conscripted me for his use, then it’s not mandatory that I return the vehicle when my standard workday is complete, so… suggestions?”

“You said you wanted to paint and, apparently, I now have some talent in that area that I need to explore. There’s actually an art supply store open at this hour, believe it or not. I know this bit of trivia because you would be… no, after meeting Prince Marcus I doubt you would be surprised, but there is a truly disheartening number of vampires with pretensions to being artistic and they can’t shop during daylight hours.”

“Really? That’s very good to know, actually, not because there are vampires as delusional as a few humans I met who fancied themselves artists because they once sketched a cat during the primary school art class and it hung proudly on their mum’s refrigerator for a full fortnight, but for when I have a late-night need for supplies, which happens with frustrating regularity.”

“And, if I give you the address, we can race.”

“Race?”

“Two vehicles, two drivers… what else is possible?”

Charles considered the question a moment, then wondered why on Earth was he pondering the bloody obvious.

“Nothing. Not a single thing. And I do have an encyclopedic knowledge of London’s streets, connecting elements that are not precisely described as streets, and am in a car with a government plate that no police officer would consider their job worth the cost of stopping, even if I ran over the Police Superintendent.”

Which had nearly happened once, but only because the man foolishly threw himself in front of the vehicle after Mr. Holmes terminated a very unsatisfactory meeting and declared the police budget now added to the ‘likely to experience extreme cuts in administrative-level salaries’ list.

“And I have a dragon’s homing sense and can find my way anywhere I want to go via the shortest route possible.”

“Think I might have gotten a touch of that?”

“We’ll find out. However, young padawan, the master never teaches everything he knows to his apprentice.”

“You mean such as painting with something other than the condiments when you’re bored at a restaurant and their white table coverings are tempting you a bit too much to overcome your usually impeccable manners?”

“You do that?”
“Knowledge sharing goes both ways, you realize.”

“Negotiation! I like that. Very dragon-like.”

Charles found himself grinning and feeling surprisingly good for a recent member of the dead.

“So, one race for supplies, then another back to my flat to put them to use on something other than tablecloths.”

“Got coffee?”

“I do.”

“Then two races it is. Points deducted for dents, scraped paint, broken windows or human beings wedged in the grill.”

“Humans only?”

“Fair. If it lives, it counts.”

“Are vampires technically alive?”

“You really are Mr. Nit Picker, aren’t you?”

“Occupational hazard when one works for Mr. Holmes, I’m afraid.”

“Any others?”

“Hmmm… not as many as you might expect.”

“Do any involve setting out traps for witches. And I mean actual traps like you’d see in a cartoon when Wiley Coyote tries to capture the Roadrunner?”

“I’ve been spared that particular one.”

“Lucky man.”

Whirling away from the source of his mental discontent, who were ignoring his discontent in the rudest possible manner, Sherlock stalked towards the door of the shop and nodded in satisfaction that John was still working, and the shop seemed empty of clientele. Excellent.

"John! I require ambergris and garlic essence.”

“For what possible reason? Regardless, let me peremptorily state that I am not wearing any cologne you concoct with those ingredients.”

“I would not waste my valuable time on such a vanity-promoting endeavor. Besides, if I wanted to craft a cologne, it would propel me to a level of notability and fortune that would distract from my work.”

And the less vanity promotion Sherlock received, in John’s mind, the better.

“Understandable. And for your information, we don’t have ambergris in stock. I can place an order, though. Greg knows a few people who supply it that we know didn’t do anything shady like
kill a sperm whale to line their pockets. It’s not cheap, though, so prepare for a wallet-pounding.”

“Ugh… I need it today.”

“Then you’re an unlucky man. There are other places you can try, though.”

“Which are not here.”

“Blessedly, yes. So… goodbye.”

“Was that supposed to be humorous?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Congratulations. You failed.”

“Boo hoo. Now, the garlic essence we do have so you can buy it today or wait until your ambergris arrives.”

“I am eternally disappointed when I am forced to enter this establishment.”

“I have the perfect prescription for that. Goodbye.”

“What was the prescription?”

“Goodbye.”

“Why are you withholding information from me?”

“Oh my god…”

“Invoking a higher power will not spare you my brother’s limited grasp of humor or social interactions, Doctor Watson, so I suggest beseeching a more vulgar and brutish being, such as a foul demon or the PM, to enact your vengeance.”

John grinned but gave Mycroft a cocked eyebrow which effectively posed the two-prong question- How are you and how is Greg? – without Sherlock being any the wiser. Mycroft’s small nod said, to John, that Greg was not immediately in need of medical intervention but Mycroft’s color said pain medication had not been recently taken and that fact was currently screaming rude things into Mycroft’s ear. Why were none of his patients inclined to follow basic medical advice? He really needed to work on a spell that made medication actually scream rude things if it was being neglected by the people who were supposed to be paying their respects to it at very regular intervals.

“Oh no, Graham left open the rear door and a sea cow has waddled in, seeking a fresh supply of water plants to eat. How are your wildly unimpressive legs supporting your bulk, Mycroft, without the water’s buoyant force supplementing their efforts?”

“Amusing, brother dear. John, I simply wished to inform you that Gregory shall likely be resting soon and Mr. Anderson shall mind the shop if you would like to confirm that Gregory’s health is still vigorous after tonight’s… well, Sherlock is certainly not interested in my sex life, so I shall keep the details to myself for the moment, though Gregory is most anxious to boast about his unparalleled performance and would appreciate an audience. Whenever you are ready to be astounded, John, do pay a visit upstairs.”

Sherlock’s rude noise was in-stereo with Balthazar’s rude laughter, so it made a thoroughly
displeasing chorus to accompany Mycroft’s return to the back of the shop to begin the remainder of the ascent up to Greg’s flat. He had persuaded Sebastian not to physically carry him through the strategic use of cash sufficient to purchase a rather large sack of pastries from the nearby café. How one person could find unlimited room in their body for food was quite beyond him, but Sebastian seemed to act as a black hole for edible goods. Any in his vicinity, and in any form or quantity, were drawn in, never again to be seen in his universe.

“Did you feel that, John? The return of the gravitational field of the room to its normal magnitude and direction?”

“You’re evil, do you know that?”

“Evil is supremely subjective, and I do not recognize your authority or expertise on the topic to acknowledge your opinion.”

“That’s fine. Doesn’t diminish your evil one tiny bit.”

“Irrelevant. Now, if I cannot purchase my ambergris, then I shall take the garlic essence as well as the other items on my list.”

Which, once removed from Sherlock’s coat pocket, was effectively one of those comical lists in Christmas programs that dangled to the ground for a child who had a rather optimistic outlook for what the holiday spirit would leave in their stocking and under the tree.

“You may deliver it after you are released from servitude this morning.”

“Uh… no. We don’t deliver.”

“Not this again.”

“Mwot wnot ugn?”

John wondered just how much food was stuffed into Sebastian’s mouth because that was poor articulation even for him.

“I am reminding this customer that our establishment does not offer a delivery service.”

“’k.”

“You are reminding me, John, why the yearly profit from this business could not purchase a pencil. Now, who is this person, besides another dimwitted dabbler who believes that the merchandise in this shop will provide him mystical abilities, fame, fortune and, in his case, proper command of the English language.”

John pressed his lips together in anticipation of Sebastian’s response to Sherlock’s query, but had his hopes dashed for something violently entertaining when Anderson stepped from behind the curtain and the growing, vicious grin left the werewolf’s lips to be replaced by something that lingered far more softly though it would take an observational ability more formidable even than Sherlock’s to notice.

“Oh, it’s you. Mr. Rude. John… is this man bothering you?”

Sebastian’s grin reemerged in gleeful pride at Anderson’s scowl and narrowed eyes which made any pearls Sherlock might have been clutching shriek in torment.
“First, I am not rude. Second, I am not bothering John. I am simply placing my delivery order and inviting him to breakfast once my order has arrived and been inspected for completeness and condition.”

Now, Sebastian’s grin was turned towards John who rolled his eyes in exasperation and snatched the heavy sack out of Moran’s hands to set down next to him on the counter.

“Sorry, Sherlock, but it looks as if Sebastian has already brought breakfast.”

The sack was quickly snatched back and held tightly to Sebastian’s chest like a favorite teddy. It made John feel somewhat unclean to think that the tall man with the rather large body count to his name looked like a small boy guarding his best friend in the world, but a hot shower would take care of that and, by chance, one was beckoning at the horizon’s edge of his morning. Well, it had been beckoning before the arrival of a certain someone who couldn’t be bothered just to say hello and ask if he’d like to share a companionable breakfast like any normal person might. Of course, if Sherlock was normal, what fun would that be?

“I mean… it looks as if Sebastian brought breakfast for himself, with a spare crumb or two for Anderson, so I suppose I’ll have to forage elsewhere. What might be on the menu this morning, Mr. Holmes the Younger?”

“I have no idea, but I have observed you are rather indiscriminate in your tastes, so I doubt it matters significantly.”

One sad point scored by Sherlock.

“Ok, that’s true. Rude, but true. Anderson, you’re watching the till for a bit while I check on Greg and Mycroft?”

“Yes, then I’ll dash home for a change of clothes before I take over for the day.”

“Sounds good. Then, what we’ll do, Sherlock, is this. You’ll have a pleasant visit with your brother while I finish my tour of duty and then we’ll both deliver your purchases to your flat, where Mrs. Hudson will provide breakfast, at least to me, since I’ll bring her some special goodies for her troubles.”

“I brought you so, by proxy, I am responsible for the special goodies and deserve a kingly breakfast, in case you were scheming to deny me my share as petty retribution for your having to carry home my purchases.”

“Who said I… oh, why am I bothering. Anderson, the helm is yours. Sebastian, feed the cat, will you? Lots. The fatter he is, the less of a nuisance.”

Balthazar opened his mouth to protest then wondered why he’d do something as stupid as protesting free pastries and shut it quickly. He could even bear the fact, for the time being, that it was the stupid werewolf who brought his tasty nibbles. There was something to be said for Greg’s new apprentice… Fido behaved far more tolerably and far less stick-up-the-arse-y when invading the Territory of Balthazar while Baby Sorcerer was in residence. And there was, also, something oddly bearable about the additional riff raff that had been drawn into his sphere of influence with the arrival of the King of England into Greg’s life. Inoffensive, for the most part, and they seemed to have a very healthy and proper appreciation of food. Frequent, plentiful food. If one must tolerate a swarm of idiots, then let it be a swarm bearing lobster, chicken and pastries.

Of course, his intoxicating empress was not classed with the riff raff. She few so high above them
that… urk.

“Eat, cat.”

Balthazar suffered being lifted by the scruff of his neck and set on the floor only because the floor held a fat, succulent pastry and his former perch did not. However, the revenge he vowed on the werewolf was the darkest imaginable. Ooh, the pastry had cream in the middle… perhaps the revenge could be a touch more charcoal gray and soul-searing black… one must encourage the bestowing of fat pastries whenever possible…

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“Ah, Doctor Watson. Excellent. Gregory was hopeful you would visit sooner than later as we both suspect he shall not remain awake for long.”

“Yeah, I’m not surprised. I may take steps, too, to ensure that the not awake bit stays that way for a little longer than it naturally might. I can’t argue with tonight’s… things… that much exertion isn’t recommended for him at this particular point.”

Mycroft merrily ignored Sherlock’s narrowed eyes and was simply happily John was not a too-severe sufferer of the ‘loose lips’ malady, which certainly was not prudent when his dear brother was nearby. Even that tiny slip had Sherlock’s curiosity flowing freely.

“Very wise. Sherlock, if you will allow Doctor Watson to tend to his duties, you and I might spend the time in pleasant conversation. Or as close to it as possible, given the parties involved.”

John used the distraction to slip away to Greg’s bedroom for a quick examination and large syringe of something soothing for his friend. That Greg had been up and functional all night could be a good sign or bad thing and either would benefit from a large measure of deep, healing sleep. If he was lucky, Mycroft would get his own measure of that once Sherlock left, but he wouldn’t try a sneaky syringe to make that happen. With his luck, Mycroft would remain awake just long enough to have his execution papers drafted, signed and delivered by a large bloke hefting a very sharp axe.

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“Have a seat, brother. I do not expect Doctor Watson to be long, however, certainly long enough for you to enjoy the time in a more restful manner than hovering like a dark spirit in Gregory’s doorway.”

Sherlock snarled and snarled harder watching Mycroft slowly navigate to a chair and work to make proper use of it as gracefully as possible. Which, for the record, was not graceful in the slightest.

“Your leg.”

“Is that a riddle?”

“I did not have a chance to inspect it.”

“Ah, true. You were far more enamored of the idea of communing with the dead.”

Which, Mycroft had to admit, was now a practical matter about which he was wondering most seriously and opportunistically. What a delightful advantage that would be for his particular line of work…
“A corpse is always a more scintillating companion than you, however, I still wish to verify your condition, so I may refine my mockery to a level you truly deserve.”

Showing even the tiniest sign of a contented smile would simply embarrass his brother, so Mycroft kept a carefully-disguised secret his pride at Sherlock’s clear concern for his welfare.

“Of course. But do brace yourself for the majestic sight of my lower body clad in nought but rather luxurious undergarments. I fear your envy might prompt a truly uncomfortable bout of dyspepsia, and Doctor Watson is not available at the moment to offer aid.”

Sherlock snorted and waved off Mycroft’s words, while Mycroft began the difficult process of removing one’s trousers while seated and sporting a leg that was currently on fire with a pain similar to that of having it lowered into a heavily-salt-laced pool of lava. It was not satisfying, per se, to witness Sherlock’s expression when the wound was finally exposed, but there was a reassurance that his brother recognized the severity of the situation and the resulting escalation in jibes would be failed attempts to keep his feelings on the matter well in check.

“Pfft. As I thought. The merest scratch.”

“Truly. I was in the midst of a rousing session of nude paperwork and a certain memo was particularly sharp in tone.”

“I now believe your fatuous driver when he said he recently spent time deceased. There mere thought of witnessing that grotesque sight has me teetering on the brink of death.”

Mycroft’s eyes widened slightly, credited Charles with an effective strategy for diverting Sherlock’s attention from what would be a somewhat atypical presentation for the normally tidy-uniformed man. And for thinking quickly in his somewhat unsettled condition, given Sherlock must just have bumped into him on the pavement below.

“I ensure he sees a monthly bonus for delivering documents during times I feel the need to indulge my peccadilloes.”

“He should receive a set of hoodwinks, however, he seems to find sunglasses an acceptable substitute.”

That was stated with tone, brother dear. Apparently, Charles’s distraction was not quite as effective as I believed.

“He also possesses peccadilloes to indulge.”

“And his… friend?”

Delightful. Sherlock had the taste of a puzzle in his mouth.

“Mr. Drothtrosias?”

“That is not his name.”

“I beg to differ.”

“It is a preposterous name.”

“As would be ‘Holmes’ in a variety of cultures.”

“Why would you even know his name, Mycroft, or that he was a friend of your driver?”
“Good heavens, Sherlock… I requested a few items to prepare for a discussion today in which I must participate, and Charles was sufficiently kind to bring them, though it would take him beyond his workday hours. I believe he asked Mr. Drothrosias to meet him here, perhaps, to make a start on some collegial activity for the morning. I did not inquire beyond the pleasantries of our introduction.”

“Morning.”

“That it is.”

“Your driver’s workday extends to the hour just before dawn?”

Damn.

“It does when circumstances demand it. As you can see, I am not entirely suited for my standard working conditions and, in any case, have never been wed to banker’s hours for my work. As such, it is not unexpected that my driver might have to adopt a more flexible schedule.”

“Hmmmmmm….”

“Sherlock…”

“There seems to be a nexus forming here and I would know why.”

“Well, given I am the center of the universe, it only stands to reason.”

“Your bulk does threaten to warp space-time sufficiently to produce a black hole, however… I am watching.”

“Is it enjoyable?”

“Not in the slightest, but one must occasionally suffer for science.”

Recognizing that as Sherlock’s dropping of the subject, for now, Mycroft made mental note to warn Charles about a tick that may be priming to leap upon him and burrow into his flesh. Given the man’s special circumstances, a pair of sunglasses might be the very least he should do to keep secret certain matters from especially prying eyes.

“Of course. Now, have you fully examined my infirmity?”

“No. And… John should examine this. It may be growing infected.”

Mycroft looked down and took note of the very slight bit of reddening around the incision which he already knew was a byproduct of the original poultice placed upon it, rather than an actual infecting agent, but that was yet another thing about which Sherlock did not need to know.

“Perhaps. However, from the bruising, you realize there was some degree of force to the injury and this may simply reflect that aspect of the situation.”

“Hmmmm… why did you not go to hospital?”

“Why would you believe I did not?”

“First, you cannot deceive me about the severity of this. It is clear that some form of surgery was involved and your legions of private physicians, hoping to bolster their already over-fattened bank accounts, would have surely insisted upon a hospital stay of several days for recovery and to
monitor for infections such as the one you are now hosting. Second… the stitching pattern is unusual, as if the person wielding the needle and thread had medical training but did not feel the need to conform to the accepted standards and patterns of their profession."

Double damn.

“I sincerely doubt a trained, competent surgeon feels particularly bound by any set of standards and patterns. They seem a most independent and somewhat arrogant lot, at least, such has been true of those whom I have had the opportunity to meet.”

“You are hiding something.”

“Many things, in point of fact. Part and parcel of my life, I am afraid.”

“And still you…”

What Mycroft was still to be doing was lost in the crash that tore the door to Greg’s flat off its hinges to allow in the large wolf who also made short work on the door to Greg’s bedroom in a perfectly timed leap with John’s ‘Mycrof, Sherlock – downstairs!’ which had both brothers staring wide-eyed at each other before Sherlock ran towards the bedroom, with Mycroft ignoring the pain to quickly jerk up his trousers and dash after him as fast as his leg would permit.

What the brothers saw when they raced through the space formerly known as a door was the enormous blond wolf atop Greg’s bed, guarding the injured man from… nothing.

“John, whatever…”

As the words left Mycroft’s mouth, he saw the window bulge inward in a way that was physically impossible for a construct of wood and glass. It was just as impossible for a large section of bedroom wall surrounding the window, but it seemed that section of the architecture was upset to be left out of the fun and was eagerly joining in with a heaving motion that would explode brick and plaster to every corner of the small room if the dam finally burst.

“Gregory…”

“Out, Mycroft. Let us deal with this.”

Mycroft waved off the dismissal and darted back to grab the firearm he’d clandestinely had Charles reload, as well as the second one he’d had Charles bring because sometimes the ‘less is more’ philosophy was bollocks. Especially when dealing with magic.

“Brother, return downstairs until this is over.”

Sherlock’s response was to snatch one of the firearms from Mycroft, then change his mind and exchange it for the larger firearm in Mycroft’s other hand.

“Sherlock Holmes! Do you even know how to use that?”

“Point at the problem and pull the trigger. Correct?”

“I… one moment.”

Mycroft disengaged the safety and then nodded.

“Yes, correct.”
“Very well. I trust this will be explained when we are finished.”

“If we still live… yes, it will.”

“Very well. Lestrade, if we survive whatever is happening, I will blame you for all of it.”

Greg shrugged as much as his injured shoulder would allow and slowly slid under Sebastian and out of bed to stand weakly on his feet. Whatever this was, it surely was his fault, and he was honor-bound to protect everyone in this room from the impending doom.

Though… it felt fucking good to have this particular group of everyone in the room ready to fight because he had an inkling of what was coming, and it wasn’t going to be pleasant…
Whatever Mycroft had been expecting, it certainly wasn’t the heaving bedroom wall bursting and… swallowing the room. It was as if a balloon had ruptured and the ripped edges closed around whatever was in their path to extend the balloon around them and reform to create a new balloon universe.

They were no longer in a bedroom. They were now in a night-shrouded land where detail was difficult to discern, and the air held a scent that was utterly foreign to his experience. Even the air, though not the air precisely, but the… reality… around him was profoundly unfamiliar.

“Gregory?”

Before Greg could answer a hulking mass of darkness leapt forward and it was only the heightened reflexes of a werewolf that had Sebastian in the air microseconds after the figure began to move that kept it from colliding with the sorcerer. The speed of the attack shocked Mycroft to his core, but the werewolf seemed prepared for precisely this form of villainy. Already Sebastian’s muzzle was bloodied and the battle between him and what appeared to be a fanged creature twice the werewolf’s size was a frenzy of claws, teeth, producing earsplitting, bestial sounds of violence and pain that raised the hair on the backs of the necks of the rest of the party.

Not that they had long to endure the chilling effects of the spectacle, since a dark blue ball of energy shot forward from the gloom, straight at Greg, who quickly raised his hands and created his defense, another volume of energy, this one shaped like a deep cone so the oncoming ball’s trajectory was handily reversed and it shot back into the darkness where, Mycroft was satisfied to hear, it found a target to savage among the ranks of their unseen enemy. As if his mind had been read, Mycroft turned towards the sound of John muttering a long series of words before he knelt and laid both hands, palm down on the ground where a very brief golden glow arose and immediately split into countless pieces, all moving away from the doctor to, as Mycroft quickly noted, find something within the blackness and spread underneath it, indicating the position of their adversary. Adversaries. Which numbered… lots.

Without hesitating, Mycroft took aim and fired at what he hoped was a useful height above several of the glowing patches of ground and was rewarded with a loud cry with each successful hit, though he had no idea if his bullets were striking in any meaningful locations to disable the target. However, the volley of fist-sized spheres of brilliant light that flew from Greg’s hands landed just as surely as his bullets and the resulting cries were equally sharp, so his small contribution may have been a touch larger than he anticipated. And Sherlock seemed fully willing to add to the carnage, firing at targets, who were now in motion, realizing that they were not facing the lone sorcerer they’d expected and whatever strategy they’d assumed would be successful required a touch of reconsideration.

As their opponents scattered, though, Mycroft noted John’s targeting mechanism begin to fade and chose to conserve his ammunition, of which he’d pocketed a few extra clips before joining the fray, for a more tactical strike. After all, it was his only means of assisting in this and that did not sit well with him in the slightest. He would, if they survived, begin a study of whatever malefactors might lurk in the shadows and what methods were most successful in warding against them. Failing that, what could be done to make any foolish attackers’ continued existence a very short thing, indeed.

With one problem reduced to the point where it had no choice but to run away to lick its many wounds, Sebastian turned attention to the other play toys that were tantalizing his senses and raced
into the dark to grow his victim list. The fading gleam of John’s spell indicated this was, apparently, not to the potential victims’ liking as a section of the attacking force clearly turned and ran to escape the fast-approaching murder beast and, though Mycroft had no idea how lessened that made their counterparts, it was a victory to savor.

“Fuck me. Who let these idiots out of their pit?”

Mycroft whirled, with gun raised, at the sound of the voice and prepared to fire before he caught sight of the lean, wild-haired man’s eyes. Which, unlike the voice that was being produced with equipment other than its norm, were easily recognizable.

“Balthazar?”

“You’re dumb.”

“I… that is untrue, for my identification was correct.”

“Pfft. There, shoot.”

Mycroft found himself pointing his gun at the space indicated by Balthazar’s pointing finger and nodded at the sound of a shout and subsequent thud as something fell heavily to the ground.

“I take it you can see in this bleak land.”

“Yeah. Let’s see what I can actually do about the bleakness part, though…”

Watching as the… cat… slowly built a cerulean mass of power between his outstretched hands, Mycroft kept an eye on Greg, who was currently standing near Sherlock and John, lobbing needle-thin, blood-red strands of energy which could be seen coiling around hefty shadows, tightening as they wound around their target. Suddenly, the shadows lost a measure of their gloom as a soft light spread out in all directions, starting a pleasing blue but gradually shifting to a heated, deep orange that gave as much illumination as a few candles in a dark room, but that was far more than they’d enjoyed before.

Not that the extra light was entirely gladdening, however, given Mycroft could now clearly see who… or what… they were facing, and it was not a sight for the faint-hearted.

“That’s about the expression I’d expect for someone who’s never seen an ogre before. Ooh, they’ve got garmr, too. Some think there’s only one of them, but there’s loads, actually. They’re just hellhounds, really, with pretensions to glory, because some drunk Vikings decided the Ragnarök story needed a dog to make it more heartwarming.”

There was nothing heartwarming, in Mycroft’s opinion, about the slavering beasts, but to each his own. At least they seemed content to play with Sebastian, who was having another bloody romp with one which was, happily, collecting a great deal of collateral damage among the ogres that were too slow of foot to get out of the way of the tumbling, slashing jumble of canine fury.

What the slightly elevated light level also demonstrated was that the force they were facing was large, though decreasing at a laudable rate due to the ongoing werewolf melee, Greg’s non-stop hurling of magical projectiles and John doing something Mycroft could not fathom that made Sherlock’s slow, studied firing do exceedingly more damage in terms of explosive force than any bullet on its own could muster. However, what that force was not doing was… charging. The sheer numbers were sufficient that a full-on assault would likely overwhelm their small contingent, however, there was clearly a lack of intent, on that score.
“Balthazar… am I wrong in thinking there is some… hesitation… in this attack?”

“No, you’re not wrong. Greg’s not one to approach without a great deal of care or an army at your back. Also, and now you have me wondering… ogres don’t usually mass in this number unless someone made it worth their time. They’re not the most collegial sort and it would take some decided palm-greasing to bring this many together in one place and not have them turning on each other to see who they could club to death first.”

“Have they no offensive magic?”

“I’d say they’re very offensive, don’t you think?”

“Now is not the time for jokes.”

The exasperated look on the man’s narrow features was precisely what Mycroft remembered from his feline nemesis and a thousand questions danced on his tongue before he turned off their music and bid them to take a quiet seat. This tale is one that would have to wait for telling, though the telling would happen, of that there was no question.

“Ok… not really. They don’t have much in the way of magic.”

“Then who is doing that?”

Mycroft pointed at the fast-moving missiles of energy that were raining down on the cluster of Greg, Sherlock and John, kept at bay only by some mechanism the sorcerer must have erected to serve as an invisible shield against magical onslaughts, though they were little use against the large, heavy objects thrown by the brawny fiends, which had to be dodged or, in Greg’s case, pulled out of the way by a quick-acting John.

“Good question. They’re not an ogre, that’s for certain.”

“Then this army has a general… can you create a distraction?”

“Probably. How large?”

“I would prefer something that created a pause in the battle, even a startled one.”

“Easy enough then.”

With a fling of his arm, Balthazar sent flying a flaming fireball that impacted the current werewolf-hellhound orgy of blood and produced such an astounding cacophony of feral anger that there was a pause in the proceedings because nobody wanted to be in the way if said anger decided it needed an outlet and began bounding towards the closest candidate.

“Excellent… thank you, cat.”

Summoning the voice he used for the most fearsome of foes, or squabbling MP’s, Mycroft addressed the silent crowd.

“I would speak with whomever is in charge of his… debacle.”

“Oh my god… you want to speak to the manager? Did your name change to Deirdre and nobody told me?”

“Hush, cat.”
And, now, in a louder voice…

“Come, come, now… this is clearly a miscalculated assault and there is surely a strategic exit that can be negotiated to both our benefits.”

Greg was still braced for the next round of combat, but noticed it was somewhat tardy in arriving. What was arriving, though, was more what he was expecting when this whole business began, and both John and Balthazar muttered something decidedly filthy under their breath, which piqued Mycroft’s curiosity to no small degree.

“Cat?”

“Dark elf. Powerful and lacking anything approaching a moral compass.”

“Self-serving?”

“Very.”

“Avaricious and duplicitous?”

“Extremely.”

“Perfect…”

Mycroft cast an appraising glance over the tall figure that was walking through the throng of confused ogres, wearing a wicked smile upon its lips, and felt himself both awed and disappointed that the dark elf met the cliché of his youthful imagination. Beautiful, in a cruel and hard way, with long, straight hair, flawless bone-china skin and with a gleam in his eye that spoke of immense power temporarily sheathed because it was amusing its master to do so to satisfy his curiosity about this insignificant human who believed himself worthy of speaking to one of his status.

With a highly-affected clearing of his throat, the new arrival smirked at Mycroft who gazed back with his blandest, most unimpressed expression.

“You called?”

Of course, the cad had a smooth, almost musical voice. Fortunately, the music was reminiscent of a dirge, so Mycroft’s unimpressed expression remained firmly fixed.

“I did, for I suspect that you are as bored with this as am I.”

“Bored? With a victory? Perish the thought.”

“Victory… a puzzling choice of words given your ranks have been depleted much as a platter of sausages placed before one of your rather adorable hounds.”

“A few minor losses, regrettable, but inevitable. And certainly not debilitating.”

Greg had been slowly meandering towards Mycroft, first putting John on alert for a surprise attack, then did his level best to stay sufficiently away from the meeting of the minds not to disrupt whatever Mycroft might be planning, but close enough to respond when, not if, the dark elf did something scurrilous.

“Of course, of course. Though any loss is somewhat troubling when one is relying upon purchased help. The degree of loyalty one’s accounts might buy, however, is finite and when compatriots are beginning to litter the battlefield rather like stalks of wheat having met the
harvester’s scythe, that degree begins to shrink precipitously.”

It was fleeting, but the elf’s smug smile faltered slightly, and Mycroft’s brain hummed in satisfaction.

“Whyever would you believe they are hired?”

“For the same reason I believe you to be acting as a mercenary and not a free agent.”

Greg made very sure not to smirk because it was clear Mycroft had scored an important point, since the supercilious smirk had fully fallen off the elf’s handsome face.

“I am always a free agent.”

“As free as the purse strings binding you shall permit.”

“How dare you…”

“I have neither the time nor the patience for your protestations and, in truth, I have no ethical qualms about such a lucrative profession but let us not waste time by denying the facts, which are plain and pointed. You suspected or, more likely, were told that Gregory was in a weakened state and were paid to… well, visit upon him a rather spectacular and final end. What you found, instead, was a markedly different set of circumstances. If this was, at its origin, your initiative, you would have pressed on with far more vigor than has been demonstrated. While the original moments of the conflict were somewhat robust… well, these latter moments have had a… shall we say, going-through-the-motions atmosphere? You quite rightly reasoned that your life was not worth your fee but were unsure how to extricate yourself from the situation in a manner that saved face. For my part, I am fully prepared to cooperate to see that endgame realized for I assume you have far better things to do with the remainder of your day, as do I.”

Greg knew that in a million years he couldn’t manage the degree of the offhand nonchalance Mycroft made appear effortless, but it was a highly interesting tool to bring to this fight. And it seemed to be working.

“That is true… however, I do have a reputation to uphold.”

Whether in human or cat form Balthazar’s mocking laughter was as grating as nails on a chalkboard.

“Be silent, cat. I have full faith that this gentleman’s reputation is a well-deserved one…”

Because he is fully a blackguard and surely could not hide his nature if he lived in a rift at the bottom of the ocean.

“… and I will naturally take that into account. What, sir, might you propose?”

And do make an entirely false show of deep thinking while I stand here and contemplate the status of my fingernails.

“A contract refunded cannot, technically, be considered broken.”

Ahh… how pleasing it was when the predictable discussion of money arrived sooner than later.

“Not at all! An objective cannot be achieved, at present, and honor is maintained by a return of the guarantee for job completion.”
“However, the objective could have been achieved, so it truly isn’t fair that I am responsible for the repayment.”

John was doing an exemplary job keeping Sherlock quiet, but even he rolled his eyes at the crap-film turn this was all taking. Sucked into the otherworld, one of them, at least, and all he had to show for it was a cheap hoodlum demanding cash to toddle off and stop being a bother. This was a tragic let down…

“A point of view that I, myself, would advocate. For curiosity’s sake, what would be the repayment cost of your employment?”

John’s mind quickly changed, and he re-anointed the elf an expensive hoodlum and the let-down was far less tragic than he’d imagined. That… that was a colossal amount of money…

“Hmmmm… I must admit, I have no idea of the conversion rate between what you stated and any form of specie with which I am familiar.”

Now it was Greg’s turn to clear his throat and provide a rough equivalent in pounds to the typical elf currency which was a gemstone found only in certain dimensions, none of which was Mycroft’s native one.

“Ah, a princely sum, but I would expect no less for a warrior of your mettle. Gregory, is it possible to lay hand on this… currency?”

“Uhhhhh…no. Not easily, that is. But, I’ve never known an elf to turn away an equivalent in diamonds.”

From the covetous smile that grew on his counterpart’s face, Mycroft was absolutely prepared to believe this was true.

“Ah, diamonds… yes, one of the pitifully-few things about your world I consider worthwhile. I would very much like to add a few… or a lot… to my collection.”

Something that was just now hitting Greg with some force as he did have a few diamonds stowed away to bribe the occasional dark elf he had to deal with, but nowhere near the quantity it would take to meet this fucker’s price. He could try Marcus, who was rich, but neither he nor Leo would be awake now… why was Mycroft looking as if he was the cat who found the cream?

“Then let me graciously offer to you a selection I feel would more than meet your standards. If you would allow us to leave, so I might retrieve them…”

Sherlock’s dismissive snort was cut short because the cold, humorless laughter that married with it made his skin crawl, a punishingly difficult thing to accomplish since he’d actually conducted a bevy of experiments to achieve that very thing.

“No… no, I don’t think so. After all, what if, unintentionally, of course, the matter slipped your mind?”

Mycroft hadn’t expected his proposal to be accepted, but it was part and parcel of this charade that he make a show of planning something underhanded. Which neither he nor the elf would in the least take seriously. This bit of theatre had an established set of rules and each of them had a role to play in it that was scripted at the dawn of time.

“Yes, that would be a shame and something to dog my heels for years to come. That being said, we do not have a supply of gemstones on our persons, so an agent or agents will have to be
dispatched to retrieve them. I propose… those two. Twice as many of our number remain here to ensure their hasty return.”

Greg nodded slightly in approval of Mycroft’s choice of John and Sherlock, the two most vulnerable to harm should another bout of conflict erupt, besides Mycroft himself.

“I suppose someone must carry back my spoils. Very well, those two and no others.”

“Most gracious, without doubt. Now, kindly do not be alarmed…”

Since reaching into a pocket was an accepted scene in this play, but one that could prove very troubling to the antagonist or, as in this case, another trite bit of cliché written by a talentless hack.

“Gentlemen, a moment of your time?”

Mycroft kept the noncommittal smile on his lips and was profoundly grateful that his brother was content to simply follow John’s lead and close the distance between them at a perfectly casual pace and in complete silence.

“If you would be so kind as to pay your respects to this individual and make our request, the matter will be managed in short order. Do not let me detain you.”

Reading the easy dismissal as a signal to keep their profile low, John took the card from Mycroft’s hand and nodded Sherlock to step away from his brother, looking around a moment for the necessary tear in reality to appear to let them back into their dimension. Which happened quickly and with no preamble. Their elf friend was, evidently, very anxious for his bounty…

Watching his brother and John step through the disquieting opening in the blackness though which he could still see Greg’s bedroom, now filled with London’s weak morning sunshine, Mycroft breathed a small mental sigh of relief and turned back to face his nemesis.

“There. It shall be a short while before they return, so how shall we occupy our time?”

“I want to watch the flea’s breakfast fight another hellhound.”

The elf’s bright smile simply made the swat Greg gave to the head of his ‘cat’ all the harder.

“How about, instead, we talk about who set all of this in motion? No contract, no confidentiality, am I right?”

Mycroft had very little faith in Greg’s hope they would pry the name of the one behind this fiasco from the elf’s lips, but there was no harm in trying. The price paid for this assassination attempt said the instigator was a person of means and that most likely meant, also, a person of power. Or an intermediary to someone who met those criteria. Whereas they might forgive a broken contract, if it was repaid, they certainly would not forgive their identity being divulged to the target of that contract. However, a discussion might reveal clues that few would notice but one who had a wealth of experience using discussions to gather clues to this sort of thing and a proverbial laundry list of others. Whereas he might not make meaning of them, Gregory might, once they had time and privacy to share their thoughts.

In the meantime, he would continue with a role he had played countless times before and which often, as was the case here, featured tracts of empty time while one side or the other enacted some bit of bargained business to the satisfaction of their opponents. Dreary, tedious, but familiar and there was benefit in that. There was little else about this situation that could be described thusly, so any port in a storm…
Chapter 30

After reassuring a highly-nervous Anderson that, yes, the massive surge in magic he’d felt had created a bit of a situation, but everyone was still alive and working to make it less of a situation, John strode out of the shop with far more confidence than he felt and stopped on the pavement to ask Sherlock about the card in his hand.

“Do you know who this is?”

Instead of answering, Sherlocked glared at John with an intensity that was doing its level best to reduce John’s false confidence to jelly.

“Fine, you’re angry that nobody told you about… things like that… and I’m fully prepared to have a conversation about it once the aforementioned things like that are settled and everyone is safe. Now, do you know who this is?”

Pursing his lips as if he hoped that would stop the legion of questions desperate to dart out of his mouth, Sherlock snatched away the card in John’s outstretched fingers and gave it a glance.

“No. Not personally, in any case. The address indicates, however, the individual would be an appropriate one to visit for the task at hand. Hatton Garden is certainly a prime example of hedonism in decline, but it is still a hive of jewelers and diamond merchants.”

“Well, then, let’s get a cab. That will likely be faster.”

“Yes, but… John…”

Sherlock’s eyes cut slightly upwards and John sighed a moment.

“I have no idea what’s going on, but your brother has London’s most powerful sorcerer, a werewolf and a miserable bastard who is surprisingly good at misery-causing magic protecting him, so I don’t suspect anything bad will happen while we’re doing this. Besides, dark elves respect power, even if it’s not to their advantage, and Mycroft has proven his is remarkable, even for a standard human. Let’s go…”

Aching to attack the term ‘standard human,’ Sherlock clamped down on the torrent of questions, aspersions and other bits of verbal mayhem that he so dearly wanted hurl at the doctor who was raising his arm to hail a cab. This was… unbelievable. In the literal since, as it could not be believed. But he could, because he had seen it. Seen it, experienced it and could not deny the evidence of all his senses, especially with corroboration from other sources.

The worst part of this, the bitter, foulest worst part conceivable, was that Mycroft knew about this before he did. That was an insult for which he would make his brother’s life a living hell from now until the end of time. Which, hopefully, would not arrive while they were out securing a king’s ransom in diamonds. If it did, he would blame Mycroft for that, as well…

“Damn.”

John stood outside the high-end shop and threw up his hands. He’d already felt like a beggar entering the shop, where security was extreme, but discrete, and who immediately focused on him and Sherlock when they strode in. To be fair, he would have gone on alert, too, but they didn’t
have to be so friendly and polite about it. That was just rubbing his nose in it.

“Would you have preferred to make our request to the overly-coiffed dullwit behind the counter?”

“No, but… I suppose Mycroft couldn’t have known that the owner was away on a buying trip. Maybe your brother does business with that bad-toupeed chap as a matter of course, but…”

“Fatcroft does not do business with menials. And, if any member of the staff was acceptable for this matter, he would have made that clear.”

“That’s what I thought, too, so I didn’t press matters. Now, though… I don’t know what to do.”

He hated it as much as he hated stupidity, but Sherlock did have an idea how to move forward and, raising his hand to hail another cab, he simply hoped that his stomach could take what he was likely to witness at this time of the morning…

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“Sherlock… where are we?”

“Hell.”

“Funny, now if you… oh. Oh….

The very nice building housing very nice flats didn’t have the best security system, apparently, as Sherlock had circumvented it quickly and led John up to the top floor where he visibly pulled a face before knocking on the door at the end of the corridor. Sherlock’s expression now had some tiny basis for existing, as John could see by the person glaring at them as if that, alone, would summon an armed response to have them escorted out and to the nearest dungeon to be forgotten for a day or two.

“Oh my god… what are you two doing here?”

John’s physical impression of Anthea was that of a supremely composed and impeccably groomed woman, but that was being a teeny bit shaken by the sight of her in pyjamas, wearing slippers, with her hair pulled back and a heavy mug of steaming tea in her hand.

“You’re wearing jim jams with cats on them.”

John hated his brain. And his mouth. They had betrayed him, and she would make him pay.

“They were a gift.”

The punch she gave his arm was a gift, too, since she could have reduced him to atoms with the force of her displeasure if she’d intensified it by even a tiny bit.

“I didn’t say they weren’t lovely!”

“You implied it. You’re bad and you should feel bad. Now, why are you here and with that one in tow?”

The fact Sherlock was there was what puzzled Anthea the most, since he avoided her like the plague and there had to be a truly pressing concern for him to present himself at her door at fuck o’clock in the morning. Not that it was actually that early, but she’d decided to allow herself an
extra hour or so in her cozy bed to make up for the eighty she didn’t get last night. Well, if this morning was a stern sermon on the evils of sloth, nothing was.

“We… can we come in?”

Sensing the ‘pressing concern’ might be more pressing than she anticipated, Anthea pointed… pointedly… at each of them before moving aside and letting them into her flat.

“Talk.”

“I demand tea.”

John now couldn’t say he was the only recipient of Anthea’s violent streak and pouted while he rubbed his arm.

“I am not in the mood for your nonsense, Sherlock Holmes. I was awake more hours last night than I slept since your brother didn’t see fit to notify me formally he was going off-grid, which… which is what I’m hoping happened and that it’s not something else and that’s the reason I had to manage the Americans and that you’re darkening my door today. Talk.”

“Ummm… there’s a situation and we were sent to do something, but we can’t and now we don’t know what to do. Help?”

Recognizing that John Watson babbling and looking sheepish wasn’t likely a common occurrence, Anthea took a deep breath and motioned them towards her kitchen then towards the table while she got the kettle going.

“I’ll say this again and it had better be better than babble. Talk.”

Seeing Sherlock cut eyes at him, John remembered that Sherlock was not clued in to certain things, one being he was a bit late to the party on learning about magic.

“Mycroft, Greg, Sebastian and Balthazar are trapped in an otherworld dimension with a dark elf and his ogre army and we were sent to get diamonds to pay off the elf, but the person Mycroft sent us to is out of the country and we have no idea where to turn next.”

Sherlock had secretly been savoring the moment Anthea would learn what he knew, and not only so he wouldn’t be the last one in the know anymore, but his savoring quickly dried up in his mouth as if he’d tossed in a spoonful of chalk. John might have been talking about a tea party! Mycroft had a lot… a mountainous lot… to account for…

“Alright. Details on the diamonds?”

“Ummm… none besides the cash equivalent. Little chips and things won’t work, though, and elves do know quality when they see it. I’d say nice stones, on the large side.”

“Cost?”

Anthea only choked slightly on the figure John named.

“Ok… Mr. Holmes sent you to Mayweather, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, that was the name on the card.”

“When we need a lot of diamonds quickly, that’s the man we use. But, we can’t just walk into a shop and ask to buy that many diamonds having 50 quid between us.”
“I suspect Mycroft intends to fund the transaction.”

Anthea cocked an eyebrow at Sherlock, then remembered the situation and that her boss’s new love interest was in danger. And, it wasn’t as if the silly man couldn’t afford that sort of thing. He had more money hidden away than she even knew about and what she knew about was eye-watering.

“Ok… it’s happened before, and we have plans in place to make that sort of thing happened, though he normally gets his funds back from subsequently-seized assets and the like. I suspect he doesn’t care a whit about that now, so moving on. I have a plan. It is a powerful and cunning plan. Neither of you are…”

Anthea gave Sherlock and John a quick look up and down and hoped dearly that she wasn’t making a grievous error.

“… are particularly well-suited but one of you is now Mycroft Holmes and you will remember that you are a quiet, reserved man who lets his wife do all the talking.”

John slid down in his chair slightly because he didn’t want to be the one summoned to action when it was painfully obvious who should be the dutiful spouse of the jim-jam-fancying Mrs. Holmes.

“I see your treachery, John Watson, and rest assured it will not be forgotten. And, for the record, I refuse to be Mycroft. He is odious, fat and humorless.”

Anthea waved off Sherlock’s protestations with the same wrist flick she used when his brother was being contentious, but mostly for appearances sake because he thought it would be amusing. He, like Sherlock, were eternally wrong on that score.

“That was just a repetition of your usual talking points, so poor show, Baby Holmes. You two can decide the matter while I dress. I just hope that lazy driver is awake and ready to work. We’ll need a nice car and a driver to make this believable. Ok, why are you two looking at each other like you’re trying to decide which of you is going to tell me something I don’t want to hear?”

“Because we’re going to tell you something you don’t want to hear.”

“You’re a sad man, Doctor Watson. Hold on…”

Grabbing her mobile off the counter, Anthea tapped an icon and ignored John waving her off the task.

“My flat. Now. Full uniform and shoes shined. What do you mean uhhhhh? I had a long night, too, so you can’t claim that excuse. This is important. No, actually important, not ‘the government thinks it’s important’ important. Mr. Holmes is in trouble and we need to help him. Good. Better. Yes, full uniform, because we’re going diamond shopping and… who just started cheering? Why are you cheering? What? No. Now is not the time for Bring a Mate to Work day. I don’t care. Pardon? Say that once more? You’re going to pay for that, you know. Oh… you are now on my list and not the good one.”

Anthea frowned and, after looking at Sherlock and John, she suddenly suspected there was something going about which she didn’t know. One of the two people in front of her, however, might offer some insight into the situation, the other being too inclined to launch into a recitation of this or that manifesto to be of much use.

“You. What don’t I know about that foolish driver?”
Knowing there really wasn’t enough time now for an explanation, John tried deflection.

“I have little doubt you’ll find out and… what’s nicer than a fun surprise in your day?”

“A lot. Most everything, in fact.”

The deflection had failed!

“Maybe this will be different. If not… you can punch Sherlock again.”

“What!”

“Fine. If my day is made even more ridiculous by this surprise, then I will punch the infant Mr. Holmes and make him cry.”

“Deal. Tea, please?”

Anthea snorted and left John to do as he pleased because she had a massive construction project ahead of her. This incarnation of Mrs. Holmes had to be precisely the type to stroll into an exclusive jewelry shops and drop obscene amounts of cash on garish, but enormous, pieces of diamond bling. That Mrs. Holmes was completely lacking taste, but paid someone to choose her outfits, do her hair and makeup so it all, ultimately, looked artificial, but wildly expensive and posh. Given it would take Charles a little time to get here, especially in full regalia when it sounded like he’d been awake all night with this ‘mate’ of his and probably hadn’t shaved or showered. That would give her just enough time to build her look, see what she could do for the other two out there and phone Mr. Holmes's banker, at least the one connected to the very special card that permitted unlimited access by the delightful Mrs. Holmes for anything she might need, anywhere in the world, at any time of day or night.

If her employer wasn’t up to his balls in trouble, and with his long legs, it took a *lot* of trouble to reach that high, she’d adore a day of shopping for things she’d never in her wildest dreams be able to afford, not that she’d wanted this particular tat because it all would be so ghastly it would make even Molly vomit and she was more than happy to show a little sparkle, at times. The tiara set she’d bought for her cousin and her cats last Christmas had been a spectacular success and featured heavily in a terabyte of photos and videos the family dearly treasured…

“Oh. Maybe I should be fake-married to you, instead of Sherlock.”

Anthea stared at the new face attached to the new body standing next to Charles and had to wonder what had been going on that this tall, smirking, elegantly-dressed man had been anywhere near Charles’s paint-splattered flat.

“I know a certain… toothsome… someone who would be very put out by even the semblance of a fake-marriage between us, Mistress Anthea.”

Anthea glared at Charles who held up his hands in the time-honored ‘not me!’ gesture recognized by irritated accusers everywhere.

“I take it you know Marcus.”

“I am well-acquainted with His Highness, yes.”

Goraseth’s smile was precisely the sort to nettle each of Anthea’s last nerves and the fact he
seemed to know that made it all the worse.

“Enough blather among the minions. This is time sensitive and we have already wasted far too much already.”

The in-sync turn of Charles’s and Goraseth’s heads towards Sherlock made him angry for no specified reason beyond it was too reminiscent of some preposterous video he’d seen of a hill of meerkats hearing the sound of a predator.

“Sherlock… it’s alright. Time moves a little slower in that dimension than this one. By our clock, it should have been too early to visit any diamond broker, but they were open and ready for business. We have a little more time than you might imagine, but I agree… we need to deploy.”

Not even John’s use of military terminology cut through Sherlock’s attention as he watched the two heads he’d been studying now turn back towards each other and he clarified his original observation. Not mammalian… reptilian. Mycroft’s driver was as fatuous as Mycroft, but *this* was proving interesting. And… somewhat a distraction from the reason he was here to witness it in the first place. Witnessing this, too, was sparking something in Anthea’s mind and she already knew that whatever was her big ‘surprise’ was going to add wildly to the headache she’d likely be sporting later today.

“General Watson’s lingo aside, he’s right. So, take off those sunglasses, Speed Racer, and prepare to be the silent, competent driver you never are but hope to be.”

“I believe my role is better portrayed with them on, thank you.”

“You believe wrong. We have to sell this perfectly or questions are going to start, and the diamond market is very sensitive to questions, none of which do good things for the accounts of certain individuals Mr. Holmes monitors who would not be happy at London for shining a light into the diamond business which really does not need any form of light falling remotely in its general direction. Not even a twinkle.”

“I am perfectly capable of selling whatever I am to vend with utter perfection. I shall be the… hip… driver for the vulgar Holmes couple that they believe make them fashionable and unique, rather than tawdry and difficult to view without my sunglasses blocking some of their wretchedness. Mr. Holmes the Younger’s pink tie, for example, is particularly difficult to witness at this hour of the morning.”

“It was all I had on short notice. And… ok, you have a point about the sunglasses. Wear them, but try to wear them with attitude. No stiff upper-lipping.”

“I guarantee that will not occur. Shall we?”

Charles smiled graciously as he motioned towards the door, but was a millisecond too slow to stop Anthea snatching the shades from his face.

“Ah ha! *This* is what you were hiding from me. And you thought you’d get away with it. Pitiful. You will provide an explanation in the car or I am transferring your assignment to the Home Secretary and have fun with that.”

Anthea’s words were delivered with her typical surgical sharpness, but Charles couldn’t miss the concerned look in her own eyes and he gave her a small nod to indicate both that he *would* tell his story and that whatever it was, his existence wasn’t being threatened by it. At least not again. Not that she knew about the first time, of course, so that would be an additional bit of excitement to
make their ride a jolly one…

Sherlock nearly had to be physically gagged when they arrived at their destination to stop him asking questions about dragons and Charles’s resurrection, but it had taken the spotlight off of John as the fount of information, so the good doctor was content to let it continue during the drive. Now, though, they had to focus on the actual purpose of their morning, which was another shop that looked ready to repel invaders and riff raff with the full force of British engineering and devotion to the orderly conduct of business.

“Ok, Sherlock… enough for now. Remember to simply look bored and let Anthea do the talking and acting and buying and… everything. You’re just the bank account funding her fun.”

“While, no doubt, she treacherously cuckolds me at every opportunity with her vampire lover.”

“Whatever backstory works for you. Ready, everyone?”

Charles was out of the car, performing his familiar duties effortlessly and only feeling slightly miffed that Goraseth had been given the job of bodyguard, along with John, for this pivotal scene in the action-comedy heist film where the thieves case the target, wearing ludicrous costumes with one being tossed last second into the role because another of the gang caught a cold or a bullet and they were certain to do or say something to put the entire scheme in jeopardy. This person, most likely, would be wearing a pink tie.

“Anthea, do you think they’ll have what we need here?”

John’s question was a valid one, but not what Anthea wanted to think about at the moment. She really didn’t want to be too visible for long in an area that was frequented by too many of the movers and shakers in government and associated areas, given the eyebrows it might raise and questions it might pose. She had no desire to have a set of fires to stamp out concerning why she was flouncing about purchasing the Crown Jewels on Mycroft Holmes’s bank card. Some things were better avoided whenever possible.

“Probably. They specialize in pieces for people in the entertainment industry. Enormous, attention-getting and expensive enough to make their equally-ghastly friends green with envy. Let’s go.”

Not bothering to look to see if her entourage was following in her wake, Anthea marched towards the door with the very precise walk that said the door had best be opened for her by the time she arrived or hellfire was going to rain down on whoever had failed so, so badly. It was actually a small scuffle between Charles and the attendant employed to do that very thing as to who would have the honor and it was perfectly in character for Anthea to push past them as rudely as possible.

Keeping her determined face set and ready to destroy any shop worker foolish enough to keep her waiting, Anthea sighed inwardly at the sound behind her, which was the excited tittering from one dragon and one semi-dragon, making her realize that taking them into what was literally a treasure room may not have been the wisest idea.

“Good morning, madam. How might I help you today?”

Slightly oily, but probably highly-skilled with parting the stupidly rich from their money. He’d appreciate someone who was more than willing to do most of that work for him.

“Finally. I’ve been standing here forever.”
“I do apologize, madam. Might I offer you something to offset my rudeness.”

“Champagne.”

“Of course, madam. One moment.”

Drinking champagne in the morning was something most people thought only the Ab Fab women did, but she’d smelled enough of it, or other potent potables, on the breath of those with more money than sense to know the sad reality.

The departure of her personal pamperer gave Anthea time to shoot a look back at the over-stimulated dragons and hiss softly to remind them that they were supposed to be serious about their job and not behaving like children seeing the first Christmas display of the year. The situation was not helped by the fact that John seemed a bit overwhelmed by the glitz and Sherlock was having a staring contest with a plant. To be fair, it was an exquisite specimen of orchid, but it was still unhelpful. Or… strike that. Sherlock distracted by a plant was probably a good thing, all things considered.

“Your champagne, madam.”

Anthea plucked the Baccarat champagne flute out of the man’s fingers with just the right amount of impatience and took a sip before looking around with an expression that said she was reconsidering things since the shop was a dump, the champagne was dreadful and Baccarat was for people lacking real money.

“It’s my birthday. He…”

A quick wrist flick indicated the ‘he’ in question was the surly plant whisperer.

 “… said I could have anything I want, and I want diamonds.”

Yes, look at the gleam in your eyes, oily man. You know a prime example of ‘regardless of the price’ nouveau-riche trash when you see it.

“Madam has excellent taste in gifts. We have many options I believe will tantalize your eye.”

There was no mistaking the quick cut of the man’s eyes towards Anthea’s intentional and fulsome cleavage and she put the odds at near 110% his first suggestion would be a necklace.

“Perhaps a tasteful necklace to wear for the many events a woman of your station must attend.”

“I’m willing to look, but don’t waste my time with those dainty little things shy little girls like to wear. I want something bold and daring. If you can’t make a statement, why be seen in public?”

That should start this jewelry expedition with the most expensive thing this fellow had in the shop, which was a nod to efficiency that even her Mr. Holmes would appreciate. The elder, not the one trying to communicate telepathically with a flower. But, that was doing a nice job painting him as utterly disinterested in the proceedings beyond paying for her purchases, so it fit his role nicely.

“Might… might this be to madam’s liking?”

Anthea waited a moment before deigning even to look towards what the man was holding, then made certain to turn away just as slowly to finish her champagne in one gulp and hand the glass to John who had been doing his level best, she had to admit, to keep the dragons from licking the display cases.
“Hmmm… maybe.”

It looked like something the Czarina of Russia might wear when she wanted to doll-up for the day. Massive, glittery as a disco ball factory… ostentatious to the point of being revolting. Perfect.

“That *might* work…”

Just in case you have anything larger that you didn’t want to bother with getting the combination for the safe, braving the guard dogs, saying the magic words while standing on one foot and submitting to an identity-verifying blood test before you could take it to the shop front.

“I am confident it would perfectly enhance madam’s natural beauty. Care to try it on?”

Having a man’s hands near her throat was not something Anthea encouraged on a regular basis, for reasons best left to the rumors and nebulous stories about this or that she may or may not have done while in Mr. Holmes’s service, but this time she let the attendant move behind her and place the ludicrous bit of pirate swag around her neck.

“Glorious, simply glorious. Madam’s skin tone is marvelously complimented by the brilliance of the stones.”

“Fake!”

Anthea startled at the sight of two heads suddenly staring at her chest, both wearing beaming smiles.

“Fake and fake and fake and fake!”

And that head was pointing! In a sense that involved fingers, that is, and not its nose.

“That one and that one, too!”

Goraseth gave Charles a quick shoulder squeeze to show his pride at Charles’s burgeoning dragon powers.

“M… madam?”

Anthea didn’t really know this new person, but she did know Charles and the new person was actually a dragon who, mythically, at least, had some expertise with various forms of riches.

“It seems you’re trying to pull a fast one. Are any of these real diamonds!”

“Madam, I assure you that we stock nothing produced with anything but the finest quality stones!”

Sherlock had moved over to see what was going on since fake diamonds were far more interesting than real ones and there was a whiff of crime in the air, which was, in his opinion, the sweetest of perfumes.

“Selling fake stones as real is a crime.”

“Crime? No… no no no, I am certain Sir is mistaken. Every stone in that piece is perfectly genuine.”

“I require a spectrometer or, failing that, a refractometer.”
With the salesperson unraveling quickly under Sherlock’s on-the-case glare, Anthea decided the mission needed salvaging.

“Mycroft, darling, there are a few fakies in here but… I like it. Strange, I know, because I demand high quality for everything, but it’s pretty and we have that party with Will and Lola next week and I want to make that cow Lola swallow her tongue when she sees my pressie. Besides, the big ones are real, right, and that’s the ones people notice most.”

Anthea cut eyes towards Goraseth who nodded without taking his eyes off of the treasure decorating Anthea’s chest.

“Anyway, I need earrings, too, and maybe a ring, so things will sort themselves out, I suspect. In fact, let’s start looking for that. You – let me see some earrings that will match this and I warn you, they had best be high-quality and glamorous.”

“Of course, madam, only the very best for a woman of your discriminating tastes.”

Hustling off to grab the biggest diamond earrings in the shop, the shopkeeper didn’t have time to notice the hushed conversation going on behind him.

“How many fakes, dragon?”

“About a dozen, but they’re among the minor stones and aren’t worth much in the grand scheme. A dark elf will know, though, so I suggest tearing it apart and separating the wheat from the chaff, so the evil fucker isn’t offended by being handed a piece studded with fakes. They’re good fakes, probably put in during a repair or because a stone got lost, but…”

“Ok… John, you work with the Scaly brothers, making certain the value of the real stones matches what we need. Sherlock, you’re doing a surprisingly good job of being scowly and bored, so well done and keep on with that. Charles, are there pliers or something in the car to disassemble this beast?”

“In the boot.”

“Good, we have a plan. It’s the same plan we already had, but better. Oops, he’s coming back, places everyone.”

Anthea was proud that her team didn’t scatter like rats with the light switched on and that what the salesperson bringing her looked just as horrid as what she was wearing now. Big, gleaming centerpiece stones and an assortment of smaller ones that… she had no idea how a person was supposed to wear those and not stretch their earlobes to their ankles, but maybe the shop sold pulleys, trusses and flying buttresses to engineer the ear and skull into a proper supporting structure. Not that it mattered since she would never wear any of this beyond the door of their car.

Though she might have Sherlock take a snap of her with it on to save for posterity…

Surprisingly, finding a sack in which to house the pile of diamonds they’d pried from their settings was the hardest challenge they faced with their caper, since both John and Goraseth agreed the dark elf would consider it an insult, at least out loud though he truly wouldn’t care either way, to be presented a paper sack from the off-license, which was Charles’s suggestion, or one from a rubbish bin, which was Sherlock’s, but with that final matter sorted, it was a race back to Greg’s shop, sack in hand with the fake diamonds divided between the two tittering reptiles who looked as happy as if they’d gotten real diamonds to play with, and the gold settings in Anthea’s handbag to melt down
and sell or form into a desk toy for the man who financed this shopping trip.

“Oh, good, I’ve been so worried…”

Given Anderson always seemed worried, John didn’t know if there was much meaning to take from that.

“Something happened?”

“No, it’s just…”

Anderson looked up and John decided that no, there was no meaning to take from that beyond the prudent concern one might have for friends trapped in an otherworldly space with enemies that frequently appeared as villains in some very upsetting fairy tales.

“I understand. Let’s hope it’s all about to end, though.”

Knowing it would be fairly silly to try and convince Charles, Goraseth and Anthea to stay behind, and also knowing that the dark elf would expect them to come back with reinforcements, John nodded the whole party upstairs and into Greg’s bedroom where he traced a symbol in the air and waited. The wait was a short one, fortunately, and it wasn’t half a minute before a fissure opened in the space between them and Greg’s exterior wall and, taking a deep breath, John strode through, Sherlock following quickly, with the last three not wasting any time darting forward in case anyone tried to close the opening and leave them out of things. Frankly, all of them would have been peeved if they’d missed the sight, not of an ogre army or hellhounds, but of Mycroft Holmes sitting in the dirt, leg stretched out, playing some game involving pebbles and long wavy lines. The fact that the man he was playing (a) wasn’t a man and (b) seemed upset that Mycroft was either winning or not losing nearly as badly as he’d predicted was delicious.

“Dragons? I’m flattered you feel you need those as protection.”

Mycroft looked at the elf, then turned, keeping up the air of lack of interest that he’d been sporting, even after he heard the elf’s ‘We have company, shall we let them in?’ Now, though, he was hoping his eyes weren’t now bugging out and his lower lip wasn’t flopping in the dirt for dragons it was. At least, one full-glory dragon and one hybrid who was slightly more blue-green than his bluer counterpart, with brilliant scales over his still human-shaped body, except for the tail that extended behind him, the sharp, pointed teeth, the talons that tipped each jewel-toned finger and… the wings. Large wings that his driver seemed as shocked as him to see, though the man was doing an exceptional job of not gaping like a fool and ruining the rather fearsome image his was presenting. His clothing, however, as was Goraseth’s was a shredded mass on the ground very near where Sebastian’s had met its own gruesome fate.

“Oh, do you mean my driver and accountant? Hmmm… I suppose one might find it shocking, but it is rather old hat for me. When one wants competent transportation and a keen eye for money, one could do worse than employing dragons.”

“Fair point.”

The elf’s even tone did nothing, in Mycroft’s mind, to diminish his wariness about the new arrivals. Good. A small, or not so small, show of strength at this juncture was typical, but always served as a handy bit of insurance against a resumption of battle. Providing, that is, the sack John was carrying held more than a picnic lunch.

“If would excuse me, I would retrieve your well-deserved remuneration.”
A slight frown being his only outward sign of the searing agony that shot through him as he awkwardly began to rise to his feet, Mycroft made certain to give Greg a look to prevent the sorcerer from enacting any magical assistance when they still might need every iota of his energy. However, if there was in John’s possession anything approaching a large syringe of morphine he would welcome it, especially after making the slow, inactivity-stiffened walk towards his brother and John, nodding in acknowledgement at Anthea’s presence. Fortunately, the look on John’s face said the walk had not been in vain.

“We had to change the plan since the chap you told Sherlock and me to visit wasn’t in the country. We got it done, though, and… well, this is what he asked for, so don’t let him say it’s short, because Goraseth verified it and Sherlock double-checked with the current diamond prices.”

“Thank you, John.”

“How… how is your leg?”

The anguish is crippling but the additional blood loss from reopening everything that had healed is making me a touch light-headed, which does lessen the crippling pain effects to a marginal degree.

“It is manageable, brother dear. Thank you.”

And he meant that. Mycroft would be eternally grateful for the look of pure worry in his brother’s eyes at that moment, no matter the level of infancy to which Sherlock would sink countless times in the future. His brother cared and that was the greatest treasure in the world.

“They take your bits of carbon and pay our toll. I am bored with this and wearing a pink tie. You know the only direction my mood shall head should this not be settled quickly.”

Anthea didn’t brave taking a photo of her boss’s fond smile but tapped Charles to make sure he was seeing it, too, wincing only slightly when her hand collided with dragon scale instead of squishy human flesh.

“Naturally, brother. I would hate for your ebullience to outshine even our colleagues’ eyes.”

Which, Mycroft had to admit, was a feature of dragons that was rather fetching.

“I have no interest in flying lizards wearing their Carnival fancy dress. Go, your paramour seems in need of a restroom.”

Mycroft turned to see Greg doing a foot to foot maneuver that was far more a working off of nervous energy action than a bladder need. Hopefully.

“Very well, onward and upward.”

Strolling with a gritted-teeth smile, Mycroft approached the elf and waggled the sack of gems enticingly.

“Your reward, sir. Do inspect it for quality.”

It was lovely to watch the elf fail to take the sack in a dignified fashion, as opposed to a greedy snatch, and Mycroft nodded approvingly at the sample of stones the elf extracted to examine.

“Very nice. Very nice, indeed.”

Greg and Balthazar moved close to Mycroft and took a look, admiring the quality of stones Scooby
Gang 2.0 had acquired in such a short amount of time.

“Those are some amazing stones. Price met, I’d say.”

The look Greg gave the elf said he knew very well the price had been met and the elf had best not play silly buggers and cry foul or the results would not make anyone happy.

“Price definitely met. It has been a pleasure, gentlemen.”

“And our honor, sir. Might I… truly, I have no idea what serves for a business card in this lovely place, however, is there a manner in which you might be contacted should we require your, shall we say… special services?”

The dark elf raised an eyebrow, but pursed his lips in an amused smirk and rooted around in the sack for the smallest diamond in the mix. He held it between his fingers, muttered a few words, then blew a stream of iridescent breath towards the stone, which absorbed the lot of it and now appeared more like an opal than the diamond it was.

“If you have business to discuss, the sorcerer will know what to do. Farewell, gentlemen. And lady.”

Mycroft knew without looking that Anthea’s bored stare was up to its usual level of snuff since the elf grinned wickedly and gave his lips an approving lick. Apparently, his PA was a proverbial hot property among the magical set. Something she would surely never let him forget, either.

“Time to go, then. If you wouldn’t mind…”

Greg smiled affably at the elf to encourage the dark elf, who finally waved a hand, a bit more theatrically than was necessary and opened their exit.

“Thanks. Shall we?”

Waiting for Mycroft to start moving first, in case… he couldn’t… Greg nodded at Balthazar who was somewhat fixated on the sight of Anthea in her very low-cut dress, so the nod had to be paired with a smack to the back of his head to set him moving and remind him of his manners. Which didn’t quite fail when they reached the rest of their entourage, but certainly stepped a little left of center.

“Your bosom is beguiling, my dark queen. Never have I seen such art outside the finest museum.”

“Oh no, it’s that cat.”

“Verily, tis I! And how fortunate you see me as I am, in my charming splendor.”

Anthea gave the rather gangly, pale, narrow-featured, scarecrow-haired man who was squinting slightly, probably because he needed spectacles a long stare but was more curious how he was here in clothes when a cat doesn’t wear them than him being, actually, not a cat.

“Why are you dressed?”

“I… ah, well, this is somewhat an illusion so as not to… be naked.”

“Fair enough.”

“I could be naked, though, if you…”
“We’re leaving. Mr. Holmes…”

Anthea gave Mycroft a look and looked harder until he took her arm, like a gentleman and not like a man feeling his adrenaline bleeding away like the actual blood in his body, and escorted her back into Greg’s bedroom, with the others following fast and feeling a little happy that only two people emerged naked and neither was Balthazar.

“In my closet, lads. Should be something to fit both of you.”

Greg nodded towards his closet where he kept a variety of clothes for people who unexpectedly found themselves naked in his presence, which happened more often than a person had a right to expect. For his part, Mycroft put a hand over Anthea’s eyes to stop her staring, only to have them swatted down indignantly, as he somewhat expected them to be, to be honest.

“Funny. Or not. You choose. Make it the second option. Besides, he has tattoos. Did you know that?”

“Charles does not have tattoos on his bottom, which was certainly the trajectory of your gaze.”

“That’s not true. I was looking at the other one’s shapely arse. I’ve seen Charles’s. No surprises there.”

“Wh… what.”

“There was an… incident. Involving nail varnish remover, cupcake icing and one of those sparklers the kiddies enjoy. You were in Taiwan. Which was probably for the best.”

“My beloved!”

Balthazar, back in cat form, leapt up at Anthea who stepped backwards so he fell rather unceremoniously back to the floor.

“You’re strange, cat. But I assume you were helpful today, so…”

Reaching down, Anthea gave him a skritch between the ears and used the opportunity to simply breathe. This was a lot to take in, but she was a professional at in-taking, so she’d keep her aplomb solidly intact until she had the full story here, she was certain Mr. Holmes was given medical attention and that silver-haired sorcerer was looked over, as well. Then, she’d give herself a day off work, go home and have a lot of sips of excellent vodka to calm her overheated brain. Oh, and Molly was visiting for a film tonight. What fun it would be keeping all of this secret from her. Not that most of her life wasn’t already a secret from Molly but this… unicorns could exist, for pity’s sake. Keeping the darkest government secrets from her cousin was easy, but the existence of unicorns… life wasn’t fair.

“Mycroft, love… John, he’s really hurt…”

Something John had noticed early on and it was a struggle nearly as intense as battling an ogre to keep his medical instincts from not kicking in during the fighting because there was no doubt Mycroft had done himself a mischief and that mischief had teeth, claws and acid for blood.

“I’m on it. Sherlock, could you help your brother to a chair and I’ll… oh dear.”

Greg collapsing onto the bed might have been funny if it wasn’t an actual collapse and the bed just happened to be between him and the floor when he fell.
“GREGORY!”

John beat Mycroft to Greg’s body and was glad to find it was not a body in the ‘I’m dead’ sense, since they’d had more than enough of that sort of thing this week.

“He’s alright. Mostly. We’re back to the beginning with his energy and I’ll check the rest of him later, which is probably as not-helpful as his drained battery, but right now, let me get his shoes off and so he can get some rest. I doubt those shifty bastards will try anything again immediately, so he should have peace and quiet for a bit. I’ll ask Sebastian to… wait. Where’s Sebastian?”

Mycroft looked wide-eyed about the room and cursed under his breath.

“John do you know anyone who can…”

John knowing anything at all was rendered unnecessary, by a bloody, snarling werewolf flying through a new crack in reality, very much in a fashion that, to Mycroft’s mind, more resembled the beast being thrown out like a belligerent drunk from a respectable pub than a trapped being willingly leaping to freedom.

“Oh good, another naked person.”

Anthea took the opportunity to inspect this example of brazen nudity, too, and had to concede that Greg knew some healthy specimens of masculinity, regardless of species.

“Sebastian Moran! Where were you?”

Mycroft’s angry-father voice sounded far too familiar to his ears and he recalled his own father using that voice many, many times, though more at Sherlock than him, of course.

“Having fun.”

“You could have been lost there forever.”

“Nah. Greg dead or asleep?”

“Asleep, fortunately.”

“You?”

“I am not asleep.”

“Can I eat your leg when it falls off?”

Mycroft didn’t want to look down at his limb, but his eyes betrayed him and he had to admit the idea of severing the bloody thing… literally… from his body held a certain tempting appeal.

“Yes.”

“Good. Hellhounds are stringy.”

“There. Proof that you, Mycroft, are fat.”

And life was restored to normal by the song-like sound of his brother’s voice. At least, to the degree of normal Mycroft considered his new normal, which was shockingly abnormal by most metrics, but one played the proverbial cards one was dealt. He might, might, permit John to
prescribe something a tad stronger for his pain level than he’d acquired previously and have a serious, albeit private, conversation with the doctor about the need for a greater level of surgical involvement that could be performed in Gregory’s flat. He was not unused to injury, but this was a bit beyond even his experience and he could not allow it to impact the work he must do. Not that it was likely, however, if he could not even toddle over to a shelf for a book without enduring chronic pain, his temper would certainly grow short and that was not always a benefit in his dealings.

The first priority, though, was Gregory. And if he required hospitalization, it would occur in a private facility, where he could receive the best of care and recover without any pesky worries about his various secrets being discovered. The secrets the facilities he was contemplating had seen through time, due to their association with the government, were not for the faint of heart and a tiny ‘whoops’ with a bit of magic would not faze them in the least…
Chapter 31

Waking to the sound of voices wasn’t unfamiliar to Greg, but the fact his ears were reaching out to grasp a specific one was, and that he wasn’t hearing it filled him with growing concern.

“Shhh… Gregory. You are safe.”

Concern reversing its growth.

“Mycroft… how long was I…”

“It has only just become evening, so you have not been asleep for as long as you might suspect. I sent home my staff and Goraseth, but Sherlock and John remain, and Sebastian has decided to stand vigil in the shop, though I feel that is more because Mr. Anderson could use some reassurance that another magical onslaught will be met vigorously than a general concern for your health. And, we are blessed… Marcus arrived a few minutes ago. With his father.”

“Wonderful. But, that’s the least of my worries right now. How are you, love?”

“Right as rain!”

“Bollocks. I was there, Mycroft. Your poor leg…”

“Remains firmly attached to my body and, though its repair has experienced a setback, is predicted to heal with only slightly less than it’s originally-predicted success.”

“Will John tell me the same thing?”

“He shall. He did have to demonstrate another measure of his surgical expertise and does not discount further action in the future, however, he does believe that to be a low-percentage possibility given… behold!”

Greg laughed softly, mostly because laughing loudly would have sent his head pain skyrocketing, but the sight of Mycroft drawing out from under his shirt something the man would normally not be caught wearing for love nor money, was absolutely chuckle-worthy.

“I see at least… three healers were called in? Maybe four…”

It was a necklace crafted by skilled hands for the purpose of magical healing. They were never lovely things, hideous was a better term for their appearance, but healers could tailor a set of talismans and purposeful objects to work an incredible number of actions. When several healers pooled their efforts, the results could be astonishing, and this was definitely soaring at that level of accomplishment. Between this and John’s handiwork, it was easier to hold a bit of optimism that poor Mycroft wouldn’t suffer lifelong, debilitating effects from his injury. Hopefully.

“Four indeed was the number! I had thought three more symbolically significant, but John began speaking in mystical geometry to explain the correctness of this configuration and I was forced to concede the argument to him.”

“Four healers… yeah, that’s an appropriate size for a certain severity of need.”

The severity being high. Or, less high and the person calling them in really doesn’t want to leave a single thing to chance. Given something was going on in their world that was not good, getting
both him and Mycroft back on the feet quickly was a matter of some priority. Full marks to John for strategy, as well as medical diligence.

“I suspect the concern was more for you, Gregory, given the continued assault you have suffered, but I was not prepared to refuse their generous offer of assistance. Once… I would have smiled politely and had them removed from my presence by security, especially the one individual slathered in body paint, however, I have realized of late that I must adjust my perceptions and expectations.”

“Ooh, John phoned Walter. Good call but, not to disrupt your adjustments, Walter doesn’t actually need any of whatever it is he’s painted on himself today for his magic. He just likes it. And likes showing it off. How naked was he today?”

“Trousers, blessedly, were present. The day’s quantity of nudity has not changed since first we returned from… wherever we were and I, for one, am not upset about that fact.”

“Yeah, it’s something you get used to in this business. Intentional and unintentional nudity seem to crop up with a degree of regularity.”

“Delightful. Already Anthea has become positively shameless with her voyeurism and I shudder to think the heights to which that might rise.”

“Nothing wrong with honest admiration of the human form. Don’t think I didn’t notice you giving Seth a quick once-over.”

“I most certainly did not.”

“It’s interesting and nobody knows why, but when a non-human takes human form, there seems to be one that’s so much easier than the other options that their magic will always choose it first and the dragon or whatnot has to really work to shift to something different. Apparently, Seth’s magic is a bit vain.”

“If pressed, I might admit to casting an analytical eye over his form, but only to compare it to… Gregory, he is a dragon.”

“That he is.”

“With wings and… all.”

“Plenty of all, that’s for certain, and colorful, too.”

A number of dragon populations owed him a favor and some of those populations had individuals who were large enough in dragon form to give Mycroft a ride. That would happen or his name was not Greg Lestrade. Which, in some circles it wasn’t, but that was because some of the letters in his name were hard to impossible for them to pronounce and, also, because some beings preferred names that were more descriptive of the person they were labeling. Which, in his case, were often rather rude.

“Quite. But, what can we now make of Charles’s situation?”

“The number of ideas I have on that sums precisely to naught.”

“That is rather simple mathematics.”

“It suits my brain. In any case, I didn’t have long to study him, but it does seem he’s absorbed
some dragon… essence… and it’s had a real effect, besides on his eyes. Anything else you noticed?”

“No, actually. Though… he was most reluctant to allow me to inspect the false diamond samples they removed from the selection of genuine stones.”

“Ha! Charles beginning to covet shiny things? Well, if that’s the worst he suffers in his workaday life, then I’d say we still have a success to boast of. I’ll keep checking on him and I suspect Goraseth will, too, to monitor for anything worrying, but I also suspect Seth is going to drag Charles into a dragon-friendly dimension soon to see if those wings are for flight or decoration.”

“Could he not do that… here?”

“Maybe. Charles may not be able to summon that form at will, though. When they stepped through the barrier, they arrived with their magic on display. Seth could have tossed on another illusion, but it was smart he didn’t. Made us look all the more non-fuckable.”

“And your cat?”

“Pfft. Balthazar is… confined to cat form here, but that spell doesn’t extend beyond this plane.”

“He is under a spell?”

“Yeah.”

“Gregory, by the tone of your voice…”

“It was me.”

“I see. Intentional?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Was there a compelling reason?”

“Trying to bring about the end of the world?”

“That does meet the relevant criteria.”

“Balthazar is a shifty, somewhat clueless, forgets about consequences, thinks dark magic is more fun than light magic dunderhead who finally went a step… many steps… too far. In my defense, not that it’s needed, I did convene a fairly representative sample of interested parties to discuss matters and vetoed the idea of just ridding the world of his ridiculous arse once and for all. Of course, that also meant I was responsible for him and… well, this seemed a good way to keep him out of large-scale trouble without an outright execution.”

Taking responsibility seemed to be a hefty component of the sorcerer’s personality and way of life, it seemed, and that was something Mycroft understood all too well.

“He still has magical abilities, however.”

“Greatly reduced, though. The spell is a bugger. Puts your magic in a veritable lead-lined box. Some still makes it out, but it’s pretty passive. You saw what he can do when the box opens…”
“That I did.”

“He’s a powerful, impulsive tit who after I asked him what he would have done if he had destroyed the world, with his stupid self in it, he said he hadn’t thought that far ahead, but was sure he would have come up with something. Sound familiar?”

“Yes, unfortunately. Though I have not the ability to turn my brother into a cat.”

“Want me to try?”

“No… not yet. I suspect, like you, I would be responsible for him at a higher level of involvement than I now currently boast and… what a galling thought that is.”

“Especially since it’s not just looking like a cat, it’s being a cat, complete with revenge-shits in your shoes.”

“I prize my shoes.”

“As so you should. They’re gorgeous. Though, not as gorgeous as you.”

Greg’s smile was the perfect mix of innocence and wickedness which, to Mycroft’s mind, was richly deserving of a reward. A long, gentle kiss was just the thing, too, in his opinion.

“Hmmmm… you are a magnificent kisser, Mr. Holmes. John give any idea how long it will be until we’re sex-worthy?”

“Gregory… such brashness.”

“You love it.”

“I do and, to provide an answer, he suspects that with the help of his colleagues, you should see but a few additional days of recovery, despite the utter mess, again, that is your arm. I shall take longer, alas, but perhaps not as long as once was thought. And, of course, it is only my leg that is injured, something that is not a substantial impediment when one has a creative mind for things erotic.”

Mycroft’s innocence-plus-wickedness smile matched Greg’s, making the sorcerer shimmy in his bed, within the limits of what his aged and aching body would permit.

“I adore a man with a plan! And, it’s unfortunately true that magic can’t do everything, but combined with the more familiar, to you, medical practices, the combination is pretty formidable. That’s one of the reasons John’s really working to grow his magical talent. He’s a good doctor, but he can do a lot more when he adds magic to the process.”

“Well, I am grateful for it though, I will confess, my gratitude at the moment leans heavily in favor of the rather standard painkillers I am receiving.”

“You deserve all the good stuff! You stared down a dark elf and won, love. Do you have any idea how hard that is? You showed him who was the king and that I wager that if we’d been slightly in a better position, you could have bargained him down on his price, too.”

“Undoubtedly, but I could not further endanger you, Gregory. I simply could not with your health being so greatly imperiled. I have full faith that you could have vanquished the villain most easily if you were in top form, but… such was not the case and with Sherlock and John to consider… I went rather easy on the chap, I do admit.”
“I meant to ask, why would you want to contact him again?”

“One never knows when an asset might be useful. Perhaps not for me, but for you. Also… as he was not forthcoming with any details about the person for whom he was working, I hoped that my little stone might act as a means to… I have no idea. Your world has tactics and techniques unknown to me so any form of information we might acquire could prove useful. At the very least, we have a way to contact him should some form of… leverage… be required to further us along our task.”

“Oooh, strongarm the bugger. I like the way you think. You’re the complete package, Mycroft Holmes. Brains, brawn, sexy, ferocious… I’m beginning to wonder if your mum has a little secret in her past that gave you some dark elf genes.”

“I wondered more about Mummy and that irksome vampire king. Dear me… Mummy is somewhat flighty, but I never dreamed she was the temptress of the magical universe.”

“It’s always the ones you don’t suspect. Seriously, love… I am astounded by what you did today. And, for what it’s worth, it’ll get around. Your name is going to start floating about as someone of… consequence.”

“Especially given my association with you?”

“Partially, but you made a striking show of power, even if it wasn’t magic, in the technical sense. That’s incredibly rare and it will be talked about. And Leo already knew who you were… ha! Yeah, he’ll be bothering you regularly now, for this or that. And, once he starts, expect others to join in. You’re doomed.”

Greg laughed at the fact that Mycroft’s expression couldn’t settle between smugness and exasperation. It was good, frankly, to know someone else with that particular problem in their life. There was an ego boost, even for a plain man like him, from knowing his plainness came along with recognized power and ability. However, it also came along with responsibility and expectations, as well as those who demanded both be used to their advantage.

“I shall instruct Anthea to begin a separate calendar for meetings of a particularly sensitive nature.”

“Oh, most won’t bother with that. They’ll simply arrive at your doorstep, demand a drink while they muscle past you, take your most comfortable chair and ask why you haven’t fixed their problem yet.”

“Would that be the one about which they have yet to inform me?”

“It would be that one, yes.”

“How nice to know that the magically talented are precisely as lacking in social graces and planning as those lacking magical talent.”

“The universe does have constants. I learned that in school.”

“A veritable plethora of them and here we append another to that vaunted list.”

As if on cue, a certain irksome vampire king muscled his way in to Greg’s bedroom and gave both people in his line of sight a ‘well?’ glare.

“Leo! You uncouth old bugger. Thanks for invading my bedroom like a fucking bedbug.”
“Pfft! Humorless witch. The dark elf should have rid me of you. I’d have paid him! Paid him a tidy sum to make my life a more pleasant place to… live.”

“Nicely done. Why are you here?”

Greg knew Leonas wasn’t as persimmonity as he liked people to believe but seeing a flash of something on the vampire’s face other than peevishness was a bit startling.

“To see if you died. Hoped you did but, as usual, I was denied any speck of joy in this world.”

Translation – to see how you were and if there was anything you needed.

“Sorry about murdering your joy. Mycroft lived, too, so that’s probably only adding to your agony.”

“I shall leave him to Petras.”

Greg shared a look with Mycroft who was pursing his lips thoughtfully.

“Oh, he’s doing a side job as an assassin now?”

“And work with your dog? Petras might be young and impetuous, but even he has standards. No, my little brother thinks that one there might have information to share. Probably a cure for baldness, though the witch shagger only has that ridiculous wisp flopping about on his head, but it’s better than nothing, I suppose.”

Applying the various filters he used with his brother, Mycroft interpreted the message as Leonas’s second in command, and information gatherer, was coming to conference on, likely, the current turn of events, as well as what brought the vampire king to London in the first place. Oh, and Sebastian was an assassin.

“I am afraid, your majesty, that the extreme energy output of my mind somewhat renders my scalp uninhabitable by any but the most vigorous of follicles.”

Greg’s snort of laughter was an endearing sound to Mycroft’s ears and, surprisingly, didn’t provoke a snippy tirade by their guest.

“Spare me your delusions. Expect Petras tomorrow night. I shall be at the theater, or what passes for it in this accursed city.”

To Mycroft, this was a very clear sign that the vampire king wanted to be seen somewhere other than the location of this particular meeting. Plausible deniability and/or distraction. That was very interesting. Oh, and now Marcus was here. Happy day.

“Father! You terrible old man. Why are you bothering Greg and Mycroft when they need a bit of peace and quiet, two things nobody in the world associates with you?”

“You are a disgrace to my loins, Marcus Algirdas.”

“Oh god, don’t say loins! Why would do that? I feel so dirty now.”

“Glad you could join us, Marcus. Really, this is a treat.”

“Has Father laughed at you yet, Greg? He did when he found out you were beset by ogres. Laughed like the evil person he is. Then had a coffee.”
“Ooh, that’s not a bad idea. A hot cup of beautiful coffee.”

“Gregory… you shall not sleep if you assault your system with caffeine.”

Greg turned large innocent eyes meet to the disapproving ones glowering in Mycroft’s skull.

“If I cry like a baby, can I have some?”

“No, but I might ask King Leonas if he can change your nappy. He has a son, so I expect he would have been pressed into duty at least once during Marcus’s infancy.”

“I’m not touching that witch’s bottom! I don’t care how poopy it might be. You shag him, you change him. Don’t forget to put a bit of powder on, too, or he’ll get a rash and really make your life miserable. Marcus, get that one some coffee so he can muster a lot of good poop for his shagger to wipe.”

“No. Greg has minions. They can do it.”

“Lazy, disobedient boy. Fine. Then get the trousers off that other one and have a go at him.”

Neither the ogres or hellhounds had shocked Mycroft quite as much as that particular statement.

“What! Father… you’ve gone loony, haven’t you? I knew it would happen, but I didn’t think it would happen today. Fortunately, I already have contingency plans for putting you someplace they specialize in mean-spirited loonies and Uncle will be happy not to have to wade through your nonsense to get things done anymore.”

“Lazy, disobedient and dimwitted. His leg! Go suck on his leg. I can smell the pitiful witch workings from here and it’s making me sick. Probably end with him having his leg turn into a frog or something. Foul witches! He’d deserve it, though. Witch shagger.”

Hoping he wasn’t the only one who lost the plot several acts ago, Mycroft cleared his throat and smiled cautiously.

“Are you saying, sir, that a vampire can heal an injury?”

“Maybe.”

“Gregory, can you confirm?”

“No. I mean… they can heal the fucking bites they give you, but… his leg’s opened up like a tin of Spam, Leonas, you daft bugger.”

“See that ugly bit of crafts around his neck?”

“No. I mean, yes, but those are…”

The little old man nearly choked Mycroft to death by grabbing the necklace and pulling both him and it forward to shove a particular crystal in Greg’s face.

“That will amplify a vampire’s wound-closing ability. Stupid witch.”

“What? No, I have never heard that, nor has John and he’s really made a study of that sort of thing.”

“Don’t know as much as you think you do, then.”
“I haven’t heard that either, Father, and I think I would have if I was possible. Stop being a nuisance.”

“Suck him!”

“I say, sir…”

“Silence, witch shagger! I… the witches may, just may, have tried something to help one of the filthy farmers that squats on my property. Don’t know if it would work for any vampire, but mine is an exceptional, noble line, Marcus notwithstanding, so even he should be able to reflect some of my glory on this pitiful human and do something useful for a change.”

Marcus’s ‘well, I never’ glare lingered on his father just a moment, then turned to Greg who was furiously rummaging through his mental files for something to add any credibility to Leonas’s claim. New things were being discovered, all the time, that was true and… ultimately, it couldn’t do any harm, except in the area of dignity, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“Mycroft, it’s up to you. I can’t say it will help, but the worst that will happen is Marcus doing filthy things to your leg and getting a few hairs stuck to his tongue for his troubles.”

“John shaved the area, in point of fact.”

“Even better! What do you want to do?”

Not have a vampire suck or lick or have any physical association with his leg was very much what Mycroft wanted to do, but if it produced any positive results, then he would be a fool to decline.

“I suppose it would be valuable simply to know one way or the other if this was a viable technique and I have no overwhelming objection to serving as a test subject. I wager, Leonas, that asking for a measure of privacy would be ludicrous.”

“Yes.”

“Of course.”

Very happy the morphine was still merrily active and his trousers were fantastically loose-fitting, Mycroft ungracefully fell back into the chair in which he was sitting before he was subjected to a vampiric choke hold and wriggled to lower said trousers, carefully removing the bandage to expose his injury.

“Mycroft… oh, love, that’s far worse than it was before.”

Mycroft’s noncommittal smile was hard for Greg to bear, since he was distressingly used to injury and had, therefore, crystal-clear ideas about how agonizing had been destroying that mess a second time. It had to be twice as large from… tearing… and Mycroft didn’t have his ability to dull the pain a bit to keep going when he had to. Which he’d done and in style. The man was awe-inspiring.

“Disgusting. Why didn’t the witch you shag do anything about that? He can, you know. Lazy arse.”

“Leonas… do shut up. Marcus… I have no idea what you wish to do to this scratch but be my guest.”

Marcus had no idea either but was exceedingly sure why his father wasn’t volunteering. What a
ghastly business. And he’d done more than his fair share of ghastly business to various creatures in his lifetime. Some things, though, were just gross. Like that knife-and-nostril scene in Chinatown. Or videos of eye surgery. Ok, now he was creeping himself out. And it still wasn’t as disturbing as Mycroft’s leg!

“Yeah… fine. Father, a kinship I’m regretting terribly right now, what did your witch friends have you do?”

“They’re not my friends! They… traitorously capitalized upon my duty of noblesse oblige.”

“Whatever. I really don’t care. But, if I’m having my way with Mycroft here, I’d rather it be good for both of us.”

“Open it up and get some spit in there. Good and deep. Use your tongue if you have to.”

“Gods, no. No, that’s revolting, even for you. And I know without asking you didn’t tongue some farmer, no matter how much you wanted to impress the witches you’re always trying to murder.”

“Just do it.”

“I… Mycroft, it’s your fucking leg. How about helping me here?”

“It seems… Gregory?”

“I hoped you’d forgotten about me.”

“Never, my dear, but… some assistance.”

“Ok… ummm… hold on. One second.”

It was actually three seconds before John came bursting through the door with Sherlock close behind, both to glare at Greg, though only John made a rude gesture.

“You do not have enough energy to be writing ‘Mycroft’s Being Violated!’ in the air. Balthazar is still laughing at that, too, in case you’re wondering.”

“My head hurts too much to yell. Anyway… Leonas wants to rip open Mycroft’s leg so his son can feel about a bit with his tongue. That alright with you?”

“Hmmmm…”

“WHAT!”

“Let me think about it a moment.”

Even Sherlock found it necessary to stare incredulously at John because the thought of anyone putting their tongue on Mycroft, let alone inside him, voided the basic rules of human decency, which he usually ignored but would make an exception this single time because even he had standards.

“Doctor Watson, am I to understand you are not immediately opposed to this suggestion?”

“Not immediately opposed, Mycroft, no. As tetchy as Leonas can be, I don’t think he’d seriously suggest something that would hurt you, since you don’t have a way to heal yourself like Greg would and vampire saliva does heal over their fang marks. They’re not big, but they are
fairly deep and those close on the surface almost immediately with the deeper tissues repairing in a few hours’ time, without the problems that can occur with punctures that close too quickly. I doubt he could completely fix that disaster, but… especially with the work the healers performed today, it might help. At the very least, we’ll get to watch Marcus’s self-proclaimed incomparable oral sex techniques and I’m always a believer in enhancing one skillset, no matter the skill in question.”

“John!”

“That was my ear, Sherlock. Thank you for deafening it.”

“The decibel level did not remotely approach the mark necessary for acute hearing loss, even factoring in proximity. And I do not believe it seemly for you to ogle the vampire performing… hmmm… I am rethinking matters. Considering the scenario, however, I feel the one to be here observing his technique is the accursed Anthea, since she is the person most likely to actually receive oral sex from the bloodsucker and knowledge aforehand of his proficiency would be helpful for her in evaluating his worth as a suitor.”

The various exclamations at that point were numerous, colorful and loud. Of them all, Leonas’s were the most entertaining, from Sherlock’s point of view because they were punctuated by boiled sweets hurled at Marcus with a force that allowed a ricochet to embed in Greg’s wall, something the sorcerer decided was a final reason to block out some time with paint and brush because the walls were beginning to look a bit dingy and it wouldn’t add but a moment’s extra work to patch any holes he might have to manage beforehand. Digging the horehound sweet out of the wall stud might take more than a moment, though. He doubted even the mice that called the building home would be brave enough to try and eat that dreadful thing so, as always, the burden would be on him to make things right.

“Stop throwing your fucking sweets at me, you old bastard!”

“You have a female! And didn’t tell me!”

“Because you’d throw fucking sweets at her and probably knock out a tooth!”

“I would never harm the mother of my grandchild!”

“She’s not pregnant!”

“Are you sterile?”

“Oh god…”

All his life, Mycroft had secretly adored stories involving vampires. Cool, sophisticated, epitomizing sensuality and seduction. The death of childhood fantasies was a crippling thing. However, the humiliation of the cad Marcus was positively delightful.

“Ok… how about we refocus on the reason my bedroom is once again crowded like a scene from a Marx Brothers film.”

Pooh, Gregory. You are curtailing the humiliation.

“John, the actual suggestion is Mycroft’s injury be opened a bit for some of Marcus’s disgusting spit to make its way in. Besides rabies, is there anything problem you can foresee because of that?”

“I’ve never heard of any particular contaminants in vampire spit to worry about, but I also don’t
know of any actual studies to confirm it. Given the tissue-repairing properties it contains, I’d hedge towards it being safe.”

“Provide a sample, vampire. I will conduct the necessary tests to verify you are not foul and unclean.”

Why Sherlock had an empty vial in his pocket was not something John to know, but he cocked an approving eyebrow, nonetheless.

“Given I suspect Mycroft would rather not wait for you to culture a few plates, he’ll have to serve as the incubation medium this time, but… a real analysis would be very useful. Secret, though. You can’t write a paper or share the results or anything like that, but I’d certainly love to have physical data to supplement what I know about the magical elements.”

“And check if he’s sterile!”

Sherlock scowled at Leonas, though there was a degree of thinking behind the scowl.

“I cannot ascertain his sperm count from saliva.”

“Then you’re as useless as he is.”

“I could, however, if someone, such as you, provided the proper equipment, run a DNA analysis to make a prediction as to how his progeny with Mycroft’s draconian PA would physically appear.”

“You’re suddenly less useless.”

“I shall give you a list of what I need.”

“Give it to Goraseth. Lazy dragon! Trotting off on adventures when he’s supposed to be working. I should sack him.”

“Then you would have to shop for my equipment.”

“A valid point. You’re not as stupid as you look. That surprises me.”

“Your surprise is not relevant. The depth of your pocketbook is.”

As the negotiations began, Mycroft gave John a nod, setting the doctor in motion to grab his medical bag and begin rummaging for supplies. With a quick spray of topical anesthetic on Mycroft’s skin, he quickly removed the stitches and gently massaged open the edges of the wound, finishing with a ‘well, it’s all yours’ gesture at Marcus, who looked about ready to vomit.

“Ok, no. I can’t… I’m not licking that. Mycroft, my bosom fiend, that is… I feel sick.”

From his bed, Greg rolled his eyes and shared a ‘why is this my life’ look with Mycroft. But, to be fair, neither would have been eager to lick the inside of an exposed wound, so fair point for Marcus.

“Ummm… I suppose, Marcus, if you want to load up a syringe with saliva, I could inject it into the tissues and…”

The chorus of ‘aaaaahhh” and ‘oooooooh’ and ‘ohgodohgodohgod’ from the cringing men in the room sent John’s suggestion fleeing for safer climes.

“Ok… I don’t think that’s a popular idea, so…”
“Useless the lot of you!”

Leonas scurried over to Mycroft and with several loud ‘pfft,’ noises gobbed a number of spit wads into the opened wound, then flicked a finger at Sherlock who nodded and casually reached in to spread the spit over the angry, freshly-bleeding tissue. Mycroft’s first response was to shout loudly then realized the pain was quickly subsiding, something he conveyed to John and Greg with an approving nod. Another of their party was not quite so approving.

“That’s just vile. I am disavowing all familial connection to you, disgusting old man.”

“My son the wilting violet. I hope your female has more backbone.”

“Anthea has the backbone of a Berserker and the temperament to match.”

Leonas gave Sherlock a hearty whack on the back that rocked the detective forward, luckily being stopped from falling over by John, who also handed him an antiseptic wipe for his mucky fingers.

“That’s what I like to hear! Woman with spunk. Just like Marcus’s dearly-departed mother. She could battle a werewolf with one hand and hold a dragon by the throat the other. Magnificent woman. How she birthed a limp blossom as a son is utterly beyond me.”

“I am not a limp blossom! Don’t forget who saved your skinny arse when you insulted the merpeople during your last beach holiday and they summoned that giant crab to teach you some manners. It stank like a crab, too, one that’s dead and you’ve forgotten in the boot of your car for a week in the summer. And that was just the outsides! Its insides were infinitely worse, both in smell and taste, which was not the highlight of my lifetime, and I didn’t hear you making any droopy flower claims then while you sat in your stupid beach chair, soaking up moonlight, watching me nearly have my arse handed to me by a crustacean.”

“What species of crab?”

“What? I don’t know, Sherlock.”

“You are useless.”

Being given contemptuous looks by two people at once was nowhere near Marcus’s personal-best record, but it was enough to make a large glass of something potent a gleamingly-appealing option.

“Greg, got whisky?”

“Yep.”

“Want one, too?”

“Yep.”

“Mycroft, you up for a drinkie-winkie?”

“I… yes. I believe a drink would be welcome.”

“No! Neither of you can drink! You’re both loaded with pain medication! I gave it to you, too, so don’t pretend otherwise.”

John’s no-nonsense expression failed to make the desired impression and he threw up his hands.

“Fine! Bring me one, too. Might as well have a pleasant buzz while the two of you are having
the life fade out of you from an overdose of painkillers and alcohol.”

“Actually, Doctor Watson… I am finding the effects of the morphine… it is not something I can put into words, but there is a different sensation I am experiencing that I do not think is attributable to your pharmaceuticals. And, if I am not mistaken…”

Mycroft looked down at his leg, which prompted John to quickly move over and join in, so both men could carefully observe the injury. An injury that seemed somewhat less injured than a moment ago.

“I think it’s working. Mycroft?”

“Yes, John, I do, as well.”

Hefting himself out of his chair, then remembering the trousers pooled around his knees and adjusting them before taking a hop forward, Mycroft moved towards Greg’s bed for the sorcerer to have his own look.

“Wow… that should be messily bleeding and furious at you for disturbing it’s rest but… that looks good. For a certain value of good which is still pretty horrible, but stepping back a bit from the horribleness precipice.”

“It is a remarkable thing, to be certain.”

“Leo, you miserable bastard, looks like part of you is less nasty than the rest. Thanks, for a change.”

The vampire king waved off the thanks, but Mycroft caught the tiny mote of satisfaction in the old man’s eyes.

“Your thanks is worthless, witch. Why wasn’t I offered whisky? I’m a king!”

“Marcus, get your yappy dog father a whisky and… fuck it, just bring a bottle and glasses. John will set aside his medical degree and we’ll have a toast to a job well done by all today. Then everyone will fuck off and leave me and Mycroft to get some rest.”

While Leonas and Sherlock launched into a detailed account about how much ‘job well done today’ should be awarded to them, as opposed to anyone else, Marcus darted off for a large swig out of the whisky bottle before fulfilling Greg’s drinks order, John began pulling out the materials to tack in fresh stitches, if only for insurance because he had an inkling that the combined healer/doctor/vampire procedures were going to work a treat for Mycroft’s leg, all of which left Mycroft and Greg free to focus… on each other. Something that was never a hardship…

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“John and I are leaving. It is clear that Mycroft will not die, giving me a fresh corpse on which to experiment, so there is no reason for me to remain.”

“That does not mandate Doctor Watson leaving, also, brother dear.”

“He is purchasing my dinner, so I beg to differ.”

Mycroft smiled at John, who huffed softly and tried not to dwell on the fact that Sherlock would somehow convince him into that very thing, even when he knew in advance it was going to happen.
“Looks like I’m leaving, then. Greg… Anderson’s working my hours tonight and I’m doing both shifts tomorrow, won’t that be fun, but I will check in before I send him home to see how the both of you are faring. If anything changes, Mycroft that’s mainly for you, let me know. Leo, thanks for being something other than a pain in the arse. Marcus, get your salivary glands exercised, because we will be experimenting with this technique. There’s always somebody with something to heal, so I suspect I can get the procedure codified fairly quickly and that could be of help to a lot of people, provided they know a friendly vampire.”

“With a large enough sample, I, also, can experiment, but on the viability of the relevant healing properties over the long term and what might be done to extend them for storage.”

John mulled Sherlock’s words a moment, then decided that he not only liked them, he liked them a lot.

“Ooh, have something to put in a bottle? That would make my job easier. Nasty gash you have there, madam. Just wear this crystal around your neck, slosh in a bit of this vampire spit and it’ll be right as rain. That’ll be twenty quid unless you’d like a few decorative plasters. We’ve got some with ghosts and a few black cats that fly off the shelves at Halloween.”

There was no surprise that his shirt collar was grabbed by Sherlock, but John did feel surprise that the subsequent dragging was not nearly as mindless as it could have been, since Sherlock allowed him a moment to actually stand from his chair and snatch his medical bag before the dragging began. That was thoughtful, all things considered. With those two guests departing, Greg gave Marcus a pointed look and reached out to take possession of the whisky bottle that Marcus still held as if it was a teddy bear.

“Fine, Greggy, I know when I’m not wanted.”

“No, you don’t, but at least you caught on quickly this time.”

“Ha! I’ll give you this, wretched witch, you’re not entirely a pimple on a fish’s back.”

With that bon mot lingering in the air, King Leonas cackled and gave one quick look at Mycroft’s leg, nodding smugly before toddling out of the bedroom, shouting for Marcus to follow and drive him home. After stopping for chips.

“Father wants me to be with him at the theater tomorrow, he has some plan which likely is utterly unnecessary, but makes him feel important to enact anyway, so you’ll be on your own with Uncle. I’ll send a lad over with lots of this amber goodness to make the situation more bearable. Have dear Charles, here, too, why don’t you? I’ll be inviting Mycroft’s better half to attend with us tomorrow or, rather, Father will throw a tantrum until I do it, so I might as well get ahead of him and save myself a headache, and it might be best if Mycroft has somebody from his team here to have his back in case Uncle becomes… pissy. Greg knows but you don’t Mycroft, old thing, that Uncle doesn’t seem pissy when he’s actually pissy, you only find out when there’s a knife stuck in your back. There used to be two, but he pulled out one for a quick lick to see what you taste like. He’ll make you watch, too, because he’s that way. My whole family is that way. Which is why I’m that way. Woe is me.”

Thinking a moment, Marcus handed the whisky bottle to Mycroft, patted him on the cheek, then stepped over to give Greg a little kiss on his.

“Get some rest, mano vyras. Who knows what shit will land on your head tomorrow.”

Greg simply shook his head, but the shaking stopped and his eyes widened seeing the look on
Mycroft’s face after the vampire had left the room.

“Mycroft?”

“I am not fluent, by any means, but I am somewhat conversant in Lithuanian, Gregory.”

Uh oh.

“That’s… very multilingual of you.”

“That particular phrase…”

“Well…”

“I believe it is the common one for ‘my husband.’”

“Yeah… ok, about that…”
“I am waiting.”

“Yeah… ummmm…”

“Gregory…”

“That’s me! Yes, that’s me. I might be regretting that a bit now, though.”

“This is not an inconsequential matter, Gregory, so humor is not particularly warranted.”

“I know… it’s just… I’m trying to think of how to answer this that won’t make you angry.”

“I see. You and Marcus are married.”

“Yes. But, no! And the no part is very important for the purposes of you being angry.”

“You know, of course, that was nonsensical.”

“There was some sense to it, but not the sort that you would recognize since you have no fucking idea what I’m talking about.”

Mycroft let his glare go from fiery to frigid and held it until Greg sighed, seemingly finally able to put words to his discomfort.

“In the eyes of the magical community, yes, Marcus and I are married. But, again, it’s in a sense. They all know we’re not married in the manner of a real couple who share a life. It’s more a… marriage of convenience. A political marriage, for lack of a better term. Because he’s my husband, again, in a sense, I am duty-bound to come to the aid of him and his people. I’d do it anyway and most know that, but it’s an extra piece of insurance for the vampires that it’s guaranteed I will step in if someone is threatening them and theirs. And it works the other way, too! It’s known that the vampires will back me up for problems that arise, so that does keep a large number of problems from ever actually reaching the problem stage. You won’t find a single legal document, legal for you, that is, that records us being married because there is no lawful basis for it. He’s trying to woo your PA, for pity’s sake… and has a long history of romances under his proverbial belt. That’s all allowed, you see! Nobody thinks twice that he’s my husband, but having a go with someone he met at a club or something. He could even marry the delightful Anthea and nobody would think it was strange or wrong. Actually, they might once they met her and had to wonder why she was marrying a daft bugger like Marcus, but not that he was marrying her since he was married to me. It’s… different. And the different doesn’t even matter! There are a lot of communities where you can have multiple husbands or wives. It can get a bit confusing remembering who’s married to who and what that means, from a social-status perspective, but… tah dah!”

The little sparkles that erupted from his fingers had been a desperate attempt to change Mycroft’s expression. It succeeded. In precisely the opposite way Greg had hoped.

“That was a frivolous expenditure of energy designed to distract me from the gravity of the situation.”

“It was. I admit it. I’m quaking like a chap that’s been caught sneaking pie from the larder when he’s already finger-wagged his spouse for wanting a second piece after dinner and tries a
spot of soft-shoe to make their spouse smile.”

“Focus, please, on matters at hand. Obligations, commitments, expectations because of this marriage?”

“Ummm… I’m generally expected to attend certain ceremonies and celebrations. Some I might be expected to attend based on my own position, others because of my connection to Marcus and his family. It’s assumed that I’ll take the Varnas side of arguments between the vampire kingdoms, but that’s not always been the case. They all do something stinky now and again, and if it’s Leo who’s done the stinking, I tell him to fuck off. I do try and mediate between him and whoever he’s been stinky to, though, so he saves face, and nobody suffers unduly from whatever’s happened. Let’s see… really, it’s all things like that! Nothing… oh. Yeah, nothing. Really, nothing at all. That’s about it.”

That wasn’t smooth. That was polar opposite of smooth.

“Meaning, Gregory, that is not about it and there is something consequential you remembered and are now attempting to hide.”

“Well…”

You… blighter.”

That was bad. That was likely as bad as Mycroft could bad. And, the thing was bad, too. This was going to hurt…

“Honestly, I forgot about this. I genuinely did and after I’d made it seem all ‘nothing to see here’ a something to see leapt up at me like a pouncing tiger and I got startled.”

“Shall I proceed to bounder, Gregory? Heel, perhaps?”

“Nooooo! I… I have to have sex with Marcus every three years as part of a ritual that’s actually very important for the city and for other things, but Balthazar and I think we could reduce that to some wanking and that would be enough. Wanking each other, I mean. And by that ‘I mean,’ I mean that I wank myself and he does himself and… there still has to be blood sharing and we have to get a bit messy with the products of the wanking, but it’s all about life energy and I hate everything, including wanking, now.”

Greg kept his eyes firmly fixed on the ceiling and really did feel like he hated everything. The sad, pathetic state of his, and Marcus’s life, was that they both had a castrated dog’s balls for luck in romance and, besides some pleasant, short-term, interludes, there was nothing… lasting that was ever impacted by this business. He’d assumed, though he now hated his brain for ever thinking like this, that he’d ultimately become involved with a member of the community and… they were better for understanding things like that. Probably had engaged in a little sex magic themselves, not for fun and frolic, but because it was necessary for the particular ritual or spell to work. It wasn’t overly common, but it certainly wasn’t unknown and… hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate...

“I believe I require a cup of tea.”

Oh god. I’ll hear one door open and close, then a second as Mycroft hobbles out of this flat, never to return. It’s fair. It’s utterly fair. Man gets himself savaged and takes care of this pathetic soul only to find out the pathetic soul had a husband on his arm and, oh yes, couldn’t avoid that occasional round of messy sex with said husband. Hate hate hate, hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate...

Door 1 – check.
Door 2 –

Come on, Door 2, don’t leave me waiting. That’s just cruel.

Door 2 – sounds a lot like a tap running.

He’s making tea. Why? You don’t need tea to leave someone. That’s preposterous! Maybe it was the sound of the door pulling over the rug as it opened. Except there was no rug. Had his pitiful brain gone insane? That was a possibility. All that hate surely couldn’t be good for it. Try some remote seeing? You’re shit for that in normal times, it gives you a headache and your head already aches, you stupid sorcerer. And, do you really want to watch him make his cup of tea to sip as he strolls away, out of your life? How can he drink tea and stroll? He’s still on crutches. That’s a pretty complex maneuver, but if anyone could do it, it would be Mycroft. He’s amazing at everything.

“Tea, Gregory?”

“You’re amazing at everything please don’t leave!”

Greg clapped a hand over his mouth, then shouted loudly since he’d used his massacred arm to do the clapping and exchanged it for the other hand, while mentally reciting his new litany of hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate until Mycroft made a sound that was highly reminiscent of a growl, which was very familiar to Greg’s ear from the recent battle royal between Sebastian and the hellhounds.

“Gregory… first, do not do that again. I have no doubt your arm is now particularly distressed with you and it has full right to be. Second… I am having tea. You may also have tea if you choose.”

Didn’t say you weren’t leaving, did you, Mycroft Holmes. Are you the sadistic type? Make me lie here watching you drink tea then politely tell me to fuck off forever and saunter out my door? Is this what insanity feels like? Probably so. The hate has won, and I’ve gone completely and irretrievably loony. At least Anderson will have a permanent job now. That was nice.

“Ummm… yes?”

“I shall assume that is a response to my original question. I shall be but a moment.”

This isn’t good. Or maybe it is. He’s not leaving. He’s having tea. He can’t carry two teas! The insanity is spreading!

Greg swung his legs off the bed, rose like a corpse emerging from the grave – gracelessly and with a lot of flailing – then toddled slowly out of the bedroom, rocking back on his heels with the force of Mycroft’s angry-mother shout.

“Gregory Lestrade! To bed, this instant!”

“Tea!”

“I am bringing the tea, you ridiculous man.”

“You have no arms.”

“I am phoning John. Your head injury is obviously more concerning than we expected.”
“No! I mean… your arms aren’t available, and you can’t balance cups on your foot. Feet. Two cups, two feet. Right?

At this point, Greg had confused himself and was genuinely surprised to feel Mycroft’s hand on his arm, steering him back to bed, using a single crutch and a slight hopping motion for mobility.

“If you leave this bed a further time, I shall poison your tea and sell your cat to home for the elderly.”

Balthazar would kill him. But, he’d already be dead, so who cared?

“Fine, but first, let me help you carry…”

Mycroft’s crutch was out from under his arm and pressing against Greg’s chest, with what Greg would swear was a small en route twirl, and before the sorcerer could blink.

“I shall not warn you a second time, good sir.”

He’s not smiling. Mycroft would kill me with his crutch and do it as matter-of-factly as he would order a sandwich. Which is sexy as hell… but, getting into bed like a good lamb because sexy as hell has no meaning for someone who has been murdered by a rather commonplace medical device.

“Ok.”

Mycroft narrowed his eyes in such a way that Greg actually gasped at the ferocity of the warning, then hobbled back towards the kitchen. Several minutes later, Sebastian barged into Greg’s bedroom and dropped a mug of hot tea on the nightstand, sloshing a bit on the wood, which was very used to sloshed tea, so failed to issue a complaint. Greg, however, was not so complacent.

“Thanks for that. Really, I adore waking to warped, discolored wood when I check the time on my clock.”

“Tea. Drink it.”

“Why are you here?”

“Because I asked if he could port our tea and provide a verification of our status to Mr. Anderson, who, I suspected, would appreciate such a thing.”

Greg cut his eyes over to Mycroft, who was now using his two crutches and not balancing anything on either of his feet.

“Got paid, too.”

And, my request was accompanied by an exchange of funds to purchase his and Mr. Anderson’s dinner and snacks provisions for the remainder of the night. A small mote of gratitude for Sebastian’s assistance during our little fracas and Mr. Anderson’s vigilance at keeping functional your place of business.”

“He wants to hire me.”

“That is not true, Sebastian. I simply stated that I would like to discuss your work in more detail.”

“He’s rich, so I’ll charge a lot.”
“Goodbye, Sebastian. Do give my regards to Mr. Anderson.”

Mycroft’s shooing motions would earn most other people two arms torn from their sockets, but the British Government apparently occupied the same safe space as old Mrs. Hodges, who treated Sebastian as an adorable, but fairly naughty little boy, who was prone to play in her yard and trample her flowers. Admittedly, that had happened once, but werecats did exist and the reaction of a werewolf to a werecat was somewhat cliched and predictable. Fortunately, Mrs. Hodges was rather shortsighted without her spectacles and now believed that Sebastian was a flagrant nudist with an enormous dog bearing the uninspiring name of Dog, but both were good boys, despite the nudity and tendency towards flower trampling, and deserved warm hand-knitted scarves when the weather turned chill.

“Another thing you failed to mention, Gregory. Your ward is an assassin.”

“In my defense, that’s his business and it’s not my place to spread that about, especially since it’s not really on the same level as him being a shopkeeper or dance instructor.”

“Very well, you have a point.”

“You really going to hire him? He’s good, I can attest to that. And he’s got a strong work ethic. He doesn’t quit until the job is done. You do have to offer him an acceptable target, though. You want him to take out a flock of nuns who run an orphanage or something, he’ll probably kill you instead and have someone he knows hack into your bank account to steal your money and give it to the nuns you were evil enough to want murdered.”

“Interesting. An assassin with a moral code. That is not as uncommon as you might believe, though some moral codes are somewhat worrying in their own right. However, that is a digression from our original topic of conversation.”

“It’s a fun one, though. Can’t we just continue to digress while we sip our tea?”

“No. However, I shall help you sit in bed, so you can sip your tea.”

A few quick moments of pillow-arranging and sorcerer-shuffling produced a situation that was very much to Greg’s liking, both for the tea-sipping angle and the greater sense of… capability… he had for the upcoming conversation. It’s hard to feel conversation-capable when you’re flat on your back and snuggled under soft blankets. That’s more a dream-the-night-away position and his dreams would be pretty bleak and horrible if this part of their chat didn’t go in a happy direction.

“This is exceptional, Mycroft.”

“It is your blend of tea, Gregory.”

“True. But not everyone can properly brew a cup of tea and that’s a fact older than… tea… itself.”

“A truth I cannot deny, more’s the pity. Now, let us return to…”

“Syringes!”

“Pardon?”

“Maybe we can wank in a cup and John can draw a bit of blood from us and mix it all up to make a…”
“Good heavens, Gregory… do be quiet.”

“I can’t! You’re going to bin me if I…”

“Have I made that declaration?”

“Uh… no.”

“Then you are assuming facts not in evidence and I do not appreciate my intentions being foist upon me by the uninformed.”

“I did do that. I foisted. I’m not collecting a lot of points on my side, am I?”

“No, I would say not, however, I choose not to look upon this as some form of contest. You will concede, I hope, that your revelations are not ones to be taken lightly.”

“I concede.”

“And that they are relevant to our own state of attachment.”

“I further concede.”

“I do not feel particularly aggrieved, Gregory, that you failed to inform me of these facts prior to now, given the abbreviated duration of our acquaintance and the… particulars it has involved. There have been, perhaps, more pressing matters to tend to and the scant bit of time where we were simply alone to share time, often has been marked by pain and fatigue, neither of which is conducive to broaching highly-sensitive topics.”

“So… you’re not angry?”

“I did not say that...”

Shit.

“… however, I am finding it difficult to place my anger on a specific matter, thereby diluting it’s intensity for any individual point of order. No, Gregory, I am not happy to find that you are wed to someone, be it for ceremonial purposes or not. And, no, I am not happy to find that your association must be a somewhat close one, in terms of time and energy outlay, as I know how you are already overtasked by your responsibilities. And… I truly am not happy about the issue of sexual interaction, but the fact you have already given thought to minimizing the intimate nature of the encounter is somewhat encouraging. I will, however, require further information on the reason this situation exists and how your engaging in sexual activities is beneficial to said situation.”

Greg didn’t breathe while Mycroft paused for a long sip of tea, then wished he hadn’t because it was bloody hard not to make a loud, embarrassing sound when you’re oxygen deprived and desperate to suck in a lungful of fresh air.

“Given the dataset presented, I cannot claim I am inclined to sever our relationship at this juncture. I would expect, understand, that further issues of such significance are not held secret from me, except, I will state, for matters of secrecy that are not proper to share outside of your community and position. There are matters that I, myself, shall not be able to reveal for various reasons and it would be hypocritical to expect else from you.”

Another long sip of tea gave Greg’s brain time to think through Mycroft’s words and finally come to the conclusion that he needed to learn to think better, as well as faster, but his tired, old brain was
up to today’s challenge.

“We’re still together?”

Why had he framed that as a question? Mycroft was right to look at him like he was a turnip.

“Was I not clear?”

“You were. I’m just…”

This time, Greg’s hands didn’t emit sparkles, but waggled their fingers to simulate the higgledy-piggledy that had taken up residence in his skull. And, for his good behavior, Greg was rewarded with a soft sigh and a gentle tracing of Mycroft’s fingers across his cheek.

“You have endured a great deal of late, Gregory. I regret now being so harsh.”

“No, the harshness was fair. I deserved it. I… it’s a hard situation. Even if I’m seeing someone in the community, it’s difficult to walk into a new relationship saying I’ve got a husband, even with practitioners who know to a better degree what that does and doesn’t mean. For some, it’s just the… divided loyalties question, I think.”

“That is certainly an unsettling aspect.”

“I know. You’re having a nice time with your new person and over trots Marcus to intrude.”

“As he did with us.”

“He did actually have genuine, and time-sensitive, information to pass along, but yeah. And there’s more than a few occasions when I’ve been spending a quiet, romantic evening and I get the call or signal to race out because Marcus needs help for something genuinely important. I’d do it anyway, because it’s the right thing to do, help someone in need, but…”

“There lingers some special sourness that a spouse can phone and command your presence.”

“Yeah. And, with all the other claims on my time… it’s hard to keep someone in my life for very long. It’s harder still when it’s someone outside the community and I can’t even give a credible explanation because I hate lying to people outright and it’s hard to justify being called away at all hours, showing up for a date battered and looking complete shit when you’re a shopkeeper.”

“Yes… I understand well the demands of work and how they might impact one’s personal life. It is not an easy thing to ask of anyone that they might be abandoned at a moment’s notice for concerns that are, most literally, matters of life and death. Often for many who certainly do not deserve their potential fate.”

“You understand, though. I do, too.”

The tiny grin on Mycroft’s face made Greg want to shimmy against his pillow, but was worried it might earn him another use of the Mumcroft voice for wriggling his injured shoulder. Which was starting to ache because he had been stupid and hate hate hate hate hate… a few less hates this time, since only he was affected andfuck him for being stupid.

“Very true. It does alleviate some concern that an unanticipated flight from a restaurant shall not be looked upon too severely.”
“Unless it was your turn to pay and your wallet was also aboard that flight.”

“Egads! The Currency Conundrum!”

“We may have to stuff a few notes in a jar for emergencies like that.”

“Or conceal a diamond or two on our respective persons.”

“That’s classier than a handful of wadded banknotes.”

“Then that shall be our plan. I shall set Anthea upon the task of acquiring a few suitable stones in the morning.”

“Oh, she’ll murder you for that. Tell the Dragon Squad to do it. It’ll make them happy, though, good luck trying to get anything they steal out of their graspy little hands. And make the Crown Jewels off limits or you’ll have to collect them from the police because I don’t trust them not to try it.”

“I shall append a small notation to Charles’s employment contract that theft of government property, that is not explicitly sanctioned by me, is forbidden and violations of this will not be met by intervention to eliminate or curtail his resulting prison sentence if apprehended.”

“Explicitly sanctioned by you? Ok… what have you had him steal?”

“That is a secret.”

“Wrong. That is far too juicy and, I suspect, frivolous, to be secret.”

“Jammie Dodgers are not frivolous.”

“I stand corrected.”

“The floorplan for the biochemical weapons laboratory in… well, let us simply say that was not frivolous, either.”

“You are lying to me.”

“Am I? Dear me, such an interesting proposition. One would hate to be asked to prove such a thing, now, wouldn’t one? Yes, such a quandary it would produce. Imagine the repercussions if one could not produce evidence in support of one’s claim. The embarrassment alone would be tragic.”

“I… oh god. You’re doing it. You’re using your super-amazing Mycroft powers on me, like you did that bloody dark elf and I have no prayer of surviving. Death comes on swift wings. Tell Balthazar to enjoy living with the dear old ladies and gents. Use whatever I have in the bank to buy Dreamies so he isn’t too much of a nuisance to them. And toss in some of the special catnip. John knows where we keep the good stuff.”

“Mayhaps that should be our currency of crisis, as opposed to diamonds. Many a restauranteur has a feline at home and a desperate desire to see said feline content and quiet.”

“I think we’re on to something. Oh, sorry, garçon, but my partner there had to dart off and took our money with him. But, I shall happily trade our meal for this exceptionally fine Nepeta cataria that will please your pussy like none other.”

Mycroft wasn’t sure if he was titillated more by the intentionally-scampish ending of that
statement, the sorcerer’s proper use of binomial nomenclature or the terms ‘partner’ and ‘our’ being tossed out in such an offhand manner, but what did it matter when the titillation physically existed. Now was not a time to overthink things.

“How skillfully you craft a strategy, Gregory Lestrade.”

“I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve. Along with the rabbits, decks of cards and smoke-and-mirror machine. Always willing to learn a few new ones, though. Know a teacher that might be available?”

That’s a better smile, Mr. Holmes. That’s a full, happy, planning ahead smile that means good… no, great… things for you and me both.

“I might have a name or two to offer.”

“I think one will do.”

“Then I have perfect gentleman in mind.”

“Perfect gentleman, huh? Doesn’t sound like he’s a lot of fun.”

“Au contraire. Gentlemen are known to be the worst sorts of scallywags and hedonists.”

“Oh, well then. Looks like I have even more to learn.”

“And your lessons shall commence very soon.”

“As soon as John clears it?”

“But, of course! If you are left ravaged and destroyed, Gregory…”

Mycroft took Greg’s lips in a kiss that was probably violated the laws of physics with its immediate heat and left Greg whining softly when it was over.

“…I want you to know fully to whom to assign the credit.”

Oh yeah, he was going to die. Balthazar was going to live with the oldsters and he was going to die. And wasn’t that the best news this sad sorcerer had heard all day…
“Ready to be relieved of command, Anderson?”

John was surprised at his level of energy for this time of the morning, which was normally evening for him, especially given Sherlock didn’t seem to need any sleep and was content to drag him back to 221B Baker Street after dinner to continue discussing… one hundred billion things that came along with realizing that magic was real. To be fair, Sherlock handled things far more… maturely… than might be expected and the questions asked sometimes seemed loony until their purpose was explained, but Sherlock honestly wanted knowledge and that was always to be applauded. No fantasy, no smoke and mirrors, just facts and truth, even if, in the end, he proclaimed them disappointing and boring. As he proclaimed for most non-magical things, so it only stood to reason.

“I am! It’s been a bit nutty tonight, actually, and I am certainly ready for a bit of sleep.”

“Problems?”

“No, just busy. Apparently, some new film opened, with witches and magic and the like, so it sparked a bit of interest. Even faces I recognized! You’d think they knew better, but here they were buying this or that to see if it might work the way it did in the film. I suspect it won’t, but Greg’s accounts will be happy, nonetheless.”

“Yeah, that happens. New book or telly program or film lands and we see surge in business. It only lasts a day or two, but it can certainly turn a tidy profit. Greg and I have thought about making an effort to keep an eye on the entertainment scene and try our hands at a bit of marketing to take advantage of that sort of thing but, ultimately, we can’t be arsed.”

“Ooh, maybe that’s something I can do. I have time on my hands, in normal circumstances, and I could easily keep an eye on what’s what in entertainment and think about how Greg could take advantage of it. Window displays or discounts or buying an advert in the paper or something.”

“I’ll mention it to him. Speaking of him…”

“Quiet as a church mouse up there in the hospital ward. Sebastian checked in now and again to make certain they were taking the medication you left and getting their rest which, surprisingly, they were, even without being pushed into doing it.”

“Good. That’s the best thing possible right now for them, quiet and rest. Marcus’s uncle is visiting tonight and… well, at least he’s not Marcus. Or Leo, for that matter, so it should stay at the level of serious conversation and no ridiculousness like pistols at dawn. Petras is more a step out of the shadows, slit your throat, catch the blood spurt in a goblet and sip in while watching you die sort of person, so he certainly won’t disturb their rest. No raised blood pressure, either, since the opposite tends to happen when you’re losing most of your blood into a cliched bejeweled goblet.”

“Pete’s coming? Fun.”

John cut eyes at Sebastian who was stepping out into the front of the shop, with what smelled like a cup of good coffee in his hand.

“He hates it when you call him Pete.”
“Fun.”

“He’ll kill you one day.”

“He can try.”

“He usually does. But, in fairness, you deserve it.”

“Heh.”

“Wonderful. Anderson, keep him away from the shop tonight, will you? Greg having to step in to stop one of their stupid murder melees is not what he needs right now.”

“Spoilsport.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, Sebastian.”

John waved off the rude gesture, but suspected, given Anderson’s rather uneasy expression, that Sebastian would not be a bother tonight. In truth, both the vampire and the werewolf relished their occasional battles because they were both extremely skilled killers and facing an opponent at their level was a treat, but it did terrible things to the rugs and there was something unsettling about seeing what happened to tall, powerful supernatural creatures when they were being scolded by a short, elderly neighbor whose telly time was being disrupted and had a cat that’d run away because of the noise. It had taken hours to find that cat…

“Maybe we’ll watch our Ghostbusters films tonight, in that case. After a long sleep, that is. I’m absolutely knackered.”

John would have been worse than knackered at that point but, to his good fortune, Sherlock scarcely noticed when he nodded off on the sofa and got a respectable six hours sleep while Sherlock worked on some experiment or other with the preliminary sample of saliva he’d gotten from Marcus. Though, there was no surprise that his eyes opening coincided perfectly with Sherlock’s loud demand for tea and flick of a wrist towards the kitchen.

“Sleep, then films, then more sleep. Got it. Smart plan. I’ll see you tomorrow morning, then.”

Before Anderson could make a polite response, Sebastian drained the last of his coffee and scooted Anderson from behind the till and towards the door, with John making it even odds that the surly werewolf wouldn’t let Anderson go home alone. It was tragic, really. Anderson finally has the opportunity to step into the real world and meet people and who he meets is Sebastian. Though, he certainly wouldn’t have to worry about getting a seat on the Tube this morning with Sebastian as his companion. It was amazing how space magically cleared when the berk started to move towards it…

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“I have to admit, Sebastian, it’s kind of Mycroft to cover my wages. I don’t think Greg suspected he’d be this hurt for this long and he’d fret terribly if he thought I was working this much without pay.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to start looking for a permanent job, though, because I’ll need it, soon.”

“Doing what?”
“Anything! I’ve actually done a lot, though always for a short amount of time. Worked in all sorts of shops and on a farm, did cleaning work, washing dishes… which isn’t the same as cleaning work because that was mopping floors and emptying the bins… I’m not prideful, so I don’t care what I do, as long as it’s honest work.”

Anderson noticed the slight shift in Sebastian’s features and waited for the upcoming, inevitably-concise question.

“Define ‘honest.’ “

“No stealing, though I have had to do a bit of that to eat, now and again, but I won’t steal money or property. And no being a fraud, say, claiming I’m sick or disabled to fool people into giving me money. That sort of thing.”

“Ok.”

‘Ok’ was a highly typical Sebastian response. But, this time, it was tinged with tone that ran suspiciously close to relief. Which was interesting, to say the least.

“You know, Sebastian… you’ve never been terribly specific about what you do for a living…”

“Uh… bookkeeping.”

That was a lie and a poorly-delivered one, at that. Time to dig…

“Oh! An accountant! Then you should be giving Greg advice on managing his business and his taxes and the like. I know John’s mentioned Greg’s thought about hiring someone to do that sort of thing, so why aren’t you doing it? I think he would have asked you by now.”

“Not that kind.”

“Of accountant? What other kinds are there?”

Why do you look so nervous, Sebastian? Detective Anderson is now on the case and he will discover the source of the nervousness! Unless it’s something personal and sad, in which case I’ll feel bad and that won’t be any good at all.

“Uh… biblical.”

“Working for churches? Well, I can see where their money issues might be a tad different than a standard shopkeeper, but there has to be some overlap. You don’t seem the terribly religious sort, though, so it’s a rather strange specialty, not that there’s anything wrong with it, of course. You must like it if that’s what you’re doing, so…”

“Not that kind.”

“We’re running out of kinds, Sebastian.”

“It’s… reckoning. That’s biblical. And bookkeeping.”

“That didn’t clarify things.”

Sebastian sighed and it was one that Anderson recognized, which signaled the werewolf was going to say something he’d rather not say but felt he had to anyway.

“I kill people.”
This time, Sebastian stopped walking so he wouldn’t find himself walking alone after a particularly-troubling revelation.

“You… kill people? Which people?”

“Bad people.”

“Define ‘bad.’ “

“Embezzlers, rapists, torturers…”

“Oh. That does sound bad.”

“Yeah.”

“And you… kill them.”

“Yeah.”

“For money?”

“Yeah.”

Anderson thought a moment, then hmmm’d loudly.

“I would suspect that sort of thing commanded a lot of money… is that why you keep trying to distract me when I ask about your flat?”

Sebastian winced and Anderson nodded his own answer to the question.

“I see.”

“No.”

“No, I don’t see or no, that’s not why you distract me?”

“Want some ice cream?”

“With distraction sauce?”

“…. maybe.”

“Sebastian…”

“Don’t want you… to feel bad.”

“Because I’m poor?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re not.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not ashamed of being poor. Are you ashamed of not being poor?”

“No.”
“Then you’re taking me to your flat so I can see it… and have a cup of coffee.”

He should probably reflect, at some point, on how he’d been cataloging Sebastian’s various behaviors, but Anderson decided that could wait for a more opportune time because this tiny smile of Sebastian’s was his ‘I’m happy and didn’t think I was going to be happy’ smile and that was something that should get a chance to shine without any pesky analysis muddying its waters.

“Ok. Got coffee.”

“Good coffee, I wager, too.”

“Yeah. Food, too.”

“More food? Mr. Holmes made certain we ate like… kings!”

“Nah, kings eat shit. Leo likes McDonalds.”

“Oh dear. That doesn’t sound very kingly.”

“I got steaks.”

“That’s a bit harsh.”

“What?”

“Just because he’s a vampire that likes crap food doesn’t mean you should put a stake through him.”

“Steaks like you eat.”

“Oh. Is this your way of saying we’re having more than coffee this morning?”

“Yeah.”

“Well… I can’t see any reason to object to that.”

“Object to what, might I ask?”

Anderson whirled at the voice, but Sebastian took his sweet time turning to glare at Jim Moriarty’s smirking face.

“That’s… that’s our business.”

Now, Sebastian was wearing a smirk of his own at Anderson’s show of defiance, slightly shaky-voiced as it might be.

“I admit that the odds of your business being indescribably boring is punishingly high, but I do so enjoy staying abreast of the local news. For instance, all the stories about sad old Greg. Needed a tedious government man to sort out his business with a dark elf? A not-very-impressive dark elf, at that? Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Or, how the old, banal and slightly saggy have fallen.”

Anderson was making ready to reply when Sebastian made a small noise that sounded like a dry click that, somehow, Anderson knew was a warning not to dive into a conversation with the man trying to dive into a conversation with them.

“Whatever.”
“Chatty as always, Moran. It’s not a good look, though, you realize… Greg having to rely on some outsider to fight his battles for him.”

“Ok.”

“Why do you have to be so dull?”

“Dunno.”

“You weren’t always this dull. Remember the little jobs you did for me, Sebastian? You weren’t dull when you were stalking and killing some unfortunate person in a spectacularly violent way.”

Sebastian kept silent and stared at Moriarty with a smile that said spectacular violence might be something the sorcerer would get to witness again today, though he might not enjoy the experience as much as he had in the past.

“Is it your little pet? Some people think pets make them more interesting, but I think yours has dulled your colors. Monochrome Moran… what a tragedy.”

“And what would be your excuse, Moriarty? For being dull, I mean. Really… droning on and on in that wheedly little voice of yours… talk about boring. King of Boring is more like it.”

Moriarty glared at the cat sitting in the flowerbox to his left and glared harder when Balthazar started laughing.

“I am going to skin you, cat.”

“Pffffbbbbt….!”

Anderson had to admit that Balthazar could make a properly rude noise when he had the urge.

“And your feeble master won’t be able to protect you.”

Balthazar hopped off the flower box, made another, albeit slightly different, rude noise, then coughed up a hairball onto Moriarty’s expensive shoe.

“That does it!”

Balthazar laughed and sped off into the shop with Moriarty hot on his heels, returning the smirk to Sebastian’s face.

“John’s problem now.”

“Do you think we should help?”

“Nope.”

“Oh.”

Sebastian nudged Anderson forward, then kept nudging as the sorcerer continued to look over his shoulder towards the shop as if he was waiting for explosions to blow out the windows.

“So, you’re saying we have a nice breakfast… second breakfast… and John has to manage a marauding Moriarty?”
“Yep.”

“He’s going to kill me, you know.”

“Not if Moriarty kills him first.”

“That’s true. But, I’d have to go back in to work in that case, so my coffee and breakfast respite would go to shit.”

“It would anyway, eventually.”

“I… was that a joke?”

“Yep.”

Anderson paused a moment, then snickered like a schoolboy, wagging a finger at an innocent-eyed Sebastian while doing so.

“Funny man. Come on, let’s go.”

This time, Anderson didn’t need to be nudged forward, but didn’t mind that Sebastian did it anyway. For a man who might appear like a simmering stone statue at times, Sebastian was a surprisingly contact-liking individual. Which was something Anderson… appreciated. A little nudge here, a small poke there, a tap, a touch… small things that were nice. Pleasant, really. Not that he seemed to do that for anyone else, of course, but Sebastian didn’t seem quite as friendly with other people, so it stood to reason. The friendliness was also pleasant. Very pleasant and very welcome in his life. Of course, nothing in his life to this point indicated that one day he’d be friends with someone who killed people for a living and liked small bits of pleasant contact, but life was full of surprises, some, apparently, more surprising than others…

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“You heard me.”

“Greg is not paying for a new pair of shoes for you. Just wipe off the gack and you’ll be done with it.”

“I can never wear these again.”

“You’re wearing them now, so I suspect your foot will still fit in them the next time you choose to put the ridiculous things on your feet.”

“My shoes are not ridiculous. My shoes are exquisite.”

“Not with a hairball on them, they’re not.”

John continued to shake the flannel at Moriarty who finally snatched it out of John’s fingers to remove Balthazar’s generous gift from his oxfords.

“Ugh… burn this.”

“I will. Now, is there anything you actually want to buy today? I could see my way to offering you a small discount in compensation for your shoe troubles.”

“I need to talk to your boss.”
“Sorry, but Greg’s not available. You can talk to me or to Balthazar, if you actually have something to talk about, as opposed to just being tetchy.”

“I have no reason in the world to talk to a shop boy and a flea-ridden cat.”

“Then, kindly don’t let us take up any more of your time. Bye.”

“Funny. I want to know why both Varnas brothers are in London at the same time. It’s odd enough that the old bastard Leonas is here, without his usual flinging of bitterness and bile about on everyone and everything, but his brother, too? That one… that one is certainly not boring. Slinking around in the darkened corners and staying just at the very edge of your perceptions… I want to know what’s going on.”

“I thought you specialized in knowing what’s going on. At least, that’s what you insist on telling everyone, whether they’re listening or not.”

“Imagine my surprise! A conundrum I cannot crack, which makes it even more tantalizing a thing, don’t you agree?”

Yes, but John certainly wasn’t going to say that aloud.

“That the business of two people in this world actually remains their business and not yours? No, not particularly tantalizing.”

“You can’t stop me going up to see Greg.”

John hated that little smirk on Moriarty’s face and not only because what the sorcerer said was actually true.

“No, but I can stand back and laugh at you when Greg is done with you for invading his flat uninvited.”

“And I do believe I shall add my rather paltry talents to whatever Gregory might deem suitable for your chastisement. I did practice fencing in my youth and I have little doubt the good doctor can find for me a suitable weapon. There seems to be no end to what this delightful shop offers for purchase.”

Now, it was John smirking because Moriarty’s face had taken on a completely different expression hearing Mycroft’s perfectly enunciated words.

“Ah… the government man. Exactly as unimpressive as I imagined.”

“I do my best. John, I am taking a brief constitutional for a small treat to add to Gregory’s breakfast. Might I offer you a croissant or pastry, as well?”

“Love one, actually. About to put the kettle on, so that will start my day off on a good foot. Jim, back to you trying to fake a reason for being here this morning…”

Not that Moriarty deigned to answer because his eyes were fixed on the figure slowly making his way out of the shop. A figure his legs decided it would be fun to follow. At least, more fun than remaining and talking to John.

“So… you’re what my tax money buys these days. No wonder we don’t have an empire anymore.”
Mycroft sighed softly but had predicted that this Jim Moriarty would follow him in hopes of having a private word, so he was already prepared for the nuisance.

“Standards are falling all over, I am afraid.”

“That’s true. That’s very, very true. Take Greg, for example. There was a time he was something of a figure in our community, though that may actually be evidence that standards have never been high to begin with, which is actually a probable thing given people, special or not, have the equivalent of custard for brains. Plain, lumpy custard, at that. In any case, now he can’t even manage one uninspiring elf. When you have to rely on a crippled custard to fight your battles… well, that’s not something to boast about, is it?”

“Fight his battles? I have no idea where you gained that idea but certainly not from a firsthand source. Or someone connected to a firsthand source in any manner. I find it best, when I have the need, rare though it is, to always seek information from sources closest to an issue else I might commit the rather embarrassing faux pas of leaping to an incorrect conclusion and stating it publicly.”

“It is best, that’s true, which is why I can proudly claim it to be my standard practice. Fortunately, in this case, I have wealth of sources for information. Not all, you see, in this particular… world.”

Mycroft slotted that piece of information away in his mental files and was happy, again, he’d gotten a calling card for the elf, should his own bit of information-gathering be necessary.

“That must be a great help in your… what was it you do again?”

“Oh, this and that. More that than this, most days. And, yes, it is. Xjalcgdlvd… not a game most non-elves can master, yet I understand that you… did.”

Moriarty certainly hadn’t been boasting about the quality of his sources. Concerning, but not overly so, lest Gregory would consider him more of a threat than he had indicated.

“Was that the delightful bit of whimsy with pebbles and wavy lines?”

“The very one. The game based on what our dreary universe would call quantum mechanics.”

“Is it? How interesting. I suppose I must have knack for… fiddly things like mathematics. Maths are involved, are they not? I seem to remember that from school.”

Mycroft smiled a particular smile that was perfectly affable yet swirled with stripes of both cluelessness and something that cast that cluelessness strongly into doubt. Moriarty despised people who could smile a more nuanced smile than him and he found himself starting at a master of the art.

“A highly-intriguing knack. The sort of knack I wouldn’t expect for a government drone.”

“Really? I would suspect, given the grey bleakness of government life, one might expect, if one possessed the spark of imagination, that the plodding drones would have at least one feature of interest. A knack for cooking or languages or maths. It’s rather what we’ve come to anticipate from novels and the film industry, is it not?”

“You… what are you playing at Mr. Mycroft Holmes. Brother of Sherlock Holmes, who is another fly buzzing around the steaming pile of disappointment that is Lestrade’s tat shop?”
“That amusing *Xjalegdvlvd* game. Was that not what we were discussing?”

That Mycroft spoke the tongue-twisting elvish word with not a single slip made Moriarty nod slightly in recognition of the rather remarkable feat.

“That we were. And quantum physics. Heisenber’s Uncertainty Principle… always a thing to ponder.”

“It seems, from my vague memories of maths and science at school, of course, that the Uncertainty Principle, is a terribly misunderstood thing.”

“By tiny minds, yes. But… even the tiny-minded interpretations can be… appropriate. For some things, at least.”

“Not something I would argue, most certainly. Well, it has been a delightful conversation, however, duty calls.”

“Oh yes, must plump Greg’s enlarging arse even further.”

“It does make his sitting activities far more comfortable.”

With another nuanced smile, Mycroft started towards the small café a few doors along from the shop, knowing that his every move was being watched and analyzed. It had been foolish, perhaps… no, it had likely been foolish to play games with the odious Moriarty, however, it would not do to let the man believe that there was a chink in Gregory’s armor or that a potentially leverageable asset existed to use against the sorcerer. Ultimately, it might be expected that a man of Gregory’s standing and power have at his side someone who had a measure of their own power and ability, so whatever Moriarty might glean from their little interaction would serve to underscore the point. However… yes, it was time to take a closer look at the man and evaluate his threat status. Of course, that Moriarty moved in circles that he had not before investigated posed a challenge, but Mycroft Holmes had never turned away from a challenge and certainly would not choose now to begin…

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“Oh… well…”

Anderson looked about the large, well-appointed flat with eyes as wide as they’d been when they arrived at the building hosting the large, well-appointed flat.

“It’s ok.”

“The flat is ok or the fact that I’m a bit astonished by it is ok?”

“Pick one.”

“I’ll pick both to be safe. And, I’m not upset or anything, if that’s your worry. I’m just…”

Anderson narrowed his eyes, looked around the flat again, looked at Sebastian, and repeated the cycle a few more times to Sebastian’s growing concern.

“What?”

“You… you don’t stay here much, do you?”

“Why?”
“This is a lovely flat, mind you. A very lovely one, but… it’s not you. There’s not a lot of personality here and you have lots of it, even when you’re trying not to show it. Admittedly, it’s very tidy and so are you, to a degree, but it’s too tidy and… on one hand, I can see you hiring a cleaning service but, on the other hand, I also see you not wanting people to be rummaging about your space, especially if you’re not at home.”

Sebastian’s look of concern had changed to one of pride at Anderson’s deductions and he began to let that show, which made the sorcerer beam brightly.

“True. Come on.”

Sebastian walked through what Anderson assumed was his bedroom and towards the large walk-in closet that occupied one wall. Then it was into the closet and, with a series of presses on different parts of the rear wall, a space opened for them to step through into a very different flat altogether.

“Well… this does look more like you.”

This flat was just as large but looked like one that someone actually inhabited. A wealthy, but slightly messy someone who had a taste for weapons as a decorating theme and didn’t mind drinking fine spirits straight from the bottle, as might be inferred from the half-empty bottle of whisky on the table in front of the sofa without a glass to be seen anywhere.

“Like it?”

There was a whisper of worry in Sebastian’s voice and Anderson was happy he wasn’t going to give it credence.

“I do, actually. The colors and things are more you and… it’s comfortable looking, despite the number of guns and knives you have on the walls. And on the tables. And other places. I very much like the wall of books. That’s always a sign of good things, from what I’ve experienced.”

Sebastian’s puffed chest made Anderson’s eyes soften. It would be so easy for people to think Moran was just a cold, lifeless person, but he really wasn’t. Though, truthfully, that wasn’t the image one likely wanted to project when you were a killer-for-hire.

“I like reading.”

“I do, too. I think I’ve spent more time at the library than anywhere else except my flat or Greg’s shop. I’m curious, though, was this all one flat that you divided, or did you connect two together?”

“Connected. I…”

“Go ahead.”

“Own the whole floor.”

“Oh… well, that’s a good investment, I suppose. The other people up here pay you rent?”

“Yeah.”

“Very good investment, then. London is stupidly expensive to live in, so it’s good money in your pocket. Your other flat is, what do they call it… window dressing?”

“Sort of. Diversion, too.”
“So, if someone comes looking for you, they might break in, but think you’re not at home?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s certainly smart. What if, though, they were watching you and know you *should* be home?”

“Escape hatch.”

“You have one of those?”

“Leads to fire exit.”

“So, they might think you caught onto them and went out the back. This… this is very spy thriller, Sebastian, I have to admit. Nicely done!”

“Thanks.”

“Is there a ritual I have to go through to swear me to secrecy?”

“Nope. Wait. Yeah… coffee.”

“I can make coffee. Can you make steaks?”

“How many?”

“One is enough for me.”

“So… four. I can make four steaks.”

“Then consider me secrecy-sworn and in charge of coffee. You can show me some of your guns after we eat. I don’t know anything about them but love to learn about anything new.”

A wide boyish grin grew on Sebastian’s lips and Anderson marveled at how happy the man looked at the suggestion.

“Really?”

“Oh yes. I think that would be very interesting.”

Sebastian had had zero reservations about bringing Anderson into his bolt hole, which, besides him, only Greg knew about but had worried a bit about… everything. Philip was a gentle, decent person, and those sorts usually weren’t content to walk into a secret weapons storehouse, even if steaks *were* involved.

“Oh.”

It was only one word, but Anderson could hear every bit of Sebastian’s excitement in it, though it was delivered with the werewolf’s typical dry tone. Honestly, the rush to get home to sleep suddenly didn’t seem as pressing. A lot of coffee, a bit of food in the stomach, and he could easily spend a few hours here examining Sebastian’s collection. Of both the weapons and the books. He had all night to sleep, anyway, so why not spend his time today doing something fun? It was a shame they didn’t have their Ghostbusters discs here, though, because Sebastian’s telly looked amazing. It was a thought for another day, however. Hot popcorn, good films and the knowledge that an invading army could be repelled easily with the firepower contained in the flat. If they add a few beers to that ensemble, the evening would be perfect…
Happily enough, Sebastian was well-provided with beer and not at all unhappy about savoring a few at an hour most people would use as evidence that someone had a drinking problem. Sizzling steaks and good beer for breakfast was a breakfast of champions in Anderson’s opinion and since his was the only opinion his stomach cared about right now, that was the one that ruled supreme and pesky naysayers could get stuffed.

“This is great! Not everyone knows how to make a good steak, but you do, that’s certain enough.”

Sebastian’s mouth was too full to answer, but nodded his agreement before taking a long sip of his beer to accompany his feast. His mouth, however, was not too full to scowl at the sound of his mobile ringing because it was Greg, who was one person he generally didn’t ignore since Greg knew he hated to talk on the phone and a frivolous call would be met with vengeance somewhere down the line in a most unexpected and irritating manner.

“What?”

“Are you eating again?”

“Yeah.”

“Why can’t I have a werewolf’s metabolism?”

“Don’t deserve it, Greg.”

“Very funny, you bastard. Look… Moriarty was skulking about and has, apparently, taken an interest in Mycroft. He already had Sherlock on his radar, and this is getting a bit too focused to not have some point behind it.”

“Keep an eye on him?”

“Yeah. I’m going to do some poking about myself, at least, the sort of poking that I can do without having to go out and actually poke, but eyes on him might be wise for a bit. At least, until we can get some idea of what bee flew into his pretty bonnet.”

“Ok. I’ll bill Mycroft.”

“Funny, again.”

“He won’t be laughing.”

“My sides are splitting from hilarity.”

“John’ll sew them together again.”

“Anderson is there, isn’t he?”

“Why?”

“You’re certainly not doing your musical hall comedy act for me.”

“I juggle knives, not tell jokes. Same costume, though.

“Oh my god… I can hear him giggling. You two deserve each other.”
“Yeah. He likes my guns.”

“Your guns… Sebastian Moran. Do you have a boy in your room?”

Said in Greg’s best ‘dad’ voice, which actually made Sebastian more prone to answer since… it might be said this was somewhat of a dad issue and Greg was the closest thing available.

“… maybe.”

“And he didn’t back away in terror?”

“Nope.”

“Then… good.”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t forget about tailing Moriarty.”

“I’m on it.”

“And… we’ll talk, if you want to.”

“Ok.”

Sebastian terminated the call and took another sip of his beer, draining it dry, before rising to get two more to put on the table.

“I have a job.”

“I heard you mention watching someone, but that’s not the same as killing someone.”

“I watch people, too.”

“Oh. I suppose I actually knew that since Greg had you watch me. I look on that more as a favor for him than a job, though.”

“Guess so.”

“Who are you going to watch?”

“Moriarty.”

“Well, that makes sense. He was being a pest today.”

“Got interested in Mycroft.”

“That’s not good. He certainly chased after Sherlock and John when they left the shop the other day, so… yes, I can see why Greg would be worried. Ok, then… what’s our first move?”

“Our?”

“I wager you want to get started on this as soon as possible and I’m full of coffee, so I won’t be ready to see my pillow for awhile. I’d love to learn how to spy on somebody. It could come in handy one day.”

“Doubtful.”
“Never say never. Working in kitchens has given me very useful skills for mixing potions and preparing poultices and creams and such. Will I need a disguise?”

“No.”

“*Can* I have a disguise?”

“No… we’ll see.”

“Since we’ve agreed to my disguise, we’ll have to factor in the size of the gun I’ll be carrying.”

“Wrong.”

“They seem to make a big deal out of that on the detective programs. Knowing someone is packing heat by how their jacket hangs.”

“Double wrong.”

“And I’ll strap a knife to my leg like the action heroes do. Someone takes my gun, I can stab them for their impoliteness.”

“Joking?”

“Maybe I am. Maybe I’m not.”

Anderson’s impudent grin cost him his bottle of lager, which was dragged across the table towards Sebastian.

“No more. You’re drunk.”

“I’m not drunk. I would never get drunk before a spy mission. I am a professional, after all.”

Sebastian paused, started sniggering and only made a half-hearted attempt to stop Anderson snatching back his beer of victory.

“Only this once.”

“That’s fine. I just want to know how it’s done and if it’s exciting or boring. Books and films show it both ways, so it’ll be nice to know for certain.”

“Boring, usually.”

“It’s the usually bit I’m especially interested in.”

“Finish your beer.”

“Oh, I will. Then we’ll work on my clever disguise. I’m not saying a trench coat has to be involved, but I’m hinting a trench coat has to be involved.”

Sebastian shook his head at the silliness, but actually found it… nice. It was nice to have someone to talk to who… talked. And didn’t mind much that he didn’t. Someone who felt comfortable in his home and, more importantly, with him. Greg would be homebound for another few days, so stopping in for a chat would be easy enough. Even with Mycroft there. He’d add Philip’s time today onto the bill and get it in cash so the man could get some groceries in his larder. And find out what those two layabouts were doing to get Philip a job. Mycroft had to have investments, people who owned companies, there shouldn’t be any reason he couldn’t set up Philip with
something good.

“I think we’ll need code names, too. Can’t be yelling out ‘Hey Sebastian, I see him!’ or it’ll give away our secret identities.”

Just nothing in the spy game. Or anything involving trench coats…

“Moriarty is a bit of a fop, isn’t he?”

“He likes clothes.”

“He likes lots of clothes. Why does a person need so many clothes? Or shoes? It’s ridiculous.”

“Vain.”

“I suppose so.”

The dynamic duo had used a spell Greg recommended to find Moriarty, then trailed him through the day as the sorcerer went about his business. Which featured a lot of shopping, but also a good bit of brief meetings with people that Sebastian and Anderson documented with photos, fortunately taken with a pro-quality camera and telephoto lens, so neither had to be in a position where their lack of disguise would be an issue. The battle for the no-disguise protocol had been fierce, but Sebastian did concede that Anderson could wear a long-forgotten hat they’d found at the back of Sebastian’s close and keep it drawn down over his eyes like they did in the films.

Now, though, it was moving towards dinner time and Moriarty hadn’t seen fit to stay at home once he got there, instead donning a highly unexpected set of clothes which were tidy, but certainly not anything purchased today in the shopping spree, and darting out as if he had an appointment to keep.

“Hmmm… maybe he’s slipping out for a pint at his local?”

“Nah.”

“Catching a film?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“He doesn’t have fun.”

“That’s… well, that’s sad, actually.”

“Fucker.”

“True, he is that, but even they should have a spot of fun now and again or they’ll become even fuckier.”

“Huh. Possible, I guess.”

“Well, let’s see where he goes. If he is just having a bit of fun, then we can stop for a quick pint of our own and discuss our mission results.”
“Ok.”

Following their target, as they had been all day, the pair of spies tailed Moriarty to a modest building some distance from his own flat and debated what to do when he went inside. The debate was short-lived, however, as Moriarty came back out minutes later with a pretty woman, wearing what could only be termed a ‘happy’ dress that flattered her figure, but certainly labeled the wearer as someone far more concerned with personally being content with what she wore than the opinions of any onlookers.

“Hmmmmm….that’s interesting.”

“What?”

“She seems… familiar.”

“You know her?”

“No, it’s just… I think I’ve seen her. At Greg’s shop, I think. Not when I was at the till, because I do tend to remember the people I help, but… maybe when I was working with Greg in the workshop and darted upstairs to get something.”

“Huh… accomplice?”

“I have no idea, but… this seems like something Greg should know.”

“Yeah. You phone him. I’ll get photos.”

Which weren’t hard to take since the couple continued to stand in front of the building while Moriarty complimented the woman’s dress and gave her a peck on the cheek, which even from this distance, Sebastian could tell drew a shy smile and blush from the woman in question. It was… weird. And in a more-than-Moriarty-weird sort of weird. Hopefully Greg or John had an idea who this woman was because she apparently had her eyes on them and that couldn’t be good. Hopefully, he wouldn’t have to step in and do any… management… of the situation. Philip would probably be upset if he killed a woman wearing a yellow dress and carrying a handbag with flowers on it and making Philip upset wasn’t a life goal at this point in time…
Chapter 34

“Shit.”

Greg looked again through the photos on his phone that Anderson had forwarded along after he’d called to brief them on the latest news from the spy mission. There was no mistaking it was Jim Moriarty escorting Molly Hooper out for the evening and that was a red flag as assertive and vibrant as rose petals from a very upscale flower shop.

“I agree. This is a most distressing turn of events, especially since I doubt this is a coincidence.”

“Oh, no chance of that. First, Moriarty would not escort out a lady wearing those clothes. And I mean for both of them. He’s a dandy when he’s seen in public and the few times I’ve seen him associate socially with anyone, it’s with people who also prefer to use their clothes as a show of… whatever. Molly is exactly the sort of person he’d normally berate, at length and nastily. How’d he get eyes on her?”

“Anderson did indicate that Moriarty followed Sherlock and John out of the shop when they paid a visit to the morgue.”

“Forgot about that. And, very likely, if he was interested enough to follow them out of the shop, he’d stay with it to see where they were going. Or… any chance he was watching you and learned about Molly through her connection with Anthea?”

“Perhaps. It is not advertised that they are related, but it is certainly not a secret, because nothing prompts scrutiny more than the discovery of a secret. Though they routinely socialize, my PA shares naught but vague details about her work, and certainly little to nothing about mine. I have no doubt, however, Ms. Hooper suspects the story is far more interesting than what she is told and has formed her own opinions based on what facts she does possess. That being said, if she chose to share her suspicions with others, it would likely come across as a boast about a relative to gain second-hand interest from the intrigue of their work. Unfortunately, since Moriarty already suspects there is more to my dabblings…”

“Ok, so this is not a miraculous coincidence and we have a major problem on our hands. Not least of which is getting Molly away from that bastard.”

“He… do you feel he would harm her?”

“Oddly, no. At least not physically, that’s not his game. Play with her head, that’s a different story.”

“Are you implying he would mesmerize her in some manner?”

“No, although that’s not impossible to do. It’s a proximity-based thing, mostly, so you can keep a spell like that at work while the person is in your vicinity and, though it might linger awhile after you separate, it won’t linger long. That sort of spell works best when you share the same house, if you want really long-term, but it’s fairly short duration, otherwise. That doesn’t mean it can’t be fantastically influential and cause a lot of damage, but… I’ve never heard of him doing anything like it. Actually, as greatly as he admires his own talent, he admires his so-called genius just as much and hexing someone to get information wouldn’t be as satisfying as manipulating them in other ways so when they learned what they’d done, they’d feel especially awful.”
“Charming fellow, but I see your point. He will not likely gain any useful information from his subterfuge, however, it is still a dangerous situation for Ms. Hooper, for she is a kind and trusting soul. It is too easy to imagine her falling victim to manipulative techniques, whether they were magically-based or not.”

“I agree. She’s not stupid or overly naive, but seems the sort to give people the benefit of the doubt and someone as skilled as Moriarty can take very good, or bad, advantage of that. There is a problem, though…”

“Alerting him to the fact his scheme has been discovered.”

“Yeah. Again, I’m not concerned about him hurting her because of it, but that his interest would grow even stronger since, when we act, it means someone had to learn what was going on, that someone had to be someone who knew he was and the threat he posed, and that this someone knew to report to us. That implies either eyes on him or her, or both, set by us, which he’d interpret as confirmation there was reason to dig even further. As a secondary effect, his ego would swell to an even more disgraceful size, which nobody in this world needs. Nobody.”

“Ultimately, I place Ms. Hooper’s safety as a higher priority than confirmation of something he already suspects but, to our good fortune, the path to securing both her safety and eliminating a potential information route are one and the same.”

“You know who we have to talk to before we make any decisions, don’t you?”

“Oh, I do. However, I am not content to be the reason the theatre news tomorrow focuses on an expletive-laden tirade during one of the West End’s highest-profile shows.”

“Yeah, she’ll explode and probably not leave many standing in the aftermath. That would rid us of Marcus and Leo, though, so it’s something we shouldn’t toss aside without due consideration.”

Mycroft smirked and permitted himself a brief fantasy of his PA drawing a battle axe from her handbag and laying waste to the vampires since the real targets of her fury were not within arm’s reach.

“True, however, we are hosting a guest very soon who might object to the outright murder of his family.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

Mycroft and Greg both turned their heads to gaze at the figure standing in the doorway to Greg’s flat and Mycroft suddenly had his broken youthful imaginings about vampires fully restored. The man towered several inches over his own height and was thin in the way that suggests his body mass was composed entirely of lean muscle, so one could not find a speck of fat regardless of the intensity of the search. He was dressed all in immaculately-tailored black, save for a crimson pocket square and an equally crimson stone set in a silver or white-gold ring on one finger. His features were sharp and his eyes unfathomably dark, possessing his nephew’s elegant-beauty, but with crueler edge, something that was effectively enhanced by the lack of hair on his head, as well as the menacing smirk on his lips, Everything about him was beguiling and sinister in staggeringly effective proportions, so a person he took to bed would never be certain if it was to be the best or the final night of their lives. Or both.

“Fucking wonderful. Does anyone in your family have enough common courtesy to knock before entering a person’s home, Petras?”
“Your door was ajar.”

“My door is a door, not a jar, and I left it cracked to hear you when you politely made certain to make noise coming up the stairs, like a courteous person.”

Mycroft took note of the long, low noise their guest emitted from behind closed lips that was a perfect blend of a growl and hiss and Greg’s brief rude noise of response, accompanied by appropriate hand gesture. Apparently, this was a familiar bit of playacting that each man found a critical element of their pre-conversation greeting.

“Dear me, Gregory… dinners with your family-by-marriage must be a terribly entertaining event.”

Watching the vampire’s eyes slowly turn towards Mycroft, who was giving Petras a look that declared ‘Yes, I said that and feel free to make of it what you will,” Greg held his breath and hoped Mycroft knew what he was doing here. Tactically, it was a profoundly smart move for Mycroft to disclose upfront that he knew about the marriage between himself and Marcus, since, one, it alerted Petras that Mycroft was not unaware of certain intricacies and complexities of his life and, two, it could not be used either as leverage against a pesky sorcerer who might not want that secret known at this juncture, or as a bomb to drop when either the pesky sorcerer or the man in his life needed to be sidetracked from something the vampire was not happy to see proceed. Defusing those possibilities right at the beginning also showed Mycroft knew they would be considered and… the man was fucking amazing. Of course, Petras was now staring like a cat facing an upstart intruder to its territory and that was usually not a good thing for the person being glared at.

However, the vampire was achieving exactly the same degree of success with his nonsense as had the dark elf… meaning none… as Mycroft held his gaze steady with the faintest whisper of a ‘I can do this far longer than you and with far less effort’ smile on his lips until the vampire gave a curt nod of acknowledgement.

“The stories are not exaggerated, I see.”

Mycroft’s eyebrow rose only a fraction, but it was enough for Greg to know this was certainly just the beginning of something important and he was, at present, only a bystander. And he couldn’t even claim to be an innocent one, not with his tragically misspent life…

“Some are…”

“By design.”

“Of course. The world would fracture from the wailing and weeping were it to discover the true depths of my banality. And, might I offer my own admiration for I am now not so disbelieving of the various tales of the mythical Tall Man as once I was.”

Ooh! That had Petras’s eyebrow raising. Not as sexily as Mycroft’s, so fuck off vampire with your eyebrow raising and lip pursing and trying to outdo the master of that sort of thing. Petras – 0, Mycroft – all the points. And the crowd goes wild! But how cute was it that vicious, calculating murder-bot Petras Varnas had a widdle pet name among the sneaky sort. This could never be forgotten. Maybe Charles wouldn’t mind another tattoo so when this mediocre stage magician got old and confused, Charles could point to his arse or something and remind the poor dear of this exquisite bit of hilarity. Should have called him the Bald Man or something though. Cueball would have been brilliant…

“Oh, have you heard of me, Iceman?”
Oh right. Mycroft had a widdle pet name, too. His was better, though. Leagues better.

“I would be a disappointing minor government official if I did not.”

Greg really wished he had a bowl of popcorn, because this was a show he didn’t expect to see tonight, but was ready to binge watch until the credits.

“Astoundingly minor, yes, but occasionally useful.”

Don’t stare at my Mycroft like that, evil bald vampire! You’re just embarrassing yourself. Unless… oh, are you doing the thing he and Sherlock do when they stare at someone then suddenly blurt out something astonishing?

“Albania.”

That wasn’t astonishing.

“A lovely country.”

“Not always for vampires.”

“Is it not? Oh my, I shall make a note of that.”

They were speaking in code! Or… something. Good for Mycroft not taking the bait at the end though because Petras was absolutely trying to find out if Mycroft knew about vampires before recently. Not going to fool my Mycroft with that soggy bait!

“At times it can be quite unfriendly, depending upon where one is and with whom one is associating. Even a small bit of information, passed along at the proper time, can be extremely valuable in securing one’s… mission.”

You weren’t going to say that, soggy bait vampire! Mycroft pulled your silly arse out of a fire, maybe literally, and saved your bloody skin. Because he’s amazing. I may have said that already, but it certainly bears repeating.

“Something I have, myself, noted often. The value of information is not something to underestimate.”

Now you’re both staring. Is that good? It wasn’t happy staring. More like sizing up an opponent before you launch into murder and mayhem staring. Or sizing them up for their opinion on coffee versus tea. Maybe hiding under the bed is a smart idea. Mycroft takes his tea very seriously.

“Gregory, whatever are you doing?”

Forgetting that I’m not actually on the bed and remembering that if the predicted murder and mayhem erupts, you’re actually at a major disadvantage and I’ll need to leap in, so I got caught halfway between sliding and leaping and embarrassed myself like a champion.

“Uh… getting water?”

“I shall obtain your water. Mr. Varnas, might I offer you something?”

“Like blood?”

“I was actually thinking a glass of Gregory’s rather impressive whisky, but to each his own. My dear, have you a tourniquet, scalpel and an insulated vessel? I doubt our guest would
appreciate his beverage being served cold.”

Fair play to evil bald vampire… that was a Mycroft-worthy snort.

“Amusing.”

“Thank you. Whisky, then?”

“Two fingers.”

Which Petras extended, allowing Mycroft to see both their length and the impressive set of claws that grew at what Greg knew was a snail’s pace because Petras was just that dramatic. However, he kept that to himself because (a) the vampire deserved a victory since he’d lost every battle against Mycroft so far, in Greg’s mind and (b) if Mycroft was impressed, he did absolutely nothing to show it.

“Excellent. I believe I shall join you.”

“Me too!”

Mycroft almost objected, then thought better of it. Though his Gregory had history with the vampire, it was certainly not the time to mother hen the sorcerer. Appearances were highly valuable things in their lines of work and upsetting the existing power structure and perceptions held by their guest was not wise.

“But, of course, Gregory.”

After Mycroft rose to get their drinks, Greg made a rude gesture at Petras who slowly made his own in return and let it linger while his claws slowly bid their farewell.

“I have no idea who your act is for, because it’s not getting rave reviews here.”

What was getting rave reviews, though, was that Mycroft wasn’t using his crutches! Limping and moving at quarter-speed, but definitely on his own two, unsupported, feet. If that was to give Petras a false picture of his condition or an actual sign of improvement was the question, but one that could be asked later when there wasn’t a drama-loving vampire there to hear the answer.

“Your lover deserves a worthy performance, does he not?”

“Oh, fuck off with that.”

Though, yes, it’s absolutely true that Mycroft deserves all the magic-y stuff the magic world offers because he loves that sort of thing and it’s a joy to watch him learn something new, his face lighting up with excitement, but you can still fuck off on basic principle.

“Trouble in paradise already?”

“And have a complimentary plate of fuck off to go with the savory, delicious bowl of fuck off you already enjoyed.”

Fine, smile that wicked toothy smile that that makes you look more menacing than amused, because it also makes you appear even sillier than normal when you do it. And by silly, I mean wildly dangerous and dashing, which Mycroft will absolutely adore. I mean… see! Look at that pleased-as-can-be grin that he’s not showing right now. I’ll give you this, Petras, you miserable bastard, you’re actually a believable vampire, unlike the rest of your family.
“For you, Mr. Varnas. Gregory…”

Greg accepted his glass with a wink at Mycroft and a cut of his eyes down towards Mycroft’s thigh, giving himself a mental ‘hurray!’ when Mycroft smiled in return. Apparently, the new magical healing technique actually worked. John was going to be overjoyed, but the vampire community was about to find itself with a hot commodity to barter with the various healers in London. Vampires didn’t need healing often, but when they did it was a serious condition, such as poisoning, deep burns or certain lethal-to-humans injuries, so goodwill was always something to promote with those who could keep them from jumping across the line from living to dead. None of that undead nonsense, either, because vampires were not reanimated corpses, though Leo looked like one a fair share of the time.

“Thanks. Now that we’re all friends… Petras, want to tell us why you’re here and your brother is being a distraction at the theatre? Admittedly, he’s always a distraction wherever he goes, but this actually has a point besides him being loony.”

And, of course, take a long sip of whisky, look a bit disgusted, even though you know it’s good stuff, then make a show of holding your glass so Mycroft can see your long fingers again.

“There have been murmurings in the community… the vampire community…”

Thank you for clarifying that to Mycroft in an almost Lugosi voice, you fruit bat.

“… that something is amiss in London. Something dark, disquieting…”

Now it was Mycroft cutting eyes at Greg who frowned slightly but nodded, because this wasn’t entirely new news. He’d experienced enough dark and disquieting these past several weeks to speak as an expert on the topic.

“Yeah, there have certainly been disturbances in the Force.”

“Ugh… puerile tripe.”

“Hey! Star Wars is great! Tell him, Mycroft.”

“Actually, Gregory…”

“Not you, too.”

“It is so… American.”

“What! Alec Guinness and Peter Cushing in the film and you call it American?”

“Unquestionably.”

“I… we’re watching it together and I’m going to show you why it’s positively brilliant.”

“I shall note that in my schedule but, for now, I suggest we return to the matter at hand. Mr. Varnas, do you believe this is an action against the overall vampire contingent in London or a particular someone, shall we say, closer to home.”

Greg kept a close eye on Petras because the vampire wasn’t usually quite so demonstrative, intentionally, or, for him, chatty. Either he was extremely worried about what was going on or something about Mycroft was changing the equation. They knew of each other, so Petras likely had more than an inkling of where on the ladder for their sort of business Mycroft stood. Oddly,
Petras had more in common with Mycroft than he had with him, despite the magic angle. And it was certainly a massive strategic victory to have a connection to someone who easily wore the King of London crown that Moriarty always claimed he was trying to stick on his own gone-grey head. And London was really only one jewel in Mycroft’s golden crown…

“Ultimately, the two cannot easily be disentangled. Though he is, without question, a ridiculous child, Marcus is highly effective in his position. He has his father’s business sense and intellect, though both do their utmost to underplay their skill for the tactical advantages they provide in negotiations. The worst he inspires in others is irritation, which rarely lingers long, and his gadfly nature ensures he is continually visible, thereby accessible, to our people. To his credit, he has remarkable talent as a mediator, if only because he often unifies the opposing parties against his prattling nonsense, however, the ends are justified by the means. And, there is his youth. His endless parties, business dealings or whatever he does with his time… it is with the young. Humans, vampires, and other species alike. The information he hears, connections he makes, favors and debts he gathers… it is not with the generation that is slowly passing out of influence but with the generation that is replacing them.”

“Entrenching his own influence for decades to come.”

“Precisely. And it is through his influence that the vampire community is protected and enriched. A threat to him is a threat to all. And, of course, we cannot forget…”

Greg found himself clutching imaginary pearls as Petras pointed to him as if denouncing him as a shifty banker or dog hater.

“His marriage and alliance to Gregory.”

“London is supported by two pillars, the mages and the vampires. Their cooperation is secured through a bond between… the two most ludicrous beings in existence, though their talents cannot be dismissed out of hand. Remove one and a pillar crumbles, and its support along with it.”

“Rivals to either position?”

This time Greg’s pearls weren’t endangered by the look thrown to him by Petras, but that didn’t mean Greg had ready information to provide.

“Not as many as you would think. There are always those who are happy to complain about things and how they could do better, but nobody really wants to step up to the job. My job, at least, which doesn’t really come with the sorts of perks that Marcus gets. But, in truth, he’s made a lot of his perks himself and the others are from his family situation, so another vampire trying to lead the community wouldn’t exactly fall into a windfall of cash and property. It’s a lot of thankless work for little tangible in return.”

“Unless…”

Greg looked at Mycroft, who was thinking carefully before finishing his thought and kept quiet because it was easy to see the gears and cogs turning in Mycroft’s enormous brain.

“… the individual or individuals in question already had the tangible benefits one might seek and were focusing wholly on the power and influence the positions offered. To leverage either or both communities towards less tangible gains, be they for ego, lust for power, or as a stepping stone to larger-scale significance… for some, the ultimate aphrodisiac is power and they will go to any lengths to acquire it. If Marcus were killed or permanently debilitated, how difficult would it be for another to uptake his responsibilities? Gregory has spoken of how he came to his position
and it seems a thing where it is expected that power be transitioned on a somewhat regular basis, with no specific family or status considerations being of consequence.”

“True, but those considerations are more consequential for the vampire race. That being said… it is not easily predictable. We are a very traditional people, in many ways. London belongs to the Varnas line and it would be expected, required really, for a family member to take Marcus’s place. But, we are also an ambitious people and what we have we gained. From others.”

“A parallel with human history, I would say.”

“Very true. However… I would know if such a coup was being planned whether from my own family or another and there are no indications that such is in the winds.”

“Then might we be left with removing vampire influence from London completely?”

“Removing Marcus would not accomplish that. Leonas would simply appoint a replacement and, in the interim, would likely have me oversee the daily burdens. I highly doubt that would please anyone. In any vampire line. Anywhere.”

Greg rolled his eyes but had to admit that the shameless boasting was actually the complete and honest truth. Petras having indirect authority over anything was scary enough, but direct control? The vampires in the city, and every other city, would probably crowdfund a small army to surround Marcus wherever he went and keep his arse in the seat of authority if the option was his uncle occupying that role instead.

“I see. Let us expand the model, then. What if your family itself, not a single member but the name and all who bear it… was shown to be unworthy of the honors and privileges you hold?”

“That… that is not a thing I wish to contemplate.”

“Which translates to it is a possible, shall we say, means to an end.”

Petras smirked but his own mind was rapidly running through the vast files of information in his possession for something to prove Mycroft’s suggestion was unfounded. Unfortunately, he could not. Both his brother and his nephew were respected, however, their individual personalities had rubbed many the wrong way over time and it was not inconceivable that the cumulative effect of each easily-shrugged-off irritation was of consequence. The community had prospered, thrived and grown under the Varnas clan and there was no reason to believe that would change. No reason now… but there were ways to shifting perceptions, opinions, alliances… he should know. He’d done it often enough himself…

“Point taken, however, I have yet to hear any particular aspersions cast upon my nephew.”

“Very well, I will accept your assessment. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Gregory.”

Greg’s brow furrowed, then a small light dawned and began to glow more brightly by the second.

“Moriarty.”

“He is most vocal about his opinions on your continued service.”

“True, but… he’s just such a shit. An overt and obvious shit.”

“His machinations involving Ms. Hooper were not overt and obvious.”
Greg blew out a breath, but nodded while Mycroft filled in their guest on the latest developments. Moriarty was a thorn in his side, a pain in his posterior, and there was no doubt he was a toxic weed in their community, but… it was the vampire angle that wasn’t fitting particularly well. Moriarty couldn’t get a toe across the line in terms of vampire business. Financial business, yes, for there were vampires as happy to deal with shady humans as humans who had shady dealings with other shady humans, but not community business. All groups were that way. Werewolves followed werewolves, fae followed fae, ghouls followed ghouls… it was hard to see what he would gain by knocking Marcus off the gameboard. Right now, the most likely outcome of that would be what Petras had already predicted and he’d seen Moriarty with Petras before… not even that little bastard could disguise his unease being within arm’s reach of arguably the most dangerous vampire in the world.

“The sorcerer has a point, Iceman. Moriarty is a blight, that is true. And he does seem, always seems, to have scheme upon scheme in motion. Would he attempt a direct assault on a vampire prince? That is difficult to conceive. I have little doubt he would attempt to end Greg’s life, but Marcus… the risk would be extreme and he is highly selective with the risk he takes, preferring to position others to take whatever blame or disaster comes from his actions.”

“Would that include hiring a dark elf to assassinate Gregory?”

“It might, but I have heard the purchase price for that particular vermin and I doubt Moriarty has that quantity of ready cash available. He is talented at hiding assets, but not quite as talented as he believes. Unless he has substantial holdings of which I am not aware, then…”

“But it is possible.”

“All things are possible. Probable is vastly different matter.”

In his own arena, Mycroft’s information sources were legion and his personal portfolio of data was without compare, but this world was utterly new and unfamiliar to him and that rankled. It left him grasping at straws, analyzing without proper evidence… it would be far too easy to make a mistake and the consequences were not allowable.

“I concede the point. Gregory? Your thoughts?”

“The business with the dark elf… that’s more direct than I’d expect from him. That being said, he’s not predictable, at the best of times, so he could easily have decided that a bold, massive strike was just what was needed to get me out of the way and make a statement to the community that he was taking his game up several hundred notches. It doesn’t necessarily feel right, but it doesn’t feel wrong, either. And, I do think he’d take a swing at Marcus, even a fatal one. The vampires are always a bit touchy, don’t give me that face, Petras, and a direct assassination of their prince would destabilize things enough for bad decisions to be made. If you revel in chaos, it’s a smart play. Could provide cover for other things you want to do or give you an excuse to do something shittier to the vampire contingent. I have no idea why, but it does open the door for that possibility. Anything firm you’ve heard, Petras, beyond vague murmurings?”

“No, unfortunately. A degree of unease and sense of worry that is unusual. It is not pervasive or Marcus would have taken note, but among those who watch and listen… I am not prepared to discount it, especially after the demon sightings and attack on you.”

Greg used both hands to scratch his head and found one thing going his way – his head didn’t hurt as horribly as it had. Enforced rest was bothersome for many reasons, but healing wasn’t one of them.
“Ok, so what do we do? I assume you’re here while Leo provides some vaudeville for the general public so it’s not too obvious we’re sharing information or have caught a foul whiff in the air…”

“Also, because my brother is convinced there was a previous threat to Marcus’s life that he has not shared with son and is not prepared, yet, to inform his son of that fact.”

Greg knew Mycroft would disapprove of the energy use, but he simply had to use his magic to open a drawer in the small table near the door, elevate a piece of paper from it, wad the paper into a ball and throw the ball at the vampire’s face where it bounced nicely off Petras’s nose.

“You’re just telling us this now, you idiot?”

“It was not a verified threat, though he did wish to discuss the matter with you, in private. I am told, however, that was not possible at the time so I am mentioning it now, in some semblance of privacy, for leaving out any information, verified or not, that is pertinent to the current situation could prove a mistake.”

“Oh… yeah, I’d sort of forgotten about that first visit to my flat. It got a bit lost in all the… everything else. What was the problem? Besides the obvious threat of death, I mean.”

“The threat was, in actuality, a prophetic vision, a disturbing one, and he hoped to gain some perspective on whether to give it credence. You know well how he hates his beloved witches.”

“Oh god… ok, yeah. Some witches are balls at that sort of thing but believe they’re amazing. There are amazing ones for visions, though, so it’s not the easiest thing to either believe a prophecy or toss it in the rubbish unless you really know the person involved. But rumors of a prophecy, especially one involving a member of vampire royalty… they would spread fast and people wouldn’t care if the threat was real or not. What were the details?”

“He was told to have Marcus cancel an upcoming trip. That death awaited.”

“The one to Italy?”

“Yes. He dispatched Marcus elsewhere during that period, much to my nephew’s peevish disappointment, but I could discover no news of any violence or catastrophe in the area of his villa to validate Leonas’s fears. The only aberrant event I could uncover was another cancellation, the day after Marcus phoned his property manager to close the house again, of a block of rooms at a hotel close by. It supposedly was for a small group of tourists and there had been a change in the weather forecast for sustained rain… nothing particularly seemed amiss and the reservations were made by a reputable travel firm.”

“Oh, probably not suspicious because I wouldn’t want to pay for a trip where it rained the entire time but… why would Leo even give a prophecy a second thought? Especially from his fake-feud opponents? I mean, it’s not something a father wants to hear, that’s easy to understand, but…”

Greg didn’t finish because the look on Petras’s face wasn’t one he’d seen before. It was hard to define, but approached, if one was inclined to believe it, the edges of sorrow. Regret. And a slew of other dark things that made for an extremely uncomfortable combination to view.

“The prophecy did not necessarily mean Marcus’s death. You were supposed to accompany him, were you not?”

“I… yeah, but only for a few days. I’ve been hoping to visit a practitioner there I know who
lives about an hour from Marcus’s house. He’s been working on several new rituals and wanted
my input, so this seemed ideal. And you can’t tell me Leo was worried for me. I’ll laugh you out
the door.”

“Not precisely… what I am going to share with you… Marcus does not know. And has no
need to know. His mother, as you know, died when he was young…”

“An accident, yes.”

Seeing Mycroft’s slight confusion, Greg added a little more to dull the gleam of the fictional
vampire fantasy most people liked to imagine was real.

“Vampires can die by accident, if you weren’t certain. It’s terrifically hard and only a few
specific things will do it, but vampires do die by injury now and again. There are even a few
illnesses that can take them if they’re not careful. Most die from old age, but there are an unlucky
handful who don’t.”

“Margryta did not die by accident.”

Mycroft’s narrowed eyes were a minimal response compared to Greg’s utterly dumbfounded
expression.

“What? No, Leo even says…”

“As an accident is the story of record. The story his son believes. But, it is not the truth. Leonas
and Margryta were attending a family wedding… a distant cousin, so without the typical pomp and
circumstance and, also, without young Marcus who remained home in my care. Though he does it
rarely anymore, Leonas can drive and used to take great pleasure from driving Margryta through
the countryside, whether at home or when they traveled. Listening to the radio, talking… savoring
their time together…”

Greg had been genuinely frightened in Petras’s presence more times than he’d care to
admit, but none had been as bad as this. The vampire looked decades older and… tragic.

“Leonas hired a car, a pointlessly luxurious one, as one would expect, and they set off into the
mountains for a little… adventure. See new things, discover whatever there is to discover in a
desolate mountain region. Perhaps it was the desolation itself that encouraged them to drive
farther than they had originally planned. I do not know… In any case, there are countless stories
of bandits roaming the mountain passes and they have become somewhat mythical in status…”

Mycroft sighed softly, because he knew those stories and also knew that they all were not myths.

“Yes, I have read a bounty of reports of their activities. Bandits is a romantic term for what
lurks in certain areas today. Bands of thugs, eager to liberate the unsuspecting of their valuables.
Some independent, some part of larger, loosely-organized groups, but none are reluctant to use
violence or commit murder to achieve their goals.”

Petras nodded slowly and Greg found himself wishing he didn’t see the sad direction the story was
heading.

“Normally, Leonas, or Margryta, for that matter, would care little about such a thing but this
particular collection of filth had gained access to military grade weapons. Between their numbers
and willingness to use those weapons, Leonas was incapacitated, albeit temporarily, and Margryta
was too distracted by him being torn apart by… to this day I am astounded that he was able to drag
himself to the car, let alone drive it while tracking where they had taken his wife. It was not a wise
decision to confront them then, not in his condition, but I cannot fault him for it. I would have
done the same and likely would have experienced the same result. They lost even more of their
men, but one of them was smarter than the others… fire is an excellent distraction. In the
confusion, it is possible to make an escape, especially if you are willing to leave behind everything
and… everyone… in your possession.”

Shutting his eyes a moment, Greg was truly disappointed it didn’t black out the image that was
forming in his head.

“Anyone… she didn’t make it out, did she?”

“Leonas could not find her, though he searched until he physically could no longer do so. It
was an old structure, perhaps a lodge, with many rooms and there was simply no time to check
them all. I suspect she was gagged, perhaps bound, because he would have heard her yell or
scream and… there was nothing. He suffered burns… it took nearly a year to heal them, so deeply
and profoundly were the tissues destroyed. Though he kept them hidden from Marcus’s young
eyes… in any case. He eventually made his way to a phone… I left Marcus in the care of the
house staff and… when Leonas and I were finished, there were none left alive who had any
connection to those who had taken Margryta from us. What we… retrieved… from where she
died… Marcus does not know and will not know. His memories of his mother are of a beautiful,
strong, loving woman and not…”

Petras paused for a long moment and Mycroft found himself reaching out to touch Greg’s arm, if
only to reassure himself that the sorcerer was hale, hearty and remained with him, despite the
attempts to change that very fact.

“In any case, and relevant to Leonas seeking you out, sorcerer… before they left home, he was
approached by a member of the local coven who… had a vision. She foresaw death, tragedy… of
course, Leonas sent her on her way and paid no attention to it, though he admitted she seemed very
much to believe what she was saying. He has never been visited again for that purpose by any of
the witches, though they dote on him shamelessly. Never… save once.”

Now it made sense, though Greg really wished it didn’t.

“The Italy trip.”

“I cannot say there was any validity to it, that it was not purely a coincidence, but it was… it is
a simple thing to understand why my brother would have more faith. He may still wish to discuss
the matter with you, but I feel events of late have made that unnecessary. Whether there was an
attempt on either your or Marcus’s life, or both, there certainly has been now. The fact that both of
you appear targeted… somebody wants London for their very own, I suspect, and it is now a
question of who that might be and for what purpose.”

“So it seems. At least we’re not muddling through each on our own. Twice the hands, half the
work.”

If Greg or Petras thought that was the extent of it, they were sadly mistaken.

“Three times the hands, Gregory. And you have access to whatever resources I can provide.
Now that I am, shall we say, back on my feet, I can be a touch more effective, especially for certain
things that are best managed in person.”

“Mycroft, you don’t have to…”
“But I do. Firstly, I will not sit idly by while your life is endangered. Secondly, this concerns matters at a greater scale than the life of a single man, insulting as that might sound. I am very uneasy about the possibilities raised from our discussions. It is to the benefit of all that the various populations in London, magical or not, remain as stable as possible and the potential for discord is not one I take lightly. I cannot know how many perturbations I have witnessed and managed have started with elements of your world, but I do not imagine that number to be zero. This is very much my concern, Gregory, and I will not shirk my duty, either to you or to a greater quantity of the population, for any reason whatsoever.”

Oh, look at you smirking, Petras, you bastard. Yes, Mycroft is very protective, both of me and of London, and fully capable of doing an eye-watering number of things to act on that protective— Which, don’t think I don’t know, is a large part of the reason Leo sent you here, rather than laying this all out himself. Set a thief to catch a thief or, in this case, a master of the shadows to catch a master of the shadows. Not that Mycroft required much catching, but your ridiculous brother takes ages to get to the point and would likely have chased Mycroft off to buy earplugs before we actually got to the heart of the matter. Leo may be ridiculous, but he’s also highly self-aware…

“Then we have an accord. Good. My brother will be pleased that all three major forces in London are committed this situation…”

Oh, you bastard. Why not kiss Mycroft’s hand or something. Twat.

“… I shall remain in London until this situation is resolved. You may reach me at this number…”

Petras pulled a single, crisp card from his breast pocket and passed it to Mycroft, ignoring Greg’s glare when his fingers lightly trailed over Mycroft’s as they took the card from his hand.

“… and I shall be staying at Leonas’s residence for the duration. He will be extending an invitation to dinner soon, so I suspect we will meet again soon, whether for business or pleasure.”

Now, Greg’s paper wad was smacking into Petras’s head over and over while the vampire grinned wickedly at Mycroft and slowly faded from view.

“Good heavens! They can actually become a… mist?”

“No, that’s a purchased spell. Probably got him as far as the stairs down to the shop…”

Which he didn’t tumble down or I’d have heard it, more’s the pity.

“… but that was enough to satisfy his need to feed his inflated man of mystery image.”

“Well, fair play to him. It is a rather impressive exit, you must admit.”

“I admit nothing. Wait… strike that. I do and freely admit that he’s an enormous tit and I hope he gets hemorrhoids.”

Mycroft looked puzzled, then began grinning his own wicked grin, which Greg thought put Petras the Tit’s to shame.

“Gregory Lestrade… are you jealous?”

“Nope. Yep. Fingers!”

“I believe it was you that touted the image he strives to cultivate. Seduction does go with it
hand in hand.”

“He can go and cultivate cabbages, the bastard, and keep his fingers to himself.”

“I seem to remember that fingers actually are somewhat critical to the planting, care and harvest of cabbages, but it has been awhile since I actively researched agricultural practices.”

“Funny. Don’t think he won’t try something sleazy. He is related to Marcus, after all.”

“I suspect it is more the case that Moriarty is not the only one with a taste for chaos and skullduggery. I appeared to me that Petras was rather of a mind to, as they say, rattle your chain.”

“It’s rattled! Marley’s ghost would give me a standing ovation for my rattling.”

Chuckling softly, Mycroft moved to the sofa, waited for Greg to budge over slightly to make space, then sat down next to him, trailing his fingers lightly across Greg’s cheek.

“Mr. Varnas is a scandalously dangerous and highly seductive man, that is true, but he is not you. I will grow an alliance between us, however, because it is a tremendous opportunity to do so. I have no information concerning his actions in your world, but I have a great deal of information for his actions in mine and he is an asset I cannot afford to ignore. But, his seductive talents are wasted on me for someone else already has a claim on any seductive initiatives and I am most content to leave matters status quo.”

“I’m sexier than he is?”

“My eyes fill from your beauty and my loins from your primal sexuality.”

A man with primal sexuality shouldn’t be able to smile like a shy schoolboy, but Greg managed it handily.

“Really?”

“Dear me, Gregory. Such a doubting Thomas…”

His leg would never forgive him if he did anything rash, so Mycroft settled for something utterly leg friendly. Since fingers figured prominently in their discussion…

“Now, you are to lay very still and quiet, Gregory, and let me chase away those pesky doubts.”

The chasing was happily facilitated by Greg’s loose-fitting trousers and pants, which put up only token resistance to Mycroft drawing out Greg’s cock and beginning to stroke it slowly.

“Already thickening at my touch. Very good, Gregory, I am highly pleased you appreciate my attention. Which is yours and yours alone. Why would I want another when I have you, who I scarcely have to touch and you respond with a lust of exquisite beauty and need.”

Humming softly, Mycroft varied the pace and pressure of his work, stopping and scowling when Greg wriggled or tried to speak, something that fired Greg’s desire even higher until he was certain he could hear his cock throbbing with want, aching to find release, something Mycroft didn’t seem quite ready to bestowed.

“Excellent. A mature man’s stamina, but a young man’s passion. Really, Gregory, how could you believe I would want another when you grant me all of this? Silly boy… I should leave you this way, hard, drops of pleasure glistening on your belly… it would be a simple thing to tie your
cock and balls in a pretty package so you ached for as long as I wished it. Reveled in the demand lingering heavily between your legs while I watched you savor the delicious agony…”

Greg’s pleading eyes made Mycroft lick his lips because he knew very well that the sorcerer would happily take anything he wished to give because the result would be nothing short of ecstasy. The fun that awaited them was just too glorious to imagine…

“…however, this time, I shall be kind. Show me, Gregory… show me how foolish you were to be jealous and why you will remember that as you are mine, so I am yours…”

Greg’s eyes grew wide then slowly closed as he let his orgasm flow through him, burning hot in his veins, Mycroft’s fingers moving precisely to enhance the sensations, reading every motion, every small gasp of breath, to leave his partner both drained of vigor and awash with erotic abandon. And what a sight he presented to Mycroft’s adoring and slightly-smug gaze… glistening with sweat and semen, his skin flushed and his cock wet and lying spent from being properly satisfied. No, the vampire had nothing to offer greater or more precious than this.

“Ok… ok, I learned my lesson.”

“Good. I am happy to find you apt pupil.”

Greg’s laugh was low and dark, promising a wealth of things, all of which had Mycroft’s wholehearted approval.

“In your hands, Mycroft, most certainly.”

Mycroft took a second now to use those hands to move aside a few wisps of hair that had fallen across Greg’s forehead, then leaned over and gave him a soft kiss, moving down to kiss the tip of his nose, then his softly smiling lips.

“Then we both have fresh incentive to make our healing time as short as possible so as to capitalize on our mutual dedication to education.”

This laugh was not low and dark. It was as fresh as a spring breeze, because that was precisely how Greg felt at the moment. Light as air and alight with something new and exciting. Mycroft was amazing. Every single day he was amazed by how the cool man that had first walked into his shop had hidden sides to him that were fully their own sort of magic. Powerful, unique… the sort of magic any man would sell his soul to wield, though the only man grand enough to do it was his…

“I agree! And, as soon as I get tidied up a bit, I will gladly do my best for healing by having another glass of whisky for relaxation… and vitamins… and enjoy the company of a truly remarkable man.”

“A most stellar plan. Though… should we carry through with alerting Anthea to her cousin’s situation tonight or might it be prudent to wait until tomorrow?”

Greg clicked his teeth together a moment, then gave a quick nod to indicate the latter.

“Tomorrow. Moriarty won’t do anything tonight and, if he did, Seb is keeping watch until she’s home safe and sound to step in and show that little misery the error of his ways. Tomorrow we can all put our heads together and decide what to do about it. And, since the vampire squad will be fast asleep, we can interrogate her about her big night out with the least impressive specimens of royalty known to history.”
“A worthy strategy. Though…”

The shadow that passed across Mycroft’s eyes was one Greg understood and couldn’t say he didn’t feel himself.

“I know, Mycroft. Shines a different light on certain things, doesn’t it?”

“It does. If ever that was to happen to you, Gregory, rest assured my response would be no less than Leonas’s.”

“The same for me. And I’m going to side with Leo on that prophecy. Witches, real ones, don’t announce a prophecy of death unless they are extremely certain about it. No strange dream, no bad batch of mushrooms… they know it’s the real deal or they would never put a body through the worry and fear of having that hanging over their head. Anyway, Petras wouldn’t have mentioned dinner if Leo hadn’t already brought it up, so we’ll have the chance to dig further into it, maybe get a few more details. Your lucky PA, what a fine family she’s fallen into. That’s if she hasn’t already murdered them for heckling the performers on stage or Leo sucking boiled sweets loudly enough to get them thrown out on their ears.”

“I wager Anthea would bribe the theatre staff to allow her to remain to see the end of the show in peace.”

“You’re right. She’s a smart woman. No use wasting a good ticket. We’ll hear all about it tomorrow, I have no doubt. Whether we want to or not.”

Mycroft snorted a quick laugh, which surprised him, but far less than when he first met this astounding man and rose to get a flannel for a quick post-pleasure cleaning. How far from the genial shopkeeper was the man in his life? Still genial, still a shopkeeper, but so vastly richer in character and experience that it beggared belief. Of all the magic he had witnessed, the greatest was still whatever mystical power drew him back to collect his left-behind umbrella when it was the most atypical act imaginable for him. Magic, luck, fate… whatever it was, it forever had his gratitude because if he had missed this opportunity, this blessing, he would be a much poorer man for it. And, though he was not an avaricious soul, for this one thing, he was very content to be wealthy and would guard that wealth with the ferocity of an enraged tiger. He had already helped vanquish a demon, so lesser beings best beware should they dare give his Gregory a baleful glance. Or a lustful one, for that matter… not that he was a possessive sort, but when one consorted with a masterpiece of masculinity such as Gregory, it paid to be vigilant…
Chapter 35

It was a mark of the esteem in which Mycroft held his PA that he hadn’t felt a need to have his half-dragon chauffer attend the meeting with Petras, but did think it prudent to have Charles present when broaching the subject of Molly Hooper with his assistant. Anthea was a far more dangerous creature than any vampire when perturbed…

“Come again?”

“Ms. Hooper has, apparently, been tricked into some form of relationship with this Moriarty character for purposes unknown. Given his naturally-repugnant personality, the possibility of this being a coincidental, mutual-interest situation is an exceedingly small one. However, let me reassure you…”

“You. Werewolf. You are absolutely certain that this… maggot… did nothing to Molly?”

It was a mark of the esteem in which Sebastian held Anthea that he shuffled a bit behind Anderson before answering. She seemed to have a soft spot for the sorcerer that he was prepared to take advantage of for his own safety.

“Yeah.”

“Let me see the photos again.”

Unwilling to let his mobile fall victim to potential PA wrath, Mycroft motioned Sebastian to let Anthea view the pictures on his phone, something that required a special glare from Anthea herself to finally occur.

“Hmmmm… ok. We can assemble a strike team with a phone call and have this bit of rubbish tossed in a skip. Which will then be set on fire and dumped in a hole that will be filled with concrete. Address?”

Mycroft tutted at Greg’s growing grin, which was quickly catching up to Charles’s and Sebastian’s, but nodded approvingly at Anderson whose look of uncertainty was a far more considered response to Anthea’s apocalypse-level thinking. Though a significant part of him applauded her quick and decisive tactics.

“I believe assassination is not appropriate for this situation, though I shall not completely rule out it’s need for a future scenario. At present, according to the information we possess, Moriarty has treated Ms. Hooper with respect, though it is certainly an affectation, so neither her safety nor her virtue was compromised.”

“No one… plays with Molly like she’s a… toy.”

Now, it was a small scuffle between Anderson and Sebastian as to which would be behind the other because Anthea’s voice had reached the low hiss stage and Anderson was sure he’d seen something flash in her eyes that couldn’t be described as anything except murderous.

“I agree his conduct is deplorable and the man is nothing short of a cad, however…”

“You. Dragon Boy. Can you breathe fire yet?”

Charles made a valiant show of coughing and wafting his hand in front of his face to catch a whiff
of the nonexistent smoke before sadly shaking his head ‘no.’

“Useless. I’ll get the other one to do it. Grill that weasel like a kebab and feed him to the cats at the local pet shelter.”

Balthazar’s cheer was loud and heartfelt, which put a triumphant grin on Anthea’s face as she imagined Moriarty with a skewer up his arse that turned him while a dragon saw him perfectly singed on all sides.

“He’s a prat, that’s for certain, but if he’s a fried piece of stringy meat, we can’t find out what his game is and that’s something… oh god, she’s glaring at me.”

Greg had thought Mycroft’s glare was cutting, but Anthea’s was a veritable runaway helicopter blade whirling towards him, sharpening its edges on the very air itself so not only would he be cut in two, his corpse would thank her for being so neat and tidy about the whole business.

“You want to know his game, Houdini? Bring him here and let me put a cheese grater to his face.”

“Uh…”

“Not enough? Run his palms across a mandoline so lovely thin slices come right off? Now, I’m hungry…”

Mycroft rolled his eyes and was simply happy he’d not predicted anything less thunderous, lest he be caught unawares by the current sound and fury.

“I do apologize for grounding your flight of fancy, however, let us take a more rational approach, shall we?”

“Oh, I assure you, I am very rational at this moment. If I was hysterical… well, I’ll let you imagine that for yourself.”

That everyone in the room, save Anthea, grimaced and vowed to consign forever the mental image that leapt to mind to the deepest, darkest recesses of their minds said a lot about both her reputation and the fertility of those imaginations.

“Be that as it may, there is a serious situation afoot in London and it cannot go unaddressed.”

“Not in a way that involves Molly.”

“It would not be our first choice, however…”

“No. She’s already being used to get information, likely on you, so you will not even consider insulting her further by suggesting… anything besides Moriarty being sold as roasted pet food.”

“She has direct access to Moriarty, therefore…”

“Don’t. Do not tell me you are suggesting manipulating her to gain intelligence on that dung beetle.”

“Given Miss Hooper’s naturally garrulous nature and her… cheery disposition… she is very well suited in this case for…”

“No. This isn’t her fight.”
“It is difficult to know, at this juncture, exactly to whom to assign this, as you say, fight, but we cannot ignore that multiple populations might vie for that honor. We have precious little information now and that is a situation we cannot let stand.”


Mycroft and Anthea narrowed their eyes and it was clear to everyone that the boss battle was about to begin in earnest. It was also clear to everyone that they didn’t want to be in any position to be collateral damage in the approaching melee. However, someone should likely hack through the barbed wire, throw a steak to the guard dogs and try to head off the worst of Armageddon. Since nobody was stepping up for the job, Greg decided to take the noble path and put himself in the path of the storm.

“Maybe that should be her decision.”

There were a lot of things he could do magically, but turning invisible, without a large amount of preparation, wasn’t one of them, so there wasn’t any feasible way for Greg to avoid the slowly-turned looks in his direction which managed, in complete defiance of physics to be raging hot and frigidly cold at the same time.

“What did you say, Magic Man?”

“You’re right… Molly shouldn’t be used as a toy. Not by Moriarty and not by us, even if our intentions are good ones. I don’t see a way, a respectful way, to keep her involved in any of this without letting it be her choice. How much we divulge about the real nature of this business… that’s something we can talk about, but I suspect, in the end, it’ll all just come spilling out, if only to warn her about the sorts of things Moriarty can try or what dangers she might face just by being with him because that miserable prick has his fair share of enemies.

“Gregory, are you suggesting she actively engage in espionage against Moriarty?”

“Maybe.”

This look Mycroft cut Anthea had none of its former ferocity since he was at a loss as to how she would react to this plan. From her expression, the reaction wasn’t likely to be good.

“What? Molly? Molly couldn’t spy on you and not make a mess of it. You two nearly started dating when she was there to find out if you were gay so you could date that one there!”

Anderson and Sebastian pricked up their ears, since this was news to them and the potential for teasing Greg about falling for Molly the Spy was delightfully and deliciously high.

“Ok, it wasn’t her best effort, I admit, but the stakes weren’t that enormous, were they? Who I date, even if it is the most amazing man in the world, isn’t in the same league as the safety and welfare of an entire city of people. And not-people. Though only because they’re not human and that’s what the term usually indicates. Most don’t mind being called people, though, they like it, in fact, but a few… that’s a good way to have your head handed to you on a silver platter and I’m not speaking figuratively.”

Anthea waved off Greg’s speech, but made a mental note to investigate the protocol of terminology for the magic community since it seemed she was going to be associated with it for some time to come.

“Very educational. And when the tapeworm finds out what she’s doing?”
“I… it’s not a certainty that he would.”

“You don’t even believe your lie.”

“I do! I mean… I’m not lying. Molly is really the last person you’d suspect of being a spy which, although I know that’s how spies are actually supposed to be, but… it’s Molly! Even Balthazar likes her, and he hates everyone.”

The cat nodded quickly, because there was no denying that simple fact of life.

“That’s true. I do. Though my sultry empress also receives an exemption from my wrath and vilification.”

“See? Nobody would suspect her of doing something shady even if she was practically tripping over her own shadiness.”

“Not going to happen.”

“The tripping part or the shady part?”

“Don’t think your broken head will save you from a thorough punching, Gargamel.”

Greg gasped softly in indignation, though it was undercut immensely by Charles’s, Balthazar’s and Anderson’s laughter, in addition to Balthazar racing into his bedroom to drag back a plush Gargamel that he triumphantly deposited at Anthea’s feet.

“Bloody marvelous. See if I ever feed you again, you miserable mog.”

Balthazar sat on Gargamel’s face and Greg hurled a sofa cushion at him, snarling when the cat deftly dodged the projectile.

“That was a gift! Don’t rub your arse on it.”

“This… doll… doesn’t surprise me. It repels me, but it doesn’t surprise me. You sit there quietly from now on or…”

Anthea positioned her heel directly over the spot Balthazar’s bottom had been warming and made a few rocking motions to indicate the dire threat to Gargamel’s soft cranium and the squishy, foam-formed brain inside.

While Greg pouted, Mycroft drew in a small breath and took the moment to recognize that his life could not, even by the most banal imagination, be termed boring.

“Perhaps we should consider a different direction. Could… might we have someone woo Miss Hooper away from Moriarty? Perhaps Mr. Anderson could engage her in conversation and…”

Sebastian’s growl matched inharmoniously with Anderson’s squeaked ‘Me?,’ causing Mycroft to reconsider his suggestion.

“Or perhaps not. Mr. Drothrosias would be suitable, and he does have a vested interest in the vampire community, in general, and Varnas family, in particular.”

Mycroft had no time to ponder the fact that Charles’s eyes not only flashed a brighter, richer green, but shifted slightly to a more reptilian appearance for a fraction of a second, since Anthea’s long string of no’s interrupted his train of thought.
“… no and no! What is wrong with your brain? You don’t do that to a person!”

“We do that sort of thing on a regular basis and to many someones, as you are well aware.”

“None of them is or will be Molly and that’s the end of it. Bring that dark elf here and get the truth out of him. He must know something. You have his magic crystal – start rubbing it or throwing it in a volcano or whatever it takes to bring him here for a little chat.”

“That is certainly a possibility when we are bereft of other options, however, I would prefer not to leverage that particular asset, one of the sort I may not acquire easily in the future, until it is demonstrably necessary to do so.”

“It’s demonstrated. Make the call.”

Seeing this might take awhile, Sebastian moved towards Greg’s kitchen to start his traditional raid on the edibles and potables, first tossing a beer to Anderson, who looked quizzically at the bottle since it was rather early and, despite the previous day’s morning indulgence, alcohol for breakfast wasn’t a normal part of his routine. It was a small relief that Charles seemed to have no such hesitation, or just decided that alcohol was the precise thing to make this meeting bearable, and motioned him to toss the beer his way, where it met a quick and flavorful death. Much to Mycroft’s consternation.

“I would appreciate you remaining sober, Charles.”

“I will remain sober, sir. It’s an unfortunate side effect of my… condition… that beer no longer has much of an impact on my system.”

Greg looked genuinely distraught, as did Anderson, though Sebastian simply turned from the refrigerator with a piece of something hanging from his mouth and shrugged. If he relied on beer to get drunk, he’d spend all of his day in the loo. With a clear head.

“You… you poor bastard.”

“I am bearing my pain as stoically as possible, Mr. Lestrade.”

The stoicism dissolved into an interested grin as Sebastian tapped Charles on the arm with a bottle of scotch, which was quickly snatched by Mycroft who huffed a frustrated breath and added this to his and Greg’s list of topics of discussion now that it appeared the werewolf was taking a special sort of liking to a certain apprentice sorcerer.

“We have now veered into the territory of the ridiculous.”

Anthea snatched the scotch and set it near her handbag. For later.

“We’ve been firmly in that territory since I arrived, sir, so don’t think this will distract me in the slightest.”

“We must do something, surely you see that? For heaven’s sake, you spent time with both Marcus and his father last evening! That must engender in you some degree of… concern… for their welfare and that of their people?”

“Leonas spent the night asking about my ovulation cycle and whether women in my family tended towards a high conception rate. Marcus mostly hid under his seat and tried to avoid my foot when I aimed a kick at his head.”
In truth, Leonas had only once asked a truly inappropriate question and muttered a quick apology when she asked which part of his weedy body he could live without when she severed it from his body with the switchblade she had hidden *somewhere* on her person and, from that point forward was a surprisingly entertaining, and agreeable, theater companion. Marcus… was the perfect gentleman. A gentleman who looked absolutely gorgeous. The sort of gorgeous that made you look twice because nobody should be able to look that good, so it had to be a hallucination. And was also a surprisingly entertaining theater, as well as pre- and post-theater, drinks companion. Of course, agreeing to accompany him to dinner *tonight*, just the two of them, was completely a pity move because… no, she couldn’t even lie to herself about it being a pity move. The stupid vampire was… interesting. It had been a long time since she’d met someone interesting, even if he did do his best to conceal how interesting that interesting might be.

“I… oh dear. In any case, consider the numbers of others, less inappropriate and more deserving others, who are at risk. It is not a situation that can be allowed to continue. It is our duty to intercede to bring about a resolution to the crisis and intercede we shall. What remains is to outline the nature of our intercession and the role Miss Hooper shall play in it but, and I am adamant in this, her welfare will be safeguarded to the very best of our ability.”

Sebastian was now tapping Anthea on the arm, this time with a half-empty bottle of vodka, and Mycroft had no time to snatch it away before Anthea had taken a long swig, earning Sebastian’s nod of approval for having the proper attitude towards high-potency potables.

“Fine. But, Molly’s role will be her decision. If she wants to help, then we craft a strategy and rehearse it to death until she feels she’s able to put it into action. If not, I work her through making a quick break with the vomit stain and you, you, you…”

Anthea made certain everyone in the room, including the cat, got their own ‘you’ and pointed finger to cherish.

“… *and* you keep eyes on her so Moriarty doesn’t try to get his claws in her again. It’s not her fault she got involved in this rubbish. It’s… well, a few of us, including me, hold the blame for that and I won’t let her suffer for it.”

Mycroft mulled the proposition and, though he was terribly unsure about Molly’s acting ability, especially for a situation where one must act specifically to extract vital information from an unsuspecting target, couldn’t see another option that would meet with Anthea’s approval, something that was critical for there to be any chance of success.

“Gregory? Is this acceptable to you?”

The ‘since it was your idea to open this Pandora’s box in the first place’ went unsaid.

“Yeah, it is. I don’t like the idea, honestly, of someone as nice as Molly being used as a pawn either by Moriarty or by us, unless she’s fully aware of what’s going and agrees to it. The worst that happens is we lose a potential source of information about Moriarty, but I’m not convinced that’s a productive avenue to begin with. He’s a sneaky, suspicious bastard and wouldn’t easily be fooled by her, or anyone’s, attempts to draw him out on what he’s doing. Just get everything out and the open and we move forward from there.”

Mycroft did a quick survey of the room and observed Anderson nodding firmly, Sebastian still perpetuating his victual burglary and Balthazar gazing adoringly at Anthea who was having a low-key slap fight with Charles who was trying to steal her vodka. It seemed the remainder of their party had already decided, and the only thing left to do was make it official.
“Very well. When would be a practical time to have this conversation with Ms. Hooper?”

Switching to employing the hand holding the vodka bottle to battle the half-dragon, Anthea used the other to snatch up her mobile and place a call.

“Molly, meet me at Greg’s shop… I know it’s your off day, and… no, it needs to be now… no, you don’t have time for that… or that… are you serious… they’ll be fine… cats don’t care about any of it… I refuse to believe that’s true… would you just put on your shoes and get over here… wrong… look, Greg will give you a 50% discount on anything you want to buy if you’re here in less than half an hour… quelle surprise… bye.”

“Thanks for giving away my money!”

“You own a piece of the blame for this farce, Sauron, so you pay your bill for the damages and be happy she won’t be walking out the door with the deed to your shop, this flat and your arse. Ok… nobody is leaving until she arrives since Molly, despite appearances at times, is a woman of science, so she’ll want evidence of what we’re telling her and this sad assortment of the unusual is well set-up to give her all she needs. I’d drag Marcus here, as well, but there’s not much evidence to be had from a charcoal briquet. Now, I don’t know how she’ll react to all of this, but… no, I’m not even going to predict, but… be nice. Werewolf, did you hear that?”

Sebastian paused building his tower of food to wave dismissively, then toss a takeaway container, complete with fork, to Anderson who caught it as deftly as a man fumbling a live grenade, but succeeded in keeping food off both himself and the floor.

“Why don’t you say anything about that one eating all your money, David Copperfield.”

“He pays me in trade.”

“Oh… ok.”

Anthea relinquished the vodka to Charles who backed towards Sebastian to pour them both a glass while moving part of Sebastian’s food mountain to a second plate since he’d missed breakfast racing here after he’d gotten the call that effectively said race here now and prepare for… Anthea.

“Details, please. We have half an hour, so I expect full-color details of this payment in trade, especially the naked and sweaty bits.”

“What? No! No, wrong and no. No naked and no sweaty.”

“You’re protesting too much. Amateur’s failing. Come on, let’s hear it.”

Now it was Anderson taking a seat, throwing an impressive glare at Greg between bites of cold Chinese food, much to Greg’s and Mycroft’s unspoken delight. The man was still far too skinny, but some progress was being made and that was its own cause for celebration.

“I am protesting exactly the right amount, thank you very much. The only person I’m having sex with is Mycroft, so…”

“Oh, so that’s actually happened. Alright, it’ll likely kill me, but I’ll take details of that, too, as well as the details of filthy, animal sex with the food destroyer.”

“There is no filthy, animal sex! Or clean, animal sex. And it’s not nearly time for me and Marcus to have a go with each other so… oops.”
Anderson’s gasp married well with Charles’s quiet ‘oh, snap!’ Sebastian’s quiet chortling and Balthazar’s commiserative mewing as he threw himself onto Anthea’s feet and rolled about on her shoes to demonstrate his sympathy for her plight.

“Say that again?”

Greg opened his mouth, closed it again, then heaved himself off the sofa to retreat to the kitchen where he had allies, if only because he could reclaim his groceries and liquors at any time and destroy their criminal reputations.

“Oh, that leaves you, Mr. Why-Haven’t-You-Informed-Me-of-this-Already Holmes. Start talking.”

Mycroft would be hard-pressed to forgive Greg’s craven betrayal, but another intimate moment such as they’d enjoyed just after waking this morning would certainly be good start. Gregory could do things with his mouth that were positively indescribable…

“Apparently, Gregory and Marcus must engage in some degree of intimacy every three years as part of a magical ritual that, from what I understand, has benefit not only for their individual communities but for London, as well. I… I have yet to inquire about the particulars of the situation, but it is one Gregory and I have plans to discuss further when there are less-pressing matters to address.”

“I see. Philip, have you heard of anything like this?”

Being drawn onto the gameboard had Anderson looking like a rabbit in the headlamps, but he rallied quickly since he liked to be helpful and it was rather nice to be consulted about mystical issues, as opposed to being told he was crazy for talking about magic as if it was real.

“I have, actually. I’ve been reading everything Greg’s given me and spoken with lots of actual practitioners about their craft and… well, there’s a lot out there that I didn’t know about but do now! And sex magic is certainly real enough and can be extremely powerful, depending on who’s involved. I suspect that with Greg and Marcus… that would be a very potent ritual.”

“Potent enough to actually be… important?”

“Easily. I… I haven’t talked to Greg about this, but I can’t imagine he’d enter into something like it if there wasn’t a very good reason to do so.”

“Having sex with a gorgeous, sexy vampire is reason enough, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh, I hadn’t looked at it like that. You’re right, it’s definitely reason enough… don’t growl at me, Sebastian! I can hear you, you know. Anyway, Greg doesn’t quite seem the type to have that as his only reason. He’s having sex with Mycroft, for example, and he’s not… maybe I’ll shut up now.”

Which, given the affronted look Mycroft was giving him, was probably Anderson’s best decision of the day.

“You may have a point. We will be discussing this, Dresden, do you understand me?”

Greg paused chewing the day-old pastry he’d forgotten was still in the bag and nodded, both in affirmation and relief that Anthea wasn’t pulling a weapon out of the shoe Balthazar was currently worshipping and threatening the bits of him that made sex with Mycroft, Marcus or anyone a feasible activity.
“And be prepared to do whatever it is you do to do it twice, because I, of course, will watch and I’m not going to watch when Mr. Holmes is there watching, too, because that’s the sort of thing give me nightmares even to contemplate. Give me your calendar and I’ll see it all scheduled properly. With necessary supplies laid in, in advance.”

“What! No! No, you are not watching us!”

“So, I’ll be participating, then? Excellent. This is actually brightening my mood.”

It was kind of Charles to give Greg a sympathetic pat on the shoulder, especially since there had been two day-old pastries in the bag and he’d already stolen and eaten the plumper, and softer, one.

“This discussion is over.”

“For now, Ridcully, since we need to deal with the Molly situation first, but we’ll chat. We’ll have a nice, friendly chat and sort things out to my satisfaction.”

The extra emphasis on ‘satisfaction’ was underscored by a cheeky smile that alerted Mycroft to a wealth of headaches to come.

“Very well, now that my PA and my… Gregory, have settled their differences, let us prepare for the arrival of Miss Hooper. I wager a genial gathering would make her more comfortable with this business and…”

“Why is John still chained to his house of horrors when his work hours ended a full eight minutes ago?”

Oh good, Sherlock had arrived. Well, genial had gone flying out the window like a bird on a wing but, perhaps, his relationship with Molly might be of benefit with the upcoming conversation.

“I need him to help me carry my explosive device to the banks of the Thames so I can document how it behaves when buried in mud. It is vital to a case and I will not be thwarted by the plodding wheels of commerce!”

Or, perhaps not…
“Oh… having a breakfast do?”

Molly’s smile was hopeful, but not quite as bright as usual since she was feeling a touch off-footed at the moment and none of the faces looking back at her was doing much to alleviate that. Getting a mysterious summons from her cousin wasn’t entirely out of the ordinary but arriving at the shop to have John escort her up to Greg’s flat certainly was. And the kind smile that nice bearded man gave her as he took over at the till wasn’t exactly confidence-inspiring. She was somewhat of an expert on kind smiles and that particular one was more of the ‘brave heart, you poor dear’ sort, which wasn’t going to inspire confidence in anyone! And now… ooh, even Charles was giving her a brave-heart smile. Was this an intervention? For what? She hadn’t had that many of those yummy frozen drinks her friend Violet made the other night. They had strawberries in them, so they were healthy! In a sense. The rum might counterbalance that a tad but…

“Not precisely, Ms. Hooper, but if you are peckish, I am certain we can find something you would enjoy.”

Mr. Holmes was being polite! He was usually polite, but that was… nice. A bit too nice… it was an intervention!

“I only had four daiquiris and they weren’t even that strong, I promise!”

The sea of confused faces at least contained one thumbs up in general solidarity with the idea of multiple frozen drinks in a single sitting. However, since it was Balthazar’s thumb, it was a bit hard to notice.

“Molly. Sit. By me.”

Uh oh… Anthea was using The Voice. Admittedly, she had a lot of The Voice’s, but they all ended at the same point which was act now, don’t ask questions or whatever was going to happen to you will now only be an insignificant fraction of the trouble you’re about to experience. So… sitting. Now.

“Am… am I in trouble?”

Balthazar jumping on her lap for a snuggle was fairly firm evidence that she was, to Molly’s mind. Cats knew that sort of thing.

“No. Not… really. There’s just…”

Anthea drew in a deep breath, because despite her bluster she genuinely was dreading broaching this with her cousin. Molly was so kind, so trusting… this was going to pain her terribly. And that was before the rest of the magical circus came to town!

“… there is a problem, but it’s not your fault, so let’s get that clear straight away.”

“Oh no…”

“Like I said, not your fault, so don’t worry you’re in trouble. It’s just… it’s just a very serious situation and…”

Molly’s ‘oh no’ and hands covering her mouth had Balthazar yowling in sympathy, Sherlock
scowling at Anthea, Mycroft fretting since he was very much outside his area of expertise here,
John and Charles looking for a tissue to have on hand, Sebastian pouring Molly a shot of vodka and
Greg rolling his eyes at all of it before deciding to, again, be the person to just cut to the heart of
the matter by whistling to get Molly’s attention, making a few gestures and filling the room with
illusory butterflies that were only slightly on the overly-colorful side because why not.

“Butterflies! Is that the problem? I don’t see how it can be because they’re just so beautiful
and friendly and… they can’t be real though because Bazzer tried to chomp one and it flew threw
his head… oh. I honestly don’t know what to make of this, but I suppose someone will tell me at
some point. No hurry! I’m happy to sit here watching the butterflies and drinking my drink.”

The heart of the matter had not been cut to by Greg.

“It was me!”

Said the man who had utterly failed at cutting, but at least wanted credit for doing something
besides dithering.

“Oh. Do you have a hidden projector or something?”

“No… watch.”

Greg changed the butterflies to hummingbirds who buzzed about and hovered where they would be
most annoying, such as in front of Sebastian’s and Sherlock’s faces.

“That’s amazing! It’s… oh dear…”

Apparently, Sebastian’s annoyance was running a little higher than expected since his face was
beginning to shift to something decidedly wolf-like as he growled at the squadron of hummingbirds
staring him down with a complete disregard for their nonexistent lives. A quick intervention by
Charles, who stuck out his arm so the little illusions had a place to perch away from the snarling
werewolf, saved the day.

“That… that was strange. But interesting! Ok, what’s happening and why is it being called a
problem because, frankly, I don’t see anything that could be described that way since butterflies,
hummingbirds and dogs are the exact opposite of a problem.”

“Wolf.”

Sebastian actually sounded hurt.

“Oh, is that what you were doing, a wolf face? They’re sort of dogs, though, aren’t they, so I
wasn’t far off. And you did a smashing job of it, too! But, now that I think about it, it was more
wolffy than doggy. Which is fine, because I love wolves as much as I love dogs, though I
obviously don’t see as many, except on the telly. No, I’m not sure I see as many wolves on the
telly as dogs, either, but I definitely see more there than in life and they’re tops, either way.”

Sebastian thought a moment then held out the vodka bottle and replenished Molly’s drink to
celebrate their understanding. On Anthea’s part, she made certain Greg received the full force of
her glare, because a show of magic was fine, but completely distracting her animal-loving cousin
with beautiful creatures… and Sebastian… was not helpful.

“Molly… look over here, back at the sane person in the room…”

Sherlock’s and Mycroft’s immediate rebuttal was cut short by John stepping on Sherlock’s toe and
Greg gently tapping Mycroft’s shoulder, with what Mycroft could not fail to notice was his bad arm. And he wasn’t wincing. That was far more distracting, and joyfully so, than being slandered by his PA.

“Ok… let’s send the dogs back to the farm and focus on the butterflies and birds… remember them?”

“How could I forget! They were so, so lovely… but I’m still not clear on why they’re a problem that I’m somehow part of though it’s not my fault. I haven’t had anything to do with butterflies or hummingbirds in life, on the telly or in a cadaver! At least, not recently.”

“Focus! Where did they come from?”

“I have no idea? Sherlock, what species were they?”

Anthea knew giving Molly a head knock would be highly counterproductive, but felt her fingers itching to do it, nonetheless.

“Sherlock, don’t answer. We do not need another rabbit hole to journey down. Molly… think more immediately. Where did they come from in this room?”

“I don’t… I don’t know. That’s a bit strange, actually, because Greg said he doesn’t have a projector and doesn’t seem like the sort to keep animals in his flat, at least not in that number and in cages or something just to spring them out to surprise guests.”

The utterly exasperated Anthea stole Molly’s morning vodka and drank it in a single gulp, hoping for some infusion of insight into how to proceed with a person who defies proceeding at every turn. Maybe it was time to leverage one of her favorite distractions against her, in a sense…

“Balthazar, you’re good at cutting to the chase. Cleave that chase in two for me, please.”

Molly started to laugh, then stopped abruptly when the cat cleared its throat in a very human-like fashion and began speaking.

“Magic is real and your new boyfriend is a nasty little sorcerer who is using you to get information about the old couple over there making heart eyes at each other. He’s ugly, too, and you can do much better, so don’t feel bad about punching him in the face if you see him again.”

Balthazar smiled proudly at his succinct summary and leaned his head towards Anthea for a reward skritch, which she bestowed after a moment of wondering what evil forces had conspired to bring her to this particular point in her life. Quite possibly, Greg knew them all personally and could have warned her about their foul sense of humor. For that, he would pay.

“Wait… you… your voice isn’t at all what I expected.”

The silence was broken by a small ‘why me’ sigh from Anthea who kicked herself for thinking a talking cat would phase a woman who very surely believed cats could talk but thought it was a hilarious joke to keep that bit of information from lowly humans.

“Normally, it’s more manly, but Greg saw fit to put me in this particular cat form which has thin and reedy vocal cords. Because he’s a shit.”

“Well, that wasn’t very ni… Greg made you a cat?”

“That’s what shits do. Make decent, upstanding people into reedy-voiced cats. And he hardly
feeds me. Leaves me to rummage through the rubbish looking for scraps of spoiled meat.”

“That last bit isn’t true and don’t think I don’t know it. Greg’s nice! And you certainly aren’t thin, so I’m definitely claiming a fib.”

Sebastian and Sherlock cackled at Balthazar’s aghast expression and quick check of his not thinness which prompted a furious pout.

“In any case… ooh, this is a bit much, isn’t it? Just a bit much… but a good much! An exciting much. Can I see the butterflies again?”

Greg had let his illusion fade but brought it back full force with lots of butterflies and a few songbirds tossed in, which happily perched on Molly, who unconsciously bobbed her head back and forth in time with their tweeting.

“Ok… much better. Greg is magic… or… has magic, which makes more sense and Balthazar is a talking not-cat and Mr. Wolf… has something, I suppose, because now I suspect that wasn’t a parlor trick or really amazing face work like some of those actors can do. Anything else I should know?”

“My scintillating bride, your cousin, is dating a vampire, which is a terrible, horrible decision you should do everything to reverse.”

“WHAT! Anthea… is he cute?”

Sensing this meeting was primed to hop onto another fair ride, Mycroft cleared his throat in a much more manly manner than Balthazar and smiled gently when Molly turned towards him as Greg’s illusion faded from view.

“I believe there is ample time for you to learn all the details concerning your cousin’s new romance, however, our time now is better spent on the details of yours.”

“I forgot! How could I forget? That… complete cabbage! He used me. And didn’t tell me about magic! Well, I’m not standing for that…”

Before anyone could stop her, Molly had whipped out her mobile and glared furiously at it until her call was answered.

“Jim! You complete cabbage! You and I are… no, no I want to do this to your face. Where are you? What? Good. You keep walking and meet me at Greg’s shop so… oh, don’t Greg who me, you cabbage. You know perfectly well Greg who and that he has magic and you do, too, which is another lie you told me, so I want an explanation and it had best be a good one or that cute little nose of yours you like to wiggle is going… well, it’s not going to stay cute for long.”

Molly’s triumphant snort was a fitting coda to her conversation and Mycroft shared a look with Greg which attempted to crystallize Mycroft’s admiration of how cleanly all their discussions, considerations, concerns and plans involving Molly Hooper had been binned.

“Good. All your nattering was for naught, Fatcroft. John and I are now leaving to bury my explosive device.”

Sherlock wasn’t a weak man, but not even his wiry strength was sufficient to drag a reluctant John Watson one centimeter out of position.

“Oh no, Sherlock. I’m taking wagers on who gets into a fight with Moriarty first and what I’m
going to need from my medical kit to patch the damage.”

The various hands that went up to indicate they intended to be first in line made John wish he was taking wagers. He sorely needed a new jacket and the one he liked wasn’t cheap.

“You assume he is actually going answer her summons?”

“Ummmmm… yep.”

“Ridiculous.”

“Not really, because when you were trying to drag me away like a child, I caught sight of him out of the window and he was walking this way.”

Molly nodded forcefully and reminded herself that ‘forceful’ had to be her theme for what was to come.

“I was surprised that he was close by and… that horrible thing! He was spying on me, wasn’t he?”

“Spying is such a distasteful term.”

All eyes whirled towards Greg’s door and the smirking figure standing there who, Mycroft and Greg were glad to notice, prompted Charles, John and Sebastian to move a little closer to Molly and send a very clear message to the new arrival.

“It fits, though, you miserable fucker.”

“Greg… Greg, Greg, Greg… so boring. Always so boring. Molly… let me explain.”

Taking a step forward was not a wise move as Balthazar was off Molly’s lap and leaping towards Moriarty, who was visibly shocked that his little hand gesture to summon some spell had zero effect on the cat and now had arms full of an enraged feline dedicated to turning him to bloody ribbons.

“Who had money on Balthazar?”

Mycroft rolled his eyes at John, but felt somewhat disappointed that he’d not put a few pence on the cat who was doing a marvelous job of completely reducing Moriarty’s smarmy calm to ashes. However, it was not moving them towards their goals.

“Charles, if you wouldn’t mind?”

Charles had no idea why he was being pressed into service, given his complete lack of defense against a crazed cat, but tried to think scaly, armored thoughts as he plucked Balthazar off of Moriarty and, after a moment’s hesitation, set him on Anthea’s lap, where the cat immediately plopped down and began to purr contentedly.

“I was mauled and you all just stand there doing nothing!”

It was surprisingly easy to shrug off Moriarty’s outrage since John was already in motion to get his bandages and disinfectant. Also, because he was a complete cabbage.

“I don’t approve of violence, normally, but… how could you lie to me! That was positively rotten and I thought you were nice!”
Smothered laughter at anyone thinking Moriarty was nice did little to stem the sorcerer’s outrage but he also couldn’t argue against their point.

“Nice is such a nebulous word.”

“Wrong. It’s not nebulous, at all. You were a very nice person, and funny and interesting… and it was all a lie so you could tell a lie. That’s a lot of lying!”

“It’s a talent, really.”

While Molly and Jim sparred a moment, Greg cut another look at Mycroft which confirmed they were sharing a similar question – why was Moriarty here? There was no reason for him to trot over at Molly’s command. Admittedly, he could be there simply to gloat, but that wasn’t the sense they were getting from any of this.

“… and look at the wounds I’ve suffered. A terrible thing for someone handsome and brilliant to have to en…”

Jim didn’t get the chance to finish his sentence since Molly had finally had enough of his smirk and used her open palm to smack it off of his face.

“I liked you! You were kind and sweet and I liked being with you. And the whole time you were using me for whatever stupid game you’re playing. I deserve better! I am worth more than being treated like a cheap toy for you to use, abuse and toss away when you’re done with it. I am not going to let you stand there and sneer at me, Jim Moriarty, not for any reason. Do you understand me?”

The room held its collective breath as Molly stared straight into Jim’s eyes and it was another quick look between Mycroft and Greg that acknowledged each had seen it. That tiny drop of Moriarty’s mask while Molly was yelling at him. Brief, fleeting, but there… whether that was good or bad for Molly, though…

“Fine. What do you want me to say? That you are a surprising linchpin to a lot of bricks I wanted to fall? At the center of a web I needed to untangle? One thread to Sherlock, which leads to his brother and also to John, which leads to Greg. Another thread to your cousin, which is a thread to Mycroft and to Marcus Varnas and his family? Many threads, many intriguing and curious threads, all ending in the same place. There. Are you happy?”

By the look on his face, Moriarty wasn’t, and that was another look not lost on two of the thread ends mentioned in his speech.

“No… but I think you’re actually telling the truth this time. Of course, you didn’t say why all of that was important to you, so it’s not the whole truth, is it?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. What are you hiding?”

“That’s my business.”

“No, it’s mine, too, since you made me a part of it all by lying to me and using me to get other people even though I don’t why. So, tell me.”

“No.”
“Oh, I think you will.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Yes, you will because... I know I’m not as good at observing things as Sherlock, but even I can see that you’re... well, there’s a way a person looks when they’re tired of hiding something and want to talk about it but they’ve been hiding it for so long, even if it’s for good reasons, that they’re almost scared to do it, though they really, really want to. Just tell me, Jim. Maybe... maybe I... we... can help.”

Molly continued to stare at Jim, this time, though, with much softer eyes, until his own tore away from hers and he shot his hand into his pocket to get his phone.

“I’m in Greg’s flat. You need to be here, now. No, I’m not joking.”

Moriarty’s shoulder shrug after he repocketed the phone didn’t add more information, nor did his walk to the window to stare out of it, back to the room, while everyone else looked at each other, deciding how to proceed. The decision amounted to Mycroft sighing and rising to put on the kettle, Sebastian pouring himself and Molly more vodka, Charles quietly speaking with Mycroft, who nodded and nodded again as Charles got on his own phone to make a quick dragon-to-dragon call, Sherlock and John deciding to have a seat and wait comfortably, Greg opting to stay seated and continue to wait comfortably and Anthea dislodging the purring Balthazar from her lap to have her own quiet chat, though with her cousin rather than her employer. Not much changed for the five minutes that passed before a hesitant knock sounded on Greg’s open door and a face Greg found vaguely familiar peeked in. Smallish man with sandy hair and brown eyes, wearing a pair of spectacles and clothes that perfectly matched the description ‘nondescript.’ It seemed, to Greg, that he’d seen the man before, but he was so utterly ordinary looking, it was hard to be certain.

“Jim?”

“Took you long enough. And...”

Moriarty waved a petulant hand up and down a few times as he frowned at the person looking quizzically around the room.

“... lose it. I can’t stand it anyway and now... just do it.”

In a blink, a near carbon-copy of Moriarty stood where the sandy-haired man had been. The ‘near’ qualification was for the frumpy clothes, the shaggier, unstyled hair and the almost embarrassed look on his face.

“Ta dah! Meet my brother Rich. He’s a necromancer who is being blackmailed for resurrecting the Great Vampire Plague. So... what are you nosy lot going to do to help him?”
The eyes staring at their new acquaintance held varying levels of confusion, curiosity and wariness which never failed to unnerve the necromancer, no matter the relative proportions of ingredients each stare possessed. The wealth of attention was not the form of riches he’d hoped to accumulate in this mortal world.

“Ummmm… hello, everyone?”

Mycroft turned his full powers of observation on their guest, hoping for some sign of something, the details of which even he didn’t know but which might provide a firmer foundation on which to base a judgement on whether this was an elaborate ruse on Moriarty’s part of a piece of honesty that was complicating their lives even further.

“Hello, lad. Haven’t I seen you… you work in this area, don’t you? Wearing your other face, that is.”

The happy nodding at least confirmed to Greg that he wasn’t having one of those old people’s moments where all faces start to look the same because you’ve seen so fucking many in your two million years of life and you think everyone is the man who used to deliver your milk or that nice girl behind the till at the chemist.

“I have a job at the electronics shop the next street over. I’m good with that, actually. Computers and phones and bigger things, like network systems. I mostly solve problems people have with those things or show them how to do this or that with them than actual selling anything, which is fine, because I’m not terribly good with the selling bit, but I do know how to find and fix problems with your gadgets, so it’s been nice, actually.”

“Nobody cares, Rich. Seriously. You spend your day telling people to turn their computers off and on again, resetting passwords and poking reset buttons.”

“You can reset passwords? How about cracking them?”

Oh good, Sebastian had found another friend.

“None of that, Seb. You don’t need any more help getting into mischief than you already have.”

“Wrong.”

“I counter with right. Anyway, ummm… that’s quite impressive, Rich. Can I call you Rich?”

“I prefer Richard, if you don’t mind. Only Jim calls me Rich, and that’s mostly because… well…”

“He knows it annoys you?”

“Basically.”

“Jim, you’re a twat.”

“Greg, you’re impotent.”

“Enough!”
The fact it was Sherlock calling for an end to the bickering was actually surprising.

“Why are we not talking about corpses?”

That was not surprising, in the slightest. And Molly was brightening as much as she did with the butterflies…

“Yes! Ooh, I’ve read about those necromancers, at least, in those fun books that have wizards and dragons and other sorts and they’re, well, they’re colleagues, in a sense. I don’t do a lot of talking with the dead, just talking to, but they don’t answer, which is a shame because I know a lot of them must have lived interesting lives. Or could tell the police who murdered them, which would certainly be helpful, and I suspect being dead doesn’t make you want to be less helpful than when you’re alive, especially with the police who are investigating your murder.”

Jim held his head in his hands and felt exactly the sort of exasperation he’d predicted if his brother and Molly ever met and at precisely the anticipated breakneck speed. Rich looked like he was going to burst with excitement…

“Colleagues? Jim didn’t say what you did to earn a wage, actually. Are you a mortician?”

“Before them in the chain, actually. Pathologist!”

“Brilliant!”

“Thank you!”

“Oh my god, just stop! Stop… Rich, sit. Sit and tell Greg and his pack of stragglers and hangers-on what happened that dropped me into a large hole filled with your bad decisions.”

Jim’s annoyance was met with his brother’s indignation, which faded quickly in a way that Greg suspected was often the case with these two. If you stayed indignant at Jim for long, you’d see most of your life eaten away wearing a scowl and suffering a sour stomach.

“It wasn’t a bad decision! It just… the decision wasn’t bad, itself, I just didn’t have all the information because I was lied to.”

“And, if you’d done as I told you and actually dug a bit before accepting the work, you would have found the lie.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do and I won’t be forgetting it. I am logging every bit of inconvenience I have to suffer because of this and when you get the bill, prepare for a scorching, searing pain that will leave you more dead than alive. And, no, you won’t be able to ring up your corpse-fondling friends to help you, either.”

If Mycroft had ever doubted that the two men were brothers, that doubt had been well and truly laid to rest. Also, even if it was by minutes, the identity of the older brother in this relationship was clearly established. However, this was going nowhere rather quickly and that was not a direction that ended in anything worthwhile.

“If we might set aside the finger-pointing for a moment… I suggest laying out an outline of the facts, starting with what seems a somewhat consequential event on which I have no knowledge. The Great Vampire Plague? Gregory, if you would be so kind as to elaborate…”
Greg shrugged, since the name pretty much told the story, but also marveled that someone like Mycroft hadn’t known it had even happened. He knew the magical community kept their news and secrets to themselves, but it was sometimes startling to realize just how good they were at it.

“Well… it’s very much what it sounds like. A vampire plague that was very great. As in Black Death great. About eight-hundred years ago it took root in the vampire community and nobody could determine if it was magical, biological or both but, for one reason or another, it killed… estimates range from a quarter to a third of the world’s vampire population.”

“Dear heavens… how was it stopped?”

“That ‘for one reason or another’ bit. The vampires began isolating anyone who showed signs of the plague. Then, when healers couldn’t do anything to cure them, kept them isolated and let them die or made it quick for them and killed them outright. How many people were killed who didn’t have the plague but were in the same family as a victim or lived nearby on the principle of better safe than sorry… nobody knows but vampires can panic and act irrationally as tragically as humans. Eventually… it died away because the vampires died away. Hasn’t reared its ugly head again, either.”

“Funny you mention head.”

Greg cut eyes at Moriarty, then at Richard, who was wearing his embarrassed look again and seemed to wish that he was anywhere else but there at the moment.

“Oh, want to tell me why that’s funny?”

Jim crossed his arms and glared at his brother who quietly cleared this throat, smiled a weak smile and nodded at Greg, as if hoping some show of willing agreement would buy him a little goodwill.

“Because… it went this way. I was contacted for a resurrection job. I do that a lot, actually. Not usually a full resurrection, because there’s a limit to what a reanimated corpse can do, especially in today’s world, but returning the spirit to the body sufficiently to allow it to speak, interact with the people who wanted it brought back, that’s a common enough thing. Questions about inheritances, where certain financial accounts are kept, deeds to property, magical secrets or hidden items, that sort of thing. In any case, I was contacted by mail, which isn’t as common as it used to be what with email and the like, but it had instructions for where I should go and what I should do and who I should meet, who happened to be a rather stern gentleman who wouldn’t answer my questions, but told me to get on with the job.”

“Which was what, exactly?”

“I had to travel a bit up to this old… well, it was one of those old vampire cemeteries that nobody knows is a cemetery because the vampires don’t want that to happen. Underneath it, was the catacomb system you see with these very old ones sometimes, which are marvelously interesting if you have the time to study the various inscriptions and such…”

“Get on with it!”

“I am, Jim! It’s… just let me tell it my way. In any case, I was supposed to try and find a certain burial crypt, which involved… well, it was a lot of waking up old vampires who weren’t very happy about being woken to ask if they were the person I was looking for, but I finally found him. Then it was a hefty bit of work pulling together any semblance of his body from what remained in his crypt, but I’d warned the gentleman that would likely be the case with someone this long dead. Normally, for this sort of thing, I’d bring along a fresh corpse and transfer the
essence, along with a bit of whatever original tissue I could find, to the new corpse and we’d move along from there, but he’d said it was alright if I could only raise a skeleton with a touch of flesh here or there. It was strange, because you can’t have that strolling along the pavement to get a coffee or something, but to each his own, I suppose…”

“There is no to each his own, you ignoramus! That, right there, should have made you stop what you were doing and refuse to go any further without some answers!”

“Well, I know that now, don’t I! Besides… I’m not at all certain if I said I wouldn’t complete the job, he wouldn’t have done to me what he did to the vampire.”

A tiny light went on in Greg’s own head, which he was exceedingly grateful was still attached to his shoulders. Unlike others who were about to be mentioned.

“He took the head, didn’t he?”

“Yes! I’d just got the vampire out of the crypt and was trying to get it oriented to what had happened and swish! One big knife, like you see in the films where they’re hacking their way through a jungle, and off the head came.”

“With whatever might have been lingering in the skull or mouth.”

“Yeah…”

“Gregory… after such a period, would not the insects and other organisms have stripped the skeleton of anything… vital?”

Good question, Mycroft. And the answer is not one to our advantage.

“No with vampires, actually. The normal beasties don’t tend to make meals of their dead flesh, partly because it doesn’t stay tasty for long. They decay very quickly, though not quite the immediately becoming ashes routine you see in films. Though what’s left, besides bones, is fairly ash-like. There are ways to render them to that state and have them not be entirely dead, so you can bring them back, which is the basis, I suspect, for what you see in a lot of those vampire films, but it’s not easy and if they stay that way for too long, they go completely dead, but… yeah. I would expect mice, insects, or whatever to have spread a lot of that material about, even out of the crypt, but what was inside the skull could still be there in fair quantity. And… the vampires contracting the plague were usually identified by red stripes appearing along their arms or… highly atypical behavior. The thought was that the plague affected the brain as well as the body, so…”

“So brain matter could be a source of the plague organism, if there remained anything useful within the skull.”

“There was.”

Richard’s soft, sad voice brought not only Greg’s and Mycroft’s conversation to a close, but the other mutterings in the room went quiet as everyone waited for what they hoped wouldn’t be what they feared.

“After that… unpleasantness… I was tossed the rest of my fee and my escort, along with the head, just left me there to make my way back to the train station. A couple of weeks later I… well, I learned I… we… were going to be blackmailed through another piece of mail, but this also contained a video file on a disc. It showed… well, it showed a vampire… and he’d been infected…”
John was on his feet pacing now and Sherlock hesitated on a moment before rising, also, and simply standing as a post of support for John to pace back and forth in front of, periodically catching his eye and sharing a worried look as the ramifications of all this crashed through John’s mind.

“We have to find him, Greg. He can’t be released into the public.”

“Oh… he won’t be…”

John stopped pacing and stared at the necromancer who was shaking his head either in disbelief or regret.

“They killed him. On the video, I watched him die. Really die, too, not go dormant, as vampires can, sometimes. Took off his head just like with the one in the crypt, then used an inferno spell to burn the remains. It was proof, you see. Just proof. That poor man died just to be proof the plague had been resurrected along with the head and that it still worked. And that I was responsible…”

It didn’t surprise Greg that Jim didn’t give his distraught brother any encouraging words, but it did surprise him that Jim motioned Sebastian to hand over the bottle of vodka on the table next to him so he could pour his brother a measure in Molly’s empty glass.

“Here. Maybe if you drink yourself senseless, I don’t have to hear any more of your bleating and moaning.”

The waspish words held very little sting, however, since Jim was helping steady his brother’s hands so he could lift the glass to his mouth.

“If I may, Richard… this type of situation is not unknown to me and… you do not bear the responsibility for the possible outcome.”

Molly beamed at Mycroft, who was doing his level best to remain calm in the face of what could be an enormous crisis, for he was the perfect sort to reassure someone like Richard. He didn’t seem, at all, like the reassuring type, so if he did any reassuring, you just knew he had to mean what he was saying.

“Listen to him, Richard. Mr. Holmes knows what he’s talking about. This… this is old hat for him.”

In an odd sense, that was true, because Mycroft had managed any number of biological crises from genuine plagues to threatened and actual releases of various vectors of biological warfare, but this… unless there was a highly active and capable scientific arm of the vampire community that had crafted a treatment for this plague, then they were no better off now than eight hundred years ago. It was possible for the labs to which he had unlimited access to work on the problem, and with complete secrecy, however, this situation transcended the normal bounds of secrecy and had to be approached with utmost caution. Something else was old hat for him, as well, and now was likely the right time to broach that particular subject…

“I would hazard a guess, though, that a portion of your upset is for bringing your brother into your predicament. Perhaps that was the reason, initially, you were chosen for this initiative.”

“Whoever is behind this definitely knows who Jim is, that’s for certain. They’ve had him… do things. Not terrible things, mind you, but get information, provide certain spells and rituals… they don’t seem to have any further use for me directly, but if Jim doesn’t cooperate, they say they’ll tell
Mycroft saw Greg’s ‘no they would not’ head shake and sighed softly.

“We shall deal with that in its own time. I would know, however… actually, I would appreciate confirmation that your brother was attempting to gain information on me to assess the degree to which I might be of assistance in this situation? And how far Gregory would go to, as they say, pull his feet from the proverbial fire?”

“He wasn’t certain Greg would help us, given… well, it’s a bit obvious. He wasn’t sure about you, how you might be helpful, I mean, but Jim did find some information about you and the fact that Leonas and Petras Varnas seemed willing to discuss community matters with you present… this early on, they wouldn’t do that if you were just Greg’s new romance. They had some notion something was happening, and both come to London and are set to meet with Greg, knowing you were staying here, too… you likely had to be someone who would have a valuable opinion to share of some influence to wield. Or not. We wouldn’t know unless Jim did some information gathering. He’s good at that. Also…”

Richard looked at Jim who scowled but nodded for him to continue.

“You were mentioned by name as someone they wanted Jim to get information on. You, Greg, Marcus Varnas, a few others…”

“I see. Thank you for your candor. The more information we possess, the better we can assess your problem and, hopefully, craft a solution.”

Though another problem in want of a solution was still looming… do not hold that blackguard Moriarty’s hand, Ms. Hooper! The amount of scrubbing necessary to wash away his villainy will occupy your time from now until Doomsday. Here, let me initiate plan Anthea Annihilation and free you from charwoman’s skin.

Mycroft caught Anthea’s eye, then cut his towards the couple’s clasped hands, doing it thrice to cement his point. Fortunately, it was a point she had already been mulling and ready to address or he might have lost one of his eyes for his impertinence.

“It’s a story, that’s true, but having a story, one that (a) you set in motion and (b) wouldn’t have been possible if your brother wasn’t a complete prick doesn’t give you the right to entangle my cousin in this mess. You knew she was being used, let it happen, and haven’t shown a speck of remorse about it. Quite frankly, I think we need to find out what’s going on and help, if possible, to prevent the vampires being hurt, but I see no reason whatsoever to shield you from their wrath by hiding what you did. And you… Jim… you don’t have the right to put a single slimy tentacle on my cousin so take that one off of her or you’ll find out what it looks like like flopping about on the floor beneath your slimy stump.”

“Anthea… be nice.”

“No, Molly Hooper, I will not. Their problems are theirs and, no matter what those problems are, they do not have the right to drag others into it without their knowledge and agreement. They lied to you and used you to get to the others. That’s not something I’m going to forgive or give them another chance to do to you.”

Jim looked as supercilioius as usual, but it was evident that Anthea’s words had cut Richard to the quick.
“I am sorry! I am, I really am…”

“You could actually have said that necro boy but you didn’t.”

“Other things got in the way.”

“Like trying to gain sympathy for yourself?”

“I…”

“Leave him alone, you shrieking harpy. It wasn’t his idea to use Molly, in the first place, so you’re wasting your fetid breath on the wrong target.”

“Fine. I’ll waste it on the right target, then, you cockroach.”

Sensing yet another derailing of their train of progress, Mycroft cleared his throat. This was ignored completely, much to his annoyance. Fortunately, others were willing to step in and lend a hand.

“Want some weapons?”

Sebastian’s single-mindedness was breathtaking.

“This is boring. John! Give them something to render them unconscious so I am no longer assaulted by their utterly uninteresting prattle.”

Sherlock was vying for Sebastian’s single-mindedness award.

“Perhaps Ms. Hooper should be allowed to set a penalty for being so sorely used. I suggest jewelry. Might we return to that well-provided jewelry store for a bit of browsing?”

Charles was a dragon.

“That could be the right idea.”

Oh dear. Gregory was becoming a dragon, too. That could complicate matters depending on the nature of his new intimate structures. The dragons did not appear to have external genitals in their natural form, but they must have something appropriate for their erotic encounters with other dragons. Mustn’t they?

“My dear, would you care to elaborate?”

“She’s the one who was wronged, so she sets whatever penalty or punishment these two receive for their behavior. I agree it should make them sting, but whether it’s a sting of the body, conscience, wallet or combination of all three, should be her decision. Molly? What do you think about that?”

“I like it! Especially the jewelry part.”

Moriarty’s squawk of outrage was a particularly delightful tune to the ears of many in the room.

“What! You’re siding with the dragon?”

Molly blinked, looked over at Charles, then back at Jim who didn’t seem suffering from hallucinations, but it never hurt to ask.
“Dragon? Jim, are you having a little moment?”

“No… see that one, standing there looking preposterous and appallingly unfashionable? Dragon. Though… an odd one, but everything about this lot is odd, so…”

Jim pointed at Charles. Charles waved and let his eyes show their glow, something he’d worked very hard to learn to control, smiling happily when Molly gasped loudly and began clapping.

“Oh my god! Charles! That’s… that’s more amazing than amazing! Really? How did that… were you always a dragon and I just didn’t notice? Do you have wings? Can I have a ride?”

That Moriarty knew Charles’s secret was either testament to his spying skills or he possessed a talent Greg lacked. Neither possibility filled the senior sorcerer in the room with joy.

“How’d you know he was a dragon, you miserable knob?”

“Not everyone is as magically-untalented as you, Greg.”

“It was me, actually.”

Richard raised a finger and huffed at Jim when a glare was fired in his direction.

“I deal a lot with the essence of a being, so I’m good at recognizing when it’s a bit… funny. I’ve never actually worked with a dragon, but Jim said… your name is Charles, right?… Charles has been very cozy with Goraseth Drothtrosias, who is a dragon, and it… well, that felt right to me. He’s not all dragon, but he’s certainly more dragon than a not-dragon like me or Jim.”

Molly genuinely didn’t care who knew or how, because she knew now and that was an incredible little discovery in a day that seemed to be gifting them to her with gleeful frequency.

“Charles! You absolutely have to tell me everything. I’ll pay for information in cupcakes. Or biscuits. I can bake loads of those quickly, so I’ll have lots to trade for your juicy stories.”

“What about me?”

Jim actually seemed put out, which was very much in character but earned him no biscuits.

“None. You get none. You may have juicy stories to tell, and your brother, too, who, by the way, you never told me about so that’s another lie on your record, you lying liar of a cabbage, but it’ll be a long time before you get any of my scrummy biscuits…”

Implying, unfortunately, to Anthea, that he would get them at some point. And, since he’d have to be there to get the biscuits, he would be in Molly’s life for more than the brief time interval she’d hoped would soon end with him flying out of Greg’s window to say a personal and bloody hello to the pavement. Drat. Her day was well and truly not brightened by this turn of events.

“… Greg and Charles have the smart idea, though, and that’s what I’m going to do to give you a chance to get back in my good graces. You, Jim Moriarty, are going to pay. Really pay. And I don’t mean that like being horrid and dreadful and bashing you about with a cricket bat…”

Anthea’s day was not only not brightened, it was darkening like one of those miserable afternoons where it didn’t get dark enough to actually be interesting, but meandered into a drippy, limp grey that left you hating life and every single person or thing that had conspired to bring the limp drips to your doorstep.
“… but I could use a few new pretties or not-so-pretties and the two of you are going to see I get them. Shopping! We can start downstairs and move along the street from there. Then, after you carry all my new things home for me, we are going to have a conversation about this, so it never, never, ever happens again.”

Richard nodded obediently and Jim scowled thunderously, especially since Sherlock was laughing at him, but punching the detective on the leg made him feel better about the whole situation for reasons a petulant mind would understand.

“I am not made of money, Molly Hooper, do not forget.”

“Another lie. He’s got lots.”

Molly gaped at Sebastian, who was grinning proudly, then at Jim, who earned his own punch, this one on his arm. Both arms, actually, because Anthea was not about to let her cousin’s feeble punch suffice as punishment for Moriarty’s many sins and profound character flaws.

“You have a problem! A true and proper problem with the truth. Well, that’s another thing we are going to talk about and you are going to listen to every word.”

Sensing that the Molly Situation had been resolved, Mycroft shared a few quiet words with Greg about how to proceed, feeling a bit of pride that his skills with non-magical issues transferred with a high degree of success to the magical world.

“Well, now that matter has been settled… Gregory and I feel that the wisest course of action going forward, to ultimately protect the interests of everyone involved, is to reconvene with the Varnas family present, disclose to them the details of this situation and leverage their own assets in discovering the identity of those posing this threat to see said threat neutralized. By any means necessary.”

The number of people who believed this to be a good idea was the number of people in the room, plus cat, minus two. Who happened to share a last name that wasn’t Holmes.

“And let them murder Rich? Admittedly, he’s a pain in the arse, but it certainly wouldn’t do my reputation much good to let my brother be torn to pieces by vampires.”

“Nice, Jim, very nice.”

“I’d thank you, Greg, but… sod off.”

“Sod yourself, leprechaun. Mycroft’s not suggesting giving an interview to the tabloids so the whole London community knows what happened. Leo, Petras and Marcus do need to know, though, because they have information sources and talents neither Mycroft or I have, and they have a very large and very hot iron in this fire. Despite appearances, which are pretty awful, I admit, I suspect they’ll be more concerned about solving the problem than kicking both your arses for getting them into it. I know a bit about vampire law, and I don’t see how you or Richard can be held directly accountable which, I admit, may not matter so much to an enraged vampire being threatened by the worst threat to their species in the history of history, but… I do believe it’s the best way. Be warned that you will want to be open and honest with them, which is completely not something you’re capable of so have your brother do it for you, because anything less will be taken as an insult and that’s going to put too many negative points on your record for your foul and bothersome life to be spared. That sound about right, Seth?”

Mycroft turned to look at the door to notice the dragon, who seemed content to loiter and observe
without announcing his presence. It was utterly disheartening to now be surrounded by individuals whose skills at looming and surreptitious observation were nearly equal to his own.

“Since I only heard the last bit, I can only comment on it specifically, but for that tasty bit I can attest that the direct insult of a lie would be greeted with a nastily-physical attack that I highly doubt Moriarty or his clone would survive, magic or no magic on their side.”

Molly looked over the new arrival and very much appreciated his tidy clothes and smile, which was a good example of pleasant menace that a lot of people tried to do, real people and people on the telly, but weren’t often terribly good at. He could give lessons.

“And there we have it. I have informed confirmation. Honesty is the plan of the hour.”

“And, can I know what the honesty is about, Greg, or do I have to play a guessing game?”

Anthea stopped Molly from voicing her opinion on the subject of guessing games, which wouldn’t need a guessing game to fathom out what her opinion would be, and this gave Greg time to fill in the details for the dragon, whose face grew more and more somber with each word he heard.

“Ok… then I absolutely stand by my position that honesty is the proper, and only, way forward. They know more about the plague than anyone, partly because Leo’s private library contains the most comprehensive and complete selection of vampire history books on the subject. Books written at the time and ones written subsequently. Vampires fear almost nothing, but they are terrified of the plague. If you wish, I can broach the subject with His Majesty first and let whatever initial responses and reactions crest and subside before a larger meeting with the rest of you.”

“You do heal quickly.”

“And am very hard to hurt in the first place. At least, not by their teeny teeth and puny claws.”

The happy smile on Molly’s face brought twin ‘oh god no’ looks to Jim and Anthea’s faces, a fact they both pointedly ignored.

“Oh! Are you magic, too?”

Anthea knew, just knew the unicorn conversation was coming soon and no amount of cupcakes and vanilla vodka was going to prepare her for it. Especially with Goraseth looking over at Charles who made a ‘go ahead’ motion that convinced the dragon to let his eyes show their full dragon nature and gave his forked tongue a cheeky peek from between his lips much to Molly’s delight.

“That’s amazing!”

“Thank you, madam. I could give you a better show, however, I do like this suit and would rather not leave it in pieces on the floor when I took full dragon form. Another day, perhaps.”

“Dragon! Full dragon? Really and truly? With all the dragon bits you see in films?”

“Most certainly and, if I might say, they’re positively fabulous from all perspectives.”

Mycroft felt a touch giddy seeing Greg hurl a sofa cushion at the dragon, using his previously demolished arm. With sufficient rest, the sorcerer’s healing rate was truly impressive. Soon… oh. Soon, the need to remain here to tend to Gregory’s needs would be nonexistent. That was not something to make one feel giddy and he was feeling the giddy fade as quickly as it had risen,
much to his regret. However, one did not need to live in the pocket of one’s lover to enjoy their company to the fullest… even if that company would often be accompanied by a cavalcade of characters such as this particular smirking dragon.

“You are always an exemplary host, Greg. And you still throw like a sleepy toddler.”

“Fuck you.”

“There’s a queue for people wanting to do that, so it’ll be somewhat of a wait. Bring a snack.”

Jim watched his brother and Molly giggle merrily and felt the beautiful dark shroud overhanging his life quickly gathering happy kittens and big swirly lollies to dump directly on his head. Fucking wonderful… at least he wasn’t the stupid cat. All he could do was stare besottedly at Molly’s cousin. Maybe he could film her and Marcus doing something truly filthy and ruin the cat’s life utterly by making certain Greg’s telly showed it on a loop over and over and over. That would be fun.

“John and I are leaving. This has descended to a level of imbecility that is not only making my brain hurt, it is necrotizing the tissue. My explosive device must be tested today, and I will not lose the opportunity because of dullwits and wand wavers.”

“Explosives? I got some.”

Sherlock’s ears pricked up at Sebastian’s words, just as John groaned loudly, which was fully predictable by anyone having known them for more than five minutes.

“Mine is a self-created design.”

“Got those, too.”

“Then you will accompany us to retrieve a selection of them to test against my device, in terms of withstanding being concealed in mud and successfully performing to expected standards.”

“Ok.”

Sebastian pocketed a selection of the food and drink he had laid out for his impromptu buffet and walked out the door of the flat, with Sherlock trying not to appear excited as he chased after him, John slowly following, much like a man walking to the gallows. Greg sympathized, but not enough to create an excuse to keep the doctor away from the very loony men with homemade bombs.

“Well, they’re happy. Most of them, at least. Seth, let’s talk about the best way to let the Varnas brothers know about this disaster. Twins of Evil… expect a call today about when this meeting is going to happen. I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s tonight, so don’t make any plans after your shopping excursion.”

“Oh, are we dismissed?”

Molly huffed loudly and wagged her finger at Jim, who waved off the wag but harbored a look in his eyes that said he had gotten the message and recognized it would be added to their upcoming conversation and shopping spree.

“Yeah, beat it. Richard… stop in anytime if you need something from the shop or… if you need anything, in general.”
“Thanks! Jim had me move from my old flat to one that’s around the corner so… well, so if it became necessary, you were right there to… do something, so I’ll stop in a lot now because… well, for a few reasons, actually.”

Greg locked eyes with Jim for a moment but kept his face carefully neutral. Theirs was a phenomenally-prickly relationship, but it said a lot that Jim believed putting his brother nearby was a smart move for his safety.

“Good to hear. Molly, always a pleasure.”

“For me, too! Especially today. It didn’t start off very well, but… I think it ended brilliantly. Come on, Anthea. You can help me shop.”

“Only for a bit, then…”

Anthea glanced at Mycroft, who nodded, fully predicting her plan.

“… I’ll start doing what I can to see if we have any information on this plague, though it might not be readily recognizable that it’s about a vampire plague. And you, Richard the Corpse Botherer, you will tell me everything you know about the person you met for the job, the job itself, the correspondence you received… I’ll want the physical copy if it still exists… and so I can start investigating that side of things, too. For my extremely valuable assistance, you will be buying me new shoes. And a lovely cashmere wrap I saw at the boutique on the other side of the street.”

The Moriarty Brothers felt their wallets wailing and weeping, but Molly found the idea nothing short of grand.

“Ooh! That lovely green one?”

“That one or the camel-colored one they also had next to it on display.”

“Why not both?”

“True. Two vile liars, two cashmere wraps.”

“Hurray! That means there’s always one for me to borrow. I’ll need some earrings, though, because mine are a touch practical and I want something showy if I’m wearing an expensive cashmere shawl.”

“I have time to look for that with you. Maybe a new dress, too, since part of your apology spoils will surely include an enormously expensive dinner at one of London’s most exclusive restaurants. You two, follow us.”

Molly and Anthea rose, took a moment for Molly to give Balthazar a wealth of hugs and kisses and Anthea to tap him a few times on his head, then walked out without a look back at their bank accounts for the day.

“She’s shagging an extraordinarily rich vampire and I have to pay for her gifts? I wonder how she’d like to be turned into a pig.”

Greg laughed outright and had a chorus harmonizing with him, since Mycroft, Charles and Goraseth could not think of a more amusing fate for Moriarty than being completely slaughtered by a murderous sow likely sporting perfect makeup despite her reformed facial features.

“She’ll kill you. She’ll kill you as a pig, she’ll kill you as a woman, she’ll kill you as a budgie.
Save yourself, lad, and get used to eating noodles for the next month.”

Jim’s death rattle was very Sherlockian, but his lack of further protest accompanied him out of the flat, with his brother in tow, who politely took the opportunity to thank everyone for their help before being dragged down the stairs. Greg felt more than slightly certain he’d be seeing his necromancer with a fair degree of regularity in the future. That his brother was part of the unholy package was just another bill presented by the universe for all the sadly-uninspiring sins of his life.

“Ok, now that the circus has left town, time for the next stage of this war council. I’m not so dumb that I don’t know Leo and the others won’t flip their nut when they hear this, so let’s make certain the flipping doesn’t end in two dead Moriarty brothers.”

“How about half-dead?”

Dragons ate half-dead things when they had to and there was something strangely appealing about removing the miniscule menace Moriarty from the world in several well-chewed bites.

“No, you gaudy gecko. Not half-dead, either. We’ll probably need them at some point before this is all said and done, so alive they shall remain. Besides… Richard actually seems a decent sort. It’d be a shame to have him murdered or permanently comatose before we even get to know him better.”

“Fine, be a spoilsport, then, Greg.”

“I intend to. Besides… think of the favors that prick is going to owe us when this is over.”

Greg rubbed his hands together greedily as the others settled in for the next layer of discussion and took heart that his avaricious thoughts were being happily accepted by all present. Richard did seem a decent sort and maybe a bit in need of a bit of contrast from his brother, so that would certainly be something to work on in the future. As for Jim… as ye sow, so shall ye reap. And there were plenty of people, some sitting right here, who were happy to start sharpening their scythes…
Chapter 38

“This will never come out! I don’t think there’s a cleaning product on Earth that is going to make any of this wearable again.”

And, John solemnly vowed, if Sherlock didn’t have something remotely in his size at this flat, then the big git would be trotting out to fund a complete set of clothes, including shoes and underpants, because there was nothing salvageable on him past the level of his skin, and even that might have to have a few bits sacrificed because he was not going to have Thames river mud linger to remind him of the utter, and filthy, lunacy of the day.

“You have not ceased with your frivolous complaints since we left the river, John. It is beyond the point of tiring.”

“It’s beyond the point of cleaning, you mean, you bastard. Look at me! There’s not a speck of me visible.”

“Untrue. I can clearly see your face.”

“Only because I was able to scrape the thickest bits of the muck off. Which dropped from my hand onto my trousers and glued itself onto them, joining the rest of the muck that was already calling my trousers its home. People on the Tube were giving me death glares. Death glares! I’m a doctor, damnit, and served proudly in our armed forces and I was being death-glared because I was dripping stinky mud on the floor like… like a mud dripping… thing.”

“I am also covered in mud, however, you do not hear me complaining.”

“That’s because, first, this was for your experiment and, second, don’t think I didn’t notice you pouting when Sebastian’s bomb made a bigger boom than yours…”

“He cheated.”

“He did not cheat, he just has more experience building those things and if you’d stopped pouting for long enough, you might have thought to ask him what he did and could he show you how to do it yourself. In any case, you don’t mind being death glared. Third, tossing an entire outfit, with shoes!, into the bin won’t make you blink, but I’ll be blinking myself nearly blind because that’s an expense I’m not prepared to cover at the moment.”

“Ah, you are now complaining about money. That, at least, is a familiar refrain.”

“Shut it! You have a rich brother. He gives you money. This is good for you. I do not have a rich brother. The non-existent rich brother, further, does not give me money. That is bad for me.”

“Then wave away the mud! That should cost you a sum total of naught.”

Sherlock stalked up the steps to 221B, having successfully opened the door to the building quietly enough so as not to alert Mrs. Hudson to the enormous mess she would soon have to clean in her entranceway and on the stairs to the upper levels.

“Can’t, though I sorely wish right now that I could.”

“Surely there is a cleaning spell you could employ.”
“No, there… well, yes there are, actually, but they’re not as easy as a wave of a hand, especially for me. And the mud wouldn’t just vanish, it would be moved somewhere else and I’d only be able to move this much mud a very small distance, so it’d most likely just slosh onto the floor around me, splashing right back up onto me, making it all a pointless act.”

“Tedious. However, I expect you to instruct me on that spell and all the others you know, so I might begin practicing.”

John wondered how long it would be before Sherlock decided he wanted to do magic and was surprised the answer hadn’t been forty seconds after finding out that magic existed.

“I can do that but, like me, you’re not Greg.”

“Thank the universe.”

“Regardless, it means that the things you’ve seen him do won’t necessarily be what you can do. Or do with nearly the degree of success. And, before you ask, that’s not something that can be changed.”

“Meaning nobody, to date, has found a way to change the situation.”

“Oh, true. I’ll give you that, but people have been working with magic for thousands of years and the magical and non-magical alike have turned their attention to that problem, with no results. With practice, you can maximize what abilities you do have, but they’re not going to rise to Greg’s or Anderson’s level. I will show you how to do some things, though. Some fairly simple things. Once you pass that, you’ll need to start laying in supplies and tools, which you may find a bother.”

“Simply gather what I require and charge it to Mycroft’s account.”

“First, your brother doesn’t have an account. We don’t have accounts. Or deliver. Second…”

“You do love your little lists, John.”

“… SECOND, if you expect me to port it here like a mule, the answer is no. First… shit… to begin with, we don’t deliver, as already stated and, to further the point along, your list would be long and with a few larger items. I couldn’t carry all of that if I wanted to. Which I don’t.”

“Make multiple trips.”

“Nope.”

“You can combine that with the trips to bring your belongings here, so you will be unable to complain, though I recognize you do enjoy that activity a great deal and might take exception to your entertainment being curtailed, prompting even more complaints. I will bear it as stoically as I am able.”

“Oh, aren’t you a funny man and… wait. What in the world are you talking about?”

“Your adoration of the performance media of complaint.”

“Bastard. I meant about bringing my belongings here?”

Throughout their conversation, Sherlock’s face had been sporting his usual collection of expressions that ranged from boredom to superciliousness, but something different slid onto it now that made John extremely curious. Especially since Sherlock was doing his level best not to meet
his eye.

“You… grumble continuously about money and you link your displeasure to the cost of living in London. By undercutting to foundation of your complaint, I can gain the peace and quiet I desire.”

“I… Sherlock, are you asking me to move in here?”

Sherlock flapped his hand at John, but still kept his eyes averted, looking everywhere in the flat but directly at the good doctor.

“It is the parsimonious route to my contentment.”

“Here?”

“There is another bedroom and the rent is reasonable, especially if divided. This location is not particularly further from your foolish shop than your current residence, so the transportation costs would not offset the savings in rent. And, though I have not seen your abysmal flat, it certainly is of a lower quality and in a more wretched area than this one. Most importantly, I will not have to wait eons for supplies and materials for certain of my experiments as you will be returning here each day, in any case, and cannot use the ‘we do not deliver’ excuse, which, if you were unaware, shames you mightily each time it falls from your lips.”

“I see. And, perhaps you think you’ll have a ready slave for helping you with those experiments?”

“Yes, though I suspected you would not appreciate that particular, though perfectly valid, reason being articulated.”

John tapped his foot and waited for his anger to swell, but quickly realized that wasn’t happening. He was coated in truly odiferous mud, listening to utterly self-important lunacy from the person responsible for the mud-coating and he wasn’t angry. Actually, he wanted to laugh. Not the evil sort of laughter that preceded a bloody nose for the person being laughed at, but a genuine, joyful laugh. Sherlock was… well, he was talking shit, is what he was. Not the offer itself and not necessarily the reasons, but the tone and the way the reasons were couched. The enormous tit was terrified right now. Terrified about putting the offer on the table and terrified about, in essence, saying that it would be nice to have this mud rat living here so they could keep doing the ridiculous things they’d been doing and enjoying immensely. He was scared of being rejected, of messing up what they’d built by doing something rash, but was hopeful enough about the possibility that he was willing to take the enormous risk of laying it out plainly, in a sense, to be judged. That, in many ways, was more telling that Sherlock’s actual words. Much more telling, indeed…

“Smartly reasoned. Have you… did you ask Mrs. Hudson about this grand plan of yours?”

“She…”

Sherlock’s haughty expression slipped slightly and, after a moment, he took a breath and finally looked John in the eye.

“… Mrs. Hudson has made mention time and again… since you first visited… that… it would be nice to have another body about the house. She is aware of your personal situation and… that I occasionally rely on Mycroft to cover a portion of the rent. That she has taken to dropping extremely obvious hints, which increase in frequency after one of your visits, leads me to believe that she has already reached a decision and it is to your favor.”
So, Mrs. Hudson was pushing for this cozy cohabitation. That was… encouraging. Given the almost motherly concern she had for Sherlock and the homey feel of the whole landlady-tenant arrangement, it was very unlikely she’d support him having a flatmate in if she thought, even for a moment, that it wouldn’t be a good thing for her unique and messy son.

“Mrs. Hudson is an astute woman.”

“She is a meddlesome busybody, but occasionally stumbles upon a sliver of truth.”

“I’m telling her you said that.”

“I do not care.”

“You do care and I know it. And… since I’ll be living here now, I can relay all your nasty slings and arrows so she thumps you good and proper on a regular basis.”

Knowing that if he commented on Sherlock’s flash of a bright, beaming smile it would immediately disappear, John simply wagged his finger a moment, then sniffed sharply and began strolling about the sitting room in his most proprietorial manner.

“All in all, I’d say this should do nicely. Of course…”

Remembering he was currently a mud rat and a cold, smelly mud rat, at that…

“I’ll need to check a few things first. Such as the status of the hot water supply in the shower. These experiments of yours tend to be extraordinarily messy and a man needs some confidence he can step from the mess into a good hot shower afterwards.”

“That… yes, that is somewhat important, I suppose. There are occasions where mixing the results of tandem experiments would be detrimental, for several reasons, so a thorough cleansing in between them would certainly be prudent. You may test the suitability of the shower now, while I seek something appropriately small for you to wear once you are done.”

You just had to cut eyes downstairs, didn’t you, you evil thing…

“You’re going to borrow clothes from Mrs. Hudson, aren’t you?”

“Everything I own is leagues too long and decidedly too lean for you.”

“I am now thinking that being completely skint and living in a featureless box is preferable to living her with you.”

“Too late. You cannot retract your decision.”

“Can, too.”

“No.”

“I’m pretty sure I can.”

“You are mistaken.”

“Show me the law that says I can’t retract my decision.”

“That is a question for Mycroft. His fuddy-duddy brain is filled with useless information such as laws.”
“You are a liar, Mr. Holmes. But, I think I see what’s going on… you got mad Moriarty had all that attention for being a lying arse and you want your share now. Correct?”

“Incorrect.”

“Really?”

“I… your premise is fundamentally flawed, however, there is no concealing the fact that he is a decidedly substandard liar and certainly does not need to be rewarded with attention for his incompetence in such a basic skill.”

“Duly noted. I promise going forward to reward you more handsomely than Moriarty with attention for your supremely-skilled lying.”

“Thank you.”

“When you show me evidence of that supreme skill, that is.”

“I… I am retracting my offer of cohabitation.”

“Too late. You cannot retract your offer.”

“John!”

“What?”

“That… I do not appreciate being the subject of my own witty repartee.”

John barked out a laugh that married well with Sherlock’s low chuckle, then shook his head in disbelief that a day which began on such an astoundingly worrying foot could end with him moving his kit into a flat with Sherlock Holmes. In other circumstances, he might be tempted to blame magic, but this seemed purely to be an effect of Sherlock’s ability to bend the universe to his will without using anything beyond the power of his own uniqueness. Maybe there was a sort of magic there, though. Annoying at times, perhaps, but as with all magic, the world would be a much duller place without it…

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“You’re smiling.”

And, on you, Mycroft, a smile is a gorgeous thing, indeed…

“I am.”

“You little phone conversation that pleasing?”

“It was.”

“Pleasing enough to share?”

“But, of course. A little bird informs me that Sherlock’s living situation has taken a very interesting turn.”

“You’re smiling, so it must be a good interesting. Or, now that I think about it, there are a lot of bad interestings that could happen to Sherlock that would also make you smile, so I suppose I can’t really pass judgement without more detail.”
“Let us say that our Doctor Watson will have far more to complain about with respect to my brother than ever before.”

“Oooooooohhh… John finally nibbled the bait?”

“I believe the phrase is swallowed it hook, line and sinker. 221B will now boast two residents, much to the delight of a certain landlady who is glad for the help keeping the structure securely affixed to its foundations.”

“Good for them! Really, it’s a great thing. John’s flat… former flat… is dismal and I know he gets lonely, so some companionship will do him a world of good. He and Sherlock really seem to get along well, all things considered, so this should be a good situation for him.”

“It is hard to describe cohabitating with Sherlock to be a ‘good situation,’ and I have a wealth of experience to support my claim, but I agree wholeheartedly.”

“Maybe you can give John some tips on weathering the storm. Seriously, though… I think this is good for Sherlock, too. John’s not the only one who seems to need a little companionship.”

“No, he is not. And he has shown great promise as a true friend for my brother, something Sherlock has had few to none of in his life.”

“Should we get them a gift?”

“Gregory, they are not newlyweds.”

“Close enough. How about a cauldron?”

“Pardon?”

“I know John’s wanted one, but really didn’t have space in his flat, even for the small ones we sell specifically to people who live in tiny, dismal flats. And Sherlock’s nearly tried to sneak mine out under his coat more than once, so…”

“Their flat does have a functional hearth.”

“And if they just want to enjoy a cozy fire, we sell fireproof stands so the chubby little fellows can sit over a burner on the stovetop or on a barbeque, for when something’s particularly smoky or smelly and you don’t to suffer that much lung damage for your craft.”

“Both efficient and convenient. Your entrepreneurial instincts are most admirable, I must say, my dear, and I believe you have lit upon the perfect gift to christen their new situation.”

“We can look at the options and I can phone about to get what we want very quickly. I’d say we could start on that this afternoon, actually, since… it’d be nice to have something positive to think about right now.”

“I concur. Any candle will do, at times, to pierce the darkness. When will we know the response of our vampiric colleagues?”

Greg snuck a look at the clock on his wall and pursed his lips in thought as he did a bit of mental calculation.

“Petras will be awake soon. He’s, for them, an early riser. And a late to-bedder. Not much for sleep is our Petras. I suspect Goraseth will talk to him first and he might phone to confirm things
before he wakes Leo. I don’t think they’ll roust Marcus until they have their own handle on the matter because… well, he’s their little poppet, regardless of how things might seem, at times. They will bring him in on this soon enough, though, since he’s the only one in the family, so far, who’s been directly targeted.”

“Would… is this an issue to involve other members of the magic community?”

“At this stage? No. Maybe not at any stage. As far as anyone knows, the plague only affected vampires, not anyone else, magical or otherwise, so none of the other community members would be impacted directly. Admittedly, they do have their own unique skills that might be useful, but I would rather not risk the word getting spread and causing a panic or… well, there are enough who might try to capitalize on this for their own ends.”

“Point taken. I simply felt I should ask… I know little about the intricacies of your politics.”

“It was a smart question and, in truth, Leo and the rest might feel differently about it since they’ll be somewhat rabid about getting this dealt with as soon as possible, for good reason. I probably should see about getting myself washed and into fresh clothes, though, because I have full faith they’ll want a meeting tonight and I’d rather not endure it while feeling a bit fermented.”

Mycroft’s faith was as full as Greg’s and he began mentally preparing for the intensity of the night to come. However, adversity faced with some joy in one’s soul was a far easier thing to bear than adversity faced without it…

“A laudable suggestion. However, I feel that is an activity for which you should be monitored, as your health is still in somewhat dire straits.”

Even without Mycroft’s small, enticing smile, Greg knew exactly the sort of monitoring that was on offer and it had his complete and enthusiastic approval.

“You’re right! I’m feeble, as well as fermented, and I absolutely need someone to keep me safe while I make myself presentable. Know someone who might want to volunteer?”

“It is a burden, I admit, but I do endorse the ‘if you want something done correctly, do it yourself’ philosophy.”

“That’s a philosophy to take seriously, I do admit, and I’m not ashamed to say that I truly appreciate your acceptance of the burden that is me.”

“You are most welcome. And fear not, Gregory… I shall ensure no harm comes to your very naked and ruggedly masculine body while it is in my care.”

“You’re good to me, Mycroft. And, I suspect that if I’m lucky, you’ll be a little bad to me, too.”

“Your analysis of the situation is, as always, exemplary.”

“Like you, I’m sexy and smart.”

Greg’s boyish grin made Mycroft laugh, something he had done so rarely in his life that he was greatly surprised his body remembered how to perform the act, but it had given a stellar performance since he had met his dear sorcerer. It was yet one more gift among the chest of treasures this man had laid at his feet. The smart and sexy gifts were gleaming and precious jewels, too, with the sexy jewel being of particular interest at the moment. Gregory’s body was glorious and when presented under a stream of warm water… an embarrassment of riches was
putting it mildly…

Bliss… a slow, sensual shower with his Gregory, pleasuring him in the most delightful of ways, was nothing short of bliss. It enclosed them in a comfortable cocoon that lingered unabated as they dressed and returned to the sofa for a glass of exceptional Bordeaux which accompanied equally exceptional film offering from Hammer studios. The cocoon, however, was rudely torn open by the sound of Gregory’s mobile, followed by an impressive volume of shouting that his lover returned with matched volume, and language, until it moderated to the level of a tight, tense conversation and, finally, to a softer, almost resigned tone that now, on his sorcerer’s part, was restricted to repeating a certain phrase over and over again. Accompanied by the defeated shrug of his shoulders, the translation was very likely and unfortunately, some version of I don’t know…

“Well, that was fun.”

“I take it, my dear, you have spoken to Petras. I believe I heard his name mentioned, though that was not a language I recognized.”

“Yeah, that was him. I have never heard him so off his head that he just started shouting in the vampire tongue, but maybe he only does that when he’s bollocks-bursting angry. Given this is the first time I’ve ever seen… heard… him bursting his bollocks, though, I’ll need more data to be certain.”

“The vampires have a language?”

“That they do! With various dialects, too, but it’s fairly universal among the vampire populations. I like it, actually, but not when it’s being shouted at near fire-alarm loudness into my ear. I think it was a very good thing that Seth took point bringing this to Petras and Leo, because I’d probably be deaf if I had to listen to them in person.”

“Their thoughts?”

“Oh, many and horrible. This caught Petras, especially, by surprise since he prides himself on knowing the things that are lurking in the shadows for the vampire community and of all the possibilities he had in mind about what was at the root of this mess, the star of their darkest nightmares wasn’t anywhere on the list.”

“Then, I shall not ask if they possess any information at present that might be relevant to the current situation.”

“Not a bit. Of course, being completely off one’s nut might make one forget a few things or not make a connection that you could make if your brain wasn’t so frenzied, but, at the moment, they’re clueless. So, our new dragon is en route to collect us and Goraseth has the pleasure of dragging the Moriarty twins to Leo’s house for a little chat.”

“Should, instead, this discussion be held here? It is a more neutral location and… I am not content with you traveling in your condition.”

“I’m not pregnant, you know.”

“I passed each of my biology courses, so that fact did not escape me, however…”

Greg reached out and ran a hand across Mycroft’s cheek.
“I’m fine, love. Still have some aches and pains, but I’m fine for a ride in a plush car to a plush house where I’ll be yelled at, but not likely thrown through a wall, by an enraged vampire.”

“I shall intervene if I feel the latter is moving from ridiculous to imminent, however, do not believe otherwise.”

“Bring some of those horehound things Leo likes. You can distract him with a handful flung in the air.”

“I doubt that will have much impact on his brother.”

“That’s true. And, to be honest, I don’t know if Petras has any little thingies he likes like that. Marcus has loads, so maybe it’s one of those number lines with him and Petras at the ends and Leo in the middle.”

“Very mathematical of you.”

“I try. No, that’s a lie, I’m balls at maths, which does pose a problem with spells that are actually structured around some fairly convoluted mathematical relationships. Luckily, there’s an engineer I know who lends me her brain when mine is stuck in the mud.”

“A laudably collaborative arrangement. I simply hope no unduly forceful spells shall be required tonight to keep matters moving in a productive direction.”

“I’ll be ready with a few lovelies if need be. I’m hoping they won’t want to outright murder Moriarty and his brother, at least not until they’re sure they’ve wrung every bit of use out of them, so tonight stays on the fairly non-dismembery side. Maybe.”

“Well then, my worries are not eased to an entirely comfortable level, but it will do for now. Another glass of wine, perhaps, to render our concerns more bearable?”

“I’d love one. And we certainly have time for it what with London traffic.”

“Perhaps not, sir.”

Mycroft frowned, turned to his driver who was standing in the open… why was it always open… door to Greg’s flat and shook his head in annoyance.

“How soon after he heard the news did Petras dispatch you to collect us? And why on Earth did you comply?”

“Oh the first point, I was dispatched once the shouting dissolved into a nearly incoherent bout of hissing and growling. On the second point, Goraseth collected me on his way to speak with his employers and… Petras Varnas is somewhat terrifying when hissing and growling. My survival instincts bade me comply and with utmost alacrity.”

“Fair point. Very well… Gregory, are you certain you are sufficiently well for the ride?”

“I am and nothing says we can’t have our wine in the car, since we’re being driven like royalty, so I’ll be happy with the ride, too.”

“Another fair point. Charles if you will take our wine and glasses, I will escort Gregory to the car.”

Both Greg and Charles took a moment to stare at Mycroft’s leg, until the British Government made
a shooing motion to hurry the dragon along.

“Unglue your eyes from my thigh, Gregory Lestrade.”

“Nope and for several reasons. Right now, the most important one, though, is that I got to see it in a very up close and personal manner in the shower and, though it’s not nearly as worrisome as before, which I’ll thank Leo the Bastard for once again… how about I escort you to the car instead?”

“I believe we are somewhat matched in our incapacity so might I suggest that we escort each other as a compromise?”

“Like two old gents toddling along, arm in arm, so neither of us wobbles to the ground?”

“Precisely.”

“Perfect plan! And with our fortifying wine, there will be no danger of wobbling once we get to Leo’s.”

“Verily, it is an elixir of heath.”

“I’m worried now, though… do you think Charles, thieving dragon that he is, might be partaking of our elixir while he’s out of sight and leaving us will less?”

“Dear god! The villain would certainly quaff our health potion and feel not a whit of remorse. He must be stopped at all costs.”

Greg gave his best prepare-for-battle snarl and stood slowly to link his arm with Mycroft’s.

“Shall we toddle off to trounce him, good sir?”

“Let the toddling begin…”

The gentle meander towards the door was accompanied by decidedly youthful giggles for such aged and infirm men, but love was as good a health tonic as wine and, apparently, the source of the fountain of youth. The source of silliness, as well, but the youth part made that aspect entirely socially appropriate…

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“This doesn’t look shady at all.”

The two Moriarty brothers loitering outside a frighteningly expensive Kensington residence, closely watched by a scowling Goraseth, positively screamed the opening scene of a low-budget heist film which, to be fair, was wholly on par with the rest of the various bits of theatre associated with this debacle, in Greg’s opinion.

“If you think we’re walking into the lion’s den alone, Greg, your intellect is even lower than I thought, which was a punishingly-low bar to start.”

“Yeah, ok, I’m in agony. Seth, they give you any trouble?”

“No. At least, not enough to matter.”

Jim was too slow to conceal the slightly-singed condition of his shirt cuffs and Greg was happy to see Richard snorting in amusement at his brother’s failure.
“I have to admit, Greg, I knew dragons existed, but I’ve never had the opportunity to really speak with any of them or learn about their nature. Mr. Drothrosias has been very accommodating in that area. I learned quite a bit today and, given…”

Richard making a Ta Dah! motion at his brother only deepened Jim’s scowl, but he quickly covered his exasperation with bored expression that Mycroft had to concede equaled his own brother’s during particularly dramatic moments.

“… however, I’ll also admit that… well, I have no idea what to expect or any real sense of the people involved, so waiting for you to arrive seemed smart.”

“Can’t say you don’t have a point. In truth, if Petras is angry enough he’d turn me to bloody confetti to get to you, but that’ll give you a few extra seconds to leap out a window. There won’t be enough time to open it before you jump, mind you, so put some extra force into your leap or you’ll just bounce right back at him like a disgraced rubber ball.”

Greg winked at Mycroft before taking his arm again for their mutual support climbing the steps to the door, which was opened by a stern-faced man in traditional butler’s garb before they had opportunity to knock.

“Evening, Jokubas.”

“Mr. Lestrade. And... friend.”

Mycroft resigned himself to the fact that didn’t appear to be a single person in Leo’s sphere who was not suffused with attitude.

“Your sense of humor is ribald as ever, my good man. Want to show us in so the slaughter can begin?”

The fact the butler’s lips broke into a momentary, pleased smile did not fill Mycroft with confidence that it would not be necessary to order an air strike on the resplendent home to secure their rescue.

“Of course, sir. You are expected. Do follow me.”

Neither Greg nor Mycroft chose to comment on the fact that the Moriarty brothers were walking so closely behind them that they might as well have been trying to hide under their coats, again, as in a low-budget, straight-to-video heist film. At least there wouldn’t be a surprise rear assault on the twins, given the dragons were strolling behind them, chatting quietly as if they were confirming a few items on the day’s shopping list. There was no mistaking the watchful eyes, though, as even Goraseth seemed to think a bit of extra vigilance was needed at this point.

While Mycroft was a tad disappointed the house’s interior didn’t resemble his personal vision of Dracula’s castle, he greatly approved of the traditional elegance and lack of ostentation, which besmirched too many of London’s great homes that had been purchased by those pointedly lacking in elegance, taste and regard for aesthetic decency. And the door to which they were led was appropriately large and looming, exactly along the lines of doors to rooms in his own home where he met with those slated for summary execution. Or being relegated to embassies in inordinately hot and insect-adoring climates.

“His Majesty… Their Majesties… anxiously await you, sir.”

Greg gave the butler a ‘oh, aren’t you hilarious’ smile and took a deep breath before throwing open the heavy door with as much flourish as he could muster with a still-stiff arm doing half the work
and swore softly under his breath as he strode in. As he got a look inside, Mycroft also swore under his breath, but with greater vulgarity, something that had the sorcerer’s unequivocal approval. On the far side of the room was a large table which sported an actual throne at one end, in which was seated Leonas looking far less crochety and stooped than he had when Mycroft had last seen him. Apparently, this was the actual man he was seeing and not the public affectation. The man who survived being turned to mince by bullets to take bloody revenge on countless thugs for the murder of his wife. Flanking him on both sides was Petras and Marcus, each staring murderously at the door, eyes gleaming with menace and barely controlled fury. Mycroft cursed every instance he’d pooh-poohed the lack of vampireness in this family, Petras aside, because the reality of the vampire nature was far more vampire-like than he would ever deem comfortable.

“Evening, lads.”

A harsh barrage of words in what Mycroft now recognized wasn’t a human language sawed their way into his ear and he didn’t resent Richard pressing against his back and peering over his shoulder like a child hoping an elder sibling would shield him from a furious parent.

“You do that, Leo, old cock, and whatever information they might have or help they can provide is lost, now isn’t it? Ripping a man’s heart from his chest doesn’t tend to make them particularly chatty, in my experience.”

Greg’s voice was perfectly-pitched, to Mycroft’s ear, to demonstrate his utter lack of concern at the vampire carrying through with the threat, but a hundred infinitesimal cues in his face and bearing told a different tale. Especially as Petras broke from the tableau, stalked like a panther towards Greg to stand toe to toe with the sorcerer and hiss a short string of words into the sorcerer’s face.

“Showing loyalty to my husband and family also means stepping in when they’re about to make a costly mistake. It means standing up for what’s right, so they don’t suffer for their foul temper and poor judgement. You want to convene the Tribunal, fine. You want to summon an Enclave, that’s your right and I won’t stand in the way beyond seeing the facts are laid out objectively. But I will not see the Varnas family fall into disgrace, to not only lose face but lose countless of their people, because the thrill of butchery was more appealing than actually solving a catastrophic problem that could devastate the vampire race. I am loyal, Petras, that’s why I will stop you if it comes to it. I just hope it won’t.”

Mycroft stood absolutely motionless because any movement would certainly spark some outcome and none of the possible outcomes he calculated were to their benefit. The long silence continued while the two men stared into each other’s eyes, until Petras huffed a frustrated breath and took a step back, spinning slightly on his heel to acknowledge Mycroft with a tight smile.

“Family is ever a burdensome thing, is it not, Mycroft? That, I feel, is something you know well.”

“I do, as well as the fact that they, unfortunately, are often the only ones who can, as they say, speak truth to power.”

Petras nodded slightly and, to Mycroft’s surprise, remained to stand beside him while the vampire motioned for the Moriarty brothers to present themselves front and center to the glowering king.

“Ummm… hello, Your Majesty. It… it is good to meet you, sir.”

Politeness was not always a successful tactic in situations such as this, but Mycroft credited Richard with trying and, at least, making it an authentic greeting, as opposed to whatever bit of bile Jim would toss out to pour petrol on the fire.
“You have possibly condemned my people to oblivion, necromancer.”

“I didn’t mean to, sir! Really, I didn’t. I didn’t have any idea what was going on and…”

“And you freely chose to desecrate the grave of one of my people and allowed their corpse to be defiled.”

“I… I won’t argue that, because it’s true. In a sense. I thought this was a normal job, someone wanted a bit of information the vampire could provide and then they’d either return them to rest where I resurrected them or… sometimes people want to move loved ones to another site for their eternal rest but don’t want to disturb any potential magic that may surround their burial that an approval to move would avoid. But… I have resurrected beings and learned that the motives behind it weren’t… good. And, no, I haven’t walked away from who I am and what I do because of it. I own that, and if there’s a price to pay, then I understand, but that’s a matter for the future. Right now, I just want to help however I can because I did not want this. I do not want this. I don’t have anything against the vampires and I’m… I’m a nice person! I don’t have anything against anyone and certainly don’t want to cause any harm. I really don’t.”

Jim laid a hand on his brother’s shoulder and glared at Leonas who glared back and with far more years of glaring practice under his belt.

“A pretty speech, boy. A very pretty one, indeed, however…”

Leo didn’t move so much as a finger as far as Mycroft could see but somehow signaled his brother, who was on Richard, his long-fingered hand covering the necromancer’s face while Marcus shot out with a speed the eye couldn’t follow to pin Jim’s arms behind him and prevent any interference.

“… one that may be akin to so many pathetic humans. Pretty, but deceitful to the core.”

Greg quickly shook his head at Mycroft’s step forward and Mycroft immediately stopped moving, trusting Greg’s instincts more than his own in this situation.

“Let Rich go!”

“Silence, sorcerous cur!”

Jim struggled with all his might, but he stood no chance of escape from Marcus’s grasp, especially when the vampire latched fangs onto his neck in such a way that sent a clear message that any attempts at magic would not have time to be completed before he was lying dead at Marcus’s feet.

“Well, Petras, my brother… what say you?”

It was only then Mycroft noticed the slight change that had occurred in Petras’s eyes, moving them from the deepest of crimson to a bottomless black that held a moment after he released Richard and motioned to Marcus to do the same to Jim.

“He speaks the truth.”

Jim snarled at Marcus and darted over, unmindful of the unhealed fang marks on his neck, to check his brother, who was slow to shake off the effects of whatever the vampire had done to him.

“Very well. Then we proceed and leave their reckoning for another time.”

Leo flicked his fingers at Petras who, in turn, motioned to Mycroft to follow him, which Mycroft did only after a look at Greg who gave him a quick nod of agreement.
“The spies will begin their work and we will begin ours. Come, I will know every detail of this. That accursed dragon failed utterly in providing anything beyond the scantest of information and that cannot stand.”

Greg saw the anger flare hotly in Jim’s eyes and was a second too slow in waving him off any hasty decisions.

“It was enough for you to try and kill me and my brother, you miserable leech!”

This time it was Leo who moved at unfathomable speed, but his hand wrapped around Jim’s already injured neck, not his face, lifting him cleanly off the floor.

“Curb your tongue or I shall remove it from your mouth. Your kind cannot be touched by this pestilence, but mine will suffer an agonizing death if we cannot stop it being released. Let me assure you, and do take me at my word, dog… the first of my people who dies, you shall watch your brother lose his skin in strips before I begin cutting through his limbs an inch at a time. And while he screams for mercy, none will arrive. It will be as a serenade to my ears, the meagerest of justice for those who perish because of his indifference to those he assaults with his dark arts.”

Hurling Jim to the ground was Leo’s punctuation to his speech and Greg simply felt grateful the vampire king didn’t add in a few kicks for good measure. All in all, this was the best he could have hoped for and what the Moriarty brothers didn’t know was that Leo promising death later meant they were safe for the moment, so… victory! Of a sort. If the plague was unleashed, that was another story, but with millions of lives on the line, he wasn’t going to begrudge the vampires their wrath. He’d remind Jim and Richard to see their passports were current and were ready to move assets to some very hidden places, though, just in case a quick disappearance was in order. Leo was actually being diplomatic right now, for him, and if he did decide to get peevish… maybe Seb could work up a few disguises to help the brothers get out of London with a minimum of fuss…
“Very impressive, Mycroft. Your access to information is most, most impressive.”

Mycroft had been more than slightly curious, and concerned, when he was separated from the rest of their party and escorted down a darkened flight of stairs, but quickly his curiosity assuaged and his concerns laid to rest when Petras led him to a large cellar room that had been outfitted with state of the art equipment that rivaled what he accessed daily for matters of work. And, it made sense why this room was below ground – it naturally had no windows nor any mechanism through which sunlight light could accidentally enter. For a vampire who saw little sleep, this was a highly-efficient arrangement and was just as efficient an arrangement for a human who saw equally-little sleep but spent countless hours of his own life sifting through the information trails to resolve this problem, that crisis or manage whatever pesky apocalyptic horseman had decided to tether his horse for awhile and wreak a bit of havoc while the poor beast had a spot of rest and a feedbag of grain.

“Thank you.”

“We have sources in various areas, of course, but none with the levels of clearance you possess.”

“There are few in the world with the clearances I possess. Perhaps none. It is a somewhat nebulous position I occupy and one that has morphed through the years in beneficial ways.”

“Very beneficial indeed.”

Mycroft took clear note of the scheming smile on Petras’s face and felt utterly unsurprised by it. He would be feeling much the same if their situations were reversed. Information was the currency on which the world ran, and the magical world seemed very much to run on the same standard. From Petras’s perspective, he had been handed the keys to a bank with a lorry idling outside to take away the pallets of cash and sacks of jewels.

“I have little doubt that a somewhat collaborative relationship would be of benefit to us both as we go forward. For this issue and, naturally, for others.”

“Our interests shall not always run parallel, of course.”

“Perish the thought. However, even those situations are made more amenable to both sides if there is productive relationship between the parties involved.”

“I agree. Now that the point of productive relationships is raised, however… I do not perceive you being unduly upset by your sorcerer’s marriage to my nephew. Is that correct?”

There was a tone to the vampire’s voice that Mycroft couldn’t precisely place, but that was likely by design, he suspected. Ultimately it was highly probable that what was being masked was an uncle’s concern for a nephew who was involved in a situation that might set him at cross-purposes with someone who could make that dynamic a highly disagreeable one.

“Ah… yes, your perceptions are correct, though there lingers some degree of uncertainty as to how it might impact Gregory’s and my relationship in the future. My final perceptions will form in short order, I believe, but the outline of them has already taken shape for if I was overly concerned about the arrangement, I would have felt differently about tonight’s open declaration of loyalty to Marcus and your family, yet I only felt… pride. I was terribly proud of Gregory in that moment
and that is a very telling indicator of my general sense of the matter.”

“You see the situation properly, then. It is a political thing, though there are magic-based reasons their union is a smart one, though those, also, are grounded in politics.”

“For example?”

“Natural power, for one. Marcus is more powerful than others for his age, partly because of his family line, but partly because of his union with the sorcerer. The rituals they enact supplement his innate talents and that is a highly beneficial thing for a prince.”

“I agree. And, if you are curious, I have no intention of interfering with their association.”

“I did not believe you would. You are a practical man. You compare the gains that are achieved at the expense of the costs and weigh them accordingly.”

“One must in the work we do.”

Petras sighed and ran a hand over his scalp, stretching after the long interval he had been bent over the computer screen while he and Mycroft worked.

“Very true. Though… the work we do is not giving gains, at this moment, no matter our costs.”

“Time, perhaps, for other avenues of investigation. Mr. Drothtosias noted that your brother has an exceptional collection of books on the subject of the plague. Are they here or…”

“Some. Many are in the castle library. And, before you ask, most have yet to be digitized for access. I have implored Leonas time and again to simply see it done, yet he procrastinates. I shall likely have to take on the task myself for access to the information should be easier for me than boarding an airplane and flying in to pay my respects at his door.”

“Perhaps he simply enjoys the excuse to have you visit.”

The mutual snort of laughter clearly spoke each man’s opinion of that idea.

“He has his witches for company when he desires it.”

“Have they no spells to digitize the books? Perhaps you could employ them for the task.”

“That… actually I have no idea if that is possible. A question for your sorcerer.”

“I shall make note of it. I take it you have not had time to peruse the library here?”

“No… however, I know what Leo stores in this house, and there is little of real consequence. He is not fond of London at the best of times. Lestrade has a collection, though…”

“Gregory examined his selections and found only a few minor notes that were relevant to the plague, none being terribly informative.”

“Unfortunate. I keep apprised of what is held by the vampire community, in terms of books and objects, and there is little in their possession that we do not have in one form or another ourselves. It is possible that there some items of which I have no knowledge, but… if it was related to the plague, I cannot fathom any of our people keeping that knowledge a secret. The stakes are far, far too high.”
“Then such a route of inquiry is unprofitable. Other storehouses of information?”

“Of course. Collections held by those other than the vampires, but the few to which I have gained access are focused fairly narrowly on the community that hosts them. The werewolves, for example, are replete with information on their kind, but have precious little for anyone else, as it is, ultimately, of no importance to their interests. Periodically, some… optimistic soul… tries to rally support for a greater sharing of such resources, but it never takes root. Too much suspicion, fear, whatever it may be, to make the divulging of potentially-leverageable information appealing. Of course, there could easily be information for a wide diversity of interests held by parties with no connection to any particular magical race who are, therefore, unaware of any political or magical concerns. Such as, say, the one housed in the British Library.”

Mycroft’s mind sparked both from the ‘ah ha’ at recognition of the source and from the pleasant memory of spending time there with his dear Gregory.

“Yes... Gregory did not mention to me any thoughts along those lines, but he may not have considered that a fruitful area of investigation. I... I read some small measure of selected volumes, but my language skills were not sufficiently developed to read a great amount. And we were only present for a few hours.”

“The collection is large?”

“I believe so, but I am not a qualified judge since I have only seen it and Gregory’s personal assemblage.”

“My sources say it is remarkable, though they have not been able to access it directly nor gain a catalog of the items it contains. However, I have a new source now that might brush aside the obstacles I previously have faced.”

The blackguard was waggling his eyebrows! Which, with a lack of hair above them, made for a particularly-pointed gesture.

“Are you suggesting I secure for you access to the collection?”

“No, I am suggesting you secure access for the both of us to study the collection. If it is as large as I suspect, two heads will be more efficient than one, especially given the time-sensitive nature of this problem.”

Mycroft blew out a small breath but had to admit that the vampire’s assessment was correct. And the suggestion was a good one.

“It might take a small amount of nudging to gain access after business hours, to coincide with your nocturnal lifestyle, but I am hesitant to use too firm a hand and potentially raise questions that we might not wish raised at this point. However, my gentle nudges are taken as seriously as my firmer ones, so I suspect we shall see my request honored no later than tomorrow night.”

“An unacceptable delay.”

“Are you considering pursuing a career as a housebreaker with the British Library as your target?”

“I could… though I would have to pull a few levers for information on their security systems that I prefer remain unpulled at this juncture. Besides, it is somewhat later than you imagine…”

Petras tapped the time icon on the computer and Mycroft startled at the fact that they had sped past
the dark of night and were fully into the area of sun-kissed morning.

“Good heavens! Gregory must be worried terribly.”

“He is well aware you are working here, and you shared a tender goodbye when he left to escort home the Moriarty pests.”

“That was ages ago.”

“Has he phoned?”

“You know very well that he has not.”

“Then he is not worried terribly. I would predict that he recognizes you are engaged in an important task and that it would be to nobody’s benefit to interrupt you with his concerns which, given you are in one of the most well-protected residences in London, would be rather… silly.”

“Perhaps, however, he would know that your household would have already taken to the beds and that it is unlikely you would leave me here unsupervised to continue working while you slept.”

“Precisely, meaning I am still with you and, if I might be so boastful, that is protection most would pay dearly to gain for themselves.”

“Pish tosh. Consider the basic… politeness or, in my case, the lack thereof, in, at the very least, checking on the status of his health. He recently has suffered some markedly worrying physical injuries, as you are aware.”

“Vulcan’s forge, man… phone him if you require reassurance. But do not make me the target of your guilt when you wake him from a sound sleep and want to soliloquize on your poor judgement and lack of loving regard for his wellbeing.”

“Pfft.”

“Eloquent. Send a text, then.”

“I despise texting.”

“Shall I summon to my side the legions of the underworld to hand carry devotional declarations to your beloved?”

“I shall continue on with my established eloquence and respond thusly – Pfft.”

Petras did a balletic eye roll- tiptoe spin combination and walked away from Mycroft providing a few waved-hands-in-the-air moments to indicate his opinion of Mycroft’s predicament.

“Foul fiend.”

“I heard that!”

“Good.”

And given it was very softly muttered and the vampire was some distance away now, Mycroft now had a better idea of the sensitivity of vampire hearing.

“I am phoning Gregory.”
“Shall I melt a few bars of gold to produce for you a trophy?”

This next round of very soft, and very rude, muttering made Petras laugh darkly and Mycroft waved him off with flick of the wrist at the vampire’s back. He had far more important things on which to concentrate than a flippant nosferatu.

“Hro?”

Damn.

“I am so sorry to wake you, Gregory.”

“Oh! Oh, Mycroft… yeah, what time… morning. Ok, you’re still at Leo’s I take it?”

“That I am, and I apologize profoundly for not phoning sooner to check on your welfare.”

“Nothing to check, really. Jim was dropped at his flat, then Charles kicked me and Richard out in front of the shop to crawl to our beds however we could. It was a survival test that I’m proud to say I emerged from clutching victory in my hands.”

Though Mycroft was firmly confident Charles actually took pains to ensure the recovering sorcerer did not meet a tragic end as a corpse moldering on the pavement after collapsing from a total drain of vitality.

“Your vigor is an inspiration. I hope you intend, however, to sleep for several more hours given the length of your day.”

“I might. Actually, I have a few things I want to look into today, so I don’t want to be too much of a slugabed.”

“Concerning our current crisis?”

“Yeah. I know a few people in the community who might have some history books I lack that… I genuinely don’t think anyone has a book that has a passage describing a vaccine or cure for the plague, that would be known even if the bastard auctioned it off to the highest bidder, but there are further accounts of what was tried and failed that could save us time if we start along that route ourselves. I only have that one book with a few useful passages, but I’ve not been one to focus much on pure history so it’s not surprising. This time, though, history might drag our arses a few millimeters out of the bonfire and I’ll take what I can get.”

“I agree. Petras indicated that a greater quantity of material is present at Leonas’s primary residence, but there are no digitized versions to easily send along for inspection.”

“And that might be our next step. Or Leo’s next step. Get his skinny arse back home to do a bit of digging.”

“We were curious… could the local witches perform the digitizing with a spell?”

“I… don’t know anyone who’s ever tried that. Even in the old days of the Internet, if you had the Internet, you had a scanner or camera and could make information available that way. People did, too. Nothing dangerous, generally a casual practitioner who’d learned something new or done something they were particularly proud of. It’s something to investigate, though. I’ll add that to my list. In any case… what have you two come up with?”

“Little, I am afraid. We have attempted to ascertain the identity of the individual who met with
Richard at the cemetery, but to no avail. I cannot find any video footage from the surrounding area that might have captured his image and even the local transportation stations have been unhelpful in that arena, given their remote location and the low level of commerce or tourist interest in the area. Further, there were no peculiarities in any identities for fare purchases, accommodation bookings or the like. And we cannot pinpoint how the location of the cemetery was originally discovered. Only a select few of the older vampires have knowledge of the more ancient cemeteries and precious little is recorded in archives that others might stumble upon should they choose to begin a search. The existence of such cemeteries is no secret, however, the vampires revere their dead and consider it a severe insult to disturb the rest of the departed. Did, by chance, Richard provide you with a copy of the video sent to him?"

“No, and I didn’t think to ask.”

“Nor did I, but that is next on my agenda. I suppose, though, he is also resting and… it can wait until this evening.”

“Does that mean you’re on your way home?”

“Likely. We were just considering examining the collection of books at the British Library, so once we have established a time for that to occur…”

“As soon as we enjoy our breakfast.”

Mycroft startled at the voice to his right and startled again as a plate with a large toasted bagel, replete with cream cheese and lox was set down beside him, along with a hot cup of tea.

“Are you mad?”

“You do not like bagels?”

“I… Gregory, why is a vampire trying to feed me lox and bagels?”

“I have no idea. Petras has never offered me even a crumb of anything. Did I hear something about him wanting to visit the library this morning?”

“Yes, as if that was a feasible plan.”

“Oh, it is…”

“Why are you laughing.”

“Because I now know why the bastard is feeding you up properly.”

“Would you care to share your revelation?”

“Nope.”

“Gregory!”

“Have fun, love. I’ll see you… this afternoon or evening.”

“What?”

“Bye!”

Mycroft threw his mobile a highly-affronted glare and wished he had sorcerer’s power to send the
sentiment straight to Greg’s shrunken heart.

“And how is the great man this morning? Getting his beauty sleep?”

“Gregory has little need for such a thing but, yes, he is getting his rest. Though he has individuals to whom he wishes to speak today who might have books or whatnot of a historical nature. He wishes to learn what has been tried to prevent or combat the plague, so we might refine any future efforts on our parts along those lines.”

“Very wise. Eat. There is also fruit, if you have a taste for it.”

“Is this your normal routine?”

“Bagels?”

“Remaining awake for a hearty breakfast.”

“Often. There is always much to do and very little time in which to do it. I keep various things on hand so I might focus on my work and not waste that precious time porting myself to the house’s kitchen to prepare a meal.”

Mycroft heaved a commiserative sigh and took a bite of his bagel, hearing in the vampire’s words a very familiar song. Though he could ignore his hunger for an extended period, if necessary, his efficiency was always best served by having something on hand to maintain a constant energy level and keep the pesky little pangs at bay. And, now that he took in more of the room, he made more conscious note of the second door, the one not leading to the loo, that must have a small kitchen so Petras could work essentially uninterrupted. Very similar to the situation in his own work spaces, though they did not achieve quite such a… lair… atmosphere. At least, he did not think they did…

“I understand. Too well, unfortunately. The lox is excellent, by the way.”

“Thank you.”

It was part and parcel of Mycroft’s life that he interacted with many complex individuals, but the devastatingly-dangerous Petras Varnas was certainly an exemplar of the breed. And, since they had a moment not entirely focused on their computers…

“As we sit here, enjoying this delightful repast… what, precisely, did you do to Richard Moriarty earlier this evening?”

Yes, smile, devilish man for you know well my curiosity has been burning for hours.

“I sifted through his mind for the unmistakable feel of a lie. I also may have encouraged him to… want to let me know if he was lying. A powerful sorcerer or an individual with time to enact certain magical protections could thwart me, however, I can often, shall we say, short-circuit even their efforts with both speed and… ferocity.”

“I see. How much detail can you glean?”

“It varies. With a cooperative participant, I can see more, though a mind is… a mind. It is difficult, at times, for even its owner to know if what they harbor in their thoughts is real or a fabrication built from their own fears, wants, conditioning… given time and cooperation, I can tease apart such things to reach the unvarnished memories or emotions, however, there is rarely reason to bother. A person acts on their own truths, not the objective truth, so the former is
generally more useful and informative than the latter.”

“Point taken. I was simply curious if you could probe Mr. Moriarty more deeply for a better description of the individual who met him at the cemetery or details of this whole affair that might not be remembered consciously.”

“I can try, but I do not hold out great hope for success. What I see is not… it is not say the image of a face or text of a document. It is more a sense and essence of a thing, which is not terribly useful for identification, unless there are already suspects that can be eliminated or pinpointed based on known qualities, actions and leanings. Here, give me your hand…”

“Pardon?”

“Give, as in present, to me, the person sitting somewhat cattycorner from you, your hand, the thing that resides at the distal end of your arm.”

“Amusing. Might I ask why?”

“Because I am a surprisingly humorous fellow.”

Dear heavens…

“Why do you want my hand?”

“To demonstrate what I can and cannot learn from your mind. If you worry that I will slither in and steal your secrets, personal and otherwise, rest assured I will not. First, you would know if I was trying such a thing and, second, it is not an honorable act unless the need outweighs the insult, which it does not.”

Mycroft scowled, but was caught between profound curiosity and fear of having his mind invaded. Ultimately, if he was to fully leverage the vampires as assets, which he greatly hoped to do, a thorough understanding of their capabilities and limits was necessary.

“Very well, but I will hold you to your word.”

Mycroft reached out with his left hand and was only slightly irritated to notice the vampire’s fingers were longer than his own.

“Thank you. If you like, imagine in your mind a solid wall behind which everything of importance is well protected from the world at large. I suspect that your mental faculties would make that a formidable barrier for me to penetrate and you would know in an instant if I was attempting something, shall we say, sneaky. Now, place a person on the other side of that wall so that I could, if you will, see them. Anyone. And I will tell you what I can of them.”

That did seem a useful demonstration.

“Very well… do begin.”

And Petras did, which surprised Mycroft slightly, because he could sense the difference immediately from when the man had simply held his hand and when he began to look inside his mind. Until he gave permission to begin, there was no action being attempted. It was a small thing, but it did bolster some trust.

“If you were a house, this individual… would be your foundation.”
Mycroft almost pulled back his hand at the pronouncement. He would be hard-pressed, himself, to describe Sherlock’s impact on his life in more blatant terms.

“I shall not deny the allegation.”

“He, and it is a he, is a… even through your efforts at limiting my reach, elements of your mind are reaching out and touching him, unwilling to leave him, perhaps, at my mercy. You love him with all you are and are keen to the point of desperation to keep him safe for… he needs a watchful eye upon him.”

“Again… true.”

“I feel he is… consequential. Someone of talent, of ability and achievement… though… there is something there… unfocused. At least to your mind. He is a presence. Not one to overlook in a crowd. Physically, but in personality, also. I… would hazard a guess he is dark, of hair and clothing, by preference, but it is by no means certain.”

Mycroft waited a moment more then looked closely at Petras who seemed to be reflecting on something.

“Do you have a question?”

“No, simply letting my own mind rest a moment.”

With that, the vampire released Mycroft’s hand and sat back in his seat to begin tapping a finger on the tip of his chin.

“I do not… not a lover. That is not the sort of love I felt. Brother?”

“Yes, actually. My brother, Sherlock.”

“Ah… the one, I hear, that has found a great… friend… in Doctor Watson.”

“The very one. Would you… would you be able to identify him by photo or in a group?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. If you asked me to physically describe him, I could give no more than I have, which is why I feel I could gain no more from the necromancer.”

“Are… do all vampires possess this talent?”

“To a degree. I am particularly gifted, though. From my mother. I favor her line more than Father’s. For Leonas, it is reversed.”

“What special gift did your brother receive in the genetics lottery?”

“The freedom to live unpestered by those chasing him about for sexual favors.”

Mycroft snorted a laugh and took another bite of his breakfast. While he chewed, did his own bit of mental reflection to determine if anything felt different than before. It seemed there were no lingering effects, so fuzziness or disorientation such as was seen in Richard’s case. Of course, the man had a vampire pounce upon him and that was surely more shocking to experience than to behold. And, Petras had noted honor was not served by prying deeply against a person’s will, unless the needs were great. Stopping a devastating plague most certain qualified. All in all, he was satisfied with his placid experiment and had no wish to experience the other side of the proverbial coin. Though one question remained…
“You remarked that you gave Richard some encouragement to be truthful. To what degree can such a thing be effective?”

“Again, it is highly dependent on who is involved. Could I convince someone to do something against their will? No. Could I persuade them to follow an already-existing urge? Yes. But, for many, that can be achieved entirely without the use of any so-called supernatural power.”

“True. I was simply curious if that was also the root of the legend that vampires had the power of mesmerism.”

“Most certainly. And pairs nicely with the way such is portrayed in fiction. As with a simple stroll through your thoughts, the effort is discernable to the recipient. If one is experiencing heightened emotions from fear, anger or… desire… the effect is far less noticeable. One uses the tools at hand…”

“Hopefully, only for meaningful purposes.”

“Always, though some tools are delightful on their own. Speaking of… I think you need fruit.”

Mycroft pursed his lips but failed to respond given his mouth was still occupied with a new bite of breakfast.

“Do not fear, though… I eschew the banal, lifeless fruit. Prepare for succulent, sugar-rich, delectable morsels of nature’s bounty.”

Lovely.

“Do all vampires embrace decadence with such abandon?”

“Have you met my nephew, Marcus?”

“Point taken.”

Mycroft had to admit that his personal lair needed more in the way of lox, bagels and delectable morsels of nature’s bounty, because he felt surprisingly full, yet energized, in a way that a day-old pastry or handful of Jammie Dodgers simply did not engender.

“Most delicious. Thank you. Now, I should see about returning to check on Gregory and…”

“Incorrect.”

“What?”

“We are going to the British Library to examine their collection.”

“No, that is not on the agenda.”

“I counter with… yes, it is on the agenda. The library is open and ready to receive visitors, two of which shall be us.”

“The sun is blazing like an inferno in the sky!”

“Its mother must be terribly proud.”
“You are a vampire.”

“I am.”

“A people not known for their happy embrace of the aforementioned solar inferno.”

“Partially true. For the young, the danger is high, but it declines with age. Not to the point where one must not take precautions, of course, but to a point where prudent planning can allow for occasions when one needs to conduct business during daylight hours.”

“Oh. Lesson learned. What sort of precautions?”

“Limiting exposure time. Avoiding the harshest hours of illumination as much as possible. Protecting one’s eyes and skin. And…”

Mycroft watched as Petras smiled and allowed his fangs to lower slightly to signal the next item on his safety list.

“… feeding well beforehand.”

“I… no. Good heavens, man! I… I scarcely know you!”

“How is that relevant?”

“It… consider the intimacy.”

“Did you feel sexy eating your bagel?”

“That was an entirely different matter.”

“Not really.”

“I am not bread.”

“Liquid bread. For me, at least.”

“That… I honestly have no idea if that is insulting or not.”

“Let me settle the question for you – it is not. A well-fed organism can withstand any and all stresses better than a poorly fed one. Whereas our nice breakfast provides a suite of nutrients I require, it does not provide all. Blood is far more… vigor-promoting… and acts quickly to revitalize our systems. Moreover, the quality of the blood… the power of the person from who we receive it… it is a significant consideration. Marcus gains much when he partakes from your sorcerer and I have no doubt your blood shall be equally a superior type.”

Mycroft couldn’t help but feel smug because, of course, his blood was superior. It really could be no other way.

“Be that as it may…”

“You know you want to experience it.”

“Experience what?”

Though I am perfectly certain I know to what you are referring, and you are a blackguard for correctly predicting that the notion is one to fire my curiosity to a tantalizing level.
“That was pitiful. It genuinely inspired in me pity for you.”

“Oh very well. Yes, I am curious to know what being fed upon entails as it forms such a robust portion of the vampire legend, however, I am not entirely comfortable actually experiencing it myself.”

“First-hand information is the only truly trustworthy information.”

Blackguard. To the power of infinity.

“That is true, though…”

“I give you permission to bite me if you are unhappy with the final result.”

“That is nonsensical.”

“It is, but if you are to become a part of the greater spectrum of this world, you must learn that your reticence falls also into that category. I can assure you, that you will be asked… no, let me rephrase. It will be demanded by certain individuals to sample your blood as part of a negotiation process, whether it be for securing access to something they possess or the cementing of an alliance. Human up, as they say, and give me a drink.”

Mycroft’s ‘why I never’ gape dearly made Petras wish he had a string of pearls handy for his companion to clutch.

“We are wasting valuable time, Mycroft…”

Mycroft huffed but couldn’t argue that he had no idea of the nuances of vampire politics and if such was a norm, then he best become used to the experience now. If Petras was simply playing silly buggers, though, there were countless ways to make the blighter’s life an utter, unrelenting misery. And… all his life he had imagined being fed upon by a member of the vampiric race… damn youthful fantasies!

“Very well. But let this serve as your notice that you are not to get… handsy.”

“Prim words from a man who enacted a scorching erotic performance with his bagel.”

“I AM NOT BREAD!”

“Sorry. My mistake. Now, before we begin, I will alert Goraseth that we require the car and… obtain a hat.”

It was the tiniest and pettiest of victories, but Mycroft savored it, nonetheless.

“A fetching one, I hope.”

“Not as fetching as your neck, Mycroft, but it will suffice.”

And, with a toothy smile, Petras moved towards the door to the upper floors of the house and Mycroft waited until he was fully out of sight before gulping slightly. The nerve of the man. Who would undoubtedly pretend he was any of the vampires from the most salacious of the Hammer films simply to be devilish. Well, that was the hurling of a gauntlet and it would not lay mockingly on the floor for long. Tomorrow, the evil, pound-shop Lugosi would find himself positively awash in hats. Of the most flamboyant sorts. Sunglasses, also. And parasols. Anthea could exercise her whimsy to her heart’s content and every shilling of his accounts that went to this worthy cause
would be money very, very well spent…
“Look what the cat dragged in! You look knackered love. Long day… and night… or just drained to a husk by a villainous vampire?”

Greg giggled at Mycroft’s stony glare and patted the sofa, inviting his obviously-harried lover to have a rest.

“Most amusing, Gregory.”

“I’m sorry, Mycroft, but you have to admit the thought of you being a snack for Petras is pretty fucking funny.”

“I am not a snack.”

“Meal, then. It’s a nice day today, so he probably had a long, leisurely drink to make escorting you out something not involving lots of blackened, crackly skin. On him, that is, not you. Though I do suspect if we visit the beach, I’ll have to bring along lots of sun protectant, what with you being so fair. Don’t want to end the day with you sporting angry red skin that won’t appreciate even the smallest cuddle!”

“You could have warned me. You knew precisely what the blackguard was planning.”

“And spoil the surprise? I know you’ve wondered about being bitten by a vampire, you love your horror films far too much not to have thought about it, and this was your big chance! Besides… it wasn’t as bad… or good… as you anticipated, was it?”

Mycroft’s glare downgraded to a petulant frown, but he still wasn’t ready to let go of his peevishness without wringing out of it every last bit of peeve he could muster.

“It was utterly humiliating.”

“Utterly boring, you mean. Sitting there while someone’s got their face fixed to your neck and there’s nothing to do because you foolishly forgot to bring a book with you to pass the time.”

“I was more concerned he would irreparably sever a major blood vessel and my life would end tragically.”

“Lie. And not a very good one, either.”

“Very well, I was more concerned that his sexual urges would inflame during the act and my honor would be compromised.”

“That was bad for a poorly-written penny dreadful someone dug out of the rubbish to read while being a tasty snack for a vampire. And a lie.”

“Gregory! I am not a food product!”

“Sorry to break it to you, but for a lot the magical sort… yes, you are. Or were back in past. Most have been very good about not eating people in recent times, but don’t think when you stroll down the street and you get an admiring look it couldn’t be because they’re imagining you served with a nice sauce and few vegetables to get some vitamins into their system.”

“I… that is positively terrifying.”
“Vegetables are not terrifying. They’re the key to a healthy life.”

Mycroft swatted the again-giggling Greg, but began to feel more of his annoyance ebb away. If Gregory was being such a silly scamp it was because he genuinely saw the situation as nothing of consequence, in terms of… meaning. Which was part of his personal irritation concerning the whole matter.

“I suppose… I admit that I may have envisioned…”

“Thought it was going to be like the films? All sensual and sexy or violent and horrifying, but it was more like waiting for a mate to finish his pint? With you, the powerful, mighty, keeps-the-world-humming Mycroft Holmes as the lowly pint?”

“Yes. In essence.”

“Poor love… I understand, though. It’s a knock to the ego to realize that a vampire, and an impressive example of the breed at that, wants to use you as a chips shop and not something more exciting or dastardly. If it’s any consolation, though, I can assure you that Petras would not have suggested that if he didn’t think you were a unique donor. A proper feeding, from anyone, can help a vampire manage sunlight better than normal, but there are limits and it’s pretty short-term. You two have been at it all day and… he didn’t feed a second time, did he?”

“No, he did not.”

“See? Two full feedings in that short a time wouldn’t have been good for the donor, potentially very not good actually. He suspected he could do it once and that would protect him all day, even with London actually permitting the sun to show its shiny face bright and clear, at least, as long as he wasn’t prancing about in it the whole time.”

“Which we did not.”

“Stayed at the library?”

“And… when we were finished for the day… Petras purchased for me a coffee that we enjoyed in a nearby café.”

“Which was a treat for him, I suspect, since he doesn’t often get to see London in the daytime, if you were worried he was plying you with a hot beverage to get another nip at your neck.”

“I did not make that assumption. Nor did I assume he was plying me for another rummage through my mind.”

It was a small victory, but seeing Greg’s widened eyes made Mycroft high-five the mind that hadn’t seen a second rummaging, one rummage being more than sufficient for a very long time.

“You let him take a peek inside your head?”

“I was curious as to how much information he could glean from Richard, for example, a visual image of the man he met at the cemetery, and he thought this would be an efficient demonstration of both his strengths and limitations.”

“Can I ask what he saw?”

“At his suggestion, I imagined a person, my brother, and placed him in front of a wall to safeguard the rest of my thoughts. Though Petras could not give a very useful physical description
of Sherlock, he did give an informed description of who is Sherlock to me and the impact he has made on my life. It was… it was a startling thing, but disinclined me to ask Richard to submit to another act of mental probing for more information on our problem.”

“Well, don’t rule it out, because I… I can assure you that Petras can get more than that from a person.”

“He indicated as much, but I am reluctant to ask Richard to endure what would be involved by a harsher inspection of his mind. If it becomes necessary, then that is another matter, however… after today, it may not be important.”

The shift in Mycroft’s tone set Greg on alert that they had arrived at the end of any levity that might have put some lightness in their conversation.

“You found something.”

“Much, actually. My coffee was actually, I suspect, a thank you from Petras from keeping him out of the hands of the authorities.”

“Oh dear… that’s usually a worry about Leo.”

“I cannot berate him the loss of… temper… given the emotional impact of… there was more to the collection than we saw during our brief examination, Gregory. Several more rooms of items and… a substantial number of volumes concerning vampires. Their history, lore, magic… human interest in the vampire race likely spurred an interest in acquiring such things, but… Petras became almost frantic to either steal or destroy much of what we discovered and it required… well, I shall not dwell upon my methods, but let us say I am somewhat looking forward to either a large scotch or one of John’s pain tablets to soothe the insult to my muscular system. Fortunately, even in a rather furious lather, he was most cautious to avoid anything that might harm my healing leg.”

Greg’s widened eyes grew even larger and he began to think that it was time to prepare for his lover a protective talisman to keep him safe from allies and enemies alike. They were balls to craft at the level he wanted, but he’d donate both of his to the task if it kept Mycroft safe and well.

“That sounds bad.”

“Oh, it was, though I cannot blame him for his loss of control. The locations of the ancient vampire cemeteries, Gregory… one book had a full accounting, at least of those in existence at the time the author put quill to parchment. And another had information of more recent ones, recent being the mid-1800’s, and referenced the other volume as a source for the older burial sites. There were accounts of certain methods, and Petras confirms they are poorly known, yet terribly effective, to kill or brutally injure the vampire people. Magical methods that could be enacted at distance. There were lineage accountings, spells to summon vampires, which Petras said are not wholly effective except on the young, but that is sufficiently worrying on its own. I speculate much was from… well, I never would have believed in a vampire hunter or another of the breed dedicated to pursuing and harming the vampire people… but that seemed to me to be the likely source of these particular items. I was finally able to quell Petras’s anger… or fright… and remind him of the inaccessibility of the material to the world at large, but… I had to promise that certain materials would be placed on a restricted-access list and inroads made to permit purchase of these items to benefit the library, as a whole. Failing that or, rather, in addition to that, an initiative to digitize this collection will be undertaken post haste so he and Leonas have full possession of the information, if not the actual volumes.”

“Jesus… that’s not what I expected, I have to admit. And, yeah, I have no doubt he went off
his head with all of that there. That’s dangerous information in the wrong hands. I was already considering… trying to get someone on staff who’d know how to properly manage the collection, the magical aspects, that is, and start to make a thorough accounting of the contents, but now it seems more important than ever.”

“Do you know an individual with those skills?”

“A few, actually.”

“Discuss the matter with them and it can be arranged. It is not a difficult thing to create a position with a specialty purpose, especially if it frees staff to concentrate on other matters. A small budget adjustment in the next fiscal cycle will make persuading the library board a laughably-easy matter.”

“Ok… ok, well, then that’s settled. I’ll get right on it. At least, as right on it as I can with this other nightmare hanging over us. Did you find anything about the plague specifically?”

Mycroft’s eyes darkened and Greg knew that they weren’t near the end of the ‘my day at the library’ story.

“Yes, and that was the most paradoxically encouraging and troubling element. I… I almost did set things in motion to move one item out of the library, however… I am fearful of tipping our hand too soon.”

“That sounds… good or bad, I don’t know, but it seems you two landed on something big.”

“We did. We found one volume, in a room you and I had not explored… it specifically focused on a certain period of vampire history, the time of the plague. Some was general history, but most was nearly a clinical text. Descriptions and diagrams of the symptoms, the progression of the disease, some basic data collection on who seemed prone to contracting the plague and who seemed less so… and what methods were successful for treatment of the victims.”

“What!”

“You begin to understand the ferocity with which I had to battle Petras to keep him from snatching the book and racing away with security mobilizing to prevent his escape, which would not have ended well for any involved. Regardless, there was, apparently, some degree of treatment that could be provided, not always fully successful, but promoted a slowing of the symptoms which was sufficient, it seems, for the vampire’s natural defenses to combat the plague agents. The individual who wrote this treatise provided copious notes on the effectiveness of the various treatments and… thoughts on how they could be improved to generate an actual cure or preventative. Given the attention this person gave to the subject, I am not willing to dismiss their musings out of hand.”

Greg was on his feet now, hands running through his hair, unmindful of the last few twinges from his freshly knit skull bones.

“Ok… ok ok… I can go tomorrow, if you can get me access. I… the first time we went I had a memorization spell in my head, and I can’t get a whole book in this thick melon, but I can get the bits about a potential cure.”

“I shall keep that duly in mind but, again, I am fearful of revealing too much of our own progress. We have no idea what eyes might be upon any of us and one perusal of a book collection might be taken as intriguing, a second, by you and only a day later, would certainly indicate we had
further interest in something we discovered. For now, I have another avenue that I wish to pursue, and we can discuss our next steps when I know the results.”

“What avenue?”

“Given Petras knows of no other repository with this level of information he and his brother lack, it is reasonable to wonder if it was the source of our opponent’s knowledge. I had the register of visitors to this collection forwarded to me so that I may investigate the names present. I recognized none out of hand, nor did Petras, but several lacked annotations I would have expected for anyone wanting to access the collection and that is noteworthy.”

“Annotations?”

“A degree indicator, such as PhD, or statement of affiliation with a university or another library. There were some notes made for an author who wished to check certain references and several more from clergy. I will investigate everyone, of course, but some names were simply names and I will begin with those. It is not uncommon, understand, for a benefactor to beg a favor from library or museum administration so an acquaintance or family member can view a special collection, closed exhibit or receive an after-hours tour, so these may not lead anywhere productive, but I place them at a higher percentage of interest than someone with verified credentials from a respected institution.”

“Do you have the list? Maybe I recognize someone.”

Mycroft slid out his phone and pulled up the file, handing the device over to Greg for inspection.

“Ok… no. Nobody here I recognize.”

“Then I shall act on matters as soon as possible. After today, Petras and I feel we have an outline of what is our situation and quick action will prove our ally to remedy it.”

“What have you come up with? Besides someone wanting to kill vampires, that is.”

“Oddly, we do not believe that is the goal here.”

Greg wrinkled his brow and stared quizzically at Mycroft, who held his gaze with a noncommittal smile.

“Go on.”

“There have been two attempts on Marcus’s life. He is the only direct heir to his father’s throne, correct?”

‘Yeah, but there are some, basically, second-cousins and the like, so the line’s not necessarily dead if he was.”

“Succession to one of them would not be guaranteed, though, true?”

“True. It’s possible a non-family claim could be laid, but I doubt it would be well-received, especially with Leo and Petras both still alive. Unless you think someone is hoping to kill them, too.”

“Not precisely. Death is one mechanism to terminate a dynasty, the other is through disgrace, proving it is unfit for purpose. Consider a situation where the greatest threat to the vampire race was unleashed, ravaging the population, and the Varnas’s could do nothing to stop it. However,
someone else could.”

“Wait. You think that’s the play? Not the plague, per se, but being the one to cure the plague?”

“It would be a powerful symbol, if you will, and weapon against the family who, I am certain it would be painted, failed to save their people in their time of need.”

“One of the other vampire families, then... some are certainly nasty and power-hungry enough.”

“Perhaps, but we have another thought, instead. Remember, you have also been a target.”

“Yeah, true… but I’m connected to the Varnas’s. My yes or no to a claimant to the throne would have some weight. Not a lot, grant you, but maybe enough to make people stop and consider a bit and that’s not something our unknown friend might want to risk.”

“You, Gregory. Not the husband of Marcus Varnas but you, Gregory Lestrade. London is held aloft by two pillars, is that not what Petras stated. Topple one, the situation is dire, but not devastating. Topple two…”

“The whole fucking thing crashes. Shit, they want the city. Grab both reins and... the human bit won’t matter so much because it’s already an unwitting player in the game. And it’s not just London, possibly. Not to boast, but my sad self is looked to far beyond London when something big happens and the Varnas family controls... a lot. A very large lot of powerful and profitable areas of the world, at least for vampire affairs. It could work. What you’re implying, it could work. They failed killing Marcus and me, but once a plague was raging through the vampires, there’d be plenty of opportunities to try again. Marcus might even be a victim of it, because I guarantee he wouldn’t run off to safety even if his father might try and push him towards that choice.”

“Such is our thinking, yes.”

“So... whoever has the plague has the cure, too.”

“Perhaps. At the very least they are working to synthesize one, most likely based on the same information we read. That may explain why the plague has yet to be released. Until they know they can stop it, setting it free may not bring them the gains they seek. A decimated vampire species offers little in the way of, as you noted, power and profit.”

“Our plan is to try and get the cure first, right?”

“That is a major element of it, yes. Learning who is behind this scheme shares the top rung on the ladder. Unfortunately... I spoke today with Anthea and it seems I can prolog my absence from work no longer. There are certain matters which are moving in a worrying direction and my personal attention is required to steer them away from the cliff’s edge. I am not setting aside this business, Gregory, do not believe I am, for I shall set in motion several things that myself or Anthea can monitor while we tend to other business. I shall not turn away from this, never think that I will.”

“I know you won’t. And... I’m actually surprised you’ve been able to take this long to rest yourself. I can’t say I’ve minded, though.”

Sitting on the sofa again, Greg leaned over and took Mycroft in a long kiss that felt bittersweet despite the warmth.
“Staying tonight?”

“I shall, but I have no idea if it is practical to return here tomorrow evening. I suspect my work hours shall be long.”

“Hmmmm….”

“Gregory?”

“I have an idea and for several reasons, actually.”

“I am… happy for you?”

“Thank you! I want to try something. It’s not easy, but I think I can do it without the usual pomp and ceremony. If I have your permission.”

“To what am I giving permission?”

“Can it be a surprise?”

“I… I suppose so, if you like.”

“Then can you say out loud that I have permission? It’s actually important.”

“Very well. I, Mycroft Holmes, hereby grant you, Gregory Lestrade, permission for whatever it is that just erupted in your mind that somehow concerns me and makes this permission necessary. Is that sufficient?”

“It is and smartly done, too. If I was a nasty fucker, you didn’t leave me much room to try something shady since you limited things to what I just thought of and specifically asked you about.”

“Does that win me the knowledge of your plan?”

“Nope, but you won’t have to wait long. Can you either collect me or send someone for me or, since I need to remember that I’m not an invalid, give me your address so I can meet you at your house tomorrow night?”

“I can have a car collect you easily, but I cannot predict the hour I shall arrive.”

“That’s alright. I’ve got a long day ahead of me, too, so I won’t be helped by an early call. And I won’t take much of your time tomorrow, so you can get to bed at a, hopefully, restful hour.”

“Might you not consider spending that restful time with me? My bed is extraordinarily comfortable.”

Given everything that was happening and the even worse things the future might hold, Greg was not going to lose any opportunity to sleep in the arms of the most wonderful man in the world.

“That’s a marvelous suggestion. I’ll plan for it and… yeah, that’s another idea and for several reasons. You are a brilliant man, Mr. Holmes.”

“True, but may I know why that is the case for this particular award?”

“Tomorrow. You’ll know tomorrow.”
“Very well. However, might I, at least, have a soothing drink as my medal of honor if I cannot have an explanation?”

“Shit! I forgot you were hurting. I’m so sorry, love! How about one of John’s happy pills and a nice cup of tea, instead?”

“That is acceptable.”

“That means more scotch for me.”

“Gregory! I feel ill-used.”

“Not right now you don’t, but wait until I get you into bed for a long massage and something so filthy I feel dirty just thinking about it.”

“Oh. Carry on, then.”

“I plan to. Carry on and on and on and on until you forget all about that nasty old pain.”

“I have never received a more welcome prescription for my ails.”

“Don’t worry, my fee will be very reasonable.”

“My returning the favor the next time we are sharing a bed?”

“Your psychic powers never fail to astound…”
Anderson snorted a quiet laugh when Sebastian tossed his ringing mobile into a basket next to the door of his inner flat, then tossed one of the sofa cushions on top of it to further muffle the ringing. The werewolf, apparently, did not appreciate interruptions when he was watching a film, even one as light and funny as *The Ghostbusters*.

“That might have been important, you know.”

“Nah. Greg.”

“Oh. Do you have that voicemail, so he can at least leave a message?”

“Yeah.”

“I suppose that’s alright, then. I have to say, Sebastian, this is very good popcorn. We got the kernel, butter and salt ratio just right and that’s not easy to do.”

“Professionals.”

“That we are. Oh… that’s not your mobile, is it?”

Sebastian snarled, then looked confused at the new source of ringing and set aside the large popcorn bowl to begin hunting through the flat for the culprit. He finally found his scarcely remembered landline a moment after it stopped ringing and looked sheepish holding the silent handset up for Anderson to see.

“Think that was Greg, too?”

“I…”

The flat suddenly darkened and what sounded like the voice of the universe itself rumbled out Sebastian’s name. The fact the next two words were ‘you wanker’ didn’t actually do much to diminish the gravitas.

“That’s Greg. He sounds mad, too.”

“Nope. Showing off.”

“For who?”

Sebastian reached up and did his best to twirl a lock of his short hair into a curl.

“Oh… his booooyfriend.”

“I’m still here, you bastards.”

The phone hit the floor and Anderson waved Sebastian’s ‘what do we do now?’ look straight back at him in an admirable act of blame wafting.

“Uhhh… I’ll call you.”

“Good.”
The room immediately lightened, and it took a full minute before either Sebastian or Anderson dared to speak in case the ethereal audio feed was still operating.

“You’d… ummm… better get to that phone call, Sebastian.”

“You call.”

“Noooo… I’m guarding the popcorn.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Get your mobile and call Greg, you horrid baby.”

“Waaahhh.”

“Pathetic.”

“He likes you. Probably won’t yell.”

“Just phone! It may be a little thing, but something he needs to know, or needs done now.”

“Fine…”

Sebastian’s large, put-upon sigh made Anderson smile and he held up the popcorn bowl for the assassin to grab a large handful as he walked by to dig out his buried mobile and ring up Greg.


Sebastian tossed his mobile back into the basket and Anderson had to wonder if he ever missed because that was an expensive mobile to be tossing about like a wadded piece of paper.

“I got work.”

“Now?”

“You made me call.”

“True. Ok, I’ll… I’ll tidy this up, then leave you to it.”

“Nope. You’re my assistant.”

“I am?”

“Yep. Tomorrow, I’m yours.”

“What?”

“I run the shop; you help Greg.”

“Oh, he needs magic help. I’m surprised he didn’t ask John to take the hours. I know he usually needs the money and…”

“John’s helping Greg, too.”

“Oh. I say ‘oh’ a lot, don’t I? Anyway, oh, it must be something big if he wants both of us
“Yep.”

“What is it?”

“Dunno.”

“He didn’t say?”

“Nope.”

“Oh… well, I suppose I’ll learn about it tomorrow. What are we doing tonight, then?”

“Research.”

“Really? I’m good at that. At least, I think I’m good at it. I enjoy it, in any case. What are we researching?”

“Security systems. Floorplans.”

“For?”

“British Library.”

“Which one?”

“The one.”

“Come again.”

“THE British Library.”

“That does qualify as ‘The One.’ Are we… are we going to rob it?”

“Dunno.”

“How much do books sell for on… what do you call it… on the black market?”

“Sometimes lots.”

“Well, that’s not good enough. Maybe, just maybe if it was a gargantuload of cash, I’d be tempted, but I have to say I’m not terribly happy about being a book thief. It’s books! They’re… you don’t treat them poorly like that. Besides, a lot of people need libraries, what with books being so expensive. What if we steal something people very much want to read? That… that would be horrible.”

Sebastian thought a moment, then reached out for a stiff, there-there pat on Anderson’s shoulder. Which made Anderson glare until the remembered the stiffness, then he started laughing. Sebastian’s sense of humor was a subtle little thing, at times.

“Thanks for that.”

“Probably not a robbery.”

“Well, I hope not. How do we get started?”
Sebastian made a ‘wait here’ motion and stalked off to grab a laptop, then went to a bookcase where he pulled out a few books, placed his thumb on a nondescript section of the exposed wall, then reached inside to rummage through the hidden cubby that was exposed when a section of the wall slid to the side on his thumb’s command. With two discs and a couple of flash drives in his hand, the secret storehouse was closed again, and the storage media were tossed onto the sofa table next to the popcorn bowl. Then, a final rummage in the cupboard under the large television produced a smaller laptop that was set on Anderson’s lap.

“Renovations. Find out about them. And new construction.”

“Ok, I can do that. And you?”

“Sneaky things.”

“Oooh. Can I do some of those, too?”

“Ummmm… no.”

“Please?”

“Maybe.”

“Yes! I will be awash in sneakiness by night’s end.”

“Eat.”

Sebastian placed the popcorn bowl on top of the laptop on Anderson’s lap and, further, lifted Anderson’s hand to place on top of the buttery mass.

“Won’t that get the computer keys dirty?”

“Sneaky people don’t care.”

“That’s very… rebellious.”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

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“Unacceptable.”

John stared at the phone in his hand and wondered if he should just make some static noises and be free from this for the night. But, knowing Sherlock, he’d just storm here to the shop to continue this conversation in person, so carrying on like a good little soldier…

“Sorry, Sherlock, but Greg needs my help and moving my few things to your flat isn’t much of a priority, since my rent is paid through the end of the month.”

“We have matters to attend to tomorrow.”

“The only matter I had to tend to tomorrow, besides sleeping, was moving my things to your flat, so I have no idea what you’re going on about.”

“Dimmock phoned. Once again, he is wildly out of his depth with a case and needs me to drag
his witless self from the quicksand, so he is not sacked for incompetence.”

“Note that, in none of your word salad, am I mentioned. So, I’m working with Greg tomorrow and you can throw a lifesaving vine to Dimmock yourself.”

‘Intolerable. I require an assistant.”

“Then hire one. I’m certain there are a few looking for work who wouldn’t mind a day playing in the quicksand.”

“If I hired an assistant, they would demand payment and that would leave me less money for more important things or, worse, I would have Mycroft pay and then be forced to endure one of his droning lectures about frugality. Very well, I will put aside saving Dimmock’s job and supervise you, instead.”

“Wrong.”

“Right.”

“First, Greg is supervising everybody and…”

“Who is everybody?”

“Me and Anderson. As far as I know.”

“Why does Graham require two minions?”

“Because he needs two people to help with what he’s doing.”

“Which is?”

“That’s a bit of a mystery, actually.”

“So, he is hiding something.”

“Not particularly. I think it’s most likely he’s still fathoming out what he wants to do and how to do it so can’t easily address questions that require an answer with appreciable detail.”

“Flailing blindly in hopes his hands accidentally collide with a solution. Disgraceful.”

“No, early-stage spell-crafting. What do you care anyway? You’re building sand castles tomorrow and watching Dimmock’s pith helmet float on the top of a quagmire.”

“If I am to observe the proceedings, I should have a firm idea of what is the objective and proposed steps to achieve it so I might properly assess the outcomes.”

“Nope. Try honesty and just say you’re curious. Greg might not mind if you observe, as long as you don’t get in the way of things. I can ask him, if you like.”

“Science should not beg at the table for crumbs.”

“I doubt you’ll want to eat anything we’ll be using, but to each his own.”

“John!”

“Do you want me to ask Greg if you can observe or not?”
“Supervise.”

“And when Greg asks if you think what he’s doing is best served by using of Tears of Sorrow, what are you going to say, Mr. Supervisor?”

“That he is speaking nonsense.”

“You’re sacked.”

“He… wants some silly plant or other and… how can I know if a plant is appropriate if I do not know at this point the context in which it will be used.”

“Not a plant. You’re doubly sacked.”

“It’s… a plant extract.”

“Trebly sacked.”

“What IS IT!”

“Exactly what it says. Greg locks himself away for a weekend, watches every sad film he can find and captures his boohooing in a specially-prepared vial. We’re lucky he’s so tender-hearted, because some practitioners can’t collect their own sad tears for love nor money and a genuine supply is wildly expensive to purchase. Lots of fakes out there, so you have to be cautious.”

“My brain is rotting from the idiocy of this.”

“Well, you work on picking out the icky bits while I help Greg with his secret project. Ooh, got a customer.”

“I will arrive tomorrow at seven in the morning.”

“Try nine. Greg’s got a late night ahead of him, so we’ll start after breakfast.”

“Sluggardly, but I feel no surprise at that. Nine o’clock, then.”

John, himself, felt no surprise that Sherlock ended the call without any of the social niceties like goodbye and, also, that Sherlock would be anxious to sit in on what was likely going to be some fairly impressive magic. Two assistants didn’t necessarily mean big magic, because even some fairly moderate spells and rituals just took a lot of hands, but Greg said Sebastian was covering the shop for ‘the day,’ not the morning, so that meant it was an extensive bit of work that required multiple hands. That leaned towards big. Still, not necessarily impressive, because some enormous spells didn’t look like much really. But, if you shifted an entire hillside ten feet to the right to give someone a better view through their kitchen window, it was still an enormously-hard thing to do. And confused a lot of sheep.

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“Greg is going to get you one day, Sebastian, and get you expertly.”

“Nah.”

“He tell you anything new?”
“Nah.”

“Oh, oh well. I hoped he’d shed a bit more light on all of this, but I suppose I can wait to learn what’s what. It would have been nice to know tonight, though, after all, we worked for... ooh, it’s a lot later than I thought.”

“You shed the light.”

“What?”

“Shed some light. Why’d he want this stuff? Magic wise.”

Anderson cast his eye over the hours of work they’d done and thought carefully.

“Well... we got the blueprints for the museum, original ones and various changes through the years. And Greg wanted what we could find for older stuff that pertains to the site the library sits on. Then, there’s what you found about the security system they have installed... and you marked out where cameras and motion sensors and the like would be placed, providing the company doing the work was competent... he wants to do something that involves... geography? It has to do with the configuration of things, that’s why he wanted to know where everything was. Not just what he could see, but what he couldn’t. I can’t imagine he’s trying to lay a spell on the whole library, but... maybe a part of it. The part of it with the rooms where those magic books are being kept. I don’t know for certain, though. There are a lot of possibilities.”

“Ok. Get some rest.”

“Ughh... you’re right. It’s late and by the time I get back to my flat...”

Sebastian huffed moved all the various bits of paper they’d scribbled on off of the sofa, slid to one end, reached over and pulled Anderson down, so the sorcerer’s head was in his lap.

“Nap. I’ll watch the next Ghostbusters film. Or two.”

“I...”

Sebastian’s soft growl was very much a ‘just do it, you ninny’ sound and Anderson found he didn’t mind being a ninny at the moment.

“Ok.”

“................”

“Sebastian...”

“Yeah?”

“Are you stroking my hair.”

“................... yeah.”

“Oh. Ok. Carry on.”

Anderson couldn’t see Sebastian’s smile but he felt it somehow and added an unseen one of his own. Apparently, he was now romantically involved with a werewolf. That was a pleasant thought. As were the thoughts about all the things that went along with romancing a werewolf. The fun stuff, like films and popcorn and the... sordid stuff, like what you did when you weren’t
already tired and had to be up and moving in a few hours. There was plenty of time for that sort of thing, though. For now, a nice nap on a warm lap with large fingers running through his hair was romance enough on its own. They could work on the rest later. Like tomorrow night…

“Here you are.”

Anthea dropped a heavy stack of papers on Mycroft’s desk, then rolled her eyes when Mycroft set down his teacup atop them.

“That’s important stuff, you know.”

“I have already read it.”

“I know but having this here makes anyone who barges their way in here today in a frantic frenzy of needing their hand held think you’re terribly busy with very important things and they won’t complain as much when I put my shoe up their arse.”

“And you are wearing formidable footwear for the occasion, I notice.”

“I always plan ahead. The material you actually haven’t read is in the top folder, though. Initial analysis of the names on your library list.”

“Ah… anything that struck you as relevant.”

“Yes, actually. One name connected to the company that owned the property Marcus wanted to purchase. They bought that building and a number of others about two months before putting them right back on the market within a week. While I was awake all night doing this for you, I phoned Marcus and waited for him to shut up so I could ask when it was he decided to add to his real estate portfolio. Guess what he said?”

“A touch over two months ago.”

“Got it in one. He doesn’t think there’s a spy dogging his heels, though, because he wasn’t shy about spreading the word about, both that he was looking to buy and what would suit his needs. Anyone with an eye or ear on him would have known.”

Mycroft picked up the folder and skimmed through, humming softly when he noticed the name that Anthea had helpfully highlighted on each of the various documents he skimmed.

“John Clay… interesting. Real estate is not his normal milieu.”

“No, it isn’t, but money is and there’s loads of it to be made in property dealings. However, I checked again, deeper this time, and there’s still nothing I can find that makes the properties this little company purchased particularly tempting. No larger development deals pending for those areas or historical connections that might gain them some tax advantages.”

“Then it is most likely they were purchased to entice Marcus’s interest.”

“And, when he nibbled, they prepared a particularly-nasty welcome to the neighborhood party for him.”

Scanning through the papers again, Mycroft’s instincts didn’t let him settle on any specific ah-ha moment. Clay was a typically-tedious banker type, having few vices, the worst of which was
rooted in his belief he was a respected wine connoisseur. More than a single dreary social function for the financial sector was made all the drearier by his over-consumption of the grape, dedicated to fully analyzing each label on offer and forcing his uninformed opinions on those too slow or ungainly to avoid being cornered to hear his thesis on the subject. None of this presented the image of a man with both the lust for power and cunning necessary to plan, let alone execute, a potential coup of the city. And, it certainly gave no indication that he would know about the non-human elements walking the streets as part of London’s chaotic tapestry of life.

However…

“If I recall…”

“And you do…”

“And I do… there were a few whispers about him roughly four years ago. Nothing firm, nothing overt, but… whispers about people who manage large quantities of money are rarely without some degree of foundation. Yet, the whispers died away rather than became part of the usual undercurrent of gossip and rumors that pervade any profession, especially those involving money. Curious.”

“I’ve met him, I think. Nothing memorable about him, so he didn’t make a tremendous impression. I don’t think his utterly boring personality was an affectation, either; I genuinely think he’s dull as dry toast. And half as intelligent. Hard to imagine him setting all of this in motion. If he’s even read a Harry Potter novel, I’d be surprised, let alone harbored hopes of subduing a vampire royal family and toppling London’s apex sorcerer.”

“I agree. However, neither a scintillating personality nor a brilliant mind is required for a puppet.”

“Someone pulling his strings… that I can imagine. Especially if they had some leverage. Whispey leverage, perhaps?”

“It is not unthinkable.”

“You’ve done it often enough to know, too.”

“True. Hmmmnnn… do what you can…”

“Which is a lot.”

“… of course, to ascertain whether the diamonds we used for my rather amusing business with the dark elf have surfaced again on the market.”

“Tracking sellers?”

“Yes. If the elf used them to repay his contract, which is not guaranteed, I admit, then we might gain further insights into who hired him. But make the inquiries subtle. I want nothing to seem amiss.”

“Not a problem. Anything else before I’m back on the Honduran situation?”

“No, that will be all. On my part, I shall pluck a few strands of the banking webs and see if anyone has stuffed a maharajah’s ransom of diamonds into a safety deposit box or used said diamonds as security for a loan or even as part of a currency exchange, which would be odd, but not unprecedented for a certain stratum of client.”
“Nice to know we’ve got the muggle lines of investigation covered to complement your hoodoo doings yesterday. Oh, I should tell you that Marcus is peeved that you’re getting along with his uncle, because he does not want another elder statesman glaring disapprovingly at him when he’s done something daft, which is all the time, from what I gather. And a glarer based in London is even worse because you can just show up on his doorstep to lecture him on proper behavior whenever you please.”

“I am as likely to do that as drink American beer.”

“I know, but I think he enjoys creating little fantasies that make him seem even more the center of everybody’s attention than he actually is.”

“Yet you are meeting him for drinks tonight, correct?”

“Delusional and narcissistic aren’t deal breakers for me.”

“Well, one has one’s own standards, I suppose.”

“He got Iggy a girlfriend.”

“Pardon?”

“Ignatious Percival Skullificus. Marcus got him a girlfriend. I named her Furiosa. She’s made of fossilized coral and is completely badass. Not everyone would get me a gift like that.”

“Not everyone would want a gift like that.”

“My point exactly.

Anthea spun and didn’t bother to strut out of Mycroft’s office, because he would just snort like a boar and who needed that in their life? Sitting at her own desk, she reached out and tapped Iggy’s bald forehead then gave Furiosa her own tap to gain whatever boons they wished to bestow for the task at hand. Track some diamonds, if they were on the move, then Honduras, then Canada. Conniving, calamitous Canadians… always made for a headache. All that politeness and wholesome decency? Lies! They smiled at you, offered you a reusable grocery sack with one hand, then stabbed you in the throat with a recycled-steel dagger with the other. Canadian vampires probably kept biscuits on hand to boost up their victim’s blood sugar after they fed, smarmy buggers. Savage your neck, then hand over a bickie because it’s what a nice person would do. It never ends with the Canadians. Never…

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“Your aroma is putrid, John Watson.”

“That’s yourself you’re smelling. Like Anderson, I accepted Greg’s kind offer of a shower and fresh clothes before meeting the public at large.”

“Your clothes are appalling, and I was not prepared to step into Geoff’s surely mold-ridden shower, except to collect samples on which to experiment.”

“The clothes are simple, I admit, but if you’re in the magic world long enough, you learn to have a lot of cheap, simple things on hand for precisely this reason – they get destroyed during a long day’s work and it’s better to destroy some discounted Asda rubbish than a nice outfit. And there isn’t a speck of mold in Greg’s shower, but what is in there is some amazing soap for handling all sorts of post-magic mess. Smell, stains… it takes care of it all and has jojoba oil for
heathy skin. We’re going to try a new recipe with maracuja oil, too, because that seems to do a nice job and people always get their interest piqued by something new and exciting sounding.”

“A shopkeeper’s speech.”

“Thank you! We take pride in our work.”

Sherlock made a rude noise, but John simply grinned at the fact the tall git still had in his eyes the gleam of enthusiasm he’d been wearing since they started on Greg’s project this morning. It was a challenge, that was for certain, and Greg was one of the few people who could do it with only a couple of extra hands on deck to help with the side tasks, so the whole business didn’t span several days of exertion.

“Your work is nonsensical.”

“Oh, ok. Meaning you don’t want to review some of what we did today so I can give a little more detail and perspective about what was going on. No problem.”

“I suppose it is important to fully understand your nonsense, so I have better grounds to disparage it in the future.”

In truth, Sherlock was having a very difficult time not grabbing John by the collar and running full speed towards 221B. Of course he wanted detail! The entire business appeared as ridiculous as he’d imagined, complete with chanting, hand waving, a wand… A WAND… odiferous smoke and all the trappings of every cliched fantasy novel that had been written. However… there were rules. A system of rules, a field-specific logic to it all. The protocols were precise and though the few books he had perused were written by near illiterates, they documented specific procedures, as well, in some cases, the story of how those procedures had been determined. Much like a scientific paper. Having no scientific merit whatsoever, of course, but… what could someone who actually understood the scientific method and, further, was a genius accomplish in this area? Even Graham had noted that for some elements of their spell he did not know the reason they worked, simply that they did. Those elements were ripe for investigation and experimentation by someone skilled at such things. With access to magic practitioners of various sort and forms…

“Of course. I’m sure Greg will adore hearing you disparage him day in and day out.”

“You, as well.”

“Oh, don’t think I believed for a moment I’d avoid being disparaged. Not for a single, bloody instant. Do you, at least, have anything for me to eat at your flat while you’re haranguing me within an inch of my life?”

“Ummmmm… bread?”

“When you’re unsure if you even have bread, the situation is dire.”

“I know I have bread. I simply do not know if I left any uninoculated with Aspergillus.”

“Moldy bread. Yeah, that’s not the way I want to end my day. Or my life.”

“Very well. Mycroft will purchase dinner for us, and you can begin detailing today’s work while we eat.”

“Mycroft will purchase… ok, I can’t muster any finger wagging at that because (a) he’s rich and can afford it and (b) half of today’s slog was for him, so it’s the least he can do.”
“No, Fatcroft can and would do far less, but not until he retrieves his bank card from my wallet.”

“Let’s not remind him you have it, then.”

“Have what?”

“Exactly.”

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“Gregory Lestrade. Am I correct?”

Greg smiled widely at the voice on the phone and for all sorts of glorious reasons.

“Mycroft Holmes. You are correct.”

“I am fulling my obligations under our compact and notifying you, formally, that I am returned home.”

“Thank you, Mr. Holmes, for honoring our agreement and at the perfect time, too.”

“Oh, pray tell why?”

“I just got out of the shower and, believe me, you do not want to even imagine how bad I smelled before I got in there. Today was a successful, but stinky day, and I hope Sherlock doesn’t decide to pay you a surprise visit before having his own shower, because he caught more of the stink than anyone else since the stupid berk simply had to get as close as possible to the burning herbs and… other stuff… even though I told him it was a very bad idea.”

“So, he behaved exactly as he ever does.”

“Pretty much.”

“I take it he was present because demanded to observe whatever it was you had planned and would take no refusal.”

“Demanded is a good word for it, but he did stay out of our way when we were working and asked some good questions about why we did this or didn’t do that. It’ll probably drive John insane, but Sherlock could be a very helpful person for whatever research John might want to do for his own magic workings.”

“I shall have a room held ready at a very comfortable facility to accept Doctor Watson when his break with reality occurs. And, now… am I to become privy to your secrets of the day?”

“You are! Are you still sending a car or…”

“I shall.”

“Then I’ll be ready! There’s nothing for you to do on your part until I get there, so relax, get comfortable and do your best not to think about what your surprise is going to be because you won’t figure it out and you’ll go loony trying.”

“Most reassuring.”

“I am a very considerate person when I try.”
“And when you do not?”

“Seas boil. Skies fall. The usual stuff.”

“Most cinematic. I shall have my mobile ready to take snaps.”

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Mycroft’s house was… Mycroft. Gorgeous, elegant, tasteful, dripping with poise and class and all the things too many tossers tried to be but failed. Luckily, he, himself, never tried so he didn’t have to suffer the sting of abject failure they faced every single day. Even his doorbell was unique and perfect. Just like him.

“Gregory, how good it is to see you. Do come in.”

The few seconds Mycroft took to read Greg’s face as he stepped inside calmed many of his worries. His house was so… him. Fussy, stuffy, pompous and chilly. His lover’s small flat embodied all that Gregory was, too, but that presentation was warm, welcoming, unique and comfortably masculine. However, his sorcerer did not seem repulsed by the old-museum quality of this space and the musty curator who lived inside, so… hurrah!

“Wow. This is brilliant, love, positively brilliant. I have to admit that I truly am envious of Leo’s digs, but this… this is so much better.”

“It… it is?”

“Definitely. A lot more inviting and… feels like someone lives here, as opposed to being one of those old houses they trot tourists through three days a week. Now, in this magnificent house, is there a room you don’t use?”

“Pardon?”

“A room that doesn’t see any use. It can be anywhere, cellar or attic is fine, too, but those might not be your best options. Somewhere people don’t really go besides you is what I’m looking for, but not inconvenient, at the same time.”

“I… my bedroom?”

“That’s actually not a bad option, but there are times it might be inconvenient, so a Plan B?”

“Gregory… what are you planning?”

“Well…”

Greg flashed his best naughty-schoolboy grin and did a few twists and turns just like a naughty schoolboy would when he knew a secret that somebody else didn’t. The somebody in question being Mycroft.

“… let’s start with an unused room if you have one and then I can change things another time if need be.”

Narrowing his eyes to tiny slits, Mycroft tried desperately to discern what was in Greg’s mind, but decided the best way to do that was simply to let the sorcerer enact his fiendish plan and take what came after with a strong spine and, if needed, a stiff drink.

“Come this way.”
Greg followed Mycroft through the house, ogling the old-world beauty surrounding him until they got to a large door that Mycroft paused in front of a moment before opening and stepping inside.

“Will this do?”

Large, with built-in bookshelves and a few pieces of heavy furniture, but lacking the characteristic energy of a room that frequently housed life. Excellent choice.

“It will do perfectly. Ok, hold out your hand for me and don’t worry, I have a wipe with me for after.”

The last part put Mycroft on alert, but he complied and only made a small moue of revulsion when Greg used oil from a vial taken from his pocket to draw a series of patterns on his palm and each finger.

“Ok, let me see… I’ll just move that… heavy chair and… yeah, that’ll do. Spread your hand wide and press it anywhere here on the wall.”

Mycroft looked quizzically at Greg a second, then did as he was told, gasping slightly when Greg quickly muttered a few words that ignited the mark he’d made into a bright blue light which quickly dimmed to deep violet glow before winking out completely.

“Perfect! And, see? Not a blemish on your lovely wood. Now, watch me and copy what I do.”

Making a short series of motions with his hand, Greg then nodded for Mycroft to replicate them and laughed when Mycroft jumped back a full three feet when the portal opened to a very familiar scene.

“Did it on the first try! It’s safe, just step through and you’re in the shop. My workroom, specifically. I thought that this would be useful for days when you want a little company but not the hassle of traveling across London to get it. And there’s none of the pesky worries from not having access to your own things in the morning so you have to be seen in the same clothes as the day before and everybody wonders how much fun you had the previous night and with whom. Come on, walk through and see for yourself it’s not a mirage or something.”

Mycroft finally took a hesitant step through the magical doorway and exhaled loudly when he found himself fully across the city in under a second’s time.

“And don’t fret that people can come and go as they please, either. It’s your doorway and only you control it. People who know how can knock and you’ll know, though not by your ears, so it’s not a problem that if you’ve got company they’re going to ask who the fuck is knocking inside your house, but you will know and can choose if you want to let them through or not. I’ll show you how to look through a peephole, too, so you’ve got a better idea if you want to tell them to fuck off or not. That last part is mostly for your brother because he was there when we were setting this up and can probably figure out how to work the door-knocking spell which is something he can do if he wants to even thought he doesn’t have magic of his own.”

“I… can simply…”

“Pop over for a visit! That should help with the problem of work getting in the way of our fun. At least a little.”

“And you can do the same?”
“I you let me in when I knock, sure!”

“Why not simply come through on your own accord?”

“Because… that’s… well, I didn’t want to be presumptuous. I’m happy for you to come and go on my side, but…”

“You opted for me to make the choice about your welcome myself.”

“Basically, yes.”

Mycroft took a step forward and gave Greg a kiss, running a hand over the sorcerer’s cheek when he was finished.

“Do what you must to give yourself free access. I would greatly enjoy having you visit me at your leisure.”

“Alright, then.”

Greg repeated the hand-oiling he’d done for Mycroft, but on his own hand this time, and laid his hand on a section of rock next to the still-open mystical doorway for another blue-spectrum blaze to give himself a key.

“There we have it. Nobody but us knows the exact symbols or gestures to open this themselves, so it’s a closed door. Except when it's open, of course…”

Which Greg indicated with his eyes as he watched Balthazar stroll through to have his own look around Mycroft’s house.

“If your cat besmirches my home in any manner, Gregory…”

“You can kill him. Kill him, skin him and use his hide for a silver-polishing cloth.”

“Acceptable.”

“But, it does highlight the point that when you go through, take a second and repeat your gestures to close it again.”

“Good to know. This… this is incredible, Gregory, simply incredible. And marvelously convenient. An exceedingly good idea, on your part.”

“Thanks! Want to see what else we did today?”

“I do.”

“Ok, hold on…”

Greg stepped through the portal and snatched up Balthazar just in time to prevent him sharpening his claws on Mycroft’s sofa, and stepped back into his workroom, closing the gateway behind him.

“I actually have a few different outlets that branch off from here, most nobody knows about, but I’ll show you how to use them just in case… well, you never know when you need to make a quick escape because something terrible is on your scent. Yours and this one are new though…”

With a different series of gestures, Greg opened a new doorway, this one shocking Mycroft as much as the one to his own home.
“Is that… what I think it is?”

“Yep! Come on, let’s explore."

“But…"

“Come on, it’s fine. I already tested it with Balthazar. No armed response or blaring klaxons or avenging angels descending from on high.”

Greg stepped through into the British Library, specifically the room where he and Mycroft had enjoyed a pleasant several hours what seemed a century ago.

“Seb and Anderson did a great job getting the room mapped out for me so I could hide us being in here. It’s sort of like those films where they tap into the security video and just run a loop of tape showing an empty room, but better. As far as the security measures are concerned, this room and a few others will be just as they were before we came in, so nobody will be the wiser. I thought that easy access to this collection was somewhat critical now, so I’ll have Leo and Petras over tomorrow and set them up to engage the doorway. They can look through things or take photos or whatever they need to do until… well, until we have other ways of having them use these resources. Us, too. And no concerns about prying eyes knowing what we’re up to, either.”

“Excellent. Truly this is a remarkable thing. And… it would not be difficult to gradually see all these volumes duplicated in one manner or another so the information could have a second repository. I would prefer we are not taken unawares again due to ignorance of vital data.”

“Very much what I was thinking. Though… there may be a few things that might be duplicated and left in the place of the originals, with certain bits removed. I’m not saying it’ll be necessary, but there could be things in there that are best not known by someone with the talent. I don’t like being the judge and jury for that call, but… let’s just say information in the wrong hands can be powerfully dangerous.”

“I understand and cannot fault your argument. We have already seen the damage a set of wrong hands can cause, and I am not eager to witness more.”

“I’ll key you for this door, too, so you can browse at will. Just don’t venture out of the rooms housing this particular collection because the spell doesn’t travel beyond them and you’ll trip the security system.”

“Very good. Very good, indeed…”

“You’re imagining grabbing a book out of here and taking it back to your lovely house to read in comfort, aren’t you?”

“Per….. haps….”

“With a nice drink and a fire?”

“Gregory! You are a powerful clairvoyant.”

“Actually, I’m shit for that, but I do know my Mycroft. Want to snatch a few and get that fire going? The security cameras don’t point in here, only at anyone entering or exiting, so there’s no worry about a gap appearing on a shelf that shows up out of nowhere to make a guard grab his hat and start running to investigate.”

“Better and better. And, might we also use the time to discuss another matter?”
“Anything you want. What is it?”

“The diamond we retained from the dark elf’s payment.”

“Ok, what about it?”

“Could it be used to locate the others with which it had been set?”

“A resonance spell?”

“I have no idea.”

“My fault. Are you asking if it has a connection with others it may, well, have a connection with so that it could find them?”

“The very thing.”

“Yes, it can. It may not be easy because there’s not likely much of a connection, given it was only next to them in the same piece of jewelry, but that can be enough in the right circumstances. It’d be easier if they’d been mined from the same place or it was an antique piece of jewelry, but I might be able to get it to work. Reason?”

“I have reason to believe that if the elf did repay his debt, the diamonds remain with the person to whom they were given.”

“Ooh… nice. Actually… hold on a minute…”

Greg quickly moved to a small nook and removed a large mailing tube from which he extracted a sizeable map of London. Next, he retrieved the diamond, tied it carefully with a piece of what appeared to be silver filament and started to swing the makeshift pendulum over the map, muttering a long string of words as he passed the diamond over every inch of the image.

“Hmmm…”

“Gregory?”

“Let me try something.”

This time Greg found his ceremonial dagger and pricked his finger, running the small drop of blood along the silver wire, then spoke another long series of words before dabbing a tiny spot of blood on each of the map’s four corners.

“Here we go again.

Repeating his first spell and swinging the small diamond to and fro across the map, Greg moved methodically over the paper until he paused, returned to a section and changed the pattern of his swing to a circular motion which narrowed in diameter until the diamond was hovering over what Mycroft recognized as a very exclusive section of the city. Where he knew lived one specific inhabitant who… damn.

“That’s a hit. I have no idea if it’s all the stones or some of them, but there they are. I could narrow it further if I had a more detailed map, but…”

“No need. At least not immediately.”

“Oh, why not?”
“Because… I may know the individual we are seeking.”

“You do?”

“Not personally, thank heavens, because Magnussen is nothing short of revolting, however… it would fit. Damn him to hell, but it would fit.”

“Ok… how do you want to handle this?”

“Verify, then… I have no idea. We need to conference with the Varnas family. Perhaps… also, Sebastian.”

“Going straight to assassination?”

“Not necessarily, but he does have other skills that might be of use.”

“Ok… when do you want to do this?”

“Not tonight, for there are several mundane lines of inquiry I would like to pursue first. Moving against Magnussen is not something anyone would take lightly, and I would rather be confident he is our target before doing so myself. You said you can narrow down your search? To more than a general area?”

“Yeah, or if you have an address in mind I can go there and be 100% certain.”

“Can you… disguise your appearance?”

Greg took a deep breath and Mycroft found himself staring at a grizzled old man who appeared as crotchety as the vampire king.

“You can.”

Greg snapped back as himself and grinned proudly.

“I can do a lot of looks, but that one is probably good for snooping since nobody worries about old people doing… well, much of anything and a dodderly old gent muttering to himself as he strolls along the pavement won’t attract a great deal of notice.”

“Perfect. Then, I suggest tomorrow night. The vampires will be here, correct?”

“I don’t know for certain since I haven’t phoned, but I can almost guarantee they’ll make themselves available for something like this. I’ll phone Sebastian, too. Moriarty brothers?”

“Hmmmm… possibly. Something to consider, at least. For now, let us… relax. We have made substantial progress and that warrants a relaxing celebration, does it not?”

“It absolutely does! And we have a library of arcane tomes at our fingertips to enjoy while we relax..”

“With a soothing libation and toasty fire.”

“Just so you know, I think I’m sexually attracted to your house.”

“Well, I suppose a ménage a trois with an inanimate object is not the strangest thing I have encountered in your company. I shall endure.”
This kiss promised Greg that no matter what or who else might be involved, Mycroft’s heart belonged to one special man and he was very content with that. Tomorrow would be another stressful day and tomorrow night would continue the theme, but this night was theirs to share and how wonderful that after their few hours of reading, a large, comfortable bed awaited them and whatever they chose to do in it besides sleep. In all likelihood, the whatever would be prolonged and deliciously sinful, which was further reward for a job well done…
“You walk like an old man!”

“That’s because I am one, you stupid cat.”

“No, you’re pretending to be one, which is an entirely different thing. It’s taken an age to get here and I’m bored. Bored, do you hear me… bored!”

Any passersby would have heard a shouy black cat making a fuss at a dodderly old gent who was talking back to it as dodderly old gents are apt to do. Bringing Balthazar along for his secret mission was a good idea, in theory, but Greg wasn’t oblivious to the potential disaster of Balthazar’s obliviousness that could easily have the cat screeching his manifesto in perfect English, something most people didn’t expected for a cat unless said person had enjoyed a few at their local which, unfortunately for today’s plan, would be closed at this hour of the morning. Hence, a little spell to keep Balthazar’s ravings a secret from innocent ears, which was, generally, a good idea in any case.

“Go home, then.”

“It’s too far.”

“Then shut it. We’re nearly there.”

“Do you remember the address? You’re old, you know, and memories don’t work so well when you’re old.”

“Funny. And, yeah, I do. Not that… hmmmmm…”

“What?”

Greg took a few more steps and stopped, staring a moment at the large house with plain pots of decorative twigs on the front stoop that was set apart from its neighbors by two narrow alleyways.

“Not that I need it. Reach out and feel…”

Balthazar narrowed his already-narrowed eyes and let his magical senses survey the scene, tail, ears and hair rising when he caught Greg’s meaning.

“Dark magic.”

“Mycroft’s friend here is a nasty sort, that’s for certain. He did a fair job putting up deflection spells around him, but not good enough for someone with a bit of strength to them.”

“Like us.”

“Yeah, but that’s not true for most of the practitioners in London. They could easily walk through this area and never notice a thing.”

“Meaning he’s stronger than average, but not punching with the big boys. Probably thinks he can, though. Dark mages are always egotistical assholes.”

“Maybe. Or maybe that’s another reason he wants me out of the way. He knew I’d cop to him eventually and… hmmmmm…”
Greg stayed still, pretending to search his pockets for some forgotten this or that and Balthazar leapt up on a wide step railing butting his head against Greg’s shoulder as if he was hoping for a scratch, which the sorcerer provided to keep up his efforts at being inconspicuous.

“Greg?”

“Hold on a moment…”

Continuing to give Balthazar a scratch, Greg concentrated and read the energy of the house ahead of him more closely, sighing when his initial thought was confirmed.

“This is definitely the person who called up that last fucking demon I had to fight. Magical signature is the same, including the little wisps of Moriarty’s style floating around in it like the aftermath of a stinky belch.”

“Meaning Moriarty knows him.”

“I wonder what else he knows?”

“Time to find out?”

“Oh yes. First, though… think you can get a look in there? Peek through a few windows?”

“Can you charm me against any boobytraps?”

“Let me check my charm pocket. Now my other charm pocket…”

“Pffffbbbtssst…”

“Your rude noises are getting better and better. But… this should do.”

A small wire-wrapped crystal came out of Greg’s jacket pocket, with the sorcerer muttering a long string of words that caused the crystal to flash briefly, then settle back to its slightly-opaque pink state to be affixed to Balthazar’s collar.

“That’ll keep you from tripping any wards or alarms, but you’re not invisible, so stay out of sight.”

“I know how to spy on people.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I do! I am a master of espionage. It’s just your fault that you’ve never allowed me to utilize my full portfolio of skills.”

“Ok, James Bond. Have at it. If I remember the map, there’s a place to get a bite to eat a couple of streets over. I’ll wait for you there.”

“I expect a reward for my efforts.”

“Fine, I’ll see what they offer for pet food.”

“You’re not funny, Greg. You’re not that type.”

Balthazar bit Greg’s finger to drive his point home and, more importantly, to satisfy his need to eat, then jumped onto the pavement to begin sauntering his way towards Magnussen’s house while
Greg continued at a slower pace a few steps, then stopped and looked about as if trying to remember something before toddling across the empty street and going back the way he came, taking the first left to find a place to sit and sip a coffee while waiting for his evil cat. And, take a few minutes to pass along to Mycroft that his suspect looked to be the right one. AND, take a few minutes to send out a few feelers to learn where Moriarty was knocking about today. That miserable tit had some explaining to do and the sooner the better. The vampires were angry enough at him that any further anger might erase his existence from the universe in the blink of an eye. Or, in their case, the flash of a fang…

The house was vulgar in that antiseptic sort of way that makes your skin crawl because you suspect that’s what the whole appearance was designed to do in the first place. This Magnussen had problems.

However, he had a problem, too, in that it was highly unlikely that another pure, perfect soul like his bride’s sweet cupcake cousin would be milling about, so today might have to rely on external reconnaissance only. But, the windows were provided with sills, aka cat thrones, so that would make this a lot easier.

The only thing that was giving him pause was… the smell. Or, rather, the lack of it. He should smell life everywhere and there was a decided lack of it anywhere. Not human life, because who cared, but other cats. Or rats. Mice, birds… he hadn’t noticed anything unusual up to this house, but there was a decided lack of vitality surrounding this building that wasn’t normal. So, keeping one eye in front of him and one eye behind him and a third eye all around him for things that go bump in the night. Or day. Or the in-between times, that could be the worst of all.

Deciding a rapid survey of the house was the best first step, Balthazar padded around the perimeter of the structure, noting the continued lack of the normal zoological denizens of London property. With that patrol completed, he jumped to the nearest ground floor window and peered inside. Boring. It was a room. In a house. What was there to say about that? Moving on.

More rooms. Typical, standard, human-centric rooms. Boring. And, it was highly likely that the upper two floors would be just as boring. Torture dungeons were, by definition, dungeons and not likely to be in a sunny sitting room fitted with windows. True, there seemed to be an attic space that could house the man in the iron mask or something, but he couldn’t get up there to check, at least not easily, and it was a poor wager in any case, since that area seemed to have its share of windows, too and, just maybe, a little hatch onto the roof for the occasional repair or access to the chimney. B.O.R.I.N.G. Magic-working spaces were usually closer to the ground and that was what he was most interested in at the moment, anyway. Or, to be fair, they were often found underneath the ground, sometimes far beneath if the soil and rock conditions were right. Magic liked the Earth. Not exclusively, but it was a good bet that involving the Earth in your rituals, in some manner, was going to make them more effective than leaving that sort of thing out. It would be interesting if they could ever get a practitioner into space because who knew what magic would do that disconnected from this sad, sour planet? And what if they put someone onto a new planet? What would that do? He and Greg had watched far too many science fiction films and had far too many conversations on this very topic for it to be anything but embarrassing but, regardless, if there wasn’t anything suspicious on the ground floor here, the next best place to search was underground.

The question was how. There was a coal chute, but it was locked up with a chain. There was also, probably, an entrance he couldn’t see due to magical camouflage but that could be tricky to find without Greg’s help. He’d need to do a bit of work to discover it on his own that would take time
and offer more opportunity to be discovered, neither of which he could easily afford. And the investment, if he made it, offered no guarantee that he’d be able to open the door, even if he found one. So, time to stop thinking like a sorcerer and time to start thinking like a cat. Cat’s didn’t need a lot of space to work their way into a house. Just a crack somewhere…

Patrol Part Deux produced no sign of a crack that could fit a cat or much of anything, really. But, there was a small ventilation fan close to the bottom of the rear wall, a touch like Greg had in his workroom to move fresh air through the space, as needed, which was usually when he was working on something funny, smoky or stinky. It wasn’t much space to squirm through, but the grill was loose and didn’t need a great deal of convincing to lay down for a quiet nap on the ground. And fans were somewhat like screws, at least in one sense. You could start to make your way through, and they’d spin a bit to help you make more of your way through until…

That was a drop. A big one. Cats always landed on their feet, though. Especially if nobody was about to say otherwise. And nobody was about, which was helpful because there wasn’t any denying this was a sorcerer’s workspace. A nasty piece of work sort of sorcerer, too. It was fairly easily to know if you were looking at the space where dark or light magic was practiced, and this was a dark space. A bit like his own in days gone by. Just a bit, mind you. Yes, he was the foulest, most malevolent sorcerer ever birthed by the flames of hell but there were… limits. Dark magic was… exciting. The toys were fun, far cooler than those Greg faffed about with and the ladies did love a brooding, dark practitioner with the black robes and demons on chains and such. Or so he was told.

But there was dark and there was… this. This was the foul stuff. The dark without the grinning skulls, flowing robes, arcane jewelry and evil spirits having a lark about summoning circles, sharing gossip about the other berks who’d called them up recently. This was another thing altogether. This was… bad. Evil was sexy but this was just bad. Bad was ugly and cold, blandly cruel and off-hand. From the tools laying here and there which had all the style of what you’d find at the dentist’s office to the… sections. Sections and whole once-living specimens and morbid stuff that was just that… morbid. No bit of fantasy or fun in any of it. No… joy. Just frigid purpose that made you shudder when you ran across it, whether it was in a teacher, nurse, judge, banker… you didn’t have to be a sorcerer to be bad. People could be bad. And they were just as harmful, in their own way, too.

Wandering around the space, Balthazar found precisely naught to change his opinion on Magnussen but began to wonder what else might be in store for an intrepid explorer who didn’t fear venturing into the unknown. The more information they had the better. Maybe, also, he’d strike gold and find where they were hiding the supply of plague. There didn’t seem to be anyone moving this way, so… slinking forth like a thief in the night though that dreary curtain across the drearier archway…

Well, the night at home certainly didn’t have any of… this. It was tempting, but only slightly, to upgrade this Magnussen from bad to something slightly more interesting because… this was unbelievable. Greg would soil his trousers if he saw this. And for more than one reason!

Balthazar moved through what could be mistaken for a museum, if one ignored that the items in the various cases weren’t of the typical historical or artistic sort. Everything here was magical. Artifacts that… holy shit, he recognized some of these! From books and scrolls! There was… some of this stuff hadn’t been seen for decades or longer, some of it had but specimens were so rare, so sodding difficult to acquire… this wasn’t good. This wasn’t good, at all. Collectors were one thing, there were loads of them in the community, but they didn’t get their hands… or things that served the same purpose… on these sorts of things. Not in this quantity. This… with all of these nasty, and not-so-nasty, artifacts, someone with talent could do a lot. Make themselves seem
more powerful than they actually were. Gain leverage in corners where they’d be chased out of normally. It fit. Mycroft the Windbag said the patterns they’d witnessed fit this Magnussen person and he was right. All those patterns and all of these items were part of a plan, one involving power and influence and someone who had the wherewithal to carry it out.

And he really wished he hadn’t just seen that particular little gewgaw just to the right of the room’s center. Someone was going to be very unhappy to learn about that and it might not be wise to be in the vicinity when they did. Ok, time to get out of here and…

The sound Balthazar heard was one he hadn’t anticipated hearing. Not in this reality, at least. These buggers had no place in this world! However, that did explain why nothing living came on these grounds…

“Alright, you horrid little bugger. You’re not supposed to be here, do you know that? It’s a bit of a violation of the established order, you see, though I admit it’s not impossible to accomplish, as you obviously know, but your lot were tossed across the border from our plane to… wherever the fuck you got thrown to… for the good of… well, everyone living. Or who might become living at some point in the future.”

Balthazar made himself a promise not to take his traditional once-a-fortnight wee on Greg’s rug because if the sorcerer hadn’t been who he was and could do what he could do, there would be one very dead cat lying on the floor with a useless pink bauble around its neck. For almost everyone the charm would have been worthless, but Greg was an old woman, a belt-and-braces old woman who habitually did everything to a greater, larger, higher or stronger level than necessary whenever he possibly could because of the ancient mystical philosophy of ‘just in case.’ And you needed a lot of just in case to survive being surprised by a basilisk…

“So, you’re the watchdog, are you? Can’t say it’s the worst idea in the world, but it’s not working in my favor right now, so fuck you and that wicked stare of yours. And it’s not being a good sport sneaking up on a… colleague. One who’s just having a look around your nice little patch. It’s not like I can steal anything. No hands! I admit there are a few items here I could carry in my mouth, but how would I get to them all sealed in those glass cases? No harm no foul then, right? You go back to guarding your pretty trinkets and I’ll show myself out the way I came in.”

Balthazar had been backing slowly towards the door that linked this treasure room with the workspace he’d entered through and trying not to show any fear to the cock-slash-serpent creature that stalked just as slowly towards him in what the cat recognized with sickening familiarity as a predator who’d found a morsel of prey that might offer a little playtime before it was torn to shreds and eaten. Not that he did that himself, of course, since nibbling on a formerly-alive rat was not the delectable experience one might think it was. Dreamies were literally heads and tails better, so the hell with that.

“Let’s be reasonable, shall we? You’ve not struck me dead, which must have you a touch baffled, and, if I say so myself, I suspect I’ve got the advantage for speed and agility since you’re… a very handsome creature but not built for darting about the way I am. More slow and methodical, which is great, it really is, but maybe not for this particular application. So, rather than look a bit foolish trying to catch me, why don’t you toddle back to your nest and…”

Balthazar was both right and wrong in his assessment of the basilisk’s mobility. The wrong part was that the beast could move like a lightning flash when it had a mind for it. The right part was that Balthazar was slightly better built for the agility part, so diving out of the way could take a complex pattern that put him out of position to be snatched by razor sharp teeth, even if the body propelling the teeth could continue forward for some distance after the expected jaw snap. The
The basilisk’s claw had almost ripped the confidence right out of the cat, but almost meant that Balthazar only lost a long strip of furry skin along his flank and not the rest of his furry self down the basilisk’s throat. With a shaky, but surviving confidence, Balthazar dragged himself the final few wriggles through the fan blades and started racing away from the house. The surviving confidence only wavered dramatically when he stopped, took a few angry breaths, then raced back to lick up his blood that had started dripping from his massacred side after he got through the fan. What few bits remained he incinerated using a very large expenditure of energy that made the second race away from the house a slower, more painful affair, but blood could be used to track him and that was not something he could allow. Neither by Magnussen or that chicken-worm, either.

Doing his best to make it to Greg without being seen and ‘rescued’ by a do-gooder, Balthazar limped through the shadows until he saw the café the sorcerer had mentioned with a familiar old chap enjoying a beverage at one of the tables set out on the pavement on each side of the café door. He could limp the rest of the way there but decided to take the more rational approach of letting out a blood-curdling yowl that had half the street looking around, including one person who did it with more keenness than the others. Using his magical senses to scan the street, Greg finally sensed Balthazar’s aura and, tossing a few notes on his table, the sorcerer moved in the direction of the energy, being guided when he got close by a few quiet mews until he came across Balthazar’s hiding place under an older-model Mercedes. The fact it took the cat a few moments longer than expected to crawl out into the light put Greg on even higher alert. Finally seeing the grisly mass that was what seemed half of the cat’s body had Greg immediately crouching down and making a few gestures to let him see through the blood to the wound itself.

“Shit! What happened to you?”

“Basilisk.”

“WHAT!”

“Can you… not squat there looking stupid and do something about this. I think it… I feel sick.”

“That’ll have poison in it, more than likely. Ok, I’ll buy us some time and then I have… hopefully… a few things at the shop to counteract it. I’m sorry, Balthazar, if I had known…”

“Who could have? And… that’s not the worst of it, Greg.”
“Oh no…”

“Talk and walk what say?”

“Talk and cab, instead.”

“Better. And, if I… if I was you, I’d prepare for a full war council tonight.”

“How full?”

“Everybody in the Scooby Gang and all the vampires besides.”

Greg picked up the cat and held it with the bloody side towards him so he wouldn’t get reported for animal cruelty by the cab he’d try to hail.

“That’s not good.”

“No, n…nothing about this can be considered go…od.”

Balthazar’s voice was faltering far more than Greg would have liked, so he began petting the mauled cat with one hand to provide what comfort he could as he raised his free arm to call a cab. Basilisk… the amount wrong with that single word could fill an ocean and if that wasn’t the worst of it? War council was definitely the way forward. And, maybe, giving Jim a little head’s up on things was no longer the good idea it had once seemed. It’d give that fucker a chance to concoct some cover story or other and this wasn’t the time to dance about trying to drag the truth out of him while he tried to save his own scrawny skin. In any case, they might need that skin to graft onto this evil cat. Balthazar had done his part today and now it was time for someone else, like Jim Moriarty, to step up. Or take a pike up the arse. Whichever seemed more beneficial in the moment.
Soft, warm… musical? Singing… no, none of that would be gifts from his sultry beloved. Her fluffy duckling cousin, however…

“I see kitty eyes!”

… was, in fairness, more likely to cuddle a valiant, basilisk-slaying… in a sense… warrior against her bosom than a dark temptress. Some days, a comforting bosom might, might!, offer more appeal than a beguiling beauty who preferred to be worshipped from afar.

“I slew a basilisk.”

“What a good cat you are!”

That was utterly untrue, he was pure, crystallized essence of evil, however… she provided a squeeze with her bosom which was warm and nurturing, so forgiveness would be bestowed.

“Not dead, I see, you evil cat. And you didn’t slay the basilisk, so stop saying you did.”

“You weren’t there, Greg the Not-Magnificent.”

“You said flatly ‘the stupid chicken-worm nearly ate me and I scarcely made it out of there with my body attached to my head’ which isn’t really a description of basilisk slaying. Besides… it’s an existing threat we have to keep in mind, though I wish we didn’t.”

“Is this mean man bothering you, Bazzie?”

Balthazar nestled deeper into Molly’s arms and stuck his tongue out at Greg while he did it.

“Yes.”

“Greg, you’re being awful to Bazzie when he was such a brave and wonderful kitty and fought a basilisk all by himself.”

Greg looked to Anthea for help, then wondered why since she probably thought he deserved being finger-wagged by her cousin. Fortunately for him, Anthea was already a bit peeved at being summoned here for a meeting, the context of which was still a mystery, when she was supposed to be sipping insanely overpriced cocktails at London’s highest-end of the high-end bars. The fact it was owned by Marcus was only a tiny fly in the ointment. Regardless, cat talk, whether that meant talking about cats, talking to cats or talking with cats, was not doing much to bolster her contented anticipation of a truly top flight mojito.

“Molly Hooper, stop being… a cat mother.”

“But I am one, Anthea No Surname! I’ve got so many sweet kitties that look to me for a bit of help now and again and a cuddle when they want one that I’m like the old woman who lived in a shoe. But with cats and not kids. Besides, someone has to look after Balthazar since you won’t do it and Greg’s being a meanie.”

“Greg, stop being mean. Molly, stop being you. When is everyone else getting here? I’m not going to be happy if I have to sit here listening to my cousin sing songs she made up, all about cats, and I will take my unhappiness out on you, Merlin.”
“Hey! I set the meeting time, but I don’t have a rope tied to all these lunatics to drag them here when I want them.”

“You could probably do it, though, so why don’t you?”

“I… yeah, ok, there are things I could do, but not with a snap of my fingers, which I just know is what you want to see, so fuck off.”

“Do you have any use? Is your magic even real?”

“You saw me use it!”

Mycroft smiled from his reconnaissance point halfway up Greg’s stairs and felt tremendously thankful for his secret doorway, since it appeared the mood for this tete-a-tete was shaping up to be as prickly as normal and being able to dart home after his rather trying work day for a shower and fresh set of clothes, then simply step into Gregory’s workshop to participate in their meeting was nothing short of a blessing. A greater blessing, however, was that none of the sorcerer’s rather formidable magical talents had been needed during the surveillance of Magnussen’s residence since… his personal memory of mythical creatures was not superlative, however, he did know one took great pains to avoid any and all contact with a basilisk. Being itself a truly dreadful creature, the cat’s personality was very likely much as armor against the basilisk’s equally dreadful nature, though the breach that armor did receive was enough to make the entire scenario a terrible one to contemplate. When one felt concern for Balthazar, one knew the situation was shockingly grave.

In any case, time to formally enter the game and lend his sword to the battle.

“Actually, Gregory, my PA has been somewhat lacking in truly impressive demonstrations of your talent. She was not party, for example, to the might and valor that I was sufficiently fortunate to witness while you vanquished that pesky demon and the dark elf.”

“I was mighty and valorous, wasn’t I?”

“Most certainly.”

Mycroft took a seat on the arm of Greg’s chair and did a mental jig that his leg failed to issue more than the standard middle-aged protest against his devil-may-care behavior.

“And me! I did my part then and got nothing for it. Now I’m shredded by a basilisk for fighting, once more, on the side of good. Stupid! I’m a stupid, stupid cat…”

Molly’s soft, ‘kitty not stupid, kitty’s a smart, brave kitty, was hummed into Balthazar’s fur while Anthea rolled her eyes again, but stopped the rolling to keep them pointed at Greg who wondered if she had a telepath somewhere in the family history, because he got the message beamed into his brain both loudly and clearly.

“You did do a good job today, Balthazar and it was a big help for us, so none of that stupid business.”

Balthazar’s long, plaintive mew was muffled a touch by sounding it into Molly’s chest, but that, somehow, added to its tone of misery.

“This is pathetic. Not that I expected anything different, but the fact my expectations were met perfectly adds a layer of tedium to the pathetic that is positively soul-deadening.”

Greg and Mycroft both relished the contemtuous note to Jim’s voice, because it would make
“I agree, you bastard. Now that you’re here, things have gone straight to the pitiful and pathetic. Richard, good to see you. Come in and have a seat; we’re waiting for the rest to arrive, so you may as well be comfortable.”

Rich grinned and took a seat on the floor near Molly, leaving the available sofa space for his brother, which was not as altruistic as it sounded since it was directly next to Anthea and was just deserts for his brother who was being more than a slight pain in the arse today for whatever reason crawled up Jim’s arse and made itself meddlesome. Anthea’s unwillingness to tolerate his peevishness for any reason whatsoever was something to admire.

“Thanks! It’s been a long day, actually, and I can use the break. My boss’s wife is a teacher and I was volunteered to speak about working in IT and electronics repair at one of those careers day. Kids don’t hold back with the tough questions! They had me on my toes, that’s for certain, but I think I kept their interest and gave them a proper idea of what my job’s about. Either that or they were asking lots of questions to keep from going back to their lessons which, admittedly, would be something I might have done at their age. Well, maybe not me, but certainly other people who may look ever so slightly like me and are named James.”

Jim’s plaintive moan was equally on-par with Balthazar’s best efforts, though his wasn’t filtered through a kind and supportive bosom, so Greg awarded it only an 8/10.

“Can’t say I’ve ever been asked to do that, but I’m not terribly surprised. I rather doubt sorcery and witchcraft is a career path they want to encourage for the kiddies, even if it’s just selling the bits and pieces to make it all happen. Mycroft, you could do one, though. Welcome to the wonderful world of government service, children. Making Britain a better place through bureaucracy.”

“A stellar suggestion, Gregory. I shall begin preparing my visual aids immediately. Nothing stirs a crowd more than a well-organized chart.”

“With color?”

“Most certainly.”

“Perfect. Oh, and speaking of color…”

Marcus was now here. Wearing a purple ascot. That certainly qualified.

“I do brighten any room, Greggy. But not as much as the beautiful and scintillating Anthea.”

Molly gave a preemptive ‘oh no you don’t Bazzer’ both in words and with a firmer squeeze so the cat couldn’t erupt into a flailing mass of teeth and claws. Which, even with a notable percentage of its flesh no longer available to flail with, would certainly mean a tragic end for Marcus’s ascot.

“Are you going to introduce me, nephew?”

Petras was not wearing a purple ascot, which would have been completely at odds with his station and personal gravitas. His ascot was stygian black.

“No. Not now, not ever. Pretend you don’t exist and everyone will be happier for it.”

Mycroft snorted a laugh as Petras physically lifted Marcus off the floor and out of his way so he could step forward to kiss Anthea’s hand. And, when she was certain one arm was sufficient to
imprison a tetchy cat, Molly’s, as well.

“Petras Varnas, at your service, ladies.”

The entertainment value of Marcus and Jim squirming and seething was enormous, so Greg, Mycroft and Rich made certain not to miss a moment of it.

“Are you a vampire, too? I suppose you would be since you’re Marcus’s uncle and he’s a vampire… Hi Marcus! I’m Molly!... but maybe it doesn’t work that way. Genetically, I mean. It’s a bit of a hullaballoo in books and films, so I have to ask an expert which, since you’re here, is rather lucky for me!”

Anthea knew the vampire’s smile. She knew it well. She’d seen it on her boss’s face often enough when he was interacting with her cousin and it already carried her grudging stamp of approval. Therefore, Petras Varnas would not die the death of the impolite and condescending bastard.

“I agree that the realms of fiction do not properly portray our nature and ways, for we are much more attractive and virile in person than one might gather from popular media.”

The Marcus – Jim Hissing and Spitting Duo was doing its utmost to be England’s entry in the Eurovision competition, but the assembled suspected they’d vote for another act since these two needed substantial work on their harmony. And Jim needed an ascot.

“… but, to answer your question formally, yes, I am a vampire and it is a genetic trait passed from parents to children. Some children do more with the gift, however, than others.”

Said while smirking darkly at Marcus who made a gesture that would have scandalized his uncle if it hadn’t been Petras who taught it to him at a young age with the express hope of annoying his kingly brother.

“That’s so interesting! I’d love to learn more about all of this, but there’s so much… this!... to learn about. Dragons!”

Molly’s non-sequitur wasn’t as non-sequitur as it seemed since the group had been joined by the 1 ½ dragons on their Scooby gang’s roster who happily waved at the gleefully-waving Molly as they walked into Greg’s flat. Rich did his bit of gleeful waving, too, because it seemed the jolly thing to do and it would ferociously irritate his ascot-lacking brother.

“Yes, Ms. Hooper, so terribly much to learn but you have exceptional teachers at your disposal, so you shall soon be quite the expert, I have little doubt.”

Petras’s laugh was as dark as his smirk, which made Greg’s eyes roll at the expected drama and various others feel tingles in places best not mentioned in polite company. One example of impolite company was, however, immune from any form of tingle.

“Oh my god… stop. Just stop. You are embarrassing my genes back a hundred generations and I know for a fact there aren’t that many generations in our family, so congratulations for doing the impossible for such a terrible reason. You’re worse than Father and that is not something to be proud of. It’s the opposite of pride. Anti-pride. I hope you’re happy. I just had to make up a word to describe how horrible you are.”

Petras ignored Marcus with a totality that made the younger vampire step aside as his uncle strode forward to avoid being the victim of a full-frontal collision that couldn’t be turned to his advantage in any manner whatsoever.
“The young, Mycroft… however do we tolerate their silliness.”

Now Greg was glaring and squirming, since the soft-voiced words were accompanied by a gentle squeeze of Mycroft’s shoulder.

“With tremendous difficulty, at best. In any case…”

Pausing a moment to give Greg a squeeze, though on the leg, which was both nearer and more intimate than his lover’s shoulder, Mycroft took a brief look about the room and decided it was best to press on to the more important matters at hand.

“Is your brother, Petras, not joining us?”

“No. Leonas is holding court.”

“Dear heavens… truly?”

The disbelief on Mycroft’s face was exactly in line with what anyone who had ever met Leonas Varnas would sport.

“The thought ravages the mind, that is true, but it is an expected thing when he visits a city and failing to do so now would prompt questions. Especially given the… undercurrents already upsetting equilibrium of our people. Further, it would be expected that if we are here discussing something of genuine import, Leonas would surely be in attendance; having him conducting business as usual somewhat clouds the issue. Especially with Marcus, this very evening, squiring the lovely Anthea to his squalid little tavern…”

“It’s the most exclusive bar in the fucking city, you antisocial, am-dram rejected Max Schreck impersonator!”

“As I was saying, with my nephew insulting his delightful companion with his eternally poor judgement, the clouds become yet more murky, something that, at present, is very much to our advantage.”

“Agreed. Then, let us begin. Gregory, I believe you have news for us that is also very much to our advantage?”

“Well… that’s certainly a matter of perspective. Balthazar, want to do the honors and receive your standing ovation?”

It had taken two hours of difficult, touch-and-go work before Greg had been mostly certain the cat would avoid both death by basilisk poison and death by blood loss and shock, but he’d successfully rallied Balthazar’s own magic, along with his own, to keep the feline on this side of the line between life and death. Now, of course, there would be no end to the posturing and demands for accolades which, in truth, were somewhat deserved since the number of cats, humans or humans-now-cats who could survive an encounter with a basilisk was pitifully small.

“I… cough cough…”

“Get on with it, you ridiculous mog!”

Molly tutted Greg sharply then quietly praised Balthazar as he laboriously turned for the assembled to see his wound and tell his tale of adventure and woe. To be fair, it was a tale worth telling, though it filled nobody with a warm, optimistic glow.
“Basilisk…”

Petras shared a look with Mycroft that clearly expressed how serious the situation had become, which was actually difficult to accomplish given the current standard was a plague that could eliminate his race from existence.

“… how has this occurred, sorcerer?”

This look was directly at Greg who had a suspicion and his answer wasn’t going to bode well for one particular person in the room.

“They can be summoned, just like demons, but the spell to do it isn’t widely known and a bugger to work, besides. If you’ve got the motivation, though, and the cash to gather the necessary supplies, then it’s not impossible. I wonder who we know might consider sharing that sort of knowledge with another nasty character an amusing thing to do?”

Jim was scowling even before all eyes turned his way, which saved him having to do it quickly and, potentially, failing to give it his best showing.

“Nor everyone is like you, Greg, and afraid to use their power to its fullest.”

Jim’s scowl faltered microscopically under the combined glares and growls thrown his way, but he refused to give anyone satisfaction by showing contrition. Yes, he’d suspected it was a terrible idea, but… not all terrible ideas were… terrible. This one, however, was and hindsight was now kicking him in the bollocks and having a right old time of it, too.

“There’s something called intelligence that lets you know how and when to use magic and I find it hilarious that the most prideful person in the world about his intellect had it fail him in the most spectacular way imaginable. Oh, and it was your little protégé that called up that demon I had to beat on a bit ago. Not Anderson’s, but the other one. Just how cozy are you with Magnusson, Jim, and why didn’t you bother to mention it earlier?”

Petras’s eyes widened and he bent down for a quick, hushed conversation with Mycroft while Greg kept his eyes locked on Jim, who was now finding it very hard to keep his thunderous scowl on his face.

“I… my business is my business.”

“Not anymore. Start talking.”

“There’s nothing anywhere that denies me the right to teach who I like.”

The complete lack of fire and defiance in Jim’s voice had Rich gulping softly and he had no issue petting the wounded cat that had crawled from Molly’s lap onto his.

“Maybe there should be if you’re teaching them about the sorts of things that help them bring back the vampire plague and, oh I don’t know, open gateways for basilisks and steal one of the pearls of the Sea Queen.”

At Goraseth’s loud gasp, Charles snarled and his eyes glowed a bright serpent green that Molly decided not to comment on since, though it was absolutely lovely, this probably wasn’t the time for a discussion about the prettiest color for a dragon. Even if she did have a fairly brilliant argument for why the answer was an almost identical match for the neon blaze of the dragon’s gaze.

“Leonas has tried to get his hands on one of those forever but she hides them like… like her
children! She hides them better than her kids, actually, because you’ve got a decent chance of finding Droon if you visit the nearest racetrack, but… this Magnussen has one of the pearls? Really?"

Greg nodded slowly and there was something in the way he did it that set an extra worry growing in the dragon’s mind.

“What? What, Greg? What else does he have?”

This was one time Greg really hoped Balthazar would chime in to gain a bit of attention for himself, but the cat stayed unhelpfully mute.

“Magnussen has been amassing influence, probably with the help of that miserable wretch right there. Objects of power that… from what Balthazar described, it’s fucking scary the things he’s gathered. All items he can use, draw upon their power…”

“Greg?”

“A dragon’s egg. The fucker has a dragon’s egg. Balthazar said… it’s a chamelos.”

“No…”

“It shifted twice while Balthazar was watching it.”

“No… no, that’s not possible.”

“It shouldn’t be. No more possible than a fucking basilisk being here, but the fucker found one from… wherever they went and it’s here and… it shifted, so it’s alive, but…”

“It won’t survive! It can’t without its parents!”

“Yes, it can.”

All eyes were fixed on Rich who was feeling nothing short of an acid bath raging in his stomach, put there, as usual, by his brother.

“It was the stasis spell, wasn’t it, Jim? That’s why you wanted it. For those of you who aren’t necromancers, it’s a little trick to keep something alive when it oughtn’t to be. It… stalls life, if you will. Locks it in place and keeps it going, but just going. No growth or change or anything. But… whatever you’ve enchanted can… oh dear.”

Greg bit his lip as a few ugly puzzle pieces fell into place.

“Let me guess, it can be used as a battery.”

“Basically. It’s a nasty spell, even for my lot, though we’re not all evil and nasty, no matter what people think. You can siphon off their life force, their generative energy and… a dragon? I don’t even want to imagine what you could do with that. Something powerful, though, that’s for certain.”

“He’s torturing it!”

Goraseth lunged at Jim with murder in his eyes and it took an unsurprisingly long time and a fixed glare from Molly to get the vampires in motion, since they were the only people in the room strong enough to pull an enraged dragon’s hands off the throat of a quickly asphyxiating sorcerer. Besides Greg, that is, but he put it at another minute or so before he’d need to step in and, frankly,
the evil bastard deserved a good throttling for the shit he’d dropped them in. Interestingly, the vampires may not have gotten Goraseth off of Jim without the timely and browbeaten assistance of a passing werewolf. The browbeating coming mostly from Anderson who had no idea what was going on, but had no great urge to witness a murder just after getting off of work. He was fine, though, with watching Charles get in a truly vicious punch as a forceful piece of punctuation to the previous round of dragon violence.

“Alright you two, that’s enough. Richard, want to comment on that torturing thing?”

Greg was already holding in a lot of worry about a hundred things, but the idea of a tiny dragon being tortured for some arse’s lust for power was surging to the head of the list.

“Ummm… physically, I’d say no. There’s no feeling, no awareness, to sense any pain. Philosophically, that’s another question. I’m not sure what to make of it shifting, but I also don’t know anyone who has tried that spell on a dragon, especially that particular species. Jim, you might want to wipe that lip of yours. I know how fussy you are and blood is the devil to get out of fabric.”

Molly handed Jim a tissue from her handbag and waved off Anthea’s rolled eyes. Jim may have deserved a bit of a thrashing, but having his clothes ruined was another matter. Professional cleaning cost loads!

“We have to get that egg!”

Petras had his arm around Goraseth’s neck to prevent another, likely lethal assault, and patiently allowed the frustrated dragon’s temper-exposed teeth sink into his flesh as an emotional release. Frankly, he had hoped the silly creature would have simply snapped the sorcerer’s neck, but strangulation was certainly a more satisfying, and painful, fate to inflict upon an enemy, so the lack of efficiency was rather understandable. But he did bemoan the loss of this shirt to the dragon’s teeth. It flattered his form exceedingly well. It was time for Greg to do his duty to family and prevent the loss of something else, such as his trousers.

“Calm yourself, Goraseth. Sorcerer Lestrade will not turn away from the plight of a child.”

Said with a tone so pointed it poked Greg squarely in the eye so it’s meaning was pushed into his brain through the easiest route possible.

“Petras, the winged rat, is right, Seth. The egg is a priority, don’t think it’s not. The problem is we’ve got several priorities on our list and they all have to be managed, so… that’s why we’re all here. To figure out how to do that.”

Anthea was already busy on her mobile digging deeper into Charles Augustus Magnussen, who she knew of and loathed thoroughly, though this new information was certainly outside her experience with the worm. And her narrowed eyes at her boss made clear how unhappy she was just finding out now about this new development. The vampires in danger of extinction, an infant dragon in danger, London itself in peril… she should have been on this as soon as they’d fathomed out who was responsible. There wasn’t a snippet of data that could hide from her when she put her mind to it and, right now, her mind found the idea of obliterating Magnussen the best the world had ever known. For the record, Mycroft’s computer-like mind had been working on the problem since last night, but this new information was putting several kinks in his tentatively considered notions.

“Gregory, if you would… this dragon is a special form?”

“Oh yeah. You know the word chameleon? It actually comes from this lot. They’re dragons
through and through, but powerful ones that have an impressive ability to mimic other things. Not become them, understand, but mimic them and often well enough that they could fool people into doing all sorts of things like letting them into vaults or signing papers that were actually land transfers. A lot of them were captured and held by bastards who used them for all sorts of disgraceful things or... just as pets to amuse guests.”

“I didn’t pay attention much in school, Greggy, but wasn’t there a story that they got sent somewhere like the basilisks and other things that go bump in the night? I assumed that was a bit of nonsense and they were basically made extinct by greedy shits but…”

“No, it’s not a story, Marcus, it’s the truth. That’s exactly what they feared was going to happen, so the elders found a practitioner powerful enough and with the right talents to locate a new home for them and open a door they could pass through.”

“Gregory, that was not you, was it?”

It was flattering that his Mycroft believed him that powerful but... ok, he was that powerful, but he definitely wasn’t that ancient. He might feel like it, on occasion, but now wasn’t the time to dwell on the tribulations of middle age, though they be mighty and have true talent for striking when they could cause the greatest trouble. And embarrassment.

“Not quite that old, love. But, it was an ancestor of mine, coincidentally. Part of the reason the dragons tolerate my nonsense as well as they do.”

“Where is he, Greg? Tell me and I will burn his fucking house to the ground!”

Petras tightened his grip on Goraseth and, for good measure, stuck his arm back into his teeth-bared mouth before glaring at Greg as penalty for not using his magic to send the agitated dragon to sleep or to a desert island where he could kick palm trees for a day or so and get the rage out of his system. His friend Charles could go along and keep an eye out for sand djinn who might not appreciate a furious dragon desecrating their lovely beach. They were relentless when their dander was up...

“With the egg inside? Good plan, Seth. Really well thought out. We need an actual plan to lance this boil and solve everybody’s problems, not one that will put more on our plate. The egg is one of our concerns, a highly important one, and it’s not going to be forgotten, you have my word. Now, can you stop biting Petras and work with us on this?”

Charles stepped over and spoke softly to the dragon, putting his arms around his shoulders until Goraseth closed his eyes for a long moment and released Petras’s arm.

“Good. Now, Jim old cock... want to tell us how you know Magnussen and why you didn’t, perhaps, mention him before now, since he’s a stellar candidate to nominate as the villain of our current situation?”

“I didn’t know it was him.”

“Notice I didn’t actually ask you if you did know, but thanks for looking even more suspicious than before.”

Now it was Molly having a quiet word with someone who needed a few moments with eyes shut to gather the threads of his mind before moving forward.

“Fine. I... I began to suspect it was him but didn’t have a shred of proof and I did not want you lot bungling into some foolish slapstick plan to trap him and my leg gets caught in the trap along
“Fair. How did you get involved with him in the first place? I never heard of this Magnussen until Mycroft mentioned his name and I usually know any major players, especially here in London.”

“He’s kept that quiet. Doesn’t do anything to attract attention, magic-wise. Works in the shadows and… ensures that nobody goes about telling tales he doesn’t want told.”

Mycroft glanced up at Petras who pursed his lips and nodded slightly in response. It was good to know someone with similar instincts and the information or experiences to back them up.

“He was blackmailing you, was he not, Mr. Moriarty?”

Jim turned sharply at Mycroft’s words, but the momentary fire died only a moment after it flared.

“He learned about… I may have had some small, miniscule, role in the attempted coup to oust the pixie king, but he was a dreadful bore and nobody liked him in any case, so it wasn’t much of a coup, more of a toddle along now, you horrid fellow, and we’ll let you have a nice little house with servants but no more pesky issuing orders and unhelpful things like that. Didn’t succeed but he’s still so mad about it…”

Molly’s happy ‘Pixies!’ wasn’t echoed by anyone in the room who actually knew that the legend of teeny little creatures who epitomized cute was stupendously off the mark.

“I took out his brother. That’s why it failed. Nearly lost my arm on that job. Fucker.”

Anderson looked between the snarling Sebastian and the refusing-to-meet-his-eye Jim and decided a quick kick to Jim’s shins wouldn’t be too great a splotch on his moral record.

“Ow! Keep your feet to yourself!”

“Not if you’re hurting my Sebastian!”

Sebastian’s snarl vanished immediately and If the werewolf looked any more smug it would probably be toxic to his system, but that didn’t stop Greg from giving him a ‘well done’ smirk and Molly clapping happily at the news, despite the small betrayal of her own significant other who was now sporting bruises on his neck and his leg. It was the price one paid, however, for being a cabbage.

“Most… protective, Mr. Anderson. Now, if we might return to my original point, did you not, James Moriarty, suspect that the person blackmailing you was the same person blackmailing your brother?”

“Of course I did! I’m not stupid, Mycroft, unlike others in this room who shall go nameless. But… I couldn’t find any proof. It all fit, the things they had Rich tell me to do, the timing… of course I suspected it was Magnussen, but without any proof who would move on him? Greg? Mr. Let’s Not Jump to Conclusions? Pfft. He’d probably take tea with the bastard so they could have a civilized conversation about it all.”

“I would not!”

Anderson quietly cleared his throat and raised a point-of-order finger that warmed his werewolf’s heart very nicely.
“I summoned a ruddy big demon and you bought me take-away, Greg. He could have a point. The git.”

“I… ok, fine, I do prefer to talk things out if possible, but…”

Jim raised his own point-or-order finger, but this one was directed straight at Greg’s face, in clear violation of parliamentary procedure.

“But I couldn’t let you put Magnussen on alert. I was trying to root out the information, the proof, that I needed but…but this blithering burlesque show you have gadding about you stomped all over that and here we are. Thank you very much.”

Given Jim had already suffered several solid thumpings, Marcus thought it rather unoriginal to provide one himself, but had a few contacts among the pixies who could do it for him at a later time. And in much ghastlier fashion.

“This member of the burlesque show, sorcerer, has his life hanging in the balance because of your arrogance and poor decisions and, frankly, I’m too gorgeous to die from a foul plague. And this fucker has designs on a lot more than the vampires, so don’t get too comfortable because you could be next on the chopping block when he worries the sorcerers are a threat to him, even if he’s sent old Greg to the great beyond. Speaking of old Greg, what do you have for a plan, Silver Foxy, because I’m bloody terrified of all of this and uncle just smolders silently when I ask him what he has hiding up his tragically unfashionable sleeve.”

The question of the day rears its ugly and obstinate head.

“Ummmm… none. Not a sausage. That’s why I want all brains on this. All perspectives, all talents and all experiences. I know this is a lot for tonight and all I really expect is for people to start thinking and drawing on personal resources so we can craft something that’s going to be quick and decisive. Not… taking tea and having a chat. Have a care, though, because there’s no doubt we’re being watched and telegraphing our intentions or progress has to be avoided at all costs…”

Rich looked about the room and felt a little foolish when a small lump rose in his throat, but he’d been so scared for so long that having allies, even those who were allies only because they had a great deal to lose if this went squiffy, was a profound comfort.

“… For now, Marcus, you and Anthea should go and enjoy your evening. The rest of you, do the same. Petras, want to hang about a bit? Nice night for a good glass of wine and a little conversation with old and new friends.”

The younger set heard loud and clear their dismissal so the older heads could conference but didn’t particularly feel insulted at being sent off to play. Keep things looking normal. Be out and be seen. Nothing said they couldn’t do a bit of idea sharing of their own while the doddery echelon sipped warm milk and reminisced about the days of radio. One of the younger set knew inevitably it would be her mission to herd the various cats, who were not Balthazar, into a functional war council, so she best take charge now and lay in the fluffy toys and laser pointers.

“I will have a nice time if Marcus provides me with my promised mojito that will make me forget all others that came before it. If not, then he dies and I’ll be early to work tomorrow without my expected late-night mojito -quaffing sluggishness. Given there is now a cocktail standard to evaluate, Molly, Philip… bring along your individual entourage and we’ll make it a panel of judges weighing Marcus’s claims in the balance. Charles…”

Anthea eyes softened as she looked at the driver who hadn’t been a dragon long and was only
partly one in any case, but seemed to be in as much pain as the full dragon who was leaning against him as if there wasn’t a spark of life left in his body and without support he’d be puddled on the ground.

“I think we’ll leave it for another day, Anthea, if you don’t mind.”

Standing straighter, Goraseth shook his head and slapped a determined look on his face as he gave Anthea a firm nod.

“It’s ok, Charles. Actually, I think a good drink or three is exactly what’s called for here. Then… a few hours with a brush in my hand. You have an extra canvas lying about?”

Charles gave Goraseth’s shoulder a squeeze and smiled gently.

“Always.”

“Alright, then. If… if His Majesty allows it, of course.”

Marcus only huffed a mildly-affronted breath that this was directed at Petras and not at him but, to be fair, the dragon was his uncle’s ride home and, also, far more disapproving of any form of fun whatsoever.

“Of course, Goraseth. Go with my blessing, however… do not mourn. The child will not be lost if it is, in any manner, within our power to prevent it.”

Goraseth nodded and gave the vampire a hopeful smile before announcing that bus service to their destination would be departing immediately, following after the rest of the party once they’d said their goodbyes and Rich depositied Balthazar on Greg’s lap. Once they were gone, the remaining representatives of the humans, sorcerers and vampires took silent deep breaths and let the enormity of the coming task wash over them like a tidal wave. Greg was the first to find his personal flotation device and took strength from the fact if he had to face this situation, he couldn’t have asked for two better people at his side. Even if one of them kept giving his lover small bits of contact that were staggeringly inappropriate and gross. Ok, the gross part might be unwarranted, but he was floating in typhoon backwash and didn’t have time to direct mental energy towards an analysis of his mental discourtesy.

“Ok… you two know more about this Magnussen than I do, so let’s start with that, then I’ll add in what I know about the various magics he’s collected. At some point, we’ll get details of whatever little strategy session the Scooby gang is about to start and… ooh, one moment.”

Greg pulled out his mobile and tapped a contact, grinning when the call was answered.

“Sherlock! Since I know you’re bored and pining now that John’s here at work, why don’t you pop over to Vesuvius and have a drink with the other kids your age?... It’s a bar… A very nice bar… ok, you have a point, so a very nice bar where half the patrons will be vampires so you can observe a scad of them while sitting at a private table with a free drink in your hand… I thought so… Most likely everybody you know… ok, maybe not everybody, but Molly will be there and you don’t hate her and so will Seth so you can ask him dragon questions and he can’t run away because he’ll be too in love with his free alcohol to leave his seat. They just left, so… that’s a good question and I have no idea if they serve blood on tap. Probably not, though, since it’s a bar lots of humans visit and it’s generally not wise to be gulping blood out of a pint glass when there are people about to see you do it…. You can take that up with Marcus… The cabbie will know… Ok, you can complain about it tomorrow when you come to collect John from work which I know you’ll do for many and exceptionally-secret reasons… Same to you but with twice the love.”
“Gregory… are you attempting to get Marcus’s establishment closed for being the scene of a riot? My brother is not one to inflict on merrymakers, no matter their race or species.”

“Nope, but since I suspect there will be a lot of heads putting themselves together over this, his is a good one to add to the mix. Besides, think of the entertainment value when Anthea phones and gives you the what for.”

“Delightful. But, I suppose Sherlock’s particular talents could prove useful, especially with such a diversity of input from which to draw information. For our part… perhaps we should adjourn to my home for our discussions. I have a rather remarkable wine cellar from which to choose our evening’s libation and I suspect we may have need of various resources easily accessible from my study.”

Greg smirked at his lover who was wearing Sebastian-level smugness at the thought of showing off his little secret, and his private sanctum, to their guest. And with the doorway, they could move easily between his workroom and Mycroft’s house to access whatever magical or non-magical resource they might need. And couldn’t forget the British Library collection! Ok, he’d created probably the most powerful information hub in London, if not in the western hemisphere, for this sort of problem and that would be his own source of smugness. Anyone who thought they could give better courtship gifts than Greg Lestrade had best think again. Nobody was as good as him and from that excited gleam in Mycroft’s eye, the rewards for his gifting prowess would be scandalous, indeed…

“I want a White Russian! With lots of cream.”

Balthazar was scandalous, but not a reward any suitor would want for their courtship efforts. Life was filled with little burdens and some were more vocal than others…
Anthea had been in her fair share of elite bars and clubs, mostly for work purposes, so she had a respectable mental measuring stick for judging the merits of the one in which she was currently sitting. It was fabulous…

“Well… what do you think?”

“Passable.”

Marcus’s grin stretched wide, because he was quickly gaining fluency in Anthea-speak and this little utterance indicated she was highly impressed and very much enjoying the lovely mojito in her hand.

“I try.”

And he did! Tried to purchase or build businesses that were successful and attracted the right type of clientele to make that success possible. Not just high-end projects, either. He was more than happy to invest in all sorts of things and for different classes of people, as long as they contributed to his plump bank accounts and provided connections and inroads into areas that could prove useful to him in the future. That, in fairness, did involve many diverse layers of London’s social strata. Though, also in fairness, he didn’t usually share his private table with quite such a representative sample of those diverse layers of London’s social strata.

“I think this is a very interesting place, Marcus.”

For instance, there was Anderson, whose entire outfit cost about as much as his lovely Anthea’s mojito. Not quite as much, though, because those shoes had to have been gained through chasing a dog who’d stolen them from its master who mucked out stables for a living.

“So happy to hear it.”

“I was worried a touch about coming, since I don’t consider myself very posh, but I’m not dressed much differently than a number of the people here, so I suppose I was worrying in vain.”

They paid hundreds of quid to look like that, though, Baby Wizard. Which doesn’t say much about their intelligence, but money and intellect never necessarily walked hand in hand. Regardless, Greg needed to take this poor fashion disaster shopping. No, what was he thinking, Greg was the grandfather of fashion disasters. Maybe the werewolf might do it. He, surprisingly, knew how to make a statement with clothes. The statement said ‘I’ll kill you for fun if I get bored,’ but fashion was all about points of view.

“We welcome everyone, no matter how… casually… they’re dressed. For instance, take Sebastian. Seriously take him because that saves some other poor blighter from suffering his sullen and leaden lovemaking, but if we focus only on his clothes, they’re dreadful and notice he strolled right in with only a few of the more sensitive patrons having fainting spells.”

Sebastian’s growl was low and menacing, something that made for gleeful pointing by Anderson and a whispered conversation about werewolf anatomy between Rich and Molly, though Goraseth simply hoped he wouldn’t be dragged into a battle between Marcus and Sebastian because he honestly didn’t care who’d win, but his employer might be a touch miffed if his darling son spent the next week moping because his arse had been handed to him by a very large dog.
“When our comrade goes a bit bestial on you, Your Highness, I would not be surprised if I was suddenly taken ill and unable to protect either your life or your looks.”

“Your feeble allegiance does you no credit, my dear lizard, however, it is completely expected given you are in Father’s employ and his allegiances shift with the wind. Whatever gives him a laugh at the moment has his support, which is why you, Godzilla-wannabe, caper and prance like a puppet on his musty old string.”

“Leo laughs at you a lot, too, leech.”

“Woof woof, mongrel.”

Whereas Jim appreciated chaos and discord, it lacked a certain flavor if he wasn’t the instigator. Time to spice things up a bit.

“So, Marcus… shown Anthea the orgy room yet?”

Marcus glared at Jim, who smiled wickedly in return, savoring that even the vampire’s pale complexion could blanch in horror.

“I have absolutely no idea to what you are referring, deluded crazy man.”

“Really? Let’s ask your indentured looks-like-a-man, then. He’s been to a few, so I hear.”

Since the dragon’s pallor was magically generated, it couldn’t pale, but his face could freeze into a rictus of ‘oops,’ so he was unable in any manner whatsoever of meeting Charles’s ‘Come again?’ look.

“Heh. Lizard got paid in trade.”

Rich waved at the server with his empty glass and made a circle with it to indicate the table needed more alcohol. A big circle. LOTS more alcohol. Sometimes Jim being a massive prick paid entertaining dividends.

“Werewolf who had a threesome with vampire triplets at one of those… parties… says what?”

Sebastian did his own bit of eye-avoiding as he glowered at Goraseth, who was wondering if he’d get to visit London more often than usual now that the Varnas brothers were cultivating an alliance with Mr. Mycroft Holmes. He actually hoped so since, vampire plague and other horrors aside, he was having a much grander time than he’d enjoyed in the past, even with the orgies, which were not quite as much fun as one might believe, but since most believed them to be scandalous amounts of fun, that left a lot of room for a very nice time. Coincidentally, that was cleanly in line with Molly’s thinking as she was now wondering what a person had to do to get invited to one of these orgies. They seemed a bit untidy overall, but they had to be fun, too, if the likes of Marcus, Sebastian and Goraseth were prancing about naked doing sexy things.

“I… uh… was working.”

“Working on improving vampire-werewolf relations.”

The werewolf snarled at the very unrepentant dragon but this time couldn’t miss the frown he was being given by the man at his side. It was a formidable frown, too, and, though he didn’t pale like the other two perpetrators of sexual debauchery, he did turn what the sorcerer thought was a fetching shade of cherry, not something Anderson would have predicted for someone of Sebastian’s demeanor.
“Triplets, Sebastian?”

“Uh…”

“Well, at least I know you may have the stamina to satisfy me, then.”

The utterly abashed look on Sebastian’s face earned him nothing, but Anderson got a small round of applause from Anthea, Rich, Charles, and Molly, who decided he was squarely on their team and certainly deserved the exquisite, foolishly expensive vodka that was being set down in front of him.

“Uh…”

Anderson waved off the vocally-stuck werewolf with a cheeky flick of the wrist and took a sip of his drink that he was very happy fell on the vampire’s tab since it was terribly good and he was perfectly content to have a few more of before the night was over. For his part, Marcus was simply delighted that Anthea was distracted by the werewolf’s predicament and not melting him with the force of her own scowl which was leaps and bounds more formidable than Anderson’s. Oh! And how convenient his head of security was strolling over for a chat about something terribly important that would make him look like a very serious businessman and not an orgy-loving fop.

“Mr. Varnas?”

“Dominic! What a pleasant moment you pick to bring me some business matter that I will handle in a very serious and professional manner.”

Marcus’s proud nod at Anthea gained him a pair of unimpressed eyes, but little else.

“We have a situation, sir.”

“I adore those. What is it?”

“There is a gentleman demanding entrance and… he’s being rather a bother.”

“Is he poor?”

“I… I have no idea.”

Realizing that he was sitting at a table where more than half the people were poor by his standards, one enormously so, Marcus cleared his throat and slapped on his most ingratiating smile.

“Then let him in! Everyone is welcome here, that’s my motto.”

Marcus nodded and winked at Anderson, his token poor friend, hoping to generate some camaraderie but didn’t feel the flush of success wash over him since the evil infant sorcerer was just giving him a narrow-eyed look that reminded him too much of the nanny he had when he was small, though Anderson mercifully didn’t smell of lavender and have his hair in a bun. She even unsettled Father and it took a lot to unsettle the most peevish man in the history of time.

“He is demanding to see you, sir. By name.”

“Oh? is he, at least, chic?”

“I… that is a matter of opinion, I suspect.”

“By my opinion?”
“Ummm… perhaps. There is a touch of panache there, but it is somewhat overbalanced by his personality which is… I have no idea how he knew I was breaking up with my girlfriend but he did and thought everybody in the entrance should know that, too.”

The soft ‘ah’ of knowing spread across the table, though it was rendered moot by the sight of Sherlock storming towards them with the security guards not even bothering to give chase because their employer was highly capable of taking care of himself and, more importantly, if there was a person who deserved to deal with the headache-causing new arrival, it was Marcus Varnas.

“Oh! Off with you, Dominic, I know this one. Unfortunately. Or fortunately. It’s hard to say, but he’s not as pedantic as his brother, so that’s something. Not much, but it’s the little things that count, right? Sherlock! Won’t you join us?”

“That is my purpose. For whatever other reason would I visit this garish hellscape?”

Sherlock dragged a chair from another table and wavered a moment before finally setting it next to Charles because he was a partial dragon, which held interest, and because it kept him from having to stare at the bar where there was a distressing number of patrons who appeared to be seeking coitus partners and had… smiled at him.

“Garish hellscape! That won’t be the name of my new club, but it’s not the worst possible theme, especially since Uncle will be investing in it and though garish doesn’t quite fit him, hellscape certainly does. He doesn’t know he’s investing, of course, but he never knows, I’m proud to say. I keep that little secret to myself, you see, for someone has to grow his accounts, since he certainly doesn’t take the time to bother. Sticks his money in a bank and thinks it magically grows into more by the power of his baldness. Money managing is not one of his talents. Killing people and scaring small children are about the sum of his interests and Father would happily let him become a pauper for the entertainment value, but I won’t because he might decide to come and live with me to keep a roof over his head and fuck that to Jamaica.”

While Goraseth, who actually knew that Petras kept an account for Marcus to be sneaky with because it made his little nephew happy to feel sneaky and superior and left his other, eye-wateringly large accounts out of the prince’s reach, shook his head, Anthea decided certain issues were more important.

“Sherlock, why are you here? You hate people and fun and… I was going to say drinks, but you do like those, as long as they’re stolen from your brother’s supply, so what’s going on?”

“Graham notified me that there was a meeting in progress that would falter and fail if my intellect and perspicacity was not added to the effort.”

Which brought everyone back to the reason they had made their way here, something that certainly wasn’t fun and relaxing, but couldn’t be ignored.

“Alright, ego aside, another brain isn’t to our detriment. Did Greg give you any of the latest details?”

“No.”

It didn’t make Anthea happy to relay the day’s news, especially seeing the darkness return to Goraseth’s and Charles’s eyes, but one thing she’d learned with the Holmes Brothers was that if you genuinely wanted their help, leaving aside even a single detail was not to your advantage.

“Magnussen. The man epitomizes vile and loathsome. I knew he was a blackmailer, of the
foulest sort, so I am finding no surprise he would take on dark magic if the opportunity presented itself. And he was a pupil of Moriarty…”

Who pursed his lips at Sherlock’s words, but was not prepared to openly admit to any miscalculations on his part.

“Well, he was looking for someone with immeasurable talent who wasn’t unduly burdened by the pesky morals and ethics that certain people find important, though they hobble their practice disastrously, so I was the obvious choice.”

Molly’s chipper ‘But we’re working on that!’ complete with raised emphatic finger gave Sherlock a small smile because his mind was imagining the mountains of cheerfully inspired agony the sorcerer was poised to endure during his rehabilitation. Cats would be involved and, very likely, candy floss and glitter.

“The problem is two-fold, then. The plague and the various objects and information that are enhancing Magnussen’s power. Did the cat indicate the plague cultures were on premises?”

A quick look around the table didn’t gain Sherlock any happily nodding heads, so he pressed on.

“Very well. Can the items be destroyed? Mycroft could likely assemble a suitable demolitions team to…”

“NO!”

Twin dragons lunging at him was not something Sherlock ever expected to experience and was happy to take great pains to avoid in the future to ensure this existed as a single data point on his life’s record.

“Nobody is going to bomb Magnussen’s house with the egg inside.”

Goraseth let his façade fade a bit so Sherlock clearly saw a flicker of the true creature behind the mask. Remembering well what the rest of that true creature looked like, especially the teeth and talons, it was time for Pressing On, Part II.

“Tell me more about this egg. When will it hatch?”

Rich hopped in to inform Sherlock about the spell it was under and the detective’s frown deepened.

“When was it taken?”

All eyes turned to Jim who really wished they hadn’t.

“I… I passed the spell along to Magnussen maybe… 10 months ago. It could be year. Who can remember?”

Anderson was somewhat shocked that his quickly muttered spell worked to keep Goraseth in his seat, since it was the one Greg had taught him to keep Balthazar from leaping into the bowl of freshly-dehydrated catnip while he was trying to package it, but it seemed not to discriminate against those of the dragon species. It didn’t work quite as well on Charles, however, but Marcus was out of his seat and pressing the driver back down more to avoid a fist fight in the middle of his establishment than to save the sorcerer’s nose from being broken.

“Ok, ok… he’s a shit. We all know that, even dearest Molly, though she seems to have a soft spot for shits but it only adds to her sweet kitteny charm. A week, a year… Mr. Dead and Loving
It there said the spell keeps things status quo, so… nothing is worse than it was before.”

Being glued to his seat was not improving Goraseth’s mood, nor was Marcus’s apparent brushing off of this problem in such an offhand manner.

“The egg is shifting! That means it’s not as status quo as the necromancer believes. A year… who knows what’s happening to it…”

“Explain shifting.”

The dragon glared at Sherlock but recognized a human wouldn’t understand the concept and found the thought putting a pinprick in his wrath balloon.

“Changing form. For a chamelos egg, it’s confined to color and pattern. I have no idea the usual frequency or degree of variation, but…”

The ‘there you have it’ shrug certainly didn’t satisfy Sherlock’s desire for information but he wisely decided stating that fact aloud was a poor idea.

“Then, perhaps, if that is the normal behavior, this is still under the umbrella of status quo. At least, it is not necessarily a factor to indicate otherwise. However… necromancer, how long can this spell persist?”

“Uh… I’m not entirely certain. Theoretically, forever, but I don’t know of anyone who has kept it powered for that long. It gets harder with time until you reach the point where the benefit may no longer exceed the cost. For a dragon’s egg, though, it’d be a long time until that happened.”

“Then we might expect that the egg shall not suffer further harm if it is not immediately liberated. It…”

Not that the cautionary eyes of Molly and Anderson were needed to push Sherlock into saying something supportive, because his own conscience was having a small chat with him and with uncharacteristic vigor, but they certainly didn’t hurt.

‘… however, should be a matter of priority, along with the plague. We might consider splitting forces to manage the two situations separately in case one proves easier to resolve than the other.”

Despite Marcus’s irritating public persona, he had been mentored by two individuals who were as silly for strategy as Mycroft Holmes, and he let the suggestion roll around his mind to see how it felt. It didn’t feel as good as he’d hoped. Unless one thought linearly.

“The egg first, I think. Or, rather, the objects of power first. Jim, and don’t lie or I’ll toss you in that orgy room, naked and tied down, with a large pack of hellhounds and we’ll make a game of identifying the bits and pieces the cleaning crew shovels into a pail, but how strong is Magnussen’s magic without his helpful little boosters?”

“Hmmm… moderately strong. Not as strong as me and …”

The pain of confession contorted Jim’s face as badly as would a disembowelment.

“… not nearly as strong as Greg. Now, though… he’s got power and a good bit of it. I’m not certain, though, his degree of skill in fully wielding it. I… I may have gotten busy after a fashion and stopped answering his calls.”
“When did that happen?”

Sherlock’s eyes gleamed with the knowledge that he knew what the answer would be, but it would still be satisfying to hear.

“Oh, look at you trying to be clever. Fine, yes, it was a month or so before Rich got taken on his little school trip to a graveyard. I fathomed out the dreary plot point once I heard Magnussen was, unsurprisingly, the root of all evil. At least, the seedy, rather tasteless, evil.”

Rich gaped at his sibling and, not for the first time, wondered how the genetics grab bag could make them identical in only one single, solitary way.

“Oh, and you couldn’t bother to tell me, brother dear?”

“That you did something mind-numbingly stupid? I thought I’d mentioned that at some point, actually.”

Sebastian’s many weapons of choice didn’t include ice cubes, but he did an admirable job lobbing each one from his drink straight between Jim’s angry eyes.

“Molly could do better.”

Molly smiled shyly since receiving praise always made her a little self-conscious, but especially when it came from large werewolves wearing chest-hugging turtlenecks.

“And Baby Sorcerer could… no, I can’t even get a lie that large out of my mouth.”

Sebastian growled dangerously, but Anderson calmly drained his vodka, signaled for another, and patted Sebastian on the leg under the table.

“Just because you’re extremely jealous of Sebastian’s good looks, fantastic body, amazing strength, awesome sense of humor and exciting career doesn’t mean you can be rude, Tim. I mean, Jim. It is Jim, isn’t it? I thought someone mentioned that at some point, but I could be mind-numbingly wrong.”

Marcus gave his personal signal for a bottle of champagne, the good stuff, to be brought to the table because Greg’s skinny assistant had more under the bonnet than he’d expected. And it was always good to have allies here and there, especially those who would be far more successful getting that overgrown chihuahua to take little jobs now and again when a certain handsome prince needed them done.

“Now that’s settled, and back to my original and extremely smart point, maybe we should take care of the egg and other items first. Cut the bastard’s power supply so he knows he has no chance against Gregalicious, Tim and… Beardy Scarecrow… leaving us in a far better position for getting him to hand over the plague sources.”

Anthea hmmmm’d and Marcus made certain she got the first glass of champagne because her hmmmmming sounded like a sexy purr and that was a magical thing in and of itself.

“It might also prompt him to release it so he could escape with his hide intact, because everyone was otherwise occupied.”

“My people would gladly free a few highly elite and horribly nasty pieces of work from plague duty to hunt him down and help him learn what his very last functional nerve thought of the unendurable agony of being flayed alive felt like.”
“Be that as it may, I worry that without a clear path to victory, he’ll burn everything down and take his chances. The man… you have no idea how horrible he is. We’ve got a file on him that would turn your stomach. Nothing matters but himself, his ego, his power, his sense of control… he ultimately might lose here, but he’ll do everything he can to make certain everyone else loses more when all is said and done.”

What if…”

Anderson believed himself to be a kind person at heart, but also believed that there were people in the world who had willingly taken action that ensured they deserved absolutely no kindness by anybody whatsoever. This Magnussen being one.

“… what if Sebastian just killed him? No muss, no fuss. Then we sort out where the plague is and what to do about the things he’s got hidden in his house.”

Everyone at the table was having a surprisingly hard time thinking of an argument against that, which was also making a few of them question a bit the direction of their personal moral compass. Sebastian was not to be counted in their ranks.

“Ok.”

“Ummmm…”

Anthea’s moral compass was actually very clear on the subject… that Magnussen should be tossed into a shredder head first… but there were matters of logistics to be managed.

“How easy is it to kill a sorcerer? This would be an all or nothing thing, know that from the start.”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“Stuff.”

“Oh my god… I’m going to assume that you don’t actually know here and would need a lot more information before setting a plan in motion.”

“Ok.”

“Philip? Care to translate?”

“I think he’s being cheeky and acknowledging your assuming things, but behind that he’s saying you’re correct which is actually a bit of a sticky wicket for, at least my, fantasy of having this tended to by breakfast.”

“Yeah.”

Anderson smiled proudly, but Anthea simply took another sip of her champagne and thought.

“If he’s dead and we need something from him, codes, spells, whatever, can be assured we can get them another way?“

The lack of confident faces staring back at her did not give Anthea the answer she was hoping to receive.
“Then maybe flat out murder isn’t the answer here. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s planned for that, in any case, setting the plague to be released in the event of his death or something else just as terrible.”

“There’s always torture.”

Molly smacked Jim’s arm, but not nearly as hard as she could. Anybody who might want to kill people and was content to enslave a precious baby dragon could stand a little knocking about. Nothing too terrible or gory, though. Just slightly terrible and somewhat bruisey.

“Then I change my question. How easy is it to torture a sorcerer? And have it stick. Greg seems to manage fairly well getting the life pounded out of him.”

The people who knew best about Greg getting pounded shared a look and Marcus elected himself to act as spokesperson for their informed opinion on the subject.

“He does, but he’s also stupidly powerful and knows the right spells and such to deal with being ground into dust. Or eaten. Or stabbed. Burned. Poisoned. Lots of dreadful things, really. He doesn’t like it, though, and the point of torture isn’t so much the damage, it’s the not liking the damage and wanting it to stop.”

“But if you know you’ll survive and the prize you’re protecting is worth the pain…”

“How about years of it?”

Anthea pursed her lips at the smiling Charles, but always knew he had a bloodthirsty streak, having born witness to countless acts of petty revenge against monstrous bureaucrats and politicians, so failed to be astonished.

“You have to have years available, someone or people willing to devote the time to it and I doubt the vampires want to wait with this hanging over their head for years of time. And there’s the egg…”

Charles frowned but wasn’t ready to give up on the idea yet.

“A spell to make it seem like time is passing when it’s not?”

Rich and Jim whispered briefly then shook their heads, not something that made Jim happy since he was getting very tired of all their ideas being shit.

“There are loads of those, but there are ways to penetrate them, see through the illusion, if you’re either strong enough or observant enough. It would work for a short while with someone like Magnussen, but not for terribly long. Can’t any of you think of anything useful?”

The rather heated responses to that were ignored by Sherlock who was noticing that Marcus was also ignoring them. And not wearing his usual swaggery grin. Seeing he’d been rumbled, Marcus cocked his head towards the bar, slapped his grin back on, had a quick word with Anthea, then rose with Sherlock following.

“No.”
“Yes. The direct approach isn’t bearing fruit, though I credit everyone’s creativity and willingness to bring this pig to slaughter. So… what would the old schemers do in a situation like this?”

Sherlock leaned against the bar, happy that Marcus had given the sort of smile to those around them that said now was not the time for a bit of chitchat and considered the vampire’s words.

“Either take a semi-direct approach, such as seizing the villain’s accounts or implanting a spy in his organization. The former is more expedient but relies on knowing all of his funding sources and does not preclude him from continuing forward through, perhaps, the sale of hard assets, such as art, gold or property. The latter is more time-consuming and difficult to achieve, however, more likely to gain valuable information in the areas of where the plague supply is being kept, what security measures are in place and what other surprises might lie in wait for those attempting a direct assault on his home.”

“Let’s get some more data, then, shall we?”

Taking out his mobile, Marcus tapped a contact and waved for two fresh drinks to be delivered to him and Sherlock.

“Hello, dear Uncle. How are you this evening?... No, I’m not in jail. Whyever would you say that?... Ok, but that was just the once… and that was just the twice… Fine! Moving on, you evil man, I have a question for you. How complete of a picture do you have of Magnussen’s finances?... No particular reason… Wrong… It just came up in conversation and I’m settling a bet… No, I am not lying… I do not do that!... Will you just be useful and answer the question?... It’s important… Ok… Ooooookk… What have you been doing all this time if this is all you have?... No… No… I am far too old to be spanked!... Ok, you have a point, but I am not relaying that to Anthea… No… Fine, I’m sorry… Yes, I mean it… I don’t care if I don’t sound sincere… Who do I hear laughing?... Wonderful… No, I will not send a photo for you to show Mycroft and Greg because I’m not cute when I’m caught out and – ok, I am cute when I’m caught out but that’s only because I’m always cute and you’re old and bald, so there… Later… I don’t know… Go back to your old man’s party and wear tweed or something.”

Marcus gulped his fresh drink in one swallow, something Sherlock decided not to emulate since he was fairly certain he could see fumes rising from his glass.

“Uncle suspects he’s got about 80% of Magnussen’s money tracked, and that’s with Mycroft’s help. Another week or so and they can, perhaps, get the rest, but he’s gone to some substantial lengths to keep his cash concealed. Which we all do, to be fair, but it’s dashed unsporting of him anyway.”

“Then our second road is the best upon which to embark.”

“And which road is that?”

It was a small victory, but Sherlock was very happy to learn that his shriek of surprise was deeper in tone than the vampire’s.

“Anthea! Good god… I move like a silent panther, but you could give me lessons. Actually, you could give me lessons in a lot of things and I propose we ring the school bell at our earliest opportunity.”

“Your sad distraction technique has failed spectacularly, so tread lightly as you consider trying it again. Now, let’s hear it and neither of you had better try to hide a single thing or the regret
you’ll experience for that painfully-dumb decision won’t be measurable by any tool of human or non-human creation.”

This time, Sherlock *did* knock back his drink, which postponed all showdowns while Anthea and Marcus did what they could to keep him alive after an ounce and a half of Bacardi 151 hit his throat.

“I thought you were smart, Sherlock. At least that’s what you tell your brother ad nauseum.”

“I did not p… predict Marcus planning my d… death.”

“Marcus, don’t plan his death. Sherlock keep coughing. Back to Marcus, tell me what’s going on while that one learns a hard lesson about drinking on the tab of someone who is rich and has far better alcohol tolerance than you do.”

Quickly recounting his and Sherlock’s conversation, Marcus got a tiny tingle run up his spine as Anthea’s eyes locked on their table and he knew, he simply knew, that she’d already leapt to the punchline.

“Molly won’t be happy. Richard won’t either, but his vote I count far less than hers.”

A quick nod by Sherlock said he, too, had already run a few laps ahead and come to the same conclusion.

“It is fitting, given he is the reason we are in this situation and, given his treacherous nature, it would not seem entirely amiss.”

Anthea tapped her chin a moment, then stole the drink of the person sitting behind Sherlock and took a long sip.

“The treacherous part is a concern, though. Can we trust him? I don’t know if we can, push comes to shove. I think he could sell a story that he put together the pieces and decided he wanted to join what he feels will be the winning side in whatever’s to come, but I also think he could believe that story himself and, brother or not, start flying new colors.”

Another thought that had flitted through both Sherlock’s and Marcus’s minds but so had the term ‘acceptable risk.’

“Your mind is fully as beautiful as the rest of you, my darling Anthea, but Moriarty turning traitor on us, ultimately, only buys us more time as Magnussen would probably try to leverage him as a cliched double-agent. At some point, probably soon, the worm is going to suspect or have evidence that we’re onto him and the more time we buy, the better positioned we’ll be when either he makes a move or we do.”

“Not if he orders Jim to put a knife in someone’s back. Like Molly’s.”

Something that had actually crossed both Marcus’s and Sherlock’s mind and it was a thought that didn’t sit well with either of them.

“I have little firm idea of ability of magical workings, but I would not doubt that Geoff has measures to prevent such a thing from occurring.”

Anthea cut eyes at Marcus who gave her a small nod, though it wasn’t as confident as she might have liked.
“It’s Greg, Sherlock, but… you have a point. It’s a tenuous point because I do not like putting my cousin at further risk in all of this but… that’s all contingent on Jim the Shit being a shit.”

“It is not an unlikely scenario.”

“Maybe… but he values his brother, so he can feel an emotional connection to another person. And… I have to admit that beyond the original lie, he’s… made Molly happy. But, given we’ve got nothing better right now, let’s consider this our play and run it past Greg, Petras and your brother to see what they think. I know for a fact Mr. Holmes has done exactly this sort of thing before and with people not dissimilar to Jim, so he’ll know better than us the possibility for success.”

Sherlock thinned his lips in slight exasperation, because the idea of Mycroft putting his fingers in their plan was unpalatable, however, he couldn’t argue the issue of experience. Mycroft had been a colossal schemer and meddler since he negotiated his way out of Mummy’s womb.

“Very well. Marcus?”

“It pains me physically to say this, but I have to agree. Uncle is also shamefully practiced in this sort of thing and can smooth, perhaps, some of the rougher edges. This isn’t Greg’s area, at all, but he’s the one who’ll know what might be done to protect Molly or any of us from negative consequences. Maybe he can enchant Jim against revealing his real purpose or something equally straight-from-fiction. He’ll never think of that himself, but the more experienced ne’er-do-wells can toss out ideas for him to work on. We do need them on board, though I wish we didn’t because you just know they’ll be incredibly smug about it all and never let us forget it.”

The twin ‘that goes without saying’ nods from Sherlock and Anthea drew a resigned sigh from Marcus but, at least, they had a plan. It might go down in flames and take a few of them with it, but it was something to bring forward to try and end this dreadful business.

“Alright, then, my beguiling beauty, do we tell the others about our incredible brilliance?”

Anthea shook her head firmly and both Marcus and Sherlock felt a bit glad at that, since they really didn’t want the job of convincing Jim into the job or handling Rich’s and Molly’s highly probable objections. That was something the smug set could do and with their compliments.

“No, let’s find out more first. Though… we should tell the Scaly Brothers. They’ll find out quicker than the others anyway and, besides Marcus here, they have the biggest stake in the game. I’ll talk to Charles and let him pass the word to his winged friend. Besides that, let’s move the tone tonight towards the notion we’ve got some ideas to bat around and have done a good job with strategizing, so we can enjoy more of Marcus’s free drinks and some time to let down the proverbial hair. I… I think everyone could use a little fun at this point.”

The sad note in Anthea’s voice emboldened Marcus to put his arm around her and he gave a little squeeze when she leaned against him a moment before straightening, whirling around and returning to their table amidst questions about the next round of drinks and did Marcus’s place do food. Seeing their duty handed to them, Marcus reached behind the bar, fished about a moment, then drew out a menu to hand to Sherlock while he motioned the bar manager over to set the rest of their evening in motion. Lots of good drink, good food and, if they were lucky, a few minds resting easier since it felt like they had done something. And, at times like these, rested minds were very much assets in their favor…
Sherlock had spent an hour pacing about his flat, suffering a growing sensation of boredom and frustration from having a problem on his hands that he, alone, could not resolve but which also kept his attention diverted from other things, such as his various experiments or the case Dimmock had phoned about earlier in the evening that was moldering without his talents lent to its cause. John would be behind the till for another few hours and had enacted a rubbish policy of not putting the concerns of anyone named Sherlock Holmes ahead of the needs of the shop’s customers, so finding diversion there was not likely to happen. But, until he could make some progress on the vampire situation, it would continue to infuriate him and Mrs. Hudson had warned that if her sleep was disturbed one further time this week, he’d not see a single cup of tea for a fortnight unless it was prepared by his own hands. Which was positively uncharitable of her, since she knew he’d exploded his kettle during his last round of explosives-device testing.

All of which, taken alone or in sum was reason enough for him to currently be breaking into his brother’s house, more for the practice than to be sneaky, because the light in the kitchen was on, meaning Fatcroft was awake and at his trough. Since his morning feeding took several hours to complete, that guaranteed a captive audience to discuss the information and ideas ricocheting about his brain.

Oh no.

“Mycroft, your lovely house has been invested by an enormous rat.”

Graham is wearing a dressing gown… and nothing else.

“Sherlock! You know full well you are prohibited from breaking into my house.”

Mycroft was also wearing a dressing gown. And nothing else. Besides his ridiculous house slippers which made the tableau even more upsetting. They were fluffy.

“I was bored.”

“Boredom is not an acknowledged legal defense for burglary.”

“It should be.”

“Be that as it may… Gregory, do pardon my brother. He is rarely mindful of either the privacy or property of others and this is a frequent outcome of that moral failing.”

“We’re lucky, then, he didn’t pay a visit an hour ago or he may have had his heart failing as badly as his morals.”

Greg’s wicked grin left no question about his meaning, though Sherlock did his best to put a thousand questions into his mind to block his mental vision of… everything even potentially associated with Greg’s grin.

“Don’t you have pixie dust to peddle, shopkeeper?”

“God no, that stuff desiccates living tissue near to dust faster than I can eat a chip. I wouldn’t keep it anywhere near the general public.”

Sherlock reminded himself that his pithy jabs might have different meanings when applied to this
new world he’d discovered than to his more familiar one.

“Finally, a good decision to your credit, though I would argue that there are numerous examples of individuals who deserve the fate of a chip destined for your greedy maw. Such as Magnussen.”

That Sherlock hurled himself into one of Mycroft’s kitchen chairs told the two older men that their growing suspicion about the reason for Sherlock’s presence was correct.

“Yeah, I’d agree with that. Got any ideas along that line from your night out with the other kids?”

“Perhaps.”

Greg cut eyes at Mycroft who pursed his lips and set things in motion for more tea. Strong tea, at that.

“You have information to share, brother?”

“The vampire nearly killed me with alcohol.”

“Yet you survived and in surprisingly-healthy fashion.”

“I am an extraordinary person.”

“Of course. In any case, your information?”

Sherlock quickly traced through the various proposed plans and their reasons for being rejected, until they finally came to the one he, Marcus and Anthea had thought the most likely to succeed, despite the clear potential for catastrophe.

“Hmmmmm…”

“Erudite as usual, Fatcroft.”

“Thank you, Sherlock. Gregory, your thoughts?”

“Oh, many and running around the garden like a pack of small dogs who saw a squirrel.”

“I do hope the poor thing escapes safely.”

“It will. Dart up a fence post to chatter at the little yappers until someone distracts them with a bone or something. Anyway, I can see a hundred million reasons this idea would fail and fail spectacularly. But…”

“Yes, it is that pesky ‘but,’ that is unsettling my mind, as well.”

“It could work.”

“That it could and with the additional benefit of discovering other surprises that may lie in wait for us.”

“I’d love it if it wasn’t for the but. That reduces things to… tepid tolerance.”

“Our task, then, is to decrease the…”

“Butness of the but?”
“Precisely. Sherlock, your perceptions of James Moriarty?”

“He is… interesting.”

“Expand.”

“There is an unpredictability to his nature that is, in turn, utterly predictable. He will choose chaos over order at every turn, but his methods are… clever. And he does not mind taking risks to achieve his goals. Within the category of risk-taking certainly lies the betrayal of allies.”

“Very much along my own lines of thinking. Would you agree, Gregory?”

“Absolutely. I know when he’s involved in something, he’ll do what he can to cause trouble, but it’s the method that usually takes me off guard. And, yes, he’ll take big risks to get what he wants, though he generally tries to structure things that someone else pays some or all of the price for his failure. As for betraying allies, I’m not certain he’s ever had allies, to be fair. He’ll betray anyone, as far as I’m aware, but I also didn’t know he had a brother who seems… to break the pattern. At least to some degree.”

“Your assessment of his willingness to agree to our proposal?”

Greg sighed loudly and shook his head. Jim Moriarty was a nasty piece of work who’d caused a lot of trouble in his day. Ultimately, his allegiance was to himself and this situation… but, it was to his benefit to see it sorted so the vampires didn’t rip him into pieces so small it’d look like very bloody sand. And, the various other magical communities would learn the role he played in it all and wouldn’t be terribly pleased about it, either.

“It’s smarter for him to stay on our side of the line than cross over, I suspect. Even if and, believe me, I am not even considering this as a possibility, Magnussen’s scheme works perfectly and he finds himself in control of everything. Jim would be very dead because someone, likely the vampires, would have slaughtered him in multiple, highly creative ways. He might wager that Magnussen would protect him for his turning traitor on us, but I don’t think he will because it’d be a fairly stupid wager, given this Magnussen doesn’t sound the sort to devote much attention to keeping a lackey safe and sound once he’s got what he wants.”

“In that, I would heartily agree, though I have known of those who have benefitted in various ways for their service. It cannot be discounted entirely; however, I suspect Moriarty’s personal talents… unless he was willing to continue acting on Magnussen’s behalf, he could outlive his usefulness to the point where he might become a threat. Of course, the greater threat to our potential spy would be discovery of James’s plan, regardless of any intended changing of sides. The whiff of betrayal would likely endanger his life as Magnussen does not take such things lightly, even if they are theoretical in nature.”

“So, he’s damned in all directions save the one he actually does his bit of spying for us and doesn’t get caught at it.”

“In essence, yes. But, such is often the case for matters such as these. Sherlock, did Marcus indicate when he would broach this plan with his uncle?”

“He was going to do so tonight… this morning… however it was contingent on other matters. Such as your PA and her resistance to his paltry charms.”

“Ah, well…”

Mycroft took out his mobile and tapped his newest contact number, smirking when the voice on
the other end answered ‘It is an intriguing proposal, I must say.’

“Yes, it is. Your thoughts?”

“The sorcerer is as untrustworthy as Leonas charged with guarding a child’s supply of sweets, however, he is calculating. Moriarty most likely has run this and a hundred other scenarios through his mind before even we learned of his involvement.”

“True, but he appears to have gauged his chances of success to be low or the stakes, yet, insufficiently large to justify any action. That has certainly changed.”

“He is not a readily- or reliably-controllable asset.”

“Good heavens, no, but no other suitable candidate exists.”

“He is a known rival of your dear sorcerer, not beloved of the magical communities, power-loving, uncaring about the consequences of his actions, takes delight in wreaking havoc and… has a brother he does seem to wish to protect. His profile does make a turncoat nature sadly believable.”

“There is, of course, the Molly complication.”

“For several reasons.”

“Just so.”

“Discuss the matter with your lover. He may have an opinion on the issue that we might not consider.”

“Yes, certainly. Shall we meet tonight?”

“If you are able.”

“I should be, though it might be somewhat late. Not a dilemma for you, however.”

“Not at all. Greg’s flat?”

“It has become rather a gathering point.”

“Until later, mano draugas.”

Smirks seemed to be Mycroft’s facial expression of choice with Petras Varnas and he gave a stellar one to his mobile before he returned it to the pocket of his dressing gown.

“We shall meet tonight at your flat, Gregory, if that is acceptable to you. All relevant parties.”

“Ooh, sounds like Petras liked the idea.”

“Like me, he has reservations, one of which I would first discuss with you, if I may.”

“Absolutely! What is it?”

“The Molly situation.”

“Another one?”

“It is a variation of the original, truth be told. Her relationship with James Moriarty does
complicate matters.”

“Why?”

“When an asset is embedded, it is expected that they will be scrutinized for conflicting interests or leverage points. Whereas it can be argued, and easily, that Richard strengthens the case for James abandoning our side and embracing the other, Molly does not. If Moriarty has been under surveillance, and I have no doubt he has, then Molly’s nature is known to Magnussen and she would be someone…I would, in his shoes, consider her a disqualifying element for that reason alone. She is one to appeal to a person’s ‘better man’ and meet with success. Further, as opposed to Richard, she would not be benefitted by betraying our side, especially with her cousin’s connection to Marcus. There is no gain to be had in any manner, so…”

“So, the Molly situation.”

“Verily.”

Greg looked over at Sherlock who was silent, but had a look on his face that said he was running through the scenario in his own mind to remove it as an obstacle. Had to remember that she was his friend and this, even more than for him and Mycroft, hit close to home.

“What do your lot do in that case?”

“The cleanest choice is simply moving to a secondary asset though, as in this case, a secondary choice might not exist.”

“You would not consider removing Molly.”

Sherlock’s tone was half adamant and half worried, and Mycroft found himself smiling softly at how his own worries about his brother finding people in this world who would embrace his unique self were gradually being laid to rest.

“Not in a way that you would find objectionable, brother dear. But, removing her from Moriarty’s affections is certainly an option.”

“I don’t know Molly as well as you and Sherlock, Mycroft, but I find it hard to imagine you could persuade her against her own instincts. If she hasn’t booted his skinny arse to Scotland yet, then I don’t know you could convince her to do it now.”

“That is why I wished to discuss the matter with you, my dear. You have a better sense of… personal… issues than myself.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, but I do suspect the harder you push her, the harder she’ll stay with him because she’ll suspect you’re pushing for a reason and it’s not a good one for him. She might do it for an act, though, as long as she has some assurance you’re not sending that prick to his death.”

“Sherlock? Your thoughts?”

“Molly is an emotional creature and her sense of loyalty is redoubtable. If you hope to shift her affections in a real sense, you will likely fail without concrete proof of something utterly despicable.”

“That is a simple matter to achieve.”
Oddly, his words did not produce quite the effect Mycroft had hoped on his brother.

“But… it is not… right. She is happy. I… I would not see that sacrificed if another path is possible.”

As Mycroft restarted the forgotten kettle, Greg made adoring note of how desperately the older Holmes was trying to hide his pride. He might conceal his smile, but his aura was lit up like a holiday display and sending tendrils out to give Sherlock a hug the young man couldn’t feel, but put a light in Sherlock’s eyes, nonetheless.

“Your point is taken, brother dear. Gregory?”

“I agree with Sherlock, but I think we could… engineer something to give her cause to back away, even if it’s just for show, then all she has to do is not be with his stupid self, which isn’t exactly difficult.”

“You have a suggestion?”

“I might. I can put it in motion today, too, without a great deal of effort. It’ll lay a brick in our road and we can add the rest tonight when we have our friendly chat. And, not to sing my own praises, but I’ve got a plan for that discussion, too, that should make it more likely Magnussen won’t question Jim’s story as strongly as he otherwise might.”

“You do? Gregory… how strategic.”

“Ugh… you are becoming amorous.”

Sherlock pointed at the kettle, which was merrily making its readiness known and earned his tea solely for the reason he hadn’t made a truly disgusted face to accompany the word ‘amorous.’

“It is something to which you must become accustomed, brother dear, because I do not foresee the situation changing in the future.”

“I truly do not care as long as your association continues to bring me suitable rewards. Pursuant to that… Gordon, what magics are you performing today that I might observe?”

Greg considered a moment performing a bit of magic at that moment for Sherlock to observe, which would be a spell that would send the prat’s tongue numb every time he got a particular sorcerer’s name wrong, but decided that might hamper the other plan his mind had concocted for later in the day.

“Oh, something interesting, actually. You’ll even get to participate this time.”

“Really? I mean… of course I will. I refuse to be set to the side like a child while there is something of scientific interest occurring.”

“That’s… that’s funny, actually.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“From inside my head it is. And you’ll see why soon enough. Mycroft, can you spare your PA for an hour or so today?”

“Likely so, yes.”

“Good, then. I love it when a plan comes together.”
Sherlock looked at his brother, who merely shrugged, though he was wildly curious as to what his lover had concocted. If there was anything more arousing that Gregory’s body, it was his cleverness and creativity. Which said a great deal about how arousing the man was and what a delight it was that he could indulge that arousal with merely a step through his own bit of magic. And, if last night’s indulgences were any indication, he was going to be a very delighted man for a very long time to come…

“Are you serious?”

John glared at the grinning sorcerer but mostly because this stupid plan could land the idiot with another fractured skull and he was grinning about it.

“Absolutely. And don’t worry, I helped Anderson refine the spell so it won’t latch onto anything too horrible.”

“You intentionally want to summon a demon in the heart of London.”

“Not the heart. More one of the artery thingies.”

“This is dumb.”

“Thank you, Sebastian, but wrong.”

“I agree with the werewolf.”

“Thank you, Sherlock, but also wrong.”

“It’s not dumb, but are you sure it will work?”

“Thank you, Anthea, for acknowledging the smartness of my plan, which will work as long as everybody does their part.”

“I hope so, because I have enough to worry about without a botched scheme adding to my day. Junior ministers, Radagast. A whole meeting full of them looms on my horizon and I am not going to walk into that hell in an already soured mood.”

“Then let’s get started! Everybody ready?”

One yes in a chorus of no’s. Motion passes!

“Alright then, it’ll just tingle a little, then you can be on your merry way.”

Greg intoned a long string of words that made the air shimmer almost imperceptibly around each of today’s actors who suddenly seemed a bit less of themselves than before.

“I’ll hand it to you, Greg. This is impressive.”

John cringed at the sound of his voice, which was now what it was when he was roughly seven years old, because they were each now the image of their seven-year-old selves, swimming in adult clothing.

“Oh my…”

Greg grinned at Anderson who’d stepped from behind the till to peek in at how things were going.
Seeing your new romantic interest scowling from behind an unscarred, surprisingly babyish face had to be a bit of a shock, but it was part of a day’s work in their line of trade.

“Well, Anderson, how do they look?”

“Like they are very ready to cause mischief, if I’m honest.”

Which Greg had to admit was fair, since the male contingent were trying to be cool and only sneak brief looks at each other and themselves in the mirror which, for seven-year-olds, is virtually indistinguishable from looking ready to do something shady.

“Lucky for us, then, all they have to do is go cavorting with a few quid to buy sweets and get attacked by your demonic friend. Which, of course, would dreadfully upset Miss Molly who doesn’t hold with that sort of thing, especially when she learns that her boyfriend was the villainous sorcerer who called it up. And there’ll be clear traces of that rat in the spell lingering about, courtesy of you, so anyone who wants to check my story can do so for a day or two, at least.”

“And all my cousin has to do is pretend she’s broken things off with him, correct?”

Seven-year-old Anthea’s glare was just as formidable as her more adult version.

“That’s absolutely all and she’ll have ample pretend reason to do it, especially after I add my little coup de grace tonight.”

“If he agrees to all of this.”

“Yes, but I’m thinking positively, so it’s when he agrees to all of this. Go on, then… there’s clothes to fit for all of you in my flat and I’ll meet you back here when you’re dressed.”

The four small people stared at Greg, all wondering why he couldn’t have cast his spell on them in his flat so they didn’t have to try and climb stairs in clothes that were nearly falling off of their bodies, but decided asking the question would just prolong their ordeal and that was not a choice for the greater good. As they trundled carefully up the steps, Anderson checked quickly for customers, then darted back to go over his part in the plan once more.

“All I have to do is perform the spell with the little adjustment you added in, right?”

“Yep. It’s fairly generic, so won’t track back to me and muddy up the bits that Jim tailored for you.”

“I won’t lie, Greg, I’m a tad nervous about this.”

“You’ll do fine. You did it before fine and this will be even easier, since you’ll be specifically summoning a fairly paltry specimen of a demon. Just wait for John’s signal, then have at it. I’ll be within seconds of getting there myself, send it back where it came from and that’ll be that. I know a few people in the area and I’ll pull a witness along with me so word spreads quickly.”

“Alright, but… take care of Sebastian, will you? He doesn’t seem very ferocious at the moment.”

“I bet he can deliver a fairly mean kick to the arse.”

“What if the demon doesn’t have an arse?”

“You’ve got the mind of a philosopher. Now, give it back to him and go mind the shop.”
“This is kind of you, Greg. A nice coffee is always good for what ails you.”

“And what’s ailing you today, Walter? You’re a bit more dressed that I normally see you.”

Though you did some especially intricate work on the body paint today. Coordinates well with your belly chain, harem pants and Union Jack bikini top.

“Groats. Groats are concerning me.”

Which would have sounded strange if Walter, besides being an extremely talented healer, wasn’t the proud owner of three vegetarian restaurants.

“I wouldn’t think there’d be much to do with them to cause concern.”

“There isn’t. Therein lies my woe.”

Don’t do anything strange, you daft bastard. I’d like to bring Mycroft for a nice dinner soon and I’ll not have you slopping curried groats with pickled potatoes or something on his plate when I know you can do better.”

“If his palm says he wants groats, he’s getting groats.”

“His palm is going to say he wants something you wouldn’t feed to a sheep, thank you very much.”

“Why not? Sheep are healthy.”

“But I far prefer escorting Mycroft out for dinner than a wooly sheep. Even a healthy one.”

“Be cheaper. Hay doesn’t cost much and you’re not a rich man.”

Greg laughed and made a show of checking his watch in exasperation, though he was really checking it for where they were on the anticipated timeline for his big scheme. The toddlers should be getting into position and then it would just be a couple of calls to put things in motion. After that, they all go their separate ways until tonight when the next item on this loony agenda began. Always looniness to look forward to in this life. Fortunately, he’d gotten rather good at handling it…

“I am formally stating my objection to this.”

“Too late, Sherlock. We’re doing this and nobody is going to be derelict in their duty. Not on my watch.”

Which, spoken in the high-pitched tones of a small, blonde boy in short pants, didn’t carry as much weight as John would have preferred.

“Stop complaining, Sherlock. Are you wearing a dress with a duck on it? No, you’re not. Therefore, you have nothing, nothing at all, to complain about. My shoes are even shiny. With bows. This cannot be overstated.”

“Philip picked that.”
Sebastian’s menacing growl was precisely as menacing as that for a small-breed puppy who was doing its very best to put the fear of dog into a fallen leaf.

“Has he ever met a girl? That’s a serious question.”

“He thought it was pretty.”

“He thought it was funny.”

“That too.”

“Are we there yet?”

John credited Sherlock with the perfect question to round out their grotesque pantomime and looked about to get his bearings. It was strange that he’d walked these streets a hundred times and they looked completely different now that he was seeing them from a decidedly different vantage point. Everything seemed so bloody far away and tall…

“Few more blocks.”

“This is intolerable! I am thirsty.”

Which suddenly made everyone else thirsty and it was a quick check of their pocket money to confirm they could pool resources for something cold to drink which would be sweet, fizzy and not at all like the bland water their stupid adult selves would drink on a day like today. With a few minutes used to accomplish that task, which took longer than normal, since the closest shop wasn’t happy about a pack of kids strolling in at once and John, the duly-designated pack representative, had to walk back outside to the thirstily-waiting trio twice because he forgot what everybody wanted and to ask if their last few farthings should go towards a bag of crisps or be saved for later.

Crisps and drinks in hand, forward motion began again and Anthea tapped Sherlock on the shoulder as they passed the café where coincidentally, Greg sat with Walter in the perfect position to keep an eye on the street and catch any passing demonic energy that might happen by. Anthea made certain not to acknowledge Greg’s small smile of recognition, mostly because she was certain her dress was funded by his money, which was a hanging offense, by her accounts.

“There’s Greg, so it’s almost go time. Priorities check. Does anybody need to wee?”

Two hands went up and Anthea directed them down a small alleyway, feeling that familiar pang of envy that boys could wee anywhere, but girls in duck dresses and frilly knickers had to smile sweetly at shopkeepers for a chance to use the loo. Which left Sherlock standing alone a moment, until he too darted down the alley because he knew the fizzy pop he’d drank would not race straight to his bladder, but his bladder seemed to be wrestling with that physiological truth and better safe than sorry. Five minutes later the diminutive Scooby pack reconvened and continued on the last stretch of pavement until they cut down a larger alley and behind a row of offices who didn’t seem to open on a Saturday, which was why this location was chosen for the Great Fake Demon Battle. The fake being the battle part, not the demon which would be very real, but that couldn’t be helped if they wanted to do more today than drink fizzy pop and eat crisps. After a quick check that there were very much alone, John took the mobile out of his pocket and phoned Anderson.

“Ok, we’re here and everything looks good. One nasty looking, but fairly uninspired demon, if you please, kind sir.”

“Good timing, because I’m alone in the shop and that hasn’t been the case yet this morning.”
“Oh, we had a rush?”

“I’ve had to refill several of the botanicals and we’re all out of those bath oils Greg had me make on Wednesday. Those new tarot decks we ordered have positively flown off the shelves, too. Is there a holiday or something I forgot about?”

“We do see a lot of self-pampering sales on weekends, but the tarot decks are usually slow but steady items. How are we doing for candles and OW!”

John rubbed his head where it had been swatted by a duck-dress wearing warrior queen who was very ready for her own forms of self-pampering which wouldn’t happen if someone continued being Thomas Tillminder and didn’t get on with the business at hand.

“Fine, right… let’s get started. Get the bugger here, then I’ll send up the alert spell in case Greg doesn’t key in on the arrival himself.”

“Got it. I’ll just be a moment.”

While John explained, at length, why physically assaulting him for being a diligent employee and keeping an eye on the shop’s financial health was a dastardly thing to do, Anderson darted to the back of the shop where he’d laid out the necessary elements for his spell then took a breath and went through the final stages, nodding smartly when the small puff of orangish smoke bloomed in the center of the circle he’d drawn on a piece of butcher’s paper. Done. Now, it was just a matter of sending this fellow back home, laying the groundwork for Molly’s fictitious breakup with Jim and getting Moriarty to be a team player and act as their spy. Which was a lot, now that he thought about it, but he was getting better at handling situations well-described as a lot, so well done him.

While Anderson congratulated himself on his success, John and the others waited for the spell to do its work, fingers crossed that Greg’s little tailoring would deliver the weedy, pipsqueak of a demon as promised.

BLAM!

Drat. Their fingers had betrayed them.

“Shit.”

“That, Sebastian, is a very good description of our predicament.”

“John! Why is the werewolf backing away from that demon? I thought it was supposed to be a weak and pitiful specimen.”

Yes, Sherlock, that was the plan and, technically, that was still the case. Technically.

“Ummm…. well, in a sense it is. Any of us, as our normal selves, might stand a decent chance of beating it in a fistfight since it’s not a particularly muscular species, but…”

The soft ‘pfft’ was nearly inaudible, but werewolves had better hearing than most and better reflexes than most, too, which kept Sherlock from being hit in the face with a mass of liquid that collided instead with the wall behind him, making it fizz and smoke in a slightly terrifying fashion, something the detective grudgingly admired from his vantage point beneath the body of his tackler.

“Oh dear.”

“Yeah, it’s a spitting form. If that hits your eyes, you’ll be blinded and it’ll do unfortunate
things to your skin, too, so… we’re a bit fucked.”

Interestingly, everybody in their merry band had a good bit of experience with situations rich in fuck potential and were quickly forming plans to diminish the fuckery to a survivable level. Anthea offered hers first because it had the benefit of simplicity.

“Alright, he… or she… looks angry and we’re rather wealthy in the skin and eyes department, so let’s hide behind that skip while you do your spell and get Greg here. Now. Very much now.”

Other, more complex plans from other minds were quickly tossed into the skip as they all ran past it to hide, knowing very well they hadn’t turned invisible and the demon watched them do it.

“This will just take a moment, but… Sebastian, can you keep the demon distracted?”

“Maybe.”

“Good enough.”

John emptied his pockets for the contents needed for his spell while Sebastian surveyed the scene for possible weapons. Seeing they amounted to naught, he found footing and peered over the edge of the skip to expand his possibilities but decided not to count the demon stalking towards them as a potential member of his arsenal.

“We’ve got a problem.”

Sherlock and Anthea joined him peeking over the skip, though Anthea needed an extra boost since her growth spurt hadn’t happened yet and that was another line item she’d add to the universe’s bill for bringing her life to his precise, preposterous, point.

“Yeah, that’s not good. Sherlock, how fast can you run?”

“If I am trying to escape a flesh-scalding demon? Very.”

“Mr. Holmes would sack me if you melted on my watch, so I’ll distract that thing and you make a run for it.”

“No.”

“Didn’t think you would, but I had to try. John, how long is this going to take?”

“Two minutes.”

“We don’t have that, so let’s hope we can purchase a bit more.”

Slapping Sebastian on the arm, Anthea sped out from around the skip on one side, and Sebastian tore forward around the other. Sherlock chose not to speed, but clambered up to pop his head over the edge of the skip and made a very rude noise at the demon, who now had its attention thirled and found itself not quite certain which of the humans was most annoying at the moment. It decided the tallest one was the first target, not because it was the most annoying, but it was the fastest and moved like a predator.

It was those predator-like moves that kept Sebastian from getting hit with a stream of caustic venom, though it caused him to misstep and slide slightly, stalling his run, making him a more suitable target for the next round being readied for him. Unaware that she was emulating her boss, Anthea snatched up a piece of masonry that had fallen from a cracked wall and hurled it at the
demon’s head so it changed its target to her for the next toxic spittle release. This one she was mostly able to dodge, though it hit the wall behind her and a bit splashed back to catch her hair with a few drops hitting the sides of her neck, which her mind was smart enough to order her hand not to wipe it off with bare fingers, but her quickly snatched off hair ribbon, so the skin damage was painful, but not worrying.

Sherlock and Sebastian were already in motion towards her, their chivalry genes blaring loudly in their ears, but stopped short when she ran towards the demon, kicked it sharply in what amounted to its shins, then continued running back behind the skip with the other two racing after her.

“Well, Captain John Fucking Watson?”

“Just done. He should be here in a few moments.”

“Ok, so we just have to keep that thing from dissolving us a little longer. It seems it needs a second or two to… reload… so use that time, if possible, to throw something or punch it in the… does it have genitals?”

John thought a second then made an ah-ha snap of the fingers.

“Nothing external, but located about where the navel would be on us is a fairly tender spot. Punch there if it comes to that. Try not to have things come to that, though.”

Sebastian was already in motion, grabbing a stray page of a newspaper, wadding it into a ball and tossing out, where it was, as he’d hoped, hit with a venom stream, buying him a chance to dart around the skip and apply a punch exactly where John had indicated, though the time it took was long enough for the demon to get a small quantity of venom prepared to sput at him, hitting him squarely on the shoulder and upper back. The upside was that this gave the other three time to run out and get in a couple of punches and kicks of their own before dragging Sebastian away from the demon who was clearly readying another, much larger volume of danger.

John quickly looked over the damage and hissed at the sight of the devastated flesh.

“Shit, that’s ugly. Can you transform?”

“Yeah, but… won’t help much.”

“Too young?”

“Yeah.”

“Greg warned of that. It’s ok, he’ll be able to do something oh bollocks…”

This stream of venom demonstrated the demon had a laudable knowledge of parabolic trajectories because it sailed cleanly over the skip and impacted the ground within a hand’s span of John’s feet, prompting a mass jumping-away maneuver that spared everyone the brunt of the peril, but John’s shoes had caught a bit and quickly began vanishing from his feet, prompting Sherlock to grab him up while Anthea carefully removed them and his socks from his feet before said feet suffered more than surface damage.

For his part, Greg was proud he didn’t leap out of his seat when he got John’s signal, but did a credible job of acting like a powerful sorcerer who’d gotten a sniff of something wicked on the wind. Which he had, sort of, but it was weak whiff that could mean a lot of things besides a fairly low-ranked demon so he hadn’t set himself on the scent just yet. Now, though, it was give his stage-worthy performance, pay the bill, and lead Walter towards the battle site, stepping around the
corner of the alley just as Sherlock and Anthea each threw what was left of John’s smoldering shoes at the demon, then ducked and covered as another volley of demon spew flew their way.

“Shit…”

“Greg! There’s kids in there!”

“Yeah, I saw.”

And this wasn’t the sort of demon he’d expected to find, though, now that he thought about it, nothing in the spell precluded it from attaching to this nasty character. His crap luck rather insured it, actually. Wonderful. Regardless, follow the script…

“There’s something in the summoning energy… something I recognize…”

“You know you summoned it?”

“I… I wouldn’t wager my shop on it, but it feels like what I noticed for the last one I fought.”

“That one had traces of the little weasel, Moriarty, didn’t it?”

“Yeah. I can’t say for certain he called it up, but…”

“Wouldn’t put it past him, miserable sod.”

The small bit of conversation time the men enjoyed was largely due to their presence being noted by the demon, who was wondering if these two might be less feisty targets than the smaller ones who were proper nuisances.

“Yes, well… first things first.”

Which was what the demon was thinking, also. First thing was lobbing a large mass of fluid being spit towards the new arrivals, who dodged with the success of those who had done this sort of thing many times before. Greg was, however, very aware that Walter was there only as a witness whose part in this sad drama was already over and, further, had shit for talents useful in fighting a demon.

“Walter, get out of here. I’ll handle this.”

“Not when there are kids involved.”

Oh yes. The kids.

“Alright… I’ll draw its attention and you get them away from here. And keep going once you’ve done it.”

“Fuck that. What if you’re hurt?”

“Not a problem.”

“You lie like a cheap rug.”

“Get the kids, get out and… if you’re worried, stay around the corner and out of sight, but let me deal with this… duck!”

Greg used his magic to move Walter out of the way of the venom that flew towards him and sent a
small burst of energy at the demon who’d expectorated it. To be fair, it wasn’t the creature’s fault it’d been dragged away from whatever it was doing to take part in this little show and he had no wish to cause it actual harm.

“Fine, but I’m not leaving entirely until I know you’re alright.”

“Deal. Ready?”

“Never.”

“Perfect. Here we go.”

Greg sent a barrage of tiny motes of light at the demon, all of which exploded in brilliantly-bright flashes when they got near their target, temporarily washing out the demon’s sight which allowed Walter to run towards the faux children and urge them to safety, something that was a bit harder than he’d anticipated since they were all in fight mode and ready to continue on like a battle group. It was only the memory of their actual role in this daytime drama that set them in motion, adding appropriate squeals and shrieks as they ran out of the alley and kept running, despite Walter trying to stop Sebastian who looked about as terrible as he felt but couldn’t risk the healer discovering his not-quite-human nature.

“Fair’s fair, friend. You’ve had a bit of a foul morning, so if you’ll keep the evil juice in your mouth for a few minutes, I’ll…”

What Greg was going to say was lost in the ‘ack!’ that he sputtered a moment before a needle-thin stream of venom lanced towards him, leaving the best option of avoiding it to be falling backwards, though not in a cool, Matrix bullet-avoiding style, but simply toppling back to land flat on his arse. He was encouraged, though, that his head didn’t bounce off the ground, so this was going well! And nothing about being on his arse stopped him throwing a spell the demon’s way that lifted the creature upwards and flipped it upside-down.

“There… that spitting mechanism of yours doesn’t work so well when your upended, now does it?”

Greg watched as the demon put its hand under its mouth and let a gentle stream of liquid pool in its palm before throwing it with impressive accuracy, and fluid cohesion, as a ball of death at the sorcerer.

“Oh, fuck you!”

A quick roll kept Greg’s face from catching that ball but had him miss seeing the second one the demon readied so he caught the second projectile squarely in the chest.

“This shirt is new!”

Quickly divesting himself of his shirt and using the venom-free sleeve to wipe away what he could of the liquid that had made its way onto his skin, Greg snarled, then did a quick count to three so his response was simply to toss the demon, still upside down, into the skip and lifted the rubbish it contained to make a somewhat grimy blanket for his demon friend.

“Now, stay there quietly or it’s a proper thumping!”

Working as quickly as his angry skin would allow, Greg cast the correct spell to send the creature back home and certainly did not take extreme care checking the spell’s success out of fear of getting ambushed by acidy sputum when he peeked inside the skip.
“Thank for your helpful assistance in this matter. Now…”

Greg took a deep breath, created the illusion of his destroyed shirt back in position on his body, muttered a second spell, this one to dull the burning pain in his chest, and strolled as nonchalantly as he could out of the alley to reconnoiter with Walter.

“Greg! All done?”

“Yes. I think it was more startled than angry, so it went fairly quietly. The kids got away alright?”

“They did, but one of them… I hope his parents get him to a doctor soon because the damage didn’t look pleasant. General chemical burn treatment should do the trick, though, so he’ll be alright in the long term, but it’ll be a painful healing process.”

Not if you were a werewolf, but Greg decided to leave that part out.

“Could have been much worse, so let’s call it a victory.”

“Better than a failure, I suppose. You going to have a chat with Jim Moriarty about this?”

Oh yes. That’s rather the whole point.

“Yeah, that’s now added to today’s appointment diary.”

“Good. Those children could have fared much worse if we hadn’t stumbled by.”

“I’ll handle things, Walter, don’t think I won’t.”

“Need more coffee?”

“Nah, but thanks. I’d best get on with things if I want to see any of my day spent earning a wage.”

“Same. Next week’s the monthly healer’s meeting, don’t forget.”

“I won’t. John has some things he wants to discuss, so he’ll be there, too.”

“The more the merrier. Peace, Greg.”

Said with a flashed peace sign before the colorful man moved towards the curb to hail a cab. Greg took a quick moment to layer a little extra of the pain-numbing spell he’d cast on himself in preparation for the walk home. Or, at least, a walk out of sight to wave over his own cab. It wasn’t far, but he’d rather not waste energy on his shirt illusion for longer than necessary and the toddlers were likely impatiently waiting for him to return them to normal. See all bumps, bruises and burns tended to, then get ready for Part II of the plan of the century. Then stop a power-hungry loony, prevent a plague from being released, save a dragon’s egg and, most importantly, place some orders because his stock was getting low for a number of things and that wage generating concern wasn’t one he could ignore for long. Saving the world was nice, but if you couldn’t pay your bills, that world turned on you pretty fucking quickly and he had enough on his hands as it was…”
Chapter 46

“I am not happy about this, Greg, not happy at all.”

“I deduced that from the last five times you told me you weren’t happy, Anderson, but thanks for driving the point home.”

And adding in the fiery glare the moment I walked into the shop that started making my skin sting even worse than the demon spit.

“Seb? You dying?”

“Nah.”

“See, you molehill mountaineer?”

“His shirt is melted into his skin!”

“Oh, couldn’t pull it out, huh? That’s easy to fix. John, that why you haven’t got him bandaged up?”

“It seemed a waste of good bandages.”

Anderson’s arms waving about was doing a nice job of producing a breeze that cooled the various patches of cooked skin on those nearest to him.

“And that’s another thing! Sebastian should be receiving pain medication. Lots! Where is it? Dunno. John can’t be arsed.”

More likely, from the twinkle in Sebastian’s eye, he’d refused because he was having a fantastic time watching his paramour cruising under full sail.

“John, how’s the feet? Are you arsed about them or giving them a prop up because it’s been a long time since the Army and marching isn’t to your taste anymore?”

John lifted his bare feet for Greg’s viewing pleasure while he sipped the juice that Philip had very grudgingly brought him, but the sorcerer brought juice for everyone and thought it would have been rude to exclude the doctor, even if he was being a right bastard.

“Lovely. Nice mix of blistering and raging red skin. Miss Anthea? How goes it this fine morning?”

“Oh, I’m having a lovely time what with my no hair and neck seared like I’m a pensioner in Spain who thought all that business about Spanish sun was foreign propaganda.”

“You have hair. Just a bit less of it. In that one spot. The neck does look a bit unhappy, though. Sherlock? Anything to report?”

“I am bored.”

“You’re consistent, I’ll give you that much. Any injuries I have to help fix?”

“Boredom is an injury of the mind and soul.”
“I’ll read up on that and get back to you. First off, let’s see you all back to your proper age and go forward from there. Anderson, I’ll keep watch on the shop if you want to help Seb toddle upstairs with the others. Someone give a shout when you’re ready to return to adulthood.”

Anderson snorted loudly and Greg only rolled his eyes as Sebastian made a tremendous show of being far more feeble and incapacitated than he actually was so his snookum wookums could continue doting like a worried grandmother. All in all, from first glance, none of this was bad. Painful, yes, but readily mended and quick to heal once he and John did their work. The objective was achieved, though. The word was most certainly working its way through the community that Jim had done something despicable, again, and Magnussen would hear of it quickly. Nasty demon terrorizing and endangering small children… Molly Hooper would be hard pressed to have anything to do with someone given to such despicable deeds. Just a bit more drizzle on the cake tonight and it should be easy to see how Jim would switch sides. It’d be easy to see why he’d race to do it, actually.

“You look sneaky.”

Given the cat was a master at looking sneaky, that was actually a compliment.

“Thank you, Balthazar. I try.”

“We’re having another party, I take it.”

“A small one.”

“With the entire Super Team you’ve gathered?”

“I didn’t gather. There was no gathering on my part. They all sort of… drifted in my general direction.”

“You’re creating a nexus of power.”

“Nope.”

“Yes, you are. And I am a vital part. The supporting thread of the web. The critical cog in the machine. The axis on which the wheels of influence turn.”

“Are you done?”

“Nope.”

John’s welcome shout of ‘Ready!’ earned an unseen nod from Greg followed by a very seen rude gesture at Balthazar.

“Then you continue orating on your greatness while I return my Super Team to normal and work on curing what ails them.”

“You will begin with my powerful and exotic empress.”

“She’s on the list. Marcus would kill me if he went to snuggle her neck and there was a smear of icky burn cream on it, so I’ll make sure it’s lickably pristine by sunset.”

While Balthazar erupted in feline fury, Greg took appropriate action to restore the demon-fighting quartet to normal form and waited for them to return downstairs for the repair work to begin. Which, now that he was recovered from his own injuries would proceed far faster and more
effectively than it otherwise might. Strategically, he should likely start teaching Anderson the necessary procedures to do this sort of thing himself, since Sebastian was a frequent recipient of standard, as well as magically-assisted, medical assistance, and chances are the werewolf would be very happy for his new love to step in and save the day. He’d always known that there was a soft center to the stony werewolf, but he’d had no idea just how soft it was. Gooey was a good word for it. At least, gooey for one special person. But, really, that was better than most people could boast in this nasty old world so why complain…

It was probably not any imaginative person’s image of a nexus of power, but this one closely resembled a very modest flat with old furniture and a stack of pizza boxes on the sofa table as a preemptive measure since it was 100% certainty that half or more of the participants would step through his door demanding to be fed, provided with drink and congratulated for stooping to set foot in the nexus when they had far better and more interesting things to do.

And here was the first few sets of feet. Complete with unmelted skin.

“Food. Good.”

And a hearty appetite.

“Sebastian, we were going to stop for curry after.”

“And?”

Anderson almost responded, then realized what a ridiculous point it was he was going to make and decided to do something more productive and see if there was something in the stack with tasty mushrooms on it.

“Ugh… the smell of malnutrition is pungent in this hovel.”

“And the world rejoices now that Sherlock has arrived.”

“Your sense of humor, Grant, is substantially less robust than that of a particularly ponderous sea cucumber.”

“They are pretty funny fellows, I do admit.”

Again, the notion pinged about Sherlock’s brain that he could not exactly proclaim that fatuous claim nonsense because… the sorcerer might know something he didn’t. The agony burned with the heat of a devilishly infernal inferno. Or Mummy’s special glare of disapproval.

“Pfft… it is my revenge for your inanity that the vampires are soon to arrive.”

“How soon?”

As if on cue, two vampires strolled into Greg’s flat as if they owned it. Not that either would deign to own any property that paltry in price.

“ Heard you nearly were melted by the puniest demon in creation. Can’t say I’m surprised. Pitiful! Foul witch. This hovel reeks of your inadequacy!”

Sherlock pointed happily at Leo, who immediately darted forward and began looking through the pizza boxes for something worthy of his royal palate. Without onions. They royal palate and the
royal colon had markedly differing opinions on the subject of acceptable cuisine.

“Glad to see your brother let you out of your cage for a bit of night air, Leo.”

“*Someone* must oversee the proceedings.”

“Coincidentally, I notice more than a single someone in this room alone.”

“Pah! You, a dog, a sorcerer *more* inept than you and a human. I’m surprised you didn’t offer this… olive bit… as a moderator.”

Sebastian’s dexterity and aim were flawless with many things, including motes of golden, melty cheese.

“Treason! And it’s hot.”

Petras plucked the bit of cheese off his brother’s nose and handed it back to Sebastian, who walked to the window and tossed it out.

“Rat food now.”

“Honored! That’s what the rat will be when it eats the cheese which has touched my august person.”

“August nose cheese.”

Anderson contemplated stepping in to state, categorically, that Sebastian wasn’t a dog, but was fairly certain that gleam in the werewolf’s eye meant he was enjoying the game and not about to go for the vampire’s throat. Hopefully. Sebastian was looking very handsome tonight in his blue turtleneck and it would certainly not fare well in a vampire-werewolf battle. Though, to be fair, Sebastian also looked good in torn shirts with expanses of hard, muscled torso peeking through, so maybe this whole business deserved a bit more thought.

“My nose is a fount of honor! It’s why I try to keep it out of his disreputable, witch-plagued peddler’s cart whenever possible.”

The cocked thumb unnecessarily identified Greg as the aforementioned ‘his,’ someone who was privately getting the last laugh since the accusing thumb had a smear of sauce on it and the vampire now had to lick it off like a toddler because Petras had conveniently nudged the serviettes out of sight behind the pizzas boxes.

“Oh… hello, everyone. Thanks for inviting me, Greg.”

Richard stood at the door of Greg’s flat and politely waved at the rest of the party while Greg gave him a mental, and sauceless, thumbs up for not appearing overly cowed by the warning snarl he received from the vampire contingent.

“Welcome to the jungle, Richard. My dense tropical foliage is your dense tropical foliage. So is the pizza.”

“Thanks! I’m famished. I was at work a touch late today. This gentleman brought his mum in to buy a computer, we sell repaired ones at very good prices, and I helped get it sorted just how she wanted it and without all the extra this’s and that’s that she’d never use. She gave me a hug before she left with her new toy. Isn’t that sweet?”
“It isn’t sweet, Rich, it’s cloying and gag-inducing as treacle.”

Oh good. The other Moriarty brother had arrived. Greg felt his joy rising like a storm surge.

“Opinion not requested, evil twin.”

“You posed an open question, boring twin, so, yes, you did request my opinion. And if there’s something not entirely created for culinary blasphemers in that heap, I want it and on a plate. The rest of you can be heathens, but some of us have standards.”

Greg heard a sound that made him grin, then grin harder when Jim leapt out of the way of the small fireball that pass through the space where he’d been standing and dissipated before it reached the far wall, something that had Greg nodding his thanks to the recently-arrived dragon.

“Nice of you to join us, Seth. Charles with you?”

“He’ll be here soon. He has to work for a living, poor chap.”

“Didn’t you drive those two here tonight? The ones who actually pay your wage?”

“Well done, Greg. Always bringing an extra serving of dreary reality into my life. In any case, Charles is driving your better half and his young majesty’s better half to your little soiree. Prince Marcus is driving himself since he bought another vehicle today and wants to impress Ms. Anthea with a tool about London.”

“Wastrel! Does he think money grows on trees? Pfft! I’m seizing his accounts and severing his allowance. That will teach him thrift!”

Petras made a show of lifting his brother’s arm to check the time on the tremendously expensive watch Leo wore on his wrist while nodding sagely at the fatherly concern for Marcus’s financial status. So far, in Greg’s opinion, everything was as normal as could be for their eclectic group. If this whole business didn’t end soon, though, he might have to think about asking Mrs. Hodges if they could hold club meetings in her flat, because it was a bit bigger than his and the parties involved would likely remain on their very best behavior for fear of breaking even one of the little knick-knacks she’d collected over the years. The porcelain basket of puppies given to her by a certain tall, not-a-dog was among her favorites…

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Mycroft sat next to Greg on the sofa, surveying the chattering gathering and wondered what in the world his lover had up his sleeve. So far, his arrival, once they had collected Molly from the morgue, had been marked by a genial experience with his new colleagues but little in the way of strategizing. He was beginning to suspect the prevalence of this rather exceptional wine and bountiful food was a lulling tactic to establish the most accommodating mood once the actual purpose of this meeting began.

“What to talk about what’s on your mind, love?”

Telepath!

“I… Gregory, can you read thoughts?”

“No, that’s actually a bugger to do and only a few can do much at all without physical contact. What I can do is read your energy and it seems like its pondering something.”
“Oh… that is still a most useful talent.”

“It certainly can be”

“Is it possible to manipulate one’s energy so that one’s state of mind is not accurately detected?”

“Look at you thinking like a master schemer. I love it! And, yes, you can learn to do that, but its difficult when you can’t actually see your own aura to know how successful you’re being. There’s a charm I can make for you, if you like, that will allow you not only to see your own aura, but other people’s too. It takes a bit of time to manage, but I can get started on it in a day or two when I get in a few things I’d need.”

“Thank you, Gregory. That would be most helpful. And, could I also learn to interpret the energy of others in the manner you describe?”

“Since you’re good at noticing patterns, I suspect you can. There are some general similarities to what you’ll learn studying yours and seeing how it responds to various emotions and intentions. Adding a tool to your mastermind arsenal, Mr. Holmes?”

“Naturally.”

“You are profoundly attractive when you’re in world domination mode, do you know that?”

“I do, now.”

“In any case, back to the original question - what’s on your mind?”

Oh yes. There had been a starting point to this pleasant tangent, hadn’t there.

“I simply… we are here for a purpose, my dear, and I am simply curious when that purpose will be revealed.”

“Now, if you like. Thought I’d just give people a chance to get comfortable, before starting with the serious stuff. I take it Anthea refused to tell you about her adventures today.”

Which, with her magically regrown hair to hide the evidence, would likely have pleased her to no end.

“She did, foul hen. And Sherlock was no better. He took positive delight in denying me even the slightest hint of the events of the day.”

“Good! Then you can have a nice surprise along with everyone else. And it seems as good a time as any to get started.”

Greg felt no shame whatsoever levitating a spoon from the kitchen to his hand so he could tap it against his wine glass to call for attention. With attention now given, along with a hurled boiled sweet from Leo’s pocket, Greg started in on narrating the tale of the valiant battle with the spitting demon, aided with great animation and exaggeration by the other participants and countered by indignation from the man who was now shouldering the blame for the whole affair.

“My fault? You utter bastard! How… how dare you set that up and blame me for it?”

Molly was getting ready to leap to Jim’s defense but Anthea put a hand on her knee and shook her head. Let Greg and Jim manage on their own for the time being.
“Because it provides Molly a highly plausible reason for binning your sorry arse and souring whatever alliance might have been building between you and the rest of us. It won’t be enough, I suspect, but… we’ll come to that part later. In any case, what’s actually being proposed is… how’d you like to be a spy for awhile?”

“What?”

“Spy! We need more information about what Magnussen is planning and what sorts of things he’s got hidden away that can cause mischief. You’re a seedy character, at the best of times, enormously opportunistic and chaos-loving - the perfect person to have fathomed out what’s going on with your brother’s situation and hopeful to be on the winning side when the cannons fire. You’ve been getting cozy with Molly there and better brains than mine for this sort of thing say that’s a liability for you being believed or having the motivation to follow through with your craven treason, so… having you set out a nasty little demon that frightened and actually hurt a pack of cute little tykes is the perfect thing to make her say goodbye and don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

Molly’s mouth opened and closed again, then opened slightly as if she was not quite sure whether to smile or grimace.

“Oooh… yes, that would be something of a bridge too far. I don’t think I could see someone who endangered sweet little children. Admittedly, these weren’t sweet children, per se, except John, maybe. He’s nice, but the rest are a bit… what’s not sweet, but not not-sweet, either. Sort of this side of sour and bitter, but not like a cupcake or one of those lovely coffee drinks I get when it’s been a long morning and I want a treat and a caffeine pick-me-up at the same time?”

Sebastian, Anthea and Sherlock weren’t certain if they’d been insulted or not but decided since it was Molly the answer was not, even if it rather came out that way in the end. One person who was very certain he’d been insulted in this whole matter, though, decided to take up the charge because the last thing he needed was Molly Hooper deciding all of this was a brilliant plan.

“It doesn’t matter, Molly. Do you have any idea how ludicrous is Greg’s suggestion?”

“Not really, Jim, no.”

“Let me tell you, then. Magnussen is a dangerous, cold-blooded, powerful man who would gladly skin me alive and mail my bloody corpse back to Rich as a thank you gift for getting the vampire plague into his loving hands. He’s stupidly clever, in a frightfully boring way, and has naught for scruples, principles or remorse.”

“Oh dear. Sounds a bit like you, actually. But we’re working on that, so it won’t be you for long!”

“I am not boring!”

That ‘boring’ was the bothersome part of Molly’s comment surprised nobody. At all. Especially the vampire strolling into Greg’s flat wearing skin-tight black jeans, a loose-fitting charcoal t-shirt and a faded purple scarf tied in a nonchalant yet unfathomably complex configuration that both Mycroft and Sherlock suspected was inadvertently based on fractal mathematics.

“You bore me but, then, I’m somewhat easy to bore. Hello all, ran a bit late getting here. All the fiddly bits associated with getting a smashing new car, don’t you know. Did I tell you I was getting something new and fabulous, Anthea, dark jewel of my life? Well, I did and it will be my honor and privilege to escort you in it for a bit of fun tonight in this occasionally entertaining city.”
It had been a minor strategic victory to have Balthazar confined to the shop with John because Marcus was distraction enough without the added complication of a ragingly jealous cat attached to his face.

“Spendthrift!”

Marcus snatched the morsel of pizza crust Leo whipped at him out of the air and popped it into his mouth with a flourish that even Sherlock and Jim, two people well practiced in doing things with a flourish, grudgingly admired.

“Thank you, Father, I didn’t stop for a nibble and I’m perishing from hunger. Of any and all forms. Some more than others.”

Said with waggled eyebrows that, to Mycroft’s irritation almost caused his PA to smile. The cad. Greg was simply happy Leo hadn’t capitalized on the caddishness and sent them barreling along another side road into some abandoned farmland where life might be a great deal simpler, but having this many pizzas delivered on short notice was nothing short of a happy fantasy.

“ANYWAY, if we can all bring the discussion back to the reason I invited everybody here… Marcus root about in our leavings if you’re hungry and… where are the dragons?”

Though Greg had a sneaking suspicion it was somewhere in the vicinity of Marcus’s new car.

“Somewhere in the vicinity of Marcus’s new vehicle, most likely.”

Thank you, Mycroft. There’s a sense of personal satisfaction in having my theories confirmed by a genius.

“Well, they’re not needed here, anyway. As I was saying, Jim…”

“I am not going to spy on Magnussen!”

“It’s only for a little while and I’ll give you some toys to use in case he gets a touch annoyed with you.”

“No. It’s not his magic I’m worried about because… he’s not as formidable as he likes to think when he’s away from his house, but it’s the other things he can do. He’s got tendrils into more people, institutions and organizations than you can imagine. Blackmail is a very handy tool for keeping the unlucky in line or having them do whatever you please to whomever you please.”

“True, but we’ve got our own people with some… countering techniques… for that sort of thing and, besides, he’d only try to saw you off at the knees if he thought you weren’t being honest about your intentions.”

“Having my girlfriend kick me to the curb isn’t exactly a life-changing disaster, you know. It’s happened to you often enough and you’ve never done more than mope about your flat and invite the Poncy Prince over for a shag to boost your spirits.”

Greg’s rosy cheeks contrasted with Marcus’s huffed ‘I’m not poncy’ but Mycroft erred on the side of ignoring both for the sake of quasi-domestic harmony.

“Be that as it may, it is a known precursor for a shift in a person’s allegiances, especially if they only loosely were held from the onset.”

“Mycroft is correct, sorcerer. He and I are experienced with this sort of… operation… and are
not engaging in wishful thinking.”

Greg chose to ignore Petras’s warm smile in Mycroft’s direction, also for the sake of quasi-domestic harmony, but he mentally vowed that the vampire would leave with a little surprise in his pocket that would make reaching into that pocket a night-ruining experience.

“Breath being wasted…”

Jim’s sing-song tone was a sign, to those who knew him, that he was entrenching himself behind his standard supercilious wall of silliness and Greg sighed loudly to proclaim his clear and keen awareness of this typical and not unexpected maneuver.

“Lah de dah, Jim’s getting all look-down-his-nose while dancing around a maypole. Stepping into the lion’s den isn’t the safest thing in the world, I’ll admit, but our entire world may not be very safe or much fun, for that matter, if that bastard gets his hands on it.”

“Soosooooo not my problem.”

The soft, feral hissing in low, vampiric tones came arm in arm with Jim’s remembering that this was, for all intents and purposes, his problem and treading extremely carefully was now his highest priority in life.

“Though I do not deny my own small part in making this a problem.”

Sherlock had been whispering with Molly and Anderson, cutting eyes at Jim now and again as he tried to posture his way out of the spotlight and the end result was Molly raising her hand to ask a question, smiling when Greg called on her like a schoolteacher.

“You said there was something else that you would talk about later. Maybe that would help convince Jim, not that I think he really needs much convincing, he’s just being a bit worried and rightly so about this awful person and nobody can really blame him for that.”

Greg knew he wasn’t much of a showman, but he still relished all eyes turning on him so he could make a grand show of thinking, then doing something he wouldn’t say he’d practiced a few times today, but he had, because he always harbored a small, secret wish to join the Flourish club and this might be his only real chance. Holding up his hand at exactly the right position he whistled and commanded his wand to come flying towards him, helpfully wedging itself between his precisely spaced fingers so it didn’t fly directly into his face and make him look like a berk. Then it was the teeniest, most dainty tap of the wand on the air in front of him and…”

“Oh. Jim’s a weasel. That was unexpected.”

Molly still reached out, though, to pick up her transfigured boyfriend because… weasel! And he was a cute weasel, too, with an evil little pout on his tiny lips.

“How dare you!”

Even his voice was cute! Squeaky and chirpy and…”

“Stop nuzzling me, Molly Hooper!”

“I can’t! You’re too cute and cuddly.”

“Oh my god…”
“Ummm… Greg?”

Richard’s concern for his brother was real, but not so much as to actually demand the sorcerer return Jim to his original form. At least, not right now. Or for a few days.

“The word running through the community as we speak is that Jim did something nasty, which isn’t much of a surprise, but what will run through it next is that I was absolutely at wits end with his behavior, especially since it put innocent children at risk, though neither the children or innocent part is actually true. That’s the same spell I used on Balthazar, which means it can’t be broken by anyone but me which, along with being a weasel, is certain to infuriate your brother beyond his normal point of insanity. Would Magnussen, or anyone really, doubt that he’d turn as much against me and anyone associated with me as possible? Not likely. And, if he’d already fathomed out the plan to take a proverbial scythe to me and the allied vampires… why not leap to join up and be of what service he can?”

The vampires looked between each other, as did the non-weasel members of the Vesuvius strategy session, which left Mycroft looking at Greg for a long moment before rising to refill their wine, something Greg noticed quickly attracted the attention of, and accompaniment by, a certain bald vampire who began a quiet conversation far too close to Mycroft’s ear for Greg’s liking.

“Didn’t think you were this dastardly, witch.”

“And do you approve, your shabby, wrinkled Highness?”

“I…”

The bodily reluctance to actually saying yes made Leo sputter like an old car trying to start when certain salient parts of its internals had said fuck it and toddled off for a soothing cup of oil.

“Glad to hear it.”

“You can turn him back, can’t you, Greg?”

Molly’s concern was a little more pressing than Richard’s, but Greg suspected that she worried more about him being a small animal in a terrible, cruel world than being a man living in a small animal’s body.

“Yes, I can and the story would be that he did something to show how sorry he was and made genuine amends, so I reversed the spell. People think he actually has a speck of conscience in his black and shriveled heart, so it’s a bit of goodwill earned for the next time he proves what a right prick he actually is despite the speck.”

“Heh… he’ll need a cage.”

“NO! No, you ridiculous mongrel, I will not.”

“Squeak, squeak.”

“I do not… fine, I do squeak but I can also dart up your trouser leg and bite you in a place your skinny sidekick there won’t appreciate very much.”

Sebastian glared at the little weasel but tried to mentally estimate the size of weasel teeth compared to the thickness of his underpants.

“An intriguing deceit, sorcerer… a personal humiliation, one that binds his power and deepens
the schism between both his former romance and you, as well those associated with either of you. It is a powerful motive for revenge.”

Oh, fuck off with your smarmy approval Petras Iosif, you smarmy fucky bastard. And stop smiling at my Mycroft!

“Binds my power!”

Weasel Jim gawped at Petras who smiled a very toothy smile as if a snack of weasel flesh would be a welcome addition to his diet.

“Ahem…”

Greg’s little wave attracted the weasel’s attention thought it was hard going as the weasel instincts were beginning to take hold in Jim and they did not like being in the room with several obvious predators.

“Your powers aren’t bound as tightly as Balthazar’s, I’m not that horrid. You’ll need something tangible to bring to recommend you to Magnussen beyond tidbits about us and your basic knowledge of magic, but they’re not what you normally command, so be aware and do a little testing so you know your limits. Magnussen will sense your power is diminished, but I fuzzed the edges so he won’t know exactly how much, so likely won’t try anything overt, thinking you’re easy prey, so to speak. You’ll be able to protect yourself, though, if he does try something horrible; I wouldn’t leave even a weasel like you defenseless against the likes of him.”

“I’d better!”

Which sounded to Greg like agreement to their plan. Or, at least, a realization that sometimes the only way out is through.

“You have my word. And I wasn’t joking about giving you a bit of extra help. I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve so you’re not going to be… Sherlock, what are you doing?”

With that measuring tape.

“Comparing his measurements with that of a standard Mustela nivalis. Are your spells typically zoologically accurate for species traits?”

“No idea. Never gave it much thought, really.”

“Your level of apathy and disregard for science is expected, but deplorable, nonetheless.”

“I live to please.”

What wasn’t pleasing him, though, was that Mycroft and Petras were still chummily whispering while Petras’s nephew was doing the same, very much the same with Mycroft’s PA. And Leo was sharing sweets with Sherlock! This was a pincer movement if he’d ever seen one. Not that he had, except in films, but nobody could hear his ludicrous mental fantasy so this was the most nefarious pincer movement in the history of warfare and they should all be ashamed of themselves. Not that vampires had any shame. Bloody shameless, seductive wankers. Excluding Leo. For the seductive part, at least.

Of course, he was also being wildly hysterical, which was not off-pattern when a truly serious problem was weighing on his mind. This Magnussen may be one man, but he was posing an extremely grave threat to the well-being of a lot of people and if his own brain needed a something
ridiculous to distract a moment here and there from the greater worry, then let the ridiculousness flow. And vampires were wankers, so there.

“So, the plan is for Molly to leave here despondent, but resolute. Richard, you’re sadly resigned with your brother in your pocket. Marcus and Anthea will drive the heartbroken Molly home then go about their business, happy that Jim got his just deserts. Seberson will…”

“Who?”

Thank you, Anderson. Very appropriate of you to chime in.

“You and Sebastian. I worked a long time on that one.”

“Oh. Carry on.”

“Thanks. Anyway, Seberson will leave smugly satisfied, for many reasons, most known only to them. Sherlock and the old vampires will just go away and I really don’t care how or to where. Involve the dragons somehow, though, because I don’t really want to have to explain all of this again and they’ll be too excited by the Marcus’s bit of automotive shininess to sit still and listen for long, in any case. And, last but certainly not least, Mycroft will stay here with me for the rest of the wine and other pleasant time-passing activities.”

Greg straightened his imaginary tie and decided if, between that and the wand business, he wasn’t initiated into Club Flourish, there was something crippling wrong with the universe.

“Bravo, my dear. You have, as they say, covered all the bases.”

Well, there was one further base and that was having Richard bring Jim here tomorrow for the final touches and discussions on how to proceed, but dragging the mundane back into the conversation would detract from the flourish and we won’t be having that, now will we.

“Thank you. And with that…”

The exaggerated shooing motions were scarcely acknowledged by anybody, the group having started in with their own conversations about what to do now, where to go and who did a good curry within walking distance. With a small motion of his lips, Greg sent a howling wind through the flat, smartly exempting from the gale the hair of those rather touchy about how it looked. Those bits of diverted wind flowed, instead, towards one very bald head for no reason whatsoever besides complete coincidence.

“Oh good, now that I have everyone’s attention… leave.”

“A king leaves only when he wishes it!”

“I’ll give you another sack of those herbs that… you know.”

“Five sacks!”

“Two.”

“I’ll stay here all night if I have to. Four.”

“Three and that’s my final offer.”

“Fine. Goraseth will collect them tomorrow. Useless reptile! Fawning over a garish car when he should be tending to my needs.”
“An Aston Martin is not garish! This from a man who nearly commissioned a full pomp-and-circumstance royal carriage when the only people who’d see the bloody thing were his witches, a few farmers and several flocks of sheep!”

Recognizing the impending escalation of family bickering, Petras and Anthea shared a look and started herding their respective cats to the door, with Molly following behind, practicing her mournful expression and getting tips on appearing wretched from Richard who’d pocketed his brother and taken on the job of acting coach.

“Well, brother dear, do you require cab fare or are you remaining to assist John tending Gregory’s shop?”

“I would rather lick the underside of the shoe of a man who inspects fish-processing facilities for a living then relaxes on weekends by strolling through fresh sheep dung than toil behind a till.”

“The go with grace.”

“And fifty pounds.”

“Of course.”

Mycroft withdrew the requisite sum from his wallet and only sighed as Sebastian beat Sherlock to the cash and held it aloft, out of Sherlock’s reach, while Anderson asked Greg if help was needed tidying up.

“Thanks, Philip, but I’ve got it. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“We will now. We’ve got fifty quid!”

Sherlock’s “Incorrect!” preceded what would very likely be an extended argument that lasted through Sebastian and Anderson’s curry stop and the equal division of the remaining cash. Mycroft put the odds as high Sherlock would then return with a curry lunch for John before finally venturing home to continue with whatever was waiting patiently for him that hadn’t yet exploded or boiled over onto Mrs. Hudson’s rug.

“Well, love… how’d I do?”

“Marvelously. I greatly admired your air of command and exposition of ideas.”

“Now and again I rise to the occasion. More wine?”

“Most certainly. Though not too much for I must make my way home at some point.”

“Forget about that. Can’t have you walking down a few steps and across my workroom floor on less than steady feet. Maybe a quiet night’s rest in the arms of a good, warm man will sober you up enough to get home by morning, though.”

“Time does heal all wounds. As does a warm embrace.”

Greg smiled widely and quickly poured them each another glass of wine, before draping his arm over Mycroft’s shoulders and budging up close.

“Then both you shall have and in abundance.”

Leaning in to kiss his lover tenderly, Greg officially closed all thought and discussion about their massive problem until tomorrow. They’d accomplished a lot today and if you didn’t take time to
enjoy what you were fighting to protect, then you were an utter fool. There was plenty of time for worry and planning and fighting, but *this* time was theirs and precious as the finest gems. More precious, actually, since gems couldn’t light up with like a candle the way his Mycroft could when he was happy…
Chapter 47

Even though his brain, both his normal and teeny weasel one, wanted to believe Greg had made a mess of things, neither could do it with any degree of honesty. The stupid sorcerer had actually thought something through for a change.

“… so, if he fathoms out how much talent you still have, it should be a fairly simple argument for you to make that I botched something or underestimated your abilities since I’m a bit thick.”

Getting the day off from the electronics shop was easy when Richard told his boss that he had to deal with family issues. He did, however, omit the family issues were his brother changing species. And being coached for a spy mission to keep London out of the hands of an evil magician.

“Greg, um… Magnussen has to know your… position, so wouldn’t that make those sorts of things a bit unbelievable?”

“I’d say it makes them even better reasons, since politics, if that’s what you want to call it and leadership don’t often run hand in hand with intelligence.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s actually true.”

“And there are plenty in the community who think I’m not the sharpest pencil in the box because… well, there have been a few occasions where I did something not entirely well-described as smart, which is true for everyone, but my little incidents tend to be higher-profile than that of the average practitioner, so… it’s humbling, but actually works for us on this occasion.”

“What about other dangers like… getting stepped on?”

Jim bit his brother on the finger and earned a solid nod of approval from Balthazar.

“Ow! It’s a genuine concern, alright. A full-grown man decides to stomp on your evil head and that evil head is going to crack like an egg.”

“That’s a much harder spell to conceal, unfortunately, and I think Jim is slippery enough, human and weasel alike, to dodge an oncoming foot. The only other thing I’m considering is… that bastard of a basilisk. There are several possibilities, but the one least likely to be detected, and by least likely is highly unlikely, is probably not something Jim here would want.”

“Why?”

“It’s grounded in a pain sigil.”

The combination Richard’s “What?” and Jim’s “NO!” made a strange duet, given Jim’s new cartoon-mouse voice.

“It’s a… pay ahead… sort of thing. All spells exact a price, usually in energy, but others have different demands. This one… likes a bit of suffering in its wages. So, you… carve… a sigil into the flesh of the person you’re trying to ward from the sort of magic a basilisk possesses, no pain-relief measures allowed, and it does the trick.”

“Oh. Won’t it be visible, though?”
“That’s what you’re worried about!”

Richard waved off his tiny brother, but did move him a little further from Balthazar who was looking more and more as if he’d appreciate a bit of fun with Jim that might end with a loud chomp and slurp.

“Yes, because if you’ve got a big scar for the world to see, I can’t imagine how Magnussen would miss it. A weasel wouldn’t get that from a go-round with a cat or weasel trap. Then you’d have had your little knifey session all for naught.”

Greg gave Richard a pleased smile because it was good to see someone named Moriarty actually thinking about practical considerations for a change.

“The knifey part is actually important, too, Richard, and I had to do some thinking about that since my athame would just slice off this prat’s head. But, as for visibility, it won’t be. Once you’ve done it… it’s sort of absorbed into the skin. I’d have to regrow the patch of hair I’d need to clear, but that’s easily done. And I just worked that spell on our demon fighters so it’ll go flawlessly for this vain weasel.”

“Well, that’s alright, then.”

“It certainly is not!”

“What were you squeaking, brother dear?”

“I don’t want a pain sigil. They… hurt.”

“A basilisk would likely hurt more, I suspect. Or maybe turning to stone is a pain-free process. Can’t see how it would be, though, what with your nerves being traded for granite one by one.”

Jim priming to explode was always fun to watch, so Greg, Richard and Balthazar paused a moment to enjoy the show.

“Fine! You owe me for this, Greg.”

“Actually, you’d owe me for this since I’d charge loads to work this on a person. Do you have any idea how much it costs for the potion, alone? I’ll wave the cost this time, though, since it’s for a good cause. And, lucky you, I have everything prepared, so we can get it over with quickly.”

Greg pulled over the small parcel Jim was just noticing and extracted a razor blade that somehow had been reduced to one-eighth it’s former size, a vial and…”

“That’s the fucking dagger from Cluedo!”

“ Took an edge surprisingly well! And doesn’t it look proper for this sort of thing? I thought about one of those plastic ones they use to skewer olives and such for drinks, but I don’t think it’d send the right symbolic suggestion to the spell. If it makes you feel better, I did practice before you got here, so I know this will work first go and I can draw out the sigil quickly. The pain fades fairly rapidly once the spell is complete, so I estimate 30 seconds to a minute of nastiness then it’ll be over.”

“Get on with it.”

Greg cut eyes at Richard, who wasn’t sure if it would make matters better or worse, but decided to
give his brother a little skritch on the head, then left his hand on the side away from Greg, smiling when Jim budged into it as if bracing himself for what was to come. And what came was Greg quickly shaving off a small patch of fur on what would have been Jim’s shoulder, followed by rubbing the cleared space with some of the slightly-yellow fluid from the vial, then a series of quick, decisive cuts, deeper than Richard’s hoped-for scratches that made Jim tremble sharply, but hold back any sound between tightly pressed lips. Finally, once Greg set down his makeshift athame and muttered a long series of words, the bloody symbol seemed to fade into Jim’s skin, vanishing completely from sight.

“You doing alright, Jim?”

Richard cut eyes at Greg when Jim didn’t answer immediately, but got a small nod that comforted him, if not the small mammal slowly drawing its wits together.

“I… yes. That was sloppy work, Greg. Sloppy and slow. Just like your brain function.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere. Ok, so that’ll keep you from becoming an ugly statue your brother fobs off on some charity jumble sale, but it won’t keep teeth and claws having their way with you, so if you do run across the basilisk, stay out of its reach. Balthazar, any advice you can give on that score?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“We haven’t settled on payment yet.”

“How about no special catnip for a month if you don’t stop being such a bastard.”

“You’re a cruel man, Greg. But, I accept your terms. In any case, the stupid lizard is faster than you’d expect and more maneuverable, too. I think it’s mostly like a sit and wait predator sort of fast, though, not good for endurance or a continued chase, but it can surprise you in the short term. Don’t let its lumbering looks fool you.”

“That’s useful. Jim, stay out of lunging distance if you can avoid it.”

“And don’t let it get between you and the door!”

“That, too. Ok, looks as if the only thing we need to do now is regrow you fur, get you there safely and let your natural abilities as a liar and overall ne’er do well sally forth. According to Mycroft, the bastard should be home today and that’s not unusual for him, so it won’t look strange when you start tapping on a window or something. I wouldn’t advise Balthazar’s method of entry since you likely don’t want to fight a basilisk on your very first day at work.”

“I don’t want a first day of work, period.”

“Talk to the HR department. They probably have a form for you to fill out or something.”

Stupid cat. If he hadn’t decided to snoop nobody would have known about any of this nonsense and there would be no reason for him to be a weasel. Fine, maybe the plague would have been nonsense enough on its own, but that wasn’t certain. Not certain at all! Now, here he was, scampering about, looking for a likely window to chitter at so he caught someone’s attention. Preferably not the basilisk. Not even Magnussen was arrogant enough to let the blasted thing roam
about like a housecat. The spell Greg the Boring affected on him was… if he was pressed to the wall even he would admit that it was a punishingly difficult one that took a tremendous amount of power to work and His Boringness might be the only one in London capable of succeeding with it.

Magnussen definitely wouldn’t have that protection so… well, it was an avenue of defense if Magnussen fathomed out the truth. Race headlong into basilisk territory and hope the bloody thing didn’t respond to some form of dog whistle Magnussen had in his coat pocket.

This was getting tiresome. And why did he have to be a weasel! If he’d had to go scurrying about climbing the sides of walls, why couldn’t Greg have made him a monkey or something? Oh right… Greg was trying to be clever and funny. NOT his strength in life and nobody else should have to pay the price… oh. There you are, Charles. Indulging in a little newspaper reading, are we? Looking for new scandals and blackmail opportunities? Well, set that aside and let me in!

Magnussen hesitated the first few times checking the sound at the window, because it could be anything from wind to some animal which wouldn’t linger long on his property in any case, but when it didn’t stop and, in fact, became more demanding of his attention, the attention was finally given via a walk to the window and a peek through the glass.

“Took you long enough? Gone deaf and forgot to tell anybody?”

“You… are enchanted.”

“Well spotted. Of course, even the most incompetent sorcerer in creation could notice that, so it’s not much of an achievement all things considered.”

“Moriarty?”

“Aren’t you going to ask me which one?”

Magnussen’s eyes widened slightly and he kept the window shut, which made Jim wonder if he’d have to live outside on a ledge for the duration of his spy mission.

“Yes, I know you know about Rich and I also know what you used him for. I’m not the only one, either!”

This time, Magnussen’s eyes narrowed and he remained silent a long moment before cracking the window just wide enough for Jim to slip through.

“Thought you were going to leave me out there for some pest-ridden bird to bother. Nice place. Completely devoid of warmth or life. Well done.”

Very you, Charles. Which is an unsettling thing even for someone who prides himself on being unsettling.

“Thank you. You seem to have done something to yourself or is this your new clubbing look?”

“I did nothing. Really. A teensy minor matter and His Nibs, the Tedious Tyrant of London, gets his knickers knotted over it.”

“I see. You are, of course, referring to Greg Lestrade.”

“Who else? Over nothing! Mostly. I admit that I may have misjudged a thing or two, but nothing to warrant this. Nothing! From a certain perspective.”

“Ah, the recent demon incident, perhaps?”
“It wasn’t even a powerful one! Just a little one. Was it my fault that a pack of unwashed brats decided a filthy alley was a good place to play? No. I can’t be held responsible for the stupidity or poor taste of others. Try to convince Molly of that, though. Oh Jim, how could you? The poor little children! Nag nag nag, bleat, bleat, bleat… at least I won’t have to hear her whinging on about do-goodery anymore.”

Jim scurried down from the windowsill and across the floor to climb onto one of the chairs and, only just in time, stop himself from continuing up to the small table that held a plate with biscuits. His weasel senses were not at all happy with this decision, but he had to maintain some sense of dignity.

“And you cannot break this spell yourself? Transfiguration spells are not terribly difficult to thwart.”

A little bit of self-satisfaction rose in the tiny weasel because it was highly rewarding to see someone like Magnussen show his hand. Transfiguration spells looked easy to thwart when you read through them, but try performing one and learn the miserable truth. Even the simple ones took a surprising amount of power, both to cast and to unravel.

“This is the same one he used on Balthazar Black and he hasn’t been able to throw it off.”

Oh fine, smirk at me, you bastard. Yes, I just admitted in a roundabout way that Greg and that irritating prat Balthazar are more powerful than me, but you haven’t even tried working a transfiguration spell so fuck all the way off with your superciliousness.

“It must be formidable, indeed. Mr. Black is… was… an intriguing person.”

“He’s a ridiculous twat with more power than sense and zero sense of artistry or… style. At least he’s in a form, now, that showcases how utterly useless he is for anything but annoying his betters.”

“Much like yourself?”

“I am the very definition of style!”

“I’d say you were the very definition of a stoat.”

“Weasel!”

“I stand corrected. However, I also stand perplexed. Why are you here, telling me this?”

 “Because I am very sick and very tired of Greg and his little playmates getting in my way, deciding what is and isn’t allowed, thinking they have the final word on matters that really don’t concern them because they’re my business and not theirs.”

“That, while entertaining, is not relevant to my question.”

“As I said, I know it was you that got Rich to raise the vampire to give you a source of the plague. And I know why you did it.”

“Me? Why would I have interest in the vampires? At best, they offer certain revenue possibilities for various investments, but beyond that, they are rather uninteresting.”

“The vampires control a lot of what goes on in London, whether the average dullard realizes that or not. And the sorcerers do their own share of manipulation; that lot, because they are
unambitious and unimaginative, follow after Greg like puppies. Greg, by dint of shagging that prancing fool Marcus, also has say in vampire dealings. When Rich got that video you sent, I asked myself who would stand to gain here. Not rival vampires, because they’ll die as surely as anyone else. Other races in the community? They can scarcely be bothered to tend to their own affairs, let alone stage some form of genocidal coup. And that brought me to Greg’s situation. While it was supremely amusing to know he was getting his arse repeatedly handed to him, the question was why? Admittedly, it is large and undoubtedly pale and spotty, but how strange it was happening alongside this new development. Who would gain?”

“And you decided it was me.”

“I decided it was somebody power-hungry, ruthless, cold-blooded and probably psychopathic. Since I knew it wasn’t me, yours was the next name on the list.”

Jim used the moment Magnussen sat thinking to leap onto the table, steal a biscuit and bring it back down on his chair to nibble. Weasels had fast metabolisms and he needed to keep up his strength for lying.

“Again, though, I ask… why are you here?”

“Because I want in! I really don’t care if you kick the legs out from under the vampires or Greg, but I do want to be on the winning side when that happens.”

“And you assume that would not be their side?”

“Greg has the tactical mind of a turnip and what does Marcus bring to the table? An ascot?”

“Lestrade has tremendous power and popular support. Marcus brings the entire vampire legions under his father’s control. And, his uncle, who does not have a turnip for a mind.”

“Petras… here’s something you may not know about him. He’s a bit busy dealing with his own brother who can’t seem to get out of his own cantankerous way and… well, let’s just say Mr. Petras Varnas may have an eye on someone highly intriguing that’s causing him a bit of distraction. Causing Greg a bit of distraction, too.”

Jim nibbled his biscuit, but kept his beady eyes locked with Magnussen’s until he saw the light go on in the man’s head.

“Mycroft Holmes.”

“Got it in one.”

“He… is not someone to underestimate.”

“I find him dull and plodding, but he does seem to actually think, on occasion, in contrast to Greg.”

“It would make sense, from several perspectives, for Petras Varnas to cultivate an association with him.”

“If by cultivate, you mean till his manly soil, then that’s certainly true. And it makes Greg green with jealousy.”

“Interesting…”
“Not really, but it does muddy the cooperation waters a bit.”

“And you, James Moriarty… what do you hope to gain here.”

“Money, power, fawning admiration… the usual things. I won’t get more than a kick in the teeth from the others, so why not lend my shoulder to a different team?”

“It doesn’t appear you have much shoulder remaining.”

“Wrong. I’ve still got a trick or hundred up my sleeve and seem to know a bit more about this situation and the players than you do.”

“But that information is finite now that you are, shall we say, severing ties. You even seem to have lost connection with the sweet Miss Hooper, which is rather unfortunate, since she seemed a most pliable and useful individual to know.”

Useful, yes. Mostly because she always has Toblerone ice lollies in her freezer and knows the lyrics to more pop songs than one might imagine for someone who worked with dead people all day, but pliable? The man obviously had never met a cat person before. Sure, they were putty in their cats’ hands… paws… they were so catlike themselves that even when they agreed with you it was actually agreeing to something you didn’t actually say, but they make you think you said and you go along with it because your brain’s been turned six degrees off center and you lost the plot ages ago.

“Molly is… you’d think she’d be a better focus of information that she really is, mostly because she’s so busy playing with flowers and kissing kittens that things fly right past her without a single notice. The most significant bit of intelligence I got from her was that Mycroft Holmes that he’s not partial to coconut because she had some chocolate and coconut thingies and he declined her offer of a taste. Do you see what my life’s been like! I did think she’d be useful but… that was a lot of mental energy and effort wasted on…”

Film nights and board games and tiny cafes that made the best coffee drinks and Pokemon Go and dancing and time just to be… himself, without his reputation to think about.

“… a proverbial dead end.”

“Not the lever you expected?”

Precisely the lever I expected, but one that was highly resistant to being pulled.

“You try and sometimes you fail. Start down a path and it’s a dead end. You move on. In any case…”

“Your brother… is he joining you in this… realignment of perspective?”

No, you’re not bringing Rich into this, you manipulative bastard. He stays well away and if he has to scarper off to Antarctica to stay out of your clutches, I’ll buy him a parka for the trip.

“Rich? He has no real perspective to speak of. He’s happier puttering with his computers than doing anything genuinely productive, like summoning spirits of the recently deceased and getting their accounts information. He has this little circle of chums who… the most necromantic thing they’ve done was get hold of one of those skeletons they sell to medical schools and made it dance. That’s his grand use of his magical talent. Tap-dancing skeletons.”

“Did it, at least, have a top hat?”
“…yes. They were drunk and it’s something I’d very much like to forget, so let’s stop talking about it now. In any oncoming storm, he’s going to pull out his cheerful purple brolly and learn new codes to cheat at whatever videogame he’s into at the moment. Don’t expect him to leap into the fray on either side. He won’t even realize what’s going on.”

“Much like most of our people. Any people actually. They have painfully little idea about what goes on around them and even less interest in finding out.”

“Something you’re counting on.”

“Perhaps. I must say, then, you offer little in the way of benefit to me. And, open a very wide avenue for being a detriment since… well, you don’t hold any alliance very tightly, now do you?”

Some. Not ones made with wankers, though.

“Depends. As long as the alliance is beneficial to me, I’ll benefit it. Once the usefulness has been outlived, then… that’s another matter.”

“Practical.”

“Thank you.”

“But still rather thin on quid pro quo.”

“What do you want, then? I’ve got some Smarties in my flat if that’s…”

“Moran.”

Oh no.

“Yeah… that’s not going to happen.”

“And I thought you had a talent for… convincing people.”

“Not thick-skulled canines!”

“Everyone has their pressure points. Take his little, shall we say friend, Philip Anderson.”

“You take him because I certainly don’t want him, but it’s… it’s complicated. Do you have any real idea of how he’s tied to Greg?”

“Oddly, no. There seems no specific reason he runs errands for Lestrade, but I assume one exists.”

“A big one. Greg effectively owns him.”

“Pardon?”

“Greg owns him. The flea hotel is indentured to Greg and that’s not going to change no matter how juicy the steak you dangle in front of his nose. First, it’s a blood contract, so good luck with that. Second, it’s the only way the muscle-bound git can stay in London without there being a constant parade of werewolves on his heels, wanting a chunk of his flesh. Anderson might be a pressure point, but not a strong enough one to make Sebastian shift course. You want him, you go get him and good luck keeping all your limbs. Or head. He’ll eat all that and shit the digestible bits on what’s left of your corpse.”
“Hmmmm… I wouldn’t have thought Lestrade had it in him to take a slave, but I admire his choice of one, in any case. It’s a very intriguing situation, I must say but, perhaps, one to explore at another time. However, that does present another option as a possibility. Does a similar situation exist between Lestrade and Black?”

“Balthazar? He’s loony! Mad as a bag of frogs! What could you possibly want with him?”

“Let me think… he’s observed Lestrade’s magic more closely than anyone else and very likely knows well what strengths and weaknesses the sorcerer possesses. And he, I would predict, has more of a grudge against him than you do, given he has suffered the degradation of being a cat for a substantial time.”

“Ok… there’s some truth there, but how much Balthazar actually observes, given he is a cat and spends most of his day napping or chasing a fluffy ball, I can’t say. What I can say is that his powers aren’t there anymore, if that’s what you’re hoping. They’re straightjacketed just like mine.”

“And if they weren’t?”

“Meaning?”

Jim felt the breath knocked out of him as he suddenly returned to human form long enough for Magnussen to smirk at him, before he was once again a weasel.

“Meaning I did say that transfiguration spells are not terribly difficult to thwart.”

Oh my… that changed things a bit, now didn’t it?

“You… you could restore me permanently. And Balthazar?”

“If you prove useful. If not, well then, I’d say your own standard for maintaining alliances would apply nicely.”

“I… can’t promise anything, but… this does make it more likely he might see things your way.”

“Might is what I predict if I approached him directly, something I have no easy pretext to do, for any reason. I suspect you, though, can raise those odds substantially.”

Was Magnussen lying? This transfiguration spell was the same as for Balthazar, but there were differences so he had more ability to use his talent. And Balthazar had been that way a long time now. The longer these sorts of spells lasted the stronger they were, so breaking it would be harder for him. But… it could be possible. Besides, that arse was also an arse and might switch sides purely for the fun of it. He only had one person he cared about before Greg cattified him and that was Balthazar. Catnip and fluffy balls aside, that still seemed very much the truth…

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“I’m certain you will. Now, do you wish to finish your biscuit or may I return to reading my paper?”

Jim snarled, well aware that he probably looked more cute than ferocious, then leapt off the chair and darted through the still-cracked window. Bloody wonderful… now he had to drag that idiot cat into things. He couldn’t be counted on to follow through with anything! One laser pointer was all you needed to scuttle any plan that miserable thing had in its brainless head.
But… how in the hell had Magnussen turned him human again? And with no apparent effort! That would take a staggering amount of power and… and that might be expected if you had a house filled with objects from which you could steal what power you wanted. Oh… this wasn’t good.

Or… very good.Depended on your viewpoint. For him and Balthazar, it could be a very good thing, indeed. Throw off these humiliating spells and be free from worrying about anyone standing in the way of using power the way it was meant to be used. Not that he was considering it seriously, though. Not at all. Just thinking of the proper approach to pull the loony cat away from Greg. Give him a good story to use when Magnussen did a spot of interrogation. Actually, this could be easy, all things considered.

And surely Magnussen would let them get their hands on some of the little treasures he had stored away. They were exactly the sort to know how to use them and have the will to do it, besides. Today was turning into something much more interesting than he’d anticipated. Was there a luck of the weasels? Well, there was now and he was possessed of a rather large helping of it…
Jim hustled along the, for him, never-ending and somewhat frightening bits of pavement and street to reconnoiter with Greg and Balthazar, who were sitting at the same café as for the last animal-led secret mission, though Greg had chosen for the day the face of a younger man with very dark hair, pale skin and slightly narrow features which made him look slightly more vampire-like than many of the actual vampires Jim actually knew.

Darting under Greg’s table and next to the napping Balthazar, Jim kicked the cat in the head to wake him up, then bit Greg on the ankle to announce his presence.

“Oh! Nice, really nice. Let me pay here then we can leave.”

Ignoring Greg for the moment, Jim shared a few whispered words with Balthazar which earned him a set of attentive, narrowed eyes and a small nod of understanding, both for what Jim was saying and that more would be said later when they had more assurance of privacy.

Once he’d cleared his coffee debt, Greg pretended to drop a coin, then leaned down to retrieve the Jim, who went into his jacket pocket, then Balthazar who happily climbed onto his shoulder so he could ride from a high perch and demonstrate to all his status in life. His regal aspirations continued until they’d found a cab willing to take a mild-mannered man with his nose-in-the-air, literally, cat and for the final few steps from the cab to the shop and into the workroom.

“Your pocket stinks!”

“That’s probably what’s left over from the bit of herb picking I did yesterday. Hadn’t planned to, but I found a few things ready to harvest and hadn’t brought my basket.”

“Your herbs smell like old cheese and your filthiest sock.”

“Part of their charm. Now... how’d it go?”

Jim quickly filled in Greg and Balthazar on his conversation, leaving out certain parts that were best kept to himself for the moment.

“Ok... so he seems to believe you, possibly. Trying to snatch Sebastian, though, is interesting. You’d think he’d want to keep werewolves out of things. They’re well known for pack loyalty above all, but Seb is, to be fair, an exception to the rule.”

“That’s why it wasn’t hard to put him off the notion. Not that I think he was interested in werewolves, per se, just that particular murder poodle.”

“That makes sense. Anything else?”

“No, but I wouldn’t expect it for a first meeting. You take each other’s measure then plan how to continue. I’ll put in another appearance probably day after tomorrow, but I’ll need something to toss his way as proof I’m serious. Some bit of information he won’t have gotten himself that seems relevant or consequential to his plans.”

“We can probably fabricate something. I’ll talk to Mycroft about it, that’s very much his area.”

“It’s certainly not yours. And, what else do we do in the meantime?”
“Let Mycroft and Petras do their own digging and scheming. I’ll do my own, too, see what I can learn about objects of power that may have gone missing or been on the shady market. I usually find out about those, but now and again, the buyers and sellers are especially close-mouthed unless someone pushes hard on them. Try not to look like anything’s different…”

“So… nothing.”

“Wrong. Until we have a very good idea exactly what we’re up against, we can’t go in guns blazing, now can we? We’ve got one shot at this and can’t leave any room for him escape out of it. Furthermore, we’ve got a dragon’s egg to think about, which I am taking seriously as a prisoner or hostage, and whatever else he may have in that house we don’t know about yet. Yeah, it might be sexy and action-filmy to just launch some form of magical attack with lots of fire and color and spells flying this way and that, but… I’m not going to do this anyway but smartly. It may not be cool and it may not be macho or whatever the fuck you think it should be. I’m focused on the end point, not the parade to get there.”

“Meaning you realize you’re doing nothing and have given a lot of thought to explaining it away. Your cat is going to escort me home so we can commiserate over your pathetic weakness.”

Greg scowled as Balthazar padded after Jim, who shot off up the workshop stairs, but had to admit to a sour feeling in his stomach because it had crossed his own mind more than once that he was doing nothing. He, himself, was scarcely lifting a finger to help with this situation, besides little tricks of the trade and it rankled. He couldn’t hide that from himself, even if he might camouflage it from others.

Sighing deeply, Greg got up from the small workshop table and moved towards his secret library, entering inside and closing the door behind him. Then, releasing another deep sigh, he spoke a long incantation that had several of the more magically-sensitive books on the shelves quivering in discomfort, before a portal opened in the air in front of Greg and he stepped through into a space that remained completely dark until he spoke a word and small spherical lights floating in the air lit brightly to illuminate the large, cavernous space with a large, extremely ornate silvery magic circle set into the stone floor. Corridors led off from the main room, but Greg’s interest lay in the circle that he stood staring at for a very long moment before walking over to a small alcove and extracting a simple dagger that he brought back with him to the circle’s edge.

After a moment’s final thought, Greg made a slash across his wrist and let his blood fall onto a specific symbol, while he chanted an guttural, atonal invocation that extinguished the small luminous spheres, dragged the temperature of the room down to a shiveringly-cold level and seemed to even draw oxygen out of the space as Greg’s breathing shallowed sharply before a figure slowly coalesced in the circle’s center.

“Gregorius… it has been a long time…”

For reasons. There were monsters. There were demons. And there was this fucker. None of the colorful, sanitized, popcorn film about the creature grinning at him from inside the circle. This was the insidious, unsettlingly-banal creature that scared the shit out of you in those horror films that didn’t have a lot of action, but kept you riveted, even as your skin crawled and, when it was over, you and your mates looked at each other and made a silent pact not to discuss this one or ever watch it again because it not only scared you, it disturbed you, which was much, much worse…

“Mol’godon… yes, it has.”

“Your need must be great to summon me.”
“It is. I wouldn’t insult you with anything trivial.”

“Very wise.

The creature in the circle could appear however it pleased and what pleased it was reaching into your mind to choose a form best designed to cause you pain.

“You’re looking good.”

“Your lover is fine of feature, I confess.”

Staring at a Mycroft lacking even a wisp of his warmth, humor, decency, compassion or love was a knife to Greg’s heart, but that was rather the point.

“Thank you. Are you well?”

“Oh yes… never better. But so few have the power to summon me… I scarcely have any little adventures to bring me amusement. Have you one today for me?”

“I might. If we can negotiate terms.”

“In itself a delightful thing. For what purpose am I paying you this visit?”

“Information…”

“That could be a simple or difficult matter.”

“I’ll be simple. Then… some not-so-simple things.”

“Such as.”

“Bit of offense, bit of defense.”

“Gregorius… engaging in battle, are we?”

“If I have to, though I’d rather avoid it.”

“You know, I would be a tremendous ally in your cause. Simple release me from this circle and there is little doubt of victory.”

Something Greg knew was very probably true. Some costs were simply too high, though. Thousands of dead vampires honestly paled in comparison to what would happen if this fucker had free rein.

“I’ll keep that in mind if my current efforts fail.”

“Will you survive failure, do you think?”

“Who knows? Mysteries keep life interesting.”

“That they do. Tell me, at least, this battle will be consequential? Whatever fun would it be if it was not a punishing experience.”

“I don’t know… maybe. Regardless, it’s not one I can afford to lose.”

“Then let us turn attention to the information you seek. For that, I will not impose a price. Consider it a gift.”
Which meant, since he’d tipped his hand about wanting more, the price for that would be miserable. Nicely done, Greg. Good lack of thinking and putting together and real strategy for minimizing the nightmare bearing down on you with glee in its eyes.

“That’s very considerate of you. Thank you. I just want to know if you or any of old legions have done business with a human named Charles Augustus Magnussen.”

Mycroft was a gorgeous man when he was deep in thought. This time, it was too tinged with malevolence and cruel manipulation to be anything but disheartening.

“The name is not unknown.”

“Knowing a name and doing business with the person who owns it are two different things.”

“Correct. Many attempt to catch our eye, however, few to any avail.”

That… was good news. At least this particular avenue of despair wasn’t accepting traffic at the moment.

“So he tried, but failed.”

“In a business arrangement both sides must have something to offer.”

“And he didn’t.”

“An evil man, to be sure, but evil, itself, is not power.”

That, also, was good news. Magnussen wasn’t personally as powerful as his actions might make it seem. His personal toy collection was handling some to a lot of the heavy lifting. That left him vulnerable, perhaps.

“He’s got help in that area, though.”

“Ah yes… you know of his little trinkets.”

“Some. He’s been a busy boy with his collection.”

“To be certain. Reluctant to part with anything, though.”

So, Magnussen knew his objects were critical to his strength and wasn’t going to part with them, even to gain favor with someone like this nasty bastard. Meaning, very likely, he had a lot of tasty toys and they weren’t worth risking for doing a deal with this one here, especially if their power was the only reason Magnussen could summon the wretch in the first place…

“Can you blame him?”

“Not at all! Though a chamelos egg… how delicious a meal that would be. Rivaling, perhaps, dining on your flesh and blood.”

So, the egg was still alive and viable. Confirmation, though not entirely comforting since he had no specific plan to get the thing safely out of Magnussen’s clutches.

“I’m flattered. And encouraged, since I know I’m only standing against one vile sorcerer and not a member of your exalted ranks.”

He smiled and bowed exactly the way Mycroft did. In a completely different manner altogether.
“You should be. But, I am growing bored with this little chat. Not that I ever regret our conversations, of course, but it is time, I feel, to proceed to more… profitable matters.”

“Alright. Got a cure for a plague?”

“Now, why would I wish to curtail something as entertaining as a plague?”

True. Beings this evil and twisted pretty much sat with bowls of popcorn watching things like this and laughing their arses off. This despicable bugger could heal, could do amazingly good and helpful things, but he had zero reason to do any of that unless it benefitted him directly. Besides, once he knew he details, he’d demand payment from the vampires, as well, and the fewer involved with this terrible thing, the better. It’d been worth a shot, though.

“You’re right. Hate to spoil your fun like that, so moving on. I need…the Light of Other Eyes.”

“Ooohhh… want to see the unseen, do you?”

“I don’t want to be caught by surprise.”

There were very powerful objects that couldn’t be seen by human eyes, invisible wards… lots of nasty things that Jim wouldn’t be able to detect and they needed all possible advantages on their side.

“It’s not exactly what one calls… white magic.”

“It’s grey, I’ll admit, but I can live with it.”

What you could see, you could control and that was a lot of advantage for someone. Very tempting advantage that was easily abused. And it was going to cost him mightily to get it.

“Oh good. That was worrying me. Anything else?”

Yes, and this couldn’t, in any manner, be called white magic. Or grey, for that matter.

“Yeah… I did say defense and offense. I also need The Death of All.”

At least the wicked thing looked startled by that. It was a mark of respect, in a strange sort of way.

“That… Gregorius, I truly am shocked. That is very, very dark magic, indeed.”

For good reason. It killed. Everything. Nothing was immune. And the death was complete. A phoenix couldn’t be reborn, forget the cat’s fucking nine lives… it, you, everything was gone. Permanently. And a necromancer couldn’t raise you for love nor money. There was no life left in you, life couldn’t touch you or be reborn in you. Once released, anything in that juggernaut’s path was gone forever and that included, some accounts said, your immortal soul, if you believed in such a thing. It was as nasty a weapon as nasty could be…

“I hope I won’t have to use it.”

“But you’re willing to pay the price, nonetheless.”

“You don’t go into battle and leave your strongest weapons at home based on hope.”

“It is… indiscriminate in target.”
“I know. There could be… innocent victims. I’m prepared to accept that.”

Or at least say so and never forgive myself if it comes to pass.

“I am intrigued…”

“Does that buy me a discount?”

Hearing such hollow, mirthless laughter from his Mycroft’s lips was crushing, but what he suffered didn’t matter. There were bigger things at stake here.

“Actually, it might. I do relish the thought of how fully you will be defiled and stained if you use this and I see so few true moments of joy in my life. Anything else?”

“No, that’s more than enough.”

“Very well, let me think…”

Greg waited patiently while this foul version of Mycroft walked about in the circle, occasionally shooting glances his way, accompanied by not very reassuring smiles.

“Alright. Let us begin. For the information…”

“That was gratis.”

“Oh yes, it had slipped my mind.”

Of course it had.

“Then let us move on. I have missed you, Gregorius, you so rarely visit. I wish to remedy that.”

Oh boy, here we go.

“How?”

“I desire a visit every thinning of the veil for… five years.”

“What!”

_Thinning of the veil_ was the full moon. So, every month for five years. Fuck that.

“It is such a little thing I ask.”

“It’s not and you know it. I… once a year, guaranteed for five years.”

And that was bad enough.

“Pathetic. I thought you did not wish to insult me.”

“It’s not an insult. This is the first time I’ve summoned you in what… four years? Longer? I’d say my offer is a vast improvement.”

“And I greatly have mourned the lack of your company. But… I suppose I can reduce our visits to half the number. For twice as many years.”

“Funny. Maybe… and it’s a major sacrifice, but a guaranteed visit per year, in addition to any
visits I make because I actually need something. For five years. That’s probably an extra one for you, since I think twice a decade is about what we average overall.”

“A paltry counter, at best. I suppose I could agree to five years and six visits a year.”

“Wrong. Five years and six guaranteed visits total.”

“In addition to meetings for further needs?”

“I can… do that, sure.”

“Then seven guaranteed visits and whatever other glad times we find we share because you need my help. My final offer.”

And Greg knew enough about his nemesis to recognize the genuine finality of his tone. Mycroft was going to kill him. The real one, that is…

“Done. So, if you’ll just give me…”

“Wait, we are not finished.”

“What? I just handed you… a lot!”

“A reasonable price for one little favor. But not two.”

Shit.

“I thought it was more than reasonable for two, but I’ll listen, in any case, to be polite.”

“So accommodating. What I ask, for your second piece of truly soul-corrupting magic is… a favor in return.”

That could even be worse than the visits.

“And this favor would entail…”

“You will discover it in due course.”

This WAS worse than the visits. An open-ended favor to the evilest creature imaginable? Not gonna happen.

“No. Under no circumstances. You trotting me out to slay every person in London or drag humanity back to the dark ages? Forget it.”

“Whereas those would be entertaining, neither particularly interests me, at present. I shall make you this promise… what I will ask of you will not require wholly violating any of your deepest convictions.”

There was a lot of wiggle room in that. A ludicrous amount.

“Not sufficient.”

“I disagree.”

“You seem to know what this favor is, so why not tell me and we can bargain from there.”

Seeing the supremely confident Mycroft, as well as the entity posing as him, show a flicker of
uncertainty was an unsettling experience, but one that might mean this wasn’t the ordinary kill, corrupt, maim, torture, enslave sort of business this lot usually reveled in…

“I… have a matter that will require somewhat… delicate handling. You will handle it for me.”

“What sort of matter?”

“Something… something about which I am still uncertain, in terms of its outcome, but regardless, the die is cast.”

That sounded ominous. Like old Mol’godon had been doing business with someone else, which wasn’t too uncommon, but he hadn’t heard any rumblings along those lines and those usually made their way to his ears.

“And it’s not Magnussen.”

“No.”

“Give me a little more here, something to actually decide how to begin a bit of bartering.”

“I think not. You have my word…”

“Which is absolutely worthless.”

“True, however… I am prepared to place some… call it collateral to forfeit if I betray you on this one, isolated issue.”

Narrowing his eyes, Greg closely watched the creature summon forth a ball of light, which it appeared to squeeze with its hand until what was left was a small, glowing jewel.

“There… all yours.”

The jewel was tossed to Greg who snatched it and examined both it and the tiny markings that covered one side.

“This is a binding spell.”

“Not a strong one, but one that would make your future visits a tiny bit… more agreeable. When my favor is presented, if I have broken my promise, this remains yours. If I have been true to my word, it returns to me.”

“And you’re trusting me to decide?”

“Perish the thought…”

A series of sharp blades shot out of the stone and sliced at Greg’s fingers, bathing the jewel in his blood.

“… but your very essence shall not be able to hide the truth. Your heart will be known and the spell will act accordingly.”

As the blood slowly vanished from the stone’s surface, the glow changed from a rather appealing blue to a dark, almost black, red that gleamed with a deep, smoldering fire.

“There. That should assuage your doubts.”
It shouldn’t. But, it did. This bastard never gave an inch except when it was absolutely necessary, so even a small concession meant he genuinely believed this favor of his wouldn’t cross any ultimate lines in the sand. There was still a punishing amount of leeway for what would be asked to be horrible in every manner possible, but… there were thousands of lives on the line here and if his own conscience had to bear even more shame, then he’d live with that pain and disgrace. At the end of the day, he wasn’t important, not compared to the much bigger picture he was fighting to protect.

“But, it did. This bastard never gave an inch except when it was absolutely necessary, so even a small concession meant he genuinely believed this favor of his wouldn’t cross any ultimate lines in the sand. There was still a punishing amount of leeway for what would be asked to be horrible in every manner possible, but… there were thousands of lives on the line here and if his own conscience had to bear even more shame, then he’d live with that pain and disgrace. At the end of the day, he wasn’t important, not compared to the much bigger picture he was fighting to protect.

“Then I agree.”

“Excellent! I suspected you would, but you do sometimes surprise me. Now… time for the fun to begin.”

Greg scowled, but nodded and quickly divested himself of his clothing, taking a moment when it was done to raise his arms and intone a long, melodic string of words that had the being wearing Mycroft’s face practically dancing with glee.

“Just the normal amount of time, so don’t think you’re getting a gratuity for your service.”

“I shan’t even try. Besides, I have all those lovely visits in the future to look forward to, now don’t I?”

“My purchases first.”

“Naturally. Step closer.”

Greg braced himself for what he suspected was going to happen and stepped up to the circle, careful his toes didn’t cross the outer perimeter.

“You love him.”

“I… yeah, I do.”

“It hurts you, so, so terribly to see me this way.”

“It does.”

“Come closer, just for a moment…”

Knowing he still had the upper hand, Greg leaned slightly forward, just enough for Mol’godon to give him a long, disquietingly-gentle kiss that sealed the two pieces of magic into him.

“I have no idea why humans find that enjoyable, but… it serves its purpose. When you are ready, call forth The Death of All. It will obey. Once. You may keep the other as token of my regard.”

“I understand and you have my gratitude. Now… care to dance?”

The purely evil being wearing Mycroft’s face smiled broadly, then produced two long, razor-sharp knives from thin air and beckoned Greg forward into the circle.

“I always enjoy this bit the most.”

“Well, that makes one of us.”
Anderson was certain he didn’t hear a single sound from the workroom but knew, without doubt, that something terrible had happened and raced down the steps from the shop to see what it was. And, to his eyes, what it was resembled a slaughtered pig that someone had snuck in and tossed onto the floor.

However, slaughtered pigs were much less bloody and…sliced than this thing was. Nor did a slaughtered pig have a human’s arms and legs. Or silver hair…

“GREG!”

Not knowing if shoving and shouting was medically sound right now, Anderson decided to throw caution to the wind since the blood-slicked form wasn’t responding to any subtler attempts to get his attention.

“A… Ander…”

“Hold on, Greg. I’ll get John.”

“No… M… Marcus.”

“What? He’s no use here. Besides it’s broad daylight! I’ll get John and he’ll know who else to…”


“Reversed? That makes no sense.”

“Do… do it. Qu… quickly.”

Anderson only then noticed Greg’s mobile had been left on the workroom table and dove for it, primarily to call John but, just in case, checked Marcus’s listing and saw there were two numbers there. It wouldn’t hurt to use three seconds to do as Greg asked, even if it was only to say that he had. Entering digits back to front and… oh.

The phone didn’t even ring, it just gave Marcus’s voice saying ‘on my way.’ Apparently, Greg wasn’t addled about that. He desperately wanted to ring John, but Greg had said only Marcus and he wouldn’t do that without reason. He’d give it until…

“Shit.”

Marcus arrived.

“How did you…”

“Little parlor trick. I’ll take it from here, Philip.”

“Shouldn’t we get John?”

“Not now. It’s ok, I know what to do.”

Anderson watched as the very sleepy-eyed Marcus, who he now noticed looked… plain… in a simple cotton t-shirt and drawstring pants as one might wear to bed, lifted Greg’s body off the floor and began climbing the stairs.

“Make sure we’re not disturbed, alright?”
“I will.”

Marcus’s small, sad smile didn’t make Anderson feel better or worse about things, but it did seem the vampire was prepared for whatever needed to be done. Right now, the whatever needed to be done wasn’t something he needed or wanted to know about, either…

Marcus gently lay Greg in his bed, unmindful of the slick layer of still-wet blood on Greg’s skin, then removed his own clothing and lay next to the scarcely-breathing sorcerer.

“Mycroft is going to kill you, Greg. Then me. And Uncle will help him do it because Uncle is a bastard of a villain. I’ll tell you all about it while you rest, alright? But first…”

Lowering his fangs, Marcus used one to slice his index finger, then carefully pushed it into Greg’s mouth, rubbing it softly across Greg’s teeth and gums.

“I’m here, mano vyras. Just a little help, though, alright? You can do it…”

Marcus kept rubbing until he felt what he was waiting for and lifted Greg’s upper lip a tad to smile at the fangs that were slowly and haltingly descending.

“They’re as adorable as ever. Now, I’ll snuggle here next to you so you can stay warm and cozy and you drink your fill. I’ll sing a song for you, too, that always seems to help. Then we’ll chat about my terrible, horrible relatives and why I’m the most pitiful person in the entire fucking world.”

Pressing his wrist against Greg’s mouth, Marcus nodded in satisfaction when Greg’s feeding instinct kicked in and he bit down, slowly starting to feed. Then it was time for a song. He didn’t sing it often, the first time being after his and Greg’s wedding, but he sang it now and then whenever it was needed. When he was needed, blood, body and energy to help this stupid man escape from hell. This path was something he’d hoped Greg wouldn’t think to take. It was…it always brought him as close to death as he’d ever seen Greg come and he’d seen it more times than he’d ever wanted to, which was more than never. But the sorcerer must have gotten something valuable in return because his aura was… polluted. Degraded. Poor, dear Greg… this was bad. And once Mycroft got hold of him, it was going to be worse…
Mycroft took several slow, deep breaths before ascending the stairs to Greg’s flat and paused halfway up for good measure. It had been a shock when he’d phoned his Gregory only to have Anderson answer the mobile and tell him with many, rushed and slightly panicked words not to worry, but refuse to detail just what was the matter about which he was to avoid worrying. The shock escalated to genuine fright when Anderson, further, was adamant that visiting now would not be a good idea for any reason under the sun. Needless to say, he was en route to his car for the express purpose of visiting when the sorcerer’s mobile phoned him and, this time, it was Sebastian reiterating Anderson’s words, but in a calmer, more calm and verbally concise manner, adding in that disturbances, by anyone, were not what his Gregory needed at present, though, visit in the evening should be acceptable.

Now, it was evening and nothing felt acceptable. He’d been met in the shop by Anderson, Sebastian, John and, surprisingly, Sherlock, none of whom saw fit to inform him about Gregory’s current status. The only information he’d gained was… to prepare himself and not to judge. So, as a result, he felt utterly unprepared and strongly prejudging this to be a situation where he walked into the upstairs flat and immediately ordered an entire barrage of medical personnel, as well as multiple branches of law enforcement and the military, to converge on the scene.

Creeping, for no particular reason he could articulate, into Greg’s flat, Mycroft looked about the sitting room and kitchen area before deciding that, yes, the bedroom was the perfect place to birth both worry and judgement so, of course, Ground Zero would lie within. Opening the door slowly and peering around its edge only confirmed that idea.

“Oh good. Wondered when you’d show up so the fun would begin.”

Marcus…naked… in bed with Gregory…

“Now, before your head explodes in flames, do me a favor and hop over to the dresser and pull up the photos on my mobile. Don’t worry, there’s no naked ones of the gorgeous Anthea, much to my despair, so it’s safe for your prim and proper eyes. Check the first one… then, well, we can talk.”

If there hadn’t been a thick layer of fatigue and… something else…in the vampire’s voice, Mycroft would have denounced the obvious distraction and launched into a scathing response, but he complied with the suggestion and was punishingly sorry that he did.

“Gregory…”

“It is! Hard to tell, though, isn’t it? I had Sebastian’s cuddle toy take that when he popped up to check if my no disturbances rule applied to him bringing up bandages or water or whatever his rather short-circuited brain thought might be needed. It’s easy to see why his brain was crossing wires, though, poor blighter, you have to admit.”

Mycroft had no difficulty mentally agreeing since his own brain was having tremendous difficulty pulling together a coherent thought about what he was seeing in the photograph. His Gregory… there were pieces of flesh veritably hanging off of him… everything coated in blood. So very much blood…

“What… what happened?”
“You’ll probably be both angry and understanding if I say he did something profoundly stupid, but that’s really what it amounted to in the end. Normally he prepares for this sort of thing, but… I have no idea what happened this time that he seems to have just gone off and followed a whim. I don’t know with perfect certainty, but this looks… I think he had a chat with one of the wickedest creatures anyone can imagine. There are a few that meet that description, actually, old and without a single redeeming feature whatsoever. They demand a high price even for knocking on their door, let alone having them do anything for you. I’m going to wager it was Mol’godon, since he’s a slicey-dicey fellow, but I could be wrong.”

Mycroft stared at the photo again and fought back the tidal wave of dark emotions that were threatening to rise up and out of control. However, he hadn’t a lifetime’s worth of practice managing his emotions to his credit to lose this particular battle, especially since he needed to have all of his faculties engaged to… comprehend this situation. However, comparing the grisly photo and the current tableau…

“He is healing.”

“That he is.”

“And… this photograph was taken, according to the file, today. During daylight hours.”

“Right again.”

“I… I have no idea what to say. What even to ask…”

Marcus had to silently confess that he’d counted on Mycroft being truly besotted with Greg and focusing, properly, on the injury aspect and not the ‘boyfriend in bed with extremely sexy vampire’ angle and was highly relieved that he’d won that wager. A truly angry Mycroft was not something he ever wanted to contemplate. That being said, it was time for a conversation and it would go much better if a few things were spelled out first.

“Then let me take the wheel for a moment, what say? First, Greg’s got a spell rigged that when this sort of debacle occurs, I’m woken the instant it’s triggered and transported here, which is one reason I sleep in pyjamas and not purely cloaked in air to let my incomparable beauty grace the day. Consider it his emergency button. It’s a bugger to reset every time it’s used, but c’est la vie. It gets me here in a blink without any of those pesky sun’s rays getting a chance to turn me into the sort of bacon only Greg would find edible. As to the reason why, which I know is really a large part of what’s swirling in your head right now… I could tell you that this is an old thing and Greg’s probably not given it any thought before today to mention it to you and that would be entirely true. But, it wouldn’t be the whole truth. Actually, you came at a good time, because I think he’s just about ready for another go, so come over here and have a look.”

Seeing Mycroft hesitate, Marcus sighed but, again, felt relieved that jealousy wasn’t the current conductor of Mycroft’s raging emotional train.

“You won’t disturb him; I don’t think a nuclear bomb would disturb him, so just come here. I promise, it’ll be worth all those tiring steps.”

That, at least, earned Marcus a disapproving glance, which was far better, in the vampire’s opinion, than Mycroft’s previously-stunned, sadly blank expression. And, in a few entirely not tiring steps, Mycroft was at Greg’s bedside, studying the legion of ghastly wounds that showed clear signs of ongoing repair.

“He’s no beauty at the best of times, but this is something you’d want to stick in one of those
fun fairs with a Halloween theme to scare the kids. And hardened criminals. In any case, watch closely. And be amazed!"

Marcus bopped Greg on the nose, then rubbed his wrist on Greg’s lips, sighing and muttering ‘drama queen’ when he had to prick his finger with a fang and stick it in Greg’s mouth to get a response.

“This is the cute part. Which is truly astonishing since it’s Greg.”

Lifting Greg’s upper lip for Mycroft to get a better view, Marcus had his first laugh of the day hearing Mycroft’s loud gasp when Greg’s own pointed canines descended.

“Gregory is a vampire?”

“Uhhh… no. At least, not permanently or very much at all, because who would want that? Him moaning about not prancing about in the sunshine to bake to a golden brown? Not me. Though he does do the tanned look justice, I have to confess. Have him show you his holiday snaps from Spain for proof. It wasn’t actually a holiday, of course, he was reminding a coven of witches that weather spells might seem a lark but farmers got a bit tetchy when their crops were withering on the vine and fuck seeing apricot prices rise because they wanted to show off their cauldron stirring technique, but he got a day on the beach for his trouble before coming back to dreary London, so that was a plus. Anyway, behold!”

This time, pressing his wrist against Greg’s lips gained Marcus the reward of Greg latching on and starting what was effectively his hourly feeding.

“Now, isn’t that the most adorable thing? He’s like an old, wrinkled, fashion disaster of a baby.”

“I… I thought you were unaware of the healing properties of vampire blood?”

“For the vanilla crowd, yes. But that’s not Greg. To be fair, this wouldn’t work on anyone but him because…”

The light went on in Mycroft’s brain and he was very unsure if he was glad for it or not.

“Your marital status.”

“Precisely. There are a lot of reasons we did that, not because we were drunk and it seemed a good idea at the time. Lots of benefits for us both that… well, they’re handy things, to say the least. This one… I wish it wasn’t necessary, though.”

“How…”

“Is it done? Where did his little teeth come from?”

“For a start.”

“Part of the wedding ritual, a massive part of it actually is magical in nature. There’s a bit of… an extended loan of certain aspects of our individual magics and energies. Each of us gets a bit of this and a bit of that from the other.”

“Is that… is that partly why you must… renew your vows periodically?”

The taste on his tongue was not nearly as sour as Mycroft expected.
“Yes, it is. Honestly, and don’t tell Greg this because he truly thinks he’s all that and a bag of crisps, but I’d be as happy as him if that wasn’t wholly necessary. Now, don’t get me wrong, I’m always up for a good shag, but I’d rather have it be because the sexy factor is running high and in both directions at the moment than an ‘Oh, is it that time again? Well, get your kit off and let’s be at it, I’ve got drinks at ten with some friends and I’d rather not be late.’ You know how it is.”

No, Mycroft didn’t, but he suspected it wasn’t as casual and nonchalant a thing as Marcus was indicating. Probably for his own peace of mind, which was rather… charitable of the vampire.

“Is it possible for me… for Gregory and I…”

“Ummmm… not really. At least, not for this specific reason. Vampires heal and do it well. He’s sucking up my extremely high-quality blood and getting that particular gift from it through whatever magical rigamarole that whole wedding business set in motion. Since you can’t heal like that, you couldn’t pass along the ability, even with magic rigamarole on your side. That’s not to say he couldn’t get other things from you, like a tasty meal, but he’d need me to get his teeny fangs in motion, sorry to say. That being said… you do have your own very intriguing aura and, I suspect, some highly fascinating things to offer. There’s no rule against one round of rigamarole rolling aside another, so you have my blessing for whenever you two finally stop making heart eyes and take all this to the altar. The party afterwards is absolutely wild, so schedule a recovery day or eight afterwards.”

There was something oddly steadying about the vampire’s nonsense for which Mycroft was grateful, though he was determined not to show it in the slightest. Appearances must be maintained for some extremely critical reason that was eluding him at the moment.

“In fact… why don’t you give him a little nibble now? He’ll do this forever if I let him, but even I need a break to do whatever it is that makes new blood and I could honestly use a shower. Sebastian helped me get this hungry baby cleaned up while Beardy Sorcerer got the bedding changed and burned, but I could use another scrub to get his blood out of some rather interesting places. Remind Greg at some point that he needs a new mattress but we flipped this one so the blood stain is on the bottom for now and it’s, at least, usable. Balthazar can have a few licks if wants of that tasty, gory goodness. While I’m up and moving, I’ll see what Greg has in the larder for a sandwich and you can feed his fat face while I tend to that. It’ll help him, if you’re worried. Not much in the way of direct physical healing, but… first, it’s just food and second… his whole self was destroyed by the shit who taught that Damian kid how to be creepy and wrong. His essence has to be repaired, too, and I suspect a nice drink from his snuggie-wuggie would actually be helpful for that.”

Mycroft thought a moment, then sloughed off his jacket, unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeve…

“Sleeve garters? You’re fucking kidding me.”

“I take no fashion advice from a man who is naked.”

“Ok, fair enough. I’ll leave it for when I’ve got something on. Which I have to find, since my jim-jams got binned and Greg’s clothes are so irredeemably boring. However, I will prevail…”

Mycroft looked deeply into his heart but honestly could not find any jealously for the small kiss Marcus laid on Greg’s cheek after removing his wrist from Greg’s mouth. He could, however, find honest amusement from Greg’s continued attempts to feed which looked exactly like he imagined would a baby’s when its bottle was withdrawn without its prior approval. Quickly sitting in Marcus’s vacated space, Mycroft placed his own wrist against Greg’s mouth and winced, with an odd delight, when Greg’s fangs sank in for the sorcerer to continue feeding. Not that he’d worried
that his own offering might prove inadequate... though he had... but watching Greg contentedly continue feeding settled something in him that was warm and fulfilling. If any drop of his blood helped his dear Gregory, then he would have that drop and all others he required. Without them, however, would Gregory be in a fit state to listen to his rather Armageddon-bringing lecture on the subject of being a complete and utter berk? Possibly not and that was a lecture his beloved would hear, with paper provided for the taking of notes...

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"Whoof, Mycroft... you're pale as a sheet. Told you he was a greedy thing."

Yes, not feeling particularly capable of summoning Armageddon at the moment, regardless of the quantity of lecture notes prepared for that very thing.

"Thank you, Marcus. I... I was simply unsure whether I should..."

"Stop shoving proverbial chips into his mouth? Go ahead and turn off the tap; he's more than had enough."

Mycroft gently disengaged his wrist from Greg's mouth and smiled softly at the pouty face he received as a reward.

"In this condition, he'll feed as long as there's a spigot available. I try and see him with something in his system regularly so he doesn't get too low on resources, but I've got highly-practiced and plentiful reserves."

"For how long?"

"Will he need this? The need part I'm not entirely certain of, but I usually keep at it until he's showing a little more responsiveness and his injuries are fairly well healed. I'd say I'll be able to see my own lovely bed by sunrise easily enough."

"Might I ask... why did you not perform this service when he was last injured?"

"Oh, for a reason you can probably guess, being someone I just know loves those wonderfully-sordid vampire films."

"I have no idea, though..."

Actually, he might.

"... could Gregory become a vampire? A true one, not an... extended loan version?"

"See? All that time watching vamp porn served you well! It's not easy to turn someone, don't get me wrong, but Greg's... partly turned, in a manner of speaking, and doing this too often would definitely tip him over the edge. He can heal himself well enough on his own for most things, but... this much physical damage would require far more of his own energy than he had left. And that's only the physical bit. Getting his energy, soul, spirit, whatever you want to call it, back in order is an entirely different matter. A good bit of this, including the cozy nuzzling, helps with that immensely. Part of that is specific-to-me magical, I'm afraid, but part of it isn't, so when I've toddled off to leave him in your capable hands, keep the cozy nuzzling going. Sit close on the sofa, hold his hand, sleep close to him, preferably with a lot of body contact. He'll rebound much more quickly than if he's left to his own devices."

"He can... access me, somehow?"
“I don’t even want to know what you think that means. Or maybe I do if it’s delightfully filthy. In any case, what I mean is that you have a strong connection with him and your own elements of power that he can draw from. Besides, anyone in this deplorable condition benefits from some loving contact, wouldn’t you say?”

Before Gregory, he would have ardently debated against that point, however…

‘Yes, I understand. Very well, then…”

Marcus saw the clear indecision in Mycroft’s eyes and made mental note to actually make some sort of plan for when this happened again so that Mycroft was clearly included with a tangible role to keep him from feeling so pitifully on the edge of things. He was a good sort, all things considered, for a meddling misery who could don a bald cap and be mistaken for his uncle, and Greg had best get this type of thing sorted quickly because his idiotic self would trod this path again and Mycroft here shouldn’t feel he was being shut out.

“It’s up to you what you’d like to do now. If you were a bit more…”

Marcus waggled his eyebrows suggestively and grinned at Mycroft’s loud snort.

“… I’d say climb in and join us. I’m going to pass the time with a bit of music you’ll likely despise, but I have an impressive collection of this and that, if I do say so myself, and we can likely find a compromise. Or, you can get some rest yourself and we can have a changing of the guard, say, a bit before dawn. You could, I suppose, have a turn behind the till and give John the opportunity to go home and shag that brother of yours, but I suspect your tolerance for customer service is on the level of mine, which hovers right at ‘No Fucking Way.’ I could be wrong, though.”

“I think I shall avoid the third option, thank you. Gregory… you are sufficiently provided to tend to him?”

“Since all I’m doing is being a layabout, absolutely. Greg’s past the point where I’m attached to him like one of those ghastly balls on a chain, so getting a bite to eat and such isn’t a problem.”

“I… I cannot believe I am asking this but… do you require more than standard food before I depart?”

It was so very much his nature to make merry with that question, but even Marcus knew when it was best to keep his amazing and inspired sense of humor in check.

“I’m fine for that, but I appreciate the offer. Besides, you probably need a bit of feeding yourself and a spot of rest before you’d be ready to… donate… again.”

Mycroft made very certain his sigh of relief was in no manner visible because, in truth, his dearest had been delightfully gluttonous dining on his exceptionally high-quality blood and both food and a small nap sounded like music to his ears.

“Then I shall return pre-dawn and uptake the caregiving duties. Will he be awake at that time?”

“No idea. Regardless, I suspect he’ll have enough subconscious awareness to know you’re here with him.”

Lies did not walk past Mycroft Holmes unnoticed, so this one was spotted immediately, but he appreciated the sentiment, nonetheless. When his inanity and childishness was set aside, Marcus
Varnas was not an entirely wearying individual. That, however, would never be spoken aloud.

“A welcome thing to know. If I am required, simply phone. I sleep lightly and will wake immediately.”

“I will. Alright, Greggie, you utter pillock, here I come. We’ll get you washed up again, too, I think, before your boyfriend takes over. Hate to have my manly scent reminding him of the gorgeous time he and I could have had while you slept off your stupidity.”

Rolling his eyes, Mycroft found himself walking out of Greg’s bedroom feeling... calm. Confident that his lover was being given the proper care and that the only further item required to bring about his recovery was time. It did not even particularly rankle that he could not do more to give aide because his overwhelming urge to do something had been quenched by the fact that something was being done and it was the solution of most benefit for the man who held his heart. It was not a solution in which he had a role, at present, but would soon, and he would take that role seriously and with utmost attention.

And, when his Gregory was awake and stronger, he would pour out every mote of fear, anger and bewilderment, as well as his sense of helplessness at the idea of this occurring again and Marcus being somehow unavailable to race to his lover’s side and preserve his life.

“Psst... human. Over here.”

Mycroft blinked away his thoughts and focused on Balthazar who was huddled strangely behind Greg’s sofa.

“Whatever are you doing, cat?”

“How’s Greg?”

“From what I gather, past the point of frantic worry.”

“Good. The leech is useless for everything but being a kebab shop for Greg when he’s gone and let himself be slaughtered, but he does seem to make a tasty kebab, all things considered.”

“I was somewhat surprised not to find you curled upon Gregory’s body proclaiming you were the ultimate source of healing power for his battered frame.”

“Yeah, well... I was busy.”

“Busy?”

“Look, Mr. Suit... got somewhere we can talk?”

Cats, by nature, were shifty-eyed, but Balthazar was currently taking that to the extreme, putting Mycroft’s senses on high alert.

“My home?”

“That works. We’ve got a situation. It’s not a good one.”

“It appears to be the day for them.”

Balthazar darted down the stairs with Mycroft following more slowly, which allowed him to be intercepted by Sherlock.
“Lestrade?”

“Progressing nicely. I shall relieve Marcus before dawn and continue to see Gregory is properly cared for.”

“Y… you are leaving?”

Sherlock’s astonishment was amusing, but also gladdening for it was another display of his baby brother’s endearingly large heart.

“There is nothing I can do to assist, therefore…”

“A disgustingly naked vampire is clinging to your lover like a groping vine and you simply walk away?”

“A uniquely-qualified purveyor of the appropriate magic is working to heal Gregory from his experience, no different that if a surgeon was performing his work in an operating theatre.”

“You would not leave then, and you are well aware of that fact. You would remain and observe the procedure.”

“Perhaps. However, there is little threat here of malpractice beyond Marcus stretching flamboyantly and spilling Gregory onto the bedroom rug.”

Mycroft had often been subject to his brother’s scrutiny, and this episode was of the most intense variety.

“You truly are not jealous.”

Surprisingly, no. Marcus was remarkably cogent in describing the situation, including providing suggestions for my own actions to facilitate Gregory’s healing. Further, he was rather blasé about the entire matter, more so than if he was affecting his casually-bohemian façade. It was unexpectedly effective in quelling any jealousy on my part. I shall, however, discuss the matter more fully with Gregory and gain a stronger sense of things and what additional supports might be of help should this arise again.”

“John indicated this was a relatively rare occurrence. If… if that is meaningful to you.”

“It is, brother, thank you. For now, what are your intentions for the evening?”

“John refuses to relinquish his servitude to assist me with a case, so I shall have to postpone that initiative until tomorrow morning. I have not settled on an alternative plan.”

“I, apparently, am to conference with a cat. Care to join me?”

“For what purpose?”

“I have no idea, but… the matter seems of some importance.”

“Very well. But my standard consulting fee applies.”

“Naturally. Submit your invoice to Anthea at your earliest convenience.”

“She bins them!”

“How unprofessional. You should file a complaint with her employer.”
Smirking at Sherlock’s scowl, Mycroft continued down to the workshop and morphed his smirk into a genuine smile, hearing Sherlock’s footsteps following behind him. Gregory’s magical gift was certainly proving handy as he would be home in moments, where a much-needed nibble awaited in addition to the proper atmosphere for a conversation seemingly in need of privacy. What the cat might possibly want was utterly unpredictable, but he highly doubted Balthazar would make this request lightly.

And, it would serve to occupy his mind until it was time to partake of some sleep before he returned in the morning. Though… if he paid a small visit before retiring to further calm his worries, there was no harm to be done by it…
Chapter 50

“Uggghhhhh…”

Mycroft smiled gently and continued to stroke Greg’s hair as the sorcerer showed the first signs of waking. It had been a fairly easy thing to work from home, proverbially, using the vast wonders of modern technology to continually coordinate with his PA while his physical self remained with his dear Gregory, pressed close against him in the tiny bed. Though he had no concrete idea when the sorcerer might wake, it was concerning that it didn’t seem to be happening until now, over 30 hours after he had suffered injury.

“Gregory? Are you contemplating gracing me the sight of your lovely eyes?”

“Hvta?”

“No, you do not have to, it is not a requirement, however, it would put my mind further at ease that you are recovering properly from your trauma.”

“Lllngr.”

“Very well, you may keep them close a little longer. I shall use the time to notify Marcus that you are waking, which will put his mind more at ease. And quash further irritation of my PA who is having to hear his increasingly-exaggerated stories of charity and valiant self-sacrifice for lounging in bed all day with you. She is, of course, blaming the situation on me and fining me fifty pounds for her inconvenience. The original fine was double that amount, but I exchanged hard currency for her arriving an hour late to work tomorrow so she might… fully enjoy the evening with her irritating vampire suitor.”

“Shree?”

“You should be sorry for she is the one to bring my first cup of tea in the morning and I, now, shall have to undertake that burden myself.”

“dhrdhr…”

Mycroft stifled a laugh at Greg’s partially conscious ‘there there’ and attempt to pat his leg with a finger. On the good side, words were being correctly processed and appropriate responses made, in a fashion.

“Might you desire some tea? Or coffee?”

Greg’s slowly returning brain applied some simple maths to connect the terms ‘tea’ and ‘coffee’ to the concept of alertness and weighed the costs and benefits of achieving that particular state of mind. It was a highly fraught battle, but the pro-alertness faction emerged victorious.

“…kfee?”

“Coffee it shall be, then. Let me prepare for you a cup.”

Of course, given you have now rolled onto your side and are attempting to cuddle me like a plush bear, the task shall be a difficult one.

“Gregory, I must rise if I am to obtain your beverage.”
“Nuh.”

“I have not your magical gifts, Gregory Lestrade, and must accomplish your coffee preparation with my physical hands and not spectral ones I summon for the task.”

Mycroft noticed the small flinch at the word ‘summon’ and felt his heart break for the man at his side.

“I shall be but a moment and you may use the time to gain a tad more rest before you fully return to me.”

Doing a slow slide and disentangle maneuver, Mycroft gradually made his way off the bed, not entirely convinced that the left-behind splayed body of his lover was so arranged solely due to exhaustion and lack of mental clarity. His Gregory could be such a scamp at times…

The likelihood of scampishness was bolstered by Mycroft’s return to the bedroom to find Greg laying on his back again stretching his arms upwards as if testing their function.

“How are they feeling?”

“Hmmmm? Stiff.”

“To be expected. Can you sit up? Drinking coffee in your current position is courting a scalding measure of disaster.”

Greg turned his head towards Mycroft’s voice and made a pouty-baby face that Mycroft remembered well from his large baby being denied his human bottle. Perhaps… perhaps it was time for a tactic of some shameful ruthlessness…

“If you will sit up and sip your coffee… I shall wait to inquire about exactly what brought you to this rather distressing state.”

The pouty-baby face vanished immediately and Greg made to budge up in the bed, then stopped and slid back down.

“Gregory?”

“Let me try something first.”

The serious tone in Greg’s voice gave Mycroft pause, but he waited silently for his lover to act, which seemed to be no more than a cracking of his eyes, then a quick shutting of them again.

“Ok… um… can you set the coffee aside.”

“Gregory? I am now highly concerned. Should I phone John? He is almost due to arrive in any case and…”

“No… no, it’s not a medical issue. It’s… I can’t say I wasn’t expecting it, but I wasn’t expecting it and… just give me a moment.”

Mol’godon… you fucker. You knew this would happen…

“Gregory?”

Greg cracked his eyes again and, this time, turned his head towards Mycroft which… helped. But also didn’t.
“You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you, but that is not particularly relevant at the moment.”

But, it was. His Mycroft was indescribably beautiful. He’d thought he could see the man’s aura before, but he’d been wrong. So terribly, terribly wrong… this mesmerizing display of color and light… swirling, glowing, radiating a jaw-dropping beauty that defied words. Defied all possible description.

“Gregory? What is wrong?”

“Nothing. Not really. Just, can I stare at you awhile?”

“I am phoning John.”

“I’m fine. I really am. It’s just…”

Greg realized that down this road lay The Conversation, but couldn’t really see a way around it. Especially since he might need Mycroft’s help for a bit until he learned to control this fucking poison pill Mr. Evil had seen fit to give him. The fact he asked for it specifically was entirely irrelevant for the purposes of this mental discussion.

“… part of what I got from my little… adventure… was a bit of new sight and I just need to work on controlling it. Shouldn’t take long! Hopefully. Just have to fathom out how to shut it off when not in use, but it doesn’t hurt or anything, just… ooooh… you’ve got grabbies…”

Greg reaching out with clutching hands confused Mycroft even further but Greg was already lost in the transfixing sight of Mycroft’s aura reaching forth to test his words, seeking lies and half-truths. Of course, it always did that, but now he could see the details such as long filaments of energy floating about giving a tiny touch to each of his words to sense their intention before sending them on their way.

“Gregory Lestrade… I am extremely worried about you at the moment and veering off into what appears to be a hallucination is not deescalating that worry one tiny bit.”

“No hallucination, just… seeing your aura. Really seeing it. That color there… I don’t think it exists…”

Recognizing that something drastic might be required to regain his lover’s attention, Mycroft set down Greg’s coffee, then stood straight and focused on the fear, anger and confusion he’d experienced with the sorcerer’s so-called adventure, letting it flow through him unchecked. When Greg shrieked in terror and dove off the bed, he patted himself on the back for a job well done.

“Now, is your trance broken or shall I…”

“NO! No, it’s… you have no idea how bloody hard it is to look at… ok, closing my eyes again so I can concentrate. Now… where’s the bed?”

Mycroft sighed and walked around to take Greg’s hand and escorted him back to bed, first plumping a pillow and arranging it so Greg could sit upright.

“There. Now… behave.”

“Yes, headmaster.”
“Amusing.”

“It really wasn’t. That was terrifying!”

“Good. Now, kindly report on your physical condition. That little incident should give you some information about your current status.”

“Ummm… it’s not bad, actually. A bit stiff, like I said… general aches and pains but nothing sharp or stabbing, so that’s a plus. I’d say I’ll be fine by… what time is it?”

“A better question is what day is it. It is now evening of the day after your foolishness.”

“I was out that long? Shit… can’t say I’m surprised because I…”

“Did not adequately prepare?”

“Basically. There’s nothing I can do to make it any less… murder… but there are things I can put in place to make the recovery time a little shorter. You’re mad at me about that, aren’t you?”

“I am angry with you about many things at present but that is one of them, yes.”

“Yeah… ok. You have a right to be.”

“Yes, I do. I gained some small understanding of matters from Marcus, but certainly not enough for my liking. However, it was more than sufficient to know you behaved most rashly and without any forethought.”

“And I won’t disagree. Got a thought in my head and started on with it before… well, before I could have changed my mind.”

“Which would have been preferable.”

“Not necessarily. Done sooner or later, the outcome would have been the same, in terms of me being…”

“Flayed alive?”

“Not the worst description of it. But later wouldn’t have given me what I now know is the time I need to get this new magic under control. Ultimately, it was for the better, but waiting a day to talk to you about it wouldn’t have been the end of the world and I’m sorry for that. I truly am.”

Mycroft braced himself, then considered how far to push his lover at the moment. It was clear his Gregory was still weak, so a full-frontal assault was not in anyone’s best interest, but a small bit of pushing was certainly not amiss. If only to gauge whether additional information might be laid on the sorcerer’s shoulders…

“What is this new magic you have acquired?”

“It’s a handy thing. Let’s you see what’s normally not seen. I can already do a bit of that, seeing auras, ghosts and the like, but this lets you get to things intentionally hidden or naturally not visible by our eyes. If Magnussen has protective spells for his house, they’ll likely be invisible to the naked eye and, though there are spells to detect them, those could tip him off if we try to go inside while he’s at home. Objects, too. Things, for example, not made by humans, so they were never intended for us to see.”

“That is now visible to you?”
“Yep. Apparently, though, since I’m… I hate saying I’m powerful because it sounds arrogant as fuck, but because I’m as powerful as I am, it’s… apparently, I’m going to be able to see a LOT. It’s a bit overwhelming right now, to be honest, but I should be able to control it. Just takes learning the right method and practicing.”

“As with Charles and his eyes?”

“That’s a good example, yes. It’s not unusual, really, just for old bastards like me who are long past the days of discovering new talents.”

“Is that all you obtained?”

“Uhh… no. Got some information. The… chap… I spoke to said Magnussen tried to cut his own deals with that lot, but couldn’t. They always want something in return, always, and he didn’t have enough personal power to make… what happened to me… worthwhile and wouldn’t give up any of his little trinkets, which were giving him a lot of the power he does have. That doesn’t mean he have lower-power help on his side, but the truly big guns gave him the sailor’s elbow. And… his toys are key. If we can separate him from them, then our chances of ending this successfully go up immensely.”

“Interesting. And encouraging. Information is always a helpful thing…”

Greg peeked at Mycroft and saw what he expected to see. His lover’s aura was nearly making wrist-flicks at him because it knew there was something he was holding back. Couldn’t you be stupid just this once, love? Is it too much to ask?

“And… I got a… consider it an Ultimate Weapon, if you will. The sort of thing you never want to use, but it’s there as the final, no hope left, tool of last resort.”

“It… you are safe employing it, I assume.”

“Oh yes. I’m perfectly safe, so if it accidentally annihilates everybody I know and love I get to live on with the guilt. Not that it’s going to happen, that’s just me being negative. But… I can’t guarantee there’ll be zero collateral damage so… what’s a word I’d never say in a thousand years?”

“I have no idea.”

“Think of a word I’d have no reason to use. Something specific that wouldn’t cross my path for love nor money.”

“I… agathokakological?”

“What?”

“It means composed of both good and evil.”

“Oh. That’s a good one. Long though, so if I’m yelling it at you and muck it up… here’s the new rule. If I yell that at you, or something that you know is me trying to say that but made a fool of myself, start running. Don’t ask me why, don’t stop to finish what you’re doing, don’t wait for me, run like your very life depends on it, because it will. Understand?”

“I understand, but I am not particularly happy about this.”

“I know but, like I said, it’s a last-ditch failsafe.”
“Very well. Is there anything else I should know?”

“Ummmm…”

Fuck you all-knowing aura! Stop bullying me!

“….. yeah.”

“Very well.”

“It’s… it’s like this. I got some good stuff from this little, call it a meeting and, pretty shockingly, I got the sight boost as a lifetime grant, not a limited-time offer, which is usually how things go.”

“I see. What else has been asked of you, Gregory?”

I hate you Mycroft aura. You’re the most gorgeous thing in the world and I hate you like fucking Marmite.

“I have to do my evil friend there… a favor.”

“Which is?”

“I… don’t know.”

“Pardon?”

I swear those aura tendrils are all throwing up their hands in disgust. Except for that one that’s making a rude gesture and the other two which are doing a strangely motion aimed at my neck. Wonderful.

“I had to promise a favor, to be called in later, but I don’t know what it is.”

“That is…”

“Oh, sod off exasperated aura!”

“Gregory?”

“I didn’t mean to say that out loud. I really didn’t. Bad me.”

“Gregory… I have rather extensive experience in negotiating bargains and one thing you do not do is agree to an unspecified… favor.”

“I know. But I got assurances! Not as dumb as all that, but close, I admit. It won’t cross any of my genuine moral lines in the sand and I even got a guarantee in writing! In stone, actually, but there was writing on it. Bit of magic to ensure that if the favor is one that crosses the line, Mol’godon pays a penalty and I don’t have to do it. If it doesn’t, then I follow through.”

“Hmmmm… that is the most minimum of reassurances and gaping wide for avenues for exploitation.”

“Yeah and it’s part of the reason, now, I think he gave me the sight in perpetuity. Make me feel a bit guilty and nudge one of my red lines over a bit. It won’t work, though, because I know the sort of rubbish that twisted villain delights in, but it does say that whatever this is, it’s important and… that may mean he really doesn’t want it mucked up. He wants it done and… if it wasn’t
something I’d do I don’t think he’d want me to be the one doing it.”

Ah ha! See, exasperated aura… I’m not quite a novice at this, you know.

“And is this the only payment this creature demanded for its services?”

Ok, maybe this next bit will make you think I am an utter novice, but I really did negotiate! I could probably use lessons in that, though.

“Noooo…”

“Oh dear…”

“I have to… visit… again seven times in the next five years, in addition to whatever visits I might need for something actually important.”

“GREGORY!”

Greg was off the bed again, this time racing for the door because every fight or flight instinct hit full force at the thunderous explosion of Mycroft’s aura. With the flight instincts winning by a very large margin.

“Come back here, Gregory Lestrade! You cannot run from your lunacy!”

The patrons of Greg’s shop wondered if it was some form of theatre when a shirtless Greg came running through with barefooted Mycroft hot on his heels, but they applauded to be polite.

“Gregory, you will cease this nonsense and return to bed!”

“No! You’re going to eat me!”

At least four people on the pavement within earshot didn’t really see the problem here, but decided there was more to the story than met the eye. Though what met the eye wasn’t terrible to look at, in any case…

“Gregory, you will cause yourself harm!”

Greg was about to say something concerning evil, angry auras and the nature of doing harm, but his physical senses finally caught up with his mental ones and he realized he’d been running with his eyes closed. Which was somewhat ego inflating until he actually opened them.

“Gregory!”

Mycroft raced forward with a surprising burst of speed and took hold of the sorcerer who had shouted, not in pain but with his vision being completely overwhelmed, and quickly walked the trembling man back to the shop, muttering soothing words and quiet reassurances until they were back in Greg’s flat.

“Be calm, Gregory, be calm. Here, return to bed and I shall bring you a drink of water.”

Greg sat propped up in bed, breathing heavily and happily drank the cool water Mycroft brought in a very large glass.

“Ok… maybe I have gone a bit loony.”

“I would say we have learned your physical condition is markedly improved and that you will
have little on your plate for the time being except working to control this new talent.”

“That was not fun.”

“No, it was not. Running, Gregory… I am most cross with you.”

“I’m cross with myself! That was dumb. But you… you big scary man!”

“Good heavens…”

Mycroft ran his hand through Greg’s hair and suspected that his lover’s emotional stability might still need a bit more recovery time in a safe, comforting place.

“… let us simply relax for a bit, shall we? We may talk of these matters further when you are more rested.”

Laughing softly, Greg reached up to take Mycroft’s hand and lowered it for a kiss.

“Big scary man very good to big dumb me.”

“Now and again I strive for compassion. How fortunate you were nearby when my latest urge manifested.”

Greg laughed again and took a deep, cleansing breath. His stupid run for his life did prove he was very well along in physical recovery and, it seemed, Mycroft knew Marcus played a role in that. Knowing Mycroft, he knew very well what role Marcus played in that because there was a chance of naught he hadn’t come here at his first opportunity to check on this old sorcerer’s latest stroke of brilliance. Maybe… well, you never knew until you asked.

“Mycroft?”

“Yes?”

“Are we… ok?”

The pithy response Mycroft had ready was refiled to use at some later date because Greg’s tone had been a touch… telling.

“Are you referring to Marcus?”

“Yeah.”

“Then yes, we are, as you say, ok. I witnessed his naked nursing while you were incapacitated and my only concern was that he was providing you with the care and support you required. And, he helpfully provided me with suggestions for when I took over the role of caregiver. A truly ludicrous individual in an abundance of ways but I cannot fault him for his dedication to his duties towards you and the diligence with which he performs them.”

“Good. I’m glad you’ve seen the full spectrum of his and my usual relationship which, most commonly, is fairly ludicrous but no more so than mine with, say, Sebastian, and far, far more rarely, is something a little different, but still not romantic or anything like what you and I have.”

Though, Greg realized, with his new bargain with Mol’godon, naked nursing would be far more frequent for the next five years. He needed to talk to Anthea about good gift ideas for the man whose aura was going to be giving him rude gestures in abundance.
“Your world is most complex, Gregory, with many norms I have yet to fully understand, but I am making progress. And I am most enamored of your rather cute fangs. Terribly adorable, I must say.”

“You saw them! Oh, that’s deflating. Undercuts my manly-man image completely.”

“You were utterly precious having your meal; no baby exists with a more endearing feeding pout when your food provider denied you your snack. I was terribly surprised by just how much you could drink! Marcus termed you a greedy baby and I find absolutely no reason to challenge his description. Verily, I was in great need of a few biscuits and a spot of juice when you had drained me of my life’s essence.”

“I drank you!”

“That you did. Here, behold the proof. I did not request Marcus tend to these because… well, I have suffered enough vampire saliva to last a lifetime.”

Mycroft unbuttoned his sleeve and pushed it up for Greg to see the puncture marks on his wrist.

“Sorry about that. The marks I mean. They will heal faster than, say, stabs with a knife because I do…. sort of kind of in a way have vampire spit when I’m doing that and that’ll help. I can’t believe you let me drink you, though. I appreciate it!”

“It was an intriguing experience, I must say. And you are a very greedy baby, indeed.”

Though Mycroft’s smile said he was actually highly fond of greedy babies, which pleased Greg to no end. Especially with his lover’s aura making slightly petting motions in his direction as if he was a highly indulged and pampered housecat.

“As Marcus loves to remind me.”

“And… you are certain there is no manner in which I could perform that action without his assistance? I was most concerned once he departed that you were not obtaining the nourishment you required for healing.”

“I… to be honest, I don’t think so, but I’ve never researched it. There might be some way I could extend his… presence… in sense, that you could activate, at least for some amount of time. I’ll start on that as soon as I can, though, I won’t be able to make you swap places with him. That bit isn’t something that can change.”

“And I would not ask you to do such a thing. But, even a few additional hours of support could only benefit your health, especially given you insist on risking it in such a blatant and frequent fashion. Seven encounters with that repugnant fiend, Gregory… already my heart aches fiercely for your pain.”

“It’s survivable. Actually, it’s intended to be that way. Can’t keep having fun if your toys are dead. Old Mol knows how much to give you because he knows exactly how much you can see healed, either by yourself or with help.”

“And if the help is unavailable?”

“Then… oops?”

“Gregory Lestrade… how childish.”
“It’s actually not because that would be a major mistake on my part and only one I’d make purely by accident. I… this is my life, love. I’ve lived it a long time and deal with this sort of thing, though not quite this horrid, with what can only be called regularity. I know what I’m doing, as scary and unimpressive as it might seem at times.”

Now it was Mycroft’s turn to laugh softly and he marveled at the fact that he had actually found someone whose life was on par with his own for dastardly, dangerous and dispiriting circumstances. However, one could not deny the various joys and satisfactions that rode along with them…

“Your point is made and one I understand well.”

“Speaking of… what’s been happening while I was greedily being a baby? Anything I should know about?”

“You require rest, Gregory.”

“Ok, that was a yes. Let’s hear it.”

“Very well… Jim approached Balthazar to turn his allegiance in Magnussen’s direction.”

“Oh. Was that a real approach or something to help with his own cover?”

“Balthazar believed it was sincere, but he conceded it could be part of the overall scheme, simply in a manner Jim did not see fit to share. Apparently, Magnussen first desired Moriarty conscript Sebastian then, when he was deflected from that idea, he focused his attention on Balthazar. From the cat’s report, Magnussen was able to morph our weasel back into a person and claimed he could do the same for Balthazar if he was amenable to joining forces.”

“Hmmmm… it’s possible, given the boost he’s getting from the objects he’s collected. Did Jim stay that way?”

“No, he was returned to weasel form in an instant.”

“Oh, then the question is whether it’s a flash spell or a permanent one, though…”

“Flash spell?”

“One that only lasts a moment or two. That can be enough, depending on what you need to do, but it can also be used to prove a point. The question is whether or not what you’re proving is true or not.”

“Ah, so he might be able to restore Balthazar and Jim for no longer than a heartbeat.”

“Basically. I think we should assume, until shown otherwise, that he can and is telling the truth. Better plan for the worst than for the best.”

“Very true. And Jim?”

“I don’t know… I don’t know about Balthazar, either. That’s a tempting offer and he is a bit of a shit, so it could be tempting enough. I didn’t expect this, I admit.”

“I did, to some extent. At least as far as our weasel betraying us and potentially betraying us through divulging truly damaging information or stealing materials from you to pass to Magnussen. Though Petras and I did discuss the potential for recruiting further allies, we did not
see a tangible benefit which could be offered to, shall we say, sweeten the pot.”

“Ideas for how we handle it?”

“Some. This is not an atypical strategy, surprisingly, and there are countermeasures to implement. The questionable element is Balthazar. Though he divulged this information to me, and willingly, at that, it is also not atypical for a compromised asset to present as one notifying you of their attempted compromise.”

“Thinking they’ll divert suspicion by telling you someone tried to get them to betray you.”

“Precisely.”

“Countermeasures?”

“Naturally.”

“Which are we going to use?”

“I will have to reflect further on the matter. Each is accompanied by its own set of risks and one must be certain they do not exceed our threshold of acceptability.”

“We have one of those?”

“That we do.”

“Ok, then. This situation is clearly in the proper hands.”

“Unquestionably. However, we do have the matter of your eyes, which shall render you somewhat unavailable for the unforeseeable future.”

“No… only a few days, at most, I suspect. Besides, when the Scooby Gang hears about this, they’re going to descend on me to make me miserable, so that’s a good time to talk strategy for going forward, so I’ll still be in the thick of things. Which… should be fast. The going forward, I mean.”

“I agree. Planning is good and proper, but we are rapidly approaching the point of direct action.”

The small knock on the bedroom door had Mycroft looking at Greg who shrugged and made a ‘why not’ gesture with his hands.

“Enter.”

Sighing loudly as Greg shrieked and rolled under the bed Mycroft glared at his driver who had stopped inside the door and decided remaining stationary was a prudent choice.

“Really, Charles?”

“What did I do, sir?”

“You are… you, apparently. Gregory, would you like to look upon Charles again and, perhaps, study him for future comparison with Goraseth to better understand Charles’s unique condition? That seems a rather productive use of your new talent.”

Greg’s muffled ‘that’s smart’ preceded him peeking his head over the edge of the mattress and
slowly cracking his eyes as he took in the enormity of the driver’s aura. Which had massive, majestic wings.

“Oooooooooooohhhhh…”

“Sir? Does Mr. Lestrade require medical assistance.”

“Shockingly, no. He is simply admiring your beauty.”

“I am very uncertain how to take that statement, sir.”

“Consider it a happy mystery, then. You are here because…”

“Your PA wanted these documents delivered tonight to prepare you for your mid-morning meeting tomorrow. One for which she insists you be present, despite any, as she phrased it, pathological urge to mollycoddle Mr. Lestrade.”

“Lovely. In any case, thank you, Charles. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, sir. I was asked by Marcus to ascertain Mr. Lestrade’s current status. And… any other matters of status you had to convey.”

“Pretty…”

Mycroft smiled indulgently at Greg who seemed a bit glassy-eyed as he stared at Charles and moved his head back and forth as if following some visual rhythm.

“Gregory is physically well and please pass along, again, my thanks to Mr. Varnas for his assistance in helping him achieve this state. We… we do have further information on several matters and shall likely be convening a meeting soon to discuss…”

“AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!”

Greg shouting and pointing at nothing in the doorway was met with resigned, somewhat confused silence by Mycroft and Charles, though Mycroft had his confusion clear first, having insider information on Greg’s new talent.

“Charles, did you, perchance, bring someone with you tonight? Who might be spying around the doorframe?”

“Spying is such a negative word, sir.”

“Mr. Drothtrosias, would you care to join us? Gregory, do prepare yourself.”

Greg physically braced himself by grabbing the bedframe and dragged the bed a solid pace backwards when Goraseth walked into the bedroom.

“Gregory is experiencing a condition of… enhanced sight, so individuals appear somewhat different than the norm.”

Given Greg was looking from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, it appeared the different from the norm also included aura size.

‘Oh, Greg, what little prize did you win for your Dance of the Knives?”

“Ooooooooooohhh….”
“Gregory, an answer please.”

Greg tore his eyes away to look at Mycroft and made a familiar pouty face until Goraseth repeated the question.

“Oh! Light of Other Eyes. Forever…”

“Shit. That’s impressive. And someone of your talent would… ha! You’re sense drunk! “

Mycroft looked to Greg for an answer, but he was back in his own little world of color and light, form and motion.

“Dear lord… would you be so kind as to clarify, Mr. Drothtrosias?”

“He’s seeing a lot more than his brain knows how to process. It’s like when you drink. Or at least when humans drink. A little isn’t a problem. A little more still isn’t. Too much and you’re pissing in the street and trying to either fight or fuck a postbox. Has he been a bit loony even with you?”

“Yes, actually. Quite… unusual, but only when he is looking directly at me.”

“Drunk. He’ll get over it, though, build a tolerance, so to speak.”

“Gregory spoke of learning to control this new ability.”

“That’s a slightly different thing. He’s likely meaning shut it down when he doesn’t need it because it’ll always be distracting, always show him far more than he needs to see to go about his day. But, his brain first needs to build the tolerance so he’s not doing this nonsense when he’s got it turned on. It’s not a problem for most sorcerers and other magical types because they’ve not got Greg’s level of power. Once he’s sorted, though… that’s a formidable gift he’s been given. I’m not going to ask what he’s had to do in return, but I’m sure it’s horrible.”

“Yes, it is. However, we shall focus on the positive. Pursuant to that, we are hoping to gather relevant parties soon to discuss new information and next steps.”

“Good idea. His Majesty the Elder will be happy to hear it, too. His favorite McDonalds gave him lukewarm chips yesterday and he’s very anti-London now because of it.”

Mycroft heard the flippant tone, but saw a different thing in the dragon’s eyes. The vampires were getting anxious and… yes, they should make their move soon before another move was made which was not quite so thought out and strategic.

“Then tomorrow night, if it is convenient.”

“It will be. Oh good…”

Mycroft snorted indignantly at Charles using his phone to video Greg’s drunken antics, but he would get a copy to set aside for those days when his own day could use a mood lifting.

“Here, watch this. Oh Greg…”

Mycroft watched Goraseth make the small motions with his throat that signaled he was singing and the effect on the sorcerer was immediate and profound. Greg looked like a cat seeing a rave’s worth of laser light and was happily trying to catch the notes which, apparently, were visible to him and extremely enticing.
“Hmmmm… well, I am happy that Gregory is enjoying himself, however, this most undignified.”

“True, but it’s giving me and will give him more idea of what his talent can do. Actually, I wasn’t sure if this would work. There are only a few documented cases in our records of anyone being able to see our song, but it’s always been very powerful sorcerers. Proves that Greg is in the elite class, that’s for certain. Not that he looks it. Or acts like it. Or smells particularly good.”

“He will be glad to know it, I am certain. When he is better capable of processing the information.”

“And on that note, we’ll take our leave. My advice, try to only have humans interact with him tonight and tomorrow, the less magical the better. By tomorrow night, he should be good for a vampire or werewolf, but pay attention for this silliness as he won’t really be paying attention to what you’re trying to discuss. Charles and I will stay out of sight or just skype in to participate. Which we will be doing. Any… any news on the egg?”

“It is alive and viable, that much we have confirmed.”

“Ok… good. I notified the… elders of my… clan… about the egg and they’re hurrying to find a way to send it back home once we rescue it. Greg may have to pitch in for that, but it’s imperative to get it back to its parents safely.”

“We shall do all that we can, do not doubt that for an instant.”

“I won’t. Enjoy the rest of your evening but remember, though, what I said about Greg and his tiny brain. Humans only around him, if possible.”

“I… does that include Balthazar?”

“Ummmmmm…. good question. Maybe not tonight, if possible, but try tomorrow and see how Greg responds. If he goes all gazing-at-a-lava-lamp-while-stoned, then kick the cat out.”

“I shall. Thank you.”

Goraseth nodded at Charles who put away his phone with its highly-valuable blackmail material.

“Anything else, Mr. Holmes?”

“Not tonight, I think, Charles.”

“Then I shall see you tomorrow morning, sir. Your residence or here?”

“My residence, please. I have a few things to collect.”

“Very good, sir.”

Watching the dragons leave, Mycroft counted the seconds before his lover shook off the effects of their presence. They amounted to… a lot.

“Gregory? Have you finally returned from your magical land?”

“Yeah… wow. Ok, that was… I can’t say it was not good, because it was fucking incredible, but that was more than slightly overwhelming.”

“Mr. Drothrosias seemed unconcerned, overall, having knowledge of your condition. He said,
in fact, it was strong evidence of your personal prowess as a sorcerer that you were so affected.”

“Dragons would know. They have a bit of extra sight naturally, more than many of the other magical types. He have anything useful to contribute?”

“Apparently, you shall accommodate to the… intensity… of the experience, but take a temperate approach to achieving it. Human contact only tonight and tomorrow, then you should be able to manage the vampire contingent and Sebastian for our meeting. The dragons will not physically attend, as that would remain too much for you at present.”

“A plan! I’ll phone Seth tomorrow and find out what more he knows and do my own bit of research.”

“Most prudent. And might you now be somewhat more able to resist the lure of my own enhanced charms than previously?”

Mycroft’s eyes twinkled and this aura followed suit, with a spray of tiny jeweled lights that enraptured Greg, but it stayed within his ability to retain focus.

“I might, at that. You’re still beautiful, though.”

“Thank you.”

“I saw… did I see dragon song?”

“That you did.”

“Definitely talking to Seth tomorrow. Think Sherlock will want to listen in and ask questions?”

“To learn more about magic? He shall be frothing at the mouth for the opportunity.”

“Good. I’d like to have someone on hand to ask…. smart questions. Scientifically smart, I mean. I’m going to write down what I learn about this ability and the more accurate and useful information I get, the better.”

“Gregory the scholar. It has a delightful ring to it.”

“That earn me a prize?”

“It does. Perhaps a tasty nibble of the non-sanguineous type?”

“Food! Oh god, yes. I could murder a plate of something hot and solid right now.”

“Then your wish is my command. Then, though you have been kept clean, a shower and fresh clothing?”

“Heaven. Actually, I’ll do that first while the food is magically appearing. Maybe… my favorite Chinese?”

“I shall place the call immediately.”

The immediately had to wait, however, as Mycroft’s mobile sounded and Greg’s eyes narrowed as he tried to see anything different about a ringing mobile and one that wasn’t ringing.

“Yes? I see… no, I have not. I agree. Very well, let me confer with Gregory. Yes, I will.”
Mycroft took a breath before turning to Greg, who was already alerted that something bad had happened by the shift in Mycroft’s aura.

“That was Anthea. Marcus stepped out for a bottle of wine over an hour ago out and has yet to return. She has tried his mobile but he is not answering.”

“Ok, that’s bad. Has she phoned Leo?”

“Not yet. She phoned here first, hoping he might be present. He is somewhat flighty and I suspect she hoped he simply became distracted by this matter or other.”

“Ok, step one, phone Leo. Step two…”

Step two was Anderson racing into the flat wearing a clearly panicked look on his face.

“Come on.”

Both Greg and Mycroft followed closely as Anderson bolted down to the workshop where Marcus lay on the floor, being checked over by John.

“I wanted to get a book, before I went to Sebastian’s flat. I thought I saw something in the alley. It was Marcus. Just crumpled on the ground like he’d been dumped there.”

Greg sucked in a sharp breath both to help push back the barrage of images flooding his vision from John, Anderson and the unconscious vampire, but didn’t need John to speak to know what had happened.

“He’s got the plague.”

John nodded and shrugged simultaneously.

“I’ve never seen it, but the symptoms fit.”

Greg turned away, with help from Mycroft and cursed softly under his breath.

“It’s starting.”

Mycroft ran through various calculations in his head, sifting through the likely versus the unlikely explanations for this bold act.

“Perhaps.”

“What do you mean, perhaps?”

“We need to know if others have been infected. If it is just Marcus, this could be a warning. An indication that Magnussen is aware of our intentions. Or… it could be something altogether different.”

“Like what?”

“If Marcus is the only one infected, then… consider Leonas’s state of mind should he have to order his son killed and burned to ensure the safety of their people.”

Greg blanched at the idea, but had to admit he couldn’t dismiss it out of hand. What a vile thing to do… but…
“Leo doesn’t do it and Magnussen leaks to the community that Marcus is infected, with his father endangering them all by keeping him alive. Leo does it and he’s… he’d be a broken man. He’d likely go berserk first and try to destroy Magnussen but he’d still have the plague sample, so… and he said he had the cure, though. Extortion? I save your son, you give me what I want?”

“There are a number of possibilities. First, though, how long can Marcus endure in this condition?”

“Awhile. It’s not fact acting. Symptoms show quickly, but it’s slow to worsen after that.”

“Then we have time for… I was going to say for Jim to gain further information on the situation, however…”

“Shit. Balthazar?”

“The probability of his loyalty is marginally higher.”

“Ok, then. First we see if he can get us something useful. Information, maybe even a sample of the cure. Then… we do what we have to do.”

John and Philip had been listening to the conversation and realized there was something going on they didn’t know about. And, frankly, they weren’t sure they wanted to.

“Then that is our course of action. I would advise notifying Leonas and Petras immediately, though caution them not to take action until we have some idea of where the cure is to be found. Or until we are at the point where… well, there are means to extract information from an unwilling individual. I am not confident how well they would work on someone magically inclined, but I am willing to try.”

“I’ll phone them now. And remind them not to race over here since… well, it’s rather obvious.”

“Fortunately, technology is our friend. We can, at least, ensure they can see and speak with him when he wakes.”

“They’ll need that or they’ll go insane. Ok, John we have work to do. The books we started photographing from British Library about possible ways to slow the progression of the plague... the photo prints are in that cabinet and I’ll get the originals from the library in case there was something we missed. Philip, can you watch the shop? I hate to ask, but…”

“I’d rather be here helping in some way than not. Besides, you might need me for something.”

“That’s true. Ok, you and John can trade off as necessary.”

Mycroft recognized he was the odd man out here and decided to remedy that particular condition.

“Then let me liaise with the vampires, my dear, while you begin your work. However…”

Motioning Greg away from the others, Mycroft did his best to observe every clue Greg was displaying for information about his health.

“Are you ready for this, Gregory. In strength and… presence of mind?”

“Maybe. Maybe not quite. Doesn’t matter, though. I’ll let John and Philip know what’s going
on with me and tell them to check that I’m staying on course, not being distracted by what I’m seeing.”

“Very well. My further concern is that… the plague cannot pass to humans, but how might your situation with Marcus impact your immunity? He indicated you were… partly turned and that has me gravely worried.”

Something that was not being helped by Greg staring stupefied at him, though not in the same fashion as when he was lost in the vision of his aura.

“I… yep, never thought about that. I don’t think it’s going to be a problem, though. There’s some truth to what he said, but it’s not quite as if I’m poised to flip over to becoming a creature of the night the next time I sneeze. I won’t say it’s not got me a little unsettled, now that I think about it, but it’s not going to stop me trying to help him.”

“I did not believe it would, I simply… if you can take precautions, Gregory, do so.”

“I will, I promise.”

Mycroft smiled, but it wasn’t his most brilliant and Greg didn’t need to see the worry and fear in his lover’s aura since he could see his pained expression the smile was trying to hide. But, as Mycroft walked away to have what would certainly be a loud phone conversation with Leo and Petras, Greg was already moving to open the portal to the British Library to get the necessary books they needed and begin doing… something… to help Marcus. Slow the progression of the plague, make him as comfortable as possible, see if he could somehow put Marcus in that fairy tale stasis condition as with Snow White. There were spells to do that, but they were not what one would call white magic and he had enough grays and blacks in his persona palette at the moment, thank you very much. Though… if he had to, he’d take on more to save Marcus’s life. He wouldn’t be able to forgive himself if he did any less…
Mycroft’s admiration of the vampire language for conveying the emotional force of a statement was unparalleled and he made a point to add it as his next linguistic conquest for it greatly would have helped him understand the actual words being hurled at him by the two men who were jointly yelling at him over the phone. However, part of him suspected that hearing the words wouldn’t have been entirely informative as they were likely the generalized enraged and frantic stream of consciousness common to those facing a devastating situation and needed more, at the moment, to work through the initial shock than actually engage in coherent discourse.

Once Leo had broken something Mycroft wagered was expensive and highly prone to extreme fragmentation, then audibly stormed away to wreak more emotion-venting havoc, Mycroft waited for Petras’s harsh, expletive-interrupted breathing to slow before once again attempting to speak.

“I am directing the collection of all potential surveillance footage from the area surrounding my PA’s flat and the route towards her preferred off license. Further, I will deploy individuals to conduct in-person interviews with owners of shops or other businesses open at that time for any information concerning what may have occurred.”

“He was infected by the plague. What else do we need to know?”

“Descriptions of suspects to compare to Magnussen’s known associates. Makes and models of vehicles potentially used to transport the suspects and/or your nephew. Any information at this point can be helpful tracing who was directly responsible so we might have the proverbial small fish to press for information and gain tactical advantage over our targeted larger one.”

“I will simply rip his throat out. Situation resolved.”

“Possibly. For the situation that ends at his death. What it does not resolve is Marcus’s situation.”

Mycroft patiently waited for this latest furious bout of language to subside, then continued on.

“Your opinion… is it time for an asset freeze?”

“What percentage do you predict we have traced?”

“Eighty percent, at least, from my most recent review of the efforts of my inquiries.”

“Twenty percent of a fortune is still a fortune.”

“True, but if he is hoping to plant his flag on London, regardless of Gregory’s and your people’s situation, he will require ready capital and would be substantially reduced in that area.”

“Also true. Do it.”

“Very well. If nothing else, it demonstrates we are prepared to take action. A blow such as this is not a critical strike but, and kindly do not destroy my eardrums, neither is his infection of your nephew. It will give him pause while he evaluates his overall financial position and… we have purchased a measure of time.”

“Or impel to quicken his pace.”
“A calculated risk. In either case, we will be quickening our pace. There are certain matters we must discuss prior to allocating assets to specific tasks and I would… I find myself not knowing whether it is the… kinder…choice to offer a meeting with you and your brother tonight or forestall until tomorrow.”

The small laugh in Mycroft’s ears was the first sign he had that Petras’s emotions were returning to a manageable level.

“A reason we strive, you and I, to keep distance between ourselves and our work. Regardless, I thank you for the consideration. We shall conference tonight. I will spend some measure of time with Leonas refocusing him on the task at hand, then we will move forward. Location?”

“Let me speak with Gregory about how easily the plague may be contracted by the non-infected. I would prefer meeting at my home, given the access to resources, including the others of our contingent and the British Library, but I have no idea if it is safe for you and Leonas to be at my home with the existence of the portal that connects this residence to Gregory’s shop. Secondary choice would be your residence.”

“Agreed. I await your call.”

With that difficult conversation completed, Mycroft took a deep breath in preparation for the second.

“Is this a work matter?”

Anthea’s voice was always pitched perfectly for the situation at hand but Mycroft detected the tiny hint of both worry and hope in her voice this time and it pained him greatly to have to satisfy the worry aspect to such a tragic degree.

“No. We have located Marcus and… I shall not say do not be alarmed for it is an exceedingly alarming situation, but do try and remain calm. Marcus has been infected by the plague. John and Gregory are currently doing what is possible to slow the progression of the contagion and seek a cure.”

“He… he has the plague. The vampire plague. The one that’s certain death for vampires.”

“This is no longer the days of old. We have far better medical technology and not a bit of it will be spared working on this problem.”

“That’s not true or you would have ordered the research started earlier.”

“We did not have a viable sample of the plague and I was reluctant, I admit, to have Richard procure another for fear of potential, albeit accidental, release. We now have a viable sample and our only concern is containment which I feel we can achieve through appropriate measures.”

“Where is he?”

“Gregory’s workshop. His father and uncle have been informed.”

“I’m en route.”

“I shall tell Gregory to expect you.”

“And where will you be?”
“Mine or Leonas’s residence. If the vampires can safely be in my home for a meeting, then we shall be there. If it is not safe, for reasons of the portal, then we will need the resources available to Petras in Leonas’s home to plan our course of action.”

“Your mobile will remain on.”

“Naturally.”

“I’m clearing our agenda for tomorrow. Matters below Level 2 routed directly to me.”

“Agreed. Matters above Level 2… the current situation in Ukraine is the only point of potential escalation on a close timeframe, so there should be little that requires my immediate attention.”

“If that changes… we shift focus for the duration then return to this matter at point of resolution.”

“I concur.”

“Is there… is there… Marcus will be kept on site?”

“To my knowledge, yes.”

“I’ll bring clothes and some of his stupid graphic novels. And shampoo. The git is ridiculously finicky about that and will only use one brand. He’s such a diva.”

A sad smile broke on Mycroft’s lips as he recognized Anthea’s standard attempt to muddy the waters concerning her feelings for the vampire.

“I have no doubt he will appreciate your generous donation of time and effort to his plight.”

“He’d better. What I will demand in return is going to be nothing short of enormous.”

“I suspect that will come as no surprise to him.”

“No, I suspect it won’t either.”

Mycroft ended the call, then turned to make his way back to the workshop when he tripped on Balthazar who had decided it was his duty as a cat to be an obstruction.

“Blast! You are fortunate, cat, I did not harm myself.”

“That’s arguable, however, what’s not is that Jim was asking this morning about where various people were going to be today.”

“Marcus included?”

“Not with special emphasis, but yeah, he was included.”

“Did Jim subsequently meet with Magnussen today?”

“Not sure. I can find out. How… how’s Greg doing?”

So, not a perfect certainty of a betrayal, but the probability weighed on that side of the scale.

“He is better, now that the healing process has come to the close.”

“Good. I… right now I sort of… look, you and I know I’m going undercover. Gotta put some
distance between me and Greg to make this look good. That’s why I haven’t visited.”

“I see. Do you feel you are under surveillance?”

“Maybe.”

“Very well. I will concede your tactics. Have you set a meeting with Magnussen?”

“Yeah. Tomorrow.”

“While you are there, do not pretend lack of knowledge of Marcus’s situation. If possible, glean information concerning the status of a cure. Try also to glean what were the motivations behind the infection of Marcus Varnas and, further, the intended specific gains to be had from such an act.”

“He’s not going to tell me of that.”

“Perhaps not. However, he may say something, truth or lie, that might be useful. Can you… Gregory indicated there were methods, magical methods, to enhance memory. Can you implement them?”

“Oh… uh, no. Greg probably can, though.”

“Though he is most busy, I feel this is something that should be done before your meeting. Further, such a technique would bring to us, potentially, more information concerning the interior of his home. I have records of the physical structure of the dwelling, but I have no idea if they remain accurate due to possible… magical reconfiguration.”

“You planning a direct assault?”

“Contingencies are not plans, simply prudent preparation.”

“Ok… I’ll do what I can.”

“Thank you.”

The fact the cat didn’t race away or do more than stare into space for a moment concerned Mycroft, but given this was a cat it was hard to attribute the actions to anything more than being a cat.

“If you want my advice, not that you asked or anything… I’d say… get firepower ready. The most and strongest you can. Not cunning plans, not elaborate schemes… firepower. This is all going to come down to a fight. Not a negotiation, not a song and dance… a fight. Be ready for it and don’t… look, I’ve got a bad feeling. I get them. Sometimes right, sometimes wrong, but… this will be a dirty, no honor fight. Just be ready.”

Mycroft pursed his lips and nodded. He, himself, had a bad feeling, however it likely had a greater number of tributaries feeding it than did Balthazar’s. The cat was correct about one matter, however… they were entering a fight and firepower was paramount.

“I shall. I will expect your report once your meeting with Magnussen is completed.”

“I don’t report to you!”

“In exchange, you will receive a steak.”
“Oral report ok? It’s hard for me to make a written one.”

“Oral will be sufficient. I shall speak with Gregory concerning memory-enhancement measures and see when he can enact them.”

“Alright. I’ll be in the shop.”

This time, Balthazar did race away, leaving Mycroft to have his own momentary pause before making his way down to the workshop, a few thoughts moving through his mind and sorting themselves into discrete mental folders before he reached his destination, where Greg was currently taking a small break to clear his brain from the visual barrage he was experiencing.

“Ah, my dear. Kindly continue staring at the wall for I can lay a kiss on the back of your neck as easily as upon your lips.”

Something Mycroft did with a slow, lingering touch.

“Oh, that’s exactly what I needed.”

“I live to serve. What news have you about Marcus’s condition?”

“Nothing new. John’s preparing certain of the treatments we’d highlighted from those books you found and we’ll start trying them. How did Leo take it?”

“If any of his home’s interior remains intact by dawn, I would be shocked.”

“As expected. And warranted.”

“Very. Your opinion on the ability of Leonas and Petras to conference with me at my home with me potentially moving back and forth between my residence and here, given the infective nature of the plague?”

“Oh… good question. Ultimately, I think they’d be safe, but I can modify the portal so, until you tell me to change it, nothing can pass through but you. That would be things living or nonliving. It’s fairly simple actually, but it’ll take an energy input from you and you’d be pretty exhausted afterwards. And it won’t be able to remain open as it can now. My only worry is that the plague may have a magical component. That part the portal may not stop and I don’t know what that could mean.”

“I understand. Regardless, I would ask you to do it. I feel they would be happier if they were closer, in a sense, to Marcus and knew their questions could be directly relayed to you. And, I have easier access to my personal resources, which will facilitate certain matters, something I feel critical as time is not on our side. Something to consider is whether Marcus has to be here or could he be located elsewhere, such as your flat?”

“Ummmm… no. I could move him up there and that’s actually a good idea since there’s a bed, shower, toilet and telly which will be helpful for him. And that would lessen to nil the likelihood of anything floating through the portal, magical or not.”

“That shall be our plan, then, and I shall ensure Marcus has access to digital technology to communicate with his family. Another issue to discuss, however, and I realize I am being somewhat abrupt, but could you also affect a spell on Balthazar to enhance his memory, as you did with your own for our visit to the British Library?”

“Yeah, I can. You think that’s necessary?”
“If we assume he will act as an intelligence asset, then yes.”

“Sure, then. Need that soon?”

“Balthazar is meeting with Magnussen tomorrow.”

“Not a problem.”

“Be certain, my dear… I do not want you to overtax yourself.”

“I won’t, I promise you. This whole business is going to be a bit of a marathon and I will make certain that I don’t fall flat on my face halfway though.”

“I am here to assist in any way possible, so please make any needs known so I can ensure they are properly met. My day is cleared tomorrow, so I will be available to you for any reason.”

Greg smiled and reached back to put his hands on Mycroft’s waist and draw him closer.

“You’re so good to me.”

“In any way I am capable. However, there is one further boon I would ask.”

“Ooh, did you save the best for last?”

“That will be for you to decide.”

Mycroft outlined his request and it prompted Greg to turn around, eyes closed, to stare at his lover.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I feel Balthazar’s assessment of the coming storm is correct. We require strength and any potential source must be mined. I actually feel this one can be added to our portfolio rather easily. If it eases your mind, however, I will be discussing this issue with Petras, in terms of a tactical maneuver.”

“No, my mind is very easy, I’m just surprised, I suppose. When do you want this?”

“As soon as feasible. We need to know the full extent of our asset bank to properly plan our next move. I will be ordering an asset freeze to begin immediately, but we should then be ready to strike.”

“Already?”

“Magnussen has demonstrated he is prepared to move boldly. We can do no less. In fact, we should demonstrate a greater resolve to act boldly, else he may choose to further chip away at our number.”

“Alright. You’ll certainly get no objection from me. Then item number one is configuring the portal to let you cross safely. Then I’ll work on bolstering our resources. Then work on Balthazar’s ridiculous brain. Lastly, eat some more, and continue on with what John will have ready.”

“I will see food aplenty be delivered. For any such other needs, simply notify me directly or Anthea, and they will be handled swiftly and to your satisfaction.”

With a nod and a lean forward with pursed lips, Greg smiled into the kiss Mycroft gave him and
took a moment to simply wrap his arms around his lover and breath in his scent. It was comforting and steadying, which was very handy since he’d have to open his eyes again in a moment and dive back into the land of psychedelic visions.

“Now, I shall remain out of your vision line to reduce the assault on your senses while you work on the portal, but I can leave entirely if that is more helpful.”

“No, that’ll be fine. Though… actually, let me try something. Can you think calm thoughts?”

“Easily.”

“The take a minute and just think soothing, calm things and let me see what happens?”

Mycroft nodded, not that Greg could see it, then settled his mind into a pattern he often used when particularly sophomoric meetings dragged on for eternity.

“I believe I have done as you asked.”

“Ok, I’m opening my eyes… oh. That’s… ooohhh…”

“Gregory?”

“That’s perfect. It’s almost like watching the water or something. Beautiful, but very relaxing.”

A gentle wash of blues and greens that did look a lot like kelp gently swaying in cool, clear water. His love was perfect in so, so many ways…

“Then I shall stand with you and you may partake of what relaxation you desire while you work.”

“And, maybe, budge back over the line now and again so I can have a moment of Zen?”

“But of course! I have never been considered a soothing presence, but I will perform my role with all due diligence.”

Taking Mycroft’s hand, Greg walked to the section of wall where the portal opening was located so he could begin reworking it to the new specifications, waiting until the last moment to infuse Mycroft’s energy into the spell and taking care not to look directly at Mycroft’s aura while that happened. That was not likely to be a cool, soothing visual experience and he was enjoying the calm too much to ruin it with a bit of shrapnel-spewning grenade blast.

“How are you, love?”

As if Mycroft’s greatly diminished aura wasn’t sufficiently telling.

“Oh my… I feel somewhat like a drained battery.”

“Then things worked as planned. There are biscuits in the cupboard and I’d say nibble a couple, then we move Marcus to my flat, so you can go through the portal and have a bit of something more substantial to start rebuilding reserves. Rest, too, if you can, but I doubt that’ll be likely with Leo and Petras raising the roof.”

“I shall. As you say, we are facing somewhat a marathon of effort, regardless of the shortened timeframe, and we must see it through, fully capable, to the end. Pursuant to that, I will not assist your task by porting the prince up the stairs upon my shoulders.”
Greg laughed and gave Mycroft a kiss which the sorcerer was gleeful to see made Mycroft’s aura glow just a tiny bit brighter.

“But you could if you wanted to.”

‘Easily. I am a man of brawn as well as brains.’

“And I adore both parts.”

“A sentiment for which you will be rewarded greatly when the time is appropriate.”

“Promise?”

“I do, and if I fail to uphold it, you may set the penalty for failure.”

“A filthy penalty?”

“I am counting on it.”

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“How long, you useless excuse for a doctor!”

Mycroft had made certain that teleconferencing was an easy thing between his home and Greg’s flat and John was currently the victim of how that technology could be used when placed in the wrong hands.

“I don’t know when your son will wake up, but I can say that he’s not been out so long I find it worrying. I wager another hour or two and he should be awake. I’ll let him know to contact you immediately.”

“Where is my dear Anthea? Anthea! Shove that useless lump of medical failure out of the way and tell me if he’s lying.”

John braced because he knew Anthea would happily shove him away from the computer monitor and was only surprised that she didn’t shove hard enough to push him out of the flat and down the stairs. Something he felt she was perfectly capable of doing.

“He’s not lying. I’ve seen this sort of thing before and it’s usually several hours of unconsciousness before they wake up, but not more. Don’t worry about that now.”

“If you say so. I have enough to worry about already without more added to it. You’re staying with him, right?”

“I am, and nothing incompetent is going to happen on my watch.”

“That’s what I like to hear! That slipshod clump of sorcerers couldn’t pull a rabbit from a hat without someone smacking them about a bit to get the spell right. Oh… Petras is waving at me.”

“That must give you a special feeling.”

“Makes me want to chew soap, but he’ll just do it again if I don’t cut off his arm, so I’d best get started.”

Anthea made a run along motion and smirked when the older man cackled with delight. Terminating the connection, she moved away from the computer and sat on the edge of Greg’s
bed, taking a moment to feel Marcus’s cheek for no reason she could think of besides it was what her mum would do and her mum always knew what to do to make a person feel better. Even when that person was herself.

“Thank you very much for leaving me to deal with your father, Marcus. Don’t think you’re going to be able to blame the plague for it either, so prepare to be lectured, at length, on why that was a terrible decision on your part. Visual aids will be involved. With handouts to study later. And you’re going to have plenty of study time available, don’t think that you won’t. They’re going to cure you and remove all possible excuses. Not that you won’t make up a ludicrous number more, but I’ll tell you now that they’ll fall on deaf ears. You’re going to have to offer me many fine dinners, theatre trips, rides in your stupid car, ice cream nights on my sofa and walks in the moonlight to even begin to compensate me for being your father’s contact point right now, so prepare yourself.”

Anthea nodded firmly and gave Marcus her best glare before her face softened and she found herself wiping her eyes with her fingers.

“Now look what you’ve done. Do you know how hard it is to get my makeup as perfect as this? Well, that’s gone downhill, so I’m adding a holiday to your penance pot. A lavish holiday, just the two of us. One this year and one next year, too. And since I know you’ll keep screwing up, it’ll probably be a holiday a year for who knows how long. We’ll start planning as soon as you wake up. Well, I’ll do the planning and you’ll do the agreeing, which is right and proper for any boyfriend of mine…”

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“There. That should lock Magnussen out of his accounts from any potential avenue of access. I will not cease the inquiries into additional of his finances, but if he does not immediately move to further protect them, I will be most surprised.”

“It’s a potent strike, Mano draugas. The best we are able at this time.”

Petras gave Mycroft’s shoulder a squeeze and straightened to crack his back after leaning over Mycroft’s computer monitor for the past half hour.

“Set his balls on fire!”

Both Mycroft and Petras had to admit that was also a potent strike, but one that was far harder for them, personally, to accomplish.

“As always, brother, your input is… colorful.”

“Eat a worm, Petras.”

“You are a worm, Leonas.”

Mycroft was saved from moderating yet another brotherly argument by the sound of his doorbell and he took a deep breath in preparation for their visitor. With the portal isolated to allow only his presence through, a car and appropriate escort had been necessary but, fortunately, suitable escort was readily available in the form of a dragon and a dragon lite.

“Gentlemen, our guest has arrived.”

Quickly moving to open the door and welcome their visitor, Mycroft led the way into the sitting room where the vampires had already converged to begin the negotiations.
“This, if you were unaware, is King Leonas Varnas and his brother Petras. Might we know your name to more collegially converse this evening?”

The dark elf looked about Mycroft’s home and his coldly beautiful face slowly let a grin spread across his perfectly-sculpted lips.

“Nyvrokh Rursozen. This is a rather… well-appointed home you have, Mycroft, was it? I seem to remember that name mentioned during our last encounter.”

“It is and thank you. I am content with it. In any case, might I offer you a refreshment?”

“I would relish such a thing. It is a rarity that I am called to your world in such a… friendly fashion. I would make the most of it while I can.”

“Excellent. Then do be seated and I shall tend to it. I anticipate a lengthy, though productive, discussion and would hope you to be comfortable for your visit.”

“How kind.”

The elf folded his long, lean body into one of Mycroft’s chairs, with the vampires taking seats close by and the dragon contingent moving to see the elf was blocked from attempting either an escape or doing something violent and rash. Not that anyone thought he would. Nobody whose eyes gleamed that brightly in the presence of wealth bit the hand that just might be willing to donate some of that wealth to a very noble cause. Such as themselves…
Chapter 52

“Oh dear… Jim, you may have had a point.”

Richard looked at Marcus’s stirring form and suffered his brother’s bite to his finger more graciously than he might have had Jim been wholly wrong about his suspicions.

“Do you two want to tell me what this is about?”

Greg had been a touch unsure about Richard’s request to bring Jim for a chat given the circumstances, but the necromancer had hinted this might be important and, now, it seemed he may have been right.

“Jim had a conversation with Balthazar, you see, and…”

“I can speak for myself!”

Jim stood upright on his small legs and bared his teeth at Richard, who shrugged in the manner of a person who had gotten more than a lifetime’s practice shrugging because of the person responsible for this particular shrug.

“Alright, Mr. Had a Tantrum Just This Morning About His Squeaky Voice, do proceed.”

Jim bit Richard’s finger again as a reminder not to bring facts into any discussion when they worked against him and carried on.

“Your cat… I set up a meeting between Magnussen and Balthazar for tomorrow but… I got the feeling it’s not the first one they’ve had.”

That shut down any joke Greg was going to make about Jim’s squeaky voice and gained the weasel his full attention.

“Explain.”

“He didn’t ask questions. We’d talked about Magnussen, but I would have expected him to ask questions about what my meeting was like, what to expect, likelihood of it being a trap… maybe that we’d work through how to approach it, what questions to ask, general strategies but nothing. He just nodded and started asking about what I thought would be Magnussen’s next move. What would give us a nasty kick in the teeth, rattle the most chains. I… I mentioned a few things, thinking, at the time, this was just anticipating the enemy, but he paid more attention to that than anything else we discussed. And, yes, one of the things discussed was infecting Marcus or Petras with the plague to create panic and divide resources between dealing with that problem and eliminating Magnussen as a threat.”

Shit.

“You believe he really might want to side with Magnussen.”

“I don’t know, but I would not rule it out, especially given…”

Jim cocked his head at Marcus, who was starting to smile, albeit with eyes closed, as Anthea moved a cool, damp cloth over his face and neck.

“… it’d be a two-prong victory. Get that ridiculous vampire out of the way so Balthazar could
continue his even more ridiculous fantasy about living happily ever after with Mycroft’s PA and sending everyone into chaos."

Staring at Jim a long moment, Greg pursed his lips and made a sputtering sound before nodding.

“Ok, I’ll talk to Mycroft about this and see what he thinks.”

“You do that. I also need something to take to Magnussen convince him I’m on his side. A show of good faith. Doesn’t have to be enormous, but he’ll want some information to show I can get it and am willing to share.”

“That’s something I really have to talk to Mycroft about. He’s better at laying out things like that than I am.”

Anthea smirked slightly and turned it into a ‘what have you done now’ glare at Marcus, who was slowly opening his eyes.

“Tell him Mr. Holmes has had one of our biomedical labs working on this problem for awhile and they’ve got some strong candidates for a curative agent. Now, we have someone to test them on, so we’re not quite in as much chaos as Magnussen would hope us to be.”

Jim stood on his hind legs again and fixed Anthea with a stare as he weighed her words carefully.

“That… is that true?”

“Do you think we’d sit idly by while something like this was in danger of being released?”

“Ok… yeah, that would work. Not wholly unexpected news, but maybe faster than he’d predicted, so… that should work nicely.”

Greg hoped that, one day, he’d be able to lie with a face as straight as Anthea because it seemed a very useful skill at times.

“Brilliant and beautiful…”

Not even Anthea could keep a smile off her lips hearing Marcus’s voice, but she did take the gold medal for speed at camouflaging it.

“Yes, I am and I know that already, so tell me something I don’t know.”

“I’m having a necklace made for you with diamonds and a stone to match the color of your eyes. I also really need to piss.”

“You were winning there. For a moment.”

“Piss now, shower you with jewelry after?”

“Deal. Come on, go slow and hold onto me.”

Marcus grinned and carefully pulled himself upwards, trying to shake off the effects of the drugs and happily holding onto Anthea for many worthwhile reasons.

“Alright, that’s Marcus sorted. Any more from you two?”

Jim made a rude noise but Richard actually seemed pleased by Greg’s question.
“Can we help? Here I mean. Maybe not Jim because he’s a weasel, but I… I’d like to be of help if I can.”

“Oh, let’s see. John and I are working on what we’ve read about possible treatments for the plague and you can help with that if you like. Or see what Anderson has going and take a turn for a few hours behind the till. I know you have your own job and I don’t want to interfere with that, but a few hours before or after would be helpful.”

“Absolutely! I’m not great on the selling end, but I can ring up things and answer questions. I doubt there’s much in the way of high-pressure sales here, at least not as much as in electronics, so I’m sure I can manage.”

“Thanks, we appreciate it. Why don’t you have a chat with Anderson about what will work for him after you do something with your brother.”

“Shoot him?”

“Bit harsh.”

“Burning him at the tiny stake is harsher.”

“You win this round.”

Mycroft was happy he’d met this particular villain before and had taken his measure because that particular measure didn’t seem to have changed one whit.

“And you think I would turn my sword against a previous client? I am impressed you learned his identity, by the way. He took pains to hide it, even from me.”

“Thank you. And, of course I believe you would betray Magnussen. In any and all possible ways, if the compensation was sufficient.”

“Very well, you have a point. However, my reputation… consider the blow it would suffer from being labeled untrustworthy.”

“Likely a blow equal in weight to being struck by a feather.”

Petras nodded his head slightly as the elf looked between him and Mycroft and the two were rewarded with another long, slow smile of delight.

“I do enjoy negotiating with someone who has a clear view of the situation. However, there are individuals who do consider things such as trustworthiness, even at my rather shallow level, to be important and I could lose those avenues of employment, something I am not entirely happy to do.”

Mycroft lifted his eyebrow and Petras recognized the signal to take over the proceedings.

“There are always other avenues of employment. Not really on the finite resources list for someone in your profession. For instance, you might gain access to avenues previously inaccessible if the right word was put in the right ears.”

“Ooh… could you be referring to vampires?”

“Among others. There are many who will not engage a resource without suitable
recommendation and there are few more suitable than mine.”

“I have heard of you, you know. I had believed some of the stories to be… exaggerated.”

“My compassion and tender-heartedness are often given a loftier presentation than I feel appropriate, but who am I to judge how I am viewed by others.”

“The idea is tempting…. though I’m not quite feeling the right urge lock into place. The reasons to say no are still overbalancing the reasons to agree. Perhaps a thumb put on the scale to tip matters your way?”

Petras pursed his lips which threw the ball back to Mycroft but it was intercepted by Leo who ran away with it back to his house, looked through the window and stuck his tongue out at the other kids because why not.

“It’s always down to money, isn’t it. Fine. What do you want and don’t think you’re talking to those two now. They like to talk, it’s all they do, worthless yammerers. Like dogs! Small snappy dogs who yip and squawk because they think they’re being smart but it only takes one visit to the barber and we see their true colors!”

The dark elves prided themselves on being sultrily arrogant and composed for every situation but Leo was a situation unto himself.

“Are you insane?”

“He’d like me to be! Put me away to languish in one of those asylums they put the people who are so clever they’re called insane because the not-clever can’t recognize true cleverness when it kneecaps them and sends them limping on their way. You’ll get your money. It’ll buy however much cream you need to hide those wrinkles you’ve got forming at the corners of your eyes… and right there above your lips so you’re going to look like a prune-faced old witch in a decade or two. I should know! I can’t step outside to sniff my flowers without a whole coven of them descending on me like a flock of evil sparrows. Wicked and foul! The whole lot of them! I only got three jars of honey from them so far this season, too, and I’m a king!”

Staring open-mouthed at Leo, the elf blinked a few times as if to clear away what had to be an illusion playing before his eyes. However, the crazy old man did indicate that his price would be met and since there’d been no actual negotiation of price, the crazy element could cheerfully be ignored in favor of the handsome profit he was going to receive.

“Well, that’s one issue sorted. I shall not be beggared by whatever arrangement we craft, however…”

“Petras! Get a sack and chains! We’re drowning this one and finding a better one. Won’t be hard.”

The dark elf smirked, but made note of the look in Leonas’s eyes. Crazy, true, but also violent. This vampire might have elf’s blood in his veins…

“First, brother, elves are difficult to drown. Believe me, I know…”

This vampire certainly had something in his veins, but what that might be was anyone’s guess. Brimstone, probably.

“… however, there are other issues to broach and I’d rather they be done now so we may decide if they are worth negotiating or if, yes, a better candidate be found for our task. So,
Nyvrokh-esketshah, what were you going to say?”

Petras smirked at the elf's look of shock. Yes, it had certainly been worth the rather extensive effort compiling names and family associations of various elves of potential-asset status, and here it was paying an amusing stack of dividends.

“You know much… very well, you are a sly man and I appreciate that. It actually makes this easier. I want an exemption to… The Rules.”

Leo’s loud cackling could be applied to the elf’s statement, the look of sheer disbelief on Petras’s and Goraseth’s faces or the confused one for Mycroft and Charles but it was likely divided equally among the competing parties. And, since confusion was not something Mycroft appreciated in the slightest, he saw no reason to let it remain unaddressed here and now. At least in some fashion…

“Given the rather startled response to your request, I am of a mind to say this will not be something to which we will agree.”

“It’s not unprecedented.”

“Be that as it may, you…”

“And given a vampire king is present and a battle mage is surely standing at the ready…”

It took a moment for Mycroft to realize the elf was talking about Greg, but he made mental note to tell his lover about the title, since it would certainly make him puff with pride. His Gregory was positively radiant when pride-puffed.

“… my petition has sufficient votes to be granted.”

“It is not that simple and you know it.”

Mycroft cocked his head at Petras who was staring at the elf with narrowed eyes and a look on his face that Mycroft easily interpreted as having already decided this was a workable idea but wanted to make their Mr. Rursozen squirm a bit before acknowledging it. Fortunately, Petras Varnas was exceedingly good at promoting various types and flavors of squirm.

“True, but the obstacles are relatively minor, given the supporters of my request. Further, a dragon stands there in what can only be described as a pitiful attempt at appearing human who can champion my cause to his people and Mycroft here… his voice carries weight, does it not? A new player, I have learned, but not one to underestimate for the future.”

“What you ask is highly unusual and I would know why you would want such a thing.”

“No, you do not, vampire, for the reason is laughably obvious.”

“There would have to be a contract. Penalties, harsh ones, for violating it.”

“Details for those who enjoy quibbling them, which I do not. Do we have an agreement or have I come here for nothing?”

Petras scowled the way an irritated parent does to a child being particularly troublesome then shook his head to further emphasize the ‘you didn’t inherit this bad attitude from me, young man’ exasperation.

“Mycroft, would you care to discuss the matter with our sorcerer? He might have a rather loud
opinion on this matter.”

Pretending to a complete lack of urgency or even concern, Mycroft shrugged his shoulders and excused himself, requesting Charles serve drinks to his guests while he was otherwise occupied, then proceeded to make his thoughts as calm as possible and proceed to and through the portal, happy to find Greg in the workshop alone.

“Mycroft! How goes your meeting? He being as much of a rat bastard as I expect him to be?”

“A pure specimen of the mercenary breed, but that is very much to our advantage. However, we are at a point where your counsel seems appropriate. Our friend desires an exemption from what he terms ‘The Rules.’ I have no idea to what he is referring but the vampires and Goraseth apparently were more aware of the topic.”

“Shit. Didn’t expect that, but given the way this whole business has gone tits up I can’t say I’m surprised. There are rules, magical and what you would call traditional, about a lot of things out there, but the one this bugger is broaching is the one about elves not being allowed to roam free in our world. They can visit, short term, usually for this job or that ritual, but they can’t stay.”

“Unless exempted. He did note there was precedent for this.”

“And he’s not wrong. It’s highly unusual and not something done lightly as those bastards, and the non-bastard ones, are very powerful and can cause a lot of mischief here if so inclined.”

“Petras mentioned a contract.”

“Yeah, that’s normally how it works. They get have free access, but under a specific set of conditions, nothing you wouldn’t expect, and if they violate that they suffer the consequences ranging from just being tossed back and things go back to normal, at one end, to more serious nastiness at the other. What was Petras’s take on this?”

“He seems amenable to agreeing but felt it prudent that you be consulted. You were mentioned, my fine battle mage, as a vote of consequence by the dark elf.”

“Oh, I like that. Might get me some armor to wear so I look the part. The leather sort.”

“I can have individuals here on your command to take your measurements.”

“Then we’ve got my reward planned for when this whole mess is tidied. But, until then… I’d say we do it. Petras and you can work out the fiddly bits for the contract because I can’t image two people better suited for leaving no loopholes or workarounds for that nasty bastard to exploit. At the end of the day, he’s not someone who can’t be kept in line by interested parties, so it’s another likely source of headaches in my future, but nothing I can’t manage. And since we’re writing the contract, it’s fair to put in certain clauses that things we might done are given special consideration. Since I doubt he’ll be looking for an office job, he’ll be soliciting work along the lines he does now and that can be very useful for us.”

“Most strategic. Very well, then, I shall convey your opinion and, as they say, seal the deal. I would ask first about you, my dear, and Marcus…”

“I’m fine. John is taking a break and that gives me a visual break, which is helpful. I’m alright, though, even with him here. It’s slowly getting better but, now that Marcus is awake, it’s difficult to look in his direction. I’m giving little peeks here and there to get myself used to it but avoiding anything prolonged. It’ll come in time, I don’t doubt that.”
“Marcus is awake… his family will be glad to hear it.”

“And feeling well, despite it all. Took a bit to work through the sluggishness from the drugs, but he’s nearly back to normal.”

“I shall relay that, as well. Warn Marcus of a call from his father in the extremely near future.”

Mycroft took Greg in his arms and first laid a kiss on his forehead, then bent to give longer attention to Greg’s lips.

“I shall inform you of our progress.”

Greg smiled and waved merrily as Mycroft stepped back through the portal, giggling at Mycroft’s rolled eyes until Mycroft closed the portal behind him. Well, that was putting another cannon on their side of the battle lines. This all was going to go down at Magnussen’s house and it was going to be making certain, on their part, that every direction had a threat that evil git would have to face. Nowhere for him to turn to get a moment to breathe. Just keep hitting and hitting until the fucker was on his knees, then throw in a few kicks for good measure. Him and the dark elf had both magic and battle experience on their side, too, which Magnussen very likely didn’t. Add in a werewolf, one or more pissed-off vampires and a few armed humans who would refuse all reasonable arguments and insist on being there when the bells chimed… they were in good shape.

“Greg?”

“Philip, how’s things upstairs?”

“Great, actually. Busy for this time of night. I wanted to ask you something, if you have a moment.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Would you… convince Sebastian that I should learn how to fight with magic so I can be there when you go for Magnussen?”

Oh no. The good shape was twisting a bit there around the edges.

“Ummm… why would you want to do that?”

“You’ll need all the help you can get and, this time, you won’t have Balthazar losing his magical leash to step in, so I thought I could learn a few things to be helpful.”

“Helpful is always appreciated! Consider, though, when I was being taught this sort of business, my teacher liked to lock me in a cell with an angry troll or harpy or something equally as savage and see who’d win. It usually wasn’t me.”

“That seems rather… drastic.”

“It was.”

“I don’t think we have time for that, though, since I’d need to heal afterwards and that wouldn’t happen as quickly as with you.”

Credit to you, Philip, you’re not afraid of the frightening parts of this work.

“Time is certainly a factor, which is why I’m not sure this is the best idea. At least at this particular moment. However, I can teach you some defensive tricks fairly quickly and if we need a
support man behind the lines, dragging off the injured, feeding us information, that sort of thing, you’d be better equipped to do the job.”

And because Sebastian would do worse to me than Mol’godon if he thought I was going to let you walk into that firestorm for any reason whatsoever. And he’d be justified in doing it, despite unquestionably being rude about it the entire time.

“Oh, that doesn’t sound bad. Helpful, which is what I want to be, but manageable. You’ll do it, though, right? I’m sure Sebastian will be in a huff about things, but I want to help with his in any way I can.”

“Regardless the size of his huff, I’ll show you some things to keep you safe, as much as possible, while you watch our backs.”

Something that will probably not only be restricted to you, because there are a few others who are not going to get involved in any fighting if this old baggage has anything to say about it, which he does, but won’t be content to be left at home to hear the war stories later at the pub.

“Magician! Where is Fatcroft?”

Such as Sherlock.

“At his comfortable home, made all the more comfortable because you’re not there insulting him.”

“John has updated me on the progress of this mission and I am appalled.”

“So, situation normal, then.”

“False. I have yet to be briefed as to my role in the proceedings and, though you speak of insult, yet this is one you have hurled directly at me like a dagger.”

“You practicing for the am drams?”

“When will I be issued a weapon or provided with the proper amulet to impart mystical abilities?”

“Uh… never?”

“That is not amusing.”

“Wasn’t meant to be. I know your brother can handle a firearm expertly and knows how to fight, besides. I’ve seen you shoot at things with a bit of John’s help, but he’ll be too busy to stop and show you how to reload or remind you not to point your gun at people when you’re trying to make a point because that could eliminate the person you’re making the point to. As for amulets… I’ve got nothing helpful on that score.”

“You are useless.”

“No, just that even making something to give you a small talent, for a brief while, takes a lot of fucking effort and time, two things I’ve none to spare of at the moment.”

“Then what is my role!”

Why didn’t I take notes when I was talking to Anderson?
“Sherlock, you’ll likely be doing what I’m doing, providing behind the lines support so the rest don’t have to worry about taking care of the injured or not receiving important intelligence.”

Oh, thanks mate.

“That may satisfy you, Anderson, but it does not satisfy me.”

“Why not? That’s an important job. Someone radios, I assume we’ll have radios, maybe with earpieces like the posh attack squads have, that John is hurt. The rest are busy throwing spells and marauding through the place so who’s there to pull him to safety? Us! Or deliver more ammo, dart in to steal things while they have Magnussen distracted…”

Anderson, apparently, had very quickly given this a great deal of thought.

“… loads of important tasks. Very easily, without proper support, these sorts of things could be a disaster!”

“They are not recreating Waterloo, you realize.”

“No, but the principle stands. Besides, Anthea is going to be in the same position, though I suspect she’s rather good at fighting. Probably better than most, but Marcus would be devastated if we found his cure but lost his girlfriend. So, that’s three of us. I’m not certain about Richard. I’ll have to chat with him about being assigned to our division or… now that I think about it… he could man the till while we’re doing that so the shop doesn’t have to close. Right! We’re getting our end sorted. Greg, how are you coming with plans for your team?”

Sherlock looked at Greg, but Greg had also lost positive control of the situation some minutes back. Not that he minded, though. A busy mind was a happy mind and one not focused on getting killed during a surprise raid on a powerful enemy’s stronghold.

“Great! Firming up the roster and pulling together vital intelligence.”

“From a weasel and a cat. Excellent, George. Verily you are a mighty general for this army.”

“Shut it, Sherlock. We’re doing what we have to and it’s paying off, so there. Now, I’ve got some things to do here, so why don’t you go with Anderson and start making plans. John can probably help with that. He’s former military and they know all about combat and what’s needed to keep it functioning smoothly.

Sherlock was about to refuse but recognized that John did enjoy talking about his time in the military and a happy John was much more agreeable than an unhappy one. Given they were now sharing a flat and, further, he hoped to escort John out for a meal tonight or tomorrow, meals also making the good doctor more agreeable, it might be wise to err on the side of strategy. Which would begin with a huffy storming off and, after a thought, changing course to ascend to Greg’s flat rather than return to the shop.

“Sherlock! Fancied a romp around the plague pit?”

Anthea punched Marcus with the precise force that appeared, to the eye, simply to make a point, and to the nerves, as if they’d been struck by Thor’s hammer. Any and all plague pooh-poohing was fully her purview and Marcus himself best not engage in it or she’d kill him before the scourge did.

“What do you remember of your abduction?”
“Oh that. Well, I was strolling, some might call it sauntering, if they’re decent, or strutting, if they’re not, but regardless, I was venturing out on an adventure to purchase a, or many, bottles of wine for my lovely night with my even lovelier Anthea…”

“I am not paying admission for your attempted comic monologue.”

“I’m rich so I don’t care. But… fair enough. In any case…”

“What direction were you heading?”

“Direction? Left. No! Right. It was definitely right.”

It was exceedingly rare that Sherlock and Anthea agreed on anything but tonight was a night to court rarity, it seemed.

“Would you answer him and stop being daft?”

“Ummmm… perhaps. Would you pop down to see if that amusing little café Greg adores is still serving? I could murder a sweet little nibble and a massive cup of coffee blacker than my hair. With sugar. Make it nearly as sweet as you…”

Marcus’s beaming smile lit up the room and earned him another arm punch before Anthea rose and left him alone with Sherlock, having recognized that for his own reasons, her vampire didn’t want to talk about his experience in front of her. And, as soon as she was out the door, Sherlock noticed the change in Marcus’s demeanor from raconteur to… tired. Tired and more than slightly afraid.

“She’s worried about me. I don’t want her worried. I want her happy and feisty and all those beautiful things she’s trying to be but isn’t because someone just signed my death warrant in large letters with a very fancy pen. Probably one of those that’s just an enormous feather. Death by the stroke of a feather. Suitable epitaph for me, wouldn’t you say?”

“I will have John prescribe antidepressants for you. You seem to require them.”

Marcus laughed and Sherlock took note that the laugh was genuine and not affected for his benefit.

“You always have the courage to say what needs to be said, Sherlock. I like that in a person, unless it’s a criticism of my fashion sense. Anyway, back to your question, I was going west to that little off license four blocks from Anthea’s flat, but I did a search for nearby florists and found one a bit further afield towards the north and changed direction to get an armload of freesia, she wears perfume that reminds me of freesia, before the wine. I was walking and my phone rang, one of my business associates who wanted to know if I still had a business card from this chap we’d met a few weeks ago, so I stopped to check my wallet and the next thing I knew I felt a sting right at the base of my neck.”

“Name of this business associate?”

“You don’t think he was involved?”

“I think nothing, but if this person drew your focus away from your surroundings then they require investigation. Name?”

“Roger Slate. I’m looking into opening a new club and he specializes in lighting systems. Worked on several of my properties; I’ve known him for six years, easily.”

“Species?”
“What?”

“Vampire, human, werewolf…”

“Human."

“Does he know you are a vampire?”

‘No, that’s not something I share with anyone outside the community. Or, people who have reason to know like you and Anthea.”

“What do you remember after you were, most likely, given an injection?”

“Little because my brain went straight to woozy. I do remember it was two beefy fellows that took me by the arms and started walking me towards a car, being a bit loud about me being drunk, which was rude of them, all things considered.”

“Details of these men?”

“Big. One more the stout sort of big, shorter, built like a cube with legs, the other the taller sort of big with some arm strength to him because he did most of the supporting while my legs turned to jam.”

“Something I can use to identify them, please?”

“Your brother is working on that.”

“Lovely. I would prefer to see actual results, so details?”

“Fine. Stocky bloke was white, they both were, had gingery hair and one of those faces that looks like it’s been smashed with a frying pan. I remember a blue shirt, but that’s all for clothes. The other one had dark hair, not black, not that dark, and was as tall as me. He was wearing a fake leather jacket, I know from the smell, but I don’t remember much about his face. He stayed behind me most of the time.”

“Vehicle?”

“Older Mercedes. Lighter in shade, most likely that odd champagne shade they use now and again. It was hard to tell because I was starting to see little but mental fog at that point, but it certainly wasn’t anything like blue or black. Before you ask, no I didn’t see the tags or the driver or if it had “Vampire Hunters for Hire’ stenciled on the side.”

“Facing which direction?”

“What?”

“I assume the car was parked, so in what direction was it facing?”

“Oh… north. The direction I was walking.”

“Did you noticing it parking or was it there already?”

“No idea.”

“Was it near Anthea’s building when you left?”
“Didn’t notice it.”

“Unhelpful.”

“I wasn’t anticipating being kidnapped and infected with the plague, Sherlock! I… I was just popping out for a little wine. Have a romantic night with someone special and not have to be in the vicinity of my father and uncle who have been positively horrid in terms of… everything… since they heard about the plague being resurrected.”

“No matter. The supremely vast majority of the public are punishingly unobservant and I have learned to work around their shortcomings. Are those the clothes you were wearing when you were abducted?”

“These? I… yeah. Except for my shoes. Not sure where they are, actually.”

“Find them. I will need those, as well.”

“As well?”

“Gerald likely has something to fit you. Once you have changed, place your clothes and shoes in a bag. I need to study them more closely.”

Without waiting for a reply, Sherlock spun on his heel and dashed down the stairs.

“John!”

John didn’t relish being the center of attention so having the entire shop stop what they were doing to stare at him wasn’t the highlight of his day.

“Thanks for that, Sherlock.”

“Get your jacket, we have a case.”

“What?”

“We have a case.”

“Yeah, no we don’t.”

“But we do.”

“First, getting my jacket implies I’m leaving here, which I’m not. Second, I don’t do cases except medical ones and, since the only person shouting here is the uninjured you, there’s not one of those in my vicinity. There, a tidy list logically organized, which you should appreciate.”

“The trail is growing colder every moment you waste time nattering at me!”

“What trail?”

“Marcus’s abductors.”

“Oh. Ok, fun and games over, that is actually a serious issue. But, I still have to be here, Sherlock. Catching Marcus’s kidnappers is important but slowing the progression of the plague is more important and Greg and I are best suited to the task.”

“Anderson can hand Gary whatever fairy wands and magic beans he requires.”
“We’re working both magical and medical sides and, I know this may surprise you, but I’m actually highly qualified for that particular task.”

“I require an assistant for my investigation and you are also highly qualified for that particular task.”

“I… alright, that’s nice to hear, but I still can’t go with you.”

“I’ll go.”

It took a moment for anyone to realize who had spoken, which was only partly due to the fact Sebastian spoke little at any given time so he was never the first one you thought of for an unprompted utterance. The other part was that he was hidden behind a shelf leafing through a book on metallurgy.

“Oh, that’s a good idea. Sherlock, take Sebastian on your case. I think the highly qualified label applies smartly to him, too. He’s done this sort of thing before. A lot, actually.”

“I would prefer you.”

John opened his mouth to respond, but let the initial words die on his lips. There was nothing in Sherlock’s request… demand… that wasn’t a reason to be flattered and, in truth, he was. Flattered and wondering if they could have a night out soon, just the two of them, to simply talk. About nothing in particular, but nothing of importance, either, which was just the sort of thing for learning more about a person you might, might, fancy. A bit.

“How about this. Meet me here when you’re done with whatever it is you’re doing and we can discuss what you found. Maybe have a bite to eat. I’ll certainly be ready for another break by then and, who knows, perhaps I can help with a second phase of your investigation, if you need it. I’ve got to see to this first, though.”

Sherlock scowled, but nodded slightly.

“The timeframe on the vampire?”

John quickly looked around to make certain nobody had heard the ‘vampire’ part and gave Sherlock a small glare of reminder they weren’t alone and quiet tones were very much called for here.

“Meaning?”

Though, the instant he said it, John saw the dark flash in Sherlock’s eyes that answered the question for him.

“Oh… you mean how quickly does the plague act. It varies, as all things do. That’s part of what we’re doing, trying to learn that sort of information from the various records. Once symptoms appear, which they have, we should see the first signs of physical distress… could be as early as tomorrow night. General aches and stinging pains when he moves quickly. Those actually fade, small comfort that it is. Other, more worrying things slip in and then… then the mental deterioration starts. Ten days, maybe, for that to happen. Could be more or less, like I said it varies. Another week or so and… well, let’s hope it doesn’t get anywhere near that point.”

“The cure… will it correct the damage he’s already suffered?”

“Correct, no, but the physical problems he should be able to heal on his own. The plague
seems, from what we gather, to suppress their natural healing ability, but there’s no indication it’s destroyed permanently. It’s the mental damage I worry about. There’s precious little for information on that sort of thing for vampires. They don’t get conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease, so it’s possible their healing ability extends to brain-related issues, also. I don’t know, though.”

“Do you know how he was infected?”

“No. And the various accounts of that time don’t really specify how it was transmitted. I’m not certain they knew, to be honest. That’s why we’re keeping Marcus away from all vampires, in case it’s airborne, but that’s as likely as any of the other possible transmission methods.”

“Am I hosting a party in my shop?”

John turned to see Greg, fresh cup of coffee in his hand, peeking out from their stockroom.

“Yes, so have some drinks delivered, will you?”

“Funny.”

“Wrong. John is not funny since he is refusing to help me on my case, offering instead a surrogate.”

The waving hand from around a bookshelf was sized perfectly, Greg noticed, for a tall bastard likely shoving a book into his jacket pocket.

“Oh, Sebastian taking a moment from nicking my stock to toddle off and be a detective? That’s novel. It’s up to you, John, but I think you could wander off for a few hours easily enough. It’s going to take that long for the potions we’ve got going to brew and the spells I need to inscribe on Marcus’s back can only really be done by me, so it’d be a good time to get out for awhile. What’s the case, anyway?”

John looked between Sherlock and Greg and decided Greg wouldn’t say it was alright to leave if that wasn’t actually true.

“Marcus, actually. Looking for his abductors.”

“That’s certainly worth taking time for. I know Mycroft and Petras are on that, too, but another approach certainly can’t hurt. Bring Sebastian along anyway. He’s a rude, thieving bugger, but finding people who probably don’t want to be found is a strength of his. Admittedly, it’s usually to murder them in some violent and vicious fashion, but skills transfer!”

Sherlock huffed a small breath but began to consider the advantages of a werewolf, with a werewolf’s sense of smell, coming along to assist.

“Very well. Given time is of the essence, I agree. If we can locate the ones who abducted Marcus then we may gain information on that, as well as from where they obtained the plague specimen. If we are very lucky, it might be traced to where it was incubated and, likely, where any work towards affecting a cure was conducted.”

“You really think you can find that?”

“It is one possibility. Another is they have knowledge of who did the work. From what I have gathered, Magnussen lacks the necessary skill for that level of biomedical research. We may not directly need him to gain the necessary information to produce a cure ourselves.”
“A lot of the works say the plague may have a magical element, which isn’t impossible. That might set it apart from the sort of things a normal researcher could do.”

“One element is not the entirety of a problem. The microbiological and biochemical work would need to be performed by person or persons trained in the field, even if Magnussen or an appropriate representative stepped in when magic was required. That magical input could likely be replicated by you or someone you feel better suited for… magical medicine. I am not lacking in the standard research practices required, however, Mycroft likely has laboratories to command that could do the work more quickly, given their greater level of resources.”

“I’m convinced! Find the berks who took Marcus and that could roll into other helpful areas. Ok, smart. You should ask your brother what he’s found, too. Might narrow your search.”

“Pft.”

“He’s chatting right now with our friend Mr. Dark Elf. Quite the little party, I hear.”

Now it was Sebastian’s head peeking from behind the shelf in addition to his hand.

“Elf? Let’s go.”

While Anderson did the ‘do you have your jacket, here let me put something in your pocket to nibble’ work, Sherlock ran back upstairs to collect Marcus’s clothes, grudgingly inform Anthea about his plan and less grudgingly accept cash for cabs and information from the sorts who would happily tell you what you wanted to know if their price was met. Then it was another run downstairs where John was chatting with Anderson about stock volume and pulling John from behind the counter while Sebastian smirked and followed slowly after them, throwing the smirk back over his shoulder at Anderson as he walked.

“Sebastian, you’ll look after them, right? We don’t need any more casualties.”

“No promises.”

“Please?”

“I’ll try.”

“Do. Or do not. There is no try.”

Sebastian paused a moment, then his expression shifted into a boyish grin that never failed to astonish Anderson with its pure delight.

“Ok.”

“That’s my Jedi.”
Chapter 53

Sherlock returned his mobile to his pocket and huffed loudly.

“As best he can remember, this is the spot from which Marcus was abducted.”

John looked around the moderately-busy stretch of pavement, taking note of the various features of the businesses and parking situation, not seeing any reason this spot would be better or worse for a kidnapping than any other.

“This is a fairly busy area, even later when Marcus would have been out for their wine. Why would they risk taking him when it could easily be seen?”

That, at least, Sherlock could answer.

“Likely because they were not intending on keeping him for any extended period of time, so there was no worry about being tracked while he was in their possession. Sebastian, does anything stand out to you as notable?”

Actually, what was notable to the assassin, was the lack of anything notable to see. Sometimes, the best place to kidnap someone was a completely unremarkable location because, unless there was a gun battle or a car squealing away from the scene at high speed, people just didn’t remember much about their surroundings. It was a street, there were shops, places to eat and drink, oh look a drunk, more shops…

“Nah. Good spot for a quick snatch.”

“Hmmmm… This was a crime of opportunity for they had no idea Marcus would leave Anthea’s flat at that hour or where he was going when he did leave. The question is whether they were under orders to abduct him tonight or at any time he was alone.”

John shot a glance at Sebastian who was still looking up and down the pavement and making a motion with his fingers that John had long associated with the werewolf wanting to take wolf form.

“From what I know of Marcus, he’s not quite as much a social butterfly as he likes to pretend. He doesn’t have a PA or driver like his father and is fine spending the night alone shopping or stopping in at various pubs and clubs to check out the competition. If they were waiting for any moment he was alone, there are a lot of them they could have chosen before now.”

“Then the timing of his abduction could be significant. A specific escalation to weaken us before… what?”

John shrugged and realized the answer to that could be a thousand different things but probably not because Magnussen was a shit, however, nothing yet had painted him as a particularly creative one. So, likely no colorful, exotic evil scheme just waiting to be hatched.

“I suspect he decided that if the winds were starting to shift against him, then acting fast was smarter than waiting. Do something before we were fully prepared so it’d have more chance of success. He seems the arrogant sort and they tend to believe nobody will fathom out their plans. We probably took him by surprise.”

Now, Sebastian was sidling away from them nonchalantly towards an alley they had passed and John smirked seeing Sherlock’s quizzical face.
“Did you think he’d transform in the middle of the pavement?”

“He is going to… oh. Won’t a large wolf trotting along the pavement cause an equal amount of commotion?”

“Watch.”

John smiled contentedly until a very large… dog… came padding out of the alley cocking its head back in clear signal to go get its clothes. While John did that, Sherlock examined Sebastian and itemized the details that varied between this form and what he had seen before.

“John… this is not a wolf.”

“Nope. It’s not as easy to take this form as his natural one, but Greg gave him a spot of magical help so he can do this when necessary, such as milling about in public. He’s got his canine senses though and that’s what he apparently wants. Here, you take his clothes and I’ll take Marcus’s.”

Swapping their bundles, John moved them out of the way of passersby and pretended to examine the clothing but was actually giving Sebastian a chance to get a good sniff of the various items.

“I also brought this.”

John couldn’t help but smile as Sherlock drew a vibrant blue ascot from his pocket.

“Anthea included this in the clothes she brought Marcus. It should have his scent predominating, so Sebastian can use it to more firmly separate his scent from that of his abductors.”

Sherlock casually let his arm drop so Sebastian could take several long sniffs of the ascot with what John suspected was an intentional extra measure of wetness to permanently spot the silk. Werewolves could be so catty, at times.

“Alright, then. Sebastian, do you think you can track them given they were driving?”

With a loud squawk at the sight of Sebastian’s leg lifting in his direction, John made a get on with it’ motion with one hand while stifling Sherlock’s snort of laughter via a rude gesture with the other. It was no surprise that Sebastian’s first move was towards the street, where he sniffed carefully until he stopped at a specific spot currently occupied by a Vauxhall Corsa.

“Well, we know where they were parked. Sebastian, and don’t you fucking piss on me, this is a busy street. Is the scent still strong enough to… ok, we’re walking…”

In their original direction, it seemed. Sherlock cut eyes at John who shrugged and made certain to stand close to Sebastian so people didn’t think a large, decidedly not fluffy dog was freely roaming the streets of London unsupervised. After walking for a solid ten minutes, it was clear that two things were important. Finding a dog-friendly cab who didn’t mind an open-ended fare and finding somewhere to get their personal preferences for caffeine because it could be a long night. How they were going to give Sebastian his infusion was a question to ponder. Coffee in a dog bowl might prompt disapproving looks from the citizenry and having their throats torn out by a peeved weredog who didn’t think their little joke was as funny as they did would make the rest of the night’s goals a little difficult to achieve…

“Well, this isn’t what I expected. Bit of a letdown, actually.”
Sherlock found himself nodding in agreement at the modest, tidy terraced house that in no manner signaled thugs for hire or evil henchmen or anything fitting the job description of the people they were tracking.

“Let me check something…”

Taking out his mobile, Sherlock did a search based on the address and scowled at the results.

“It is listed for rent, currently. This may simply have been a convenient empty property for their temporary use.”

“Do you think they’re still there?”

Sherlock looked down at Sebastian who looked surprisingly mournful, but not quite in the way Sherlock would expect if the house was empty.

“Yes. Though… they may not be helpful.”

Starting forward, Sherlock quickly made his way to the front door, with John looking around for neighbors peeking out of windows or the friendly constable on patrol, which was in response to seeing Sherlock take a parcel out of his pocket that contained a set of professional lockpicks that had the door open with a speed that impressed even Sebastian. Of course, once the door opened, both John and Sebastian wished Sherlock had left the lockpicks at home since the air was foul with the familiar stench of death.

“It seems their use came to an end. Follow me, but do not touch anything.”

Creeping inside, Sherlock looked about the room that seemed to serve dual function as an entrance and parlor and continued walking until he stopped at the doorway to the kitchen and looked inside.

“Nobody. Sebastian?”

The weredog only paused a moment before entering the kitchen and moving towards a door set against the left-side wall, which Sherlock opened to find a set of stairs descending to what was likely a cellar. Where the odor was decidedly stronger.

“Sherlock… we need to phone your inspector friend.”

“No… we phone my brother. He has people to manage this sort of thing and, most likely, will want to view the scene himself.”

The willingness to bring Mycroft into the picture shocked John, but he couldn’t find a reason to argue against the idea. Whether it was the police or Mycroft’s people, there would be someone official in charge of the crime scene to see justice done. In some form or fashion. While Sherlock drew out his mobile, John shot a look at Sebastian and the weredog moved down the stairs, with John a few steps behind, mostly to do the honorable thing and check that nobody remained alive though, from his experience, this wasn’t the sort of situation where some lucky bastard was going to be found as an exception to the very dead rule.

There were four of them, in total. All men and two were certainly the ones Marcus had described to Sherlock. Looked like single shots to either the head or chest, except for one who had an exit wound through his shoulder, front, and a second shot to the head. Probably tried running but it didn’t help. In any case, everyone was very dead and his duty to his profession, and human decency, was satisfied. Though it didn’t fill him with glee, even when Sherlock joined them with reassuring news.
“Mycroft is en route and will have a team present shortly. We should gather what evidence we can before they arrive. I prefer to ensure we are in possession of anything useful in case it is compromised in the cleanup process.”

John suspected Mycroft’s team was more than a basic cleanup crew, but wisely kept that to himself as Sherlock began looking through the pockets of the victims and Sebastian carefully surveyed the room and took in the scents on the stairs before trotting up them to investigate the rest of the house.

“What do you think, Sherlock?”

“At first glance, they brought Marcus here, where at least one other person was waiting.”

“The shooter.”

‘No, I believe someone besides the gunman was also present. The shots were fired from that side of the room, but notice how the dust has been disturbed on this side of the table away from where the gunman stood.”

“He could have walked over there easily enough.”

“Do you see any footprints between these two positions?”

“I don’t really see much in the way of footprints, at all.”

“Look more closely.”

John crouched down but didn’t see anything until Sherlock motioned for him to put the light from the doorway and the cellar’s weak bulb behind him when faint disturbances in the dust and debris on the floor became visible.

“Alright, that makes sense, then. You think it was Magnussen?”

“No. I doubt he would act directly. Also, I doubt he would have been so sloppy as to leave this behind…”

John stood and peered at the fag end lying in a corner as if tossed aside by whomever was at the table.

“How do you know that’s not been here for awhile?”

“It is lying on top of the dirt and there is none covering it. Importantly, that is a decidedly expensive cigarette, not the standard low-quality tobacco of mass-produced brands. If there is no video footage of this individual, we may be able to trace their identity through that.”

“What about fingerprints?”

“Perhaps, but it is difficult to believe he and the shooter would not wear gloves. They had to know the bodies would be discovered, at the latest when the estate agent next came to inspect or show the house to a potential renter.”

“True. So, what do we…”

A sharp bark at the top of the stairs had Sherlock and John turning, then running up them into the kitchen to follow Sebastian who led them out to the back garden where another body lay.

“Ok… four dead from gunshot wounds and this poor bugger from having his throat slit. What
do you think, Sherlock?"

The detective knelt and sniffed the corpse’s fingers nodding slightly as if it confirmed what he already suspected.

“This was the shooter. Sebastian, did you find another body?”

The look Sherlock received, even presented with dog features, expressed clearly Sebastian’s thoughts on being asked if he would have left another body as a surprise like a dinner mint on your pillow at a nice hotel.

“Very well, then it is a fair assumption that our killer was his accomplice in the other murders. Do you have enough of his scent, Sebastian, to track him?”

This look was one of frustration and the weredog cocked his head for the others to follow after nudging Sherlock to return his clothing, which he donned after transforming back to human shape.

“No. Should, but… it cuts off. Sharply.”

John sighed at the knowing look Sebastian shot him and rolled his eyes.

“Magic. There are ways to conceal your presence, including some easy spells if you just need it the once. Those tend to be of limited perimeter, though, so it’s possible you could find something further out, but a larger search area means lower chance of success. Greg might be able to do something, though, if we think it will help.”

“Not necessarily.”

Taking out a small magnifier, Sherlock started examining the ground around the body and continued on through the small area of the back garden.

“There are two fresh footprints likely belonging to our killer. A large man who pitches slightly forward so his toes receive more pressure when he walks than his heel. Given the discarded cigarette was certainly his, it should be possible to secure his identity in short order. Once Mycroft has arrived to start his meddling, we can make a start on that. Though… several of the tobacco shops I would want to visit are closed.”

“Heh.”

Sherlock looked at Sebastian and quickly smiled.

“Of course, ‘closed’ pertains only to those who cannot actively change that situation in their favor.”

Remembering who were the other two persons in his party, John began shaking his head and fixed each of them in turn with ‘a look.’

“No. We are not burglarizing honest businesses for information that’s easily available tomorrow after they open.”

“I would argue your use of the term easier since I doubt the shopkeepers will contentedly part with that information if we simply ask them for it politely. This way, we avoid the inevitable and tedious conversation that will occur before I finally gain the information I require. It is a far more efficient plan.”
“I like it.”

John, however, did not.

“Thank you, Sebastian, your vote is accepted and promptly discarded.”

“Why?”

“You… colored out of the lines.”

Sebastian cut John more deeply with his disappointed dad frown than if he’d used one of the three knives currently on his person.

“Fine, that was rubbish. Let’s… let’s just wait for Mycroft and his people, then decide how to proceed.”

Not that it was a long wait, because they had just completed a second look around the house and garden when a large, dark sedan pulled up in front of the house, let its passengers exit and drove off to park somewhere that was pointedly not in front of the house in question.

“Oh dear, Fatcroft has hired a Greek chorus to follow him around.”

It was rare that Sherlock felt even a shred of actual worry about his little quips, but the sight of both Mycroft and Petras bearing down on him with a steely look in their eye had him coughing slightly and wondering if he should inquire about someone’s health or make a banal remark about the weather.

“Report, Sherlock.”

Rapidly detailing the events of the night to his brother, Sherlock provided a succinct summary of the situation before he shifted his attention towards the newest, albeit familiar, face in the small group.

“Why are you here, elf?”

“Because I’m incalculably handsome.”

John wondered what specific failing of his existence determined he deserved people like this in his life. And in such quantity. Perhaps it was time to brighten things up with some dead bodies!

“Care to see our victims?”

That, at least, got people’s attention and the parade of vampires, humans, elf, werewolf, dragon and half-dragon returned from parking the car made their way to the cellar to view the scene then out to the garden to take in the final body that rounded out the count.

“And you think, brother, you can determine the identity of our unknown killer?”

“Probably. Tonight, even, if someone who shall remain nameless, it’s John if you’re interested, stopped waving an outdated and ill-applied moral code in my face like a protest sign.”

John waved something else in Sherlock’s face, though it’s single-finger nature lacked the appropriate placard to resemble any form of protest signage.

“We are not breaking into businesses for you and Sebastian to pilfer their ledgers!”
“I have no intention of pilfering anything. Any sales records are likely on computer, so we only need to break into those and search for the information I need. Nothing need be carried out of the shop.”

“I want cigars.”

“You, Sherlock, are not stealing records and you, Sebastian, are not stealing cigars.”

“Fine. I’ll steal fags.”

“There will be no stealing!”

“Is that one always so boring?”

Sherlock pointed happily at the Dark Elf who was more and more enjoying the happy turn of events in his life. Already there were murders and thieving! This was certainly not the worst coalition to sponsor his new opportunities. Money was one thing, but entertainment was quite another. And this Mycroft might be waving him off, but that fellow clearly enjoyed a bit of mayhem, himself. Quite mayhem, but to each his own.

“Doctor Watson is quite right, there shall be no stealing. However, one can successfully argue that viewing sales records does not constitute stealing since they remain happily in place after being viewed. I expect word as soon as possible, Sherlock. I had people collecting the CCTV footage for the area from which Marcus was abducted, but it is not highly probable there is anything in this vicinity for us to use to identify our new target. While John fumed, Sherlock nodded and held out his hand, earning a large big-brother sigh as Mycroft drew out his wallet which prompted Sebastian and, after a moment, Nyvrokh to follow suit. This had Mycroft glaring at Petras until he drew out his wallet to help pay off the not-burglars, slapping away Leo’s now-outstretched hand in the process. And, no, he and Mycroft certainly did not hand a token payment to the dragons because they were making neglected puppy eyes at them. It was payment for… something or other. As the only member of the raiding party not directly receiving cash, John decided that he would assume the mantle of regimental captain and take charge. Not that this loony lot would listen to him but if he wasn’t getting at least 20 quid for his troubles, he’d settle for the laurels of command.

“Right. Fine, we’ll do this your way, Sherlock, but I am overseeing this nonsense and if I think you’re crossing the line, I will bring things to a halt. It’s not as if you can’t get the information tomorrow in a far more legal manner.”

“A far slower and more irritating manner, you mean.”

“You have your reality and I have mine. Thank goodness. Now, let’s go.”

Striding off with his best military posture, John was a little perplexed to hear not two sets of footsteps following him, but three. Turning around did not lessen the perplexity.

“Why are you following me?”

The Dark Elf smiled a smile that might have been eager or menacing, depending on perspective. John was helpfully compromising with ‘eagerly menacing.’

“To participate in the thievery, of course.”

“There will be no thievery!”
“I think there will.”

Sherlock and Sebastian nodding in agreement did not sit well with John’s command laurels.

“From this moment on, remember that I’m making the rules because I’m the only person here who actually cares about them.”

“Feel free to follow them, then. I shall make do with thieving.”

“Mycroft! He’s your problem, do something.”

Mycroft nodded commiseratively and walked over to hand John £20 and follow it with a credible sign of the cross.

“I anoint you the bearer of the problem that is Nyvrokh Rursozen. Go in peace and sin no more. Or if you choose to indulge in a bit of sin, do try to enjoy it.”

Turning on his heel Mycroft walked back towards his contingent of the Scooby Gang, savoring the daggers John was glaring into his back.

“Well, that was official, in a creepy sort of way. First off, Mr. Sodding Dark Elf, you’ll need to change because I’m not traipsing about London with an escapee from a Dungeons and Dragons game.”

“That sounds fun. Can we play once we’ve stolen our fill?”

“There will be no stealing! If you want to play D&D, ask Anderson. Or Charles. They seem the type. Anyway, you need clothes and…”

“I will wear those.”

The clothes under John’s arm that belonged to Marcus. Who would probably pout that his clothes went on an elf’s back, but was rich and could replace them easily and at no cost to John, which was really the most important factor in the good doctor’s ruminations.

“Fine, here. They’ve been werewolf sniffed, but should be in good condition. No! No, you will not change on the front lawn, my god man do you have any decency?”

“No, not really.”

But, worrying that the smaller man might explode with indignation if he continued, Nyvrokh stepped back inside to don the new clothes, leaving the top few buttons of the shirt unfastened to accommodate his broader chest and dumped his own clothes into John’s quickly raised arms.

“Not your valet, thank you very much.”

With the clothes thrown back into the house and a quick word with Charles to burn them for a fire if they got cold, the party finally set in motion towards the first shop Sherlock knew carried the brand of cigarette they’d discovered and was still open for business. What struck John most about the visit was that Sherlock’s interrogation of the shop owner was that his questions were demanding, relentless, but stayed on the side of the courteous line that kept them acceptable, if a touch frustrating for the man who genuinely was uncomfortable about disclosing information about clients. However, demanding relentlessness won the day and they left with a short list of names of people who had purchased that brand of cigarette in the last month.
The same strategy worked for the next shop they visited, though the final open target proved more of a challenge. That was handily met, however, by the looming presence of two large, silent men who leaned against a section of wall smiling at the shop attendant in such a way that made him suspect the only reason they weren’t killing him right now was that they were having far more fun watching him wonder when the killing was going to begin. With that list in hand, it was time to address the actual challenge of the evening’s romp.

“How many shops are closed, Sherlock?”

“Three, possibly four. I am not entirely certain about the fourth as ownership changed and I have not had occasion to visit since that occurred. They may have varied their stock.”

“Names of two.”

John and Sherlock looked at Sebastian who had his mobile out and was looking expectantly at Sherlock.

“Why?”

“Me and the elf will check out two. You check the other two. Faster that way.”

Sherlock opened his mouth to protest, but remembered the werewolf was actually not unskilled with computers and probably well-versed in the art of burglary. Surely not all assassination victims were lounging by their pool or casually strolling down the street when it came time to end their life in a quietly violent manner. Two names were tossed Sebastian’s way and, after a quick search, he nodded that he had the addresses in hand.

“Meet?”

“Veg?”

“Where.”

“Oh… Graham’s party magician shop.”

“Ok.”

Sebastian glanced at the elf who smiled ferally and nodded. With the two of them stalking away like jungle cats looking for prey, Sherlock glanced about for a cab to hail to the first of their two addresses. Fortunately, it wasn’t too late that a few weren’t still roaming the streets for fares.

“I wonder what your brother and the others are doing?”

Sherlock handed his mobile over to John who started laughing at the long string of messages, all from Leo, which began with ‘Petras showed me this texting thing!’ and continued on as a long series of complaints and surreal questions from the vampire king.

“So, we at least know they’re keeping His Majesty distracted. That hopefully means the rest are able to actually accomplish something.”

“Despite his cake obsession and watch chain fetish, Mycroft is surprisingly good at his work. Whatever can be learned from the site or victims, he will find and trace as far as possible if the information proves useful.”

“ Anything from the lists we’ve gotten so far? I didn’t recognize any names and nothing stood
out as pointing to an evil ne’er do well.”

“I recognized none, either, though four names do appear on multiple lists.”

“They’re looking at lung cancer in their future.”

“Perhaps. Or, perhaps they did not wish to draw attention to their habits by frequenting the same establishment on a regular basis. Varying one’s routine is an intentional, and suspicious, act.”

“Hadn’t thought of that. But, then, I’m not a detective. Or criminal. Yet.”

“Nothing I have planned is criminal. If viewed in the correct light.”

“Which is your light. That’s a flickery little oddly-colored bulb that you find in every spooky attic in Britain. It fools you into thinking ‘Hey, I’ve got light!’ then goes dark the second the witch or ghost or whatnot wants to have a go at you.”

“That was very poetic, John.”

“Thank you.”

“Besides, Mycroft will ensure we are not charged, let alone convicted of anything, even if Dimmock decides he wants to be funny and have us in the cells for the night. I suspect he leads a sad and lonely life.”

“Well, then, I feel much better. I just hope all of this leads somewhere. The part I’m most worried about is we take care of Magnussen, but the plague remains out there somewhere waiting to be released intentionally or accidentally. Or that we lose information that might lead to a cure in time to save Marcus.”

“We’re doing what we can, John. There isn’t anything else to do at the moment.”

There was a softness in Sherlock’s voice that John appreciated even if the words, themselves, held little comfort.

“I know, Sherlock. It’s… I’m a doctor and I’m former military. Both sets of instincts are feeling very uneasy right now that we could lose on one or both fronts.

“Then we ensure that does not happen.”

“Just like that.”

“Of course. I will let Mycroft tend to the pesky details.”

John felt a bubble of laughter rise up and couldn’t see any reason not to set it free.

“Naturally! Mycroft the Detail Manager. Well, we’ll soon have a tidy list of details for him to check out while we savor our criminal victory.”

“And have egg rolls.”

“Oh, feeling peckish are we?”

“Not particularly, but I have noted you enjoy eating at regular intervals.”
“I do no… yeah, ok, I’m not going to deny it. Everyone but you does, so I’m not ashamed of that, either. We’ll phone in an order to be delivered as we’re moving towards the shop. I suspect Anderson will be ready for something by then, too.”

“I have Mycroft’s bank card, so he can pay for our meal.”

“Another pesky detail for his plate.”

“If there’s room amongst the cake.”

Breaking into shops was surprisingly easier than John had anticipated and gaining access to the purchase records was also easy, since one shop still kept an actual ledger under the till and the second used a non-password-protected computer. It didn’t take long before they had what they needed and left the shops exactly as they found them, which assuaged the last vestiges of guilt John was feeling about the whole business.

He also felt a bit of self-satisfaction that he and Sherlock made it back to the shop before the other strike team, but it quickly shriveled when Sebastian and Nyvrokh entered the shop smoking cigars and had suspicious bulges under each of their jackets. The elf hadn’t even been wearing a jacket before they split up, either.

“You didn’t!”

“Ok.”

“Sebastian… you will go back and pay for those cigars. And where did you get that jacket? Is it stolen, too?”

The elf looked down at the garment as if he was surprised to find it there, then shrugged in highly exaggerated disbelief.

“No idea.”

“Unacceptable! I’m extremely disappointed with you two. Especially you, Sebastian. The moment you’re out of my sight, you go to the bad.”

“Nah. We’re already there.”

Two heads nodded solemnly while John seethed, but he got a bit of a boost when Anderson stepped out of the stock area and stared at Sebastian with shock on his face.

“Smoking?”

“Uh…. yeah.”

“That’s terribly unhealthy, you know.”

“Not for me.”

“I… really?”

“Probably.”

“I’m going to research that, just to be certain. It does smell nice, though. Much better than
tatty old fags people smoke on the streets. They’ll kill you and your death will be a stinky one. What’s the good side of that? There isn’t one.”

“I’ll stick with the good stuff.”

“I’m still researching it.”

“Ok.”

“Go downstairs, though, because Greg won’t want his shop smelling of cigar smoke, even if it’s nice smell.”

“Ok.”

Sebastian nodded towards the stockroom and found the entire party, minus Anderson, following him down to the workroom to begin the debriefing, which John decided to take charge of because he needed to maintain some positive control of this ridiculous situation.

“Now that we’re all getting cancer from second-hand smoke, what did you find? Besides stolen merchandise, that is.”

The elf dug in the pocket of his still-unexplained jacket and took out a mobile, which also required explaining, in John’s opinion, and showed John and Sherlock the list of names they’d acquired.

“Alright, I recognize two of those names from Sherlock and my lists but none of the others. Sherlock?”

“No, nothing.”

“Talking about your sex life, Sherlock?”

Sherlock scowled at Greg who was coming out from the real workroom, though part of it was for the fact Greg was wearing dark sunglasses.

“You look ridiculous.”

“Thank you! They actually help, though. We were laughing about the idea, but when I tried a pair it made a difference. Of course, not looking directly at people helps, too, like those two wretches over there filling my shop with smoke, but that’s not too much of a hardship since it also means I don’t have to be assaulted by their ugly faces. It’s a double-win situation!”

It wasn’t only the not looking situation that got Greg hit in the chest with a snipped cigar butt that Sebastian produced only a split second after drawing out another cigar and attacking it with a suspiciously new-looking cigar cutter. The werewolf was scarily fast when he wanted to be.

“Littering and smoking. You’re going to the bad kids’ school, Sebastian. I’m signing the paperwork tomorrow. They’ll beat some discipline into you. Anyway, I heard about the bodies. Mycroft is covering things so that nobody will be the wiser about the whole business, so that’s one less worry for us. What did you lot discover?”

“Besides stolen cigars and smoking paraphernalia?”

“That would be my focus, John, yes. But good on you supporting my shipping Seb off to learn the error of his ways.”

“Sherlock stole fags.”
Sebastian’s smile was just taunting enough for John to wonder what bit of mischief Sebastian was setting in motion.

“He did not, Sebastian. I was with him the whole time.”

“Yes. I smell them.”

“Sherlock didn’t st… Sherlock, why are you suddenly looking guilty?”

The packets of high-end cigarettes Sherlock drew from his coat pockets were explanation enough.

“I give up.”

“It is likely better for your health if you do, John. In any case, Grace…”

“Run out of men’s names for me already, Sherlock?”

“No, I simply refuse to exclude females from opportunities to nettle you.”

“Carry on.”

“Very well, our work has gained us the names of purchasers for the type of cigarette discarded at the crime scene by the person responsible for the killing of the shooter of the other victims. All that remains is seeing if any have connections to Magnussen or experience in fields suiting them for culturing the plague.”

“That’s certainly useful. I spoke to your brother ten minutes or so ago and he was seeing the cleaning crew sorted with final marching orders. He should be able to take a look at your list now, probably. Send them to him and I’ll ring him up so we can talk.”

Sebastian showed Nyvrokh how to send their list to Sherlock who forwarded it to Mycroft while Greg waited the few moments for his lover to answer his phone.

“Ah, Gregory. Perfect timing, we are just setting off for my house to attend to a few matters. I see Sherlock wants my attention. Should I check or let it be a happy surprise for later?”

“It’s actually helpful, if you can believe that. The names of the people who bought that cigarette he was talking about.”

“Ah, very well, let me see what… hmmmm…”

“Mycroft?”

“I actually only thought to verify that they were sufficiently few that I could run the checks myself or hand the job to Anthea but… I do not think that will be necessary.”

“Why not?”

“Because I recognize one of these names.”

Greg quickly put the phone on speaker so everyone could hear.

“I’ve got us on speaker… who do you recognize?”

“Robert Frankland. He works at Baskerville.”
The name meant nothing to Greg, but Sherlock and Sebastian stared at the phone with widened eyes.

“And what’s that when it’s at home?”

“A highly secret research facility.”

“Could that give him access to the things he’d need to grow the plague?”

“Easily. Both culturing it and working on producing a cure. He would have everything he needed at his disposal and the skill to do it, besides.”

“Ok, what are we going to do?”

“Fancy a tour of a classified facility, Gregory? They are ever so much fun.”

Greg grinned and decided that would be a very good use of his time since the protection amulet he was making for Marcus had to see two moonrises in its rainwater-gathered-in-an-oaken-vessel bath before it could be used.

“I would love one.”

“I shall collect you before lunch, then. I have some matters to oversee in the morning, but it has been awhile since I peeked in on certain projects there and I am certain Dr. Frankland will happily agree to act as tour guide.”

“You’re going to make him squirm like a worm on a hook, aren’t you?”

“Perhaps. Sometimes the direct approach is more appropriate. I shall decide once I have taken the measure of the man.”

“Which you’ll start tonight with his file, won’t you, you sly dog.”

“Guilty as charged! In fact, I shall add that to our list of objectives for the evening. Oh, and you might wish to notify Anthea that Leonas was introduced to a marvelous website tonight which combines the faces of two potential parents to predict the appearance of their offspring. He is highly pleased with the results.”

“She’ll be thrilled to hear that, I have no doubt. I’ll tell her to expect his call.”

“Most certainly. Sherlock, thank you for your work tonight and give my thanks to the others, as well. I shall phone later, Gregory.”

“Looking forward to it.”

Greg smiled at the now-silent phone a moment before putting the mobile away and taking a sniff of the air.

“Someone order Chinese food?”

Sebastian and Nyvrokh were up the stairs before the question mark sounded in the phrase with Sherlock only a second behind them.

“I hope you ordered lots, John. I’ve seen a Dark Elf eat. He’ll be matching Seb fork for fork.”

“I think Sherlock told them to put the whole menu in sacks and drag it over here. If not, I’ll see
what we have for biscuits.”

“Stay away from my custard crèmes, you bastard. But bring me a carton of something, if you can pry it away from the others. It’s been a long day.”

“I’ll bring two. Can’t let you waste away; I’m not certain Mycroft fancies bony men.”

“He does seem to enjoy snuggling my teddy-like self.”

“If you start to go trouserless like Winnie the Pooh, we will be having words.”

“Will I enjoy them?”

“If we go as much as Sherlock taking your photo and sneaking a copy into each of our sacks so the customers get a special bonus when they get home with their purchases.

“Understood.”
Chapter 54

Mycroft experienced fatigue differently than most people, he suspected. Though, perhaps experienced was not the correct word. Expressed might be more accurate. Until the moment he collapsed into an unconscious heap, he betrayed few of the characteristic signs of fatigue and only those who knew him well would recognize the minute signals he emitted as screams into the void for a comfortable bed and the peace and quiet to enjoy it.

Which was why he was now frowning at Charles who was driving him back to his office for a quick gathering of certain papers in preparation for his morning’s work. It had been a long night of effort on his part and that of the vampires to ensure bodies were successfully transported, a crime scene was scrubbed, research begun on the identities of the victims and their connection to Magnussen and it had only ended a short while ago as the vampires returned to Leonas’s house to set in motion a few things from their end. And, in all of this, his driver appeared virtually unchanged in energy, though he had not seen a wink of sleep.

“Charles?”

“Sir?”

“Are you experiencing difficulties with sleeping?”

“No, sir.”

But there was something in the man’s voice that Mycroft could not miss, despite his own need for a nap.

“Very well, are you experiencing issues, not well-described as ‘difficulties’ with sleeping?”

“Are we quibbling semantics, sir?”

“Are we hiding something, Charles?”

“No particularly, sir. There is simply enough to occupy people’s minds that small matters needn’t be tossed out to distract from more important things.”

It hit Mycroft rather sharply that he hadn’t inquired about his chauffer’s wellbeing after his traumatic death and the startling aftermath. And he, of all people, knew how easy it could be to hide a minefield of concerns behind a socially acceptable mask.

“The matters concerning you are not small, Charles. I admit I have given them little thought in the tumult we have been experiencing, but I do not consider them minor or inconsequential. How are you? You seem to be managing well with your new situation, but I am not sufficiently naïve to believe managing well is the same as being content, healthy and satisfied.”

“It truly is nothing, sir. I have, however, noticed that I need far less sleep than I did before…the incident. There have been a number of changes, mostly little things, though some are more significant.”

“Such as?”

“The sleeping issue, for one. Dragons are fine with little sleep, apparently, and I’m finding myself making do with far, far less than my norm. My art…”
“Oh dear. Charles, tell me your talent was not impacted. I know that is very important to you.”

“It’s different now, let’s say. Not worse, just different. In truth, I’m intrigued by the new way my ideas and emotions are coming across in my work. Goraseth says it’s bolder, makes a sharper impact, and I think he’s right. It’s still a difference, though, and a bit strange when I expect to see one thing on the canvas and that’s not the way it ultimately manifests. Then it’s various likes and dislikes, responses to various stimuli. Cold, for example. I normally enjoy the cold weather, but I’m finding even cool rooms uncomfortable. To be fair, Seth has been experiencing his share of changes, which he daily finds reason to complain to me about. We’ve had to implement a rule that den time cannot boast more than three complaints for which we blame the other without penalty of very good wine.”

“Den time?”

“Uhhhhh…”

Mycroft cocked an eyebrow and met Charles’s eye in the mirror.

“… it’s a dragon thing, sir.”

“With wine.”

“Wine is a stellar accompaniment to much in life, sir.”

“Point taken. However… you will inform me of any problem or situation that I might ameliorate, correct? An issue of scheduling or any other matter to assist with your new circumstances?”

“I will, sir. And, thank you. I appreciate that.”

It was the least he could do, Mycroft thought, given he’d dragged Charles into this magical world in the first place. And besides… having a half-dragon driver would certainly come in handy for a myriad of things, though the extra-hours pay might make the various bean counters squeal with indignation…

However, this conversation had put him in mind of another situation that he had somewhat neglected and he knew very well he would not rest easy until that was put aright. Fortunately, Charles was not the only person who could make do with little sleep if need be.

Stepping through the portal into Greg’s workshop, Mycroft smiled softly at the sight of the sorcerer sitting at the small table, reading glasses perched on his nose while he studied a particularly ancient-looking book.

“Ever the scholar, Gregory.”

“Mycroft! If I was a scholar, I’d likely have this problem cracked by now instead of struggling to remember which book I was looking through that mentioned sparrow feathers. I wrote down ‘sparrow feather elixir has possibilities’ but not which sodding book the reference came from. I don’t think my marks this term are going to be particularly stellar.”

Mycroft laughed and walked forward, laying a kiss on the top of Greg’s head before beginning to rub the shoulders that his fingers could feel were tight and stiff.
“You need to rest, Gregory.”

“I need to find a way to cure or at least slow the progression of the plague.”

“And you will. However, if you do not rest and take proper care you will find your ability to conduct your work limited by fatigue and flagging spirits. Given Marcus occupies your flat, at present, where shall you sleep?”

“Oh… probably on my cot. I’ve got one for those nights I need to be right on hand if something strange happens with this or that I’m doing.”

“Facilities for bathing?”

“Down here? No.”

“Then we shall have to make do.”

“What?”

Mycroft was already rolling up his sleeves and moving towards the more modern section of the workroom that housed the kettle, microwave, sink and small refrigerator.

“Ready the cot, please, my dear, and remove, if you will, your shirt.”

Greg opened his mouth to protest, but even with his sunglasses on Mycroft’s aura informed him that such a thing would not go in his favor. Marking his place in the book he was scarcely reading, in any case, because he was fucking exhausted, Greg quickly got the small cot erected and retrieved the pillow and blanket he kept in a nearby cupboard. Then it was a tug of his shirt over his head, which took more energy than it should have, before he sat heavily on the cot and waited for whatever his lover had in store.

Which was a bowl of water, a flannel and…

“Baking soda?”

“Though I suspect you will shower upon waking, it is a pleasant thing to fall asleep with the feel of freshened skin.”

The bowl was set on the floor and, after adding a small amount of baking soda to the water, Mycroft soaked his cloth, wrung out the excess water and sat next to Greg, so he could begin moving the small flannel firmly against his back.

“There are times when I am unable to access a shower for several days, for this reason or that, and though there are pre-treated cloths now to accomplish the task, this was always a simple method to regain some semblance of hygiene, if only that mental illusion of being better in control of one’s physical self.”

And, though he had never experienced this particular aspect, the simple intimacy of the shared act was surely its own benefit, especially if one was as depleted as his dear Gregory.

“Oooh… that does feel good. I can do it, though, if you need to get home and…”

“Perish the thought. Rarely can I savor such a delightful indulgence, especially with such a rugged and handsome man such as yourself.”

“You, sir, are a flatterer.”
“Guilty as charged! However, you deserve a measure of attention, Gregory, and I am honored to bestow it. Your days of late have not been easy ones.”

Mycroft made certain to keep both hands on Greg’s body, slowly stroking his lover’s bare skin with his free hand while the other continued to wash away the day’s, and night’s, exertion.

“No, they haven’t, but it’s not as if there’s another choice.”

“True. You have help, though, and do not hesitate to share your tasks with those who can perform them equally well. Our new comrade, for instance. He has magical talents and I assume can offer assistance for various things.”

“It’d be fair payback for all the food he threw down his throat tonight. I swear him and Seb had a contest going, but it may also be that he’s not had much for human food and found it surprisingly to his liking. He went home with Sherlock, by the way, so I hope the landlady is prepared for that two-person typhoon.”

“Oh dear.”

“John’s covering the shop and Sherlock wanted to collect samples of… well, everything from our elf friend. I think Sebastian’s taking him tomorrow to learn a thing or two about guns for no particular reason other than they can spend the day destroying things and making loud noises. Probably do some knife throwing and whatever else the kiddies get up to these days.”

“One takes one’s fun when one can.”

Mycroft continued washing, periodically wetting the cloth and relishing how such a small thing was visibly relaxing his sorcerer and his heart went out to the man who was bearing so much on his shoulders.

“That’s a good philosophy. Maybe I can do that someday. Date night when all of this is behind us?”

“Our few dates *are* well described as fun.”

“Exploring rare books, having a few drinks at a cozy pub, fighting a demon… somehow I don’t see us growing stale as the years go on.”

Laying a small kiss on Greg’s shoulder, Mycroft turned over those words in his mind and the blissful implications behind them.

“I do not, either. I have not said this to you, specifically, and this is perhaps not the most electric of moments to make such a confession, but… I do love you, Gregory. I have come to realize that in the most natural and almost unremarked manner imaginable. I found you in my heart like a cozy flame which feels as if has ever been there and shall be there forever more. I cannot say when first I noticed it, yet I do not question its existence. Do with my feeble words what you will, but know I mean them sincerely and with the fullness of my love for and adoration of you.”

Greg’s mouth gaped slightly as he listened to Mycroft, who had continued calmly on with his work yet the sorcerer could see how his aura was telling the story both of how greatly Mycroft had wanted to say this, but how terrified he was that this was not a revelation Greg would welcome. Well, the latter was easily settled…

“I’m glad you told me, Mycroft, since I’ve been wondering how I was going to tell you. I’m not one for words like you are and knew that, no matter how hard I tried, I wouldn’t be able to do
justice to what I feel for you. I love you, Mycroft Holmes. That’s a paltry way to express it, though it’s the simple and unvarnished truth. I very much love you and you being here right now, with me, is worth more than all the wealth in the world.”

Mycroft stopped what he was doing and gazed into Greg’s eyes before leaning forward to take a kiss from the man who held his heart. There were many ways to describe kisses, but none could adequately convey the complexity and profundity of the kiss the two men shared, so neither of them would have dreamed of trying. Besides, that would require speaking and it was some very long moments before that could possibly occur.

“You know, I think this is the best date I’ve ever had. More like this please, kind sir.”

“As many as you desire, my dearest Gregory. Our drive tomorrow is not a short one and I have secured, if needed, a room at a rather charming inn so we might enjoy a pleasant meal and a night of… oh, whatever we might desire, before returning home in the morning.”

“That sounds like the best idea anyone, ever, has had in the entire world.”

“I am glad you approve. Now, how are you feeling?”

“Good. Much better, actually. You wield an incredible flannel.”

“Thank you. Another small moment with fresh water will make matters even more pleasant. And then, you shall sleep.”

“Do I get a story?”

“Perhaps. Is there a particular topic with which you would like to be regaled?”

“Ummm… not a fairy tale. How about something with kings and knights. Or pirates.”

“Dear me, such a daunting assignment. I believe, however, I shall be up to the task.”

Greg leaned in for another kiss and smiled that Mycroft made certain to hold him gently, very much as he expected Marcus would have advised for recovering from Mr. Evil Slice and Dice. His Mycroft was perfect, he really was. The years ahead were going to be amazing ones. Not easy ones, or peaceful ones, neither of their lives permitted that, but fucking amazing ones and he was ready for each and every one of them with his glorious man at his side.

And tomorrow night would be an excellent time for them to do a bit of celebrating. Nice inn, comfortable bed and someone special to share it with. That pretty much ensured, with their luck, that truly shitty things were about to happen, but he’d take the good now while he could. That was the only way to keep going in this business and he planned to be in said business for a very, very long time to come…

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Ok, he had to admit that getting some rest was an exceptionally good idea because his brain was definitely working better than it had been before Mycroft tucked him into his tidy crib so he could sleep like a baby. Bath, story and, while a glass of whisky to sip wasn’t exactly a bottle, it was a very acceptable substitute.

The only wrinkle to his morning had been visits by both Balthazar and Jim, each reminding him of upcoming meetings with Magnussen and each throwing subtle and not-so-subtle hints to keep an eye on the other. It was something to discuss with Mycroft, certainly, and he should be arriving
soon to collect him for their trip, where they’d have abundant time for that discussion. But, neither of the furry creatures knew about the events of last night or the Baskerville lead and he’d made certain everybody involved was well aware to keep that piece of information away from either set of animal ears… for several reasons.

Now he just had to finish making himself fit to be seen in public so he and his overnight bag could be safely set free into the world at large. One additional matter to tend to, though, before the freeing occurred…

“That sounds delightfully boring. Enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you, Marcus, Prince of the Pricks.”

“Wouldn’t that be brilliant? I can’t honestly think of anyone better to hold the title and I look positively magnificent in a crown.”

“As long as it’s a new one. The one you have now isn’t terribly impressive, you have to admit.”

“Alas, that I must. Not what you’d expect from bygone-era craftsmen. It looks like something from a sad fantasy novel about a tragic and fading kingdom that’s sold off everything of value to keep feeding the sheep and some passing tinker tossed together a few odds and ends so people would have some fucking idea who was king of their misery. That’s what lies on a tufted pillow in readiness for my ravishingly handsome head, more’s the pity... Honestly, I think the old, dreadful vampires lacked any and all sense of style. Which is probably why Father is old and dreadful, himself. Among a thousand other reasons.”

“Your loony ravings aside, I think this trip is going to be fun. I mean, a super-secret government facility… that’s the sort of thing you only see in films.”

“I wager it’ll either be all that sterile white creepiness with vaguely Aryan scientists who look like they’re made of weirdly-shiny plastic or a bit shabby and smelly with dodderly old white-hairs wearing stained lab coats.”

“I’m hoping for something out of Young Frankenstein, all electric arcs, dials and enormous switches.”

“Pics if that’s the case.”

“Loads. Actually, probably not, because if it’s as super-secret as Mycroft says they probably don’t allow holiday snaps of the inside.”

“And we’re back to boring.”

“The story of my life, so what do you expect. In any case, I double-checked the spells to keep the sunlight out of the flat and you’re alright there. Anderson’s minding the shop and he knows not to toddle up for a chat unless he wants to talk to a log.”

“I do sleep soundly.”

“John’s coming in early and will probably be here while it’s still light outside. I know he wants a bit of hair to get started on something; can I leave word it’s ok to have a snip while you’re being that log?”

“Yeah, go ahead. He… does he, or you, have something promising you’re working on?”
“It’s hard to say. How much of the old accounts can be trusted? I lean toward they’re as accurate as they can be, because why lie or tell stories about something so important and horrible as the plague, but people don’t always think clearly when they’re scared. We’re pulling together the most credible possibilities and I do know that the work I did on you already should help a bit. There is one thing I’d like to do now, though, if you promise you won’t laugh at me.”

“I will never promise that.”

“Bastard. I just want to try staring at you for awhile.”

“Oh, see what your new eyes pick up?”

“Yeah. I’ve been avoiding looking at you, if you haven’t noticed…”

“I always notice when someone isn’t looking at me and try to find someone to help the poor insane, deluded soul.”

“In any case, I want to try it now, without these sunglasses and… I know what your aura used to look like and even though it wouldn’t look the same to me now with the new sight, I should be able to find the more familiar patterns and compare them to how they look post-infection. That may give me some insight into how the magical element of the plague is acting and how to counter it.”

“I saw the video, Greg. I’m not sure you’ll be capable of doing anything insightful if you sally forth.”

“What vi… oh, that video.”

“It cost me loads, but my stalwart dragon mercenary is usually willing to part with juicy things if the price is right. Are you… that didn’t harm you in any way, did it?”

“Nah, just had me a little off-footed afterwards while my brain climbed back down from its free acid trip, made me feel a bit tired, but all I’m doing for the next few hours is riding in a car, so there’s plenty of time to recover.”

“Alright, then, but if you seem to be falling too deeply down the rabbit hole, I’m kicking your arse out of here.”

“Deal.”

Greg took a breath and sat on the sofa next to Marcus, then removed his sunglasses and stared full-on at the vampire. Then promptly fell off the sofa, but maintained the presence of mind to wave off Marcus’s offers of help and continue on from the floor.

Most people would assume a vampire’s aura would be awash with blood reds, blacks and silvers but that couldn’t be further from the truth for Marcus. He was always embraced by an expanse of blues, greens and purples but now those were separated into every possible hue under their umbrella, each dancing to their own soundless rhythm. He could also, for the first time, see tiny pockets of pure yellow, like dandelions rebelliously peeking through vast fields of stately irises. All in motion. All glowing with a light that defied being called warm or cold. Long, slender tendrils of energy emerged from the central mass, some of which reached out to him, but others seemed to wrap around the vampire as if for protection or comfort. It was wild and beautiful and mesmerizing and heartbreaking and a hundred other things that Greg might not have been able to pull together if there wasn’t a foot gently kicking at him to focus on the task at hand.
With that intermittent jostling, the sorcerer kept his wits back from the cliff’s edge and started viewing the expanse with an analytical eye. The yellow. That yellow wasn’t just new, it was… wrong. If he focused hard on the little dandelions, he could see that the rest of Marcus’s aura seemed to draw away as they moved to and fro. And they stayed close to Marcus’s body, not following various tendrils of mystical energy extending out from Marcus’s body which, when he peered closely at them weren’t just dancing or waving. They were trembling. And… there. Fucking, fucking there…

It was tiny, just a speck, but a piece of Marcus’s aura had broken off like a stray wisp of flame, and simply dissipated. That shouldn’t happen. A powerful practitioner could send their energies to accomplish a task, but it was controlled and purposeful. And always returned. This, though… there went another. Just teeny flickers breaking away and… leaving. Shit…

It took a massive act of will for Greg to peel away his eyes and he kept them closed for a long moment while his brain continued to bathe in the miasma of color and form those eyes had witnessed.

“Greg?”

“I’m ok, just need a few seconds to… sit.”

“Take your time.”

Greg didn’t precisely hear Marcus rise from the sofa to get him a glass of water, but he knew it on some level so having a glass pressed into his hand wasn’t cause for surprise.

“Thanks. That was…”

“Tell me I’m gorgeous, Greggy. You know you want to and I certainly do.”

“You’re gorgeous. And I’m not being sarcastic… your aura is absolutely gorgeous, so well done you.”

“Thank you. And what’s the part you probably don’t want to tell me but you really should because… I don’t why besides I don’t want to be kept in the dark about anything and I suspect that if you thought the gorgeousness meant all was moonbeams and kittens, then you’d have said so straight away.”

“To be honest, I don’t know what I saw, in terms of what it means.”

“Besides it means shit for absolutely gorgeous me.”

“Basically. I saw pockets of… for pretty yellow specks, it’s something malevolent, that much is certain. And…”

“Tell me, Greg.”

“Pieces of your aura are vanishing. Breaking off and dissipating, not being resorbed or anything like that. I know I’ve never seen anything like that before and… there’s no doubt it could have a negative impact on you. Auras ebb and flow in intensity and even size, based on mood and health, but I have never seen bits just flying off. Your body is being attacked on one front by whatever bugs are floating about in you and your energy, your magic, your spirit are being ripped away, as well. I’m sorry, Marcus. I’ve got something to work with now, though, something specific to attack. I’ll do this a lot more once I’m back from Baskerville, but I have a few books I’ll take with me that are solid references for aura-based magic and start right away looking for a
solution.”

Marcus didn’t even try to put up his standard ridiculous front and just slumped back on the sofa, eyes locked on the ceiling.

“Can it be rebuilt? The parts I’ve lost. Am losing. Auras can be cleansed, repaired, but can they be added to when parts go on permanent holiday?”

“I don’t know. My instincts say yes. They’re highly dynamic and change all the time. A baby’s aura is small compared to that of an adult, so where did all of the extra come from? They had to have generated it themselves, so why can’t you do that if you lose some of yours? I will work on it, Marcus. Not going to leave you suffer this without doing everything in my power to help.”

Keeping his eyes closed, Greg got off the floor, sat close to the vampire and drew him into a hug that lasted longer than either man likely realized because there was a peace to be found in the arms of a friend and each could do with their share, given the circumstances.

“So… while you’re away shagging your boyfriend, I shall be entertaining my dear lady in the comfort of your squalid flat. Any chance you can get Mycroft to get Uncle to get Father not to pester us during our alone time?”

“You know that if anyone tells him not to pester, he’ll pester ten times as much.”

“Yes, but Uncle is good at sending the old frog down the wrong road that leads to an abandoned petrol station overgrown with weeds and no street signs because they all blew down during the storm of ’65 that uprooted the old tree that fell on the petrol station, which is why it was abandoned to begin with.”

“You have issues.”

“Many! And each of them as fabulous as the last.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

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“Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?”

Mycroft gently smacked Greg’s leg and grinned at the sorcerer who was sticking his head out of the window like a dog anxious to get to the park.

“We are, in fact, quite near our destination.”

Pulling his head back into the car, Greg threaded his fingers through his hair in a completely ineffective attempt to tame his silvery mane. Something that was very much to Mycroft’s liking.

“Yes! It’s lovely here, I have to say. Much lovelier than I’d expect here for a highly classified government facility, but I suppose that’s the point. Nobody would anticipate something like that to be nestled in a picturesque section of Britain; you’d anticipate more the inside of a dead volcano or in some enclosure at the bottom of the ocean.”

“An extensive part of remaining secret, whether it is a location or a person, is to defy expectations, often in the most banal manner. For instance…’’
Mycroft pointed ahead of them to the series of structures they were approaching and Greg nodded in acknowledgement.

“Boring. Dreary and boring. I mean the chaps standing guard there and the big fence offers a bit of interest, but everything is just so…”

“Governmental?”

“That’s it! It looks boringly governmental or military and not a bit like there would be aliens living in the cellar or cyborgs being constructed to take over the world.”

“The cyborg program has not yielded positive results, I’m afraid, due to even the most benign models finding ways to circumvent various aspects of their programming so that dedicated ‘stop’ commands are handily ignored. Not a possibility you want in something you unleash to wreak targeted havoc.”

Greg cut suspicious eyes at Mycroft, who kept a small smile on his lips as he continued to drive them towards the gate. His Holmes actually driving them today had been a major shock for the sorcerer, who wasn’t actually certain if the refined man knew how to drive, but it had certainly made the ride feel like they were a couple having a nice day out and it was a feeling he was enjoying to the fullest.

“Now, kindly keep arms and legs, as well as head in the vehicle, Gregory dear. The soldiers to take their responsibilities most seriously and I would hate to curtail our mission to see you to hospital for an emergency bullet removal.”

“Pooh. I was going to race around naked and let them chase me.”

“Another day, perhaps.”

Making a distinct show of straightening his non-existent tie, Greg sat straight in his seat and checked his teeth in the mirror, earning a snort of laughter from Mycroft before he brought the car to a stop at the gate and presented his ID before being asked to do so. It was a mark of his particular level of clearance that the guard had no idea what he was looking at and had to clear it with various escalating layers of authority until someone did. And swallowed hard.

Scarcely looking at the young man who returned his ID with far more deference than he’d taken it, Mycroft drove through the now-open gate and towards the nearest access to the research levels, the location of which was easy to find since he’d memorized the schematic of the facility, including the plans that were no longer supposed to exist of the more sensitive areas, long ago.

“Ok, love, now what do we do?”

“Watch and see.”

Mycroft motioned Greg to exit the car and Greg had to smother a laugh at the impeccably dressed Mycroft Holmes, who impatiently tapped the ground with his umbrella tip the very second he was standing straight and shot a disapproving look at the security camera that had swiveled to take them in. Deepening his frown Mycroft began stalking towards one of the nondescript structures and swiped his ID card, which had the door in front of them opening before anybody racing to greet them had a chance to wave hello.

“That’ll get their blood flowing.”

“Most certainly. One does not disappoint the bureaucracy without the bureaucracy
disappointing one in return. And our reach is both broad and deep. As well as sinister. Consider
the suffering if all supply requests for toilet paper were lost and access to video entertainment
curtailed for a month. Or five. I would ask, though, are you seeing anything… suspicious?”

“Not yet, though there are traces of magic floating about. That’s not entirely abnormal,
because with any group of people, the likelihood of a practitioner or two mixed in is fairly high.
Mostly people who never know they have magical talent or ancestry shared with some very
interesting characters, but it leaves traces. We’re going down?”

“That we are. To the… fun zone.”

“Color me intrigued! But, if there was additional magics being practiced, the ground would be
a good insulator for much of it. I’ll keep my eyes, all of them, open for anything troubling.”

“Excellent.”

The ride to the lower levels was a long one and Greg found himself dancing foot to foot
like an excited schoolboy because even someone who had seen any number of truly astonishing and
unbelievable things in his life found the lure and mythology of the secret lair exceedingly
attractive. And, when the doors finally opened, he wasn’t let down, in the slightest, by what he
saw.

“This is serious Doctor No stuff, Mycroft. Or Doctor Who. Or a bouncing baby bundle of
both.”

“Here, at least, our objective lives up to the, as they say, hype.”

“Is there a gift shop?”

“Not yet, but I shall suggest that very thing at the next budget meeting. Revenue is always
welcome, even if one must sell shirts and plush dolls to receive it.”

And, of course, Mycroft now had a wonderful set of gift ideas for the next holiday he shared
with his beloved partner. For now, though, there was a rather angry woman bearing down on him
and there was certainly fun to be had there, as well.

“Who are you?”

“Today? Mycroft Holmes.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I became lost seeking a Marks & Spencer.”

Greg bit his lip to keep from laughing, especially given Mycroft’s utterly deadpan delivery which
seemed to completely exasperate their companion.

“We do not have time for pointless and time-wasting government inspections. And you are a
government man, too. I can… tell.”

“Then this is a day of good fortune for you, Dr. Stapleton, as we are not here for a general
inspection. Do be so kind as to escort us to Dr. Frankland’s laboratory.”

The woman’s features hardened into a strange rictus of offense and concern, because having
someone you don’t know call you by name is never a comforting experience. Opting, however,
not to press the issue, Dr. Stapleton simply spun on her heel and stormed in a direction Mycroft and Greg assumed was as requested, and Mycroft took her several step lead to lean in and whisper in Greg’s ear.

“I did not mean to slight you, Gregory, by failing to include you in the introductions, however, an unnamed associate always lends a delightful touch of menace to a situation. I hope you do not mind.”

“I have never been prouder of being anonymous in my life. I’m the menacing henchman!”

“That you are and you perform your role marvelously.”

“Here’s something else I do marvelously… there be magic.”

Greg cocked his head towards the corridor down which they were walking and Mycroft nodded, happy Greg had accompanied him today for more reason than one. When they reached a particular unlabeled door, Stapleton turned and fixed each man with a glare.

“Here. I anticipate Major Barrymore will have something to say about all of this.”

“ Likely. Perhaps you can help him prepare a sermon on the topic.”

With his most insufferable ‘hurry along’ motion, Mycroft ignored the affronted snort that accompanied Stapleton back down the corridor, however, he waited politely until she was out of earshot to chuckle.

“There is little more infuriating than an individual over which you have zero actual authority but feel you possess immeasurable intellectual or moral authority that you cannot exert. In any case, the scientists here do operate with a great measure of autonomy and are not often, as they say, brought to heel. Shall we?”

Greg wished for a day when he could shadow his lover at work and have a full day’s entertainment of this quality but this certainly sufficed for now.

“We shall.”

The shall-ing first involved peeking through the small window which revealed very little, then a casual strolling in which continued to reveal little until another door opened and an older man stepped through carrying a cup in one hand and a periodical in the other.

“Oh, hello.”

“Doctor Frankland.”

“That I am! Can I help you? Not lost, are you? You’d have to be very lost to find yourselves here.”

Content his little joke was being echoed, though intentionally, Mycroft smiled blandly and shook his head.

“We are here, actually, to speak with you about a certain matter.”

“Hope it’s not my taxes. I do get a bit forgetful now and again, but I’m fairly certain I’m up to date with the government’s ransom demands.”

“I shall give you a note should it prove otherwise. In any case, I wish to discuss your work
with a strain of organisms recently come into your possession.”

Greg caught the glint of alarm in the man’s eyes and predicted that his next words would be an obvious lie.

“Can’t say that sounds familiar…”

Obvious and a lie. Score!

“… Who’d you hear that from, might I ask?”

“Oh, the proverbial little bird. And one that is rather unerring in the information it tweets into my ear.”

“Well… maybe it ate a worm that disagreed with it or something because none of this is ringing any bells with me.”

“You are not conducting any form of biochemical or microbiological research?”

“Not… at present, no.”

“Then the Aberdeen Project is complete?”

Greg wasn’t sure if he should grin or glower at Frankland’s second flash of alarm but decided glowering was a better look for a henchman. Dumb henchmen grinned and that wasn’t the role he auditioned for.

“That is extremely classified information, Mr. … I’m sorry, but I don’t know your name.”

“I do apologize. Mycroft Holmes, at your service.”

That was more than a flash of alarm. That was a flash of panic and Greg clearly caught the cut of eyes towards a corner of the laboratory though he, like Mycroft, was satisfied to ignore that at the moment.

“Mycroft Holmes… rather like your little bird’s information, it’s not ringing any bells. Most of our lot, scientists, that is, don’t dress quite so nicely, money because of the money, but also who’d want to ruin fine clothes with the messes we make while we work! It would be a crime and that’s always something to avoid. So, I’m guessing you work for the government.”

“Many do.”

“True, though most do not have knowledge of highly classified government research projects.”

“Perhaps. However, that, ultimately, is not important. I am more curious about this new endeavor of yours which, oddly, is not something that has been sanctioned by any of the appropriate review bodies.”

“Endeavors… we all have this or that side project on the burner. Mostly to see if they should become something to pursue that a review agency would fund. Nobody wants to hand you a sack of cash unless they’ve got reason to believe they’ll see some return for their investment. Even the government, wasteful bugger that it is.”

“However, those little, shall we call them introductory investigations, are logged with Baskerville’s internal records systems. This one has somehow failed to appear. As if by magic.”
Autonomic responses were old and dear friends to Mycroft Holmes, whose eyes drank in the sight of each and every one shrieking how nervous was the man to whom he was speaking. It bordered quite happily on fear, which was a terribly helpful tool for many situations.

“I… I honestly have no idea where you’ve gotten this idea from, Mr. Holmes, however, I can assure you…”

“‘Honestly’ and ‘I can assure you’ in a single sentence is rather a telling thing to one practiced in the nuance of deception and misdirection. Come now, Dr. Frankland, you and I both know of the little matter to which I refer. Care to show me your progress?"

“Can’t make progress on something that doesn’t exist. Hey! Get away from there!”

Greg had followed the slight flick of Mycroft’s fingers to the area they’d already identified as being of interest to their suspect and was beginning to nose around none to subtly.

“Have no worries, Dr. Frankland. My associate is well versed in proper safety protocols.”

“That’s not the point. Look, I don’t what you know or think you know but a tremendous amount of the work we do here is dangerous and…”

“I agree. Participating in the production and dissemination of a plague is an exceedingly dangerous thing, especially for you.”

“P… plague? Are you mad? At the very least, plague research is certainly not something this facility would bother with. We have far more important, groundbreaking research to conduct.”

“I agree, which is why this particular plague was too tempting for you, was it not? Or was coercion involved? That might be a mitigating factor in any future, shall we say, chastisement for your participation.”

“Look here…”

“No, I think it is you who should rather look there…”

Mycroft pointed over towards Greg who had shown foresight in donning a pair of gloves from one of the many boxes on the work surfaces and had picked up a sealed tube to examine.

“Put that down!”

“Ah, yes. Something of interest?”

Greg nodded and made what he hoped was a dramatic show of carefully scrutinizing the tube. Which emitted a magical radiance highlighted by pretty specks of dandelion-yellow light.

“It’s a high-level spell, that much is certain. There are some highly unfamiliar elements in it, though. I don’t know what the liquid part is but it’s carrying a tidy measure of infused magic.”

“And there we have it. Is it a plague sample, Dr. Frankland, or a treatment?”

“You misunderstand…”

“I think not. You are involved with something most unpleasant, Dr. Frankland, and that unpleasantness is not something we can tolerate, I’m afraid. It would do you well to disclose the depth of your involvement and the results of your efforts so that you may, perhaps, purchase a measure of leniency when the situation has been resolved. Do not believe, however, that any…"
benefactors… you feel you have will be able to ameliorate the outcome, for that is rather impossible, given the circumstances. At least, not without my personal assistance.”

Greg had no idea how such vague language could sound positively ominous, but his lover was supremely talented at making that happen. And from the beads of sweat on Frankland’s brow, they were doing the trick.

“Look… this was… it was the chance of a lifetime. Vampires, magic… it’s all real, always been real and I hadn’t a clue! When Mag… when I was approached to work on this, how could I refuse?”

“Easily, given what you were tasked to do imperils the lives of thousands. Millions, even.”

“Vampires. Who prey on humans. Not really the sort to worry about, in the grand scheme.”

“Oh, is that it? Basic prejudice? Rather a commonplace excuse when I expected something far more… personal.”

Which, knowing Magnussen’s penchant for blackmail, was still very likely in the cards.

“In any case, the plague has yet to be released into the general vampire population, so there is time to prevent further black marks on your record. Your sole victim, to date, however, was not prudently chosen since even I cannot guarantee safety from the wrath of a rather spectacularly violent element of the vampire race. However, they are amenable to reason and I can likely forestall appreciable retribution if you turn over to me the cure you have designed.”

Mycroft had kept eyes on Greg who was inspecting various items around the lab and Mycroft wished he knew if that was being done simply to maintain Frankland’s sense of unease or because he was actually finding things of magical concern.

“I’m not worried about a few vampires.”

“Ignorance often promotes lack of worry. I would advise you against staying that particular course. However, you might also wish to consider the select humans who might take umbrage with this.”

Extracting his mobile, Mycroft pulled up several photos he’d taken of the recent murder scene and flipped through them for Frankland to view.

“You are complicit in four murders and a kidnapping, and directly responsible for one murder and attempted murder, for I feel certain it was you who infected the abducted vampire. For the human crimes, alone, the penalties are notably harsh, regardless of what you might hope for an intercession by Charles Augustus Magnussen.”

That Frankland went white as sheet at Magnussen’s name told Mycroft that blackmail very much played a role in Frankland’s recruitment along with, most likely, other threats besides.

“Come, come, Doctor Frankland. There are ways to avoid the direst consequences for your crimes, however, they shall not be implemented if you fail to cooperate. The probability, also, of you evading justice, either by human or vampire hands, should you try to flee, stands squarely at naught. We hope to tidy this situation post haste, so do deliver your research findings and products to us, so I might begin to erect certain, let us call them, guardrails for your future disposition.”

“You can’t threaten me.”
“I believe I just did. Ultimately, the choice is yours, though you know as well as I the likelihood of this ending well for you without an appreciable amount of assistance from someone well placed to provide it. Magnussen, for all his charms, has neither the leverage he believes with the vampires nor the influence he touts with those in the human areas of power. This matter will be concluded to my satisfaction, I promise you. It is your choice whether you will assist or impede my efforts.”

Greg wondered when he’d just started staring at Mycroft, but he was certainly doing that now and marveling in how his aura matched every imposing element of his presentation perfectly. Nothing about him gave even the slightest hope he was anything but deadly serious. And Frankland knew it.

“We… don’t have a definitive cure. Only a potential one.”

“Potential?”

“It works under laboratory conditions on cultured samples, but it’s never been tried on an actual victim. And… what I have here is incomplete. It requires certain additions that I don’t possess. Magnussen does, but I don’t have any samples here on site. He won’t give it to me.”

“Very well. Give me what you have and I shall worry about the rest. For what should I be seeking?”

“Blood… blood of the stricken. You can’t simply inject the material into an infected vampire, you first have to mix in some of their own blood.”

“I see. And?”

“Basilisk venom.”

Mycroft cut eyes at Greg who scowled thunderously.

“Not unmanageable. Further?”

“Nothing that I know of.”

“I require the exact quantities.”

“Five drops, for the blood, and one… banshee’s whisper… for the venom.”

Mycroft looked again at Greg who gave him a ‘got it’ nod in return.

“Very well. I shall take what you have for the prepared cure and your formulation to produce more. Further, all existing samples of the plague and your research notes on all matters concerning it.”

“They’re on the computer.”

“Show me.”

Frankland quickly moved towards a laptop, then took a few moments to call up the relevant folder. In a moment, Mycroft had copied the files onto a memory stick.

“The physical materials?”

Frankland hurried to a large cabinet that he unlocked with a long punched-in code and extracted a
small box to which, after a moment, he added the sealed tube Greg had been examining.

“Thank you, Dr. Frankland.”

“He’ll have me killed if he finds out, you know.”

“Then let us hope he does not. I shall be in touch.”

Mycroft turned without a goodbye and stalked towards the door with Greg following behind more slowly and somewhat sideways so as to dissuade Frankland of any behind-the-back hasty actions towards either of them.

“Success, Mycroft Holmes, Master Manipulator?”

“Perhaps. What on Earth is a banshee’s whisper?”

“And anything less than half a teaspoon, basically. Lots of potions and the like have fairly colorful measurements but they’re not terribly unique or, necessarily, precise. I usually use a quarter to a third teaspoon of whatever’s called for and it’s never failed me.”

“Well, then we have the blessing that we are not required to fill a pint glass with the stuff. Basilisk venom, Gregory… securing that shall not be an easy task, I take it.”

“No. Not in the slightest. Not impossible, though, obviously.”

“Quite.”

“Do you think he really gave us everything?”

“It matters little. I will have his laboratory locked down and computer access traced to locate any additional files of relevance. However, we have enough, hopefully for Marcus’s sake and…”

“You!”

Mycroft rolled his eyes and turned towards the voice, belonging to a clearly agitated man in uniform.

“Ah, Major Barrymore, I wondered when you would arrive.”

“Look, I don’t care who you are; I am in charge of this facility and…”

“How is your nephew Andrew, Major? Settling in well with his new position.”

Greg had no idea what that meant, but it stopped Barrymore in his tracks.

“Let us discuss that, what say, over a spot of tea. I am positively perishing for one. Your office is this way…”

Said not as a question, but a flat statement that made Greg grin, though he quickly stowed it away as he accompanied Mycroft along a side corridor with Barrymore huffing and snorting behind them. It seemed today’s show had a second act and it looked to be as entertaining as the first…

“__________

“That was brilliant, love. I have to ask who that Andrew chap was, though.”
Mycroft steered the car back through the winding roads and smirked at the man sitting beside him.

“Andrew Needham is the son of Barrymore’s sister. He used his influence to get the boy a DOD position, which proved somewhat embarrassing when Mr. Needham was discovered passing secrets to a charming woman working for a foreign government. Not intentionally, mind you, but pillow talk is equally, if not more, damaging than battleships. Our accidental spy was shuffled into the private sector and matters quietly laid to rest so that there were no ramifications for Barrymore, himself. Not many know about the incident, actually, so it was rather successful, all things considered.”

“Not entirely successful, though.”

“Few things ever are.”

The men shared a smile and Greg leaned back in his seat, enjoying the chance to simply share time with the man he loved and savor the sensation of a job well done. They drove for awhile in silence before it was broken by Mycroft swearing under his breath and tapping a dial on the car’s console.

“That is not possible.”

Greg was about to ask what wasn’t possible when he noticed the car slowing to a stop.

“Car trouble?”

“This says we are out of fuel, but that cannot be correct.”

“Mycroft… is this the old ‘out of petrol’ trick for getting me into a lovely, isolated place for some quality snogging?”

“No, but I shall keep that in mind for the future. One moment…”

Getting out of the car, Mycroft swore again and, from the beginning of his very awkward motion, Greg caught the gist of what Mycroft wanted and called out for him to stop. Instead, Greg himself exited the car and got down to inspect the undercarriage, though Mycroft was now catching an odor that Greg’s observations corroborated.

“Fuel line’s been tampered with. Frankland must have slipped out and done it while we were having tea with that Barrymore fellow. Why, though? It’s not as if we’re terribly inconvenienced by the walk to the nearest petrol station or a call to the local garage.”

Greg knelt and peeked over the bottom edge of the window when Mycroft didn’t immediately answer, then mentally rescinded his assessment of the situation’s inconvenience.

“Gregory…”

“Fucking big hound staring at us, got it.”

“One of a type I have seen before.”

“Yep, it’s a hellhound.”

“Ah… good to know my magical beast identification skills are up to snuff.”

“I’ve very proud.”

“Thank you.”
Chapter 55

The two men stared at the hellhound, squinting a little at the enormous beast glaring murderously at them in return. Greg was squinting all the harder because he was studying the creature’s aura which was surprisingly easily to view. Not complex, really, only a few shades of green that pulsed as a mass rather than sending out a cavalcade of arms to entice the viewer. Given the hellhound wasn’t really a complicated beast that wasn’t entirely a surprise, but it was a very welcome bit of luck because he didn’t have the time for one of his aura-induced head trips, given the circumstances.

“Gregory, are these… common?”

“Nooo… and they’re bastards to keep, so they’re generally only summoned for very specific and vital tasks.”

“Such as murdering pesky meddlers in a sorcerer’s evil scheme?”

“That was very Scooby Doo of you, Mycroft. Nicely done.”

“Thank you. But, what do we do?”

“Ummm…if I had my wand it’d be easier, but I may be able to banish it if I have time to work the spell.”

“Though I abhor senseless cruelty, could you not, instead, simply wound the beast or kill it outright?”

“Not without help. I’d need my wand and a few prepared bits of nastiness at the ready. One of the reasons hellhounds are brought out is that they’re nicely resistant to simpler magics and if you’re not expecting them, you don’t have the necessary stuff on hand. The best magical solution is banishment. And that’s still difficult if you’re not properly prepared.”

“Is it vulnerable to bullets?”

“Not really. Might tickle it, though. They’re brutally tough. Sebastian did a great job wounding the last ones we faced but he didn’t actually come close to killing one. To be fair, though, he wasn’t particularly trying. More keeping them busy while we sorted out the rest.”

“I see. Well, do begin with whatever you require to accomplish its banishment. I shall attempt to keep our friend occupied.”

With that, Mycroft reached under his coat and drew out a weapon which he quickly turned on the hellhound, but held his fire to conserve ammunition.

“Hello, beast. I can assume why you have been taken from wherever you were frolicking and brought to his lovely but rather uneventful location, however, look upon us and recognize how little sport you shall receive if you choose us as prey. For a far more entertaining experience, might I suggest somewhere more diverting, such as Parliament? I shall script a list of individuals that you would positively delight in consuming. Her Majesty would likely award you a knighthood for your services, as well.”

The hellhound stalked forward, making a sound that didn’t so much resemble a growl as the opening of the door of a long-forgotten crypt.
“Was your journey here a prolonged one? Might a small snack be appropriate, before you dine on your main course? Kibble perhaps? I have little doubt I could secure you the finest the pet food industry has to offer. Consider also the wondrous diversity of squeaky toys you could gain, as well as colorful balls to chase and the coziest of beds in which to enjoy a restful sleep.”

Continuing to stride forward, the hellhound cocked its head as if considering Mycroft’s offer but Mycroft suspected it was more a reflection on whether the creature it was approaching was best eaten in one bite or enjoyed over several mouthfuls to better savor the taste. Not wanting to take his attention away from the rather grave menace in front of him, Mycroft made do with whispering over his shoulder.

“Gregory?”

“Getting there! Do we have any salt?”

“I… no. You purchased crisps, however. They have salt attached.”

“Ooh! That might work.”

Mycroft mentally ran through the vehicle’s provisions which were non-crisp in nature and calculated how many seconds it would take to reach additional weapons and ammunition, should it prove necessary. He may have thought himself a touch overly-dramatic preparing the car for their trip, but it seemed drama was looking upon them kindly today.

“Do pardon me, Mr. Hellhound. What were we discussing? Ah yes, the myriad of… oh dear.”

The hellhound charged forward, eyes blazing and each of its muscles rippling as they moved the creature at shocking speed across towards its target. Mycroft stood his ground and took careful aim at the hellhound’s eyes, emptying his clip and snarling that the projectiles did little more than bounce off the hellhound’s armored tissues.

Hoping momentum applied equally well to magical creatures as for non-magical, Mycroft vaulted over the boot of the car and dragged Greg a few yards back, getting him clear only an instant before the hellhound slammed into the side of the vehicle, pushing it most of those yards forward with the collision.

“How much longer, my dear?”

“Depends on what I can find in the car and around. Is there an insulated bottle in there?”

“Not of which I’m aware.”

“Ok, I’ll do it the old-style way. Powdery? Anything powdery?”

“I… perhaps there was sugar remaining from your coffee?”

“I can try to grind it finer, maybe.”

“Dirt?”

“Uh… that’s novel. Maybe if I can find a slightly different type than what’s right here. It’s an idea, though. Shit. Looks like our friend has gotten tired sniffing the car. Get ready.”

Mycroft took the moment to reload and craft a plan in his mind. Distract. That was the goal.

“Can they sustain their speed?”
“Yes.”

‘Anything they avoid?’

“They’re not fond of cold. Shit… hold on a moment…”

Mycroft watched Greg lay his palm flat on the ground and intone a string of words before lifting his hand and swinging it up and to the side. Which, as Mycroft watched, ripped up an enormous quantity of earth that flung itself on top of the hellhound that had crept around the rear of the car and started moving towards them.

“Here…”

This time, Greg snatched up a few pebbles and closed his fist around them while making several motions over the closed fist with the fingers of his other hand.

“Take these. Before you throw one say ‘glacies.’ ”

“Ice.”

“Yes. It’ll stick to the fucker and start freezing the skin. He’ll stop to get it off, so throw where that will be difficult.”

“Very well. Continue on.”

Mycroft took his pebbles and dashed a good distance away from Greg, getting into position just as the hellhound was shaking the final bits of dirt and grass off of its head.

“Hello, my canine friend! Over here! See the man waving at you in a highly cheeky manner? You are not going to let that stand unaddressed are you?”

The hellhound turned fully towards Mycroft who smiled genially and kept the smile in place as the hellhound bore down on him, waiting until the last moment to leap aside and toss a pebble onto the hellhound’s back, shouting his magic word before it impacted. As soon as it hit, frost began to form at the impact site, with spiderwebs of ice fanning out in all directions and spreading out quickly.

At the hellhound’s bellow of anger, Mycroft ran to take a new position further away from Greg than before. There was some strange symmetry to battling a hellhound and watching your lover dig in the dirt much like a hound with a rapid, two-handed motion as if he was desperately hoping to secure a safe place to bury his favorite bone. Magic was a terribly puzzling thing, at times.

“Fire?”

For example.

“You want me to shoot it again?”

“No, do we have any matches or anything? I can’t use fire I create myself.”

“Oh. The car has a cigarette lighter, I believe, to set something ablaze.”

“That’ll work.”

Did there exist some form of emergency supply bag for magical practitioners, such as were carried by doctors? He would raise the subject with Gregory at their earliest possible opportunity. Never
again should they be left frantic for the mundane necessities when they were best by hellhounds or hobgoblins.

“Silver? I don’t have any, do you?”

“Sterling?”

“Yeah. Pure is better, but sterling will work.”

Mycroft inventoried his person and found little in the way of treasure.

“What quantity?”

“Even a few flecks will do.”

With a quick rummage in his pocket, Mycroft extracted a fine pen and sighed at what would undoubtedly be its untimely demise.

“The cap’s filigree is silver.”

Throwing the pen, Mycroft smirked that his throw was boosted by a small gust of wind so it easily landed in the sorcerer’s hands.

“Perfect. Eyes on Fido, Mycroft. He’s got that pebble sorted.”

Mycroft turned back and saw the hellhound had gotten the enchanted stone off of his back, along with a visible amount of skin, though that was healing at an astonishing rate. Waving his arms and shouting again focused the hellhound’s attention on him and Mycroft used that attention to begin running, very glad for his long legs, towards a stand of older, hearty trees that should provide some advantage as he tried to keep the hound from succeeding with a direct leap.

Using the tree trunks as shields, Mycroft continued shouting at the hound, though he had little idea if that was doing anything to bolster the creature’s attention and the shouts turned to a bitten-off shriek as the hellhound predicted his next course change and he came face to face with it just an instant before Mycroft spun himself to the other side of the adjacent tree and bought a few precious seconds to grab the lower limb and haul himself upwards, ascending another two limbs before looking back down and throwing another pebble at the back of the hellhound’s neck, much to the fury of the hound in question.

Then it was a look towards the car, where Greg’s arse was jutting out from the passenger-side door, though not for nearly as long as Mycroft would have preferred, before the rest of the sorcerer returned from the interior with one of the mostly-empty bottles of water and proceeded to drop the pen cap into the bottle, twisting the lid back on, then setting the bottle into the hole he’d dig which was now in the center of a crude circle made of stones and various small items from the car’s interior. The hole was quickly filled in but Mycroft didn’t have a chance to witness the next few steps in the ritual as the tree suddenly shook from a violent force that had been provided by the hellhound slamming into it, hoping to dislodge his quarry.

Which it did. Mycroft plummeted to the ground and cursed, more at the fact the pebbles flew from his fingers than the pain from hitting the ground. The hellhound slowly stalked around the tree and Mycroft hurriedly looked about for one of his pebbles, finding the closest was just out of reach even with a quick lunge from his prone position. Something instinctive kicked in and Mycroft did lunge but pulled from his memory the small spell Greg had taught him for moving objects and, though the pebble wasn’t something he’d used often, it had been in his hand long enough for it to shift his way the necessary inch so that his fingers wrapped around it and he threw as he rolled.
The hellhound was nearly on top of him and preparing to use its teeth to tear off whatever hunk of Mycroft looked the tastiest, meaning it’s open mouth was directly in the pebble’s path and the loudly-shouted ‘glacies!’ gave the pebble’s landing in the beast’s hot, wet maw an effect that shocked Mycroft as much as it did the hellhound. With that much water present, what formed was not so much the frosted-over frozen surface tissues, but larger masses of ice that began to seal the hellhound’s mouth shut as saliva dripped and the hound roared in spittle-laden rage.

Scrambling to his feet, Mycroft grabbed two of the remaining pebbles and sprinted as quickly as he could on shaky legs away from the hound who was positively frantic to get its mouth cleared and was becoming a storm of claws and muscle smashing everything in its path.

“Mycroft!“

Mycroft whirled to see Greg running towards him waving him away and sending a flurry of glowing spheres of energy at the hellhound, which impacted with a loud crackling noise that almost drowned out the stifled growls and roars of the hound itself.

“Alright, you bastard. Come on, look at the nasty man throwing those pesky orbs your way. That’s it… come on, you know you want to squash me like a bug. Go ahead and… oh shit.”

The hellhound leapt and covered the remaining 20 yards or so to Greg in a single bound, which had the sorcerer throwing another spell at the hellhound’s legs, making it trip, while Greg ran back towards the car, the bit of head start just enough to get him there an instant before the hellhound. As soon as he reached the circle, Greg ran through it, spitting onto the spot just above the buried water bottle and continued running, stopping only when he heard a loud whoosh that seemed to suck not only the hellhound away to another dimension, but half the air around them, too.

Looking back at the now-blackened circle, Greg heaved a large sigh of relief and smiled when Mycroft ran up to meet him.

“Is it gone?”

“Yep, back from whence it came. Was his mouth full of ice?”

“Yes, through a rather fortunate bit of projectile luck.”

“Brilliant! It’ll have vanished the moment he entered the circle, but that’s a sight I won’t soon forget. Mycroft Holmes, master hellhound vanquisher! Did I also see you fall out of a tree?”

“Yes, adding a somewhat vaudevillian quality to my vanquishing.”

“You’re amazing… absolutely amazing! Nothing stops you getting the job done.”

Mycroft blew out a small huff of breath and took a good, hard look at Greg who was still beaming brightly.

“Oh Gregory… how difficult was that for you to accomplish?”

Since you appear to be four steps from completely exhausted and three of those steps would actually best be taken as a crawl.

“It’s nothing. When you have the right tools and supplies, that’s a tricky rite, but not too terrible. When you don’t, you have to put more of yourself into it to get everything to function. No different than fixing a leaky pipe with the wrong wrench and none of that spray that loosens up the bits that are rusted tight.”
“I see. Given we are victorious here and have nothing else to battle, I suggest we call for transport and make our way to our room. I did inquire as to the size of both the bed and the bath, so I may state with confidence that both shall be very much to our liking.”

“Tell me there’s one of those enormous bathtubs that can float a battleship.”

“Or the healthy frames of two adult men.”

“Yes!

Greg did a tiny shimmy that had Mycroft forgetting his own aches and pains as he watched with delight.

“Then I shall arrange for the car to be moved to a garage and an alternate vehicle be delivered for our use.”

“And we can snog while we wait.”

“But of course! Apparently, my running-out-of-petrol strategy is paying the dividends, after all.”

“Cad.”

“Indubitably.”
Chapter 56

Greg nestled back against Mycroft’s chest and made happy splashes as the fresh rush of hot water came from the tap into the bathtub.

“I still can’t believe you used magic. I only showed you that spell once!”

Mycroft smiled smugly and ran his hands leisurely across Greg’s belly.

“My memory is remarkable. And… I may have been practicing.”

“It worked!

“It did. The stone moved scarcely an inch; however, it was enough when the moment demanded it.”

“And that’s all we can ask for. How’s your shoulder?”

“Much better now that the heat has been working upon it. I was never an active youth and the climbing of trees did not feature heavily in my early years, partially because of worry that the trip down would be far less enjoyable than the trip up.”

“And, now, you’re scampering up them like a monkey.”

“When the incentive is sufficient. Our hellhound provided that in abundance.”

“No question. I’ve never worked a banishing ritual that fast in my life. Not with no preparation. We got lucky there wasn’t a pair of them. That’s a common variation but takes a lot of power to call up and would have been a bugger to work in the short time between us speaking with Frankland and leaving Baskerville.”

“Did Magnussen underestimate you, perhaps?”

“Possibly. I don’t take pains to talk about the bigger things I’ve done but there are stories. Most aren’t certain which are true or not and, with the various hints and suggestions…”

“It creates a reputation that may or not be warranted, but few would challenge. Given the ferocity of a hellhound and the difficulty in bringing about its demise, it would be reasonable to believe one easily be up to the task.”

“Fucker didn’t count on there being a professional tree climber present to take matters in hand.”

“Lack of forethought has doomed many a campaign. I would ask, Gregory… to affect a cure for Marcus…”

“Oh, I’m giving that a lot of thought and none of it good.”

“How does one gain from a basilisk its venom?”

“Very much like I’ve seen for those videos of getting venom from a snake. We don’t need much, though, so maybe we could just stick something into its mouth and hope it bites a bit angrily.”

“Delightful.”
“There are some things I can do to protect the lucky venom gatherer from being turned to stone by the basilisk’s gaze, but that’s certainly not its only defense. They’re tough bastards.”

“As formidable as the hellhound?”

“I’d say so. Not as much brute strength, but they’re smarter and with extra methods of keeping pesky opponents at bay.”

“Very well, we have yet another complication in our assault on Magnussen.”

“Yippee!”

“Indeed, though I would rather know all factors involved at the onset than encounter them as a surprise.”

“I would, too. I have some ideas, actually, about dealing with the basilisk, as a whole, so it’ll be a matter of having the moment to put them in place one things get started. We’ve got a veritable army at our disposal now, though, so it should be possible. I hope.”

Mycroft wrapped his arms around Greg’s chest and softly kissed his temple.

“We shall prevail, Gregory. And, then, we might see some few days of luxurious tedium before the battle, in whatever form it will take, arrives again at our doorstep.”

“I absolutely LOVE tedium. Perch on my stool, drink tea and smile at the customers when they give me money. It’s the good life.”

“And I recline in my chair, nibble a chocolate and listen to Anthea tossing government ministers out of my office and onto their completely empty heads. They are the most exquisite and precious of moments.”

“You know, there’s a spell I can set up for you that when you engage it, whoever walks through your door will experience a sensation of dread and doom. That can keep a lot of the empty heads at bay.”

“Ooh, that would be a most helpful thing. At the very least it would winnow the queue of handwringers venturing into my lair to only those with truly pressing matters.”

“I’ll get right on that! The moment we get a tedious moment, that is.”

“Then let us ensure those come sooner than later. For now, though, we have our cozy bath, a meal to be delivered to our equally-cozy room and a supremely cozy bed of which to take advantage in any manner we please.”

“I can think of a lot of pleasing manners, actually.”

“Such was my deepest and fondest hope.”

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“Ugh… I don’t want that near me!”

“You can’t get more plaguey, you ridiculous vampire.”

Greg continued to hold up the vial for Marcus to see, but had to concede he wouldn’t want a big vial of the Black Death being waved about in front of his face, either.
“People like me, the rich and fabulous that is, can always take something to the extreme, so pardon me if getting history’s most plaguey case of the plague is something I damned well believe could happen.”

“If that makes you happy, go ahead. In any case, I’ve got the tube here sealed with enough magical barriers that nothing inside is getting out until I say so, and that includes its own magical bits that actually do keep trying, persistent little fuckers. I don’t think they can do anything on their own, but there’s no reason to take any risks.”

Anderson peered at the glass container and tried to see even a glimpse of what Greg was seeing but remained sadly disappointed.

“Greg, if you could… nullify the magical part, would the rest of the plague even function?”

A question Greg had been asking himself and, unfortunately, didn’t have an answer to offer.

“Maybe. The problem is we wouldn’t know until we tested it and there’s only one way to really do that. Mycroft offered to have another of his super-secret labs make more of this for testing, but I don’t think we have time to try and work out the necessary spell or spells before Marcus’s condition deteriorates. And a test tube or body filled with only the plague organisms… I have no idea if the little buggers are dangerous on their own. I mean, we could then work on an agent to kill them in a host, but that’s another measure of time we don’t have. But, once we cure Marcus, that’s not going to be the end of this story. I can’t imagine Leo and Petras will be happy to let the possibility of this happening again loom over their heads. I suspect some researcher, vampire, human or other, is going to get a fat bit of funding to study this and do all the whatsits they do to come up with a definitive cure that doesn’t involve basilisks. Or maybe a vaccine. That’s something for the future, though.”

Waving his hands in the air, Marcus rose from the sofa and made certain the tiny sway from a short spell of light-headedness wasn’t noticed by Greg or Anderson.

“I’m having a drink. Who’s going to join me?”

“Us.”

Rolling his eyes, Marcus waved his hands in the air again as one werewolf and one elf strolled into Greg’s flat, each wearing an outfit that Sebastian knew was wildly expensive and wearing them well, to be honest, which was something that sat very well with Anderson, but made Greg roll his eyes.

“Been shopping, Seb?”

“Yep.”

“Any reason you went shopping for clothes that makes you both look like you’re hangers-on at some twat’s upscale, but utterly dreary, cocktail party?”

“Yep.”

“Want to share?”

“Working.”

“On being twats?”
“Job.”

Greg cocked an eye at Anderson who made a ‘dunno’ gesture, then looked expectantly at Sebastian, who paused following Nyvrokh to raid the larder, awaiting a bit more detail.

“Paying job.”

The added detail was not highly detaily.

“I saw you this morning, Sebastian Moran. Are you saying you killed someone and had time to shop for clothes?”

The fact Anderson sounded more suspicious about the clothes-buying timeframe than the murdering piece made Sebastian swell with pride.

“Nope. Sorta.”

“That wasn’t helpful.”

“Sorry. Here.”

Sebastian quickly texted Greg, who followed the link in the text, then let out a whistle.

“Is this what I think it is?”

“Yep.”

“So… you did what? Beat this out of someone?”

“Nope. Sorta.”

The bright smile on the dark elf’s face let Greg know that something certainly happened to some poor someone, but hopefully more a verbal and mental beating than anything physical.

“What is it, Greg?”

Anderson leaned over to see Greg’s mobile and Marcus did the same after putting two unasked for drinks on the sofa table.

“These are plans for a security system. I recognize the address. It’s Magnussen’s house.”

“Really? That’s very helpful, Sebastian? How did you get these?”

Greg tried not to smile at how adorable Sebastian looked when he was being praised by his snookums, but failed utterly and smiled wider at Sebastian’s pointed glare in his direction. If there wasn’t a pair of chewed up slippers in his future, Greg would be extremely surprised.

“Made some calls.”

“Then?”

“Did… something.”

“Is the something still alive?”

“Yep.”
“Well, that’s alright, then.”

Though, from the shared werewolf-elf grin, how much alive was their informant was open to interpretation.

Marcus had been looking over the plans and was impressed by what he saw. At least as good as what he had for his own home, if not better. Very expensive, very effective, but nothing was ever perfect. Lucky for them…

“You did something useful, Sebastian, for a change. I’m shocked.”

“Leech.”

“Pomeranian.”

Greg did his own bit of hand-waving and focused in on one remaining loose thread.

“You said this was a paying job?”

Downing his whisky in one swallow, Sebastian retrieved his wallet and drew out a bank card that he pretended to squint at to read the name of the cardholder.

“Piecroft Holmes.”

“Goddamit…”

A wag of his fingers had the card flying from Sebastian to Greg who scowled thunderously at both the card and the card thief.

“Where did you get this?”

“Squirrellock Holmes.”

“You’re not allowed to play with him anymore, young man, do you understand. I’m not sure which of you is the bad influence, but I’m putting a stop to it right here and now. Just tell me Mycroft didn’t pay for more than your embarrassing clothes.”

Sebastian looking down at his new and very expensive shoes while Nyvrokh tugged down his sleeve to try and hide the new watch on his wrist just made Greg sigh. He’d really expected nothing less.

“Wonderful. At least you actually did something for your ill-gotten gains. I can suss out his magical defenses, but that doesn’t do much to help with things like alarms and whatever else he has installed.”

“Lots of stuff.”

“Stands to reason. I can manage what of this I can see on the spot, but I’d rather not rely on that. Can you do something?”

“Maybe. With the corpse fondler.”

“Not a bad idea. Especially if Richard is as good as he says. Most of the stuff nowadays does have some… computery elements involved. When can you get started putting together a plan?”

“Oh… I’m not late, am I?”
Apparently now.

“Not a bit, Richard, come in. I take it you spoke to Sebastian today.”

“In a sense. We have a job to do, I take it?”

“You take correctly. Doing something about the pesky security measures Magnussen has for his house.”

“Oooh…what do we know about them?”

“Um, lots, apparently.”

“Then I’m your man! I brought my laptop, but I have other resources at home… do we want to do this at my flat?”

Sebastian immediately broached the most important question concerning the venue for their work session.

“Got food?”

“A little. I haven’t actually been to the shops this week, so…”

“We’ll stay here. You can get what you need later. Greg has food.”

“And drink!”

Nyvrokh raised the whiskey bottle and waggled it happily. Greg wondered when, precisely, he became nothing more than a supplier for the various appetites of what seemed like half of London. At least Marcus looked as disgruntled as he did.

“I don’t want all that going on here! My lady Anthea is stopping in and it’s not terribly romantic having a Pomeranian, direct-to-video Legolas and Captain Formaldehyde giggling over nudie videos on the computer. It won’t even be quality porn, either. Probably sad amateur stuff with pasty pensioners thinking their backs are still up for a bit of randy fun. Here’s a hint, they’re not. Their cocks don’t do a very good job of it, either. Just ask Uncle. No… don’t ask Uncle. He’ll make me pay for that and not in a way that will have my cock properly functioning no matter how sexy is my sultry beauty.”

Speaking of sultry beauties, Greg paused to wonder where Balthazar was since he hadn’t launched any form of assault on either Sebastian or Marcus. Or any of them, for that matter.

“Where’s Balthazar?”

Richard took the glass of whiskey being offered him by the rather unusual person he didn’t know, but who he was fairly certain wasn’t named Legolas, and chimed in with a quick upheld finger until he got some of Greg’s libations down his throat.

“He’s off with Jim. They spent at least part of the day with Magnussen, then must have visited Jim’s flat somehow because his mobile is there and I got a text saying they had some things to check out and would be done when they were done.”

“Ok… right…”

Greg pursed his lips and made a face Sebastian often referred to as ‘concerned dad,’ though only to himself. Certainly not where Greg could overhear because he was enough of a dad already not to
add more leaves to his laurel wreath.

“… I won’t say that doesn’t worry me, because Balthazar is used to racing about London, but Jim’s not as experienced with that sort of thing.”

And, Greg thought, there was no telling what they were doing but the likelihood that it was worrying sat high on the scale.

“My brother can manage. Even as a weasel, he’s still rather resourceful. You might want to check your inventory of smaller items, though, because there are things appearing in his flat that have a few marks that look suspiciously like they’re from weasel teeth.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. To be fair, Balthazar does the same thing, though he steals slightly larger items I usually see when I do my periodic check of his various treasure hoards. Alright… I’ve got work to do of my own, so sort out who is doing what where and do not include in that plan anything involving my few remaining edibles.”

Richard set his laptop on Greg’s small dining table and rubbed his hands together eagerly.

“Definitely food! I could murder a little something right now. I worked through lunch and that always does my blood sugar a mischief.”

“What did I just say, Richard?”

“I have no idea. I was distracted by Sebastian waving a bank card and pointing between Marcus and the phone.”

Marcus leapt off the sofa as if his arse was on fire.

“What! Give me that… how did you get my bank card, you bastard?”

“Stole it.”

“When?”

“Dunno.”

“I knew it! I knew I didn’t order £300 of socks. They were rubbish ones, too, and no matter how drunk I was, I would never stoop to sticking my feet into that déclassé hosiery.”

“Envy makes you ugly.”

“Like those socks.”

Greg slipped out the door while before the sock war could escalate to the territory of underpants and stopped to check the shop before continuing downstairs. He expected to see John and, perhaps, Sherlock, but Molly was a bit of a surprise, albeit a welcome one.

“Molly! Good to see you.”

“Greg! Oh good, I hoped you would be here.”

That didn’t sound like a hope for a skin cream recommendation, so Greg nodded her towards the stockroom and had her draw up one of the two stools to take a seat.

“How are things, Molly?”
“That’s… that’s what I’m not certain about.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“I think someone is watching me. Following me, really.”

“Ok… that’s not entirely unexpected. Probably Magnussen wanting to know if you and Jim actually did end your relationship. Have they bothered you at all?”

“No, but…”

“But it’s unsettling to know someone is watching where you go and what you do.”

“It is!”

“It shouldn’t be much longer, Molly. Not much longer, at all. We’re near the end of this madness and I’m more confident than ever it’s going to go our way. Jim will back with you soon enough, for better or for worse.”

“I hope so. I just wish I could hear from him that he was alright.”

“I haven’t talked to him today but Richard seems to and he didn’t indicate anything was wrong. I think…”

Meaning, I lie…

“… that if something was truly wrong, Jim would find a way to let you know, even if it was just to have one of us pass along the word to you.”

“Really?”

Not in a million years.

“I do.”

“Then you’re not very observant.”

Shit.

“Fine, I was lying to try and make you feel better.”

“Thank you! That’s kind of you, Greg, it really is. But, that’s why I’m especially worried. Jim wouldn’t let me know. He might not let anyone know until it was too late.”

“For what it’s worth, he seems to be spending a lot of time with Balthazar and he wouldn’t hesitate to say something if Jim was in trouble, if only because it would be humiliating.”

“That’s true. It’s something, I suppose. But… if you hear anything yourself, can you let me know? I like Richard, but if Jim told him not to pass along information, I think he’d feel obligated not to, but people tell you things, so…”

“I’ll do what I can, Molly, I promise.”

Molly smiled and felt much lighter than when she came into the shop. Of course, that didn’t mean she felt particularly light in general, with Anthea’s situation concerning Marcus and being followed by some strange person, but it was better than nothing.
“Thanks.”

“Battle mage! I require your money card.”

Greg slumped and tried to think of anyone else who had these problems. Besides the Mycroft, that is.

“First, no. Second… there really is no second, because the first is enough on its own.”

“We require pizza and that requires money, apparently.”

“You don’t even know what pizza is.”

“You eat it; that is all I need to know.”

Molly giggled and won a surprisingly non-menacing smile from the elf.

“In my flat, at this very moment, are two people far richer than I am. They can order food if they’re hungry.”

“Sebastian does not wish to belittle his impoverished lover through a display of wealth. The vampire desires something called Korean barbecue and will not fund another option. That leaves you or the necromancer, but he is as poor as the werewolf’s concubine.”

“Marcus can order both, it’s not a this or that choice and Sebastian just paraded in front of his partner in clothes costing more than Anderson will make here in a week. No, longer than a week, because I’m poor, too, and pay shit wages.”

Or no wages, in this case, since Mycroft was footing the bill, but that was going to change fairly damned quick.

“Are you having a party?”

Greg sighed internally because he really didn’t want Molly interacting with this morally questionable nuisance. However, since that did describe Jim fairly well…

“No, Molly, they’re not. But, I suppose I should make the introductions. Molly Hooper, this is Nyvrokh Something or Another and he’s one of our… special friends… here to help with this whole nasty business.”

“Ooh! Another werewolf? Or vampire?”

Oh, don’t bow, you horrible phony…

“I am born of the Dark Elves, my lady. Of very old and powerful blood.”

“Brilliant! Are your ears pointy?”

The elf pulled back a section of his long, black hair and Molly clapped in delight.

“They’re lovely! And you’re so pale and mysterious looking. Tall, too. Like a proper elf. Not that the little elves you see in children’s books or toddling about after Father Christmas aren’t proper, they’re just more cute and cuddly. I don’t think any of them could survive a quest or ride a dragon or anything like that.”

“Dragon riding is rather hard on the buttocks, but not an altogether unpleasant method of
travel.”

“YOU’VE RIDDEN A DRAGON!”

Time to intervene before Molly got too friendly with this cad.

“One day, Molly, I’ll try and get you a dragon ride but, for now, this one here has work to do and pestering me for my hard-earned pence isn’t seeing it tended to.”

“Right! Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Can you analyze security systems and break into whatever computer monitoring they have connected?”

“No, that’s not really my area. Call me, though, when you need an autopsy done or a rollicking bit of histology. I suppose I should continue home, then. And try not to notice that someone is following me the whole time.”

“You are being followed, tiny Molly? Battle mage! Why haven’t you killed this villain yet?”

“Because I just learned about them two minutes ago and I don’t kill people unless there’s a very, very good reason for it.”

“Tiny Molly’s safety and honor are reason aplenty.”

“Molly isn’t in any danger! Magnussen just wants to be certain her… ok, this isn’t the time for that whole daytime drama script, but Molly isn’t going to be harmed.”

“No, she will not, because I will escort her safely to her destination. And procure pizza. You will provide the funds, if only to erase some miniscule portion of your disgrace from ignoring her plight.”

Molly brightened like the sun and nodded approvingly.

“Ooh, that’s manipulative. I didn’t know elves were supposed to be manipulative, but it suits you nicely.”

Nyvrokh’s pride at Molly’s assessment was clearly visible and made Greg sigh another long sigh, though he reminded himself not to ever underestimate cheery, positive people’s ability to admire the unsavory.

“Alright, you bastard. You see Molly home safely and I’ll see to getting you and the rest of the livestock fed. BUT, it’s on the condition that some actual work gets done tonight and it’s not just you prats lying about in your jim-jams stuffing your faces and watching crap telly.”

“The work is already underway, mage. You might consider doing some of that yourself tonight.”

The dark elf bowed again towards Molly who giggled and hopped off her stool, leading the way into the shop and out the door, after laughing again, this time at John’s reaction to seeing her being followed by someone tall, dark and utterly untrustworthy. For his part, Greg took a moment to bolster his fortitude by letting his thoughts wander back to the previous night and the carnal delights that had followed his and Mycroft’s long bath, then walked down to the workshop to continue researching both the plague and its potential cure. Tripping over Balthazar and tumbling down the last four steps, however, rather undid what fortitude his lustful thoughts had generated.
“Arsehole!”

Balthazar made certain Greg got a good luck at that piece of his anatomy after he jumped on Greg’s stomach, then sauntered over to the table and hopped up to sit impatiently waiting for Greg to join him.

“One day you’re going to kill me, you evil cat, and where will you be then?”

“Feasting on your entrails. And choosing my new catnip provider.”

“Funny. Is there something you actually wanted or did you just pop in to end my life?”

“Magnussen knows about your visit to Frankland.”

Greg slowly got off the floor, certainly not for the reason that he was past the age where a minor fall could be laughed off without a second thought, and joined Balthazar at the table.

“Ok, we didn’t think it would stay a secret, especially given the visit triggered the release of a fucking hellhound that Magnussen would likely have set up and configured to let him know when it happened.”

“Yeah, well, it spooked him for some reason, I think. He was especially snippy today and…”

“What?”

“I got dismissed, DISMISSED!, during out meeting today, but Jim didn’t. I waited and after an hour, I got called back into what I thought was the rest of our meeting, but Jim was gone. Magnussen began asking a lot of questions about what you and the others knew about what he was doing and how he was doing it, what had you prepared to counter him, if and when you might try something direct, that sort of thing. He didn’t ask outright, though. Lots of hypotheticals and circling around the point, but I got the gist of it. The part that worries me is he was also fishing for information about the fortifications here and in other places, like stinky Leo’s house and Mycroft’s. I think he’s readying something, Greg. If this Frankland gave you something important, Magnussen may be worried about his stupid scheme and think his only options are scrap his plans and lie low, at least for a good, long while, or hit and hit hard now.”

“He’s not strong enough to hit here.”

“Maybe not, but that’s not true for other places and he’s been getting information from both Jim and me about methods to strike remotely. His power base is his house; he won’t admit it outright, but I don’t think he’s left it since this whole business began. I know I haven’t told him much about distance conjuring, but Jim’s always been particularly good at it. Not the most powerful who’s ever tried, but he knows how well enough and for someone who does have a lot of power, even if its begged, borrowed and stolen…”

“Yeah, got it. What do you know about any allies he might have?”

“He’s had a few visitors. Some I recognized. That Wilkes character, for instance.”

“Dumb as a brick and not very powerful.”

“But rich and rich can be helpful if you don’t want to spend your own money on things.”

Greg nodded in agreement, especially given Magnussen’s assets were currently frozen.
“Anybody else?”

“That creepy Culverton Smith.”

“Necromancer… huh. Wonder why Magnussen didn’t use him to resurrect the plague?”

“My opinion… Magsie doesn’t trust him. He’s definitely helped with certain rites, because I can feel the nasty residue in a few rooms of the house, but I doubt he knows anything more than the narrow bit of information he’s been given to perform specific tasks. He’s doesn’t have the magical abilities of Magnussen, but that doesn’t mean he couldn’t capitalize on something like the vampire plague for his own purposes.”

“True. Anyone worth worrying about?”

“I get the feeling there are a number of low-level practitioners, but nobody consequential. He’s got a base forming, but it’s mostly on credit. If he succeeds with his stupid plan, they’ll gel together, but if he fails, they just go back to being general pains in the arse. I did see part of a note with Adler’s name on it, but I haven’t seen her slinking around or sensed her particular brand of magic in the house.”

“I doubt she’d sign on with him. Irene is self-serving and would think it a marvelous laugh to give me and a few others a kick in the teeth, but I seriously doubt Magnussen getting his claws into London, or anywhere else, would be something she’d support. She doesn’t like strings on her and, from what Mycroft tells me, Magnussen is all about pulling people’s strings. Keep an eye on that, though. I could be wrong.”

“Fine. I haven’t gotten back into his room of fun yet, but I’ve gotten into other areas. Even that collection is impressive. He’s drawing from all magic cultures and seems to have fathomed out some way to link various things to have boost each other.”

“Yes… that can be done, but it’s a slow process working out how to do it. And it’s a different strategy for every series of objects you want to link.”

“Whether he did it or someone did it for him, I don’t know, but if he’s got the more powerful objects linked up this way…”

“Let’s hope he hasn’t. It’s a tough thing to do and the stronger the objects the harder it is. They just don’t play nice with others and resist your efforts at every turn. It can be done, though, so…”

“Keep an eye on it, yeah, I know.”

“Ok… let’s start adding to the list of what you know he owns and then we…”

Greg stopped and looked around, Balthazar doing the same, though with his hair standing up on his back.

“Greg…”

“I felt it. Someone tried to see into here.”

“Tried hard, too.”

“Only to see, though. Not to take a real swing.”
“That’s what comes next, you know. He’s testing you.”

“Well… we just tested him, too. He didn’t get through, so that’s a fail.”

“This time. Magnussen isn’t stupid. He learns from failure.”

As if on cue, Greg felt another attempted breach and shook his head. This one didn’t get any further than the last, but it did come from another form of spell.

“Readjusting our priority for the moment. Adding a few layers to the defenses here, with some very old and tricky stuff even my mentor would be hard-pressed to crack. Then we work on our list of his assets. Then… who the fuck knows.”

“Veal!”

“What is it with you people and food? All the time and all on my bank account. It’s a sickness.”

“I’m a cat.”

“Ok… that’s fair.”

Greg took out his mobile and placed an enormous order for pizza, then sighed and placed another order for the Marcus’s request, because it would be meaty enough for both the vampire and the cat. Right now, food and rest were going to be crucial because… this was it. If Magnussen knew they had the plague and the cure, even with the caveats for the latter, his leverage was all but gone. Balthazar had it right – there were only two options and Magnussen didn’t seem the type to simply walk away when he’d invested this much into something he wanted.

It was time to move. The ducks were in a row and no more were paddling over to join the queue. Knowing Seb, Richard and the rest, the physical security system would be cracked soon enough and then it would just be give people a job and… go.

Greg made another phone call, this one to Sherlock to have him stop in and join the security-thwarting party and set aside making a call to Mycroft or the vampires until later. Tomorrow night, strategy session and wring what they could from both Balthazar and Jim. What they could trust of that, who knew, especially since Balthazar’s aura was throwing off an enormous amount of mixed signals, but they couldn’t keep waiting. Magnussen was knocking on his door and it was time to answer it. With a big fucking fist right in his face…
Chapter 57

Mycroft had a long career of managing extremely dangerous and complex situations, the sort that could be upturned by a single misspoken word, and he had never been quite as unmoored as for the one currently looming on the horizon. For the upcoming storm, he was an utter novice and it was very much not to his liking. This new world was rich with its own rules, norms, capacities, expectations, possibilities… and he had only the tiniest of fractions of it at his disposal.

And he had no time to learn. For the future, yes, but for the present, no. All he had to lend to the task at hand was his paltry physical skills and entirely non-magical strategy suggestions.

“If you’re trying to set your desk on fire with the power of your mind, it won’t work. We’ve tried that. On your desk, various ties and toupees, and the rife-with-misspellings reports of a number of ministers too high to quantify with modern maths.”

Mycroft waved off his PA, but had to admit he was very much in a setting-something-on-fire frame of mind and wasn’t certain how to shift that to a more productive direction.

“Ridiculous, as ever. I was simply ruminating upon a matter of import. It is not my fault you take issue with the configuration of my face while I do it.”

“You could just say you’re not sure what tonight’s going to bring and worried that too much of it is going to be out of your normal areas of expertise.”

The foulest of foul hens.

“Untrue.”

“Very true, because you’re wearing the same face you made when your mother made you escort her friend’s daughter and her young children on a tour of the Palace.”

“I have no memory of that.”

“Because you washed it away with a half bottle of brandy in the aftermath. Luckily, I’d cleared your schedule for the remainder of the day since I suspected you’d not be fit for purpose. I saw the three-year-old. That child looked… energetic.”

As Mycroft’s hand unconsciously reached towards the bottle of exceptional brandy he kept in the bottom drawer of his desk, Anthea cleared her throat and snapped him out the horror film that was playing across the screen of his mind.

“In any case, your boyfriend would shrivel and die if you weren’t there to manage him appropriately, so focus on what he’s going to need for management tonight. Here’s a hint – it’ll be a lot.”

“For what reason?”

“He’s Greg.”

There was that, yes.

“Gregory is most capable of managing himself, however, your point is taken. We are a successful team for various matters and there is likely no reason to doubt that would be the case
“True. And, for the record, Marcus is hoping you and Greg both keep an eye on his uncle and Leo. They might not be thinking too clearly when they unleash toothy fury on Magnussen and he’d rather not see them hurt if it can be avoided.”

“Petras and Leonas are well-suited to unleashing toothy fury, however, there are things we must achieve that might require the fury be a bit less murderous. At least at the onset. Once we have the dragon egg, the necessary amount of basilisk venom and are confident that there are no additional samples of the vampire plague awaiting release, then they are free to do as they like.”

“They’ll like to do something incredibly violent and bloody.”

“Most likely. It is a lovely thought, is it not?”

Anthea smiled a smile that Mycroft recognized from many a meeting with individuals who left with no idea they had reached the end of the current incarnation of their lives and careers. For Magnussen, that end had certainly arrived.

“I’m planning to get video coverage of the carnage.”

“I am certain Marcus will appreciate your gesture.”

“He should. I may have to pull back my hair for this fiasco and the amount of money I spend for my hair to look this good makes that something I do not appreciate. I expect both gratitude and compensation for my aggravation.”

“You do have holiday time saved. Perhaps a nice bit of time away funded by your paramour?”

“That’s a possibility. A very good possibility.”

“Do feel free to take the time you desire. I shall muddle along as best I can in your absence.”

“Charles will probably wear a skirt if you think you need someone to sit at my desk for appearances sake.”

“Strangely, I believe he would enjoy that.”

“Oh, there’s no doubt.”

Mycroft smirked and found himself feeling much more confident about the upcoming storm than he had before their bit of verbal sparring. He had to be confident, of course, else Anthea would not get her desired holiday with her safe-and-well vampire suitor and that would be catastrophic for everyone involved. For that reason alone, people depended on him to help see this situation sorted and sorted properly. Which was a particular skill of his. Sorting exceedingly-difficult situations with, at times, limited information and resources. And, not to be boastful, but his paltry physical skills were of notable use battling that tenacious hellhound.

Very well… a moment of doubt now thoroughly quashed, as were they always, and focus was regained for the ordeal to come. Then, perhaps, a small holiday for himself, with Gregory on his arm. It might task Charles somewhat to shift between wearing a skirt and an impeccable suit to maintain the appearance of a fully-staffed office, but the man was nothing if not creative for matters involving chicanery. Even before, in fact, he became a dragon…
“Neither one of them?”

Richard shrugged and set aside the small tool he’d been using to work on the laptop Greg had brought, currently sitting on the kitchen table. It was nice to make new friends and not for the only reason that they all seemed to have devices that needed repair, customization or configuring and were happy to have him do the work for a reasonable fee, payable in cash, food, alcohol or favors, such as access to Marcus’s clubs and bars despite being a bit understated for the usual clientele. He wouldn’t even charge to fix Mrs. Hudson’s computer since she sent along a nice assortment of biscuits with it and, though, booze was nice, sweet old lady baked goods were worth their weight in gold.

“Jim said he and Balthazar have to be Magnussen’s house tonight. Apparently, he…. Magnussen, that is… has gotten very concerned about things, though he’s trying to hide it. Jim thinks he’s hoping to get more information out of them or get them to dart back and do a bit of spying. I suppose we’ll know later.”

Greg ran a hand through his hair and looked at his watch. He’d hoped for a quick word with Jim before tonight’s meeting, but not only wouldn’t the word be had, but Jim wouldn’t be at the meeting anyway. Wonderful.

“I suppose we will.”

“I’ll be there, though. Philip and I have some ideas for wiring the behind-the-lines team for radio so they can communicate easily, but have their hands free at all times for whatever wicked things might come their way. It’s his plan to station people around the perimeter so someone will always be close if there’s a need, but they’ll also need to coordinate their response for bigger things, give status reports and the like.”

Greg felt an odd miasma of pride and oh-fuck rise up in him and he made a mental note to have a chat with Sebastian about not providing his burgeoning generalissimo with any weapons for the upcoming melee more fearsome than a fork.

“That sounds very efficient and professional.”

“I think so. It’ll also help me if I have a question about special orders or giving a discount or something when I’m behind the till. I can just radio in for a quick word and that’s that.”

It was official. This division of the troops was far more organized than his own. Shit.

“Ok… you all absolutely do what you think is best here. I have no doubt it’ll be extremely helpful when the moment comes.”

“That’s the hope. Yeah… that’s the hope.”

Richard’s voice took a slight detour from its previously-confident tone and Greg drew in a breath before taking a seat and waiting for Richard to say what was on his mind.

“Greg… all of this you’re planning. We’re planning… Do you believe Jim is… do you think he’ll do what he’s supposed to do? For us, I mean?”

What Richard had on his mind was exactly what Greg hoped he wouldn’t have on his mind, since it too closely mirrored some of his one worries about moving forward.

“I don’t know. I hope so.”
“What if he doesn’t?”

“Do you have a reason to think he won’t follow through?”

“Not… precisely. Just a feeling something’s not right. Jim lies. A lot. That’s simply who he is and I’ve a lifetime of practice spotting his lies and seeing around them to the truth, but… I don’t know what’s on his mind now. I feel… I feel like he’s lying to me, but it’s not the normal feel of his lies. He tells me that it’s all going to plan, that he’s got Magnussen, if not fooled, then not knowing that Jim knows he’s not fooled, but there’s something else going on that I can’t fathom. I don’t want to think he’s betraying us, but I can’t say I believe he’s precisely on our side, either.”

“I won’t lie and say I’ve not had that worry myself, but I can’t say he’s specifically done something to make me certain one way or another.”

“Nor have I. Jim and I… we didn’t have the easiest time of it when we were young and he was always so resentful of those who had more than we did. He saw them as undeserving of what they had because they were stupider than he was, not as clever or bold. He’s always wanted to be someone with real power, real influence… even after he learned of his magic, he schemed more about what it could get him in life than learning what he could do with it. It’s not gone quite the way he planned. He does have influence, in a sense, but I know it irks him that he’s more seen as someone who can fix a problem, rather than someone who is an actual voice in the community. He doesn’t care about being well-regarded or liked, though I have to admit that Molly has made me rethink that a bit, but he does want acknowledgement. He loves his name whispered in the shadows. Adores being the person you check back over your shoulder to make certain he isn’t following you…”

“You’re worried he’s thinking Magnussen can give him what he wants.”

“Perhaps. Honestly, I can conceive of Jim working to bring down both you and Magnussen, somehow making it look both completely not his fault and completely his doing at the same time to put himself at the top of our abracadabra-scented heap.”

Not a thing Greg had considered, though he was considering it extremely hard at the moment.

“I just don’t know anymore, Greg, but… if things do go to the bad… try to leave him alive, ok? Even as a weasel, I don’t care, but try to leave him alive. I’ll take him away from London, permanently. There’s not a lot I can do to the living being a necromancer, but there are a few tricks up my sleeve I can use to make sure he comes with me and we’ll go somewhere you’ll never have to worry about him again. He’s my brother, you see? I don’t ever ignore what he does or even come to grips with it, but I still try to make him… better. I did think Molly was helping a lot with that and it’s my fondest hope that she and I can both keep letting him realize the world and the people in it aren’t just ants for him to amuse himself with. It’s working, too. I genuinely believe that. Slow, perhaps, but he’s loads better than he was when we were younger and getting better every day, painful step by slow, excruciating step, but it is working. If I have to do it all myself, though, somewhere far from here, I will. If it’s possible, Greg, give me that. I understand if it’s not; I’m not blind to what you’re walking into, but if it’s at all possible… just let me keep trying.”

Greg sighed and his heart went out to the younger man. What a weight it must be to have a brother like Jim that you truly care about and worry for constantly. Mycroft would understand this better than he did, but he could at least try to offer what little solace he felt possible.

“I’ll try. My plans don’t involve anyone dying, if all goes well, but nothing seems to ever all go well, so… I will do my best, even if Jim does betray our side, to see him safely out of danger and then we can… talk about the future. No promises for things I can’t control, but for what I can,
I’ll do my best to see him away from all of it alive. Sound good?”

Not that Richard needed to answer, since the wash of relief that flooded his face told the tale in living color.

“Yes. Thank you, Greg. I really appreciate that.”

“It’s the least I can do for the best kindly-landlady tech repair service in London.”

“Sherlock and John are lucky, Greg. My landlady doesn’t offer tasty biscuits for little favors or mend my shirts when they’ve had a go with a cat. Not that I have a cat, but Molly’s seem typical for the breed and if they took swats at Sherlock, maybe I should reconsider. Has Mrs. Hudson met Molly yet? They seem the sort to get along famously.”

“I’m not sure. I think, however, that’s something I should investigate and make happen if it hasn’t already. As soon as is humanly possible. Maybe Mrs. Hudson would like a Sherlock-swatting cat of her own… Molly is more connected than most with London’s cat people. They always know someone who has a cat or kittens in need of a good home. My neighbor, Mrs. Hodges is actually knitting pixie caps for Molly’s brood at the moment. I’m sure she’d happily knit some for Mrs. Hudson’s hypothetical cat, if it came to it. Maybe even sew a little frock. She does make exquisite cat frocks as Balthazar can attest.”

“Cat frocks?”

“And caps.”

“Can Molly knit or sew?”

“If not, I suspect she’ll be learning quickly. I can’t imagine her seeing her cats in teeny caps and frocks and not wanting a piece of that action herself.”

“Always good to have a hobby or two.”

“And a cat or four.”

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His favor to John discharged, Greg started for home, then paused a moment, stepping out of the way of the others sharing the pavement. In all likelihood, they would assemble some strike plan tonight and enact it swiftly. The tech crew had the physical security system analyzed and were prepared to interrupt it when signaled. Balthazar and Jim had both provided extra details about the house that the various architectural plans didn’t show and the contents of the house that would factor into their plans. That was a great start, but the more information they had, the better. Maybe he could put a few more assets into their portfolio, this time without the massive blood loss and sadly familiar tango with death…

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Mycroft wasn’t used to the eyes of crystal skull on his shelf glowing in any manner, let alone with quite such a verdant hue but various recent experiences had him leaning towards waiting a moment before summoning security to deal with some form of explosive device.

“You’re alone, right?”

“Ah, Gregory. How… transparent you appear today. And minus a body.”
“Like that? Hold on and I’ll firm up a bit.”

What appeared to be a waterfall of light flowed from the skull’s glowing eyes and a translucent version of Greg stood in front of Mycroft’s desk.

“There. Now we can chat a bit more personally than over the phone.”

Mycroft smiled warmly and marveled how his lover could surprise him as no other ever could.

“A most welcome situation. Is there a particular reason for this chat or simply the desire to pass a few pleasant moments in conversation?”

“How about both! A few pleasant moments spent in conversation to discuss something that is very much like a reason?”

“A gladdening combination. Tell me, Gregory, what sounds very much like a reason to you today?”

Greg filled in Mycroft on his conversation with Richard and was happy to see his lover was thinking about the situation as keenly as was he.

“That is certainly a possibility for our weasel. He does seem the type to seek the most beneficial outcome for himself and possess the capability and drive to increase greatly the probability of it becoming fact.”

“Does it change things?”

“No. All likely paths to achieving this goal will involve the downfall of Magnussen so it is a matter, for us, of identifying the selected mechanism, ensuring it does not enmesh any of our colleagues and remaining vigilant for any overt actions against us.”

“Oh, is that all? A pittance of effort.”

“Ultimately, it is the same effort as for any of our previous concerns but, perhaps, one that lays an additional path to the elimination of Magnussen as a threat.”

“Which we may have had already if Jim is on our side and saw an opening he could use to help us.”

“Very true. I would not be overly concerned at Richard’s supposition, but it is something to keep in mind.”

“Ok… that makes me feel better. I’m still going to do a little extra recon, though, before tonight in case a few additional traps or defenses have been laid in.”

“With your new, altered vision?”

“That’s a big part of it. Also, I put together a few little spells to detect some of the more likely defensive measures you put in place for a structure that, even now, I may not be able to see. I didn’t sense anything when I was there last, just wards against the structure being detected as housing magic, but I’ll go a bit deeper today.”

“Take care you are not discovered, Gregory. I anticipate Magnussen will be far more alert for threats now than ever.”

“I will. Well, that’s my morning planned. How’s your day going?”
“Nearly as rife as yours with potential chicanery and opportunism.”

“Fantastic! Or boring, since that seems to be the norm for your workday.”

“Alas, it is so, however, there was a rather substantial amount of chicanery involved in the positioning of the chairs in the conference room for a meeting in which I participated earlier. The chair with the upsettingly lumpy cushion that typically resides in the room’s small storage closet was placed in the PM’s traditional seating location. There is suspicion of an attempted coup. I, however, am loathe to endorse this notion for I have a wager such an offensive move by the office staff will not occur for another three months, at the earliest, and shall lose a full ten pounds if I am proved incorrect.”

Mycroft’s cutting glare hung for a single further moment before he broke into a chuckle to accompany Greg’s giggling.

“Not ten pounds! Better bribe the office staff to scuttle that rumor so your riches are safe.”

“A prudent suggestion. It shall cost me no more than £150, I suspect, to safeguard my week’s biscuit fund.”

“A bargain at twice the price. Alright, I just wanted to check Richard’s ideas with you and have the chance to see your gorgeous face before tonight. I’ll let you get on with your work.”

“Oh, must you? Cannot you simply remain cloaked in invisibility to the Chancellor’s eyes when he pops in for his meeting in a quarter hour?”

“If I was physically there and had advance notice to prepare, then yes! Otherwise, my only available trick is pretending to be a hat stand and hoping he doesn’t notice when his hat just falls to the floor through my hands.”

“A regrettable situation. Very well, be off with you, Gregory and… I am so happy you chose to visit today. A phone call is a joyful thing, but not nearly as joyful as something more personal. Can you do this often?”

“If you hadn’t been playing with your skull so much, despite what you tell Anthea, it would be a lot harder, but I suspected you’d created a link with it by now and that made things a great deal easier.”

“I do not… play… with my objet d’art.”

“You pet him like a cat, don’t you.”

“Incorrect.”

“Hold the bugger in your hands and pet him while you imagine perpetrating all sorts of villainous deeds.”

“Ridiculous.”

“Give him a jaunty rub when you’re feeling especially self-satisfied from your villainous deeds.”

“That… very well, there is some validity to this latter point.”

Mycroft wondered how long it had been since his office sounded with genuine laughter and
wondered further how often he might beg his lover to indulge him with a few moments of extremely private, yet wonderfully personal conversation.

“I thought so. And it’s well deserved! I’m off, then. Love you, Mycroft.”

“And I love you, Gregory.”

Greg could easily simply vanish the illusion, however, it was far more fun to flow back into the skull and give Mycroft an extra magical thrill. He did adore his horror film atmosphere. And, given how well that worked, it would be an easy thing to do it now and again to keep the thrill alive. There were so many little baubles he could give, in addition to the skull, that would likely amuse the man with far too much weight on his shoulders. For instance, there was that ridiculous spell he’d worked out in his twenties to make people’s voices sound like they’d been breathing helium. Bind that to a handsome crystal or metallic sphere and visits by a certain baby brother would suddenly become something far less bothersome…

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Greg took care to conceal his presence from whatever detection methods Magnussen may have laid in the vicinity of his house and was glad he’d made the effort since he detected various, and new, magical tripwires to sound the proverbial alarm if someone of consequential ability came strolling by. They were well-crafted, but nothing to concern him greatly. What did concern him, however, was they were similar to those Jim had around his place. That didn’t mean anything necessarily, since the spells were fairly standard and weren’t subject to a lot of variation if you wanted them to work properly, but there were subtle hints he’d only noticed with Moriarty’s defenses, so he couldn’t dismiss out of hand the thought that Jim had done the work for these.

What did it matter, though? Magnussen would obviously fortify his defenses and it would have been smart for Jim to give him help with it. They still weren’t strong enough to do anything about someone with a high-level of talent, so… why was there a sour taste in his mouth about the whole thing?

In any case, he had far more important issues to think about now. Many being involved with the actual sight of Magnussen’s house. Admittedly, his new vision would reveal much more than his regular eyes could, but even his normal eyes could have seen some of this if it had been here the last time he paid a visit. This was definitely a step up from the previous status quo and, though it wasn’t a great thing for their side, it wasn’t catastrophic, either. Fairly standard, albeit evil, traps and snares, but they were enough to cause problems for the vampires and the non-magical humans when they were triggered into action. The sorts of problems that led to temporary or permanent physical disability.

So… first strike is him, the elf and Sebastian. Seb had an enormous talent for scaring the living shit out of people who were watching a slavering werewolf baring down on them and being a massive distraction for those who might not be quivering in terror, but racing to remember how to manage a marauding murder machine. The elf would be the magical battering ram, getting the pounding started while this wily old wizard tore down the defenses that would endanger the others. Goraseth… no. He’d need to lose his illusion completely to unleash his full dragon abilities and not even the jaded citizens of London would shrug at the sight of a full-size dragon launching a torrent of fire at a handsome residential building in a highly respectable neighborhood.

Without question, all of what he was seeing was manageable. Though only Round 1. What he could see out here was just the beginning; the truly nasty stuff would be inside the house and that’s what he couldn’t s… no, wait… maybe he could see. At least a little. His distance vision, which his new eyes didn’t help, was crap and Magnussen had protections for that anyway, albeit
moderate ones. And he couldn’t pull the little trick he’d used for Mycroft’s office, but his bilocation talent didn’t mind if there were walls in the way between him and where he wanted his other self to go. It wouldn’t be easy since Magnussen did have his house warded for that sort of nonsense, but he could see how the wards were woven and unraveling a corner to sneak through was possible.

Of course, having his other self appear right in front of the maid or something would be bad, but from the plans he’d seen there were a few closets and the like he could aim to land in to listen for a maid milling about before taking a quick peek for something that leapt out, hopefully not literally, at him. Alright, then… pay no attention general public to the doddering old gent fluttering his hands about and talking to himself about something very important like his ungrateful children or the price of eggs.

Ooh, that bit’s a little twist. Magnussen or someone does have a clever thought now and again, but it’s not enough to thwart this doddering old gent. Now, that area there looks a touch saggy, so just a few tugs should...

“Always so boring, aren’t you, Greg?”

Greg had no time to startle at the sound of the voice which scarcely registered, in any case, as his body was suddenly gripped by a nauseating pain that had him on his knees and breathing hard to keep from vomiting up his intestines all over the pavement. Several sets of helpful hands got him to his feet again and, though the owners of those hands were hard to dissuade from calling an ambulance to take him to hospital, he was kept steady long enough to get his legs back under him and promise to go straight home and stop in at his local clinic if he took poorly again. Once out of sight from the small crowd that had assembled around him, Greg’s hand dove into his pocket to pull out his mobile.

“Anderson! Something’s happened and…”

“Greg! Oh god, Greg… it’s terrible! You’ve got to get back here as fast as you can!”

Greg was running to find a cab as soon as the words were out of Anderson’s mouth.

“Tell me.”

“It… I have no idea! It felt like an explosion and people were screaming… oh no, I have to call John.”

“Anderson? Philip! Shit!”

Greg nearly body checked a woman who was taking the nearest cab and shouted his address at the cabbie, with a promise of an extra ten quid if he got there fast. To be fair, the cabbie did a dangerously-remarkable job getting him to the shop in short order, but every minute felt like an eternity, especially since Anderson wouldn’t answer his Sebastian-provided, questionably-legal mobile and neither did Sebastian, whose own mobile was only slightly more legal than Anderson’s. He was about to ring Mycroft when his own phone sounded and made the call unnecessary.

“Gregory! Are you alright?”

“I am, but I may be in the minority. What’s going on? I phoned Anderson, but…”

“We are monitoring the situation, my dear. I have people en route to assess and provide assistance and… oh dear. I will phone again in a moment.”
Greg snarled at his mobile, but packed it away as the cab braked sharply, unable to go any further.

“What’s wrong?”

“Traffic’s stopped, sir. Looks like police up ahead. Lots of them.”

Greg peered through the windscreen, swore, and threw a handful of notes at the cabbie before darting out of the cab and running towards the shop, not feeling the least bit guilty of using various magical tricks to move people out of his way and conceal his dash through the police cordon to reach the shop, which seemed only standing through an incomparable force of will, given much of what surrounded it was in various states of rubble and ruin.

“Greg!”

Sebastian rarely spoke at anything other than conversational volume, so hearing him shout chilled Greg’s blood and he ran towards a small knot of people among the other human-populated knots dotting the pavement.

“Sebastian, what… shit.”

“Oh, Greg… what happened? It was all so sudden… I was only a little girl during the war, but I remember the bombs… oh Greg, it was just like that but from underground!”

Greg knelt and gave Mrs. Hodges a long hug wishing he never had to hear that much fear in her voice.

“I don’t know what happened, but I promise I’ll find out.”

“Your young man, he’s with the government, isn’t he? Surely he knows…”

We are monitoring the situation, my dear.

“I suspect he does and he’ll be making certain everyone gets the help they need. How are you, though? How… how’d you get out of your flat?”

Though, from the way Sebastian was snarling at anyone who came near them, he had a good idea.

“Sebastian, that dear boy. I’ve never seen anyone move so fast in my life! And I’ve lived a long one! I’d just… I’d just heard the second boom and my door burst open. That little devil had me over his shoulder and out the door again before I heard the third one! Fiona has been out all day, the silly cat, so she’s one thing I don’t have to worry about, but… look at it, Greg. Just look at my building. Yours is one of the only few still standing that might be livable!”

Greg looked up and down his street and seethed quietly that she was right. And it was only because he had invested more time, energy and magic into protecting his shop and flat than might be imagined that it only looked shaky in a few areas while everything around him looked very much like it’d been victim of a terrorist incident. The structures on either side of his were absolutely devastated and a gradual progression of decreasing damage continued on for a solid block. Buildings across the street were in better shape, mostly missing windows or sporting destroyed pavement displays and exterior decoration, but intact and functional.

“Don’t worry, not for a moment. You let us manage things and I promise you this will be alright.”

Greg glanced up at Sebastian who had taken a break from snarling to stand close to Anderson, who
looked both shaky and despondent as he gazed about at the disaster.

“Sebastian and Philip are going to keep watch here a moment while I get a look around, then we’ll see you… have you phoned your daughter yet?”

“Not yet. I don’t have one of those mobile phones and mine…”

Mrs. Hodges glanced back at her building and Greg sighed, knowing her meaning. In truth, at second glance, the structure was actually in slightly better shape than Greg first thought, though that only meant it might survive with extensive repair work as opposed to being slated for immediate demolition and he wondered how much of that was spillover from his efforts to keep a roof over his own head. Regardless, he’d make sure to start layering in protections for whatever building was present after this evil business was sorted because he would not let another foul person endanger this dear person ever again.

“I’ll have Sebastian phone for you and we’ll look after things here. I have her number in the shop, so I’ll phone as soon as we know anything about what happened or learn more about when you might get back into your flat.”

“And Fiona?”

“I suspect she’s not far and when she peeks out, I’ll keep her safe until I can get her back to you.”

“Oh, thank you, Greg. This is all so… much… and I’m so fuddled right now…”

Greg waved over Sebastian and Philip, had a few quiet words, then moved off to check the shop which, hopefully, still contained a vampire.

“Marcus? You at home?”

“Funny, Greg. Or not. Honestly, I don’t know at the moment since I’m still not convinced the building’s still standing and I’m alive. This could be an elaborate hallucination but I’d rather a happy hallucination than a horrible reality.”

Greg strode into his stock area where the vampire was sitting, as if afraid to peek out from behind the curtain to survey the damage.

“What happened?”

“Not a clue! There was a series of explosions, started off a ways, then moved closer. I ran to the workshop since I could dart through the rear door and hide in the alley if the building was threatening to come down or jump through that portal you have to your mentor’s old cottage and bide my time there, if need be. But… you told me you have this place defended and… not that I doubted you… but seeing what could only be a wall of energy trying to rip this building apart being stopped by another wall of energy that was saying fuck off and not too politely… you did a good job with it, I’d say.”

“That’s good and bad, actually. Good because it worked but bad because this was definitely a magical assault and a powerful one. Multiple explosions, though…”

“Philip said he heard one of the coppers saying it was a gas line.”

“That… that could be true. And smart. Magnussen doesn’t have the power to directly attack us here but he could leverage other natural forces to do the work for him. Or, at least, add some
power to his punch. I’ve done it often enough myself to know. If it really was just a natural disaster my spells wouldn’t have worked as well. They’re designed mostly to combat magical influences, so it definitely proves someone’s ugly hands were behind it. Besides, I have one spell in place that lets me know if something magical is happening here when I’m away and it dropped me to my knees with its impact.”

“It was a bold move, on his part.”

“Bold, angry or scared. I was creeping about his patch and… I can’t be certain anymore, honestly, but I swore I heard Jim’s voice just before I got hit in the gut with a proper load of bad news.”

“I think you’d be sure of a squeaky weasel voice being a shit in your ear.”

“That’s the thing, though. It wasn’t a weasel voice. Sounded like his own, normal voice. That’s why I can’t be sure. I’m not joking about the punch part… damn near sent my stomach out through my mouth.”

“Well, that’s a lovely image.”

“Lovely or not, it scrambled me for a moment, so… I don’t know. What I do know is this has now gone far beyond far enough. I haven’t asked but… people had to have been hurt, Marcus. Killed even. Businesses ruined, homes destroyed. Whatever I thought I might be able to do to just knock Magnussen down and make him stay there isn’t enough anymore. I don’t even…”

Greg’s mobile sounded with a ringtone that he wouldn’t ignore for any reason, let alone now.

“Mycroft! What’s the story on your end? It’s a fucking disaster here and…”

“Gregory, listen carefully and answer quickly. Where do Leonas and Petras typically sleep in the Kensington house?”

“I… what?”

“Now, Gregory.”

“Um… Marcus, where’s your dad’s and uncle’s bedrooms in Leo’s house?”

“What?”

“Just tell me.”

“Father has garish suite off the upstairs library and uncle has a dank lair a few doors along from it looking over that fuddy-duddy rose garden the staff insists on maintaining even though it went out of fashion about nine hundred years ago.”

“They’re up one flight and to the left, why?”

“Damn. Gregory… yours was not the only area impacted by whatever has occurred. Much of Leonas’s residence is in ruin, with the leftmost portion the greatest affected. An anti-terrorism team is being dispatched both to your location and this one, but you realize the sensitivity of this location in particular and its inhabitants.”

“Fuck.”

“Agreed. Probability of survival due to concussive force or… having a building fall upon
“Overall? Good, surprisingly. They may not be in wonderful shape, but it’s something they could survive.”

“And exposure to sunlight?”

“That’s… it’d make things worse, a lot worse, but still survivable if you can get them out of direct sun fairly quickly once they’re dug out.”

“Will they be awake?”

“After that? Hard to say. Vampires sleep like the proverbial dead but being blown up and having a house fall on you is easily enough to prod them awake. What I can’t guarantee, though, is that they’ll not attack whoever tries to rescue them because if they’re badly injured their feeding instincts will be at maximum. If you’re lucky, though, they’ll be unconscious from injury and avoid that particular unpleasantness.”

“Then I shall supervise the rescue operation personally and have it managed by individuals who can be relied upon for their discretion. Inform Marcus that I will provide any news the moment we have it.”

Greg didn’t even wait to hear the dead, silent line because Mycroft was in business mode and he was simply thankful that they were being provided with any updates whatsoever.

“Greg? What’s going on?”

“Magnussen struck your dad’s place, too. Mycroft says it’s bad. He’s going to oversee rescue operations so things don’t get worse for Leo and Petras, but I’ll get to them as soon as they’re dug out and do what I can. I’ll text Mycroft to have them diverted somewhere safe, not a hospital, and call in other healers, too. Don’t worry, Marcus. I can’t imagine anything’s happened that they can’t survive. They’ve survived worse in the past.”

“If being turned into dog food by bullets didn’t kill my wretched old father, this certainly won’t. Oh, don’t look at me like that, Greg. I’ve known the real story about mother’s death for years. I just don’t tell them I know so they can… they can feel like they’re still protecting me. They’re so silly, the old biddies. I’m a grown man and they still think they have to protect me from the terrible truths of this even-more-terrible world. Silly. Just silly as hens, both of them. I love them for it, though. Don’t ever tell them I said that or I’ll come to your and Mycroft’s wedding wearing red and looking damn good in it.”

Greg smirked and wrapped an arm around the vampire, squeezing a little before noticing that the electricity was out.

“I’d offer to put the kettle on, but that’s not going to happen. Want a beer?”

“Stronger.”

“Want vodka?”

“Loads.”

“Alright, I’ll do that while you phone Anthea and tell her you’re alive.”

“Already did and she was very impressed by my strength and cunning.”
“You hid in the cellar until the danger passed.”

“You have your version of events and I have mine. Mine, by the way, is leagues better.”

Shaking his head and failing to hide his smile, Greg rose and patted himself on the back for, so far, keeping his cool when all he wanted to do was storm over to Magnussen’s house and raze it to the ground. If it wasn’t for the dragon’s egg and whatever else might be inside, he would have done it and not felt a twinge of regret. He could hear more ambulances arriving now. He could hear people shouting and crying and tried not to imagine what was facing them because of this tragedy.

“Greg?”

“John! Not the way you wanted to be woken from a sound sleep, was it?”

Not that John looked rested, but who would getting a call that said come quick the whole block’s exploded.

“Oh, I wasn’t sleeping, soundly or not. We have a flatmate, did you know? Tall fellow with pointy ears. Thinks Sherlock is as daft as he is, which is true, to be fair, and they’re having a wonderful time with all sorts of nonsense that Mrs. Hudson giggles about because Mr. Elf calls her ‘dear lady,’ smiles and steals flowers and sweets to hand her when they’ve done something particularly smelly that they’re dragging across her rugs.”

John’s words were light, but Greg couldn’t miss the sadness that was heavy in his eyes.

“Elves can be charming, that’s for certain. He out there now?”

“Yeah. Sherlock’s making a nuisance of himself with the police while Nyvrokh and Sebastian are seeing what they can learn from the wreckage and rescue personnel. I’m not certain, but I suspect the support teams think Sebastian is with MI-5 or something, since he’s taking pains to act mysterious and treats them all like he’s the one who ordered them in place but isn’t feeling particularly in need of informing them of that little fact. Which, given he fails to say more than three words at a time makes it all highly convincing. I just came up to check on Marcus then I’ll be down there helping however I can. I checked Mrs. Hodges and she seems fine. The on-site medics already did it, but I’m not sure it meant much until someone she knew and trusted said the same thing. Her daughter is on the way and Sherlock is making certain she can get through the police line to collect her mum. Oh! Philip found Fiona feasting on the flurry of food from the café that’s currently all over the street, so she’s safe, too. Sebastian’s happy about that since he was soon to be dispatched in wolf form, I suspect, to drag the cat back home. Marcus, you seem alive. Nicely done!”

The vampire answered with a hand gesture that was not a wave.

“Lovely. I’m telling Anthea about that lack of manners and… ok, that was weak, because she’d approve wholeheartedly. I’m so fucking tired…”

Greg passed Marcus his lunchtime vodka and hoped it wouldn’t be long before Leo could send word to his son. John couldn’t see it, but Marcus’s aura was telling the whole story about the vampire’s emotional state and it was not something for the faint of heart to witness. But, it was probably a good idea to clue the good doctor into things because he might be one of the healers called in to help the broken, crispy vampires when they were dragged from the rubble.

“Oh shit… I’m sorry, Marcus. I really am. Greg’s right, though. I honestly think they’ll be alright but I’m going to do everything possible to make sure that happens sooner than later. It does
explain, though…”

The slight ‘should I or shouldn’t I’ look on John’s face told Greg that ‘you should’ was the correct answer to the quandary, even if it wasn’t the happy answer they all might want.

“What, John?”

“Ummmm… You and Marcus’s family weren’t the only ones targeted. There’s three major powers in London…”

“MYCROFT!”

“Targeted, but not hit, fortunately. If it’s any consolation, he didn’t tell Sherlock, either. His was the first area for the ‘terrorist attack’ and Sherlock recognized the houses on the news footage. Mycroft’s house, apparently, is specifically not near any gas lines and he’s not even on the same electrical feed or water line as his neighbors. Has a massive generator nearby specifically for his use, too, if needed. Given his position, whatever it is in full, he’s got the basics isolated so an attack like this won’t hit him. If he didn’t tell you, it was because he didn’t want you to worry or feel guilty or any of the things you’re doing right now when your energies are best spent elsewhere.”

“Bloody wonderful… he and I are having a long talk about this later.”

“Oh, I have no doubt. And it’ll end with hot, angry sex that nobody will want any details about whatsoever.”

“I will!”

“Shut it, you bloody vampire. Speaking of blood, we’ll need to have a hefty supply ready for Leonas and Petras. I’ll get that in motion. Ok… I’m off to muck in with the medical types. We could use a little surreptitious help from you, too, Greg for rubble clearing and other things a grunty caveman like you can do. See you soon?”

“Yep. Just came in to check on this one and make certain the shop and workshop are secure. I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

John nodded and left with a determined expression that Greg wagered was a typical one in his military days. Honestly, the rescue people couldn’t have a better man on hand than John. And not only to keep Sherlock on a leash.

“Alright, Marcus, you continue lounging and… what’s that?”

“What?”

“The thing you’re shoving behind my sofa cushion.”

“You’re hallucinating. Sorry, Greg, but we both can’t be hallucinating because that’s my thing for today and I don’t share my things, not even with someone as pretty as you.”

Greg twitched his fingers and a small cloth came flying from behind the cushion and into his hand.

“What’s bleeding?”

“That’s jam.”

“Marcus…”
“Right eye. And before you ask, why yes, Greg, I did find myself talking to the mirror this morning like it was another person. Normally I only do that when I’m very, very drunk, but with my brain melting, I suppose it’s to be expected. More vodka?”

Marcus grinned smarmily and held up his empty glass, hating the grief splashed across Greg’s features.

“We’re going to beat this, Marcus. We’re close.”

“Close only counts in quoits, old bean. So, more vodka for me, please, then get on with being Mr. Helper. Let me know when Mycroft’s got the old people dug out so I can prepare myself for the endless complaining while they grow new bones and skin. God… Father is a misery when he stubs his toe. This is going to be dreadful beyond belief and I’ve known him long enough to believe a lot!”

Greg swallowed hard, but only nodded, turned and walked out of the flat to check on this workshop. When life went to hell in a handbasket, it gathered passengers in a fast and furious fashion. But, he hadn’t been lying. They were close. Even with the vampires out of the picture, they had enough force to bring this to a close and it was time to see it done. Tonight. No reason to wait any longer. They’d go tonight. They’d been cautious, wary and Magnussen would likely expect more of the same, especially with some of their lot injured or dead. Well, he’d be wrong. He’d be very, very wrong, indeed…

Mycroft maintained his aloof composure watching first the unconscious, broken body of Leonas pulled from the rubble, quickly covered by a light-proof blanket, then the next several who were members of the household staff, fortunately all vampires, and further through the managing of transportation for the victims, Leo to his own residence and the staff to Marcus’s flat where John and other healers were descending with quantities of blood and various other techniques and materials to speed along their recovery. He still maintained his composure, though with diminishing levels of success, through the very long wait while the crews sifted through the rubble and searched the intact sections of the house for more victims, pointedly not finding one particular body, until a tall figure finally emerged from behind a large pile of destruction, waving off the hands of rescue personnel who refused to be waved off by a man with bloody hands, a limp and skin turning red before their eyes.

“Petras! You buffoon! Get out of the sun!”

The vampire seemed just to realize that, in fact, he was in the sun and hurried his limp towards Mycroft who helped him into one of the lightproof vans he’d ordered delivered to the terrorist scene for reasons of grave security importance, should anyone bother to ask.

“L… Leonas?”

“I had him transported to my residence. Gregory has been alerted and there are measures already moving towards his location to treat him, as well as the members of your staff, though they shall be housed at Marcus’s flat for the time being.”

“Good. I tried to get to them, but… I had a house on top of me.”

“You were in the cellars.”

“That I was. A rare occasion my ludicrous work ethic worked to my advantage. I heard the
explosions, but the first must have dropped…”

Petras waved a hand vaguely in the area of the collapsed section of the house.

“…a good bit of that onto the stairs and even I couldn’t shift it. There are four exits from my office rooms and none remained accessible once the explosions ceased. I’d gotten one door somewhat cleared when the last explosion brought another load of debris to block it. It took… until whatever time it is to get a space large enough for me to move through free of rubble. If I knew Leo and the others were safe I may have simply stayed where I was but…”

“But one does what one must for family. Your hands, though…”

“These? A few broken bones and a bit of lost skin. Perhaps more than a bit. I think my knee is somewhat destroyed, also. My little escape tunnel suffered a rather cliched collapse at one point and… well, what’s done is done. It does hurt rather alarmingly at the moment but, time heals all wounds.”

“How long?”

“That depends.”

Petras smiled wickedly and lowered his fangs.

“Oh, good lord…”

“You cannot blame me, mano draugas.”

“No, but I can chide you for your ridiculous grin.”

“Petty. Always so petty when I desire the smallest of nibbles.”

“I am not recommencing the bread discussion with you.”

“Good, for I have no wish to hear it. I do wish, however, to taste your delicious blood before we storm Magnussen’s house this evening. And have a much-needed sleep.”

Mycroft narrowed his eyes and felt somewhat relieved that the vampire was thinking very much along his own lines about the timeframe of their next move.

“You agree, then, that a swift and decisive response is the correct way forward.”

“Of course. Leonas will be irritated that he is not involved, but we are not fatally diminished by his loss.”

“No, that is true. It will not leave much time for rest, however, and this was not the only residence targeted by an attack.”

“I did not suspect it was but also suspected you would have informed me straight away if there were other casualties amongst our ranks.”

“We were lucky in that regard. Others were not.”

“And we shall avenge them.”

“Yes, we shall. And… drat. I need to remain here awhile longer and should see some rest sooner than later. Very well, you may take some small nourishment from me to help spur your
healing, but do not think for an instant I am to be considered some… sordid buffet.”

“Hmmm… I don’t know upon which I shall capitalize then. The buffet part or the sordid piece. Both are wonderfully intriguing.”

“I shall murder you, then leave your vestiges for Gregory to torment until Doomsday.”

“Which could be before dawn.”

“Yes, so drink up lest you face the end of days with a rumbling stomach.”
Chapter 58

“Well, this is cozy.”

And Greg actually meant it. Sherlock’s and John’s flat was cozy. Homey. Felt like a place overflowing with domesticity. Which was why John was shooting laser beams of death out of his eyes into a certain sorcerer’s face because said sorcerer had made his pronouncement with… tone… and, therefore, needed to die.

“It is nice, I have to say. Much nicer than my flat, that’s for certain.”

Nobody opted to mention that Anderson’s flat was one even the London rats found a bit too downscale for their tastes. Besides, there was a bit of wagering going on as to when Sebastian simply tucked Anderson under one arm, the two things Anderson owned under the other and physically relocated the new sorcerer into his own flat. Petras and Mycroft were both fuming since they’d selected exactly the same date and would have to split the winnings between them when, as they saw it, their inevitable victory was at hand. And speaking of…

“Younger brother lives here, Mycroft? I would have expected something more… cage-like.”

… here they were and already planting their flag as the unruffled movers and shakers who’d just sorted a terrible business that would have others racing about tearing out their hair, which did accurately describe the legions of politicians and bureaucrats who had raced through Whitehall all day while booking holidays to get away from the terrorist riffraff.

“Mrs. Hudson, the landlady, was most reluctant to allow me to install a Sherlock-sized cage on the property. I think she feared he would spend night and day rattling the bars and distracting her from her television programs.”

Greg made certain to run his new vision closely over both men to assess the effects from the day’s catastrophes and was relieved to find them both physically healthy. That was helpful, since he was ready to kick both their arses to the moon. Mycroft’s arse was first on his priority list and, fortunately, a certain arse-kicker needed a refill of his coffee, which made an excellent excuse for a quiet kitchen conversation, which began as soon as Mycroft was frog-marched away from the rest of the group.

“Dammit, Mycroft, where have you two been? And why didn’t you bother to tell me that your nice neighborhood is now something not terribly-well described as nice anymore?”

Greg’s arse-kicking fire dampened a bit seeing the genuinely peeved look on Mycroft’s features.

“Gregory Lestrade… I ensured you were informed of both our location and our endeavors throughout the day.”

“Yeah… through Anthea.”

“Which kept Marcus informed, as well.”

“Ok, but…”

“I saw a written message hand-delivered to you, also.”

“True, but Charles smirked at me when he delivered it. That hurt.”
“Setting that nonsense aside, what did my message indicate?”

“I…”

“Yes?”

“That I could phone anytime if there was a problem and you’d get back to me as soon as possible.”

“Very good. I have been somewhat engaged with various matters today, as you can well imagine. My attention was rather focused on those particular areas of difficulty.”

“I don’t need to imagine it, I was puttering about in the middle of it for most of the day.”

“As I was continually informed. Gregory… what is the real issue at hand?”

Greg made to speak, then shook it off and, instead, took Mycroft in a crushing hug which Mycroft returned for a very long time.

“I’m sorry, love. I’ve been so fucking worried. Scared, frustrated…”

“I know, Gregory. I have felt much the same. Given the nature of the situation, the government is treating this as a critical terrorist incident and… well, you do not wish to know the levels of bureaucracy involved in such a thing, let alone how few are actually sufficiently competent to manage the crisis.”

“And there’s nobody more competent than you for this sort of thing. I know… I have to admit that I’ve handled a lot in my day, but nothing like this. How’s Leo?”

“Surprisingly alert and evincing his normal personality.”

“So, cranky and already a pain in the arse. Nothing too horrible for long-term recovery, though?”

“According to John and Petras, he should be fully recuperated in but a few days’ time. In truth, he will be mostly healed by tomorrow, but Petras believes he will seek to maximize the sympathy he might claim for his experience. Which, to be fair, was a horrendous one. From what I gather the house staff fared far better, though they are hiding that news from him to prevent a monstrous, monarchical strop.”

“Vampires are hearty, that’s for certain. Part of why the plague scares them silly. There’s so bloody little that can damage them permanently, let alone kill them, besides old age that the things that can are almost mythically terrifying.”

“And for good reason. I spoke with Anthea concerning Marcus…”

“Yeah, he’s not doing very well, though he’s trying to hide it. But, if I have my way, we’ll have a cure for him by the time the sun rises because I will have finished ramming my fist down Magnussen’s throat and bullying his basilisk into giving up a few drops of venom.”

“So forceful, Gregory. I am most impressed. And relieved, for that is very much in line with my own intentions.”

“Good. I’ve been working on my end to pull together a plan, but it always seems to come down to show up, wreak havoc.”
“Such is the way for most combat engagements. However, we do have a few additional objectives that must be met, so the havoc must be wreaked somewhat strategically.”

“Do we put people directly on those or direct all focus on Magnussen and get him out of the way first?”

“That, I feel, should be put out for discussion. I place the odds at nearly 100% that, although various parties will proclaim their dedication to the cause at large, they will be secretly relieved when they are subsequently, after participating in an initial salvo, dispatched to more specific, and personally-relevant tasks.”

“Got it. Is Petras up for this?”

“I would hope so. The blackguard nearly drained me dry to achieve a state of ‘up to this’ by appealing to my humanitarian nature.”

“And had a good nap, too, by the looks of him. I’m glad for it, I’ll admit, since he’s a devil in a fight. I’ve seen what’s left of his opponents and it can mostly be picked up with a spade to toss on a flower bed.”

“As with Sebastian, I assume. Our dragons?”

“Goraseth can’t truly unleash his abilities wearing human form, but he can call up some extra strength and a few smaller fireballs. Charles? No idea.”

“Could you enable his half-dragon form? I remember some rather fearsome talons and teeth at his disposal.”

“I… maybe. He’s unique, in the true sense of the word, so I have no idea how trying to coax out that form will go. I’m a bit afraid to try, honestly, in case it doesn’t go well for him.”

“Then let us ignore that option for now. Charles is both trained and skilled with a variety of firearms and I have made access to a rather delightful assortment something of a priority. We shall be well provided in that arena, for those of us who shall rely upon them.”

“Really cool stuff?”

“Most certainly.”

“Sebastian is going to be very confused since he can’t really use a cool gun when he’s in werewolf form but he’s going to want to use a cool gun so… maybe we can lash it onto a paw and he can pull the trigger with a tooth or something.”

“He shall be most aggrieved, also, I suspect, as I have set aside something most delightful, yet light of weight and very user-friendly for our Mr. Anderson.”

“Yes, you’ve just sparked domestic warfare. On the eve of another bout of warfare. Nicely done!”

“Thank you, I try my best.”

Laying a kiss on Mycroft’s smug lips, it suddenly hit Greg that he could lose this man tonight. There were no guarantees that they’d all walk away alive and well and it was a realization that hurt him in the deepest manner possible. If he didn’t make the offer, he’d never forgive himself if something went wrong.
“Mycroft… you don’t have to come tonight, you know. This is your fight in a certain sense, but in another it’s not and even I can’t predict what we might encounter. It might be best if you, Sherlock, too, stayed here or, at least, if you came and stayed with the support team like Sherlock will be doing. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you… I really don’t.”

‘You would carry on, Gregory. Just as I would if I lost you. Lessened, with an eternal hole inside that could never be filled, but you would carry on because it is necessary to do so. I considered making a similar suggestion to you, and for the same reasons, but realized quickly the foolishness of it. You are our linchpin, after all.”

Said with a proud smile that made Greg’s heart begin to lighten again.

“I’m a pinhead, that much is true. But I’ll do my best tonight.”

“Nothing more can I ask. The status of our troop positions?”

“Uh… the ones you see here are here. Except Sebastian who’s downstairs helping Mrs. Hudson change some lightbulbs and, very likely, being paid in food.”

“Wise, given the energy depletion he is soon to endure. For my part, Anthea shall be collected by Goraseth to delivered here and Charles is en route with a large car whose also-large boot is filled with lovely bringers of carnage and disaster. That leaves our elf friend…”

Who, Mycroft noticed was just entering the flat with a familiar face on his arm.

“Dear heavens…”

Greg turned and made a noise familiar to anyone who owned a cat that brought live gifts with a supremely-satisfied smirk such as the elf was sporting.

“Molly Hooper! Why are you arm in arm with that elf?”

There were days Greg regretted his dad tone. This was one of them.

“It’s my disguise! Sort of. I know whoever was watching me saw Nyvrokh walk me home the other night and I decided it would be brilliant to do it again, since it not only makes it seem I might be dating someone, which helps protect Jim, but makes it understandable when we’re both here at once for the big meeting! And the big battle, which I’m looking forward to, actually. I already phoned the morgue to say I was sick and wouldn’t be in tomorrow so I don’t have to worry about being too tired or singed or trying to get goblin blood out of my hair to do my job properly. Nyvrokh said goblin blood stains, but that’s not putting me off coming with you because I’m rather used to being stained in my line of work.”

“Tiny Molly has a warrior’s spirit. And cats.”

“They love him.”

“They are admirable creatures. Except the orang… ginger… one.”

“She is dreadfully lazy. Couldn’t be bothered to even get off her cushion to meet a real elf! And he had Nando’s!”

Greg tried to remember the last time today he saw the elf to fathom out how he could have been out on the town with Molly Hooper, then a tiny sputtering spark ignited in his brain.
“That’s what you and Anthea were whispering about, isn’t it, you evil sod.”

“Anthea is another female with… well, her charms are many, including a warrior’s spirit, but they are being wasted on her ridiculous vampire. She asked that I see Molly safely here since Molly has refused to stay at the shop with the necromancer and sell your paltry wares.”

“I want to help, Greg. Besides, John isn’t the only one with medical training and if he’s fighting with you lot, someone has to be ready to handle casualties! I’ve got my medical bag and everything.”

Which was apparently magically camouflaged as a handbag that the elf hadn’t un-disguised yet. Despite the preparedness, however, the idea of Molly Hooper setting foot into a battle zone was not sitting well with anyone present and the series of concerned looks that raced around the room was not lost on the hopeful medic.

“I saw that! I can help and I’m going to help since you likely need all you can get. Besides, Jim is in the middle of this and I’m not going to let him… it will help, I know it will, for him to know I’m out there counting on him to do the right thing in all of this.”

Greg wondered if a certain necromancer and a certain pathologist had been sharing concerns behind his back. He certainly couldn’t blame them if they had.

“But Molly… it’s going to be very, very dangerous what we’re doing and…”

“Tiny Molly has a gun. She can use it, also. The werewolf provided instruction.”

Greg glared at the elf, but couldn’t help but notice Molly’s beaming smile of pride.

“I do! It’s in my medical bag. Not a very large one, but Sebastian said it would work to scare off anyone who tried to kidnap me or something because of Jim, so it should suffice if somebody tries to sneak up on us while we’re keeping watch on things. I have to give it back to him, though, which is a shame, since it would be a nice little souvenir of this whole business, but Anthea can probably get one for me to take its place. Or Jim! I’ll have him look for one just like this. Or buy this one from Sebastian. Sebastian, apparently, has a rather lot of these, so he might not miss this little one, especially if he was paid a fair price for it.”

Anderson gave a ‘you’re probably right’ nod, which made Molly beam even brighter and Greg add Sebastian Moran to his list of people whose arse he wanted to kick. Oh look, Sherlock was inspecting Tiny Molly’s not-so-small-actually gun. Bloody marvelous. He’ll want one next.

“I demand a firearm!”

And the crowd goes wild. Or in Mycroft’s case, eyes were rolled. But in a slightly wild manner.

“There are firearms for those who desire them, brother, however, recognize you are not as practiced with them as you might claim.”

Sherlock adamantly pointing to the bullet holes in his wall did not emphasize his point as well as he may have hoped.

“Walls neither run, attack nor behave unexpectedly. Now, if we might take a moment to frame the upcoming events…”

“Go and kill people. Then steal stuff.”
The older contingent frowned at the returned Sebastian, but each privately thought that was as succinct a framing as one could expect for the situation. John, however, felt it might be time to offer the voice of experience.

“As a former soldier, I’d have to say a little knowledge of who is doing what helps when you go into this sort of thing. Confusion and uncertainty are not your friends in combat.”

Anyone thinking Sherlock’s nodding and pointing at John the moment after he was nodding and pointing at Sebastian had anything to do with an actual change of the detective’s mind and not a clear understanding of what would make his new/maybe/oh-hell-yes boyfriend happy was a fool. Sherlock’s brother, for instance, was objectively not a fool.

“I am heartened you agree with John’s assessment, Sherlock. Pursuant to that, after conversations with Gregory and Petras we have a positioning and action strategy crafted that should be of maximum benefit to our cause. Mr. Anderson, I hear, has done an exemplary job crafting much the same for his division of our assets, so he can brief that team once we are on site. Much, I am afraid, will be out of our control once matters begin in earnest, but I am confident that we shall persevere. Now…”

“Gotta piss.”

“Thank you, Sebastian. I was going to suggest that any needs for food, drink or other comforts be tended to in the next few minutes while we await the vehicles.”

Greg had not been party to many planned larger-scale engagements but decided if they didn’t all start with a food and piss break they were doomed to failure. Given the importance of this particular larger-scale engagement, failure was not, in any manner an option…

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Large vehicles were a blessing, Greg decided, when he and Mycroft could ride in them with the rear compartment to themselves. When they were sharing with Sherlock, John and Petras, the quarters were a touch close. Especially given Petras seemed intent on flirting with his Holmes and Sherlock was finding it absolutely hilarious. It was almost a blessing when their destination loomed into view.

Loomed being the correct word for it, too. As the cars came to a halt and both passengers and driver disembarked, with attention heavily focused on the boots, Greg kept his attention fixed on Magnussen’s house and felt his frown deepen as his sense of dread grew.

“Gregory?”

“Something’s wrong.”

“Explain.”

“I can’t. But, there’s something very, very wrong here, much wronger than before. He’s waiting for us.”

“To be expected.”

“Maybe. No matter what, Mycroft, stay behind me and if I use, or try to use, our magic word, you run with everything you have in you.”

“I will. Now, shall you take a more traditional weapon into the fray?”
“Ummm… no. I’d probably shoot myself in the foot.”

“Shooting is not the only option on offer.”

Greg looked quizzically at his lover and followed him to the surprisingly merry throng of people milling about the cars. The reason for the happiness was quickly apparent.

“Are those grenades?”

“Yeah…”

Sebastian looked giddy enough to burst.

“I… I have no idea if that’s good or not?”

“These are mine…”

It wasn’t appropriate for Anderson to hurriedly snap a photo of Sebastian cradling an assortment of large, terrifying weapons in his arms like they were his newborn children, but he did so anyway. If they survived tonight, it would be a much-cherished memento of their victory.

“None are legal.”

Greg cocked an eye at Mycroft who shook his head and held up a correcting finger.

“They are not legal for those lacking the authority to possess them, Sebastian. I have that authority and can, shall we say, extend it to others when necessary.”

“This is an exquisite piece, mano draugas. I trust it shall not be missed by your supplier when you return the rest.”

Petras petting the handgun that looked very much like it had been ripped from a videogame was nearly as ridiculous a sight as Sebastian’s gleeful grinning, so Anderson got a snap of that, too, earning him an approving nod from Mycroft, while Petras got a snort of disbelief from Greg.

“You don’t need a gun, you stupid vampire.”

“Need is a terribly restrictive word, sorcerer.”

“I got another gun!”

Anthea squeezed her eyes shut to prevent her from snatching away Molly’s new toy, but knew her cousin well enough to be confident she would take seriously the responsibility of having a loaded firearm in her hand. Hopefully.

“I want to keep this one, too, since it’s as cute as the first one, but also more evil looking, which is nice.”

Greg had no idea how cute and evil went together in Molly’s mind, but she was dating Jim, so it must be an easy thing for her to accomplish. However, it was time to put that sort of thing out of his mind and focus on the task at hand.

“We’ll chat about that when this is done, alright? Ok, so let’s split into our teams and…”

For a super-serious assault mission, the devolution to a Benny Hill episode was blindingly fast as arguments began and somewhat wavy lines in the sand were drawn, requiring the community
elders to step in to quash the bickering and straighten the wavy lines to place Sherlock, Anthea, Molly, and Philip as the support team and Mycroft, Greg, Petras, John, Sebastian and Nyvrokh as the assault group. The dragons proved harder to sort as they refused to be separated, so it was decided they would join the assault group, with Charles moving back to the support team, as needed, once the fighting got underway.

It took a further few minutes to sort out who wanted what from the arsenal of destruction and get the backup team stationed with an illusion thrown over them to hide them from enemy eyes, and dog walkers, then the assault squad turned attention to the job before them.

“Alright, I can’t easily conjure another illusion to hide us doing what we’re doing so the plan should be go hard and get inside quickly. Nyvrokh, whenever you’re ready, start hitting the wards with everything you have and I’ll work a hole through them that will let us through. That’ll be faster than trying to bring them down completely.”

Without saying a word, the dark elf began a barrage of high-intensity energy aimed at the house, none of which connected, being dissipated by the protections Magnussen had placed around his home and the holders of more conventional firepower conserved their ammunition until they could get inside and make better use of it than breaking windows.

While, he hoped, Magnussen was distracted by the magical assault, Greg started the fiddly work of untangling the various spells that were woven around the house and, though he had worked out a plan beforehand, and was no slouch when it came to unmaking other sorcerer’s magic, it still worried him a little that he made his desired hole in fairly short order. They knew already that even if Magnussen didn’t expect them tonight, he would expect them at some point and this was very much walking into some form of trap, but it hadn’t felt quite as much like a trap as it did right now.

Not that it mattered in the slightest.

“I’m through. Let’s go.”

The elf continued his onslaught until the moment he darted through the opening after the rest of the team, then the group moved quickly through the distance to the rear door of the house, which Sebastian wasted no time kicking open. Seeing nobody poised to counterattack, they then crept through the kitchen area checking rooms on the right and left of the short corridor in front of them which opened into a larger sitting room where sat Magnussen, sipping tea as and reading the newspaper.

“Ah, good evening. Normally, I appreciate advance notice for visitors, however, this is an understandable exception to the norms of propriety.”

Refusing to acknowledge the casual aplomb of their target, the group advanced and took position surrounding his armchair. A quick series of looks was the only tangible sign that Greg was appointed spokesperson to carry this forward.

“Charles Magnussen, I presume?”

“Correct. I do forget we have yet to meet. It seems I know you very well at this point, but that is only an impression based on collected data.”

“Yeah, well… looks like we have a situation on our hands, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would, actually. Perhaps not the one you anticipate, but a situation, nonetheless.”
Greg cut eyes at Mycroft, then at Petras, who were frowning and carefully scrutinizing the man still giving them only a marginal amount of attention, as though they were servants asking if he wanted more tea.

“Oh, ok, then. What situation do you think we’ve got going?”

Greg had been actively using his new sight to check for traps and gather information to make their actual strike successful, but he certainly didn’t need it anymore, given the tidal wave of foreboding that washed over him the moment Magnussen’s lips twitched into a smirk as a response.

In the next instant the room grew cold, dark and Greg threw a protective spell over the group to ward off whatever was going to happen, though, he feared, it wasn’t going to be enough. When a familiar figure appeared in the center of the room, he changed his mind.

He knew it wouldn’t be enough.

Mycroft gaped at the sight of Greg Lestrade manifesting at the room’s center.

For Petras, it was his brother Leonas.

Sebastian saw Anderson, much as he’d looked the first time Sebastian laid eyes on him.

John saw Sherlock. Nyvrokh beheld a sister killed in battle long ago. The dragons were the only two who saw something different and it made them move to stand in front of the others, though they had little confidence it would accomplish much if the figure decided to attack. Greg respected the gesture, but stepped around the two to take point.

“Mol’godon. Fancy meeting you here. Thought you’d given our boy Magnussen the sailor’s elbow.”

“Gregorius… how healthy you look. Our last conversation seems not to have caused you any lingering harm. Good. And, yes, I had scoffed at what your nemesis was willing to offer. However, he has, apparently, a most persuasive ally who convinced him to, as you say, sweeten the pot.”

The low-hissed ‘Moriarty’ in enraged vampire tones didn’t shock anyone, but it seemed to amuse their focus of attention.

“He is an insect and was dealt with as such.”

Greg narrowed his eyes, then widened them at the sound of a new voice entering the room.

“You always underestimated me, Greg. Fortunately, not everybody is as foolish and shortsighted.”

Leaning against a door frame to their left was Balthazar. Not Balthazar the cat, but Balthazar Black, in human form, looking far less disheveled and scattered than his usual norm.

“Balthazar?”

“The fact you’re surprised is really the problem here. You always looked down on me, thought I was a massive joke, even though you knew I was second to you in power for London and most of this fucking country. “

“Balthazar…”
“You made me a cat, you miserable bastard. Thought that was fucking hilarious…”

“I… I saved your life!”

“And never asked if I wanted that! You asked the werewolf if he wanted a way out of his problem. You ask others if they want your help. You never asked me if I wanted your help. If I’d rather live as the joke of the community, live as your pet. Trot me out for the amusement of your customers. And you probably thought I was grateful, arrogant sod that you are. Surprise! I’m not. And I found my chance to make that clear in a way that even someone as smug and thick as you could understand.”

“Your vassal, Gregorius, is an ambitious man. And utterly lacking in morals. It was easy to negotiate with him for my wants. The dragon’s egg… I thought it the only prize I might win, but how nice I shall have a few others of interest to add to my power.”

Greg quickly conjured a spell that made his arms nearly as immovable as bars of iron as he stretched them out to hold back the dragons who began to leap towards Balthazar and Mol’godon.

“Oh, let them try, Gregsie… that’s what you’re here for, right? Need more encouragement? Magnussen, you ready for this?”

The instigator of this entire nightmare took a final sip of tea, laid aside his paper, rose and strolled over to stand by Balthazar, showing absolutely no concern or worry about what was to come.

“I suppose. There is a film I would like to view tonight and I despise missing the opening credits.”

“Sounds good. Let’s see how our Greggy boy manages after…”

Balthazar waved a hand and only Greg saw the lance of magic speed towards Mycroft and slam into his chest. What the rest did see was the expulsion of Mycroft’s essence from his back and his body crumple lifelessly to the ground.

“Learned a new trick! A Hollowing is easy actually, if you have the power and the will. I have plenty of both.”

As Sebastian roared forward and the dark elf hurled a massive orb of energy at their opponents, Greg blinked several times as he stared at the body on the ground and felt something rise in him he hadn’t experienced before. Hate. Hate and a desire for pure, unadulterated revenge. They wanted to encourage him? Success. Now they could deal with the result, which was a sorcerer ready to burn all of this to the ground to see them wiped forever from the face of this Earth…”
Chapter 59

Philip happened to be looking in the right direction when a brilliant mass of color and light shot from the house and spiraled up into the sky, far out of sight and took a moment to simply enjoy the beauty. Until, that is, his brain gave a polite cough and replayed a certain bit of memory footage and he felt a cold, thick mass grow in his stomach that he decided, for the moment, not to share with the others on his team.

As it was, the chaos of howls, shouts, crashes, booms, lightning flashes and mysterious moments of the bitterest cold imaginable were quite enough to worry about for now. Worry was the word for it, too, since they were, for all intents and purposes, blind and nobody inside was seeing fit to clear their vision.

“What do you think is going on in there? Charles hasn’t come out to give us any news and… it’s probably because he’s too busy and I’m not sure if that’s good or bad.”

The words were no more out of Philip’s mouth that an enormous crack appeared in the ground under their feet which raced into the house and caused the wall nearest them to sag, leading everyone to feel that his question had been suitably answered.

“This is intolerable! How are we supposed to do anything to facilitate this nonsense if we are simply standing about as if waiting for a bus?”

Sherlock’s words were laced with their normal level of scorn, but nobody missed the strong undercurrent of worry and desperation in them. Whatever was happening, they were doing nothing to help and that wasn’t what they were here to accomplish. The feeling wasn’t eased in the slightest, either, by Charles’s body being hurled out of a window, pinwheeling through the air to slam into the house next door with a sickening thud and the sharp sounds of bones cracking.

As they raced over to help the driver, said driver dragged himself off the ground sporting a look on his face that wasn’t… human. That image grew more intense as his features shifted even more drastically and the useless arm dangling at his side, as well as it’s less destroyed sibling, stretched out with large, sleek wings appearing in their place which, with another sickening sound, realigned the bones. With a strong down stroke, the more-dragon-than-ever Charles shot back into the house through the same window from which he’d been evicted.

“Well… that’s a thing.”

Molly grinned weakly and looked between the other people standing stunned, wondering what to do now. Anthea’s wondering ended first.

“Sherlock, you and me. Let’s have a look.”

Nodding towards the house, Anthea strode forward then stopped and sighed when three people, two of which weren’t named Sherlock, started following after her.

“You two stay here. We can’t all go.”

“I think we can, actually. Philip’s and my legs work perfectly well.”

Anthea glared at Molly, then at Anderson who was nodding his support of the functional-legs position.
“And if something happens to one or both of us, who is *not* going to be in danger to come and save us?”

“Which will immediately put us in the middle of the danger, so your point is flimsy, I have to say. Come on, Philip, let’s see what’s happening and if there’s anything we can do to help.”

No, Anthea certainly did not consider shooting both Molly and Philip in the leg to put a non-lethal stop to their nonsense but, knowing them, they’d just crawl towards the action and bleed on her in revenge.

“Fine, but stay back a bit, alright. I’m not kidding about putting all of us in the line of fire.”

Molly rolled her eyes but kept a few steps back as Anthea stormed forward, crouching low as she neared the building to peer over the edge of the windowsill. Which she immediately wished she hadn’t done.

“Ok, Sherlock, how about you say back a step or so, also. Not much to see here that I can’t report on myself.”

Sherlock, of course, immediately dove under the window and peeked over, gasping at the sight of his brother’s body lying still and unbreathing on the floor.

“Mycroft…”

“We don’t know what happened. He could be… betwitched or something. There’s Magnussen and… oh that fucker. Balthazar…”

Now Molly and Philip were peeking through the window, seeing not the ally they hoped to find, but someone pummeling Petras with lances of energy that were tearing off hunks of skin and blistering what remained behind faster than the vampire’s body could heal.

“He betrayed us!”

Anderson’s voice was tense with fury and Anthea had to give him a thumb’s up as the sorcerer unleashed a ball of light that impacted the former cat’s head. Though it didn’t do a bit of damage, it did disorient him enough for Petras to drag himself out of direct sight to give his body a few moments to get him battle fit again.

“Nice shot. Who’s that one there?”

Molly pointed at an unfamiliar figure standing slightly to the side, leaning against the back of a chair, smirking at the melee and sporting a human shape that did nothing to camouflage the fact he wasn’t at all human. At least, however, they all saw the same odd figure and not a loved one.

Anthea and Sherlock shot a look at Philip, who shrugged dramatically since he not only had no idea, he had no idea how none of what was happening seemed to be coming anywhere near their mystery man. It was as if the magic simply dissipated when it came anywhere near him and that was rather frightening, truth be told.

“Don’t look at me! He’s powerful, though. Powerful enough to swat away strong magic like he was swatting a fly.”

Given the person wasn’t acting offensively, as far as Anthea could discern, she chose to ignore him, creepy as he was, and focus on other problems. Such as the dragons wrestling with a large lizard-like creature that moved fast and seemed hellbent on getting into the room.
“That’s the basilisk, isn’t it?”

The others looked where she was pointing and reflexively looked away from the scene in self-protection, Philip especially, since he’d been studying that very image only this morning.

“It looks like it, from the drawings I’ve seen in books. Greg made a charm for Mycroft, but he wasn’t sure how well it would work on the others. The dragons seem to be managing nicely, though. Of course, that could be the reptile aspect as opposed to anything else, but I think they’re trying to make certain it stays their problem and doesn’t become anyone else’s. Ooh, it’s Seth’s turn this time…”

A flick of Magnussen’s wrist had Goraseth flying across the room, though he smashed into the fireplace rather than sailed through a window. That additional bit of structural damage made the house groan in frustration, but at least the dragon only had to briefly shake off the effects before launching back towards the basilisk, which was doing its best to claw Charles to pieces. Fortunately, whatever dragon essence had blossomed recently was doing a respectable job keeping his body parts attached to keep the fight going. That put him very much on par with Sebastian who was slowly being cornered by something that looked like a kinetic sculpture made of a few dozen types of blades, but getting in his own amount of damage by knocking off parts of the sculpture which, mercifully, didn’t magically reattach to the source.

The dark elf wasn’t faring much better, currently being chased back into this room by… himself.

“Oh! Nyvrokh has a twin.”

Molly’s pointing finger wavered slightly because it really couldn’t be said which was the real elf and which was fake. Philip, again, found himself the resident expert, which was a situation he genuinely wished he could have experienced at another time since he would have enjoyed savoring the sensation, as opposed to hating that he seemed to be the continuous bringer of bad news.

“I know this spell. It’s a nasty bugger. Sort of a… parasite. It makes a clone of you that has your abilities but sucks the energy to use those abilities from you, also. He’s trying to sever the connection, though. See those little sparks at the parasite’s feet. That’s a sign there’s some… negative feedback… in the connection. The problem is, the more you try and break the spell, the more of your own energy you use and send to it, instead.”

“Can you help him? Greg seems to have his hands full.”

Full of slinging a blinding amount of energy at all three of their opponents while John did much the same, both seemingly standing guard over Mycroft’s unmoving body. Very, very much not the image of the man Molly had first met in the fun little magic shop when all of this was something she still believed was only found in fantasy novels.

“I… can try?”

Philip thought a moment then muttered a few words and made a gesture with his hands that caused the elf clone to sputter to a stop, dragging Nyvrokh slowly back towards it while the actual elf snarled and let loose a massive burst of magical energy that exploded the clone in a very wet and messy fashion.

“Oh good. It worked.”

Anthea prided herself on stoicism in critical situations, but she couldn’t stop her upper lip curling in disgust at the liquefied bits of elf clone dripping off the wallpaper.
“What did you do?”

“It’s a spell Greg was teaching me to keep the neighborhood cats away from the building since they upset Mrs. Hodges’s kitty and Balthazar tries to enlist them in his feline army, but it’s never worked well for me at all. It just does that.”

Anthea’s jaws dropped and she clapped her hands over Molly’s ears in horror.

“Oh god! You exploded them!”

“No! The elf did that exploding bit! I… just made the poor cats rather confused and they simply stopped and sat there until I went out and slowly picked the threads of the spell off of them. Then gave them a treat because they were a touch off for a bit after that and treats always help in those situations.”

Molly’s furious nodding, sans her cousin’s hands on her head, was confirmation of this fundamental truth of cat life and Anthea simply let the answer go further unexplored because it would certainly lead into a very convoluted rabbit hole that they had no time to follow at the moment.

“Yeah, you need to work on that one a little. But, it worked in our favor this time and that’s all that’s important. Ok… I’m not seeing any clear signs of immediate victory or defeat for either side, so… we start looting the place?”

Sherlock brightened visibly at the thought of theft, which was a very welcome change, in Anthea’s opinion, from the horribly worried expression he’d been wearing since seeing the condition of his brother.

“Yes. We should secure as many magical assets as we are able while there is a distraction.”

“What assets are magical? Do we know?”

Molly’s question spurred a look around the potential heist perpetrators who sheepishly looked back at everyone else since the ability to detect a magical from non-magical item was not currently in their portfolio of skills.

“Ok… well… Magnussen is evil, so I don’t feel terribly awful stealing anything that looks magic-y in some way. Balthazar said a lot of things were in some museum-like room, so they should be easy to find, at least. If he was telling the truth, that is.”

Not a thing Molly wanted to contemplate any more than she did the fact that Balthazar had betrayed them. Or that in this battle royal, a certain combatant was nowhere to be seen. That fact hadn’t been lost on Anthea, either, who was proud of her cousin for not letting herself become distracted by what could be a very tragic answer to the question in her mind. Best act quick, though, before that question couldn’t be ignored anymore.

“Alright, through the back. I doubt we’ll be noticed given the Armageddon going on there. Be careful, though. We’ve got our magical booby trap protections, but that doesn’t mean an enormous pendulum of death isn’t rigged over a window to decapitate anyone who sticks their head in for a peek.”

With that horrible thought now in their heads, the backup team dashed around to the back of the house to find the already breached door and, after swinging Philip’s jacket through the door first to test for death pendulums, which would never be mentioned again by any of them at anytime, anywhere, they crept inside and immediately began moving through the rooms to find one that
matched Balthazar’s description.

The house wasn’t so large that it took ages to find their target, but it did require some creative multi-floor path-taking to avoid the main combat zone. A final rear staircase originally designed, most likely, for servants’ use, let them out into a large space that very suitably matched the description of a museum. Objects in cases, on plinths, set into depressions in the walls, displayed on shelves… the question was where to begin and it was a question Anthea took it upon herself to ask.

“Alright, Philip, any idea what to take first? Something yelling to you loudly or something you recognize from Greg’s books?”

Cursing that Anthea had set him as the expert again which was starting to be somewhat a responsibility losing its gleam and luster, Philip began walking through the space looking for objects, shapes, sigils or whatnot that might spark his recognition or, at least, scream POWERFUL AND IMPORTANT in magical, mystical language. One thing did an exceptionally good job of the latter, but he did not want to be responsible for relocating it. No amount of gleam and luster was worth that.

“That’s the chamelos egg.”

The others rushed over to look at the large object in a glass case which… didn’t look much like an egg. Then it did. Then it didn’t again. To Molly, the various shifts told a very distinct story.

“That blue… that’s Sherlock’s scarf. And… that’s Anthea’s green top and black trousers. It’s trying to mimic us!”

Sherlock nodded and found the sight rather expected, from an evolutionary standpoint.

“Camouflage. The egg mimics its surroundings as a protection from predators.”

“Who would be a predator for a dragon?”

“Egg predators often don’t bother the adult forms. Should we… move this? I have no idea if this case is serving solely to keep it from being touched or stolen or if it serves another purpose. Given this is a living creature, we cannot discount the latter.”

This time, the looks were evenly divided between Molly and Philip as the medical and magical experts in the room. Unfortunately, neither felt they had advice to give and merely shrugged. Given the enormity of their task as a whole, Anthea decided to leave this question for later.

“It’s not going anywhere, so let’s leave matters until we have more time to study it or ask someone who would know. Ok, if there are no clear winners for the game of Steal Me First!, just start grabbing things and getting them back to the vehicles. If Magnussen is drawing strength from his bits and pieces, then that may weaken him a little and give our side an advantage.”

No sooner were the words out that Sherlock, Molly and Philip were loading arms and pockets with whatever they could grab, crossing their fingers that what they were grabbing wouldn’t get angry about the grabbing and take a bit of magical revenge. After the second successful relocation effort to the cars, they shed that worry and began to focus on another, which Sherlock finally decided to voice.

“This cannot be the extent of his acquisitions. There is precious little here and the reports from both Moriarty and Balthazar indicated a substantial trove of objects. There have to be other locations where items are stored.”
Anthea nodded and huffed out a breath of irritation.

“I agree. Philip, Molly, you keep clearing this room while Sherlock and I see if we can find another room or rooms to loot.”

A tremendous pressure filled the air and the entire house bulged outwards slightly, producing worrying cracks in the masonry and a dust/debris deluge from overhead.

“And we do this quickly. Go.”

Without arguing about who would do what, the separate pairs leapt into action with Sherlock and Anthea both moving towards one of the closed doors they had yet to explore. Which led to another large room, this one apparently rarely used, given the obvious closed-up, musty scent in the air. Leaving that one as an unlikely candidate of interest, they began to walk away, then both stopped and looked back into the room, this time with a different eye. Anthea risked a step forward and took a better look before deciding she wasn’t misinterpreting the scene.

“That last bit of magic… there aren’t any cracks or fallen plaster or anything in here.”

“That illusion, perhaps. Designed to divert attention away from the space. The question is whether this space is important or whether it is concealing the path to another area Magnussen wishes remain hidden.”

Striding forward further into the room, Sherlock took note of vague sense that his mind was being manipulated, refocusing him from the left side of the room every time he tried to observe it more closely.

“There. Something wants to keep me from investigating that particular section of the space.”

Anthea stood beside Sherlock then matched him step for step, slowly progressing towards the portion of the room he’d indicated, which seemed to their eyes nothing more than a bland section of a bland normalcy hosting a small sideboard, a cream and brown rug and a vase on the floor with some tall, thin twigs, similar to what was on the front doorstep. Except…

On the floor, were tiny sticks that appeared to have been broken off at some point from the ‘decorative’ twigs in the vase. Together, they vaguely made the shape of an arrow pointing behind the sideboard. Looking, then feeling behind the sideboard, Anthea’s fingers came across something that she tugged on slightly and pulled out for her and Sherlock to see.

“That’s… that looks like a spell. The handwriting seems familiar, too, though I can’t place it. Sherlock?”

“Neither can I. This was placed here intentionally, however. Should we… try it?”

“Do you think it would work? Neither of us has magic and, worse, we don’t know what this is designed to do.”

“There is only one way to find out. It seems mostly Latin, besides two, on three, words of Greek…”

Sherlock read through the spell twice before intoning it aloud, then yelping as a door appeared in the space next to the sideboard.

“Ok… good job with that, Sherlock. Now, I suppose we have to walk through the spooky door?”
“Apparently so.”

“On we go, then.”

Sherlock reached out and turned the knob, feeling a flash of relief when the action didn’t produce an explosion or turning him into a toad. Peeking beyond the door, though, he almost wished he was a toad as toads didn’t have to descend truly spooky staircases into a darkened space that seemed to emit a faint glow of warm light as if illuminated only by candles. Slowly walking down the stairs, Sherlock, then Anthea, paused as they reached the bottom, the scene in front of them prompting the need to steel the nerves and for more than one reason.

The first was the size of the room, which was larger, far larger than the house’s structural footprint. Second was the quantity of objects the room contained, all giving off an air of pure force and power that the objects upstairs, besides the dragon’s egg, simply didn’t. And third, which was a stone statue near another staircase leading to the room. A statue they recognized.

“Jim. Oh no.”

Darting forward, Anthea looked closely at the statue to confirm that it was the sorcerer and that, yes, he had been turned to stone. The bite marks on the statue’s arm gave further evidence to what had transpired.

“The basilisk.”

Sherlock did his own round of observation and, unfortunately, came to the same conclusion.

“I thought Lestrade gave him protections against this.”

“He did. I would not doubt those protections could be undone if they were discovered, however.”

“Say, as in a traitor making their existence known.”

“Precisely. We must hope that there is some… reversal… for this condition.”

“Yes, we do. Molly will… ok, not thinking about Molly or Jim right now. Thinking, instead, about the fact that all of this is very likely what Magnussen really doesn’t want people to find. Do we start taking things or… I’m genuinely nervous about handling any of these. Your brother said there was a book in Greg’s library, for example, that could actually enact some rather violent things if it had the urge. If I can feel the power these possess, I’m not ashamed to admit I’m scared of what that revenge could be.”

“John has said similar. Magical objects can self-protect or even attack if they have a reason.”

“That they can.”

Sherlock and Anthea whirled at the sound of the voice which came from the same unknown figure they’d seen upstairs.

“Very good. Finding this place, I mean. Magnussen, rather amusingly, sought to hide its presence even from me, which was rather telling about his degree of arrogance. However, he is Gregorius’s concern at the moment and not mine.”

“Who are you?”
Anthea fought very hard to keep a tremor out of her voice, but the utter lack of humanity in the creature’s tone and demeanor made that a battle she couldn’t quite win.

“Someone who will soon own a number of these objects and, as such, is not content to have you steal them. And, someone who is having a surprisingly entertaining time observing the pitiful and desperate acts of your species… and a few others. And, to that, I now return. First, though…”

Without moving a muscle, Mol’godon summoned his magic to pin Sherlock and Anthea to the wall, with what felt to them like a meat hook being stabbed through their back to hang them from the stone. With a trembling hand, Anthea pulled out her pistol and fired a full clip into the smirking figure who seemed to be evaluating the experience as the bullets shot through his body.

“Interesting. I anticipated some form of discomfort but, as with everything your lackluster species accomplishes, I am met with disappointment.”

And, with that, a shimmer in the air was the only goodbye the two pinned humans got as Mol’godon vanished.

Only to appear back in the main combat zone, where there had been some actual progress beyond the pathetic throwing of stones he had been witnessing before he sensed his treasures being endangered. Good… Gregorius had finally lost whatever hope he had that there was some ruse or deceit occurring and was unleashing his rage where it would do the most good. Leave Magnussen to the vampire, the werewolf and the small human. He was laughably ill-prepared for a physical assault and already being pushed back into a proverbial corner. Use your magic and that of the elf on the true threat in the room, besides me, of course - your former cat.

And Greg was doing a ferocious job of it, too. While Nyvrokh provided defense, Greg was pure attack, and if it wasn’t for a fear of bringing the house down on them, which he’d nearly done twice so far, he would be hitting even harder. One of Balthazar’s failings was an inability to focus on the important when too much was happening at once, so Greg was flooding the room with a barrage of spells, most of which were just pretty shows, which distracted the other sorcerer from the punishing magics he hid among the fluff until Balthazar’s body was racked with physical damage as terrible as the damage to his magical energies and a final onslaught threw him back against a table which did little to break his fall as he slammed to the ground.

Running forward, Greg set his magic aside and began using his fists to deliver the retribution he’d been fantasizing about since Balthazar murdered the man he loved.

“I saved you once before, you miserable fucker. This time, you die.”

Oh no… now was not the time to laugh, you bastard.

“Look left, King of London.”

Greg cut his eyes, then spat out a curse. From somewhere Molly and Philip had appeared between the dragons and the basilisk, causing the dragons to rear back from the attack they were launching and put them in the path of a spell the elf had been launching. The spell hit Goraseth at an angle hurling him first into Charles, then the both of them into Sebastian, with John, Petras and the now-running Molly and Philip leaping out of the way before they found themselves underneath a pile of fury and very sharp claws.

“Greggy?”

Greg’s eyes snapped back to Balthatzar and they widened sharply when his face was taken in
Balthazar’s hands and drawn down for a quick, cheeky kiss.

“Agathokakological, babycakes.”

With a heave Balthazar shoved Greg off of him and rolled quickly away as the light dawned in Greg’s mind and a path was lying clear between him and Magnussen. Drawing a breath, Greg closed his eyes and drew deep to find the last thing he’d wanted to use, but now was exactly the time to use it. All around him the lights dimmed and it felt to everyone in the room as if the vital force of reality itself was being shaken. Acting faster than the rest, the dragons and Sebastian made themselves as large as possible and leapt to take down every member of their team, sliding across the floor as far as they could behind Greg before the sorcerer, whose eyes had turned pure, gleaming black said a single word and…

…it was over. Magnussen was gone. Mol’godon was gone. There was a feeling of emptiness in the room that none of them had ever felt before, because they’d always been surrounded by life, no matter how small and unnoticed. Now, there was nothing. And it was the most terrifying experience they’d ever known.

“Greg?”

Looking slightly over his shoulder, Greg smiled a weak smile at John and gave his head a little nod.

“I’m fine.”

Just with a cold knot in my soul that may not go away for a long, long time. Looking around Greg met Petras’s eyes and without saying anything, said everything necessary.

“It could not be helped, sūnēnas. Marcus will understand.”

And, now, everyone else did since no amount of glancing about produced any sign of the basilisk. Greg gave a brief nod and shoved down the indescribable pain he was feeling. Yes, they’d rid London and the world of a terrible threat, but the cost was high. Too high for him to ever forgive himself, no matter how long he lived.

“Oh boo hoo…”

Greg snarled at the words, then gasped loudly, since Balthazar’s battered, limping form was accompanied by Mol’godon, looking completely unscathed.

“No. No….”

“Not pleased to see me, Gregorius? You owe me a favor; I would not do something as convenient as dying before I could collect it.”

“I… you were in the path of that spell.”

“What you see is not always the truth, no matter how deeply you desire it. Collect your other pets and what belongs to you of Magnussen’s treasures. Balthazar will deliver to me my spoils. Oh… and though the chamelos child is not mine, the remnants of the egg are and I believe I shall have that, too, in but moments.”

In the wink of an eye, Mol’godon vanished and, after a puzzled few seconds, Molly and Philip were racing out of the room shouting for the dragons to follow.
“Oh no…”

Molly’s hands flew forward, but her wrists were grabbed by Charles who gently urged them down.

“Don’t touch it, Molly.”

The egg’s case, as with many others, lie smashed on the ground, but the egg itself was still intact but for small, visible cracks that were enlarging by the second. Charles locked eyes with Goraseth who nodded, then clasped Charles on the shoulder for a quick squeeze before the two ran the final few steps to carefully lift the hatching egg and hold it in their arms, slowly removing each piece of shell knocked clear by the baby dragon until they held a small, wriggling infant who cooed softly as its features shifted several times before settling on those of a smiling baby human boy with what Molly would swear were Charles’s eyes and Goraseth’s nose.

“Do… you two have a baby now?”

Greg felt the first smile of the night form on his lips and found himself chuckling at the strangeness of it all.

“They do, Molly. Dragon’s bond with their parents or whoever is with them when they hatch. Usually, there's a ritual involved if the egg is orphaned, because the family energies or pheromones or whatnot don't match, but it seems that doesn't apply to the chamelos breed.”

“But, didn’t the egg have parents?”

The sudden look of dread on Charles’s and Goraseth’s faces made the barely vertical Balthazar roll his eyes and clear this throat for attention.

“Dragons don’t give up eggs easily. Magnussen… let’s just say the first set of parents aren’t an issue anymore. Death was too good for that piece of filth.”

Greg clenched his teeth and wished he could raise the dead to kick Magnussen square in the face. However, since there was nothing left to raise, it was a moot point.

“Heh, lizards have a lizardling.”

Charles snorted, but grinned widely as he stroked the new dragon’s very human, for the moment, skin.

“I hope Mr. Holmes is amenable to giving me a little leave to… oh. Oh god…”

Nobody wanted to look Greg in the face because nobody wanted to see what had to be a life’s worth of pain splashed across it. Nobody that is, but Balthazar.

“Oh yeah, forgot about him. Fido, go sling him over your shoulder and follow me. We need to get that sorted before Greg goes all daytime drama tragically scarred for life which nobody, especially me, wants to endure.”

Greg glared at Balthazar, who looked minutes from collapsing and grudgingly gave Sebastian the go-ahead, which was quickly acted on and spurred the entire group, including baby, to follow the struggling Balthazar from the room, down a flight of stairs into Magnussen’s actual magical storehouse. Where they found three figures, two of which were still flesh and bone, though they weren’t liking that much at present.

“Ol’ Mol’ just has to be an arsehole, doesn’t he?”
With a visibly-difficult wave of his arm, Balthazar severed the spell holding Sherlock and Anthea to the wall, then turned as they fell to the floor and faced the stone statue instead.

“Is… is that Jim?”

John laid a hand on Molly’s shoulder and Petras only held back giving Balthazar a slap on the back of his head for some very obvious eye rolls because it genuinely looked as if Balthazar’s head might simply fly off his shoulders from the force since it was taking all the sorcerer’s strength just to keep it upright on said shoulders.

“Yeah, another loose end I have to clean up. That’s all I do, it seems. Clean other people’s messes. Toss Mycroft there next to Mr. Granite.”

Sebastian growled dangerously and gently laid Mycroft down at the foot of the statue.

“Ok… let me remember how to do this properly.”

Balthazar thought a moment, then tried to raise his arms, failed and gave Greg and Petras a ‘little help?’ look, which earned him a snort, but each man took an arm and lifted it upwards. As Balthazar began intoning a long, guttural spell, the room began to glow with an increasingly-bright light until a sharp flash exploded, causing the dragons, John and Anthea to huddle around the baby dragon and the rest to cover their eyes until the light dimmed and was replaced as white light by a vibrant mass of color and form.

“There you are. Took your time, stubborn bugger.”

Weakly pushing so his arms would be released, Balthazar muttered another long stream of words then, effectively, fell down so he could pluck a hair from Mycroft’s head and painstakingly tied it into a knot that he laid on Mycroft’s forehead. After a moment, the mesmerizing, pulsating mass moved towards the body and slowly flowed in a thin stream through the knotted hair into Mycroft’s form until it could no longer be seen and the hair had been reduced to ash.

“Give him a kiss, Greg. Wake him up like the fairy tale princess he longs to be.”

Greg felt no shame giving Balthazar a small kick as he moved past him to kneel next to Mycroft and tap his cheek lightly.

“Mycroft? Anybody home?”

Greg tried to keep his voice light, but he was torturously worried since… his stupid cat was not this powerful.

“I… oh my…”

Mycroft’s eyes slowly opened and he blinked away the confusion.

“Why am I on the floor?”

The collective exhalation of relieved breath was near hurricane force.

“Because you’ve been… away and this was the most comfortable place for you to be.”

“I see. Balthazar murdered me, didn’t he?”

Greg purses his lips and only just stopped himself flicking Mycroft sharply on the nose.
“So, this was a plan you hatched without telling me?”

“No, it was the plan I hatched without telling you.”

Greg spun at Petras’s voice, fuming at the vampire’s ‘hello there’ wave.

“Why? Why on Earth would you do that?”

“Because Mycroft was concerned your attention would be divided between the assault and defending him from attack. I merely asked Mycroft if he was willing, should it become necessary, to be temporarily removed from the equation to better focus your actions and, as well, truly promote a volcanic response on your part. I did not anticipate Balthazar would act straight out of the proverbial gate. Or commit murder.”

“I was bored.”

Petras bared his fangs at Balthazar who tried to bare his back then remembered he didn’t have any to bare and turned a touch red with embarrassment.

“THAT aside, you fucking mog. How did you get the power to do it? You are not at that level, magically.”

“Borrowed it.”

“From who?”

“Guess.”

“You fucking didn’t.”

“I fucking did.”

“Can we do something about Jim?”

Molly’s small voice cut through the growing tension like a knife through butter.

“Right, sorry Molly. Ok, mighty Balthazar, borrower of magical might from a THE FUCKING EVILEST CREATURE THERE IS, what do you have in your pocket for Jim?”

“Don’t worry, we planned this, too. Jim and me, that is, not me and Mr. Teeth. Nobody touch him though before I’m done. That’s actually very important. Except you, John. Maybe. I’ll let you know, but be ready if I say so, ok?”

John frowned but nodded and stood closer to the statue while Balthazar took a few breaths, then used his fingernail to scratch a sigil on the statue’s chest, stepping back when he was done. A few gestures followed, then a short, nearly shouted command and… the stone became flesh. Massively hemorrhaging flesh.

“No! Don’t touch him!”

In a flash Balthazar conjured a ball of light and caught a quantity of the blood inside of it, scooping it also from Jim’s skin and sealing the ball when it had filled like a small balloon.

“Ok, John… do.”

John blinked sharply, then began shouting for shirts or shoelaces to make a tourniquet to stop the
flow of blood from Jim’s arm.

“What was that all about?”

Anthea’s snarled question made clear that Balthazar’s answer had better be a damned good one.

“There was a huge chance that this whole business would nuke the basilisk as thoroughly as Magnussen. Jim was the backup plan. We made it seem as if he’d double-crossed Magnussen and tried to steal one of his toys or something and got his sorry arse frozen. That’s my official story, at least. Actually, the plan was to use his protections to wrestle some venom out of the basilisk, but… apparently the protections don’t work very well over the long term and when Jim could feel them fading he shoved his arm into the basilisk’s mouth so the stupid thing would start biting and injecting him with the venom. I tossed a preservation spell on him just before he transformed and… I think it will have done the trick to keep the venom from either attacking his body or breaking down, so there should be enough in here to make a batch of plague antidote. That basilisk drooled a LOT of venom into and onto that arm.”

Greg had no trouble remembering why he’d originally turned Balthazar into a cat. And why he’d argued for turning Balthazar into a cat, as opposed to the other option on the table.

“Ok… so, I have a few heads to break, a large whisky to drink and a lot of theft to accomplish. Oh, and a baby to… I have no idea what to do with a dragon baby. Does he need nappies? Seth? Formula?”

“We’ll cover that, Greg. He… he’s our little boy.”

Mycroft quickly pieced together the puzzle and decided that being dead was dastardly when you missed all the fun that went on while you were a corpse. His driver, however looked very content about his new situation. Must check the current laws for family leave and ensure that Charles had the necessary time to tend to his newborn. New hatched? Did the man have a crib in his flat? Suitable infant clothing? Good heavens, the flat was positively redolent with solvent fumes and toxic materials!

“Mycroft, where are you going?”

Mycroft looked up from trying to crawl to his feet, while having a highly shaky go at the trying.

“The baby cannot eat paint!”

“Ok, I’ll make certain that doesn’t happen and take care of you, too, alright, so sit down again and have a little rest. John? How’s our other injured party?”

Helping Mycroft get comfortable, Greg gave him a little kiss and began to hold his hand, something that made the world seem a much, much better place.

“Good, actually. He’s already showing signs of healing and it’ll just be a few days of rest for him to be good as new.”

Molly squeezed the tottery Jim so hard Greg was a little worried about the poor chap’s ribs.

“My hero! Well, one of my heroes. There were a lot of heroes today, but he’s definitely in my top three!”

The fact the dark elf puffed with pride told Greg where he thought he fell on the list along with Sebastian who seemed to take part of that for himself, too, though he seemed happier having his
ribs broken by Philip who’d welded himself to the werewolf’s side and didn’t appear to want to move from that spot. Ever.

“I agree, Molly. There were a lot of heroes today. I’m still waiting, though, for Balthazar the hero to explain how he suddenly became so magically strong and… why the hell did Mol’godon basically show up to the party and not do a bloody thing but sit on the sofa!”

Balthazar tried to roll his eyes but realized it would take too much energy and consigned this batch of scorn to the dustbin.

“He wasn’t actually here, in truth. Just a projection of him. Magnussen couldn’t tell the difference and I gave him permission to extend just enough influence here to make the illusion look good and… give me a few bits of help. Part of the price I had to pay was keeping things going awhile, because he thought the whole thing was extremely funny, and take a beating, magical or physical, for his amusement. But, he also didn’t give Magnussen what that arse thought he was getting, since I physically brokered the deal, not Maggs and I… changed the terms. He wouldn’t help you win, but he wouldn’t help Magnussen, either.”

“Deal… what did you have to do for your side?”

“Oh, give him a few things.”

“Such as?”

“Some of Magnussen’s stash. Some extremely powerful and nasty things, but whatever. The dragon’s egg shell bits, too. Apparently, they’re like extremely tasty crisps, so go figure. And… my magic.”

The whole room stilled and gaped at the frazzled man, blooming purple with bruises and doing his best not to meet anyone’s gaze.

“Say that again?”

“My magic. Not all of it. I can still do passive things, bit of divination, some low-level object enchanting, brew up potions, a bit more of this and that but my main fireworks have officially sputtered out.”

“I… really?”

“Mol’godon convinced Magnussen to part with the dragon’s egg. He’d get it after Magnussen had finished using it to help put you and the vampires on a slab, which would be in exchange for helping put you and the vampires on a slab. I didn’t have enough to offer to put the slicey bastard on our side, but I at least got him to stay off of Magnussen’s, though he did agree to reveal Magnussen’s remaining stash of the vampire plague, too, so we can destroy it. And, no, it wasn’t all for you. I wasn’t lying. I don’t want to be a cat anymore. I hate being looked down on and maybe I deserved it once, but I shouldn’t have to pay for my mistakes forever. The way I see it, if this isn’t fucking enough for you to keep me human, then… well, nothing is and… I don’t even know what to say about that.”

Greg glanced over to Petras who nodded, then to Goraseth, who was too busy keeping Sherlock from doing more than taking basic measurements of the baby to notice, and found himself smiling.

“Yeah, you can stay human. You’ll be more useful to me with actual hands, anyway.”

“Who says I’m still going to work with you?”
“Got any other ideas?”

“I… I haven’t thought about it. I’m leaving my options open.”

“You do that. And while you’re weighing those options, you can show us what we can relocate from his hellhole and what you promised to THE EVILEST FUCKER IN EXISTENCE!”

“You shouldn’t yell, Greg. It makes you ugly. Or is that just your face? I think it’s just your face, actually. My bad. Oh, why’s it getting dark in here.”

Balthazar was saved from actually colliding with the floor by the good samaritanism of Anthea who scowled at Greg who smiled sweetly at her act of kindness.

“If he gives himself a concussion, what use is he to us? I’m not coming back here to finish this. It ends here and now and with a vanilla vodka and cupcakes or we will be having words, Doctor Strange.”

Greg shook his head and grinned. They’d won. They’d won and they definitely deserved something as decadent, silly and life-affirming as cupcakes. They’d eliminated a disgusting stain on humanity so a large number of beings in this ridiculous city could continue to have as many cupcakes as they wanted, in fact. With or without a vodka chaser.

“I could murder a cupcake right now, actually.”

Molly was now officially brightening like the sun and bouncing slightly, though she made very certain not to bounce into Jim’s injured arm.

“Ooh! I know where we can get some. And they’re open late, too. I’ll take one of the cars and load up on goodies. And we can drop the new dads at Charles’s flat while we’re at it. That poor dear sweet baby must be getting cold and hungry and we can do that first, actually. And take lots of baby’s first day at home snaps. Then come back with cupcakes. Or sandwiches. Or something. A lot of something. I’m actually very hungry. You wouldn’t think stealing makes you hungry but it really does.”

Jim was very curious to hear about the stealing part but chose to remain silent because… his arm fucking hurt! And, Molly was unbelievably cute when she was gearing up for a mission. Even something as ludicrous as baby photos and cupcakes. He really did need to learn where that baby came from, too…

Anthea turned Balthazar over to Nyvrokh who made little sparkles with his fingers until they irritated the former cat back to consciousness, then took a good look at him and decided a few extra minutes off his feet was probably a good thing, so Balthazar stayed in a bridal carry while the elf announced the thieving was now commencing and followed Balthazar’s pointing finger deeper into the room of treasures. All of which met with Greg’s staunch approval.

“Alright, you lot. Thieves follow the elf; child minders follow Molly. We’ve got work to do and tasty rewards to enjoy when we’re done.”

The group splintered into two fragments, with John deciding to take the ball of blood from Petras and catch a lift with to the shop with the child minders to begin separating the venom from Jim’s blood and making a start on antidote preparations. With that tended, Petras knelt a moment beside Mycroft, whispered in his ear a long moment then, to Greg’s utter exasperation, gave him a kiss on his cheek before chasing after the makeshift Thieves’ Guild to help move their well-deserved spoils.
“Look at you getting some vampire love. I hope you’re happy, Mycroft. I’ve never known Petras to kiss anyone in public, so you must be a special boy.”

Mycroft chuckled and motioned Greg to sit by him, where Greg’s shoulder made a handy pillow for his still spinning head.

“He apologized for endangering me to that degree. I doubt he would have done anything different if he knew what would occur but he might have taken extra steps to ensure that Balthazar knew precisely how to reverse my untimely demise.”

“I lost it, Mycroft. When I saw you die, I positively lost it. I love you so much and… the thought of you dying like that set off a bomb in my head that… I guess they were right about one thing. My response was nothing short of volcanic.”

“Well, what’s done is done and I am simply glad to be returned to you. I love you, Gregory Lestrade and, temporary death aside, I live in hope that I will be able to celebrate that love for a very long time to come.”

Greg turned his head and laid a kiss in Mycroft’s gloriously-mussed hair.

“I do appreciate a good celebration.”

“Ours, however, shall not involve cupcakes.”

“Oh. Could it involve cupcakes, though?”

“Have you an idea to share, my dear Gregory?”

“Maybe. When there aren’t any young and impressionable ears nearby to scandalize.”

“The infant is no longer present, my dear.”

“I was talking about Sherlock.”

“Ah. Yes. Point taken.”
Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

We come to the end of our tale and say farewell to our merry Scooby Gang! I greatly appreciate all the support I've received during the writing of this story - it truly made the experience a joyful one!

“I believe this represents our last turn as pack animals, Gregory.”

Three days had passed since the battle with Magnussen and it had taken that long, surprisingly, to move the stash of magical items from Magnussen’s house to their new home. Homes. The wrangling over various things with the vampires and, also surprisingly, the dragons took a day in and of itself but that chapter was officially closed. Now it was Mycroft’s chance to work his magic and see the remainder of Magnussen’s assets dealt with in a productive manner. Such as funding the rebuilding of homes and businesses destroyed during the assorted bouts of mayhem whose owners didn’t have sufficient insurance or means to see it done themselves. Not that anyone knew about the last bit, of course. His Mycroft could be a very discrete, and modest, man when he so chose…

“And what handsome pack animals we are! Fast ones, too. This didn’t take as long as I’d feared. We still have most of the day to celebrate our staggering success!”

Greg grinned like a schoolboy, then nodded Mycroft to a large chest that was surrounded by a chain and padlock which, to Mycroft’s eyes, appeared to be solid gold.

“The Chalice of the Moon’s Shadow will go in here. I’ll dump my unlovely Mask of Summer’s Death on that pedestal. It likes being where people can see it, even if there’s actually nobody there to do the seeing.”

Mycroft looked about for what felt like the hundredth time at the space they had been traversing and felt as if he was in a dream. Truthfully, he’d felt that way often since he met his Gregory, but this secret lair was positively something out of a dream. Countless corridors, hidden rooms, an astonishingly elaborate summoning circle in the floor, which was only one of several magic circles inscribed on the floor of this astounding room.

And the contents. The eldritch tomes that he read as a child scarcely prepared him for a true lair of a sorcerer.

“Mycroft?”

“Oh, I do apologize. Were you speaking to me?”

“No, but I recognize that look. Even for those who’ve never been here which, besides me, is everyone but you. Well, and a few creatures from other planes of existence, but the point stands.”

“It is somewhat…”

“Like something out of a book?”
“Precisely.”

“I won’t say that’s not true, because that’s one of the reasons I actually do adore this space. Every sorcerer who the city takes on as its helpful handyman is shown this place and it becomes theirs to defend and use for the benefit of the city and its people. Further afield than that, actually, but the original builders of all of this or, at least, the original bit, really didn’t know how greatly the world would become connected. It’s a place of tremendous power. And tremendous responsibility. Which makes me sound like a character from a comic book, but nobody heard me say that but you, so it doesn’t count. Now, these ridiculous objects of Magnussen’s will be safe from the wrong hands and we can sleep a little easier because of it.”

“Should… should you have revealed this to me, Gregory? It seems rather a critical secret of your trade.”

“Which you’re a critical part of now. And… I would know if this place wasn’t happy about the decision. I’d know very quickly and very confidently, but… it’s ok with you being here. I think it realizes that you’re important to London, value it like I do. And that your reach is a long one, which I suspect it likes, prideful bugger.”

Giving the incalculably ugly mask a final polish with his sleeve, Greg set the hideous thing on the pedestal, propping it so the face could look out over the new realm it surveyed.

“There we go. Yours?”

“In its rather sturdy cradle. Is there a safety reason for the gold lock and chain?”

“Nah, it’s symbolic mostly. It is solid gold, so there’s not much safety in something you can practically cut with a pair of cooking shears, but the symbolism of it being contained with a pure, noble metal is important. Now, we can turn our attention to our other bit of treasure seeking.”

Mycroft shook his head with a soft, puzzled expression on his face that Greg positively loved seeing. Mycroft was a formidable, highly competent and sometimes cold person, at least for work matters, but the true person inside was warm and caring. Especially when tiny dragon babies were involved.

“I have no idea what is appropriate for an infant gift, Gregory. Besides the necessities for its survival, that is. No, I stand corrected. Since it is an infant dragon, I am utterly in the proverbial dark. However, I doubt scripting a check as my gift for the ceremony would be viewed positively. Well, it would likely be viewed highly positively depending on the size of the check, but I suspect the various cultural norms and traditions would shake their venerable fists in my direction and sport the most thunderous of scowls.”

“Normal baby things are fine for now. Little Alex seems content to mimic his daddies’ human appearance, which is good since he’s taken a great liking to being wheeled in the pram Molly borrowed from her neighbor, so hats and typical human baby toys are going to work. We’ll throw in a few special gifts, too, for the tyke’s horde.”

“Already?”

“Well… ok, it’s more for the dads to feel boatsful of, but that baby will be gravitating towards the shiny and sparkly sooner than you’d think. I’ve got a few bits knocking about here we can add, semi-precious stones, pieces of jewelry, that sort of thing. Should be a fun party, though. There will be a LOT of people there who aren’t human people and it’ll be a good time to get a view of all the various faces you’ll certainly be bothered by in the years to come. And who’ll bother
you at the party because they want to be the top botherer on your list. This is a big deal in the
dragon community and nobody who’s anybody will want to miss it, so expect some top-quality,
professional-grade bothering to wrestle you to the ground for a friendly chat.”

“The jubilance of a many a ceremony and circumstance is besmirched by the machinations of
politics and social climbing. That is something with which I am highly familiar. However, I freely
do admit to being somewhat agog at the thought of dragons officially returning to London. It
sounds so very Arthurian, in a fashion.”

“And that’s the way you’ll still see it described in various official records. Official for the
magic community, that is. Much pomp, much splendor when it’s actually just Seth, Charles and
little Zythyriss Choziass Eikym and whatever else they stuck in there to make Seth’s family
happy. And, of course, Alexander for Charles’s grandfather, which makes that side of the clan
happy, though they don’t know yet they’re now part of a dragon clan.”

“Waiting until Charles’s family overcomes their shock at finding him both living with a man
and having an adopted baby is probably wise before breaking the news that he is now partly
dragon himself and their baby is a very real dragon, albeit an utterly unique one.”

“Which has Seth’s parents over the moon. A chamelos back on this world is a momentous
event. More momentous is the fact their ne’er do well son is settling down with a family and
invoking the ancient rites, blah blah blah, to claim London as his territorial seat. The dragons that
do business in the city, and England in general, are happy, too, since they have someone close at
hand to complain to when they’ve got a problem. I generally forget Seth’s from a highly placed
family because he’s such a berk, but they’re as influential in the dragon world as Leo and his lot
are with the vampires. I just hope he knows what he’s in for, now that he’s actually acting on his
position. Dragons are as much of a pest as the vampires, so he’s going to have his hands full.”

“The poor man. Well, I know the perfect scotch to gift him for those particular days when the
complaining has risen to the depths of Noah’s flood and one simply must float above it all lest one
be drowned. That being said, since he will now be working for Marcus, or with Marcus depending
upon who is telling the tale, I suspect not even my favorite scotch will be enough of a relaxant after
a day of his nonsense.”

“I’m genuinely surprised Leo didn’t complain more about losing his PA. Of course, Seth did
wait to tell him until Leo was playing with the baby so the old duffer was in a good mood, imaging
all his future grandchildren scurrying about.”

“And he did gain a rather formidable, and morally questionable, dark elf in Goraseth’s stead.
Perhaps not as mannerly as our dragon, however, I suspect his own particular gifts more than
compensate.”

“Nywrok’s as loony as Leo and as bloodthirsty as Petras – definitely a good fit. Besides, it
keeps the bastard out of our hair, so the whole business has my full approval. It has Marcus’s, too.
I think a house falling on his father and his own near-death experience has made him more
cautious than ever about their safety.”

“Hence, further, Leonas’s approval of his own ferocious dragon taking a position at his son’s
side.”

“Absolutely. And I can’t blame either of them. Yes, we have a cure for the plague now, so
that crisis is managed, but there’s always another lurking around the corner. Ready to go and
check if one is waiting for us now?”
Mycroft handed back the gold key for the gold lock and nodded.

“Yes, I believe so…”

The faraway look in Mycroft’s eyes earned him a long hug while he continued to drink in the sights around him.

“We can come back anytime you’d like.”

“Thank you, Gregory. I find myself very anxious to explore this place.”

“And it’ll be my pleasure to show it to you. Truthfully, it’s been a long time since I’ve actually looked about more than in a few rooms and there are corridors I don’t think I’ve ever fully explored, so it can be an adventure for both of us.”

“A dangerous one.”

Mycroft’s eyebrows waggled hopefully and Greg giggled very manfully before giving his lover a kiss.

“Could be! There’s loads in here that are extremely dangerous and they might enjoy exercising that a bit to make our adventure highly fraught with the most dangerous of dangers.”

“Excellent. Magical mayhem is a terribly invigorating thing, much to my surprise.”

Greg made himself a promise to involve Mycroft in as much magical mayhem, the safer forms, as possible going forward. There were always astonishingly showy problems rearing their head that required even showier solutions, so his love could live fantasy novel adventures whenever he had the taste for them. Which, knowing Mycroft, would be often.

However, at the moment, pushing The British Government through the portal back to his shop was as much of an adventure as they were going to see.

“Ah… back home once again. And how nice that we’re in my private cozy library for a few kisses before braving the cold, cruel world.”

Something that had Mycroft’s passionate support. They had been lucky with Magnussen and that selfsame cold, cruel world harbored many things that could endanger the man he held dear. Every chance to celebrate their love would be taken and savored greatly.

“Ah… we’ve got company.”

Mycroft looked around but Greg simply smiled and pointed at the wall between the library and the shop.

“Then, I suppose, we should go and greet them.”

“Must we?”

“No, however, should it be your cat… former cat… he might vent his irritation at not finding you at his beck and call in many an uncharitable and creative manner.”

“True. Alright world… here we come.”

Greg opened the secret library door and peered out, smirking when not only Balthazar, but John and Anderson were milling about very obviously not wanting to look like they weren’t getting
ready to give the library door a loud proverbial knock.

“Lovely. Man can’t enjoy a bit of affection without the grannies storming in to put a stop to it?”

“You’re basically a granny yourself, Greg, and neither John nor Anderson has any more tolerance for your geriatric sex life than I do. We want to talk about a business proposition.”

Greg felt a headache looming but a quick one-hand massage at the back of his neck from Mycroft did a lot to keep it at bay.

“If we come out there to hear your loony idea it’d best not be as loony as most of your loony ideas.”

“It is and fuck you.”

“Fine.”

Stepping out into the workroom, Greg now noticed that Anderson was dressed a bit more nicely than was typical and John had on a tie. An actual bloody tie.

“Why are you wearing a tie?”

“It’s appropriate when discussing a business proposition.”

Knowing, now, that no amount of massaging was going to alleviate his headache, Greg simply took a seat at the small worktable and made a ‘go ahead’ motion. This, however, didn’t prompt the speech he was expecting since the three musketeers seemed more intent on trying to get the other two to be the speechmaker for any words to actually be spoken.

“I’m going for coffee.”

“Keep your plump arse in the chair, Greg. This… it’s a bit of a delicate matter and we just want to see it done right.”

Balthazar wanting anything done right was an enormous lie, since he was far more concerned about being done fast or being done flashy, but Greg simply nodded and folded his arms to wait. Honestly, it was a bit jarring to be, once again, talking to Balthazar Black in human form given the amount of time the tit had spent as a cat. At least he’d kept said tit’s spectacles so the man didn’t have to squint anymore, which he didn’t actually have to do to a great extent, in reality, but he enjoyed the pretense of being far more shortsighted than he actually was. Because he was a tit. And, apparently, the chosen spokesperson for this pantomime.

“Ok… me, then. It’s like this, Greg. It’s been three days since we binned Magnussen and I still don’t have a job.”

“That doesn’t explain why John’s wearing a tie and Anderson shined his shoes.”

“I’m not responsible for their fashion choices. Anyway… Anderson and I both want to work here.”

“Can’t afford it, I’m afraid. Two people per shift is twice the wages and the shop isn’t that profitable.”

“Not yet, it isn’t.”
“You used a tone there, Baz. Nicely done, but I have no idea what you’re going on about.”

Balthazar looked over to John who cleared his throat and did his level best not to reach up and straighten his tie or smooth the lapel of his jacket as he took up the charge.

“I was chatting with Mrs. Hodges yesterday when I popped by to give her a health check. She… she’s thinking about selling her building.”

That was not, in any manner, what Greg was expecting to hear.

“What? What’s she going to do, live with her daughter?”

“No. Or maybe. She’s tired of being a landlady for whatever business is using the ground floor space and, ultimately, would like to flip the arrangement. Sell the building with her gaining a permanent lease on her flat. Her daughter did the math and what she’d save in taxes, maintenance costs, etc. would easily offset a reasonable rent. She just doesn’t know if anyone would give her that sort of deal, let alone pay her what she wants for the building, what with the condition it’s in right now. And the condition of the rest of the street…”

Greg narrowed his eyes, then cut them towards Mycroft who was pursing his lips and deciding also to have a seat at the worktable because this was going moving in a very intriguing direction, although not one as surprising to him as to Greg.

“… in any case, Anderson’s been talking to other business owners, too. Some are eager to rebuild, others not so much.”

“That’s what I hoped not to hear, John, to be honest. I really don’t want a pack of greedy developers moving in and making a mess out things. It’s been good here, for businesses and residents alike. That’s not going to be the case if the money mongers start getting their hands on properties.”

It was John’s turn to toss the conversational ball and Anderson who caught it with only the slightest of wobbles.

“That… well… yes, but it would depend on who the money mongers were, don’t you think?”

“Keep going. I suspect this is going to lead to my massive headache sooner or later and I’m starting to think I’d prefer sooner.”

“Not necessarily. About the headache, I mean. John also spoke to Marcus when he was doing that examination. He’s doing brilliantly, by the way. The cure really did work a treat getting the plague out of him. Anthea was even smiling! Anyway, he’s very interested in investing in this area. It’s respectable, the businesses are… were… profitable and he doesn’t really want to change much in terms of the atmosphere, just add opportunities for late-night shops so vampires could work or browse more easily. We can all chat about the specifics later, though, when there’s a better idea of who wants to sell and who wants to rebuild on their own.”

“Ok, that all sounds good. Marcus is always looking for new investment possibilities and he’s got a smart head for business, despite being an utter wanker most of the time. I fail to see, in any way whatsoever, what that has to do with me.”

“Well… the three of us were talking, with Sherlock, too, and Richard… we think you should buy Mrs. Hodges’s building and expand the shop space.”

Greg shared a look with Mycroft and wasn’t sure why Mycroft wasn’t looking as befuddled about
the whole thing as he was.

“First, I don’t need a larger shop. Second, I don’t have the money to buy Mrs. Hodges’s building. Third, the extra taxes and repair costs and the like that’d come with the property is another drain on the money I already don’t have. Why in the world would you even think it was possible? Or a good idea?”

Anderson kicked the conversation back to Balthazar who was ready for it and gave a quick nod to indicate he’d take things from there.

“We’ll start with the good idea part first. The shop could expand and be successful if you had more people working. That’s been the most significant factor in your poverty since the beginning.”

“Wrong. It’s a fucking magic shop! There’s not a huge market for that sort of thing, even when you factor in the people just looking for a unique gift.”

“There are always people looking for unique gifts and we don’t offer a lot because there’s no time to make them or space to display them. And how many people pop in because they see we sell herbs and leave empty-handed because ours mostly aren’t for cooking. There are opportunities aplenty, Greg, if you think beyond sitting behind the till, usually beaten and bruised, smiling at some bloke buying a copper bowl for a purification ritual.”

“I admit we could do a better job with display. Make it more efficient, but…”

“The shop is a closet in a dollhouse. The ground floor space in Mrs. Hodges’s building isn’t much larger so you wouldn’t have a bloody Asda, just a moderately-sized shop that could be better stocked and display the wares we sell. And her below-ground space is actually a little larger than yours, so there’s the bigger stock area, workshop and space for classes that you’ve moaned about often enough. You’d probably have to fight her to the death for more garden space but she might not be too upset with a few additional flower and herb beds as long as they didn’t interfere with her own favorites. The shop could do a lot better, Greg, you just have to make it happen.”

Greg pouted mightily because he knew Balthazar and the rest were right, but the ‘make it happen’ bit wasn’t as easy as they seemed to think.

“What you’re suggesting…”

“Asserting. Suggesting is for the spineless.”

“Ok, asserting… what you’re asserting requires time I don’t have and money I don’t have. Forget buying the building, think about the additional upfront costs for stock, having a builder merge the spaces…”

“You can do that yourself, you lazy bastard.”

“Yeah, but that sort of thing actually needs various permissions that could come around to bite me if someone from the council wandered in and wondered who gave all this approval.”

Balthazar stared at Greg, then pointed at Mycroft, which was echoed, though with less assertiveness, by Anderson.

“Mycroft is not my golden ticket to doing whatever the fuck I like! And before you say it, he’s not my golden goose either. I still have to repay him for Anderson’s wages and I’m certainly not going to look to him to loan me the money for this looniness, either.”
“Funny you mentioned gold.”

Greg’s pout shifted into something resembling irritation but Balthazar was a master of irritation, so it didn’t faze him in the slightest.

“If you think I’m creating gold, you’re…”

“Correct in every way.”

“Wrong.”

“Nope, and for this reason. You don’t like to make gold because it’s hard to move in quantity. However, I bet ol’ Mycroft there deals with all sorts of unusual things as payment, ransom, bribes, whatever, often enough that he could easily turn it to cash. The man knew where to get a king’s ransom in diamonds at a moment’s notice, for pity’s sake.”

“It’s… illegal! Or something that’s close enough to illegal not to matter. And I’m actually insulted you’d think I’d just magic up a sack of gold to play the rich property developer. That’s not who I am.”

“No, you’re the pathetic sap who never does a single thing for himself because he’s so focused on helping everybody in the world except himself. I’ve watched you suffer and go without time and time again because you don’t think it’s right to use your abilities for personal gain. Ok, fine. That’s a perspective, not one I’m fully on board with, but it matters to you and I understand that because you’re stupid and believe stupid things. However, don’t you think you’ve earned a little something after all this time?”

“Yes, and I see that when I do the monthly books for the shop.”

“Greg…”

Greg looked at John and braced for the ‘voice of reason.’

“… you’re not getting any younger.”

The evil, evil voice of reason.

“Well, thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome. What I mean is that dividing your time between the shop and the rest of your work is taking more and more of a toll on you. It’s time, perhaps, to shift more of your focus away from running the shop and towards your other responsibilities. I agree that the gold idea isn’t a stellar one and I don’t particularly support it, but if you could get a bank loan or funds from Leo or something to make the purchase, then I think it’s smart to do it. At the very least it would open up more space for us to work away from customer eyes on non-shop matters and put more money in the bank to purchase the things we need to do that work. And, for the shop, If it helps, Sherlock thinks that we’d most likely see more in profit from increased sales than the outlay for the building costs and extra wages, especially if this area leans the way Marcus is hoping for the properties he wants to buy. Still our standard clientele, but new faces, also, who would have deep pockets and enjoy eclectic and unique goods, which we certainly offer.”

John paused a moment as if he was weighing his next words carefully.

“As it stands, Balthazar and Anderson want full shifts and I… well, I was considering reducing my hours, actually. Just for manning the till and the like. I still intend on working some hours but
also spend more time studying, experimenting and helping prepare potions, teas and such. Further, I want time to work with Sherlock on some of his cases. I’m actually enjoying that. I’m rather good at it, too. I talked to Richard and he’d like to take my hours from the shop himself. He can use the money and… he’s been a bit isolated from the magic community. Now, he’d like to integrate back into it more fully and you have to concede that he shop is a good place to meet people in our walk of life.”

“Ok, yes, some of that is actually sensible, John, but I still…”

“Oh, and I want your flat.”

Greg stared open-mouthed at Balthazar who had started to lick the back of his hand out of habit, then dropped it with only the slightest hint of embarrassment on his face.

“What?”

“Consider it less wages you have to pay. It’s a squalid and horrid place, but acceptable. You’ll be living with Mycroft soon enough, anyway, so I’m staking my claim before anybody else does. As it is, I’ll probably have to take the spare room at Richard’s flat until then because I need somewhere to sleep and his sad flat is the closest. Your place is better, though, since my rat spy network is already in place and I don’t want the trouble of having to train a new league of minions just because you were too selfish to get a flat with only one bedroom. The only other option is Philip’s hovel, which will be vacant shortly, but I’m not even that desperate.”

The hovel dweller in question quickly clutched his pearls and reached for the smelling salts.

“I told you, Balthazar, I’m not moving in with Sebastian!”

“Yeah, you are. You think we don’t know but the dog can’t stop smirking every time you say you’re ‘going home.’ It doesn’t matter anyway because I’m not living in your deplorable flat. Greg’s is slightly less deplorable, but enough to make it manageable with a few plants, maybe one of the lizard’s paintings on the wall…”

“I don’t know what Philip is doing, but I know I’m not moving in with Mycroft.”

Balthazar fixed Greg, then Philip, with a look that said louder than actual words he sincerely believed both were complete cabbages.

“Neither of you have an ounce of real deception in your blood. Admittedly, I think it’ll be a month you’ll be living his overly-fussy palace and Sherlock put the date at two weeks or less, but he’s never seen you when you’re being truly stubborn, so I think you’ll hold out longer than you might normally just to be difficult. Doesn’t matter anyway. Your flat will be mine soon enough and it’s not as if I have a lot to prepare to move since I don’t own a bloody thing but cat toys.”

Greg frowned and frowned deeper when he looked at Mycroft, who was trying to stifle a smile.

“Oh, look who’s jumping ship and siding with the pirates. Got anything to say, Mr. Holmes?”

“Actually, yes. As for the business venture, I think it is a prudent one. Even a cursory analysis of the situation and your personal investment to see it grown shows an acceptable net benefit to you in monetary terms but also a laudable benefit in terms of easing your daily burden to focus on other matters for which you are responsible. And whereas I understand your reluctance to see financial gain from your magical talents, I view the matter more as leveraging your talents precisely to assist your community with your aforementioned responsibilities. A goodly percentage of what you here is for the well-being of your patrons and that would only be assisted by greater workspace and
more time to accomplish those specific tasks. I feel a variety of funding sources could be plumbed to secure you the necessary financial means with an appropriate repayment schedule set in place to see the repayment of certain monies at a pace that is eminently manageable. Consider, also, your neighbor and how she would be helped in terms of securing a dependable residence with a compassionate landlord and an agreeable business on the ground floor that would certainly not be disagreeable in terms of noise or other disturbances.”

“Ok, I agree that last point is important. I’d rather not see Mrs. Hodges being taken advantage of in a bad deal and, if possible, I’d prefer to be able to keep our eyes on her because she’s a dear soul and has been a good friend to me and the shop. But, I can’t see expanding the shop being anything but a financial disaster.”

“I think otherwise but, if you like, I shall confer with several associates and gain additional opinions on the matter. Not that they shall say anything to the contrary, but they may have supplementary suggestions for facilitating the process and expediting your debt repayment. There are ways debt can actually assist your overall financial standing, Gregory, if properly leveraged and it would be a simple matter to construct a framework for that to be the case here.”

Greg quietly fumed but conceded that if Mycroft said this was possible, then it definitely was possible. The man didn’t make mistakes with things like this. And, in truth, he’d enjoyed having a bit of a break recently in terms of the day-to-day running of the shop. Not that he’d had a break in any other terms, but he only had them to concentrate on and that had been . . . nice. John, the fucker, was right – he wasn’t getting any younger, either…

“I’ll… I’ll think about it, alright? Chat with Mrs. Hodges about what she wants for the building and look over my finances to see how this might actually work. No promises, but I’ll consider it and make an honest effort to know, one way or the other, if it’s possible and if it’s, ultimately, something I want to do.”

Greg kept his face neutral as he was glared at by the three conspirators but it almost slipped when he noticed the extremely tiny shift of Philip’s eyes in Mycroft’s direction. Ah ha…

“So, why don’t you three fuck off and actually work in the shop you want me to expand. Who’s up there now?”

“Sherlock.”

How did that fall out of Balthazar’s mouth without a hole opening in reality to swallow them all?

“What!”

“He didn’t want to be part of this, as he called it, hat-in-hand begging. It’s a slow day, in any case.”

“Arguing against your corporate scheme, stupid cat.”

“More than half the businesses on the street are closed and it’s Wednesday morning, which is never a great time for us, anyway. But, we’ve got some ideas to change that. Go back to your old man sex, Greg and, in the meantime, we’ll keep you flush to buy your erectile dysfunction pills.”

The glares were replaced by smirks as three of the room’s occupants took their leave, with Greg now turning to confront the only one, besides him, remaining.

“Oh, you… when did they run this idea past you to find out how utterly loony they were being?”
“Gregory Lestrade… not a single person in this room have I spoken to about your interests.”

“That was waffly. Who, who was not a person in this room, did you talk to, then?”

“Sebastian.”

“What?”

“It is, perhaps, a good thing that Sherlock so often breaks into my home and disturbs my rest as I was little distressed by finding Sebastian doing the same last night. Had you but accepted my offer of a shared rest, this conversation likely would have been had at that time.”

“I didn’t refuse! I just…”

“Spent a rather large amount of time trying to restore your shop to its normal condition, peruse the ledgers, tend to orders you received online and a myriad of other things, up to and including hosting a representative of the local witches to discuss a rite they wish to perform to help protect this area from future evil misdeeds.”

“Yeah… ok. Fair.”

“And relevant to the conversation I had with Sebastian. From what I gather, this whole matter was John and Balthazar’s original idea and they drew in Philip to gauge his support. Needless to say, he carried the notion to Sebastian who… he worries for you, my dear. He will not say so explicitly, but he cares deeply for you and I sense he was disturbed by recent events more than he has revealed. Not particularly for the magical elements, but for the additional burdens on you for he has seen you fretting over your daily concerns and he worries as would any son for his father.”

“He got all of that across using seven words?”

“Eight actually. He was most uncharacteristically garrulous. Jesting aside, Gregory, it was my impression that he was also testing the waters for purchasing the property himself and deeding it to you or, possibly, nudging Marcus to do it, if it became necessary. Your good deeds are not always unknown to others, Gregory, and I suspect you would find a legion of individuals stepping in to offer support to provide you a more comfortable life.”

Mycroft quietly waited a moment while Greg wrestled down the emotional wave that surged through him. His poor sorcerer… he worked so desperately hard for those under his wing and without a thought as to gratitude or recompense. The ability to see some rest, a few extra days here or there where he could enjoy his own life, was the very least this glorious man deserved.

“Do you… you really think it would be possible? What Balthazar and the others are suggesting?”

“I do and to make my confession, I have already sent a message to an acquaintance in the financial district to oversee the preparation of a market analysis and development of financing packages for a variety of scenarios towards purchasing the property and increasing in your business presence. You would be most surprised, I feel, to know how such things can be relatively painless when one moves within certain circles. Ultimately, this will rest on your desire to pursue this path but I have no doubt whatsoever it would work financially to not only your benefit, but the benefit of those the shop employs.”

“I do need to do something about Balthazar. And Philip. Does John really want to reduce his hours?”
“He does. Sherlock has mentioned the idea several times. I believe what John is more desirous of is spending more time, shall we say, behind the scenes, learning about magic and practicing the craft. From Sebastian’s eight words, I gather the plan would be to see two people, besides you, working at all times so that one could assist your endeavors when required and one could manage the business when that second person was needed by you. Or, one person could engage in their own project, instruct a class or whatever other needs might arise while the shop remains tended.”

“They’ve thought this out.”

“A prudent decision when suggesting… asserting… a business proposal. Shall you consider it?”

“Yes. I said I would and I’d do it just for that but… I can’t say it doesn’t have me interested, too. It’s not really a thing I thought possible, but the more I hear about it the more I like the idea.”

“And that is sufficient for now. I will have various possibilities for you to examine in but a few days and you will, then, have a better idea of how to proceed.”

“Ok… ok, that sounds good. Manageable. Have a few days to mull it over in my own head before looking at the numbers.”

“There we have it, then. I shall inform any who attempt to gain from me your thoughts where they currently lie and embellish not a whit.”

Laughing with more delight than he might have imagined, Greg set his mental eye looking forward and liked what he saw. His responsibilities weren’t lessening, not by any margin, what with a new force, the dragons, entering the frame and him being named as Protector of the Den, which mostly meant child minding when the dads needed a night to themselves but, also, stepping in if anyone took issue with a new presence in London or threatened the little family… and all the other people that looked to him to keep the darkness at bay.

But, he would do it, all of it, with the most amazing, wonderful man at his side. Not that he was giving up his flat anytime soon, of course. That was silly. True, the portal between the shop and Mycroft’s house made it as easy to move between there and here as it did his own flat and the shop, but that wasn’t relevant. Much. And, also true, now that Mycroft was fully pushed into the spotlight with the magical community, he was going to be as subject to unannounced visits that would, without question, draw him in sooner than later and being in one location to make all of that happen at once would be helpful.

And, of course, he loved the man. Loved him deeply and felt a sense of peace when they were together, a sense of strength that made this old bastard a lot happier than he’d felt in years. The scales were tipping away from his ‘not moving in’ stance fairly rapidly, weren’t they…”

“Gregory?”

“Just thinking about how much I love you.”

“Oh, that is something I highly endorse. Shall we commemorate your exceedingly appropriate train of thought?”

Leaning in, Mycroft kissed Greg with a gentle passion that returned every bit of love Greg had expressed and promised a lifetime of it stretching before them.

“Uh… Mycroft?”
The pair broke their kiss and scowled at Philip who was standing on the stairs holding a package in his hands.

“This arrived for you?”

“Is that in doubt?”

“No, it did arrive for you, but the deliveryman wouldn’t say who it was from. Didn’t even ask for a signature.”

That put both Greg and Mycroft on alert and Mycroft let Greg take point, accepting the delivery from Anderson and performing a few tests to ensure it didn’t hold anything immediately dangerous.

“Nothing seems amiss with it. Thanks, Philip.”

Anderson scurried back to the shop because he really didn’t want to find out what was in the package before the other two did in because there was every possibility it was an embarrassing joke gift or a something a bit disgusting both of which, to be fair, Greg did receive somewhat regularly. Not Mycroft, though, but there was always a first time.

“Well, my dear? Your recommendation?”

“None, particularly. It won’t leap out and eat your face, that much I can guarantee.”

The room that left for a myriad of other horrors didn’t escape Mycroft’s notice, so he slowly removed the string and paper covering the box and stared along moment at what he found. Which was a box. An elaborately carved one, at that.

“Is this a further clue?”

“It… might be. I’m more certain than ever your face is safe from being eaten, though.”

“Meaning you were not wholly certain at the onset.”

“I can’t know everything! There could be an angry kitten in there who’ll maul you when you open the box! Poor thing… it’s not its fault it ate your face. It was just angry and probably scared and certainly didn’t put itself in there to start with, now did it?”

Mycroft huffed loudly and certainly didn’t listen carefully for petulant hissing when he opened the box which, once the contents was revealed housed a heavy cream-colored envelope and…

“A ring. Good heavens…”

A heavy gold ring with a green stone which, when turned a certain way flashed a deep violet. None of which was reason for his lover exploding in a peal of laughter.

“I see little here that is amusing, Gregory Lestrade.”

“I do. I see a lot here that’s amusing, actually. Hold on…”

Greg made a motion with his fingers that Mycroft thought highly reminiscent of his beckoning his wand and, after a moment, a golden flash sped through the workshop and into Greg’s hand.

“See! I have one, too.”
Mycroft examined Greg’s ring and noted the similarities to the one from the box, thought that stone was a deep orange-red.

“This is not clarifying.”

“This is my wedding ring.”

Mycroft nearly let the ring in his hand fall to the floor in shock, but stopped his fingers in time and closed them, instead, around the piece of jewelry.

“C… come again?”

“Wedding ring! Typical thing for a member of vampire royalty, bulky and nothing anyone with taste or the need to use their fingers would ever actually wear.”

“I… wha…”

“What’s in the envelope?”

Greg’s too-innocent, expectant grin snapped Mycroft out of his fugue and he glared sharply at his capering counterpart while opening the envelope to find something he couldn’t decipher for love nor money.

“Is this some form of code?”

“Let me see… oh, no code. Just the old vampire language. By old, I mean what they consider the original, formal form. Yep, says what I expect, so no surprises there.”

“I am besieged by surprise, Gregory! Kindly rectify this situation!”

“Look at the handwriting, Mycroft. Surely you can fathom things out.”

Mycroft screwed up his face as he stared at the paper and tried to dislodge from his mind the fact that had moved in and begun to make itself at home.

“That is in Petras’s hand. The villain.”

“Be nice, Mycroft, that’s your fiancée you’re talking about.”

“He is most certainly not!”

“Ok, technically not, since it’s not official until you sign the bottom of this and send it back to him, but we both know what’s what.”

Greg smarmily patted Mycroft on the knee and earned a slapped away hand for his troubles. Which only made Greg laugh harder.

“Your guffawing is not appreciated, Gregory Lestrade.”

“I’m appreciating it. I’m appreciating it a lot. You have to have expected something like this, love. You cannot sit there with your enormous brain and tell me you didn’t.”

“I most certainly did not.”

“You’re either lying or… no, you’re lying. Maybe you expected something a touch different, like him trying to get you into bed, but you absolutely expected the suave and sneaky bastard to try
“Not… this!”

“Pfft. You can’t honestly tell me it never crossed your mind, especially knowing about Marcus and me.”

“I… it did not cross my mind that he would propose an… alliance by marriage… however, I will concede I wondered if he would suggest some greater degree of cooperation between us for matters of work.”

“I still think you’re fibbing, but it doesn’t matter, all things considered. I’ll get a pen for you.”

“Whatever for?”

“To sign the marriage proposal.”

“Are… Gregory, have you gone mad?”

“No, but I haven’t taken my official ‘Have You Gone Mad?’ quiz today, so it is possible I’m mistaken.”

“Gregory!”

“What?”

“You… you cannot be endorsing this ludicrous notion.”

“I can be endorsing it and I am endorsing it. It’s smart! The whole affair would be like my and Marcus’s marriage. Strategic and useful. Petras doesn’t live in London, either, so you don’t have to worry about him appearing at your doorstep unannounced with this or that tale of woe, like his favorite barista serving him a cappuccino instead of the espresso he specifically ordered. Marcus was in a strop a two-year-old would appreciate over that particular incident and I got to be the shoulder he pouted on. Now, he can pout on Anthea, though, I suspect she’ll still kick him my way so she doesn’t have to be party to his coffee-inspired strops.”

“Are you finished?”

“For the moment. Let me just get you a pen and…”

“NO! Good lord, Gregory… you are treating this as if it is an agreement to meet the man for lunch.”

“I was thinking about doing lunch today at that Portuguese place Sebastian mentioned the other day. I’ve never been there, but it sounds good. What do you think?”

“That you are being beastly.”

“Nope, that’s Sebastian. But, since I did just mention him, I can understand your confusion.”

“I am NOT marrying Petras Varnas!”

“That’s true, you’re not.”

Mycroft’s mouth opened, then quickly closed with an audible snap.
“Pardon?”

“You’re not marrying Petras Varnas.”

“I… that is most surely his handwriting.”

“Oh, well yeah, but there’s a… let’s say technicality… you’re not catching. Look at my ring again and tell me what’s different about it.”

Mycroft held both rings side by side and the difference, at least one, was readily apparent.

“It has a different color of stone.”

“That’s the most important difference. The red or as I like to call it, fermented orange, stone represents the Varnas line.”

“My… I mean this… stone is not red.”

“Correct. It’s… honestly, I didn’t even think of this but it’s absolutely perfect, the evil bugger.”

“Would you care to explain?”

“I’d love to! Though the first part, the stone color, you probably already know. Different colors for different families. It’s a ceremonial thing, mostly, but the symbolism is important and you can send a fairly pointed message to a cousin who’s done a shady deal the family doesn’t approve of by using a wax seal with something other than the family’s traditional color. Anyway, Petras isn’t asking for your lovely hand as a member of the Varnas family. That comes along as part of the bargain, regardless, but he’s asking you while wearing his other hat. Or crown.”

“Crown?”

“Royal marriages for vampires are a lot like those for humans. Actually, they stick more to the old ways than we do for that sort of thing. Marriages are for building power, gaining something important like money, land, business opportunities, etc. Anyway, you’re a good fit for him in that respect since you bring a lot to the table, along with your gorgeous body and incredible sexual technique.”

“I am warning you, Gregory…”

“ANYWAY, it’s also a bit of flick to Leo’s ear to marry your sexiness under his own title, which he inherited from his mother. Their mum was a princess in her own right; her family ruled over a fair swatch of the vampire community that, though they were still technically under the thumb of the Varnas family, given the choice between obeying her or some faraway, upstart Varnas, there’s no question who those vampires would rally around. Again, similar to humans. There’s a king or president or whatnot but the local leaders hold a lot more direct day-to-day influence and power. Anyway, when Mihaela married Domantas Varnas, she retained her title, as per vampire law. Move forward a number of years and Leo inherited his father’s title after old Domantas’s death - eldest gets the higher ranking – and Petras got his mother’s when she passed. He’s the direct ruler of his mother’s people and that’s not a thing to sniff at. Domantas’s own father wanted her for his son because that group of vampires were some of the most vicious fighters and calculating manipulators that existed. Exist, I should say, because they haven’t changed a whit and I speak from experience. This one time, I had to pass through that area and I made some foolish crack about Petras… I don’t really remember the rest of the day besides a note pinned to the seat of my trousers, which were no longer on my body, that effectively said Varnas
Scum and was signed with a picture of a rude gesture. Oh, and half my blood missing, along with my hair… all of it. Everywhere.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yeah… and it’s not a small population, either! Old, well-respected, feared… perfect for you!”

“I… no, this is utterly ludicrous.”

“Imagine it, Mycroft. You get to rule over a highly significant group of vampires that positively drip with bloody, terrifying history. They’ll scarcely get out of bed if Leo calls, but Petras crooks a finger and they’re grabbing their shoes, as well as their weapons, and leaping into the fray. And the castle that goes with the title… it is precisely what you’d imagine for a vampire’s castle, including having to get there via a mountain pass and it looking down from on high over a village of peasants. Actually, it’s a village of tourists and academics, now, with a small, but rapidly growing tech sector. Our Petras encourages growth opportunities and being bloodthirsty is as important in battle as it is slaying competitors in the software/app market and gaining contracts for military drone production. You’d never know it, though, because a lot of that is housed in an old brewery which they haven’t changed the look of because of the tourists and academics. And that’s only one village! Imagine what you could bring in terms of developing their economy, while honoring tradition and that sort of thing. That whole region sees a lot of income from its ambience and atmosphere, history, scenery and they’re not eager to change that. So keep it in mind.”

“I… I see… no, I absolutely do not.”

“I’m not entirely certain what title you’d be given, because I don’t follow that sort of thing, but it’d be a good one. Maybe even prince itself! I’d have to check… I have a book on that somewhere. And, of course, you’d get the family name which you would use for official vampire things or when representing them to other communities and that, in and of itself, is a tasty treat.”

“Why?”

“Petras’s mother was Mihaela Drăculea of House Drăculești.”

“P… Pardon?”

“You heard me.”

“I…”

“And, yes, it’s exactly what you’re thinking. History is a bit mixed up about the whole business, mostly by intent because the vampires are happier that way, but the long and short of it is Petras is offering, among a lot of other things, to make you, at the very least, Count Dracula. For real.”

Holding back a laugh at Mycroft’s stunned expression was one of the hardest things Greg had ever done. It was utterly perfect for his love and that bastard Petras knew it. Actually, the whole situation was perfect for Mycroft and he, honestly, was thrilled for it. Mycroft was focusing on the wrong bits right now and that was to be expected. The important parts were that his love would have the lifelong protection of the vampire people, especially that of one of the most formidable kingdoms of that lot on the planet. He, himself, couldn’t be everywhere and know everything and the more eyes watching over his Mycroft the better. They would, too. Petras’s people were fiercely protective and loyal and Mycroft would inherit all of it.
Besides... Petras would be a good friend to Mycroft. The sort of friend who understood you in ways even your lover didn’t because they operated on the same wavelength you did. That was comforting, to his mind. There were going to be a lot of times Mycroft’s life would be hard and he wouldn’t have the understanding or perspective to say the right thing, offer the right sympathy or assistance. Petras could, though. Be an advisor, as well. This simple shopkeeper certainly didn’t know much about politics or world affairs, let alone spy craft, but that bald bastard did and that would be a safe ear to hear Mycroft’s woes and help him find a solution. What a fortunate boost it would be to his lover’s power in the magical world, also. In their world, power was greatly coveted and Mycroft was positioned, between himself and Petras, to gain a massive chunk of it. Since Mycroft was already the kingliest man he knew, it was just another perfect piece to this already perfect pie.

“It’s also smart, and scheming, that he’s asking now, rather than waiting, since it would be expected that, for an official function which baby Alex’s party actually is, you’d come with your titles and whatnot on display since it’s a show of power that reflects on the new den of dragons and the more power the better. That’ll gain the appreciation of the dragon community, at large, something that comes in very handy now and again. I’ll wear this gaudy excuse for a wedding ring, for example, because I’m coming as farty old Greg, the sorcerer, but also husband of Marcus Varnas, Crown Prince of House Varnas AND lover of Mycroft Holmes, the man who makes the rest of the world go round. For an ugly, rather smelly package that’s a lot of flash to step across the threshold of Marcus’s club to pay respects to an adorable baby and his useless dads. Petras is already playing the power and influence game which, I suspect, is something that has your approval.”

His Mycroft still wasn’t entirely listening, but the vague nodding said some of that made it through the fog. After a few moments, the nodding grew stronger and a gleam rose in his eyes.

“A bold move, to be certain.”

“That’s Petras for you. Don’t do a thing unless you do it with style. His mother was known for expressing her ennui at various meetings by taking knives she’d have hidden on her and seeing how close she could get when she hurled them at whoever was the current cause of her boredom.”

“She would have adored Sherlock.”

“You, also. Petras has never taken a spouse, real or for politics, because, Marcus thinks, he would want someone that would bring honor to his mother and her family. Congratulations, love, it’s you!”

Mycroft’s brain cleared a little more and he slotted various things Greg had said with his own observations and fed them to his mental computer for a detailed analysis. Then did it twice more to make certain the same answer was spit out on the paper tape he liked to imagine accompanied the end of a complex mental calculation.

“You mentioned you had a pen on hand?”

Greg whistled and summoned a very ornate and hefty pen that he used for extremely special occasions. And when his biro fell and rolled under the sofa.

“There you are. Sign in that big empty space and use all the flourishes you’d like. It’ll go into the family records and copies sent to the other royals, including Leo which will make him sputter and snort, to formally announce your engagement. Then it’ll be finding a time you both are free to do the actual deed.”
“Does that mean… sex?”

“Uh…”

“Oh dear lord.”

“It’s expected once to cement the bond and, to be honest, it’ll be up to you after that. You can’t gain quite the benefits I did from marrying a vampire because you’re not in my position, magic-wise, but that doesn’t mean there’s nothing to be gained. Healing, for instance. It wouldn’t be as effective as with me, since I can do a lot to heal myself, but he could definitely help you survive something nasty that landed on you unexpectedly. I could even work the same spell that I use for Marcus when I need him immediately because I’ve fallen victim to my own stupidity, not that I think you’ll ever be as stupid as me, but accidents happen, or assassination attempts, and any help for that sort of thing is something I would welcome you having. But, that’s a concern for another time. First, you have to decide you want there to be another time for that concern.”

Greg waggled the pen and, after a long look at it and a large sigh, Mycroft took the pen and signed his name on the document with what Greg recognized as an especially florid hand.

“I want to know much more about this, Gregory, however the tactical benefits are not of the sort I can ignore.”

“See? That’s why you and Petras are well suited. To be honest, I think you’ll make the most of this match and work it heavily to both your advantage. Congratulations, Mycroft! We’ll certainly have to celebrate this happy occasion.”

Mycroft shook his head at Greg’s chipper voice and hands waving in the air, but he also couldn’t stop the grin slowly spreading across his lips. There were so many reasons he loved this man. Honest and true reasons that meant no matter the fact they would both have other spouses, they were always first and foremost in each other’s hearts. Hearts that would share a residence in the very near future. His own estimate was ten days before Gregory began leaving items of convenience at his house and then no more than another two weeks before personal mementos began to appear.

And he was ecstatic for this to happen. To share his home and life with Gregory Lestrade was a joy and gift he never would have predicted, but he was going to embrace it with his whole heart and soul, never to let it go.

“Uh… Greg?”

Both men turned towards the John’s querulous voice and stared with a ‘this better be good’ stare at the doctor standing at the head of the stairs. Who was soaked head to toe with water.

“Ashiel the sprite is up here and… rather angry.”

“What am I supposed to do about that?”

“He seems to think you should just turn them into fish so they can eat them, but I suspect you’ll want to go a different way.”
Greg and Mycroft looked at each other and simply shook their heads before Mycroft folded his marriage agreement, returned it to its envelope and replaced it in the chest, minus the ring which he put into his pocket.

“I shall manage Thames Water.”

“I’ll handle the sprites. Then lunch?”

“Most certainly. One cannot jointly rule the world on an empty stomach.”