Summary

When Martin goes missing, Arthur makes a decision that leads him to an unusual new friendship.

Notes

Dear, sweet Arthur Shappey... luckily, he's a man who knows how to go with the flow... especially when Sherlock Holmes is steering the boat.
Chapter 1

“Douglas. Where’s Martin? He’s late and Martin is never late. You’re here for god’s sake, so you understand my concern.”

“Since I am not Sir’s personal assistant, Carolyn, I cannot provide you with an accurate appraisal of his location. However, I would hazard a guess that wherever he is located, it is somewhere other than here. Which is where I would most certainly like to be, as well. Have you tried calling him by any chance? Just asking, since that would seem to be the concerned thing to do.”

“Of course I’ve called him. He doesn’t answer.”

“Well, we’re on standby, anyway, so what’s the problem? We’ll probably be on standby for the next two weeks. Mr. Stanhope has a dodgy record for actually remembering he’s hired us. I mean he’s 86 year old. And has been for the last three years, per his wriggly recollection. Martin might simply be using the man’s dementia to get a bit more sleep. He’s been looking a little ragged lately. Well, more ragged than his usual state of dishevelment, so good for him having a lie-in.”

“Standby or not, Martin is supposed to be here. If the old buzzard does have a burst of memory that he’s supposed to be flying to Brazil, there has to be two pilots here to actually fly the plane. Unless you’ve been hiding a talent for instantaneous cloning, we need Martin.”

“Hi Mum! Hi Douglas! Are we having a meeting? Is it secret? Where’s Skip? Can’t have a meeting without Skip. Unless it’s secret. Why are you keeping secrets from Skip?”

“Arthur, love of my life, sit down and pretend you’re a rock.”

“But rocks don’t do anything.”

“Precisely. Unless… Arthur, you don’t know where Martin is, do you?”

Watching Arthur think always put Carolyn in mind of a dog trying to decide between the soup bone or the dead squirrel, overwhelmed by the sudden abundance of wealth.

“Well, no. Not today. I know where he was yesterday…”

“He was here yesterday, Arthur.”

“Right, like I said, I know where he was yesterday. He did look a little funny, though. And he was really quiet, too. Remember, Douglas? He didn’t even want to play I Spy and I gave him an easy one since I Spied with my little eye something that started with S. For Skip! And he drank my coffee! Both cups!”

“Now that he mentions it, Martin did seem a bit off yesterday. I mean Martin seems a bit off every day, but he was especially keeping close to vest. Not even my finest japery got a rise out of him, so I presumed he’d gone hard of hearing and missed the nuances of my bon mots. However…”

“So he was having a sulk. That’s not sufficient reason for being late. Filling your mouth with concrete, yes, but tardiness…no. Arthur, go to Martin’s house and see if he is there. Wake him up if he’s asleep, resurrect him if he’s dead, but get him here now.”

“On it, Mum. I don’t suppose I could borrow your car, though? I had a little accident with an ice cream bar. And some finger paint. The passenger’s seat is a bit sticky.”
“Good. That will trap the lazybones if he tries to escape. Now, why are you still here?”

“I’m going… I’m going…”

Arthur wished he could have lived like Skip. Well, not totally like Skip, but it would be fun to live in a big house with lots and lots of people. And new people every few years! What could be more fun than that? And he got to live in an attic! Brilliant! Like having his own clubhouse. He really should talk to Skip about having a password, though. Something like “banana” or “platypus.” Can’t be a proper clubhouse without a password and you’d have to think about who got it, since not everyone could come in or it wouldn’t be a clubhouse. It would just be a househouse and that wasn’t nearly as much fun…

“Can I help you?”

Oh, it happened again. Sometimes Arthur’s brain worked so hard that his body moved on autopilot. At least this time, he hadn’t found himself at the park. In the lake. With a duck under his jacket.

“Hi! I’m Arthur. Is Skip, I mean Martin, at home?”

“Martin? No… well, I don’t think so. He was here last night, but I haven’t seen him this morning. And his van’s not out there, is it? Sorry mate. Can’t help you.”

“Oh. Well, thanks. You don’t know where he might have gone, do you? It’s just… if I don’t come back with him, Mum’s going to get all shouty. And you don’t want to be around Mum when she’s shouty.”

It was doubtful Arthur noticed the student take a cautious step back inside the house.

“Sorry, don’t know where he’s off to. If I see him, I’ll tell him you’re looking for him.”

Arthur yelled “Ok, thanks! Bye!” through the rapidly closing door, then stood a moment wondering what to do. Mum was going to be ever so mad. Maybe if he brought back pie. Everyone was happier when they had pie.

For the next two hours, Arthur ate pie from every bakery in Fitton. He was very happy with the chocolate custard he finally brought back to the airfield. Carolyn was not.

“Where have you been? I send you to pick up Martin and you come back with pie instead? Nearly three hours later? And why didn’t you answer your phone? I thought you’d been swept up into the black hole that ate my soon-to-be ex-pilot.”

“Well, I knew you’d be mad and I didn’t want you to be mad. So, I wanted to make you not mad, but not talk to you while you were mad cause that makes me a bit nervous and… I may have lost track of time.”

“Arthur, you are my son and I love you dearly, but I could do with a reason right now not to call the orphanage and see if they have room for an additional resident.”

“I tried to pick up Skip, but he wasn’t home. His van was gone and he was gone and… then I went for pie. I’m sorry, Mum, but I thought…”

“And that was your first mistake. I have one pilot who’s decided to shirk his duty and a son who believes my company can thrive so long as we have baked goods in the pilot seat. Now might be a
good time to leave me talking to your shadow, Arthur.”

“But my shadow’s sewn to my feet. You remember, Mum. When we watched Peter Pan…”

“Out!”

Arthur scurried out of his mother’s office and decided that it was a very good time to do some cleaning on GERTI. And it gave him something to do while he thought. It wasn’t like Skip not to show up for work. He never missed a flight or a single day on standby. Never. And now, he wasn’t there and wasn’t home or at any of the bakeries in Fitton, because Arthur did look around and check while eating his pies. It wasn’t normal and that worried Arthur. Actually, as Arthur wiped down the equipment in the galley, there were other things that worried him about Skip. Like the fact that he’d lost more weight lately. And that his eyes were sometimes really sad. And all he’d say was that he was feeling under the weather, maybe caught a bit of a cold or something.

Maybe Skip had just taken the day to see a doctor. That would make sense! Going to see the doctor always took a long time with all the waiting and then the trip to get ice cream when it was over. Skip could be back later this afternoon and Mum would be, well not happy, but at least not ready to send Arthur to the orphanage, which would really be bad because he’d probably have to eat gruel and not get telly time, but he might get to share a room and have bunk beds…”

“Arthur! What in god’s name are you doing?”

“Oh, hello Douglas…polishing the metal?”

“With what? Shoe polish?”

“Well, polish is polish, isn’t it? And this was much cheaper and it sort of smells nice.”

“Arthur, not that it affects me in the least, but for your own safety, I would advise that you clean all of that off before Carolyn sees it. She’s in a right mood already because of Martin and you’re head would take up space on her wall as easily as his. Speaking of which, where is he? Weren’t you supposed to get him and deliver him up for sacrifice?”

“Skip wasn’t home. But, I think I figured it out. He’s been sort of odd lately and I suspect he’s at the doctor’s getting a checkup. He’ll probably show up later and everything will be fine.”

“Then why isn’t he answering our calls? If Martin was sick, even your mother wouldn’t deny him the time to visit a physician. She might make him sweep the runway as a penalty, but only after he’d gotten his clean bill of health.”

“I don’t know. But he might have forgotten to charge it! I do that all the time. Or lost it. I do that all the time, too. Or he might not have paid the bill. Skip does that a lot, but I haven’t. That’s probably because Mum pays the bill, though.”

“And why would Martin not pay his phone bill?”

“Oh… I wasn’t actually supposed to say anything about that. He seemed a bit huffy when I found out and made me promise not to tell. One day, Skip was very angry and had to borrow my phone to make a call and I asked him what was wrong with his and he said some things about phone bills and people who sent them that weren’t very nice. And then he said some things about Mum that weren’t… well, ok they were true, but they weren’t very nice, either. Then he went on about how a man shouldn’t have to choose between petrol and having a phone. And then he got a little confusing talking about clothes from charity shops and eating food from dented cans and I just thought about what I was going to put on my Christmas list this year until he gave me my phone
Douglas felt something oily and sickly-hot curl and settle into his stomach.

“I knew Martin wasn’t exactly flush, but I had no idea he was near to going on the road with his dog and knapsack-on-a-stick.”

“Brilliant! That would explain why he didn’t come in today! And it sounds much more fun than going to the doctor. Good for Skip. I wish he would have told me, though. I would have gone with him. And Snoopadoop could have come along and be puppy pals with Skip’s dog. What’s his name, anyway?”

There were days, few and far between, when Douglas wished he had never stopped drinking. Unsurprisingly, many of those days were filled with Arthur.

“You can ask Martin when he deigns to grace us with his presence. However, on the off chance he hasn’t forsaken his piloting career behind to become Hobo Jack, let us hope he has a very official doctor’s note to present to Carolyn or she’ll be the one putting him out on the streets through a collision between her foot and his arse.”

“And mum wears pointy shoes sometimes, so that’ll really hurt.”

“Indeed.”

3 days later

“Douglas, have you heard anything from Martin?”

Douglas thought about pointing out to Carolyn that she had asked him exactly the same question every morning since Martin’s disappearance, but the worried tone of her voice stopped him. Because he was fighting that worry, too.

“No, and before you ask, yes I did stop at that commune he calls a house and they haven’t heard any news either. I take it the police have no information?”

When Martin failed to appear at the airfield for the second day in a row, they had gone to the police station and filed a report, but neither Carolyn or Douglas was very hopeful there would be much of an effort put towards finding an able-bodied adult male who had few ties to the community and apparently vanished through the use of his own vehicle.

“No, and I have the distinct impression they are getting tired of me calling to ask for updates. What are we going to do? I mean… I’m not just concerned for MJN, even though I’ll have to start looking for a replacement if Martin doesn’t turn up soon, but I’m worried about the boy, too. And this is doing terrible things to Arthur. I’m not sure he’s slept more than a few hours a night since Martin disappeared.”

“He has family, doesn’t he? Did you try…”

“That is not a conversation I care to remember. Martin’s family has neither the knowledge of his whereabouts nor any particular interest in them. Should we… I mean MJN’s accounts are so deeply in the red that Crayola has asked me if they can make a new crayon in that particular shade… but should we offer a reward for information?”
“It’s an idea. Many a lip has been loosened by money; it could persuade someone to tell us what they know about Martin. If anyone does know anything. I don’t want to think it any more than you do, Carolyn, but Martin may simply have buggered off for greener pastures. He was having money troubles and…”

“NO! Skip wouldn’t do that!”

Arthur knew he wasn’t supposed to eavesdrop on other people’s conversations, but this was about Skip and he was in trouble so it had to be alright. But how could Douglas even think Skip would just leave them without even saying goodbye?

“Arthur, I know it’s a horrible thought and I really don’t want to believe it, but we have to consider all possibilities.”

“No. Not ever. Skip wouldn’t do that. Not to us. We’re family to him and that’s not what you do to family. Maybe he’s trapped somewhere and can’t get to a phone. Or he’s hurt. Or someone’s hurting him…”

There were too many images filling Arthur’s head and none of them were good. He almost wanted Douglas’s idea to be the right one, because at least that would mean Skip was safe and healthy. But he knew it wasn’t true; he knew deep in his heart that Martin wouldn’t do something like that ever ever ever…

“It’s alright, Arthur. Douglas doesn’t believe Martin abandoned us any more than you do. He’s just laying out all possible scenarios so we make some decisions about what to do. We all want Martin back as soon as possible. Right, Douglas?”

Even without Carolyn’s pointed stare, Douglas had no trouble agreeing with the sentiment. For all their pointed and prickly interactions, Martin was one of the few people left in Douglas’s life that he would call a friend. And he made working for MJN quite a bit more fun than any of the previous pilots Carolyn had hired.

“Absolutely. We don’t want to overlook anything and ignore any means to help find Martin.”

That made sense, even if it made Arthur a little sick to think about it. Something else was making him sick, too. It had been eating at him since he realized that Martin hadn’t just gone to the doctor for a check up. He hadn’t been able to sleep or even eat. And Mum made pancakes yesterday! With berries and everything and Arthur could barely wrestle a few bites down his throat. Douglas was right… they couldn’t ignore any means to help Skip. Even if Skip maybe didn’t want them used.

“Mum? If someone made you promise something…. really, really promise, but you think that breaking the promise might be the right thing to do, should you break the promise or keep your promise not to break the promise and…”

“Arthur! My nerves are already frayed, you idiot child. In less than ten words or not at all, please.”

“I have a super secret emergency number that we can call, but Skip might not like us using it. Damn, that was more than ten words wasn’t it? Let me try again. ‘I have a…”

“YOU HAVE A WHAT?”

There were two rather alarmed faces staring at Arthur and he began to wonder if he should just turn around and hope they didn’t notice him running away. That plan was thwarted when Douglas’s
large hands grabbed his arms, while his mother smacked him on the head with a magazine.

“You have an emergency number for Martin, you silly twit, and you didn’t tell us until now? If you weren’t my own blood, Arthur Shappey, I’d give you a trouncing you’d not soon forget. Why Arthur? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Skip said never, ever to use it unless it was the emergenciest of emergencies. Like the Martians landed and tried to make off with the Queen. Or make out with the Queen. I’m not sure which…he was really, really drunk and sort of slurry.”

“Now, Arthur. Give me the number now.”

“It’s on my phone. I stored it just in case…”

Two sets of hands jammed themselves into Arthur’s pockets, which felt sort of weird, especially since Arthur’s phone was in his car. By the time his trousers had nearly been yanked from his body, Arthur had made Douglas and his mother understand the situation and they raced outside to get to his phone.

“Are you sure about this, mum? Skip was terribly serious when he made me promise. I mean, yeah, he was also completely drunk, but he looked sort of worried when he gave me the number. Like something bad might happen because of it.”

“Something bad has happened, Arthur, and we need to use every resource we have to try and fix this. Now, give me the phone…”

“Sorry, mum. That was the other part of the promise. No one else can see the number. Just me.”

“Dear lord, Martin must have been drunk if he entrusted his welfare solely to Arthur.”

“Just do it, you useless thing! Make the call!”

“Text.”

“Pardon?”

“You mean make the text. It’s a text number. And a word. A code word. Hah! I was thinking the other day that Skip needed a secret password for his clubhouse, well, his attic… but it’s like a clubhouse since you have to go up those rickety stairs and it’s all small and sort of damp…”

“By all that is holy, Arthur, if you don’t use that phone right now…”

“Alright, alright….there. It’s done.”

“And now what?”

“Dunno, Skip didn’t say.”

Sir? There’s been a message for you.”

“Message?”

“Yes sir. A text. Just one word.”
“Oh… I see. Very well, I will need the coordinates for the phone from which the text was sent immediately. And, if you would be so kind, a little of the brandy the French ambassador left last week.”

“I take it your brother will be calling soon.”

“And it undoubtedly will be as pleasant as always.”
A cup of tea. A senseless, wonderful novel. A day off from the surgery. No case of their platter. John Watson wondered what he did to deserve such riches. Of course, that was the exact second he had to hear Sherlock’s phone blare out a noise that nearly sent John out of his chair. Not quite a ring, more like an alert, but in the time he’d known the detective, nothing as strange as this sound of an angry cat being beaten with an air-raid siren had ever been emitted from the device.

“Sherlock! You’re phone’s… ringing. Sort of.”

A strangled series of syllables came from the bathroom, jigsawing themselves into something that John interpreted as ‘why are you bothering me when you are in the same room as the phone, please try and use common sense next time and save us both the bother.’ Mrs. Hudson wasn’t Sherlock’s housekeeper and John wasn’t his butler, yet the man still managed to live like a spoiled prince. John had absolutely no idea how Sherlock had ever managed to live on his own without a sizable indentured entourage.

Laying aside his book, John picked up Sherlock’s phone and squinted to make sure he was seeing things correctly. Strange texts were commonplace on Sherlock’s phone and, sadly, on John’s of late, but this one sent something skittering through John’ skin that was unpleasantly like worry.

“You’ve got a text! And it’s a little odd. You might want to…”

“Just tell me what it says, John. I trust you to read, even if you don’t always understand what it is you’re reading.”

“Hey! There’s no cause to be insulting just because you’re mad at Lestrade, so leave off or you’ll find that gall bladder you brought home yesterday at the bottom of the bin. If you just apologize for stealing his ID again, he’ll give you a case, you stubborn prat. And your text is only one word anyway – Red.”

The bathroom door slammed open so hard, John was sure they’d owe Mrs. Hudson even more money for wall damage. Sherlock raced into the room, clad only in a pair of black silk boxers, with his toothbrush dangling from his lips. The toothbrush and a mouthful of toothpaste foam was spat out onto the floor as Sherlock grabbed the phone from John with, what John was unnerved to see, slightly shaky hands.

“What’s wrong? Sherlock, what’s the matter?”

Getting no response from his flatmate, John’s unease began to grow. Little affected Sherlock Holmes, but this text had the man so out of sorts he hadn’t bothered to wipe the trail of toothpaste that was making its way down his chin.

“Sherlock, please… tell me what’s wrong.”

John laid his hand on Sherlock’s arm and that seemed to cut through the detective’s daze.

“I’ll need you to start packing a bag for me. Enough for a few days, at least. I have to make a call.”

“Of course. Anything you need, but where are we going?”

“Not ‘we,’ John. Me. And I can’t say for certain how long I’ll be gone; I’ll know more once I
get there.”

“Where? Sherlock, you’re actually worrying me, so don’t think for one moment you’re running off and leaving me behind.”

“I don’t know where, John! That’s what I’m trying to find out if you would only leave me alone to do it!”

John refused to let Sherlock see the anger on his face because his friend was clearly distressed. Instead he clasped Sherlock’s arm even tighter a moment before he let go to find Sherlock’s travel bag.

“John? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean… I really don’t know anything right now. I’m not hiding anything from you.”

Trust had been a sore point between the men since Sherlock’s apparent death and John was taken aback that the detective was actually making an honest and conscious effort to repair that bridge. It was things like this that gave him hope their relationship was going to heal with only the smallest of scars. With a smile, John gave his friend a nod and went about his task, making sure to close the door to Sherlock’s bedroom behind him.

When he heard the click of the latch, Sherlock grabbed his phone and nearly put his finger through the screen placing the call to Mycroft.

“Let me guess - Dr. Watson had questions. Otherwise, I would have expected to hear from you a full five minutes ago.”

“Where he is, Mycroft?”

“I can tell you from where the text originated, a quaint little town called Fitton.”

“Fitton? Why in the world would Martin…”

“There’s an airfield in Fitton. However, the text was sent from a mobile registered to an Arthur Shappey whose mother, coincidentally, owns a one-jet charter service.”

“For whom Martin flies.”

“It appears so. His name is listed on the flight plans filed by MJN, however, I can find no record of income gained or taxes paid from his association with the airline. It is rather an intriguing puzzle.”

“A puzzle? You know when I purchase a substandard coffee or when John steps in chewing gum, but you are surprised by Martin’s state of employment? Has your surveillance team been napping or are they simply slothful and verging on being sent to your equivalent of Siberia. Where is that now? The Isle of Man?”

“And the Manx people thank you for your cultural sensitivity. However, despite what you believe, brother dear, I do not have every member of the British Empire under, shall we say, my watchful gaze.”

“But this is Martin. Martin… do not tell me you have neglected to keep an eye on him.”

“While Martin Crieff is our cousin, Sherlock, he is not critical enough to either of our lives anymore to warrant…”
“He is MARTIN! If anyone should have your busybody network’s attention, it is Martin. For heaven’s sake, Mycroft, Martin was thrashed to near tears in a toy store. By a girl. Three years younger than him. When he was seven!”

“My prime concern, above everything else, Sherlock, is you. Regardless of what other motives you associate with my actions, the ‘busybodying’ as you would term it, is reserved almost exclusively for you and those in your immediate circle. That number has not included cousin Martin in a very long time.”

“And now we find ourselves in this situation. Bravo, Mycroft. Well played. I’m sure if Martin is still alive he will be heartened by your concern.”

“Spare me your dramatics and take a moment to think about what I said. I do monitor those involved in your life, however, as we both acknowledge, Martin is no longer a part of that assemblage. And that was in no manner my choice. Nor do I think was it entirely his. I could offer you a robust ‘well played,’ myself were I so inclined, so take care where you cast your aspersions.”

If he had unlimited time, Sherlock would happily cast aspersions like it was a carnival game, but time was not a luxury he possessed. No matter what Mycroft chose to believe, Sherlock had never lost his regard for his cousin. Growing up, Martin was really the only acquaintance Sherlock could abide and he made long, boring summers slightly more tolerable than if Sherlock had to suffer them alone. And, though it was shameful to admit, Martin was a bit like John, always amazed by Sherlock’s genius and not hesitant to express that amazement often and eagerly.

“Now, I forwarded to you the information I currently possess, along with the location of the Fitton airfield. I will continue to forward to you any information that seems pertinent and I trust that you will reciprocate. I know that you will refuse to believe me, but I do care about Martin. I have ensured that his emergency number remained active and sent him a notice several years ago that it could be accessed by text. Further, I saw him at your…funeral. It pained me deeply that I was unable to spare the time to speak with him.”

“What? You saw Martin and did not even bother to…”

“I was a tad busy keeping Dr. Watson vertical and aware through the proceeding. He was sufficiently dissociated from the event that he did not even realize it was me who had his arm, which was fortunate for both of us, I’m quite sure. By the time John was situated in the car after the service, Martin had gone.”

The sharp stab of guilt had become familiar to Sherlock, but the pain had not diminished in the slightest. He had so much to make up for with John.

“When I have sorted whatever is wrong with Martin, we will have a conversation, Mycroft.”

“I look forward to that, Sherlock, as I do always.”

Sherlock’s retort was to remain unspoken since Mycroft terminated the call. The detective thought about calling his brother again, to deliver his final, parting shot, but heard a shuffling behind him that put the idea out of his mind.

“I…ummm… I pulled together some things for you, Sherlock, but you’ll have to round it out yourself.”

“You heard?”

“Only the last bit. This, Martin… I take it he’s important to you.”
There was something in John’s voice that Sherlock hadn’t heard before and if the situation wasn’t so pressing, he would pounce on the new puzzle like a cat on a mouse. As it was, he would have to store away the tone of John’s voice and the almost wistful look in his eyes for later analysis.

“He is my cousin. We spent time together when we were children. His siblings were nearly as insufferable as Mycroft and there were two of them.”

Was that relief Sherlock now saw on John’s face? This was the worst time to be presented with a mystery that involved his best friend, because nothing could slow him down now that Martin used his emergency signal.

“And he’s in trouble, I take it.”

“Before I left for Uni, I had Mycroft establish for Martin a number to call and a code word to use in case there was an emergency and he needed help. Martin was… Martin was the sort of child one associates with emergencies, but he has never used it. Not until now. I have to go, John. I do not have a choice.”

“Can’t you just call first, and find out what’s…”

“The text did not come from his phone. I have no sense of the situation and if Martin did not send the text, it would be inadvisable to send word that help is coming.”

“Makes sense, I guess, but that would make having back-up even more important. Give me a minute and I’ll pull together a few things…”

“Not this time, John. That number… it was only supposed to be used when the problem was beyond the reach and abilities of the authorities.”

“You mean like most everything you take on.”

“True, but you don’t know Martin. If he is aware the text was sent, then his assessment of the situation is extraordinarily grim. And if he didn’t send the text, then that is another problem altogether.”

“All proving my point that…”

“That I need to do this alone. I have full faith in your ability to assist me in the work, John, but this is one case that I need to take on by myself.”

There was nothing but silence in 221B while each man looked at the other, not really wanting to know what was going on in the other’s head. Finally, John reached out and handed Sherlock the packed bag.

“It’s a family thing. I understand that, even if I don’t like it. I wouldn’t want you to get involved in any of Harry’s difficulties, truth be told. You’ll keep me updated, right? I… it would be really helpful if I just knew what was going on… and that you were ok.”

There was a time Sherlock would have scoffed at John’s request, but that time lived far away in their past.

“I promise that I will not leave you in the dark. Once I assess the nature of the problem, I will provide you with the details. Depending on the need for information, I may require your assistance as liaison with Scotland Yard.”
“Since Greg’s got an unsigned arrest warrant on his desk just waiting to be filled in with your name?”

With John’s grin, a large knot of tension in Sherlock’s chest began to unwind and the smile he gave John in return was as much one of gratitude as it was of amusement.

“I will neither confirm nor deny that statement.”

“I would expect no less, you slippery bastard. Finish packing and I’ll put together a little something for the drive. Or are you taking the train?”

“I’ll know in a few minutes if… oh, it looks like Mycroft is mobilizing faster than I expected.”

John joined Sherlock at the window to see a large black car parked at the curb, with a new Land Rover idling directly behind. One of Mycroft’s anonymous minions got down from the driver’s seat of the car and into the black sedan, which pulled away as silently as it arrived.

“At least he brought you something nice. Now, get yourself together and I’ll set you up with a picnic basket, which you will promise not to toss out at the first service area.”

“You have exhausted my storehouse of promises for one day, doctor. You really should think ahead if you are going to be so demanding.”

“When you sort things out with your cousin, ask him if he needs a flatmate. I may be in the market for one very soon.”

“Nonsense. Anyway, I am quite certain that your search for a flatmate would go exactly as well as your search for a girlfriend.”

“Well… you would know.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Sherlock meets the crew of MJN...

“MUM! DOUGLAS! HURRY BEFORE IT VANISHES!”

Neither Carolyn nor Douglas had run as fast in years as they did hearing Arthur’s piercing yell. When they made it outside and stared across at Arthur, they understood the volume. A car’s length away from Arthur stood a tall, thin man with a wealth of dark curls to match his dark coat. And he was wearing Martin’s face.

“I would appreciate you ceasing to call me ‘it’ and answering my question. Where is Martin Crieff?”

The man’s rich baritone sounded ridiculous coming from Martin’s mouth, but that was the least of the MJN crew’s concerns. Hours after Arthur makes his text, Martin’s twin arrives, but the captain remains nowhere to be seen. The mystery was deepening and that couldn’t mean good things for their pilot.

“MUM! DOUGLAS!”

“Yes, Arthur, we see him. Hello, I am Carolyn Knapp-Shappey, CEO of MJN…”

“I know who you are, now take me to Martin.”

“Good to know our mysterious visitor isn’t burdened by inconsequentials like manners or communication skills.”

“Douglas, do shut up. Now see here, young man, we have our own questions and perhaps they are better asked when we’re all sitting nicely…”

“I have no time for tiresome conversation. If you will not assist me, I shall find Martin myself.”

The man whirled around and stalked towards the portacabin, only to find his way blocked by a large and unimpressed First Officer.

“Assuming you just didn’t stop by for a little chat with Captain Crieff, it would be to all our advantage to have a civilized discussion about Martin’s whereabouts. And, of course, how you fit in to the discussion will be the first topic of our dialogue.”

The mutual glaring might have gone on for an extended time, if it hadn’t been for Arthur sidling up next to their visitor and attempting to surreptitiously poke him in the back.

“I assure you I am neither a spectre nor an apparition. And, if you take the time to observe, I am quite a bit taller than my cousin and decidedly not ginger. Now, this ridiculous posturing is wasting time that should best be put towards taking me to Martin. Unless you are the reason he used his emergency call in the first place, in which case I hope you are sufficiently prepared to defend yourself.”
“Gentlemen, this is getting us nowhere. I think we can agree that Martin’s well-being is important to all of us. Now, as I was saying, I am Carolyn Knapp-Shappey. The great lummox in your way is Douglas Richardson, my First Officer. And the monkey trying to groom you is my son, Arthur.”

Who quickly lowered his hands from picking stray threads from the man’s nice blue scarf.

Looking at each of the MJN crew in turn, the man seemed to reach a decision and let his stance relax just a hair.

“My name is Sherlock Holmes and Martin is…”

“She DETECTIVE! WITH THE HAT! BRILLIANT!”

“Arthur, do you know this man?”

“He was in the papers, Mum. He’s famous for solving crimes. And dying. And coming back like the baby Jesus. But he wasn’t a baby when he died. Then, neither was Mr. Sherlock…”

“Thank you, Arthur. Now, Mr. Holmes…”

“And he’s Skip's cousin! This is amazing… Skip has a famous detective for a cousin. But he never told us? Why wouldn’t Skip tell us something as brilliant as that? Oh my… Skip was undercover, wasn’t he? That’s it! That explains why he vanished…”

Sherlock grabbed Arthur by the shoulders and stared into Arthur’s wide eyes.

“Martin has disappeared?”

“Well… yes. He’s been gone for days and no one knows where he is. But if he’s an undercover detective…”

“Martin is not a detective. You… your phone is the one from which the text was placed. Why does Martin have your mobile?”

“You see, it’s like this. We were in Oslo and Skip had a few drinks, well more than a few drinks, since I saw him have four and he’d been there awhile before I went looking for him. I got him to leave and we were walking back to the hotel. Well I was walking and Skip was sort of… flopping. But, then Skip sees these men across the road and he starts to get nervous. Then I got nervous when they started following us and it was lucky that the hotel was just a few blocks away because I grabbed Skip’s arm and we ran as fast as we could and they didn’t follow us once we got inside the lobby. But, then this really, really big man came out of the elevator and Skip ran into him and he got so mad, which didn’t make sense since it was an accident, but anyway… the man got mad and turned a scary shade of red and shoved Skip against the wall. I thought he was going to hit Skip, but then Skip threw up on the man’s shoes and that made the man go from red to green, so I grabbed Skip and ran away again. When we got to Skip’s room…”

“Does this in any way have anything to do with the fact Martin is using your phone?”

“I’m getting there, Mr. Sherlock. I want to be sure you have all the facts because I know detectives need facts and I don’t want to leave any out so you can’t do your detecting properly.”

How that simple concept, completely ignored by everyone else Sherlock had to speak to during a case, was understood fully by Arthur Shappey was yet another small enigma among the many that was dotting the map of this problem. And, strangely, the detective was fairly convinced that
anything Arthur said would be the truth, so far as he knew it. There was something about the man that said he might burst into flames if he even tried to tell a lie.

“Now where was I? Oh yeah! When we got to Skip’s room, he started going on about there being nowhere safe and how if he’d gotten into real trouble, there wouldn’t be anyone to get him help and he wasn’t ready to die yet and meet the end of the world in a pool of sick. That’s when Skip pulled out his phone and made me put a number into my phone and made me memorize the code word that went with it. That was the easy part. I could remember ‘Red’ since that’s the color of apples and… have you ever just sat there and tossed an apple hand to hand…”

“Martin simply gave you his emergency code?”

“Well, like I said he was pretty upset. And rather drunk. But he said that I should never use it unless there was an emergency like Godzilla stomping through Fitton. Well, he didn’t exactly say that, but that’s what I was thinking about when he described how big the emergency had to be before…”

“Yes, I think I understand. Thank you, Mr. Shappey.”

“Arthur! You have to call me Arthur, Mr. Sherlock. You’re Skip’s cousin and he calls me Arthur, so you have to, too.”

“Yes, fine… Arthur. Now, can you make tea?”

Arthur felt like he had waited his whole life for this moment.

“Mr. Holmes, I appreciate your need for nice cup after your long drive, however… well, oh no… there he goes. So, I hear you were dead… fancy another go at it?”

While Sherlock sipped what Arthur assured him was tea, he questioned the members of MJN for all information pertaining to Martin’s disappearance, which amounted to frustratingly little.

“And he said nothing about any disagreements, romantic entanglements…”

“If Martin had any romantic entanglements, we would have heard every sordid detail. Ad nauseum. In Technocolor.”

“No enemies…”

“One has to actually know people to have enemies, Mr. Holmes and Martin, while not actually bestowed with the title of hermit, was sufficiently hermit-like as to warrant a beard and malodorous cave. Actually a cave would be a notable step up from his current hovel.”

Sherlock wasn’t sure he appreciated Douglas’s attitude towards Martin, but he was sure he didn’t like the picture he was putting together of his cousin’s life.

“Mr. Holmes, Martin is very dear to us. I don’t know what you normally charge, but I will gladly pay it if you can find him and bring him back safely.”

“I do not want your money, Mrs. Knapp-Shappey; I only want Martin’s location known and his health verified. I am learning nothing here; who else is employed at this airfield? I need to speak with everyone with whom Martin may have had contact.”
“Practicing those manners again are we, Dupin? You might want to rethink your approach with the rest of the lads. They aren’t as forgiving of public school tits who give them a bit of a look-down as some of us.”

“Something for you to consider, Mr. Richardson, as you ponder adding a third…no, fourth wife to your ledger.”

“Spoken by someone whose matrimonial ledger has yet to see any ink, if I read things right. Dating record is probably just as dry. Care for a few tips?”

“Douglas, shut up. Do not antagonize the one person who might be able to find Martin. And do it for free. Now, Mr. Holmes, I would be happy to show you around our airfield and introduce you to…”

“Oh! Mum! Can I do it? Please, can I? Help Mr. Sherlock do his detecting and investigating and all that? Please…”

The final please was drawn out so long, Sherlock had time to empty his remaining tea into a potted plant without Arthur noticing.

“Arthur dear, I’m sure Mr. Holmes would perhaps be more… efficient… at his work if…”

“He may assist if he likes. I can ignore him as easily as I can anyone else.”

“Good to know our Arthur will be in caring hands.”

“Douglas, not one more word. As you wish, Mr. Holmes. Anything to get Martin back. Arthur… do try and listen to Mr. Holmes and for heaven’s sake try and keep your mouth shut.”

“Oh, mum. Mr. Sherlock do you want me to go to your car and get your hat?”

Perhaps Arthur was not the best assistant Sherlock could have chosen.

“I do not wear a hat.”

“But in the papers…”

“Hang the papers! There is no hat!”

“Oh, well alright. I know… I can make you a hat. Done it before and they turn out brilliant!”

Sherlock, for now one more reason, hoped he would find Martin very, very quickly.

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As Arthur scrambled to find his jacket and Carolyn followed after to make sure he didn’t get lost, Douglas pulled Sherlock aside for their own little chat.

“Now see here, Mr. London Detective, I don’t know who you are and, frankly, I don’t care. What I do know is that you say you’re Martin’s cousin yet I’ve not heard one word about you, not even your name mentioned, in the vast quantity of empty time I’ve had to endure sitting next to Martin. And our captain is not one to hide anything about his life that could be described in boastful terms. If you’re playing some game with us, be aware that Arthur’s hat won’t be the worst thing in Fitton that lands on your head.”

“He is your friend.”
“You say that like it’s a surprise.”

To some extent, it was. Sherlock was still very new to the concept of friendship that the subtleties and variations of the interactions still remained outside his understanding.

“You do not speak of him as a friend.”

Something that Douglas knew well, and which wasn’t always a source of pride.

“Well, Martin and I have an unusual relationship, perhaps, but then…Martin is an unusual person. However, I do value his company and have a concern for the man. So let me be very clear. The only thing of importance right now is finding Martin and bringing him back safely. If you think you can do that, then we have no problem. Do we have a problem, Mr. Sherlock Holmes?”

There wasn’t a person in the world who could make Sherlock feel physically threatened, but he would credit Douglas with enough honest menace to make him think a second about his reply.

“As long as you do not hinder my investigation in any way, then we have no problem, Mr. Douglas Richardson. I, too, want only to see Martin safe. Now, if you will excuse me, I hear either Arthur calling for me or a dyspeptic goose giving a mating call.”

“You will keep me informed, I assume.”

“If it is convenient.”

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“This is Brilliant! I get to help Sherlock Holmes on a case!”

“You could start by actually locating for me someone to talk to about Martin. So far, you have provided me with a tour of your aircraft, the parking lot…”

“Well, yeah… I guess I’ve been a little excited and show-offy. We’ve never had a detective here before. And I did think you might want to see those places since Skip flies the plane and parks in the parking lot and there could be clues, but… yeah, we can go find the crews. They’re probably in the secret pub that no one’s supposed to know about, but everyone knows about…”

“That rather invalidates the term “secret.”

“True, but if everyone agrees it’s a secret, isn’t that just as good as it being a real secret?”

“No.”

“Oh, well then, I’ll tell Mum. And Douglas. And Carl…”

“Can we simply go there, if it is not too much trouble?”

“Right Away! Let’s see, it was in the spidery section of the grounds maintenance shed, and then they moved it when one of the fire crew got bit and his arm swelled up like a beach ball. A big pulsing, shiny beach ball. Do you like the beach, Mr. Sherlock? You’re sort of white, which makes me think no, but some people go to the beach a lot, but stay under umbrellas the whole time. Or smear their faces with that really strong lotion. So, I guess you can’t say that being white means you don’t like the beach. I think you’d like the beach, actually, there’s so much stuff to do and see and people to watch…”

“I am not fond of the beach, Arthur.”
But, Sherlock had to admit, Arthur’s observations concerning his lack of color not correlating with degree of beach exposure was an interesting one. And not one that would immediately have entered Sherlock’s mind, since he avoided the seashore like a plague ship.

“Oh, that’s a shame. I was thinking that when we found Skip we could all celebrate and go to the beach! Well, not now, since it’s sort of cold. And drizzly. But when it’s warm and sunny… or you could come with us when we go somewhere nice. That could be a present for finding Skip for us! That would be brilliant! I’ll need to get a new suit, since my old one is a bit ratty, and I’ll have to check when Mum and Douglas can come. Oh, and you can bring someone, too. It can be a party! And…”

“Arthur. Do you really want to help me?”

“More than anything. Seriously, more than anything at all in the world right now.”

“Will you then agree to take me to the not-at-all-clandestine, but definitely illegal, pub and, while on the way, provide me with just a few minutes of silence so I may process the information I have gathered so far.”

“Sure! I can do that. I can do a great job, of it, too. Just you wait and see. You just follow me like a baby duck follows it’s mother, which is really fun to watch by the way, and…”

“Arthur…”

“Shutting up.”

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“Here we go. I’ll… well, I’ll wait out here for you.”

That was the first break Sherlock had seen in Arthur’s cheeriness. The hesitation and bit of unease on his face made Sherlock pause and surprise himself by making the inquiry.

“Why won’t you come inside?”

“Nothing. No reason.”

Sherlock was wrong, Arthur didn’t burst into flames when he told a lie, but it was a near thing.

“Why are you lying?”

“I’m not. Well, not really. It’s not a big deal that they don’t especially want me in there. I mean, I don’t drink much, cause I get really silly when I drink, and I don’t follow the matches or have lots of stories about school or my mates and I don’t like to really talk about, you know, what goes on between people on dates and things, I don’t think it’s polite, you know what I mean? And no one really seems to like the sort of things I like so… that sort of leaves me…”

“They do not want you there because you are not like them.”

“It sounds kind of mean when you say it like that.”

“The truth often is.”

“Yeah, I guess, but they’re not bad people, I mean…”

Sherlock would have no idea what Arthur meant since he grabbed Arthur’s arm and propelled him
through the door of the abandoned vehicle shed.

“Now, I will not need you while I am interviewing these people. Go and sit at the… piece of metal being held up by sawhorses… and purchase a drink. While you are there, I want you to make a list of any friends Martin has outside of his job and also any passengers with whom he has experienced any altercation. I will join you when I am finished.”

Sherlock dug into his pocket and pulled out a few notes, which he pressed into Arthur’s hand before pushing him towards the makeshift bar.

“Ok! Bye!”

With Arthur settled, the detective turned his attention to the sea of staring eyes and chose one pair as his first target.

“You, I need to talk to you.”

“And just who might you be? I haven’t seen you before and you definitely have no business in our private club, even with Arthur on your arm.”

“There are many people I might be, and have been when the situation called for it, but at this moment I am the person looking into the disappearance of Martin Crieff. Now, when was the last time you saw him?”

“Oh, the Captain’s gone missing? Well, that’s a surprise. I thought it would take an act of god to pry him away from GERTI. Where’s he gone off to, then?”

“If I knew that, I would not be looking for him, would I?”

“Fair enough. Well, I ain’t seen him, so if you don’t mind…”

Sherlock’s grip was more formidable than most would assume. At least those who forgot the years of practice on his violin.

“I do, thank you. Now, when is the last time you saw Martin Crieff.”

“Fine. The last time I saw Martin Crieff was… was… I don’t know. He spends his time flying the plane, now doesn’t he? Not much cause for his Captainship to roam around the airfield, is there?”

“And I assume he is not a regular patron of your lovely tavern.”

“The Skipper? Hah! He tried, once, but he’s not really the sort to fit in around here. Had to move the whole place to get a bit of peace.”

“A bit of peace?”

“Well, you’ve met him, right? Going on and on about flying. Bloke doesn’t talk about anything else and we come here to get away from all that; don’t really want it dragged in right behind us.”

“I see. And Arthur? I take it he is also kept at arm’s length so you can ‘get a bit of peace.’”

“Oh well, Arthur… not much in common with the rest of us. And does he ever stop nattering on about… everything? Funny how he can talk nonstop and not touch on one normal topic that anyone else might want to listen to. Not that he’s a bad fellow, real nice guy, Arthur is. Just not…”
“One of your sort?”

“Yeah, you get it.”

“I think I do. No one wants a freak in their little club.”

“Hey! There’s no call for that! No one called anyone a freak…”

“Don’t worry, your message was quite clear. Since you are not only stupid, but pitifully unobservant, your use to me is negligible. Maybe the next person I interview will be a more valuable human being.”

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“Mr. Sherlock! Looks like we were lucky we got here when we did. The place was full earlier on and now… lots of people have been leaving. Must be time for their dinner. I understand that. Mum gets angry if I’m late for dinner and don’t call. Did you have any luck?”

Sherlock took a seat next to Arthur and had to smile when he caught a whiff of the apple juice Arthur was drinking.

“No one saw Martin leave the night he disappeared and no one noticed anyone talking to him during the days before his disappearance. All in all, no useful information has come out of any of my interviews.”

“That’s too bad. But really no one here really knew Skip to say if he was doing anything odd or meeting strangers or anything. Oh, here’s my lists.”

“This one is blank.”

“That’s the one for Skip’s friends.”

“Martin doesn’t have any friends?”

“None that I know of. I mean, there’s the people he lives with, but they just share the house. And they’re always new ones coming and old ones going. My other list is better.”

It would have to be. Sherlock carefully folded the blank piece of paper and put it into his pocket. Blank and empty… apparently a good description of what Sherlock actually knew about his cousin.

“The man with the orange socks. That woman who smelled like leeks. Mr. Leeman. That angry lady from Unbeaten Track Travel. Mr. Leeman. You wrote him twice.”

“Well, he was especially mean to Skip. Made him cry and everything.”

“He sounds promising.”

“Yeah, too bad he’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“I sort of killed him with a fire extinguisher.”

Sherlock had to admit to being somewhat impressed.

“You do not need to include the dead on your list of suspects. And I do not suppose you have
actual names for any of these others?’”

“No, but Mum might. I don’t remember names very well, but I can usually remember something about them, like if their voice is all high and shrieky or if they have very tiny hands.”

“I also find that a name is not necessarily a useful piece of information about a person, but distinguishing features often can be invaluable in identifying a perpetrator.”

“I know! If you go to the zoo and ask for Mrs. Whatsit, no one knows who you mean, but if you ask for the woman with the bright purple hair everyone knows who that is!”

“Quite.”

“Is there anyone left here you need to talk to, Mr. Sherlock?”

“No, I believe I have drained dry this very shallow pool of data. Regardless, I have had my fill of ‘conversation’ with the patrons.”

“Oh, didn’t you have a nice time talking to everyone?”

“Not my cup of tea in terms of topics of discussion.”

“No? What do you like to talk about?”

“Science, forensics… matters related to my cases. Perhaps not everyone’s areas of interest.”

“I think those sound like lots of fun. You can talk to me about any of that – it would be brilliant!”

And Arthur would find all of it brilliant. A blind man, but obviously not one that hung about a ramshackle illicit pub, could see Arthur loved learning about new and interesting things.

“What about you? What do you like to talk about, Arthur?”

“Almost everything! Movies and plants and airplanes and animals… I love talking about animals. Do you like animals, Mr. Sherlock?”

“I like… bees.”

“I LOVE BEES! I have two books about bees at home. It’s brilliant they way they build their hives and dance. Who would have thought bees would dance?”

“Actually, the reason bees dance…”

And an hour and two more apple juices passed before Sherlock remembered there was actually a job to do.
“Well, what have you learned? I’m not paying you by the hour, you know.”

“You are not paying me at all, Mrs. Knapp-Shappey, if you remember correctly.”

“Hah! That’s another you have in common with Skip!”

“Not now, Arthur. Mr. Holmes, do you have any ideas? Clues? Suspects?”

Yes, yes and no. But Sherlock wasn’t prepared to share his preliminary theories. And he made a mental note to follow up on Arthur’s comment about Martin’s pay.

“I need to see Martin’s house. If you will give me the address…”

“I can show you! You’ll need someone along anyway because you won’t know if anything’s missing or rearranged or added or…”

“I believe I have caught your meaning, Arthur. Thank you.”

And, Arthur’s meaning was actually along the lines Sherlock had already been thinking, though it had been Martin’s housemates to which his attention had been turned.

“Arthur… Martin doesn’t live near you and I’d say your social circles do not overlap in anyone’s Venn diagram. Why would you know the current status of his, and I use this term perilously loosely, home?”

“I don’t know about any diagrams, Douglas, except the ones in some of my books. I like the ones that show you all the parts of something, like a clock or a volcano or a broom…”

“Broom, Arthur? There’s only two parts to a broom – the handle and the… sweeping part.”

“Yeah, but with a diagram, I KNOW there’s only two parts and there’s not something hiding on the inside.”

“Like the cleaning pixies.”

“Now you’re being silly. There are much nicer places for pixies to live.”

The collective sigh from the other three persons in the portacabin nicely rustled the papers on Carolyn’s desk.

“Touche. But, back to my original point – why do you have up-to-date knowledge of Martin’s living environment when you are not what one would call friends?”

Arthur looked like he had taken a knife to the heart…

“I… I’m not Skip’s friend? Did he… did he say something?”

…and the knife was being twisted. Luckily, Carolyn was a veteran of implementing damage control with her son.

“Nonsense. What this enormous trout was trying to say was that he didn’t know you were so close a friend to Martin. Isn’t that right, Douglas?”
What Douglas actually thought was immaterial since he was being mentally crippled by the combined glares of his employer and the visiting detective.

“Absolutely, my distress over our dear captain’s disappearance has impaired my usual flair for precise, yet scintillating, communication.”

“Oh, that’s ok, Douglas. I just didn’t want… I mean if Skip had said something…”

“Are you ready to go, Arthur or do we need to stand here and continue to waste time?”

For once, Douglas was rather glad of Sherlock’s rudeness. Especially since he felt sure the rudeness was somewhat calculated, in this case.

“I am! Let me get my keys and…”

“We shall be taking my vehicle. Yours is not fit to accept passengers with the ice cream/fingerpaint glue you have layered on the seat.”

“Wow! You knew which one was my car and I didn’t even tell you. Brilliant! You’re simply amazing.”

“The clues were subtle, but I did my best.”

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“Right over there. It should be ok to park on the street. I mean no one’s ever bothered my car, but this one is so nice. You must make a lot of money being a detective. That would explain your nice clothes, too. I bet you live in an enormous house and have a huge telly and everything.”

“Money is not the motivator for my work and I have little use for television besides news programs, and those only rarely report relevant detail to be worthwhile. I live in a flat in London which suits my needs but could hardly be called enormous, though there is an agreeable amount of space for John and myself.”

Sherlock thought about leaving the car unlocked and unalarmed, just to irritate his brother, but realized that Mycroft’s revenge might take the form of failing to provide replacement transportation, leaving Arthur’s car as the only expedient option.

“John… that’s Dr. Watson, isn’t it? I remember his name from the papers, too. He seems very nice. It must have been terrible for him when you were dead. Well, not real-dead but pretend-dead. I hope you got him balloons or cake when you got back. Those always make me feel better when I’m sad and I’m sure Dr. Watson was very sad being all alone like that for so long. I’d need balloons and cake if I was that sad.”

‘Very sad’ didn’t come close to describing what John went through. Over Mycroft’s half-hearted protests, Sherlock had watched pieces of the surveillance videos and read through the stacks of reports on his friend for the time when he was ‘gone.’ In truth, Sherlock suspected that Mycroft was quite happy to let his brother know the depths of his flatmate’s despair over his supposed passing. Looking through the evidence of what John suffered, Sherlock wasn’t sure he wanted this new heart he was forced to discover. How could anything be worth that amount of pain? And, no one as good and decent as John Watson should have to suffer for someone like him. It was wrong. It was an injustice. And Sherlock had no idea how to pay John back for the hurt he’d caused. Or ease the pain his friend still struggled with every day.

“John is not what one would call a ‘balloons and cake’ person.”
“Ok, then what did you get him?”

Sherlock had assumed that if he ever did grow a conscience, it would not have taken an Arthur-like form.

“I did not get him anything. I returned and… we took up where we left off. It has been a very agreeable arrangement.”

Arthur stared at him with surprisingly familiar narrowed eyes and nearly tumbled over a bush before pulling his full attention away from the man walking next to him.

“You said that last bit too fast.”

“Pardon?”

“That last bit – you said it really fast. Faster than the other words in front of it. That means you’re telling a lie. Or part of a lie. Or you’re trying to hide something. With a lie. It’s like when I let Skip try a piece of my Banana Bonanza and he said it was good. But he said that very fast. And then he had to spend a little while in the loo.”

“I see. And do you have empirical data to support your conclusion.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

At least Arthur did not try and pretend so that Sherlock had to take the steps to reveal his ignorance. That was… refreshing.

“Have you actually gathered evidence or done an experiment to back up your idea?”

“Well, not one like you see on the telly with burbling liquids and computers and people with white coats, but I do pay attention to things. Sometimes. When they are interesting or fun or seem important.”

“I suppose there is a place for anecdotal evidence when drawing conclusions.”

It was a grudging admission, but Sherlock had to admit he’d resorted to non-quantified observations when he’d had no other choice. And, also grudgingly admitted, the observation had been a good one.

“So you admit I’m right and you’re hiding something.”

“I would not go that far.”

At least Martin lives in sizable house.”

“Oh yeah, it’s pretty big. Has to be, doesn’t it, with all the people living here.”

“All the people? How many housemates does Martin have?”

“Ummmm… I don’t know. There’s always people coming and going and they get replaced every few years…”

“Why? Are they transient workers?”
“Does that mean students?”

“No.”

“Then… no.”

“Martin lives with students?”

“Yep. From the agricultural college. He’s like the old dad amongst the kiddies. But don’t tell him I said that. Sometimes it makes him upset that he’s been here so long and all the students go off and find new places to go and people to meet.”

That picture of his cousin’s life that Sherlock was trying to avoid painting was gaining color at too rapid a rate.

“And how long has Martin lived here?”

“Oh, going on ten years now.”

Garish, ugly color. It took several minutes on knocking for the door to open and the state of sobriety of the girl on the other side of the threshold didn’t instill in Sherlock a great deal of confidence that his interviews would be very productive.

“Oh Hi! We’re here to see Martin’s room, if that’s ok. I’m Arthur. I work with Skip. This is Sherlock Holmes the world-famous detective. He’s Skip’s cousin – isn’t that brilliant!”

“I seen you in the papers. Didn’t look much like Martin then, but here in the flesh… wish Martin had flesh a little more like yours, if you know what I mean.”

Even Arthur understood the body language and both men took her failure to refuse entry as permission to slither by her with as little contact as possible and enter the house. Inside, there seemed to be a party going on and the space was crowded with young people gripping beer bottles and music blaring through the stereo.

“Please tell me this is an aberrant event.”

“Come again.”

“Is this unusual?”

“Depends. Sometimes, like during exams, it’s very quiet. But, Skip’s got earplugs and he says he’s used to it.”

After ten years, he should be. Sherlock would already be incarcerated for mass murder, but Martin was always one of the more accepting members of the family. Arthur stood against the wall, twitching and wriggling slightly as he tried to hide his desire to start dancing while he waited for Sherlock to give him instructions and, for once, the detective was a bit at a loss. With a party going on, assessing the condition of the common rooms wasn’t likely to yield any leads and with interviews needing to be put on hold until the tenants had systems free from cheap alcohol, Sherlock took a very uncharacteristic step by asking Arthur to lead the way. Maybe it was the way his whole face lit up, but Sherlock couldn’t help but think about John when something made him happy. There wasn’t a sight more luminous than John’s face shining with delight.

“Right! Well, Skip doesn’t spend much time down here besides in the kitchen, so we can look in there.”
With the detective trailing behind him, Arthur cut through the group of students clustered at the kitchen door and stopped beside the cabinets.

“That’s Skip’s area. And he gets a corner of the fridge, too.”

He pointed to one small cabinet that, when opened, certainly didn’t contain any information. It barely contained any food.

“He must have packed for an extended time away…”

“Nah, it always looks like that.”

“So he eats out often or has take-away.”

“Ummm… no.”

Sherlock opened the refrigerator and Arthur indicated the space set aside for Martin’s food. Not that he needed to provide the assistance, because there was only one empty space in the appliance. Sherlock was surprised that he needed to take a deep breath before he could actually speak.

“Where is Martin’s food, Arthur?”

“Well, this is pretty much what Skip has whenever I’ve been here. Actually, that’s not true. Sometimes there’s a loaf of bread in his room or a box of tea. There’s not much, is there?”

It was hard to miss that Arthur couldn’t bring himself to look inside the refrigerator and had quietly closed the cabinet so that was out of view also. A quick look around found the rest of the cabinets filled with an appropriate quantity of food, admittedly questionable in nutritional value, and the current party was certainly not lacking in snacks and drinks.

“Sometimes, the students let him have their leftovers, though. Only if its really, really leftover, though. Skip is adamant about that. And… and I do try and bring things by when I visit. He won’t let me buy him any food, but sometimes he doesn’t mind if I drop by something Mum forgot to freeze.”

“Or you tell him Carolyn forgot to freeze.”

Arthur had a complete inability to hide his thoughts or emotions, so it was a good thing he didn’t even think to try.

“No… it’s not like that. Mum does forget sometimes to put things away. Especially if she can’t find them when she goes looking.”

With his eyes looking everywhere but at Sherlock, it was easy to see that even this bit of deception was difficult for him to handle. But he still tried his best for Martin’s sake.

“That’s good… that’s good of you, Arthur. Not everyone would be… or apparently has been… as attentive to Martin’s situation and welfare as you.”

And, though it was true, Sherlock had a somewhat difficult time adding ‘and that’s what friends are supposed do, so you are a good friend to Martin.’ In theory, Sherlock was very aware of what was involved in a bond of friendship, but he still found it daunting to meet the criteria in a meaningful way, even though he desperately wanted to for John’s sake.

“Thanks Mr. Sherlock! I try. I really, really do. Want to see Martin’s room now?”
“We might as well. I doubt I shall learn anything from the rest of the house at this point.”

Arthur pushed through the people and led Sherlock upstairs and to the final leg towards Martin’s room.

“Martin lives in the attic?”

“Yeah, it’s…”

Sherlock left Arthur standing at the steps to the attic and barged into each room on the floor, eliciting more than one shriek or yell of irritation. Nice rooms, decently sized, though deplorably kept in many cases. Then he rapidly climbed up to the attic and felt his last small hope dashed looking around at his cousin’s home of many years.

Martin’s space was neat, but it was easy to be neat when one owned little in the way of… anything. A bed, a table a computer so old and out-dated that it would make even John’s laptop look cutting-edge. A few hand-built model airplanes served as decorations and there were books stacked in various parts of the room, all relevant to airplanes or aviation. Beyond that, there was very little of note.

“If I make a comment about Martin having packed up his belongings, you’ll interrupt me again, won’t you Arthur.”

“Sorry, Mr. Sherlock. I haven’t looked carefully, yet, but… yeah, this is about all there is. I’ll check the closet, though.”

The closet was a part of the attic cordoned off by a dark blue curtain and Arthur completed his inspection very quickly.

“It looks like about half of his clothes are gone.”

The remaining three shirts and two pairs of trousers stared sadly back at Sherlock. And, of course, there was Martin’s uniform. Neatly pressed and freshly laundered. It looked very lonely.

Sherlock looked around the attic room, desperate for any sign of either Martin’s whereabouts or some indication that all was not as grim as it appeared.

“I know it’s a bit bleak, but you can pretend it’s like a clubhouse if it makes you feel better. That’s what I do.”

“And Martin?”

For some reason, it bothered Sherlock to see darkness in Arthur’s eyes.

“I don’t think he pretends. I think he just does the best he can.”

With a nod, Sherlock began a more thorough investigation of Martin’s room and belongings, interrupted only by the sound of his mobile ringing.

“In my coat pocket. Please tell whoever it is that I am rather busy trying to work.”

Whoever being Mycroft. John would text.

“Oh! Can I tell them I’m your assistant?”

“You are serving that role.”
“Brilliant!”

Arthur actually cleared his throat before answering.

“Hello! Phone of Mr. Sherlock Holmes world’s greatest detective. Arthur Shappey speaking, as assistant to Mr. Sherlock Holmes. How can I be of help to you today?”

There was an extended silence on the other end, broken finally by a very unsurprised voice.

“It appears my brother has finally succumbed to his inflated ego and established a cult. How sadly predictable. Tell me, did you enjoy the initiation ceremony?”

“Must have missed that. Maybe he’s waiting for us to find Skip so he can watch. Wait… YOU’RE MR. SHERLOCK’S BROTHER! That mean’s you’re Skip’s cousin, too. This is brilliant! Two cousins! What’s your name? I’m Arthur.”

Though it was inefficient, Sherlock couldn’t help but stop and listen. If there was anyone who deserved the full force of Arthur Shappey, it was Mycroft Holmes.

“My name is not important, now if you would hand the phone…”

“Of course it is. Names are very important. What would people know what to call you if you didn’t have a name? And how would you know if I was talking about any little doggy or Snoopadoop if I didn’t use her name? Mr. Sherlock wouldn’t have said that so I’m guessing you’re not a detective because names are facts and facts are very important for a detective.”

Sherlock had never wished so badly for a video camera in his life.

“Yes… fine. You may call me Mycroft.”

“Hah! That’s funny. Do you live on a farm? Then you’d be Mycroft on ‘my croft.” Get it!”

And the detective knew that each of Arthur’s giggles was like fingernails on the chalkboard of his brother’s ears. This alone was worth the trip to Fitton.

“If I promised you money, would you please give the phone to Sherlock?”

“Sorry, but I’m his assistant and he told me to say he was busy so that’s what I have to do. You could send the money to a charity or something, though. There’s the animal shelter down the street from the airfield…”

“THANK YOU, Mr. Shappey…”

“Arthur.”

“As you say, Arthur. If my brother insists on being infantile, perhaps you could tell me the current status of his investigation. Did I understand you to say that Martin has disappeared?”

“Yes. It’s been days, too. The police haven’t found anything. Mum says that’s because they lazy sods who couldn’t find their arse with both hands, but I think she’s exaggerating. I mean, maybe if you only had one hand. And very short arms…”

“AND does Sherlock believe he was taken forcibly?”

“I’m not sure, but his van’s gone, too. And, we’re in his room, but there’s nothing broken. So, I’m going to say no, but I’ll check.”
And, of course, Arthur had to hold the phone to his chest so Mycroft couldn’t eavesdrop.

“Mr. Sherlock, you brother wants to know if you think Skip got taken forcibly. What should I tell him?”

It was a shame Arthur lived so far from London or else Sherlock would be sorely tempted to take him on as his own Anthea, if for no other reason than to have a weapon of mass destruction in his ever-raging sibling war.

“I think you summed up the situation quite appropriately. Tell him I have nothing to add.”

“Mr. Sherlock says I did a good job filling you in so that’s that. I supposed, though, that if you wanted to come and help…”

Arthur’s ears would ring for quite awhile, being blasted from both directions with strident cries of “No!”

“I do apologize, Arthur, but I am unable to get away from London at the moment. However, I will gladly provide any assistance that you or Sherlock might require from me. You simply need to ask, even if Sherlock is too busy to do so. For example, I suspect you do not have the number for Martin’s van. I shall obtain that for you and also see to it that the authorities are alerted to look for the vehicle and emphasize the importance of their efforts towards finding my cousin.”

“You can do that! Brilliant! Mr. Sherlock – Mycroft’s going to get the police to help look for Skip and his van. Isn’t that great! Your brother is amazing!”

Sherlock’s weapon turned traitor. However, the detective was convinced it was a temporary changing of sides.

“Why thank you, Arthur. I appreciate your kind words. Do tell Sherlock that I will be checking in again soon, will you?”

“Sure thing! Bye!”

Arthur fluttered with Sherlock’s mobile before returning it to the detective’s pocket.

“Skip is SO lucky! I mean right now he’s not because he’s missing, but the rest of the time. He’s got you and Mycroft as cousins. You must do lots of fun things together. I wonder why Skip doesn’t talk about you?”

The fact that he was Mr. Sherlock and Mycroft lacked a prefix pleased Sherlock to no end, but that pleasure was heavily dampened by the rest of Arthur’s words. And he was hesitant to enter that discussion with the enthusiastic man standing in front of him. Luckily, he was not allergic to lying.

“We did, once… but everyone has had their own affairs to tend to and there have been few opportunities of late to share some time. Perhaps after we find my cousin…”

“And have the party. Mycroft HAS to come to the party.”

“I shall entrust that job to you, Arthur. And to ensure he brings a date.”

“__________

“There is nothing more to learn here. Martin appears to have driven himself away from the house, though the reason is not yet obvious. That is where my attentions need to turn – motive, not
crime. Where is the nearest hotel? I cannot accomplish anything more tonight.”

“Nearest hotel? If I was to say… well, there isn’t really any to say.”

“There is no hotel in the area?”

“Not as such. Fitton doesn’t see a lot of tourists and there’s not much in the way of business that people would travel here to do, so… there are a few places that rent out rooms…”

“That would not be much better than staying here.”

“Oh! Oh Oh Oh!!! You can stay with Mum and me! We’ve got lots of room and when you’re ready to start detecting in the morning, I’ll be right there ready to assist. Brilliant! Let me call Mum!”

And Arthur was on the phone faster than Sherlock could refuse.

“Hello, Mum? It’s me, Arthur. Your son… I know you know, but I’m trying to be precise because I’m a detective’s assistant… no we haven’t found him, but Mr. Sherlock’s brother is going to help, too – can you believe Skip has two cousins! And Mycroft… yeah, that’s his name… Mycroft says he can get the police to help and I believe him because he sounds real posh. Even more than Douglas. Anyway, Mr. Sherlock needs a place to stay and I thought… no, he can’t stay with her… well, she’s got all those cats… it’s actually eleven now, she’s added two… come on, Mum, it would be great!… oh… ok that sounds fine… of course I will… of course I can… Ok Bye!”

Sherlock had to wonder if smiling that wide hurt Arthur’s face.

“Mum says you can stay at our house. She’s going to Herc’s for the night anyway, but since I’m an airline steward, I should make a very good host, so I get to be in charge! How does that sound?”

“Brilliant.”
Chapter 5

Carolyn’s house was in a nice area of the town and was a nice house on top of that. Loose ends tickled the edges of Sherlock’s brain and he picked a few that he would work on with Arthur tonight.

“There it is! See what I mean about there being plenty of room? You’ll be able to get all cozy and snuggly and it won’t be any trouble at all.”

Arthur led Sherlock into the house and made sure to give him a grand tour before depositing him in one of the empty bedrooms.

“There’s even a bathroom right here, so we don’t have to share. Unless you want to. I don’t mind sharing. Actually that could be fun – I could sleep in this room and it would be like a sleepover! I love doing that when we’re at a hotel and Mum’s only booked one room for me, Skip and Douglas. They always let me have the floor too. Isn’t that great! I don’t even have to say please.”

“I will be fine here alone, Arthur.”

“Oh, well… ok. Let me know if you change your mind. Oh! Are you hungry? We missed dinner and I can make something…”

“I do not eat when I am on a case.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“I assure you, I do not.”

“That’s… nah, you do. You’re just having a little joke.”

“I do not eat while on a case, Arthur. I am not going to direct precious energy that my brain could be using to good effect towards… digestion.”

“But Mr. Sherlock, you don’t want your body getting all sickly and weak while you’re detecting, do you?”

“The body is simply transport, Arthur. Nothing else.”

“What does it transport?”

“My mind, Arthur… my mind.”

“Well, it seems to me that you’ve got some wrong thinking going on.”

Sherlock was never one to back down from a challenge to his thought processes.

“Do I? Please elaborate.”

“Well, your mind lives in your brain and your brain lives in your body. This is like Skip and his van, not that Skip lives in his van… well, not usually… anyway…”

Not usually?

“Let’s say Skip is your brain and his van is your body. Without the van, Skip can’t get to his
jobs and can’t earn money. When his van breaks down, he can’t work. See what I mean?”

The loose threads Sherlock wanted to explore were becoming more pressing.

“Arthur, you do realize…”

“And your brain doesn’t just sit in your head like a biscuit in a tin. It’s tied to the inside of your head with… stuff. Sort of gross stuff, but it’s inside your head and no one has to see it, so that’s alright for everyday, but I have a book on the body and there’s a picture of a brain and eyes and all kinds of things that are in your head. And they all connect to the rest of you, because your head’s connected to the rest of you, you see. So when you eat, your brain and eyes and tonsils eat, too. And your brain needs to eat, Mr. Sherlock. Everyone’s does. It’s science and you can’t argue with that.”

Well, Sherlock could, but on the most basic level, Arthur’s point was valid and there wasn’t any harm acknowledging his effort at debate.

“While a physiological discussion would be enjoyable, I am willing to bow to your expertise for the moment and table the issue for a later date.”

“Come again.”

“Let’s eat.”

__________

While Arthur worked up a manic level of energy in the kitchen, Sherlock used the time to honor his promise to John.

“Is everything alright? What have you learned? Are you ok?”

“Is there an order in which you would like me to respond?”

“Git. I was just worried… and I guess I forgot you can only process one question at a time. I promise to be more simplistic in the future.”

“You should take training in acting, John. I am certain the stage is simply weeping for someone of your comedic mettle.”

“That’d never work. I’d be fired the first week after I missed most of the performances trailing after your coat tails.”

And he would. Even after the hell Sherlock had put John through, the man still stood loyal at his side.

“I suppose, then, I shall have to continue to tolerate your presence as best I can. As for your inquiries, my cousin is missing and I am endeavoring to locate him, though there is little to indicate that he did not leave of his own accord. I have exhausted my options for tonight, but the trail likely will not be any colder tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry, Sherlock. I really am. If there’s anything I can do…”

“I know, John. And I appreciate that. It is… strange being on a case without… without my faithful blogger.”

“Well, I hope you’re taking notes.”
“I shall set Arthur on that immediately.”

“Do I want to know who that is?”

“Actually, you might. I have found his assistance to be quite valuable. You may have competition.”

Arthur’s ‘but not really, Dr. Watson. He’s being funny. Or trying to. I think. It’s hard to tell with Mr. Sherlock sometimes’ set John laughing and Sherlock couldn’t help but join in.

“Oh yeah, I hope you get to introduce me some time.”

“He is even making me eat.”

“Ok, scratch that. I’m going to marry him. You really should have two parents in your life anyway.”

“I will have to decline any invitation to the ceremony due to my documented aversion to sentiment. Mycroft will stand in my stead. There will be cake, so he shall be happy to attend.”

“I bet Mycroft actually doesn’t even like cake.”

“Says the man who was never traumatized by watching my brother consume an entire chocolate sponge. Before breakfast. I still carry the mental scars.”

“And he carries not a one because of you, am I right?”

“It is nice when we agree, John. I feel tingly inside and the little cherubs sing in the heavens.”

“That’s gas and I think you’re hearing your new partner.”

Who was singing *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*, using a spoon as a microphone. And a good half of the notes were on key.

“Perhaps. It *has* been a long day.”

“Maybe Arthur can make you get some sleep, too. Give me his number so we can coordinate our efforts.”

“What was that? I believe my battery is dying,; I am barely able to hear you.”

“Such a bastard. Take care of yourself, Sherlock. You’ll find Martin a lot faster if you stay in top shape. Check in when you can, ok?”

“I will. And… you take of yourself, also.”

Sherlock ended the call before John could reply. It helped keep him from dwelling on the fact that hearing John’s voice was something he had missed, even though it hadn’t been a day since he’d last spoken to his friend.

“You’re smiling.”

Arthur went about setting the table and kept an eye on his guest as Sherlock put away his phone.

“Am I?”
“Yeah. You always smile when you talk about Dr. Watson.”

“I doubt that is the case.”

“Sorry, Mr. Sherlock, but you can’t actually see your face so you’ll have to believe me on this one. And it a different smile, too.”

Following this path would not lead to anything good, but Sherlock could never refuse his curiosity anything.

“And what do you mean by different?”

Arthur took a moment to stir a pot, then took a seat across from Sherlock at the table.

“Well, people have all kinds of smiles. There are friendly smiles and ones that are just for being polite. Some are mean, which I really don’t like, and others are naughty, which are loads of fun to see. Then there’s ones that you give people you care about, like your Mum, which are different from ones you give your mates. And then…”

Arthur scooted his chair closer to the detective as if he was preparing to share a secret.

“…there are ones that you give to people you like. Know what I mean? Like…”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You know… like. Like like. That kind of like.”

“That clarified nothing.”

“For people you fancy! Every time you talk about Dr. Watson, that’s how you smile. And talking to him on the phone… you’re lucky to have boyfriend like him. He really does sound awful nice in the papers.”

“John is not my boyfriend, Arthur.”

“Why not?”

From now on, Sherlock would be more discriminating in the allowances he made for his curiosity.

“That is simply not the sort of relationship we have.”

“You mean you haven’t asked him yet.”

“If that was what I meant, that is what I would have said.”

“Yeah… no. Sorry, but I don’t think you’re being honest. Which is silly, because there’s nothing wrong with being shy about telling someone you fancy them. You shouldn’t be, though. I bet Dr. Watson would be thrilled for you to say you want to be his boyfriend. If it helps, I can ask him for you…”

“ARTHUR! Thank you, but that will not be necessary. John and I are friends and that is the extent of our association. Now, should you not be checking on the food?”

“Fooling yourself only means… well, I won’t call you a fool because you’re really smart and an amazing detective, but… opportunities aren’t like flowers, you know? They’re not everywhere and all pretty colors and easy to see. So, you take them where you find them and try never to waste
any. I like you, Mr. Sherlock, and not just because you’re Skip’s cousin. I’d hate to see you miss an opportunity for something as important as being with someone you care about. That would be a terrible thing… really, really terrible…”

As gobsmacked as Sherlock was at that moment, he could not have possibly missed the tone in Arthur’s voice. The one which said he was speaking from experience.

“Hey look! The food’s ready! Just think about what I said, ok?”

Arthur jumped up from the table and removed the hissing pot from the stove, scooping out its contents onto the two plates on the table. Sherlock decided to put this entire conversation in a small, securely-locked box in his mind-palace and not revisit it until… until he couldn’t put it off any longer.

“There you go. My specialty. Surprising Rice!”

Contemplating the… what it was could only be called indescribable by a lesser mind… neatly turned Sherlock’s attention away from the troubling conversation to a very intriguing puzzle.

“Don’t you want to know what’s in it?”

“I assume that if you wanted me to know, you would not have called it Surprising Rice.”

“Exactly! Brilliant!”

__________

The meal ended quite late since Sherlock became enmeshed in the dissection of Arthur’s culinary creation and only set the mystery aside when he realized the gas chromatograph and mass spectrometer he would need to complete his work were not currently at his disposable. Fortunately, Arthur was enthusiastically agreeable to setting aside a portion for Sherlock to take back with him to London for further analysis.

And now, Sherlock was antsy. There was nothing to work with in his search for Martin, nothing for his brain to tear apart and reconfigure into a picture that made sense. He needed more data and his current housemate should be able to help.

“Arthur, I have a few questions for you, if you do not mind.”

Politeness was not the detective’s first choice as an interrogation tool, but he felt it was the wisest choice for Arthur Shappey.

“No! You can ask me anything. Will it be like 20 Questions? I’m not very good at it, but it’s a lot of fun, anyway.”

John hated playing 20 Questions with Sherlock. He never won. Never.

“Not quite. I have some questions about Martin, on which I am hopeful you can shed some light. Specifically about his financial situation, which I assume is not good. Is that correct?”

“Are you asking if he’s skint?”

“In a slightly more formal way, yes.”

Sadness was not a look Arthur wore well.
“Yeah, I guess you can say that.”

“What did you mean earlier about not usually sleeping in his van? And why would Martin be doing jobs with his van? He pilots an aircraft; there should be no reason to take a second job, so why would he go to the extra effort?”

Sherlock could see the gears turning in Arthur’s head as he processed the question and pulled together his answer.

“That’s a lot of questions, but I’ll do my best. Skip’s only had to sleep in his van once. Well, that I know of. We found out because Douglas came in late and noticed that Skip had covered up the back windows of his van. He got nosy and looked inside and saw Skip’s computer and books and clothes. And a sleeping bag. He went to Skip’s house and found out that he’d gotten evicted because he hadn’t paid his rent. Douglas squared things with the landlord and made the man take Skip back and tell Skip that he could work off the rent he owed by fixing things around the house. Skip doesn’t know about any of that, so you can’t tell him, ok?”

That at least settled Sherlock’s mind once and for all that Douglas Richardson could be considered Martin’s ally.

“And Skip has his business moving things for people because that’s how he makes money. Not a lot of money, though, since he can’t work much because of being a pilot, but he does his best. Skip works really, really hard, Mr. Sherlock. You’d be proud of how hard he works.”

“I am proud of him, Arthur. Martin was never lazy or without ambition. So why is he even hauling boxes? Surely his salary…”

“Doesn’t have one.”

Why was nothing he learned about his cousin pleasant? How could things have gone so wrong for Martin?

“How can Martin not have a salary? Airline pilots command reasonable salaries, even for airlines as small as yours.”

“That’s the deal he made with Mum. Skip wanted to fly more than anything and Mum said he could be captain, but he wouldn’t get paid to do it. I… I don’t think Skip had a lot of offers, what with failing his exam six times. I don’t understand that at all. He did finally pass, so what does it matter?”

That text.

*I passed! I’m finally a pilot! – MC*

No wonder Martin was so exuberant. It was not a small stab of guilt that pierced Sherlock, it was a massive spear of regret. He’d never replied to that text.

“Let me make certain I understand this fully. Martin is employed full-time as a captain of an aircraft, but receives no compensation for his work. He survives by using his off time to earn a living with his van.”

“I know he gets 10 pounds an hour, but Mum says that’s pretty low. The problem, Skip says, is that he can’t always guarantee that he’ll be able to make a job. We get diverted and, well…stuck in places… a lot and don’t get home on time. At least being cheap attracts people to call him, even if he isn’t the most reliable man-with-a-van around.”
Arthur’s eyes never moved from the table in front of him and his fingers obsessively twisted the napkin in his hands. It was rare that Sherlock understood what another person was feeling, but this was one of those times. At least he had solved the puzzle of why his cousin lived like a pauper. He was one.

“You have tried to give him money, haven’t you, Arthur? And he refused.”

Arthur slowly nodded his head and tossed his deformed napkin onto his empty plate.

“Skip doesn’t like taking help from people. If he doesn’t realize you’re doing it, sometimes you can trick him, though. Remember that table in his flat? The old one was really shabby and gave Skip splinters sometimes. One day, I pretended to trip, grabbed Skip for support and made sure we landed on his table. That way I had to buy him a new one, but he still insisted on going to a second-hand shop for it.”

“You wish you could do more for him.”

“All the time. Skip’s… he’s a great person! He’s smart and work’s hard and nice and I think he’s funny even though Douglas doesn’t. But he won’t let me; he won’t let anyone.”

That, at least, Sherlock understood. For how many years did he spiral downwards rather than ask for or accept any help from Mycroft? He would still rather cut off his own fingers than let his brother into his life that way. But this was Martin; Martin deserved help and needed to learn to bend his neck and accept it when it was freely offered. Especially when it would make the person offering completely and wildly happy to do so.

Arthur looked tired. Tired and sad and frustrated and, though he still had questions to ask, Sherlock decided to officially end the day. The information he wanted could wait until tomorrow and it was making the detective uncomfortable to distress his new acquaintance. He almost felt as if he was making Mrs. Hudson cry.

“Thank you, Arthur. You have been very helpful. We shall take up the investigation tomorrow.”

Another slow nod and then a deep breath before Arthur got up, cleared the table and bid Sherlock goodnight.

“Are you coming, Mr. Sherlock?”

“Not now. Perhaps later. Sleep well, Arthur.”

“You too, Mr. Sherlock.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Very, very sincere thanks to all those who have left comments on this story. They have definitely encouraged me to keep this piece moving!

Sherlock thought he’d only closed his eyes to think, but suddenly there was sun on his face and there was a smell in the air that indicated Arthur was again in the kitchen. He looked down and saw a blanket lying on his legs and his shoes and socks on the floor and off of his feet. Apparently, Arthur was taking his job as host very seriously. Rubbing his fingers through his hair and dragging his palms over his eyes, Sherlock joined Arthur in the kitchen, content to leave his shoes behind, especially when he saw Arthur was as barefooted as he was.

Mr. Sherlock! You’re awake! That’s amazing! You knew in your sleep that breakfast was almost ready. It must be wonderful being you. Have a seat and I’ll take care of everything.”

One cup of hot… something… landed in front of Sherlock along with a large jug of milk and bowl of sugar.

“How did you sleep? I thought about carrying you up to your bed, but you’re sort of big and you didn’t look that uncomfortable in the chair.”

At least something was going right for Sherlock Holmes.

“It was fine. Though you didn’t have to remove my footwear.”

“Sometimes, when you’re in a plane and you’re just sitting there for a long time, your feet get all swollen and then your shoes try to choke your feet and it can be really, really dangerous.”

Fortunately, Sherlock’s cup of hot liquid seemed to have an abundance of caffeine in it.

“We are not currently in an airplane.”

“Yeah, but better safe than sorry. Here you go. Toblerone pancakes! Another of my specialties. Do you want Nutella or chocolate syrup? Or both? I’ve got lots so don’t be shy.”

There was a mass of vaguely polygonal pancakes stacked on Sherlock’s plate, each oozing bits of melted candy.

“Nutella. And don’t tell John.”

A second up of caffeine helped combat Sherlock’s impending sugar coma and he watched with great interest as Arthur polished off a second pile of his breakfast creation with nearly a full bottle of chocolate syrup forming a moat surrounding the pancake tower.

“You seem to enjoy cooking, Arthur. And you do take an interesting approach to cuisine. I find myself rather eager to see what you come up with next.”
Sherlock had seen a man electrocuted and his face looked almost as surprised as Arthur’s did at that moment.

“Really? BRILLIANT! Thank you, Mr. Sherlock. Thank you, thank you, thank you…”

Arthur tried to hide the wiping of his eyes behind a chocolate-stained napkin.

“I take it you do not receive much in the way of positive response to your work.”

“No… not as such…”

“Move the napkin, Arthur.”

“It’s just… I know I’m supposed to follow the recipes in Mum’s books, but they’re all so boring. But Mum hates it when I experiment. She says it smells bad and… well, sometimes I do wind up making a big mess in the kitchen and forget to clean it up because I get distracted. Or maybe break one or two things. Like the microwave. And I do sometimes use up all the stuff in the pantry and she has to go to the shops again. I’ve tried telling her to just buy twice as much the first time and she won’t have to go out again, but she calls me a dolt and makes me promise not to even look at the kitchen for at least a week… I guess it doesn’t matter anyway. Skip and Douglas always look a little scared when I bring them something I made when we’re flying. But, I have never poisoned anyone, despite what Douglas says…”

Sherlock, surprisingly, had sincere sympathy for Arthur’s plight.

“The work of the scientist is not always appreciated by the masses. Certainly not within his lifetime.”

“Really?”

“Gregor Mendel’s work was ignored for decades until it was rediscovered by deVries and Correns.”

“And who’s he?”

“He established certain laws of inheritance using garden peas.”

“Brilliant! I have some wonderful things I make with peas! We can have that for dinner!”

Sherlock left Arthur to erase the traces of breakfast and took a moment to shower and change. Coming back downstairs, he found Arthur on the phone.

“Everything’s fine, Mum… yeah, we’re working really hard… uh huh… no, I’m not being a lump… I’m not sure, I’ll ask Mr. Sherlock when he’s finished showering… we have plenty of hot water, Mum… I’ll let you know, I promise…I will…. I will… ok, Mum. Love you. Bye!”

“How is Mrs. Knapp-Shappey this morning?”

“Oh, she’s fine. She sounds very happy, actually. She always seems to be extra happy when she stays over at Herc’s. I have no idea why.”

And Sherlock had no intention of voicing any opinion on the matter.

“She did want to know what we were doing today and I said I’d ask. So what are we doing
today, Mr. Sherlock?”

“I would like to talk to Martin’s most recent clients. He must have kept records, but I didn’t see any ledgers in his flat.”

“You mean like books? Skip keeps some books at his flat. I’ve seen him writing in them at night or on off days and there’s lots of numbers and sometimes they get thrown about a bit. One time Skip threw one on the floor and stomped on it like he was trying to put out a fire.”

“Then we’ll start at the house. Perhaps I will be lucky and there will be a few people whose hangover is sufficiently weak that they can actually compose a coherent sentence.”

“Great! Let’s go!”

“As a general rule, I have found it is not the best practice to follow leads wearing one’s pajamas.”

“Yeah, I guess it might distract the witnesses.”

“Among other things…”

__________

There were several ledger books in the bottom of a small trunk that also served as crude bookshelf. Ultimately, it was not the client list or pitifully small fees his cousin received for what had to be tiresome, difficult work that engaged Sherlock’s interest. It was the writing. It told a story and Sherlock had to figure out what it said. There was almost a schizophrenic quality to the entries. Some were smooth and precise. Others were frantic and scratchy. Then there were those that were sloppy. Loose and sloppy… Sherlock wished there were records dated earlier than the previous year to determine the duration of this troubling discordance in Martin’s mind.

“I can’t find any more, Mr. Sherlock. He may have kept some in his van, but…”

“That’s fine, Arthur. Tell me, have you noticed anything disconcerting about Martin’s behavior?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Actions or inactions that were unusual or troubling. Incidences of inappropriate emotion, depressive or manic episodes…”

“You want to know if Skip’s been a little off lately.”

“Has he?”

“Not all the time, no.”

“Detail would be appreciated, Arthur.”

“Ok. Well, lots of times, Skip’s just Skip. I know that some people think he’s odd just like that, but it’s not true. It’s just Skip. But then there are times when he’s… he’s not Skip. He’ll be sad, but it’s a different kind of sad than when Mum’s yelled at him or Douglas makes fun of something he does that’s a little… wrong. Or he’ll be angry, but he’ll be quivery and angry, like he’s a bomb ready to blow up. Then, once in awhile, he’ll laugh at all sorts of things, but it’s sort of a scary laugh. Like he’s trying to make everyone believe that’s he’s laughing when he’s really, really not.”

“Is there a pattern?”
“Is no pattern a pattern?”

“It can be.”

“Then, yes.”

“Just a bit more, if you would.”

“Well, it’s not like I can say Ooh! Mum yelled at him and now Skip will be sad or his van got towed again and now he’ll be angry. I actually tried, you know, because I thought… well, I thought if I could predict things I could maybe try not to be so stupid when Skip’s really angry or learn some new jokes for when’s sad, but… it never worked very well.”

Erratic mood swings could be caused by any number of things, especially with Martin’s fractured life, but it was, at least, more data and that was critical given the little they actually possessed.

“Thank you, Arthur. That’s helpful. Now, let’s go see if we can get any information from the students. I seem to hear at least some of them beginning to stir.”

Sherlock pocketed Martin’s ledgers and turned to descend the stairs to the main part of the house. He chose not to acknowledge in any way that Arthur stopped a moment and quickly stuffed a horrid little airplane-shaped pencil sharpener into his own jacket pocket. It was something Martin may or may never miss, just like the stuffed *Vibrio cholerae* bacterium, which John got at a conference, that now lived in Sherlock’s bedside table.

Although the majority of the residents and their respective guests had woken, the search for evidence was slow-going and failing to bear much fruit. The debilitating after-party effects rendered many of the young people useless for Sherlock’s purposes and the few who weren’t knew so little about Martin that they might just as well have been mute. It wasn’t until the last set of interviews that Sherlock heard anything that piqued his interest.

“Anything… anything at all you can tell me about Martin that might explain his disappearance?”

“Like I’ve told you, Mr. Holmes, Martin keeps to himself most of the time. I mean, once in awhile he’ll come down and watch a film or something, but he usually just stays up there with his airplane books and stuff. He doesn’t even really get any visitors except that chap…”

Pointing to Arthur.

“… and, now and again, this older man who sounds like he’s auditioning for the Royal Shakespeare Company.”

A set of bleary eyes peeked around the kitchen door and cast a glance at Sherlock and Arthur.

“There was that one bloke. Remember him, a couple of months ago?”

“That’s right! Good and strange he was, not wanting to give his name or anything. He wanted to see Martin, but Martin was off in his plane somewhere. Never came back, either.”

Sherlock looked at Arthur who made the internationally-recognized, shrugged-shoulder gesture signifying ‘got me, can’t help you there.’

“What did Martin say when you told him about his visitor?”

“Not much. He just sort of nodded, but he looked a bit upset about the whole thing. Didn’t
mention it again, though.”

“What did this man look like?”

“Average height, bit thin maybe, dark hair maybe a little lighter than yours, had a little color to his skin like he’d spent a week at the beach.”

“His clothes, how was he dressed? What was he driving?”

“Jeans and a jacket. Nothing special. Didn’t see his car, sorry.”

“You have been of minimal help, but it may prove useful. Arthur, I want to visit the airfield again and determine if anyone else has seen someone looking for or talking to Martin.”

Arthur raced to keep up with the detective who was quickly striding towards their car.

“Mr. Sherlock, do you think that man had something to do with Martin’s disappearance?”

“It is pointless to speculate without further evidence.”

Arthur hurried to get in the passenger’s seat before he had to run behind chasing the car.

“Oh, ok… but you do, don’t you. You’ve got that squint.”

“Squint?”

“Yes, the one when you’re thinking hard about something. You should take care, you know. That’ll give you wrinkles. Mum’s got some cream I can lend you…”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Maybe not, but…”

Arthur’s rebuttal was cut short when his phone rang, blaring out In the Hall of the Mountain King. Sherlock nearly crashed the car reacting to Arthur’s shriek.

“OH MY GOD YOUR BROTHER IS MAGIC!”

Arthur shoved his phone into Sherlock’s face to show him the caller information on the screen, complete with a picture of The Royals Arms of England to go along with his customized ringtone. Would the number reasons for Sherlock hating his brother even cease to increase?

“Hello, Mycroft! It’s Arthur! This is absolutely brilliant! How did you get on my phone?”

“Just a parlor trick, dear boy. But won’t this make our chat a tad more fun?”

“More than a tad. It’s like you’re a wizard. Skip is SO lucky! That’s the first thing I’m going to tell him when we find him. Well, maybe not the first… that would be Hi Skip! but it’ll be right up there at the top.”

“Good… that’s very good. I take it that our cousin is still, as they say, in the wind?”

“Yeah, Mr. Sherlock hasn’t found him yet, but he’s trying! He’s been taking statements and looking for clues…”

“He does enjoy that, doesn’t he? And what about you, Arthur? I do hope that Sherlock is
allowing you to fully exercise your skills to aid his investigation.”

“Definitely. Mr. Sherlock has been letting me assist the whole time. He lets me cook for him, too. And he eats it!”

“That alone makes you an individual of note. Should Dr. Watson be worried?”

“No! Absolutely, not. Not at all. I just like helping and especially since it’s for Skip. And Mr. Holmes doesn’t fancy me like he does Dr. Watson.”

Fortunately, Arthur’s seat belt prevented the concussion Sherlock was hoping to cause when he slammed on the Land Rover’s breaks. This kept Arthur sufficiently aware to evade the detective’s attempts to steal the phone.

“That of course is very true. I’m surprised how quickly you realized that about my brother. I don’t think that he has even fully understood that frighteningly simple fact.”

“I know… it’s weird. He’s brilliant about everything else. Mr. Sherlock didn’t even realize that he makes a like like smile every time he thinks about Dr. Watson.”

“You mean that little one that rather resembles one a person might wear upon remembering his fondest toy from childhood.”

“EXACTLY! You. Are. AMAZING! That’s… no! I’m not finished…”

Sherlock in no way felt ridiculous holding the confiscated phone out of his window until Arthur gave up trying to reclaim his property and sat pouting in his seat.

“Yes you are. And you… I swear to you Mycroft that I shall burn the Diogenes to the ground if you don’t…”

“Childish, as always. Fortunately, your new associate seems uniquely suited to handle such behavior. A new playmate for your sandbox… aren’t you a lucky boy.”

“To. The. Ground.”

“You’re going to hurt your teeth if you keep grinding them like that, Mr. Sherlock.”

“Thank you, Arthur. Now, come over here and drive so I can attend to this nuisance.”

“Really? I can drive your car? Brilliant!”

Arthur nearly fell out onto the ground as he scrambled to get to the driver’s seat and Sherlock was perfectly content to let Mycroft wait until they were both properly situation and the Land Rover was back on the road.

“I must say I am quite taken aback by Mr. Shappey. He is quite a different person than his dossier describes. Most interesting… you do seem to have a new-found talent for discovering individuals who are more than meets the eye, don’t you?”

“Piss off, Mycroft, if you don’t have anything useful to tell me.”

“Like the name of a marvelous jeweler for when you choose to ask John for his hand?”

“You are not so protected that an assassin couldn’t create a day of mourning for all the bakers near Whitehall.”
“Until that time, would you perhaps like a summary of the information on Martin’s vehicle and the woefully small amount of security footage from the Fitton area?”

“If any of it is useful.”

“I’ll send the raw information to Mr. Shappey’s email address and you can decide for yourself. Of note is a series of images on the day of Martin’s disappearance. His van was captured by a few security cameras showing that he was certainly the one driving, however it is unclear if there were any other individuals out of sight in the rear of the van.”

“Direction?”

“East.”

“Arthur, can you think of a reason that Martin would leave Fitton and travel east?”

“Ummm… and which way is east?”

Sherlock pointed and Arthur shook his head.

“I can’t think of any, but you should ask Douglas. He spends a lot of time talking to Skip on the flight deck and he might know something.”

“Mycroft, are you…”

“I’ll thank you for not insulting me by finishing that question. Every piece of video footage is being collected as we speak. The local authorities in every direction from Fitton are on alert, as are the emergency services, hospitals and clinics. There are many eyes on this, Sherlock, besides mine.”

But would they be enough? If Martin took himself away from Fitton without telling even his employers, it would mean that he did not want to be found. Eventually, Sherlock would find him, but that did not mean that Martin would agree to return or to even allow him to tell others his location. Martin was an adult and his decisions were his own to make, but Sherlock hoped they would not end up hurting those who knew him. Especially Arthur.

“I will continue to attend to things from this end, Sherlock, but do not hesitate to contact me if you require any specific assistance. Any resource you require, you shall have. Now, do say farewell to Mr. Shappey for me and pass along that I will be checking in again with him very soon.”

And the call was over.

“Did Mycroft learn anything else?”

“No, but he is sending video footage that will have to be reviewed…”

“Oh, can I do it? I love watching videos. I have a whole folder of bookmarks of videos, especially funny ones with cats.”

“Then the job is yours.”

“Brilliant! Can I have popcorn?”

No one at the airfield had any memory of the man described by the students at Martin’s house and a brief conversation with Douglas failed to give Sherlock any new ideas about where Martin might
have gone. The men returned to Martin’s house and canvassed the neighborhood for any information on Martin’s mysterious visitor. It was well into the afternoon by the time Sherlock and Arthur returned to the Shappey house for Sherlock to think and Arthur to begin watching the video footage Mycroft had provided.

“What am I supposed to be looking for anyway, Mr. Sherlock?”

“Any evidence of Martin. Note the time and location of every sighting and any accessory information such as his actions, whether he spoke to anyone, if any face seems familiar to you perhaps from the airfield or your travels for work, individuals that seem to appear too frequently in relation to Martin’s appearances on the video feeds…”

“So, everything?”

“Within reason.”

“Ok, I can do that. And I’ll call Mum and fill her in, too. You’ll stay here again tonight, won’t you Mr. Sherlock? I mean… you don’t have to, but it’s sort of fun having you here and we’re making a good team, I think…”

“Yes, Arthur, I will stay here tonight, but I think it best that I start to follow in the direction that we last saw Martin traveling. The one place that I know my cousin is not located is Fitton, so remaining here will be pointless once I have exhausted any remaining leads in the area.”

“Oh… right. That makes sense.”

Arthur’s grin faded a bit and he fiddled with the hem of his shirt before continuing.

“Will you… do you think you’ll need an assistant when you go? I mean… I know you don’t really need one since you’re brilliant on your own, but if you do think you need one…”

“Arthur, would you like to come with me and continue the investigation for a while longer.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“This is…”

“Brilliant?”

“Very.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Exhausting the leads in Fitton and preparing to take the show on the road...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Item 1 – Martin’s disappearance, barring further data, was voluntary.

Item 2 – Martin chose not to inform any of his work associates or housemates about his leaving.

Item 3 – The unknown visitor.

Item 4 – Martin did not take all of his clothing and possessions from his flat. This could indicate that his plan is to return at some point. However, it could also indicate that his flight was unplanned and hurried, so he could not take his remaining goods. Thirdly, it is slightly possible that Martin would anticipate that myself and Mycroft would hear of his disappearance and take it upon themselves to find him. The few items in flat could have been left behind as a distraction. But… the uniform. Martin had no goal or passion in his life… ever… than to fly. He would not have left that behind as a distraction. So option 1 or 2 was far more likely.

Item 5 – Martin being ‘off,’ as described by Arthur. Not enough data to postulate a reason.

Item 6 – Martin’s life was not anything like I would wish for my cousin, but he does have some people who care about him and his well-being.

Item 7 – Martin traveled east, but no one knows any reason why he would choose that direction.

Item 8 – Need to check with Arthur to determine his progress with the video feeds before can add more points to mental list.

Several hours had passed since Sherlock had set Arthur to his task and the detective had settled on the couch to process the information they had gained so far. If John were here, Sherlock could moan for tea and a hot cup would appear, as if by magic. If John were here, Sherlock could work off some of his frustration by picking a minor fight with the doctor that neither would care who won or lost, or entertain the both of them with his violin. John loved listening to Sherlock play, sitting quietly for hours while the music flowed. If John were here, Sherlock could feed off the doctor’s warmth and quiet strength for focus and to smooth over the tiny cracks and pits of insecurity that always marred Sherlock’s road to a solution. Cracks and pits that only John was ever permitted to see…

But John wasn’t here and the sooner Sherlock solved this mystery, the sooner he could be home. Not 221B. Not the flat. Home. The only place, including his parent’s residence, that he ever thought of as home.

Sherlock pushed those thoughts back into the depths of his mind and went to find Arthur. Who had created his own moving-watching experience complete with a very large bowl of popcorn (another bowl sat on the floor empty except for a few unpopped kernels and husks), an almost obscenely large container of juice and a tower of candy that rose two feet above the desk on which his computer sat.
“Mr. Sherlock! You’re out of your trance! I was a bit worried at first, but I did check if you were breathing and you fogged up… well, I didn’t have a mirror so I used my Lion King DVD and that worked. Did you learn that from some really old Asian man who lives in a tiny cave on top of a mountain? That’s what happens in the movies. Or, sometimes it’s a really old man who wears a turban and lives in the desert. Or a witch.”

“Laying aside the fact that witches do not exist, tell me what you’ve found.”

Arthur moved the candy wrappers and boxes off of a stack of paper and handed them to Sherlock. For every sighting of Martin there was a notation of the time-stamp on the video, a summary of the action on the film, the direction from which the van or Martin entered the video field and the direction to which they left, a description of other individuals in the feed and small observations like ‘Skip’s laughing! He looks like a big happy ginger baby.’ Sherlock had seen police summaries that were less detailed.

“This is… you’re doing a very good job, Arthur.”

“Thanks! It’s like playing Where’s Waldo, except with a movie instead of a book. I’ve got all the books, actually, and I’ve never not once not found Waldo. And it helped that you told me what you wanted. People don’t always do that and I have to try and figure out what they want. And I’m very good at getting it right.”

“Clear directions are critical to receiving the correct outcome for any endeavor.”

“I’ll tell that to Mum. She’s got to believe it since you’re the smartest man in Fitton.”

“I would expand that geographic range.”

“Well, I would… I really would… but I haven’t met a lot of people in other places to know for sure so I can’t just say it even if I’m thinking it. That doesn’t seem like something a detective’s assistant would do.”

Point to Arthur, although Sherlock’s ego abstained from voting.

“Very well. How much more do you have to view?”

“Only a few more. Mycroft only sent videos for the week before Skip vanished and we flew to Prague one of those days.”

“I’ll read though your reports while you finish. The last places Martin visited should be checked before we leave. You should also pack enough for a few days. I’m not sure how long we’re going to be away from Fitton, but it could be for an extended period. If necessary, we can purchase what we need later on.”

Right! And I’ll tell Mum. She’ll have to serve the meals if GERTI has a trip and she says she always needs a full day’s warning for that since she has to get mentally prepared so she doesn’t kill a passenger. I’ll finish this up as fast as I can, Mr. Sherlock, I promise.”

A very large handful of popcorn went into Arthur’s mouth as he turned back towards the screen. Sherlock resettled on the couch and read through Arthur’s notes, looking for any pattern to Martin’s movements or actions. After an hour of work, the only concrete fact Sherlock could put forward was that Arthur had an enthusiastic attachment to Martin’s laugh and smile.

“I’m done!”
Another stack of paper landed on Sherlock’s stomach.

“The last two days of Martin-spying was a little different than the first few and… well, I have to admit I am a little worried. More worried than I was, I mean, because I was always worried… really, really worried and now I’m more worried…”

“Perhaps you’ll feel better if you tell me what you found.”

“Oh! Good idea! Well, on all the other videos, Skip did Skip stuff, you know… stop to get a coffee, replace his flyers at the shops, buy petrol. Well, the last couple of days, he still did Skip stuff, but he also went to the bank, which is weird because Skip said he didn’t have any money at the bank. And he went into Mr. Murphy’s shop, which Douglas says I can’t go into because the police visit there sometimes. Then… you see, Fitton’s full of really nice people but… well, there’s one part where the people aren’t so nice. Well, maybe they are, but Mum says I mustn’t go around there, so I can’t actually find out. ”

“And you saw Martin enter this area?”

“Not as such, but from the center of town, there’s one road you take to get to the bad neighborhood and Skip went down that road a couple of time. Including on the day he left. I don’t mind saying, Mr. Sherlock that this is very, very strange for Skip. I think it’s a clue.”

“I agree. Martin has always had a rather irritating attraction to rules and laws. Pack your bag, Arthur. We leave in ten minutes.”

How Arthur managed to pack a travel bag, a full-size suitcase, a garment bag, a toiletries bag and three large sacks full of assorted crisps, candy, biscuits and other snack food in ten minutes would forever remain a puzzle that even Sherlock Holmes was wary of approaching.

“And I brought some things for Skip, in case he lost his or they’re really dirty… and Mum’s first aid kit in case Skip’s hurt. And some pictures of Skip and me and Mum and Douglas and GERTI in case he has amnesia…”

“Yes, very thorough. Now, may we get underway?”

“Absolutely! I’m very excited about this, even though I’m so scared for Skip. Is that normal? It doesn’t sound normal now that I say it out loud.”

“Conflicting emotions often characterize circumstances of unusual or unexpected distress.”

“That’s a relief. I didn’t want you to think I’d gone loony or something. Oh, and I brought my stuffed polar bear to be our mascot. He doesn’t get car sick, so he can ride up front without any problem.”

“Delightful. And he can guard the car when we step out.”

“You read my mind, Mr. Sherlock. Amazing!”

The pair’s first stop was the bank where Arthur had witnessed Martin visiting. After a thunderous ten minutes of Sherlock unfurling his absolutely most infuriating behavior, the bank manager grudgingly revealed that Martin did not have an account of any form, but had wanted to pursue
taking out a loan. After discussing his financial situation, or lack thereof, and the absence of collateral or co-signers, the manager had little option but to deny Martin’s request. Which, apparently, Martin did not take well.

“It isn’t very seemly for a grown man to take to his knees and beg in the middle of a respectable, professional institution. We nearly had to have security remove him.”

“Wonderfully compassionate of you. And you say he wanted the staggering sum of a hundred quid. That truly would have shuttered your doors if he defaulted on his payments.”

“I have an obligation to all of the account holders and board members for this bank. I cannot simply hand out notes as if they were napkins at a tea party.”

“But Skip must have really, really needed the money! Don’t you try to help people? That’s what banks are supposed to do – guard money from robbers and give people money when they need it. Doesn’t sound like you were doing your job to me. I’m going to ask Mum if she puts money here and tell her to take it out because if you don’t do the helping people part of your job then you probably don’t do the robber-thwarting part of your job either. I’ll wait in the car, Mr. Sherlock. It’s getting a little… disappointing… in here for me.”

And the flair with which Arthur stalked out of the bank put a smug grin of pride on Sherlock’s lips.

“I think I’ll join him.”

The second stop made Sherlock’s stomach turn a little when he saw it was a pawnbroker.

“Douglas says that this is a regular stop on the policemen’s route. I don’t know why, but he said that doing business with Mr. Murphy was something to do only if you like looking at people through iron bars. I have no idea what he meant.”

“He meant that Mr. Murphy is in the habit of receiving stolen property.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“When people commit a theft they need someone to purchase the stolen items. Mr. Murphy appears to be a well known for performing this service.”

“Why would someone steal something only to sell it?”

“For the money, Arthur.”

“Then why not just steal money?”

A question Sherlock had pondered more than once.

“I don’t know. Perhaps for the challenge. Or the fun.”

“Brilliant! I mean, not brilliant that they’re stealing which is very, very wrong, but brilliant they’re making a game of it.”

“Sometimes the game… the challenge is the whole point.”

“Well, they should find some other way to play, like with sports or maybe a board game. Stealing is a bad thing to do. OH NO! You don’t… you don’t thing Skip stole something, do you?”
“Nothing is impossible, however, Martin is the last candidate I would put forward as a thief. I suspect he is one of the few people in Fitton who actually used this establishment for its intended purpose.”

“Come again.”

“He pawned something. Follow me.”

Sherlock had been in enough pawn shops to know immediately that this was one of the seedier variety. And the man running the counter was as run down as the merchandise. Fortunately, his tongue was easily loosened with a moderate exchange of money and he agreed to bring out the item that Martin had pawned.

“It’s a watch. I’ve never seen Skip wear a watch like this. It seems quite posh for him.”

“It’s mine.”

No, Sherlock. I don’t want to.

I need those eggs for my experiment, Martin.

You don’t even know if there are any.

Don’t be stupid. It is the proper spawning period for newts and I have observed adults in the area. Now, take this jar and retrieve a sample. I don’t need many, twenty or thirty will do.

Why can’t you get them?

I shall do my part by conducting the experiment. You must contribute in some way, also.

But I don’t care about newt eggs.

Then I don’t care about being in your company. At all. For the rest of your holiday.

Fine.

“Martin… fell into a lake and his watch became waterlogged. I gave him this one as a replacement.”

My watch! It’s all full of water!

That you would even purchase a watch that wasn’t water resistant proves that you are as ridiculous as the rest of the population.

My Mum bought this for me.

And we know how dim-witted she is. Look at who she married.

Hey! Stop it, Sherlock. You don’t have to be so mean.

Whether it is mean or not, the truth is the truth.

I don’t care. And what am I going to do about my watch? I’m going to get in trouble.

Here. Take mine if it will keep you from crying.

I’m not crying. I’ve got something in my eye. Probably one of your stupid eggs.
“Wow! That was so nice of you! I dropped mine in a blender once and Mum made me do her chores AND mine for a month to pay for it.”

“I… I didn’t even know he still had it.”

It was an expensive watch that, considering Martin’s living situation, could have been sold long ago and likely for a better price than he received from pawning the piece. But he’d held onto it, all these years. Until now.

“Did the gentleman give you any reason for pawning his watch?”

“Just said he had debts to clear, that’s all.”

“I don’t know what debts Skip could have. He pays cash for everything and the only credit card he has is the expenses card Mum gives him and she only puts a certain amount of money on it. When she’s not punishing Skip or Douglas for something, that is.”

“Does he owe money on his van?”

“Nah, Skip’s dad left that to him when he died. Skip still gets a little mad when he thinks about that because his brother and sister got actual money and he got the van. I can understand that, a little. It’s not a very nice van and it breaks down a lot…”

Which didn’t surprise Sherlock one bit. Martin’s family never understood him and was not terribly inclined to try. They were more than happy for Martin to spend as much time as possible anywhere but at home, hence the summers and holidays spent with Sherlock and Mycroft. But on the issue of money, though it might have contributed to Martin’s problems, the detective had a difficult time believing that lack of funds was the primary reason for his departure. It seemed that financial difficulties and Martin were not strangers and there was nothing to indicate the situation had worsened in any appreciable way. But, a debt owed could explain the visit from the unknown man if he Martin’s creditor.

Sherlock negotiated the return of Martin’s watch for no further exchange of money, but instead for his promise not to bring the police back with him and point out the hidden space behind one wall of the shop before he and Arthur returned to the car.

“Brilliant! The way you made him do what you wanted only with the power of your mind. You could be a superhero. And then you could have a hat. And a cape. I’ve never made a cape, but I’m willing to give it a go!”

“However, I refuse to wear Spandex.”

“That’s too bad. I bet Dr. Watson would like it.”

“Not when he had to do the laundry.”

The last stop was Arthur’s personal forbidden zone, but nothing Sherlock could say would convince him to stay safely in the car and let Sherlock go about on his own.

“It’s not safe, Mr. Sherlock. I won’t let you be by yourself when I know it’s not safe.”

“I often investigate alone, Arthur. And in some of the worst parts of London. And other cities of the world. I assure you that this is not… would you please remove your fingers from your ears.”
“I can’t hear you, so I don’t have to listen to what you say.”

“You can hear me, Arthur.”

“Well, yeah, I actually can, but when you put your fingers in your ears, anything anyone says doesn’t count. And I can keep my fingers in my ears a very long time, Mr. Sherlock.”

Barring knocking Arthur unconscious, Sherlock didn’t see how this was going to go his way.

“Alright, but stay close to me and do not… let me be clear about this… do not speak to anyone.”

“Oh! Like one of those scary bodyguard chaps that just stands there and looks mean.”

“If that will make you do as I ask.”

“Brilliant! Just like make-believe!”

“The we are agreed.”

“I’ll do my best. Can I have a make-believe name, too?”

“Anything in particular?”

“Brick Steel.”

“That sounds very convincing.”

“Thanks! I thought so, too.”

Sherlock spent the next two hours roaming through the streets of the depressed area, with Arthur nearly glued to his side. To his credit, Arthur kept up his make-believe stoic façade, but Sherlock could read the subtle clues that he was very uneasy with the environment and the people they encountered. For Sherlock, the various members of Fitton’s criminal class were barely worth noticing, but for his assistant, they would be quite intimidating. It was with a very relieved sigh that Arthur slid into the passenger’s seat of their vehicle, though he shared Sherlock’s frown of frustration. Either no one had seen Martin or would admit to seeing Martin. A few individuals did say that they had seen a van that could be Martin’s but no amount of persuasion, threatening or bribery could coax more of an admission out of any of them.

“What now, Mr. Sherlock?”

“It’s time to say goodbye to Fitton for now, Arthur. Are you still sure that you want to accompany me? I can’t guarantee what or who we will encounter.”

“This is for Skip. I have to go with you and help any way I can.”

“It’s brave of you, Arthur to take on the unknown like this.”

“Brick Steel fears nothing.”

“Nor does his faithful polar bear companion.”

“Yeah, no one messes with Mr. Snowball.”
Our boys are getting close to finding Martin... but will they be happy with what they find...
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

My continued gratitude for all those who leave kudos and kind words. They mean a great, great deal to me and I appreciate them all...

With no information to go on besides ‘east,’ Sherlock had only his instinct to guide this stage of his investigation. With no word from Mycroft to indicate a sighting or report from any authority or hospital, the detective had to try and place himself in Martin’s mind and evaluate each location through which they drove, seeking anything that warranted a deeper look. After conducting a cursory examination of each town they encountered, the duo checked the locations that offered the cheapest petrol, clothing, food and lodging, each showing pictures of Martin and his van to employees and patrons.

And no one knew anything of significance. In one small village, the petrol station owner reported that a van resembling Martin’s stopped to add air to a tire. At another, a worker in a café said that there had been a man resembling Martin’s description that stopped in for a coffee, but she wasn’t completely sure it was him. The one good piece of evidence was that both individuals agreed that Martin continued traveling east, forestalling, for now, Sherlock’s worry that Martin would change direction and further slip from his grasp.

“Detecting is hard work, Mr. Sherlock. But you do get to talk to lots of interesting people. The lady I spoke to at the flower shop plays the harp! One of the great big ones too, not the tiny one you see in those Hercules movies. And the man feeding the birds told me that the best bread to feed the…”

“Did he happen to have any information pertaining to Martin?”

“Not as such…”

“Then he is irrelevant to…”

“…not like the chap on the bicycle.”

Sherlock was fortunate that Arthur had no issue barreling along with his sentences even when interrupted.

“The chap on the bicycle?”

“Uh huh… you see, Skip spends a lot of time at a park near his house. Sometimes he brings a book and sometimes he just sits, but he’s there a lot. Anyway, I noticed that you see the same people over and over at a park. There are the people feeding the birds, the people jogging, the people having lunch…”

“I get your point, Arthur.”

“Oh, good! So, I thought it might be an idea to ask around at the little park by that church over there and see if anyone had noticed Skip, figuring he might have stopped for a break and went there like he does at home…”
“And you met a man on a bicycle.”

“Yes! I was talking to the bird-feeder man and the bicycle man rode by and stopped to see what we were doing and he’d seen Skip! Isn’t that brilliant!”

“It is if he had information to offer other than ‘I’ve seen Martin.’”

“Well, he couldn’t have said that since he didn’t know Skip’s name, but he did say he’d seen ‘that squirmy little ginger thing’ and I guessed it was Skip. Especially since he was looking at the picture and all.”

“So, we can be somewhat confident that he was discussing Martin, however, I would very much like to know exactly what the man said, Arthur.”

“He said that Skip was sitting on a bench a few away from one the bird-feeder man was on today and was drinking a bottle of water. He looked sort of sickly, kind of shaky and perhaps a bit gray and the man on the bicycle stopped and asked if everything was ok, which was a rather silly if Skip looked sick, but, anyway, according to the man, Skip sad ‘no, but I will be, hopefully.’ Then, the bicycle man asked if he could do anything to help and Skip said only if the man could give him his life back and that’s when Skip got up and walked away. Frankly, I don’t like the sound of any of that, Mr. Sherlock, but at least Skip was… mostly ok. Oh, and there wasn’t anyone else around either, like Skip had been kidnapped or something.”

“Thank you, Arthur. That’s valuable.”

That data reinforced the notion that Martin did voluntarily leave Fitton, but also that his defection was because of some significant trouble. Sherlock couldn’t think of any genetic ailment or illness in the family that might explain Martin’s situation and refused to speculate on anything Martin might have contracted without concrete information. Regardless, why take himself away from Fitton, where there were surely some competent doctors and medical facilities? Surely Martin’s pride hadn’t grown so insurmountable that he would feel the need to hide away and not divulge his condition to his co-workers? That surely did not sound like the Martin that Sherlock had known, but his baseline for measurement was woefully outdated.

“Mr. Sherlock, if Skip is sick, wouldn’t Mycroft have found something already? He said he was checking hospitals and clinics and things, right?”

Good point. The information line from the older Holmes brother had been very quiet.

“I would assume that is the case, but we are taking your witnesses interpretation of events as factual. Dehydration, exhaustion… those could also explain Martin’s appearance. The important thing is that Martin is still in motion and seems to have some plan associated with his departure. I think we can rule out the possibility of suicide for now…”

“What! Why did you even say that, Mr. Sherlock? Why did you even think it? No… no no no no… Skip wouldn’t do that! Not ever. At least not without saying…”

Arthur couldn’t finish, so great was the lump in his throat. Comforting someone was not one of Sherlock’s strong points, but he did his best to settle his companion and relieve some of his distress.

“I don’t believe Martin is contemplating ending his own life, Arthur. Truly, I do not. It had to be considered, but the evidence does not lean in that direction. As I said, that is something we can rule out, but that means the explanation for Martin’s disappearance still eludes us.”

“Whatever it is, no matter how bad or sad… nothing would be as horrible as losing Skip. I don’t
know what I’d do, Mr. Sherlock if I lost him? I just don’t know what I’d do…”

Sherlock, feeling very out of his element, took hold of Arthur’s arm and led him back towards their vehicle. Once inside, he set the stuffed polar bear on Arthur’s lap and was not surprised when it was then clasped tightly to Arthur’s chest. This was why Sherlock needed John. John would know what to say, what to do… John would be able to make Arthur feel better and it was surprising Sherlock that this was something he wanted, also. Arthur just wasn’t right like this and it was making Sherlock very uncomfortable.

“I’m… I’m sorry if I upset you, Arthur.”

At least that brought a small smile to his assistant’s face.

“Thanks, Mr. Sherlock. It’s not your fault. I just… I can’t think about Skip hurting himself like that. It makes me hurt, and I sort of want to cry, but I’m trying not to, because detective assistants probably don’t cry and I’m trying to do a really good job.”

“You’re doing an exemplary job, Arthur. Very useful. I’ll… I’ll try not to mention this issue again, if it will help you not cry.”

“It would. I appreciate that. So does Mr. Snowball.”

John had thought Sherlock killed himself. It was becoming easier to understand why John had been so devastated after his ‘fall.’ Another of the loose threads that was dangling in Sherlock’s mind floated to the forefront again and now seemed a good time to see where it lead.

“Arthur, you seem to be very close with Martin. Can you tell me how that came about?”

“I’m not sure what you’re asking.”

“You know a great deal about Martin. For example, you knew that the park would be a likely location to find evidence. And you are quite versed in the details of Martin’s finances and conditions of his life. I am curious as to how you and Martin grew so close as friends. Your mother and Douglas seemed a bit confused about your relationship, for example.”

At least Arthur’s storm clouds were breaking a little as his mind turned towards formulating an answer to Sherlock’s questions.

“I don’t know, actually. Skip gets sort of lonely, so sometimes I stop by and visit him and we watch a movie on my phone or play cards or I watch Skip play with his flying game on his computer or other things like that. If there’s something going on in town, like a free concert or a match at the college, I’ll try and get him to go with me so has something to do that doesn’t cost any money.”

“It sounds like you try very hard to make your friendship work.”

“Oh, it’s not all me! Skip will bring me coffee when we’re on standby and sit and talk with me or read one of his flying books while I draw. And, when he has a little extra money, Skip buys me ice cream or a muffin after a flight. And, but I can’t be completely sure about this, Skip may know and then tell me when he’s going to be in the park. And then I know to go, too and we have a nice afternoon. That all means something, doesn’t it, Mr. Sherlock? He’s trying, too. It’s not just me. Right?”

The earnestness in Arthur’s voice matched the determined look on his face to perfection. Again, Sherlock very much wished he had John with him because John understood emotion and this all seemed very much like emotional business. However, the facts that Sherlock had gathered indicated
that Arthur’s emotions and actions were perhaps a little more than one would associate with a simple friendship. John… Sherlock very, very much needed John for this.

“I am not the correct person to properly analyze this, but I would not say that your assessment is entirely incorrect.”

“Come again.”

“You could be right.”

Sherlock and Arthur crept along, thoroughly checking every sign of civilization they encountered. As the sun was setting, Sherlock realized that they could accomplish no more since this was not London and this civilization closed shop early. Luckily, the pair ran across a small inn with an available room and a respectable restaurant attached.

“I don’t mind saying, Mr. Sherlock, this is very good. I wouldn’t have thought of making fish with butter and garlic, but I’m going to try it when I get back.”

“How do you normally make fish”

“Well, fish like the ocean, so I use a lot of salt. And water. And there’s lots of seaweed around, but I don’t really like seaweed. Douglas let me try some, he eats a lot of sushi and they use seaweed for that and it tasted… well, it didn’t taste very nice. But kale is like seaweed since it’s green and leafy, so I use that. Or lettuce. When I’m feeling fancy, I’ll put in some fish friends like shrimp and clams, but not sponges, because even though I have a book that says there are sponges in the water… real live ones!... Mum says they’re not the same as the dish sponges so I won’t do that again. Then when I’m feeling incredibly fancy…”

“That sounds very… well thought out. Arthur, may I ask you a question?”

“Does it involve fish?”

“No. Does that matter.”

“Nope. I just like to be prepared.”

“Efficient of you. I notice that you can be very garrulous at times. Is there a reason for that?”

“Well, it’s like this… no, I don’t know what you’re asking.”

“Sometimes you talk rather a lot. Do you know why?”

“Oh! Yeah, I do that sometimes, don’t I? Helps with my brain.”

Now this was an answer that Sherlock was quite interested to pursue.

“What is the problem with your brain that speaking helps resolve?”

“Maybe problem is the wrong word, but my brain… well it just runs all the time. Runs and runs and runs and runs… There’s always things swimming around like a school of fish and it can be so hard to just concentrate on one thing or just make the fish stop swimming. I’ve found that if I just let the fish swim out of my mouth, there’s fewer of them in my head. I’m not talking about real fish, you know. You realize I mean thoughts, right? I’m sure that doesn’t make much sense but…”
“Actually, it makes perfect sense.”

If there was one person in the universe who understood what Arthur was describing it was Sherlock Holmes.

“Really? When I tried to talk to Mum about it, she said I was just being more daft than normal and called me ‘idiot boy.’”

“Your mother isn’t a world-famous detective or his assistant, is she?”

Arthur’s face lit up brighter than the sun.

“She isn’t! She isn’t at all! I’m glad I met you, Mr. Sherlock. You understand things better than anybody.”

Particularly when Sherlock shared a very similar problem. Sherlock would only admit to a very slight bit of wishful thinking that Arthur’s solution to this problem would work for him.

“I brought some books if you want to read. And I’ve got plenty of movies on my phone. Lots of songs, too, so we can dance if you like.”

“I prefer to use the time thinking about the investigation.”

“Oh, ok. But if you change your mind, just rummage through my bag and take what you want. I’m going to write Mum a letter telling her what we’ve been doing.”

“Or, you could just phone her.”

“Yeah, but I can’t include any drawings if I use the phone.”

And a quietly busy Arthur was a quietly busy Arthur… Sherlock laid back on his bed and prepared to spend the night working through the information and nearly snarled when Arthur’s phone rang.

“I wonder who that is? Hello? Arthur Shappey speaking.”

“Hello, Arthur. It’s John Watson.”

Sherlock nearly fell off the bed hearing Arthur shriek.

“DOCTOR WATSON! This is absolutely brilliant! How did you… oh… Mycroft gave you my mobile number didn’t he?”

Sherlock did leave his bed this time, hurling himself towards Arthur, who quickly stood so the detective landed face first and bounced on Arthur’s mattress.

“Um, Arthur. Is everything alright.”

“Everything’s fine. Mr. Sherlock is trying to steal my phone, but I’m used to his tricks. Hold on one second.”

As Sherlock scrambled across Arthur’s bed and leaped towards his assistant, Arthur jumped quickly into the bathroom and locked the door behind him.

“Sorry, Doctor Watson. If you hear a banging noise, it’s just Mr. Sherlock. Banging.”
“You locked yourself in the bathroom, didn’t you?”

“This is why you’re so perfect for Mr. Sherlock. If you were here, we’d probably already have found Skip.”

John couldn’t help but feel a little smug at Arthur’s words. It was nice that someone appreciated what he added to Sherlock’s work.

“So Sherlock’s cousin is still missing.”

“Yes, but we have some clues and Mr. Sherlock has been doing his best. I’m still very worried, though. The bicycle man said Skip didn’t look well and I hate the idea of Skip being sick or hurt. I hope we find him soon so I can help him. Or Mr. Sherlock can help him. As long as someone helps him.”

John served with a chap who sounded just like Arthur. Nicest person in the world, hardest worker in the whole camp… if you just took him for who he was, everyone was happy. Sort of like dealing with Sherlock. Except for the nice and industrious parts.

“I’m sure you’ll find him soon. Mycroft said there’s been no word on his side, so there are no official records of anything bad happening to Martin. Sounds like you just have to chase him a bit more and if there’s one thing that Sherlock is good at, it’s chasing people. How’s he getting on, by the way? Still fattening him up for me?”

“He could use it, couldn’t he? I’d say he’s been doing very well. He ate almost half of his dinner tonight, which wasn’t wasted because I ate the rest so don’t worry about him spending money on things that got thrown away. That always makes Mum angry, so I always make sure to clean my plate, even if it’s a little… not good. And I’ll send you my pancake recipe. You’ll have to buy some Nutella if you don’t have any… oops! That’s supposed to be a secret, so forget I said that. But, don’t completely, because you really do need the Nutella. And Toblerones.”

John knew his life would never be complete unless he could watch his flatmate consume whatever it was Arthur was describing. It might need to be filmed for future crime historians to ponder.

“So you don’t worry about him, Doctor Watson. I’ll make sure he gets back to you in one piece. I know it’s not easy to be apart from someone you care about, so as soon as we find Skip and plan the ‘finding Skip’ party, I’ll make sure he goes right back to London. He really misses you, you know. And you miss him, too or you wouldn’t have called. Or you would have called him first because if you ask Mr. Sherlock how he’s doing, he probably won’t tell the whole truth. But you were worried, so you called me because I always tell the truth.”

John had no idea how to respond to any of that, so he decided on the most expedient… ok, cowardly… way out.

“Thanks, mate. I appreciate you taking care of His Highness. How are you holding up?”

“Pretty good. This is actually a LOT of fun. And I feel better doing something to help Skip than just sitting at home waiting for Mr. Sherlock to find him. I see why you like doing this, Doctor Watson. You have an amazing life!”

If you factored out the complete aggravation dealing with Sherlock Holmes, his infuriating brother, the mess, the lack of sleep, the lack of dates, the lack of money and the… the immense hole in his soul that was just starting to refill.

“I do, Arthur. And I’m grateful for it. Now, since Sherlock is still pounding on the door, I’d
advise you to open it a crack and slide out your phone. That might distract him long enough for you to safely escape.”

“Brilliant! I hope I can talk to you again, Doctor Watson. This has been fun.”

“It has been fun. And Arthur, call me John.”

“Thanks! Bye!”

Arthur knelt and did as John instructed, bolting from the bathroom as soon as Sherlock dove to the floor to grab the mobile.

“John! Whatever Arthur said, ignore it. Just ignore everything. I’ll explain when I get back to London and…”

“Arthur and I talked about Martin’s case. What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Too late for that, you prat. Confess.”

“I have no sins to report.”

“Lying is a sin, so you’ve just proved yourself wrong.”

“One could argue that ‘sin’ is defined by the individual and I say none of my actions constitutes a sin. Therefore, my conscience is clear.”

“One could also argue that you having a conscience is subject to debate.”

“I can find no flaw in that statement.”

“You mean I won?”

“For a given value of ‘win.’”

“Piss off and let me enjoy this. Anyway, I got the short story on your investigation and I’m sorry you’ve not found your cousin yet.”

“It is only a matter of time. I have ruminated on the idea that Martin will not wish to return to Fitton, but that shall be another duty I will lay on Arthur’s shoulders. I have a suspicion that Martin would not easily be able to deny Arthur anything.”

“He’s got puppy-dog eyes, doesn’t he?”

“He’s got puppy-dog everything.”

“Just as long as everything works out ok. Look, I’ll let you go because I’m sure Arthur, at least, could use some sleep. Take care of yourself, Sherlock.”

“I will, John. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Good. It’s a little boring around here without you.”

“Well, we can’t have that, now can we?”
An early morning start had both Sherlock and Arthur yawning through the check-out process, a hot cup of tea and re-checking of the area map to prioritize their search locations. Using the same technique as the previous day, they prowled through every inhabited piece of land in their path until Arthur spotted a building, set off from the road that looked quite new and rather industrial, despite the quaint countryside surrounding it. Sherlock pulled the vehicle into the parking lot and noted that the name of the side of the building only said ‘The Willows.’

The men walked into the lobby and Sherlock zeroed in on the woman at the receptionist desk.

“We are looking for Martin Crieff. Do you have any knowledge of his whereabouts?”

The woman looked at Sherlock as if he had grown a second head. Arthur decided it was time for a polite intervention.

“What Mr. Sherlock means is that his cousin, and my friend, whose name is Martin Crieff has gone missing. No one knows where he is and everyone is terribly scared for him. If you’ve seen him or heard from him or anything, could you please tell us?”

Arthur slid Martin’s photo across the desk and even he saw the look of recognition on the receptionist’s face.

“No. I’m sorry, but I’ve never seen this man.”

“Arthur, is she being truthful?”

“I have to say no, Mr. Sherlock.”

“I concur. Now Ms. …”

Sherlock peered to read the woman’s name tag.

“… Gardner, you will take me to see Martin and stop wasting our time with your poorly-executed lies.”

“Firstly, sir, there is no one here by that name. Secondly, threats will only serve to have security called to facilitate your removal. Now, why don’t you make life easy on all of us and take your friend and leave quietly.”

“That route is, of course, open to you; however, I’ll gladly place your working-wage security lackeys against some of the British government’s finest examples of law enforcement personnel and we can wager on the outcome. Here’s a hint – I’ll win.”

All the threat served to do was strengthen the receptionist’s resolve and Arthur knew this was not the way to get the information they needed.

“Please, Ms. Gardner. Skip just left and didn’t tell anyone where he was going. If we could just know if he’s ok, then… then that would be enough. If he’s ok and safe then… well, that’s the important thing. It doesn’t matter that I want him back home so badly that it hurts inside like I swallowed a hot coal. I just need to know that someone’s taking care of him. Skip really needs someone to take care of him. So, it would be a very nice thing for you to do if you just told me he was safe. Told us he was safe, I mean.”

Sherlock never believed in the power of sentiment, but he’d started to see examples of it when he met John. And here was another. The receptionist’s eyes softened listening to Arthur and when she stepped away from the desk and motioned the men back towards the door, Sherlock knew they’d get
“Look here, I’m telling the truth when I say that this man is not here. He did arrive, but didn’t stay. Actually, we never even got his name in the system. As soon as the clerk began taking his information and started to put it into the computer, Mr. Crieff got very upset and left. I have no idea what happened to him after that.”

Arthur looked at Sherlock, but the detective was just as baffled.

“Martin was here and simply left. What is your purpose? What does this facility do?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, sir. I’m sorry. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve told you all I know.”

The receptionist went back to her desk and Sherlock led a very anxious Arthur out of the building.

“Can’t Mycroft tell you what this place is?”

An idea Sherlock had already considered and discarded.

“Likely, but that is not a priority right now. We can assume that Martin came here for a reason, the nature of which, at this point, is not relevant. That will change when we find him, but that is where we must concentrate our efforts. The baggage of involving Mycroft can easily bog down my work.”

Arthur did not look convinced, but he didn’t have a lifetime of his brother’s interference to use as reference material.

“I promise to call him if we exhaust our leads, agreed?”

“I guess so. I just don’t want to waste any chance to find Skip.”

“Neither do I. Now, assuming that Martin left here in significant distress, yet did not return to Fitton, there is a good chance that he has not strayed far from this area. I would doubt that my cousin came here with a backup plan at the ready, so he likely is adrift right now. Providing Martin has not changed in all matters of his life, confusion would lead to his own unique brand of inaction.”

“Meaning?”

“He will run in circles, going nowhere.”

“That does sound like Skip.”

“Which means have a good chance of finding him in this vicinity.”

“Brilliant! I’m going to keep my fingers crossed, Mr. Sherlock. My toes, too.”

“Since I won’t carry you, please wait until we get to the car.”

Sherlock and Arthur inspected every inch of land surrounding the facility and into the neighboring town. Even Arthur was beginning to look defeated when Sherlock spied a van parked at the far end of a parking lot abutting a partially-built row of shops. He drew Arthur’s attention to the vehicle and took his widened eyes as a sign that they’d found Martin. Or at least his vehicle.

Sherlock parked the Land Rover behind Martin’s van and the men quickly got out, with Sherlock
taking the lead as they moved forward. When a few knocks produced no response, Sherlock checked and found the rear door unlocked. Opening it slowly, he looked inside and turned back towards Arthur.

“I need you to go and wait in the car, Arthur.”

“Wait. Is Skip in there?”

“Please, Arthur.”

“No. Not until you answer me. Is Skip in the van?”

“Yes. Martin is in there. Now, I need you to trust me and just go and wait in the car.”

“I do trust you, Mr. Sherlock, but I can’t sit and wait if Skip needs me and I’m thinking from the way you’re acting that Skip needs me really, really badly.”

And that was not something with which Sherlock could argue.

“Alright, but I will need you to remain calm and listen to me when I speak to you. Can you do that?”

“For Skip, I can do anything.”

Sherlock hoped that was true. He hoped very badly for Martin’s sake that it was true, because Arthur hadn’t seen Martin yet. All it took was a look at his face. Sherlock knew that face, he knew it well. He saw it in the mirror every day for a very long time.

Until he finally got clean.
Chapter 9

I greatly enjoy and appreciate all the kudos and comments folks are leaving. Makes writing this so much more enjoyable...

“Damn. I thought you were a hallucination.”

Sherlock had made Arthur stay out of sight as he reopened the van’s rear doors to talk to his cousin.

“Is that what you’re on? Hallucinogens?”

“Piss off, you bastard. Like you care anyway.”

“Whether I care or not has no bearing on what you’re taking, so answer the question.”

“I did. Piss off. Don’t like my answer, feel free to take yourself somewhere else.”

There was a feral quality to Martin’s face that Sherlock remembered too well and, at that moment, he had no strategy for circumventing his cousin’s altered mind so that this would continue peacefully. No one had been able to reason with him when he was like this, so he had no faith he’d fare any better trying to reason with Martin. But, he had to try.

“I’m quite comfortable here, thank you.”

Sherlock cut his gaze around the door to check on Arthur who looked as if the only thing holding back his tears was sheer, raw shock.

“Why are you here, anyway? Come to finally give me my puppy? HAH. Bastard. You’re the last person I want to see, Sherlock. Ever. Got Mycroft hidden somewhere? That’d make my day complete, now wouldn’t it?”

Arthur couldn’t stand it anymore and even though Sherlock had told him to wait out of sight, he couldn’t bear to hover outside the van any longer. Not when Skip was inside it. He peered through the door’s window and knocked to get Martin’s attention.

“Mycroft’s not hiding anywhere, Skip. It’s just me.”

Faster than he’d ever seen anything move, Arthur watched as Martin flung himself as far from the back of the van as possible and grabbed what looked like one of his shirts to try and cover his face from Arthur’s view.

“NO! You can’t be here, Arthur. You CANNOT be here. You can’t… not with me like… You CAN’T BE HERE. I left so that… YOU CANNOT BE HERE ARTHUR!”

Sherlock nearly went flying as Arthur shoved him out of the way and vaulted into the van, scooping the wildly shaking Martin into his arms and pulling him down to the van’s floor to cradle against his body.
“It’s ok, Skip. Really, it’s ok. I should be here. There’s no place else more important for me to be than right here. Right here and right now. It’s ok… I promise, Skip. It’s all ok…”

Neither Sherlock nor Arthur liked the laugh that erupted from Martin. It was harsh, hollow and tinged with an ugly combination of panic and despair.

“Ok… No, Arthur. Things are far from ok. You’re not supposed to be here, Arthur. You were never supposed to see me… This was never supposed to touch you.”

Arthur’s pain and confusion were etched deeply into the lines of his face but, seeing the unashamed tenderness with which Arthur attempted to soothe Martin, Sherlock’s last doubt about Arthur’s feelings for his cousin faded away. He was, however, still unsure if Arthur realized those feelings for what they really were. John… why did John have to be all the way in London?

“I don’t understand, Skip. I always want to see you. When you’re happy or tired or mad or all rumply from loading boxes or just woken up so your hair is like flaming feathers around your head…”

Which Arthur was recreating with his fingers, tentatively threading them through Martin’s locks.

“But not this, Arthur… I tried so hard to make it so that you… none of you… ever saw… ever knew…”

Sherlock took advantage of Martin’s preoccupation to quickly scan his cousin and the interior of his van. Martin was certainly no longer the boy Sherlock had grown up with, but there were still vestiges of the young Martin in the man in front of him. Still the slight build, though now sadly emaciated from his poor nutrition and whatever chemicals he was putting into his system. Still the vibrant ginger hair and the piercing eyes, despite being glassy and partially failing to focus. He wasn’t dirty and there was no indication of other physical ailments, so his overall health, besides the current problem, appeared to be fair. And the drugs were a complete revelation to Arthur. Compound with the fact that not one of the people Sherlock interviewed made any mention of Martin’s habit, the indication was that Martin was not so far gone as to have lost the ability to care if his friends knew of his problem. And, he wasn’t obviously altered when around other people. Either his cousin was very good at hiding his condition, and Martin had never been good at hiding anything, or his abuses tended to occur during off times, when he wasn’t around others. Moderate use, then, not heavy.

But it did explain the anomalies. The variations in his handwriting and the mood swings that Arthur had noticed. They were fairly recent by all accounts, which may point towards either a relatively recent addiction or an escalation of an existing problem. Regardless, this was something Martin had obviously wanted to keep from his friends, but why then his very noticeable disappearance? A quick word that he had a sick relative or some other common excuse would explain away his absence without causing alarm. Even if his plan was never to return, he must have realized that, at minimum, the MJN staff would be highly distressed and Martin had never been one to willingly cause another person any form of distress.

“Martin, why did you leave Fitton? Why would you take yourself away from there without a word to anyone. If you wanted to keep your situation quiet…”

“I am NOT talking to you, Sherlock.”

“Then talk to me, Skip. I don’t know why you won’t talk to Mr. Sherlock because he’s been worried about you and came all this way and even let me assist!, but I’ve learned enough from him to
know that it doesn’t matter right now when there are more important things to talk about, like why you left. *Why* did you leave, Skip? I’ve been crazy with worry. And so have Mum and Douglas. If you needed help, we’d have done anything for you. And that’s still true… whatever you need, Skip. *Whatever* you need… I promise I’ll help…”

Sherlock studied Martin’s face while Arthur spoke and was rather startled to see nothing but confusion on Martin’s features.

“What are you talking about, Arthur? I told your mother I’d be gone for awhile.”

“You mean the holiday Mum said you couldn’t take.”

“The one I told her I was going to take and since she didn’t pay me anything she really didn’t have the right to refuse me. I put it on the wall chart. Martin’s holiday. It’s right there…”

“Then, oops.”

“Oops, what?”

“Well, I assume you wrote it on the old wall chart which had a little accident and Mum had to recopy all the information onto the new one.”

“Accident?”

“Yeah, I tried to juggle eggs and… I did pretty well until… I didn’t. I guess Mum decided that since she said you couldn’t have a holiday, she didn’t put it on the new wall chart and forgot about it.”

It wasn’t like Sherlock to breathe a sigh of relief, but he did this time. At least his cousin did as he would have predicted, took steps to keep everyone informed, albeit with a deception and it wasn’t his fault that his plans went awry. Truthfully, it was a stroke of good fortune, from Sherlock’s point of view, because there was no predicting what would have happened to Martin once his original plan failed. Which was something else Sherlock now needed to pursue. Sherlock wriggled a finger to catch Arthur’s eye and moutheed ‘The Willows’ five or six times, finally trying to pantomime draping willow branches with his fingers.

“I love charades Mr. Sherlock! But I’m not really sure if this is the right time…”

“THE WILLOWS, ARTHUR! Hang it… Martin – your holiday was actually a cover for a treatment program wasn’t it? You were going into rehab.”

“Why are you STILL HERE?”

Martin nearly spat the words at him and Sherlock was both shocked and impressed when Arthur grabbed Martin’s face forcefully with both hands and turned it towards himself.

“Don’t worry about Mr. Sherlock right now Skip? Ok? Just talk to me. Just look at *me* and talk to *me* and tell *me* if that place we visited was going to help you.”

Martin licked his lips a bit but answered after a moment’s hesitation.

“Yes. They take a few NHS patients and, it took awhile, but I was finally approved. I told Carolyn that I needed the time away for a holiday… but there was no possibility of turning down the opportunity. I’d be on the waiting list *forever* if I let this chance slip by. It was only luck that they had a cancellation and I was able to get in when I did. I’m so sorry, Arthur… I’m so sorry… I never
wanted you to know…”

Arthur gently pressed Martin’s head down so it lay against his shoulder and let Martin release the tears he’d been trying to hold back. Sherlock took the moment of quiet to rummage around Martin’s van for evidence of any drugs or paraphernalia and, unfortunately, got too close to Martin who sensed his presence and lashed out, kicking the detective’s hands away from his things.

“I said piss OFF, you…”

This Martin launched himself at Sherlock with a tackle that sent both men onto the ground behind the van. Arthur scrambled out and tried to drag the out-of-control Martin off of the detective, who shoved his hand against Martin’s mouth and quickly pinched his cousin’s nose with its now-free mate. Martin struggled like man being dragged to the gallows until he finally had no choice but to swallow. He did, however, demonstrate his opinion of Sherlock’s behavior with a fierce kick to Sherlock’s ankle which earned him a sharp shriek as a reward.

“You bastard, you stupid, sodding…”

“Mr. Sherlock! What happened? What did you do?”

“Martin will be fine, Arthur. I’m sure he’s had enough experience with those, let’s call them sedatives, to weather their effects nicely. However, they should help keep my body parts attached to the rest of me for the time being until we can get Martin to a hospital.”

That set off another round of wrestling as Martin jerked away from Arthur and dove towards Sherlock a second time.

“WHY THE FUCK ARE YOU EVEN HERE! LEAVE ME ALONE! I’M NOT GOING TO A HOSPITAL! I AM NOT!”

Martin jumped to his feet and began to run, but Arthur’s reflexes were as quick as his legs, catching up to the pilot after only a few seconds. He came up behind Martin and grabbed him in a bear hug that had the smaller man squirming furiously, but unable to break free. Sherlock slowly rose, brushing the dirt off of his clothes and cautiously approached the pair.

“Skip, you have to calm down. You have to calm down because I’m not used to doing this and I don’t know long I can and I don’t really want to anyway and it would just be easier if you calmed down for me so I could let you go and neither of us would have to be upset and isn’t that for the best Skip, that neither of us is upset, because…”

Sherlock let Arthur ramble on because he knew the pills he’d forced down Martin’s throat would be kicking in soon. He’d made Martin take enough that they would act fast and for a good long time. As he watched, Martin’s struggles became weaker and weaker and he lost the mania that had painted his eyes.

“Better now, Skip? Isn’t this better? It is for me and I’m sure it is for you. Now, we’ll just get you some place where they can take care of you and…”

This time Martin’s reaction wasn’t a burst of white-hot anger, but a sad and quiet moan of defeat.

“Please, Arthur… please. No one can find out. The computers… if it gets in there, everyone…the CAA, Carolyn… everyone will find out. Everything will be ruined. That’s why I couldn’t stay at The Willows… the computers, Arthur… do you understand? Please don’t do that to me, Arthur. Don’t send me somewhere like that with all the records and computers… If you are my friend at all, promise me you won’t do that to me. Please, Arthur… promise me…”
Martin’s lights were dimming quickly and it was doubtful that he heard Arthur’s shaky ‘I promise, Skip’ before he fell unconscious. Sherlock helped Arthur the dead weight of Martin’s form back to the Land Rover, where they laid him gently across the large rear seat.

“Finally. He has more stamina than I would have credited given his diminutive frame. Now, we can see if The Willows still has a bed open or if we need to seek an alternative facility…”

“No.”

Sherlock was tired, frustrated, guilt-ridden… right now was not the best time for Arthur to argue.

“Arthur, I recognize that you likely place a great deal of value on giving your word to Martin and that is quite commendable. However, in light of his mental condition at the moment and his need for medical assistance…”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Sherlock. Skip made me promise and I can’t break it. It’s not possible. I mean, I don’t think I physically can. I sort of want to, because you’re right – Skip needs help from a doctor and equipment and medicine and things like that, but… no, it’s not going to happen. You have to think of something else.”

“Like leaving him alone in his van and hoping it all works out right as rain?”

“Ok… I understand that you’re tired and mad and Skip hasn’t been very nice to you, but you don’t have to be mean about things.”

John… Sherlock wondered if it was a bit too not good to blame John for not being here to help with this, even though he was the one who hadn’t let John come.

“Arthur, trust me when I say that even if Martin chose to fight his addiction on his own, I doubt that he could. Especially in these circumstances. There’s no food in there, Arthur. And only a few bottles of water. His blanket is threadbare and someone is bound to notice his van and report it to the authorities. How will being taken in and given an arrest record be better than having a medical record for treatment for his problem? And the police aren’t always known for giving the kindest welcome to junkies.”

Sherlock had never seen Arthur angry and he rather hoped he would never have to again because the burning sensation in his chest from being caught in his assistant’s furious glare actually hurt.

“Do not ever… ever… call Skip that again.”

Yes, must remember that not everyone appreciates the factual nature of certain labels.

“I will endeavor to use a better word in the future. However, you do see my point, don’t you? Martin needs the assistance he was originally seeking…”

“Then we give it to him! We find another way, but we do what it takes to get Skip well. And he wants to be well which is absolutely brilliant! Not like those sad people you see on those police shows on the telly who die at the end because they didn’t listen to anyone and kept on… doing what they were doing. Skip wants to get well and then he can come home and we can all be a family again like we used to.”

Sherlock was certain that the likelihood of Martin agreeing to return to Fitton was rapidly dwindling, but he was not going to risk upsetting Arthur any further by bringing that fact to his attention.

“Anyway, I was thinking that if we try and take Skip somewhere he doesn’t want us to he’s just
going to get very angry and that can’t be good for him now, can it? He’ll make a lot of fuss and that’s not what he needs to get better. He needs to be happy where he is and trust the people who are trying to help. He certainly won’t trust the doctors and… and he won’t trust us either. That can’t happen, Mr. Sherlock. I can’t have Skip not trusting me, because if that’s the case then he won’t let me help him get better and won’t be my friend anymore and… no. I can’t have that, so you have to use your brain and think of something else besides taking him where he doesn’t want to go.”

There was one portion of Arthur’s argument that Sherlock could in no way refute. Martin’s recovery was going to be long and difficult and he would need to have people who he trusted around him to facilitate his healing. Sherlock never had that during his many visits to rehab and subsequent half-hearted attempts to remain off the drugs. And, it was highly probable that having individuals hovering around him, intruding on his privacy and space would have simply hastened his inevitable relapse. The only person who ever stood for him in a way that Sherlock even vaguely recognized as helpful was Lestrade. He gave Sherlock a very tangible method to overcome his ever-present boredom, so that the drugs became superfluous. And, the new diversion worked well enough that he was able to get clean and stay clean, barring small and short-duration relapses. Which had dropped to near zero when John entered his life. Looking at Arthur stroking Martin’s arm with obvious concern and affection, Sherlock had to wonder how his own addiction would have played out if he had met John earlier. He’d seen that same look in John’s eyes before when he’d tended to Sherlock’s injuries after a case.

But Martin was not Sherlock. He would need support, and even if Martin denied it, he would recover much more efficiently with a strong support system at his back. Sherlock had no idea if Martin would allow him to participate and was completely unsure if he actually had the skill and capacity to help his cousin, but others did even if his own efforts proved useless. And there was one person who would be ripped apart if he could not be there to help Martin overcome his problems and find his return to health. Sherlock was absolutely certain there was nothing he would be able to do to remedy that situation if it occurred.

Item 1 – Martin needs to rid his body of his physical addictions.

Item 2 – Withdrawal, especially with someone as frail as Martin, is physically dangerous and should be medically supervised for maximum safety.

Item 3 – Martin’s fear of documentation. Not completely unfounded given his profession and the pitiful security surrounding digital information.

Item 4 – Hospitals, clinics and treatment centers will create a record that would follow Martin throughout his life.

Item 5 – What was necessary was medical intervention by a provider who would be agreeable to offer treatment without registering it officially.

Item 6 – Discuss with Arthur items that were considered appropriate as apology gifts.

“I need you to call Mycroft and give him the details of the situation. Martin’s van must be taken back to Fitton and he will need to mobilize the home-rehabilitation protocol that I know he has scripted and waiting in some folder in his desk. It should be in place as soon as we reach London.”

“L… London? Do you… do you have a plan, Mr. Sherlock?”

“I do, Arthur. Now, please call my brother.”

“Sure! Brilliant! That’s wonderful! Thank you, Mr. Sherlock! Thank you thank you thank
you! And Skip thanks you, too!”

“Fine, Arthur… you’re welcome. Now, I need a moment alone, if you please.”

“Ok… but… what are you going to do?”

“Warn John that we’re having guests.”
Conversations

Chapter Notes

Continued and profound gratitude for all of the positive feedback!

Conversation 1

“Ah… Arthur, how wonderful to hear from you. I take it this is not a social call.”

“Hi Mycroft! Not this time, but that would be brilliant wouldn’t it! Me and you chatting on the phone like mates. Which we are because Mr. Sherlock and me are mates now and you’re his brother, so that means we’re mates, too. And Doctor Watson. This is amazing! I have so many new friends…”

“Yes, perhaps we can enjoy a nice sherry if you ever find yourself in London, now…”

“BRILLIANT! Because we’re coming to London!”

“Oh… when?”

“Right now! Well, as soon as I talk to you. And Mum, although Mr. Sherlock didn’t say to call her but I really should since I’m going to London and I’m not sure how long I’ll be there. Especially with all the new friends I have there now. I’ve never had sherry – is it nice?”

Trust Arthur to be the first person ever turn Mycroft’s condescending nature into a liability.

“Some believe so. Now, I assume you have news about Martin and I take it from your ebullient tone that the news is good.”

“Come again.”

“You sound happy; I trust you’ve met with success.”

“Yes! Well, sort of. Can you have success that’s sad? I mean on one hand Yeah!, but on the other Oh No! It’s all a bit confusing, but…”

“Then let me help you, if I may. All you have to do is answer a few questions. Let’s begin. You found cousin Martin, yes?”

“Oh, it’s like a game. Brilliant! I love guessing games! Ok, here I go…Yes.”

“And he is alive?”

“Did I get it right?”

“That’s the beauty of this game, Arthur. Since you already know the answers, you’re sure to win.”

“Wow! I never win games like this! Oh right…. my answer is Yes!”
“Good, very good. And you won again didn’t you?”

“I certainly did. We can play this when we have our sherry. I’ll even ask you questions so you can win.”

“How delightful. Ready for another? There’s something wrong with Martin, isn’t there?”

“Yes. Mycroft… Skip’s… sick. And not the type of sick that needs medicine… well, he may need medicine, I really don’t know about that but… I don’t know if I can actually say it. I never thought this could happen to someone like Skip, but it doesn’t matter because he tried to get better and it’s not his fault he got scared of computers and records and things so he couldn’t stay at The Willows because I get scared of computers sometimes. The important thing is that he tried to get well, but it didn’t work out and Mr. Sherlock wanted to take him to a hospital and Skip kicked him again. Skip is really angry at Mr. Sherlock. Do you know why that is? No… that’s not important now. I’ve got to stick to what’s important because that’s what detective’s assistants do, which I don’t know if I can keep doing much longer since I need to take care of Skip, but Doctor Watson will be doing that too so I don’t know what Mr. Sherlock will do if there’s a really important case…”

Mycroft pinched the bridge of his nose and let Arthur work through what must be a whirlwind of chaos in his mind. Actually, Mycroft had to give the man credit for communicating with the degree of clarity that he had mustered so far. Martin’s disappearance, days in close contact with Sherlock, and now the discovery of drug use by his, well it was doubtful that Arthur realized fully what he wanted Martin to be to him… Perhaps they would have to share that glass of sherry after all. He’d personally assessed Doctor Watson’s suitability for Sherlock; it really was family duty to perform the same service for Martin. Now, if he could just encourage any of them to put his assistance to good use…

“Very good, Arthur. You seem to have thought through quite a number of the details of this little ordeal. Now, let me make very sure I understand the situation and I’ll try to be as delicate as possible. Martin has acquired a small problem with substance abuse, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah… I don’t know why because Mr. Sherlock shoved a lot of pills down Skip’s throat to make Skip sleep. Well, it was actually so Skip would stop attacking him, but Skip’s sleeping now so I can’t talk to him about what went wrong and why he wouldn’t come to me to talk, because I would have! I would have talked to him any time he wanted to. Oh! But I’m supposed to tell you to, let me remember, mobilize the home-rehab program you already have planned that’s in a folder in your desk somewhere. I’m not sure what that’s all about, but Mr. Sherlock seemed sure you would.”

Oh, but the question was which one? At which home? To what level of incarceration and/or restraint? With or without the medically-induced coma? He’d crafted so many scenarios during his brother’s less productive years. Perhaps it was best to keep things simple at first and modify as necessary.

“Yes… thank you, Arthur. I presume we’ll be setting up in Sherlock’s flat.”

“I suppose. Sherlock is talking to Doctor Watson now to tell him we’re coming. Unless you have a different idea. No hospitals, though. Skip was adamant about that and he made me promise and I did so…”

“I would never think of such a thing. I’ll do everything in my power to ensure my dear cousin does not carry a record of this little aberration anywhere it could ever be found.”

It would, however, become part of the new file series that Mycroft had established for his cousin. Something he should have done long ago. It had been a mistake to remove Martin from his radar,
just because his brother saw fit to leave Martin in his wake. And it was a mistake he wouldn’t make again. Now that his own staff was acquiring the details of Martin’s ‘life,’ Mycroft was seeing just how costly his error had been. He’d always known that despite their physical similarities, Sherlock and Martin were nothing alike. Martin always needed connections with other people to thrive and he’d found so few in his young life that Sherlock of all people was actually closer to him than anyone.

And, although Sherlock made a point to keep the distance between himself and Mycroft as large as possible, Martin had never done so. Mycroft remembered times when Sherlock was being particularly ‘Sherlock’ and Martin would sneak away, knocking carefully on the library door and asking if he could sit and read with Mycroft. And he always had a book about airplanes in his hands, one that now and again Mycroft had to help him understand. Though he might wish to, Mycroft couldn’t lie to himself and say that that experience was completely unpleasant. But he’d turned his back on Martin as readily as did Sherlock, to Martin’s obvious harm. No, not a mistake he’d make again.

“Thank you, Mycroft! Skip will be so happy! He was terrified and now he won’t be. Well, at least I hope he won’t be. I don’t know what we’ll have to do to get Skip well, but I… it won’t be easy will it?”

If Sherlock’s various bouts of rehab were a yardstick, Martin was facing a close approximation of hell. And the aftermath…

“I won’t lie to you, Arthur, it will be very difficult for Martin. And for you. However, I have full faith you’re ready to rise to the challenge. I am correct, aren’t I?”

“ABSOLUTELY! I don’t care what I have to do or how horrible it is or how long it takes or what it costs or anything at all! Even if I have to take him somewhere like a little hut on an desert island like on Gilligan’s Island, but without all the other castaways, so he can get healthy and be himself again, I’ll do it and I bet… I bet you could find an island like that couldn’t you, Mycroft? You seem like a chap that can get anything done and you’d do it, right? If Skip needed that?”

Once in a very, very great while Mycroft actually felt appreciated for what he accomplished and could accomplish…

“If it comes to that, I’ll find you a very nice island completely bereft of any other inhabitants, though I daresay the Professor would be a useful asset if you required a coconut radio or some other little comfort.”

“Nah… why would we need the professor when we’ve got you, Mycroft? Oh, Mr. Sherlock is making a really scowly face at me so I have to go. We’ll see you soon, though. Ok?”

“Of course, Arthur. I look forward to it.”

“Brilliant! Me too. Bye!”

“I take it you enjoyed your little chat with my brother. Tell me you at least remembered to pass along the relevant information.”

“It only takes a little extra time to be nice to someone, Mr. Sherlock and when you’re nice to them they’re nice to you.”

“Mycroft is not nice.”
“I beg to differ.”

“I think I have a little more experience dealing with my own brother…”

“But, have you taken a course on understanding people? You haven’t, have you? Not everyone has, so don’t feel bad. But I can you that Mycroft demonstrates all the signs of someone who genuinely wants to help.”

“Or knows the signs of someone who genuinely wants to help and mimics them when it advances his personal agenda.”

“You don’t always have to look on the gloomy side of life, Mr. Sherlock.”

“I’m happier there. People are quiet and leave everyone else alone.”

“Well, at least you have me to visit you. Oh! Can I call Mum? She’ll want to hear that we found Skip and that… I’M GOING TO LONDON! Brilliant! We almost never go there since it’s too expensive to land GERTI. This is such an adventure. Well except the part about Skip, but maybe he’ll think it’s an adventure too once he wakes up. How many of those pills did you give him anyway?”

“Enough that we’ll have a peaceful drive home. Believe me, Arthur, every moment he spends asleep is going to be valuable for all of us.”

Sherlock watched Arthur chew his lip and play with his fingers.

“Mycroft said it’s going to be bad. He’s telling the truth, isn’t he?”

“Yes. But I’m hopeful that the outcome will be positive.”

“I told Mycroft that I’m going to do everything I can to help Skip and I meant that, Mr. Sherlock. So you have to make sure and tell me what I can do and not hide anything. Mum and Herc and Douglas and sometimes even Skip don’t always think I can handle things on my own, but I can. I just need someone to tell me what to do and sometimes how to do it. You’ll do that for me, won’t you? No matter what it is or if you think I can do it or not. I can count on you, right Mr. Sherlock?”

A few days ago, Sherlock might not have agreed, but Arthur had proven he was not someone to underestimate. Appearances notwithstanding.

“You can, Arthur. Make your call to your mother while we have a moment. John apparently can’t take a phone call when he’s busy with a family of six with the stomach flu. I will have to have a talk with him about priorities because he has apparently forgotten about our last one.”

"Just remember to be nice."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Conversation 2

“HI Mum! It’s Arthur!”

“Arthur! Thank heavens. Have you found Martin? What have you learned? You haven’t broken anything or anyone I’ll have to pay for, have you?”
“No, Mum. I haven’t broken anything. I’ve been helping Mr. Sherlock and guess what! We found Skip!”

“You found Martin? Is he in one piece?”

“He is in one piece.”

“Put him on the phone. I have a few words for him and you should perhaps take a little walk while he absorbs them.”

“I would, Mum, but he’s asleep right now.”

“Then wake him up, idiot child. I have a very great desire to share my current thoughts with Captain Crieff and his nap can wait until I’m done.”

“He actually can’t wake up right now, but if you tell me what you want to say, I’ll make sure I tell him when he does.”

“Arthur, listen to me. I want you to tell me exactly what is going on and I do not want you to leave out one detail. And I mean that knowing just how long I will have to keep this phone attached to my ear. Now… begin.”

“Well, first we stopped at the bank to talk to the manager… no, wait… first, we were at Skip’s talking to his housemates… but… we were in his room before that. Maybe I better start at our house, instead…”

“Ok, I lied. I don’t want every detail. Just tell me what is wrong with Martin and when you two are coming back. I just had to accompany a party of rich hens for their ‘let’s fly to Paris for a little shopping’ excursion and keep Douglas from pulling his next ex-wife from the pack. If you two aren’t back here yesterday…”

“Mum, that’s not possible. I don’t even need to ask Mr. Sherlock, I know that on my own. And we can’t come back because we’re going to London.”

“What! Arthur Shappey, you are not going to London…”

“I am, Mum. We have to. I’m sorry, but we do.”

“You’re not making any sense, you silly thing. Just tell me what happened to Martin and do it while on the way back to Fitton.”

“I can’t tell you exactly what is going on because I sort of promised Skip. Well, I didn’t actually promise that I wouldn’t tell you but I think he’d want me to extend the promise to cover this because… well for reasons that I can talk about because of my promise…”

“ARTHUR! Just tell me if you’re alright. Your promise doesn’t cover that does it?”

“No, I can talk about me all I want. And I’m fine, Mum. Actually except for Skip and his… well, this has been brilliant! Mr. Sherlock lets me do all sorts of things and I’ve actually been helping. And I get to keep helping when we’re in London. And meet Mycroft! And Doctor Watson! It’s hard to explain, but I’m doing something Mum. I mean I’m always doing something, but this time it’s something important and I’m doing a good job and even Mr. Sherlock says so and he doesn’t say many nice things. About anyone. At all. Well, except for Doctor Watson, but that’s different because he fancies him…”
“Love of my life, do shut up. What you are saying is that you are actually managing to survive your first foray out of the nest. Now, I want you to pay very close attention because I am not sure when I shall ever say this again. Ok… here goes… Arthur, I am proud of you.”

“Really?”

“As surprised as we both are – yes. I am quite proud of you.”

“Wow… Thanks, Mum. When we get back, I’m going to give you the biggest hug of my whole life!”

“I shall wait with bated breath. Can you at least tell me how long you and Martin will be in London?”

“I can’t. But it’s because I don’t know not because I don’t want to. It’s… it’s going to a while, though. I’m pretty sure about that. But then we’ll come back and it will be just like it was before. Better than before because Skip won’t… it’ll just be better!”

“I’ll take your word for it. At least Martin’s absence isn’t costing MJN any money.”

“Oh no, we’ve no jobs?”

“On the contrary. We’ve been contracted by a Mr. Farmer to courier documents around and we’re not going anywhere that Douglas can’t handle alone. For once, MJN may actually operate in the black.”

Carolyn wasn’t sure why Arthur was laughing, but who could ever be sure of anything with Arthur.

“Mr. Farmer? Like a man who owns a farm? Mr. Sherlock needs to learn to listen to me when I say I understand people.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, my darling son, and I am glad for it. Now, will you promise to call me and tell me what you can?”

“I will. I can keep two promises at one time with no problem at all. And yours is easy to keep. I’ll call every day if it’s possible. I don’t want you to worry, Mum. There’s really nothing to worry about. At least not for me because I’m fine and it’s not like I’m not going to be alone. But, if you want to worry about someone, you can worry about Skip. And keep your fingers crossed for him. And tell Douglas to do it, too. He’s… well, he’s going to need a lot of fingers crossed for him, not that I can tell you why or anything…”

“Yes, Arthur, I get it. I shall keep our mangy pilot in my thoughts and advise Douglas to follow suit. Take care of yourself, boy. And try to come home soon.”

“I’ll try Mum. Love you! Bye!

———-

**Conversation 3**

Sherlock’s mobile rang just as Arthur got off the phone with his mother and Sherlock motioned him to get seated in the Land Rover. There was no surprise in the fact that Arthur climbed in the back seat with Martin, laying Martin’s head on his lap.

“Sherlock, I’m going to begin this with a warning not to launch into a rant about priorities
because I still smell like child vomit and I haven’t eaten since breakfast. Which actually may be a good thing. So, let’s just move to you telling me how you are and how the investigation is going.”

Damn John Watson’s pre-emptive strike. When was he ever going to lose his grasp of military tactics?

“If it will bring ease to your trying day, I will avoid any rant, planned or spontaneous, that I may have been considering.”

“Ok. What’s wrong?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“You gave in too easily. You’re up to something.”

“I simply don’t wish to add any turmoil to your day. Isn’t that what friends do for each other?”

“Just tell me now, Sherlock. It will go far worse for you if I find out later when someone delivers the head of a cow or something to the flat.”

Trying the soft approach was obviously going to take some practice. Being 'nice' was not as easy as it appeared.

“I promise it’s not the head of a cow.”

“Oh god. I should be sitting down, shouldn’t I?”

“Well, if you’re tired, then by all means. Firstly, I am quite well. Secondly, we have located Martin and have him with us.”

“That’s great! Really, Sherlock… that’s fantastic. What was the problem? Off with a bird or something?”

Sherlock wasn’t actually sure if that would have been more or less upsetting to Arthur.

“Unfortunately, no. Martin seems to have gotten involved with drugs…”

“Christ… Sherlock, I am so,so sorry…”

“… and I was wondering if you meant what you said about being willing to do anything to help?”

“Of course! I can make a few calls and see if I can find him space at a rehab facility. If I say I’m his doctor…”

“Unfortunately, there are problems with that arrangement that I will happily explain when we arrive in London.”

“We?”

“Myself, Arthur and Martin.”

“Sherlock, if Martin’s got a drugs problem, we should get him treatment as soon as possible…”

“That is the plan. Martin will get the best possible treatment, from the best possible doctor…”
“Tell me you’re joking.”

“I’m not given to telling jokes, John.”

“Sherlock… I cannot provide the help Martin needs. I don’t even really know how to go about it. Not actually something I had to do a lot of as, you know, a trauma surgeon!”

“You wipe up child vomit, John. I doubt you did much of that as a trauma surgeon, either.”

“Prat. In all seriousness, Martin needs specialized treatment, as well as counseling, and I’m not qualified for either. You know I want to help, Sherlock but this is not in Martin’s best interests.”

“There is no one more qualified that you, John. You must remember that I do have more than a passing familiarity with the caliber of doctor at the so-called treatment facilities and can make an objective comparison of your skills versus theirs. Mycroft is, as we speak, having all the necessary equipment and supplies that you will require delivered to the flat and you can use the time until we reach London to research the various accepted protocols to facilitate Martin’s recovery. This is in my cousin’s best interests, John. There is no one I trust more than you to tend to his health.”

That long-suffering sigh was all Sherlock really needed to hear to know that Martin had a new doctor.

“Fine. I’ll do what I can but, if in my medical opinion, Martin needs more help that I can provide, we will be revisiting this discussion and finding another alternative. And you will fill me in on all the details of this. Is that clear?”

“You used simple enough words. And I agree to your terms. I will answer all your questions, John and… I do appreciate that this is not an easy situation for you. But I would not do this if I did not honestly believe that it is the best option for my cousin.”

“Oddly, I believe you. This one time, I don’t think you have another motive up your sleeve. I guess I had better head to the shops before Mycroft’s serfs arrive, though. We’ve got little in to feed guests, even one who won’t be eating much for awhile.”

“You may be happy to hear that Arthur very much enjoys cooking, so he can take over that duty while you tend to Martin.”

“Oh, that’s a bonus. Good cook too, is he?”

“I have found his dishes to be very intriguing.”

“Well, I look forward to it. Now if I can just train you to do some laundry, it’ll almost be like a vacation.”

“It is very unfair to place me in the position of bringing destruction of your fantasies.”

“Trust me, you’ve been in that position for ages.”

“It will be very good to be home.”

“Yeah… it will be. Safe drive, ok?”

“Without doubt. We will see you soon.”
Sherlock gathered Martin’s few possessions from his van and made sure to clear any evidence of his less-than-legal activities in case the authorities found the van before Mycroft’s minions. This also had the benefit of giving Sherlock some picture of what his cousin had been taking and that would be helpful information for John. As well as for Sherlock and Arthur… drugs of choice told a story and that story would be valuable in understanding Martin’s state of mind for taking his first steps on this path. Well, it would at least let Sherlock more easily catch Martin in the inevitable lies he would tell when they began to question him about his behavior.

“Are you ready, Arthur? How is Martin doing?”

“I’m very ready, Mr. Sherlock. And Skip’s fine, I guess. He looks so peaceful, but it’s not a real peace is it?”

“Perhaps not. But if it serves the same purpose, does it really matter?”

“I suppose not. That’s what I want to do, though. Get Skip to have some real peace. I think that’s what he needs most. More than money or a different place to live, even. Just the chance not to have to be worried and stressed and unhappy… I’m going to think about how to do that and if you get any ideas I want you to tell me. I’m going to ask Doctor Watson, too. He should have some ideas because he’s very smart, maybe in a different way than you, but he’s definitely smart. Maybe if we all try, we can think of some way to just get Skip to be happy.”

Sherlock had at least one idea of how Arthur could make Martin happy, but that was not something to bring up while confined to a vehicle for the next few hours. There would be opportunities later. When John was there. Maybe doing the talking. While Sherlock was elsewhere.

“I promise to give the issue due attention. Alright then, let’s get on the road.”

“Mr. Sherlock?”

“Yes, Arthur?”

“Can I have my snacks bags?”

Sherlock gathered up Arthur’s food stash from the floorboard and passed it over the seat.

“Thanks. And Mr. Snowball?”

Mr. Snowball followed the bags, albeit with a bit more aerial acrobatics.

“Thanks. Mr. Sherlock? Would you mind if I took a little nap? Just a small one, but I want to be wide awake when we get to your flat.”

Sherlock smiled his first smile of the day.

“I wouldn’t mind in the least, Arthur. Not in the least.”
Arthur slept nearly the entire way to London, one hand resting on Martin’s chest, shifting it unconsciously every time Martin moved to maintain his bit of contact. It wasn’t until the traffic noise began to increase that Sherlock’s period of silence came to an end.

“Oh Wow! We’re here! Unless we’re not and you actually went somewhere else instead, but that’s not very likely, but it is you and if…”

“Welcome to London, Arthur.”

“Yeah! So how much longer? I can’t wait to meet Doctor Watson. And get Skip comfortable, though he does look very comfortable right now. Like a little ginger kitten you want to put in a warm basket by the fire.”

“Very poetic. We shall be there shortly and if my brother is operating at his usual level of meddlesome efficiency, the flat should be ready or at least nearly so. John, however, might be a tad irritated at this point, so do not be surprised if he’s not as welcoming as he might be usually.”

“Well, I can understand that. Mum gets very upset when we get unexpected guests. Especially when Dad stops by. Then, I’m under strict orders to hide her favorite vase and take all the pictures off the walls. But he is ok with helping Skip, isn’t he? I mean… I don’t know what I’ll do if he’s not but…”

“John would not have agreed if he wasn’t sure that he both wanted to help Martin and that he could. Rest assured, Martin is now in the hands of the person best capable of providing his treatment in the whole of England. And, unlike the rest of the medical community, he will do it while allowing Martin as much dignity as he possibly can. John actually cares about his patients, although I cannot fathom why as they are ridiculously tedious and suffer mainly from hypochondria.”

“He sounds like a very good man. You’re lucky, Mr. Sherlock. He’s a doctor and a nice man. You’re a detective and a genius. Got all the bases covered… that’s what makes the best couples.”

“Arthur if you say one word to John…”

“I would never do that! That’s your job. I just hope you make him your official boyfriend, and not just you wish-boyfriend, while I’m here so I can say congratulations!”

Despite the frustrations Sherlock endured on a daily basis, he never suffered unduly from headaches. That was starting to change.

“I will hold you to your word. And, I will again inform you that we are not in a relationship.”

“I know that, but it’s because you haven’t stepped up and offered for him yet.”

“Offered? John is not a Victorian maiden, Arthur.”
“Funny you attack that and not actually what I said. I think I’m learning something about being a detective, Mr. Sherlock. Thanks!”

There had to be painkillers in the flat. Lots and lots of painkillers…

After scowling his way through London traffic, Sherlock finally pulled the vehicle alongside the curb near the house. He was becoming more and more convinced that part of Mycroft’s busy-bodying involved keeping parking spaces open on Baker Street for his fleet of black vehicles and Sherlock’s occasional hired car. One large black sedan was already idling further up the street and directly in front of the flat was an unmarked delivery van.

“You live here, Mr. Sherlock! This is brilliant! There’s so many people and all you have to do is go for a little walk and there’s so much to see and do! Maybe… maybe when Skip's feeling better we can do that. All of us! Just go for a little walk and see things and do things and it would be amazing. Can we, Mr. Sherlock? Really, can we because it would be so much fun and everyone loves to have fun…”

Whether Martin would agree to be within a city block of Sherlock was still extremely uncertain, but if it were ever possible… a walk was not the worst possible way to spend a little time with his cousin.

“We shall see. Now, let’s get Martin upstairs…”

A sharp series of taps interrupted Sherlock and he drew in a deep breath knowing he would turn around and see…

“Mycroft! It has to be! It is, isn’t it!”

Arthur opened the rear door, carefully slid out from under Martin and jumped out onto the sidewalk.

“Hi Mycroft!”

“Well, Arthur… I see your deductive skills are improving exponentially. How did you figure it out?”

“Well, people just don’t tap on windows of cars of people they don’t know. Unless they need directions, but you didn’t look like you needed directions. And Mr. Sherlock’s jaw tightened up like it always does when I mention your name, so it had to be you. Oh and I knew you were posh because of how you talk and… well… you’re really, really posh aren’t you. It’s hard to believe Mr. Sherlock is your brother with how posh you look.”

“And just what’s wrong with the way I look?”

Many… many people had commented on how well-dressed a man Sherlock could be. Not that he cared. In the least. At all.

“Yes, Arthur. Please elaborate. I am simply dying of curiosity.”

Sherlock hoped Mycroft was an aficionado of reggae music because there was going to be a steel-drum band playing outside his townhouse every night for the next month. And Lestrade would probably be more than happy to keep the police from responding to any calls from irate pompous bastards between the hours of midnight and 6:00 am.

“There’s nothing wrong with the way you look, Mr. Sherlock! Nothing at all. Your clothes are quite nice… it’s just that Mycroft’s suit is very nice and you’re a bit more… colorful. And you’ve
got your whirly coat and scarf... and your hair isn’t all nice and combed. You’re more like... a posh gypsy than a regular posh.”

“Oh very good. I think you’ve hit the proverbial nail right on its head. Nicely done, Arthur. And, do you know, Sherlock plays the violin. That’s rather fitting, isn’t it?”

Two months. And if Sherlock could find an opera-school dropout to add to the mix...

“Mr. Sherlock plays the violin! Brilliant! This is going to be wonderful. You’ll play for us, won’t you Mr. Sherlock? Skip likes music and not just the things I have on my playlist; he likes music that is big and swoopy and has harps and violins and thundery drums and things.”

“You *can* do swoopy, can’t you Sherlock?”

And a bagpiper and a tap dancer and one of those people who played the Alpine horn...

“Perhaps we can turn our attention to the actual issue at hand, Mycroft? I don’t suppose you’re willing to rumple your oh-so-posh suit and help us get Martin up to the flat?”

“Heavens no. Nor do I expect you or our dear Arthur to risk your backs on those stairs.”

Mycroft gave a brief wave and a very large man in his own very nice suit emerged from the black sedan, walked over, gently picked up Martin from the rear seat and carried him away from the car towards Sherlock’s front door.

“Shall we, gentlemen?”

Arthur heard Sherlock’s whispered ‘piss of, you fat tit’ and gave him a look a disappointed mother would rank as top-notch.

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“This is BRILLIANT!”

Arthur looked around Sherlock’s flat with pure amazement written on his face and Mycroft’s chuckle nearly earned him Sherlock’s elbow in his ribs.

“How nice that your décor has the power to astound and astonish.”

“Mr. Sherlock, I have to say that this is the best flat that I have ever seen.”

“Wouldn’t say that too often, Arthur or I’ll never get him to clean up his mess again.”

Arthur whirled and almost let out a shriek when he saw John standing at the entrance to Sherlock’s bedroom.

“Doctor Watson! Oh My God. You look just like I pictured you, all chummy and warm. You’re just perfect for…”

This time Sherlock’s elbow did connect with ribs.

“…for helping Skip. Thanks so much for that. I can’t tell you how much happier Skip will be here and I know that will make him get better faster, which is the best thing that could happen to him. And I’m going to help too. Anything you need, Doctor Watson. Anything at all. I’m a cabin steward, so I’m very good at following orders.”
“Well, that’s good to know, Arthur. I was a Captain in the RAMC, so I’m used to giving them. How about I give you a tour of the flat while Sherlock and Mycroft do their usual thing and then get you settled. Martin looks like he’ll be out for awhile, so we’ll have time to talk about what to expect over the next few days and beyond. Sound good?”

“Oh my. Oh my oh my oh my… you and Skip are both captains! That is BRILLIANT! Now, I’m not one to believe in superstitious things… well, ok I sometimes do, as long as they’re not too weird, but I think this is a good omen. I really do. I knew it was right to keep my promise to Skip. He is going to get better. He is.”

John looked over to Sherlock and gave him the smile that always put a spark of warmth in the detective’s insides. Then, it was a pat on Arthur’s shoulder and a nudge to get the man moving towards the kitchen, leaving the brothers alone.

“Martin has been placed in my bedroom, I suppose.”

“Of course. No steps to manage and the bathroom is easily accessible. You don’t sleep anyway, Sherlock so I didn’t think that you would mind.”

“You know I don’t. I’m simply not sure how he will react being in my flat, let alone in my bed. He’ll probably set it on fire the first chance he gets.”

“Yes. Arthur did say it was not a joyful reunion.”

“Did you assume it would be otherwise?”

“I assumed nothing, however, on the rare occasion, I do permit myself the indulgence of a little hope. Shall we look in on cousin Martin? I has been a long time, at least for me…”

Mycroft strode towards Sherlock’s bedroom and the detective grudgingly followed, pulling up short when Mycroft stopped suddenly and drew in a hissed breath when he got his first good look at Martin.

“Time has not been kind to him.”

“Life has not been kind to him.”

“I’ll see what can be done about that.”

“The last thing Martin needs is your fat arse sitting in the middle of his business the way it is in mine.”

“You mean in the middle of your nice flat, nice clothes, adequate food, devoted companion business?”

“He has pride, Mycroft.”

“Which goeth before the fall. And since we are picking him up from the bottom of that fall, I think I can be permitted some leeway.”

“Don’t you…”

“No Sherlock. Don’t you. If Arthur hadn’t taken the initiative to use Martin’s emergency number, we might never have laid eyes on him again. At least alive. Is that what you want? To attend his lonely funeral as he did yours?”
“That is unfair.”

“As if that matters in the least. I have already come to terms with my conscience on this matter and I suggest you look into doing the same. And you have far more to examine than I do, don’t you?”

Mycroft could feel the anger radiating off of his brother and wagered that it would spur him, as it often did, into a course of action that would prove useful.

“Your presence here is unnecessary, Mycroft. Don’t you have a puppet regime to install that requires your attention?”

“No… that project is at a stage where my moment-to-moment attention is not necessary. But, it would not be amiss to step back and give you some time to get used to your new flatmates. And don’t worry about disturbing Mrs. Hudson. I arranged a very nice holiday in the south of France for her and her sister. You can thank me for that later.”

Sherlock had his thanks at the tip of his tongue when John peeked his head in the room and drew the malignant air out of the room.

“Hey, are you two playing nice?”

“As always, Doctor Watson. I was just saying my goodbyes to my brother and reminding him that I expect to be notified if there is anything that is required to assist Martin’s treatment. I hope I can also count on you in this, John. Arthur has my personal number if Sherlock has erased it already from your mobile.”

“Actually, he did. About three minutes after it was programmed into memory. But, yeah, for this I won’t hesitate to let you know if I need something. And… feel free to call or drop by to check on Martin anytime you want to. He is your blood after all.”

The last bit said with a glare to silence the objection that was ready to leap out of Sherlock’s mouth.

“You’re too kind. I’ll just bid farewell to Arthur and be on my way. Sherlock… consider well what we discussed, won’t you. If you’ve learned any lesson of late it should be that the future is unpredictable and regrets are not what you want to carry with you to the afterlife.”

John looked up at his friend and gave the detective’s back a brief pat after Mycroft left the room.

“Good conversation, for a change?”

“That is not possible in this universe.”

“I’m sure physics will find a way, somehow.”

“There are some things quantum can’t even cure. How is Arthur?”

“As he would say – Brilliant! I left him with that mushroom colony you’re growing at the back of the pantry. I think he’s naming them. Arthur’s a good chap, I like him. And I can see why you two got on so well together.”

“You can?”

“Oh sure. “

“Really.”
“Clear as day.”

“And would you care to share your reasoning?”

“I’m sorry if your mind doesn’t work as quickly as mine, Sherlock, but I don’t have time to keep catching you up.”

“You know I can’t leave that unchallenged, John.”

“I’m up for any challenge you propose, Sherlock.”

There was no reason for Sherlock’s face to grow warm, but his body seemed to find it funny and resist his urgent mental orders to cease and desist.

“Sherlock, are you alright? You’ve gone a bit pink.”

“It is the flush of victory. I’m enjoying it a bit early since your defeat will occur at some unnamed time in the future when I have sufficient time to savor it properly.”

“Ha bloody ha.”

Time for a strategic distraction. Digging into his coat pocket, Sherlock quickly withdrew the various containers of pills and powders that he’d taken from Martin’s van.

“Make yourself useful and start planning Martin’s specific treatment protocol, why don’t you? This is all I could find, but I can’t be sure that it’s all he’s taken recently.”

“Good god. This is a right ol’ grab bag, isn’t it?”

“I suspect he bought whatever was cheapest when had the money to spend.”

“Yeah, well it’s a place to start. Right now, I need to do a preliminary exam and hook up an IV to get some fluids in him. Any idea when we can expect him to rejoin us?”

“Another hour or so, based on his body weight and dosage level.”

“Just enough time, then. Why don’t you go see if Arthur needs anything?”

“Arthur is remarkably self-sufficient, he’ll be fine.”

“Oh. Ok. Guess we’ll just have to hope he doesn’t get into that experiment you have festering in the vegetable crisper in the fridge.”

“Call me if you need me.”

“Mr. Sherlock! This is the greatest place on the planet! I thought my room was amazing, but you’ve got a real skull and very interesting books and Doctor Watson told me about your experiments. Can we do some while I’m here? I mean, when we’re not helping Skip, but can we? A real science experiment? I don’t mind begging for this, Mr. Sherlock because it would be…”

Sherlock never found out just what it would be since the sound of Martin yelling drowned out any other sound in the flat.

“WHO ARE YOU? WHERE AM I? GET THAT AWAY FROM ME! YOU GET
Arthur moved faster than Sherlock and burst into what was now Martin’s room.

“Skip! It’s me, Arthur! It’s ok, Skip… you’re safe. I promise you that you’re safe and you know that I take promises very, very seriously. And that’s Doctor Watson, Mr. Sherlock’s friend. And you’re not in a hospital, just like you wanted but Mycroft got all these hospitaly things together so that Doctor Watson could help you.”

Martin had been fighting John to get out of the bed, so the doctor was basically laying on top of him pinning his arms and using his weight to immobilize his legs. But that had almost no effect in comparison to the de-escalation that Arthur’s voice produced. Martin’s eyes locked onto his friend and John felt his muscles relax and breathing begin to slow.

“A… Arthur?”

“Hi Skip!”

“I wasn’t dreaming?”

“Well, you probably were because you slept a long time, but I’m here and Mr. Sherlock’s here…”

That information set Martin struggling again and this time it took both Arthur and John to keep him on the bed.

“GET ME OUT OF HERE! I REFUSE… I WILL NOT BE HERE WITH HIM! GET ME OUT… ARTHUR! I WANT TO LEAVE RIGHT NOW! DO YOU HEAR ME? RIGHT NOW!”

Sherlock, who had stepped closer to the bed when Martin began to fight a second time, stood stunned anew by the sheer fury in his cousin’s eyes. All of it trained on him.

“Sherlock… Sherlock! Step out of the room. Now!”

A second command from John was not necessary as, in the span of a breath, the detective was gone with the door closed behind him. Arthur began talking to Martin and John couldn’t follow any of it, but it did the job of cooling Martin’s fire until John felt it was safe to release Martin’s hands and legs and leave him free in the bed.

“There Skip… isn’t that nicer? And, I have to say, that was pretty brilliant Doctor Watson! It was just like you see in the movies. Well, usually the man on the ground isn’t as small as Skip, but you’re sort of small too, so it all evened out. But you can’t do that anymore, Skip. I’m sure it’s not good for you and I really don’t like grabbing you like that. Well, it’s not that I don’t like grabbing you, but not like that when you’re all wriggly… well, ok… that’s not really the problem… but it’s when you’re angry. I really don’t want to grab you when you’re angry. Does that make sense?”

And John couldn’t help but notice a touch of pink on Arthur’s cheeks that wasn’t there a moment ago. Seemed to be that ‘flush’ was the color of the day in 221B.

“You need to listen to your friend, Martin. I also promise that that you’re safe and no one here has any other agenda but to take care of your health. I’m John Watson, by the way. I share the flat with Sherlock. Who you really don’t seem to care for.”

John extended his hand and, after a moment, Martin gave it a small shake.
“If you live with him, you must be accustomed to people not liking him.”

“Well, I can’t say you’re wrong there. But, I like to think there’s another side of Sherlock that people don’t normally get to see.”

“And I’d like to think that the lottery is just waiting for me to call and claim my life-changing winnings but I think the odds are about the same as my cousin growing a decent side.”

John shared a look with Arthur and decided that this was not the best time to delve into family history.

“Well, that’s something we can talk about later. Right now, I’d like it if you’d let me give you a general check-up and replenish the fluids you seem to have lost. It’ll help me later if I know how you’re doing right now. Ok, Martin? I’ll even warm my hands first.”

John put on his most ingratiating grin and received a hesitant nod from Martin in return.

“Arthur, would you excuse us for a little while. I’ll let you know as soon as we’re done here because I’m sure you and Martin have some catching up to do.”

“Ok, Doctor Watson. Skip? I’ll be in the living room. Or the kitchen. Or the bathroom. Anyway… I’ll just be right out there if you need anything.”

Arthur backed towards the door, not wanting to take his eyes off of Martin.

“Arthur? Thank you. I’ll… it will be good to talk to you.”

“I can’t wait. See you soon.”

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“How is he?”

“Good, I think. He quit fighting and finally let Doctor Watson do his job. And he wants me to sit and talk with him when they’re done. Which is good… it means he’s not mad at me, so he’ll let me help him get better. He didn’t say any more about you, though, which I guess is also good. Now, I’m not an expert, but I think you and Skip have issues you need to deal with.”

“You don’t say.”

“No, I do say. You don’t seem like the type who likes talking about things, Mr. Sherlock, but I think you’re going to have to with Skip. I think you’ll both feel better if you do.”

Sherlock was not in any way convinced of that, but there was no reason to share that thought with Arthur.

“Let’s see how Martin’s recovery progresses before we consider airing old animosities. Agreed?”

“I think that’s a good idea. I don’t want Skip getting any more upset than he has to right now. But I won’t forget about it, Mr. Sherlock.”

That much was undoubtedly true.

“That’s good, Arthur. I can always count on you to make wise decisions concerning Martin’s health.”
“Thanks, Mr. Sherlock! Now, we just have to wait for Doctor Watson.”

“Yes. Funny that… it’s usually John who is waiting for me.”
“Well, that was quite the show, wasn’t it? I thought you said I had an hour before Martin regained consciousness?”

“I seem to have underestimated his vigor.”

“Yeah, well… vigorous does describe him pretty well. I haven’t had to restrain someone medically like that in a long time.”

“It should not have been that unexpected. Junk…”

Arthur’s whine of warning sliced Sherlock’s response in two and the detective quickly backpedaled.

“Those under the influence often demonstrate unexpected strength and resolve.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sherlock.”

John’s tired grin moved from the detective to his new friend and he shook his head. They fit together quite nicely as a team. Luckily, Arthur had his eye on another member of the Holmes clan or John might actually be worried.

“Well, he’s quiet now and he’d very much like to see you, Arthur. Think you can spare him a moment?

“I can spare him a dozen moments! However many he wants! Thanks Doctor Watson!”

Arthur was gone in a blink, closing the door to Sherlock’s bedroom to give him and Martin a little privacy.

“How is he, John?”

“Good, considering. I’m worried about his weight, of course, but I talked to Arthur earlier and got a little of Martin’s story from him. Not surprising he’s a bit of a twig. But, basic vitals were fine, heart and lungs sounded good, teeth are healthy, skin tone should bounce back with enough water. Didn’t get a urine sample yet, but I did pull some blood, which reminds me…”

John got on his phone and made a quick call to what must have been one of Mycroft’s operatives. One blood sample would be retrieved from the downstairs entrance in less than ten minutes. John nipped down and set the vial on the bottom step and ran back up to the flat.

“Mycroft said he’d set up a full lab in 221C, but it’s been years since I had to do any real lab work, so this is the next best thing.”

“You could have used Molly.”
“I wasn’t sure you would want her involved. At minimum, it would give her more to question you about when you’re at the morgue.”

“Ah… true. Good decision. When can we expect the results?”

“Soon. I have a suspicion some poor lab tech is now locked up inside his lab with his meals held out until he gets his work done. That will give me more of a place to start, to really think about what he’s going to need, but at least I have a small while until Martin starts to feel the worst of the withdrawal. Especially with the nice lot of pills you tossed down his throat earlier.”

“Don’t chide me for that, John. It is highly unlikely that we would have been able to get him here in a conscious state. As you could see, he is rather adamant that if I am somewhere, he will be elsewhere.”

“He does hate you a bit doesn’t he? I think he might actually be at the top of the list of people who want to take off your head with an axe. Care to share why your cousin doesn’t want you anywhere in his line of sight?”

No. Sherlock did not want to share. There was too much, it would take too long… and John might not smile at him anymore. That was not something Sherlock could bear right now.

“It is really Martin’s story to tell.”

“Fair enough, but at some point I will need to know what’s going on, if only for the welfare of my patient. I can’t have him throwing a nutter every time he heads to the loo and runs into you coming out.”

“I agree, but we don’t need to broach the subject again until Martin is further along in this process. I don’t think our history is going to be at the forefront of his attention over the next week or so.”

“I’m not sure about that… while I was in there, he kept cutting his eyes towards the door like he was waiting for the devil himself to stroll in. That level of stress…”

“Is negligible compared to the stress of dragging him through the past and through my dirt. Not now, John. Just let this rest for the time being. When he’s stronger, then… then we can have this conversation.”

“Fine. But, I will retain veto power and if I find that Martin is suffering unduly because of your unresolved conflict, I will lock you in a room with him and me and dig to the center of the whole mess.”

“Don’t forget Arthur… I doubt he’d let Martin get locked in a room with me after seeing Martin in a full rage. He is very protective of my cousin and he has already agreed not to drift into this particular stormy sea until Martin is in better condition.”

Surprisingly, that brought out a chuckle from John.

“He is protective, isn’t he? Think he realizes? About what he feels for Martin, I mean.”

“People can be very good at blinding themselves to extremely obvious things they simply don’t wish to see.”

“Yeah… I have to agree on that one.”
“Hi Skip! Doctor Watson said you wanted to talk to me, which I’m totally excited about since I was so scared you’d be angry that I used your emergency number or found you or worked with Mr. Sherlock…”

“Arthur… it’s good. It’s… fine. I guess I have to thank you, actually. I made a right mess of this, as usual. Even when I try to fix things, I wind up failing again. Martin F. Crieff… F for Failure.”

Arthur didn’t ask if he could sit on the bed next to Martin and didn’t even think before he settled there and lay his hand very close to his friend’s.

“I don’t want to hear you talk like that, Skip. It’s not true at all and you should be proud of yourself instead. You were sick and you tried to get help. That’s something to be proud of.”

“No, Arthur, something to be proud of would have been to never have gotten into this cesspit in the first place. Something to be proud of would be having a life that left me any form of a choice… no, that’s not true. There’s always a choice and no one should be surprised I chose the wrong one.”

Arthur slid closer to Martin and did think this time for a second before closing his hand over the one Martin had resting near Arthur’s thigh.

“That’s not the way to think. I know maybe I’m not the right person to give advice about thinking, but everyone makes bad choices sometimes, like the time I went on that auction site on the Internet and bought all of those stuffed lizards and Mum had to pretend that I was a little kid so we didn’t have to actually pay for them. That was really too bad because it would have been brilliant to have my own lizard army and there were so many different kinds that the man had… but anyway, making the mistake isn’t that what’s bad. What’s bad is if you don’t try and make things right afterwards. I had to give up my computer for a whole two weeks for my lizards, but I was ok with that because it would make things right with Mum. That’s what you did, Skip! Well, not for Mum, but for you and that’s why you actually didn’t fail – you won! See, isn’t that better?”

“If you say so, Arthur.”

“I know what that means, Skip. It means you don’t believe me but you don’t want to tell me in case I get mad or feel bad or get confused. But, I’m not going to do any of that, so you can tell me the truth. Doctor Watson said that right now, you’re going to be little hard to deal with and not want to believe good things and I shouldn’t get discouraged if you’re mostly shouty and angry or cry a lot and be sad. So, I’m not. Because you’ve got us on your side and we’re going to help you and then, when you’re ready, you and I are going back home and everything will be all right.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“Well, I do and that is what will happen as soon as Doctor Watson says it’s ok.”

Martin knew that trying to cripple Arthur’s determined optimism wasn’t going to work and he didn’t have the energy for the fight anyway.

“I won’t say I believe you, but I will agree to keep an open mind.”

“Brilliant! An open mind can get filled with lots of things and I’m going to make sure they’re happy and healthy things! But… when I was talking to Doctor Watson, he said it would be helpful for us… all of us… to know why you… what happened. I’m thinking that if you get some of that out of your head, there will be even more room inside you for good things. Do you think you could
do that for us, Skip? I understand if you can’t right now but Doctor Watson said that once you start
the… scary… part of getting well, you probably won’t feel like talking, so it seems smart to talk
about things before that goes on.”

“You mean that when I go into withdrawal I won’t be able to do any more than scream, cry, piss
myself and want to die so, now’s the best time to chat?”

As tired and frustrated as Martin was, it didn’t stop himself from making an internal promise to try
and shield Arthur from his tongue. He shouldn’t be here at all to see what was coming, let alone
have to suffer Martin’s petulance and poorly-aimed barbs. He’d hurt his friend enough already, if the
darkness settling into his eyes was any indication.

“Forgive me, Arthur. Please… I’m sorry. If there is one person at whom I shouldn’t be lashing
out, it’s you. I’m sure I’ll do it again, and probably soon, but try and believe me when I say I
honestly don’t want to hurt you. You are the last person in the world I want to hurt.”

Arthur squeezed Martin’s hand and let his wide, sun-shaming smile light up the room.

“Of course I forgive you, Skip. And you’re the last person I ever what to hurt, too. I’ll go get
Doctor Watson now and we can all talk.”

“But why can’t you and I…”

“Because then I’d have to try and remember it to tell Doctor Watson and you know how I can
muddle things sometimes. Or, you’d have to tell everything all over again and I don’t want you to
have to do that because I know this isn’t going to be fun for you so why do it twice?”

Martin had to admit that Arthur’s point wasn’t bad, and he was getting tired… the quicker he got this
over with the faster he could just go back to sleep for awhile.

“That makes sense, I guess. But not Sherlock. I don’t want him in here.”

“Ok… sure. If that’s what you want. We can do that for right now. But, you need to talk to him
sometime, Skip. Not until you’re ready, though, so don’t worry that I’ll try and fool you and make
you do something before you’re feeling better. Wait here and I’ll get Doctor Watson.”

‘Wait here.” As if Martin was able to go anywhere or had anywhere to go.

A few moments after Arthur left, he returned with John in tow, who carried with him a very
welcome cup of hot tea. Arthur helped Martin get propped up in the bed, despite Martin’s
protestations that he was far from being an invalid, passed the tea to Martin, took his spot on the
mattress and waited for John to pull over a chair so they could begin. The bit of noise of everyone
getting settled handily covered Sherlock’s own settling on the floor outside of his bedroom door.

“Drink that up, Martin. Nothing better than a good cup of tea to cure what ails you. Now,
Arthur says you’ve agreed to a little talk. I promise we’ll keep this simple and stop whenever you
say so. Sound good?”

No. It did not sound good. What could be good about wading through the waist-deep muck of
memory and sharing it others?

“As good as it can. Where do you want me to start?”
“Wherever you’d like. The beginning is probably the best spot, though.”

Martin took another calming drink of his tea and let the heat fill his cells before he set the cup on the bedside table and began.

“I… I’ve never done anything like this before. I may get pissed now and then but I never… never… and I never thought I would either.”

Martin cut his eyes towards Arthur hoping for signs that Arthur believed him. He already felt disgraced in the eyes of his friend and couldn’t bear that disgrace to deepen. But, all Martin saw was a very concerned, very sympathetic, very accepting Arthur Shappey. And that made letting things out a little easier.

“I don’t complain, Doctor Watson. I live the life I have and try not to complain because every last problem I have is purely my own fault. I mean yes, growing up wasn’t especially pleasant…”

These eyes cut towards the bedroom door, but John refused to push, even though his curiosity was burning like a house on fire.

“…however, I made my choices and know I have to live with them. But it can be so hard sometimes. And it’s not like I have any way to make it easier but by my own hard work and… well, that was the problem.”

“Is it money, Martin?”

“More what it buys. I’m not a greedy man, Doctor Watson. Nor a vain one. But a flat that’s dry with actual heat in the winter… clothes that aren’t so worn I can see through them… enough food that I’m not stretching a can of soup and a bit of pasta over three day’s dinner…an extra few quid to have a night out, maybe get to meet some people… make some friends…”

John’s heart sagged hearing Martin confirm everything Arthur had told him, and sagged more seeing the despair sink into Martin’s bones. Which was matched in the man sitting next to him, trying desperately not to take the small captain into his arms for a long, quiet hug.

“And there’s petrol and maintenance for the van, which is a vicious circle because the damn thing always needs work but without it I can’t earn anything and there’s no possible way I can afford a new one…”

“Is it always like this?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Then, what changed? If you were managing, even if a little shakily…”

“Shakily… that’s a good word. That’s how I feel every day, like I’m ready to shake apart. Every single day fighting so hard go nowhere. And the worst… the worst is when we’re on standby. I can’t fly, I can’t work…like I’m trapped in quicksand…”

“And that’s what you love, isn’t it Martin? Flying?”

Even as shredded as Martin felt, just the mention of flying softened his features and drew the corners of his mouth into a very slight grin.

“All my life. And I mean that, Doctor Watson; I’ve wanted to fly my entire life. I devoted everything to getting my license. All my money, all my time and, because I’m… well, me… I had to
devote everything to getting my license.”

“That’s why you’re wonderful, Skip. There aren’t many people in the world who would work that hard for something, even if it’s something they really wanted. But you did it, even when you kept getting knocked back, you still kept trying until you finally succeeded. You should be very proud of yourself. I know I’m very proud of you.”

Martin’s gaze moved to meet Arthur’s and John was only a little surprised to see that very familiar stare that said the recipient was being weighed and measured and god help them if they were found wanting.

“How can you mean that, Arthur? I am nothing for anyone to be proud of.”

“Oh, Skip. You’re only saying that because you’re a little low right now and you can’t see all the great things about you. I mean, I know I’m not observant like Mr. Sherlock, but I know a lot about you and they’re good things. For example, you’re smart so I can always ask you questions about things and you know the answer or at least where to find the answer and you don’t mind lending a hand when there’s a problem or someone needs a spot of help. Oh! And you like interesting things like I do and… remember that time we got to go to that museum in Rome? That was Brilliant! And you make me laugh, Skip. Well, ok… lots of people can make me laugh, but not everyone can do that when I’ve a bad day or I’m hiding from Mum, but you always can! And you don’t mind listening to me when I talk, even when… well, you know I can get a little garrulous. Like that word? I learned it from Mr. Sherlock.”

Even the mention of his cousin’s name didn’t break the mood or lessen Martin’s complete amazement at Arthur’s speech.

“You… you really think all of that about me?”

“Sure, and lot’s more. You’re funny and polite and really strong from lifting all those boxes and things and you’re honest and brave and have brilliant hair and you’re really handsome, much more than Mr. Sherlock who doesn’t smile much and just has dark hair, plus he’s too tall…”

John had to cough away a laugh knowing his partner was absorbing every word and gnashing his teeth.

“…but you’re just right. The only thing that’s not so great about you, I have to admit, is that you don’t let people help you when you need it. But that’s going to change, right? You’re letting us help you now and that’s simply brilliant, but you need to let that happen when we’re back home, too. Actually, don’t worry about that now. I’m going to make sure you always have help, even if it’s only me, so that’s decided and you don’t need to think about it.”

Martin was quiet for a moment and he was the one this time who slid his hand a little closer to Arthur’s so they rested skin-to-skin on the blanket.

“There’s nothing ‘only’ about you, Arthur.”

Arthur took that as an invitation and grabbed on tightly to Martin’s hand and John knew that if Arthur had his way, he’d never let go.

“Thanks Skip! That’s what I mean, you say nice things and make people feel happy. But Skip, we still need to know why you… you know. I mean, those… you know… cost money don’t they? And if you already didn’t have any money, why spend money on those… those.”

Given Martin’s life and current circumstances, John honestly couldn’t think of anyone better
equipped to offer support and affection than Arthur. Now, all they had to do was get Martin and Arthur to realize it and do something about it. No use letting cluelessness stand in the way of a promising relationship. You had to feel sorry for those poor people who had something good right in front of them and they never reached out and grabbed it.

“The stupid part was that I thought the drugs would help me make money. And they did for awhile…”

“Martin, you weren’t selling them, were you?”

John heard the faint shuffle outside the door, knowing Sherlock was repositioning to make sure he heard the answer.

“No! My problems are my own; I’m not going to help someone else suffer for theirs.”

Martin took a deep breath and used his free hand to wipe the perspiration that was building on his upper lip.

“The only way I earn a living, Doctor Watson, is through my business. I move things for people. It’s hard, tiring and I can only do it when we’re not flying or on standby. Normally, I can just eke out enough of a living that at least I’m not living out of my van.”

John tried not to let on that Arthur was mouthing ‘but he has’ behind Martin’s back.

“It was getting so difficult, though, to know each and every day that this was all I would ever have. The barest minimum to keep my skin on my bones. And if something happened… something unforeseen… I would be done for.”

“And that’s what happened, isn’t it.”

“Yeah. I’m a man with a van, Doctor Watson. And a very cheap one, at that. Normally, I move things for people who don’t have a lot to pay or just don’t want to pay a lot, but most people are smart enough not to entrust anything truly valuable to someone whose number they got off a flyer at a shop. All it takes is a one mishap and you’ve lost something expensive…”

“THE BOX OF BABIES!”

Arthur had jumped to his feet and nearly dragged Martin with him. Arthur looked horrified, as if he’d accidentally stepped on a newborn puppy.

“Arthur, what’s wrong?”

“That’s it isn’t it, Skip? You said…”

“I meant what I said, Arthur. It wasn’t your fault. Not at all, I promised you that and I’m still promising you…”

“Ok, someone needs to tell me about this, and I hope Arthur’s not being literal, box of babies.”

Arthur was muttering and fretting and pacing and John was actually worried the man would start weeping in a minute.

“I was on a job and had a small accident with a box. Antique figurines, those little children doing things and playing with dogs. The ones the older ladies seem to enjoy.”

“Antique, huh? Bad luck, mate. How bad was the damage?”
“Nearly two thousand.”

“That hurts. And no insurance?”

“Give me a moment to curtail my laughter.”

“Sorry.”

“And it was my fault, Skip!”

“What Arthur fails to understand, Doctor Watson, is that simply being in the vicinity of an accident does not make one responsible for the accident.”

“Letting go of the box does!”

“I told you to let it go, Arthur! I thought I had a good enough grip. I didn’t. It was my error and stupidity.”

“But I knew you were wobbly, Skip. I saw it and…”

“And I didn’t listen to you, Arthur. I thought I knew better and I was wrong. It was not your fault.”

“And that woman was yelling at you… I tried to calm her down…”

Which, John was sure, didn’t help matters much.

“She was angry and she had a right to be. I messed up and I had to make things right.”

“But you were already, sorry about this, flat broke.”

“As you say. I worked out a payment program with the client, but then I lost a tire on the van and Carolyn had a unusually good month for bookings and I was running myself into a tizzy trying to find enough work to keep up with my bills and finding time to do the work. I started doing anything I could to earn money – paint, work lawns, wash cars, do little fix-ups around people’s houses… I set up jobs I could do day or night. Some days, I’d leave the airfield and work solidly doing a hundred small things until I got back into my uniform and drove back to the airfield.”

“And you couldn’t keep up the pace.”

“No. And I still had to shut everything down when we were on standby and the stress felt like it was eating through my stomach.”

“Might’ve been true. We can take a look at whether you’ve formed an ulcer once you’ve moved past this issue.”

“Wonderful… I was exhausted all the time, too, and you can’t fly or be a modern-day slave if you can’t keep your eyes open.”

“Hence the stimulants.”

“Yeah. I asked around… found someone who knew someone. And it worked. I had energy, could keep going all day. For days, actually.”

“Is that why you were so fidgety and sort of anxious sometimes, Skip?”
Arthur was still standing and ill at ease. John knew he’d have to have a chat with Arthur and see if he could convince him that there wasn’t a reason to carry any guilt for Martin’s distress. But, John also knew it wouldn’t be easy.

“Yes. I never took anything at the airfield, Arthur. You have to believe me about that. But, there was often some carry-over, especially if Carolyn got a surprise job and we got called in unexpectedly.”

“Then you started to burn out, didn’t you Martin? Wasn’t just stimulants in your collection, mate.”

Arthur looked confused, but Martin nodded in agreement.

“I had to sleep. And I couldn’t. I was tearing myself apart and had to just get some rest now and then.”

“So you started cycling, up and down, over and over…”

“Basically.”

“And your tolerance started to build.”

“Sounds like you know the rest of the story.”

“Not an unfamiliar one. Lots of people have gotten sucked into that whirlpool. Alcohol and pills or pills and pills.”

“At that point, on top of feeling like I was teetering on the edge of a very deep hole, it was starting to affect my work. Flying and the other work. I hear about addicts who manage to function for years and I couldn’t. Figures I couldn’t even be a successful addict. I started crashing at the wrong times, getting bad cases of the shakes, losing control of my emotions. And the expense… I couldn’t keep up with the cost which put me right back at the point where everything started. Only now…”

“Now, you had another problem to deal with and this one threatened every other part of your life.”

“Directly. When they started showing up at my house looking for payment, I knew I had to find a way out.”

“The man! The students said a man came to your house, but wouldn’t leave his name.”

“And a couple of others that showed up during the day when the rest of the lot were in class. Before I left, I knew I had to pay off what I owed. I tried to get a loan, but got kicked in the arse onto the pavement. It wasn’t even a wealth of money for the average person, but it was more than I had.”

“We talked to the bank manager. All Skip wanted was a hundred, Doctor Watson. That was it and the man at the bank wouldn’t give it to him. I’m going to get Mum to take her money out of the bank and if I had any money, I’d put it in and then take it right back out to show them how mad I was at how they treated Skip. That’s why you pawned Mr. Sherlock’s watch, wasn’t it, Skip?”

Martin turned a very unhealthy shade of white and John looked him over quickly for any sign of physical problem.
“You… you found out about that? How could you have known about the bank, the pawn broker…”

“Mycroft helped. He sent us videotapes and I got to watch them! Even though it was very serious work, it was a lot of fun! I saw you go to the bank, the pawn broker, the laundry, the coffee shop…”

“Of course. Why did I even bother to ask?”

“Don’t worry about the watch, though, Skip. Mr. Sherlock got it back and I’m sure he’ll give it to you just as soon as you actually let him stand close enough that his arms can reach. I know it must have meant something to you, Skip, to keep it for so long. And it was very nice of Mr. Sherlock to give you that one when yours drowned.”

“He told you that, did he? Did he tell you how mine got ruined?”

“Sure! He said you fell in a lake and he gave you his watch since yours didn’t work anymore.”

That was an ugly smile that broke out on Martin’s face and John made it a point to find out more about this ‘watch’ incident from Sherlock.

“Of course he did. What a lovely story. And in what a generous and considerate light it paints His Majesty. Well, absolutely no surprise on my part for this one.”

“Skip…”

This was not going to end in anything but stress for his patient, so John stepped in to derail the train.

“Arthur, I think you and Sherlock both agreed that this wasn’t an area of discussion until a later time. Let’s try and keep away from that topic until Martin’s a bit stronger. Ok?”

“Ok…”

Arthur still looked off-center, but settled back next to Martin on the bed. John noticed that Arthur’s hand immediately sought Martin’s and Martin didn’t seem to notice, but he also didn’t shake it away.

“Skip, when the men started coming around… when you started to feel extra sick…is that when you decided to get help?”

“I’m not that competent, Arthur. I tried to just give it all up and do it on my own. I honestly didn’t think of myself as an addict at that point, but I proved myself wrong pretty quickly. Finally, I knew I couldn’t get anywhere without some professional assistance so I took a day off and drove out to meet with the doctor I used to see when I was a child. He’s still registered, but doesn’t do much work anymore and no one really remembers any connection between him and me. I got him to give me a referral for a treatment program and he called around to find a place away from Fitton that had a good success rate and a reputation for discretion. The Willows mostly handles private cases, but they do take the occasional NHS referral and are considered good at what they do. I was on a waiting list, but got lucky. Well, I thought I’d gotten lucky.”

“Arthur said you didn’t stay. Not even for a night. Can you tell me why?”

“I thought I was ready. I was ready, until I saw the admitting clerk begin to create a file with my name and I… I just snapped. The thought of having a permanent record of my idiocy… following me forever, everywhere I went… and what if someone found out? Who would ever trust a pilot with an addiction history?”
“Martin, there are recovering addicts in every profession. It is not necessarily the death knell for a career…”

“Maybe for someone who already had a solid career. I’m a pilot who works for free because any most airlines would laugh me out of the interview room if I ever applied for a job. Maybe one day, one day far in the future, after I’ve established some credibility based on my flight record I could think about taking another step forward, but not if I have that great albatross tied around my neck.”

Martin was getting agitated and John knew it was only partially because of the conversation. He must be starting to feel the cravings and the real fun was going to begin soon.

“And… if my name got into the computer, there was a chance… just a chance that…”

“Skip?”

“There was a chance that Mycroft might run across it and wouldn’t that just be the final nail in the coffin of my dignity.”

And that was something with which John could sympathize. More than once he had thanked the stars that he didn’t have any skeletons in his closet that the elder Holmes might stumble across.

“Mycroft is nice Skip! He really helped us out a lot and he’s funny, too. We’re going to have some sherry while I’m here, he and I, and chat like mates do because we are mates now. He wouldn’t have made you feel bad, Skip. That doesn’t sound like Mycroft, all.”

Martin looked over at John and the men shared a look. It did sound like Mycroft, but John had to admit that the man’s most acidic comments were retorts to something equally acidic from Sherlock. And Martin had no standing on the world stage so that Mycroft would delight in collecting embarrassing knowledge on him.

“Well, I’m glad that you and Mycroft hit it off, Arthur. He’s a cold bastard, but there were… sometimes you can find a little more hiding under the frost with him. Good for you… actually, I shouldn’t be surprised. If anyone could thin the permafrost a touch it would be you, Arthur.”

Arthur looked thrilled, but Martin was starting to look both tired and restless; interview time was over.

“Thanks Skip! Maybe when Mycroft and I have our sherry, you can join us. It would be like one of those cocktail parties you see on the telly.”

That was not a happy gleam in Martin’s eyes, so John decided to step in and spare his patient more distress.

“I’m sure Martin will look forward to that, Arthur. Right now, could you go and check on Sherlock? Tell him to put in a call for some take-away…”

“Oh! I can cook! Really, I’d be happy to…”

“Maybe later, Arthur. But you just got here; it’s not very polite to stick you straight to work. We’ll have a take-away celebration to welcome you and Martin and then you can be my kitchen maid for the rest of your stay. Sounds good?”

“Brilliant! I’ll go tell Mr. Sherlock! You’ll be ok, Skip? I’ll just be out there on the other side of the door if you need anything.”
“It’s fine, Arthur. Thank you. I mean it… thank you, Arthur.”

Martin’s hand was given a final squeeze before Arthur bounded out of the room. The ‘oomph’ he heard put a large smirk on John’s face. Lanky git needed to learn to move faster.

“Think you’ll get any food down?”

“I don’t know. I’ll try.”

“Starting to feel it, aren’t you?”

“How did you guess?”

“I don’t guess. I observe.”

And, after a moment of silence, both men erupted into a long series of giggles.

“Bruised knee?”

“Elbow.”

“Getting slow in your old age?”

“Says the man who has been investigating men’s hair color. Especially those brands noted for covering grey.”

“Stay off of my laptop.”

“Don’t covet my youth.”

“Mr. Sherlock, I found your take-away menus. Which one should I call?”

“Funny, I seem to remember telling Arthur to get you to call for food.”

“Why should I do that when it thrilled Arthur to do the job for me?”

“Manipulative prick. For that, it’ll be Russian Roulette for dinner.”

“What ever are you…”

“Arthur! Sherlock says to surprise us. Money is no object so think big!”

“BRILLIANT!!!”

“John, you have no idea what you’ve done.”

“But won’t I have fun finding out…”
Chapter 13

Sherlock would never admit to John that it was rather intellectually stimulating to try and determine exactly what he was eating and from where it came. Arthur had somehow convinced one delivery driver to collect the orders from five other restaurants, as well as make a stop to pick up vanilla ice cream, jelly candy, juice, chocolate milk and one whole coconut that was currently being executed with cleaver. This was the fallback option since John, despite both Sherlock and Arthur’s impassioned pleas, refused to let his gun be used for the judgment.

“Well, this is a right treat. We’ve got almost every continent of the world represented on one plate. Looks like there’s a little tectonic motion going on and smashing a few cultures together, too.”

Arthur perked up from the kitchen and broke into a jig.

“BRILLIANT! I just knew you’d understand, Doctor Watson! I told Mr. Sherlock you were very smart and here you go catching hold of my culinary theme without even one hint!”

“And don’t overlook the detailed topographical work, John. It isn’t often one has a relief map sculpted out on their dinner plate of curry, pizza, dumplings, and… I haven’t finished my analysis yet.”

“Well, eat up chaps because I have a real surprise for desert. Mr. Bear’s Chocolate Tropical Holiday! It’s smashing!”

John and Sherlock forks both halted in mid-air and both silently agreed to ignore the synchronous ‘gulp.’

“Just going to bring a little to Skip and see if he’ll eat. Should I… what if he doesn’t want to, Doctor Watson?”

“Don’t worry about it. Try and get him at least to shove something down, even a bit of plain rice if that’s all he’ll take, but if he’s not up for eating, don’t press the issue too hard. He won’t starve to death, I promise.”

Arthur nodded and carried a small plate of food into the bedroom.

“He’s not incapacitated, John. Martin is fully capable…”

“Of holding on by the skin of his teeth right now. Look, Sherlock… and I don’t mean this unkindly, you’re probably not looking at the whole picture because parts of it aren’t in colors you tend to see. Martin is emotionally devastated, humiliated, terrified, in an unknown place with… well, I’m an unknown person and he’d appreciate a trip to the cemetery to spit on your grave. Physically he is not incapacitated at the moment, but there’s no reason we can’t treat him little gently, because there’s not a lot of time to build him up before his body starts tearing him down with a wrecking ball. Besides, this is good for Arthur. Which reminds me, I need to pull the lad aside at some point soon for a talk. See how he’s doing in all of this. I know how hard it is to be in that situation and the guilt…”

“What guilt? Arthur didn’t do anything. You heard what Martin described. Not even the breakage had anything to do with Arthur. He shouldn’t experience any guilt for Martin’s decisions or actions.”

Sherlock always knew when he’d entered uncertain territory by a stillness that settled over John like
a heavy blanket.

“You really think that, don’t you… yeah, of course you would.”

“John?”

“Nothing. It’s all fine.”

Item 1 – John is upset. No… disappointed.

Item 2 - John is disappointed specifically with this conversation.

Item 3 – This conversation concerns guilt by one person over the actions of another.

Item 4 – Said actions were harmful to the second person and resulted in a disappearance.

Item 5 – Must determine from Arthur where he took his class on understanding people.

“John… is that what you felt? Guilt?”

John set his fork down, drew in a deep breath and met Sherlock’s confused gaze.

“More than I can ever possibly describe.”

Guilt? That was preposterous. John had nothing to feel guilty over. Nothing.

“But, why?”

“For everything I said to you and didn’t say to you. For everything I did to you and didn’t do. For not being clever enough to protect you from that viper. For not being aggressive enough to protect you from the insults and cruel jokes from the idiots at the Yard. For not… for not giving you something you could care enough about so that you had one thing, just one thing, that would have made your life worth living. I failed you completely, Sherlock. Completely and utterly. In every possible way. And the fact that it was all smoke and mirrors doesn’t make me feel any different today.”

Sherlock found himself nearly paralyzed in his chair and could do nothing but stare dumbfounded at John.

“So there’s… yeah. I understand what’s going on with Arthur. And I’ll take care of it, as best I can. Ok… think I’ll grab a shower while it’s free.”

John rose a little too quickly and left Sherlock sitting alone at the table, still barely able to process John’s words that were ricocheting around his brain. He had accepted that John would miss him, perhaps. Feel a pain of loss. He knew that it would not be easy for John and his bit of spying at the cemetery proved that. There would also be anger and feelings of betrayal when he returned. But this… none of this… he’d never predicted this depth of John’s pain. And all because of him. All for him.

“Mr. Sherlock, are you ok? You look sort of like Douglas when his ex-wife told him she thought she might be having a baby.”

“Arthur, If I ask you a question, will you answer me truthfully, even if the answer is not… even if you’d rather not answer?”

“I… I suppose so. Is it important?”
“I think it is.”

“Then, sure. I won’t mind.”

Arthur moved John’s almost empty plate to the kitchen then took John’s place at the table.

“Do you feel that what happened to Martin is your fault? Do you feel guilty about what happened to him?”

“Oh. Oh, I see. Yeah… I see what you meant about not wanting to answer.”

“I recognize this might be difficult for you, but I do want to know.”

“Ok. Well… yes. I guess so. No… I know so.”

“But you also know that Martin made his own choices and they had nothing to do with you.”

“Yes. But it doesn’t matter does it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When you care about someone, it’s your job to make sure that they don’t get hurt, even if they make bad choices. I didn’t do my job and Skip got hurt.”

“But he didn’t ask for your help. In fact, you even said that he refused the help you offered.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You tried to help him, Arthur. You did what you could. Your conscience should be clear.”

“Sorry, Mr. Sherlock, but it doesn’t work that way. Even if Skip didn’t want my help, I should have done more. I could have made a deal so he thought he won a prize from the grocer and had food delivered. Or learned to fix cars so I could work on his van when it broke down. I’ve tried to talk to Mum about paying Skip and it didn’t work, but I could have talked to Herc and maybe he would have talked to Mum. I could have… I know I did some things, Mr. Sherlock, but I can’t even count how many nights it’s been hard to sleep because my brain was spinning around knowing I should be doing something for Skip but not knowing exactly what or how mad he would be if he found out. But I told him… I told him that I’m just going to do what I have to from now on and that was the end of the story. I’m not going to try and sleep with a spinny brain anymore.”

That was all absolutely ridiculous. Ludicrous. People owned their mistakes, their decisions, their lives and no one else should take credit for their successes or feel guilt for their failures. But Arthur… and John… felt differently. Did everyone feel differently? Sherlock swallowed down the feeling that he was, once again, on the outside looking in. John knew, and he’d held back saying anything because he also knew that Sherlock wouldn’t understand. But there was one thing Sherlock had come to realize – his understanding wasn’t necessary for issues like this. What was necessary was acknowledging them and accepting, albeit grudgingly, that they were considered important by people like John and Arthur. Sherlock’s understanding was immaterial to their emotions; his response, however, was not.

“I can’t say I fully comprehend the sentiment, Arthur, but I recognize that this has been significant in your life.”

“Thanks, Mr. Sherlock. I think.”
“And, I would assume that the closer you are to a person, the more profound the sense of responsibility and, therefore, guilt upon failure to live up to that responsibility.”

“Come again.”

“The more you care the guiltier you feel.”

“Oh! Yes.”

“And since you feel very guilty about Martin, you must care very much about him.”

“Well, of course. I mean, he’s my friend.”

“I think we can go a little further, can’t we?”

“Now you’ve lost me.”

“You care for Martin.”

“Yeah… I said that. Are you having memory problems, Mr. Sherlock? It wasn’t dinner was it? Because I didn’t cook and… well, usually… strange things don’t happen when all I do is serve the meals.”

“Let me put this in terms you might better understand, Arthur. You care care for Martin.”

There were Christmas stockings that weren’t as red as the color Arthur was turning.

“No!… well, not… you see… I don’t… oh! You did your mind reading on me and that’s not really very fair since we’re supposed to be mates.”

“Then you admit it.”

“I’d rather not.”

“It’s too late to avoid the question, Arthur.”

“True, but if you already know the answer then I really don’t need to say anything do I? How about I get started on dessert? Skip actually ate a little when I promised he’d get something sweet for afters…”

Arthur jumped up from the chair and Sherlock stalked after him like a panther on the trail of a particularly succulent deer.

“Why won’t you simply say it, Arthur?”

“Why won’t you?”

“We’re not talking about me.”

Sherlock was very aware of how looming over someone could be intimidating. Especially when said someone’s back was pressed against a refrigerator.

“Now, Arthur. Answer the question.”

The spark of defiance that had flared in Arthur’s eyes died away and Sherlock was surprised to see it replaced by regret.
“Because it doesn’t matter.”

“What doesn’t matter?”

“Whether or not I care for Skip.”

“I have been told that caring matters quite a bit, actually.”

“Not if it can’t go anywhere it doesn’t.”

That took Sherlock by surprise and he leaned closer to encourage Arthur to fill in the blanks.

“Why can’t it go anywhere, Arthur?”

“Can you just…move back just a little?”

“No.”

“Oh. Ok. Look, Mr. Sherlock. I’m sure you know this but everyone in the world is brilliant. They all have special things about them and… ok. Look at you and Doctor Watson. You’re a famous and amazing detective and smarter than anyone else. Doctor Watson is, well, a doctor. And he’s a Captain. In the army! He’s got brilliant things that are up there on the scale with yours. You’re both… sparkingly brilliant. Like big diamonds. Skip’s like that, too. He’s a Captain. Of an airplane! And he’s a fighter – he’s had such a hard time but he still keeps going and that’s insanely brilliant. See?”

“No. Not at all.”

“You and Doctor Watson are big diamonds and that’s another reason you’re so right for each other. Skip’s more like, what’s that blue stone?”

“A sapphire?”

“Yes! Or a huge ruby because of his hair. And then there’s me.”

“And you’re like.”

“One of the rocks in Mum’s garden.”

Sherlock did take a step back then.

“Arthur, that’s rather a low opinion of yourself.”

“No, not really. The rocks in Mum’s garden are brilliant, too. They have interesting shapes and some are smooth while others are rough, but all of them are nice to touch. They’re lots of fun to play with, too, and they have all sorts of different colors, even though they’re not as bright as a sapphire or a ruby.”

“You think you’re not good enough for Martin.”

“Skip’s my friend. And we’re good as friends. But his kind of brilliant is too different than mine. On a different level than mine. He needs someone who’s closer to his level of brilliant.”

Sherlock backed away completely and let Arthur turn and pretend to hunt around in the refrigerator. How was he supposed to tell Arthur that he was in error? That his evaluation of the data was flawed. This was, again, John’s area of expertise, but an upset John spent on average 63% longer in
the shower than normal and wouldn’t be finished in time for the window of this opportunity to remain open. And, ultimately, he owed it to Arthur to at least try and show him the flaws in this theory.

“I am not a diamond.”

Arthur pulled his head out of the refrigerator and turned back to face Sherlock.

“I’m not even a rock in your mother’s garden. John is a diamond. And every day he shines and flashes and I stand there trying to catch a few rays of his light. I am in no fashion on his level of, as you term it, brilliant. All I have is my mind, Arthur. That is all. It goes no further. John is so much more than that. The first part of your theory is therefore disproved. As for the second… I admit that I no longer have a baseline of data on Martin to assess your profile of him, but I do have one for you and I can assure you that what you offer is both valuable and unique. I have no reason to doubt that taken in sum, your attributes are an ample match for my cousin’s. I would be most disappointed in you if you did not accept my summary as accurate based on your first-hand knowledge of my skills and failed to act appropriately on the information.”

Arthur mouth opened and closed several times before it morphed into something Sherlock thought was impossible – a larger smile than he’d ever seen on Arthur.

“THANK YOU MR. SHERLOCK! Oh… thank you…”

And there might be tears. And a lot of them. And Sherlock was already at his admittedly small limit.

“Now you may prepare your… whatever it was you were making.”

And with a quick turn Sherlock moved away from a quivering Arthur.

Directly into John.

Who was grinning.

“So, I’m a diamond, am I?”

“How much did you hear?”

“Well, I only came in on that high note, but was there something juicy that I missed?”

“Don’t be silly, John. I do not lower myself to ‘juicy’ conversations. Now, if you will excuse me, if the shower is free, I should perhaps make use of it myself.”

Sherlock tried to step around the army doctor and found himself stopped by John’s hand on his arm.

“What you said to Arthur, Sherlock… that was good. Really and truly good. But what you said about yourself was crap. You’re right in that you’re not a diamond because diamonds are dragged out of dirt and need a hell of a lot of work to make them blaze. And they’re flash, but not much else besides that. You’re like one of those rock balls that you crack open and find a whole fairy kingdom of crystals inside. Maybe most people never take the time to look inside, but when they do… there’s nothing more amazing. Complex, mysterious and just breathtaking. Remember what you said to Arthur… valuable and unique. Now, get on with you before our chef has his Mr. Bear thing made. I’m sure… well it probably won’t improve with age.”

John gave his rapidly blinking friend a pat on the shoulder and joined Arthur in the kitchen.
Mr. Bear’s Chocolate Tropical Holiday proved to be a blended concoction of ice cream, chocolate milk, pineapple juice and fresh coconut chunks. On top of each glass was a collage of gummy bears sitting or laying down underneath cocktail umbrellas, which both Sherlock and John were astonished they possessed.

“There we go! I thought we could maybe, if it’s ok, watch a movie or something, too. And, I might be able to get Skip to come out and watch, too, if I tell him it’s ok to pretend Mr. Sherlock isn’t actually here, which isn’t at all nice to Mr. Sherlock, but I was thinking that it could be good for Skip to…”

“I will not offended, Arthur. If you can convince Martin to sit and watch a film, I have no objection.”

“That’s great Mr. Sherlock! Doctor Watson, it is ok, isn’t it? It won’t hurt him or anything.”

“Lord, no. In fact, it could do him some good. Especially with this artistic creation waiting for him, too.”

“Hurray! I’ll go and get him.”

Arthur sprang towards the bedroom and both John and Sherlock were surprised that there was no yelling ringing through the flat. In a minute or two, a beaming Arthur walked out, followed closely by a very fragile-looking Martin.

“Here you go, Skip! You and I can sit here…”

Arthur dragged Sherlock’s and John’s armchairs to the side of the couch so that Martin sat in the chair next to the couch and Arthur took the one on the end. John picked up on the intent and took the spot on the couch next to Martin, leaving the man wedged between what he considered allies. Sherlock’s muttered “oh, guess I’ll just sit here then” earned him a quick kick from John, which actually stung since John’s foot perfectly fit the bruise Martin’s had made earlier.

A quick turn through the channels found, almost serendipitously, an airing of Airplane! which thrilled Arthur to the point of speechlessness, if only for ten seconds, actually drew a few chuckles from the slightly sulking detective at the end of the couch and open laughter from the obviously nervous pilot sandwiched between his protective caretakers. As the film ran, Arthur was nearly continuously reminded of some story from some MJN flight that he felt compelled to share, much to his audience’s amusement.

By the time the film was done, John was tired, Arthur was exhausted but riding the high of sugar and good company, Sherlock was ready for everyone to go to sleep so he could work on an experiment.
John didn’t know he had already started on one of John’s jumpers and Martin looked like he was ready to jump out of his own skin. Even Arthur was very aware that the pilot was reaching the end of his waiting and things were going to take a turn for the worst.

“Hey Skip, I think it’s time to try and get some sleep. Doctor Watson said he could help you a little with that, so how about we get set up and ready to sleep and see what happens? Maybe a quick shower before bed, too and you can go first so you’ll get more of the hot water. I don’t mind it when showers are cold because it’s like going outside naked and playing in the snow. Which is a lot of fun, but Mum really gets mad, so I can’t do it when she’s home. How does that sound?”

“Good except for the naked snow frolicking part.”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it. I’ll get your pajamas out and your bed all nice and made, so everything will be ready for you.”

“Arthur, you can take my room upstairs. I’ll bed down on the couch, so you go up and get a good night’s rest.”

And John had no idea why his kind offer made Arthur look upset.

“Oh. That’s very nice of you, Doctor Watson, but I thought I’d sleep on the floor in Skip’s, I mean Mr. Sherlock’s room.”

“There’s no need for you to be uncomfortable, Arthur. I’m more than happy…”

“I won’t be uncomfortable. Not at all. I’m thrilled to get to sleep on the floor. It’s like a camping adventure and what could be more brilliant than that! And, I’m right there if Skip needs a glass of water or wants to play a game on my phone or, well, anything like that.”

“Arthur, you do not need to wait on me like an orderly.”

“No, I don’t need to, but I want to. And I’m not waiting on you; I’m just making things easier on you so you get well faster. Now go and get in the shower and let me get your room ready.”

“Pushy bastard.”

“Stubborn Skipper.”

Before the war of stuck-out-tongues began, Martin made a strategic retreat.

“That was so much fun! It’ll be… we won’t all be able to do that for a bit, will we?”

John and Sherlock shared a look and John made sure to use his kindest tone.

“No, not for awhile. But it could be faster than we expect. Martin’s proven that he’s strong-willed and tough, so let’s not get too gloomy right now. Now, I’ve got a bedroll stored in my closet. Why don’t you pop up and get that to make your camping adventure more authentic and we’ll clean up out here.”

“Wow! That sounds great! Thanks Doctor Watson!”

And Arthur was taking the stairs two at a time up to John’s bedroom. And nearly all at a time when he nearly tumbled down after retrieving the bedroll.

“This is brilliant! If I don’t get a chance to say it – Good night, Mr. Sherlock! Good night, Doctor Watson! Sleep well!”
“You too, Arthur.”

And a quick pinch had one quick ‘enjoy your rest’ tossed out to the grinning man heading towards the downstairs bedroom. John set about washing the dishes and Sherlock set about watching him.

“You know, Arthur’s Mr. Bear what’s-it was actually pretty good. And he did a nice job with the decoration. Very inspired.”

“Arthur does offer up a wealth of wonders.”

“He’ll be helpful to have around the next few days. Martin’s going to need his support in the worst way. I just hope the poor lad’s up to it. Things are going to get hairy.”

“He is. And even if he’s not, he’ll push through it for Martin’s sake. Tonight, do you think?”

“Doubtful. He’s just getting cravings and they’re not so bad that he’s really compromised yet. But soon. Like David Bowie said ‘commencing countdown engines on.’”

“Colorful, but appropriate.”

“Look at it this way. If Martin can hold out until tomorrow, Arthur will probably make breakfast and I did lay in supplies for pancakes.”

“Pancakes?”

“Yep.”

“Do we have Nutella?”

“Brand new jar.”

“I knew there was a reason I keep you around.”
Chapter 14

Martin did hold out overnight and Sherlock did get his pancakes, which even without the Toblerone chunks, were still sufficiently interesting to the man that John got the pleasure of watching the detective consume a full two, which he felt had to be some form of record. Of course, John hadn’t witnessed breakfast at the Shappey house, so he could be excused for his mistake.

For his part, Martin apparently consumed one and was not thrilled with Arthur’s insistence that he eat more, which turned the rest of his breakfast into projectiles that landed a good distance past the bedroom door.

“I think he may be getting a little testy, Doctor Watson.”

“Oh yeah. Frisbee pancakes is a sure sign of agitation.”

“And he called me smothery. I’m not smothery, am I?”

“We talked about this, Arthur. Don’t take anything he says personally right now. Believe me, that’s not close to the worst thing he’ll probably call you before this is over.”

“I suppose… but I’m not, am I?”

“Not that I’ve noticed.”

“Good. I don’t want to do that to Skip. Especially since I’m planning to… oops!”

John had to laugh when he saw Sherlock roll his eyes in exasperation at the hand Arthur had clasped over his mouth.

“Arthur, John is surely aware of your intentions towards Martin so wasting time trying to hide your attraction is stupidly inefficient.”

“He is? Well, Doctor Watson is smart and has been your assistant for a long time. I mean, look at how much I’ve learned and I’ve only assisted for a couple of days! I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. And I decided to take your advice, Mr. Sherlock. I am going to ask Skip out. On a date, I mean. And if I ask him out, he can’t complain if I pay for the dinner. And a movie, I think. Or flowers. I think Skip would like flowers, I mean... who doesn’t like flowers. They’re brilliant!”

Sherlock huffed and announced that he was going to St. Bart’s to see if there were any interesting corpses.

“Doesn’t he like flowers?”

“Probably likes the ones that poison people. But good for you, Arthur! I think you two will make a wonderful couple.”

“Thanks! I just hope Skip agrees. And then we can do one of those couples things with you and Mr. Sherlock. Well, when he offers for you…”

…that...

…is...

Oops.”

“Well, don’t hold your breath, mate. It won’t help. Trust me, I know.”

“Wait. What?”

“Sherlock has no intention of ever letting anyone drag him into being a couple. I gave up that bit of daydreaming a long time ago. Shot me down almost as soon as we met, actually, but I did hold onto a little spark. Guess I always will. But he’s who he is and I accept that. We’re a good team and he’s the closest friend I’ve ever had, but that’s where the story ends.”

“No… I… look, Doctor Watson… I think you may have things a little… cross-eyed.”

“Sorry, Arthur. I know you like Sherlock and probably have some fancy romantic idea…”

“It’s not me! It’s Mr. Sherlock! He’s got a like smile for you and I noticed as soon as we got here that he leans, which really tells it all… and…”

“Excuse me? Sorry, but… leans?”

“Yeah, well leans and walks. Ok… let’s say you’re not in the room but then you come in. Mr. Sherlock will walk closer to where you are. Or he’ll lean towards you at the table when you smile. I don’t even think he knows what he’s doing, because then he probably wouldn’t do it, so that’s just his brain or a part of it trying to tell you that he wants to be more than friends. Oh…and he gets all twitchy when I bring up the subject like he’s trying to hide something.”

John honestly had no idea what to say. Arthur was Arthur, but he’d shown a surprising degree of perception that John wouldn’t have predicted. But it was all balderdash. It had to be. Sherlock had shut the door on anything beyond friendship and done it rather emphatically. No room for misunderstandings on that one. However… their friendship had grown beyond what John would ever have thought possible. He’d never had a best friend and now he lived with the person who filled that role and very satisfyingly, at that. No… this was silly. Arthur was seeing hearts and butterflies everywhere so it wasn’t a stretch that they’d started flying over John and Sherlock’s head in Arthur’s imagination.

“Arthur, I appreciate what you’re saying and I’m sure you believe it’s true. But, I just haven’t seen it myself, so let’s forget all about it, what you do you say?”

“I say nope. I mean I won’t be a bother about it, but I won’t forget it. And now that I’ve brought it up, you won’t either. It’s like when a little bird gets inside the house and, it’s not big, but it flies everywhere and that’s all you can think about is that bird and even when you try to catch it and put it outside, it just keeps flying and flying and flying…”

“Well, good for the bird. Find a nice house, get away from the cats. Could be worse.”

“Now, you’re being silly…”

“Not as silly as…”

Arthur never found out how silly he was being since Martin chose that moment to begin smashing whatever breakables remained in Sherlock’s room.
of hot tea in their hands.

“And that’s just the start.”

“That scared me. And I’m not exaggerating in the least!”

“It’s just because he took a swing at you.”

“No… that actually didn’t bother me too much. Even though it really hurt. It was how mean Skip’s eyes were. His eyes are never mean.”

“If it makes you feel better, that’s not really Martin right now. His chemistry is going haywire and he’ll be nothing like his normal self until that settles down.”

That piece of reassurance seemed to pacify Arthur, but John hoped he would keep it in mind when mean eyes were the least of their worries.

“Martin’s finally melting down.”

A testament to John and Arthur’s preoccupation was that neither heard Sherlock enter the flat.

“And hello to you to Mr. Sunshine.”

And, no… John would not acknowledge that Sherlock moved to stand by his side of the couch, even though he was fiddling with his coat and scarf and didn’t seem to notice his behavior at all.

“Skip has gone a bit funny, but Doctor Watson says it’s actually normal.”

“Is that a black eye, Arthur?”

“Well, yes. But it’s not a bad one. I’m going to take a picture of it when it gets more purple. I’ve never had a black eye before, so the picture’s for my scrapbook.”

“Everyone needs a hobby, I presume. Anyway, I ran into Lestrade at the morgue. I think he actually grows less intelligent as he ages. Fortunately, his latest case does have points of interest, so he won’t have to muddle through without my assistance.”

“You’re taking a case?”

“You sound surprised.”

“Sherlock, your cousin is in there and needs our help.”

“No, he needs your help. You and Arthur. You know as well as I that my help is not only unnecessary but not desired.”

John leaned over and held his head in his hands.

“Um… I’m just going to check on Skip.”

Leaving Sherlock and John alone.

“John, you have to admit that I cannot do any good in this situation.”

“True… I do have to admit that. However, whether or not you can do any good is not the point. The point is you should want to be here in case things change.”
“That is highly unlikely.”

“He’s family!”

“He does not want me here, John, and I am simply giving him what he wants. Surely that is a form of help in itself?”

In this case… perhaps, but John had to bite down against the sourness in this mouth. Sherlock would never understand anything like this…

“If you ask me to, I will stay.”

…and then he does something like that. Sherlock may not ever understand, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t act without understanding. It showed awareness, effort… bastard.

“No… you’re right. And it must not be easy on you… with Martin going through this. Must bring back some unpleasant memories.”

“I told you, I’m not prepared to share…”

“I mean from your own experience with substance abuse, Sherlock.”

“Ah… truthfully, I’ve not given it much thought. That part of my life is no longer relevant, therefore I don’t keep those memories readily accessible.”

“Guest bedroom of your mind palace?”

“One of the smaller ones.”

And John again refused to acknowledge that Sherlock did lean a little towards him when he couldn’t hold back the grin.

“You’re not angry with me?”

“Nah. I understand your point, just took me a few moments like it does sometimes.”

“But you always get there in the end.”

“Slow and steady wins the race.”

And a race it was when another eruption of noise from the bedroom had John running one way and Sherlock the other. Surely they needed him at the Yard…

The following few days were some that John hoped he never had to revisit again in his lifetime and he was certain that Arthur felt the same way. And it was so much harder on him because he was Arthur. Kind, decent, loving, gentle… facing down someone who had all of that burned out of them. Between the physical and verbal abuse, the bouts of vomiting, the uncontrollable tears, the screams for Arthur to leave one second and then screams for him to come back the next. More than once John found Arthur just sitting quietly fighting desperately to pull himself together so he could return and face Martin again.

And, though Sherlock was rarely present, John couldn’t miss little things like the piles of Martin’s soiled clothes and bedding that would vanish from outside the bedroom and reappear clean. There was an unopened box of tea in the cupboard John hadn’t bought, as well as a fresh loaf of bread and
carton of milk in the kitchen. And not one new experiment appeared on the kitchen table. Sherlock may not be a perfect man, but he was a better one than anyone else might ever suspect. Which John already knew, but that didn’t stop a hot tide of warmth that rose up in him when he found a note on the kitchen table and his makeshift nurse curiously absent.

John,

*Have taken Arthur for the afternoon. We are having a walk. Will not involve him in any criminal activity. Will do same for you at future time, as necessary.*

__________

“This is Brilliant! I love the zoo, Mr. Sherlock!”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself. I reasoned that a change of venue for a few hours would be beneficial for your well-being.”

“Once more?”

“You could use an afternoon out.”

“Oh! Oh… yeah…it has been a… Skip’s quite a handful. A bit… ARRRGGGHHTTTT… then OOOOOHHHHH and then he’ll puke and sleep a little. I knew it was going to be hard, Mr. Sherlock, but I didn’t know hard could be *this* hard.”

“You’re doing a credible job helping John. Whether or not the situation is difficult, you are managing acceptably.”

“Thanks! Doctor Watson says this part won’t last too much longer, then it will be being with Skip and helping him stay away from… things… and letting him know that he’s not alone and things are going to be alright. That’s the part I don’t understand, Mr. Sherlock. Skip is wonderful, but things don’t go right for him. Did you know Mum called Skip’s brother and sister and they didn’t even want to come and help look for Skip? And he has such a hard time with people. He tries to talk to them and be nice and they just don’t act the same towards him. I don’t understand that at all.”

“The ordinary person has a difficult time relating to someone who deviates from the average.”

“You mean people don’t like when someone’s different?”

*Why do you even try Martin? It’s embarrassing.*

*I just wanted to talk to them, Sherlock.*

*You didn’t honestly believe they would be friendly towards you?*

*Yes. Why not?*

*Well, the evidence should be sufficient for even you to see the pattern. People don’t like you Martin. And they aren’t going to.*

*No! I have… I’ll have friends!*

*Nonsense. Your diminutive size and atypically-colored hair will not encourage boys your age to seek your company and will actively discourage girls your age from considering you a romantic partner. Your interests, I mean, interest, is singular and not one that the common person will share. You stammer when you are stressed, humiliated or frustrated, all of which you frequently*
experience. You lack charm, poise or a well-developed sense of humor which, while I see no value in any of those, might promote successful social interaction even in light of your other faults. You lack money, property or social standing which might gain you followers, if not friends…

STOP IT, SHERLOCK! YOU SHUT YOUR MOUTH RIGHT NOW!

There’s no use getting angry, Martin. It is the height of stupidity to be angry at the truth. And now we have another flaw to add to your portfolio.

“Yes Arthur, that’s what I mean.”

“Well, some people may be like that, but not everyone. I mean, I’m sort of different, but I’ve had it a lot easier than Skip. And Mum would never let me go missing and not look for me. But that’s ok… I’ll make sure that Skip always knows that he has people he can count on. People who care about him. And it’s true, so I won’t even have to pretend!”

“That’s good, Arthur. I’m sure Martin will appreciate that a great deal. Now, shall we visit the giraffes?”

“Brilliant!”

With take-away boxes in Sherlock’s hands and several souvenir bags hanging off of Arthur’s arms, the duo climbed the stairs to the flat and Sherlock nearly dropped his baggage onto the floor seeing his brother standing in the living room.

In khakis.

And a pull-over.

“Ah, Arthur… I take it you enjoyed your trip to our lovely zoo.”

“I had an amazing time, Mycroft. We saw everything. Oh! And I got souvenirs for everyone.”

Arthur rummaged through the large plastic bags and withdrew a brightly-colored shirt adorned with monkeys for John and a stuffed orangutan, which he proudly handed to Mycroft.

“Did you know they call an orangutan the Wise Man of the Forest? That’s why I thought it would be perfect for you. Not that you live in the forest. But the wise part fits.”

“I shall treasure it, Arthur. Thank you.”

Arthur broke into a huge grin and collected the take-away containers from Sherlock.

“You’ll stay for dinner, won’t you Mycroft? There’s plenty.”

“How gracious. I would love to.”

Another massive grin and Arthur nearly skipped towards the kitchen.

“I think I’ll give him a hand. Give you two a chance to rattle your sabers.”

And, with his own massive grin, John corralled the rest of the souvenir bags and joined Arthur in gathering dinnerware and platting out the food.
“Have you developed a case of fashion amnesia, Mycroft? Forgot the route to your tailor?”

“Says the man with his own garish shirt stuffed into his coat pocket. Is that a gorilla wearing a hat?”

“It was a gift.”

“Justly deserved, I'm sure. Not for your observational skills, however, or you might have considered I might choose, shall we say, more disposable clothing to visit our dear cousin while he is in this state. There was a time I kept several sets of such garments for just this type of visit with another family member. Perhaps you know him?”

“That was a pitiable attempt at deception, Mycroft.”

“I assure you that no deception was involved. It is not my fault if your memory of that time is riddled with holes. I was there, Sherlock. And not only when we were packing you into an ambulance after an overdose or off to yet another futile attempt in rehab. I take it you don’t discuss those years with DI Lestrade very often or you would perhaps be better versed in the details. Quite a useful man. We got to know each other quite well during that period. We still meet for tea now and then, in fact.”

“You mean you’ve drawn him in as yet another one of your spies.”

“Not at all. Rather like your Doctor Watson, he refused my generous offer. We simply enjoy a spot of tea and little harmless conversation. Do try and contain your jealousy.”

Sherlock was sure that the day would come when his hands would freeze in a position typical for a serial strangler.

“So you’re here to visit Martin? How did that go? Enjoy being kicked? He has a surprising amount of muscle for someone so small.”

“Despite your less-than-warm welcome, Martin was more than agreeable to our reunion. We enjoyed a pleasant chat, in fact, while Doctor Watson gave him a brief examination.”

A chat greatly smoothed by Martin’s shear exhaustion, the news that MJN was holding its own financially despite his absence and a stack of aviation and aeronautics books that Mycroft was sure Martin had not read due to their exorbitant prices. The fact that Martin’s feelings for Mycroft were closer to the cooler side of fury was also helpful.

“I think that Martin may not be averse to maintaining a degree of communication in the future.”

“And his paramour is your greatest fan. Not an insubstantial weapon for cutting through his disdain.”

“Ah, the metallic whiff of cynicism. I should have a dog trained to track the aroma in case you go missing.”

Sherlock had a very elaborate scenario involving a pack of feral dogs and Mycroft’s suits ready to detail out loud when Arthur’s piercing yell signaled that dinner was ready. Mycroft sniggered at his brother’s interrupted retort and took a seat at the table next to Arthur, leaving Sherlock to sit adjacent to John.

Who counted the number of times Sherlock brushed against him reaching for something or leaned towards him when he spoke or laughed. That would be seventeen.
Mycroft left after sharing a glass of wine with John, while Arthur spent time with Martin and Sherlock ignored everyone and studied a new type of synthetic fiber under his microscope. John took time to neaten the kitchen and pour himself a second glass of wine, filling a glass for Sherlock also.

“Here. You deserve it. A trip to the zoo and Casual Mycroft all in one day.”

Sherlock chuckled and accepted the glass, rising and following John to the couch.

“It has been an unusual day, but unusual is greatly preferable to boring, so I am content.”

“Well, my day was less unusual than it has been, so I’ll say I’m content, also.”

“Martin is doing better?”

“Yes. I’d say he’s almost out of the woods, so we’ll have to start thinking about what the next step will be. Ship him back to Fitton to recuperate or keep him here a while longer.”

“Ask Arthur. He’ll have the best idea of how to proceed. At the very least, he’ll be the one to initiate the discussion with Martin.”

“Maybe on their epic date.”

“I’ll ask Mycroft for the surveillance footage.”

“Good plan. I’m dying to know what flowers Arthur buys.”

“He should better invest his money.”

“What? Take it from me, Sherlock. Flowers and romance are like strawberries and chocolate. Or pancakes and Nutella.”

“That good?”

“No question. You fancy someone, you give them flowers. They’re beautiful and impractical and can’t be misinterpreted for anything else but ‘You’re special enough for me to actually bring flowers.’ And you just know that whatever Arthur gets, it will be worth seeing. Tell Mycroft to film them in color, will you?”

“And add audio. I am very curious about the full range mating rituals, dances and calls that would be displayed.”

“Oh… smart one.”

John drained the last of his wine and let loose a large yawn.

“I’m knackered. You’re up for awhile?”

“I have an experiment I want to begin on bleach resistance for certain synthetic fibers produced in Eastern Europe. And I am supposed to meet Lestrade early to discuss a cold case that may have bearing on a current investigation. I won’t be sleeping, if that’s your question.”

“Just curious. If anyone needs anything, just wake me.”

John kicked off his shoes and fitted the couch with the pillow from his bed and a blanket.
“Good night, Sherlock.”

“Sleep well, John.”

John was happily surprised that he’d gotten an entire night’s worth of uninterrupted sleep. Either Arthur had taken care of all of Martin’s needs or Martin had actually slept through the night, also. That would be a very positive sign. One large and extremely satisfying stretch later, John swung his feet onto the floor and reached over to grab his wine glass to return to the kitchen. And froze.

Inside the now water-filled wine glass was a mongrel bouquet of small flowers, the likes of which you saw growing in window boxes and planters. The kind that had to have been hand-gathered, probably by torch light since the sun hadn’t risen yet. They were mismatched, haphazard, stolen and… perfect. One, and only one, thought rose to fill John’s head.

I’m done for.
Chapter 15

“Now, I may be wrong, but I think that Mr. Sherlock has done something quite nice.”

John hadn’t moved from the couch, though it must have been an hour since he woke.

“You are the detective’s assistant, Arthur. Care to explain your thinking?"

“Well, they weren’t there when I went to sit with Skip, so that leaves you, Mr. Sherlock or Mycroft as suspects. Then, they still weren’t there when I got up to get some juice and a biscuit and the only people in the house besides me and Skip were you and Mr. Sherlock and you were sleeping. Now, you could have gone out yourself, but your hair’s all sleepy and you’re not the kind to go outside to pick flowers with sleepy hair. And, the flowers look like you and people don’t usually pick flowers that look like them. So, it had to be Mr. Sherlock. Which makes sense since you’re the only person he’d give flowers …”

“Hold up… the flowers look like me?”

“Sure! They’re small like you, but tough because they’re still blooming and it’s getting nippy out. And they’re not all fancy pretty, but real pretty, you know, like real flowers you see when you take a nice drive out in the country. Mr. Sherlock was thinking about you when he got these and that’s why they look like you. Because he fancies you…”

And, of course, Arthur had to sing that last bit in the perfect chipper, knowing tone that John would have wanted to Ka-Bar him for… if he hadn’t been right the whole time and John would look petty.

“Assuming, and I do mean assuming, you’re right, what’s my next move, Saint Valentine?”

Arthur jumped onto the couch next to John and pulled the blanket over so they were both underneath it like kids snuggling up to watch a scary movie.

“Well, I would let him know that he made you happy. He did make you happy, didn’t he?”

There was a little uncertainty in Arthur’s voice that opened the door for John to lie, but it would have been a ridiculous thing to do. Arthur already knew how he felt…

“Yeah… it was a nice little surprise to wake up to.”

“Make sure he knows that. He’s a bit clueless when it comes to you, so you’ll have to tell him all the things you like and then say thanks! when he does them. Sort of like with Snoopadoop. That’s how Mum got her to stay off of the furniture and not pee on the carpets.”

Drat. John thought his strategy of dealing with Sherlock was a secret only to him.

“And be really obvious about it! Mr. Sherlock strikes me as someone who can over-think things, so you can’t leave him anything to think about.”

“Ok. Subtlety bad, flashing neon-sign good.”

“You have a neon sign? Brilliant! Can I see it?”

“Just an expression, Arthur.”

“Oh. Oh… I get it! That’s a good one, Doctor Watson. But yeah… I think you’re going to
have to make sure you lay things out for Mr. Sherlock very clearly.”

John had to agree, actually. Sherlock would over-think things, devote his attention to trying to find the alternate possibilities and analyzing John’s every word or action unless there was one and only one possibility.

“I need to shag him.”

Arthur tried to say something. Make that somethings. Make that a lot of somethings but none were brave enough to come out of his mouth.

“Ahhhhh…..”

“Good advice, Arthur. Clean, clear, no need for forensics or his steeped-fingers-on-the-couch thing. Shag him senseless. Keep the bastard from even thinking, let alone deducing.”

“That might be a bit… a tad…”

“No… no, you’re right. Sherlock and I both have the capability of making a right mess of this and there’s only one way to nail things down quickly and without any misunderstandings - get those long legs doing something besides walking away and leaving me to run behind. Good chat, mate. Thanks.”

And John was up to take care of his sleepy hair and put some fresh sheets on his bed.

And Arthur was left sitting wondering if this was one of those times he should have just sat there and smiled.

Because Arthur had a different plan for what he hoped would be his Skipper. Skip deserved everything, since he had close to nothing right now. He would move slowly, because he had to make sure Skip understood that he truly cared for him, even knowing about the drugs and seeing Skip at his absolute worst. Then, he had to make Skip understand that he cared for him. There would be dates and movies and ice cream and picnics and flowers and sweets and then… then Arthur was going to take a kiss and it would be wonderful and brilliant and special and perfect and Skip would kiss him back and then they could do dates and movies and ice cream and picnics, but with kissing thrown in, too.

And, one day… there would be more than kissing.

And that would be indescribable.

The rest of the day was blessedly quiet in the flat. Martin was still struggling, but the worst of the detox process had passed and Arthur was able to get him to eat a little soup in between bouts of peaceful healing sleep. With the free time, John worked on updating his blog, carefully couching his wording so that Martin’s identity wasn’t divulged and Arthur was ecstatic that he was allowed to add a bit to the entry, specifically his impressions of Sherlock and what it was like working with the great detective, even though John only identified him as Sherlock’s ‘esteemed temporary colleague.’ John was certain this was going to be one of his most popular entries.

They were just finishing John’s latest piece when Arthur’s mobile rang and the lack of giddiness told John it probably was not Mycroft.
“Hi Mum! It’s me, Arthur.”

“I know that, stupid child. I called you. Because you haven’t called me. Arthur, are you alright? Is everything alright?”

“I’m sorry, Mum. I really am. I guess that things got away from me with so much going on.”

“So much going on? Arthur, I have had enough of this. You need to tell me…”

“It’s ok, Mum. I promise. There’s… things that I just can’t talk about right now. At least not until Skip says it’s alright, which I’m sure he will someday, but I can’t ask him today since he’s just settled down and it really is better when he’s settled down and not… doing other stuff. But, besides that it’s been great! I am learning things I never thought I’d ever learn, like how to be a nurse on top of how to be a detective and I got to go to the zoo for an entire afternoon and we’ve been watching movies and I’ve gotten to cook and even Doctor Watson eats my cooking! And, not to be smug, but I got Mr. Sherlock and Doctor Watson to finally get together and that’s Brilliant since they’re a smashing couple and…”

“Arthur, do I want to know why you’re learning to be a nurse?”

“Well, probably, but I can’t tell you right now. But I’m doing a good job, everyone says so. Doctor Watson even told me that I should take a first-aid course when we’re back home because I’m good at taking care of people. Even when I have black eye.”

“A black eye! Arthur, what in the world are you doing that you…”

“It’s not bad, Mum. Honestly! And Skip… whoever gave it to me did it by accident. Well, sort of by accident. He… they didn’t mean it and the point is that I still did a good job so when we get back to Fitton I’m going to take a class and that way you can count on me to take care of any little accidents with the passengers or be able to do something if someone gets sick. And I’ll have experience and a thumb’s up from Doctor Watson and he’s a brilliant doctor and detective’s assistant. And he was in the Army, too!”

“Yes, yes… I’m sure all he’s next on the list for knighthood. But, Arthur… can you assure me that you are safe and that not in any trouble? And I do mean any, Arthur Shappey, with all the implications and layers of meaning that the word ‘any’ could possibly have in this language or any other.”

“Nope. No trouble. Not one tiny bit. Really, it’s been like a holiday. Except for… certain things that are less holiday-like. But nothing dangerous! I promise, Mum. And I’m sorry I haven’t called, I’ll try to do better.”

“Will you be coming home soon?”

“Not sure, really. It shouldn’t be too much longer, but I don’t know so I’d rather not say. I have to talk to Doctor Watson about that. And Skip. Then I’ll let you know. I’m having lots of fun, but I do miss you and Douglas and GERTI.”

“And… oh this hurts… I miss you, too, Arthur. But, I am glad that you are doing whatever it is you’re doing. You sound almost… grown up.”

“Wow, Mum… that’s… thanks! We’ll have lots to talk about when we get back and maybe you’ll think I sound completely grown up!”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”
“Ok. Well, I have to go, Mum. Doctor Watson’s going to the pharmacy so I have to… well I have to go.”

“Arthur… take care of yourself.”

“I will Mum. Bye!”

Arthur ended the call and looked up at John’s warm smile.

“She worries about you.”

“Yeah. I mean, she’s my Mum. That’s what they do.”

“And I’m glad you’re considering getting that first-aid training. You’ll be the star pupil. I’m off now, but I’ll be back in a few minutes. Need anything while I’m out?”

“Well, if you find any Toblerones, that would be brilliant.”

“Hmmm… lube and Toblerones… that should give the register girl something to think about.”

And something for Arthur to blush about.

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John and Arthur were watching something on the telly that John hoped he’d never have to admit to since it was pure crap and they’d been watching it for over an hour, when they heard Sherlock’s tread on the stairs. John slapped Arthur’s knee and stood, straightening his jumper, before marching over to the door.

“Ah, John. Good. Yes… good.”

John knew that look. It was what he thought of as Sherlock’s ‘before the look’ look. It was how Sherlock’s face arranged itself when it was waiting for Sherlock’s mind to read the environment and decide which face would best work to Sherlock’s advantage.

“Ah, Sherlock. I’d say… definitely good.”

Now the cautious glare that wasn’t quite ready to believe what the senses were saying.

“Definitely good?”

“Oh yeah. Glad you’re home.”

Sherlock’s coat had many uses, one of which was as a place for John to grasp when he gently pulled the detective down a little to press a soft kiss on the man’s full lips. Which got licked by their owner as soon as John broke away, as if said owner wanted to savor John’s taste on his skin.

“I… I take it you liked the flowers.”

“Loved them. Thought we’d spend some time letting me thank you properly for them.”

Sherlock rarely let a full smile bloom on his features, unless it was related to solving a case, but this one was almost transformative. Sherlock looked happy and John was completely mesmerized by the sight.

“That’s… I’m glad, John. And you can thank me later. If we don’t leave now, we’ll be late.”
John’s simmering libido got taken off the stove.

“Late? Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. Arthur! John and I will be out for the evening. You are in charge. Use Mycroft’s card if you need anything.”

And John was whisked out of the door before he could even squeak out a protest. When the downstairs door closed, Arthur jumped up and danced to the horrible music from the program they’d been watching. Arthur - 1, other matchmakers - 0.

__________

“Sherlock. Sherlock! Where are we going?”

The detective flagged down a cab and nearly pushed the army doctor inside.

“First, we have tickets for tonight’s performance by the LSO, then…”

“Wait? We’re going to the Symphony? Sherlock… I’m not… I look like hell. And you said they are nothing but a jumped up band of buskers…”

“You do not look, as you say, like hell. This is not the opera, John… you are quite appropriately dressed for the occasion. And, while I do not always approve of the quality of the musicians they hire, or their choice of material, I acknowledge that others find enjoyment in the performances.”

And John had watched a televised performance only a few weeks ago and mentioned that he would like to enjoy it live one day.

“That’s… I don’t know what to say, Sherlock. This is… this’ll be fun.”

“After, we will have a late dinner. I have reservations at a small French restaurant that I think you will find acceptable.”

Actually, Mycroft had reservations and was paying, but that was something his brother didn’t need to know until… some other day.

“I… Sherlock Holmes. Is this a date?”

John had to admit that no one in the world could cut their eyes as sexily as the man sitting next to him.

“Is that not good?”

A date. John Hamish Watson was on a date with Sherlock Holmes. And had a bouquet of flowers waiting at home. This bordered on surreal. But was positively exhilarating.

“It’s better than good. It’s… I just never thought…”

What John may or may not have thought was interrupted by a firm, slightly off-center kiss that made his toes tingle.

“Neither did I. Interesting that both of us overlooked salient clues until fresh eyes pointed them out.”

“Happens when you’re too close to the situation.”
Said John as he shuffled across the cab seat so that they sat thigh-to-thigh.

“True. But I do intend to stay close to the situation.”

“As do I. Great minds think alike.”

“Precisely.”

Arthur peeked in on Martin and felt the now-familiar lump in his throat seeing the man tangled in the sheets and borrowed pajamas. He was so… delicious… lying there. Arthur’s eyes drank in the little patches of bare skin that were visible and couldn’t think of any skin he’d ever seen that was so lovely. Pale and smooth… just like a bowl of fresh cream. And Arthur absolutely loved fresh cream.

“Arthur? Are you in a trance?”

“Skip! Oh… no. I was just… thinking.”

Martin tried to push himself upwards to sit, but failed miserably. His weak and exhausted muscles were not willing to cooperate.

“About what?”

“Oh, you know… this and that.”

Martin waved Arthur over and patted the mattress to signal Arthur to sit down.

“Good this’s and that’s, I hope.”

“Oh yeah… very good.”

“I’m glad. I wish… I’m sorry that I haven’t given you anything good to think about, Arthur. I’m sorry about everything, actually. I have no idea how I will ever make any of this up to you… all the things I said and did… your poor eye… I can’t begin to…”

“Shhhh…. It’s ok, Skip. I was pretty scared at first, but then Doctor Watson helped me realize that you weren’t actually you and I got the hang of it. And you have nothing to be sorry for… you suffered so badly, but you didn’t give up and Doctor Watson said you could have been a lot worse if you’d let yourself, but you didn’t so that shows how much you were thinking about me. Us. About us, I mean.”

Arthur moved to break away from looking at Martin, but the man’s eyes refused to let Arthur’s move a centimeter.

“I was thinking about you, Arthur. I’ve never… never… had anyone who would do something like this for me. And, I know I’ve never said anything, but I am very grateful for everything you’ve done for me. Even just sharing a park bench… you’ve been…”

Arthur watched as Martin swallowed and drew a breath.

“… important to me. And I wanted… you need to know that.”

Neither man knew when they had linked hands, but neither could bring themselves to let go right away. After a moment, Martin raised their clasped hands to his lips and softly kissed Arthur’s fingers
before letting them fall away.

“I… you’re important to me too, Skip. I like doing things with you, even if it’s just read in your flat. Or sit here and talk. I hope… I’d like to do this a lot more. If we can… I mean, if you wanted to.”

“I do want to. I… that would be nice. Well, when I’m able to lift a finger and don’t smell like sweat and sick.”

Arthur knew he had a large heart. It was one of the brilliant things about himself. But now, he wasn’t sure his heart was large enough to hold all of the joy that was suddenly filling it. Skip wanted to spend time with him! This would make his plan so much easier. As soon as Skip was feeling stronger, maybe they could go and take a walk and get a coffee. And he just might try and hold Skip’s hand while they walked and see how that went. It was going to be brilliant! And right now, he could do something to make Skip feel better.

“I can give you a wipe down, Skip. Doctor Watson normally does that, but he let me wash your arms and face and I can do that now so you don’t feel so sticky. Hold on and I’ll get ready.”

A quick run to the bathroom produced the soft cloth and basin of water that John kept waiting for just that purpose. Another quick run and Arthur was back at Martin’s bedside and rolling up his own shirtsleeves.

“This will make you feel good. You calmed down a lot when Doctor Watson gave you a little wash off. I’ll get your face first.”

Martin’s ‘Arthur, you don’t have to…’ got drowned by the wet cloth that moved over his chin and mouth and upwards across his cheek.

“Just relax, Skip. Let me do this. You’ll feel better and that will make me feel better so we both get something we like.”

And Martin did. He let his body go slack and simply let Arthur wash off the latest sweat and tears from his face and neck. Each arm was slowly cleaned, attention given to every finger in its turn. And Arthur looked so blissful doing this simple thing that Martin wanted nothing more than to keep that look on Arthur’s face for as long as possible. And feel some of that bliss himself.

“Arthur, if it’s not too much to ask, would you… do you think you could give my back a wipe down. I know it’s asking a lot, but I’ve been lying here and everything is starting to stick to me.”

“Sure! That’s no problem. Let’s get your shirt off and you rolled over and you’ll be nice and clean.”

Maybe Arthur’s fingers were a little clumsy working the buttons of Martin’s pajama top, but he was always a little clumsy. But he wasn’t clumsy lifting Martin’s torso to pull the shirt off of his small frame or rolling him slowly onto his stomach so he could clean Martin’s back.

And it was a beautiful back. The man in the bed might be thin, but his muscles still had definition and there was just so much of that sweet cream skin that Arthur had to choke back a small whine of delight. He freshened the water on the cloth and ran it in one long stroke from the top of Martin’s neck to the edge of his pajama bottoms, watching as Martin arched slightly into the contact.

“That feels wonderful.”

So Arthur did it again. And again, this time with his fingers training behind the cloth, just to make
sure he was leaving Martin’s skin clean and cool. And he repeated the motions across every inch of skin lying exposed in front of him, now knowing if he should ignore or absorb the small sighs that followed every stroke across that lovely skin.

“Is this… is this ok, Skip? Am I… doing this right?”

“It’s perfect, Arthur.”

The nearly-inaudible ‘just like you’ sent a tremor up Arthur’s spine. He was so focused on that sensation that he didn’t even notice that he’d started ‘washing’ Martin’s back again, but the cloth was sitting waiting in the basin. And these sighs that Martin was making were lower and more like tiny moans, which sent that tremor into other parts of Arthur’s body.

“My… my legs. They’re sticky, too. Could you… if it’s not too much trouble.”

“It’s no trouble, Skip. I’m… I’m happy to do it.”

Arthur reached down to hike up the legs of Martin’s pajamas, but was stopped when Martin grabbed his hand.

“It’s easier if I just lose them.”

The train wreck of Arthur’s brain left no surviving thoughts. Everything was about instinct now. And his instincts had his hands reaching to grasp the waistband of Martin’s pajama trousers and begin to slide them downwards, helped by Martin lifting his hips slightly.

Arthur waited until he had had fully removed the pajamas and dropped them on the floor before looking back at Martin. This time it wasn’t Martin making soft noises. *His* Skip was stunning. Small, but perfectly proportioned. And Arthur was having a hard time looking away from Martin’s firm arse, which looked to be absolutely the right size to fit in Arthur’s hands. Which, of course, Arthur had to check, running each hand slowly up Martin’s thighs and across that pert bottom, thumbs gently massaging the base of Martin’s spine.

“D…don’t stop, Arthur. Please.”

Arthur’s skin heated and blood started flowing to areas that made his trousers fit tightly. And there was no possible way he would stop. Not with his hands touching the most exquisite body he’d ever seen. And every touch, every little tease made Martin shift and writhe beneath Arthur’s fingers until he grabbed Arthur’s hand and looked up to lock their eyes.

“Help me turn over?”

Suddenly it was very difficult for Arthur to breathe, but that was not going to stop him from doing as Martin asked, moving the bed covers clear of the bed and slowly turning him onto his back.

“Now… don’t stop.”

Arthur wasn’t breathing at all now. How could someone breathe when their greatest wish was handed to them? But his hands weren’t as paralyzed as his lungs and gladly roamed over Martin’s body, memorizing every curve. He learned how sensitive were Martin’s nipples; only a slight bit of rubbing brought them erect and pleading for more of Arthur’s touch. And he found every other sensitive spot on Martin’s body, guided by every sound and shiver his senses drank in.

“Please, Arthur… do not stop.”
As if Arthur would. Or could. But the best had to be saved for last. Or not last, because that implied an end and Arthur was praying that there wasn’t going to be an end, just a series of intermissions that stretched over a very, very long time. Years of time…

“Arthur, please. Just… please, more.”

Years of time to hear Martin beg for him. With his impossibly vibrant hair, which was as colorful everywhere as on his head, and his achingly hard response to Arthur’s touch, there was nothing in the world that was going to drag Martin away from Arthur’s side. Never again. Never, ever again.

“Yes… oh, just like that… just a little faster. Oh god, Arthur… just like that… so good. Christ, Arthur… you make me feel so good…”

And Martin made Arthur feel good, too. He couldn’t remember a time his body felt so hot or had such a fierce desire for another person. Martin was his now. That was the truth and Arthur was feeling the fire of that truth burning into his soul.

“Arthur… oh god… I’m going to… please… just like that… christ, I’m going to… ARTHUR…”

And it didn’t matter that Arthur was going to have to wash Martin off again. Wash his belly, and his chest and that little glistening spot on his chin.

“Skip? I…”

Martin grabbed the hem of Arthur’s shirt and tugged, directing Arthur to lean down so he could take Arthur’s mouth in a kiss that made the man’s knees threaten to fail. And, a quick flick of Arthur’s tongue took care of that pesky drop on Martin’s face.

“You’re amazing, Arthur. I can’t even… just amazing.”

“No, Skip… that’s you. Amazing and stupendous and mine and… oh! can I say that? I mean, is it all right if I…”

Another kiss that made Arthur’s body want to start its own round of begging cut off the string of words.

“It’s alright, Arthur. It’s more than alright. Now, can I… I’m not sure how well I can return the favor, but I want to try.”

And Arthur wanted him to try. Really, really wanted him to try, but it was easy to see that Martin was still exhausted and weak and now completely boneless.

“Later, Skip. Let’s get you well first, then you can return the favor. With interest.”

Arthur had never given anyone a wolfish grin, but it slid easily across his lips and Martin shuddered with the thought of where that grin could one day lead.

“Ok, but… you know… there’s no reason you couldn’t… and I couldn’t… watch.”

No… no there wasn’t.

“Skip, do you know what’s even better than brilliant?”

“No.”

“I don’t either. But I’m pretty sure I’m about to find out.”
The Calm Before The Storm

The concert was fantastic and Sherlock even kept most of his disdainful comments to himself, gaining them far fewer nasty looks from surrounding patrons than John would have ever expected. The dinner was magical... a cozy restaurant where candles seemed to be the only source of light and food that made John weep when he thought about his own efforts in the kitchen. Then it was a walk. They walked for what seemed like hours through streets they normally raced through, focused on a purpose and oblivious to the details of the streets, buildings, lights, sounds, smells and colors around them. Sometimes they talked, sometimes they didn’t and John didn’t care at all. He was walking through London with a Sherlock Holmes who was relaxed, in the moment and seemed to be enjoying himself, not just tolerating the evening for John’s sake.

Before John knew it the sun had risen and Sherlock was guiding him towards a tiny shop that offered the best tea John had ever tasted and slowly towards 221B. There were many dates in the doctor’s past, but no other had ever made him feel like he would destroy the moon and the stars before letting it end. And maybe it didn’t have to...

“How’s your tea?”

“Excellent. Think they deliver?”

“Your tea is far superior. I have no interest in making any other a standard at home.”

Home... how John did love that word when Sherlock said it.

“Fine. Keep me chained to the kettle.”

“Is there somewhere else you’d rather be chained?”

“You’re a naughty man, Sherlock Holmes.”

“We all have layers to our personalities.”

“Hope this layer has jam.”

“And whipped cream.”

“Oh, that’s good…”

“But John…”

That was not a pleasant shiver that ran down the back of John’s neck.

“... this is... new... to me. I hope... there’s a phrase, silly and clichéd but it fits - taking it slow. I don’t know if you are willing...”

Whatever Sherlock wanted he would get. At least for this. John was fully prepared to do whatever it would take to keep the detective moving forward with this new situation.

“More than willing, Sherlock. The best things are worth waiting for and I honestly think this could be the best thing ever for me. So I don’t mind in the least. Just... you do want this, right? I’ll wait for however long you’d like and take things as slowly as you want to... just so I know we both want the same thing. That we’re on the same page.”
Sherlock stopped and fell into what John recognized as very deep thought. Usually, this lasted for an eternity, but this time, the reverie broke quickly.

“I want to build something. It’s not an urge I have normally, but I have wanted this with you for a significant amount of time. I have seen my life enriched in ways I could not have predicted by the simple addition of your presence to it and I am eager to see how this will progress though time. I find myself anxious when we are parted and relieved when we reunite. I have… thoughts… about you and want to experience those thoughts outside of my mind. I want to be able to do this.”

Sherlock reached down to took John’s hand in his.

“I cannot explain why and I have devoted a great deal of thought to the matter. It is a useless gesture. It offers nothing beyond basic, fleeting contact… yet I want it. Is this something that you want? Is this the page you’re on, John?

John couldn’t stop his joy and yes, reassurance, blooming as a wide smile that brought out Sherlock’s in return.

“Chapter and verse, too. And we’ll turn the rest of the pages at a pace we both like.”

“Acceptable. May we now cease the book references?”

“Not even the one about judging by the cover?”

“Especially that one.”

“But I like it.”

“That explains your reading habits.”

“Prick.”

“Philistine.”

“Stop using more letters than me.”

There was something different this time about walking up the steps to the flat that made John want to do a very Arthurian jig. He’d always felt comfortable in this space, from the first moment he’d stepped inside, but now there was a warmth to that comfort that wasn’t there before. It had been their flat, but now it was their flat and that change connected with something inside John that he thought he’d perhaps lost a chance at with the years and the mileage behind him. And it was good. Really good. Really, truly, inspiringly…

“Mycroft.”

“The happy couple returns to the love nest. Well, one of the happy couples. There does seem to be an abundance of that particular species hovering about of late. Congratulations, brother dear. Doctor Watson, my condolences.”

“Very funny, Mycroft. For your information, I consider Sherlock a prize catch.”

“Then we must take a fishing trip together. You’ll have a wonderful time, as easily pleased as you are.”
“Piss off, Mycroft. Why are you even here? I didn’t think your alarm clock had numbers this low.”

“Responsibility does not obey the yoke of the clock Sherlock, and, unfortunately, my schedule is often marked by uncertainty. However, this does leave me amusing little windows of opportunity to stop by and visit this lovely hive of domesticity. And I did bring a very nice pastry assortment. Why don’t you indulge yourself, John, while I give my brother the very long-overdue ‘talk.’ You understand why I’d rather not entertain witnesses for this particular conversation.”

John had to admit that when Mycroft was suitably motivated, he had a very sharp sense of humor. Of course, Sherlock was not as appreciative, especially when John barked out a laugh.

“Pastries you say? Bye Sherlock. You’re on your own.”

But the silently shared look before John turned to the kitchen told Sherlock that he’d never have to be on his own again.

“I do recall we had that ‘talk,’ Mycroft. Well, we had that section of your reference book on human physiology that you bookmarked and laid on my desk when I was twelve. Silly really, I’d already read your pitiful reference collection by the time I was nine.”

“Hence my giving the cultural tradition the lack of attention it was due. However…”

A ‘however’ from Mycroft was never followed by anything that worked to Sherlock’s benefit.

“… I want you know that I am… satisfied… with your decision. This will be good for you, Sherlock. Try not to ruin it.”

“I have no intention of ruining anything.”

“You may not, but that doesn’t mean you will not meet with unpleasant circumstances. With your specific interests, it is a certainty. You will need to respond to those appropriately and that is not an area of strength for which you are noted.”

“Ridiculous! I am highly skilled in dealing with the unexpected.”

“And the fact you misunderstand validates my display of concern. There will be times, Sherlock, when you will need to stretch your abilities in directions you are neither used to nor will enjoy. Being a couple means that your concerns will now always be shared. So will your problems, pleasures, sources of guilt and frustration… and you will have to navigate that with more than your usual brutish bull-through-the-china-shop insensitivity.”

“A concern for sensitivity… not something I expect to from you, Mycroft.”

“Because it is not something that concerns me; however, it is something that now concerns you.”

“I have no idea what…”

“That is something of which I am aware and over which I worry daily. All I ask, Sherlock… all I ask is that you…”

Sherlock was certain he had ever seen his brother fumble with words. What should have been a source of glee, actually made the detective strangely uncomfortable.

“…make yourself available to Doctor Watson. Even if it is difficult or unpleasant. We both
know that you are not good at that, but you will need to learn to keep John… to keep John.”

All Sherlock could do was nod as he watched his brother give his head an almost imperceptible shake and cool his features, which only now Sherlock realized had taken on a vividness he’d never seen on Mycroft.

“I will give what you said some thought.”

“Please do.”

Fortunately, John reentered the sitting room and Sherlock was spared any further conversation on this troubling topic.

“Sherlock, it’s too bad you’ve got the appetite of a sparrow because these are fantastic. Mycroft, if it isn’t a diplomatic secret I would love to know where you got them.”

“I’ll leave you the address. And, I will also leave you this…”

Mycroft removed an envelope from an inner pocket of his jacket and handed it to John, who shook powdered sugar off of his fingers to receive it.

“Please pass this along to Arthur. I would do it personally, but I would never dream of interrupting such a cozy scene.”

The nod towards Sherlock’s bedroom was something about which John was now insatiably curious.

“An invitation to join MI6?”

“An invitation to join me for a little sherry. Our highly-anticipated tete-a-tete is sadly overdue.”

John did a fairly good job at stifling this laugh at Sherlock’s near apoplexy.

“What possible motive could you have for this, Mycroft?”

“None other than fulfilling a promise and becoming more closely acquainted with a very singular individual.”

“It’s not like you to have guests in your home.”

“But it is very like me to have guests at the Diogenes.”

Sherlock felt no shame that he was awash with the need to pull John towards him and hold him close for it was a near certainty that the end of the world was on the horizon.

“Arthur at the Diogenes?”

“Rather sounds like a terribly overwrought play, doesn’t it? I’m quite looking forward to it, actually, so do remember to pass along the invitation. Now, I must be going. Breakfast with… well, you don’t really need to know that, do you. Doctor Watson, a pleasure as always.”

“Mycroft. Same to you. Always happy to have a guest bearing pastry.”

“Something I shall keep in mind. Sherlock, please do not hesitate if you require… an affable ear.”

And out the door he went, likely to wave a finger or two and destabilize a stock market or send some
foreign potentate to an early grave. At least, that’s what John liked to think when he was feeling a little whimsical or more than a little drunk.

“You should burn that envelope, John.”

“Oh no. For some reason, Arthur thinks Mycroft walks on water and if Mycroft is happy to support that fantasy, I’m not going to get in the way. Besides, Arthur… Mycroft… the Diogenes… that’s the stuff dreams are made of…”

“I think I understand why you sleep so poorly at night, John.”

“Fair enough. Maybe I need a teddy bear.”

“You can have Mr. Snowball.”

“I’d rather have Mr. Warmball.”

“We only brought one bear with us.”

“We’ll talk, Sherlock. We’ll talk.”

__________

But first, John wanted to check on Martin and get an eyeful of the ‘cozy scene’ Mycroft mentioned. Oh, and it was cozy…

On Sherlock’s bed were two sleeping forms. Arthur, clad in a pair of blue pajamas decorated with smiling koalas, was wrapped around a more sedately pajama-ed Martin, who clung to the larger man much like a baby koala, so John had to admit that Arthur’s outfit was surprisingly appropriate. It was the sweetest thing that John had ever seen, though the air in the room was certainly not the sweetest John had ever smelled. Apparently, a sordid path was traveled to this little island of contentment and that made the doctor grin like a madman. He was an enormous sucker for “happy endings”, even without the naughty air-quotes.

“I suppose you find that cute.”

“Cute, precious, adorable. Like kids at a sleep-over. One where mum and dad aren’t home. Catch a whiff?”

Sherlock leaned in and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“Atrocious.”

“Price you pay. Nothing a little air freshener won’t cure and they sell that in the same stores that sell condoms, so it’s one-stop shopping. And isn’t it nice to see things work out for people? Looks like all they needed was a little push in the right direction…”

“People often do. At least this will further guarantee that Martin won’t return to Fitton without some form of support system.”

“I doubt that was ever a worry. You don’t have to be involved with someone to care about their well-being. Arthur would have been there even if they had never taken things a step further.”

As would John. John’s loyalty was independent of whatever new path their relationship would take. John always knew that and Sherlock was quickly catching up. John eased Sherlock back away from the door and closed it quietly so the men inside could continue to sleep.
Sherlock stood in the middle of the sitting room, hands in pockets and body radiating that peculiar energy that mean he was thinking.

“Is that something we can do?”

John knew better than to assume he knew what Sherlock was talking about, so it was the smartest plan simply to ask.

“Define ‘that.’”

“Sleep. Like they are.”

Sherlock Holmes the closet cuddler. John was somehow not surprised.

“When you choose to sleep… yeah.”

“Even without… requiring air freshener?”

King of the closet cuddlers.

“Sure. I’d enjoy that very much, actually.”

A light switched on in Sherlock’s eyes and the smallest of smile peeked at the corners of his lips.

“As, I think, would I. We shall move your things as soon as Martin and Arthur depart.”

“Excuse me, move my things?”

“If you are to share my room, your clothes and possessions should remain easily accessible.”

“Hold up… share your room?”

“If we are to sleep together, then it is a better use of our living area to simply move you into my bedroom.”

“No… just hold on… I need my space, Sherlock. And you’re the one who wanted to take things slowly.”

“You will have your space, John. You are fully aware that I rarely use my bedroom, except to gain relief when you are being irritating. Therefore for all intents and purposes, you can consider my room your room. Where I occasionally sleep. In your bed. Next to you.”

“I suppose… I guess that wouldn’t be…”

“Excellent! That’s settled. And with your bedroom no longer occupied, I can move my equipment into the space and give it a new purpose.”

“You bastard. You wanted my room for your lab.”

“No, I don’t necessarily want your room, it is rather small and I prefer to have my work near the refrigerator, stovetop and microwave, but it will suffice.”

“Sherlock…”

“This is a secondary benefit, John. Not the primary one.”

“The primary one being that your bedroom now falls into my housekeeping duty zone and I have
Sherlock decided that stopping John’s complaining by kissing was both efficient and enjoyable. And John was so prone to complaining.

It was well after noon when Arthur emerged from Martin’s room, looking so happy John wondered if he should get a string and tether the man before he floated away like a balloon.

“Nice night, Arthur?”

Arthur grinned and skipped over towards John, grabbing one of Mycroft’s pastries off of the counter and covering them both with powdered sugar with his first bite.

“It. Was…. I still can’t think of the right word!”

“I’m guessing romance was in the air.”

Sherlock, sensing the conversation taking a turn for the emotional, announced he was going to study the floorplan of his new laboratory and headed upstairs with a book on atypical bone development under his arm.

“New laboratory?”

“Yeah, well… we decided that it was a little wasteful to have two bedrooms when…”

“BRILLIANT! You and Mr. Sherlock are officially boyfriends now and that is so amazing that I can’t even… my head feels like it’s going to pop like a soap bubble. I told Mr. Sherlock I wanted to be here when that happened and I was!”

“Sounds like we all have something to celebrate. Lucky for us, Mycroft brought sweets. Which reminds me…”

John picked up the envelope from the table and handed it over to Arthur.

“Did I win something?”

“Frankly, I don’t know. Mycroft said to give that to you. Mentioned your little sherry date, too.”

“I won’t be shy about this, Doctor Watson… I am very excited about my sherry. No one has ever asked me to have a drink with them like that. I mean, Douglas and Skip will let me come along when they step out for a nip, well not Douglas because he doesn’t drink, I mean he does drink, because he’d die if he didn’t drink at all, but I mean he doesn’t drink alcohol, however… did you know that vodka doesn’t make your breath smell? It doesn’t and if you…”

“Well, sherry should make your breath sweet, so expect Martin to want to snog you senseless when he gets a sniff of that.”

Blush was definitely Arthur’s most flattering color.

“And, between you and me, Mycroft hasn’t invited me or Sherlock to join him for a little relaxation in all the time I’ve known him. Looks like you’re the golden child.”

“I’ll remind him of that. I’m sure he’s just busy and forgot. Maybe we can all have a nice drink together once Skip is up and about.”
“Ah, that’s alright. We see him enough as it is without adding alcohol to the mix. How is Martin, anyway? Any problems while we were out?”

“Not a one. I think, but I’m going to cross my fingers and knock wood, that’s he’s going to be ok now.”

Of course, Arthur found the closest piece of wood within reach and gave it a dozen sharp knocks.

“I tend to agree. I’ll give him a good once over today and send another blood sample over to be checked, but I’m hoping we’ve closed that door. Now, what’s in the envelope?”

Arthur shoved the last of his pastry into his mouth and opened the very fine bit of stationary. John was suspicious that the cost of that one envelope equaled that of last night’s dinner. And suspicion was the word of the day when Arthur’s eyes went wide as that of an anime character and he began giggling.

“Arthur?”

“My lips are zipped, Doctor Watson. And I’m not saying that to be rude, it’s just what I’m supposed to do. Oh! And look at the time. I’ve got to tell Skip that I’m going out and I have to see if I have any clean clothes. At least I won’t need a cab because Mycroft says there will be a car sent for me, which is brilliant! I’ve never had a car sent to pick me up before! This is so exciting! Oops – that was supposed to be a secret. Don’t tell Mycroft I told you.”

John had to chuckle, as usual, at Arthur’s antics. Like a boy getting ready for a first date.

“You know, Arthur… Mycroft is single, if you’re interested.”

“Don’t be silly, Doctor Watson. Skip is the only person I want. He’s perfect! Mycroft is more like… a snuggly big brother, even though he’s Mr. Sherlock’s brother and not mine. Not that Mr. Sherlock treats him much like a brother, which is a bit stupid, really, since Mycroft is brilliant and I bet they could be great mates if Mr. Sherlock would just be a little, well, nicer to him.”

“Their relationship isn’t the most normal in the world, but it’s what they’re used to so I suppose it works well enough for them. Now, anything I can do to help you get ready?”

“Oh! I…”

Arthur re-read the crisp piece of paper he had taken out of the envelope.

“Nope. I think I’ve got it. But… you could sit with us while I get ready and tell me about your evening. I bet it was the very best of everything!”

“Well, now that you mention it…”

———

Martin, John and Arthur took an hour to get Arthur prepared for his afternoon appointment, going through every bit of clothing John possessed, most of which didn’t fit, leading to a raid of Sherlock’s closet, which was filled with more clothes that mostly didn’t fit. But between the two men’s wardrobes, a respectable outfit for Arthur was constructed with a pair of black trousers of John’s that Harry had bought him, thinking he was a few inches taller than he actually was, a dark blue shirt that Sherlock had never worn since it actually fit properly, meaning it was far too loose for the detective’s taste, and one of John’s nicer jumpers in a rich charcoal grey that he wore on especially hopeful dates. John couldn’t wait to wear it for his next outing with Sherlock.
All the while, John kept an eye on Martin and was very pleased with what he observed. He still looked rather like death reheated on a hot plate, but his body was relaxed in a way it had not been since John had first laid eyes on him and he was smiling on top of it all. It was very, very strange to see Sherlock’s face so frequently break into a large, shining smile.

“How do I look, Skip? I’m supposed to ‘dress like I’m visiting my grandmother and taking her to tea.’ Did I do it right.”

John was lucky he was sitting on the bed because when he fell over laughing, he didn’t break a bone.

“I think you nailed it, Arthur. Now come here…”

One quick kiss and a posterior pinch that made Arthur shriek like a little girl later and Arthur was being dragged away from his new boyfriend by a very amused doctor and into the sitting room where Sherlock had finally decided to make an appearance.

“Visiting the Queen? And is that my shirt?”

“Hands off, Sherlock. We’ve got him just how we want him and your interference is not appreciated.”

“Yes, I heard you in there whispering and giggling much like a group of adolescent females.”

“Shut it, you. Mates step in when they’re needed. All that was missing was a few pints and it could have been a party.”

“A very giggly party.”

“What part of ‘shut it’ didn’t you understand?”

Sherlock stalked in a circle around Arthur, subjecting him to an intensely focused period of observation.

“I’m still opposed to this, John.”

“Not your decision, Sherlock.”

“Are you two talking about me?”

“Yeah, Arthur. Sorry. Sherlock is just a little concerned that you’ll fall into Mycroft’s pit of starved tigers and we won’t see you again.”

Luckily, John was very quick with the ‘just kidding’ since Arthur appeared close to tears at the thought of starving tigers.

“Mr. Sherlock, you seem to be giving this far too much thought. And I’m not supposed to listen to any of your ‘naysaying,’ so I’ll be closing my ears for now, thank you very much.”

And Arthur’s hands were neatly placed over his ears while he walked over to look over the street for his promised ride.

“Not supposed to be…”

“I think Mycroft gave him marching orders in that envelope. Honestly, I think your brother is having a bit of fun with this. Finally found someone completely without ulterior motive that he can
have a laugh with.”

“Don’t sicken me, John.”

“My car’s here! Well, I think it’s my car. It’s massive and black and there’s a man getting out of it and he’s looking up at me.”

Arthur waved.

“He waved back! Are you sure I look alright, Doctor Watson?”

“Arthur, you know you don’t…”

“Nothing from you, Mr. Naysayer. Doctor Watson?”

“You look great, Arthur. You’ll fit right in – have a good time.”

“Thanks! I won’t be late. I promised Skip another movie tonight and we can watch one on my phone or if you two want to watch too we can do it in here and I can make popcorn and…”

“That sounds like fun. Let’s see how things go when you get back. Right Sherlock?”

“What. I wasn’t listening.”


“Bye!”

Rule 1 – Keep my little list as a treat for yourself. Others may want the details, but this is something for you, so shall we say mum’s the word?

Rule 2 - Dress nicely. Choose something your mother would have you wear if you were going to take your grandmother to a nice afternoon tea.

Rule 3 - Ignore Sherlock and his interminable naysaying. If possible, adopt a policy of ignoring Sherlock anytime he chooses to speak.

Rule 4 - A car will come to collect you. You may make use of it, at will, on your return.

Rule 5 - Upon arriving, be aware that members of my club play a delightful game. Once across the threshold, you may not utter one word. Yes, I know this will be difficult, but that’s why it is a challenging game. If you can follow the nice gentleman who will escort you and make it all the way to find me, you will win.

I look forward to seeing you this afternoon, Arthur.

“You can breathe, Arthur. That will not award you any bonus credit.”

Arthur exhaled loudly and let his large grin stretch wide.

“I did it! It was very difficult, but I made it! And the people here are so interesting. They all look like carvings that someone put in chairs. And Charles is a brilliant driver! Did you know he
paints? His wife Felicia even sold one of his paintings to a gallery! I’m going to take Skip to that gallery and show him Charles’s painting because I actually met Charles and he’s brilliant so his painting must be extra-brilliant…”

Mycroft motioned the rambling Arthur to a chair near the fire and reflected that besides him, only Charles’s wife knew about Charles’s career as an artist. It was truly a shame that Arthur’s temperament was not suited to intelligence work…

“I’m glad he met with your approval. Now, how are you enjoying my brother’s hospitality? And please, do take a glass of sherry. I think you will find it most agreeable.”

“Oh thanks! I’ve been looking forward to this, I must say. And it’s been a lot of fun with Mr. Sherlock and John. Well, that’s a bit of a lie, since not all of it was fun, but that part isn’t important since it was Skip getting well and that’s the whole point of coming here… but the rest has been a smashing time.”

“Good… that’s very good.”

“And this sherry is BRILLIANT! It’s sweet! Doctor Watson said my breath would smell sweet, not like vodka which doesn’t make your breath smell, and Skip would want to kiss me and I’m pretty sure that this will definitely make Skip want to kiss me… oops! Oh dear… I’m not sure Skip wants me to tell you that. He’s a bit touchy about you and Mr. Sherlock, so you won’t tell him I told you, will you? Please, Mycroft… I don’t want Skip getting upset just when he’s getting better. So much better! He even helped me get dressed, well him and Doctor Watson…”

“Have no worries, Arthur, I assure you that I will not let on that I am aware of your affair de coeur. And it would be remiss of me not to offer congratulations. Tell me, where do you see your relationship going with dear Martin?”

“I don’t understand. But can I have more sherry?”

“Of course, feel free to help yourself. Now, let me rephrase a little. What do you hope to gain out of your association with Martin?”

“I’m sorry, Mycroft, but that didn’t help.”

Mycroft wondered if he could offer Arthur a part-time position helping to train interrogators.

“How would you describe what you and Martin have? Romantically, I mean.”

“Oh! Skip’s my boyfriend. I asked him if that’s what he was and he said he would like to be, as long as I was his and I am so there you have it.”

“How adorable and how utterly appropriate.”

“I can call him my Skip now.”

“Is that a touch of pride I hear in your voice, Arthur?”

“I am proud. Very proud. Someone as wonderful as Skip wants to be my boyfriend… of course I’m proud of that. Thrilled about it, really. Really, really thrilled.”

And there was not one break in Arthur’s body language to suggest deception. Not that Mycroft was expecting it, but it was never good to let down one’s guard.
“And what should we expect from you both now that you’re a happy couple? A nice flat in your beloved Fitton? Perhaps a cozy little house… I’m sure we could locate a perfect property for you and Martin. Do you enjoy gardening, perhaps? Or would you enjoy a swimming pool to use in the summer. I have been assured that you take your culinary duties quite seriously so we will, of course, secure a residence with a prominent kitchen. I’ll have my assistant prepare a portfolio of suitable locations for you and Martin to examine.”

Arthur wasn’t sure if he was supposed to say anything, so he simply drank his sherry and let Mycroft engage in his own form of rambling.

“And I am hopeful that you will be able to persuade Martin to consider rebuilding our rather frayed family bond. I am older than Martin, enough so that we were not the closest friends in our younger years, but I would like to change the timbre of our association. Can I count on you for your assistance, Arthur?”

“You can! Absolutely! I would be happy to help you and Skip become friends, because, I must say, you are a brilliant friend and Skip doesn’t know what he’s missing. But I can tell him and when he hears about my afternoon, he’s going to be so jealous that he didn’t get to come that he’ll probably jump at the chance to get to know you again. Frankly, Mycroft, he hasn’t really said anything bad about you, not like Mr. Sherlock, so I bet it won’t be hard to get him to like you. He’s going to need friends, too, to stay well. Doctor Watson said that friends and family are very important for Skip staying off of… what he was doing… and so the more the merrier I say! But I don’t think we need a house yet. I mean, we’ve only just started being boyfriends and I really don’t want Mum being lonely so I have to talk to her about maybe getting a place with Skip, which I would LOVE to do, but I don’t want Mum upset and then there’s Skip’s pride, which is very large considering how small he is, so that’s something that we may have to wait on for awhile…”

But not forget about. Could it be that there was finally someone in the Holmes family that would accept the little assistances that Mycroft could offer? That would be a novel thing. Not that Mycroft would admit that it pleased him. Because that would be silly and sentimental. Neither being words in Mycroft’s nearly limitless vocabulary. And Martin had not taken a verbal knife to Mycroft’s soul… how felicitous. That would make keeping an eye on him and offering a helpful hand much easier.

“As you say, Arthur. You do have a keen mind for planning and foreseeing consequences and I am certain that you will sort your affairs very successfully. You have my contact number, as well, so any aid you require is only a ring away. I am placing my trust in your to look after my cousin, Arthur. Do not disappoint me.”

“Thanks Mycroft! And, believe me, I am going to take great care of Skip. He’ll be safe and warm and never even look at… things… again. And he won’t be alone. He’ll never, ever be alone again. And if we need anything, you will be the first person I call. Well, after Mum. That’s ok, right?”

Oh, that was decidedly ok. Mycroft poured Arthur another sherry and finally took a sip of his own. He allowed himself very few indulgences in life, but Arthur and Martin… this was going to be better than chocolate.

Arthur was nearly bursting with happiness by the time Mycroft had to put an end to their visit. It had been brilliant! They had talked for a long time and Mycroft was so interesting! He knew so many things and had gone so many places and met so many people… and he was going to be family to Skip, real family that stepped in to help when it was needed. Arthur had to remind himself to write
down Mycroft’s phone number in case he lost his phone and make sure Skip had it, too. Mycroft said he could even call just to talk and Arthur was going to make time to do that because talking to Mycroft was a great time!

“I must thank you, Arthur, for agreeing to meet me. This has been a very enjoyable and enlightening afternoon.”

“I had a fun time, too. I hope we can do this again soon. Maybe with Skip next time.”

“That would be delightful. Now, ready to play?”

“Yes. All the way back out and not one word.”

“And this time, you will win one extra point if you hold your breath.”

“Brilliant!”

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Arthur arrived back at 221B with a large bag filled with soda, popcorn, sweets, crisps and more ice cream. He wanted the movie tonight to be fun for everyone because Mycroft, as a final word, had put a small cold drop into his blood and Arthur needed to do something to make it go away. Especially since he was afraid it was true…

“Thanks again, Mycroft!”

“My pleasure, Arthur. But, if I may offer a bit of parting advice?”

“Sure… anytime. You’re very smart, so I know whatever you say will be brilliant!”

“You’re too kind. What I have to say won’t make you terribly happy, but it will serve, I hope as a forewarning. I have observed that you have become attached to my brother and your affection for my cousin cannot be questioned. What I advise you, Arthur, is to hold fast to those feelings in the days to come. It cannot have escaped your notice that Martin and Sherlock have a history and one that is not pleasant. Knowing my brother and my cousin, I’m afraid this matter will not stay quiet now that they are in the same place at the same time. When it comes to a head, you will be sorely tested, as will John. I can only have faith that both of you have the heart and the courage to weather the coming storm. It will not be easy, but neither you nor Doctor Watson has shown any tendency to shy away from the difficult. Now, please make use of the car if you have any needs before you return. And Arthur… I am here for you. Please remember that.”
A bit of a short update, but I won't be able to post tomorrow, so I thought I'd put up the first piece of the coming chapter tonight...

“That’s quite a presentation, Arthur. I’m not sure they put on this big a spread for Hollywood premieres.”

Every inch of the sofa table was covered with some form of edible good, with refill bags and cartons sitting on the floor beneath.

“Well, there are four of us and even though Mr. Sherlock probably won’t eat much, I had to make sure that no one went hungry. It’s not polite when people go hungry.”

John was a little ashamed to admit that he’d somewhat expected Arthur to drag himself back to the flat in a state of complete disillusionment after his visit with Mycroft, but, happily, it was exactly the opposite and John had no doubt that Arthur’s Christmas card would be the biggest and brightest on Mycroft’s mantle this year. And probably handmade. With glitter.

“Did you convince Martin to join us?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t easy, though. Now that he’s not…”

Arthur made a series of very impressive losing-one’s-mind motions.

“…he’s thinking more and I’m not sure that’s good. I mean, it’s good, but not always good like when he hears you and Mr. Sherlock talking and gets this look that’s not quite his mean eyes, but it’s pretty close.”

“It’s just a film, so he should be alright. And what shall we be watching, oh King of Entertainment.”

“You know… I do have a crown. A big one. I made it out of foil and some lovely plastic jewels I found at a toy store. It’s quite dramatic.”

“Oh, I’m sure it is. Send me a picture, will you?”

“Sure! I’ll be sending lots of pictures from now on. Lots and lots and you have to do the same thing. I’ll make sure you have my email and phone number and home phone number and address. And we’re watching Harry Potter. The first one. Skip hasn’t seen any of them, can you believe that? So, I’m going to start him at the beginning.”

“Good choice. I liked the effects and the story is fairly classic. Sherlock will be a wet rag, but that’s nothing new. Don’t get me started on my attempted James Bond marathon. I though the flat would burn down from the heat of his disapproval.”

“I bet Mycroft knows James Bond. He knows everybody and he said he works in the government. I’ll see if he can get us an autograph, because I think Mr. Bond is brilliant and Mum
likes him, too.”

“Arthur, you do realize that he’s just a character in a movie. I mean, haven’t you noticed that different blokes play him in different films?”

“It’s a disguise, Doctor Watson. That’s what spies do.”

Sherlock didn’t realize it, but they would be taking little vacations to Fitton now and then because a dose of Arthur was an incredible salve for the spirit.

“Yeah, well… point to you. I’m sure Mycroft will be happy to oblige.”

“He is very obliging. He’s going to help Skip from now on, too. I’ll have to make sure that Skip understands and that his feelings don’t get hurt, because they get hurt very easily when you try to help him, but that’s ok, since I’m his boyfriend now and that’s part of what boyfriends do. Speaking of boyfriends, where’s Mr. Sherlock?”

“Up in his ‘lab.’ He dragged his notions up there while you were out and already started tossing my things down the stairs. Now we have to go shopping for one of those little refrigerators to go up there, and he wants an incubator, and some hot plate-stirrer thing and he mentioned an autopsy table, but that one will only come in when it’s ready for my own dead body.”

“Ooh… that sounds a bit… icky. And sad, too, because you’ll be dead and you won’t be able to send me any more pictures.”

“Yes, that is a downside of being dead. For now, how about I get our resident mad scientist and you drag Martin out. Personally, I’m ready for my movie.”

“Brilliant! I am, too. I’ll race you.”

“You’re on, mate.”

Arthur and John fled towards their respective targets and, although he had closer to travel, Arthur lost miserably since he took care to gently escort Martin to the film feast while John had no compunction against effectively throwing a sputtering Sherlock over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry and hauling him downstairs.

“Suck that, Arthur.”

“You’re like a superhero, Doctor Watson! If one of those scary villains starts tossing buildings around London, I want to be close to you where it’s safe.”

“Safe for you, perhaps, but my work with Enterobacter cloacae has been irretrievably compromised. And he bumped my bruised elbow.”

“I’ll kiss it better later. Now, grab your spot. Martin, you too. We have a long movie to get through, a full tanks of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, it’s dark and we're wearing sunglasses.”

“That is completely erroneous.”

“Was I supposed to buy sunglasses, too?”

“We’re on a mission from God.”

“Martin, you’re my new favorite.”
It came as no real surprise to John that since he was enjoying himself completely, his mobile had to ring and the caller had to be Harry. Even the generic ringtone sounded wobbly.

“Oh god… I have to take this.”

It had been a few weeks, just about the normal time frame for her latest heartfelt dedication to sobriety to fail spectacularly. And dear brother John was always there when things fell apart.

“I’ll be back.”

“Is everything alright, Doctor Watson?”

“Ignore him, Arthur. That will be his sister. The one who apparently believes John is her personal whipping boy when she falls off the proverbial wagon.”

“She has a wagon! Is it one of the little red ones or a great big wooden one? Either would be brilliant!”

“Proverbial wagon. Even you should have heard that trite expression.”

“Do not use that tone with him, Sherlock.”

Arthur looked to see if his head had fallen off because Martin’s voice had a razor-like sharpness and Arthur’s neck was between him and Sherlock.

“It’s ok, Skip. He’s just being Mr. Sherlock.”

“Really, Martin. Do try and control your tendency for over-reaction.”

“Over-reaction? You’ve never given me anything to over-react to, you bastard. It is absolutely impossible to over-react to…”

“Calm down, Skip. You’re just getting better and Doctor Watson said that stress was going to be especially bad for you, right now. So can you try and calm down. For me?”

Arthur took Martin’s hand in his and gave him a small, quiet smile. Which Martin truly despised because it melted him like an ice cube.

“Only for you.”

And peace was restored. For the moment.

“Mr. Sherlock, do you want any popcorn? It’s very good with LOTS of butter. That’s actually for safety as well as taste because sometimes you get popcorn caught in your throat, or at least I do, and the extra butter helps it slide down without sticking.”

Sherlock looked like he’d been offered a live scorpion, which meant he was somewhat intrigued, and opted to test a small handful of Arthur’s butter-drenched kernels.

“It has some merit. More so, at least, than the puffed morsels of cardboard John had tried to force me to eat. But now…”

Sherlock’s intermittent fastidiousness took that moment to make an appearance and his glistening fingers were making him quite unglued.
“Oh here, just let me…”

Arthur snatched a napkin off of the table and used it to wipe Sherlock’s flailing fingers. And nearly crushed it to dust when he turned back and saw Martin watching them. With mean eyes.

“Wipe your own damned fingers, Sherlock. Do not use Arthur as your personal servant.”

“Skip, I offered…”

“No, you think you offered, Arthur. Good to see Sherlock’s manipulation skills are still top-notch. Always a spot of comfort to find some consistency in this chaotic world.”

“No, you’ve got that wrong.”

“No Arthur… I don’t. Please don’t let him fool you.”

“Skip, that’s unfair. Mr. Sherlock has been a real friend and he’s been very concerned about you and… you know I hate to say this… you’ve been a bit rude to him.”

“You have no idea, Arthur…”

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t change the fact that I know you can be nice to people, so there’s no reason you can’t be nice to Mr. Sherlock. Can’t you try a little? Just a little so that Mr. Sherlock doesn’t have to feel sad and I bet you’ll feel a lot better, too.”

Arthur’s heart clenched seeing Martin’s go from mean to cold, but at least he wasn’t the target of the ice. Arthur was actually worried to turn around and find Sherlock frozen into a very large detective-shaped ice lolly.

“Trying to take him, too? Turn him against me? Why am I not surprised.”

“Skip, what’s going on? That’s… well people tell me I’m being silly all the time, even when I’m not, but right now you are being silly.”

“Ignore him, Arthur. Mental distress often manifests as paranoia and delusion. Now, if you will hand me one of those juice boxes, you neglected to mention your popcorn was also laden with salt.”

“Do not insult his cooking! Arthur works very hard to prepare…”

“He wasn’t insulting me, Skip.”

“Don’t defend him, Arthur. You don’t understand…”

“Martin, you are upsetting him. Kindly reign in your hysteria…”

“You are trying to turn him against me!”

“No! Skip, you have to relax and take it easy…”

Martin was on his feet now and Sherlock rose to meet him. Arthur jumped up, trying to placate the very angry man, but the jump was a little too quickly done and the loss of footing had Sherlock reaching out to support Arthur’s tottering frame.

“DO NOT TOUCH HIM!”

Martin flew across at Sherlock tackling the detective and pushing Arthur back onto the couch. The
ensuing struggle had Arthur yelling for John and trying to pull Martin off of Sherlock, who wasn’t throwing any reciprocal punches, but was trying to pin Martin’s arms. To little avail. John ran back into the sitting room on hearing Arthur’s shout and had to stop and marvel that Martin actually seemed to have the advantage in this fight. But, as John had learned in the army, the little guys were the ones to watch.

As John moved to separate the combatants, Martin pushed forward with a burst of frantic energy and flung himself and Sherlock across the room and it was only Arthur’s purely panicked speed that kept the men from crashing through the window behind them and falling onto the sidewalk. John leaped to Arthur’s side and helped him drag Martin off of Sherlock and into the bedroom where they could at least confine his fury. When Martin did not regain his balance, even when pinned solidly to the bed, John had to leave Arthur to do the pinning alone while he prepared a syringe and sent Martin to a place where the unicorns frolicked among the lollipop trees.

“Arthur… what the hell happened?”

“I… I’m not sure, Doctor Watson. Skip got worked up over stupid things. Not even stupid things, he got angry over nothing. I… what’s going on Doctor Watson?”

“I don’t know, Arthur, but I don’t think we have any choice but to find out. Are you up for this?”

“I am. Skip won’t get well with all of this terrible feeling inside him and it’s hurting Mr. Sherlock. I just know it is and he doesn’t deserve to hurt like that.”

John had a sick feeling that Arthur’s outlook might be a little optimistic, but he’d reserve judgement until they had the facts. And it looked like the time for fact-finding was going to be much sooner than John had expected. Or wanted.

“Then it’s settled. When Martin comes to, we’ll see if we can get him to talk. I’ll tell you what, if you volunteer to watch over the patient, I’ll clean up out there and check on Sherlock. Deal?”

“I hate to leave all that to you Doctor Watson, but… I really don’t want to leave Skip, either.”

“Good man. And get some rest yourself if you can. I think tomorrow is going to be a very long day.”

“I’m afraid you’re right Doctor Watson. Tell Mr. Sherlock I’m sorry, ok? Tell him I don’t listen to the things Skip says about him. He’s still sick and that’s making him a little crazy, but I know better. You’ll tell him, right Doctor Watson?”

“Yeah… don’t worry about that. I’ll make sure Sherlock understands you’re on his side.”

“Thanks! And I’ll take care of Skip. No matter what,…”

John’s presence in the room had vanished for Arthur and John was glad for it. But he also promised himself that as much as Arthur was going to devote his energy to taking care of Martin, there would be someone or someones ready to devote their energies to taking care of Arthur. John had thought the worst was over, but now he wasn’t so sure.

“How is he?”

“Unconscious.”
“Probably for the best.”

“I might argue, but frankly I’m too tired.”

“Harry?”

“Exactly what you’d expect. She’s pissed and self-pitying and I am so utterly sick of having to deal with her mess.”

“And now you have another ‘mess’ with which to deal.”

“At least this one’s going to end. Harry’s…”

“People can change, John. It does happen.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Whenever possible.”

“Prudent.”

Sherlock looked long and hard at the man in front of him and saw fatigue, frustration, and a worrying mote of self-doubt trying to hide from Sherlock’s sight. But nothing could hide from Sherlock Holmes.

“Come to bed, John.”

“I will… I just have to clean up and get the couch ready…”

“You misunderstand. Come to bed.”

Sherlock wondered if the desire to hold John’s hand could be classed as an addiction and made a mental note to research the issue as soon as possible. With the doctor’s hand in his, Sherlock simply walked and guided the doctor upstairs to where John’s old bed still lived, stopping to collect John’s pillow on the way. He carefully removed all of John’s garments except for his pants and tucked the sheets around the man who hadn’t spoken a word, but whose eyes were filled with a warmth Sherlock had never noticed.

“You never fail to amaze me, Sherlock. And I don’t think you ever will.”

John had to eat his words when the detective peeled away his own clothes and, draping his dressing gown over his graceful form, joined John in the bed and pulled the smaller man towards him.

“Rest, John.”

“You… you’re going to stay?”

“Of course.”

“You don’t have to, I…”

“I don’t do anything I do not want to do; you should be more than a little aware of that at this point. Now, try and rest. How can you fight the good fight if you are fatigued?”

“Taking care of me… you’re a good man, Sherlock Holmes.”
“Takes one to know one, John Watson.”

Even when the truly good man was seriously mistaken.
Despite Sherlock’s promise, John was still surprised that he woke with the detective next to him in the small bed, but not that said detective was immersed in a technical book instead of sleeping. That didn’t matter, though. Not in the least. In fact, John couldn’t see himself ever caring if Sherlock stayed awake in bed reading, taking notes, thinking, researching on the laptop… not as long as he was within arm’s reach when John woke up in the morning.

“I know you are awake, John. And no, screwing your eyes more tightly closed will not convince me otherwise.”

“Worked with my Mum.”

“Do I remind you of your mother?”

“No you do not, Dr. Freud. Well, maybe a bit around the nose…”

“That is rather a shame. I was going to kiss you, but now I think it would be inappropriate.”

“Oh, but that’s when kissing’s the best.”

And John took a good five minutes to prove his point. It would have been longer, but the knock on the bedroom door nicely put an end to the shenanigans and going’s on.

“Mr. Sherlock? Doctor Watson? Are you awake? It’s me, Arthur.”

John laid his head on Sherlock’s chest to stifle his giggling.

“We’ll have to add cockblocking to Arthur’s list of talents.”

“Carnality and vulgarity so early in the morning. Are you always such a base creature upon rising?”

“Only if you’re lucky.”

“I shall see about collecting a rabbit’s foot.”

“You’ll make Arthur cry.”

“I meant a four-leaf clover.”
“Better. Arthur! Come in. We’re awake and mostly decent.”

John ignored Sherlock’s muttered ‘mostly, in the broadest possible sense’ and waited for the door to open, which took a surprisingly long time since Arthur was carrying John’s cutting board that had been laden with plates of food and two steaming cups of what John hoped was tea.

“Good morning chaps! I thought you might like some breakfast and there’s nothing better than breakfast in bed. Well, maybe I shouldn’t say that since I haven’t had breakfast in many other places besides beds, tables, chairs and the like. Breakfast on a beach could be brilliant, for example, but I can’t be sure since I don’t have any facts. I wonder if we’re flying to anywhere that has beaches soon…”

“Thanks, Arthur. This looks… very edible.”

Perhaps in the way that paste or grass was edible. Meaning non-lethal.

“Oh! I’m glad you think so. You and Mr. Sherlock are the greatest! I made tea and I hope it’s strong enough…”

The fact that John couldn’t see the tip of a spoon when he dipped it beneath the inky depths was a good sign that ‘strong’ might be a bit of an understatement. Arthur’s tea might be the elixir science had been seeking to raise the dead.

“… and you didn’t have orange marmalade, which is what I normally put on eggs, but you did have strawberry jam, which is almost as good. I did take Skip’s advice and put the jam on the side in that little dish, though, so you could add as much as you like. I mean, you might like your eggs very berry, Doctor Watson, but Mr. Sherlock might like them a little less so. Oh! And I also brought the pepper sauce you had in the fridge. Some mornings I really like a nice sweet and hot plate of eggs. Really hits all the taste buds in one go! And there’s toast. But it’s sort of plain since there’s not really much else you can do with toast. Except make toast castles, but you really didn’t have enough bread for that.”

Arthur’s phone number was going straight to the top of John’s contact list, if only for the tiny smirk that was creeping up on Sherlock’s face. John had a suspicion that the detective’s blackest moods could at least be shoved into the grey by a little chat with their new friend.

“This looks smashing, Arthur. And the jam on the side is very considerate. Sherlock’s not always much of a jam fellow. Now honey…”

“HONEY! Oh my… that is BRILLIANT! Honey’s almost the color of eggs, and it comes from bees! Mr. Sherlock’s favorite! You are a genius, Doctor Watson! That is going into my recipe idea box right away. Well, as soon as we get home.”

“Hear that, Sherlock? You’re not the only genius in the house.”

“Yes, I do await the Nobel committee’s decision on the societal impact of your honeyed eggs. I do feel that you have a good chance, unless of course, someone develops chocolate-covered bacon…”

“They already have that.”

“What?”

“Oh yeah, so I guess I just lost my chance at fame. Drat. I already had the prize money spent, too. Fund a trip down the shops for a few jars of that nice sweet, sticky stuff. There’s lots you can
do with honey. Lots and lots…”

Arthur was oblivious, Sherlock was… curious… and John decided that eggs with jam wasn’t actually as bad as he had feared.

“…when do you want to talk to him? I’m definitely going to be there when you do, but I’ll try and get Skip ready beforehand so it’s not a surprise and maybe give him a little chance to think about what he wants to say. That helps me sometimes…getting a hey! head’s up! so I can sort things out in my brain before it all tries to come out at the same time and I look a bit stupid.”
“I hadn’t really given it much thought. I’d say give him time to get a bite to eat, maybe have a shower. Take some time and watch a little telly or something so that’s relaxed and in a better frame of mind.”

“Could we… do you think it’s ok if we took a little walk? Just around the block or something, because Skip’s been inside and mostly in the bedroom and he’s not really had any fresh air or sunshine or seen other people or anything in so long.”

“Honestly, I think that would be super. Little change of scenery, chance to stretch his legs. I trust you not to push him too hard, so yeah… give it a go.”

“Thanks Doctor Watson! I’m sure Skip would say thank you, too.”

Arthur turned to leave, but hesitated and came back and squatted down by Sherlock’s side of the bed.

“I wanted you to really know, Mr. Sherlock, that I am very thankful for all that you’ve done for Skip. And I know that you’re my friend and that makes me very happy and feel really lucky. Truly, like the luckiest person ever! So, I don’t want you to feel sad about Skip. We’ll make him see that you’re a brilliant friend and that you care about him and then he won’t be so rude to you and we’ll all be friends then. And we’ll visit you here in London and you and Doctor Watson can visit us in Fitton. Oh, I’ll make sure to tell Mycroft that when we’re ready for our house, it has to have a guest room. Two guest rooms! Because then Mycroft can visit at the same time and it will be like a family reunion, but with me and Doctor Watson there, too! Brilliant!”

Sherlock was sure there was some response he was expected to make, but he was having a difficult time parsing all of Arthur’s speech to properly formulate a reply. Another reason to keep John close by at all times.

“That’s good of you to say, Arthur. And I’m sure Sherlock will gladly tell you once his tongue remembers how to work. And a house, you say? Sounds like you’re making Mycroft a very happy man. Always looking to help out where he can…”

“I know. I like to do that too, so I’m glad that Skip and I can let him get the chance. It’s just makes me so happy to help people so I want to make sure Mycroft gets to feel just as happy because he’s amazing and he’s been so nice to me.”

Sherlock’s ‘Mycroft can’t even spell nice’ was squashed by the last bit of John’s jam eggs being stuffed into his mouth.

“So, good luck with your tongue, Mr. Sherlock! I’ll let you know when we’re going for our walk.”

And with a final grin at the pair in the bed, Arthur skipped out of the bedroom.

“Nice job. Arthur tries to make you feel better and you freeze up.”

“I did not ‘freeze up.’ I was considering the most appropriate to tell Arthur that his placation was not required and keep the bile down at the thought of Mycroft’s giddiness with his new playthings.”

“Wow. That was just… awful. Truly, you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“I am well aware that Arthur considers me a friend and worries about my feelings. I don’t understand his concern, but I do appreciate that he feels and demonstrates it. And even you must admit that the image of Mycroft as some form of demented puppeteer with a pair of dancing
“No, I can honestly say that’s not the case.”

“Then some image of equivalent meaning.”

“Nope.”

“You’re lying.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“I will find out; you may as well save us both some time.”

“I’ve got lots of time.”

“And I get to fill that time.”

“Oh god.”

“Quite.”

“A school teacher with his classroom filled with little children that color or nap or take their snack only when he flicks an eyebrow or taps the floor with his umbrella.”

“That’s a bit twisted, John.”

“You asked.”

“Remind me to never do it again.”

“Coward.”

It took quite awhile for Arthur to get Martin up, washed, dressed and ready to leave. And he made sure that their departure was preceded by a very loud shout so to guarantee the way to the front door was clear of tall, dark-haired obstacles. Luckily, Sherlock had decided to spend the day in his new laboratory, so there was only John present to bid the Arthur and Martin farewell.

“Have fun, you two. Try to stay out of trouble.”

“We will! Come on, Skip – it’s great out there. So much to see and do!”

Arthur walked Martin out of the flat and John peeked to see him gently help Martin down the stairs. Martin looked very weak and John knew he had to still feel like he’d lost a fight with a rugby team, but he was also smiling and letting Arthur set the pace and John knew Arthur would do everything today with Martin’s welfare in mind.

“Are they gone?”

The man moved like a ghost when he wanted to. And he wanted to a lot.

“Just now. They’ll be gone for a bit, I suspect. Arthur will take things slowly, but he’ll want to parade his new relationship all over the neighborhood. What say we work on getting you lab set up? We can move the rest of my things down, though I’d say keep the bed in there until Martin and
Arthur leave. For obvious reasons.”

“I suppose I can temporarily allow you to a place to sleep in my laboratory, though the loss of space is very inconvenient.”

“I’ll make it up to you somehow.”

“Clearing the closet of your jumpers will suffice.”

“You are absolutely no fun.”

Arthur slowly walked Martin around, working up the courage ten minutes into their stroll to clasp Martin’s hand in his and they continued on joined together, soaking up the weak seasonal sunshine and the hustle and bustle of the city. And it felt so perfect. So wonderful and brilliant and spectacular and… Arthur had no idea how many words could describe how he felt but he knew they were all magical. And he also knew that he wasn’t alone in his feelings. Martin seemed relaxed, content and more than willing to spend this time with Arthur, holding hands and talking about everything and nothing.

When Martin seemed to be flagging, Arthur steered them to a small café and took a table near the window for the best people-watching while they enjoyed some tea and shared a bit of cake.

“Are you having fun, Skip?”

“I’m having a very nice time. This is… this feels good. Everything about this feels good. Thank you, Arthur. You always seem to know what it will take to make things better. To make me a little happier, no matter whatever else is going on.”

Arthur felt his heart leap at the compliment because it meant he was doing what he wanted most – taking care of his Skip and making him happy. And Arthur knew that this was something he could do and could do very well.

“I’m glad. I’m thrilled, too. And we can do this anytime now! We can take walks and spend time together and it will be better than before because I can hold your hand or put an arm around you or even kiss you when I want to and… I want to do all of that all the time and I’m not sure how I’ll be able to when we’re back in Fitton but I’m going to try and I hope you want to try to.”

Arthur watched Martin and wasn’t sure what the uneasy look on Martin’s face meant.

“I’m… I don’t know how I’m going to return to Fitton. I messed things up so badly. How am I going to face Carolyn. And Douglas… oh god, he’s going to make my life hell. I’m not sure if I can handle that. Maybe… maybe I should think about…”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“Whatever you’re thinking, Skip, I’m going to say no.”

“You have no idea what I’m thinking.”

“It doesn’t really matter. Not one tiny, itty-bitty baby bit because I’m thinking it has to do with you not going back home and that is not going to happen. You and I are going home and we’re
going to be a couple and we can both talk to Mum and Douglas so they understand and won’t get made or make fun of you.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be that easy, Arthur.”

“That doesn’t matter either. it’s going to happen and if it’s hard, then it’s hard. We’ll make it work no matter what. You’ll be GERTI’s captain again and we’ll go flying and I’ll get to see you every day and when we’re ready, we’ll even be able to go home together, which reminds me that we’ll need two spare bedrooms and I have to remember to tell Mycroft…”

That broke Martin’s mood and his brow furrowed in confusion.

“Mycroft? What does he have to do…”

“He’s going to be there to help if you… we… need it. I know you aren’t as happy with Mycroft as I am, because we’ve been real mates since I met him, but he does care about you, Skip. And he wants to help you and I think that’s brilliant and you should, too. He said that when we’re ready… and I’m not pushing you or making you make any decisions until you’re well and everything is back to normal… he’ll help us find somewhere to live where we can be together. Somewhere nice that’s just right for us, a cute little house with a kitchen and guest bedrooms and maybe a pool or a garden and… I know how mad you get when people try to help you but I hope you don’t get mad at Mycroft because it makes him happy, really happy, when he gets to help so if you say yes, it would be nice for Mycroft and it would make me happy, too and…”

“Arthur! It’s ok… I’m glad, actually, that you and Mycroft are getting along. He’s a good person to have in your corner and it’s reassuring that he’s got your back. There’s not much you can get into that Mycroft can’t get you out of.”

Martin’s shoulders drooped a little at that and Arthur drooped in response.

“You’re thinking, aren’t you, Skip? Thinking about Mycroft and you and why you had to… do all the things you had to when Mycroft is so brilliant and helpful. I have to admit that I’ve thought about that, too, but I haven’t been able to talk about it. Well, I guess I could have since I only promised not to talk about you and Mr. Sherlock, but it didn’t seem right to talk about you and Mycroft since he’s Mr. Sherlock’s brother and it’s almost like talking about you and Mr. Sherlock…”

“I get it. And it’s simple. Wait… no, it’s not simple, but it is what it is. Mycroft and I weren’t necessarily close when I was growing up. Not that it was intentional; he was just older and had his own life. I think that I was only on his radar because of Sherlock and when that prick decided I wasn’t worth his time anymore, Mycroft just stopped paying attention. He’s a busy man… far more than you realize, Arthur. It’s not surprising that I didn’t rate highly enough to keep tabs on. I don’t blame him, really. I was never his responsibility.”

Arthur knew he couldn’t know how true that was since he didn’t know Martin growing up, but it made him upset to think that Mycroft had ignored Martin when he was having such a hard time. Arthur hoped it was more that Mycroft was distracted and sort of let Martin slip his notice rather than actively ignoring his now-boyfriend.

“So, you’re ok with Mycroft now?”

“I don’t think I was ever not ok with Mycroft. I never expected anything from him, so I wasn’t surprised or upset when I got nothing from him. So… a house. With me.”

“Is that… I know we haven’t talked about anything and we’ve just started being together and I
can’t go anywhere until I know Mum won’t be lonely, but I thought… I can’t help it, Skip. I’m just so happy and I want to go on being happy and since I’m happiest when I’m with you, I thought…”

Arthur wasn’t sure if Martin was laughing or coughing or having one of his normal bouts of sputtering when he got flustered.

“S…sounds like you have it all worked out.”

“No! I mean, yes… but no! You don’t think I… sorry, I don’t know what you think.”

“Me? Are you sure, Arthur? I mean… me? There are so many other options, better options for you to even consider…”

“No… there aren’t. I’ve had lots of dates, you know that, but nothing ever lasts very long. They always want to tell me what to do, which is ok because I don’t mind that at all, but they don’t let me do things on my own sometimes. Let me make some decisions or take care of them and it doesn’t always feel… right. Especially when… when they get mad because of something I’ve done or said that they think is stupid. But this feels right. You aren’t like any of them and it’s brilliant! You let me be me and you let me do things and I’m so excited I could burst open like one of those amazing piñatas where candy goes everywhere! So there aren’t any better options, Skip. You’re the best one and, not to sound nose-in-the-air, but why shouldn’t I have the best when I can have the best?”

Martin smiled a very cautious smile and reached over to stroke his thumb across the back of Arthur’s hand.

“You are a wonder, Arthur Shappey. And if you want a house with a kitchen and a pool and a big fireplace and a garage… with me… then you shall have it.”

“You… you won’t be mad if Mycroft maybe give us a little hand with it?”

“Surprisingly, no. Very surprisingly, no. Looks like my weakness is whatever puts that smile on your face.”

“You know Skip… I do smile a lot…”

Said with a very large grin and a hint of mischief in his eye.

“My life has just gotten complicated, hasn’t it?”

“Nope. It’s gotten simpler. We make each other happy and there’s not much that’s simpler than that.”

“And if you say it, it has to be true.”

“Absolutely.”

Arthur started to get very anxious as they neared the flat, knowing that the soft grin Martin had been wearing was about to be erased. But it was for the best. It had to be. His Skip might feel ok right now but Arthur knew that as soon as they set foot in 221B, that was going to change. And that wasn’t ok. Arthur silently promised himself that they wouldn’t leave London until there was peace between the cousins. And he was not, not for one minute, think that such a peace was impossible. Everything was possible if you wanted it and Arthur wanted this badly.
As they walked up the stairs, Arthur couldn’t help but wrap his arm around Martin and try to send him all the happy thoughts and good feelings that he could. And he did make sure to check the scene to ensure that Sherlock wasn’t visible before walking Martin inside. Although Sherlock wasn’t in sight, John was present, on the couch with a beer in his hand and Arthur saw that his smile was open and kind, but not the same open and kind as it normally was. And one of the armchairs had been moved so that it faced the couch, making a cozy nook for a conversation. Now, apparently was the time…

“Martin, Arthur… how was the walk?”

“It was fantastic! We went all over and then we had tea and talked and I even told Skip about Mycroft and he wasn’t mad about maybe thinking about letting him help us get a place to live together, which is absolutely brilliant. So, yeah… we had a great time. A really, really great time. Good times… yep… lots of them…”

Martin looked confused at Arthur’s rambling trailing off so strangely, John looked faintly amused and Arthur tried desperately to look nonchalant. John finally took the reins and motioned the pair over, with Arthur grabbing the chair and leaving the space on the sofa for Martin.

“Martin, why don’t you have a seat? Arthur and I are hoping to have a little talk with you. Just a friendly chat, but I think it’s important, as your doctor, that we get this out in the open.”

Neither John nor Arthur liked the eyes that Martin cut over to his new romantic partner. They could only be described as accusatory.

“Well, well, well… looks like our nice little walk had another purpose. Learned a lot from Sherlock, didn’t you, Arthur? Well played, truly… I never suspected anything.”

Arthur clutched his chest as if he’d taken an arrow through it, which, in truth, is what it felt like.

“Martin, Arthur didn’t do anything…”

“Anything except try and distract me or put me in a good mood or dangle fantasies in front of me so I’d be more agreeable to your interrogation. Was any of it real, Arthur?”

“Skip… Skip, you can’t think that I…”

“Oh yes I can. I should have known. Sherlock destroys everything… why shouldn’t he destroy… I was pretty stupid to think that you could walk away from this and stay the same person. I’m sorry, Arthur. I am more sorry than you can imagine.”

“Martin, you’re being unfair. Arthur and I thought that you could use a little time out of the flat for your health.”

“Are you going to deny that there was more to your intentions?”

John wanted to, but if he wanted Martin to be honest with him, he had to be honest with Martin.

“No. We knew we needed to have this talk with you and felt it was best had once you had the chance to get some fresh air in your lungs. We are both concerned about you and will do what is necessary to help you recover. You may not like all of our decisions or actions, but they are one hundred percent in your best interests. You cannot possibly believe that Arthur would ever do anything to hurt you. Deep down, Martin… you know that’s not the case, so don’t let your anger do the talking.”
Martin pressed his lips together as if he was holding back a reply, but only nodded at the doctor. He did not take back any of this words or offer an apology and John could tell that Arthur was still very distressed.

“Do you want to tell us why you would think Arthur would work against you? And why you think Sherlock was the reason for it?”

“Oh! And you were yelling at Mr. Sherlock about turning me against you, which is so silly that I can’t even begin to tell you how silly it is. I would never do that Skip; it’s like Doctor Watson said, I will do anything I can in this world to help you and I’ll be your friend and your boyfriend no matter what. Whatever you’re thinking is not real, I promise you and I’ll cross my heart and hope to die for that promise, which kind of scares me so I don’t do it a lot, which should tell you how serious I am about this promise. And Mr. Sherlock just wouldn’t do that. I’ve spent a lot of time with him, Skip and I’m sure…”

“That’s the problem with Sherlock, Arthur. Well, one of the many problems… you can never be sure with him. You think you know what’s going on and why you’re doing something until you realize that it’s all a play for his amusement. Or to gain something he wants. Or for one of his damned experiments. You can’t trust him, Arthur and the fact you do is killing me right now because it’s not fair to you. You should never have been put in his reach.”

“Martin, hold on…”

“No, Skip! It’s not like that! Mr. Sherlock worked hard to find you. He left London almost the minute he got my text and he did everything he could… I know because I was there the whole time. You’ve got it wrong.”

Martin scrutinized both Arthur and John for a full minute before Arthur saw his eyes turn to pure ice and his lips curl into an almost frightening smirk.

“Fine, Arthur. You believe him over me – that’s fine. You’d rather be on his side than mine. Go ahead. He’s done this before, taken from me the things I wanted, hurt me… hurt me… Just go, Arthur. Now. Go back to Fitton or stay here in London. I don’t care. But you and I are nothing anymore. Nothing… that’s what he always leaves me…”

John wasn’t sure who to tend to at that moment because both of the men in front of him were dissolving quickly and both needed his help. Martin appeared to have grown a very familiar shell around himself, but Arthur… Arthur actually did look like he was dissolving. Falling away by bits and pieces and John could feel the man’s pain from where he was sitting like a punch to his own chest. But Martin was really his patient, so John really had no choice about where he had first to administer aid.

“Arthur? Look at me…. good. Remember all the things we talked about? Just nod. Ok… good. Why don’t you give Martin and I a little time alone right now and I’ll try to help him understand what you’re saying. And I’ll see if I can find out why he’s so worried about you. That sound ok?”

Arthur went back to trying to catch Martin’s eye, but the man had no intention of looking Arthur in the face and stared blankly into the distance. John watched as Arthur dragged himself upwards, face so heavy with sorrow that John worried it would pitch him over onto the floor. But then, that sorrow began to transform into something else. Arthur set his mouth into a straight line and fell straight back down into his chair.

“I’m not going anywhere. I do remember what you said, Doctor Watson and I’m not going to let
the fact that I’m really upset right now get in the way of being here for Skip. He can say whatever he wants to me because I know it’s not true and that he’s still too sick to know better. So… that’s it. I’m staying right here.”

Sit right there and glare at Martin with a look of determination that made John proud as a peacock. This is exactly what Martin needed to get himself back to healthy. In body and in mind.

“It doesn’t matter. Stay if you want because I’m not talking to either of you. I don’t want to talk about this, at all. It’s not necessary. It’s in the past and the past doesn’t matter, so leave me alone.”

Arthur’s chest ache flared more sharply and despite his frustration, he moved to take Martin a massive hug, but John placed a warning hand on his arm and shook his head to keep Arthur in place.

“It’s not in the past, Martin. If it was, you wouldn’t react so violently to Sherlock’s presence or let your history muddy what you feel about Arthur. We need to get into this, mate. Toss it out and take a hard look at what’s tearing you up. Now, we’re here for you and we’re going to listen and let you tell your story. That’s all… but I do think it will help you. I’m not going to say it will fix anything between you and Sherlock, but I honestly believe it will benefit your recovery if you can dredge that tar out of you and start trying to let it go.”

“It won’t change anything. This is ridiculous…”

Martin stood and John moved to stop him before he stormed away, but the stopping happened before John could act, prompted by a voice from the other side of the room.

“John is often insufficiently serious, but he is rarely ridiculous. And you can’t deny, even to yourself, that you’ve wanted to drag me through the mud for years. Here’s your chance. Are you going to let it pass you by?”

The two men stared at each other, their faces, both set in defiant snarls, until Martin threw himself back on the couch and released an anguished groan that John felt vibrate thorough the floor and into his feet. For his part, Sherlock walked over to the other armchair and sat down, staring away from the other men, fingers reaching for then pulling away from his violin.

“Martin?”

“Fine. Just remember, John… Arthur… you asked for this.”
"What do you want to know?"

"Whatever you want to tell us. But I think it’s best that you concentrate on why you and Sherlock’s relationship is so... toxic. I’m going to say this and I don’t want you to take it the wrong way, but it appears that the way you feel about Sherlock isn’t the way he feels about you."

"Sherlock doesn’t feel anything about me, if that satisfies your curiosity. No more than his microscope or something in a dish that he’s got growing somewhere. I had uses and all he cared about was how I fulfilled those uses. End of story. It’s the same for Arthur. And it’s the same for you, do not believe anything different."

"We’re not talking about Arthur and myself."

"We should be! Do you think it’s something different because it’s you that he’s got tagging along behind him? Let me put that idea clear out of your head. I already see the signs. He whistles and you come running. He barks and you come to attention. You try that and he’s nowhere to be found. Ever had that happen – you need something and it’s like you’re alone in the world, even though he’s sitting close enough for you to strangle him? Get a little tired of hearing yourself called stupid? Deficient? Useless? Get frustrated waiting for a thank you or some... just some small signal that you have value to him? Start to question you have value to anyone because the only words in your head are how you are nothing and never will be? Hope for a real ‘I’m sorry?’ Not one that you or someone else told him to say but one that he actually said because he felt regret? I bet he didn’t even say it when he came back. Or if he did, you knew... you knew... better than to completely believe it."

John held his expression as neutral as possible and hoped that what was starting to itch inside of him wasn’t showing to anyone. He could not... could not... allow Martin’s words to take hold in him. He’d worked too hard once Sherlock returned to put his doubts and fears behind him to let them creep back under his skin.

"Once again, Martin, we’re not talking about me. Just focus on your own feelings. Your own experiences."

"My own experiences? Oh, where to begin? Let’s see... how about all the lies? All the times he lied to me to get me to do what he wanted, lied to see if he would get caught, lied to see what would happen or how long he could get me to believe them. Here’s an example. I was seven and my whole family got the chicken pox. Well, everyone but me. I was sent to stay with Sherlock and I would be there over my birthday. I was so upset that I wouldn’t show up to anyone. He could not... could not... allow Martin’s words to take hold in him. He’d worked too hard once Sherlock returned to put his doubts and fears behind him to let them creep back under his skin.

"Once again, Martin, we’re not talking about me. Just focus on your own feelings. Your own experiences."
Of course I’ll help you with your school project. Lie. Not forgot, not was too busy… just a pure lie that he gladly admitted to. How nice it feels to know that you’re not worth the truth. That your own cousin thinks it’s a game to lie to you and watch what happens and when you finally begin to call him out, he tears you apart with his tongue and threatens never to spend any time with you again. I should have let him make good on that threat when I was a kid and saved myself a lot of heartache.

“That’s… terrible, Martin but children do lie. It’s not uncommon.”

“Oh that’s not good enough? His unapologetic manipulation probably won’t rank highly on your scale either. Make sure everything goes exactly as he wants no matter how I felt or what I wanted. For years… I spent so many days and nights on the verge of tears because he’d gotten me to do things I never wanted to do and I wasn’t clever enough to see his traps and tricks until it was too late. Well, that’s easily explained away, too, I suppose. Children are just right little bastards, so why pout about feeling my self-worth and esteem crumble away, little by little like an old abandoned house.”

John tried to build a mental wall against the images in his head, because they felt far too familiar for comfort. And Arthur… none of this was familiar to him and the effect was far more devastating. John spared a quick glance over to the detective himself and made note of the tension in his lean frame and the blankness on his face. One thing knew for sure, Martin wasn’t lying to them.

“So what would be enough for the stalwart defenders of the great Sherlock Holmes? Oh, this might do.”

Martin turned around and dragged his shirt collar down to expose long, straight scar running through the skin at the join of his neck and shoulder.

“Sherlock got hold of a scalpel. I just want to cut some hair, Martin. Stop being a baby, Martin. What did he really want? To see what it felt like to cut into a person’s flesh. God… the blood was everywhere. And he told me that if I told my parents they would think I was weak and stupid for letting that happen. He said it was my fault for being brainless and gullible.”

The nasty churn in John’s stomach only abated through an act of sheet will.

“How about this one?”

Martin pulled his shoe and sock off and John saw a burn mark alongside the exposed foot.

“Wanted to know if the smell of burning skin was as bad as they described in books. Heated the fireplace poker while I was out of the room and set it against my bare foot. Told me to come and sit by the fire and we’d read together. This was what I got for hoping that he was telling the truth this time.”

John took a deep breath and tried to ignore the almost supersonic whine that was working its way out of Arthur’s mouth.

“I’d show you my broken arm, but that didn’t really leave a scar. That was such a fun afternoon; go out to ride horses. I’d been begging for so long to get to ride the horses that belonged to some of the neighbors. Mycroft had told me that they were happy for Sherlock and him to take the horses out and as soon as I heard that I pleaded for a chance to ride. I got my chance, too. Just after Sherlock had read a report in the newspaper about a man who had died after being thrown from a horse. He didn’t think the newspaper account was accurate or maybe the police had gotten it wrong because the description of the accident shouldn’t have caused the man’s death. So, off we went to ride horses. Funny that my horse ran into a tripwire that set off a homemade flashbomb. I woke up with
my arm making me want to scream and Sherlock taking measurements on how far and high I’d been flung. And, no matter what I said, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get him to realize or care that he was trying to find out if I WOULD DIE from the accident. That didn’t matter to him in the least. If I had broken my neck, it wouldn’t have mattered to him any more or less than me having broken my arm."

“S…Skip… I… oh no… Skip…”

“Save your tears, Arthur. They might tarnish your golden idol over there. And what about you, Doctor Watson. Been a little quiet… things sounding a little close to home? Has he involved you in any of his experiments? Got any battle scars to show for it? Don’t worry if you’re lacking… you’ll collect your own set before long.”

No… no scars from Sherlock specifically. At least none that would show. John still had the occasional nightmare, though, about his experience at Baskerville. He’d been terrified and it was all because Sherlock wanted to test his theory. See the results… and John’s terror hadn’t even crossed the detective’s mind. No more than knowing John already had nightmares and this might trigger more had crossed his mind…

“Got you thinking, haven’t I, Doctor Watson? Who knows, maybe some good will come of this after all.”

“This… this is not about me, Martin.”

“No… you’re right. It’s not. But you understand, don’t you? And you’ve only known him a few years. Imagine how this will play out over the long term? How much you’re going to have to swallow and how much it’s going to hurt. Now, imagine you’re a lonely boy, who tries so hard… so desperately hard to have a friend and be one in return. Only the person you’re trying to be friends with barely regards you as human. You’re nothing but a lab animal to him. A stupid, dirty lab animal that he can do anything to because he owns the lab. And you’re so alone…even when you try to reach out for someone, he makes sure you suffer for your audacity. Turns something good into nothing but pain.”

Arthur didn’t see the cold eyes Martin cut towards him, but John didn’t miss them. He couldn’t. Right now, all of John’s attention was focused on the small, ginger man and what he had lived through.

“Is there… was there someone, Martin?”

Martin’s lips curled into another cruel smirk and he let out a fractured laugh.

“Oh yes… my first boyfriend. Met him at a bookstore when I was visiting Sherlock for the summer. We got together a few times at the bookstore and then caught a film one evening. He liked kites and we spent a few afternoons at the park with him teaching me how to fly them. Andrew… that was his name. We had a good time together and he didn’t care that I was short or wasn’t tops in school… he was my first kiss, too. Right after I’d crashed one of his kites, he leaned in and kissed me and said it was fine because I was more important than some old kite. Then I brought him around Sherlock’s house. And suddenly, I was being sent off to get snacks and trying to ignore the whispers and laughs when I came back. Watching Sherlock and Andrew sit next to each other when we watched the telly and leaving no room for me. Feeling the eyes on the back of my neck when I looked the other way.”

“Maybe… maybe Mr. Sherlock was just trying to be nice to your friend.”
“Yes. How foolish of me. Thank you, Arthur. He was just being nice. Very nice. I’m sure it was somehow for my benefit when I caught them naked in Sherlock’s bed. AFTER Sherlock told me that he’d be there at that time. My dear cousin must have wanted me to get the best possible view. So kind of him to be that considerate.”

Arthur’s hands flew up to cover his face, as if hiding his eyes would keep him from picturing what Martin had seen. All John could think of was the long line of women he’d tried to date, each relationship taking severe damage from the man studiously ignoring their conversation.

“So, Doctor Watson, is that enough? Can I get my little scout badge for surviving Sherlock now?”

Martin’s eyes had lost their frost and were now glassy and nearly manic.

“Do you want to know the worst part of it all? I kept going back. No matter what he did, I always went back for vacation or my holiday because… home was so boring. Nothing happened and no one paid me any attention. At least with Sherlock, there was always something going on. Even if it hurt, even if it was humiliating or made me furious… it was better than just sitting and watching life pass me by.”

This new pain in John’s chest was sharp, like a sliver of glass had been pressed into his heart.

“And I kept trying. Trying to connect with him. It never worked, but I kept trying. I told myself that if I just tried hard enough, he’d eventually… no, I don’t know what I thought he’d eventually do, but I hoped it would be something different than what he’d always done. After he left for Uni, I kept trying. I’d call and write. Email when I could. And he never responded. Not once. It was like Sherlock Holmes had fallen off the face of the Earth and as much as I wanted to jump for joy… I couldn’t. I still… I don’t know if I can say I loved him, but I missed him. After all of that, after everything he’d done to me, I still missed him. And then, well I can’t say he died because we all know THAT WAS A LIE, but I felt like I’d been scooped out hollow for the longest time. I went to his funeral, even though I promised myself years before that I’d never stand at that bastard’s graveside and mourn for him.”

“You… you were there? I’m… sorry, I’m so sorry, Martin. I didn’t even notice you. I don’t even remember you…”

At least this smile wasn’t sick with malice.

“I don’t blame you for that. I barely noticed you, either. I think I could have passed you on the street the next day and not even known who you were. I was there… I don’t even know why I was there, but I had to go. I had to be there. And then TA DAH! The holy resurrection. I texted him when he came back. Asked to meet. I… when I heard he was alive I was happy. Thrilled, really. And that prick didn’t even bother to respond to my text, to my call… I was still just the stupid little lab rat who wasn’t useful anymore. I had a dream, though. I dreamt that one day I would run into him, just some random thing and he’d see that I was more than that. I’d be an airline captain and have a nice house and car and someone in my life… maybe even a family… and I’d show him. But, of course, he won again. When do I have my little run in? When I’m at the lowest point in my life. When the fact that I am a useless excuse for a human being is clearly on display. No matter what, Sherlock always gets the upper hand.”

Arthur wasn’t even trying to hide that he was crying and John wished Martin would offer him some comfort, but he knew that wasn’t going to happen.

“Is that enough? Want more? I’ve got more. We can sit here all day and I can go on and on and
on until it’s spilling out of your ears. What’s that I hear? Nothing? No pleading for an encore? No congratulations on following orders like a good little boy? Well, I guess my job here is done, then.”

This time, no one stopped Martin getting up and retreating to the bedroom. Arthur tried to say something, but nearly choked on his words and once the bedroom door closed, he raced towards the bathroom and closed that door with a slam.

Leaving John and Sherlock alone.

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“Are you satisfied, John? Did you learn what you wanted to learn?”

John gritted his teeth, then breathed through the process of relaxing his jaw.

“You… you tortured him.”

“Rather an extreme description.”

John knew that tone. And he knew the haughty face that accompanied it. Sherlock was on edge and ready to lash out to cover the fact that his control was tenuous at the moment.

“Rather an apt description, I’d say. Christ, Sherlock… did you even… what was going on in your head when you did those things?”

Sherlock’s pinched features told John that he wasn’t going to get an answer. At least not an answer he could fully trust.

“What does it matter? You said the past was past, so my perceptions are immaterial.”

“No. That’s not true. Sherlock, I need to know. How could you do those things to him?”

“Those things? Those weren’t even the worst of the lot. I’m actually rather disappointed in Martin. Here was his chance, one I know he has been waiting for and he leaves out some of the most interesting items. For example, he stopped being given toys by his parents because he supposedly couldn’t care for them. What they didn’t know was that he would bring his favorites when he visited and I would take them and use them for materials tests. His toys, always airplanes, were plastic and they were much more fascinating to investigate than the boring wood or metal things my parents tried to get me to take an interest in. Or how about the time I pushed a pin into his hip because I wanted to measure his reaction against what I’d read about individuals who had bone marrow harvested from their hip bone. And he had to thwart my research by pulling away before I could tap the bone.”

John had stopped trying to hide his confusion and revulsion, but could not, as much as he wanted to, walk away until he had heard everything.

“Or perhaps you'd like to hear about when I poisoned him with ipecac so I could investigate the effect of extreme emesis on the rate of dehydration. I put it into his food and drink and monitored his skin tone by pinching and assessing elasticity. And he had to ruin that test, as well… he would not stop crying and the whole data set was compromised. Believe me, John… if you want a full accounting of my and Martin’s history, you’ve been given the sanitized version. There are far more intriguing tidbits that Martin’s chosen to leave hiding under the bed for now.”

Cold arrogance… condescension and nonchalance… John knew this was Sherlock trying to hide his real feelings but… John had nothing in him right now to give the man comfort or support.
Everything Martin had said… it was crashing in on John’s mind and framing a coherent sentence was nearly at the limit of John’s abilities.

“And his boyfriend? Was that an experiment or… did you care for the boy, this Andrew… did he mean something to you?”

“If Martin hadn’t mentioned it, I doubt I could have given you his name.”

“Then why? Why do that? Why do something so…”

“Boring. This whole conversation bores me. You wanted to know why Martin bears me ill will and you now should have your answer. Anything more is unnecessary. Is it possible that we may finally lay this to rest?”

Years… Martin suffered this for years… and he was broken. At that moment, John honestly didn’t know if he could face his own years and come out any less broken.

“I need some air.”

“You mean you’re running away.”

“Whatever you say, Sherlock.”

John grabbed his jacket and was out of the flat in under a minute. In the next, Arthur returned from the bathroom, face red and streaked.

“Mr. Sherlock? Where’s Doctor Watson.”

“Trying to save himself.”

And Sherlock was the next to flee, striding quickly up the stairs into his laboratory, with Arthur racing after him.

“Mr. Sherlock! I… I don’t know what to say to you right now, I really don’t, but…”

“Then spare us both and don’t say anything.”

“No. I am going to say something. Maybe not right now because… I can’t really think right now. But I will say something when I can think. I… I… I know you’re not a bad person, Mr. Sherlock. I really know that even with what you did to Skip, which was…no, I can’t think about that right now. But I don’t understand any of it and we have to talk about it so I do understand. I just don’t… I think I still want to be your friend. I just need to understand. I think there’s a lot I don’t understand and when I do… I can stay your friend. Ok? So, don’t think that just because you were mean… well, more than mean… to Skip that you’re completely a bad person or that you don’t deserve any friends or anything awful like that. Just… I need some time and a little help to understand. Can you do that? Can you help me understand?”

Sherlock felt the lethal barb right on the tip of his tongue. All he had to do was let it fly and Arthur wouldn’t try to understand anymore. He would give up the ridiculous notion of being his friend and go back to his life without Sherlock’s stain spreading over his skin.

But the barb didn’t fly. Sherlock tried to push it out, but something kept him from letting go and eviscerating Arthur the way he had done to countless others in the past.

“I can try, Arthur. I cannot promise you more than that.”
“Ok. That’s ok, Mr. Sherlock. As long as you’re willing to try, that’s all that matters. I’m going to go check on Skip now. If he’ll let me. I don’t mind admitting that I’m really afraid right now. Skip was so… I’m very afraid that he and I… that when he said we weren’t together anymore…”

“Give him time, Arthur. And… just be yourself. That will be good for him.”

“Oh. Ok. I’ll try. I’ll… I’m going to go and check on him now. I’ll check on you too, a little later and I’ll just be downstairs if you need anything.”

And Arthur scurried back downstairs before Sherlock could reply. Which was probably for the best. Sherlock knew he didn’t deserve the man’s attempts to reach out to him. Or Arthur clinging to the relationship they had created. He deserved none of it. Just like he didn’t deserve John. John should just keep walking and never look back.

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“Skip? It’s me, Arthur. I’m… I’m going to come in, ok? Just to see if you need anything.”

Arthur had knocked on the door first, but wasn’t surprised that he got no response. He was surprised, though, when he walked into the bedroom and found it empty. As was the bathroom. And the kitchen.

*Oh no…*

Arthur’s fingers flew over the keys on his mobile and he thought his heart would explode in the time it took for it to be answered.

“Arthur, my boy. How are…”

“MYCROFT! Skip’s gone. And Doctor’s Watson’s gone. And Mr. Sherlock… he’s not in a good way and I don’t know what to do because I’m so scared that something bad is going to happen because everyone was so angry and hurt and…”

Mycroft had received more panicked phone calls than he could count, but few had set his blood running as cold as this one.

“Arthur! Arthur… please do me the kindness of taking a deep breath and telling me again what is going on.”

“Doctor Watson and I decided it was time to talk to Skip because he attacked Mr. Sherlock again last night. I took him for a nice walk and even told him about you wanting to help us out a little and he didn’t mind that which was terrific, but then when he saw that we wanted to talk he said I’d tricked him and that I was against him and on Mr. Sherlock’s side and that we were through. Then, Mr. Sherlock made him talk and… it was horrible! All those horrible things Mr. Sherlock did to him. Hurt him so badly and I don’t mean his feelings. Burned him, broke his arm…”

“The horse riding incident was an accident, Arthur.”

“No it wasn’t. It was an experiment and Mr. Sherlock didn’t disagree when Skip talked about it.”

Mycroft massaged the bridge of his nose and made himself a promise that he would corner Sherlock and wrest out every sin he’d committed against Martin. That would help him strategize how to salvage what little might remain of their family ties and how to give Martin some compensation for the damage he’d suffered.
“I’m sorry, Arthur. I truly did not know.”

“Ok, well… there were a lot of other things, too. A lot of other things and I couldn’t help myself and had to go have a little cry. When I got back, Doctor Watson was gone and then Skip disappeared and I… I didn’t know what to do, so I called you.”

“You did the right thing. I will find both John and Martin, but I must ask something of you, in return. Do you feel that you can supervise my brother and see that he is taken care of in the interim? Sherlock delights in presenting himself as a marble statue, but he does have feelings and they run very, very deep. Can you be there for him now while I collect and have my own conversation with my cousin and the good doctor?”

“Sure! I can do that. I mean… I’m not very happy with Mr. Sherlock right now, but he promised that he’d try to help me understand things, so I know I’ll be happier with him very soon. I can take care of him for now, that won’t be a problem at all and I know you’ll be brilliant at taking care of Skip and Doctor Watson when you find them.”

“Excellent, then we have an agreement. I will call you as soon as the gentlemen have been located. I think I’ll bring them to spend some time with me for our chat, so don’t expect them back until tomorrow at the earliest.”

“That sounds ok. I think they both need to cool off anyway. But Mycroft… what I’m most scared of is… Skip just got well and I’m very worried that he… you didn’t see it, Mycroft but it was really terrible here and I’m so worried that he’ll try and… you’ll find him before he does anything to hurt himself again, won’t you?”

The very worry Mycroft had already suffered, which was why a veritable army was being deployed into some of the least desirable portions of the city on the lookout for a readily-identifiable man trying to purchase cheap drugs.

“Don’t worry, Arthur. I will do everything I can, and I can do quite a bit, to ensure that does not happen. Now, I will have to bid you goodbye so I can focus my attention on this little problem. Do not hesitate to call if any other troubles arise, or if John or Martin returns.”

“Thanks Mycroft! Really, thank you. You’re a great friend and I really… thank you. Bye!”

A great friend. Oddly, Mycroft found that the phrase felt laden with responsibility, which was probably why he had avoided having friends in his life. However, if there was one thing that Mycroft Holmes excelled at was taking responsibility, so perhaps he could manage this new situation with little discomfort. And perhaps, a little enjoyment.

After he’d found his lost sheep, of course.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Very sincere thanks for all of the thoughtful and encouraging comments. They mean a great deal to me...

Do you think it's something different because it's you that he’s got tagging along behind him?

Get a little tired of hearing yourself called stupid?

Hope for a real ‘I’m sorry’?

Has he involved you in any of his experiments? Got any battle scars to show for it?

Imagine how this will play out over the long term? How much you’re going to have to swallow and how much it’s going to hurt.

John thought that getting out of the flat would help him breathe, but he was wrong. It was just as hard to endure the tightness in his chest when he stepped out onto the sidewalk. Walk. He needed to walk. Walk and breathe and try and stop his chest aching and his head pounding. Silence the screaming in his head… all the horrible voices reminding him of every slight, every insult, every pain… every hope crushed and every wish that never found its star.

Which was real? The man who saw the people around him as toys to play with or the man who held a frustrated and disheartened John until he fell asleep. And stayed there because he said he would. That wasn’t a lie, but so many other things… so many other lies… and so many other tiny gestures and private smiles…

John walked, oblivious to the people and places he passed and desperately trying not to remember the last time he’d strolled these streets, hand in hand with the man he’d left sitting in the flat. It was not a surprise, then, when he nearly walked directly into a large dark car parked directly in his path.

“Of course.”

The door swung open and John didn’t even consider walking the other way. There was probably an identical vehicle directly behind him for just that possibility.

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“Ah, John… it is good to see you, despite the unfortunate circumstances.”

Mycroft’s home was much like the man himself – elegant, sophisticated, but staged. Everything was pleasant to look at but there wasn’t one personal item or memento on display anywhere. No honest display of personality anywhere in sight. John hoped there was a room somewhere in the house filled with photos, stupid souvenirs from vacations, crap DVD’s and evidence of embarrassing childhood memories and hobbies.

“One day, John we’ll tour the upstairs and you’ll discover all my little secrets, but I think there are matters of greater importance to tend to today.”
At least Martin hadn’t inherited the family mind-reading abilities. On the other hand, he might have avoided a tremendous amount of pain if he’d had.

“I’m tingly with anticipation. But look Mycroft, I know why I’m here and…”

“Then this simplifies things immensely.”

Mycroft motioned John to take a seat in one of the far-too-comfortable chairs and settled himself into the one placed opposite.

“I understand that there was a bit of excitement on your home ground. Would you care to discuss it?”

“Don’t you… now is not the time for your pithy little comments.”

“My sincere apologies. I was attempting to lighten the mood.”

John expected to see one of Mycroft’s trademark smirks, so he was taken aback to be confronted with an honestly contrite expression on the man’s face.

“I am not taking this lightly, John. Even without Arthur’s description of the discussion, I would anticipate hearing Martin recount the events of his youth to affect you profoundly.”

“You would? Of course you would. None of this is a surprise to you, is it? Because you were there! How could you let Sherlock abuse Martin like that? I know you can be a right bastard, but to allow a child to be brutalized under your roof… that’s not something I’d expect even from you.”

“I have done many things in the service of the Crown which, shall we say, are not sources of great personal pride. However, my soul has not been unduly burdened by my actions or lack thereof with respect to Martin. No, doctor… my greatest sin in this is apathy. Martin and Sherlock went their own way and I went mine. There was precious little overlap.”

“No… that doesn’t track. You observe everything, you have your fingers in everything; you can’t sit there and tell me that Sherlock’s… atrocities… went completely unnoticed.”

“Not completely unnoticed. Perhaps the more accurate term is ‘misinterpreted.’ ”

And again a look of regret flickered across Mycroft’s aristocratic features.

“Boys play, Doctor Watson. They get hurt and they cry.”

“And it never occurred to you that Martin was the only one doing the crying. And the getting hurt.”

“Of course it occurred to me. However, cousin Martin was exactly the type of child one associates with misfortune. I remember an afternoon I took him to purchase new shoes, his old ones being set on fire because he, not Sherlock, tried to dry them by holding each with a small branch over the stove top. During our little excursion, he managed to lose the handkerchief I had loaned him for his oncoming head cold, catch his fingers in not one, but two shop doors, and drop his new shoes into a puddle when we were ten steps from the front door of our home. That is Martin in a snapshot, John. Seeing him upset or anxious was not unusual at the best of times and… though I do hate to admit it… looking further into his situation did not occur to me. At least… not early on.”

“Not early on? So you did know!”
Mycroft settled back into his chair in a pose that uncomfortably reminded John of his flatmate.

“I began to learn some things. Mostly from reports by the staff because Martin never approached me directly with any concerns or fears. But as the years passed, even I could not overlook what were becoming more extravagant behaviors on Sherlock’s and their effects of Martin. Teenage boys do not weep easily, even teenage boys as nervous as Martin and I found him too often huddled in our library trying to compose himself. I did ask, John. But he never would tell me the source of his troubles.”

“But you knew.”

“I suspected and yes, in time, I did know some of it. I find it rather amusing that both you and my brother assume that I keep him under surveillance solely as a protection for his welfare.”

John stared at the man across from him and felt an icy draft blow through his core.

“Most children are self-centered, self-absorbed, cruel and devoid of empathy. Starting with that foundation, add my brother’s natural personality and you have a being who has little to no capacity to understand the consequences of his actions, if those consequences impact another person. That, along with his intellect and series of interests ensured that he was himself treated very cruelly by his schoolmates and others his own age. Whether he consciously chose to manifest his inner pain on Martin is subject to debate, however, I believe he lacked the capacity at that age for even that minimal level of emotional involvement.”

John continued to stare, silent as a gravestone and wondered whether Mycroft was trying to convince him to run towards Sherlock or away from him.

“However, it cannot be denied that there was no person that Sherlock ever spoke of frequently except our cousin. No other whose company he ever tolerated or expressed a desire for than Martin.”

“Because he wanted a caged chimp for his… experiments!”

“I do not in the least doubt that. But he could have had others. And he never did. In his own, albeit unusual way, I truly believe Sherlock was trying to cultivate their relationship. He simply lacked the ability to do it in a way that was beneficial to Martin. My brother struggles with many things and the concept of affection is likely the most difficult for him to comprehend. Either for the receiving or the giving of it. And, before you offer your official accusations, let me step in and say that, yes… I do bear the weight of failing to properly nurture and guide him into accepting the needs of others and responding accordingly. Sherlock was left alone to interact with a world that didn’t make sense to him and seemed to have no place where he could feel included. And that did not serve him well. I have no reasonable excuse to give you except that I had other claims on my time. He suffered for my neglect and, by extension, so did Martin.”

John shifted in his chair and it was only a conscious effort that kept him from getting up to pace around the room.

“But Martin’s sad history is not the real source of your unrest, is it Doctor Watson? Let us be honest with each other. Your greatest fear is that you will find yourself in cousin Martin’s place. Used, abused and left forgotten. Unlike Martin, however, you have more to lose because he never looked into the future and saw himself standing at Sherlock’s side the way you do. His life was never as entwined with my brother’s as is yours and you are terrified that the binds and ties will rot and fray and you’ll be set adrift, watching as he goes off to find younger, more interesting possibilities. Tell me, Doctor… how much of your hatred of Moriarity was simply jealousy? How
much of your guilt for my brother’s ‘death’ was actually self-hatred because you were simply an ordinary person who had nothing to offer Sherlock compared to the excitement of his new interest. That you weren’t and aren’t enough of a friend or a man to keep his attention.”

John was on his feet now, staking back and forth between his chair and Mycroft with a frantic pace and trembling fingers running through his hair.

“Although it would be terribly useful, I have not yet developed the ability to see the future so I can offer you no unequivocal reassurance that your fears will not grow and bear fruit. However, I can offer you some items to reflect upon. When Sherlock left for school, he was adamant that Martin be given some method of emergency communication. He was not satisfied until I established a dedicated line that would direct to the both of us in the event it was used. And when it was used, after years of silence, Sherlock did not hesitate for a moment before answering the summons. You were there, would you say he demonstrated a disinterest in Martin’s well-being?”

Sherlock was undone when the text came. That was the fastest John had ever seen the man move. It was almost panicked.

“Consider, also, his ‘respite’ from the world, taken solely to protect those few in his life with whom had forged some semblance of a connection. I wager that not many of our illustrious citizens would have committed such a dramatic act of preservation. And his return has led to some very interesting interactions with one of those he sought to protect. Some very interesting interactions… and completely unique in my brother’s life. I was not able to provide the guidance he needed, but that does not mean that Sherlock is incapable of learning means of change if provided with the appropriate teacher.”

John’s mind tried to reach out and take solace in Mycroft’s words, but at the moment they were just more bits of debris tossed about by his internal hurricane. Fortunately, Mycroft was well practiced in the use of a strategic retreat if it bought a more advantageous battle ground in the future.

“Perhaps what is needed is some time to refresh your mental energies. I’ve already informed Arthur that you will remain here with me tonight, as will Martin as soon as his whereabouts are determined.”

And John’s hurricane increased exponentially in force.

“Martin’s whereabouts? What’s happened?”

“Apparently, my cousin made his own escape after your departure. I have initiatives in play to locate him and I am confident he will join us before long.”

John felt the room spinning and found himself steadied and returned to his chair by a pair of strong, yet surprisingly soft hands.

“I left him alone. Knowing he was in extreme distress, I simply walked out and left my patient alone. I… oh god, I failed him. I abandoned him in the flat without anyone he felt he could trust. I left him behind me… and here I am wanting to cripple Sherlock for treating Martin like less than a person and I WALK AWAY knowing he needed help. Knowing he… christ! Mycroft, are you… it’s likely he’ll…”

“All possibilities have been considered and prepared for, John.”

One breath. Then another. Neither cleared away the guilt John felt over blatantly ignoring his medical oath and leaving a high-risk patient without access to the care he would desperately need.
after the emotional firestorm he’d endured. At least Mycroft had been there to step in and protect Martin when John had failed so pathetically.

“I… thank you. For Martin. You’ve been… just, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, I’ve had a room prepared for you and there is a rather sinfully large bathtub available for your use. You will also find several changes of clothes in the closet, as well as the appropriate toiletries. I hope you do make yourself at home, John. For as long as you wish.”

It was all John could do to nod and follow Mycroft to a large bedroom with an en suite bathroom, where he was left alone to collapse on the bed. How could everything have gone so wrong? Maybe Martin had asked the right question – was any of it real? Sherlock said he wanted to take things slow. That was better for collecting information, wasn’t it? And their new relationship very, very quickly bought the man the laboratory he’d wanted. And at what cost? A little hand-holding. A few kisses. Sherlock gladly took punches if it sold his performance… maybe all the detective had learned was that a softer approach was more socially appropriate for getting he wanted than a bloody scalpel to the neck.

John felt his muscles tensing again and dragged himself into the shower to use a large quantity of Mycroft’s hot water. The bathtub had called to him, but that call would likely have him falling asleep and drowning. He wondered how likely it would be that Sherlock would attend his funeral when the time came… He also wondered how Mycroft knew the soap he used, the toothpaste he preferred, the brand of underpants he wore and that he liked a little extra room in the shoulders of his jumpers. Maybe Mycroft would let him take them home with him. Wherever home was going to be.

A very tantalizing smell led John into an immaculate kitchen where a suit coat-lacking Mycroft was speaking with a small woman who was wiping her hands with a white cloth that was set aside before she began to unfasten the ties of her apron. A few more words and she was leaving the kitchen through a side door after a brief smile in John’s direction.

“Ah, Doctor Watson. I trust you found everything to your satisfaction.”

“Yeah, I did. Very much so, actually. You’re very gracious.”

“I do try. Now, please feel free to serve yourself if you are hungry. I’m afraid I have some work that requires my attention so I won’t be able to join you.”

“That’s fine. Thanks… it smells…”

John’s appreciation was lost in the cacophony of noise and voices that set Mycroft moving far more quickly that John would have thought the sedate man was able. John followed fast and actually had to laugh when he saw four of Mycroft’s suited minions in a state of thorough dishabille, and in various states of injury. Arthur’s black eye had a new twin and one poor bloke wouldn’t be kissing his sweetheart anytime soon with that very fat lower lip. Supported in the middle of the scene was an unconscious, but apparently unharmed, Martin Crieff.

“Thank you, gentlemen. I take it you had a little trouble apprehending him?”

Mycroft shot one man a slightly disapproving glare and an amused, yet approving, one to his sleeping cousin.

“A bit, sir. I don’t think he appreciated being interrupted making his… purchase. We had no choice but to take steps to ensure his safety.”

John glanced at Mycroft Holmes and recognized the tightening of the lips and chin as the man
schooled his expression into complete impassivity.

“Quite. Doctor Watson, if you would kindly escort Mr. Crieff’s entourage to the room adjacent to yours and ascertain his condition, I would be most thankful.”

“I don’t know if you want this, sir… but here.”

John’s stomach clenched, but then he felt lighter than he had all day when the man handed over a bottle of some of the cheapest alcohol John knew existed. The large exhalation from the older Holmes brother told John he wasn’t the only one who was thankful.

“Ah. Well, perhaps I shall save it as a trophy. John, if Martin requires anything, do not hesitate to ask. I shall be in my study, but I would appreciate a status update when you have completed your examination.”

“Of course. Gentlemen… this way.”

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A soft rap on his study door alerted Mycroft that John had tended to his latest houseguest and the lack of urgency boded well for his cousin’s condition.

“Please come in, Doctor Watson. You have news, I take it.”

John stifled the urge to peek around the door before entering and strode in confidently. And, though the room was as richly intimidating as the rest of the house, this room had at least a few framed photographs on the mantelpiece, including one of a dark-haired boy with cat-like eyes and a very familiar scowl. John cursed himself that the sight made his heart speed up.

“Can’t say I have any news because there’s really nothing to report. He’s in the same shape as I last saw him, though I’m not happy about the number of times he’s been tranquilized recently. It’s like the man’s a wild boar taking a dart in the arse every time he goes on a rampage.”

“And he does rampage rather well, doesn’t he? I must admit to a modicum of pride… those were very well-trained men.”

“Oh yeah… and he took down Sherlock without breaking a sweat. Maybe if his flying career doesn’t work out, we can get him into the boxing ring.”

“I’ll have the best trainer at the ready should that occur. However, I do not see Martin ever turning towards any career except flying. It is all he has ever wanted to do since he was a very small boy. I carry few regrets in this life, John; not being there to facilitate Martin’s career as a pilot is one of them.”

John was certain that Mycroft carried more than a few regrets about Martin, but he wouldn’t call the man out on his admission. It was enough to know that underneath the flawless veneer beat an actual flesh and blood heart.

“I’m sure you’ll get a chance in the future. Even if Martin won’t ask, Arthur won’t think twice.”

“If there is an Arthur in Martin’s future. The poor man insinuated there was some, how shall I say this, trouble in paradise.”

“That’s an understatement. And I don’t know what I’m going to do about it.”
“Then allow me the opportunity to offer my experience in delicate negotiations. It would be a treat to broaden the use of my meager talents, especially for such a worthy cause.”

“Sherlock would jump on the word ‘broaden’ Mycroft, so aren’t you lucky it’s me here and not him.”

A very unsteady Martin Crieff stood in, or rather was propped against, the study door, regarding John and Mycroft with wary eyes.

“He would, wouldn’t he? My brother’s sense of humor is sadly one-dimensional. How are you feeling, Martin?”

“Like I’ve been pushed through a propeller. And I didn’t even get to enjoy the nice bender I was planning, thanks to your extraction team.”

“I will be most agreeable to letting you enjoy your inebriation as soon as Doctor Watson clears you for alcohol.”

“One thing I can say though, mate; I’ll never clear you for booze that comes in a plastic bottle. That’s just sad and a waste of a good drunk.”

Martin chuckled weakly and moved to drop his body onto the small couch across from Mycroft’s desk.

“I can’t wait to see your doctor’s note for that one. Might get me a discount at the off-license.”

It was John’s turn to chuckle and he took a seat next to Martin, trying not to be obvious about assessing the man’s ability to be up and out of bed.

“Though I am loathe to complain, if Doctor Watson is handing out medical orders, I do develop a small twinge in my index finger when I am forced to use any pen less expensive that an Onoto or a Tibaldi.”

This time it was a true giggle from the men on the couch and John was happy to see the lines smooth on Martin’s face.

“Soon as I get my pad, gents, it’ll be discounts for everyone.”

“You are man of tremendous worth, Doctor Watson. I am most happy to count you among my allies. And, I am hopeful that I can place you in that circle, Martin. I know our history is very much an empty book, but I would like to change that if you would permit it.”

John prepared to step in to stop an angered rant, but was startled that Martin only leaned back on the sofa and laughed.

“It would be nice, one day, to know people who gave a damn about me when things were normal, not just when I’ve hit rock bottom.”

“Dramatic, but inaccurate. Despite your current circumstances, there is still a great distance you could have fallen. In this I am especially qualified to judge, having been party to Sherlock’s various overdoses and nights in the care of the authorities. And it is a mark of character that you sought assistance without being coaxed or bribed into doing so and I always welcome an association with men of character.”

Martin may have scoffed loudly at Mycroft’s speech, but John saw the faint spark of pleasure in his
eyes from hearing the older man’s words.

“I cannot go back and change the past, Martin even though I might wish to. However, I can alter the path of the future by changing circumstances in the present. I have already discussed this in great detail with Arthur and I look forward greatly to continuing my association with both of you.”

And as fast as it rose, Martin’s spark was doused and he closed his body into a defensive posture.

“It seems you’re destined for disappointment then, Mycroft. There is no ‘both of us.’ Not anymore.”

“Martin, look. There was a lot of emotion and tension being flung around. You shouldn’t make any decisions until you’ve had a chance to cool down and think things over.”

“Says the man who preceded me out of the door.”

“You do love turning the conversation away from yourself, don’t you?”

“Honestly, I don’t… it’s only when I feel cornered or threatened. It’s in the blood, John. Surely you’ve noticed.”

“Gentlemen! Martin, no one is trying to corner you. John, you know better than to be drawn into an argument with a patient.”

Neither man would ever admit to feeling scolded like petulant children.

“For now, Martin, I suggest we focus on your situation, as Doctor Watson and I have already engaged in one conversation, which he is currently digesting. I would appreciate it deeply if you provided me with a synopsis of your reasons for abandoning dear Arthur, who clearly adores you and would do anything within his power to ensure your happiness.”

“Florid, Mycroft, but that has always been your style. Just as it’s been Sherlock’s to kick everything I ever wanted out of my hands and into his.”

“If there’s one thing I can guarantee you, it’s that Sherlock has no interest in Arthur. Well, no interest beyond their… honestly I don’t know what their their is, but it’s not what you have with Arthur.”

“I’m not stupid, Doctor Watson. I know there’s no romantic involvement because Sherlock isn’t capable of that. At least not for real. I’m sure he playacts exceedingly well, but there’s no honest emotion behind his actions. Just more manipulation.”

“Then explain to me what is the source of your insecurity. And that is what we are discussing, whether you wish to admit to it or not.”

“I am not insecure, Mycroft! I’m just… I know what’s going on and I don’t… I can’t…”

“You can’t what?”

“I can’t trust Arthur! Not the way I want to. Look… I thought I’d finally found someone who believed in me. Who trusted me and then I find out that he’s not the one. He couldn’t simply stand by me and believe what I was telling him. No… I had to prove it because, apparently, my word isn’t good enough. He’d only known that bastard a few days and suddenly Sherlock was the hero and I was the villain. I bet that if you peek in the window right now you’ll find that he’s in the flat fluttering around Sherlock trying to make him feel better and telling him that I’m crazed in my
thinking. I don’t need that in my life.”

John drew in a breath and looked over at Mycroft for some inspiration as to how to proceed. Fortunately, Mycroft was content to continue the battle alone.

“So, it is your desire that Arthur follow you unquestioningly, without free will or independence of thought.”

“No! That’s ridiculous…”

“But you are in a temper over his refusing to take you blindly at your word, even though he had some body of evidence to contradict your unsupported accusations.”

“I just want someone who values what I say! I don’t lie. I don’t fabricate or manipulate or anything like that so why would Arthur choose to stand behind someone who does that as easily as breathing and not me? Why am I not good enough? Why can’t I find one person who thinks I’m worth their love and support without having to constantly prove myself? Over and over. I’m so tired… tired of having to fight for everything. I’d thought this was one thing… one thing I could have… all for me… without a fucking struggle… and I was wrong. I’ll never have anything good in this life. There will always be something or someone to snatch it away. I’m…”

Martin brushed away the wet streak that trailed down his cheek and bolted from the room, leaving Mycroft and John sitting in silence.

“That could have gone better.”

“Actually, that could have gone much worse, John. At least we have a starting point from which to work. And from which to coach Arthur into acting.”

“If Martin is willing to talk to him.”

“Are you willing to talk to Sherlock?”

“Christ… it does run in the family, doesn’t it?”

“My point is that despite your sincere doubts and not unmerited worries, you will not make any final decisions until you speak with my brother. Even if you believe it to be for the last time. I anticipate Martin will behave the same way, so there will be at least one window of opportunity to repair the damage.”

“Care to give me the odds?”

“I would never be so crass, Doctor Watson. However, I will admit that I find it a poor strategy to engage in any course of action where the outcome is doomed to failure from the beginning.”

“You like sure things.”

“I like to win.”

“Well, I hope this is one of your victories.”

“In that, John, we are in complete agreement.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Whereby Arthur and Sherlock have a little chat... change has to start somewhere...

Sherlock heard his brother’s name yelled out by Arthur’s voice, but chose not to investigate. It was logical that Arthur would inform Mycroft about the events of the evening, especially since it directly impinged on his relationship with Martin, something about which Mycroft had taken a very uncharacteristic interest. But Mycroft did seem to have a bend towards the romantic of late, sticking his prominent nose even into Sherlock and John’s burgeoning relationship. No, that had to be restated. Burgeoning implied growth and development and Sherlock had no reason to believe that he would be allowed to pursue that with John anymore. Which was acceptable. He didn’t deserve to pursue a future with John and the repulsion and disappointment on John’s face screamed that John agreed with that assessment.

“Mr. Sherlock? Mr. Sherlock, something awful has happened! Can I come in?”

The distress in Arthur’s voice cut cleanly through Sherlock’s impending black mood and had the detective racing towards the door to jerk it open.

“Oh! Thanks! Well, thanks isn’t a great word since… oh Mr. Sherlock… Skip’s gone! Doctor Watson’s gone and Skip’s gone and I didn’t know what to do so I called Mycroft and he says he’ll look for them, but I’m not as worried about Doctor Watson since he knows London and isn’t weak and he doesn’t have problems with… things and…”

Sherlock grabbed Arthur roughly and dragged him farther into the room.

“Arthur! Are you saying that both John and Martin left the flat?”

“Yes! Skip must have sneaked out when I came up here. He didn’t leave a note or anything and I don’t think he has his phone with him, even if he would answer if I called. Oh Mr. Sherlock, this is terrible! We pushed him before he was ready and now Skip’s angry and hurt and he hates me and it’s just all a big disaster!”

John’s trips for ‘air’ were sufficiently commonplace that Sherlock had no worries for his safety, but Martin? Martin could be robbed, raped and tossed into the Thames within ten minutes of being out of their sight. And that assumed he met with these unfortunate circumstances before he found someone peddling drugs at the pitiful price he could afford. Stupid! Martin was stupid for placing himself in danger, John was stupid for leaving him unsupervised and Sherlock was stupid for letting John’s temper distract the man into forgetting his responsibilities. And for being the reason for the situation in the first place. All that stupidity and, again, Martin was the only one to truly suffer.

No, not the only one. It took very little of Sherlock’s observational talents to see that Arthur was suffering terribly. Not only was Martin in very real crisis, but Arthur had seen his hoped-for chance at love ripped away and because he’d stood up for the person Martin wanted to tear into very small and ragged pieces. Another reason for Sherlock to keep others at a distance. If no one cared, no one could be disappointed or hurt or…
“Mr. Sherlock? It’s ok… I mean it’s not _ok_ ok, but you don’t look good right now and, I know no one probably looks very good right now, but you look like a water balloon that’s been filled too full, you know… all quivery and shaky… when it’s just about ready to burst and that’s not good for you. It’s not your fault that Skip left, you know. Maybe it’s your fault that he’s unhappy with you, but it was Doctor Watson and me that made him sit down for a talk. We could have waited or done it earlier. We _should have_ done it earlier. Or later. Anytime but when he was happy and looking almost like himself and letting me… letting me tell him that he makes _me_ happy. _We_ sort of screwed up and now Skip’s somewhere and if Mycroft can’t find him… I’m so worried, Mr. Sherlock. He just started getting better.”

Sherlock chose not to reflect on the specifics of Arthur’s argument in lieu of moving the man out of the way and storming down the stairs towards the door of the flat.

“No! I mean wait! Mr. Sherlock, you have to stay here!”

Sherlock whirled on Arthur so quickly that Arthur ran headlong into the detective’s body and bounced back shaking his head to clear his vision.

“I do _not_ have to stay here, Arthur. Here is exactly where I should not be when Martin is out there.”

Sherlock’s long finger pointed out towards the city and he was shocked when Arthur reached out and gently lowered the detective’s arm to his side.

“Mycroft is going to find Skip and Doctor Watson. The he’s going to take care of them for a bit so everyone can stop being so angry and we can try talking some more. I’m going to take care of you for a bit, too. I don’t think you’re angry, but I think you need some time and someone to listen so you can stop feeling whatever it is you’re feeling. Mycroft and I made a deal and I can’t go back on that, Mr. Sherlock. So you need to stay here and maybe we can talk a little. Just take some time and talk a little and… maybe we can find a way to fix some of this. There’s a lot to be fixed, Mr. Sherlock so we have to start somewhere… and soon.”

“Mycroft can’t find Martin as quickly as I can, Arthur. Every minute he’s out of our sight is a minute that he has to find himself in trouble. I can retrieve him far quicker than Mycroft’s teams…”

“He has teams! That is amazing! What do they play? And they volunteered to find Skip! I’ll have to write thank you notes. I know! I can make thank you cards. I’ll need to find some supplies. Do you have any scissors? And glue? Wait… I can do that later. Right now, I have to focus on one thing and that’s you.”

“I am the last person you need to focus on, Arthur. Save your attention for someone who deserves it. Now, I _will_ go and find Martin…”

Arthur jumped towards the door of the flat, locked it and mimed swallowing a key with a very large slurp.

“Arthur, you do realize that I can unlock the door myself.”

“Yeah, but you’ll have to get past me to do it. I may not be wriggly like Skip or as strong as Doctor Watson, but you’re not much taller than me and you’re sort of skinny, so I’m pretty sure I can at least sit on you until you change your mind. Or take a nap.”

Sherlock had a long list of possible ways to disable Arthur forming in his mind, but the look of determination on Arthur’s face said that it would not be as easy as he might hope. And Sherlock did
not want to contemplate the censure he’d receive if John did return and he found Arthur in less than perfect physical condition, current black eye notwithstanding. That would undoubtedly be the final nail in Sherlock’s second coffin.

“Arthur, I understand that you reached an accord with Mycroft, but he does not have intimate knowledge of where Martin might go to procure the drugs he will likely turn to combat his troubles.”

“And you do?”

“Without doubt.”

“Why? Well, I guess it does make sense since you are a detective and you must have had cases that involved… things… but Mycroft is very smart and I think he’s very clever, too so…”

“I know because I used to be an addict, Arthur! I suppose I’m to say that I still am, according to the so-called professionals. So yes, I do feel I have a broader and deeper insight into where Martin might go compared to that prissy bastard Mycroft!”

Arthur stood blinking and then took Sherlock into a full-body hug that surprised Sherlock both in its strength and duration.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Sherlock! I am so, so sorry… but you’re better now, right? You’re ok? I didn’t mean to be so firm with you; I didn’t know this was harder on you than I even thought. And I already thought it was very hard! Did Doctor Watson help you, like he did Skip?”

Sherlock squirmed his way out of Arthur’s embrace and bought himself recovery time by straightening his clothes.

“No, I didn’t know John at the time.”

“Oh… then Mycroft was there for you by himself. That’s awful, though. It must have been very difficult without having someone like Doctor Watson there, but I guess as long as you…”

“Mycroft, when he was presented with no other option, shipped me like a crate of bananas to whichever rehab facility was the most expensive and ineffective at the time. They didn’t help me, Arthur. When I had sufficient cause, I set aside my habit and took up more engaging pursuits.”

Arthur’s confusion was clear and profound and so was Sherlock’s when Arthur tugged him by the sleeve and nearly dragged him to the sofa, where Arthur took a seat and pointed at the space next to him to indicate he should join him. Sherlock had no idea why his legs obeyed, but apparently his transport had chosen to make a decision and took steps to ensure his brain’s compliance.

“I don’t understand. But I think it would be a good thing if I did. Why did you start taking… things? And why didn’t the help you got work? Does that mean Skip isn’t really better? What if this doesn’t work for him either?”

“Martin is not me, Arthur. Chemical use was an acceptable pastime when I was bored, when my mind stagnated or was overwhelmed by useless input that buried what was important under a mountain of clutter. Until that changed, I had no motivation to give them up. Martin’s situation is very different, there is no reason to assume he will allow his addiction to take hold again.”

Providing Sherlock could find him before he tumbled down the rabbit hole.

“I… I think I sort of understand. It’s like when I buy a lot of sweets, because I really like sweets, and keep eating them, even though I know it’s not really good for me, but I still eat them and then I
want to use my computer or my phone and then I don’t want the sweets anymore because I have other things I want to do and I can’t eat the sweets while I do them. Well, I could, but it wouldn’t out very well. Did you know that chocolate can turn into a kind of cement when it gets mixed with the…stuff… that gets on computer keys? Well, it does and sometimes you can’t even use a fork to chip it away and, let me tell you, keyboards aren’t cheap and Mum won’t pay for a new one to replace one that’s gotten ruined by chocolate cement.”

“From what I can follow of your statement, there are some commonalities.”

“Once more?”

“It is similar.”

“Oh. Good! But do you… do you think about it? Do you sometimes want to go and buy… something… again?”

There was no benefit to lying, so Sherlock chose not to waste the effort.

“Yes. Sometimes.”

“But you don’t.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Arthur, I need to be out there…”

Arthur mimed pulling a key out of his stomach using an imaginary string and then swallowing it a second time.

“Fine. If I work cases for the Yard, I have to remain off of drugs. It is the deal I made with Lestrade and if I break it he will not hesitate to withhold cases from me.”

“Oh. That makes sense, I guess, but is that all? Is that the only reason? You’re really clever, Mr. Sherlock and I bet you could hide it if you were doing that so that people wouldn’t know…”

“John would know.”

Sherlock wondered if there was a pair of shears in the flat he could use to cut out his tongue because it apparently had joined his legs in staging a mutiny against his consciousness. And Arthur apparently enjoyed Sherlock’s brain being lashed to the mast.

“That’s the real reason, isn’t it? Hah! Doctor Watson would be upset if you were doing… things and that would upset you. You don’t like making Doctor Watson unhappy; in fact, I have gathered a lot of clues and I think it’s safe to say that you really don’t like making him unhappy. Not one tiny bit.”

“There is no benefit to making John uncomfortable in our relationship.”

“You like making him happy.”

“I would not make such a statement about my motives.”

“That’s ok. I’ll make it for you, instead. You like making Doctor Watson happy and that’s why you got him flowers and let him assist you with your detecting and tell him little jokes so he smiles
and laughs. And you *really* like that, too... when Doctor Watson smiles it’s like he’s a big magnet and you’re a paperclip because you get stuck looking at him.”

“I will not argue with you, because you’ll simply tell me that I’m thinking incorrectly again.”

“As a detective, I would assume you would want your assistant to point out if you aren’t interpreting the facts correctly so you don’t draw any wrong conclusions. I have noticed that you don’t like talking or thinking about feelings, so you need to let others give you a hand with that, even if they have to tell you you’re wrong about something, which isn’t fun I know... people are always telling me I’m wrong about things and I do get a little sad sometimes but if I learn something then I don’t stay sad for long because I’ve got new ideas in my brain. And that’s brilliant!”

“If I am forced to respond to you, then I will say that I do take some pleasure when John is pleased with something and if I am the cause of that pleasure I find additional satisfaction in the situation.”

“You lost me a bit.”

“I like making John happy.”

“I knew it! So what changed?”

Somehow, Sherlock found himself in Arthur’s normal place in the conversation and that was not a location he found agreeable.

“I don’t understand your question.”

“Well, and this is going to be hard for me to talk about and I’m sure it’ll be hard for you to talk about, but we need to and now’s a good time since there’s not much else we can do except watch a movie and I’m not really up for a movie since my stomach is a bit whooshy what with Skip and Doctor Watson somewhere out there...”

“Arthur!”

“Oh! Oh yeah... I know you like making Doctor Watson happy but... but you didn’t like making Skip happy. In fact... you know I’m still really trying to be your friend right? Well, it almost seems like you enjoyed making Skip unhappy, but that can’t be true, can it? You didn’t actually *like* making Skip unhappy? Right?”

It was a very rare person who could blindside Sherlock Holmes and, apparently, Arthur Shappey of Fitton was on that painfully short list.

“I... there was no enjoyment to be gained purely from Martin’s suffering.”

“Can you just say you didn’t enjoy it?”

“I didn’t enjoy it.”

“Then why?”

“Martin’s welfare was not a variable in my calculations.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“The work had to be done. I had to... know. I used the resources I had to answer the questions I asked. There was nothing more.”
“But Skip got hurt. And not a little hurt like an Ow! You pinched me! sort of hurt, but the kind of hurt that makes you cry and you can still see even when you’re grown up. And you did it a lot, which confuses me Mr. Sherlock, because it would seem like once you saw him get hurt you’d stop, but you didn’t stop.”

“I provided my rationale, Arthur. Martin was necessary for my investigations. I neither wanted to bring him discomfort, nor did I take precautions not to do so. That was simply not a consideration for the work at hand.”

Arthur studied Sherlock’s tense, yet slumped posture and brought all of his understanding-people skills to bear on the problem.

“If you could go back in time… and I know that can’t really happen, but it would be simply brilliant if you could do something like ride in the TARDIS with Doctor Who and visit the past and see amazing things… oh! Well, if you could go back in time, would you try and do things differently? If you could keep Skip from getting hurt and saying mean things to him… would you do it?”

“Time travel, as you say, is not possible, so this line of inquiry is frivolous.”

“Don’t do that, Mr. Sherlock.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Hide. You try and use words to hide and I’m on to you now. This is actually very brilliant since I’ve learned so much from being a detective’s assistant that I can detect things on my own. Mum is going to be amazed!”

“I do not ‘hide,’ Arthur. I have nothing to hide, so the behavior without purpose would be foolish.”

“There you go again! Just answer the question, Mr. Sherlock. Even if you think I won’t like the answer, I think you need to say it. Would you change things if you could go back in time right now so that Skip wouldn’t be so hurt and miserable?”

“This serves no…”

“Answer the question.”

“Arthur…”

“Mr. Sherlock…”

“I am not…”

“Chicken britches.”

“What?”

“I heard that on a Western movie from America. It was great! I’ve always wanted to say that, too, and now I have. And it’s true. You are a big chicken britches if you won’t answer my question and no one wants to be a big chicken britches so you might as well…”

“I WOULD CHANGE THINGS! ALRIGHT! I WOULDN’T LET MARTIN HURT OR CRY OR HATE ME! I WOULDN’T LEAVE HIM ALONE OR FRIGHTEN JOHN OR
Sherlock’s body shook heavily and Arthur just laid his hand over the detective’s to remind him he wasn’t alone.

“I don’t understand, Arthur… I don’t see or know or understand and I hurt people. I make them angry, disappointed… I frighten them and I don’t understand why! I don’t comprehend the problem until after it has occurred and I don’t know how to fix it and no one describes what went wrong in a meaningful way so I can try and… John is the only one who has tried to talk to me and it…”

“It began to work.”

“Yes.”

Arthur wanted to give Sherlock another big hug, but decided to wait and let Sherlock talk as long as he could.

“I don’t fully comprehend events and situations that involve feelings…”

That last word being spat out like a piece of bad meat.

“… but I can respond appropriately if I know what is considered correct.”

“And Doctor Watson shows you what’s right… what works and doesn’t work.”

“He does. I don’t particularly enjoy the company of others, Arthur. I don’t find solace in surrounding myself with individuals who speak and act in ways that defy logic and rationality. I am not comfortable with people seeking my attention. I know I will not be able to properly translate the emotional subtleties of their behaviors nor reciprocate in ways that will meet with approval. But… I know that I am better equipped to do so now than I was when I was younger. I see now where my actions should have been modified to properly show Martin that I valued his company. Truly, there has been no one whose company I have valued more, save John. I did not mean to hurt him, Arthur. I had no burning desire to abandon him, yet I did so because I honestly saw no reason to do differently at the time.”

“But you’re trying now. To do things differently, I mean.”

“I am endeavoring to more proactively apply my experiences in this area to matters of the present.”

“Mr. Sherlock…”

“I’m trying now.”

Arthur more tightly gripped Sherlock’s hand before he let it go so he clap his hands together and rub them vigorously in a move he’d seen in some sports movie that had been very fun, even though he wasn’t much for sports.

“That’s what’s important. Honestly and truly. I mean… we all do things that aren’t the best, though I have to admit that what happened to Skip definitely wasn’t the best. And it sounds like Doctor Watson might have had some not so nice things happen to him, too. But if you do everything you can to make them see that you know now and want to do better… I think that will be important. Doctor Watson is smart and kind and he cares about you a lot. I think, I probably shouldn’t say this because I’m sure he wants to say it first but I think in this situation he wouldn’t be mad, but I think he actually loves you and if he knows you’re trying to be the best you can for him he’ll forgive you and
keep helping you get better and making him and other people happy. It’s… I think it’s going to be harder with Skip, but I can try and talk to him, too, and I just know that he’ll see what you’re trying to do and how sorry you are and he’ll forgive you, too. That is… if he ever lets me talk to him again.”

Sherlock stared at Arthur and felt something he usually only felt with John – hope.

“I don’t know if it would be prudent, but I will offer my assistance in swaying Martin’s opinion of your relationship. And I know that John will not be silent on the matter. The probability of success is sufficient to warrant the attempt.”

“Is that good?”

“I think we can win back Martin for you.”

“Brilliant!”

Sherlock found that talking to Arthur was a cathartic experience and the pair spent a long time on the couch simply talking about Sherlock and Martin’s past and Sherlock’s experiences with John. Somewhere in the conversation, Sherlock’s drive to race out into the streets in search of his cousin faded, so the phone call from Mycroft was both startling and frustrating for the detective. Arthur was a distraction of nearly Moriarty caliber, though his methods were far less damaging to innocent bystanders.

“Hi Mycroft! Have you found them? Mr. Sherlock said you had teams, which is absolutely brilliant since teamwork always gets things done faster than if you work alone. Like when Mum decides that GERTI needs to be washed and we all pitch in… well, Mum has to bully Douglas into pitching in… but GERTI gets nice and clean and we have a super time and…”

“Ah Arthur, it is wonderful to hear your voice, as always. And the news is quite good. Both Doctor Watson and cousin Martin are in my care. Quite safe and sound.”

“YOU FOUND THEM! BRILLIANT!!! And Skip didn’t… he’s still ok, right?”

“Martin comported himself most admirably and successfully avoided the snares of temptation.”

“You and Mr. Sherlock must have been brilliant in school – I can’t understand a lot of what you say but it sounds so smart!”

“Thank you, Arthur. I’m quite flattered. May I assume that Sherlock is in a comparable state of well-being?”

“Absolutely. He did try and leave when I told him that Skip had vanished, but I locked him in so he couldn’t escape. We’ve been talking and talking and I think that that’s been good and even talking about how we’re going to talk to Skip and Doctor Watson so that we can try and make things good like they were before… well, before.”

“How delightful. You are able to work wonders with my brother, Arthur, and that is an extraordinarily rare skill. I shall despair the day you leave London and John is left on his own to manage their lives again.”

“That’s part of what we’re working on… making sure that Mr. Sherlock and Doctor Watson are going to be ok and that Mr. Sherlock doesn’t feel bad about how hard it is for him to be nice to
people, especially since Doctor Watson is so brilliant at guiding him sort of like a seeing-eye dog, who are so nice and warm. We had a passenger with a seeing-eye dog and she was the sweetest thing! Well, except for Snoopadoop, who is the sweetest dog ever, but this one was awfully nice and she loved to give kisses…”

“That sounds very industrious. Do keep up the good work. Now, I have decided to keep my charges for at least the night and reassess their readiness to return tomorrow. I trust you will understand if I hold them for a bit longer if I am not confident that their moods, shall we say, are not indicative of a willingness to enter into a productive discourse.”

“I have no idea what you said.”

“If they are not ready to come home, I shall let them stay here until they are.”

“Oh! Yes! That’s a great idea! We pushed Skip too hard, I think and that upset him, but I’m sure you won’t let him come back to talk until he’s ready so you don’t have to send your teams out to find him again.”

“I appreciate your faith in my judgment. Now, I shall endeavor to promote communication as vigilantly as have you and we can speak tomorrow and compare notes as to the degree of our success.”

“I’d love to chat again tomorrow! I’ll make sure to charge my mobile so I don’t miss your call. I’ll even take it with me to the loo so I’m sure to hear it ring even if I’m in the shower.”

“Planning ahead, how thorough of you. Do let me know if you require anything while you keep Sherlock under your guard. I can have anything you’d like or need delivered, so do me the honor of letting me provide any assistance that I can.”

“I will! You’re like me, Mycroft… you like making things good for people and that’s brilliant! I’ll call if we need anything and you do the same. I don’t know what I could do since I think you can do just about anything in the world you want to, but I’m game for it!”

“Excellent. Do pass along my best wishes to Sherlock.”

“I will. And say hi to Skip and Doctor Watson for me. And could you… if it seems ok… could you tell Skip I miss him?”

Mycroft’s heart had been described as a block of ice on many an occasion, but sometimes… very, very rare times… he actually felt it beat.”

“I will, Arthur. Until tomorrow.”

“Thank you so much! Bye!”

“Sharing cake recipes?”

“When we get you and Skip and Doctor Watson square, we’re going to talk about you and Mycroft.”

“Can I offer you a pound of flesh instead?”

“What would I do with that?”
“Good point. You do realize, Arthur, that years… decades… of behaviors cannot be undone or remediated with a jolly chat?”

“I’m not completely clueless, Mr. Sherlock. What I do know is that if things are one way and you don’t do anything to change them, then they’ll stay that way. Forever.”

“That’s rather a good description of inertia.”

“Should I say hurray?”

“It would be warranted in this case.”

“Hurray!”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

A crack in the ice...

Chapter Notes

The wonderful comments really make this a wonderful experience. Thank you all very, very much...

John had spent many a sleepless night in his lifetime but never one where his brain seemed like it would never stop racing. And the surge of ache recognizing that Sherlock suffered this daily made his night even more disastrous. Several times, John got up to simply give his eyes something new to look at and used the time to check on Martin. It was good to see the emotionally-battered man getting some rest, but John’s mind had to force the memory of the last time he’d seen Martin sleep. Cradled in Arthur’s arms. No, that was not going to help return John to any semblance of his own sleep.

John also snuck to listen at the door of Mycroft’s study and found it pained him that Sherlock’s brother worked the entire night, seemingly without a break since John also never heard any noise around the house while he was lying awake in his temporary bed. Sherlock often went without sleep, but John had a suspicion that Mycroft did as often, if not more so, and with far heavier consequences pressing down on his shoulders. No matter what happened when the rubble of the past few days was cleared, one thing was certain. John would never look at Mycroft the same way again.

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“What’s your pleasure, Captain Crieff? Eggs, toast, porridge, sausages… it looks like Mycroft has an entire restaurant’s worth of food in his kitchen and, apparently, the cook’s got the day off.”

Martin had arrived in the kitchen, dragged by an enormous yawn that seemed to further ruffle his flaming hair.

“How about all of it? I’m sure Mycroft has a tea tray somewhere that you can pile it on.”

“One clear-the-kitchen special coming right up. How are you doing this morning, anyway? Sounds like your appetite’s back, at least.”

Which thrilled John’s medical mind to no end. Martin had a lot of ground to make up in weight for John to stop worrying about the man’s meals. And he had no idea how long Martin would be under his care so he could work to build him back to health.

“I can’t say I feel better or worse than I did last night. I think I slept, but I feel like I’ve been awake for the past week.”
“No, that would be Mycroft.”

“Nothing’s changed then. I always suspected that Mycroft was born with every minute of his time predetermined and planned and any moment he tried to snatch for himself meant something else was left undone. Even when he seems to be relaxing, he’s actually strategizing. Reading? It’s some dossier, report or book that he needs to absorb ASAP for some initiative he’s working. Once… I think I was about six, still very little. I was outside playing and Mycroft came outdoors with a calculator, of all things, in his hand. I asked if he’d play ball with me and I remember watching him and almost seeing the brain cells working away. He told me he could spare seventeen minutes. Exactly.”

“Mycroft played ball with you?”

“Well, I’d throw the ball and then race and try and catch it before it hit the ground. Then I’d bring it back and he’d tell me how close I got and how fast I ran and then I’d throw the ball again and tear off after it.”

“So, he had you play fetch with yourself.”

It soothed something in John to hear laughter in the kitchen.

“Well spotted. But, he did play, even if he didn’t get his own hands dirty. And he stayed out there his full seventeen minutes. Even showed me the time on his watch. And honestly… I had a smashing time. Too bad… too bad Mycroft wasn’t the younger Holmes brother…”

And dangerous ground surrounds them again. John took a moment to crack some eggs into his heated pan and popped some bread in the toaster.

“Didn’t you ever… wasn’t there some fun to be had with Sherlock? I’m not downplaying what you suffered Martin. Believe me, that’s the last thing on my mind. I’m just curious if you’ve got any fond memories of that time.”

There was nothing of the previous lightness in Martin’s expression, but there was also none of the blistering anger he’d shown every time Sherlock’s presence intruded into the discussion.

“Some. I won’t deny that. I can’t say that everything was always bad, but it wasn’t enough to balance the scales. Some days we would just explore. We’d travel for miles around the Holmes house and examine everything in our path. We’d investigate every little thing we came across and Sherlock would make notes of things he needed to research later, meaning we’d be back another day with a real experiment to run. When the family spent time in London, Sherlock and I would roam like wild creatures, taking in the sights and sounds and smells and textures. Sherlock blazed through the city like he owned it… I always knew he’d end up there.”

“But not you?”

“No… I knew what I wanted and I wouldn’t find it here. I didn’t necessarily know where I fit in, but it certainly wasn’t here. I didn’t have the Holmes money or mind… making my way in the city wasn’t a future I saw for myself. I admit, I didn’t quite envision my life the way it actually turned out, but I always knew this…”

Martin waved his arms around Mycroft’s expansive and exquisite kitchen.

“…would never be mine.”

“Not all of us are destined for riches.”
“Exactly and I don’t expect it. Can’t say I really want it anyway… maybe enough to keep myself in one piece but this isn’t my life.”

John plated up their hearty breakfast on Mycroft’s nice dishes and placed on plate in front of Martin.

“Nice to visit sometimes, though.”

“Oh yeah.”

John wondered if another step through the minefield was safe and decided that nothing ventured nothing gained.

“Of course, if you asked him, I’m sure Mycroft would set you up nicely. That seems to be his hobby, managing the lives of family members and the riff-raff they associate with.”

“You know… I never thought about it but Mycroft actually never denied me anything I asked for while I was growing up. He never offered, never gave without a request, but he at least did step up every time I asked him for something.”

“And now you don’t even really have to ask. You look out the window and there’s a nose peeking around sussing out how your day’s going and then, like a bloody miracle, doors are opening up and your train’s missing stops to get to you somewhere in a blink. Handy sometimes, but don’t let him know I said that. But, I do have to ask why you didn’t turn to him with your financial problems. He could have easily done something…”

“There’s an enormous difference between having someone help you learn to knot a tie or bring you an airplane model from a shop and dropping you a ladder so you can climb out of a hole that you dug yourself. Besides, once the door slammed behind Sherlock’s skinny arse, Mycroft never tried to unlock it.”

“Did you?”

“You are not going to let this go are you? I’m not sure if that’s the doctor in you or the lovesick fool. No, alright. I didn’t. I hadn’t really talked to Mycroft in a long time even before Sherlock went off to school, so there wasn’t any reason to just pick up and start. I told you, John; I didn’t have any expectations of him and I can’t sit here and say I feel any real anger. I did try and keep contact with His Majesty and that was a complete waste of time and effort. We all made our decisions and, for better or worse, we all have to live with them. At least Mycroft’s actually looking to make a new one and… I’m not sure how I feel about that, but it’s nice, I suppose, that he wants to see if things could be different from now on.”

“Arthur will be glad to hear that.”

John knew the second the words slipped out that his foot had hit a mine and his leg would be the least of what he’d lose.

“That’s not something I care about, John. Arthur has his own life and it no longer intersects with mine in the slightest.”

“Look, Martin… give it some time…”

“I’m not saying it’s not a good thing that Mycroft is willing to take Arthur under his wing. Arthur is… a good person and deserves what Mycroft can do for him and prevent being done to him. I have no problem with that at all.”
Martin’s mouth was set into a tight line as he poked his fork through the food on his plate.

“Tell me then, how’s this going to work when you’re back in Fitton? You work for his mother’s company and…”

“I’m not going back.”

John wondered if he’d ever find his footing in this conversation again.

“Like I said, give it some time. You’ll see things differently.”

“No, that’s not going to happen. What do I have to return to? Carolyn is likely interviewing my replacement as we speak and even if she isn’t, I don’t think I can go back and face their disappointment or their scorn. They already know how much of a failure I was, now let’s add this heap of stupidity on top of it all. And, even if they did welcome me home, my life won’t be any different. Any better. I’ll be in the same pit I was already living in with no chance of making it out. It’s time I went somewhere else. Try a fresh start with new people and new things.”

“Oh, and are they giving out pilot jobs like pound notes?”

“Who says I’m going to be a pilot anymore?”

Chasing this dog’s tail wasn’t even getting John bitten. It was getting John savaged.

“Martin, as your doctor, I’m telling you that what you’re thinking right now is not what you’ll be thinking later. Everything seems overwhelming, you can’t find any bright spots… that’s not unusual. Give it a few days and things will look more hopeful. I’ve seen this more times than I can count and I can assure you that the further you get from yesterday, the better you’ll feel. Trust me, mate, it’s not as bad as you think.”

“I’m completely skint, have to face a drugs problem, saw my one-day love affair explode into flaming shrapnel. I’d add may or may not having a job to my list, but since I don’t get paid to fly, I’ll just say I may or may not still have my fingers around my dream. It is as bad as I think, John, but I can fix some of it. I'll quit flying. Yes, I lose my lifelong dream, but I'll gain a real wage doing something else. If I have a decent job, I won’t have to kill myself working like a damned slave and I can forget about the drugs. And… I’ll have some time, maybe. Some time and some cash to get out. Meet people. Meet someone. I don’t see a downside big enough to call this a bad plan.”

“You have someone, Martin. You have Arthur. You’re angry and hurt now, but I’m going to tell you that he’s as devoted to you as a person can be. If you walk away from him, you will regret it for the rest of your life and you will never, ever find anyone who will care for you like he does.”

“I’ll trade a little caring for a lot of trust and not regret it.”

“You can trust, Arthur!”

“Like you can trust Sherlock?”

Now it was John’s turn to feel his muscles clench tightly.

“Ooooh… hit a bit of a nerve, did I? Once you’ve lost trust, not much else matters does it?”

“How many times do I have to say this isn’t about me?”

“As many times as you want, but I’ll still call you out as a hypocrite if you sit there and tell me to
just swallow Arthur’s disloyalty…”

“Christ Martin! He wasn’t disloyal! He was just trying to keep the peace. You have to admit that you were a little off your head when it came to Sherlock and if there’s one person in this world that values people being civil to each other it’s Arthur Shappey!”

“And I had every right to be ‘off my head’ to that bastard! If Arthur cared at all, he’d have realized that I had good reason for what I did. I’m not like this, John! This isn’t me! If I’m at someone’s throat, there’s a reason!”

“Like you’re altered from filling your bloody body with crap from a dozen different plastic bags?”

“I don’t have to take this.”

Martin shoved his chair back from the table, but John was faster and stopped him before Martin could leave the kitchen.

“Yes you do. I am not going to let you destroy your life, Martin. I am not going to let you walk away from flying nor from Arthur. Not without at least having you sit down and talk these things out. Now go and finish your breakfast. You’re going to eat all of that and what’s left in the pan, then you’re going to sit with me in front of the telly and we’re going to act like a couple of birds up to and including eating pints of ice cream, one-pint-one-spoon style. If and when your temperature’s gone down, we’ll try this again. So, truce? I’m here to help you, Martin. If you don’t believe anything else right now, surely you can believe that?”

A few breaths passed before Martin stepped around John and dropped back into his chair at the table. One large forkful of eggs and sausage went into his mouth while he glared at his doctor. For his part, John popped a few more slices of bread into the toaster and pulled some fresh melon out of the refrigerator to cut.

“I’m in this for the long haul, Martin. I’m going to be here for you. Whatever you need, whether you think you need it or not.”

“What you’re going to need are bigger trousers if you keep grazing on Mycroft’s grass.”

“Now that’s just low. Just for that, no melon for you, you prat.”

“Fine, you can have the melon and I’ll have the rest of the sausage.”

“My god, there’s no winning with you lot.”

“Mr. Sherlock! You’re still here, right?”

Arthur called up to Sherlock’s laboratory and was pleased that he received a vague grunt in response. Even though Martin and John were secure, Arthur had worried that Sherlock would simply do as they did and race out. Then Arthur would be alone. And that wasn’t something he thought he could handle. Not right now, at least.

“I’m going to make tea! Unless you want coffee! And I thought about my famous fried porridge for breakfast. It’s brilliant! All crispy and, well sometimes sort of black, on the outside and nice and gooey on the inside so it runs all over your plate like a wave washing onshore when you cut into it. It’s really very poetic…”
This grunt Arthur chose to interpret as an enthusiastic ‘yes’ and he got to work. Work was good. Work kept his brain focused on good things. Productive things. Not… other things. Other things weren’t good to think about. Other things kept him from sleeping and maybe made him really want to call his Mum, but that would be too hard since he wasn’t supposed to talk about some things with her yet and it would make his brain hurt and it already hurt too much. But cooking was easy. One big pot of porridge. Super! Get big pot of tea brewing. Super! Make Jazzy Tomatoes with lots of onions and orange piece, ok none of those, so lemon pieces and olives and maybe some of that peanut butter on the middle shelf. And about sixteen shakes of pepper. Triple Super! And maybe some pasta. That would absorb the Jazzy Tomato sauce and fried porridge middles and that would be brilliant. And anything else he could think of because as long as he had something to do he didn’t have time to think about… other things.

Sherlock watched Arthur’s frantic pace in the kitchen from the bottom of the stairs and knew there was something he should be doing to help him. Unfortunately, he had no idea what that would be. Neither he nor Arthur had left, so it was not really their responsibility to make contact with John or Martin. Or maybe it was. The one person who could tell Sherlock what to do was the person who had left because Sherlock didn’t know what to do. This was intolerable… and it felt like it was taking his skin off his bones.

“Mr. Sherlock! I was going to bring breakfast up to you, but this is nicer since we can sit at the table and be near the kettle for more tea and I can use the microwave to re-warm our plates if we start to talk and forget about breakfast, which I do all the time, then I have a cold breakfast, which isn’t always brilliant, but sometimes it is when I make custard pie smoothies…”

“Thank you, Arthur. It all looks… voluminous.”

“Is that good?”

“Far better than… depauperate.”

“Brilliant! You just sit down and let me take care of everything.”

As if Sherlock had any idea how to step into Arthur’s version of a laboratory and take up his work.

“Let me know if you want anything else. There’s still some things in the cupboard and I think there is one or two pans I haven’t used yet.”

“This is satisfactory, Arthur. You don’t need to go to this much trouble…”

“Oh but I do. We need to keep up our strength in case… well, maybe we’ll need to take walks or go to the park or go out dancing sometime. I mean, maybe we’ll have things to do, with people, and we have to be in good shape for that. And when you eat well, then you feel well and you’re happy and things don’t get to you as much and you’re happy and you feel strong and ready to be strong and you’re happy and…”

Sherlock tapped Arthur on the shoulder and that broke the man’s monologue. One index finger pointed to the plates in the cabinet and the other pointed to the table and Arthur was back on track putting out the food.

“There is data to indicate that for the general population, proper nutrition does promote improved physical health and mental well-being.”

“That means you’ll clear you plate, right?”

“I do not include myself in that aggregate, but I will give your efforts all due attention.”
“What does that mean?”

“I’ll do my best.”

Bringing a notebook to the kitchen table was not a new behavior for Sherlock, but using it while eating was rather new. At least for taking notes about what he was consuming. Truly, Arthur’s approach to food preparation was worthy of at least one monograph.

“I’ve been putting this off, Mr. Sherlock, but I think it’s time to ask. What are we going to do? I was thinking that we’ve both got the same end of the stick here and we need a plan to get things turned around.”

Sherlock had hoped that Arthur wouldn’t ask this question of him because, of all the worst possible times, he had no answer.

“I would assume that when John and Martin are prepared to communicate, they will contact us. Until then, there is not much we can do to besides attempt to anticipate the nature of their complaints and prepare a set of potential responses.”

“That sounds... good. No... no it doesn’t. I’m sorry, Mr. Sherlock but they’re mad at us and not the other way around so we’ve got to try to show willing and try and win them back.”

“They are not carnival prizes, Arthur.”

“Skip is. He’s an amazing, shiny prize you’d win at a booth at a fair. The kind that no one wins because they’re so big and brilliant and you have to do crazy things to bring one home. Doctor Watson’s one of those too, I bet. We have to do something, Mr. Sherlock or they’ll just stay in that little stall and get dusty and sort of faded and no one will even try to win them then and that’s... ok I’m not going to think about that because I have to stay positive to think of a plan and I can’t do that if I’m having another little cry thinking about Skip all alone and faded and scruffy.”

Sherlock regarded the man across from him and knew that even if he did not participate, Arthur would concoct some ridiculous scheme that likely involved costumes and whatever paraphernalia Mycroft’s charge card could provide. Whereas that might return him to Martin’s good graces, it would not help Sherlock with his own dilemma. Perhaps this was a time to combine their efforts.

“I am open to suggestions.”

“Oh! Well, I was thinking that they’re probably still very upset, so we have to be sort of gentle. Little baby duckling steps so no one feels too pushed or pressured. I know! A letter! That’s rather classy and you can draw pictures to make it extra special. Do you have any nice paper? That paper that Mycroft used was ever so nice and I think that nice paper would make our letters even more special and they’d take them more seriously.”

“I am not writing John a letter.”

“Why not?”

“Let’s see, it’s trite, clichéd, overdone, saccharine…”

“You’re saying you don’t like the idea.”

“No.”

“Well, I do, so I’m going to write Skip a letter and have Mycroft get it delivered. If you don’t
Arthur was likely correct in that John would want Sherlock to make the first move towards reconciliation. That had produced the best results for past disagreements, though none had come close to approaching this degree of tribulation. But John would know that the idea for a letter would not have come from him and that would likely diminish the value of the gesture. But, a preliminary gesture would show intent and good faith.

“I shall follow your lead but in my own fashion.”

“That sounds… vague, but I know that means you’re either still thinking about it or you’ve already got an idea but you’re unsure about it and want to think some more. Either way, can I help?”

And, suddenly, Sherlock did have an idea.

“Yes. Bring me my phone.”

I said I was anxious when we were separated. I feel that now. SH
I said that I wanted to build something with you. I still want that. SH
Your bed looked strangely empty last night. It was distracting. SH
I know you are upset. I want to understand. SH
I can’t promise anything beyond trying, but I must understand to try. SH
Breakfast was not the same without you here. SH
Nothing is the same without you here. SH
I wish you were here. SH
I want to try with you. SH
I will be here if you want to try, too. SH

“John? Is everything alright.”

Neither man had moved during the few hours of criminally awful daytime telly they’d been glued to until John’s phone had vibrated to indicate he had a text. And another. And another.

“I’m not sure. I guess it all depends, really.”

John handed the phone over to Martin who scowled reading the texts, but at least didn’t hurl John’s phone against Mycroft’s wall.

“Yeah, I guess it does. What are you going to do?”

“Don’t know. This is… Sherlock’s not done anything like this before.”

“Which probably means he calculated an unexpected and uncharacteristic action would add authenticity to his supposed affection.”
“Or he misses me and wants to work things out.”

“If you’re a sappy romantic.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

“Don’t do it, John. Take it from me, it won’t lead where you think it will. How much more of your life are you going to waste on him?”

“Martin, you didn’t know me before I met Sherlock. I had… nothing. Bum shoulder, bum leg, still looking at the world through combat goggles… I had no prospects. Nothing beyond four bland walls to stare at day in and day out. Then, I met Sherlock and all of that changed. I’m still seeing red over what he’s done and part of me wants to tell Mycroft to send a car over to the flat and collect my things. Another part of me remembers what I used to be and wants to… at least give Sherlock a chance to explain. Well, maybe not explain, but at least let me hear his mind on this. What was going through his head. What is going through his head. At the very least… I owe him that for all he did for me. He handed me back my life, Martin. I do owe him for that.”

“I can’t tell you what to do, but I can give you this advice. Don’t meet him with your soul exposed. If he slashes, it won’t be quick to heal.”

That was something about which John had no doubt.

“Ta, mate. I’m not sure I’m ready to sit and chat, but at least I know that Sherlock is willing to at least give it go when I am.”

Martin passed John his mug of tea, which John had to juggle when his phone vibrated again. And John refused to feel ridiculous that his heart was pounding in anticipation of his new text. Only to be pinched on the arse by fate.

“It’s for you.”

Martin gave John a too-Sherlockian side-eyed glance and took the phone from John’s hand.

*Hi Doctor Watson! It's Arthur. Arthur*

*Can you read this to Skip? Arthur*

*Or let him read it? Arthur*

*Skip? Arthur*

*I’m sending you a letter. Arthur*

*Please read it. Arthur*

*I really miss you. Arthur*

*I don’t want you to hate me so please read my letter. Arthur*

*I really, really miss you. Arthur*

*Are you ok? Arthur*

*I hope you’re ok and resting and eating and having fun with Doctor Watson and Mycroft. Arthur*
Did I say I missed you? Arthur

Oh, I did. Well, it’s true. Arthur

I want to be with you, Skip. Arthur

Just like we talked about. Arthur

Please read my letter. I miss you. Arthur.

“Looks like we’re being double-teamed.”

“We left them together, Martin. Did you expect anything different?”

“I suppose it didn’t enter my head.”

“Now you have something to think about, also. Are you going to read his letter?”

“I suppose… I suppose I can at least do that much.”

“That’s good to hear. Now, ready for that ice cream?”

“Make it a double.”
Neither John nor Martin were in highly talkative moods, each with their own mind turned towards personal issues; therefore, vegetating in Mycroft’s sumptuous sitting room was a very acceptable way to spend the day. When the front bell sounded, John assumed it was the Chinese take-away they’d ordered, but was instead met by one of Mycroft’s anonymous drones, who handed him a rather rumpled envelope that was addressed ‘To Skip. That means Martin Crieff, in case you need his whole name.’ The man left as soundlessly as he arrived and John returned to hold out the envelope for Martin to take.

“Well, he wasn’t lying. And it feels thick, so I guess he has a lot to say. I’ll go wait for the delivery, what say. Give a shout if you need me.”

And then Martin was left alone with the envelope that he’d said he’d read, though taking a leap out of the window was looking like a less painful plan right about now. He did not want to do this; not one bit. He did not want to read Arthur’s praises of Sherlock and how he’d misinterpreted things. He had no desire to see the physical proof that Arthur would not, could not, ever really be his. That was far too painful to contemplate. It was absolutely the right time to start a fresh chapter of his life. New job, new people… this was just the lock on the door of what he was leaving behind.

But, Arthur deserved it to have his letter read. Martin knew Arthur far preferred to speak and phone than communicate in writing and the heft of the envelope did indicate he’d put a great deal of effort into his missive. Whether he wanted to or not, Martin had to read the letter; Arthur was worth the respect, at the very minimum.

__________

Dear Skip,

I always spell ‘dear’ wrong when I write it out, like Bambi, but this time I got it right so that means my brain really, really wants to do this perfectly and that’s brilliant. Because I do, Skip. I want to do this right like I’ve never done anything right before in my life.

Maybe I should start at the beginning. That’s the first day we met. Of course, it couldn’t be any farther back than that, but it truly was the very first day and you were at the airfield and I saw you standing there looking sort of scared and nervous and I wanted so badly to just give you a big hug and ask what was wrong. Now, you might think that I do that to lots of people, which I do, but I also sort of wanted to make you smile and stop feeling bad, which I know I also want to do for lots of people, but this time it was different. I didn’t just want to make you feel better, I wanted it to be me that made you feel better. That was important. And I kind of wanted to take you somewhere and get you some tea and let you be away from where people were because I saw how fidgety you looked every time someone passed by. So that was the very beginning. I saw you and knew you were different because you made me feel different.

When Mum said you’d be our new pilot, I didn’t sleep at all! I was so excited! I would get to see you every day and talk to you every day and we’d go all over the world together and see new things. And we have! We’ve had marvelous adventures and even when they haven’t necessarily been marvelous adventures, but sort of like disasters, it’s still been brilliant because we’ve been there together and even if it’s really awful right then, we get a laugh out of it later. And even if we don’t get a laugh later, at least I know that you’re there. I mean, you’re there. You’re still there. Does that make sense?
Well, after that first day, I knew we’d be mates and we have. But, I’ve got lots of mates, Skip. Well, perhaps not lots, but some and I can assure you that you were always a different sort of mate than the others. Not in a bad way, though! I don’t have any other friend that I’m just really happy sitting with and doing my connect-the-dots pictures or playing with the photo app on my phone (remember when I put Mum’s head on Snoopadoop’s body? That was brilliant, even though Mum took my phone away for a week) or just thinking or singing songs in my head. I get told all the time that I talk too much, but you’re the only person I can be quiet around. And it’s not that hard. It’s just nice, so I do it and we sit there and you read or do your log books and I do what I’m doing and it feels good. Sometimes I stay with you, even when I could go home since all my work is done and I don’t need to be there, because it feels so good and why should you stop something you really, really like?

And, I know you don’t want it and you get very angry, but it’s like I have a big hand inside my chest and it pulls and tugs and sometimes it even really hurts when I see you need help and you won’t let me. It feels like I’m doing something horrible and wrong when I see you trying so hard and needing something not because you’re not good enough to get it yourself but just because you’ve got so much else to do and there’s only so much one person can do, even someone as wonderful as you, Skip. And it hurts. It really, really hurts sometimes when I see you mad and frustrated and wanting to scream or cry or hit something and I know that if you just let me help, even a little bit, it would make things better and you’d be happier and I’d be happier and we’d both be happier at the same time. I don’t want to, but I probably should tell you that when I think about you hiding your problems and letting things get so bad that you started taking things (I know what they were but I can’t write it, Skip, I can’t even say it) I felt like I’d been the worst possible friend and that hand in my chest turned into a fist and started punching me and even though you’re better now, I still feel it. Even when the punching has stopped, I know I’ll still feel the bruises and I don’t think there’s anyone but Mum that could make me hurt so much.

But I don’t just hurt with you, Skip. Ever since that first day (which I talked about already so you may want to read that part again if you don’t remember), I’ve felt so lucky and glad that I get to see you and talk to you all the time. When we don’t fly and I’m just at home and you’re in your attic, I wish every minute that we were flying just so I could be near you and feel lucky and glad again. I started coming round your house more, if you didn’t notice. I’ve tried to spend more time with you, especially when we’re not flying or on standby and I told

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that I thought you were trying to spend more time with me, too. If you weren’t that’s ok because we weren’t boyfriends then, but I think you were trying and that made me want to spend more time with you because I wanted to dance every time I saw you and we got to be with each other. You know how much I love dancing and that’s what being with you is like. Dancing. It’s great fun and you can’t really do it wrong and you feel so light and free. Spending time with you is just like dancing. No matter what we do, I have a big smile on my face and you do, also. Well, maybe not as big as mine since you tend to make little smiles more than big ones, but your eyes get bright so I know it’s a real smile and you’re enjoying yourself, too.

Even before we came to London, I thought about how it would be if we were really a couple and I mean like boyfriends and not just good mates. I’d think about how it would be if we could spend even more time together and I was sure that time would be better than anything, even new books or brand new candles that smell like suntan oil or Christmas, since we’d be together not just together, like sitting together or riding in a car together. I would think about what it would be like to hold your hand and have you hold mine and walk with my arm around your shoulder to keep you warm and also just to have you close and touching and that would make me warm, too. And I don’t just
mean my skin, you know, I mean my insides, too. That’s one of the first things I noticed when I got to know you. My insides get warm and cozy when we’re doing anything. You know when we sit in the park by your house? Sometimes my insides felt so warm I wanted to take off my jacket, but then I’d worry that you’d ask why I was taking off my jacket when it was nippy outside and since we weren’t boyfriends then I thought you’d think I was a little strange and then you might not want me to meet you in the park anymore. And that would be terrible because we have a nice time at the park and I do think you’ve given me little clues at times to tell me that you’d like me to meet you there even if you didn’t say so outright. So, maybe I was getting some practice being a detective even before I went out to try and find you and that really came in handy since you were a right mess to find and it took all of my detecting and people-understanding skills, but it was worth it because you’re safe and well and that’s all that really matters to me.

I don’t know if I can tell you what it was like when

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made me say that I care cared for you. It felt scary and wonderful and sad and insanely brilliant and confusing and so many other things. I never thought someone as amazing as you could like like me, Skip. Never in a hundred million years. I mean, I knew we were friends and that was super, but I’d thought that anything more could never happen. And that had always sort of made me sad because I knew that if we really couldn’t be more than friends then you’d find someone someday to be more than friends with. But then I was told that I shouldn’t think I wasn’t the same kind of brilliant as you and that I should take a chance and not be worried that you’d say I was stupid or something for trying. And you didn’t! And I got to touch you, which was something I’ll never be able to describe because there aren’t any words brilliant enough. I’ve done some things on dates but never anything that was so fantastic. Your skin is so soft, it’s like bunny fur or that cotton Mum buys that’s all rolled up. And you liked what I was doing and I knew what to do, which I can’t always say I do, but I just knew that I could make you happy and I wanted to always be able to do that. Make you happy like that and then sleep all snuggled up with you curled up against me like puppies in comfy dog bed. That was the best, Skip. Sleeping like that and feeling you relaxed and toasty warm. When I woke up I tried very hard to make sure I remembered every bit of that. I have a book about how to make your memory better and I did all the things they said to do so I’d never forget one second of waking up with you for the first time.

I could write pages telling you what you mean to me, Skip, and how happy I’ve been. When you said we could be boyfriends – that would take up at least ten pages all by itself! And another ten pages when you said that we could someday have a house and live together and really be a couple. I guess you could say that we’d be a family, actually. And we could have some pets and people could come to visit us and I decided that I would really like a fireplace so we could cuddle and make hot cocoa. And we’d have our room and in the bathroom I’d have a blue towel and you could have a green towel and I’d get to kiss you goodnight before bedtime and, actually, I’d get to kiss you anytime, which with a fireplace would be brilliant because we could add kissing to our cuddling and cocoa and that’s ridiculously super and I almost want to stop writing so I can just sit here and think about doing that but I won’t because this letter is too important. It’s the most important letter I’ve ever written.

I don’t know what went wrong, Skip. I really don’t. I probably could ask

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to explain it, but he probably couldn’t give me a good answer because that’s not his area and also because I want you to tell me. I don’t understand any of this and I’ve really tried to figure it out and it isn’t working. I don’t ever want to hurt you, Skip. Or make you mad at me. I know that people
do that even when they don’t realize it and if I did something to you, you need to believe that I didn’t mean it because I couldn’t mean it. I can’t hurt you or make you mad for a lark or to be cruel. I can’t. It’s just not possible. I need your help this time and all I can do is ask if you’re willing to do that. I can’t make you help me see what I did wrong and how I can fix it, but I can ask so that’s what I’m doing. I don’t want to be here and you’re there, Skip. I don’t want to be here and you’re anywhere but with me. When we took our little walk, I saw two old people on the opposite side of the street. It was an old gent and his wife and I know we’re two blokes, but I thought about how lovely it would be if that was us years and years and years from now. They were talking and smiling and you could tell that they cared for each other so much that nothing else around them mattered. That’s what I want with you, Skip. Doing that for years and years and years and being so happy together that we can be rich or poor or flying or moving boxes or sick with colds or trying to fix flat tires and none of it matters. Because we have each other.

I’m going to finish this up now and then I’m going to wait and give you time to read it and think about it. I have to call Mycroft later anyway and maybe you’ll have said something to him or to Doctor Watson whose then said something to him to let me know if you’re willing to talk to me in person so I can ask you questions and we can talk about what went wrong. I hope you’ll let me do that, Skip. I really, really do. Please take care of yourself and say hello to Doctor Watson for me.

Love,

Arthur

Insert picture of small airplane with GERTI written on the side and two men standing next to her, one with blazing ginger hair.

John loudly cleared his throat before walking into the room and setting down the armful of take-out containers. John decided to ask, even though Martin’s eyes were wet and red-rimmed and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to hear Martin’s answer.

“Well?”

One long letter was placed in his hands before Martin leaned backward to rest his head on the back of the sofa and closed his eyes. John read through the message and felt himself choking up a little at the glaringly obvious affection and sincerity behind the words.

“So, I’ll ask again. Well?”

“I need to think.”

“I’d say that’s a good plan.”

Martin opened one eye and let it turn to catch John’s own pair.

“What do you think I should do?”

“Whatever feels right. There’s no harm in talking to him and if you still feel you can’t move forward, then you can at least do him the courtesy of saying it to his face. Arthur’s a good man, Martin. One of the best I’ve met. I think he deserves his chance.”

“I need to think.”

“You said that.”
“I’m compromised and not thinking clearly.”

“Does that mean I can eat all the egg rolls?”

“I’m never that compromised.”
I apologize for the short update. A colleague of mine said that a certain film trailer for a certain Star Trek film starring a certain actor who also plays a certain detective who provided a spine-shivering voice over for said film trailer was boring. Since I now have to spend my evening burning down her house, I couldn't pull together a longer scene...

“I don’t think I can wait any longer.”

“Arthur, your letter was delivered eight minutes ago.”

“Exactly! Eight whole minutes.”

“It took you nearly three hours to write your manifesto, it would seem prudent to allow more than eight minutes for it to be thoroughly read and analyzed.”

“That’s true. That’s completely true, but I still don’t think I can wait any longer. It’s like waiting for my birthday and Christmas and summer holiday all in one. It is entirely possible that I may not survive much longer.”

“I’m certain you will.”

“I think you may be wrong this time, Mr. Sherlock.”

“As you wish. I will make sure, in the appropriate eventuality, to properly dispose of your body. Perhaps I can have you stuffed and left in Mycroft’s office.”

“That a bit disturbing, though I did read a book one time where there was a man who turned people into zombie dolls and…”

“Fine. I will instead turn you into a zombie doll.”

“But they still had to be alive for that, so your plan won’t work. I think I’d rather you do something good with me, like give needy people my organs.”

“I was actually considering taking your body to the zoo and feeding you to the animals.”

“That would be BRILLIANT! They could get a tasty snack, well I would hope I’d be tasty. But what if I’m not? Here, lick me and tell me if I’m tasty.”

“I refuse to lick you.”

“Come on, please.”

“Absolutely not.”

“But you have to. I mean, I can lick myself but what if it’s like tickling.”

“What?”
“Tickling. You can’t tickle yourself, but other people can. What if when you taste yourself it’s not like others taste you. So you need to lick me and tell me how I taste.”

Sherlock hoped he was successfully hiding the fact that he was currently testing Arthur’s self-tickling theorem. Of course, it would take John to test the remainder. This would likely be one experiment in which John would be delighted to participate. Assuming John ever chose to return.

“Arthur, if Martin decides to discuss your current situation, I doubt the knowledge that you asked me to lick you would work in your favor.”

“Oh! Right. Good call. Maybe Skip can help me with that. When we’re back together. And notice how I said when and not if. That’s me being confident. How many minutes has it been now?”

“You’ll make excellent lion food.”

“Thank heavens for that.”

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“John, here, take the last one.”

“No, you have it. I had all the pork.”

“Yeah, but I got most of the beef. Wasn’t the same though.”

“Oh?”

“Last time I had Chinese it was with Arthur and he insisted on adding pickles to it.”

“Good?”

“God no, it was horrifying. But it so purely Arthur that…”

“It made things special.”

“Yes. Yes, yes, yes…”

“Is that part of your thinking process?”

“One more comment like that and I’ll deem you more than deserving of a pisser like Sherlock.”

“Just for that, you’re all mine Mr. Lonely Eggroll.”

Which was suddenly not there, instead being hefted aloft by Mycroft’s perfectly manicured fingers.

“Ah, the Lotus Garden does prepare marvelous egg rolls. Thank you, John.”

“Good day toppling governments?”

“Unfortunately, all current governments remain standing. Now, ask me again tomorrow…”

Two bites and one smirk and the egg roll breathed its last.

“I’m pleased to see that my guests have been enjoying themselves. I do take my duties as host quite seriously.”

“If you get tired of running the free world, you could easily open up a nice little inn somewhere
in the country. You’ll need to keep a bigger stock of ice cream, though.”

“Hmmm. Tempting. Something to consider for my dotage. Right now, I am more concerned with the details of our current dilemma. I must say that my brother rather outdid himself in terms of communication. Points will be deducted for his use of texting, vulgar media that it is, but I must admit to a bit of pride that he exposed himself to that degree.”

“How do you know… forget it. I forgot who I was talking to.”

“And you, Martin? I am under the impression that you received a piece of correspondence today. May I inquire as to its contents?”

“Sure, why not?”

Martin wiped his fingers before tossing the sheets of paper to his cousin who read it with the same intensity as he did diplomatic papers.

“This is without doubt the most romantic letter I have ever read. And you both are surely aware how much it pains me to say that.”

“Oh yeah, Arthur put his whole heart into that. I’m surprised there’s not blood on the pages.”

“All of it for my cherished little cousin. You must be quite flattered, Martin. Touched, even.”

“Nope, he’s thinking.”

“Does he require assistance?”

“Ha ha the both of you. You could take this a little seriously.”

“I have allowed you to litter my home with grease-sodden paper containers and set your feet on my furniture. I assure you, I take this very seriously.”

“I just need some time! John… you even said you needed some time to get perspective.”

“True. I won’t deny that. However, I know that when I’ve caught my breath, I’ll wind up using it all again arguing with Sherlock to try and crack open that head of his. I won’t say it will accomplish anything, but I do know that if I don’t give him the opportunity to explain himself, I’ll regret it. I will always regret it. I’m just not sure when I’ll be up for the verbal fencing that’s going take.”

“Well, when you’ve cleared your own head you can think about mine.”

“You are very touchy about this, Martin. Are you perhaps worried to be caught out rethinking your attitude towards our dear Arthur?”

“Rethinking is still thinking. Which I could do if two big gits weren’t keeping me from it.”

“Testy. A sign that your adversary’s resolve is weakening.”

“Am I cleared for alcohol, John?”

“It’s, well it’s close enough to evening, I guess. Mycroft… mind if we attack the liquor cupboard?”

“Of course not. The truly expensive bottles are on the top shelf beyond your reach, so feel free
to indulge yourself. I do have some matters to attend to, so if you will excuse me?”

And without waiting for a dismissal, Mycroft appropriated a half-full container of fried rice and disappeared into his study.

“Did he just make a short joke?”

“I think he did.”

“I’m shocked.”

“Me too. I had no idea Mycroft knew any jokes.”

“It’s a brave new world, John.”

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“And how are you today, Arthur?

“Mycroft! Hi! I was going to call you, but Mr. Sherlock took away my phone and said I couldn’t have it back until after he finished doing something with the sole of one Doctor Watson’s shoes and then shoes made me think of clothes, so I started doing laundry and that made me think about tidying, so I started neatening up the flat and…”

“You are quite the dedicated worker bee. I’m sure my brother has lauded you with a veritable basketful of faint praise.”

“Come again.”

“You’re doing a fine job.”

“Oh. Thanks! What can I do for you? Or… do you have some news? Maybe a message or something? It’s ok if you don’t. I mean, I really like talking to you when it’s just to talk but if you did have any news then you could just slip it into our chat and that would be very helpful and sort of fun, too.”

“As it happens, I do have some news to pass on to you. At the moment, Doctor Watson and cousin Martin are enjoying my fine selection of libations and contemplating the contents of the communications they received today. I do believe that your salvo produced some weakening of their defenses.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“It is a very good thing. I further believe that if you press your advantage you will be rewarded.”

“Should I send Skip another letter?”

“The most effective strategy at this juncture requires a more personal touch.”

“Meaning.”

“It’s time for you to speak with him.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Mycroft. Skip was so awfully mad and I’m not sure… I get a little fuddled at times when I’m nervous and I’m going to very nervous when I talk to Skip. And what if he doesn’t want to talk to me?”
“Well, then we have to remove the decision from his hands and stage the battle on beneficial ground.”

“You sound like you have a plan.”

“Always.”

“Arthur, this is ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not. We just have to wait. It’s not midnight yet.”

“Midnight. On a bridge. In a car. In the fog. Trust me, Arthur. This is the definition of ridiculous.”

“You need to learn how to enjoy things, Mr. Sherlock. Oh look! Over there!”

Sherlock watched as a shape darkened a patch of fog further along on the bridge. The shape flashed its headlights twice and Arthur slapped Sherlock on the arm until he repeated the action.

“Ok, let’s go.”

“Arthur, what are you…”

“Come on. If we don’t live up to our end of the deal, bad things could happen.”

“Bad things?”

“Very bad. I don’t like to be alarming, but there is the definite possibility of bullets and bloodshed.”

“Your consonance betrays your insincerity.”

“That sounds like a code phrase! Brilliant! Now, come on.”

Arthur hopped out of the car, ran over to Sherlock’s side and dragged the detective out onto the pavement. The dragging continued until Sherlock was in front of the car where he got pinned by Arthur’s surprisingly strong hand.

“Now, wait here until I call for you. When I do, don’t hesitate. Follow what I say to the letter.”

“Arthur, did you perhaps drink the contents of the Erlenmeyer flask at the back of the refrigerator?”

“It’s for your safety, Mr. Sherlock. Now, behave.”

Arthur straightened his posture and ran a hand through his hair before turning and striding forward, confidently, with his chin held high. Sherlock scoffed at his playacting until he saw another figure walk forward into a patch of light.

“Ah, Mr. Shappey. How good of you to meet me.”

“Hello, Mr. Holmes. Such a nice night to meet an old friend.”

“It is, isn’t it? And I believe you have something I want.”
“I might. I might at that. Perhaps we can work a trade. Do you have anything that might interest me?”

“I believe I do.”

Mycroft held up a hand and flicked his fingers. Sherlock’s knees went weak when he saw John emerge from the fog and move to stand next to his brother.

“I think that will work.”

Arthur held up his hand and flicked his fingers. Then had to turn and wave sharply to get Sherlock moving forward to stand next to him.

“Are you satisfied, Mr. Shappey?”

“I am, Mr. Holmes. Mr. Sherlock, please escort Doctor Watson to the car.”

And, without looking backwards or saying one word, Arthur walked forward and past Mycroft, who turned and followed, also in complete silence. Leaving Sherlock and John alone in the middle of the bridge.

“What just happened, John.”

“Asset exchange, I suppose.”

“And you agreed to this?”

John gave Sherlock a tired smile. But it was a smile, nonetheless.

“I guess I did. Actually, I thought we were going out to buy some beer. Did you know your brother doesn’t keep beer in the house?”

“You could have stayed in the car.”

“Yeah, I could have. But how often does a person get to act out a classic scene from spy novels.”

“True. Do you want to… if you don’t want to come back with me, John…”

“Let’s go home, Sherlock. It’s time to talk.”
Sherlock and John rode in silence back to the flat, but Sherlock kept a surreptitious eye on the man in the passenger seat, alert for any sign that he was changing his mind or showing undue distress. He was not so oblivious to the situation that he was unaware of the tremendous importance and fragility of this moment. Whereas walking a tightrope was normally an activity that Sherlock relished for its challenge and excitement, this time he found himself hesitant, awkward and very uncertain of his talents. This time, above all others, he could not afford to fall.

The silence lasted until both men were in the flat and John had gotten a fire going. The lack of speed which John prepared the fire and then settled himself into his customary chair indicated that he was as nervous about starting this discussion as Sherlock. Of course, however, he had the greater courage for this sort of thing and made the first move.

“I appreciated you texts. They were… good.”

Sherlock took his own traditional seat and felt a tiny flare of hope from the fact that John’s opening remark was positive.

“I meant them. I know that I sometimes can be less than honest or needlessly hyperbolic in my communications with you, but I did try to… I tried to be as clear and truthful as I could.”

Sherlock watched John nod and finally another small smile lifted the corners of his lips.

“I wanted to answer them and be as forthright and focused as you, but I couldn’t. Too much jumbling around in the head. I guess that’s what I need most from you right now, Sherlock. I need you to do for me what you do for yourself – clear the clutter so I can concentrate on the important things. For that, I’m going to need some explanations so I can sort things out. Lay some things to rest, if I’m lucky, or at least sit them in the corner for now so they don’t get in the way.”

“Then there is still a chance?’

“For you and me? I didn’t leave here thinking we were over, Sherlock. But, if I’m truthful, I also didn’t leave knowing I’d come back. Confusing, isn’t it?”

“Another example of why I prefer a more rational approach to things.”

“But not everything is rational. Emotions, desires, dreams… not necessarily rational. But they do make life more rewarding. Even for you – how many cases do you work that don’t involve one of those?”

Sherlock had to admit that John had a valid point. And he wasn’t trying to imply that Sherlock needed to wallow in those things to find reward in his own life. This was exactly why John was so perfect for him. And, of course, for his patience. And bravery. And love of the chase. There would be a list in Sherlock’s future, but he could postpone that contemplation for now. Otherwise,
there wouldn’t be a need for his list.

“I concede the observation. I also concede that these things are personally important to you and your behavior is, to a varying degree, based on the less rational aspects of your life. That is what I need from you, John. How do I provide you a fulfilling relationship when you know that we are treading soundly through my primary area of weakness?”

“That’s what we’re here to find out. And it’s ‘us’ a fulfilling relationship. This has to work for both of us. You have to get what you need, too. If you don’t, that’s just going to breed resentment. I can’t ask from you what you can’t or don’t want to give, Sherlock. That’s not fair. To either of us.”

“What I want is you, John. The way I have you. I want what you already do for me. For lack of a better term, I am happy with what we have. There is no need to concern yourself with satisfying my wants, since that has already occurred. What is required is that I provide for you the same level of satisfaction. I need to know how to do that. I don’t want to lose you, John. I cannot abide the separation. Not again.”

It was not possible for John to miss the intensity of concentration behind Sherlock’s eyes and it served to further crack the wall he had erected around his heart. Actually crack might be an understatement; he felt bricks and mortar beginning to give way. The amount of effort it was taking his… whatever Sherlock was to him… to state clearly what he felt was staggering. What was admittedly difficult for most people, was nearly impossible for Sherlock, but he was trying. Painful as it was to watch, John knew that no matter the outcome of today, this would remain his best and brightest memory of Sherlock Holmes.

“That’s good, Sherlock. It’s nice to know that I haven’t failed you completely, at least in this.”

“You have never failed me. You have failed to meet my standards on occasion, but then no one can rise to that level with any regularity. That you manage it as often as you do is a very serious testament to your worth.”

“Ok… I’ll just focus in on the compliment part of that statement and say thank you. But, you have to promise me that you’ll talk to me, Sherlock. When you need something that I’m not giving or I’m doing something that makes you upset or uncomfortable, you have to tell me. I can’t deduce things like you can. You have to spell it out so I understand. It’s occurred to me that as much as I get frustrated because you don’t understand… neither do I.”

“Are you calling yourself a hypocrite?”

“That would be a ‘no.’ I’m just saying the situation is more complicated than I sometimes like to think.”

“I grant that is true. I find that all emotional issues are more complicated than the participants acknowledge, which is another reason to avoid them at all costs. Can’t we simply agree that you may do whatever you desire if it makes you happy? I believe this is the customary concession by the dominant member of a partnership.”

“Try that again.”

“It is the obligation in traditional relationships for the dominant member of the pair to place value on the happiness of their partner and one measure of the dominant’s success is how well he accomplishes this goal.”
“Ok, hang on. What makes you think you’re the dominant partner?”

“I am taller. Though you have more muscle mass per unit body volume, the human eye interprets size more directly by height than other factors. When asked to state which glass contains more fluid, study participants choose the taller glass over a shorter, wider glass though both glasses contain the same amount. Therefore, height is often interpreted as an indicator of overall size, as opposed to weight or girth, and the larger partner is normally considered the more dominant. I earn a greater share of our overall income, though I admit that the flow of funds is not regular or predictable. I also hold more personal wealth through family means. That means that I am the primary provider, which further associates with dominance. I am intellectually superior, considered more intimidating than you and that is all without taking into account that you readily defer to me in matters of work. Further, you have greater emotional skills and empathy, are more concerned and talented with matters of the home and act as the peacemaker in our dealings with others. You are shorter, tend to blend into the background and follow my lead with almost no hesitation. I realize that relationship dominance is often linked with sexual dominance, which we have yet to explore, though I have conducted thought experiments placing myself in the dominant and submissive positions that produced conflicting results as I find both roles intriguing…”

“OK! Ok… do me a favor will you? Up on your feet?”
Sherlock gave John a curious scowl but complied, only to find himself face down on the floor with his arms pinned behind his back before he could say ‘ow.’

“You used a word that you might want to re-examine, Mr. Dominant – traditional. There is nothing about us that is traditional, so you can toss your analysis into the rubbish bin. Yeah, I let you run out in front when it comes to your work, but do not for one second think that puts you on top of things. And I’m not talking about sex, thank you very much. I like to think that we have a real partnership and that we each get our turn at having the say.”

“You do have a point, but may I still make your happiness a significant concern in my own life?”

John wondered how in the world he got involved with a nutter like Sherlock Holmes? How did he get so lucky?

“Yeah, you can. If I can do the same.”

“I have no issue with that. Now, may I please get up?”

John released his hold and held out his hand to give Sherlock an assist onto his feet.

“Since you said please.”

“I do not understand the cultural insistence on something as irrelevant as politeness.”

“Politeness demonstrates respect.”

“And most politeness is faked.”

“Well, you got me there. I can’t deny that sometimes people are just going through the motions, but it’s not all the time. Sometimes it’s sincere.”

“I don’t know if I can become a polite person, John. It seems so pointless and fabricated. But, I can attempt to be more polite with you if that is something you want.”

“I’m a little worried that if you start being too courteous, I’d spend more time looking for your
pod than getting on with life, so I’ll be happy with a few ‘thank you’s’ on top of the occasional ‘please.’ “

“I will do my best. However, I am also certain that an increased degree of politeness is not going to bring you the reassurance and security you require for our relationship to work.”

John did start looking for Sherlock’s pod and hoped that Arthur hadn’t binned it in case he needed the original packaging to keep this alien Sherlock factory fresh. And the intensity was back in Sherlock’s expression. He was trying so hard to be open and exposed that John was almost afraid to reach out and touch that vulnerability for fear that he would accidentally break Sherlock’s extremely fragile emotional core. Time to tread very, very lightly.

“No… no it won’t. It shows willing though, and that’s important. Highly important, actually. Here’s my problem, Sherlock. Well, one of them. I’m having a hard time reconciling the person that’s sitting here in front of me with the person who regularly and horribly abused a child. A small child desperate for someone to be his friend. Kids can be right bastards and family can be the worst bastards of all, but this… this went completely off the scale! Psychological and physical torture… I’m actually astounded that Martin turned out as well as he did.”

“Martin has an inner strength that is not readily apparent in his demeanor or demonstrated by his behaviors.”

“You know that about him… was that part of it? Did you just think he could take it, so you kept pushing to see how far you could go?”

“That was never a consideration, John. Martin himself was never… in many ways, Martin correctly described our interactions. He was useful to me and I did not let that usefulness go to waste. I never did anything to him, however, for the sole intention of causing him pain. Of any form. The consequences to him of anything I did were not part of my protocols and afterwards I felt…”

It was rare to see Sherlock at a loss for the proper words, but John took no delight from watching it happen.

“Felt what, Sherlock? Regret? Did you feel any regret? Or were you happy? Justified?”

“Some regret. But not regret. Happiness, yes. And satisfaction, but both because of what I’d learned or accomplished, not because he suffered for my success.”

“What do you mean by some regret, but not regret? That doesn’t make sense.”

Sherlock chewed a moment on his lower lip before fixing his eyes on his fingertips and starting to speak.

“I knew when he was damaged. I knew when his body or mind felt pain. I didn’t want that for him, I had never tried to give that to him, so there was a… discomfort… in me, though I cannot say fully that, at the time, it was regret. Regardless, this was not sufficient to prevent me from behaving similarly in the future. I did not wish him harm, but the work came first. So Martin continued to be harmed.”

John hated every word that Sherlock had spoken, but he had wanted honesty and Sherlock was giving that to him. Liking it wasn’t part of the bargain.

“So you were married to your work even as a lad. You… do you understand why I’m worried? That person scares me, Sherlock. That person sees one thing as more important than everything else
and I don’t know if I can live with that. Actually, I do know… I can’t live with that. I can’t live with the worry that one day it will be me you’re cutting open or manipulating towards my own destruction. I can’t live with the worry that it will be me that is calling and emailing and texting and wondering what in the hell it was I did or didn’t do or wasn’t good enough for that you left me behind. I think that hurt Martin worse than anything else. He stayed with you through all of that pain and then he found himself left outside in the rain like the dog no one wants anymore. Do you see? Even if you don’t understand, do you see why I’m worried? Or even that I’m worried…”

“I see. I do see, John.”

“Why did you do it, then? Why did you turn your back on Martin? After everything… he was there for you, with you and you just walked away and left him behind. Why? Can you tell me why?”

“No. I cannot. Not because I don’t want to, but because I cannot provide an informative answer. I am not certain it went any further than he was no longer there and, therefore, no longer worth my attention.”

“Worth your…”

“Not in a moral sense. There were simply other things that demanded my time and Martin was not one of them. I did… I did, on occasion, consider responding to his communications. However, with other matters more pressing, a response moved lower and lower in my priorities until… not even I have a flawless memory.”

“You ignored him until you forgot about him again.”

“Harsh, but accurate.”

John leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. Sherlock looked across at John and focused on keeping the worry off of his face. This he definitely saw as an area of worry for John. But it should not be. In this, John never had to worry.

“I cannot do that with you, John.”

“You ignore me all the time.”

“But I never forget about you. Never.”

“Never?”

Sherlock snorted loudly, but it lacked the righteous irritation of his usual thunderous snorts.

“Fine. For moments here and there, I forget about where you are or what you are doing or what you asked me to do or where you asked me to go. But I never forget about you. You are a constant in my mind. I care about you, John. I care more than I am sometimes comfortable with. I am not used to this situation and feeling you in my mind… having a constant, warm, calm place in my brain is both euphoric and terrifying. It is anything but boring or forgettable. I could no more forget about you or walk away from you than I could reach in with a knife and cut you out of my head. I am not who I was, John. I admit that I have not changed to a degree that most would consider appreciable or even acceptable, but I have learned. I have observed and analyzed and made modifications to my actions. Not in time to make a difference with Martin, but perhaps in time to secure a better future than I deserve. I can see you worry, John, and I know there is nothing I can do but try to reassure you of my sincerity. And I intend to offer this reassurance to you as often as I can. I just need to know what you need from me to do that.”
John swallowed down the lump in his throat before it choked him to death. Sherlock was not backing down from his position, not giving up or turning away. John turned his head slightly and stared at the wine glass, freshly topped with water, still holding his singular and stalwart bouquet. More bricks, more mortar… more rubble at John’s feet.

“Right. Right… what I need from you. I need to know that you now think before you act. And not just about the work, but about what the work might mean for me. I will not… I cannot endure another Baskerville. I need to know that I can come to you with my problems, real problems, and you won’t turn a deaf ear. And that you trust me enough to come to me with yours. I need to know I’m wanted. I don’t need you glued to my hip, but a little touch here and there… maybe I’m getting old, but that is something that’s important to me. I know you’re going to screw up, Sherlock. And I know I will, too. From you, I need you to at least acknowledge it when I tell you I’m upset and put a sticky note in your ‘mind palace’ to try to not do again whatever it was that set me off. Also, you need to tell me when I’ve upset you, for whatever reason, so I can do the same thing. Even if what’s upset you is that you don’t understand why I’m upset.”

Sherlock didn’t even stop to think about an answer.

“I can do that. All of that. I will err, more often than either of us prefer, but if you acknowledge that possibility from the beginning… it is helpful to know that your expectations are realistic and, for my part, achievable. I can promise to try for you, John. And to meet my failures with increased resolve. Will this be enough? If you need more, you have only to tell me and I will agree to that, also. I have never found myself in a position where I wanted to hand over the world to one person, but that is what I want for you. Simply ask me, tell me what you need and how to provide it and I will try.”

The last bits of the barricade around John’s heart crumbled away and it was almost painful for John’s heart to be so freshly reborn. Sherlock Holmes was a flawed man, there was no denying that fact, but he was something besides his flaws. And whatever that something was, it had captured John’s love and John had no regrets or doubts about it anymore. Life with Sherlock was not going to be easy, but when had it been? Life would be exciting, rewarding… a life that John would be proud of living. But, there was one more thing…

“And so will I. God help me, but I want all of that for you, too. But you need to do one last thing for me. You need to make things right with Martin.”

“I would be happy to agree, but I doubt that is within my power, as any truce between he and I will be contingent upon his agreement and that is unlikely, at best.”

“Maybe. I won’t say you’re wrong. But as Martin’s doctor and your… we need to figure that out, don’t we… anyway, your… I have to see about getting this done. I don’t expect a miracle or anything to happen overnight, but I do think you need to have a real talk. Try and see if you can find common ground. His drug use isn’t your fault, nor are the circumstances of his life. But, you did have a hand in shaping what Martin grew up to be and you owe it to him to at least try and make a few repairs. And, I get the feeling that Martin can use as many people in his corner as he can get. It will help him immensely in his recovery, but also… the man just needs some friends! And I like him. And Arthur. I’d hate to have to avoid them just because you and Martin are still at war. Can you make an effort? If it doesn’t work, if he won’t budge… then fine. You did your best and we move on from there.”

“If you can arrange for Martin to be in the same room as me, without substantial danger to my person, I will make an honest effort. Martin was… he was the only person who ever willingly spent time with me without being offered something in return. He did mean something to me, John,
though I could never have described what that was with any accuracy. I don’t even think I can do that today. If he is willing to make the effort to lay down swords, so shall I."

“That’s all I ask. Now, come here.”

“Pardon?”

“Come. Here.”

John wriggled his index finger and the slight motion pulled Sherlock across the room and onto his knees next to John’s chair. John fingers tingled when they touched the skin on Sherlock’s face as he drew the man into a kiss that lasted until saying the words ‘I love you’ was no longer necessary…

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Meanwhile…

“THAT WAS BRILLIANT! I can’t wait to tell Mum that I got to play at being a spy. If it wasn’t for Skip being sick and then being very angry with me, this would be the greatest holiday I have ever had.”

“Well, perhaps we can plan another one for you at a later time that will not be sullied by such unpleasantness.”

“That would be great! I just hope… I really hope with all the hope a person could ever have that I don’t have to do it without Skip. I mean, I would because you and Mr. Sherlock and Doctor Watson are just fantastic and you do such fun things, but…”

“But fun is always best when shared with someone you care about.”

“Yes! I knew you’d understand. You know, I probably shouldn’t say this, but Mr. Sherlock thinks he’s the smartest person in the world, but I’m not so sure, if you know what I mean.”

The tap alongside Arthur’s nose brought Mycroft closer to a real laugh than he’d experienced in a very long time. At least outside of Arthur’s presence.

“Well, let him hold onto his ego-flattering self-image for now, the poor boy can use the boost in morale. Now Arthur, are you ready for this? I can offer you a guarantee that your conversation with Martin will neither be easy nor especially pleasant.”

“I know. I wish I didn’t know, but I do. I don’t mind admitting, Mycroft, that I’m very worried about this. It’s something I’ve never really had to do. Normally, when I date someone and we break up, it’s just a Bye! and Bye! and that’s that done. I just don’t know if I’ll be able to do this correctly. Skip is smart, maybe not like you and Mr. Sherlock, but he is smart and sometimes he can talk me in a big circle and I get confused and then I won’t be able to say what I want to say or just get things jumbled and make it all worse.”

“When in doubt, Arthur, simply be honest. If you do not understand, state that clearly. If the conversation is moving too quickly for you, ask for a moment to think about what is being said. Use what is available to purchase time… a glass of water to sip, a tickle of the throat you simply must clear, a case of anxious legs you need to exercise away. Making a cup of tea is a very agreeable method of inserting a neutral activity into a debate to allow an opportunity for tempers to cool and words to be considered. Martin is quite prone to irrationality and outbursts right now, so do expect that you will need to help control the flow of the conversation, not simply ride along like a leaf in the wind.”
Not that this in any way resembled Mycroft’s personal philosophy for verbal engagement, but situations dictate strategy.

Ok. I can do that. Well, I think I can do that. No… I will do that! This is for Skip. And me. And Skip and me! Whatever it takes, I’m going to do it!”

And he would. Of that, Mycroft had no doubt. The question would be how long it would take to break down Martin’s defenses and circumvent his anger. Fortunately, Mycroft’s people had already made arrangements.

“Good. That is admirably enthusiastic of you. And you will be supported for as long as it takes to win Martin back to your side. There is a room prepared that is yours for as long as you need it.”

“Oh… Thanks! Yeah, I figure this could take a bit. I’ll call Doctor Watson and have him send over my things and…”

“No need. You shall find that you will want for nothing in personal items.”

“Really? That’s… wow! And so fast! But… well, I must admit that I would really like my pajamas. I know it’s silly, but I do sleep better when I’ve got them. They’ve got…”

“Ah yes. I do apologize that we could not procure a pair of koala pajamas for you; however, there is a pair with polar bears available for your use. Will that do?”

Arthur wondered if heaven was this amazing.

“Polar bears? Polar bears. That’s… oh, heaven’s, I feel a bit light-headed.”

“Quite all right. One tiny benefit of having a driver is that one is free to faint in one’s car if the mood strikes.”

“Mycroft… you are brilliant.”

“Thank you, Arthur. So are you.”
Chapter Notes

Breaking this section into two pieces. Won’t be posting tomorrow night, so thought it would keep the flow going a bit better this way...

Very much enjoying all of the encouraging and thought-provoking comments. Thank you all for taking the time and effort to give me the feedback!

Arthur hid behind Mycroft as they entered Mycroft’s home, hoping that Martin wouldn’t spot him right away. Fortunately, the pilot was nowhere in sight and Arthur heard a telly in the background, which was good because it meant that Martin was relaxing. A relaxed Skipper was far easier to speak with than an agitated one.

As Mycroft turned to welcome Arthur to his home, he noticed Arthur’s hand unconsciously rising towards his blackened eye.

“I doubt you shall have physical violence to worry about, now that his body has rid itself of, shall we call them the compromising chemicals? But, if you wish, do take this.”

Mycroft handed over his umbrella to Arthur, who clutched it tightly despite looking a bit panicked.

“You won’t need it, I am certain; however, one’s bearing is always improved by the presence of a quality accessory.”

“Wow… this is very nice. I promise I’ll take care of it! Even if I have to give Skip a little poke or something to make him calm down if he gets a bit shouty.”

“Excellent. But remember Arthur, with great power comes great responsibility.”

“Wait, isn’t that from the Spiderman movie? No… it couldn’t be… Don’t tell me you’re actually…”

“Heavens, no. What good is a secret identity if one allows a movie to be made of it?”

“Oh. Right! So, not Spiderman… Can I see your costume?”

“Another day, perhaps. You have more important things to attend to at the moment.”

“Yes! Yes I do… I really, really do… yes, can’t say otherwise, can I…”

And hearing that flare of uncertainty and procrastination, Mycroft stalked towards his sitting room and flung open the doors.

“Martin, we have an unexpected guest. Do try and behave yourself. Doctor Watson will not be here to sedate you if you lose control of your actions.”

Mycroft ignored the ‘what the hell?’ coming from one side of him and ‘already?’ from the other, simply smirking to himself before leaving to attend to his own, sadly-neglected affairs. Arthur
suddenly felt very unprotected, so he poked the air in front of him a few times with Mycroft’s umbrella to test the weight of the thing before moving forward to face Martin.

“Hi Skip. It’s me.”

Arthur gave Martin a little wave and wasn’t surprised that it wasn’t reciprocated.

“What are you doing here, Arthur? Seriously, what in the world are you doing here? I thought I made it perfectly clear that your company is no longer wanted.”

Arthur tried not to wince at the sting of Martin’s words, but he knew he didn’t do a very good job. He’d never been able to hide anything. But, maybe that wasn’t a bad thing because Arthur caught the briefest glimpse of Martin’s own wince seeing the pain on his face. Maybe there was some hope after all. Arthur gave Mycroft’s umbrella another squeeze and soldiered on.

“No, that’s not right. You weren’t clear, Skip. You weren’t clear at all. You just got angry, and this doesn’t make me happy to say, you also got mean. You didn’t let me talk, you didn’t explain anything in any way that made sense and then you just left. I’m sorry, but I can’t agree that you were clear. Maybe you can do that now, though. That’s why I’m here, Skip. I can’t even try and tell you I’m sorry because I don’t know what I did wrong. And… that’s not fair. You weren’t clear and I didn’t get a chance to explain, which would have been hard, I must admit, since I didn’t know what you expected me to explain, but I still didn’t get my chance. So… there.”

Arthur realized he hadn’t been taking in any air and found that he couldn’t start until he got some signal from Martin. Luckily, it came before Arthur passed out. A resigned scowl twisted Martin’s lips and he jerked his head, motioning Arthur to come further into the room. One very long inhale later, Arthur was able to take in his surroundings. Mycroft’s house was brilliant! It was just like Mycroft with everything being so posh, but not ugly posh like some chairs Arthur had seen in one of his Mum’s antique magazines. It was nicely posh and smelled like his Mum’s lawyer’s office. Well, that and what Arthur thought was Mu Shu Pork; Skip and Doctor Watson had made a very large mess of Mycroft’s brilliant house. No matter what happened tonight (this morning?), Arthur would make Skip help him clean so that Mycroft didn’t have to deal with the mess. He had a very strong suspicion that Mycroft did not enjoy mess.

“Alright, Arthur. I can see your side of things and I have no qualms about making myself understood. Listening? I have no intention of spending time with a traitor. You know where the door is. Goodbye.”

Arthur sat there gaping at Martin and wondered if he was going to fall through the very large hole that had opened inside his belly.

“Traitor? No… No Skip! NO! I am not a traitor! That means I betrayed you and… NO! How can you think that?”

“How? I watched you! That’s how I can think you decided that Sherlock Bloody Holmes was a better… a better person than I was.”

The hole inside Arthur was growing rapidly. It had already eaten into his chest and was quickly exposing his heart and lungs to a cold, dark nothingness. Skip thought that? Arthur was uncomfortable calling someone crazy because some people were crazy and it wasn’t polite to use the word that way, but Skip really was crazy if that was what he was thinking. Arthur tapped the umbrella tip to his toes over and over as he tried to fit together the right words to get through to Martin.
“Silence? How atypical of you Arthur. Must have caught you off guard. No ready reassurance at hand for your Skipper? Used it up making His Highness feel better about himself? Can’t let Sherlock feel bad, now can we? Actually, that’s a ridiculous statement and I do apologize. He can’t feel bad, so it was a silly thing for me to say.”

This was what Arthur had feared so badly. He was nervous and scared and hurt and Martin was good with words and his brain was getting spinnin. He tapped the umbrella harder on his feet and the thump on his toes helped focus his thinking. Mycroft said this would happen, so that meant it wasn’t unexpected or he had done something wrong already. That was good. Now, he had to control the flow of the conversation and not be a leaf in the wind. Though that would be absolutely brilliant, it wouldn’t help him fix things so that thought had to wait. Arthur sifted through Martin’s words and picked out the two bits that weren’t just harsh things meant to hurt him and had his starting point.

“I’m not saying anything right now, Skip because I’m thinking. Also, I think you need to say things, even if they’re not especially nice or helpful, so I’m giving you time to do it. And… that’s ok. Well, not ok, but I’ve been told you would be like this so… it hurts, but I’ll take being hurt right now if it will help you. And us. But here is what my thinking says. You’re upset because you think I believe Mr. Sherlock is better than you. No wait… a better person than you, which is actually a worse thing to think. I don’t. You know I don’t lie, Skip. You know what happens when I even try. So I’m telling you… I’m promising you that I don’t think he’s better than you. He’s different that you, but so is Doctor Watson and Mycroft and me and Mum and Douglas… not better, though. Mr. Sherlock is really brilliant at what he does but he can’t fly a plane. And he doesn’t make me laugh like you do. And I think he’s had it a little easy in life, well, not when he was taking… things… and was in a bad way like you were. Anyway, he hasn’t had it hard like you, but you’ve kept going and maybe things aren’t the way you want them to be, but everything you have you got for yourself and that’s something to be proud of. I’m proud of you… He’s not better than you, not in any way. I don’t think that… I really don’t.”

Martin snorted a very Holmesian snort and picked around through the take-away containers more for something to distract his mind than for something to eat.

“And he can feel, Skip. I know it doesn’t seem like that, but he can. Not… well, not exactly like most people feel and it’s muddied up by his brain and the way he is, but he can. After you left, I talked to Mr. Sherlock for a long time. I mean hours of a long time and he told me a lot. Things that Doctor Watson doesn’t even know. Things about him and you and him and Mycroft and him and other people… and they weren’t good things. Nothing in the world could make them good things and Mr. Sherlock thinks that, too.”

“Oh how nice that he’s now playing the bad boy.”

“No, that’s not the way it is. Like I said, I talked to him and I listened to what he said. Mr. Sherlock doesn’t think of himself as a ‘bad boy’ because you’re using that term like you would for a cute little doggie that’s done something naughty. He thinks he is someone who deserves for Doctor Watson to leave him. For Mycroft to stop trying to help him. For you to hate him. For everyone to stay so far away that he can’t do something to them. It’s hard to explain… Mr. Sherlock doesn’t feel bad about what he did to you, Skip. No… that’s not right. Let me try again… Ok. Mr. Sherlock doesn’t feel bad about what he did to you, but about what he did to you.”

“You are not making any sense.”

“I know! I told Mycroft I’d get jumbled… Mr. Sherlock doesn’t feel bad about doing experiments or learning things. He does feel bad that you got hurt and it made you upset. I think he’s sort of like those people we see selling fun food like kebabs and hot dogs and sandwiches and
things on the street from little carts when we walk around in big cities. They sell things and people eat them and everything is good, but sometimes I see on the telly where someone gets sick from eating from one of those carts. Now, the people selling the food didn’t plan for that to happen, but it did. And they don’t stop selling afterwards, even though they know someone got sick. They feel bad, but they don’t go to work every morning thinking about getting someone sick, so maybe they don’t do things that could prevent it from happening again.”

“Yes, Arthur… they do. There are books of health codes they have to follow and they get shut down when their food makes people ill.”

“Oh. They do? Well, that wasn’t helpful, was it? I’m sorry, Skip. I’m really trying to explain it as best I can but to be honest; Mr. Sherlock didn’t do the best job of explaining it to me. He even said he didn’t understand it very well. I just know that he never meant to hurt you and he wishes now that he could make it so that never happened.”

“I’m sorry Arthur, but I honestly don’t believe…”

“I do. And not because I think Mr. Sherlock is better than you but because he was very upset when he was talking to me and I don’t think Mr. Sherlock gets like that very often. And no, it wasn’t playacting or making fun of me or anything like that. I know when people are upset, Skip. I know when Mum’s really mad or just being Mum and when Douglas gets a call to say that his daughter can’t come and visit even when he doesn’t say what the call is about… I know when people are upset and Mr. Sherlock was upset when he talked to me. And he wasn’t trying to lie, either. I don’t think he would have told me the things he did if he was trying to lie.”

“Arthur, he plays people like his damned violin. Don’t think you can see through his game.”

“I think that was true when you were kids. I do think that. I think that he did an awful lot of terrible things like one of those bratty tots whose Mum’s don’t tell them it’s wrong to run around at the coffee shop or be mouthy to the nice ladies at the library, even though they don’t actually hurt people or make them cry. Though this one horrid little girl did kick that nice Mrs. Peters who runs the flower shop and I think Mrs. Peters did get a little teary…”

“You cannot truly be comparing what Sherlock did to me to that insufferable florist’s bruised shin?”

“No, not really. I’m just saying… those kids did what they did and didn’t see anything wrong with it. They did what they wanted to do and thought that was alright because no one told them any different. And it’s harder for Mr. Sherlock, because I think he has a little problem in that area anyway. Sort of like I have a problem when it comes to some areas like math. I really tried in school, but I just couldn’t understand any of it! Everyone else did and they made it seem so easy and it was all just a big swirly splash of numbers to me. And then they added letters! Mum had to have a little talk with the school and I got to stay out of those letters-in-math classes. Mr. Sherlock has a little problem, too, and he knows that now. I don’t think he knew that when he was small, though.”

“And that excuses everything.”

“No! It doesn’t excuse anything. Mr. Sherlock knows what he did wasn’t good for you. And I, Doctor Watson and Mycroft think that, too. But none of that changes the past. You can’t do that, even though those Back to the Future movies are brilliant! And I think that’s where Mr. Sherlock’s little problem peeks out again. He can’t change the past, so it’s hard for him to see how it matters. I mean… it’s hard for him to want to say he’s sorry or talk about it because it won’t erase things like when I make a mistake with my find-a-word puzzles. To him it’s a bit silly to be sad and upset about things he can’t change, even if we do. Even if we get very upset and sad and angry about
what’s been done to us or things we’ve done to other people. That’s his brain and we can’t change it. At least not quickly. But I think he’s doing better. Mycroft even says he’s doing better and Mycroft is a very smart man, smarter even than Mr. Sherlock, though we agreed not to say where Mr. Sherlock can hear, at least until Mr. Sherlock feels better about you and Doctor Watson.”

“He doesn’t want to feel better about me, Arthur.”

“He does, Skip. Well, ok… I’m not sure that’s completely true. What he wants is for you to feel better. He wants you and Doctor Watson to be happy. He can’t go back in time, but he can try and do better now. I don’t know if you are willing to let him try to treat you differently now that you’re both grown up, but I think he would like that.”

Arthur began to worry that he was going to break Mycroft’s umbrella from the force he was using to grip it, but it had helped keep him from straying too far from what he’d wanted to say. Well, at least some of what he wanted to say. There was still so much more, but at least he had confidence now that Skip would at least listen. He wasn’t shouting or cursing and Arthur hadn’t had to poke him once.

“Arthur… I know that you and Sherlock have connected and that will cloud your judgment…”

“Let’s go to bed.”

Martin looked like he’d taken a raw egg to the face and it took a moment before he could push through his shock.

“I am not going to have sex with you, Arthur.”

“What? NO! I didn’t mean that! I mean… a little cuddle would be very nice, but that’s not what I was saying. Oh, I really do have to take a moment to think before I speak, don’t I? What I meant was we’re both tired and maybe we should get some sleep and see how things go tomorrow. You’re not shouting at me and you haven’t given me any mean eyes, so I think that you are at least willing to keep listening to me and that’s making me feel a lot better than I’ve felt since you got angry with me at the flat. Mycroft said I have a room I can use and he even got me pajamas. Polar bears! Have you ever heard of anything more wonderful! I can’t wait to go to sleep surrounded by polar bears… oh! Sorry… I’m just thinking that some rest will do us good. I’ll cook breakfast tomorrow and we can clean up a bit so Mycroft doesn’t get cross and then we can talk some more. That’s all I was suggesting. Is that ok? Can we take a little sleep and try things again tomorrow?”

Martin didn’t want to want what Arthur was suggesting as much as he did. He didn’t want to agree that he was willing to listen and that willingness was becoming less grudgingly given the more he heard Arthur’s voice and watched his eyes shine. It was definitely time to get some sleep and see what the morning brought because he was obviously not thinking clearly right now.

“That sounds good. I’m not making you any promises, Arthur. I can’t do that. But… tomorrow. We’ll talk some more tomorrow.”

And Martin especially did not want to admit that Arthur’s smile did things to him that made him want Arthur to be sitting next to him rather than so far away.

“Really! That’s brilliant! I’m so happy, Skip… thank you! Really… thank you…”

Martin quickly pulled himself off of the couch and bid Arthur goodnight before he got as quivery as Arthur was becoming.
“Mycrof? Can I come in?”

Mycroft set aside the folder he’d been examining and welcomed Arthur into his study.

“And how goes the battle. I don’t see any blood, so I assume all combatants are still among the living.”

“Well, Skip didn’t get as upset as he has before and he did listen to what I was saying. I decided we needed to take a break and get some sleep. Take things up again tomorrow when we’re fresher. That was ok, wasn’t it?”

Oh, how it warmed Mycroft’s heart to see his pupil so readily embrace his teachings.

“It was an excellent decision. I am sure you will be amply rewarded tomorrow. Do you have a specific plan in mind to woo your errant consort?”

“That went a bit over my head.”

“What are you going to do to rekindle your romance?”

“Oh! I don’t know. I didn’t know what I was going to do tonight but I muddled through and it didn’t go so badly. I guess that’s what I’ll do tomorrow. I’ll just be honest and try to be patient when Skip gets stubborn, because he can get very stubborn when he wants to and hope that it works.”

And perhaps it would. Mycroft knew that Martin’s anger and sense of betrayal wasn’t truly directed at Arthur, so it was quite possible that a simplistic approach would be the most efficient road to an acceptable outcome. If not, he could always arrange a small situation that would appear to put Arthur in danger…

“I can find no fatal flaw with that line of reasoning, so I will wish you good luck and remind you not to become overly discouraged if cousin Martin does become stubborn. As you say, it is one of his greatest talents. Now, shall I show you to your room?”

“That would be quite nice. Suddenly, I’m very tired.”

“Suddenly, you remember your pajamas, I do believe.”

“You caught me.”

“It is one of my greatest talents.”
Arthur woke up with sun on his face, polar bears giving him warm hugs and a large, soft bed cushioning him and his bear friends like a big, puffy cloud. Only one morning of his life had ever been better and that set Arthur’s determination up to the highest point on any possible scale. If he could get his Skip back, every morning could be that wonderful… though this one was also fairly nice and it was quite a long time before Arthur finally swung his legs over the edge of the bed and into the plush polar bear slippers that he had found lying on top of his jammies, as a little bonus surprise. One quick trip to the loo and his brushing -my-teeth song to make sure he brushed long enough as his dentist taught him and Arthur was sliding his way into Mycroft’s kitchen to get breakfast ready.

When he had a house… with Skip… he wanted a kitchen like this. It was like something on one of those cooking programs on the telly. Mr. Sherlock might like his little laboratory, but this was what Arthur wanted for his experiments. And it had everything in the pantry and refrigerator! All the food he could ever want and things… Arthur didn’t even know what a lot of it was but it looked brilliant! Arthur began grabbing pots and pans and filling bowls with ingredients and when he saw the very expensive looking radio on the counter, he turned it on, got rid of the boring news station and found some fun music and began dancing while he got food ready.

Which was how Mycroft found him a few minutes later, though he did take a moment just to watch the exuberant young man before he interrupted his work. Such enthusiasm for life… a lesson his brother dearly needed to learn.

“Ah Arthur, how masterfully you command your environment. I envy Martin the lovely breakfast he’ll receive, which, fortunately, shouldn’t have to sit waiting. I heard a rather loud groan coming from his bedroom, so I am certain he will desire some strong coffee and a hearty meal to prepare for the day. He and Doctor Watson did rather overindulge yesterday.”

“Hi Mycroft! I saw! Don’t worry, though, I told Skip that even if he’s still mad, he’s going to help me clean up. No reason to be untidy, just because you’re having a bit of a sulk. But you’re not staying? I’m going to make scones and you’ve got fantastic things to put into scones like chocolate pieces and teeny marshmallows. A little ketchup will make them a pretty pink so they’re cheerful, too. I’ll just need to find something to make the milk and butter pink, as well.”

Mycroft’s reputation as the Ice Man often came in handy, such as this exact moment as he tried to keep both the amusement and trepidation off of his features.

“I do regret that I will miss this opportunity to sample such an exotic morning meal, but duty calls. And so should you, if you require anything. I or an associate will be on hand for whatever you might need. Even… even if it just to hear a friendly voice.”

“Thank you, Mycroft. You’re the best! And don’t worry about breakfast, I’ll have plenty of opportunities to cook for you, I’m sure! Have fun at work!”

Oddly, Mycroft looked forward to those opportunities…

When he had mounded the small kitchen table with food, Arthur peeked his head out of the kitchen and looked around for Martin. When peeping didn’t work, he crept through the house until he finally found Martin in Mycroft’s study.
“Hi, Skip. It’s a very nice morning isn’t it?”

Martin took in the entirety of Arthur’s ensemble and felt an unwelcome twinge of tenderness for the man in front of him.

“Yes. It is. Quite nice.”

“And you slept well? My bed was brilliant! I didn’t know they even made beds that soft and comfy. I’d ask Mum to buy one for me but I suspect it might be a tad expensive and you know how she is about money.”

Martin knew very well how Carolyn was about money. Hence his current use of Mycroft’s computer.

“I’m certain she would have something to say about that and you’d want to cover your ears while she said it. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m trying to do something…”

“Oh! What is it! Can I help! I’m brilliant with computers. Really, I am. I can make them play videos and songs and find all sorts of information on the Internet, though a lot of that is… I really, really hope I never find some of that again. And my computer skills were a big help finding you since I had to watch lots of videos and collect information and fast forward and type and all sorts of things. So, can I?”

“No. This isn’t something I need help with. And I suspect you wouldn’t want to anyway.”

“Wrong. I always want to help you, Skip. Even if it’s a little boring. Or muddy. Or uses all the jam.”

“I’m trying to find a job. And a flat. Not, before you ask, in Fitton.”

“What? No… no, I’m sorry, Skip but you can’t do that. Not right now.”

“I most certainly can. See my fingers tapping on the little keys?”

“Ok, you can, but you can’t. You promised me that we’d talk and work on things today.”

“The only promise I made was that I wasn’t going to make any promises.”

“You said we would talk and if you’re already looking to leave then that means you aren’t really going to talk. You’re just going let me talk and then walk away and that’s not fair. Or right. So, no… you can’t do that right now. Not until I’ve had my chance.”

Martin had to admit that, though he didn’t show it often, Arthur’s backbone was made of stern stuff.

“Alright. You win. You want to talk… talk.”

“Well not now! You’re all pouty so that’s no good. And besides, I’ve got breakfast ready. So here’s what we’ll do. We’ll have breakfast and not talk about what it is we’re going to talk about later and just have a nice time. Then we’re going to neaten up Mycroft’s house and after that we can have our talk. Unless you want to do something too, like play a game or take a bath.”

Arthur was certainly holding his ground today and Martin had a suspicion that if he had to, Arthur would find rope and strap him to a kitchen chair for their meal and discussion.

“Breakfast it is, then. And a whip round to clear out the rubbish before the fun begins.”
“That’s a bit flippant.”

“Just a bit? I was going for heroically flippant.”

“You know you won’t make me let this go, right?”

“That, Arthur, is one thing I know for certain.”

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Martin had found that drinking Arthur’s coffee first was usually sufficient to numb his tastebuds so that the rest of the meal was far more palatable. So, it was with little anguish that a full plate of breakfast made it into his stomach and he even asked for another scone, since they were filling and the ketchup both in the scone and smeared in the middle added an intriguing piquancy. Happily, Arthur was content to simply chatter away about whatever was happening on the radio, Mycroft’s kitchen, every other part of Mycroft’s house, polar bears or a hundred other topics that seemed to ricochet around his brain like stray bullet. And, of course, he had to sing while they returned Mycroft’s sitting room to its original pristine condition, using stray plastic forks as dance props to his own songs. All the while Martin did his level best to ignore that he was enjoying himself more than he had in a long while. But, that was the way with Arthur. He made even the smallest, most mundane activity an enjoyable experience. Not that such a thing was important to Martin, of course.

Once Arthur pronounced the house clean per his satisfaction and he agreed to change clothing more befitting a serious discussion, the two men resumed their places in the sitting room and each took a mental deep breath to prepare for what was to come.

“So, Arthur. What do you want to talk about?”

“Us. Me and you, I mean. Not just me and you, but me and you. We didn’t get much of a chance to do that last night and that’s ok, because we had to start somewhere and we talked about important things, which was good, but now I want to just talk about us. I want an us, Skip. I’ve wanted that for a very, very long time and it was marvelous when we were an us. Tell me the truth, Skip. Not with the angry brain you’ve got right now, but with the normal brain you had before – did you like being an us?”

How could someone as innocent as a lamb be as ruthless as a shark? Martin had a feeling that Mycroft had started taking on students.

“The truth is yes. I did like being an us. It was the most…”

Martin’s anger flared as he felt his voice catch from the emotion of the memory of his brief time as Arthur’s Skip.

“…it was the most perfect thing I’d ever experienced. If it hadn’t been, the hurt wouldn’t have been as crippling when it was destroyed.”

It surprised Arthur that the terrible admission made him deliriously happy, but his heart felt as free as a chirpy baby bird. If Skip felt that way and valued what they had so much… then part of him had to want to get it back. It was too important, too wanted, too everything to just let die. Skip’s happy heart and brain knew this, so the trick was to get those to elbow aside the angry versions and take over again.

“Not destroyed, Skip. Just… hidden, maybe. Hidden under a lot of bad emotions that I completely understand. Ok no… I really don’t, but I understand that you’re feeling them and that’s what we’re going to talk about. Also… now don’t get even more angry at this, but… are you feeling
well? I mean for the… other problem. You look very tired and you’re a bit shaky at times. Doctor Watson said that getting all the poison out of your body was only the first step. So… are you feeling well?”

Trust Arthur to ask the one question no one had yet even thought of besides him. No, he was not feeling well. He wanted to tear Mycroft’s immaculate house to pieces to try and find something. Right now felt like he could murder someone for a couple of pain pills or a few sleeping tablets. The sleep he had been getting was fraught with dreams he didn’t enjoy remembering and not a bit of the alcohol that had gone down his throat completely erased his mental craving for something. No, he was not feeling well.

“Skip?”

“Sorry… I’m fine, Arthur.”

“No, you’re lying and you’re not fine. Right now you should be honest with me. About everything. Even if I don’t want to hear it, you shouldn’t lie or try to hide things. Is it… bad?”

“Alright, yes. Not as bad as the detox process, but it’s not a jolly frolic in the park.”

“Is there something that would help you? Something I can get you or do for you? Even if you’re mad at me, you shouldn’t not get the help you need to feel better.”

“John probably has something, but I’m sure he’d just start going on about me seeing a counselor also, and that’s not something I want right now.”

“Oh. Why not? It would be good to talk to someone who went to school for talking to people. I mean, you can talk to me anytime. All day. Even all night. I’ll drink tea and stay up for as long as you need me to so we can talk about how you’re feeling. But I don’t know if I can say the right things for… that… and tell you ways that might help you feel more like yourself.”

And he would, too. Arthur would dedicate himself wholeheartedly to paying attention to his troubles, being his confidant and sounding board and Arthur would cherish every minute of it. Not something Martin wanted to think about right now.

“I know you would, Arthur. And I do appreciate the thought. That’s just not something I want to talk about with anyone right now. You wanted honesty, so here goes. Even thinking about what I did makes me feel like such a failure, I just want to dive back in and shove pills down my throat until I can’t think about anything anymore. Talking to people about how I feel… I can’t begin to fathom doing that at the moment. It would be like contemplating scaling Mount Everest with my bare hands.”

Even though Martin wasn’t looking at Arthur, the floor being the only place his eyes seemed able to point, he could feel the extreme sadness and concern radiating from him. It wasn’t unexpected when he felt a slight graze of a hand over his arm.

“Please, Skip… even just as a friend.”

Arthur’s arms wrapped around Martin’s body and drew him against his chest, resting his cheek against Martin’s disheveled curls. And it was savaging Martin that this felt so good. Arthur’s body was warm and that warmth crept into Martin’s bones like nothing else in the world ever could. And his scent… breathing in the scent from Arthur’s skin settled the cravings, the twitches, the worries, the uncertainties… It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that something this beautiful could exist in the world, in his grasp, and he’d lost it. But… maybe for this one stolen moment, he could at least pretend and
he pressed himself closer to Arthur and relaxed into his embrace.

“You can let go now.”

“Do I have to?”

Martin pushed back and Arthur released his grip.

“Yes. You said you wanted to talk and this isn’t doing it.”

“No, but it’s nice. Like it should be. Hugs are supposed to feel good and especially when you care a lot about the person you’re hugging. So if it felt really, really good, like it did for me, that means you care about the person an awful lot. I know it felt really, really good for you, Skip, because you got all soft and bendy and you made a little happy sound when I fiddled with your hair, so that means you still care about me. You’re mad, but you still care and I’m going to fight as hard as I can to make you see that and accept that we can be an us. As soon as you let me know really why you’re mad, that is. I never did anything to betray you, Skip. I really didn’t.”

Martin dropped himself onto the sofa with a very dramatic ‘thud’ and fixed Arthur with a skeptical eye.

“That’s not how I see it.”

“Then tell me. Tell me how you see things. I’ve tried, Skip. I’ve thought and thought about what little you said before you left and I can’t make it make sense.”

Martin rubbed his face. Then his eyes, watching the little flashes of light the rubbing produced.

“Sherlock is a sodding bastard, Arthur. You sided with him over me. You wouldn’t believe me when I told you to watch out for him. You wouldn’t believe me, Arthur. I’ve never given you any reason not to believe me, but you didn’t. You sat there and took his side and left me on the other end of the field wondering one more bloody time why Sherlock had gotten what he wanted and I was tossed away like a piece of rubbish. By you, Arthur! Someone I wanted to make a life with and you just ran smiling and laughing to Sherlock fucking Holmes and I choked on a mouthful of your dust!”

“NO! Wrong wrong very wrong! VERY VERY WRONG! The WRONGEST! Maybe that’s what you believed, Skip, BUT THAT DOESN’T MAKE IT THE TRUTH!”

Martin visibly flinched at the force of Arthur’s near yell.

“You were being rude and getting upset and none of that was making things easier. And I’d been with Mr. Sherlock, maybe not for very long, but long enough all day every day to see how hard he was trying to find you. Maybe that’s what you don’t want to hear, but it’s the truth. He tried hard and was in Fitton quick as a snap when he got my text, well, your text. Now, I must admit that looking back at things, he wasn’t all weepy or nervous or doing things that I do when I’m very worried. But he was there. He didn’t have to come, Skip. He didn’t. But he did. To me, that means something. And you… you were a bit out of your head. You haven’t been like yourself at all and people don’t always say what they mean or even things that make sense when they’ve got wooly thinking. That doesn’t mean I walked away from you. It doesn’t mean I thought you were actually lying. I did think that you might be seeing things a little funny, what with the… thing… you were going through. Maybe like you’d say I was a bit off in my thinking if I’d had a little drink or two. Actually, you think my thinking’s off quite a bit of the time. And… you think I’ve got the wrong end of things an awful lot. Yeah… what does that mean, Skip? Am I supposed to think you’ve
betrayed me every time I say something and you say I’m a loony? Am I supposed to say we’re through and I don’t love you anymore because I’d be doing that an awful lot! So… your turn.”

Arthur had crossed his arms and was trying to look very tough, but he mostly looked anxious and maybe even a little frightened by his outburst. Martin would wager he probably looked about the same. Arthur was putting his all on the line and, although Martin had seen the man’s passion about everything in life, he’d never witnessed Arthur pushing this hard and refusing to back down from the fight. Now was not the time to think about some of the words… or word… that Arthur used, though. Not the time for that, at all…

“My turn… ok… I know Sherlock. I know who he is and what he can do. And I saw you take to him like you do to people and I knew he didn’t deserve it. And I tried to tell you. Tried to get you away from him for your own good and I got slapped down for trying. My word simply wasn’t good enough for you. Maybe… maybe the drugs made me more… antagonistic against Sherlock than I would usually be but, I still had cause. And I didn’t want his filth on you, Arthur. Not you… and when you just accepted him so easily and told me I was the one in the wrong… I felt something break inside. Snap clean in two. How do you fix that? How do you mend something that’s just in pieces…”

“By wanting to. And by working on it.”

Arthur took a chance and sat down next to Martin on the couch, just a little closer than was normal for ‘just friends.’

“I didn’t know, Skip. Maybe I should have just taken you at your word, but if I did that to anyone else you would have called me naïve or gullible or something else like that. I didn’t know… We, that’s Doctor Watson and Mr. Sherlock and Mycroft and me, all thought that it was best to wait until you were better before we talked to you about you and Mr. Sherlock’s problems. If that was dumb, then I’ll say I’m sorry. And I’ll mean it! We were just trying to keep you from having extra stress because you were already so terribly stressed. I couldn’t have let you attack Mr. Sherlock, Skip… but I could have talked to you more and gotten a better idea of why you were acting the way you were. I’m on your side and I always will be, but you know I can’t always agree with you, right? Just like you don’t always agree with me. I think part of the problem is that this is a big deal for you, the whole Mister Sherlock business. It seems VERY big to you and it is… it really, really is. But I think you’re also making other things VERY big when they really aren’t. I like Mr. Sherlock. He’s been decent to me and he let me help him when other people just try and make me go away and leave them alone. But I more than like you, Skip. I more than like you, even if I don’t agree with you on some things or you don’t agree with me or I do something dumb or you get a bit stubborn… now and then you can be a bit rude to me, too and I still don’t want to have anyone else as a boyfriend, because that’s just the way people are. They have good bits and not so good bits and as long as the good bits win out, then Bob’s your uncle. Don’t I get the same from you? Shouldn’t I? I haven’t done anything to you either, Skip… I haven’t lied or played tricks on you or been cruel, so why don’t you want to take my side? Believe that I’m saying and that we can be an us and can love each other and have a little house and cuddle in front of the fire and decorate for the holidays and have that for years and years…”

Martin felt like he was trying to swim through concrete. Usually, it was Arthur trying to grasp the threads of words that flew by him too quickly or too high over his head but this time it was for him to race and try to catch up.

“It’s more complicated than that, Arthur. I wish it wasn’t, but it is. I need someone in my life that I can count on. Someone in whom I have faith to be there with me no matter what. Someone I don’t have to plead with or bribe or beg… I needed you to stand with me and you weren’t there. I’m
“But I was! I was there with you and trying to help you. I did take your side and stay by you when you needed me. And I tried to make things as easy for you and have little bits of fun. Keep you safe and calm and you’re just angry that I don’t hate Mr. Sherlock and he doesn’t hate me. That’s it, isn’t it? He hasn’t hurt me or said ugly things to me and that makes you feel even worse than you did before. Now you think you’re not even as good as me and that’s making your heart feel like it’s all clogged up with leftover porridge. I haven’t done anything wrong, Skip. I’ve done everything I can to show you that I care, but you have to let go of that hate. That’s the porridge in your heart and until you make it go away, you won’t be able to let anyone care for you. Not like you deserve.”

It wasn’t like that. No. It wasn’t. Arthur was wrong.

No he’s not

He is! He fell for Sherlock’s smoke and mirrors and…

Arthur’s sweet but not stupid

He told me I was wrong.

What if I was

I can’t trust him.

Then I can’t trust anyone

He wasn’t there for me.

He’s always there for me

I need someone who has faith in me.

He loves me

And wants a life with me

What if I disappoint him?

He’ll forgive me

Can I forgive him?

Is there anything to forgive?

__________

Martin had no memory of Arthur sliding closer and drawing his head over so that it rested on the larger man’s shoulder. When the fog cleared he keyed in on a quiet humming and a hand idly patting his knee to the beat.

“Is that from Annie?”

“Brilliant! We watched that ages ago and you still remember!”
Martin straightened himself out and looked over towards Arthur's grinning face.

“I tend to remember movies that have you following along with the song-and-dance routines in the middle of my room.”

“That’s why I love movies like that! You can sing and dance and have a great time. And watch a movie, too!”

Martin couldn’t hold back the chuckle seeing Arthur’s honest enthusiasm and got off the couch to stretch and shake away some spiderwebs in his head. He should have known that Arthur would be close behind and felt the man’s body heat against his back as he looked out of one of Mycroft’s very clean windows.

“What am I going to do, Arthur?”

One arm wrapped itself around Martin’s waist and Martin didn’t spare a moment’s thought before leaning back to rest against the one person who had ever fought to keep him. Who wanted him, knowing his secrets and failures and inadequacies.

“What you want to do. I hope what you want to do is be my boyfriend again and let me hold you like this and kiss you again and see you smile and laugh. And I hope that what you want to do is try and make peace with Mr. Sherlock so that the terrible hate doesn’t keep eating big holes in your insides and making you hurt.”

“The former… I want that. I don’t know how it will work out once we get back home…”

This little chuckle was for Arthur’s whispered “yes!” and tiny jig that shook them both.

“…but if I don’t at least admit that I want you, us, I will be the failure I feel like. But the rest… I don’t know if I can. I’m sorry, Arthur, but I’ve spent so long with that inside me and… I don’t know if I can ever forgive him.”

“You won’t know for sure unless you try. No one expects you to be best mates, Skip. No one expects you to forget, either. But you’re hurting and at least letting some of the bad things in your heart get a chance to escape may make you hurt less. I really don’t want you to hurt, Skip. And… I think Mr. Sherlock wants a chance to be better to you. To try and at least be someone else that you can talk to or visit or come to if you need help. He’ll never be a jolly, happy person but, at least…”

Arthur went strangely quiet and Martin started to twist around to see what was wrong, only to be more tightly held in place.

“Arthur, what is it?”

Arthur stayed quiet and Martin felt an uncomfortable tendril of worry snake up his spine.

“Arthur, please tell me…”

“Roll up my sleeve, will you Skip?”

Still unsure of what was going on, Martin rolled up the sleeve of the arm Arthur was wiggling in front of him.

“Ok, now what.”

“Look around my elbow. Down towards the pointy part.”
Martin turned Arthur’s arm slightly and didn’t see anything but a few faint white lines.

“Do you mean those little scars? Sorry, but I’ve got you beat there, mate.”

That was not a happy laugh from his again-boyfriend and Martin did turn around this time to face Arthur.

“You’ve met my Dad, Skip. He’s not a very nice man, sometimes. Well, most of the time. I was dancing in front of the telly and he told me I was terrible and should stop. I tried to show him that I was actually pretty good and he swatted at me with his lager bottle and it broke and I got cut. That’s the only thing he ever did that left a mark you can still see but… he liked to pinch me. He’d pull me by the arm so my shoulder really hurt. He’d tell me I was an embarrassment, retarded, pitiful… not like Mum says it because she really doesn’t mean it, but quite nasty because he did. He’d tear up my drawings and tell me they were crap. My Dad did things just to make me feel bad. Just to make me hurt. There wasn’t any other reason or point to it. I didn’t suffer like you did, Skip, but I’ve always known that my Dad did things for no other reason than to make me suffer. At the very least, Mr. Sherlock never did that to you. He didn’t want you to hurt like my Dad wanted me to. But I still try with him. I send him a birthday card and a Christmas card and talk to him when he calls and send photos of me and Snoopadoop and GERTI, but not Mum because they don’t get on well, as you know. Anyway, I do it because I hope that one day he’ll want to be better for me and we can be a real Dad and son. It won’t erase anything, but I’d like the chance to maybe try to start again and see if we could have something better this go around. I think you and Mr. Sherlock could do that. Try and have something that’s not so scary and hurtful. He wants to try if you do. Just think about it. It won’t make me care about you any less if you can’t do that. I’ll just have to try and find other ways to make your heart spit up the porridge.”

Martin stared at Arthur’s bright and moist eyes for what seemed like an eternity before drawing the taller man down and pressing a long, warm kiss to his firm, welcoming lips. Martin knew that if he could feel this every day, Arthur’s lips against his and hand roaming up and down his back, he’d be able to face whatever life decided to throw at him. And maybe… a gargantuan and kraken-like… he could find it within him to sit in a room and not want to drive a knife through Sherlock’s eye.

“Well, isn’t it fortunate that I had to return for some papers else I would have missed a scene of romance worthy of the grandest film classic Hollywood ever produced.”

“If that means Skip’s kisses make my toes tingle, then you’re right!”

Of course Mycroft had to witness their reunion… Martin suspected that he’d actually been watching them the whole time from some hidden room in the house using a battalion of hidden cameras. Mycroft would agree with this suspicion, though he would find it impolite to say so out loud.

“How delightful. I believe this calls for a celebration. I would be honored if the both of you would join me for dinner this evening. Just the three of us, so you may stow away your furrowed brow, dear cousin. I have no intention of spoiling such a monumental day with my brother’s petulant yapping. And a good meal is wasted on him anyway. Now, how does that sound?”

A lot like admitting to spying.

“Brilliant! Oh, that sounds marvelous, doesn’t it, Skip?”

“Oh yes… marvelous. I assume proper attire will be arriving this afternoon.”

“You always were the clever boy. Now, I must retrieve my documents and bid the two of you
good day. Reservations will be for 8:00 pm and there is a car waiting if you decide to venture outdoors today. I trust you will find a wealth of things with which to amuse yourselves.”

Martin was surprised Mycroft actually took the time to get a file from his study to complete his ruse, but perhaps this time he actually was going to do whatever it was Mycroft did for a living. Not that Martin was entirely sure he wanted to know.

“Dinner with Mycroft… this could be painful.”

“You’re just being sour, like one of those candies that makes your whole head feel like it’s being twisted four ways at once. Mycroft is a lot of fun! And he’s very funny so we’ll have a super time.”

Martin would never admit to the tiniest of worries that it was actually Mycroft that was the threat to his relationship with Arthur. Happily though, that worry was for Mycroft’s attempted plucking, not for Arthur’s possible offering.

“I know I’ll have a super time, Arthur. You’ll be there.”

If small compliments bought him kisses that large, Martin would have to start compiling a very substantial list.

“So, what do you want to do? Mycroft gave us a car and maybe… oh! There’s a gallery I want to bring you to because the man who drove me to see Mycroft at his club has a painting there and I wouldn’t mind doing a bit of shopping because I should probably get Mum a little present for being gone so long and there’s still so much I just want to see and if we have a car we can get to lots of places quickly and…”

“Anything you want, Arthur. We can do whatever you’d like. This can be your day. My little ‘I’m sorry for being a colossal berk and letting myself think that you were anything but the most special man in the world’ present. That Mycroft will pay for, but I’m strangely fine with that this one time.”

And another kiss that gave Martin thoughts than ran slightly on the wrong side of the line of impurity, but nothing was going to derail their chance to enjoy a grand day in London. Arthur deserved nothing less.

“We should get him a present, too. Mycroft’s been a real friend and I already got him an orangutan from the zoo but maybe we can find him something else that’s special.”

“Like a boyfriend?”

“Does he like boys?”

“I think he favors men, but maybe he’s looking for that one special cyborg instead.”

“Skip…”

“How about an umbrella?”

“Brilliant! Maybe we can find a nice one with ducks or rainbows or happy raindrops on it.”

“Perhaps a tad casual for him. Businessman and all…”

“Oh. Right! We’ll find something though. It will be like a scavenger hunt, but without a list and lots of people skittering about digging through bins.”
“I’m tingling with anticipation.”

“Are you sure that’s why you’re tingling?”

How Arthur Shappey could look shy and naughty at the same time was mind-boggling.

“I’ll admit you’re a man of many talents.”

“I am! And you haven’t even heard me yodel.”
John took a mental inventory of himself and his surroundings as soon as he pushed the last of the sleep out of his head. In his own bed, boxers on his bum and socks, for some reason on his feet. Blankets on the floor and, in their place, at least on his legs, was one similarly clad detective whose face was hovering about an inch above John’s right knee.

“If I ask what you’re doing, will I get a headache?”

“I am studying your body, John, specifically, at this moment, your patella. Your knee, if you prefer.”

“Yeah, got that. We did study knees in, oh what was that called? Medical school.”

“But, did you know that your right knee is three percent smaller than your left? There is a similar relationship with your elbows. Your shoulder joints I excluded from my examination due to the trauma from your gunshot wound. I shall move to your ankles next.”

Ok, non-lethal. Benign, actually and John had to admit that being the subject of Sherlock’s complete attention, even for his joint construction, was oddly flattering.

“Bodies aren’t perfectly symmetrical, despite first impressions.”

Sherlock looked up from his study and gave John a very familiar ‘don’t include me in any statement that highlights the general stupidity of the masses.’

“Your skin texture also varies significantly from area to area. I anticipate it will take me quite a number of hours just to quantify the properties of your skin.”

“And that’s important?”

“Very. You are important to me; therefore I must learn everything I can about you.”

“Well, when I was five I had a favorite blanket that had trains on it and…”

Sherlock’s bite on his thigh did more than stop John’s sentence and Sherlock’s narrowed eyes told John the soft moan that he’d let escape had not gone unnoticed.

“You like that?”

“I guess so.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I kind of am. No one’s done that before.”
Sherlock wriggled upwards a bit and gave John another firm bite a little higher up on his leg and let a small smile cross his lips as John’s back rose slightly from the bed. And using his tongue to soothe the lightly reddened skin dragged the most interesting noises out of his partner’s mouth. In fact, the more Sherlock used his tongue, the more vocal John became. Sherlock mentally cursed the fact that he had not established a baseline yet, else he could have taken data on which combination of tongue and teeth produced the most rapid rate of sexual arousal and erection for his partner/lover/friend/lifemate… they really did have to come to some agreement on terminology.

“Sherlock, if you wanted to take things slowly, this is really not the way to go about it.”

“I find that the pace of our interactions is not as much of a concern right now as I might have expected. Now, be quiet so I can monitor your parasympathetic reactions.”

“You say the most romantic things.”

“Only to you.”

A good scientist uses all of his senses to gather information and all five of Sherlock’s were quickly becoming oblivious to all other stimuli except those associated with John. His taste, his appearance, his scent, his feel, his sounds… nothing in Sherlock’s life had been able to completely silence the rest of the world as effectively as pleasuring John. That his own body was experiencing its own set of reactions was secondary. But not unwelcome.

Sherlock did something he had never done before and simply let his instincts guide his tongue, his fingers, his teeth, moving upwards over John’s body, nudging away bits of cotton to take small tastes of the skin they were concealing. And he made a mental note that (a) John’s body writhing against him was extremely arousing and (b) he liked having his hair pulled by John’s strong hands when extremely aroused. While licking circles around the rim of John’s navel, Sherlock began to work his thumbs under the waistband of John’s pants and…

His mobile rang.

“Sherlock Holmes, do not…”

Sherlock was already off of the bed retrieving his phone from his coat pocket.

“It’s Lestrade. He needs me.”

“I bloody well need you!”

Sherlock wavered a moment before nearly leaping onto John, covering him entirely with his body and taking his lips into hard kiss. He lined up his own needy flesh with John’s and began to move his hips, dragging upwards and downwards with startling friction.

“Will this be enough to satisfy you, John?”

“As long as you don’t stop again!”

That was the last possible action occurring to Sherlock as he felt the sharp spikes of pleasure driving through his skin and deep into his core. He was certain he could feel every nerve in his body and all were in agreement that whether or not Sherlock deserved this bliss, it was exquisite nonetheless. John must have harbored similar feelings because it wasn’t a matter of minutes before Sherlock’s name was shouted out, filling every part of the room and a warm, wetness stained John’s pants. The extra assault to his senses pushed Sherlock over the cliff edge he’d been teetering on and it was only the mouthful of John’s shoulder he was trapping that kept John’s name from following his own out
into the flat.

“Ok… ok… that was… yeah, I’ve got nothing to compare that with.”

Sherlock wasn’t so undone that his ego didn’t preen a bit at the compliment. John had *quite* a bit of experience in this area.

“I concur. And now that we have formalized our relationship, I assume that we may indulge in such activities on a regular basis.”

“Yeah, we can shag whenever we want.”

“Everyday, I find new reasons to approve of our arrangement.”

“Love you too, Sherlock.”

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“Are you sure you’re alright. Why don’t you let them take you to hospital anyway, just to be sure?”

“I am fine, John. I have *been* fine each of the last ten times you’ve asked me.”

“Pardon me for worrying about the blood all over you and the fact that you called me James the first two times I asked.”

“I did?”

“And you called Greg ‘Mycroft’, which admittedly was pretty funny.”

“Then I do apologize. I must have *some* impairment to insult Lestrade to that degree.”

It should have been a simple affair. Examine the murder scene of a very average businessman with an above average art collection. Of course, Sherlock had to pursue the clues he discerned through four different locations in the city, only to arrive at an unassuming townhouse where the deceased’s mistress lived with her new lover and his merry band of home invaders. In the melee that followed, John must have run a mile at top speed to take down and detain two of the perpetrators, earning a few knife wounds on his arms, more ugly than damaging. Sherlock’s own battles were closer to the townhouse, but he took away a nasty scalp laceration and probable concussion for his troubles.

“Apology accepted. Just let me know if you start to feel nauseous or light-headed, experience undue fatigue…”

“I am aware of the symptoms of concussion, John.”

“Little reminder never hurts.”

Sherlock gazed over at the man sitting next to him on the curb, looking anywhere but at him.

“I promise to tell you if I notice any signs of brain trauma.”

One long-fingered hand reached over and rested itself on top of John’s own.

“And I want to thank you, John. For not staying behind with me.”

John cut his eyes at Sherlock but saw no sarcasm in his partner’s expression.
“What do you mean?”

“I had worried that, with our new circumstances, you might make choices that would be detrimental to the work.”

“Like saving you rather than catching a criminal.”

“Yes. But you didn’t and that… I was very pleased with your actions.”

John couldn’t hold back his very tired and rather frustrated chuckle.

“Yeah, well… I can’t say that will always be the case. This time, I knew you could handle yourself. And, I won’t deny that I knew you’d probably feel insulted if you thought I didn’t believe you could take care of yourself. But, if it truly comes down to a decision between your life and your work, I will choose your life. Maybe I won’t choose a bumped head or a broken arm… but I will choose your life.”

Sherlock felt a swell of pride try to push its way out of his chest. There was no one, no one, more suited to him… more perfect… than John Watson. He understood, as well as cared.

“And I will hold myself to the same standard. I will not let your life be lost because of my work, John. I will do everything in my power to prevent that.”

John turned his hand palm-up under Sherlock’s and squeezed.

“While you’re at it, try and keep an eye on my hands too, ok? Can’t do much doctoring with dodgy hands.”

“Of course. Now, may we return home? I have more work to do for my tests on passive oxygen infiltration into dead tissue.”

“Sounds like a barrel of laughs. Since no one’s talking to us anymore, I suppose we can leave. Although… why does Lestrade keep staring at us like that?”

“For one thing, he is likely wondering why we are holding hands, probably concerned that I have suffered a greater degree of head trauma than he first suspected. Secondly, note that he is using his mobile. The fact that he continues to keep his attention on us, while simultaneously trying to hide his mouth from me in case I can read his lips tells me that he is informing on us to my brother.”

“Well, you did get a bop on the melon and Mycroft is your emergency contact.”

“No, that is you.”

“Oh, well… then shame on Greg tattling to Mycroft like that.”

“Precisely. Shall we go.”

“Absolutely. I’m feeling offended.”

“As you should. And… if my own inquiries can be laid to rest sufficiently early, you might feel something else.”

“Cab!”
Martin sat in their borrowed car, in a suit that likely cost as much as their borrowed car, completely unable to tear his eyes away from Arthur, who was stunning in his own expensive suit and grin as large as his heart.

“This has been the BEST day ever! And now we get to go to a nice restaurant with Mycroft and... if I had dreams this amazing I would never, ever get out of my bed.”

Martin reached over and raised Arthur's hand for a small kiss.

“It has been a bit dream-like, hasn’t it?”

One full day of museums, puppet shows, sweets shops, tourist attractions, and more posing for photographs than he’d done in all the years he’d been alive had left Martin barely able to keep his eyes open. However, there was no power on Earth that would make him cancel their dinner out. This was Arthur’s day and he would get the best of everything. Besides, once they returned to Fitton, nights out for fine dinners would be dwindling to an extremely small number. Such as zero.

“And you look very nice, Skip. That suit makes you very handsome. Not that you’re not always handsome, because you are. You’re the handsomest man I’ve seen and I’ve seen lots of men, what with flying around the world and walking around all those cities. It’s just now you look even more handsome, especially with your hair like that. It’s very chic all slicked back, so you look like a model in one of those magazines. I might say that you’re actually sexy and I have never called anyone that word in my entire life.”

Martin couldn’t hold back the laugh seeing the exaggerated twitching of Arthur’s eyebrows.

“Well, if you clone me and stick that copy on my shoulders, we just might make one supermodel. You on the other hand are absolutely gorgeous. You’ll put everyone else out in London tonight to shame. And I include the celebrities and supermodels in that lot.

A blushing Arthur was a sight to behold and Martin wished he had the energy to take one more picture by which to remember the day. And the pink in Arthur’s cheeks was still lingering when the car pulled up in front of the very discrete door to the restaurant. Arthur bounded out without waiting for the driver to open the passenger door and Martin was not surprised when he extended his hand to assist Martin out of the car. And, of course, he had to hold Martin’s hand as they walked into the restaurant. It would never occur to Arthur to hide his affection and Martin couldn’t deny he was happy for it. His few relationships with men had always been marked by some degree of secrecy and restraint in public, not by his choice, and it was a delight to be able to show the world the wonderful thing he’d found.

Not that the maître d’ necessarily considered them wonderful. A short ginger and a man nearly bursting with excitement contrasted sharply with the elegant and sedate patrons Martin saw seated at the tables. Even in their new suits.

“Hi! I’m Arthur! We’re here to meet Mycroft. Is he here yet?”

The man at the dais blinked in surprise, then let his face return to its stoic and unimpressed expression.

“You’re here for Mr. Holmes?”

“Yes. We’ve had a super day and now we get to have a nice dinner with Mycroft. And, I’m sure it’s going be a brilliant dinner because this place looks very nice and all the tables are full and no one is making that face they do when they find a mouse in their salad or something like that.”
Martin groaned slightly and wasn’t surprised when the maître d’ set his shoulders in preparation of tossing them out the door.

“I don’t know what you gentlemen are playing at…”

“Arthur, perhaps we should…”

Arthur looked between the two men and a worried look dimmed the light of his smile.

“What’s wrong, Skip? You don’t think… you don’t think we’re in the wrong place, do you? I’m sure Charles would get it right since he drives cars for a living, but what if…? Oh no! What if we are and Mycroft’s waiting somewhere for us and we’ll be late. I’ll call him and find out where he is.”

Martin was too slow to stop Arthur taking out his phone and hitting Mycroft’s contact key. And all three of the men at the door jumped when they heard a phone chirp directly next to them.

“Mycroft! Oh thank heavens! I was worried we’d gotten it wrong and you were waiting somewhere.”

“You are exactly where you should be, Arthur; I’m very glad you and Martin were so punctual. And how nice you look in your suits.”

Every word said while staring coldly into the maître d’s eyes, prompting the man to begin lining up a list of potential employers. Or morticians.

“If you’ll follow me.”

Mycroft led his guests to the table he had taken in a quiet corner of the restaurant and they were barely seated before an army of waiters appeared with menus, platters of starters (compliments of the owner), bottles of wine from which to choose, with absolutely not one comment about Arthur’s request for milk instead, and enough offers of service to make Martin feel somewhat like… well, someone who was used to all of that.

“This is amazing, Mycroft! It’s lovely here. And all the people look so happy. It's like the dinosaur exhibit at the museum we saw today. Except for there being no dinosaurs. Or little kids.”

“Thank you, Arthur. I am very glad you and Martin agreed to join me. It is a very rare thing for me to be able to dine with friends, rather than associates. Now, I simply must hear the details of you day.”

And off Arthur went, with Martin more than happy to sit back, sip his wine and watch the best man in his world animatedly describe their escapades. And there was no mistaking the twinkle in his cousin’s eye as he gave Arthur his full attention. There was a great deal of comfort in knowing that no matter what happened to Martin in this life, Arthur would always be taken care of in the best possible way.

The dinner was going splendidly and Mycroft was finding himself actually relaxing into the experience. When his mobile rang, he startled Arthur with the snarl that tore across his face.

“If this is not of the utmost importance… oh, do accept my apologies Detective Inspector, I was just involved in something rather delicate… I see… of course he wouldn’t, when has Sherlock ever listened to reason…No, let them go. John is a doctor, after all. He won’t allow even Sherlock’s pigheadedness to override his medical instincts… true, John does have unexpected physical strength at times… it would be amusing to watch, wouldn’t it?... yes, thank you Detective Inspector…
Tuesday? I do believe I am… of course… our usual location?… delightful, and good evening to you, as well.”

“I didn’t like the sound of that Mycroft. Not one bit. Is everything alright?”

Martin would gladly admit to the fire that rose in his belly hearing Arthur’s concern, but he clamped down on the anger and reminded himself that no matter what he thought of Sherlock, the man had carved himself a place in Arthur’s heart and it wasn’t right to criticize Arthur’s concern for his friend. Another long drink of expensive wine almost washed away the bitterness of having ‘Sherlock’ and ‘friend’ in the same thought.

“Yes, everything is fine. My brother and Doctor Watson were involved in a small altercation associated with one of their dealings with the authorities. Doctor Watson suffered a few cuts and Sherlock a minor head injury. Nothing of great concern.”

“They’re hurt! Who is taking care of them? Did they see a doctor? I mean Doctor Watson is a doctor, but doctors have to see doctors when they’re hurt, too.”

Martin rubbed Arthur’s leg under the table and that seemed to calm the man down and slow down his verbal train.

“I’m sure that if there was any real problem, Mycroft would not still be sitting here spearing a piece of prosciutto. Don’t worry, Arthur, I’ve no doubt they will be fine.”

“As Martin says, if there was a true worry, I would have all of us in a vehicle moving to provide assistance. You must understand, Arthur, this is a common occurrence for Sherlock and John. What Sherlock does is associated with some risk and he does not hesitate to assume that risk, even if puts his or Doctor Watson’s person in danger. His health and safety is not a concern where his work involved and, although I deplore his disregard for his own welfare, I have yet to be able to convince him to take a more thoughtful or cautious approach.”

Martin tried to ignore that Mycroft was looking at him for much of his speech and refused to link his words to any situation that might pertain to him.

“Well, I’m going to have a little talk with Mr. Sherlock about that! I know he catches murderers and thieves and the like but that’s no excuse to let him or Doctor Watson get hurt. None at all. Skip, I think I’m a little agitated and I might like a glass of wine.”

Martin and Mycroft shared a brief grin before Martin poured Arthur his wine and pushed over a plate of crostini.

“Sherlock and John are ok, Arthur and I am fully confident that John will have your back when you give Sherlock his much deserved scolding. Now, let’s get back to our own evening, what say? Which reminds me, don’t you have a little something in your pocket?”

“Right! Oh, I nearly forgot in all the hullabaloo. This is for you, Mycroft. Just a little present for being so helpful with all of this and being a wonderful friend. It’s not much, but I hope you like it.”

Mycroft was so infrequently surprised that when he was, it caused his entire being to freeze for a moment. As much as he thought about it, Mycroft could not remember a time in years he’d been given a gift that wasn’t wrapped in obligations and ulterior motives. He took the small box out of Arthur’s outstretched hand and opened it to find a tie pin. If his eyes didn’t deceive him, it was the propeller of an airplane crafted in platinum with what he was certain was a high-quality diamond in the center. It was that special piece that was understated, yet made a statement at the same time.
And it was something that Mycroft might actually wear. Again, his system needed a moment to reboot.

“Do you like it? I know it’s a bit small, but that one was brilliant since it’s a propeller and Skip and I work for Mum’s airline, so if you wear it you’ll think of us.”

“I… I very much like it, Arthur. It is quite stylish and will complement my wardrobe very well. But this must have been very expensive…”

“You’d think that, wouldn’t you, since it looks so nice! Skip and I thought about it all day and decided that since you have to wear ties that a tie pin might be a nice gift and then I asked Charles the driver where to get a tie pin you might like and he brought us to this very posh jewelry store. He said he had to make a call and we went in and a very nice man came out from the back to help us find something for you. When we told him how much we could spend, he walked us around the store and when I saw that I just knew it was perfect. And we could afford it, too! It was like a miracle. Even Skip said so. He said ‘that’s a rather coincidental miracle.’”

So Martin was on to Charles’s little intervention. Another bonus for his driver and a little nod towards his cousin for not bursting Arthur’s enormous bubble.

“This is without doubt the nicest gift I have ever received. Thank you both. I shall treasure it as dearly as I do my orangutan.”

“Hurray! I’m glad you’re happy. Oh, there’s the waiter! And I haven’t even looked at the menu yet!”

“Don’t rush, Arthur. I’m sure they won’t mind if we take another moment or two. People tend to be accommodating when Mycroft’s around.”

“Well, they should. He’s brilliant.”

“Which is why I have brilliant guests. Now, may I recommend the gnocchi?”

Mycroft had to return to his office after dinner but Arthur extracted a promise that he would sit with him tomorrow morning and look at Arthur’s pictures from their day. On the drive back to Mycroft’s house, Martin leaned against Arthur and enjoyed the weight of Arthur’s arm wrapped around his shoulders.

“This has been the best, Skip. And you know what? Even when we’re in Fitton and we’re just watching a match at the college or reading in the park, I always think it’s the best because you’re there with me. And I know that because I’ve done all of those things by myself and it’s not nearly as much fun then. I know today was especially special and we got to wear nice suits and all, but what made the day the best was you, Skip.”

And one kiss was pressed to the top of Martin’s head which, even with Arthur sputtering and making bleech sounds at the taste of Martin’s borrowed hair gel, threatened to turn Martin’s bones to jelly.

“I agree. Even housecleaning is more fun when we do it together and that’s saying a lot because I despise housecleaning. That’s the one thing I like about being poor. Less to clean.”

“We’re going to work on that. I’m going to talk to Mum about paying you something, even if it’s not much. And she’s going to have to start paying me, too when I move out. She should be making a little more money since Mycroft is having GERTI fly papers around for him, so there
should be some to give to us. And I can help you with your business or get a second job. Maybe I can work at a café. That would be a lot of fun and I’d get to talk to people all day and watch them smile when they got their tea. And even if we’re still poor, it doesn’t really matter. I’ve got lots of things, but none matter as much as time with you. And we don’t need things to spend time together.”

Martin knew Arthur had no idea what it meant to be poor, but he also knew that if all they could ever do was live in his attic and eke out a living, Arthur would be satisfied. Being loved was something Martin was in no way used to, but his whole being embraced the feeling and he vowed that even if it meant asking Mycroft for a little side job of his own, Arthur would want for nothing. He’d given Martin everything, and Martin would do nothing less for him.

And along those lines…

“No, we don’t. All we need is to be happy together and that’s what I want to give you, Arthur. I want to give you whatever I can to make you happy. So I was thinking… maybe tomorrow… yeah, tomorrow… we can ask John and Sherlock to come by Mycroft’s for tea. And a chat. You can see for yourself that they’re ok and maybe… maybe Sherlock and I can have our own little talk. Still… no promises. But, if we’re to clear the air, I should probably do it before the damn fool gets himself killed. For real this time.”

Martin snuck a look upwards at Arthur and felt the sunshine on his face when Arthur’s grin lit up the car.

“Brilliant! What a wonderful idea! Are you sure you’re ready though, Skip? I don’t want you doing anything you’re not ready for.”

“I don’t think I’ll be any more ready if I wait. Best strike while the iron’s hot, I guess.”

“That’s… thank you, Skip. I know this isn’t easy for you, but I’m glad you’re doing it. And, I may have a little reward for you when we get to Mycroft’s.”

That perked Martin’s ears. Among other things.

“Really?”

“Uh huh… I found something very interesting at Mycroft’s that I think we’ll both enjoy.”

Now that was intriguing.

“Do tell.”

“Well, it’s great for couples, is very pleasurable, I love to push a little bit into my mouth and just suck….”

“Arthur, are you talking about Toblerones?”

“Yes! Brilliant! Oh, Skip… you’re so smart. And Mycroft even has the white ones!”

“We are blessed.”

“Oh, definitely.”
Preparing For Round 2

Chapter Notes

Again, very thankful for all of the encouraging and thought-provoking comments!

Martin had to laugh at the extreme care Arthur used with their suits when they returned to Mycroft’s house and that he ordered Martin to get into his pajamas and join him in his bed, which of course, meant a great deal of rolling around and bouncing like three-year olds before settling down. Arthur drew Martin close to him and flipped him around so that Martin became the very stereotypical ‘little spoon.’ Not that Martin was going to complain. Others might find it strange that Arthur Shappey could be considered a source of strength, but Martin had never in his life felt as safe and secure as when he was wrapped in Arthur’s embrace.

“Thank you for this, Skip. For all of it, really, but especially for this.”

“Oh, so you like having your own teddy bear?”

Arthur’s limbs seemed to lengthen and even more of Martin’s body felt enclosed by polar bear-covered skin.

“I know that my other teddies might get jealous, but you are certainly the best I’ve ever snuggled. I hope Douglas doesn’t feel left out when you and I are snuggly warm in a bed and he’s by himself, because, and you know this is a serious thing for me Skip, I’m fairly sure I’m going to want snuggles even when I could get a chance to sleep on the floor.”

“I think that if given a choice between having his own bed and joining us in ours, Douglas is going to choose a bit of solitude. Of course, how we’ll work it when Carolyn decides to get her favorite one-room-one-bed option is up in the air.”

“That’s true. We’ll have to discuss it with Douglas. I mean you and I could take the floor together or we could all have the bed like sardines. One happy threesome, like the Three Wise Men.”

“Don’t say ‘threesome,’ to Douglas, Arthur. He probably will join us then.”

“Well, that would be fine with me. Some of the places we stay are very cold and Douglas is nice and big so I bet he gives off lots of heat.”

“And don’t say ‘big’ to Douglas either. I made the mistake of making a teeny tiny joke about his waistline once, because, let’s face it, he makes jokes about my height or my hair or my everything all the time and, well… my van smelled like cat piss for a week.”

“How’d he do that?”

“He got a cat. And let it piss. In my van. Very efficient, that Douglas Richardson.”

“Well, I hope he didn’t steal someone’s cat. That would be terribly sad and I’d have to have a discussion with him about it.”
Martin was very tempted to say that Douglas did steal a cat just to watch Arthur give him a dressing down for his reprobate behavior. Apparently a little independence and time to prove his mettle was doing Arthur a world of good. Now, it was just a matter of what Carolyn thought when they got back. Not that Martin wanted to expend any of his own thought about that right now. His anxieties ruined enough of his life as it was; there was no way he was going to let them destroy this very comfortable time with Arthur.

“I’m sure he just borrowed a cat, so you can forgo the finger-wagging. Now, how about some sleep? It’s been a long day and tomorrow… tomorrow could be much longer.”

“Oh. Right. Good idea. It has been a long day. A long, wonderful, special, Father Christmas-perfect day. And tomorrow won’t be bad, Skip. I mean, it could be bad, but not bad like someone dies bad. I know it’s going to be hard for you and if you want to change your mind, don’t be worried that I’ll be upset that you did. If you need more time, just let me know and I won’t mention it again and maybe we can try some other day like when we have the ‘finding Skip’ party or our housewarming party or Easter.”

Looked like Martin’s social calendar was filled for the coming months.

“I’ll be ok, Arthur. Actually, it’s probably good I do this right now. Sherlock didn’t…”

“Didn’t what, Skip?”

“He didn’t deny anything, did he? The other night. He just sat there and let me say what I wanted to say. And you said he let you know about some other things… maybe… he’s willing to hear me for a change. I mean, if he’s not throwing his typical tantrums and trying to make me look like an ass… I have to wonder if that’s his dysfunctional way of giving me an opening. I know that every time I ever tried to talk about the crap that he pulled, he bloody well made sure I never tried to do it again for a very long time. This is different for him. Maybe it means something… I don’t know. Maybe I’m completely insane, too. Guess I’ll find out.”

“You’re so brave, Skip. Brave and caring and just so special that not even those limited-time-only Disney DVD’s are as special as you. So yeah, get some sleep. And you’ll see, come tomorrow night when we’re right back here snuggling, you’re going to feel a lot better.”

“I hope so, Arthur. So, good night. And thank you for a wonderful day.”

“Good night, Skip. I lvrh dzhu.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I said good night, Skip.”

“And then?”

“Oh, just clearing my throat.”

“Well, maybe your throat will be clearer tomorrow so I can understand you better.”

“My throat does get a little cloggy in the evenings.”

“Well, I’ll give you a chance to cough first, before you say goodnight that is. Because I’d hate to not hear something if there’s something you want to say.”

“Are you sure?”
“Very sure.”

“Ok… maybe I’ll get some spray.”

“You do that.”

Arthur gently slid out of bed and piled the blankets around the still-sleeping Martin so that he could remain warm and comfortable. Every day. Very soon this would be Arthur’s morning every morning. And last night would be his night every night. They were an us and would be an us forever and this was the first breakfast Arthur would make for them as a real us and this was the first day from waking up to going to bed that they’d be an us the whole time. Arthur suddenly felt like he needed a tissue and tiptoed out of the bedroom before he started to make snuffy noises and wake up his… Skip.

Armloads of pots and pans were put into action and, with the radio tuned to a station that was playing Japanese pop music, Breakfast Bacon Berry Soup and Fried Parsnip Pineapple Cakes were on the way. And the snuffy noises were threatening again. This was so brilliant! Ultra super brand new crayon brilliant! When they were back at work, there wouldn’t be as much time for this every day, but whenever he could, Arthur would be making special things in the kitchen and planning fun activities for the day and doing all of the things he’d wanted to do, even when it was only in his head and the closest he thought he would ever come is when he made paper dolls of him and Skip and acted out having breakfast or going to hear concerts or climbing trees.

When Arthur heard that particular measured step coming towards the kitchen, he quickly poured a cup of tea and readied food and his phone and met Mycroft with a bright smile and rigidly suppressed urge to salute.

“Good morning Mycroft! Did you sleep well? I bet you slept wonderfully since my bed is completely amazing and yours is probably even more amazing.”

“Ah, but you did have a little something extra in your bed, if I correctly interpret Martin’s empty room.”

Mycroft had to admire the winning shade of rose that bloomed on Arthur’s cheeks.

“Well, yes… I must admit that’s the case. It… you don’t mind, do you? That we snuggled up last night? I know we’re not married or anything, at least not yet, and some people get a bit sticky about that sort of thing but…”

‘At least not yet…’ Mycroft wondered if it was at all possible for Arthur to be any more endearing. How perfect he was for someone whose life had been as lacking in affection as his cousin. John Watson and Arthur Shappey… it was astonishing how quickly the Holmes family was growing… Mycroft had to wonder how Arthur felt about children… it would be prudent to begin investigating appropriate surrogates and adoption agencies, just in case.

“I don’t mind at all, dear boy. I am quite thrilled that you and cousin Martin had a restful evening. And what plans fill your calendar today? Another day in the city? Perhaps you would prefer a restful tour of the country. The car is still available for you, so do not hesitate to put it to use.”

Mycroft carefully took a seat at the table and, with the block of time he had built into today’s schedule for Arthur’s picture show, allowed himself a moment to contemplate the… substances… in
“Drink the tea first. Trust me.”

Martin sleepily entered the kitchen and gave Arthur a quick kiss on the cheek before taking his own place at the table. Mycroft felt an extraordinarily uncharacteristic twinge seeing his kitchen host such a happy domestic scene. It was with regret that he remembered his guests were only temporary and soon he would be alone in his house once more. Caring was most certainly not an advantage, but neither was chocolate or a bit of fine brandy. Sometimes, in some situations, things were simply meant to be enjoyed, advantageous or not... And with that rather trite bit of sentimentality, Mycroft sipped Arthur’s tea and found himself wondering if his tongue was still attached to his body.

“Oh, that does sound fun. A nice drive, I mean. But we already have the day planned. Sort of. Well, I guess it depends, really.”

“What Arthur’s trying to say, is that we’re going to ask over Sherlock and John for a visit.”

“Really? That’s a bold move considering the circumstances.”

“Do you believe the circumstances will be more in my favor if we wait?”

Mycroft considered a moment.

“For Sherlock’s response, no. He is rather exposed right now and with his emotions being assaulted on multiple fronts, the likelihood of an honest and penetrating discussion is much higher than if you allow him time for re-establish his equilibrium. However, the same can be said for you and I can assure you that you will feel this conversation far more than will my brother. Do you believe that you are ready for such a demanding task at this point?”

Martin sat back and indulged in his own bit of consideration while Mycroft hesitantly sampled Arthur’s breakfast, mentally pronouncing it challenging and Mycroft Holmes never backed down from a challenge.

“I think so. You’re right, this is going to be a nasty business, but if we both walk in closed off nothing is going to come of it. And... it’s important that something happen now that my own situation has changed.”

The eyes he cut at Arthur’s back were soft and fond.

“Yes, Christmases will be even more the trial if you do not. However, if we staged an annual duel, it might actually make family holidays somewhat bearable.”

“And with John present, we can keep the fatalities to a minimum. Though there probably wouldn’t be any since Arthur would insist on using water balloons or somesuch rather than solid ammunition.”

“Water balloons! I don’t know what you are talking about right now but if it’s about water balloons I agree! Will that be today? Can we have teams? Mycroft’s teams can even play and we can go to a field and have a big water balloon war! Brilliant!”

Fortunately, Mycroft’s mouth was occupied with what he felt certain was a combination of strawberries and some type of pork product so he couldn’t add his opinion that his team would include himself, Doctor Watson, Arthur and the young American man on one of his strike teams who played that baseball game at school. Pitcher, too, if he wasn’t mistaken. Leave the rest of the lot for Sherlock and Martin, who Mycroft’s team would crush like eggshells. Neither had any real sense of
tactics…

“Another day, Arthur. We’ll get a whole bag of balloons and reenact Waterloo. Today’s a different type of fight, remember…”

“Don’t think of it that way, Skip. Today is going to be brilliant, even if it is bit miserable. That reminds me – I do have to call and invite them for tea. That’s alright, isn’t it Mycroft?”

“Of course. I shall not return until quite late, I fear, but do let your gathering last as long you wish. Or you require.”

“Thanks! I’ll do that now and get on some clothes. Though my jammies are very, very comfortable. I don’t suppose…”

“They leave when you do, Arthur my boy. With my compliments. Now hurry off and make your call before my brother becomes embroiled in another police matter.”

Arthur leaned down and whispered something in Martin’s ear before giving him his own kiss on the cheek after getting a quick nod of the head. One quick check that everyone had plenty of provisions and off he scampered.

“Is there a reason you wouldn’t be alright, Martin?”

“Ears like a bloody bat. Always had them, didn’t you?”

“They do come rather in handy. Now, cease your deflection and answer the question.”

“Arthur is concerned since… he knows that I’m still… there’s more to kicking drugs than going through detox.”

Mycroft hid his internal wince. He should have known that his cousin would still have much to overcome, having seen Sherlock go through the same thing many times. It had been easy to overlook, however, in light of Martin’s very joyful mood over the past day or so.

“I had forgotten, Martin, and I apologize for that. Perhaps today’s agenda should be revisited and rescheduled for a later date.”

“I’m actually counting on this edge getting me through dealing with that prat. I already want to punch something, so it won’t take much of his attitude to really get my dander up.”

“You are hiding your condition quite well, which is admirable. Mostly for Arthur’s sake, I presume.”

The ghost of a grin across Martin’s lips was all the answer Mycroft really needed.

“He doesn’t need to live in the muck with me right now. Let him have a bit of fantasy about things. It will get better, especially with Arthur’s distractions. Honestly, yesterday was a truly good day. They will come, more and more frequently, I’m sure. At least that’s what John said when we had that talk. And when a bad day crops up, you know there will suddenly be water balloons and modeling clay and ridiculous movies and astonishing meals appearing everywhere to help me through it.”

“You’re very lucky in that. Very lucky, indeed. Sherlock would accept nothing in terms of comfort or assistance when he suffered his own turmoil.”
“You would have tried, though. If he wasn’t a complete arse about everything.”

That went without saying. Mycroft had been trying since Sherlock was born and with about the same success now as he had then. Meaning none.

“I should have tried for you as well, Martin. I have not broached the subject, but I do want to extend my sincere apologies for not being there for you over the years. I have as little excuse as Sherlock for that… in fact, I have less, since I am not as socially unaware as is he. I do hope that someday, you can find it within yourself to forgive my neglect. I would hope to remediate our relationship as much as feasible, if that is agreeable to you.”

“I wasn’t yours to watch over, Mycroft. My parents… my own brother and sister… they should have been the ones to step up for me. That wasn’t your responsibility.”

“It became my responsibility when I realized that they would never do that for you. And I realized that very early in our association.”

“No. That’s not what I believe. Besides, you had your hands full with Sherlock. How much time could you spare for a cousin who came around now and then when you had him to look after?”

“The extent of one’s duty does not excuse one from doing it. You were family, Martin. And you had needs that were not being met by those closest to you…”

“That still does not lay the responsibility on you! I have no… I have never blamed you, Mycroft. If you want to pick up where we left off, that’s fine with me. As long as I can count on you to watch out for Arthur, we’ll be good. That’s the only deal-breaker and I don’t think it’s even a small worry. Right?”

“I am not confident I could be as gracious if I found myself in your position, but I am grateful for the chance to rekindle our ties. And let me assure most forcefully that Arthur will always be safeguarded. Measures are already in place to ensure that is the case.”

“Thank you for that. There’s little I can do for him but be there. It helps to know that he won’t pay for my failings.”

“Self-flagellation will not benefit him either.”

“But it’s what I’m best at.”

“Find another hobby.”

“Maybe I’ll take up the violin.”

“That could sufficiently stress your new bond with dear Arthur that you will find yourself forever a member of the bachelor race.”

“Exaggeration doesn’t suit you, Mycroft.”

“So says the man who did not have to live with Sherlock’s unending ‘practice.’ Actually, that was one of the reasons I found your visits pleasant. Sherlock played his instrument rather than torturing it. In fact… he always played when you visited.”

“One of the few good memories I have, actually. He actually seemed pleased when I told him I enjoyed his music.”
“How interesting that Sherlock never subjected you to his fits of havoc as he did the rest of the household. In fact, I do remember the evening we brought you back from having your arm set. He played the entire night, pacing back and forth down the hall outside your room.”

Martin remembered that night very well. He remembered the ache that the painkillers didn’t erase and the sleep that refused to come. And… hour after hour of Sherlock’s violin.

“Nice try, Mycroft.”

“That is not even close to a ‘nice try,’ dear cousin. When I choose to try you will never know that I have.”

“Hi Doctor Watson! It’s Arthur! Are you ok? I heard you got hurt chasing criminals, which has to be terribly exciting, I do admit, but not if you get hurt! I know you probably can’t prevent it sometimes because criminals are certainly not nice people. Well, that may not be true; I guess you could be a criminal and be nice, but that’s probably not normal and you’d be considered a bit odd by the other criminals, which would be sort of sad because no one should be considered odd, especially by their friends. Anyway, if you need me to take care of you, just let me know. Even when we’re back in Fitton, I’ll be happy to come back here and make sure you and Mr. Sherlock are alright and take care of the flat and make sure you take your medicine…”

“Arthur! We’re fine and I’m saying that as a doctor. Ok? Thank you for worrying, though, and I promise that if Sherlock and I become incapacitated, you’ll be the first one we’ll think of as our in-home nurse.”

“Brilliant! Now I’m really anxious to learn first-aid so I can be the best nurse ever. Oh! And I’ll need a uniform. I can look that up on the Internet and get to work on it as soon as we’re back home.”

“You said we’re twice, Arthur. Did you and Martin patch things up?”

“That’s right! You don’t know! YES! Skip and I are together again and we celebrated all day yesterday and went to dinner with Mycroft, which is how I knew you got hurt because we were at the restaurant when Mycroft got the call, and then we snuggled all night… I’m so happy I could explode! Well, maybe not explode because then Mycroft’s house would get very messy and I already had to clean up the mess that you and Skip left, which was a very big mess by the way, but I guess if I was dead I wouldn’t have to clean but that wouldn’t be fair to Mycroft since Skip probably wouldn’t do it…”

“Well done, mate. Congratulations. You and Martin are a great couple and I know you’ll be very happy together.”

“Thanks! And… well, do you have any news of your own? Maybe something happy that makes you want to explode, too?”

“I might. Let’s just say that Sherlock and I woke up in the same bed this morning, just like you and Martin.”

“BRILLIANT! Oh this is wonderful. You and Mr. Sherlock – now that’s a great couple. You’re perfect for each other! That’s going to make this even better!”

“Make what better?”
"Asking you and Mr. Sherlock to tea this afternoon. Here at Mycroft’s. He already said it was alright, so don’t worry about that."

John took a breath and thought about Arthur’s invitation.

"Arthur, does Martin know you’re inviting us over? And by ‘us’ I mean me and Sherlock?"

"Absolutely. You see, part of why I’m asking is that Skip wants a chance to talk to Mr. Sherlock about when they were small. He and I talked about that a lot and then Skip said yesterday that he wanted to invite you both over today and that he would try and see if Mr. Sherlock would be willing to talk to him. I mean, if you think it’s a bad idea, we can just have tea and that will be fine. I don’t think Skip’s going to attack Mr. Sherlock anymore, so we could just have a nice afternoon, but I think it would be brilliant if they could talk, especially since Skip actually said he was willing to, which I didn’t think he’d be able to do right now, but that’s my Skip. He’s so brave… I don’t think I could be that brave, especially with his problem, which I want to talk to you about so maybe we could do that while you’re here, too. Or another time; I don’t want to sound bossy."

Arthur Shappey had nothing on Sherlock Holmes in terms of bossiness, but it did remind John that he needed to check on Martin and see how he was doing. John had actually called around and gotten the names of a few counselors in the Fitton area that might match well with Martin. A trained professional to speak with could go a long way to securing his recovery.

"That’s not bossy, Arthur… that’s just smart. And, so you know, Sherlock is hoping for a chance to talk things out, also. This looks like an opportune time, so I’ll accept for the both of us. I can’t guarantee when we’ll show up since getting the Great Detective dressed and out of the house, if it isn’t for a case… let’s just say I had an easier time in the desert. Taking fire. I’ll phone as we’re leaving, though."

"That sounds great! It will be wonderful to see you again! Even though it’s only been a little while, I miss you and Mr. Sherlock. This will be fun. Well, maybe ‘fun’ isn’t the best word, but it will be helpful. For Skip and Mr. Sherlock. I really do believe that. I talked to Mr. Sherlock for a long time, I don’t know if he told you, but… Skip’s not the only one that needs help. Mr. Sherlock does, too. That’s the one last thing I want to do before Skip and I go back home – try and get them each at least a little help. Does that sound crazy? I mean… you know Mr. Sherlock better than I do and…"

"No, not crazy. Not crazy at all. And I tell you what… when we get there, let’s swap burdens and make sure they know this is something everyone wants. Sherlock isn’t convinced Martin wants to listen to him or at least try and move forward."

"That’s what Skip thinks, too, so that’s a good idea. Oh! I have to go now. Mycroft and I have to look through my photographs and it’s getting late. We’ll see you later, Doctor Watson. Bye!"

"Goodbye, Arthur. Fingers crossed."

"Toes, too."

Mycroft dutifully sat with Arthur and looked at each and every photograph on Arthur’s phone, including the multitude of Carolyn, Douglas, Snoopadoop, Arthur’s bedroom and GERTI. When they’d exhausted the several gigabytes of photographs, Mycroft reminded Arthur that anything he needed was a phone call away and left the young man to put away the breakfast dishes and join Martin in the study.
“Skip, please tell me you aren’t still looking for a flat… and a job.”

“No… I’m actually playing Solitaire. Just giving you and Mycroft some play time alone.”

“Oh Skip, you could have sat with us. We had a brilliant time looking through my pictures. Mycroft said I did a ‘very credible job of documenting your momentous day,’ which is quite impressive. I know, because I asked.”

“It’s quite impressive. Getting compliments from Mycroft Holmes is harder than getting gold from gutter wash. He likes you, Arthur, and that is quite the compliment of its own.”

“Well, I like him, too. He’ll visit us in Fitton, won’t he? I mean, I know he’s busy and all, but we will get to see him now and then. It’s not that far and I plan on coming to London a lot more often than I did now that we have people to visit.”

“You’ll see him, Arthur. I think Mycroft is having fun and that happens so rarely for him that he won’t let the opportunity slip through his fingers. You’re stuck with Big Brother Mycroft from now on, I think. Welcome to the family.”

Arthur tore into a dance routine that Martin sat back and enjoyed for the sheer energy and amount of midriff skin that was exposed as Arthur twirled around with his arms above his head.

“That is the most brilliant thing to happen to me in… oh I don’t know because so many brilliant things have been happening to me lately. See Skip! This is why you’re so amazing! All of these wonderful things are happening just because I met you. And once you at least get a few things off your chest with Mr. Sherlock, we’ll be able to visit with them all the time, too and… I think I need to sit down now…”

Arthur dropped into a chair, still swinging his feet to his own internal rhythm.

“We’ll see how things go. They should be stopping by soon, shouldn’t they? Wow, I’m actually starting to get nervous. Feels like I’m sitting here waiting for Sherlock to suddenly appear and toss a worm down my throat when I’m not looking.”

“He did that?”

“No, he did not toss a worm down my throat.”

It was a big, hairy spider. But, Martin had to concede, Sherlock did help to retrieve it when the bugger refused to be swallowed or coughed up. Martin could still see the horrid thing sitting on the sofa table staring angrily at him, while snacking on the phlegm it had stolen during its forced extraction. Luckily, Arthur’s phone rang, dispelling that nightmare from his mind’s eye.

“Hi Doctor Watson! Ok, that sounds good… no, I think we have everything. Mycroft’s got lots of lovely biscuits and THAT IS NOT NICE MR. SHERLOCK… I know, but you fancy him so it makes things easier… that sounds about right… ok, bye!”

“On their way?”

“Yeah, I’m going to get the tea going.”

“Skip the tea, Arthur. Just pour out the gin.”

“Tea first. We are civilized gentlemen, Skip.”
“Then the gin?”

“Come help me in the kitchen. I am suspecting that I need to keep an eye on you. Maybe two eyes.”

“You just want to check out my bum.”

“I already have a photo, so I can resist for now.”

“With or without pants?”

“Let’s say, I had to hurry past that one when we were looking at photos on my phone. Mycroft did say, though, you hadn’t changed much since you ran around as a baby without your diaper, which is actually quite a nice thing to say when you think about it.”

“Are you sure it’s tea first, gin second?”

“Kitchen, Skip. Now.”

When the doorbell sounded, Martin felt another lurch of anxiety, but used a few biscuits to give calm his stomach back down. Arthur quickly ran to the front door and eagerly welcomed their guests and it only took one good yank on Sherlock’s arm by John to get the detective into the house along with his partner.

“Oh, it’s good to see you both! I admit to a spot of worry that you’d get here covered with bandages like mummies, but you don’t look like mummies at all! We’ll have tea in the kitchen, if that’s ok. It really is my favorite room, even though I haven’t seen many of the other rooms here. To be honest, I’m a little nervous to go about exploring on my own. Mycroft is brilliant, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there were trapdoors or something just as amazing in some of the rooms.”

“I’m glad I’m not the only one. I was petrified to sleepwalk and find myself transported to some demon dimension by the bewitched pentagram he had carved into the floors.”

“Mycroft would not bother with the black arts. Far too messy and robes make him look even fatter…”

The in-stereo chastisement sent Sherlock stalking towards the scent of tea and nearly into and bowling over his cousin.

“Bloody hell, Sherlock. Give a man some warning if you’re going to be playing at being a guided missile.”

“Blame Arthur and John. They are insufferable, at times. Together, doubly so.”

“Feeling a bit henpecked? Welcome to couples life. Not that Arthur henpecks. It’s more like fluffy-baby-chick pecked. It seems so cute and nice until you realize he’s maneuvered you right away from the gin and into letting him measure your feet for your own pair of polar bear slippers.”

“Did you say gin?”

“Not until after tea. Believe me, I’ve already tried.”

It wasn’t until Arthur and John arrived that either man realized that they had actually shared a handful of sentences without resorting to fisticuffs, profanity or handmade, prison-grade weapons.
“Martin, want to come with me for a few minutes? Need to give you a once over. My medical degree will throttle me if I don’t.”

“I’m fine, John.”

“Thanks for that, but your assessment isn’t the one I’m going to rely on. Come on, Martin. I promise I’ll even forego the prostate exam.”

And on the collective wince of all those in attendance, John gave Martin a solid push out of the kitchen, leaving Sherlock alone with Arthur.

“I heard about your head, Mr. Sherlock. I was very worried because I know how important your brain is to you and if it got hurt, that would be a disaster! It is ok, right? Your brain, I mean.”

“My brain is uninjured. John suspected a mild concussion, however, he has a tendency to overreact in these situations.”

“I think I’d overreact, too, if I thought Skip’s brain had been coshed. Just more proof how much he cares.”

“Proof is no longer required. John has made his feelings known and they have been tested for strength, receiving a passing score.”

“And who said it first?”

“Are you hoping for a gift?”

“No, but I never say no to a present! They’re brilliant and that’s why we gave Mycroft a present last night. He was very happy, too. I don’t think he gets a lot of presents, which is sad really, but I’m going to change that. You’ll need to tell me his birthday so I can get him a present then and, of course, for Christmas and Valentine’s Day…”

“My brother doesn’t need presents.”

“No one needs presents, that’s why they’re so great! Don’t worry, you’ll get yours too. And Doctor Watson. I have lots of ideas and not even you will be able to guess what they’ll be until you unwrap them.”

That was not a wager that Sherlock had any intention of accepting. He had accepted that Arthur would forever be the conundrum his deductive skills would fail to crack.

“And we’ll be visiting a lot, too. Me and Skip. We’ll be visiting a lot and having you visit us. Both of us.”

“Arthur, are you attempting to make a point. If so, do get on with it. I am beginning to rethink my lack of brain injury and may begin to fall deaf very soon.”

“Don’t even talk like that, Mr. Sherlock. Won’t you feel silly if all of a sudden you couldn’t hear? Oh, that’s not even funny to say so I won’t either. And yes, I do have a point. It’s Skip and me now. We’re an us and are going to stay an us. And I want to get to stay friends with Mycroft and Doctor Watson and you and even be your temporary assistant if you need me when Doctor Watson gets a cold or wants a little vacation. Since we’re all going to be bundled up together from now on, Skip thought that it would be a good thing if you and he started talking a little. Maybe get to understand each other a little better, get to know each other again, that sort of thing. Now, you don’t have to if you don’t want to, but Skip’s hoping to at least get a chance to give it a try. So…”
what do you think?”

Hence John’s insistence that they go through with this social visit, despite the need for Sherlock to conclude a series of time-sensitive experiments. However, if Martin was advocating an attempt at communication, Sherlock was hardly going to refuse. Beyond John and Arthur’s disappointment, Sherlock himself would suffer a nagging unease if he walked away not knowing the outcome of his and Martin’s potential confrontation. No, that was insufficient. He would suffer from the knowledge that Martin extended an invitation and he failed to honor it. Martin deserved to be heard and have his questions answered. Sherlock did have a desire to find a common ground from which they could all find a level of comfort. Despite his distaste for personal interactions, the detective was actually not averse to adding Arthur to the tiny roster of individuals that he considered worthy of his regard and returning Martin to that position. Since reuniting with his cousin, Sherlock had found himself strangely reluctant to let the man vanish from his life again.

“I think that the idea has merit. And you are certain that Martin has expressed interest in this course of action?”

“Brilliant! And yes, I know Skip is on board with this. This is going to be a good thing, Mr. Sherlock, just you wait and see. Now, plate out the biscuits, will you? I’ll pour the tea.”

“We don’t need plated biscuits, Arthur…”

“Are you in charge of the tea? No? I thought not. Now, biscuits on plate and if do it nicely I’ll put aside the extra chocolate ones for you.”

“And the shortbread.”

“Demanding, but since you’re a genius, I guess it’s to be expected.”

“I’m glad we understand each other.”

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“Well, will I live?”

“Barely, you’re a scrawny bastard and you’ve got vitamin deficiencies that would kill a housefly.”

“So, like an average teenager?”

“Pretty much. How’s things beyond that? Arthur will have some meat on your bones soon enough and the sheer variety of ingredients he uses in his cooking should cover every vitamin, mineral and trace element that you’ll ever need, but there’s only so much he can do. And be honest with me. It’s going to be hard enough for me to keep an eye on your when you’re back in Fitton without having to worry about you keeping things from me.”

Martin had a large bag of lies and fantasy stories by his feet, but decided that John was right. He had to stay on track and keep himself from falling back into the pit, for Arthur’s sake at the very least.

“Physically, I feel better. Mentally… I’m hoping you accidentally leave a prescription pad behind. Sad, isn’t it. Sad and pathetic… story of my life.”

“None of that. It’s to be expected. If you’d said everything was kittens and rainbows, then I would have been worried.”
John dug into his pocket and pulled out his list of possible therapists, handing the paper over to Martin.

“It’s going to be that way, mate, though I wish it could be different. That’s a list of counselors that should be able to help you. I’ve gotten a good word about each, so you should be able to find one that’s a proper fit for you. And, I’d advise that you include Arthur in some of your sessions. I’ve talked to some colleagues with experience in this area and they said that having a loved one with you, especially a significant other, can be beneficial.”

Martin looked at the paper for a moment before carefully folding it up and putting it in his pocket.

“I’ll check them out. I admit that I don’t want to talk to a counselor, John; that is absolutely the last thing I want to do. But if it will help, I’ll give it a try.”

“Good. You’ve got people on your side, Martin. In Fitton and here in London. And… look, here’s the deal. Sherlock wants to be one of those people. As best he can, which can be surprisingly helpful at times. That’s one of the reasons we’re here today; he’d like a chance to tell you that himself. Think you’re up for it? You’re never going to get him to cry over what he did, but you might be able to get some honesty out of him if you’re willing to push for it. I don’t think you’re even going to have to push that hard, truth be told. He’s willing, Martin but if you can’t talk to him now, that’s fine. Don’t feel pressured to do something you’re not up for, however, I think you’ll feel more settled if you leave London with as many loose ends tied up as you can.”

So Sherlock wanted to talk…that actually put Martin a little at ease. At least any conversation they had wouldn’t be one-sided. Or just a futile crashing of his fists against a solid brick wall.

“That’s not the worst idea I’ve ever heard. I won’t lie and say that I don’t have the highest hopes of any real progress, but I owe it to myself… to everyone… to at least make an honest effort. Going back to Fitton is going to be enough of a struggle without unfinished business from London hanging over my head.”

“So, you’ll give it a go?”

“Will you and Arthur really let me say no?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

“I love dealing with Holmes boys.”

“You love dealing with one Holmes boy.”

“Open your mouth and say aah.”

“Coward.”

“Want to turn your head and cough?”

“Opening as ordered, sir.”
Arthur had been terrified to use the beautiful and delicate cups he found in Mycroft’s cupboards and actually found himself staring at the corresponding assortment of teapots like he had opened the Ark of the Covenant. Fearing his own sometimes less than agile serving abilities, he made sure that the plainest of everything landed on the serving tray, using simple dinner plates for the biscuits and shying away from the elegantly embroidered napkins that had beckoned him from a very tempting side drawer. He shooed Sherlock on ahead of him and followed the tall man into the sitting room where John and Martin had already taken seats.

“Here we go chaps! Lovely tea… very lovely tea. And Mycroft does have the finest biscuits. I’ve never even heard of the brands! That means they’re very posh because if there is one thing I know, it’s my biscuits.”

“A fact to which I can readily attest by the sheer variety of packages we had to transport in his ‘snacks bags.’ “

“And that wasn’t even all of them! You only gave me ten minutes and I had to work fast. But that’s what detective assistants do – work fast! Can’t be poking about when there’s clues to be found or criminals to chase or Skips to find.”

“Yes, John is well known for his gazelle-like speed. Sherlock, where’s my socks, do you have your coat, hold up… I’m brushing my teeth, what’s blocking my door you big git…”

Martin sniggered at John’s very accurate pillow projectile and maybe, just the smallest bit maybe, at Sherlock’s teasing. It wasn’t mean-spirited, at least.

“Don’t listen to him, Arthur. I’ve got pep in my step when I want it. He’s just gets miffed when I remind him that a dead body can’t get any deader and there’s no need to gadding about in my nightshirt.”

“Why not? Arthur was fully prepared to engage in our investigations in his pajamas. I quite admired his dedication to the work. I will have no reservations leaving you to your aspirin peddling when I have a case in the Fitton area, since I have a capable assistant already in place who is ready to pour his all into my efforts.”

“Tough luck for you, Arthur, but a nice little holiday for me.”

“And I’m going to say yes if you ask, Mr. Sherlock. Don’t you worry about that! I loved being a detective’s assistant and I learned so much that I just know is going to be useful when we’re back home. Mum is going to be amazed at what I’m able to do now and I’m going to tell her it’s all your doing. She might even call and say thank you, which would be incredibly not-Mum-like, but this is actually a hugely big deal. It’s not every day someone is able to teach me something.”

“I have no doubt Mrs. Knapp-Shappey will have a great deal to say to me when you return. I
shall remember to fail to charge my phone for several days after your departure.”

Martin sat back, sipped the tea Arthur had poured for him and simply watched the back and forth between the other men. In Sherlock’s flat, he’d only concentrated on trying to block his cousin from any of his senses but now he was making an effort to go beyond that. Try to see with different eyes and he was actually seeing something. Sherlock was participating in the conversation, not simply delivering orders that he expected to be followed. And he was treating John well, playing but not... anything else. He looked at him so fondly, too. Martin had always wanted just a bit of fondness, the smallest measure of what Sherlock was showing John. A soft eye instead of a sharp, hard gleam. He’d wanted to feel free to banter and tease and talk about anything and have Sherlock be like this.

And Sherlock had seen Arthur. Seen that he was more than the clown so many others believed him to be. He’d let Arthur assist him, for christ’s sake! Arthur had delighted in detailing how he’d helped Sherlock track him down and... he had helped! What was going on in the world that Sherlock had let Arthur Shappey take an active part in an investigation. Sherlock believed that every other human on the planet was inferior, yet he took Arthur with him and gave him responsibilities. And willingly acknowledged Arthur’s contribution. It was becoming easy to see why Arthur called Sherlock his friend. Sherlock was his friend. The friend he never, ever was to Martin, but that he now was for Arthur. Oh, it was not easy to use these different eyes. They hurt and made Martin want to pluck them from his face, roll them in flour and let Arthur fry them for a snack. Arthur had been right, so very right in every way. He was jealous. Jealous of what Sherlock had with John and Arthur because he’d wanted it all so badly and was denied at every turn. Denied and punished for wanting.

“Martin? You’ve been a little quiet. Everything alright?”

“What? Oh... yeah. Everything’s fine, John. Just enjoying my beverage.”

Martin ignored John’s frown and stern cast of his eyes, concentrating on the feel of his chest hair growing out from another swallow of Arthur’s tea.

“If John believes you are less than truthful in matters, he does become much like a dog-with-a-bone. Witness the canine cast to his head right now. Like a small, confused hunting hound.”

“Well, if you want to talk dogs, let’s discuss this year’s winner at Westminster, who has happily joined us today. Some pampered long-hair, I believe... that type with the long snout and pouty eyes.”

“A handsome breed, obviously. And highly intelligent. No wonder I took Best in Show. Thank you, John.”

So easy, so natural. And so treasured. Martin looked at the happily bickering men, listened to Arthur’s bell-like laughter and suddenly he didn’t want to do this. It was pointless. Look at them... enjoying a nice spot of tea. Comfortable, confident... he had no place in that. Maybe with Arthur, just Arthur, away from everyone else, he could cope but not this way. Not with a medical doctor, a famous detective, King Mycroft... Arthur fit right in with them, too. They adored him and no matter the flow of the conversation, Arthur would happily chime in and be a welcome part of things. But not Martin. Not stupid, fidgety Martin. The reality of it all was becoming staggeringly clear and breathing was getting harder the clearer things became. Who didn’t fit it? Martin. Who did Sherlock find lacking and useless? Martin. And why not? He was lacking and useless. Maybe... maybe he needed his plan again. Just go somewhere. Go somewhere and start over and let everyone else have a good life without his shadow ruining things. It would be for the best. Mycroft would see to it that Arthur was tended to and would probably find some very nice man who went to a very nice public school and has a very nice, very well-paying job for Arthur to make a very nice
life with and… can’t breathe… cannot breathe…

“Skip! Doctor Watson! What’s wrong with Skip!”

“Christ! Panic attack. Martin, listen to me. You have to focus. Take a breath, let it out… take another… let it out…”

“He can’t breathe! Mr. Sherlock! Skip can’t breathe!”

“Let John work, Arthur. Martin will be fine.”

Martin personally had a different opinion since his vision was beginning to go dark. But suddenly there was a deep voice in his ear reinforcing John’s mantra to breathe and a hand running up and down his back in time with John’s words. And it started to work. Each breath lasted a little longer and the near paralysis began to release its grip on Martin’s muscles.

“Excellent, Martin. You are doing well. Continue to follow John’s instructions.”

Well? Shaming himself in front of everyone… poor Arthur looked horrified…

“I… I’m s…sorry.”

“Martin, don’t try and talk. Just breathe and let yourself relax. We’re not going to let anything happen to you.”

Pity. And why not? He was pitiful, after all. Please find someone good for Arthur, Mycroft…

Martin flew out of his chair and rushed towards the door, desperate to escape the eyes, the judgment, the disappointment. He nearly made it out of the sitting room before long, wiry arms gripped his shoulders tightly and refused to let go no matter how hard he struggled.

“John, Arthur… leave us. Martin and I have business to attend to.

“Sherlock, I need to keep an eye…”

“He won’t suffer any ill effects by being out of your sight, John. If necessary, I will collect you to assist him. Please… leave us alone for now.”

Arthur was completely at a loss about what to do, but the slight smile Sherlock gave him made him far more confident that this was the right decision. He knew that Sherlock had sharp edges, but he had faith that the detective would not put Martin in harm’s way. Not again. Arthur gently tugged on John’s sleeve and John allowed himself to be led out of the room, favoring Sherlock with one last look that let the detective know how much of John’s trust he was holding in his hands. There was no option now… he had to make this work.

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“If this is too difficult for you at this time, we do not need to continue.”

“T…this?”

“John and Arthur are no longer present, so let’s dispense with the pretense of the cordial tea party. You know why I am here and… I am agreeable to the true purpose of this visit. However, I will not object to postponing our discussion until another time.”

“Taking pity on poor sad Martin Crieff…”
“You of all people should know that I am incapable of feeling pity. If you want the truth, I have a vested interest in this course of action and if you are not in a condition to proceed, then a postponement is warranted.”

Martin let out a weak chuckle and finally relaxed to the point where Sherlock felt it was safe to release him.

“You mean you don’t want to piss off John.”

“Partially. John would be happier if I addressed your concerns and we came to some accord about any future interactions. Arthur also has a strong hope that we find a way to lessen the weight you carry…”

“Going on a diet?”

“What prompted your panic attack, Martin? I did nothing to provoke you.”

That was not a question Martin wanted to answer. Admit he felt left out because he wasn’t worth being included? Never was and never would. Childish. Stupid and pointless and childish.

“Silence will only prompt me to discern the reason myself and you know that will not likely end well for you.”

That was not a point Martin could argue. Just by how he held his tea, Sherlock probably already knew the first glimpse of libido he’d had in a very, very long time was at Baker Street. No use letting him drag out any more embarrassing secrets.

“Fine. I… I just realized… I mean… it’s like this…”

“Though I may have all day to listen to you temporize, I’d rather use the time for more productive pursuits.”

“It’s this! What he fuck does temporize even mean?”

“You had a panic attack over vocabulary?”

“No! Because I will never be able to fit in with you. No wonder you always thought I was dirt. A stupid animal that had no use but to satisfy your sadistic whims. You never had any interest in me as a friend. I was too dumb and too naïve! I was the drippy little boy who was weak and scared and silly and that hasn’t changed has it! I see it now and…”

Martin’s voice was breaking and felt even more worthless that he couldn’t even speak with any degree of backbone.

“You treated me worse than I… than I thought was possible short of killing me. Not that I don’t think you honestly tried that, too. No one else. Not one other person took that much abuse from you. I sit here watching you and John and Arthur, having a lovely time and seeing you… I’ve never seen your face like that Sherlock! Caring, engaged… pleased. You can be everything I always wanted you to be so it has to be me that’s the problem! I’m not worth anything but the hurt and blood and scathing… fucking crippling… things you’ve said to me. You… you…oh christ…”

Martin’s breathing was rapidly constricting again and Sherlock quickly got the man seated and repeated John’s method for calming him down…

“Breathe, Martin. Take a breath. Idiot. Let it out. Take a breath. Ridiculous. Let it out. Take
a breath. *Foolish, simply foolish.* Let it out.”

…which with Sherlock’s personal touch should not have been working, but between the regular cadence of Sherlock’s voice and hand firmly reinforcing the rhythm against his back, Martin slowly pulled back from the brink.

“It is a wonder you have any Holmes blood in you at all. How can you… Have I given you any, any reason to believe I do not consider you someone of worth?”

Martin’s shock and disbelief slapped Sherlock across the face.

“Not *then.* Now. Have I, in the very few times you have agreed to breathe air that has been with a meter of my person, treated you differently than I have Arthur or John?”

Martin dragged a few more breaths into his lungs and stared across to his own eyes, narrowed and waiting for an answer.

“I… I suppose not.”

“Have I threatened you? Assaulted you? Asked you to leave? Refused to be in your presence? Restricted your movements, this incident notwithstanding, or throttled your speech? Indentured you? Humiliated you?”

“STOP! I said no! You’ve been quite the gentleman, is that what you want to hear?”

“There is nothing specific that I want to hear, so please don’t try and tailor your responses to meet my nonexistent expectations.”

“Fine. You have not gone out of your way to do anything or say anything hurtful to me.”

“I have learned that much, though it takes concentration and *that* is not something I squander on the underserving masses. And I often fail, simply because I do not recognize, even after the fact, that what I have said or done was in any way inappropriate. John is forever vexed by my, as he terms it, cluelessness. I continue to try, though. For those whom I consider the effort worthwhile.”

“You do not consider me worthwhile, Sherlock. Maybe you’ve learned to be more cordial, especially when it makes people like John or Arthur upset… or loses you something you want… but please don’t try and tell me that you place any inherent value on me. Don’t add insult to injury.”

“I have always valued you, Martin. And I am not, as you wish to paint me, sadistic in my desires or behaviors. That implies a need to inflict pain for its own sake and that has never been an aspect of my personality.”

“You could have fooled me. What with being your pin cushion, punching bag, whipping boy…”

“Not for its own end. I never had a drive to see you in any form of pain. That was an artifact of the process. Of the work. Not the goal. It was *never* the goal.”

“The work! You were a child Sherlock! A child! You were not the man splashed across the papers like you are now!”

“I am still not that man! Damnable hat. I have one purpose, Martin… I have *always* had one purpose – to know. There is nothing else.”
“Then why were you never the one to wake up with Calla lily extract painted on your skin! I itched for days!”

“I had to monitor the experiment! How could I do that if I was continually scratching myself?”

“That is the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard far more ridiculous things.”

“That’s not the point! If your work was so important, why didn’t you experiment on yourself?”

“I did!”

Martin blinked. Then blinked again.

“What are you talking about?”

“What do you think I did when you weren’t there? The work was not nearly as objective, since I could not divorce my personal sensations from the focus of the study, but if that was my only recourse, I did not hesitate!”

“I… I never knew that.”

“You never asked.”

Sherlock drew himself up and found another perch in one of Mycroft’s chairs.

“It doesn’t matter. You made that choice for yourself. You didn’t have the right to make those choices for me.”

“No, you’re correct. However, you never chose to put an end to it.”

“I told you all the time I didn’t want to do things! I told you I hated the things you did to me. I begged you to stop!”

“Yet, you never actually stopped me. You never said no and walked away. You never refused to come with me and you never refused to…”

“How could I? If I did… you said you’d never do anything with me anymore. Leave me alone…”

“That’s what you’re saying you wanted!”

“I wanted you to be my friend, Sherlock!”

“I THOUGHT I WAS!”

Sherlock’s roar ripped through the house and Martin was very surprised John and Arthur didn’t come running to put a stop to things.

“It’s not… I did not have a wealth of examples to use as models for that concept.”

“That’s pathetic even for you, Sherlock. ‘Friend.’ Very common word. Used often on the telly, in books…”

“It was… not that easy.”
‘Not that easy’ was trying not to drown while you sat on my back and held my head under ice water."

“You allowed it!”

“I was terrified I’d lose the only person who ever even noticed me!”

“I believe you used the word ‘pathetic’ a moment ago…”

“I was a child, Sherlock!”

“So was I!”

“Even a child sees! A child understands! Screaming! How much screaming did I do? How many times did I cry and plead and try and suffer? Only a freak wouldn’t…”

And he couldn’t finish. Sherlock looked like he’d been stabbed. No, that was a lie. He looked worse. Like Martin had reached over and crushed whatever he had inside for a heart.

“Sherlock… I… I’m…”

Sherlock flung himself out of his chair and paced a moment before sitting again. Different. Martin saw it immediately and cursed what he saw. This was the Sherlock he knew well. Cold, closed off…

“I didn’t mean that.”

“It is of no consequence.”

But it was. Sherlock had called him many things, many terrible things… cruel, heartless, terrible things that were cruel, heartless and terribly honest. Brutally and harshly honest. What he never did was call Martin names.

“Yes… it is. I shouldn’t have called you a…”

Sherlock’s facade broke for the tiniest of second as he braced for word a second time and seeing it made Martin feel sick.

“I shouldn’t have called you a name. You never did that to me. You said plenty of nasty things, but none that I can say weren’t true.”

“The majority would agree that your terminology was accurate.”

Few would have caught it. Few knew Sherlock well enough to hear the ache beneath the arrogance.

“I thought your position was that the majority had the intellect of a tin of beans.”

Putting the almost invisible smile onto his cousin’s face should not have lifted any of Martin’s own distress, but it did. Damn it all, but it did.

“True. However, the collective opinion of what is and is not appropriate… it is a formidable obstacle sometimes.”

“Not obstacle, Sherlock. Certain things keep society running. Keeps the peace in families.”

“I doubt that Arthur is who he is in order to maintain societal harmony.”
That actually made Martin laugh. Arthur was truly a pure soul.

“No, you’re right there. There are those who are just good. I wonder sometimes that if Arthur turned the right way in the right light, I could catch a glimpse of his wings.”

“I’m sure he has a pair in his closet back in Fitton. The question is whether they are angel wings, butterfly wings, bird wings or airplane wings.”

“Or all of the above. Sherlock… why couldn’t we do this before? Why couldn’t we just talk?”

“We did not exist in silence, Martin.”

“Not as such, but… normally, you talked and I listened. You orated, really, and I was the audience. I don’t remember ever really just talking.”

“John complains that I do similar today. It bothers him, for some reason, that I choose to talk to him whether he is present or not.”

“People do like to participate in conversations. Like… like earlier. You and John and Arthur…”

“You were not excluded, Martin.”

“No… but… maybe that’s it. I wanted to be part of something. To be included. To feel like I was good enough to be included. To do things with you… not have you do things to me.”

“I did not try to make you feel that way. It was never a consideration. I had no desire to make your self-perception a negative one. I did… you were included, Martin. Perhaps it did not seem that way, but there was no one else who occupied a prominent place in my childhood. It may not have been in the fashion you preferred, but I did believe you to be close to me. To be a part of my life and my work.”

Sherlock could mimic sincerity as well as the finest actor on any stage, but Martin knew the difference. He wasn’t faking this.

“Then why did you throw me away? If I had some place with you, how could it be so easy to toss me aside? Not one word, Sherlock… I tried over and over and never got one single word back from you.”

Martin watched as Sherlock rubbed his palms on his thighs and then rum them through his dark curls.

“I don’t know.”

“And the word of the day kiddies… pathetic.”

“I cannot provide an answer that will satisfy you, Martin. I did not make a conscious decision to sever ties. I simply… I simply made no effort to retain them, either.”

“So I did mean nothing. Get your story straight, mate.”

“No! You were there and you had my attention. You were not there and you didn’t.”

“Flattering that I made such an impression.”

“That is not the issue. My mind… you have no concept of what it is like in here.”
Sherlock tapped the side of his head and took a moment to try and find a way to phrase his thoughts.

“I have not always had the organizational structure inside mind that I do now. All of the information, the sensations, they concepts, ideas, images…there is not a moment my mind is not saturated with demands for attention. I am better at sorting and prioritizing than once I was, but I still struggle sometimes. John chastens me frequently that how I have structured items for my consideration is not socially appropriate. You were a fixture of my days and, therefore, you maintained a constant position in my mental framework. When I left, you were no longer there. Other items filled the gap that your absence created. It was not intentional. I was not ‘glad’ that you were no longer there. To be honest, I cannot say I noticed.”

Sherlock was not lying and that, perhaps, was what hurt most of all.

“But I tried, Sherlock! I tried to maintain a place in your mind…”

“It was not sufficient. I’m sorry, Martin. I know this is not what you want to hear and you should feel no responsibility for my lack of contact. You called, I heard the message, I had other matters to attend to, your message moved further and further away from my attention until it was not even a memory. I promise that I took no pleasure from that. I did not do it to cause you pain or make you feel unwanted. There was no intent… for anything.”

“And that’s what I have to look forward to again? When I leave, I won’t even be a memory?”

“No. I told you, I have developed certain skills… I have practiced and have been successful. I was without John…”

The smallest memory of his time away from John was enough to make Sherlock’s body feel cold and empty.

“I was without John for a long time and… he was never out of my thoughts.”

“Because you love him.”

“In years past, that would not have mattered.”

“That’s crap.”

“You are not the same person you once were, Martin. Do not assume that I am.”

It would be a foolish assumption. The Sherlock of old would not be sitting here allowing this discussion. He would already have told Martin his exact opinion of Martin’s insecurity and mental pain and found other activities to occupy his time. But he was still there, in Mycroft’s chair, talking… answering… no, this was not the old Sherlock. The question was whether the new Sherlock offered Martin anything more than the old one did.

“Alright, I won’t. I won’t assume anything at all. That means you have to present things to me clearly. So clearly there is not one bit I have to try and fill in on my own. What do you want, Sherlock? You’re sitting here and I know you must want to be anywhere in the world but here. What do you want? And not what John or Arthur or Mycroft wants. What do you want?”

“I have no firm idea.”

“Then this is all a waste of time.”

“I said I have no firm idea, but I do have a nebulous one. I cannot be specific because I truthfully
do not know what possibilities exist. I have no foundation to calculate the all of the hypothetical permutations of our future relationship and give you details or identifiable labels. I can tell you that it has not been unpleasant having you here, provided I ignore my new collection of bruises. Besides John, there are extremely few whom I am able or willing to spend any appreciable time. I would not have thought when I first met him that Arthur would be one of that group, but if I did not speak to him again, I would feel the loss. And, that is also true for you. I don’t know what that ultimately means, but I do not want this to be our last meeting. I cannot change our past, Martin. I would, if it was in my power to do so. I also can offer you nothing to make your memories more pleasant or any justifications to make my behaviors excusable. Arthur would like to create a relationship between us, you and him with John and myself. I would enjoy that, I think, though the scope of that relationship is not something I have experience to quantify. That is the best I can offer you, Martin. It is for you to decide if that meets with your own expectations.”

“I have no expectations, Sherlock. Maybe I’m a hypocrite for demanding you lay out your vision for where we go from here, when I don’t have anything to give in return. John said not to hope for a weepy plea for forgiveness and, frankly, I wouldn’t have believed you if you did fall to your knees begging me to absolve your sins. I don’t know what I want. No… that’s not true. I want my childhood back, but that’s not possible. I want to be able to stand proud and point to a life lived well. I did my own damage to that dream, though, didn’t I? I want to make Arthur happy. I have no idea if I can, once he realizes that what little I have to offer is all I have to offer, but I have never wanted anything more than to try to give him happiness. I want friends. I’ve always wanted them. I’ve always wanted to be part of something and… I think I have a chance at that. I’ve built something in Fitton and I would like… I would not refuse the chance to build something with the people here.”

“Including me?”

“As much as that is possible. I can’t forget, Sherlock. I can’t. My scars won’t let me, neither will my dreams. I can’t say I feel comfortable around you right now. I keep waiting for something to happen, for an idea to flash across your brain and I’m a victim of your curiosity one more time. I can… not let that rule me. I can try to take things at face value. I can walk away for awhile if I feel overwhelmed or anxious or distrustful. I can listen to Arthur… apparently, he’s better at understanding our family than I am. That’s all I can do Sherlock. I can’t offer promises or even guarantee that I won’t change my mind in a month’s time. So… where do we stand?”

Sherlock scrutinized his cousin and took in everything. The tilt of his head, the droop of his eyes, how his fingers curled around each other, the rate of his breathing, how he bent his body slightly to the left and deeper into the protection of the chair and how his feet pointed directly towards Sherlock’s own chair, although it meant his legs twisted slightly into an unusual position. He was scared, vulnerable, unsure of himself but… truthful. And it was a truth Sherlock respected because it was not unreasonable or blinded by unfounded optimism.

“On higher ground, perhaps, than before. I accept your position and find it surprisingly rational, given the circumstances. I do not begrudge you your hesitation; I actually applaud you assessment of the situation and your ability to respond to change.”

“Was that a compliment?”

“Would you like my pen to mark this in your diary?”

“Bastard.”

“Unfortunately, I am clearly aware of the identity of my parents and their tedious marriage.”
“This is us trying, right?”

“I think we’re rather good at it, actually. Holmes men are noted for their dexterous wit.”

“I thought you just admitted your legitimacy.”

“Careful, or I shall turn you over to Mycroft for proper handling.”

“That’s an empty threat; he likes me more than he likes you.”

“But he likes Arthur more than the both of us.”

“I don’t find myself minding that.”

“No, neither do I.”

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“They’ve been awfully quiet for an awfully long time, Doctor Watson. They are… you don’t think…”

“They’re not dead, Arthur. You’ll know when Sherlock’s headed for the grave by the profound and carefully prepared speech he’ll be delivering with his last breath.”

“Is it written down somewhere? I’d rather like to read it. I might not be there when Mr. Sherlock passes and I don’t want to miss anything, especially if he’s worked really hard on it.”

“I’ll see if he’s got a copy lying around. Wait a minute… Arthur! Over here… look casual.”

“How? Oh, oops…”

The sitting room door opened and Arthur decided that he needed to study the lovely pattern of Mycroft’s Oriental rug, much as John was admiring the painting on Mycroft’s wall.

“This is not your best effort, John.”

“Not really trying, to tell the truth. Simply going through the motions. You knew I’d snoop.”

“True, though I didn’t know you would so readily admit it.”

“Nice to know I can still surprise you.”

“You are an eternal surprise, John Watson.”

Sherlock took John into his arms and hoped that his kiss would ever be able to let John know how much he appreciated and desired those surprises.

“Mr. Sherlock? Is it ok if I…”

“Martin is waiting for you. John and I will be going home now, but we will return tomorrow evening for perhaps another, as you call it, ‘movie night.’ And yes, Martin agrees that this would be acceptable.”

“Really! Another movie night! I’ll have to see if Mycroft has any movies. I’m sure he does but if not, Skip and I will go and get one. And we’ll need movie snacks. Don’t worry, I’ve got it covered. All you need to do is be here. And Skip agreed? That means that… something happened.
And it wasn’t too bad. Right? Not too bad? How bad could it be if you kissed Doctor Watson like that and still have your happy smile on your face?"

“Arthur… Martin will fill you in on the details. We have a detente of sorts that will suffice for now and will permit a peaceful evening of entertainment. Now, John and I are going home to enjoy our own peaceful evening of entertainment.”

“Oh! That sounds suspiciously like snuggling and I must say that I approve completely. Have fun! And thank you, Mr. Sherlock. I’m not sure if Skip said that so I will. Thank you for whatever happened in there that makes you able to come back tomorrow. Really… thank you with every bit of thanks in my heart.”

John pulled Sherlock away after his slightly shaky ‘you’re welcome, Arthur’ so the detective didn’t become uncomfortable revealing any undue emotion. Once safely on the other side of the front door, John clasped Sherlock’s hand tightly and favored him with a large, contented grin.

“Things went well, then?”

“They went… I think that I am satisfied with the outcome.”

“You’ll let me know more than that, won’t you?”

“I will. I am currently processing and indexing the information.”

“Well then, I’ll make sure to stay out of your way when we get home so I don’t disrupt your process.”

John’s faux-innocent smile was quickly becoming one of Sherlock’s favorites.

“I’ll have things sorted by the time we get home, John. And I shall expect you be in my way.”

“Can I be under your way?”

“You can be anything you wish.”

“Dangerous…”

“And you love danger.”

“That I do.”

“Skip? Are you alright?”

“On balance, I’ll say yes. Come here, love.”

Arthur’s heart jumped like a gymnast and rushed over to Martin’s side.

“You… you had a good talk with Mr. Sherlock?”

Martin patted his legs and Arthur dropped into his lap with a giggle that filled Martin’s soul with sunshine.

“Good is not the word I would choose, but we had a real talk. And… I think there’s some chance for… something.”
“But you feel better now, don’t you? Did you… how much porridge do you still have in your heart?”

“A little. I suspect I always will, but you were right. I was able to spit up a lot of it… well, some of it at least. I’m fairly sure I’ll be able to accompany you on your future London visits with a minimum of discomfort. Most of the time. Sherlock is who he is and I’m sure I’ll want to sprinkle rat poison into his tea at some point… or at many points… but not all of the time anymore.”

Arthur leaned in and pressed a kiss to Martin’s lips, which started chaste, but with Martin’s arms closing around his body, turned a little less chaste to both men’s delight.

“It’s still early, Arthur… what would you like to do?”

“Would you mind… I’d like to see the city at night. I hear it’s lovely and maybe we can find new shops and things to see and a cute little place to have dinner just the two of us where they have candles and we can hold hands and be romantic… if you that’s something you’d like, that is. I know you’ve had a difficult day and I am so incredibly proud of you and…”

Kissing distracted Arthur beautifully and Martin made certain Arthur was well compensated for the interruption to his speech.

“Whatever you want, Arthur. We’ll make a night of it. You and me… consider it date night.”

“Brilliant! We’ll always have to make time for that. Real dates with films and dancing and picnics under the moon and all of those wonderful things.”

“Like I said, Arthur, anything you want.”

“Skip… could you… could you say it like you did…”

“Like I said, love, anything you want.”

“Including you?”

“Especially me. Most especially me.”
Debriefing

The glow of contentment that Sherlock had developed from sitting quietly with John in the cab, John’s head resting against his shoulder and hand curled around his knee, vanished when he saw the dark sedan parked outside the door to their building.

“Sherlock, you can be honest with me. Mycroft’s unemployed, isn’t he. No shame there, everyone’s hurting. Maybe we can find him a handy job so he has something to do during the day besides visit relatives.”

“If Mycroft were unemployed, there would already be a foreign flag flying above the Palace. He’s just a busybody who has found himself dropped into an entire ocean of family drama with an air raft and one of those drinks with straws and umbrellas.”

“Like the Mr. Bear whatsit.”

“Precisely.”

“So this is all like a holiday for him?”

“Oddly, yes. I expect he hasn’t had this much fun in… ever.”

“Well, glad we’re entertaining, at least.”

Sherlock made a rude noise that John was surprised the detective even knew about before dragging the shorter man up the stairs.

“And how was your afternoon? I’m sure dear Arthur provided a marvelous table for your enjoyment.”

“John is convinced you’ve been sacked since you have nothing better to do than sit on your expanding arse and meddle in our affairs.”

“Not to fret, Doctor Watson. You will know the minute I have been ‘retired’ from my duties. Someone will notify you so you can make suitable arrangements for the body.”

John was fairly sure Mycroft did have a sense of humor and was completely sure he was not using it now.

“Well, good to know. Might want to update your personnel file so they call me instead of Sherlock, just in case. He’ll let you rot until some poor tech finally tosses you in an incinerator just to cut down on the smell.”

“Excellent point. I shall remedy that post haste. Now, the details. What is the status of Sherlock and Martin? I would ask my brother, but we both know that would not produce anything useful.”

“You’re going to have to, Mycroft. Sorry. Prince Sherlock over there hasn’t given them to me yet.”

“Sherlock! Holding out on your intended already? Bad form, little brother. That could earn you many nights on that distasteful sofa.”

“Intended?”
“Distasteful?”

“Have you and Martin conversed about your history, Sherlock, or are you still running from the inevitable?”

“Hang on, Mycroft. My hand’s up first. About this ‘intended’ business…”

John found himself being turned towards the kitchen and given a shove with the command “find gin.”

“I’m not leaving this alone!”

“And he won’t, either. What a *vigorous* conversation that will be.”

“I will make you pay for that.”

“I shall leave behind a blank check when I go. Whatever you choose to charge, it will be worth every pound. Now, report.”

“Look here…”

“Stop. Calculate the quickest path to securing my absence and make the appropriate decision.”

The calculation was as rapid as the rise of the petulant pout on Sherlock’s lips.

“Very well. We discussed individual perspectives pertaining to our respective youths and have agreed that though the past cannot be altered, it is possible to restructure the future based on mutually-beneficial decisions.”

“So, I do not have to order the two of you searched for firearms when you are scheduled to attend the same social or family event?”

“I doubt Martin would choose a gun as his weapon of choice. He’d likely not survive the recoil.”

“Point taken. However, you should probably take care not to insult Martin’s height or build during this delicate time of remaking bridges. He seems rather sensitive about the topic.”

“Ah, you could be correct. John also gets his dander up when his height is the focus of conversation.”

“And he *can* successfully manage recoil. You had best step lightly, Sherlock.”

“John will not shoot me. He already complains that he has too much to clean around the flat as it is.”

“Then I shan’t ever contract you a maid.”

“You had best *never* consider that action. It is sufficiently inconvenient that John moves my things, bins important experiments for his petty ‘health’ concerns and fails to show proper consideration for the organization of my dresser when he refills it with clean garments.”

“Which delights you in a manner you cannot accurately describe, but embrace nonetheless.”

“There is no need to matchmake, Mycroft. John and I are an established couple and will remain so.”
“So you must allow me my bit of teasing; I have waited for this a very long time. I am happy for you, Sherlock and, for a large portion of your life, I despaired of ever being able to say that to you.”

Sherlock stared across at this brother and swallowed down the extreme discomfort at being in a room with a candid Mycroft Holmes.

“John! Why don’t I have gin?”

“Because you don’t actually like gin?”

John set a glass with a small amount of brown liquid next to Sherlock and another next to Mycroft. The third he kept for himself.

“Will I like this?”

“Who knows? But it’s alcoholic, so it really doesn’t matter after the day you’ve had. Down the hatch.”

“Quite practical, John. There is no sense in pouring a fine bottle of spirits when it will not be properly appreciated.”

Mycroft downed his measure of John’s ‘oh god Sherlock’s in a mood’ single malt and made himself ready to leave.

“I am satisfied that you made an honest attempt at reconciliation, so I may lay that concern to rest.”

“He did a good job, Mycroft. You’d have been proud. Don’t scowl at me, Sherlock. Learn to take compliments graciously.”

“I am always proud of my brother, John. But yes… some days more than others. Until later.”

Mycroft’s smirk prompted Sherlock to drain his glass and John was ready with a refill.

“John, are you trying to get me intoxicated?”

“Nope. That wouldn’t be the best idea, what with my plans for later.”

“Plans?”

“Parasympathetic plans.”

“Oh…then I shall slowly enjoy this one.”

“Slowly… that’s a word you’ll come to enjoy later, as well.”

Arthur had read a lot of fairy tales in his life and right now he felt like he was squarely inside of one. He had spent the evening with a handsome prince, riding around in a fancy carriage, and was now sitting sipping a coffee topped with a mountain of yummy whipped cream watching smiling and laughing people walk by the café window. There were beautiful lights and happy voices and everything was magical.

“Can I get you and your young man anything else?”
“Oh, Hi! Yes! Well… yes! Maybe a couple of those big muffins. Or maybe not, we just had the most romantic dinner with candles and everything so Skip might not be very hungry. But they do look quite tasty and I think you had chocolate ones, which are his favorite and…”

“How about I bring one and cut it in half so the two of you can share?”

“Yes! Brilliant! That’s a fantastic idea! That must be why you’re the only person working here since you’re so good at your job!”

The server took Arthur’s good-heartedness for what it was and didn’t launch into her usual rant about the Scrooge of an owner who refused to hire more help.

“Just for that, how about I give each piece a bit of heat and add a little chocolate sauce. Spot of whipped cream, too. Nothing like a special treat for a special night out.”

“Oh my heavens, that would be… brilliant! Thank you! And it is a special night out. It’s our first date night, though we did have a date day, but this is more official.”

“New couple are you?”

“Well, yes. We’ve known each other for a long time and I’ve wanted to be his boyfriend since the day I met him. But now we’re together and I’ve got lots of new friends because of it and I can’t believe how lucky I am. The luckiest man in the world isn’t as lucky as me!”

“Good for you. Oh, looks like your man’s coming back. I’ll get your muffin.”

“Thanks! Hi Skip! How was the loo?”

“As enjoyable as it can be”

“You know… sometimes that can be very enjoyable. Especially if you’ve been in the car a long time and Mum won’t stop because she’s already running late because you took too long in the shower because you were listening to the radio and dancing with your new rubber duckie.”

“Well this wasn’t that enjoyable and we should find something else to talk about besides the loo. For example, how are you enjoying the rest of the evening?”

“It’s been amazing! This is the best date I’ve ever been on and we’ll get to do it over and over and over… You don’t know how happy you’ve made me, Skip. I don’t know if I can ever find the right words to make you understand just how happy I am, but I’m going to get a dictionary and read through every page and make a list and maybe one of those words will do the trick. Because I’m very happy!”

And Martin knew that as long as Arthur looked at him with those bright eyes and let him see that gorgeous smile, he would be very happy, too. But, old demons are hard to kill…

“I’m glad Arthur. If anyone deserves happiness, it’s you. But you do realize…”

Very hard to kill.

“Skip? What’s wrong?”

“You know that it won’t always be like this, right?”

Martin waved his arm around and Arthur’s confusion grew.
“I can’t give this to you, Arthur. I don’t have enough money or time to take you for nice dinners and to museums and shows. I can’t fund coffee stops and new suits and have you chauffeured around in fine cars. Once we’re back in Fitton, there won’t be any of this anymore. I can’t even afford to buy you take away! Or rubber duckies or packets of biscuits. I’m going to try do to everything I can, but it will never compare to all of this. I’m sorry, Arthur, but it won’t.”

Arthur grabbed Martin’s hands and squeezed them very hard to break the flow of words and focus Martin’s attention away from the ugly parts of his brain.

“I’m not stupid, Skip… I know this is a fairy tale. But there’s nothing wrong with enjoying the story while it lasts! I don’t really have anything to give you either, if you think about it. Mum doesn’t let me have much spending money and she doesn’t pay me either, so I can’t buy you fancy dinners, not that there’s really anywhere fancy to go in Fitton. Well, not like the nice places we’ve been going lately, which have been wonderful, but I couldn’t even take you for some nice Indian like at that one restaurant by the library. At least not more than now and then. My car’s not much nicer than your van, though Mum does pay for repairs when it breaks down. We’re not posh, Skip and that’s just a fact. Well, I was posh once, but not for a long time and Dad said that when he died he wasn’t going to leave his money to ‘a moron who would give it all to some ridiculous cat hospital’ so I probably won’t ever be posh again.”

“I’m sorry, Arthur… Gordon is a complete bastard.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the point. The point is that if you’re worried about what you can’t give me then I have to worry about what I can’t give you and that’s not a lot of fun, so I don’t do it, but if you do, then I’ll have to start and feel bad, which on top of you feeling bad, means we’ll just go around feeling bad and why would we want to do that? We’ll do alright, Skip. There’s nothing wrong with staying home and watching telly and cooking our own meals and taking walks and playing games, and you know how many games I already have so we have lots to choose from. And if something really happens, then we ask for help…”

“That’s not something I want to get in the habit of, Arthur. I don’t want to owe anyone when I have no way of paying them back.”

“Skip, you need to understand people. Take Mycroft. He likes to help, just like me. It makes him happy when he gets to make someone else happy. And he doesn’t expect you to turn around and hand him a bag of money later on when you’re flush. You pay people back by saying ‘thank you’ and just doing what you can to make them happy. Take our dinner last night, for example. Could you tell that Mycroft was having a really, really good time? I could and he was. He was paying for all of it but he was enjoying himself a lot and, I’m not sure if you’ve noticed that Mycroft always has a bit of worry around him, like he has a lot on his mind, but he didn’t have that last night. He was just happy and that’s how we paid him back for our nice dinner. We gave him something that was important, even if it didn’t cost anything. So if something happens, like the box of babies or your van gets stolen, we ask for help. It’s what happens in families, Skip.”

“I’m just… I’m tired of being the poor relation. And, I’m sorry Arthur, but it doesn’t seem fair to you.”

“I know this seems like a very big deal to you, and I understand why, but you’re over-thinking things again. Look at it this way, Doctor Watson doesn’t make much money. He and I talked a lot while you were having your… problem… and I found out all sorts of things about him. His family didn’t have a lot of money and he didn’t make a lot in the army, either. And they still don’t give him much now that he’s out, even though he got hurt, which I don’t think is very fair, but Doctor Watson says that’s just the way it is. And he can’t work a lot as a doctor now, because he’s always having to
help Mr. Sherlock with his cases. If something happened to him, he’d have to rely on Mr. Sherlock or Mycroft to help him out. It has nothing to do with being fair or not; it has everything to do with being friends or not. Friends and family don’t care about fair, they care about helping you when you need it. We’ll do what we can on our own and if we need a leg up, we’ll ask. And if anyone we know needs a leg up, we’ll help them. Even if that help is just making them laugh or cooking breakfast or setting up a really fun movie night so they can relax and just have fun.”

“Arthur, I…”

“Ahem. Your chocolate muffins, sir…”

“Oh! Thanks! I forgot, but I got us a muffin and then she said she’d make it special and look! Chocolate Muffin Surprise!”

“You’re welcome. And you should listen to your boyfriend… he’s obviously a bright one and knows a lot about people.”

The server gave Martin a glare that said if he didn’t listen to Arthur he’d probably wind up homeless, on the streets, eating rats and dying from the plague. And he didn’t doubt that she was right.

“Ummm… ok?”

“Good lad. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“We will! Thanks! See Skip, I think I’ve got the right end of the stick this time. The only thing I really want in this world is you and I have you, so I’ve already got everything I really want! Isn’t that brilliant! Just eat your muffin and just enjoy our little holiday. We’re going to have a good life, Skip. With lots of adventures and snuggle times and it’s going to be grand. Ok?”

Maybe he’d feel different tomorrow, but right now, it was easy to hold onto a little of Arthur’s faith.

“Ok, Arthur. Now, do you think you can make muffins like these?”

“You want me to try and make these myself? Really?”

“They’re very good, but I think you could add in your personal touch and make them better. Something to work on when we get home?”

“Oh Skip, that’s… I accept the challenge! I’ll make you the best chocolate muffins ever!”

“I know you will, Arthur.”

“How do you feel about beet root?”

“Sounds amazing with chocolate.”

“That’s what I thought! Brilliant!”

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“And my home once again fills with the joy of love and romance. How fortunate I am to have welcomed guests across my threshold.”

“Have you been drinking, Mycroft?”

“I don’t think you and Doctor Watson left much behind for me to sample.”
“Don’t be silly, Skip. Mycroft is just happy! We did talk about this…”

Arthur wasn’t a bony man, but his elbows were sharp and savage when they gave a poke to the ribs.

“Quite right, Arthur. It has been a very productive day and I am feeling unusually buoyant. I was hoping, perhaps, that you and Martin might join me awhile for some conversation and, if you wish Martin, a little of brandy I seem to remember I have stored away for a special occasion. How does that sound?”

“It sounds great! Well, it sounds great to me, I really can’t answer for Skip. But even if he’s too tired, I’ll stay for up for a chat. Can I change into my pajamas, though? I love staying up late in my pajamas.”

“That sounds very comfortable. Do prepare yourself and meet us in study. I’ve a fire going, so it will be quite a cozy evening.”

“Brilliant! Skip, are you staying up, too?”

“How could I pass up the chance for a bit of brandy in front of a fire? You know, if we get rid of Mycroft, we can make even better use of that fire.”

Mycroft again admired the rosy glow on Arthur’s cheeks.

“Skip… that’s a tad rude. And… naughty.”

“That was my intention.”

“If I have the pleasure of your company for a few more days, I can guarantee that you will have an evening alone to enjoy a warm fire. And I have a very nice sound system for soft music to accompany your… conversation. I shall program in a useful selection for your listening pleasure. For now, Martin and I shall get settled and you may join us when you are ready.”

“You’re the best, Mycroft! See you in a minute!”

“Martin, a word now that we’re alone?”

“Oh, I should have known…”

Martin followed Mycroft into the study and took a chair, leaving the one closest to the fire for Arthur.

“Is this the first or second in your round of interrogations?”

“Second. You were out with Arthur, but John and Sherlock went straight back to their flat following your afternoon tea.”

“Then you know what you need to know.”

“Incorrect. I know where Sherlock stands on your relationship, but I do not know your own mind on the issue. Kindly enlighten me.”

“I’m willing to let Sherlock show me he can fail to be a sodding prick. That’s about it.”

“And is that enough for you?”

“It’s more than I’ve had.”
“That did not answer my question.”

“Are you looking for me to forgive him?”

“Heavens no. I am looking for you to forgive yourself.”

“Forgive… forgive myself? Are you mad?”

“Martin, you are exactly as easy to comprehend as when you were a child. For every slight you receive, you seek the point where you made the mistake and earned the cruelty. You have yet to fully accept that not all of your misfortune has been related to any of your perceived inadequacies. Do you remember the first words you always said to me as a child when I asked you about your condition? ‘I’m sorry.’ Regardless of what atrocity Sherlock had perpetrated, your first reaction was always to apologize. You accepted the off-hand remarks by your parents and the passive abuses by your siblings as a matter of course. Can you honestly tell me that you do not worry that you are undeserving of Arthur’s affections? That will never have a fulfilling life simply because your failings make you unworthy of contentment?”

Martin hoped his shock didn’t show on his face, but then remembered with whom he was speaking. Mycroft was better at pulling information out of thin air than Sherlock.

“H… have you been talking to Arthur?”

“Ah, so he has also discerned this particular area of weakness for you. How perceptive. He will be beneficial to you in so many interesting ways… regardless, what I want is for you to realize that you are an individual with inherent value that is recognized by those around you. When you do, it will be easier for you to accept Sherlock’s overtures, which, though likely awkward and baffling, will be genuine.”

“You… you think I have value?”

“I have always believed you had value, Martin. You are loyal, hard-working, tenacious, curious and you take a proper measure of pride in your accomplishments. You deserve to be happy, to have a rewarding life with Arthur at your side. And you deserve to have as much support as we can provide. Sherlock is abominable, at times, but he has proven he can, on rare occasions, be a shoulder to lean on for John and, recently, for Arthur. Why should you not have the benefit of his occasional largesse?”

“And what if I still get the urge to put my fist in his face?”

“Then by all means do so. He certainly deserves it. Do try and avoid any permanent disfigurement, however. For some reason, John finds Sherlock’s appearance pleasing. But, do make the effort to find it within yourself to allow Sherlock the opportunity to demonstrate that he can be someone other than the monster you remember him to be. It has been an exhaustingly long process, but he has made strides.”

“That is basically where we left off, anyway. Like I told him, I won’t give any promises, but I’m open to the possibility of change.”

“Good. That’s very good. No one could reasonably ask more. Ah, Arthur! Perfect timing. Do you like your new pajamas?”

Arthur stood in the study doorway with a heart-melting expression of joy, wearing pajamas festooned with stylized caricatures of what appeared to be otters. With fuzzy slippers to match.
“They. Are. Brilliant! Otters! How did you know? No! I don’t want to know. I want it to be like you have psychic powers. Which I actually think might be the case. Look Skip! Ottery pajamas! And I bet these get to go home with me to, don’t they Mycroft?”

“Now who is the mind reader, Arthur. Consider them a little token to commemorate your stay. Speaking of which, how much longer do you think your visit will last? I hope you believe me when I offer you my hospitality for as long as you wish it.”

Arthur bounded over to his chair and curled up with his feet tucked under his body.

“Well, I hadn’t really thought about it, but I guess we do have to go back at some point. Mum is probably wondering what’s going on and I do miss her and Douglas and Snoopadoop. But, I also know I’ll miss everyone here, so it’s hard to just say ‘what ho! time to go!’ Maybe we can stay a little bit longer? Skip?”

“Maybe a very little bit. If Carolyn hasn’t given my job away yet, it probably won’t be long before she does.”

“Would the two of you be agreeable to three more days? I believe that MJN will be given an assignment very soon that may entail several stops, with a few overnight stays in between. Will that be enough time for you to declare your holiday satisfyingly complete?”

“That would be fantastic! Three whole days! And if Mum’s earning money she won’t even think about being worried or angry. Please, Skip? Can we? Can we please? You’ll have time for Doctor Watson to make sure you’re alright and to see if you and Mr. Sherlock can be nice and we can have more time to just have fun and see things and do things and Oh Please Skip! Please Please Please…”

They should get back to Fitton and Martin should try to start fixing the damage he’d caused by his absence but… Mycroft was right. He deserved this. He deserved a bit of a holiday. With Arthur. Even without the chauffeur.

“Alright, Arthur. Three days. But then we need to go back. You should probably call Carolyn and tell her our timeline, but don’t let her convince you to cut our time short. We’ve got a lot of things to do and three days is barely enough time to get them done.”

“REALLY! BRILLIANT! Thank you, Skip! And thank you, Mycroft! This is positively the best holiday I have ever had. I’ll call Mum first thing in the morning.”

“Excellent. Now, I believe I did make the offer of some brandy. Arthur, will you join us?”

“Is it as good as sherry?”

“Some prefer it, actually.”

“Then I will happily accept a little drink. That’s part of a holiday – trying new things.”

“It certainly is. And you now have a bit more time to try all manner of new things.”

“I am more than a little excited about that, I must say.”

“Martin, are you more than a little excited, as well?”

Arthur was right. Mycroft was definitely enjoying all of this.
“Without question. Giddy with excitement, even.”

“Giddy… that would be a brilliant name for an otter.”

“If we adopt one, it will be yours to name.”

“Skip, you’re the best boyfriend anyone could have.”

“Takes one to know one, Arthur.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

As always, my continued thanks for the supportive comments!

“John, what are you doing?”

“Tasting your areolar region. For those among us who haven’t attended medical school, that means…”

“I know what it means, John. I am merely curious why you…. oh…”

“Basically to hear you make that noise. And, to see what other noises I can get you to make. For example, if I do this…”

Sherlock’s was flummoxed that his mouth only allowed out a random string of rarely-used consonants.

“… I get to hear that. Such an exotic sound for a silly nipple wiggle. Now if I add in a little teeth…”

This time it was mostly vowels. All vowels if the situational ‘y’ was included.

“This is very educational. Now, using a combination move…”

John felt certain he heard his name was somewhere in the gibberish that flowed into his ears, but even if he didn’t, the very hard nudge against his hip let him know his efforts were appreciated.

“I’m starting to understand the whole ‘experiment’ thing. It is satisfying to learn new things. I mean I learned this just last night…”

John wrapped his fingers very loosely around a very sensitive part of Sherlock’s anatomy and stroked lightly until the detective’s entire body was vibrating with pleasure.

“You know what would make a great experiment? Seeing how long you can last if all I do is this? I mean, I’m quite comfortable so I could keep this up for a long time. A long time.”

“I…Is this your r…repayment for my r…ruining your socks?”

“You used one of each pair, Sherlock. I go to get some socks and find a bunch of… sock. Had to wander the flat like an eccentric with mismatched socks on my feet. I think a little fun on my part is warranted.”

“S… socks were necessary…”

“For my feet, not your experiments. Ooh, what will this do…”

John ran his fingers lower and drew swirly patterns over the very tight flesh he found between Sherlock’s thighs. Now, that was a word John hadn’t heard since Afghanistan.
“My my my… you do have a mouth on you when you’re not trying to be all cool and mysterious.”

“T…this is i…infantile…”

“Maybe. I won’t deny it completely. So let’s see… what might make me grow up a bit? I know! Listening to my lover beg. Want a teeny bit more friction, Sherlock? All you have to do is ask. Nicely.”

“Outrageous! I won’t… like that… yes, just like… NO! DON’T STOP!”

“Want more? You know what I want to hear. Have a little more inspiration if it helps.”

John caught some of the plentiful fluid running across Sherlock’s soft, pale belly and let it lubricate another bit of attention to the detective’s firm and flush nipples.

“I…if your ego req…requires…

Sherlock’s nipples apparently also liked a little pinch-and-twist for contrast.

“PLEASE! Please, John… this is u…unfair, but PLEASE! Just a little more…”

“Little more what?”

“FRICITION! FORCE! GRIP! Please, John I need more…”

“Like this?”

John curled his fingers tighter and Sherlock’s hips rose up to steal even more sensation.

“God you’re beautiful, Sherlock. You steal my socks, but you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Well…. almost…”

John stroked harder and faster and drank in every ‘please’ and ‘more’ and ‘John’ and finally was privileged to watch Sherlock paint his sleek body with lovely, shiny stripes.

“Now… now you are truly the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Love you too, John.”

“Really?”

“I lack the energy to lie.”

“Well then… love you, back.”

“Excellent. Now, I will love you more if you find a wet flannel and put it to good use.”

“I will. In a moment. There’s something I need to do first.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, just lie back and let the artist do his thing. No good leaving that gorgeous painting unfinished. Needs some of my personal creative juices.”

“You are a surprisingly creative man, John.”
“Only since I found my muse. Now lie still, this is delicate work.”

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“Why do we have to pick up pizza? Have the delivery drivers worn out their tires driving to Mycroft’s flat?”

“Your brother’s not fat, you know, so that joke’s getting old. And we’re getting the pizza because Arthur asked if we would. We get pizza and beer and he’ll have the rest assembled. I tell you what, I’m going to miss Arthur and Martin. We haven’t had this much social activity in a long… ok, I could have ended that sentence a little earlier.”

“You do realize that I could be using this time in a far more worthy fashion?”

“No, you couldn’t. This is important, Sherlock. Spending time with people whose company you enjoy is one of the things that make life fun to live. And don’t try to lie, you have enjoyed Arthur’s movie nights.”

“I was nearly pushed through a window during the last one.”

“Well, you were enjoying it before then. And this is going to be especially fun since Mycroft will be there.”

“I’m staying home.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Is my happiness not important to you, John?”

“It is extremely important to me, that’s why we’re going. You need to be around people now and then who actually like you. Do you some good to relax that gigantic brain of yours and have a little fun. So we’re going to have a nice time and watch whatever film Arthur has picked out and you will not criticize it non-stop…”

“Wizards, John! We had to watch a movie about wizards! Wizards do not exist. I’m sorry, but that is a scientific fact.”

“Fine you big Muggle. I’ll check it’s not a movie about wizards before we start. Now come on, we’ve got things to do, places to be and people to see.”

“If I am hit by a cab, will that excuse me from the festivities?”

“Nope. But I will let Arthur practice first aid on you as a penalty.”

“Hurry up, John. The pizza is getting cold.”

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“That smells wonderful! And Skip will be thrilled since you got beer and it’s nice beer, not the type he usually gets when he can afford to buy beer that he says tastes like it’s been drank before. I’m not really sure what that means, but he makes a rather upsetting face when he takes a sip, so I expect it’s something not good.”

“And hello to you, Arthur. Why don’t you help Sherlock carry things to the kitchen and I’ll go make our hello’s to the rest of the chaps.”
“Oh, wonderful! I could use a little help anyway getting things together and Mr. Sherlock is wonderful in the kitchen. He’s a great help even if he only keeps me company.”

“Wonderful in the kitchen? Arthur, you’re a godsend. Now I have cause to get his skinny bum to help me with the cooking.”

“I assist solely in an advisory capacity, John. And I will gladly serve that role when you perform kitchen work.”

“Ok, I take it back. Arthur, he’s yours and yours alone. Oh, and the movie for tonight isn’t about wizards is it?”

“Actually no. I found a brilliant movie that looked very funny. And Mr. Sherlock will love it. It’s about these famous detectives… well, they’re not really famous because they’re actually not real since they’re based on detectives from books and, anyway, they have to solve a mystery and there are lots of people in it I recognize from the movies Mum likes to watch so it should be brilliant!”

“Oh that sounds perfect. Detectives, Sherlock. Right up your alley. You’re going to have a super time with this one.”

John gave Sherlock a grin that said clearly he didn’t believe Sherlock actually could set his brain on fire with mental power alone no matter how hard he was trying and went in search of Martin and Mycroft. For his part, Sherlock resolved to bully Mycroft into turning over any and all research pertaining to telepathic control of human beings and followed an enthusiastic Arthur into the kitchen.

“This is… you know, Mr. Sherlock, I don’t think I can describe how much I am enjoying all of this. And it started with you, so I will always be grateful to you for making me your temporary assistant so I could find Skip and meet Mycroft and Doctor Watson and get to have this brilliant adventure.”

Honest gratitude was rare for Sherlock to receive and, searching his memory, most of it had come from either John or Arthur, with a bit from Lestrade thrown in on occasion. It felt… good. There was no logic to it, but Arthur’s ‘thank you’s’ meant something, though Sherlock suspected it would take him awhile to understand exactly what that something was.

“It was my pleasure, Arthur. This has been something of an adventure for me, as well. I trust this will not be the end of our experiences, however.”

“Oh no! Well, maybe for a little bit. Skip and I are only here for two more days and then we have to go back to Fitton. Believe me, you should be thankful you couldn’t hear Mum when I called her this morning. I think I’ll have to calm her down a bit before Skip and I see her in person. She’s a bit angry that I haven’t called lately and then I told her how much fun Skip and I have been having so now she thinks that we’re just having a big holiday, which is sort of true, and making her and Douglas do all of the work. Of course, she doesn’t know that they have work because of Mycroft, so maybe she’ll be somewhat less upset when I tell her that and she won’t hurl her shoe at my head like she said she’d do. She’s got worse planned for Skip, though, so I don’t feel too bad about a shoe to my face.”

“I’m sure Mycroft will provide you with a protection detail if you ask him.”

“That’s ok, Mr. Sherlock. Mum doesn’t throw as hard as she used to. When I was little, she could throw my Dad’s car keys clear across the yard and into the little fish pond one of the neighbors used to have. The last time she threw my car keys, because, I am a little ashamed to admit, I got distracted looking for a song on the radio and ran over her flower beds trying to park, they only went
as far as her first rose bush and that’s not very far at all.”

“Well, just as long as you feel safe in your person. And, at last resort, you can pick up Martin and use him as a shield.”

Arthur sniggered and covered his mouth to try and hide the fact he was sniggering.

“I could at that, but don’t tell him I said so. I know Skip’s sensitive about his size, but he’s just so cute! I wouldn’t want him any bigger.”

“I find John’s diminutive proportions to be appealing, as well.”

“One more time?”

“John is also ‘cute.’ “

“Oh he is, that’s very true. Funny how we each managed to get ourselves a cute little bloke for our boyfriends. I don’t suppose Mycroft knows any wee men that could be his boyfriend. It would be brilliant if he did. We could take a photo and it would be big and wee, big and wee, big and wee...”

“John will likely have you on the floor with your arms behind your back if you call him ‘wee,’ therefore I would advise against it. And there is no one so desperate that they would find Mycroft an acceptable suitor.”

“Mycroft would make an excellent boyfriend! He’s nice and polite and smart and helpful and a good listener and interested in interesting activities and all sorts of other great things.”

“You marry him, then.”

“I’ve already got Skip, but there’s someone for Mycroft. Just you wait, he’ll find that special person, or I should say, they’ll find him.”

“The thought is nearly debilitating in its horror, so I shall delete it immediately from my mind. Now, since I had to prevent John from eating the pizza en route, I expect he would appreciate a serving now.”

“I’d almost forgotten! Here you carry one box and I’ll put the others in the oven. This is going to be so much fun! I’ve already put out the sweets and popcorn, just the way you like it too!, and juice and here, carry these two bottles of beer, I’ll just put them in your pockets, one per, and I’ll bring out the napkins and extra cheese and olives and meats sort of like we had the other night at dinner, but not as fancy and...”

And that went on for a moment while Sherlock found his arms and pockets laden with enough items to make him resemble a pack horse that got led by its scarf into the sitting room.

“Movie time! This is... oh this is just amazing. Everyone here watching a movie. And Mycroft too! I’ve always wanted to be able to do something like this and now I’ve gotten to. Three times! I really wish Fitton was next door to London so we could do this all of the time.”

Arthur took a moment to unburden Sherlock and then hopped onto a large cushion he’d placed on the floor beside the chair currently occupied by Martin. Who couldn’t help but slide his hand forward to muss the top of Arthur’s hair.

“Maybe it’s possible. Mycroft, can you send out a couple of cars and have Fitton moved a bit
closer to the city? Shouldn’t be too much of a fuss, I wouldn’t expect.”

“Hmmm… I haven’t had to perform such an operation since… well that’s best left unsaid. I’m sorry, Martin, while the logistics are certainly possible, I am quite confident the humbugs among the free press would create a terrible fuss. And I do strive to keep ‘fuss’ to a minimum.”

“Oh well, I tried, Arthur.”

“Thanks, Skip. And thanks, Mycroft. I know you’d do it if the humbugers weren’t involved. Oh! I’d better put in the movie! There’s plenty more pizza in the oven, gents, so eat up! And Mr. Sherlock and Doctor Watson brought a lot of beer, Skip, and good beer too, so you can have as much as you like and you won’t make any faces, I can promise you that. Ok, here we go.”

Sherlock looked around and observed the other persons in the room. John was relaxed and grinning. Martin was relaxed as was possible for him, but he had an easy smile on his lips, especially when he looked at Arthur. Even the Great Scourge of British Cakes lacked the tension that seemed to have a permanent place in his bones. And Arthur… was Arthur. But he looked especially joyful as he started their movie and checked that everyone had some form of snack food within easy reach. It wasn’t… objectionable. There was a peace in the room that Sherlock rarely experienced outside of quiet evenings at home with John. No cases to dissect, no nattering to aggravate his temper, no stupidity, no scorn or contempt when he made an error about something that everyone was supposed to understand… Even if he had to suffer through films involving wizards or dragons or other fantasy creatures, this was not the worst possible way for him to spend time. And soon it would be gone. Two days, Arthur had said. Regret was not a feeling Sherlock was used to experiencing, but he recognized the tendrils beginning to wind their way through him.

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Martin was doing well, he thought. His temper was under control and the few flares that threatened to erupt were successfully camouflaged with a mouthful of pizza or a long drink of beer. It was only until a scene involving poison that he knew he had to be somewhere else if he didn’t want to cause a disturbance. Excusing himself to get a glass of water, Martin didn’t notice John rise to follow.

“You ok, Martin?”

“Fine. I’m fine.”

“You know, it’s nice being around someone who can’t hide a lie the way Sherlock and Mycroft can.”

“Really, John. I just needed a little water.”

“Martin, you shot out of there like your arse was on fire. If you needed water for that, I understand, but I don’t see smoke rising from your trousers.”

“Look… I got a little… I’m trying, ok John? I’m trying to be a good little boy and make everybody happy and not ruin the evening. I just needed a moment to calm down. Can’t I have that? Does it mean I fail if I need a moment when I’m remembering that every time I took something to drink from Sherlock I had to worry that I’d get sick or knocked out or have a foul taste in my mouth for days on end? Sorry if I’m being a disappointment.”

“God, Martin… this isn’t some contest! You can’t fail. If you need to take a step back, you do it. And I’m the one that should be saying I’m sorry. You don’t need me looking over your shoulder like an old hen, especially since you seem to have things under control. You’ve been doing great
tonight and when you hit a rough patch, you took a reasonable action. As your doctor and your friend, I’m very pleased with how you’re doing and what you’re thinking. You’ll be going home, I think, in a good place up here…”

John tapped the side of his head with his first two fingers.

“…definitely better than you were when you left. And you’ve got yourself to thank for that. And, just so you know, I have to go out for a spot of air quite often living with Sherlock.”

“I may always have to do that, John.”

“Good. If you have to then you do it. What my doctor’s ears are hearing is that you at least considering an ‘always.’ That’s worlds beyond the Martin I first met. I think there’s still some spit on Sherlock’s bedroom wall from some of our earlier conversations.”

“Oh no. Well, tell Sherlock it’s a DNA sample in case he wants to create a family database.”

“Don’t give him any ideas. I’m already worried he’ll start taking semen samples to monitor my number of swimmers as I age.”

“How disturbed will you be if I tell you he’s already ventured down that road?”

“Oh, ready to go back to our movie? Our nice, happy, completely no-semen movie…”

“I do believe I am. And thanks, John. For everything. I don’t think I could have made it through this with any other doctor.”

“You’re welcome. And you have my number if you need anything. Not to mention, I’m sure I’ll see you enough to keep your records up to date.”

“I hope so. I really hope so. Come on, we’ve left the Brothers Holmes alone with Arthur for long enough. He’s probably already braiding their hair.”

“Get ready for the family portrait.”

“Posterity deserves nothing less.”

Mycroft cast a brief look at the returning pair and was quite relieved that Martin’s distress was so quickly alleviated. His cousin had made such progress and it was all the more admirable that it came so soon on the heels of his substance abuse problem. So soon on the heels of all his problems, actually. And Sherlock was behaving himself, which was a miracle of its own. Perhaps, just perhaps there was hope for something approaching a family dynamic, even if it had to be catalyzed by the non-Holmes members of their little party. Feeling quite pleased with the thought, Mycroft settled back further into his chair, only to spring back forward when Sherlock’s mobile rang. Given the hour and Sherlock’s complete lack of friends, there was only one option as to the caller.

“What do you want, Lestrade?... boring… still boring… better, but still not a case of interest… you’ll have to have something more stimulating than that…. because I’m in the middle of movie night… hallucinations are not the standard one uses to characterize, as you call them, loonies…”

Sherlock looked at John and rolled his eyes, but then landed his gaze on Arthur who was staring up at him with a look of pure wonder.
“…how much did you say it was worth, again? Consider this a favor for which I will demand repayment. We’ll be there shortly.”

Sherlock ended the call and rose from his seat beckoning Arthur with a crooked finger.

“Arthur, get your coat. We have a case.”

Arthur didn’t feel bad that he was starting at Sherlock with his mouth open, because he was not the only one in the room doing so.

“M… me? A case? Here? But Doctor Watson…”

“John’s skills will not be useful for this particular investigation; however, I believe that you will bring a specialized knowledge base to the case.”

“And that means?”

“We’re going to find a missing dog.”

“A missing dog! Oh no! The poor thing… it must be very frightened. Snoopadoop got out of the car once when we were at the shops and we couldn’t find her for a whole hour. She was shaking and dirty, but I don’t think she was hungry since we found her among the bins behind the bakery and she’d found some old pastries…”

“Sherlock Holmes, do not expect us to believe that you agreed to investigate the disappearance of someone’s pet. That’s quite a departure for you, dear brother.”

“The dog belongs to a Mrs. Chatham, wife of Edward Chatham, the financier and idiot if the fact that his dog, Helen of Troy, wears a diamond collar valued at over 150,000 pounds.”

“Ah yes… ghastly beast.”

“The dog or Mrs. Chatham?”

“Both. I have had the misfortune to attend certain functions where they were also present. Vulgar people. One could almost mistake them for Americans.”

“Arthur, I don’t think this is a good idea. Puttering about Fitton is one thing, but racing around London is quite another.”

“But Skip I have to! Someone had to help that poor dog and Mr. Sherlock’s right, I do know a lot about dogs. I mean, I have a dog and I have books about dogs and I’ve seen All Dogs Go to Heaven and Lassie and Mum and I watch the dog shows sometimes… I think my expertise could come in handy. And I did promise to help Mr. Sherlock whenever he needed me and I can’t go back on that promise.”

John sat back and took in Arthur’s nearly explosive excitement and Sherlock’s poorly concealed smirk. As oblivious to danger as Sherlock could be, he wouldn’t put Arthur in harm’s way. Actually, John was proud of the detective, since this matter was something he would never take on, but for a desire to give Arthur one last chance to be his assistant. No, Sherlock wasn’t perfect, but sometimes he surprised even John.

“It will be alright, Martin. No matter what, Lestrade will be there to keep an eye on things and he won’t tolerate anything happening to Arthur. And they’re right, I’m shite for knowing about dogs, so if Arthur can bring something useful to the case, he should be the one to go.”
“Really! Thanks Doctor Watson! Please, Skip… I’m actually a very good assistant. I don’t get in the way and I do what Mr. Sherlock tells me and I won’t get into trouble, I promise.”

Martin made the same observations as John, with the addition that Mycroft had gotten on his own mobile during the discussion and was having a quiet conversation that Martin felt was completely for Arthur’s benefit.

“Alright, Arthur. You go and help Sherlock. I’m sure you’ll find all sorts of dog-related clues that he’d miss. Just take care of yourself, ok? You have our numbers if you need us.”

“Hurray! This is absolutely brilliant! I thought it would be forever until I got to be Mr. Sherlock’s assistant again and now here I go!”

Arthur raced off to get his coat and with that in hand, raced off again to get a plastic bag into which went a piece of pizza.

“We might have to coax the dog out from under a car or something and Snoopadoop loves pizza so this dog might love pizza, too. Or I might need a snack if we’re still investigating at breakfast time. Maybe I’ll bring another few pieces, to be safe.”

With his pizza in his pocket and coat on his back, Arthur’s beamed his wide smile and announced he was ready to leave.

“Bye Skip! Bye Mycroft! Bye Doctor Watson! When I see you again, we’ll have found that poor doggy and brought it back to its mum. Don’t wait up for us, I have a feeling this could take awhile.”

Sherlock maintained his bored expression, but John recognized the little dancing gleam in his eye. There would be need for a reward when this was over. An all-night reward, at the very least. When the detective team had finally gone, Mycroft let out a chuckle that was quickly joined by two others.

“Tell me I actually saw that? Seriously, John, Mycroft… I did just witness Sherlock Holmes take on a missing dog case just to give Arthur a little thrill.”

“Sherlock does behave in the most intriguing ways, at times.”

“My favorite bit is that Arthur doesn’t care a bit about the bloody fortune the mutt’s got around its neck. To be a fly on the wall when he gets to the crime scene.”

“I’m sure we’ll get a report. I think cousin Mycroft made sure of that.”

“I may have checked that Sherlock was in possession of all salient facts before allowing their excursion to continue. And, I may have provided the Detective Inspector with some salient facts of his own concerning dear Arthur.”

“Well, we’ve got food, drinks and… how many movies did Arthur get?”

“Half the store’s worth.”

“And half a store’s worth of videos. Shall we get comfortable?”

“I did clear my evening for this event, so I am agreeable. Martin?”

“Pass me the popcorn. I’m here for the long-term.”
John, Martin and Mycroft sat glaring at the two muddy figures that stood at the entrance to Mycroft’s sitting room. Figures that had been clean nearly 24 hours ago.

“Arthur solved the case.”

Arthur gave the seated men a little wave and a shaky grin and shuffled a little closer to Sherlock.

“And the case involved what? Digging another tunnel to France?”

“You are quite aware, John, that one cannot predict where an investigation might lead.”

“And why is Arthur wearing a shock blanket?”

“The nice policeman had one in the back of his car and made me put it on before we tried to get a cab because I was a lot muddier than Mr. Sherlock.”

“Sherlock, in as succinct a manner as possible, kindly explain yourself. We have been trying to reach you…”

“Oh! That’s partly my fault. I mean if you tried to call me at all because my phone met with a little accident and… don’t worry that I lost all my photos though because I email them to myself when I take them so I always have a copy… but…”

“Sherlock also has a mobile, Arthur. And did not respond to his texts or calls.”

“I was engaged, John. Arthur and I were quite busy attempting to retrieve the dog and the collar and had no time for any little chats.”

“Will one of you please just tell me what has been going on? Arthur, do you have any idea how worried I was!”

“I’m sorry, Skip! But really, we were working very hard and time really gets away from you when you’re working hard like that. Next time, I’ll set an alarm on my watch so I’m reminded to call you ever few hours so you don’t worry. I really didn’t want you to worry, Skip, but it was so hectic and so…”

“Exciting?”

Arthur looked very sheepish and shuffled even closer to Sherlock.

“Would you be happier if I said no?”

Martin ran an eye up and down the extremely filthy man and what struck him most was the spark in Arthur’s eye. And, despite his current attempt to hide behind his cousin, the pride that was powering that spark.

“No, Arthur. No, I wouldn’t. I’m thrilled you had a good time. Now, someone just please tell us what happened.”

“Well, we got to Mrs. Chatham’s house, and let me tell you it was an enormous house, and Mr. Sherlock began asking questions and searching for clues and I was looking at all of the really fancy furniture they had, which had a lot of gold paint on it so it sort of looked like something a fairy queen would own. And they had an indoor pool too! That’s what happened to my phone. I was taking a picture of it and slipped on some water and the phone fell in and now it just sort of squelches when I hit the keys. Anyway, with all my looking about I noticed that the doggy didn’t seem to have many
toys for living in such a posh house and the lady got a little mad at me when I asked about that and opened up a big chest full of toys but then she said that the doggy’s favorite wasn’t there and it was always on top and that was very strange and…”

“And that indicated the dog was taken by someone who would know which of the toys was the dog’s favorite and, in the taking, indicated that they might have some regard for the animal. Further questioning produced information about a gardener’s assistant that could not be located…”

“Then Mr. Sherlock had the policeman find out who the gardener’s friends were and we started finding them and talking to them and I got to play at being the mean bodyguard again and, let me tell you, Brick Steel can be quite ferocious when he wants to be, so no one messed with Mr. Sherlock and me except for some strong language that was quite rude, but no one wanted to give us any information at first…”

“Fortunately, not all of the perpetrator’s associates were quite so closed-mouthed and we discovered his current whereabouts in a flat near the river…”

“But when we got there, there was nobody home even though the telly was on. Mr. Sherlock was going to get the police to try and track down the dog thief, but I thought about it and… well, dogs do need their walkies and we took our own walk around and we found them! The thief didn’t want to admit that he was the thief but I talked to the doggy in that voice Mum uses on Snoopadoop and called her Helen Welen and she started barking and wagging her tail and then the man started running…”

“And Arthur gave pursuit.”

“I couldn’t let him run away with Helen! Even if he did bring along her favorite little plushie when he dognapped her. So I ran and then Mr. Sherlock ran and we got down by the river and it got hard to run what with the mud, but we didn’t stop and Mr. Sherlock lost a shoe, which slowed him down but I had my shoes tied tightly and I caught up with him first but when I grabbed at him we both fell and slid. Then Helen got loose and I had to chase after her and Mr. Sherlock jumped on the thief to keep him from running away and, well it took awhile and I fell a lot and had to run through the water and crawl around trying to get Helen to come get the pizza, which finally worked and… hurray!”

Arthur looked like he was going to burst with happiness and no one in the room could miss Sherlock’s fondly proud smile, tiny as it was. That tiny smile did more to assure Martin that his cousin might be worth knowing again than anything else that had happened.

“And the little matter of the collar? Was that by any chance retrieved or is it now adorning the neck of a trout?”

“Mr. Sherlock found the collar in the thief’s flat.”

“How a man of his status believed he would be able to dispose of an item of that quality defies logic. And he had secreted it in a jar of coffee. Instant coffee.”

“The bounder.”

“You said it, Mycroft. Stealing a sweet little dog like Helen was not a very proper thing to do.”

“Well, now that you two conquering heroes have returned, how about you grab a shower? I’m sure Mycroft would rather not have his house smelling like the Thames .”

“Well, now that you two conquering heroes have returned, how about you grab a shower? I’m sure Mycroft would rather not have his house smelling like the Thames .”

“Actually, John I have grown used to my home smelling rather different than the norm. I am
starting to welcome the ‘bachelor Uni boy’ aroma.”

“I would be insulted except being called a boy at my age is not something to sneer at.”

John cut his eyes over to Martin, who was being suspiciously quiet.

“Martin, how are you handling all of this nonsense? Mycroft and I are used to Sherlock showing up looking like a drowned rat, but this must be pretty new for you.”

Martin drew a breath and gave John a little nod.

“Yes… yeah it is. But… did you see him? Did you see how… he was shining! I mean Arthur always shines, but he looked like he was going to take off like a rocket at any moment.”

“He did indeed. Arthur is man of hidden depths and abilities and you would do well to remember that.”

And Martin would. He would keep that fact very much in mind and do what he could to let Arthur show off those abilities once they were back in Fitton.

“I will. I just wish we had more time for Sherlock to give him detective lessons. Arthur seems to have a flair for it.”

“Oh, forgot about that. You two only have what… one more day here? One thing Sherlock does excel at is monopolizing time.”

“You know what, John? I don’t mind. I wouldn’t have wanted Arthur miss this for a month longer on holiday. And… we’ll be back. I’ll make sure to negotiate some regular time off with Carolyn so that we can visit. Arthur won’t be satisfied unless he can see holiday time blocked out when he checks his calendar.”

“I’m sure Mrs. Knapp-Shappey will be able to accommodate you; your little airline has proven quite useful for small, unobtrusive functions that can be performed with a reduced staff. Arthur and I will coordinate your desired visitation time, so don’t let that burden your mind. Now, if you two will excuse me, I have matters that require my attention. Please give my regards to the dog catchers.”

Mycroft retired to his study, leaving John and Martin to make a raid on his liquor cabinet and let the day’s tension finally bleed away.

“What’s your day looking like tomorrow?”

“I have no idea… I’ll let Arthur decide. Make sure he gets to do everything he wants to do. He deserves it.”

“Have you thought about what you’re going to say when you get back? You’ll have to talk to Arthur’s mother about all of this, you know.”

“I’ve tried not to think about it, but I know it has to be done. I mean, she’s my employer and Arthur’s mum. I’ll be lucky if she doesn’t kick me up and down the tarmac a few hundred times.”

“Well, you’ll have a sore bum, but you’ve survived worse.”

“Yeah… yeah, I have. And Arthur will be there to apply the salve.”

“Too much information, Martin.”
“Says the man who tried sexting Sherlock to make him answer his phone.”

“Not my finest moment.”

“Nor mine. I took notes.”
Sherlock and John went home, Sherlock wearing an ensemble crafted from the finest pieces of Arthur’s Mycroft-provided wardrobe though he refused Arthur’s eagerly-offered slippers and left bare-footed. John refused to let him have socks, at least not two that matched.

Arthur and Martin ended their day curled warmly in Arthur’s bed, Martin very content in his little-spoon role in their bedtime arrangement.

“You amaze me, Arthur. Honestly and truly, racing off with Sherlock and solving a case. John said working an investigation could be harried, dangerous, exhausting… and you didn’t hesitate. Won the day, too. You chased a suspect! You, Arthur Shappey, chased a suspect in £150,000 theft and took him down. How in the world are you going to be satisfied going back to serving Douglas and I coffee for a living?”

Arthur clutched Martin tighter to him and pressed a kiss to the smaller man’s temple.

“I’ll be satisfied because I love doing it. I love flying and meeting new people and seeing new places, even if we’ve been there before, it’s not like we’re there all the time so it feels new when the air’s different and the sun’s different and everything is just like a big surprise. And I love spending time with you and Douglas and Mum and GERTI. Honestly, Skip… being cold and wet and muddy isn’t the way I’d want to spend every day. And Mr. Sherlock’s been shot at and people have come at him with knives other dangerous things. That’s not something I really think I’d enjoy very much. It’s ok for Doctor Watson since he’s been in an actual war and he knows what to do, but I would be all muddled and no help at all if that was happening when I was assisting. Nope, I’ll be happy to give Mr. Sherlock a hand now and then when my specific expertise is needed like with finding Helen or if it’s something not too upsetting, because I wouldn’t be able to handle something awful like a murder, but that’s about all I think I want to do. It’s a lot of fun, believe me it is a LOT of fun, but so is being with MJN, so no matter what, I get to have fun and that’s all that really matters!”

“Well, I’m glad, because I don’t think I’d be very happy getting a delivery man job here in the city and worrying about you while you were out fighting crime.”

“You know, Skip… if you had a delivery job you might get a nice uniform and if I was a crime fighter, I’d have a costume and that would be simply brilliant because we’d get to get dressed up every morning to go to work and…”

“Well, I have my Captain’s uniform and you know that Carolyn wouldn’t mind if you made yourself a nice outfit to go with the steward’s hat you already made.”

“That’s true! Actually, I could make a lot of uniforms since there’s not really an official one for me… lots of different colors and everything. Skip, I do believe I have a project when we get back. I’m going to start on it right away.”
“I think that’s sounds great. My Arthur, dolled up in his fancy uniforms.”

“My Skip, with all his gold braid.”

“We do sound a little flamboyant, don’t we?”

“Well, that’s better than boring and Mr. Sherlock says there is nothing worse than boring.”

“And, for once, I actually have to agree with him.”

Arthur’s last full day in London was a whirlwind of activity that made his head swim and his face ache from all his grinning. He was certain that if there was something fun to do in the city, they had found it, done it and thought about doing it again. With souvenir bags filled to capacity and a plantation’s worth of sugar in his system from the sweets that they’d sampled from sun up to sunset, Arthur flopped onto Mycroft’s sofa with a feeling of pure bliss and made sure to do everything he could to remember his day and all of the days they’d had to explore and play and just have fun. As a couple. A real couple that could be introduced as a couple. Arthur and Martin. It was just too bad their names didn’t make a good one-name. Marthur wasn’t very good and the other possibility was Artin, which people might just think was Martin with the M said really, really softly.

But that wasn’t the only name issue. Though he wasn’t sure he was ready to tell anyone, Arthur was already debating what their last name would be if the day ever came that he got the courage to ask Martin to be more than boyfriends. No, when the day came that he asked Skip to be more than boyfriends. Crieff-Shappey sounded much posher than Shappey-Crieff, so that was his current leaning, but Arthur also wished a bit that Martin was a Holmes in name so that could be part of their name also. He’d have to ask if you could put someone’s name with your name even if it wasn’t your name or your boyfriend’s name but just because you wanted to. But then they’d have three names, which would get a bit long to write when he had to sign something, so this would require some thought. And maybe a talk with Mycroft. This seemed like the sort of thing he would know about and he would give good advice, which he always did, better than anyone so it was brilliant that Mycroft was one of his best mates now so he could always get advice when he needed it. And speaking of Mycroft, Arthur heard the man’s steps coming towards him and did a quick check that his feet weren’t getting anything dirty.

“Well, Arthur, are you enjoying a moment of solitude or did you dispose of my cousin somewhere in London as a little game to keep Sherlock occupied?”

“That would be a brilliant game! A huge hide-and-seek game all over the city. Between that and water balloons and all of the other wonderful things Skip and I have been doing, I am beginning to think that London is magic. Really and truly magic. And since you run London, that means you’re magic, too, but I already suspected that. Not real magic, of course, because Mr. Sherlock spent a lot of time on our last case telling me why wizards can’t actually exist, but something so wonderful that it seems like magic. Oh, and Skip’s in the loo. And changing his trousers. We, that is I, had a little accident with a big cherry lolly…”

“I cannot admit to having magical abilities, pesky security regulations prohibit releasing that information, but I thank you for your assessment nonetheless. Now, I do have a have a little something for you that I think you need.”

Mycroft pulled a new mobile out of his pocket and handed it to Arthur who looked as if he’d been handed a bar of gold.
“This is… Wow! What a great phone! It’s so thin and the screen is so big and… my pictures! And… all of my numbers and songs and… oh my… everything is here! It’s like my old phone in a much better new phone! Thank you, Mycroft! Oh… pooh on Mr. Sherlock. There is real magic out there.”

Magic, along with a dedicated tracking chip, call monitoring and call forwarding software, and a few other features that Mycroft felt might help protect Arthur’s welfare snugly nested amidst the circuitry. Six more phones with similar features were at the ready to be delivered when, and Mycroft felt certain it was when and not if, this one met an unfortunate, though undoubtedly colorful, end.

“I’m glad you’re pleased, Arthur. It wouldn’t do for you to be without a means of communication now that you have more people with whom to stay in communication. And, now this is between you and me, there’s an extra contact in your list. Martin has his emergency number and now you have yours. It is an emergency number though, Arthur, only to be used in the gravest of circumstances. But I trust that you will use it should those circumstances arise. Not that I plan on allowing anything dire to happen to you or cousin Martin, of course, but on the off-chance something slips my notice, I don’t want you to be without recourse.”

“Really? I have an emergency number now? That’s… oh that’s brilliant! I feel like part of the family! Is it… it’s ok if I feel like that, isn’t it? Because I really do, even though Skip is the one that’s actually your family, but with Mr. Sherlock and you and Doctor Watson, it seems like it’s a big London family and that I’m part of it and that makes me happier than you can imagine, but if that’s too forward of me then…”

Mycroft stood and listened to Arthur ramble and thought about the word ‘family.’ Family was forged by blood but that did not ensure that what one had with those that shared blood always produced the joys and rewards that those horrendous books and movies tended to portray. In the past few days, Mycroft had felt more like a part of a family than he had since… not even his prodigious memory was that powerful. Yes, it was an abysmal dip into a trench of sentiment and set an unfortunate precedent, but no one had to know about it, did they?

“I can assure you that both Sherlock and I consider you an honorary member of the Holmes family and, I am quite certain, that the honorary status will be elevated in future. You do have intentions of a legal nature towards young Martin, don’t you, Arthur?”

“Intentions?”

“Come now, you don’t have to be shy with me. You have been contemplating a more committed future with Martin. One that involves a strengthening of your ties through legal documentation.”

Arthur really did not want to ask Mycroft for clarification again, so he thought hard and was somewhat confident when he gave Mycroft an answer.

“Uh… yes?”

“Excellent. When you are ready to begin the planning phase of your nuptials, I will expect notification so we may confer on the details. I am actually quite looking forward to that event. It will be special… quite special.”

“What will be special? Don’t tell me you’re already rearranging Arthur’s life, Mycroft. He’s done perfectly well up until now, without anyone’s help.”

“Perish the thought. Arthur and I were just having a little chat about things best left between the
two of us for now. Rest assured that you will be part of the discussion if and when we feel you can make a contribution. Now, are you prepared for tomorrow? I do wish that you would make use of the vehicle I offered you and forsake the train. It would far simpler for all involved. No tickets to lose or people to… smell. You can return it the next time you find yourself in London.”

“We don’t need a car, Mycroft. The train will be fine and both of us can relax on the trip. I’ll make you a deal, though. If I decide to treat Arthur to a bit of motoring around the country, I’ll ring you up about using a car for the trip.”

“Well, if I must compromise on the issue, I suppose I could be presented with one of far lesser benefit. You won’t be upset, of course, that I upgraded your tickets and put you on an earlier departure? Mrs. Knapp-Shappey won’t be expecting you until evening, but you will actually arrive in the afternoon. I surmised that a measure of time to get your affairs in order might be welcome before braving the conversations that are sure to arise the moment your presence is made known.”

Martin had to admit that Mycroft’s meddling sometimes produced useful results.

“That’s actually a pretty good idea, Skip. We can get you set back up at your flat and… well, we’ll probably need to talk about what we’re going to talk about with Mum, which I’m sure we’ll do on the train, but maybe not as much as we should because I love trains and looking out of the window and talking to the conductor to try to get him to let me pull the whistle.”

“Oh, I agree. The best part is that we’ll be by Sherlock’s flat very early to get our things and I’m sure he’ll just love that.”

“The likelihood is that John is the one whose temper you will provoke, Martin. The good doctor does enjoy a bit of sleep in the morning, while Sherlock will not have been to bed yet. I believe he did succumb to a small nap two nights ago and that will have met his quota for the week.”

“Yeah, Mr. Sherlock doesn’t seem to need much sleep. He’s like a bat, up all night fluttering around. But that doesn’t work, does it, because bats sleep during the day and Mr. Sherlock doesn’t sleep during the day either. But he is sort of bat-like with his coat swooping out like big wings and he’s got a battish look about him when he’s thinking. Maybe not like a real bat because they have lovely big, round eyes, but like those bats they show in the cartoons who are sort of evil, but not really evil because they’re actually vampires and I can’t really say they’re evil because they do kill people but they do it because they have to eat like we do and they can’t help it if they need human blood or they go all sort-of dead. But not really dead because they’re the Undead. Like werewolves and mummies that walk around and kill people because they’re cursed.”

“Ok, so Sherlock will be roosting when we get there and John will need a coffee. Good to know what to expect. And you, Mycroft? Will you be up to give us a wave?”

“Without doubt, but, unfortunately, I will not be present to bid you farewell. I leave tonight for a brief trip to… let’s just say somewhere to the east. A car will be arriving shortly, so I must make my goodbyes at this time.”

“Goodbyes! So soon? I thought… I hoped we’d have one more breakfast at least. And one more time for a chat. And one more… oh I don’t want to say goodbye, Mycroft!”

Arthur began to snuffle and Mycroft laid his hand on the Arthur’s slumped shoulder.

“I would rather not say goodbye either, but the world simply refuses to behave itself for very long. But this won’t be forever now, will it? Think of it more as a ‘until we meet again’ than a goodbye. In fact, I expect that I will hear from you often and I look forward to that, Arthur. I truly
do. Now, I must ready some things before I leave. Perhaps… would you have the time to prepare me a small nibble for travel? I did not have time for a proper dinner and I doubt that the aircraft in which I spend the next several hours will offer anything close to the caliber of your cuisine.”

“I’m on it! I’ll make you the best snack you’ve ever had. Just give me a minute!”

Arthur ran off like he was chasing another wayward dog and Martin just shook his head watching him leave.

“Thanks for that, Mycroft. He’ll feel better now, with something to do. And thanks for everything you’ve done for him. And… for me. It’s been a lot easier keeping my head clear with the distractions and diversions… and a happy Arthur.”

“Arthur did not need my intervention to be happy, Martin. All he needed was yours. However, if I observe that you are failing to provide sufficient or appropriate interventions, I will place someone more suitable with Arthur to ensure his continued happiness.”

“I’ve already had nightmares about that, just so you know.”

“Then we understand each other perfectly. I take my responsibilities seriously, as you know. Arthur is now one of them. You are another.”

“And you don’t worry about Arthur not providing sufficient or appropriate interventions for me?”

Mycroft stared at Martin for a full five seconds before both men broke into free and comfortable laughter. Mycroft waggled a finger at Martin and strode off to pack his valise. Martin watched him and tamped down the regret for lost years with a hearty dose of hope that his future promised something better.

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“John! Answer the door!”

“You’re closer.”

“I am currently engaged and at a delicate phase of my work.”

“Are you shaving?”

“That is immaterial.”

“For christ’s sake…”

John reluctantly threw off the very warm blankets and threw on a quick pair of track pants. A quick run of his fingers through his hair to flatten the sleep-tossed strands and down the stairs he went to see who was insane enough to be knocking on their door at, oh god, 5:00 am.

“Hi Doctor Watson! We’re sorry to wake you up, but we taking an early train home so we had to come by early to get our things. Mycroft said you’d be sleeping and I guess he was right and I do really apologize, but we brought pastries from that place Mycroft said you liked and do you know what? They opened up early just for Skip and me to get the pastries and coffee. We got a lot of that, too, since we only got a few hours of sleep ourselves and it’s going to be a very busy day and probably a late one, too but Mycroft got us seats on the train in the posh section and there’s a loo just for people who sit there so we won’t have to queue up for long after drinking all of this coffee. Can
we come in?"

John caught an extra few minutes of sleep while waiting for Arthur to finish speaking and it was only the diligence of his subconscious that roused him in time to say ‘sure’ and lead his visitors up to the flat.

“Oh! Mr. Sherlock’s up and about already. He really is like a great big bat, even though bats don’t shave and I can tell Mr. Sherlock is shaving because he does it really slow and makes those little noises like he’s trying to cast a spell on the razor. Hah! I do have magic on the brain lately, don’t I? It must work, too, because I haven’t seen him with any nicks and I always get a nick when I shave. I wonder if vampires have to shave? I mean if they’re Undead, then their hair is Undead hair and that would mean it would grow, right? I wonder if it’s stronger than normal hair since vampires are stronger than normal people. Does Mr. Sherlock use a special razor, Doctor Watson?”

“Sherlock isn’t a vampire, Arthur. When he does eat, he’s not put off by garlic and he once wiped his fingers off in holy water when we trailed a suspect into a Catholic church. Admittedly, the priest did condemn Sherlock to an eternity in hell for his sacrilege, but I don’t think that would turn him into a vampire. A demon maybe… pity the poor bastards who get tormented in the afterlife by a demon Sherlock.”

“I’m sure he’d do a brilliant job as a devil! With a big pitchfork and little horns on his head. You should start checking soon because horns might take time to grow and first they would be little nubs, which would be amazingly cute. You will send a picture if he grows little nubs, won’t you Doctor Watson?”

“On nub photo will be on its way the second I find them. Now, coffee? Pastries? You’ve got a few minutes before you have to leave, right? Good time to chat, what with there being nothing else to do this hour of the morning.”

Arthur distributed the food and beverages, feeling very much like he did when he was on GERTI, handing the last coffee cup to a freshly-shaven and dressing-gown clad Sherlock as he walked into the kitchen, taking a seat next to John at the table.

“Pastry, Mr. Sherlock?”

“Vampires have little need for pastries, Arthur.”

“Oh. Right! Not even this one? It’s filled with jam. Red jam, which sort of looks like blood. I think a vampire would very much appreciate a nice red jam pastry.”

John took the proffered item and tore it in half, eating one half in two bites and putting the other half in front of the detective who sniffed at it cautiously before taking the smallest bite a human being or vampire could manage.

“Decidedly non-blood like. Now, why are you here at an hour that even John would consider early?”

“We’re leaving, Sherlock. A little earlier than we had planned and Arthur needs his koala jammies.”

John wasn’t sure what to make of the expression that Sherlock quickly hid, but it reminded him a great deal of sadness.

“Of course. Mycroft, I expect. Decided you required acclimation time before returning to the harsh reality of your life.”
“Beautiful bastardry, Sherlock. Unfortunately, you’re right. I’m going to have to explain where I was, then almost certainly have to plead for my job. And I don’t even want to think about what Carolyn is going to say about Arthur and me.”

“Don’t worry about that part, Skip. Mum always said that when I found someone who would actually take me for good, she’d throw a party. Which is actually brilliant! We can combine that with the ‘finding Skip’ party and have a massive knees up!”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea, Arthur. I can’t wait to see Sherlock with his knees up. You’ll have a camera around right?”

“Definitely. Oh, and I have a new phone too, so I can take lots of pictures with that.”

“Great. More for my blog.”

“I believe you are aware that the phrase ‘being cut off’ can be used for more than alcohol, John.”

“Curses, foiled again.”

The four men sat at the kitchen table for as long as Arthur and Martin were able before having to collect the few belongings they’d left and make their final goodbyes to London.

“Martin, I want you to call me regularly for the next few weeks, ok? And that’s the doctor in me talking. I just want to keep an eye on how you’re feeling. I’ll email some suggestions for vitamin supplements and food plans for building up your weight. And you’ve got my list right? The one with the counselor’s names?”

“Yes, Mum. I’ll remember to wear clean pants, too.”

“Come on, mate. I spent a lot of time in medical school. Let me get some use out of that training.”

While John and Martin said their farewells, Sherlock pulled Arthur aside and grabbed the phone out of Arthur’s pocket.

“Good. Mycroft gave you an emergency number. You will use this if necessary, correct?”

“No question. If something horrible happens, I’ll call immediately.”

Sherlock scrutinized Arthur for a few moments then replaced the phone.

“That will not be the only time, I presume. You will maintain contact if there is an emergency or not.”

“Mr. Sherlock… are you going to miss me?”

“I do not engage in sentiment, Arthur.”

“We talked about this, Mr. Sherlock.”

“I’m going to miss you.”

Arthur’s sun-shaming grin broke out and he gave Sherlock a crushing hug.
“I’m going to miss you too. Ever so much. This has been the most amazing time. It’s been like a dream, but not any dream I’ve had since I would have never have imagined something this brilliant to even start to dream about it. You’ve been a good friend, Mr. Sherlock. Even with the troubles with Skip, you’ve really been someone I’ve been happy to know. And do you know what Mycroft said? He said that I was an honorary Holmes now, so we’re like family. And I take family very seriously, Mr. Sherlock. I remember birthdays and I phone and write and visit and send pictures and get a house with guest rooms so that they can visit me. I must admit that I don’t have any family that I do that with now, but I’ve always wanted to and now I can! I’m going to miss you so much, though. And Doctor Watson, too. But, I’m really going to miss you because… well, because you treated me like a great friend even when you didn’t know me and not a lot of people do that. And you never treated me like I was stupid or incapable, like a lot of people do, which meant a lot to me, Mr. Sherlock. It’s meant the world to me. So… I’ll call and write and visit, but you have to, also. I know it’s hard for you and I understand that now, so I’ll remind you lots and lots. And… you know I’m there if you need anything. And I just don’t mean cases. I mean if you need anything, like to talk when you need someone who will listen. I don’t care if it’s hours and hours of listening, either. You call and I’ll be there for you.”

One more rib-cracking hug and Arthur pulled away, dabbing at his eyes. Sherlock, as he found himself uniquely with Arthur, was at a loss for words at the honesty of Arthur’s speech and the depth of Arthur’s feelings. He had no idea why good people like John and Arthur would count him as a person of importance in their lives, but he could not deny that their regard was also important to him. So important that he would call Arthur. Would find reasons to be in Fitton or to have Arthur join them in London. Sherlock had counted only one man as a friend in his life, but now… perhaps there were two.

“I will make myself available to you, Arthur. I would not be pleased if we failed to continue our association. And… I will call you if it is required. To talk. You have proven yourself a valuable resource for explaining aspects of emotional issues that I do not easily grasp. John excels at that, also, but I foresee times that the issues I need to discuss have arisen because I have disappointed him in some way. Take care of yourself, Arthur. I will be most put out if you are no longer able to keep your promises to me.”

Few people saw Sherlock Holmes true unguarded smile, but for those that did, it remained a cherished memory. As it would for Arthur Shappey.

“Arthur! Sherlock! Cab’s here!”

Sherlock nodded at Arthur and chuckled as the man nearly skipped across the flat and down the stairs.

“Arthur, it’s been a great pleasure to meet you and I’m sure we’ll see you again soon.”

“It’s been a ton of fun Doctor Watson, and we will be seeing you again before you know it. We’ll have our ‘finding Skip’ party soon and you have to be there with Mr. Sherlock and Mycroft. And I promised Mr. Sherlock that I would get Mycroft to bring a date, so I have to start working on that, but I’m sure I can do it. When I put my mind to something, I get it done!”

And John had absolutely no doubt that was true. Arthur clambered into the cab and John gave Sherlock a pat on the arm before going back into their building to give the detective a moment alone with his cousin.

“Goodbye Martin. I… I am glad that you have successfully overcome your addiction. And that you have forged a promising relationship with Arthur. That will be good for you.”
“And goodbye to you, Sherlock. I’m glad you’ve got John to keep you on the straight and narrow, too. I guess I’ll see you sometime. Arthur is going to make sure of that.”

“Undoubtedly.”

Sherlock and Martin stood in awkward silence for a moment before Sherlock made what he had learned was a socially-appropriate gesture and extended his hand to his cousin. Martin looked at it with a mix of distrust, worry, amazement and amusement, but did extend his own in response.

“Take care, Sherlock.”

“You, as well, Martin.”

Martin climbed into the cab with Arthur and kept his eye on the rear-view mirror as they rode away, to see Sherlock standing watching the cab until it was no longer in his sight.

As predicted, Arthur was busily engaged on the train with a wide variety activities and Martin used the opportunity to catch up on his sleep. There was so much to talk about, but it was as if each man knew that starting those conversations would put an end to the holiday fantasy and neither was quite ready to that. There was no further procrastination, however, when the train arrived, the cab let them off at Martin’s house and the men climbed up to Martin’s attic flat to take in the bleak surroundings.

“Home bloody home. Here you go, Arthur… my worldly goods offered to you as a token of my affection.”

Arthur grabbed Martin by the collar and led him over to the small bed, giving the man a little push to make him sit on the edge. Arthur deposited the various bags they’d been carrying on Martin’s table and took a seat next to him on the mattress.

“I know this is what you have, Skip. I’ve always known and I’ve always wanted you anyway. If it came to it, we could live here together. There’s enough room if we put sleeping bags on the floor.”

“You will not live in this hellpit, Arthur. I’ll work the streets as a low-end prostitute during my free time to earn rent for a real flat for us before I’d let you live here.”

“I’m sorry, Skip, but no one is going to get to snuggle with you but me. That might be the one time in my life that I’d have to be a bit stern because I don’t think I could be very nice to someone if they tried to kiss you and I was there to see.”

Martin was used to the flush of a blush on Arthur’s cheeks, but a flush of jealousy was something new. And very attractive.

“I’m just joking, Arthur. I promise on a crate of Toblerones that the only person who will ever be able to kiss me is you. But… you now, it just hit me that we won’t be together tonight. In fact, I don’t know when we’ll be together again.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, Skip. Well, that’s not true. What I’ve been trying to do is not think about that. I love my bed at home, with all my teddies, but I’ve never slept as cozily as when I’ve been with you. But it won’t be for long, will it? I mean… I really don’t know how long it will be because I don’t know how long it will be before I can convince Mum to pay us something, but it won’t matter if we don’t let it. I can still come by all the time and we can cuddle together and maybe just crawl under a mountain of blankets and pop popcorn and watch movies on my phone. We’ll
spend lots of time together and we’ll get to work together and Mum can’t complain if I kiss you on cargo flights because there won’t be any passengers so it won’t be unprofessional but even if there are, I can kiss you on the flight deck because only Douglas will see and he’ll already know we’re boyfriends so that will be alright. And as soon as we make a deal with Mum, I’ll talk to Mycroft and get him to start looking at little houses for us. We’ll tell him what we want and I’m sure he’ll find the perfect place that we could afford and live happily ever after in. Just a little while, Skip. We just have to wait a little while.”

Arthur leaned over and stole a kiss from Martin’s lips, then drew him close and held his body tightly until he felt Martin’s worries begin to melt away.

“You’re far too good for me, Arthur, but I’m not going to let that stop me from holding on to you. Now… do you think it’s time?”

“That’s up to you, Skip. Mum isn’t expecting us for a few hours so we could do all sorts of things right now.”

Martin sat there, warm in Arthur’s arms, and gave the question some thought. He absolutely did not want to face Carolyn. And facing Douglas was an even more disheartening thought. But the sooner it was done, the sooner he’d know how his future was going to play out.

“How about this? We sort through the bags over there and get all of your things together. Then we’ll get some ice cream and maybe sit in the park for a bit. And then… we’ll call Carolyn and tell her we’re headed over.”

“That sounds like a good plan. A little fun, a little not so fun. I’ll have to go home with Mum tonight, which I’m happy about since I’ll get to see her and Snoopadoop, but I’m not happy at all about since you won’t be there, but we can promise to get coffee tomorrow morning unless we’re supposed to work, which I’ll have to ask Mum about, but if not then we can get coffee and maybe look at finding me a second job so we can afford our little house when we get it. No matter what though, it will all be fine. You need to trust me on this, Skip. It will all be fine.”

Martin allowed Arthur his optimism and settled for giving Arthur a kiss of his own. Then it was a long slog through the many souvenirs and new clothes and a few unexpected things that Mycroft must have slipped into the bags while neither of them was looking. Arthur was nearly delirious with joy with the packet of colored pencils and small parcel of fine paper and envelopes in one bag and nearly fainted when he spied a packet that contained two lifetime memberships to the London Zoo. Martin discovered the business card for a local auto mechanic slipped into one of his new books. On the back were two words – On Retainer. As much as his pride chafed at the thought of accepting Mycroft’s charity, Martin couldn’t deny the overwhelming sense of relief he felt knowing that worries about his tatty old van were a thing of the past.

Then it was Arthur’s promised ice cream and a good hour of holding hands and watching the ducks on their favorite bench in the park. It was only as the chill was beginning to seep through even Arthur’s warm embrace that Martin knew the time had come.

“Arthur, make the call.”

“Are you sure?”

“No, I’m not, but yes, I am.”

“For all that doesn’t make sense, I understand it perfectly.”
A quick phone call garnered Arthur and Martin the knowledge that Carolyn was at the airfield and that if they weren’t also at the airfield before she hung up the phone, they shouldn’t come back at all. The two men raced to Martin’s van which, very fortunately, started and broke more than one traffic law obeying Carolyn’s order. For all the speed they used getting to the airfield, they moved at a snail’s pace walking from the van to the portacabin where lights were shining brightly. Martin noted that Douglas’s car was still in the lot, also, which meant this was going to be doubly painful.

Somehow, Arthur managed to move into position as the point man and fixed a very wide and very anxious grin on his face as he opened the door.

“Hi Mum! Oh, hi Douglas! We’re here!”

“ARTHUR SHAPPEY! YOU COME HERE THIS INSTANT. AND FORMER CAPTAIN CRIEFF HAD BEST NOT BE FAR BEHIND!”

“Now Mum, don’t be like that…”

“Don’t be like what, Arthur? Like a concerned business owner and mother? My pilot decides to take a walkabout and my son chooses to follow along like one of the Lost Boys.”

“It wasn’t like that, Mum! And Skip did say he was going away. We just sort of forgot when we had to replace the wall chart where he’d marked off the time. It’s not his fault that I got egg all over it so you can’t be mad that he just did what he said he was going to do.”

“Martin, are we to assume that your little scurry-away had something to do with the stoutly-vetoed holiday you proposed to Carolyn?”

“Vetoed or not, I said I was going regardless. And I did. I appreciate the concern at my supposed disappearance but…”

“But what! Off you go to on a jaunt and I’m left trying to hold together an airline with one pilot, who can’t be bothered to arrive on time, let alone file flight plans or even fly the plane unless he’s asked nicely.”

“But that time was not something I could give up, Carolyn. I’m sorry, but I told you that I had to take that time. I gave you fair warning to make alternate arrangements. I won’t feel guilty for doing exactly what I said I was going to do in the first place.”

“And did you have an enjoyable holiday, Sir? Some fun in the sun? Or was this more of an opportunity for snow bunnies and ski lodges? Oh wait… I forgot that you share a bank account with the rest of the vagabonds in the tent city. Was it a panhandlers convention? Pick up any useful information? Best type of tin cup to shake for coins, perhaps?”

“I’ll ask you not to be so mean to Skip, Douglas. A bit of friendly joshing is fine, but I won’t stand for anything mean. That you actually mean.”

Douglas tried glaring at Arthur who did not cringe in his usually subservient fashion. His glare turned to a look of pure shock when he realized Arthur had taken Martin’s hand and was squeezing it tightly without letting go.

“Arthur Shappey, why in the world are you holding hands with my ex-pilot?”

“Because Skip and I are boyfriends. Serious boyfriends. Not just go out for a bit of fun
boyfriends.”

Now it was Carolyn’s turn to stare in shock, especially when Arthur escalated from hand-holding to standing behind Martin with his arms wrapped around the man’s shoulders.

“Since I haven’t been drinking, I know I’m not seeing things. And none of this explains where either of you have been and what you’ve been doing. That ends now. Arthur, Martin… sit. And you will not stand until I am fully satisfied that I know what in the world is going on.”

Arthur placed a kiss on the top of Martin’s head and walked him over to the small sofa, where they sat, one of Arthur’s arms still resting on Martin’s shoulders.

“Martin – speak.”

Martin looked to Arthur and took strength from the quiet smile and twinkle in the eye that he knew was set aside for him alone. And he spoke. Starting with the first pill he put into his mouth and ending with the train ride back to Fitton. He omitted his troubles with Sherlock as they weren’t relevant to his situation with MJN and because he was too raw to share that issue with anyone outside the small circle of those already in the know. He would do it someday, that much he felt sure… just not right now. Throughout his long speech, Carolyn and Douglas remained silent, which made talking much easier, but as soon as he was through Douglas leaned forward in his chair and surprised Martin by laying a large hand on his small knee.

“Martin, why didn’t you… you know I fought my own battle with a certain chemical of mind destruction. Why not come to me? Why not seek counsel from someone who has been where you were?”

“What would have been the price, Douglas? I’m already bracing for the unending taunts and jabs that I’ll have to endure… if I still have a job, that is. If everything had gone to plan, I would have done my stint in rehab and returned with no one the wiser. It didn’t go that way to, I’m sure, no one’s surprise. I already had enough to worry about without adding that on my plate.”

Martin cut a quick eye over to Douglas and saw something he’d never seen on his co-pilot’s face – guilt.

“I’m sorry, Martin. If I’ve behaved in such a way that you felt you had no ally in this, then I am truly sorry. Trust that is not the case, however. I will be here as a supportive ear when you need it. And you will need it. That is something that I can, unfortunately, assure you. Do not hesitate to think of me as friend in this, Martin. I may not have performed the necessary rituals to make that fact perfectly clear to you, but I shall affix whatever feathers and bones are required to my person and dance in the sacred circle to demonstrate my sincerity.”

“Really? Because that would be brilliant to watch!”

“I was using imagery to cement my point, Arthur.”

“Well I’m not using imagery you useless baggage. Martin, why on earth didn’t you at least come to me? I like to think that I am at least a fair person…”

Carolyn ignored the rude noise that erupted from Douglas and the incredulity written across Martin’s tired and nervous face.

“… and would have found some way to obtain you the help that you required. Apparently, I could have offered you my firstborn son and that would have been an acceptable sacrifice.”
“Sorry, Carolyn, but my experience has been shown me that exposing my throat to you only results in getting it ripped out.”

Arthur drew Martin closer to him and Carolyn could not miss the protectiveness of the gesture. Her little boy had certainly begun to grow up.

“There are decisions I have to make that do not make me particularly happy, Martin, but that does not mean I make them purposefully to inflict damage.”

Martin winced at the familiarity of Carolyn’s words, but had to credit that if he could bring himself to consider believing Sherlock, he could do the same for his employer.

“Perhaps that’s true. But that doesn’t alter that I made my decision based on the facts at hand and… and I didn’t see a way to keep my head above water any other way. It was stupid and I will live with that stupidity the rest of my life but I did what I thought I had to. And I tried to get help when it became apparent that I’d made the wrong choice… help for which Arthur was an instrumental part.”

“But I couldn’t have done it alone, Mum. We had to get Skip to a doctor and that’s why we had to go to London. Doctor Watson was there and, in no way am I exaggerating, he is the very best doctor in the entire world. He got Skip well and he’s a detective’s assistant and a soldier. How many doctors can say that! And he’s Mr. Sherlock’s boyfriend officially now, even though Mr. Sherlock fancied him before, they only got together once I got Mr. Sherlock to decide to offer for him.”

“Good Lord, how can a person sufficiently intelligent to obtain a medical degree willingly partner with that cold fish?”

“Mr. Sherlock’s not a fish, Douglas. I can’t say he’s not cold because it was pretty chilly when we were looking for Helen, but he loves Doctor Watson and Doctor Watson loves him and they are a fantastic couple, just like Skip and I are a fantastic couple. We even did couple things like have movie nights. I wish we could have gone on a double date, but we didn’t get the chance. We did get to have dinner with Mycroft, though, and that made up for it.”

“And this Mycroft? Who is he again?”

“That’s Skip’s other cousin and Mr. Sherlock’s brother. He’s very nice and he said I’m an honorary Holmes now, which I think is actually a very big deal what with how important Mycroft is. You already know him, even though he called himself Mr. Farmer to keep GERTI with something to do while Skip got better.”

“Hold on, are you saying that the petty little courier runs I’ve been having to fly were orchestrated by Martin’s family?”

“Yes, isn’t that brilliant! Mycroft had to make sure that Mum wasn’t losing money so she’d find someone to take Skip’s place. And you haven’t, have you Mum? Skip still has his job? He’s still the Skipper, right?”

Carolyn sat back and tried to digest the wealth of information that had been forced down her throat. She’d completely missed Martin’s distress and subsequent drugs problem. Her son had apparently fallen head-over-heels for the ginger that he’d welded to his side and Martin’s family had sufficient connections and money to keep her airline in the black, though why that never directly benefited Martin in the past was still a mystery. Not a mystery she wanted to solve today, but apparently she’d have enough Sunday dinners to worm it out of the fidgety Captain.
“As much as it pains me to say, and believe me I have not felt this level of pain since your birth Arthur, Martin is still employed. This cousin of his has done a tremendous service to MJN and it would be exceedingly rude to throw it back into his face.”

Douglas’s ‘and exceedingly unprofitable, too’ was shushed with prejudice.

“However, I will need some continued assurance that your little habit will not make a reappearance, Martin. I cannot endanger my clients or even this lot with a compromised pilot.”

“John is going to monitor my progress. I can ask him to set up blood or urine tests if you’d like.”

“That I would. “

“Mum, you don’t make Douglas take any tests. I don’t think that’s very fair to Skip.”

“If Douglas just this week took his oath of sobriety, I most certainly would require that he provide continued proof of his sincerity.”

“It’s fine, Arthur. And it’s fair. The only thing I must demand is that any documentation John sends will be destroyed once you’ve read it. I’ve worked too hard to leave no paper trail to have one start now.”

“That will be acceptable. Now, Arthur, gather your belongings. We are going home to have a little talk of our own. We have a flight tomorrow, so I expect everyone ready for the cab to pick them up first thing in the morning. Martin, are you fit to fly?”

Martin felt about as fit to fly as a lump of mud, but nothing was going to keep him out of the air.

“Without question. I’ll… I’ll see everyone tomorrow.”

Martin stood up and gave every person in the room a weak smile.

“And thank you all. It’s good… it’s good to be back.”

Carolyn and Douglas watched the man walk quickly out of the door and neither was surprised when Arthur sprang up and ran after him.

“Skip! Wait! Are you ok? That went, well a lot better than I thought it would, so I’m happy, but how are you? Tell me you’re ok, Skip. Or tell me if you’re not.”

Arthur caught up with Martin and grasped his arms lightly.

“I’m really ok, Arthur. I’m just… I don’t know. Relieved, grateful, confused, waiting for the other shoe to fall… I half expect to be waiting tomorrow for a cab that never arrives.”

“You know I won’t let that happen. I’d stand right in front of GERTI and not let her take off if they tried to leave you behind.”

Martin looked into the eyes of the man he’d come to love with his whole heart and knew that Arthur would do that. He’d have his back no matter what anyone tried to do.

“I know you would, Arthur. Now, get back in there and make nice with your mother. She’s going to want to know all about us, so be prepared for a fierce interrogation.”

“Oh, I’m sure of that. But, it’s ok. I’ll tell her whatever she needs to know. I’m not ashamed of anything, not anything at all.”
“Neither am I. Call me if you need anything ok? I'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning.”

Martin drew Arthur down into a deep kiss that, unbeknownst to them, was observed by the remaining members of the MJN crew. Who quietly returned to the portacabin with grins on their faces.

“It won’t be the same. Bright and early, I mean. You won’t be there with me.”

“You’ve got pictures, Arthur. Put your phone next to you and it will be like I’m there.”

“You won’t mind if I leave it on the one of your bum? Because it’s been very nice sleeping with your back and bum all warm and soft up against me.”

“As long as Carolyn doesn’t see it.”

“Don’t worry about that. Some things I can definitely keep a secret.”

“Except from Mycroft.”

“He’s magic, Skip. It’s not even worth me trying.”
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

All good things must come to an end. But some ends are more end-y than others...

Chapter Notes

This has been an incredible ride and I am more than a bit humbled by the good wishes and encouragement I've gotten while wrangling this behemoth. For those who held on until the bitter end of this piece - my eternal gratitude. Also, my eternal gratitude for ignoring the shameful lack of editing and Brit-picking...

Hope to find everyone along for the next rodeo!

“I do not think I can wait one minute longer.”

“Arthur, you’ve been jumping around like water in a hot pan all morning. Just calm down. Everything’s already set up and the party doesn’t start until this afternoon.”

“Yes, but Mr. Sherlock and Doctor Watson will be here before that and until they get here my hair is going to keep feeling like it’s made of candle wicks. Lit ones at that!”

“It’s only been a few months…”

“Three Months! That a full quarter of a year! I haven’t seen Doctor Watson or Mr. Sherlock or Mycroft for a full quarter of a year and I’m… AAARRRGGGGHHH!!”

Arthur was jumping foot to foot in a wide circle and Martin made sure he’s put down his tea before approaching the agitated figure. Luckily, Arthur was easy to quiet if you got your arms around his waist and turned his agitation into an opportunity to slow dance.

“While we were in Greece the other day, waiting for GERTI to be repaired, weren’t you watching a movie on your phone-telly with Sherlock?”

“He was bored! And Doctor Watson was at the pub and Mr. Sherlock’s experiment was incubating for awhile and I don’t know how my phone is able to play shows just like a normal telly, but it was brilliant that I could talk to Mr. Sherlock while he was watching the same program as me and I explained to him about mutants with superpowers and he explained why mutants with superpowers couldn’t exist, but he did agree that if he had mutant superpowers he wouldn’t want to be telepathic because that would make solving crimes absolutely no fun. I listed all the mutant powers I remembered and he wants to be a teleporter so he won’t have to wait for cabs.”

“My point is that in the three months since we left London, you’ve been in contact with everyone there either by phone or text or letter almost constantly.”

“But it’s not the same!”
“And every week I ask if you want to move to London and you say no.”

“You can’t fly in London, Skip! And that would be too far from Mum, though I think that’s been less of a concern lately. For her. I probably shouldn’t gossip, but I have run into Herc more times that I care to count at very early hours of the morning. With him wearing very little.”

Martin slowly danced Arthur around his tiny attic room and reflected on the months since they’d returned from the city and the adventures, if that was the right word, they’d enjoyed or endured, depending… It had both been easier and harder than Martin had expected. For one thing, Carolyn and Douglas had not caused him as much personal grief as he had prepared for. Even though every other topic was still fair game for Douglas to mock him about, his substance abuse issue remained off the table. And, Carolyn had been suspiciously agreeable to his and Arthur’s relationship, forcing Martin to join them for dinner several nights a week and not batting an eye at the fact that Arthur tended to spend every minute of his free time in Martin’s company, even if that meant, as Arthur termed it, a sleep-over in Martin’s attic.

On the harder side, there was the return to his normal day-to-day life. Without the distractions of London, it was harder to ignore his brain when it yearned for something to bring up his energy level or take away the stress. He’d found himself several times driving past streets where he’d been able to purchase whatever his body had wanted without any memory of actually getting in the van in the first place. But Martin hadn’t succumbed. It had been very hard a few times, but he’d been able to hold back from taking the one step that would set him all the way back to the start of the yellow brick road. For those times, it was both a blessing and a curse that Arthur was a very perceptive individual. Martin hated when Arthur noticed his struggle, as it made him feel weak and worthless, but he loved that Arthur would take him up in his warm arms and kiss away his insecurities and doubts, whispering in his ear how proud he was of Martin and his victory against his ugly wants.

But that didn’t change the fact that he was still barely holding his nose above water and without Mycroft’s mechanic-on-call, the last van breakdown would have had him living on the street. Carolyn was trying to find some way to give him a salary and had been able to award him a miniscule percentage of profits when they were in the black, but she had been uncharacteristically transparent when she opened the books for Martin to examine. And not just MJN’s books, but her personal finances, as well. There truly was no margin for error, no excess, no spoils or fat. And that made Martin fearful. Not for himself, but for Arthur, who he knew had no idea how close he was to Martin’s own sad circumstances.

“Skip? Are you thinking again? You know how upset you get when you do that.”

“I’ll try to remember never to think in the future.”

“Silly Skipper, you know what I mean. I know the difference between you thinking and it’s a good thing and you thinking when it’s a bad thing. Are you nervous? I mean, I’m so excited for this party that I haven’t been able to sit still for days, but… are you maybe not as happy about it? This will be… well, like you said, we haven’t seen Mr. Sherlock in three months…”

Not that Martin had worried much about that particular fact. No, that wasn’t the full truth. It was easier to breathe without Sherlock in his field of view, but just because something was easier didn’t mean it was better. These months had given him time to think without anyone voicing their opinion on the subject and that had been a welcome reprieve. It gave him time to concentrate on his own feelings and listen to only one voice. Even Arthur had left the subject alone, besides general mentions of Sherlock and what was going on for cases or why John was currently taking a walk for ‘air.’ He didn’t push and didn’t pry and Martin was grateful for the time and the space to see where his comfort level finally fell. And it seemed that is was leveling off at a point higher than he
expected. It wasn’t going to be easy and he knew there would be times he would regret it, but letting
Sherlock make camp in a small corner of his life would be something he could do. And if the git
cocked everything up again, it would be easy to implement a scorched-earth protocol to that small
corner and salt the ground when he was done.

“I’m looking forward to the party, Arthur. And to seeing everyone. You’ve worked so hard on
things, how could I not be anxious for the festivities to get started?”

Arthur had gone full-throttle into event planning and turned Carolyn’s home into a cross between
Disneyland and a Cinco de Mayo piñata party. The only input Martin had for the ‘finding Skip’
party was that the cake would not say ‘We Found Skip!’

“Brilliant! Because you know, if you suddenly didn’t want your party, I would tell Mum to call
the whole thing off and we’d get to eat all the food and cake ourselves. Which wouldn’t actually be
a bad idea because most of it would freeze quite nicely and we’d have meals for a long time and cake
for breakfast.”

“We have cake for breakfast at least once a week, Arthur.”

“Yeah, I have had a bit of the baking urge lately. But I did make amazing chocolate muffins!”

“That you did. They were very chocolaty and the shredded beets added that special something
that made them particularly titillating.”

“I’m glad you think so. I’ve got plans to make the recipe even better, so you’ll get to taste test
lots of muffins. Did you know that people in South America put red pepper in chocolate? Well, I’m
not overly fond of hot pepper, but maybe some nice sweet peppers like those roasted ones they sell in
jars. And I was thinking I’d like to make a Super Chocolate something with different chocolates and
chocolate-covered raisins and nuts and those peanut-butter and chocolate candies. And licorice. I
know that’s not chocolate, but it’s sort of brown, well more black but it looks brown in the right light
and…”

“They’ll be wonderful, love. Simply wonderful. But look at the time… Sherlock and John
should be getting to your mother’s house any minute and I don’t think we want them alone with her,
do we?”

“Oh… right! Ooh… yeah, that might not be the best thing. Mum’s still a little miffed that Mr.
Sherlock took me to London and I know she wants to talk to Doctor Watson about your… problem.
And you know Mum, if she wants to talk to someone about something, they are in for a
conversation.”

“Yes, that I know well.”

“Now Skip, it was only a few hours.”

“She made me divulge my entire medical history, my prior romantic interests, which she deemed
pathetic, my detailed plan to ensure your safety and contentment for the future, thank heavens for
Mycroft, how I plan to support her when she’s old and toothless, thank heavens for Mycroft part 2,
and a long list of even more embarrassing things including, but not restricted to my personal
measurements and her opinion on whether or not that will be satisfactory for her darling boy. There
was a reason I had to have a lie-down afterwards, Arthur.”

“I think Mr. Sherlock and Doctor Watson can handle her.”

“Maybe with John’s sidearm.”
“Well, at least we know we’re in the right place.”

“What gave it away, John? The streamers dangling from the windows or the several hundred balloons in the yard?”

“Remember what we agreed?”

“If I have nothing nice to say, I should say nothing at all.”

“Exactly.”

“Asinine.”

“Silence!”

Sherlock snorted and glared at his partner who was busily ignoring both his snort and glare. Damn John’s immunity to his scorn. It was tiresome and inconvenient. Sherlock parked the car on the street where, in his words, they would be assured of a rapid and unimpeded exit and both men descended from the vehicle. Sherlock stalked off towards the chaos of color, leaving John to gather the luggage and bottles of liquor he planned on sharing with Martin when the party died down. Just a little token of his pride that the man was holding on well and seemed to actually be following John’s recommendations for care. That he had gone through with interviewing a few counselors was a very bright spot and part of John’s visit would be discussing Martin’s observations and helping him choose one that would work best for his situation.

John dragged his overly-laden self through the front door and stood a moment relishing the sight of Sherlock Holmes pressed against a wall by an elderly woman with nothing more than the power of her extended index finger.

“…and you will think more than twice before you whisk Arthur off on another round of nonsense. I will not have that simpleton of a boy running loose chasing ne’er-do-wells all over Europe!”

“And you must be Mrs. Knapp-Shappey. How do you do? I’m John Watson.”

“At least this one’s polite. Hello Doctor Watson, the Imbecile Squad has told me much about you and… I suppose you’ll suffice. Now, your room is on the second floor and you’ll find it clearly marked. Try not to touch the sign, I’m not sure the glitter and glue have completely dried.”

Sherlock edged away from Carolyn, keeping her in his sights as if he was wary of a sneak attack the moment his back was turned. John pressed one suitcase into his hand and used the other to nudge him up the stairs.

“Don’t worry, Sherlock. I’ll protect you from the bad lady.”

“I am fully capable of taking care of myself, John. I simply did not want to cause a disruption that would subsequently distress Arthur or Martin.”

“That’s actually considerate of you. Was it true?”

“Not at all, but I calculated that you would respond better to that line of reasoning than ‘if I broke her, we’d have a body to hide.’ ”
“Very well thought out.”

“I am trying, John.”

“Yes you are, Sherlock… yes you are… and doing a wonderful job.”

“Mr. Sherlock! Doctor Watson! Hurray!”

Arthur flung himself out of Martin’s van and raced across the yard as fast as his legs could carry him, nearly bowling down the detective and the doctor with his enthusiastic hugs. Martin used the commotion to sneak into Carolyn’s house and deposit his overnight bag in Arthur’s room. Carolyn had gladly given up residence for the duration of Sherlock and John’s visit, stating categorically that she had no desire to be part of whatever Bacchanalian activities a houseful of young men had planned.

“Good to see you, Arthur. Very good to see you. And the house looks wonderful. I very much liked the sign for our room. Quite handy.”

“Thanks Doctor Watson! I wanted this day to be as special as possible. And you look so happy! I guess you and Mr. Sherlock are getting on well.”

Arthur’s version of wink-wink-nod-nod involved a number of accessory body parts, but John got the gist of the gesture. Sherlock rolled his eyes heavenward and removed his phone from his pocket, pretending to ponder an important text.

“Every day is a blessing. And it looks like you’re taking good care of Martin. He’s looking healthy and, well more fit than I last saw him.”

“I’ve been making sure he follows all of your instructions to the letter, which believe me is not easy since he sometimes thinks he knows best about things even when they’re not his specialty, but I remind him that you’re the one with the doctor’s degree and not him and that he doesn’t want to get sick and not be able to work and that makes him straighten right up.”

“Sounds like you’ve got things under control. So, how many people are you expecting today?”

“Everyone! All the people at the airfield and the students Skip lives with and other people that Skip runs into in town. Mum says they’re only coming for the free food, but I know better. They want to show Skip how happy they are that he’s back!”

“I’m sure you’re right. Now, how about a bottle of that beer your Mum made me carry out. I’ll buy you one, too.”

“Can I have juice instead?”

“All you can drink.”

Sherlock watched John and Arthur get reacquainted and was glad when they moved off towards the tables that had been set up for refreshments. The quiet was more than welcome, but it left him exposed when Martin exited the house and saw his cousin standing on the lawn. For a moment Sherlock thought Martin would simply turn and go back inside, but after a few breaths, Martin walked over and stood next to him.
“Hello, Sherlock. How was the drive?”

“Without incident.”

“Good. Good to hear.”

“And… how was the… decorating?”

“Oh, full and busy day of taking orders from Arthur to get everything right.”

“The results are very… ambitious.”

“That they are… that they are…”

Each man stood gazing around at the veritable Mardi Gras that had sprouted on the Shappey estate and desperately tried to think of something to say. With a simultaneous, ‘goddam it’ and ‘this is intolerable,’ each man reached into a pocket and drew out a piece of paper, Sherlock’s being an index card with writing in black ink and Martin’s a lime green slip of notepaper decorated by purple felt-tip marker.

“What’s your list say?”

“I am to ask you about your flying, you van business, your health and any social activities of which you have been a part. And you?”

“Recent cases, your health, goings-on in London, your experiments and cheese.”

“Cheese?”

“I have no idea.”

“Shall we begin?”

“Might as well. So Sherlock, tell me about your recent cases.”

“Several have been of interest. We concluded an investigation last week, for instance…”

John looked over at Sherlock and Martin, clutching their prompt sheets, and standing at near attention and had to smile. Not one thrown punch, no one was on the ground moaning and he couldn’t even hear what was being said because there was no yelling. This was going better than expected.

“They don’t look angry, do they Doctor Watson?”

“No, they do not. I brought my bag in case I needed to patch someone up, but it looks like I might not need it.”

“Well, that’s a weight off of my brain. Skip got a little nervous today and I was worried he’d let it rumble him up so his behavior wouldn’t be top notch. But he did me proud. Like he always does.”

“I understand that. Sherlock’s been in a state ever since we left London. But, it looks like now that he’s here, he’ll be alright. Shall we go over and see that they’re actually talking about something polite and not just insulting each other quietly so we don’t find out?”

“Very sneaky, Doctor Watson. And I agree. Because they’re even sneakier.”
“Kings of Sneaky.”

“I do have some crafts planned for your visit, so we’ll make some crowns for them. We can use mine as a model.”

“I honestly can’t wait.”

Sherlock, John, Arthur and Martin milled about as the remainder of the guests began to arrive. John and Douglas had a long conversation about medical school and Sherlock found himself actually engaged in a stimulating discussion about animal dissection with one of the students from the agricultural college. Arthur and Martin circulated, spending time with each of their guests, ensuring that everyone was having a good time. After awhile, they caught up with John and Sherlock and stood as a group, watching the hustle and bustle of the crowd.

“Is this the flow pattern common to the average party, John?”

“If you mean people flow to and from the grub, then yes. Soon, there will be flowing to and from the loo for various reasons based on state of intoxication and then to and from available bedrooms if Carolyn lets her guard down.”

“You are not planning on hosting any parties in the future are you?”

“None bigger than our last Christmas get-together. Well, perhaps with one or two more attendees.”

John lifted his beer and gave a nod towards Arthur and Martin.

“Christmas in London! Brilliant! Skip, I do believe that we have to add that to our schedule. Can you think of anything more amazing! With all the lights and decorations and trees and Mr. Sherlock and Doctor Watson and Mycroft!”

“Speaking of Mycroft, wasn’t he supposed to be here?”

“He will. He promised me, but he did say he might be late. Actually…”

Arthur made a good show of squinting to see into the distance and the other three men were ashamed to admit they did the same thing.

“One large, black vehicle. Apparently, His Lordship has arrived.”

“Sherlock…”

“I will say nothing about his weight or cakes, John.”

“I know it will be a hardship and promise I’ll make it up to you. Arthur how soundproof is our room?”

Arthur’s blush made the men chuckle even harder, but all of that came to a grinding halt as the car pulled up to the curb and Mycroft stepped out of the back. From the other side another figure exited and Sherlock reached over to grasp John’s hand as if to reassure himself that he wasn’t in the throes of a side effect of some poorly remembered brain injury.

“John…”
“Sherlock…”

“I am not sure I can successfully tolerate this situation.”

“I’m with you on that one.”

Arthur and Martin stared at the two men and back at the other two who were approaching at a sedate pace.

“Well, I did as you asked, Mr. Sherlock. I got Mycroft to bring a date.”

“Good job there, love. Nice looking bloke, too. Not too often you see a fine head of silver hair like that…”

“I know… isn’t it brilliant!”

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